

Behind the Bombing

Nixon Is Said to View Cost in Criticism As Less Than That of Major War Defeat

By NEIL SHEEHAN
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WASHINGTON, Dec. 28— It has become evident here, despite varying official explanations for the renewed heavy bombing of North Vietnam, that the central purpose of the Nixon Administration is to stave off a major military setback in Indochina. The Administration apparently has concluded that even in an election year the domestic political price for such "limited-duration" raids against the North by hundreds of planes will be less than the political consequences of a major military defeat in Indochina.

The President and other senior policymakers have also apparently decided that whatever the historical record, American airpower is now sufficiently effective to limit North Vietnam's offensive capabilities severely and to fill the gap created by the withdrawal of American ground troops from the South.

The raids against anti-aircraft installations and fuel and supply depots in the North went through their third consecutive day today. On the ground in Indochina, however, the military situation continued to deteriorate. The North Vietnamese infantrymen have now seized the Laotian town of Paksong, giving them control over the strategic Boloven Plateau in Southern Laos.

The defenses in Northeast Laos have similarly been crumbling before the dry-season offensive of the North Vietnamese.

Repercussions Begin

The domestic political repercussions to the bombing raids have already started with an outcry against the raids by Mr. Nixon's leading Democratic opponents, Senators Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, George S. McGovern of South Dakota, and Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota.

Mr. Muskie, the leading Democratic contender for the Presidential nomination, asserted in a statement released by his office here that the bombing "exposes the bankruptcy of President Nixon's Vietnamization policy."

He called on the President to cease the bombing and open "genuine negotiations" in Paris that would obtain the release of American prisoners of war by setting a date for a total withdrawal of all American forces from South Vietnam.

Mr. Muskie is vacationing in Maine and a spokesman said the statement was worked out with his staff by telephone.

Mr. McGovern asked all other Democratic candidates to join him in a statement that likewise condemned the renewed raids on the North as a "desperate attempt to salvage a wrecked policy" and asked the President to negotiate the release of American prisoners by setting a total withdrawal date.

Thant Joins Protest

Secretary General Thant also entered the protest, charging that the bombing constituted "one of the major obstacles to meaningful talks in Paris."

In an apparent effort to calm the outcry, Jerry W. Friedheim, the Pentagon spokesman, contended today that "we have not resumed the bombing campaign on the North" that Mr. Nixon's predecessor, President Johnson, had waged for three

and a half years from March of 1965 until Oct. 31, 1968.

"We have responded in a limited way for a limited time with the geography limited and the targets limited," Mr. Friedheim said.

In Philadelphia, Mr. Humphrey called for a halt to the bombing and an extended cease-fire from New Year's Day through the Vietnamese Tet, or Lunar New Year, holiday in February. "Now is the time to end the wanton sacrifice of lives," he said.

Thirty-one House members, one of them a Republican, Representative Donald W. Riegle Jr. of Michigan, sent a telegram to Mr. Nixon labeling the bombing raids "a reversion to the discredited bombing policy of the past" and requesting "stepped up initiatives in the Paris negotiations, not a stepped-up air war."

Three Reasons Offered

One well-placed Administration source cited three immediate reasons for the current raids against the North:

¶A "moderate" enemy buildup in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, where Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird said yesterday that the North Vietnamese might be planning an offensive.

¶Deterioration in the military situation in Laos, which is seriously worrying senior policy makers.

¶The new and increasingly bold sorties by North Vietnamese MIG-21 fighter planes against American B-52 bombers pounding the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply network through Southern Laos.

This and a number of other statements by Administration officials have demonstrated that the central purpose of the bombing is to prevent any major military setback in Indochina that would unravel the President's Vietnamization policy. Vietnamization seeks to achieve the objective of a non-Communist South Vietnam by gradually turning over the war to a South Vietnamese army and administration capable of holding their own against both the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

In fact, it is believed that the inevitable consequence of Mr. Nixon's decision to reduce American troops to a residual force of 40,000 to 50,000 men and still preserve a non-Communist South Vietnamese state.

Nixon's Stated Position

The President himself outlined the importance of the air weapon to his strategy when he refused at a news conference last December to accept any restrictions on bombing of the North.

Mr. Nixon said: "Now if, as a result of my conclusion that the North Vietnamese, by their infiltration, threaten our remaining forces, if they develop a capacity and proceed possibly to use that capacity to increase the level of fighting in South Vietnam, then I will order the bombing of military sites in North Vietnam, the passes that lead from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, the military complexes, the supply lines. That will be the reaction that I shall take."

The President's statement appeared to encompass virtually any target in the North that he deemed of a military nature.

The collapse of the pro-Amer-



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DEBRIEFING FOR PILOTS of A-6 attack bombers on the carrier Constellation following a mission over enemy supply trails. The carrier was stationed off South Vietnam.

ican regime in Laos because of North Vietnamese advances there, as well as the demise of the pro-American Government in Cambodia, where the enemy has likewise delivered telling the military blows this month, would threaten the President's Vietnamization policy because of the adverse effects they would have on the morale of the Saigon Government's forces.

The undercutting of the American position in Laos and Cambodia would also give the President's domestic critics new ammunition.

Whether American airpower will prove sufficiently effective to stave off a military defeat in Indochina will depend upon the validity of recent claims by Pentagon officials of new and significant advances in interdiction of truck traffic moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail's jungle roads.

These air techniques involve an interlocking system of electronic sensors, so-called "smart bombs" that are guided to their targets by laser beams and other devices, and C-130 gunships, which spew thousands of shells from 20-mm. and 40-

mm. Gating guns at the trucks and troops moving down the roads.

At a news conference in mid-December, Secretary of the Air Force Robert C. Seamans Jr. asserted that of the estimated 68,500 tons of supplies the North Vietnamese sent down the trail during the last dry season, in 1970-71, only about 9,500 tons reached its destination.

There have been no reports, however, of ammunition shortages among the North Vietnamese troops fighting in Laos and Cambodia.