

Nixon's Political Gamble

By David S. Broder
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Washington

With his speech last night, President Nixon made it more than ever inevitable that the Vietnam War — the issue which, above all others, gave him the presidency — will determine whether he retains office in this election year.

His decision to mine North Vietnam's harbors and risk a showdown with the Soviet Union represents a political gamble second only in significance the military-diplomatic showdown the President deliberately provoked.

Associates said Mr. Nixon took the risk knowingly, and his own past pronouncements bear out their view.

FIRST

In his first major speech on Vietnam as President — delivered just a week less than three years ago — he said:

"In my campaign for the presidency, I pledged to end this war in a way that would increase our chances to win true and lasting peace in Vietnam, in the Pacific, and in the world. I am determined to keep that pledge. If I fail to do so, I expect the American people to hold me accountable for that failure."

A year later, in April, 1970, Mr. Nixon defended his decision to send American forces into Cambodia by saying:

"I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history."

RHETORIC

Last night, as he made a move far more hazardous in its implications than the Cambodian incursion, the President invoked that same rhetoric and again asked the

Admiral Dies in Tonkin Gulf Crash

Saigon

A helicopter crashed in the Tonkin Gulf last night apparently from engine failure, killing the first U.S. Navy admiral to die in the Indochina war.

Two high-ranking members of the admiral's staff were listed as missing.

The dead man was identified by the U.S. command as Rear Admiral Rembrandt C. Robinson, 47, who commanded about 25 cruisers and destroyers bombarding North Vietnamese positions along the coastline. He was commander of Cruiser-Destroyer Flotilla 11, based in San Diego, Calif.

The U. S. command said the cause of the accident was under investigation, but other sources said "initial indications are that there was an engine failure of some sort."

The command said two other officers, Captain Ed-

mund B. Taylor Jr., 40, chief of staff of Flotilla 11, and Commander John M. Leaver, 38, the operations officer, are missing in the crash.

But his own words — and the events leading to the decision — implied the realization that it is his neck that is on the line politically in this decision, and no one else's.

As he said at the time of Cambodia, "I made this decision. I take responsibility for it. I believe it was the right decision. I believe it will work out. If it doesn't, then I am to blame. They (his advisers and his critics) are not."

There is no way Mr. Nixon can shift responsibility for the decision to mine the harbors, if it fails of its objective or brings on a wider



AP Wirephoto

ADMIRAL ROBINSON
Flotilla commander

war. Equally, there is no way his political opponents can deny him credit for the strategem if it succeeds in halting the Communist offensive and speeding an end to the war.

Associated Press

SECRET

It was as closely held as any decision of his term. In defending it, the President specifically rejected the alternative urged by virtually every Democrat who may oppose him in next November's presidential election: maintaining U.S. forces from South Vietnam.

Mr. Nixon said that "from a political standpoint," withdrawal "would be an easy choice for me to accept. I did not send over one half million Americans to Vietnam. I have brought 500,000

home . . ."

But he said that course would leave South Vietnam helpless, end any real hope of securing the release of U.S. prisoners of war, and jeopardize world peace — all propositions his political opponents would dispute.

PROMISE

Throughout his term, Mr. Nixon's political fortunes have risen and fallen with the public judgment on the likelihood of his redeeming his key 1968 promise that he had a plan "to end the war and win the peace."

The latest Gallup Poll reading, based on an early February survey, showed 51 per cent of the American people approved Mr. Nixon's handling of the Vietnam war, while 39 per cent were opposed, and 10 per cent had no opinion.

That was his highest standing in 18 months and reflected public confidence that the reduction in America's involvement in the war would continue.

But the "Vietnamization" program was thrown into doubt by the North Vietnamese Easter offensive, and Mr. Nixon's speech tacitly conceded failure of his long-cherished dream of seeing Saigon's army become militarily self-sufficient.

DOUBT

At the same time, he was forced to tell the American people, in the plainest language he ever has used, that the path to a negotiated settlement appears to be blocked by what he termed the "insolence and insult" of Hanoi's diplomats in Paris.

Instead, he decided to risk peace — and his political future — on what may be America's last roll of the military dice.

Criticism of his decision seemed inevitable. But as Mr. Nixon said at the time of Cambodia, he alone does not have "the luxury of criticism" on this question.

"The decision that I made," he said then in words that fit last night's action, "will bring the peace that we all want — in my opinion. I could be wrong, but if I am wrong, I am responsible, and nobody else."

That is a responsibility he will be called upon to defend at the polls this November.