

Pouch
8/22/67

The Washin

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Straying Bombers

Nothing that can be said by the United States Government will mitigate the seriousness of the flights of two Navy bombers over Red China, which led to their destruction. The trespass was especially deplorable because of the delicate relations between the two countries. Yet the accidental nature of the encroachment upon Red China's airspace is unmistakably evident. The planes did no bombing in China. Their targets were not close to the border. All indications are that the pilots strayed into the Kwangsi region because of confusion while they were attempting to escape groundfire, MIG fighter attacks and thunderstorms.

Peking denounced the air intrusions as part of a plot and "an act of deliberate war provocation," but the propagandistic nature of this charge is highlighted by the accusation that the plot was hatched jointly by the United States and the Soviet Union. This charge is so ridiculous that it will help to give credence to the factual report that the two pilots inadvertently strayed over China.

It is not to be supposed that China's policy will be determined by the content of its propaganda. Nor is it likely to be greatly influenced by accidental events. Nevertheless, the incident re-emphasizes the urgency of tightening up precautions against any encroachment upon Chinese sovereignty. This is the fifth incident of this kind this year, and while that number is not large in relation to the number of raids made by American

aircraft in North Vietnam, it is necessarily a source of much concern to the Chinese.

The problem is related, of course, to the recent narrowing of the buffer zone along the Chinese border designed to avoid the penetration of China's airspace. That buffer zone was previously 25 miles wide. Recently, bombing has been authorized and carried out within 10 miles of the border. The reluctance of the Administration to allow the North Vietnamese a definite immunity zone in which troops, factories and supplies might be assembled with impunity is quite understandable. But it is also evident that the closer bombing increases the risk of overflights into China, even though the planes which went astray on Monday had been bombing some 75 miles from the border.

Both the overflights and the narrowing of the buffer zone call for further precautions against error. President Johnson has said that every human and technical precaution has already been taken, but in matters of such moment intensified vigilance is always in order.

It is devoutly to be hoped that the bombing as well as the ground operations and the guerrilla warfare in Vietnam will soon be ended. Every phase of the war involves risks as well as bloodshed and the frustration of human hopes. But means of ending the struggle have not yet been found. While pursuit of those means continues, the risks of widening the war must be kept at a minimum consistent with our basic aims in Vietnam. And critics need to remember the impossibility of eliminating all risks in war and the hopelessness of trying to preserve freedom in this age of violence without the use of military force in its defense.