

Making a Case in Public

By this time, the Administration felt that it had sufficient information on infiltration to make a public case for bombing the North. The intelligence community had obtained evidence that a minimum of 19,000 and a maximum of 34,000 infiltrators, mostly former southerners who had fought against the French in the Vietminh, had entered the South since 1959. Chester L. Cooper, a former intelligence officer, had put together a major report on Hanoi's support and direction of the guerrillas, but the Administration had decided earlier in December against public disclosure of the document itself because this might create "undesirable speculation," and had instead instructed the Ambassador to continue the piecemeal approach. Now, the analyst says, Mr. Rusk wanted this halted as well for fear that more publicity might create pressure for action prematurely.

Debate Grows in Congress

The political upheaval in Saigon, the writer continues, was fueling a Vietnam debate in Congress, which, while it did not exhibit much antiwar sentiment, did show considerable confusion and dismay, the writer says.

Secretary Rusk, on television on Jan. 3, 1965, felt it necessary to defend the Administration "in the context of a year-end foreign policy report," the account adds.

Mr. Rusk did not hint at the Administration's plans for possible bombing of the North. "Ruling out either a U. S. withdrawal or a major expansion of the war," the writer says, "Rusk gave assurances that with internal unity, and our aid and persistence the South Vietnamese could themselves defeat the insurgency."

On Jan. 14, however, as a result of the loss of two American jets over Laos in Operation Barrel Roll, "accounts of U.S. air operations against Laotian infiltration routes gained wide circulation for the first time," the writer says. A dispatch from Laos by United Press International, he adds, "in effect blew the lid on the entire Yankee Team operation in Laos since May of 1964."

"Despite official State or Defense refusal to comment on the nature of the Laotian air missions, these disclosures added new fuel to the public policy debate," the writer continues. The disclosures were complicating matters for the President by giving ammunition to the very small minority of antiwar senators who were taking seriously the press speculation that the United States might be getting ready to bomb the North.

In a Senate speech on Jan. 19, the account goes on, Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon charged that the Yankee Team air strikes had ignored the 1962 Geneva accords on Laos and "violated the nation's belief in 'substituting the rule of law for the jungle law of military might.' Broadening his attack, he warned, that 'there is no hope of avoiding a massive war in Asia' if U. S. policy towards Southeast Asia were to continue without change."

Within the Administration in Washington, key policy makers were coming to the same conclusion that Ambassador Taylor and his colleagues had reached in Saigon—that it was desirable to bomb the North regardless of what state of government existed in the South.

The political turmoil in Saigon, the narrative says, appears "to have been interpreted in Washington as an impending sellout" to the National Liberation Front. Fear increased that a neutralist coalition government would emerge and invite the United States to leave.

Victory for the Vietcong

Washington's sense of crumbling in the military situation was heightened when Saigon's army suffered a "highly visible" setback in a ferocious battle at Binhgia, southeast of the capital, between Dec. 26 and Jan. 2. Vietcong guerrillas nearly destroyed two South Vietnamese Marine battalions.

"All evidence pointed to a situation in which a final collapse of the GVN appeared probable and a victorious consolidation of VC power a distinct possibility," the narrative says.