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Nixon Takes Fateful Gambles

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WITHOUT SIGNALING to those around him either any special sense of drama or any really chilling anxiety, Richard Nixon has put his presidency on the line in two fateful gambles over Vietnam.

Domestically, he is consciously risking defeat in November—though the degree of that danger is in fact not seen at the White House as so high as the “antiwar” people believe it to be—by resolutely refusing to halt the bombing of North Vietnam until and unless the Communists end their invasion of the South.

Internationally, the President in going forward with his mission to the Moscow summit is gambling with fortune in the absolute conviction that, no matter what public appearances may be, the Russians actually want some cold war accommodations going way beyond Southeast Asia.

It is a firm belief at the White House that the head of the Soviet hierarchy, Leonid Brezhnev—who personally initiated the recent secret trip to Moscow of White House assistant Henry Kissinger—has compelling reasons of his own to make the summit a genuine source for easing tensions.

TO BE SURE, the Russians continue to supply the main weapons of war to the North Vietnamese invaders. To be sure, too, the day-by-day news from the Vietnamese battle fronts is to the public by no means reassuring.

Nevertheless, the White House view comes down to this: The whole of the diplomatic position of the United States, as well as the true military position of the South Vietnamese, is much better on the inside than it looks on the outside. It is obvious, parenthetically, that this opinion rests directly upon information brought back to Washington by Kissinger and less directly upon certain other sources of intelligence.

The administration knows it must live with Soviet as-

sistance to the North Vietnamese. And while there is no effort to deny that this is a tremendously troublesome factor, the net assessment is that Brezhnev has an overriding need to offer his people a Russian-American understanding that would enduringly guarantee Russia's European flank. This, of course, would permit the Soviet Union to concentrate more than now upon the security of its Eastern frontier with Red China.

Moreover, the belief within the White House is that Brezhnev badly needs a diplomatic understanding with the United States for sheerly domestic reasons, notably to increase trade with the West and specifically to bring in more American goods. Wrong this belief may of course be. But motivated simply by a wish to put a good face on things it is not, in the careful opinion of this columnist.

IF ALL THIS appears at any rate to reflect a highly optimistic attitude in the White House, it is by no means a Pollyanna affair when viewed in the context of all the current realities. For one example, it may be stated that the Russians now know that the President will not only resist all dove pressure for paralyzing the American sea and air arms in Indochina, but that he also has not ruled out an American naval blockade in certain eventualities.

As to home politics, Mr. Nixon has made a final decision that no man in his position could honorably abandon the South Vietnamese and our own forces or do so without destroying respect for the institution of the presidency all over this globe.

Thus, he will never back down on this point and if that should cost him the office he will at least not have been the occupant who presided over its liquidation as a great force in the world.

The President's stance here is strictly fatalistic; as it has been over and over in one of the most crisis-ridden political careers of our history. If, inside, he is “up-tight” or in fear, his associates have not discerned it.

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