

Viet Moment of Truth

Now that the enemy in Vietnam has begun to capture cities, President Nixon faces a difficult decision.

Should he render those cities useless by saturation bombing?

Or should he spare them and let them become staging centers for the next attack?

It is simple to say that if the enemy puts them to military use they become military targets. But the question won't rest there.

These were friendly cities, whose residents and property we promised to protect.

Having been unable to keep our promise, do we now have a right to treat them as enemies?

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A SIMILAR question arose concerning occupied France during World War II. It was never satisfactorily answered.

Some French cities we bombed, trying especially hard to hit only military installations, although it didn't always seem that way to the French. Other cities we placed off-limits to our planes.

The Vietnam dilemma is more troubling. We were pledged to liberate France and bombing was an unfortunate prelude.

In Vietnam we aren't coming back. The bombing there is postlude.

Even so, we may see a similar policy of bombing some captured cities and sparing others.

We might get away with bombing Kontum, the captured district capital in the highlands, since to most Vietnamese it's a long way from nowhere, more Montagnard country than a true part of Vietnam.

An Loc, when and if it falls, is likely to be no problem. After three weeks of artillery shelling it must be the St. Lo of Vietnam, a rubble heap rather than a city.

Bombing Quang Tri would be a more sensitive affair. Historically there are three Vietnams — Tonkin, Annam and Cochin — reading from north to south.

Quang Tri is in the heart of Annam, in many ways the most Vietnamese region of all — the most fiercely independent, the most rebellious, the most resentful of outsiders.

Bombing Quang Tri would convince a lot of Vietnamese that we are everything the Viet Cong has called us.

As for Hue, if it falls to the enemy, only a fool would drop even one bomb on it.

Hue is the lodestone of Vietnamese patriotic sentiment. When their emperor sat on his throne at Hue, that was their time of greatness.

University city, religious center and ancient capital, it is Cambridge, Canterbury and Camelot all in one.

The Vietnamese may fight for Hue themselves. But for us to bomb it on our way out of Vietnam would create in many Vietnamese minds an ugly parallel to Hitler's mad query, "Is Paris Burning?"

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AND YET, if the cities that fall into enemy hands are left unmolested, they will become hubs of enemy transport, communications, supply and administration, moving the locus of the war deep into the south and immensely facilitating future offensives.

To bomb or not to bomb is likely to become Mr. Nixon's most excruciating question. And apparently he has left himself no other options.

It isn't clear whether he really believed the Communists would hold back and let him complete his withdrawal gracefully before throwing their Sunday punch. If so, he knows better now.

Perhaps he allowed himself to be persuaded the blow could be blunted by air power alone. If so, he isn't the first to overrate air power.

Now he faces his moment of truth, made thornier by this consideration: Having spared the cities of North Vietnam all these years, can we justify bombing the captured cities in the south?