



Victor Zorza J-2

Reasons Cited For Hanoi Policy

NP- 6/14/72

THE PRIVATE air war waged by the commander of the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam until he was disciplined in March was denounced bitterly by the North Vietnamese at the time, but nobody here took any notice, perhaps because they did not pin it on him personally.

While President Nixon was making peace proposals to Hanoi in private, and ordering in public the air strikes which he described as "protective reaction," the Communists objected that they were no such thing.

"How can people believe in his arguments about protective reaction," the main Hanoi paper Nhan Dan asked. Mr. Nixon's arguments, it said, were "inconsistent, illogical" and they "smelled of banditry."

Was this just the usual Hanoi invective, or did it have something to do with the nature of the air strikes ordered by Gen. John D. Lavelle after he took command in August 1971?

"Protective reaction" was supposed to be triggered by enemy action against U.S. aircraft. Gen. Lavelle told his men, however, that their reports should not disclose bombing raids unrelated to enemy action.

Certainly the North Vietnamese objected emphatically and expressly to Mr. Nixon's claim that the U.S. strikes were aimed at "selected military targets." Hanoi repeatedly claimed that, on the contrary, the U.S. Air Force had bombed civilian populated areas under the guise of "protective reaction" strikes, and that this lead to heavy loss of life.

Defense Secretary Melvin Laird said during the heavy air raids last December that they were "of limited duration and that their termination would be announced." This was, indeed, duly announced, but we are now told that Gen. Lavelle did

not stop.

What would Hanoi now make of the administration's credibility, especially since Laird had also gone out of his way to insist that the bombing had been "approved by the President and myself?"

Hanoi again formally complained in February that, although the United States had announced officially that the new series of air

strikes launched in mid-month had ended, U.S. aircraft continued to bomb the North.

Did Gen. Lavelle again refuse to stop? Official Hanoi spokesmen drew the conclusion that Mr. Nixon's peace "boast," and specifically his eight-point peace plan, were "contradicted" by his actions.

President Nixon's own "protective reaction" strikes were carefully calibrated to have the desired effect on Hanoi. Gen. Lavelle's unauthorized strikes—the 28 missions to which the air force now admits, out of 123 "protective reaction" strikes during the four-month period in question—comprise nearly a quarter of all such missions. After the Mylai coverup, these figures can hardly be accepted without a full and impartial investigation.

But, whatever the figures may be, the general's first unauthorized bombs rained on North Vietnam on Nov. 8, and just over a week later Hanoi cancelled the secret meeting which White House adviser Henry Kissinger was due to have with its emissary in Paris. More than a year's secret negotiations lay in ruins.

History was repeating itself. In December 1966, the Polish government set up se-

cret talks between Hanoi and Washington. But Hanoi was bombed, without White House authority, and the Communists angrily cancelled the talks.

The Nixon administration now admits that hawks and doves in the Hanoi leadership have been arguing for some time about the best course to take. There is reason to believe that North Vietnam had made full preparations to launch its offensive in February, but drew back from it because at that time the doves were able to muster sufficient strength in Hanoi.

It is arguable that the U.S. air strikes were used by the Hanoi hawks later as an argument for launching the offensive after all, in March, just to show Mr. Nixon that they too had a "position of strength" from which to negotiate.

©1972, Victor Zorza

Return to HW