
Victory Through Air Power?

There is now good reason to believe that the widespread weekend air assault on North Vietnam represented an effort to block a new Communist build-up in South Vietnam through American air power and did not simply constitute a "protective reaction," as billed.

Defense Secretary Laird's explanation of the raids as a "response" to the shooting down of an "unarmed reconnaissance aircraft" was never very credible. The scope of the attacks, if merely retaliatory, was obviously excessive, especially in view of the fact that the reconnaissance planes that fly regularly over North Vietnam are accompanied by armed aircraft capable of instant retaliation.

The credibility of the Administration's explanation has been further undermined by reports from the French press agency in Hanoi, as well as by North Vietnamese charges that the air attacks extended to the Hanoi-Haiphong area and were not confined to areas below the nineteenth parallel as Mr. Laird first indicated. His additional announcement yesterday that a helicopter task force had landed near Hanoi during the air raids in an attempt to rescue American prisoners of war neither clarifies the situation nor justifies the bombing. It only raises additional questions about the judgment of those directing United States policy. Even if this abortive exercise in military theatrics had succeeded in rescuing a few prisoners, it would have further compromised the already wretched position of the many Americans remaining in North Vietnamese hands.

There is naturally great concern over the increased infiltration from the North and build-up of Communist supplies. If Hanoi succeeds in moving large numbers of men and supplies to the South this winter, they could pose a serious threat to the Vietnamization program next spring when American force levels in South Vietnam are due to drop below 300,000 men, only half of them combat troops. It is illusory, however, to think that air power is the solution.

Air power has not been able to prevent the enemy from operating against American troops in the past. It will not be able to save the South Vietnamese and residual United States forces from similar challenges in the future after the bulk of Americans have departed. Reopening the air war against the North only suggests a tendency to fall back on a policy that has proved futile, either in winning a war or achieving a peace. It could seriously jeopardize prospects for a negotiated settlement, which is the only way the United States may still extricate itself with honor from this fruitless, interminable conflict.