

Nixon's Vietnam Strategy: How It Was Launched with the Aid of Brezhnev and Mao And How the Vietnamese Intend to Defeat it

LATE THIS MAY, while President Nixon was giving away Cadillacs and signing treaties in the Kremlin, a letter soliciting funds for his campaign chest was sent to a select list of Republican supporters. The contents of the letter cast an illuminating light both on the strategy of the coming elections and its intimate links to the shifting vectors of the world power struggle.

"Dear Fellow American," it began, "We need your help to make the reelection of President Nixon a reality." We believe that the President should be re-elected, it went on, "*first*, because by travelling around the globe and meeting with all major leaders, he is setting us on the path to world peace"; *second*, because by appointing strict constructionists to the Supreme Court, "he is bringing law and order back to America," and *third*, because he is "slowing inflation" and has "helped to return America to a sound fiscal economy." (The bread and butter issue, usually in the number one spot in election campaigns, is no doubt relegated to such a low priority be-

cause, with a \$90 billion deficit to explain, and large-scale unemployment to minimize, it is so weak.)

If the Nixon campaign strategy, as outlined in this letter, pays off, conservatism at home and abroad will be confirmed in November, as a workable solution to the conflicts and general disequilibrium which troubled the Empire in the Democratic '60s.

Such a prospect would have seemed wildly implausible just a short time ago. At this juncture, however, it is not only plausible, but all that remains to make it probable is a ceasefire agreement with the Vietnamese, sometime before the November election. One can confidently assume that such an agreement is the next objective of the Nixon-Kissinger strategy, the calculated climax of the diplomatic offensive which first came into the public eye with Kissinger's appearance in Peking just one year ago. Even a ceasefire agreement would virtually clinch Nixon's chances of re-election, and it is unlikely that, having gone to such lengths to create a winning hand, he will fail to play any card that

would take in all the chips.

One can further assume that if Nixon gets a settlement, as the result of the diplomatic maneuvers of the last year, it will be a settlement that he wants, and not the settlement for which the Vietnamese have paid so heavy a price in human suffering and human life. For if Nixon were willing to settle for a face-saving exit from Vietnam, he could have done so three years ago when he first took office. In fact, 1969 would have been the best year to get a favorable (but meaningful) withdrawal agreement, because as a new president he was in a stronger bargaining position to negotiate such a solution. But Nixon did not want that kind of withdrawal, i.e., one that would "ratify" an NLF victory, and therefore he bent his policy towards another course.

While withdrawing American troops under the deceptive rubric of "Vietnamization," he escalated the air war in the South, invaded Cambodia and Laos, and resumed the bombing of the North; since then he has mined North Vietnam's harbors and in general

by David Horowitz



President Nixon and Mao Tse-Tung

raised the technological assault to the most intense levels of the war. All this effort of diplomacy and destruction has been marshalled for the settlement Nixon wants — not a satisfactory withdrawal, but a settlement that would mean “pacification,” denying the NLF the victory that it has won on the battlefield. Pacification has been the aim all the time; however much the original expectations have been lowered, the goal has remained. That is the meaning of the four years of Nixon’s war in Vietnam.

What has given Nixon’s strategy the prospect of success, where Kennedy and Johnson failed? It is simply that the Soviet Union and China, Vietnam’s closest and most important allies, have accepted Nixon’s offer (which Kennedy and Johnson could probably not have made): to come to the diplomatic table and pick up most of the chips that the Vietnamese have paid for with their lives. For the Chinese this has resulted in virtual recognition, UN membership, a general easing of U.S. cold war pressures, and the prospect of economic trade; for the Russians, a nuclear arms agreement, a long sought-for stabilization of the European security problem, and also the prospect of increased trade. As a result of these gains by their allies, the Vietnamese now stand virtually alone before the destructive

might of the U.S. Air Force (even North Korea’s Kim Il-Sung has taken the opportunity afforded by Nixon’s diplomatic opening to indicate that he would welcome the chance to improve relations with the United States). Meanwhile, Nixon has been freed to prepare the settlement cards, which, if he has not already done so, he will shortly lay on the negotiating table. We don’t even have to speculate about secret deals at this point; the very structure of the situation and the behavior of the great power participants only makes sense in terms of their desire to facilitate such a settlement.

That is the significance of the Sino-Soviet failure to react to the resumption of the air war against North Vietnam and the mining of Haiphong Harbor — indeed, their reception of Nixon as an honored guest within weeks of each of the respective escalations. For, until now, the fear of possible military responses by China and the Soviet Union has been the significant brake on the murderous propensities of the U. S. Air Force, prompting the White House to restrict its military leaders. A *New York Times* dispatch of June 12, under the heading “The Gloves Are Now Off in the U.S. Air War,” tells how the situation has changed: “United States military leaders are being permitted to wage the air war as

they want in Indochina.” the *Times* correspondent writes from Washington. “North Vietnam’s coast and harbors have been sealed off with mines and the bombing of military and industrial targets has become systematic and relatively unrestrained.” Unlike the shifting objectives of Johnson’s 1965-1968 campaign, the dispatch continues, “the goals of this air war are simple. Nixon Administration officials say they intend to deny North Vietnam any seaborne supplies that are essential to its long-term war effort.”

Thus the Chinese and the Russians in effect have given Nixon the green light to make an all out effort to deny the Vietnamese the supplies necessary for them to continue the war on the military front. At the same time, it can be safely assumed that Nixon will also call the debts he has secured in Moscow and Peking, in the form of appropriate pressures on the Vietnamese to accept a “reasonable” compromise settlement at the negotiating table. Once having allowed the war effort to be so weakened, Vietnam’s allies can be reasonably relied on to counsel early acceptance of realistic terms at the Paris talks. This was in fact the scenario of the 1954 Geneva Conference, at which China and Russia prevailed on the Vietnamese to accept an unviable agreement in th



President Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev

face of Washington's nuclear gun. It seems practical of Nixon and Kissinger to hope that the gamble might work again.

For obvious reasons, the Vietnamese cannot disclose their present feelings about the policies of allies who are still assiduously sending supplies to be interdicted by Nixon's planes. But it is not really necessary to rely on pure conjecture in order to establish the terms in which the Vietnamese must view these developments. Within two weeks of Kissinger's surfacing in Peking in July 1971, the Vietnamese had warned that Nixon's policy was "aimed at achieving a compromise between the big powers in an effort to impose their arrangements on smaller countries." (Editorial in *Nhan Dan*, the organ of the People's Army, July 19, 1971) A month later, *Nhan Dan* analyzed the Nixon Doctrine which, it said, consisted of "dividing containing and repelling." According to *Nhan Dan*, Nixon wanted to "uphold the signboards of 'negotiation' and 'East-West detente' and realize the policy of making friends with every country with a view to driving a wedge among the socialist countries and pitting one country against another." Nixon's policy and scheme, *Nhan Dan* concluded, "amply demonstrate the inevitable trend of imperialism which, as Lenin has pointed out,

wants to divide workers, increase opportunism within their movement and bring about its temporary dislocation." With regard to the peoples fighting for self-liberation, the "Nixon doctrine" wants, by wielding a steel fist in a velvet glove, to maintain and achieve neo-colonialism there at all costs." (*Nhan Dan* commentary August 30, 1971)

AN IMPORTANT INSIGHT is gained into the current turn of events by recalling Peking's very different position more than a decade earlier when Moscow called for a summit meeting as a "response" to Washington's Marine landings in Lebanon and Jordan at the time of the Iraqi revolution. In an editorial titled "The Countries and Peoples of the World Who Love Peace and Freedom Cannot Look On With Folded Arms," the *People's Daily* proclaimed: "Nothing can be saved by yielding to evil, and coddling wrong only helps the devil. The histories of the aggressive wars launched by Hitler Germany and Japan are still fresh in the memories of the whole world and are sufficient to bring this lesson home. Consequently, if the U.S.-British aggressors refuse to withdraw from Lebanon and Jordan, and insist on expanding their aggression, then the only course left

to the people of the world is to hit the aggressors on the head! . . . The imperialists have always bullied the weak and been afraid of the strong. The only language they understand is that of force."

Recalling China's stance in this incident provokes two immediate reflections. First, the current Chinese response (or lack of response) to Washington's escalation of the war in Indochina is evidently not an inevitable reflex of Chinese weakness, as many on the left are suggesting, but flows from a deliberate policy choice. For China was far weaker *vis-à-vis* the United States in the days when its posture was far more militant, viz., when it committed troops in Korea in 1951, when it shelled the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu in 1955 and 1958 and provoked an international crisis of the first magnitude, or when it dealt the Indian army a strong retaliatory blow in the border war of 1962.

The political, as opposed to the military sources of the present posture of compliance can perhaps best be seen by the absence of any public demonstrations in China in response to the mining of Haiphong Harbor. This can be contrasted with China's response to the Cambodian invasion, just two years ago, when a million demonstrators marched in the streets

of Peking. Even within the current context of cautious detente with Washington, such a demonstration would have been in order. But there was none. Behind this vacuum lies the fact that the current shift in Chinese policy is not merely tactical, but strategic, part of the fundamental re-orientation of China's foreign policy that began in earnest with the acceptance of Nixon's proposed visit. This re-orientation was possible only after a tremendous internal struggle in the Chinese party. A faction, led by Lin Piao, opposed the detente with Washington, and apparently advocated, as an alternative, an effort to heal the breach with the Soviet Union, and step up support for Vietnam. The defeat of Lin Piao's faction was registered in the disappearance of a number of important Party leaders last fall (see RAMPARTS, March 1972), and by the internal exile of Lin Piao himself, who reportedly has been sent to a commune for political rehabilitation. A mass demonstration over the mining of North Vietnam's harbors, it can be hypothesized, would have provided a rallying point for the followers of Lin to use as a vehicle for promoting a strong Sino-Soviet response to the U.S. aggression, and opposition to the long-term goals of China's present leadership, which gives equal priority to the struggle against Moscow and Washington, at the expense of the Vietnamese.

This points up the second insight afforded by the comparison of China's present and previous postures towards U.S. interventions in the Third World, namely, that the shift in China's policy is undoubtedly the key factor in the current train of events. For if China had initially failed to go along with the Nixon visit, or if China chose to balk at any point, the Nixon strategy could not be made to work. However overblown China's rhetoric of militance has been in the past (just what in practical terms could hitting the aggressors on the head have meant in the Middle East in 1958, for instance), China's active advocacy of the revolutionary interest of smaller nations was a crucial check on Moscow's ability to compromise the struggles of Third World peoples, like the Vietnamese. The Russians, in point of fact, have wanted a compromise set-

tlement in Vietnam all along, but neither Kennedy nor Johnson could get them to exercise enough pressure on the Vietnamese to accept a disadvantageous arrangement, because Moscow always had to look over its shoulder at Peking. As long as China was ready to expose such a deal or, by offering independent aid to the Vietnamese, upset it, the Russians were reluctant to pursue "coexistence" to such lengths. Too heavy-handed a pressure on the Vietnamese might at the very least have moved Hanoi into Peking's camp in the Sino-Soviet struggle and caused incalculable damage to the Soviet international image; on the other hand, as long as the Chinese could offer Vietnam an alternative source of supply, no threat to withdraw aid would have the possibility of being decisive. It was thus absolutely critical for Nixon to be accepted in Peking first, if such an arrangement were to have a chance of success.

Nixon's visits to Peking and Moscow marked the satisfactory completion of the first two stages of his pacification strategy. Whether he will be able to complete the third stage remains to be seen. One month after the mining of North Vietnam's harbors, the critical factor in the war still remains the endless resourcefulness and courage of the Vietnamese themselves.

To defeat the calculations of the Nixon-Kissinger plan, the Vietnamese strategy has been to launch an offensive on the battlefield which will undermine, militarily, the very pacification settlement that Nixon is preparing for the conference table. In his report in this issue (page 21), Tom Hayden analyzes the nature and prospects of the Vietnamese offensive, and the basis for continuing optimism that they, the forces of the NLF and the DRV, can achieve a just end to their epic struggle.

Two other factors could conceivably play a role in the outcome of the current Vietnamese offensive, which, as Hayden's informants in Paris make clear, is conceived in political and diplomatic as well as military terms. The first and most tenuous of these is the perhaps still uncertain political situation in China. How secure the present leadership faction in

Peking is, is not known. Whether a dramatic shift in the military balance in Vietnam or some changing alignment in the Sino-Soviet balance will cause a corresponding reappraisal of current Chinese strategy, or whether that strategy can survive the passing of Mao, is also unknown. But a re-orientation of Chinese policy in the form of increased emphasis and support for Vietnam's struggle could at any point have a major effect on the outcome of the Indochina war.

Secondly, there are the factors of U.S. domestic politics—the anti-war movement and the candidacy of George McGovern*—both of which can set real limits to the ability of Nixon to implement his strategy, both to escalate the war further and to withhold acceptable terms for a settlement. A strong revival of the anti-war movement and/or a hard-hitting campaign on the war issue, could significantly enhance the possibility of a relatively quick and just end to the war ("just" that is, for the Vietnamese, the only party to the war that has a claim to justice).

Finally, it needs to be said that, by their weakness in the face of Washington's campaign of terror, both the Soviet Union and China have seriously jeopardized the gains that have been made in the last decade toward putting some controls on the U.S. war machine. It was only the immense resistance put up first of all by the Vietnamese, but also by the American anti-war movement, that forced the issue of withdrawal to the center of the American political stage in this presidential campaign. By dealing with Nixon in the hour of his escalations, the Russians and the Chinese have undermined that effort, and thereby endangered world peace. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, in the midst of their own increased suffering, intensified hardship, and incalculable risk, have redoubled their energies of struggle. Once again, their example must become an inspiration and call to the anti-war movement at home, not only for their sake, but for our sake.

** This is being written three weeks before the Democratic Party Convention, but it obviously applies to any candidate (e.g., Kennedy) who might make a strong campaign on the war.*

The Prospects of the Vietnam Offensive

"In Vietnam spring is beautiful because it is usually the season of national glory. This land of braves was founded four thousand years ago in springtime. Since then its history has recorded resplendent pages, mostly in the spring.

"Liberation fighter, spring in Vietnam is ineffably beautiful. Tet in Vietnam is unbelievably epic. Apricot blossoms vie with other blooms in cheering your feats. Swallows are soaring overhead, waiting for your good tidings, to carry them to our countrymen in North and South, to our friends in all the five continents.

"Liberation fighter, spring belongs to you. Your exploits will give it a more dazzling brilliance.

"Liberation fighter, let off your gun instead of the traditional crackers. Wave your flag in lieu of the customary flowers. And ornament Vietnam's spring with an everlasting beauty."

—From *South Vietnam in Struggle*, official organ of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, February 14, 1972

"We know that some of our Western forms have another connotation in Vietnam. Maybe we don't have enough imagination."

—Henry Kissinger, press conference, May 9, 1972

THE SPRING OFFENSIVE IN VIETNAM brings the generation-long war to its most critical stage. "From the beginning of the offensive until the moment of final victory we consider to be one period of continuous struggle—military, political and diplomatic. Not two periods, not three periods, but one period." These were the carefully chosen words of an important but untitled Vietnamese source when we talked in Paris in early June.

The official Vietnamese view, given by Ly Van Sau of the People's Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG) a week earlier, was nearly as optimistic: "The people's liberation armed forces have developed a position of victory, of continuous offensive. . . . In all the big battles it is we who impose the conditions under which we fight, not the enemy."

As these declarations of optimism were made, the largest armada of B-52s in the history of aerial warfare was unleashing hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs on all of Vietnam and the American government and mass media

In an effort to clarify the purpose and effectiveness of the Vietnam offensive, Tom Hayden, David Dellinger and Rennie Davis met at their own initiative with the PRG and DRV delegations in Paris from June 6 to June 10.

were declaring the offensive variously to be "stalemated," "a last gasp," "a desperate attempt to shore up a negotiating position," and some were even proclaiming its defeat. No one in Washington, however, was claiming any great successes for the U.S. trained and financed troops of the Thieu dictatorship in Saigon, and all were agreed that the B-52s were the main barrier between the Vietnamese people and the victory of their liberation war. The Nixon Administration, like administrations since 1941, still found that its military technology was being used as a protective shield around an unsalvageable and hopelessly corrupt Saigon regime. The critical nature of the crisis exposed by the spring offensive was that the Thieu regime could not stand on its own against withering and sustained revolutionary warfare. And since that regime and the Vietnamization program in general represent the last strategy seriously available to an American president, the time of final showdown in the Vietnam war seemed to have arrived.

As recently as February, Nixon was proclaiming the success of his entire Vietnamization program. He was still claiming, as he did after the 1971 incursion into Laos, that the Saigon army could "hack it." He was confident that the war would not be an issue in the election year. His Air Force secretary was reporting that the "smart bombs" of the electronic battlefield were working wonders in reducing supplies going down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Melvin Laird was asserting that an offensive by the NLF was impossible. In his State of the World message in February Nixon reported that 90 percent of South Vietnam was pacified. Pentagon computers designated provinces like Binh Long, where the battle at An Loc would rage only two months later, as 100 percent pacified. The Mekong Delta, scene of several hundred guerrilla attacks up to battalion size during the offensive's first three months, was considered to be a pacified area in which "all but a handful of the more than 4300 hamlets and most of the 6.8 million people" were safely in hand (*Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 1972). This pattern of illusion continued even to the first moment of the offensive, which found Ambassador Bunker vacationing with his wife in Kathmandu. Interwoven with the illusions was a growing tendency towards "psywar" pronouncements designed to blur the negative image of Vietnam in the minds of the American voters. Psywar would reach its most blatant level in the ultimate pronouncement that the offensive was aggression from the North. This is a convenient attempt to erase the fact that the real invasion was from U.S. bases in Thailand and Cambodia and aircraft carriers in the South China Sea, that Vietnam is one country with two zones of combined struggle against

by Tom Hayden