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President Nixon's Political-Military Policies

By JAMES RESTON

The problem before President Nixon now on Vietnam is not unlike the problem Mr. Lincoln discussed in his first Inaugural address. "Suppose you go to war," Mr. Lincoln said, "you cannot fight always; and when, after much loss on both sides, and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the identical old questions as to terms of intercourse are again upon you."

Mr. Nixon and his aides know very well that they are not going to risk the lives, the money, and the division of the country, as Mr. Lincoln had to do, to compel a military settlement and preserve the Union. They also know that they are not going to get a settlement with North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front on the basis of their present peace terms in the Paris negotiations.

The Nixon Timetable

They are saying privately that they have to "go through this preliminary negotiating phase," but that if it doesn't produce a settlement by the end of the year, they will then demonstrate that they can find other means of settling the war. They are quite dogmatic on this point.

In other words, going back to Mr. Lincoln's point, they will face the "identical old questions" six months hence but not now.

This raises a fundamental moral question: What price delay? Last week, 351 Americans were killed in Vietnam, fifteen more than the week before. Over 10,000 Americans have died in Vietnam since the Paris peace talks started ten months ago, and at the present rate of casualties we will lose over 8,000 more lives in the next six months

The Dangers of Compromise

Like President Johnson, President Nixon is in danger of proving that compromise is not a solution but a trap. His half-measures between the hawks who want to impose a military victory and the doves who are ready to accept defeat, are convincing neither, confusing both the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front, and confronting this country with 350 dead American soldiers a week.

This obviously can't go on without more opposition from both hawks and doves, and a revival of the antiwar demonstrations against the President wherever he goes, and on the university campuses of the nation.

At some point, the President must choose. The weekly bloodletting is too much. He has a chance now either to risk for war, as President Johnson did, or to risk for peace, but he cannot evade the "old questions" much longer without losing the advantages of a new President.

Nixon's Timing

His timing has been very odd. He has evaded a decision on Vietnam which was primary and unavoidable, and made a decision on the antiballistic missile, which was not primary and which was avoidable. The result is that, while he no doubt wants peace in Vietnam and an accommodation with the Soviets, he has been postponing a decision on his Vietnam peace terms, and plunging into a missile debate on how many Americans they can kill and how many Russians we can kill if we get into a major war.

This is clearly not the way to peace in Vietnam or an understanding with the Russians, both of which are vital to the appropriation of money for the American cities. The new President for the moment is going the way of Secretary of Defense Mel Laird and the Joint Chiefs of Staff—that is to say, he is looking at his problems in the political and military terms that have failed in the past.

"The problem of armaments," wrote Herbert Butterfield, "is a bigger one than is generally realized, and we cannot begin to put the initial check on the evil—we cannot begin to insert the first wedge—unless we make a signal call upon every human feeling we possess. We wait perhaps, for some Abraham Lincoln who will make the mightiest kind of liberating decision.

An Epic Stage

"Here is a spacious and comprehensive issue, at what may well be one of the epic stages in the world's history. It is a matter not to be settled in routine consultations between governments and their military experts, who are always bent on going further and further in whatever direction they have already been moving. . . . We must do more than arrogantly hold our own against the barbarians, merely meeting them with their own weapons. Everything is going to depend in fact upon what we do over and above the work of self-defense. . . ."

This is the larger philosophic perspective Mr. Nixon has missed. He has gone the way of the politicians and the soldiers, and this has been a very unprofitable journey in the past.

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