



Time for Decision On Vietnam War

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ANYONE who knows how to read the signs, must be aware that grave decisions about the Vietnamese war are soon to be taken in the White House. The ritual visit to the front by General Alexander Haig has always meant just that. Enough time has passed since Haig's return for the President to begin to make up his mind.

Anyone who knows the situation also knows the question the President has to answer. It has been staring the President in the face for at least a month. It comes in two parts.

Will the U.S. look the other way, while North Vietnam freely, flagrantly and dangerously violates the most vital provisions of the cease-fire agreement, that was attained at such cost and negotiated with such difficulty? Or will the U.S. end by taking the hard, hideously unpleasant measures that may be needed to force Hanoi's compliance with the cease-fire accord?

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THE MEASURES in question can only be progressively dosed applications of force by bombing, and perhaps renewed mining of the ports of North Vietnam. Nothing could be more repellent for any political leader than the kind of choice now facing the President. Nothing could be more bitterly disappointing, either — although the need for the choice should not be all that surprising, since breaking just-signed agreements has always been a habit of the North Vietnamese leaders.

Against this background, the apparently isolated tit-for-tat in Laos has to be seen as a first warning shot across the

bows, so to say. If the Hanoi leaders are wise, they will read this warning shot as meaning that the President is most unlikely to look the other way, while the cease-fire agreement is continuously and grossly violated.

Anyone who knows Mr. Nixon also knows, in fact, what course his successive decisions are now likely to follow. He is not the sort of man to do nothing while the agreement he worked for, and took risks for, and asked national sacrifices for, goes down the usual drain of Hanoi's broken promises. One has to expect him to end by doing all he can to make the Hanoi leaders understand that this time, they must keep their promises.

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ONE MUST of course wait and see whether this reading of the President's basic character and style of policy-making is correct. One must further wait and see whether the leaders in Hanoi steer away from their usual promise-breaking, because of the inherent risks. They certainly will not lack for Chinese and Soviet warnings.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting another factor, never before noted, that must be making the President's hard choice a great deal harder. In brief, he is the first President of the United States in the whole course of our history who has not been able to explain all the reasons for his hard choices to the country, in full and forthright terms.

This is because Mr. Nixon is also the first President in our history to have engaged in sustained, highly successful and genuinely secret diplomacy.