

Nixon's timing was ruined by Hanoi's new offensive

WASHINGTON — There is no longer any doubt that the showdown battle over South Vietnam is now raging on several fronts.

It is also evident from secret White House papers in our possession that the timing has upset President Nixon's strategy for ending American involvement in the Vietnam war.

He had gambled that Hanoi wouldn't force a military showdown until the U.S. pullout was complete. He, therefore, paced the withdrawal to give the South Vietnamese time to bolster their defenses.

His timing was also intended to delay the final offensive until he was safely past the November election. He did his best to persuade Hanoi, Peking and Moscow that the United States would depart Vietnam but would fight if provoked.

Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese have now thrown their entire army, except for two training divisions, into a victory drive at the worst possible time for the President.

Back to Vietnam?

His military advisers agree that bombing will hamper but won't stop the Communist offensive. There are also grave doubts about South Vietnam's ability to withstand the assault. The President, therefore, is studying contingency plans to send the U.S. Marines back to Vietnam.

This would certainly wreck his summit meeting in Moscow and jeopardize his goal of a "generation of peace." It would also cause disruptions at home that could jeopardize his re-election.

Yet the secret White House papers show

that the President was fully aware of South Vietnam's inability to stand alone when he began withdrawing U.S. forces. Shortly after he took over as Commander-in-Chief, his military advisers joined in a unanimous warning that the South Vietnamese would be unable to handle the Communist threat alone "in the foreseeable future."

They agreed: "Today's Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), without full

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support of U.S. combat forces, could not cope with a sizeable level of North Vietnamese Army forces. . . .

"The RVNAF, with their present structure and degree of combat readiness, are inadequate to handle a sizeable level of North Vietnamese Army forces. The RVNAF simply are not capable of attaining the level of self-sufficiency and overwhelming force superiority that would be required to counter combined Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnamese Army main force offensives."

At best, the military advisers hoped that "by 1972" the South Vietnamese would be able "to handle the Viet Cong insurgency if the Viet Cong are not reinforced and supported by the North Vietnamese Army."

The Defense secretariat made this blunt additional assessment: "Without major reforms with the RVNAF command and selection system, it is unlikely that the RVNAF as presently organized and led will ever constitute an effective political or military counter to the Viet Cong."

Final paragraph included in version carried by SFChronicle (filed Nix Ad):

Although President Nixon did his best to strengthen the South Vietnamese, he hoped to postpone the inevitable test until the United States had cleared out of Vietnam. Unhappily, the showdown has come while he still has one foot stuck in the country.