

Concepts of 'Protective Reaction'

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 23 —The air strike carried out against North Vietnam Tuesday was the fifth such massive raid ordered by much-explained, much-misunderstood policy of "protective reaction." In the three days since the first bombs were dropped, Administration spokesmen here and in Saigon have labored to persuade reporters that the huge raid was consistent with the standing definition of "protective reaction." Privately, however, officials here have begun to acknowledge what they so far have declined to say in public: that protective reaction has a political definition as well as a literal one, and that the Administration is using these occasional heavy air strikes to keep North Vietnam off balance and prevent a build-up for an enemy offensive.

"Essentially, we're hitting targets of opportunity as they present themselves," one Pentagon official explained, "with an eye toward stopping any major build-up before it develops."

Jerry W. Friedheim, the Pentagon spokesman, came close to conceding this in a briefing on Tuesday, the day of the raid.

Asked if current policy provided that "whenever there is a heavy enemy build-up, we go up and bomb it," Mr. Friedheim replied: "That's it."

In a briefing in Saigon today, the spokesman for the Ameri-

can military command made it clear that Tuesday's raid had gone beyond the original definition of protective reaction when he acknowledged that the planes had bombed military oil storage areas in North Vietnam, as well as the anti-aircraft and missile positions that were first described as the primary targets of the raid.

Phrase Coined, by Laird

The phrase "protective reaction" was coined by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird at a news conference on Oct. 9, 1969. Under this policy, American field commanders in South Vietnam were instructed to seek out and attack concentrations of enemy troops that threatened them or the South Vietnamese.

Some months later, the policy was extended to cover the American aircraft that have been flying reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam on an almost daily basis since full-scale bombing was suspended on Nov. 1, 1968. The pilots were authorized to attack with rockets whenever their radar indicated that a North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile site had "locked on" the plane and was about to fire.

Scores of small strikes were carried out under this policy, often involving only a single Shrike rocket from a single American F-4 fighter against an anti-aircraft position.

The first of the five massive raids, which the Pentagon later called "reinforced protective reaction strikes," came on March 27, 1970. The most intensive strikes were conducted between May 1 and May 4, 1970, when more than 500 aircraft took part in response to

what Mr. Laird described as "attacks on our unarmed reconnaissance aircraft."

He contended then that when the full-scale bombing of North Vietnam was originally suspended, "it was with the understanding that unarmed reconnaissance flights would continue."

Mr. Nixon gradually expanded the policy to include strikes against the enemy's supply and troop concentrations in a series of televised addresses on Vietnam during 1970.

On Jan. 11, 1971, he told three television interviewers that "if the enemy starts moving troops and supplies through the Mugia Pass and other passes, I will have to order bombing strikes on those key areas."

The North Vietnamese consider the massive raids a violation of the agreement under which they agreed to join the peace talks in Paris. They signalled this again by canceling the session that was scheduled for today.

Administration officials said today that given the current deadlock in the talks, it was a small diplomatic price to pay for a militarily desirable move.

The officials added that they expected the President would order more such strikes as the American combat strength declined in South Vietnam and the 1972 campaign season approaches.

"The President has said he will do what is necessary to protect American troops as they withdraw," one official observed, "And I have no doubt he will. He's also likely to use air power to prevent the North Vietnamese from upsetting his political plans."