

Bombing and a Pause

In April, 1965, when President Johnson secretly changed the mission of the Marines at Danang from defense to offense and thus committed the United States to the ground war in Vietnam, the sustained bombing of North Vietnam was relegated to a secondary role, the Pentagon study declares. Discussing this bombing campaign, known as Operation Rolling Thunder, the study adds:

"Earlier expectations that bombing would constitute the primary means for the U.S. to turn the tide of the war had been overtaken by the President's decision to send in substantial U.S. ground forces. With this decision the main hope had shifted from inflicting pain in the North to proving, in the South, that NVN could not win a military victory there. Rolling Thunder was counted as useful and necessary, but in the prevailing view it was a supplement and not a substitute for efforts within SVN."

By the summer of 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder's scope and pattern of operation had also been determined, the narrative relates.

To emphasize American power, it goes on, the bombing of the North would proceed "in a slow, steady, deliberate manner, beginning with a few infiltration-associated targets in southern NVN and gradually moving northward with progressively more severe attacks on a wider variety of targets."

Because Operation Rolling Thunder was considered "comparatively risky and politically sensitive," all bombing strikes were carefully selected in Washington. Targets were chosen in weekly packages, the study says, and each target package "had to pass through a chain of approvals which included senior levels of O.S.D. [Office of the Secretary of Defense], the Department of State and the White House."

Attacks were also permitted against certain broad categories of targets, such as vehicles, locomotives and barges, which were defined in Washington. In this type of attack, known as armed reconnaissance, the final selection of a specific target was left to the pilot.

The number of sorties—individual flights by individual planes—was gradually increased, the account relates, from 900 a week during July to 1,500 a week in December, 1965. By the end of the year 55,000 sorties had been flown, nearly three-fourths of them on armed reconnaissance.

While the list of targets was also lengthened, Secretary McNamara continued to keep the Hanoi-Haiphong area and the Chinese border area off limits through the end of 1965.

The study reports that the original purpose of Rolling Thunder, "to break the will of North Vietnam," was changed during the summer of 1965 to cutting the flow of men and supplies from the North to the South.

This change in the Government's internal rationale, the analyst writes, brought it in line with the publicly expressed rationale, which had always been an infiltration cutoff.

The rationale was changed, the study declares, because it was recognized that "as a venture in strategic persuasion the bombing had not worked."

In fact, intelligence estimates commissioned by Secretary McNamara showed that by the end of 1965 the bombing had had little effect on North Vietnam.

Strains Show in Industry

In November, 1965, the Defense Intelligence Agency told Mr. McNamara that while the "cumulative strains" resulting from the bombing had "reduced

industrial performance" in North Vietnam, "the primarily rural nature of the area permits continued functioning of the subsistence economy."

And, the agency's estimate continued, "The air strikes do not appear to have altered Hanoi's determination to continue supporting the war in South Vietnam."

In the analyst's view, "The idea that destroying, or threatening to destroy, North Vietnam's industry would pressure Hanoi into calling it quits, seems, in retrospect, a colossal misjudgment." The analyst continues:

"NVN was an extremely poor target for air attack. The theory of either strategic or interdiction bombing assumed highly developed industrial nations producing large quantities of military goods to sustain mass armies engaged in intensive warfare. NVN, as U.S. intelligence agencies knew, was an agricultural country with a rudimentary transportation system and little industry of any kind.

"What intelligence agencies liked to call the 'modern industrial sector' of the economy was tiny even by Asian standards, producing only about 12 per cent of the G.N.P. of \$1.6-billion in 1965. There were only a handful of 'major industrial facilities.' When NVN was first targeted, the J.C.S. found only eight industrial installations worth listing."

"NVN's limited industry made little contribution to its military capabilities," the account continues. "The great bulk of its military equipment, and all of the heavier and more sophisticated items, had to be imported. This was no particular problem, since both the U.S.S.R. and China were apparently more than glad to help.

"The NVN transportation system was austere and superficially looked very vulnerable to air attack, but it was inherently flexible and its capacity greatly exceeded the demands placed upon it.

"Supporting the war in the south was hardly a great strain on NVN's economy. The NVA/VC forces there did not constitute a large army. They did not fight as conventional division or field armies, with tanks and airplanes and field artillery; they did not need to be supplied by huge convoys of trucks, trains or ships. They fought and moved on foot, supplying themselves locally, in the main, and simply avoiding combat when supplies were low."

An important element in Secretary McNamara's program of pressure against North Vietnam, the study says, was a pause in the bombing. On July 20, 1965, Mr. McNamara wrote in a memorandum to the President:

"After the 44 U.S.-third-country battalions have been deployed and after some strong action has been taken in the program of bombing in the North, we could, as part of a diplomatic initiative, consider introducing a 6-8 week pause in the program of bombing the North."

He apparently felt, the Pentagon study says, that the previous pause—May 8 to May 13, 1965—had been too short and too hastily arranged to be effective. Hanoi was simply not given enough time to reply during the May pause, the study says. It also relates that President Johnson had viewed the pause "as a means of clearing the way for an increase in the tempo of the air war in the absence of a satisfactory response from Hanoi."

The Secretary of Defense repeated his proposal for a bombing pause several times during the fall of 1965, the account goes on. As he and Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton envisioned it, the pause would be used as a kind of "ratchet,"—which the analyst likens to "the device which raises the net on a tennis court, backing off tension between each phase of increasing it."

All the high officials who debated the pause in bombing assumed that it would be temporary, the study declares. "Throughout this discussion it was taken for granted that bombing would be resumed."

Too Stringent for Hanoi

The officials, known in government circles as the "Vietnam principals," believed the bombing would be resumed, the narrative adds, because they knew that the conditions they had set for a permanent halt were tougher than Hanoi could accept.

In a confidential memorandum on Dec. 3, apparently intended only for Mr. McNamara, Assistant Secretary McNaughton outlined the conditions the United States should insist upon for a permanent halt:

"A. The D.R.V. stops infiltration and direction of the war.

"B. The D.R.V. moves convincingly toward withdrawal of infiltrators.

"C. The VC stops attacks, terror and sabotage.

"D. The VC stop significant interference with the GVN's exercise of governmental functions over substantially all of South Vietnam."

After noting these conditions, Mr. Naughton wrote that they amounted to

"capitulation by a Communist force that is far from beaten."

The Joint Chiefs as well as Secretary of State Dean Rusk opposed any halt in bombing, the study says, because they were concerned that a pause would ease the pressure on Hanoi. [See text, State Department memo, Nov. 9, 1965.]

They also feared that Hanoi might offer an opening of negotiations in exchange for a halt in bombing, without making any of the substantive conces-

sions that Washington wanted, the study adds.

"The available materials do not reveal the President's response to these arguments," the narrative relates, "but it is clear from the continuing flow of papers that he delayed positively committing himself either for or against a pause until very shortly before the actual pause began."

The pause was to last 37 days, from Dec. 24, 1965, to Jan. 31, 1966.

The Series So Far

Events before Tonkin Gulf: Incidents were preceded by months of covert U.S.-run raids against North Vietnam and of planning for escalation that would lead to full-scale bombing of North. Tonkin Gulf resolutions, study says, "set U.S. public support for virtually any action."

Planning the bombing: Between Tonkin clashes and the November, 1964, Presidential election, the Johnson Administration secretly reached "general consensus" favoring air war against North Vietnam; it began in March, 1965.

The ground war begins: The chain of decision resulting in the U.S. assumption of the major burden of the war started almost immediately after air attacks on the North, with approval of a troop increase and an unannounced "change of mission" to the offensive.

The Kennedy years: These were a time of significantly deepening U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict, the study says. It cites covert actions authorized by President against North Vietnam and asserts "complicity" of the Kennedy Administration in the coup against Diem "inadvertently" enlarged U.S. commitment.