Will the War Go on Until 1976?

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"Every aware person, he [Nixon] believes, knows that the Vietnam war will soon be over."

"How the President Sees His Second Term," by Daniel P. Moynihan in Life, September 1, 1972

The US Air Force dropped a bomb of its own on Richard Nixon the night he was making his acceptance speech in Miami. A senior Air Force official spent that evening with some eight reporters who cover the Pentagon regularly. The comings and goings of Kissinger are a pantomime which creates the illusion that peace somehow may be imminent. But what this Air Force official told the reporters in the course of a long and cozy visit opens the possibility that the war may still be going on when the election campaign of 1976 gets underway.

This "backgrounder" and its implications have all too hastily been swept under the rug, in part because the New York Times—unlike the Washington Post and the Washington Star-News—buried the story. One participant in the meeting said the whole affair made him feel as if he were taking part in a sequel to the Pentagon Papers. The Air Force official's revelations, and the clash with the Pentagon's—and the Nixon Administration's—party line on the war ought not to be forgotten. There is no reason why the Senate Foreign Relations Committee could not call Air Force, Pentagon, and CIA officials to get a fuller picture of the war's prospects and costs. Could it be that the Air Force is restive because the cost of the war in planes and pilots far outweighs the results being achieved? What are the plane losses per sortie? How many more pilots have been lost this year? Does the Air Force find itself, as in the Korean war, swapping planes for trucks?

Michael Getler, a Washington Post man at the meeting, said the Air Force official told reporters that in spite of heavy damage from US bombing and a mine blockade of North Vietnamese ports since early May, Hanoi was still getting 25 percent or more of the previous flow of war matériel and that this was enough "to sustain Hanoi's war effort for a long time to come, although at an uncertain level of fighting" (Washington Post, August 25). Orr Kelly, another of the Pentagon reporters at the backgrounder, wrote in the Washington Star-News August 24 that they were told, "The way things are going... the United States could still be bombing North Vietnam two or three years from now." By then Agnew, too, will probably have a secret plan to end the war if elected.

Kelly wrote that while the Air Force official voiced the hope of an early settlement he thought it "unlikely that the bombing and mining can force a quick negotiated end to the war." He said reporters were told "it would require unacceptable measures—such as bombing of the dikes or destruction of Hanoi and Haiphong—to cause any further reduction in the flow of supplies reaching North Vietnam or its front lines in the South."

Apparently the Air Force is running out of meaningful military targets in the North. The official spoke of "a few" that remained unbombed, and mentioned two. These were thermal electric plants located in populated areas of Hanoi and Haiphong. "It is possible," Kelly quoted the Air Force official as saying, "that these targets, which have remained off limits because of the possible danger to civilians, might be hit." But it was not claimed that this would make a decisive difference.

The dimmed hope of victory in the Air Force backgrounder recalls McNamara's astringent testimony on the inefficacy of the air war before the Senate Armed Services Committee in August, 1967. That was McNamara's boldest and finest hour, and the beginning of the end for him in Johnson's cabinet. McNamara in effect said the same thing as the Air Force official: The actual volume of supplies needed to carry on the war in South Vietnam was relatively small, and the combat options open to the Viet Cong and the North in husbanding these supplies so varied and flexible, that enough could

1William Beecher, the New York Times Pentagon man, was at the backgrounder but buried it August 25 in a story, "US Aides Report Raids Near China," a lead which carried little that hadn't been reported before. Beecher is the most "gung ho" Pentagon reporter the Times has had in years, and a favorite of the military establishment. Some colleagues present felt that he buried the story because he disapproved of the maverick views presented. The rules of the meeting were that the source was to be referred to as "high Air Force officials," but Beecher identified the source as "a senior Air Force official who declined to be identified publicly." Time, but not Newsweek, was also represented at the meeting, I am told, but neither carried any account.
get through no matter how heavy the bombing.

The difference is that Nixon has since lifted many of the bombing restrictions imposed by Johnson, sharply increased the volume, and given the military the free hand it long coveted to mine North Vietnam's harbors. For years we have been hearing that the war could be ended if Haiphong were blockaded. After almost four months of virtual blockade, this too seems to have failed. The mining and the bombing, like the Cambodian invasion and the Laotian "incursion" to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail, have failed to give Nixon the quick road to a military victory the Joint Chiefs of Staff promised. What does he try next if elected? Systematic bombing of the dikes? Nuclear weapons? There are few untried military options left.

The Air Force backgrounder supports the pessimistic forecasts in two recent stories out of Saigon. The first covered President Thieu's speech on August 1 to a graduating class at the National Defense College in Saigon. He called for "the total destruction" of the "economic and war" potential of the North by relentless and continuous bombing, declaring that otherwise the communists would "revert to their half-guerrilla, half-conventional warfare and the war will go on in Indochina forever."²

²Sydney H. Schanberg from Saigon in the New York Times August 14. This dispatch is full of lame excuses for the two weeks it took for the story to surface in the Times, though it was on the wires the day it was delivered and appeared under a four column headline in the Washington Post August 2. The US Embassy, always protective of Tieu, did its best to talk down the significance of Thieu's bloodthirsty speech, insisting that it was meant only for domestic consumption.
The other dispatch was Malcolm W. Browne's in the New York Times August 15, "Saigon's Commanders Say the War Can Last For Years." Browne's conversations with "many of Saigon's military leaders" turned up views quite unlike those of the Nixon Administration's official optimists. Browne cabled from Saigon that "South Vietnamese commanders foresee an indefinite military conflict with Hanoi that could last years or decades," provided—and the qualification is even more revealing—that "American support of the war effort here is not radically reduced by Congress or the election to the Presidency of Senator McGovern." Given continued United States aid these commanders "foresee a more or less permanent state of war in Vietnam" as "highly probable." This is all the more probable since Nixon in his acceptance speech clearly hardened his terms. He insisted—as Johnson did—that national honor and the credibility of the Pax Americana depended on a political victory for the US in Saigon. If American honor requires the maintenance of the repressive and unrepresentative Thieu regime, then Nixon's re-election would mean that we are stuck in this quagmire for a long time to come.

Even Laird, in moments when candor was unavoidable, has admitted that despite the bombing and the mining a military victory is not in the cards. There was such a moment when he was before the House Appropriations Committee last June to break the bad news that the $83.4 billion in "obligational authority" requested by the Pentagon for the fiscal year 1973 would have to be revised upward to cover the sharp increase in Vietnam war costs caused by the enemy offensive which began last March. Cost estimates for the war during fiscal 1972 are a secret, but Congressional Quarterly, in a newly published survey, The Power of the Pentagon,3 says they were unofficially estimated at $7 billion before the new offensive began. Since then the ferocious response of US firepower from sea and air has "nearly doubled the cost of the war for the US on a month-by-month basis." Robert C. Moot, the Pentagon comptroller, who accompanied Mr. Laird to the Appropriations Committee hearing, estimated that an additional $3.3 billion would be needed if the offensive continued through September and an additional $5 billion if it continued through December.

Plainly disturbed by these mounting costs, the Appropriations Committee chairman, George Mahon of Texas, turned to Laird and asked if the Vietnam war could "go on for four or five years now with varying degrees of intensity?" Laird, trapped into brevity for a change, replied, "Yes." If the Democrats are wise, they will rescue this admission from the already forgotten record and make it reverberate in the campaign. There followed this equally intriguing bit of dialogue:

Mahon: When could we cease our Air Force and Navy support?

Laird: It can be tomorrow if the enemy accepts our peace proposal.

Mahon might well have expected a

3This useful 115-page compendium may be obtained for $5.00 from Congressional Quarterly, 1735 K Street NW, Washington, DC 20006. See page 96.
Vietnamization, like pacification, is among the casualties of the current enemy offensive. The war had suddenly to be "Americanized" to save the Thieu regime. The record on the ground, where wars have to be won, is a landscape of failure. Despite large-scale US support from air and sea, nowhere can Thieu’s forces point to a victory. In five months his troops have been unable to lift the siege of Anloc. His two elite divisions of marines and paratroopers have been chewed up in two months of trying to retake the citadel in Quangtri. The Queson valley has fallen and endangered Danang.

With increasing frequency one reads of the roads being cut in the neighborhood of Saigon. A survey of civilian casualties (in the New York Times, August 27) turns up a startling figure. The heaviest civilian casualties — “more than a third of the national total” — have been suffered in the Mekong Delta. There a series of small-scale Viet Cong actions seems to have destroyed the “pacification” program in the very area that was once its showpiece. The war has been winding up, not down.

Something has gone wrong with Nixon’s “secret plan” to win and end the war. Who would have dreamed in 1968 that the war would still be going on in 1972? How many realize today that if Nixon wins, and continues to

September 21, 1972

"RIDICULOUS"

The President: I noted some report out of the Air Force to the effect that we probably would be bombing North Vietnam two or three years from now. That, of course, is quite ridiculous.

Q. Mr. President, if it is, as you say, “quite ridiculous” . . . then how about a year from now is it likely that bombing will no longer be necessary . . . ?

The President: No. . . . I am not going to put any limitation on when the US activities in the air would stop.

—Nixon at Press Conference, August 29
make Thieu's future synonymous with national honor, the war may still be going on in 1976? Four more years of war may easily add up to another $40 billion in expenditure.

Nixon's secret plan, his last card, was to buy the peace he wants in Moscow and Peking. Two indications have surfaced in recent days of what has been going on behind the scenes. One was in Washington where Secretary of State Rogers in an interview with the Knight Newspapers on August 20 incautiously suggested that one reason the Nixon Administration was hopeful of peace was that China and the Soviet Union now favor a negotiated settlement. This, he said, makes for "a wholly new situation." The other was in a declaration from Hanoi that it was determined to resist pressure from either or both of its allies to give Nixon the settlement he wanted.

On August 17 the Hanoi daily Nhan Dan published an editorial warning Moscow and Peking against playing Nixon's game. Nhan Dan said Nixon was trying to use "an equilibrium of forces among the big powers and the division of the socialist countries, especially the division of the main components of the socialist system [i.e., the conflict between the USSR and China]...as a shield to give US imperialism complete freedom of action in checking, by means of violence, the national liberation movement, first of all by hurling back the patriotic struggle of the nations on the Indochinese peninsula." It said the victory of the national liberation movement should "serve as a serious warning to those who are departing from the great, all-conquering revolutionary thoughts of the time, and who are pitifully bogging down in the dark muddy road of compromise." In a passage of evident anguish Nhan Dan asked:

Who is the chief enemy of the world revolution? Where lies revolution and where counterrevolution? These questions which were easy to answer in the past become today puzzling questions because of unhealthy tendencies.

What are these "unhealthy tendencies"? Nhan Dan clearly saw them in the rapprochement between the US on the one hand and the two big communist powers on the other. It said a policy of "genuine reconciliation among various countries" must be based on respect for the independence of all nations, large and small. But it added that "for the US imperialists, reconciliation is but a Machiavellian policy to materialize designs of aggression... by new methods." Nhan Dan warned its communist allies against allowing "narrow, immediate interests" to "harm the revolutionary movements of various countries." No other embattled small power I know of ever dared

4 Newsday, August 21.
deliver so plainspoken a lecture to the
great powers on whom it depends for
its supplies.

Hanoi's leverage, paradoxically
enough, springs from the same source
as Nixon's. The split between Moscow
and Peking which enables him deftly
to play on their mutual rivalries also
gives Hanoi a power it would not
otherwise possess. The two communist
superstates are engaged in a struggle
for influence in Asia and in the Third
World generally. Neither can shut off
supplies to Hanoi without enormously
increasing the influence and prestige of
the other at the cost of its own in the
eyes of the anti-imperialist and peace
movements. There is a limit beyond
which they cannot go in making an
accommodation with Nixon. Neither
can simply turn off the supply spigot
for the Vietnam war.

Yet both Moscow and Peking now
have a stake in Nixon's re-election.
They have met with Nixon and they
understand each other. Should he lose,
it would be much harder for the
Democrats to deliver on trade and
credit. We do not know what private
understandings may have been reached,
what price Nixon is prepared to pay if
they help him to get peace on "honorable"
terms in time for his election.

The Washington Post in an editorial
on August 20, "The Wheat Sales to
Russia," called attention to the fact
that current wheat sales to the Soviet
Union involve large and growing sub-
sidies by the US and will soon bring
about an increase in the price of bread.
It pointed out that since Nixon an-
nounced the grain agreement six weeks
ago the price of wheat had risen from
$1.50 to $1.85 a bushel while the
export subsidy fixed by the Depart-
ment of Agriculture had risen from less
than five cents a bushel to thirty-eight
cents.

The Post recalled that the other major
wheat producer, Canada, "is selling
wheat successfully on the international
market at prices substantially higher
than our subsidized world [export]
price." It said that subsidies of this
kind could be defended in the case of
sales to underdeveloped countries with
shortages of both food and cash. "But
the Soviet Union," it concluded, "one
of the world's two main producers of
gold, is hardly an appropriate applicant
for welfare." It asked why Moscow
could not pay "the true market price."
Since the article was published the
bakers have asked for an increase of
one to three cents for a loaf of bread.
We can imagine the outcry if the
Democrats were in power and
subsidizing wheat to Russia at the expense
of higher bread prices at home.

It is time Congress and the public
knew more about the real prospects in
the war, about Nixon's secret plan for
ending it, and about the part this plays
in current negotiations on trade and
credit with Moscow. To hinge app-
proachement on a sellout of Vietnam is
to run the risk of a breakdown in a
fragile détente. Four more years of
Nixon may not only mean four more
years of murderous war in Indochina
but the possibility that the war may
yet precipitate a new confrontation
with either or both of the big com-
munist powers.