

Washington Nights (cont.)

Senator Proxmire, sauntering home,
 Savoring visions of using a comb,
 Met a marauder who stopped him and said:
 "Mister, your money or mister, you're dead."
 Senator Proxmire, suddenly mute,
 Eyeballed the mugger, then told him to shoot.
 "Fire!" he shouted with devilish cheek;
 "I'll be a terminal case in a week."
 Struck by the image and suddenly sick,
 Proxmire's mugger took off like St. Nick.
 If you're accosted by pistol or shiv,
 Say you've got cancer and maybe you'll live.

W. H. VON DREELE

Actually, the amplifying commentaries by Henry Kissinger, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kenneth Rush and various military spokesmen beginning with Joint Chiefs Chairman Moorer prove that Mr. Nixon was not initiating a "major re-escalation of the war," not "provoking a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union," and not, in any strict sense, even ordering a "blockade" of North Vietnam. A blockade tries to prohibit any vehicle getting into or out of the blockaded area. But the official spokesmen have meticulously stressed that the U. S. Navy is charged only with sowing mines and, possibly, with preventing lighterage of some types of cargo if offloaded outside the minefields onto barges or sampans. "The instructions," specified Mr. Kissinger, "are to warn all foreign ships of the existence of those minefields, but not to interfere with them if they decide to proceed into the minefields at their own risk." This limitation is obviously designed to avoid the kind of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, China or for that matter other powers that would appear humiliating and might thus provoke dangerous counteraction. Similarly, Peking has been notified that aircraft attacking rail and road routes from China and North Vietnam will keep well short of the Chinese border.

Undoubtedly, Moscow and Peking were informed of these rules beforehand, and it is likely that their response gave the President sufficient reason to believe that, whatever complaints they might utter in public, the American semiblockade would not cause a big military rumpus.

Even if the blockade could be made total, it would not directly affect the current situation in South Vietnam for many weeks at least, perhaps several months. And in fact, as shown by the 1969 CIA study that Senator Gravel has just read into the Senate record, the blockade cannot be made total. Thus the semiblockade has almost no immediate tactical significance and no decisive longer-term strategic significance. It must therefore be understood as not primarily a military, but rather a psycho-political move, linked to the other political elements indicated in

On May 8 the President reduced to or very close to the vanishing point all of the diminished political conditions that he had theretofore advanced as a basis for negotiation and settlement with North Vietnam. Gone was the business about elections and electoral commissions, the timing of Thieu's resignation, the arithmetic for prisoner exchange schedules, etc. Gone also the preceding week's demand that the North Vietnamese invading army go back inside North Vietnamese borders. "We will stop all acts of force throughout Indochina" and "will proceed with a complete withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam within four months" if Hanoi will release the American POWs and agree to "an internationally supervised ceasefire throughout Indochina." What then about Thieu, about the composition of South Vietnam's government, about South Vietnam's national existence? "These terms are generous terms. . . . They would allow negotiations and a political settlement between the Vietnamese themselves." Kissinger resaid it the next day: Our proposal would "leave the determination of Vietnam's political future to the Vietnamese." We wash our hands.

We are now in a position to sum up what the President wants. In one word, he wants out. His military action—the semiblockade—is a screening move for his political proposition. He is asking Hanoi, Moscow and Peking to get him off the hook. He offers to meet, in substance, Hanoi's terms as these have been laid down for the past several years. He begs only that our withdrawal from the contest be carried out according to a protocol that can be publicly labeled "peace with honor"—by which is meant, the release of our POWs, no Dunkirk-style exit, and no requirement that we publicly "join with our enemy to install a Communist government in South Vietnam."

For Hanoi, these are indeed, as the President calls them, "generous terms," and they guarantee Hanoi's achievement, in due course, of the aims of its protracted conflict. With its armies intact and firmly planted on the soil of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and the pledge of total American withdrawal in four months, Hanoi would not have to worry how "Vietnam's political future" would be "determined by the Vietnamese." It would seem logical, then, that Hanoi should accept Mr. Nixon's capitulation, after some of the standard hemming and hawing. But it may be that General Giap and his colleagues are not willing to be merely logical in this matter. It may be that they seek not merely their regional objective but the public humiliation of their foe—as they sought and achieved the humiliation of the French. If so, and if they believe their military situation makes this possible, they may scornfully reject the Nixon offer and, in spite of the damage that the semiblockade and the bombing will cause, will aim for a military victory in the field, the overthrow of the Thieu regime, and the disorderly retreat of the last Americans. It is even possible that Moscow and Peking, for their own reasons, now find the Vietnam war distracting to their grander purposes and wish to be done with it. They may have

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made Nixon aware of this, and may be urging Hanoi to bring matters to a close. But it is also possible, whatever may have been their private communication to Nixon, that they, like Hanoi, will concert publicly to humiliate their foe.