

Nixon's Challenge to the

By Murray Marder
Washington Post Service

Washington

President Nixon gambled massively last night that he could end the Vietnamese war by an audacious use of military force that risked a clash with the Soviet Union after a decade of work to reduce East-West tension.

No president except the late President Kennedy in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis has wagered higher stakes in the nuclear age.



There are direct parallels, but also profound differences, in these two Soviet-American crises. The threat of imminent nuclear war dangled over the 1962 crisis.

In the crisis that emerged last night, Mr. Nixon is gambling that the Soviet Union will not construe his actions as a direct challenge to its vital interests.

The President's actions, however, and the main burden of his remarks, were directed squarely at the Soviet Union. From the opening sentence of his grim address, he held the Kremlin primarily responsible for supplying North Vietnam with the weapons of offensive war.

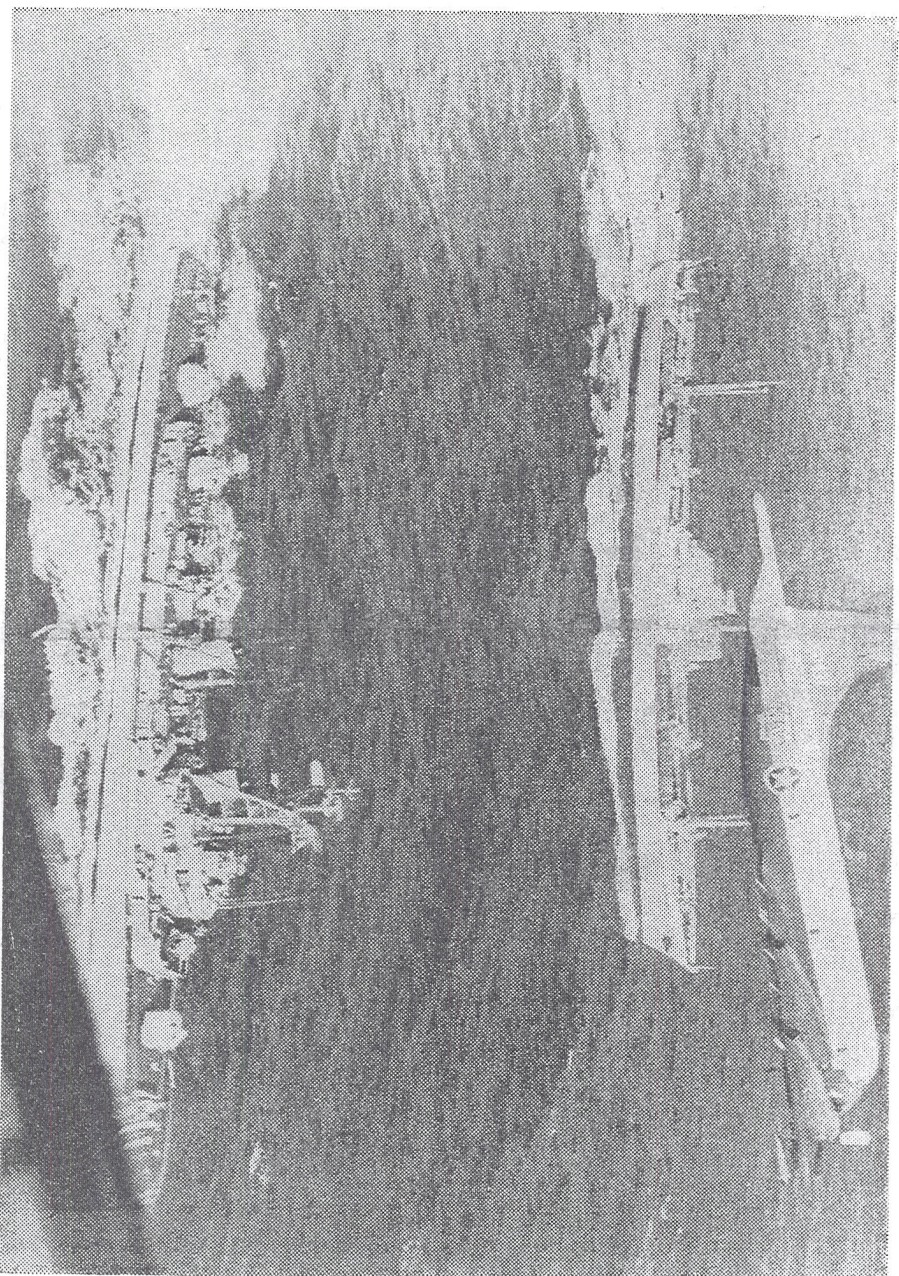
His orders to mine the harbors of North Vietnam with just "three daylight periods" allowed to remove all shipping before the mines are activated, confronts the Soviet Union with a supreme national choice.

The distinction between mining the harbors of North Vietnam and imposing a quarantine line of warships around Cuba, as President Kennedy did in 1962, differs only in degree.

In one sense it is a more limited challenge, but in another sense it is greater, because the blockade of Cuba in 1962 barred only the passage of Soviet vessels carrying nuclear missiles and other specified offensive weapons, while President Nixon's order last night was to close North Vietnamese ports to all shipping.

The prime inducement the President held out to the Soviet Union to comply with his military orders was the prospect of fulfilling the "significant progress in our negotiations," which were intended to be climaxed by Mr. Nixon's talks in the Soviet Union, scheduled to start May 22.

Mr. Nixon, without expressly mentioning the summit talks, touched on the major interests at stake in them, including above all the first stage of the strate-



A U.S. destroyer and patrol plane intercepted a Soviet freighter during the 1962 Cuban crisis

gic nuclear arms agreement that is now in sight.

After years of intensive negotiations, the United States and the Soviet Union have within their grasp an agreement to freeze for the

first time their mutually spiraling stocks of mutually destructive nuclear missiles.

Along with this accord, the President noted, there are high hopes of new agreements "on trade" and "on a

host of other issues."

Noticeably absent from the President's remarks was any direct reference to North Vietnam's other main ally, China.

China was included only in

the most oblique references by the President, in his references to weapons supplied "by the Soviet Union and other Communist nations."

The President's orders, however, to sever "rail and

Kremlin

all other communications . . . to the maximum extent possible," do involve China indirectly because the rail and other ground supply lines carrying weapons and other equipment into North Vietnam are routes from China.

Nevertheless, by omitting any direct reference to China, the President is presumably trying to maintain the rapprochement between the U.S. and China that he achieved and confirmed with his visit there in February.

Since the North Vietnamese offensive was launched in South Vietnam March 30, China has been markedly moderate and restrained in its support for Hanoi's cause and in its verbal attacks on the U.S. The Chinese have avoided personal condemnation of President Nixon.

China's bitter ideological rivalry with the Soviet Union may cause it to stand back and try to reap whatever gain it can from the challenge raised to the Soviet Union from President Nixon's actions.

If China takes such a position, that could make the Russian decision more tortuous because there is underlying Kremlin suspicion about Sino-American "collusion" against Soviet interests.

In the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the backdown that the late Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev was forced to make under U.S. pressure, and the great split between Moscow and Peking that occurred during his time in office, both helped to bring about Khrushchev's overthrow on 1964.

The positive prospect that President Nixon has held out to the world, an end to the Indochina war, may or may not be in the interest of the Soviet Union. U.S. strategists have debated through the years whether it is in the interest of the Kremlin to see the war end, or to see it continue, draining off U.S. resources which otherwise might be pitted against the Soviet Union globally.

President Nixon's proposal for ending the war with an internationally supervised, Indochina-wide cease-fire, a release of American prisoners and a withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam, has previously been offered in several forms.

This combination of proposals has never before appeared publicly with a time limit as short as "within four months." But in the present case, this time limit is coupled to a continuing, novel, military threat.