

THE SON TAY RAID: A STUDY IN PRESIDENTIAL POLICY

'Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it.'

- Pericles

The raid force approached the hamlet of Son Tay in North Vietnam at 0230 hours on 21 November 1970. Flying over the hills at treetop level, the helicopters and their escorts could see the yellow lights of Hanoi winking in the cool night air. Suddenly, they were over the camp at Son Tay and the sky, which had been bathed in the pale light of a waning moon, exploded in brilliant light as flares and muzzle flashes filled the night sky. The escort aircraft fired on pre-selected targets and dropped fire-fight simulators in several locations near the camp. Simultaneously, the lead helicopter passed over the camp and destroyed two guard towers with a laser beam like stream of bullets. Seconds later, another helicopter executed a planned crash-landing into the middle of the camp as its blades chewed into a high tree. The helicopter hit the ground with a thud and fourteen heavily armed raiders burst from the crippled machine with chainsaws, axes, and bolt cutters in tow. The fourteen liberators began fighting their way to the prisoners' cells. Amid the confusion of combat a blaring bullhorn announced that Americans had landed and were here to rescue POWs. The prison came alive, cracking with fire of automatic weapons. A large explosion blew a hole in the prison wall as the raiders from a third

helicopter which landed outside of the camp made their entrance. Meanwhile, another helicopter landed at a location that looked very similar to the Son Tay POW camp. Within seconds of touchdown, the disembarked raiders found themselves in a huge fire-fight unfolding all around them. Four violent ground battles were now raging within the Son Tay area: one at the prison, another at an undisclosed location, and two faked by air delivered fire-fight simulators. However, before the helicopter could get back to pick up the force deposited by mistake, the raiders had killed approximately 150 enemy soldiers without any raider casualties, while the location burned like a roman candle. Back at the prison camp, nearly 60 enemy guards lay dead or wounded as the raiders swarmed over and through the camp like robots. As the raiders broke into one cell after another, they were reporting 'negative items' (no prisoners). After the last cell was opened and the other cells checked again, the mission commander was informed that the search was complete with no items. The raiders were stunned to find that the prison was totally empty of POWs. The raid force departure was as quick and ghost-like as their arrival, leaving behind a wake of death and destruction as their calling card. However, they left empty-handed. The Son Tay Raid was over. What had gone wrong? Had the mission been compromised? Had the raiders fought their way out of a poorly executed trap? Was the mission really designed to rescue POWs or was there some other motive? What political intentions and ramifications did the current Administration seek? Was the war in Vietnam about to take a dramatic turn from the stated policy of Vietnamization? In an attempt to answer these questions, this paper will examine the political/strategic goals and intentions of the Administration's policies regarding the war in Vietnam. More specifically, was the policy reflected in the actions taken at Son Tay?

SETTING THE STAGE: NIXON'S POLICY

During the 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon, well known as a hard-line anti-Communist, proposed a plan to end the war and ran his campaign based on a peaceful withdrawal from Vietnam. Nixon did win the Presidency and many believed he won it by his stance on ending the war. Upon assuming office in January 1969, Nixon ordered an internal governmental survey of American involvement in Vietnam. The results, published as National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM-1), noted 'emphatic differences' among the various agencies on how to defend and withdraw from Vietnam. Perhaps the largest area of disagreement was over the bombing strategy employed, then later stopped by President Johnson. It appears that the division over the bombing arose not because it was a bad way to ensure a peaceful withdrawal, but because of the manner in which the Johnson Administration used the bombing campaign. Specifically, targets were selected by the President and his staff in Washington. If Nixon were to employ such a tactic, many of his supporters feared that this might also lead to a perceived escalation of the war, resulting in another round of public demonstrations. Since NSSM-1 had confirmed the divisions between government agencies and bureaucrats on the overall conduct of the war, Nixon would use this confusion among the established system of governmental 'checks and balances' to his own advantage by freely acting without the concurrence or non-concurrence of those agencies in his policy decisions. In other words, organized internal governmental opposition (Democratic Party, Republican in-fighting, etc.) to his policy would be almost non-existent. However, Nixon had several major considerations, both domestic and international, which would affect the development and execution of his policy.

The first issue was the growing anti-war movement. Many Americans were ready for an end to the war because measurable gains at any level (political and military) were far outweighed by the rising cost in American lives and economic resources during the previous five years of the conflict. Secondly, and inextricably linked to the first issue, was America's long-standing investment in and commitment to the protection of South Vietnam. This issue would inherently cause conflict and contradiction in the face of establishing a withdrawal policy when considering the billions of dollars of aid and thousands of lives expended for an apparently futile effort. Additionally, Nixon was concerned that the USSR and China would view this 'retreat' and change in American policy as a victory for world communism. If America failed to stop communist aggression, then the 'Communist Revolution' was sure to succeed. In a July 1969 speech, Nixon would sum up these concerns by saying: The way the war ends in Vietnam will have an enduring impact upon events, although the domino effect is not necessarily valid. It is easy to feel that we should get out of Asia at all costs. The war plagues us at home, is costly in our relations with the USSR, and offers all kinds of temptations to our politicians. Yet if the Vietnam war goes sour, there would be an escalation of not just 'get out of Vietnam sentiment' but 'get out of the world sentiment.' And this would be disastrous. Should we abandon Vietnam, there would be far more blood spilled than if we remain steady in our purposes.

Nevertheless, Hanoi continued to stall at the Paris negotiations in hopes that the American anti-war movement would force the Administration to withdraw almost unconditionally from Vietnam. Aware of Hanoi's diplomatic tactics, Nixon would have to establish his policy quickly in an attempt to strengthen his position and bargaining power. For several months, Nixon tested the waters by maintaining a policy towards the war which was not significantly different from that of his predecessor. However, now the time had come to implement his style of leadership through actions regarding the war in Vietnam that differed significantly from that which the world had come to expect of Washington. This change would catch many governments off guard, especially those of Hanoi and other leading communist states.