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Why Nixon Took 'The Slow Road'



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WE HAVE had access to classified documents which shed new light on the controversy over whether President Nixon "missed" an opportunity to end the Vietnam War in 1969.

The North Vietnamese sent out several signals after the 1968 election that they were willing to make peace with the new Nixon Administration. These ranged from guarded messages to military pullbacks.

The messages, some more vague than others, reached Washington through a variety of channels. But more impressive was the withdrawal of 22 of 25 regiments from the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam.

The key to the controversy lies in the interpretation of these moves. The new President chose not to regard the messages as serious peace overtures. He also interpreted the withdrawal of the 22 regiments as a military redeployment rather than a political signal.

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THE MINUTES of a secret White House meeting on October 28, 1969, summarize the Nixon attitude. Speaking for the President, Henry Kissinger declared:

"We have mentioned 'cease fire' (to Hanoi) in various connotations. If they want a reasonable compromise, we will meet them half way. If they insist on American humiliation, we will resist."

He held out hope the North Vietnamese, despite louder growlings from Hanoi, would come to terms.

He outlined a two-track strategy for peace. "The rapid road would be negotia-

tion," he said, "the slow road to Vietnamization."

President Nixon has traveled the slow road. His intelligence estimates warned that a Communist takeover in South Vietnam was inevitable. His Vietnamization policy, therefore, was aimed at delaying it, not avoiding it.

The President was determined to hold off the day the Communists took power in Saigon, we must conclude, for his own political reasons. He simply didn't want the Communists in control of the South while he was running for re-election in 1972.

He had reason to regard Communist control more as a political problem for himself than a serious menace to the United States. For at the time of his inauguration, the national intelligence estimate was cautiously optimistic about the effects of a Communist takeover.

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THE CIA's Office of National Estimates said in 1969 that, if Saigon fell, "North Vietnam would consume itself in Laos and South Vietnam. Only Laos would definitely follow into the Communist orbit."

This would leave Southeast Asia, in the CIA's opinion, "just as it is at least for another generation."

Whatever the intelligence assessment, however, President Nixon's political assessment was that he couldn't afford to lose South Vietnam to the Communists before the 1972 election.

Perhaps he is right that the "rapid road" to peace, via negotiation, was illusory. But the "slow road," which he elected to take, has cost more than 15,000 American lives since he took office.