

Unauthorized Bombing Is Laid To Relaxed Command by Nixon

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WASHINGTON, June 18 — A number of former Government defense specialists believe that the recent disclosure that Gen. John D. Lavelle conducted a series of unauthorized bombings of North Vietnam reflects an even larger problem — the Nixon Administration's relaxation of command and control over the air war in Southeast Asia.

In a series of interviews this week, the specialists — all of whom worked in the Pentagon or the White House for the Nixon Administration — agreed that President Nixon's decision, made early in his administration, to consolidate authority in the hands of a few men in the national security structure and to remain more remote from day-by-day military planning loosened Washington's ability to control Air Force activity in Vietnam.

More than half a dozen specialists were interviewed, including men who had direct responsibility for the over-all planning and focus of the air war. For reasons of security, the men — four of whom worked in similar positions during the Johnson Administration — did not discuss any specific incidents that occurred during their tenure with President Nixon.

"Things Get Very Sloppy"

One man who recently left the Government stressed that the command and control system, with its reliance on the forwarding of orders down the chain of command to tactical units, "is by its nature capable of incredible sloppiness."

"If you don't go and check things up," he added, "things get very sloppy."

In the current dispute, General Lavelle was relieved as commander of the Seventh Air Force in Southeast Asia and demoted after ordering — by his own admission — "in the neighborhood" of 20 unauthorized bombing attacks on military targets in North Vietnam and reporting them to higher authorities as "protective reaction." The strikes took place

between November 1971 and March 1972.

Because of the vastness of the undertaking in Indochina, the loss of command and control of military commanders in the field is not unique to the Nixon Administration. Some of the Government specialists recalled lapses in command and control during the Johnson Administration as well.

One source mentioned the bombing of Hanoi in December, 1966, just after the United States had received indications from an envoy that the North Vietnamese were willing to open peace discussions in Warsaw. A second major incident during the Johnson Administration involved the bombing of two Soviet ships in Haiphong harbor by American Air Force jets. The pilots in that case, along with their commander, were court-martialed.

The Mylai massacre—involving the slaughter of 300 civilians by American troops—also took place during the Johnson Administration. No charges were filed in the case for 18 months after it was first reported to the Pentagon in a letter from an enlisted man—a pattern similar to that in the Lavelle incident.

Bending the Rules

In interviews last week, a number of former photo intelligence analysts said that at least 20 unauthorized "protective reaction" raids on such targets as oil and truck depots were planned in advance and carried out each month by the Seventh Air Force throughout 1970 and 1971. General Lavelle took over his command in July 1971, indicating that such abuses — if the allegations are true — were carried out by his predecessors.

One former key White House aide acknowledged that he and others had "assumed" that some of what he termed "bending of the rules" of protective reaction had been going on in the last three years.

"I don't think that there was an effort made to look carefully into every single P.R. raid," he said, explaining that it would be considered "within the rules of the game" for Air Force and Navy reconnaissance aircraft operating in North Vietnam to provoke enemy missile batteries or anti-aircraft guns into action.

Under the rules of "protective reaction" as enunciated in 1969, when such strikes were formally initiated, American fighter planes flying escort for the unarmed reconnaissance missions could bomb and strafe North Vietnamese missile and gun positions after enemy action.

In his appearance before a House of Representatives subcommittee last week, General Lavelle admitted that he had ordered his subordinates always to list "enemy action" in filing official after-action reports to justify the unauthorized raids.

The former White House aide, asked about the general's testimony and the reports of

earlier abuses of "protective reaction," declared that such action would not be within the informal rules as the White House understood them. He added that the staging of offensive and unauthorized "protective reaction" missions without reporting all of them, as also was alleged by some former intelligence personnel last week, "would be out of bounds." Also ruled out would be the bombing of enemy supply depots and similar targets, he said.

'Conspiracy' Rejected

This official categorically rejected, as did all the others interviewed, the conclusion that the Nixon White House was aware of all the "protective reaction" raids and in fact had a role in planning them in an attempt to apply maximum, but covert, pressure on North Vietnam. Such views had been expressed privately by some high-ranking former Johnson Administration officials.

"I don't see a big conspiracy," he said. "In fact, I think the White House role has often been one of restraint" on the military. Nonetheless, he said he believed that "L.B.J. had more command and control over the military—but at a higher cost of military irritation."

"Under Nixon," he said, "the rules of engagement have been more relaxed."

Another former White House official, who also was closely connected with planning for the Vietnam war, gave the following analysis to explain why he thought command and control had eroded under the Nixon Administration:

"The chain of command, particularly with McNamara, was much tighter. McNamara dealt much more frequently, in my opinion, on matters of strategy with the President than Laird does. McNamara was an intensely loyal and selfless man and he really did rule military operations with a very firm hand—that was the source of much of the military's difficulty with him. The chain of command worked much better because the communication was much better."