

'No Pretty Picture'

Phase One of President Nixon's renewal of the air war against North Vietnam has ended after five days of the heaviest bombing since President Johnson suspended the attack in 1968 to get peace negotiations started. The renewed bombing halt is a welcome start for 1972. But a bigger and even more perilous Phase Two cannot be far behind unless Mr. Nixon abandons his vain pursuit of military victory in Indochina and acts to revive the neglected Paris peace talks.

Citing recent Presidential warnings, the Saigon command has strongly indicated there will be further raids unless the North Vietnamese stop trying to build up "significant" war supplies and halt their mounting challenge to American bombers over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The North Vietnamese certainly are not going to comply with what amounts to a demand that they give up the battle in South Vietnam, just when "Vietnamization" is proving so ineffectual.

The Administration's apparent faith in the ability of air power to restore the eroding balance of power on the ground is beyond comprehension. The Pentagon Papers clearly revealed widespread disillusionment with the effectiveness of the bombing campaign that was carried out against the North in the Johnson years.

As early as Oct. 14, 1966, Secretary of Defense McNamara observed: "Nor has the Rolling Thunder program of bombing the North either significantly affected infiltration or cracked the morale of Hanoi. There is agreement in the intelligence community on these facts." The following May Presidential Assistant McGeorge Bundy wrote: "On the ineffectiveness of the bombing as a means to end the war, I think the evidence is plain . . . Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues simply are not going to change their policy on the basis of losses from the air in North Vietnam."

To be sure, American bombing techniques have been improved and strengthened since then with new electronic devices and more terrible weapons of destruction. But the new techniques have not been able to prevent serious setbacks in recent weeks for American-backed forces in Cambodia and Laos and there is no reason to believe they can do more than prolong the agony of South Vietnam and of the Americans still caught up in that interminable conflict as participants or prisoners.

Beyond the practical question of the efficacy of bombing as a way to win an unwinnable war, there is a moral issue raised by these mass attacks which inevitably exact a toll of innocent lives. Before moving to Phase Two of the revived air war, President Nixon and his advisers would do well to recall Secretary McNamara's warning to Mr. Johnson in a memorandum May 19, 1967. It read, in part:

"There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go. The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one. It could conceivably produce a costly distortion in the American national consciousness and in the world image of the United States—especially if the damage to North Vietnam is complete enough to be 'successful.'"

Mr. McNamara's wise counsel is even more in need of attention at this dawn of a new year.