

Viet Confidence Crisis

NEW YORK — Four short turbulent years ago, the great hue and cry among so-called peace candidates for the presidency was that a complete halt to the bombing of North Vietnam could lead to meaningful negotiations and a hasty end to the war.

It was all so simple. Or so it seemed from the rhetoric of Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, the late Robert Kennedy and the strident hordes who echoed their words at the 1968 Democratic maelstrom in Chicago.

WITH THE REINS of the presidency still in his hands, Lyndon Johnson ultimately took the exact steps advocated by his dovish critics. In return for an understanding with North Vietnam that it would not violate the DMZ or shell South Vietnamese cities, Johnson ordered cessation of all air attacks against the North.

In addition, the two sides agreed that the Saigon regime of Nguyen Van Thieu and the Communist National Liberation Front would join Washington and Hanoi at the Paris peace talks, which already had been underway for nearly six months.

Finally the four sides did get together in Paris to argue interminably about such vital issues as the shape of the negotiating table. That was nearly three and a half years ago. In the interim practically nothing of substance has happened in Paris' old Majestic Hotel, except that delegates meeting in the name of peace have spent much of their time vilifying one another.

Now the President's grand design for Vietnamization is facing the same kind of crisis of confidence that confronted the de-

mands of the doves once Johnson stopped the bombing and arranged the peace talks.

Those of us who believe South Vietnam has a right to exist as a free and independent nation hope that this tide of aggression can be stemmed — and eventually reversed. Yet it would be a terrible mistake for us to blind ourselves to the possibility that our Vietnam adventure may be coming to a disastrous conclusion.

With Nixon, as with his immediate successors in the presidency, the best laid plans to save South Vietnam seem to be going awry. Like Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson before him, Nixon has made a valiant effort to prevent South Vietnam from falling beneath the communist yoke. He also has sought to extricate America from the war with honor.

Now Nixon's great plans stand on the brink of failure and the political consequences at home could prove grave indeed.

Through the long ordeal of Vietnam, however, we seem repeatedly to have underestimated the determination and the staying power of the North, while overestimating the ability of the South to defend itself.

SADLY, WE HAVE COME to the point where millions of Americans no longer care; where the desire to get out of Vietnam may be greater than the desire to save Saigon or save America's honor. If the current Hanoi-led offensive proves successful, more than 50,000 American men will have died in vain.

The ultimate reality we must face is that Vietnam is a war that history has passed by.