

Bloody Path to Peace?

The enemy's Tet offensive, which penetrated even into the United States Embassy in Saigon, offers further painful proof of the limitations of American power in Asia.

By their daring guerrilla raids on principal South Vietnamese cities and in the concurrent massing of main force units around Khesanh, the Communists have undermined the optimism about the course of the war voiced in Saigon and Washington within the last few months. These are not the deeds of an enemy whose fighting efficiency has "progressively declined" and whose morale is "sinking fast," as United States military officials put it in November. Enemy initiatives inside South Vietnam and along its borders suggest that the United States and its allies cannot yet be said with accuracy to be "winning," as Admiral Sharp maintained on Nov. 21.

The Communists' surprising capacity and will to mobilize and to strike, in spite of the punishment they have absorbed, suggest that the road to a clear-cut military victory, if that is the road chosen, will be longer and costlier and will require substantially more troops than the Administration has yet admitted, perhaps even to itself.

At the same time, diversionary actions in Korea, Laos and Thailand—which appear to be related to and coordinated with developments in Vietnam—are reminders of the constant risk of further costly and dangerous escalation in other areas.

But if American power and options are limited, so are those of the other side—much more so. Neither Hanoi nor its allies can be eager to test the full might of the American military machine. There are hints of desperation in the suicidal city raids and in the risky concentration of men and arms along the DMZ. Recently captured documents suggest the Communists may be launching one last massive push to try to improve their bargaining position in anticipation of a bid for peace.

If this is their aim, it is a bloody road to peace the Communists have chosen. But if the United States and its allies stand fast in their present positions, as superior power should enable them to do, and if Washington persists in the more flexible diplomacy it has apparently begun to pursue, today's fierce battles could conceivably mark a preliminary step toward the negotiations that will have to precede an end to the war in Vietnam.