

James Reston

The Sure Way To Re-Elect Nixon

Washington

THE ANTIWAR student movement has reached another critical point in its turbulent history. Some of its leaders are advocating violence again, and some are holding back, while the majority of the university students seem apathetic or frustrated; so this may be a good time to look at the problem.

The hope of the campus militants apparently is to influence President Nixon to stop the bombing in Vietnam and maybe even to drive him out of office, but while the tactics of violence undoubtedly contributed to these results with President Johnson in 1968, the situation now is quite different.



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Mr. Johnson had over half a million American soldiers in Vietnam in the spring of 1968 and no plan to get out. There was no visible movement then toward an accommodation with China or the Soviet Union, no real progress toward control of nuclear arms, no tangible evidence of European unity or East-West agreement on European security, no cease-fire between the Arab states and Israel, and no realistic negotiations for world monetary and trade reform. All this is different now.

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NOTHING has been settled but everything is in movement. The Democratic party controlled the White House in 1968, and Richard Nixon was struggling back from a record of unpopularity and defeat, but now he is in the White House, in trouble but in command, and it is the Democrats who are in disarray.

Mr. Nixon is not going to be blown out of the White House by students taking over ROTC headquarters on campus or throwing deans out of second-story windows. He is not trapped in the White House or forced to travel around the country from military base to military base. He is not worried about his health or thinking about going home to save his life.

He is running well ahead in the polls, with a lot going for him in the foreign field outside of Vietnam, and violent demonstrations against him could easily assure his re-election.

THE STUDENTS who want to wind down Nixon and set January 20, 1973, as the date certain for his total withdrawal from American politics have only two chances, and even these are not very good: to turn their energies to quiet, legal, political organization to get the 25 million young new eligible voters registered, and to turn their minds to the domestic issues of unemployment, high prices, tax reform, and the reunification of the nation.

The country is sick of violence, sick of Vietnam and bored to death with the trivial squabbles of the Democrats; and more violence by the campus militants, who are even less popular now than when they helped elect Mr. Nixon in 1968, is only going to divide the country even more, and perpetuate the very things they fear and hate the most.

The sticking point that just barely holds Mr. Nixon's Vietnam policy together is the American prisoners of war, and on this issue the antiwar student movement might have some influence. The more demonstrations there are against the President on the campuses, the more Hanoi is likely to believe that it can win the war by invasion and violence and by holding the American prisoners as hostages and by counting on antiwar public opinion in the United States.

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THE KEY to ending the war is the release of these prisoners. Once this is done, the last popular argument for Mr. Nixon's policy is gone.

Hanoi is operating on the illusion that holding the prisoners is their greatest asset, but in fact holding them could be the greatest barrier to a settlement, and nobody has a better chance to persuade them of this fundamental point than the antiwar organizations in the American universities and elsewhere.

In any event, Mr. Nixon is not going to be diverted from his present course by campus turmoil, which he regards as a political asset.

The universities cannot persuade him or bully him with demonstrations, but they have the power of political registration and organization, and they might have some influence in Hanoi to get the prisoners released to their families. And this sort of thing has much more chance of influencing the course of the war and the election than smashing windows or stopping traffic.

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