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A factor in Hanoi: Nixon's slide in '68

WASHINGTON — When the conventions were over in the summer of 1968, Republican Richard Nixon held a lead over Democrat Hubert Humphrey of 16 per cent in the polls. As everyone now knows, that lead dwindled by Election Day to less than 1 per cent.

There are lessons to be learned from this experience—lessons for Richard Nixon—and lessons for whoever is the Democratic nominee.

But these can wait. For the present, what is important about the Nixon slide of 1968 is what it means to the men in Hanoi who, we may be certain, have it very much in mind.

The men in Hanoi

The reason the men in Hanoi have the Nixon slide in mind is that they are now engaged in a searching dialogue, trying to decide whether they will go back to the negotiating table at Paris.

In Washington, in Moscow, in Peking and to a lesser extent in the other foreign offices of the world men are waiting to see how the dialogue comes out. In all these capitals, there are two schools of thought, doubtless paralleled by two opposing factions in Hanoi.

The first school holds that the men of Hanoi will come back to the table, ready to deal on Mr. Nixon's terms: cease-fire, supervised elections, end to the bombing, all U.S. troops out of the country.

Wait for McGovern?

The second school holds that the men of Hanoi will wait for George McGovern—or some other Democratic candidate—whereupon they will simply take over the country.

The first school—to which Dr. Henry Kissinger inclines—argues as follows: China and Russia have urged the men of Hanoi to go back to the table. Coming from chief suppliers, the advice carries weight.

A 'bird in the hand'

Moreover, so this school reasons, the men of Hanoi must know that the moment the United States gets out of Vietnam, they

have an excellent chance to take the place over. True, Mr. Nixon will continue to supply the South Vietnamese army, but it was not the South Vietnamese army which halted the latest offensive. It was U.S. bombers. Once Mr. Nixon removes those bombers, Ha-

Tom Braden

noi, ought to win. A final point—a clincher, so this school believes: If the men of Hanoi refuse to come back to the table, and Mr. Nixon is re-elected to another four years, there will be nothing to restrain him from doing what everybody suspects he has wanted to do all along: clobber Hanoi and win the war. "A bird in the hand." That's the essence of the argument by school number one.

But there is also school No. 2. One surmises that Gen. Giap—thought to be somewhat out of favor since the failure of his recent offensive—is a member of this school. The argument of school No. 2 is based upon the Nixon slide. It may also be based upon memories of the peace marches, the moratoriums, the national revulsion after Cambodia and the revolt on the campus.

The American people, so school No. 2 maintains, will defeat Nixon. The men of Hanoi will wait for the election of George McGovern or for a Democratic nominee who thinks along McGovern's lines.

Watch the polls

As in all battles between factions more more or less evenly disposed, this one seems most likely to end in compromise. The betting here is that the men of Hanoi will decide to go back to the conference table—thus placating their suppliers—but will stall, thus placating their own hard-liners.

They will seize a point in Mr. Nixon's plan about which they may reasonably haggle, and they will haggle through the summer and into the fall.

Meantime, they will watch the polls. When October comes, they will move, one way or another. Which way will depend upon whether the polls show the likelihood of another of Mr. Nixon's slides.