

# The Nonwar War

By HERBERT MITGANG

The uncontested nonelection next Sunday for the South Vietnamese presidency has its counterpart in creative fantasy for over 200,000 Americans there: from the Delta to the DMZ and beyond they are shooting and being shot at in an unofficially undeclared nonwar.

The biggest public relations triumph of the Administration thus far is planting the impression that, like Pan Am's commercial, President Nixon is making the going great. He told Congress and the country this month about "our success in winding down the war" but, skeptical Senators and Vietnam-watchers say, he has only succeeded in winding down persistent opposition to the war.

This year the casualties and body counts have dropped sharply but the going is slow, costly, still perilous and pegged to politics. Senator Mansfield's original amendment to the draft-extension law calling for a nine-month troop withdrawal deadline was weakened into phrasing that is open-ended. The only "date certain" for withdrawal there is considered to be the '72 election here.

It was not Mao but Confucius who said that the best way to leave is simply by going through the door. But the revived fury of United States aerial strikes in the last fortnight indicates that our exit is through the bomb bays.

The air war is very costly in human and financial terms. A year ago about 5,000 American planes (1,000 fixed-wing and 4,000 helicopters) were operating over Indochina. There are still 3,500 American planes (500 fixed-wing, 3,000 helicopters) in action today. One and at times two aircraft carriers are in coastal waters. Plane losses by hostile fire and accidents have been heavy: more than 3,300 fixed-wing and more than 4,500 helicopters in the war up to now.

Nor has the theater of combat been narrowed in this twilight time of disengagement. Five states are still directly involved. Thailand remains the base of operations for B-52 missions; Laos and Cambodia are regularly interdicted to hinder the enemy's supply system; North Vietnam above the demilitarized zone is photographed by reconnaissance planes and struck by fighter-bombers on "protective reaction" missions; South Vietnam is one big free-fire zone when required to bail out Saigon's soldiers.

In the semantic acrobatics of the Vietnam war, "protective reaction" strikes against antiaircraft emplacements and missile and fuel sites have been stressed. But far more dangerous in the future are the actions behind two less-familiar phrases: "pre-emptive attack" against troop infiltration on the trails and "ancillary effect" bombing—meaning, in support of South Vietnamese forces. When ARVN troops retreated from a Cambodian town a few months ago, under heavy United States air cover, Gen. Creighton Abrams remarked, "Dammit, they've

got to learn they can't do it all with air. If they don't, it's all been in vain."

In this withdrawal phase of Vietnamization, American troops are supposed to be in a defensive posture. On-the-ground combat responsibilities now belong to the ARVN; it is their turn to search-and-destroy and carry the fight. But an Air Force colonel explains, "Consistent with this concept we support ARVN ground operations with air and artillery. Both B-52's and tactical fighter-bombers have been involved." In these operations the American Air Force's role is restricted to "air logistical support and close air support."

Translated into what has taken place this month alone, the clear implication of these terms seems to be that American "advisers" and fliers are very much part of offensive actions. They have been engaged in a two-front war in September: carrying South Vietnamese infantrymen into battle deep in the Mekong Delta 145 miles southwest of Saigon and backing them up with helicopter gunships; bombing in the southern panhandle of Laos in direct support of Royal Lao forces and C.I.A.-trained guerrilla battalions. These activities hardly accord with the periodic announcements from Washington about "winding down the war" through Vietnamization.

It is difficult to predict what American casualties will be in the next twelvemonth of nonwar if no settlement is achieved in the Paris talks (and the Administration shows no eagerness to advance the prospect of a settlement there). The present rate of fewer than 100 killed a month is an encouraging drop but it could go up or down, depending not on American-originated actions but on the support given to sustain the governments of client states. The United States has become their hostages militarily.

The probability at this point is that the Air Force activity will be kept at a steady level. Two years ago there were 1,800 sorties (one aircraft on one mission) a month; currently the monthly rate is 1,000. It has gone up this month. The cost of one B-52 sortie in Southeast Asia today—for fuel and bombs alone—is between \$35,000 and \$45,000. Multiplied, this comes to more than \$35 million a month.

Many moribund national programs—for education, housing, employment, parklands—could be revived by the hundreds of millions of dollars now falling out of the bomb bays on Southeast Asia. Perhaps a more meaningful local measure, even though Federal funds are not directly involved, is to compare just the financial costs of the B-52 bombings with what it would take to reopen the main branch of the New York Public Library evenings (\$350,000), Saturdays (\$350,000) and Sundays and holidays (\$200,000) for a full year.

A few nonflying days, not to mention peace, would do it.

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