

Poster

Aid and Comfort

A Commentary

By *Nicholas von Hoffman*

Marge Tabankin, the president of the National Student Association, recently had an unparalleled chance to see her tax dollars at work. She's just back from a week in North Vietnam where she was bombed 17 times by her fellow countrymen.

She and three others who've been active in the antiwar movement got the invitation to visit Hanoi via cable just as they might get one to attend an international medical meeting. It was natural for Tabankin to be invited. The organization the young woman heads is the largest independent student group in America, and also one that has opposed the war for many years. It doesn't have any money, however, so she had to borrow the \$1,550 for the round-trip ticket, the last leg of which—Vientiane-Hanoi—is served by Aeroflot, the Soviet airline where enormous Slavic stewards push you down in the seats and serve you lukewarm bottles of Coke.

She reports the Hanoi civilian airport hadn't been bombed but that the bridge across the Red River coming into Hanoi was out of commission. No attempt was being made to repair it, apparently because the pontoon bridges are much easier to keep in operation.

On the way into town the air-raid sirens began their wail. This was the final red alert, earlier warnings having been given on the P.A. system which, Marge says, covers every block in the city. "The driver blew his horn and rushed across the bridge. In Hanoi, Haiphong and every other city we visited one-man bomb shelters with cement covers that you pull over you have been dug every three feet. You're safe in them unless you get a direct hit and because there is only one person in each of them fewer people are killed when there is a direct hit.

"Our driver kept swerving over to let us get out and into the shelters and then changing his mind. Finally he took us to the hotel where they put helmets on our heads and got us to a very deep shelter that had benches, fans and comfortable chairs. The minute we hit the shelters we could hear gunners on the roofs near us and feel the earth shaking from the bombs. It was like something out of an old Bogart movie with us in there with the diplomats, Polish, Indians and Russians.

"We didn't know how to deal with it . . . didn't know whether to laugh or whether to cry. We talked about how long it was going to last and how far away the bombs were dropping. None of us said we were scared but I was. We kept saying, 'God, it's our country that's bombing us.' Bill (one of Marge's companions) said 'I wish I had a gun.'"

One of the things that she learned in North Vietnam is that Nixon's war-hawk friends in Congress are right when they say that the antiwar movement is an aid and a comfort to the other side. Many Vietnamese, she learned, know all about the antiwar movement, right down to its various factions and jealously political sectarian divisions. "In their Revolutionary Museum, the first thing you see when you come in is a big poster of a bushy-haired kid holding his middle finger up and saying, 'F—— the Draft.' They have a special antiwar movement room where the Kidnap Kissinger buttons are already in a glass case."

Her visit to the War Crimes Commission building was interrupted by another air raid. In the shelter "a man stood up and explained we were welcome. He said he knew the American people didn't want war and that we were truly the brave ones because we fought Nixon every day while they do only every so often when he comes in the planes."

The War Crimes Commission has an exhibit which shows where your tax money goes. "It was," Marge said, "like a museum of American technology. Unbelievable! Every kind of weapon and antipersonnel bomb . . . you could see the Honeywell-Minneapolis label on them. There were the names of a lot of other companies, but I didn't take them down. I just wanted to get out of there. The pictures of destroyed fetuses and the exhibits of the flechettes, those arrow bomblets that go through your system."

In the village of Phuc Loc, 11 miles outside of Haiphong, she saw what the B-52's do—"Sixty-some-odd people died that night. I talked to an 11-year-old boy who lost eight members of his family. After the all-clear sounded he couldn't even put pieces of his mother and father back together." Marge says that she inspected the remains of a hospital the Phuc Loc survivors were brought to before it was bombed by F-4 Phantoms. She remembers that, "They had left the surgical ward just as it was after it had been hit with a defused fragmentation bomb wedged into the air-conditioner."

After visiting several cities Marge is convinced they're being deliberately destroyed, neighborhood by neighborhood. Her hosts told her they anticipated there would soon be no North Vietnamese city left standing. So the Pentagon high accuracy "smart" bombs either have a low IQ after all, or Melvin Laird is lying again when he says no civilian targets.

In either case Marge flew back to America convinced the North Vietnamese will never give up. By night the roads are heavy with trucks, and beyond knowing how to dodge, these people have themselves, their own spirit and the aid and comfort of so many thousands of Americans who do fight Nixon every day.