



The Grim Decisions Coming Out of Hanoi

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TO UNDERSTAND the present crisis in the Vietnam War, Americans must use their imagination. Mercifully, no government in Washington could ever make the kinds of underlying decisions that the Hanoi government has made.

In this matter, it is best to begin with the population of North Vietnam. By the accepted estimates, North Vietnam's population is rather less than one-tenth of the population of the United States.

Thus a decision in Hanoi to offer up another 124,000 men on the grim altars of the war, is exactly equivalent to a decision in Washington to call up a million and a quarter young Americans. By last year, moreover, the war had already cost Hanoi about 700,000 men — or the equivalent of 7 million men for Washington.

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YET IT IS indisputable that the Hanoi Politburo took the terrible decision above-described in the spring of 1971. This was the time when the First Party Secretary, Le Duan, went off to Moscow to ask for — and to get — vast quantities of artillery and other heavy equipment for a major offensive.

Hard as this is to credit, moreover, another 124,000 North Vietnamese were then called to the colors to fight in the south. Prisoners of war now report whole districts in North Vietnam stripped of all able-bodied men between 14 and 45.

If there was any intelligence error about Hanoi's great offensive, the foregoing facts indicate the source of that error. In 1972, as in 1968, a major offensive was correctly foreseen. But it was not easy to

foresee the enormous increase in the numbers of men Hanoi was willing to spend in battle.

The indications are also indisputable that Hanoi's losses have already been horrendous. On the approaches to Saigon, the order to take the miserable village of An Loc "at all costs," has already knocked the crack enemy division in the south, the 9th, clean out of the fighting for the time being.

On the approaches to Hue, again, it appears that two of the three North Vietnamese divisions assigned to that series of battles have lost so heavily that they have had to be merged.

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SINCE THE great offensive began, finally, the enemy troops who have been fighting and dying have been all but exclusively North Vietnamese. The Viet Cong in the south could not be relied upon, this time, for the simple reason that Hanoi broke the back of the V.C. at Tet in 1968.

No one should assume for a moment, however, that Le Duan and the other Hanoi leaders will falter because of losses already incurred. On the contrary, they will fight on until the war has consumed the great majority of the 124,000 men they budgeted for sacrifice in 1972. Only if a moment comes when they literally cannot go forward, will they cease trying to do so.

Consider, then, the constraints upon President Nixon. Then consider the decisions made by First Party Secretary Le Duan and his colleagues. If you do this, all else becomes comprehensible.