

Today a House subcommittee heard testimony from a former commander of the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam who was relieved of his post earlier this year for carrying out offensive air strikes against North Vietnam and calling them "protective reaction." Bob Kuttner reports from Washington.

Kuttner [voice]: General John Lavelle, the commander of the U.S. air forces in Vietnam until his firing and demotion April 7, acknowledged today in a hearing before a House Armed Services Subcommittee that he had ordered offensive bombings of North Vietnam during a five-month period prior to the [rebel?] offensive in violation of official American policy. During that time the North Vietnamese repeatedly insisted that the United States was engaging in such bombing, and Administration spokesmen vigorously denied it.

According to Air Force chief of staff John Ryan, today's other key witness and the superior officer who dismissed Gen. Lavelle, a total of 28 missions involving 147 strikes by individual planes against unauthorized targets were carried out between last November 8th and March 8th. Under questioning from Congressman Otis Pike of New York, who reportedly was the moving force on the Armed Services Committee who compelled the hearing, Gen. Ryan testified that the pilots had made false reports in at least three of the 28 missions and possibly more. Gen. Lavelle admitted that the false reporting was probably the result of his orders that the pilots could not report no enemy action, in order that the mission could be justified as a protective reaction strike, the Administration's jargon for bombings of missile and anti-aircraft sites or other retaliatory raids. But according to today's testimony, none of the 28 missions could be legitimately characterized as protective reaction strikes even under the Administration's definition.

Lavelle, who had been a four-star general, acknowledged that he had made, quote, "a very liberal interpretation" of the rules of engagement in ordering his pilots to strike missile sites, missile transporters, airfields, radar installations and 120- and 130-mm guns before they had actually attacked American planes.

In this afternoon's executive session, which was closed to the press, Lavelle reportedly told the committee that U.S. commander in Vietnam, Gen. Abrams, was aware of what was happening.

Congressman Pike said that the entire episode raised a grave question of civilian control of the military.

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Congressman Pike, ironically, seemed more concerned that Lavelle was denied permission to bomb certain targets than about his willingness to bomb them anyway in violation of orders.

In addition to the question of command and control, other more serious questions were raised by the Lavelle affair. With daily debriefing of pilots taking place, how

could the White House not have been aware of the offensive bombings? If the White House did know, were officials deliberately lying about the then policy of no offensive bombings? Did the offensive bombings and their vehement denial by high officials have any effect on the break-off in the Paris peace talks and on the latest round of escalations? At the White House press briefing today, press officer Gerald Warren refused to comment on any of these questions.

[End of Kuttner's report and end of item.]

*Date is correct; see NYTimes 17 May 72, this file,
"Air Force Relieved Its Vietnam Chief For 'Irregularities'."