



Final U.S. Defeat Entirely Possible

Joseph Alsop

DESPITE THE headlines, most people in this country seem to be blandly unaware of the deadly inwardness of the crisis in the Vietnamese war.

Maybe the trouble is that no Americans of any generation, in the entire history of this country, have ever experienced final defeat in war.

It had better be faced, however, that a final U.S. defeat in Vietnam is entirely possible. Begin with the Saigon government's extreme shortage of reserves. Add the Hanoi government's totally ruthless way of expending manpower. The odds today then have to be quoted as about even, either way.

In the next days and weeks (and we should know the answer within weeks), it will be critically important not to mistake local defeats for final defeat. In South Vietnam's central highlands, for example, there may well be local defeats that will make hair-raising headlines.

But just such headlines were the cause of the all but universal American misjudgment of the Tet offensive in 1968. That year, after all the horrors were over, the upshot was a military and political disaster for the enemy.

★ ★ ★

THIS TIME local defeats, especially in the central highlands, will not add up to final defeat, any more than they did in 1968. There are in fact only two areas where final defeat appears possible — on the approaches to Saigon, where the outlook is hopeful but tricky, and around Hue, where all depends on Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong.

If you consider these two areas, how-

ever, you can see that defeat, if it comes, will not seem unimportant to Americans and important only to the remote South Vietnamese. At the Hue-Phu Bai base alone, for example, there are some thousands of American troops.

President Nixon cannot pull out those troops from Hue-Phu Bai without pulling the plug on General Truong. They add up to the airpower and the helicopter power that give General Truong a pretty good chance of throwing back the worst the enemy can throw at him. But if the northern front goes really wrong, those Americans will be in deadly danger.

★ ★ ★

ALL IN all, this is the grimmest yet, among the crises that the President so strangely likes to ponder and to analyze. Is it reasonable, for instance, to improve the odds in Hanoi's favor, even if only a bit, by going off to Moscow at what may be the moment of maximum danger?

Again, is it not only prudent to embark the marine division from Okinawa without delay, so that those thousands of Americans at Hue-Phu Bai will have a rescue party near at hand if the need arises? Logically, those are the kinds of choices that President Nixon must be mulling over at this instant.

It seems an excellent bet that the President will make his hard choices with maximum tough-mindedness.

Those who are horrified about tough-mindedness — indeed all of us — had better reflect upon the consequences of a final U.S. defeat in war.

In these circumstances, what needs doing to avoid defeat had better be done.