

Nixon's Hardest Decision

By JAMES RESTON

President Nixon is now approaching another critical decision in Vietnam: What to do if the enemy stops the invasion before or after the battle for the former Vietnamese capital of Hue, and offers to make a deal while Hanoi is in control of a large part of the north of South Vietnam?

There have been some reliable indications through the embassies in Paris and Washington that Hanoi and the National Liberation Front will do just that, and such a pause in the fighting would put the Nixon Administration and the Thieu Government in Saigon in a very awkward situation.

So long as the Communist offensive goes on—and it is making alarming progress—Mr. Nixon's policy is clear. He has stated that he would do "whatever is necessary," short of using atomic weapons or sending the American expeditionary force back into the battle on the ground—"until the North Vietnamese stop their offensive in South Vietnam."

But he has left himself an out. He has not said that he would continue his air and naval attacks until they pull back of the demilitarized zone and get their troops out of South Vietnam, but only "until the invasion stops." What then if it stops, with Hanoi in substantial control of the North or even of Hue?

"The only thing we have refused to do," Mr. Nixon said in his last Vietnam policy statement on April 26, "is to accede to the enemy's demand to overthrow the lawfully constituted Government of South Vietnam and to impose a Communist dictatorship in its place."

But when Le Duc Tho of the North Vietnamese Politburo got back to Paris on April 30 to re-open the negotiations, he denied that he was demanding a Communist government in Saigon.

"In South Vietnam," he said in a formal statement, "what we want is a government of national harmony.... We in no way want to impose a 'Communist regime' in South Vietnam such as Mr. Nixon has fabricated, but our people is also determined not to permit the American administration to establish a puppet power in its pay."

Well, we have heard all this before, but with the enemy invasion cutting South Vietnam in half and threatening Hue, the alternatives before the President are hard and even ominous. The farther south the enemy penetrates, the closer the armies get together and the more they move into populous civilian areas, where the President has to risk hitting the ARVN and the South Vietnamese people.

He can insist on fighting the battle through, relying on the South Vietnamese and American air and naval power to smash the invasion and drive the enemy back of the DMZ; or, if the enemy pauses and offers to negotiate at Hue, he can agree to negotiate for a coalition government in Saigon, with the Communists and without General Thieu.

It is a hard bargain, but he is probably going to have to choose between fighting even harder while he withdraws his ground forces, or negotiating a new coalition government in Saigon. Mr. Nixon has been up against many hard decisions since he entered the White House, but this may be the hardest of all, especially since he has to try to reconcile the tough moral line he took at Secretary Connally's ranch in Texas, with his mission to Moscow this month to negotiate "a generation of peace," which is his main Presidential election argument.

In the middle of his first term in the White House, Mr. Nixon offered to negotiate a settlement on the basis of the hard political and geographical facts: Who was in control of what in South Vietnam? And now Hanoi seems to be testing that proposition.

Mr. Nixon gave three reasons in his April 26 speech for continuing the battle: "First, to protect our remaining American forces. Second, to permit continuation of our withdrawal program. And third, to prevent the imposition of a Communist regime on the people of South Vietnam against their will, with the inevitable bloodbath that would follow for hundreds of thousands who have dared to oppose Communist aggression."

Hanoi's answer to this, from Le Duc Tho in Paris, was that his Government would guarantee the protection of the remaining American forces and the release of the American prisoners, and that it didn't want to impose a Communist government on Saigon, but that it "demanded" the "immediate resignation" of Nguyen Van Thieu as head of the Saigon regime, and a change of policy in Saigon by a new coalition government, including the Communists.

Nothing could be harder for Mr. Nixon to swallow, but he may have to swallow it or fight even harder than before by the end of this month. The danger at the moment is that Hanoi is doing so well in the drive toward Hue that it may think it can smash its way to a military victory and not only demoralize and defeat Saigon but humiliate Washington.

Hopefully, they will not take this gamble, because nobody in Washington or Moscow or Peking, let alone in Hanoi, can calculate what Mr. Nixon will do if he is trapped. This point has been emphasized through private channels to everybody on the other side, and apparently they have got the point.

So Hanoi will probably call for a cease-fire at Hue and proclaim an alternative "government" of South Vietnam there, and ask for a compromise settlement and a coalition government in Saigon without General Thieu.

What then will Mr. Nixon do? This is the question that is being debated privately in Washington these days, and the answer may very well determine the outcome of the war and influence the Presidential election in November.