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THE PRESIDENT'S VIETNAM STRATEGY (520)

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WASHINGTON--THE PRESIDENT'S POLICY ON VIETNAM HAS THREE EXTREMELY SENSITIVE FACETS. IT MUST PERSUADE AMERICANS THAT SOMETHING CONCRETE IS BEING DONE TO REDUCE THE AMERICAN MANPOWER COMMITMENT IN VIETNAM. IT MUST ASSURE THAT SOUTH VIETNAM WILL NOT BE LEFT HELPLESS IN THE FACE OF THE HANOI MILITARY THREAT. AND IT MUST PERSUADE HANOI'S LEADERS THAT AS TIME GOES ON THEIR OPTIONS BECOME MORE AND MORE LIMITED. THERE IS EVERY EVIDENCE THAT AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR MR. NIXON'S PLAN HAS GROWN. DOMESTIC CRITICS WHO HAVE BEEN CALLING FOR WITHDRAWAL OF AMERICAN TROOPS ARE SEEING A STEADY REDUCTION IN THE U.S. MANPOWER COMMITMENT IN VIETNAM. THE MOST ADAMANT OF THE DOMESTIC COMPLAINANTS INSIST THAT THE REDUCTION SHOULD BE MORE RAPID. BUT IN THE CONGRESS AND ELSEWHERE THERE IS VISIBLE RECOGNITION THAT A MANPOWER DISENGAGEMENT IS IN PROCESS. PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ALSO REFLECT WIDENING APPROVAL OF THE PRESIDENT'S COURSE.

THE PRESIDENT'S DECISIVE MOVES -- MOVES THAT BY NEXT APRIL FIFTEENTH WILL HAVE REDUCED THE AUTHORIZED CEILING FOR U.S. TROOPS IN VIETNAM BY ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN THOUSAND MEN SINCE LAST JANUARY -- HAVE GIVEN HIM INCREASED FLEXIBILITY IN THE MATTER OF FUTURE REDUCTIONS.

SOUTH VIETNAM'S CONFIDENCE THAT IT WILL BE ABLE TO DEFEND ITSELF CAPABLY IS INCREASING. PRESIDENT NIXON'S ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS IN THE VIETNAMIZATION PROGRAM IS PARALLELED BY A NUMBER OF OPTIMISTIC REPORTS FROM OFFICIAL AND NON-OFFICIAL SOURCES. IN HIS STATEMENT DECEMBER 15 THE PRESIDENT QUOTED ONE OF THOSE SOURCES AS SAYING: "A WINNING POSITION, IN THE SENSE OF OBTAINING A JUST PEACE WHETHER NEGOTIATED OR NOT, AND OF OBTAINING AN INDEPENDENT, NON-COMMUNIST SOUTH VIETNAM HAS BEEN ACHIEVED."

THIS DOES NOT REFER TO MILITARY VICTORY IN THE CONVENTIONAL SENSE. IT MEANS THAT THE WAY THE SITUATION IS DEVELOPING, SOUTH VIETNAM WILL NOT HAVE TO GIVE UP ITS

FREEDOM TO ENEMY MILITARY POWER, OR HAVE TO RELINQUISH ITS RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION IN A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT.

WHAT THE PRESIDENT'S POLICY CONVEYS TO THE LEADERSHIP IN NORTH VIETNAM WOULD BE HARD TO DEDUCE FROM THE FLOW OF BELLICOSE COMMENTS FROM HANOI. BUT IT IS NEVERTHELESS CLEAR THAT NORTH VIETNAM HAS LOST WHATEVER POLITICAL INITIATIVES IT MAY HAVE HAD IN THE PAST. IT IS IN A POSITION OF HAVING TO RESPOND NOW TO A PROPOSITION PUT FORWARD BY WASHINGTON AND SAIGON, AND ITS OPTIONS ARE LIMITED AND HAVE THE CHARACTER OF DILEMMA. PRESIDENT NIXON HAS TAKEN NOTE OF THE INCREASED NORTH VIETNAMESE INFILTRATIONS INTO THE SOUTH, BUT HE HAS TAKEN THE RISK, IN THE INTEREST OF PEACE, OF ANNOUNCING THE LATEST TROOP REDUCTIONS.

THE AMERICAN WITHDRAWAL SCHEDULE COULD BE AFFECTED BY INCREASED HANOI MILITARY ACTIVITY. IN SHORT, HANOI HAS THE CAPABILITY OF SLOWING DOWN THE WITHDRAWAL OR NOT? IT IT INCREASES THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE, THE PROCESS WILL BE RETARDED. AND IF IT MERELY SITS BACK AND SIMPLY WAITS FOR U.S. FORCES TO BE WITHDRAWN, IT WILL HAVE TO CONTENT WITH A VASTLY IMPROVED SOUTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY FORCE OR NEGOTIATE WITH A POLITICALLY STRENGTHENED GOVERNMENT IN SAIGON.

A THIRD OPTION IS OPEN AT THIS TIME -- MEANINGFUL NEGOTIATIONS AT PARIS. IT IS THE BEST CHOICE FOR ALL, INCLUDING NORTH VIETNAM AND ITS PEOPLE. AND AS MR. NIXON HAS SUGGESTED ON VARIOUS OCCASIONS, NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH THE EXISTING MACHINERY NOW AVAILABLE AT PARIS COULD PROVE TO BE FAR LESS DIFFICULT THAN NEGOTIATIONS AT SOME DISTANT FUTURE DATE BETWEEN HANOI AND A GREATLY STRENGTHENED SOUTH VIETNAM. ITEM

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