

If the Worst Does Happen

WASHINGTON — Despite the grim uncertainty, it is too soon to judge that South Vietnam will not be able to check Hanoi's massive invasion.

Saigon is being forced to resist the onslaughts of almost the entire North Vietnamese army and the balance-of-power is narrow. The goal is to hold off the invaders sufficiently so that serious negotiations will be necessary.

BUT THE WORST could happen and therefore it is not too soon for Americans to examine in their own minds what their response is going to be if total disaster befalls the people of South Vietnam; if Communist conquest-by-force engulfs the whole of Indochina and a blood bath for millions of resisters ensues as threatened.?

What will be the impact of this ominous spectacle upon the United States? Will there be a nightmare of recrimination, a frantic search for scapegoats to assign the blame to anyone else but ourselves?

Will such a foreboding defeat persuade America's adversaries — and allies — that the United States is on a downward path to eclipse as a great power and that they must make new alliances or face new aggression?

Or will we view a Communist takeover of Indochina as a painful but relatively minor setback and a lesson from which the whole nation has much to learn?

Calamity in Vietnam — if it comes — couldn't come at a worse time for the United States because:

It would almost certainly lacerate already deep division within the nation.

It would add boiling controversy to the heat and scuffle of the presidential campaign.

It would cast a pall of perilous uncertainty over every independent country in Southeast Asia — from the Philippines to Indonesia.

It could greatly increase the danger of

war in the Middle East by persuading the Soviet Union and Egypt that the United States is so distracted that now is the time to take on Israel.

It could convince China that the United States is really a "paper tiger" as it has long claimed.

It would be a disaster greater than the Bay of Pigs because the United States has been deeply committed and directly involved.

Because the Presidency itself would be at stake, the tendency would be for the candidates, the parties and doves and hawks to point accusing fingers at each other, to exaggerate every argument and to stir the nation to a state of acrimony and self-doubt.

The French suffered some of this after the disaster at Dienbienphu. But it could be worse for us. The French lacked both the power and the will to win. But in our case we had the power but lacked the will.

All this is what President Nixon hoped to avoid by everything he has done to strengthen South Vietnam's capacity to defend itself.

He may succeed, but if not, it will be hard to escape a period of bitter recrimination. Its first impact would cause nearly everyone to see others as scapegoats: the President because many feel he is to blame for not getting out sooner and faster; his principal critics because they didn't care if South Vietnam was overrun and the consequences of their policies would be only too visible; the military and many Vietnam veterans who have felt all along that the home front let them down.

THIS KIND OF RECRIMINATION could be terribly dangerous unless as a people we can summon the poise, the restraint, the self-discipline and the mutual respect to take the worst and rise above it, and to learn its lesson without it leaving us crushed and hopelessly divided.

The worst may not come upon us — but we need to be ready to deal with it.