

# Tragedy of Ignorance

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## WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON, April 20—The Vietnam war has illustrated once more the limitations of political leadership and the unpredictability of human conduct. Nothing is more tragic in this seemingly endless story of human weakness than the consistent misjudgments on both sides of the enemy on the other side. Time and again, by misconceiving the leaders and people they were fighting against, both have failed to serve their own best interests. It is happening again in Hanoi.

First, it was President Kennedy who thought he could bluff Moscow and intimidate Hanoi by increasing the American contingent in Saigon to 16,000 American "advisers." Then Lyndon Johnson, in the critical period after his spectacular victory as a "man of peace" in the 1964 election, misjudged the tenacity of the North Vietnamese and the determination of Moscow and Peking to risk a confrontation on a battlefield unfavorable to the United States.

It was simply inconceivable to Mr. Johnson that the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong would not submit if (1) he put his air power over the battlefield, and then (2) put an American expeditionary force on the ground. And now, even Mr. Nixon, who is a less romantic and more pragmatic man, is still operating on the assumption that the enemy that would not compromise when we had over half a million soldiers on the ground and an even larger air force in the battle, will compromise when we are saying negotiate on our terms or we'll pull all our ground troops out anyway.

This says a lot about human faith and patriotism, but even more about human ignorance, for Moscow and Peking will probably never have a better opportunity to confront the United States under more favorable circumstances, at so little cost to themselves, and with a Communist ally in Vietnam whose soldiers have more courage and endurance.

All this having been said, it is now apparently Hanoi's turn to demonstrate that its ignorance of America's psychology and America's politics is almost equal to our ignorance of theirs. They are supposed to be among the most patient people on earth, but they couldn't wait to let the logic of the American withdrawal from Vietnam work its way. They felt they could smash their way through the demilitarized zone and defy the "understanding" they knew we expected, even if they had not agreed to it themselves, and destroy the South Vietnamese without the massive intervention of American air power.

This was an assumption and a pre-judgment of Washington as great as Kennedy's or Johnson's assumptions in the earlier phases of the war. Leave aside the wisdom or unwisdom of the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong—the main point in both cases is that war is unpredictable, and Hanoi, like Washington, misjudged the reaction.

Hanoi is now misconceiving the United States in other ways. It apparently thinks it can influence the outcome of the American Presidential

election if it can embarrass and even humiliate President Nixon; but it would have to smash his Vietnamization policy all the way and destroy or scatter the Saigon forces to do that, and this would be such a humiliation for the President that the American voters might very well rally to his support and re-elect him.

Hanoi's handling of the American prisoners of war is an even better illustration of its misjudgment of American psychology and its own best interests. Hanoi is trying to win the battle of American public opinion. It thinks the American people are sick of the war, which is right, and that they will act like the French people after Dienbienphu, which is wrong.

They seem to believe that holding the American prisoners is their trump card in winning their battle for American opinion, and forcing President Nixon to settle the war on their own terms, and one can understand their logic in historical terms.

Seldom, if ever, in the history of warfare have prisoners been released before the terms of peace have been arranged. But the Americans are funny people. They care more about the human problems than the political problems. And in the present situation, the guess here is that they will be more likely to get out of the war if the prisoners are released and safe conduct for the remaining 69,000 American soldiers is assured, than if Hanoi holds onto them as hostages and demands that Mr. Nixon knuckle under to them.

The attempt by Hanoi to win a classic victory on the battlefield and compel a settlement by holding the prisoners is probably as great a blunder as Kennedy's or Johnson's efforts to win by power in the sixties. The lesson of this war is that physical power has not worked for either side, and it is not going to end the conflict by bombing Hanoi, invading the DMZ or holding prisoners as blackmail.

The families of the American prisoners are now well organized. They know better than anybody else that increasing the violence by a massive invasion of South Vietnam or by sending the B-52's against Hanoi and Haiphong is not going to settle anything, but merely keep their men in prison.

If American opinion is Hanoi's objective—and it has been for a long time—its greatest opportunity is to release the American prisoners, not to the American Government, but to their families, and guarantee the safe exit of the last few thousand soldiers.

These are really the popular objectives of the American people, not the defense of the Saigon Government, or the democratization of South Vietnam, or the future strategic configuration of Asia and the Pacific. But Hanoi, at the end of the war, has misjudged America, as Washington misjudged North Vietnam at the beginning. And this is the ultimate tragedy, for America is ready for a settlement, if the politicians on both sides will only give back its prisoners and its soldiers.