

by David F. Mustin

'The Ultimate Betrayal'

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By ROGER MORRIS

WASHINGTON — There is no room now for sympathy with either side of the painful debate over the blockade of North Vietnam. But at some point this decision should also be seen as personal tragedy for the men who made it—Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon.

The sense of defeat for Kissinger is already there, of course, in the pain of his public defense of the action, in the artless leaks trickling through Washington that this was the decision Henry finally opposed. History, as Kissinger well knows, will be both more generous and less sparing than these first sordid efforts at public explanation.

There is an authentic and sad irony in Henry Kissinger—one of the most gifted minds in grace public service, the man who at last brought rigorous independent analysis to master public affairs, whose incompetence and illusion in so many issues—should now forsake the facts and follow a course his own best studies have shown unwelcome. And it is tragic that this man, who might well have been a worthy example for a new generation of men of letters and humane policy-makers, will now have his reputation consumed by Vietnam.

One suspects that in the end he simply lost control. Our policies in East Bangladesh and the Middle East have been failures because Kissinger left them too long to the bureaucrats. Vietnam he left too long to the President.

But then the blockade is his loss, a tragic loss for President Nixon. He came to office with probable the most thorough preparation in foreign affairs we have ever enjoyed in the Presidency. His knowledge and insights matched what Kissinger made early in his career at the National Security Council. It contrasts in a most embarrassing way to the other part of the table.

Yet a President who possessed the subtlety and foresight to reach for détente with Moscow and Peking now

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strikes out to retrieve a failed cold war policy in Vietnam.

Kissinger and Nixon are both captives of a mistaken historical and political analogy. Both men truly believe those rhetorical omens in Presidential speeches about a "bright line" between Communism's victory and defeat. Kissinger wishes to believe that the line is drawn by the fact of West Germany. Nixon believes that he can look at Albania to learn about the possibility of the McCarthy period. Mixed with fear and misunderstanding are an obsessive hope, a heavy burden of pride and that much expanded passion with no limits in life or death. Perhaps the only secret that Kissinger has for Nixon and grandiose explanation for Kissinger was the unwelcome realization of honor and approval in Vietnam.

And so we were to have a strategy of the "decent interval"—a Homer for a poet who offered anything but a plan for the "decent interval" of this epoch.

The purpose was to avoid a Communist victory and Richard Nixon's "détente" Kissinger's tenure in the White House will have been seen as a failure if it ends in a "decent interval" that led the Saigon regime and led for the complete period, or to hold the interval militarily with Vietnamese troops and U.S. air power.

North Vietnam rejected the first approach and doubtless saw the second—after Cambodia, Laos, the resumed

bombing of the North, and all the talk about fidelity to Saigon—as proof that American disengagement would be limited to ground troops to assure the President's re-election. Faced with the prospect of a "decent interval" in which a second-term Nixon could count on without political restraint, they would while they could still affect the Presidential campaign here.

There is one last, bloody result of Kissinger and Nixon in their failure: the very people they claimed to protect, the people of South Vietnam, who are now paying the price of this North Vietnamese offensive and American policy has unleashed.

For men who so prize honor, this ultimate betrayal of an ally is damning.

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