

The Receiving End of the Bombing

By GEORGE McT. KAHIN

SANTA BARBARA, Calif.—The 1,000-sortie bombing raids which President Nixon ordered against North Vietnam extended into Thanhhoa Province only one hundred miles from Hanoi. "Military targets," the President's spokesman said—the same terminology used during the three and a half years of Mr. Johnson's bombing of the North.

As did his predecessor, President Nixon gets aerial photographs which detail the destruction caused by the bombs—of structures at least, though not of the civilians caught in them. Like President Johnson, he is fully aware of the lack of precision inherent in such attacks—the wide swath of destruction of adjacent areas almost inevitably incidental in efforts to hit those "military targets." And he knows what led Johnson to stop bombing the North—that this costly effort is incapable of impeding the flow of war materials to the South.

One wonders whether Nixon's bombing raids are not simply a return to one of the crudest of the Johnson Administration's policies—its "peace through pressure plan"—the effort to rain sufficient destruction on the population to induce Hanoi's leaders to yield to Washington's demands, a strategy which was counterproductive.

Regardless of how the operation looks in the planning room or from high up in an airplane it works out about the same on the ground—with homes, marketplaces, schools and churches destroyed and civilians killed and maimed.

This was brought home to me five months ago when I took a two-day drive south of Hanoi for a little over 120 miles, and well into Thanhhoa Province. My trip largely retraced the somber journey made by visitors five years ago during the height of the Johnson Administration's bombing. If the destruction I saw was the result of "precision bombing" of "military targets," I can only ask: What in the vernacular of our President and our military leaders is not a military target?

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Each town and city which I passed through—Phuly, Ninhbinh, Thanhhoa—had been leveled by the bombings of 1965-68. In all of them and in the smaller intervening towns and villages there stretched a desolation of rubble, with only a scattered few of the original structures still standing. Most of their buildings had been destroyed, and most of the remainder severely damaged—temples, churches, schools, hos-

pitals, marketplaces, houses and public offices. The 1967 ruins remain, though possibly the rubble has been ground a little finer by subsequent bombings.

I asked to visit Phatdiem, seat of a Catholic bishopric, some twenty miles to the east of Route One and the railroad and devoid of any military importance.

Phatdiem and its surrounding district is clearly a nonindustrial, intensely agrarian area, and I could not fathom why it had been bombed so heavily and so often. I couldn't bring myself to believe that President Johnson would have consciously included the heart of Vietnam's most intensely Catholic area as one of the objectives in his "peace through pressure" plan. And so, I initially concluded that here was just another example of "precision bombing."

However, from descriptions which townspeople gave of the attacks, it was apparent that many of them had been deliberately directed at the town of Phatdiem. A large part of the devastation had been caused by planes that

had presumably been driven away from more important targets to the west and northwest and had jettisoned their remaining bombs before returning to their carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. As was the case everywhere, the inhabitants of Phatdiem were immensely proud of their feats in shooting down American planes.

Despite the wreckage, the towns and cities to the south of Hanoi have come back to life, with their streets crammed with cyclists and pedestrians of all ages. But they are no longer built of brick and stone. In almost every case the new homes, offices, temples and

churches that have been erected are made from bamboo, mud, wattle and thatch. American raids against North Vietnam have left the people acutely distrustful of President Nixon. Seeing no prospect of an end to the bombing, they have been unwilling to invest again in buildings made of stone, brick and timber.

Whatever President Nixon's objective in loosing bombing sorties against North Vietnam, it is inevitable that some Vietnamese civilians are killed and others hurt. As with previous raids, the people of North Vietnam are bound to feel every bit as outraged

and bitter as Americans would if their own cities and towns had been hit and their own families had suffered.

By ordering his massive post-Christmas raids the President not only reduced prospects for negotiating an end to the war; he also further undermined the credibility of his frequent professions of concern for the release of imprisoned American pilots.

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