

Nixon Struggles to Avoid

By Thomas B. Ross

WASHINGTON — (CST) — Yesterday was the 18th anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, and President Nixon was struggling desperately to extricate himself and the nation from a similar fate.

Official spokesmen continue to talk hopefully about the fighting qualities of the South Vietnamese army, but privately there is virtually unanimous agreement here that the only chance of stopping the North Vietnamese lies in U.S. bombs and Hanoi's own manpower and supply problems.

The President talks boldly of doing whatever is needed to repel the invader, but there are clear signs from high inside the administration that he is now prepared to accept the North Vietnamese advance, short of a military take-over of Saigon, provided he can withdraw the remaining U.S. forces with "honor" and get back the prisoners of war.

The great unanswered

question is whether Hanoi will offer Nixon an acceptable way out or seek, through further victories, to dictate a settlement as it did to the French nearly two decades ago.

On May 7, 1954, Vietnamese Communist forces overran the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu in the climactic battle that persuaded Paris to liquidate its colony in Indochina.

As the vise was closing on Dien Bien Phu, Nixon, then the Vice President, proposed the introduction of U.S. troops, if needed, to save the French.

He is also believed to have supported the more radical proposal of Adm. Arthur Radford, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, that tactical nuclear weapons be dropped on the Communist forces.

Now, in the view of many military experts, Nixon is confronted by a similar dilemma.

Sen. John Stennis (D-Miss.), chairman of the

Senate Armed Services Committee, warned last week that there might be a total collapse of the South Vietnamese and a "humiliation" for the United States unless U.S. combat troops were reintroduced.

Other knowledgeable persons, particularly in the Pentagon, suggested that the North Vietnamese could be persuaded to call off their offensive only by the kind of saturation bombing that threatened their very survival as a people.

The President warned last weekend:

"We are prepared to use our military and naval strength against military targets throughout North Vietnam, and we believe that the North Vietnamese are taking a very great risk if they continue their offensive in the South. I will just leave it there, and they can make their own choice."

Since it is generally accepted that the previous pattern of raids on North Vietnam was largely ineffective,

Another 'Dien Bien Phu'

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the President's words carried the clear implication that he is prepared to bomb much more intensively and with much less restriction on targets, be they large numbers of civilians or Russian ships.

Nixon obviously hopes he will not be driven to such a pass.

The civilian death toll in North Vietnam could destroy the moral stature of the United States in the world. More immediately, it would probably result in the withdrawal of his invitation to visit the Soviet Union later this month.

Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev is understood to have advised the President's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, that it would be difficult for him to pay host to Nixon if he was bombing Hanoi and Hai-phong.

Kissinger is said to have

replied that it would be equally difficult for the President to make the trip if the North Vietnamese were in the process of marching on Saigon.

Both sides withheld commitments, Kissinger because the bombing may prove to be Nixon's only card, Brezhnev because the Soviets do not appear to have any real influence over Hanoi's battlefield decisions.

But Brezhnev did encourage the United States to go back to the Paris peace talks, reportedly leaving the impression that the North Vietnamese were ready for serious negotiations. The Paris talks are now in recess again.

Kissinger is understood to have flown to Paris secretly last Monday to test Hanoi's intentions in a meeting with Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese politburo member who was his contact point in a series of other secret meetings over the last three years.

But they evidently got no-

where, and the Pentagon promptly announced that more planes were being sent to Vietnam, signaling that the President was ready to end the diplomatic pause that had kept U.S. bombers away from Hanoi and Hai-phong after the raids of April 14 and 15.

But administration officials implied that, before taking the fateful step, Nixon would probably wait to see if the battle front can be stabilized after the impending struggle from Kontum and Hue.

The President has been advised by the Pentagon that 25,000 North Vietnamese troops, a fourth of their offensive force, has been killed and that their supply lines may have been stretched to the limit.

If so, Nixon may be able to salvage the situation, at least temporarily, without escalation and thus keep the cherished Moscow summit on track.

Then his apparent game plan is to induce Brezhnev, by holding out lucrative

trade concessions, to slow down the shipment of weapons to Hanoi and thus lessen the prospect of another offensive when the forthcoming rainy season ends in the fall.

At that point, with Hanoi's short-run opportunities diminished but its long-run possibilities intact, the President might be able to negotiate a compromise that would get U.S. troops out of Vietnam by election day and delay the final North Vietnamese test for a decent interval.

It was apparent this weekend, however, that Nixon is not fully confident that he would be able to achieve a settlement even on such relatively unfavorable terms.

When the Pentagon let it be known that a detachment of Marines, now shipborne in nearby waters, might be sent ashore to help the remaining 69,000 U.S. troops, it was obviously to extricate them in the event the President is confronted by a latter-day Dien Bien Phu.