

# Watch and Wait

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, March 18—The stories from Washington about alleged North Vietnamese infiltration southward in violation of the truce terms have had a well-orchestrated quality. First reports of the movement of men and arms were leaked. Then the Pentagon officially endorsed the field reports. Finally the President spoke gravely of them at his press conference.

The tone of the warnings to Hanoi grew sharper also. The opening suggestion was that such infiltration could imperil any American aid for North Vietnam. Then Mr. Nixon, recalling his "actions over the past four years," said Hanoi "should not lightly disregard" his expressions of concern. It was left to commentators to make it explicit that this could mean renewed American bombing and mining.

Why this highly dramatized signal from Washington to Hanoi, this implicit threat of renewed American military action? After all, the Vietnamese parties have done a great deal of fighting since the truce was signed at the end of January, and there has been little American reaction. Few observers in South Vietnam doubt that both sides have committed truce violations, and they are continuing.

The answer must be that the President saw in these particular reports a potential for something he could not ignore: a large-scale Communist offensive in South Vietnam. He implicitly drew a distinction between weapons useful for that purpose and routine resupply or reinforcement. Indeed, in contrast to Henry Kissinger's talk of North Vietnamese forces in the South withering away, Mr. Nixon seemed to accept their permanence by indicating that he was little concerned about infiltration of "replacement personnel."

The distinction reflects the political realities inside the United States right now. Americans are on the whole relieved to see their country's role in the Vietnam disaster ending, and are prepared to close their eyes to much continued fighting among the Vietnamese. But if the other side moves too crudely and too quickly to upset the terms, Mr. Nixon might well have public support for intervening again.

Those who have thought for years that the United States was trying to impose its will by savage means on another people's conflict will find bitter ironies in the sudden grave warnings from Washington to Hanoi. For once again the United States is viewing the situation with distorted partisan vision.

Any fair appraisal of the balance of weapons and supplies in South Vietnam could hardly ignore the immense tonnage of American matériel

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rushed there after Saigon successfully objected to the proposed peace terms in October. There probably has been nothing like it in history.

For example, between Oct. 26 and Dec. 1 the United States got 608 aircraft to South Vietnam, enlarging Saigon's air force by nearly 50 per cent. As for ground supplies, this post-truce comment by a British correspondent says enough: "The Government side is expending ammunition as if they were getting it free and as though there was plenty more where it comes from—both of which propositions are probably true."

The other point of partial vision is of course the way Washington does not see, or at least says nothing out loud about, Saigon's violations of the truce. The Communists were given a political quid pro quo for agreeing to the military terms: the right to compete politically on equal terms in the South, with civilian as well as military prisoners released and free speech and freedom of movement restored. The Saigon regime has so far simply ignored those provisions.

But those flaws in the official American vision, however bitterly one may regard them, cannot cancel out political realities. And so President Nixon's warnings have to be taken seriously.

The truth is that Hanoi would be extremely ill-advised if it had any idea of launching an offensive soon in the South. Its principal interest now should be that the United States really stop playing God in Southeast Asia, leaving the people there to decide their own future. That end can be achieved only by allowing time for emotions to fade—time for Americans to forget a war they want to forget.

Washington, for its part, should perceive that Saigon's violations of the truce also carry great potential dangers. If President Thieu's forces keep trying to nibble away at the other side's territory, keep bombing any village under Vietcong control that foreign correspondents visit, keep refusing to release prisoners, keep prohibiting freedom of movement and political organization, the other side will at length almost certainly respond by fighting.

A moment of maximum danger for this fragile stand-off arrangement may be at hand. A little more than a week from now the last American prisoners are to be returned. That will reduce direct American concern, but it could also weaken restraints on United States policy. It is in the interest of both sides to keep their relations on an unprovocative course.