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'The Ultimate Betrayal'

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By ROGER MORRIS

WASHINGTON — There seems no room now for sympathy on either side of the partisan 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 exculpation.

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

One suspects that in the end he simply lost control. Our policies toward 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 no less a tragic irony for President Nixon. He came to office with probably the most thorough preparation in foreign affairs we have ever enjoyed in the Presidency. His knowledge and insights, matched to Kissinger's, made early meetings of the National Security Council a contrast in talent embarrassing to the other men at 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 "nightmare of re-creation" in this country following a Communist victory in Vietnam. Kissinger seems to believe it because he is haunted by the fate of Weimar Germany, Nixon because he still seems to look at America too much through the prism of the McCarthy period.

Mixed with fear and misunderstanding are obviously more banal ingredients of pride and that much-examined obsession with *machismo* in life and policy. Perhaps the only goal that rivaled re-election for Nixon and grand policy reformation for Kissinger was the martyrdom to their notion of honor and manliness in Vietnam.

And so we were given the strategy of the "decent interval"—a misnomer for a policy which offered anything but decency to the thousands of innocent people the U.S. bombed.

The purpose was to avoid a Communist victory during Richard Nixon's (and Henry Kissinger's) tenure in office. There were two ways seen to buy that time from Hanoi: to negotiate a deal that left the Saigon regime intact for the requisite 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 bomb without political restraint, they struck while they could still affect the Presidential campaign here.

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

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

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