

Bombing Hotly Debated In the Johnson Period

NYTimes

By TERENCE SMITH
Special to The New York Times

APR 17 1972

WASHINGTON, April 16 — The merits of the air war over North Vietnam, and particularly the question whether to bomb targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area, were fiercely debated within the Johnson Administration from the outset of the air strikes in the spring of 1965.

The Pentagon's history of the Vietnam war reveals that there was a constant tugging match at the highest levels in the Administration between those who doubted the value of the bombing and feared its political repercussions and those who regarded it as an invaluable weapon that should be employed to the fullest.

The Pentagon history, an account of which was published by The New York Times in a series of articles last year, disclosed that the intelligence community was generally skeptical about the efficacy of the bombing, while the military and others supported it and urged its expansion.

Ultimately, President Lyndon B. Johnson resolved the debate by suspending the entire bombing campaign, known as Operation Rolling Thunder, on Oct. 31, 1968.

The Central Question

The question whether to strike at Hanoi and Haiphong, the so-called "top of the funnel" through which North Vietnam's war matériel flowed, was always at the center of the debate.

As early as October, 1966, Robert S. McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, was urging that the United States end its bombing of North Vietnam or at least shift the targets from the capital and its port to the staging areas and infiltration routes to the South.

In a memorandum to the President on Oct. 14, he argued that shifting the targets "would narrow the bombing down directly to the objectionable infiltration areas and would reduce the international heat on the U.S."

To support his argument, Mr. McNamara appended an appraisal of the bombing by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency that asserted: "As of July, 1966, the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South."

The intelligence estimate concluded that this situation was "not likely to be altered by reducing the present geographic constraints, mining Haiphong and the principal harbors of North Vietnam or otherwise expanding the U.S. air offensive along the lines now contemplated in military recommendations and planning studies."

Joint Chiefs Disagree

In a memorandum to Mr. McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff took direct objection to this assessment and to his recommendations. They argued that "to be effective, the air campaign should be conducted with only those minimum constraints necessary to avoid indiscriminate killing of population."

Specifically, the Joint Chiefs recommended an expansion of the campaign that "would decrease the Hanoi and Haiphong sanctuary areas, authorize attacks against the steel plant, the Hanoi railyards, the thermal power plants, selected areas within Haiphong port and other ports."

Bundy Opposed Expansion

The Joint Chiefs maintained that the air campaign was "an integral and indispensable part of our over-all war effort."

Mr. McNamara was not persuaded. In a memorandum to the President a month later, on Nov. 17, 1966, he observed that "at the scale we are now operating, I believe our bombing is yielding very small marginal returns, not worth the cost in pilot lives and aircraft."

Another significant voice in the debate was that of Mc-

George Bundy, the President's national security adviser, who was not opposed to the bombing, but objected to its expansion. He argued in a memorandum to the President in May, 1967, that the real value of the campaign had been its detrimental effect on North Vietnamese infiltration and beneficial effect on South Vietnamese morale and concluded that "Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues simply are not going to change their policy on the basis of losses from the air in North Vietnam."

Noting that "There is certainly a point at which such bombing does increase the risk of conflict with the Soviet Union and China," he added, "I think it is clear that the case against going after Haiphong harbor is so strong that a majority would back the Government in rejecting that course."

Mr. Bundy's successor as national security adviser, Walt W. Rostow, picked up the debate in a subsequent memorandum entitled "United States strategy in Vietnam," which circulated throughout the top level of the Administration. Sensitive to the criticisms of the bombing, Mr. Rostow wrote of the North Vietnamese.

"We have never held the view that bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area alone would lead them to abandon their effort in the South. We have never held the view that bombing Hanoi-Haiphong would directly cut back infiltration. We have held the view that the degree of military and civilian cost felt in the North and the diversion of resources to deal with our bombing could contribute marginally—and perhaps significantly—to the timing of a decision to end the war."

Three Options Cited

As Mr. Rostow saw it, the United States had three options.

"Closing the top of the funnel" was the first. He wrote that "Under this strategy, we would mine the major harbors and, perhaps bomb port facilities and even consider a blockade."

"Attacking what is inside the funnel," was second. This option included continued bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area, which was underway at the time.

"Concentration on route packages 1 and 2" the infiltration routes to the South."

Mr. Rostow, rejected No. 1 as incurring too many risks with too little return and urged the adoption of No. 3, while holding open the option of raids on Hanoi and Haiphong "when they make sense." He added the comment, "I believe we are wasting a good many pilots in the Hanoi-Haiphong area without commensurate results."

Secretary McNamara's disenchantment with the bombing campaign continued to grow. In a draft memorandum written for Mr. Johnson in 1967, he observed: "There continues to be no sign that the bombing has reduced Hanoi's will to resist, or her ability to ship the necessary supplies south."

McNamara Notes the Cost

Mr. McNamara rejected the various suggestions for expanded air activity as involving unacceptable risk and urged, once again, a staged reduction of the bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th Parallel in an effort to persuade Hanoi to compromise. It argued.

"The air campaign against heavily defended areas costs us one pilot in every 40 sorties. In addition, an important but hard-to-measure cost is domestic and world opinion: there may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go.

"The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."