

Silence on Vietnam

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, May 25—The North Vietnamese should be getting the message by now. Their main ports are closed by American mines. There are now six U. S. aircraft carriers off their coast, bombing them night and day. The railroad lines from China to Hanoi are now under constant attack, and the weather and American air power have slowed down their offensive against Hue and Danang in the north, Kontum city in the central highlands, and Anloc, north of Saigon.

Moreover, the U. S. counteroffensive in the air is not only battering their lines of communication and supply, but turning to their electric power plants, and they are on notice that their industrial factories will be next and that even the destruction of the Red River dikes is not ruled out.

Meanwhile, the Chinese diplomats almost seem to be going out of their way these days to be pleasant to Americans in the capitals of the world, and the Soviets are signing an agreement a day with President Nixon on issues which are more important to Moscow than Vietnam.

It is popular among the friends of Hanoi to say that air power never settles anything, particularly when the North Vietnamese can always break off the battle and retreat into Laos and Cambodia, and carry on a protracted guerrilla war from there, and this may very well be true. But the human cost of this battle, whatever the safe arm-chair strategists say, is appalling.

This war could easily turn into a massacre and end up by destroying everything Hanoi, Saigon, Washington, Moscow and Peking say they are trying to save. In such a situation the so-called "great powers," if the phrase means anything, might be expected to put all their peace-loving proclamations into practice and give a little to encourage a cease-fire.

There is little point now in raking over the arguments of the past, or counting on a new American President to introduce a new American policy. By the time of the election, the way things are going, there will be very little left to save, and it is no favor to Hanoi or anybody else to cheer them on to disaster.

The plain fact is that President Nixon now has no incentive to stop the bombing and lift the blockade, other than the human tragedy, which does not seem to move him. Moscow and Peking have turned away from his challenge—at least so far—and unless they can break his blockade, which does not seem likely, they either have to watch the slaughter go on, or fly in new long-range rockets which

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can hit the carriers and the South Vietnamese cities. And that would only add to the carnage.

Maybe Hanoi is still hoping to take the old imperial capital of Hue and then call for a cease-fire, with both sides holding the ground they have captured; but they are not likely to do even that without a little more pressure from Moscow and Peking than they've had so far.

President Nixon has asked for two things: to get his prisoners out, and to have an internationally supervised cease-fire. He has offered two things: to get all his forces out of Vietnam within four months of the return of the prisoners and the introduction of the cease-fire, and then to leave the political settlement to the North and South Vietnamese themselves.

This was not put forward on a take-it-or-leave-it basis but as a basis for discussion. Obviously many other things have to be settled, including what aid, if any, Washington and Moscow and Peking would continue sending to their respective allies. But even if there were a cease-fire on Nixon's terms, Hanoi would still be in possession of much of the north of the country, and could claim that it had expelled the French, fought the Americans to a compromise, and finally got all foreign troops out of the country after over a hundred years.

At the very least, the President could send Ambassador Porter or John Connally back to the negotiating table in Paris. The argument against doing so is that Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator, merely uses the negotiations for propaganda. But the absence of the Americans gives him the argument that we won't even talk, and besides, Le Duc Tho doesn't need the talks to put out his propaganda. All he has to do is call a press conference at his hotel.

The immediate problem is to stop the killing. There is little evidence that either the enemy's ground offensive or the U.S. aerial counteroffensive will actually be decisive for one side or the other, but a prolonged struggle along the present lines could be disastrous for both the North and the South.

Presumably these things were discussed by the President and Chairman Brezhnev at the dacha outside Moscow the other night, but so far the world has heard nothing to indicate that the new Moscow "atmosphere of peace" and the "acknowledged responsibilities of the great powers" are being brought to bear on this unspeakable human tragedy in Vietnam.