

In ordering the closing of land and sea supply routes to North Vietnam by American military action, President Nixon is taking a desperate gamble that alters the entire nature of the war, that risks the fundamental security and deepest interests of the United States for dubious and tenuous gains, and that runs counter both to Congressional mandate and to the will and conscience of a large segment of the American people.

The mining of the harbors of North Vietnam poses a direct challenge to the Soviet Union and other arms suppliers to Hanoi that could quite possibly escalate into a confrontation between the world's two great superpowers. Only the gravest threat to the security of the United States could justify such a challenge, as was indeed the case in the Cuban missile crisis. But Vietnam is not Cuba; and there is no conceivable American interest at stake in Indochina today as there was in Cuba to warrant the risk—and the escalation—the President has so clearly undereaken.

Let us grant that the North Vietnam Communists are infuriatingly—even insultingly—intransigent in the negotiations at Paris and are stubbornly aggressive in the field, as indeed they are. Let us grant that the United States still has a commitment to support to the death the present Saigon Government as representative of South Vietnamese democracy—a commitment which, if it ever existed, has surely been long ago fulfilled. Let us even grant—contrary to fact—that President Nixon's Vietnamization program has been a success and that all that is needed is a little more time and a few more arms to bring Hanoi's belligerence to a halt. Granting all these hypotheses, what possible good could President Nixon's present escalation-cum-confrontation accomplish?

Even if the closing of the ports by mining and the interdiction of land routes by renewed extensive bombing should succeed in their goals without retaliation by the Soviet Union and China, the resultant cutoff in supplies could not materially affect the outcome of the present North Vietnam offensives in the South.

In any case, the bulk of North Vietnam's military supplies enter not from the sea but from China via road and rail. The entire history of deep interdiction of supply routes, from World War II to the present, demonstrates its ineffectuality. At most, therefore, Mr. Nixon's orders would simply tend to move Soviet supplies back to the trans-China route and shift the balance of influence in Hanoi a little more toward Peking.

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This semi-blockade policy is both spurious and impractical; and it is difficult to understand how the President and his advisers, given the history of the war, can genuinely believe in it either. But to explain it, as the President did in his television address Monday night, as a means of protecting the American troops still remaining in Vietnam strains credulity to the breaking point. In fact, it is painfully obvious that Mr. Nixon's escalation of the conflict, including the stepped-up bombing of the North in reprisal for the Northern successes in the South, only increases the peril of American ground troops in Vietnam while obviously raising with every air raid the potential number of American prisoners held by Hanoi.

The President's risky action Monday evidently signals a decision to intensify and enlarge American military involvement in the war from sea and air, with all the attendant risks accompanying such escalation. The President is in fact leading the country down precisely the road—though by different means—that President Johnson did in 1965. The difference is that President Nixon has the benefit of these last seven years' experience.

Yet, like the Bourbons, he seems to have forgotten nothing and learned nothing.

Even the peace offer included in Mr. Nixon's speech has a specious ring to it. He tells Hanoi that if it agrees to an internationally supervised cease-fire and returns the American prisoners, the United States "will stop all acts of force throughout Indochina" and will be out of Vietnam "within four months." On the face of it, this sounds as though Mr. Nixon were at last cutting all ties with the Saigon Government, for there is no mention of any political condition whatsoever. But given Hanoi's present military successes, there is little incentive to North Vietnam to accept a cease-fire now; and while Mr. Nixon specifically promises American withdrawal from Vietnam within a short period, he does not promise withdrawal from the neighboring states, leaving the implied threat of American force and American power still hanging over the peninsula.

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By his rash and precipitate action, President Nixon is not only risking military confrontation with the Soviet Union over an issue that is not and never has been vital to the security interests of the United States; he is also risking the almost equally dangerous collapse of the painfully built progress toward a genuine diplomatic détente, at it is already taking form in the SALT agreements and would surely be further advanced by the now-threatened Moscow summit conference.

By his action, President Nixon is also inviting Soviet retaliation, if not in East Asia, then in other sensitive parts of the globe. By his action, he is unwittingly encouraging the Soviet hawks. By his action, he is incurring the possible speedy dissolution of the thin and delicate relationship just painfully constructed with Peking. By his action as well as his rhetoric, he has dug the United States deeper into the hole from which it had for four years been trying to extricate itself in Indochina.

And by his action he has clearly defied the Congress if not the Constitution. This may turn out to be the most dangerous of all the ominous aspects of Mr. Nixon's present course. The Congress of the United States last year resolved that it was "the policy of the United States to terminate at the earliest possible date all military operations of the United States in Indochina. . . ." Mr. Nixon said at the time that the resolution was "without binding force or effect and it does not reflect my judgment about the way in which the war should be brought to a conclusion."

But now Mr. Nixon has in effect defied the expressed will of the Congress by replying to North Vietnamese escalation with more escalation—an old, familiar and demonstrably useless course of action. His dangerous and unnecessary resort to semi-blockade and massive bombing in a futile search for military victory in an undeclared war repudiated by a large section of the American people can only weaken the country internally and discredit it abroad.

The only recourse now is in the hands of Congress. It still has the Constitutional power to curb and control the Executive. While it is an extremely distasteful action, under the circumstances Congress still can regain its along the general lines of the Church-Case amendment in the Senate. It can shut off funds for all further military operations after return of the prisoners and after a certain date, either in Indochina as a whole or, as a more limited restraint, above the North Vietnam panhandle.

Mr. Nixon is pushing the country very near to a Constitutional crisis; Congress can yet save the President from himself and the nation from disaster.

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