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POWs

The Next Step in Vietnam

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Washington

The North Vietnamese should be getting the message by now. Their main ports are closed by American mines. There are now six U.S. aircraft carriers off their coast, bombing them night and day. The railroad lines from China to Hanoi are now under constant attack, and the weather and American air power have slowed down their offensive against Hue and Da Nang in the north, Kontum city in the Central Highlands, and An Loc, north of Saigon.

Moreover, the U.S. counter-offensive in the air is not only battering their lines of communication and supply, but turning to their electric power plants, and they are on notice that their industrial factories will be next and that even the destruction of the Red River dikes is not ruled out.

PLEASANT

Meanwhile, the Chinese diplomats almost seem to be going out of their way these days to be pleasant to Americans in the capitals of the world, and the Soviets are signing an agreement a day with President Nixon on issues which are more important to Moscow than Vietnam.

Some say that air power never settles anything, particularly when the North Vietnamese can always break off the battle and retreat into Laos and Cambodia, and carry on a protracted guerrilla war from there. This may very well be true. But the human cost of this battle, whatever the safe armchair strategists say, is appalling.

SAVING

This war could easily turn into a massacre and end up by destroying everything Hanoi, Saigon, Washington, Moscow, and Peking say they are trying to save.

President Nixon now has no incentive to stop the bombing and lift the blockade, other than the human tragedy, which does not seem to move him. Moscow and Peking have turned away from his challenge — at least so far — and unless they can break his blockade, which does not seem likely, they either have to watch the slaughter go on, or fly in new long-range rockets which can hit the carriers and the South Vietnamese cities. And that would only add to the carnage.

POSITION

President Nixon has asked for two things: To get his prisoners out, and to have an internationally supervised cease-fire. He has offered two things: To get all his forces out of Vietnam within four months of the return of the prisoners and the introduction of the cease-fire, and then to leave the political settlement to the North and South Vietnamese themselves.

This was not put forward on a take-it-or-leave-it basis but as a basis for discussion. Obviously many other things have to be settled, including what aid, if any, Washington and Moscow and Peking would continue sending to their respective allies.

But even if there were a cease-fire on Mr. Nixon's terms, Hanoi would still be in possession of much of the north of the country, and could claim that it had expelled the French, fought the Americans to a compromise, and finally got all foreign troops out of the country after over a hundred years.

TALKS

At the very least, the President could send Ambassador William Porter or John Connally back to the negotiating table in Paris.

The argument against doing so is that Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator, merely uses the negotiations for propaganda.

But the absence of the Americans gives him the argument that we won't even talk.

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