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History suggests bombs will not budge Hanoi

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HANOI — How strange comments that filter into this isolated place from the outside world often sound. This week the Voice of America told us that Vice President Agnew had declared the North Vietnamese army "demoralized." Then Maj. Gen. Alexander Haig Jr., Henry Kissinger's deputy, told correspondents that the political structure was under serious strain in Hanoi and prostitution growing.

There came to mind the marvelously sardonic comment of the Constable of France on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt

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in Shakespeare's Henry V. When a messenger comes into his tent to say that the English camp lies within 1,500 paces, he asks owlishly, "Who hath measur'd the ground?"

Of course American intelligence has problems in getting facts about North Vietnam. But it would be unfortunate if any serious official believed such stuff as the notion that Hanoi is demoralized or prostitution rife—ideas that the most experienced Western diplomat here termed "nonsensical" when he heard the reports.

Terrible damage

It is certainly true that the bombing has done terrible damage, to both strategic and purely civilian targets. As the Pentagon speaks of even looser restraints on the bombing, the mood among foreigners in Hanoi—including some European Communist diplomats—is increasingly fearful. The question, however, is what the Vietnamese attitude is.

In two weeks here this correspondent has been in a number of highly unpleasant situations: walking across a long pontoon bridge between air raids—hopefully between—for example, or wandering in a huge open-air food market during an alert. The fact is that among the Vietnamese in those situations there was no sign of panic.

But suppose the United States simply bombed Hanoi flat as it easily could—sections of Haiphong have been totally destroyed and places farther south are said to be even worse. The question was put to an official.

'Very little to regret'

"We would have very little to regret anyway," he replied in English. "We have

no big skyscrapers, so if the electricity stops we are not stuck on the 50th floor.

"During the war against the French I lived in the jungle, once I traveled from Hanoi to Hue—nearly 400 miles—on a bicycle. Another time I crossed Laos on foot carrying 40 pounds on my back. I am older now but I can go into the jungle again."

In the foreign ministry and other offices it is said, and experienced Western observers here do not doubt it, that everyone has a small sack ready so that he can bicycle off to the country at any moment. The bag contains some rice, a bit of salt, a few clothes and such things.

The record of history

Is all this told to foreigners just to impress them with North Vietnam's determination? It could be a confidence trick, yes. But for one strong reason Americans would be most unwise to assume that it is. That reason is the unarguable record of recent history.

For the last seven years this country has stood up to bombing and shelling in a way that Europeans have the greatest difficulty understanding. That could change, but on the record no dispassionate analyst would consider that likely.

It is well to remember that according to various American experts this war should have been won long ago. Six or seven years ago they were seeing light in the tunnel and talking about having the boys home for Christmas. That need not be a comment on the rightness of the cause. It is simply a fact that past American predictions of an early Communist collapse have not come true.

Uncertainty about the effectiveness of the latest escalation must underlie that Washington talk of demoralization and prostitution. The officials want to reassure themselves as well as the American public.

Very difficult to see

But from this vantage point it is very difficult to see how the bombing and blockading can have a timely effect on the crucial area of decision. That is the battlefield in the South. Those American officials who say that just one more turn of the screw will make the Communists negotiate on our terms have a heavy burden of history to overcome.

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