

President Nixon And General LeMay

By TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

WASHINGTON, June 12—A survey of reliable and experienced military sources in Vietnam by Charles Mohr of The New York Times convinced him that only "the enormous use of American air power . . . had prevented a South Vietnamese collapse early in April."

Last week, B-52's resumed pattern-bombing raids in the panhandle region of North Vietnam, even while the number of fighter-bomber raids on the North also was being increased. The numbers of American fighter-bombers and aircraft carriers in the Indochina war have been tripled, and B-52's have been quadrupled. These increases far more than offset the continuing withdrawals of ground forces from South Vietnam.

Moreover, Pentagon officials say publicly that more North Vietnamese targets are now available to them than was the case during the earlier air offensive waged by President Johnson.

"In '68 we really didn't pursue this to the end," Adm. W. P. Mack said at a briefing last week. "There are many fewer targets off limits now." Nor, apparently, is President Nixon exercising the personal control of target selection that Mr. Johnson did.

The broader air campaign is being waged at a time when Mr. Nixon also has sealed with mines the North Vietnamese harbors. The two steps obviously go together, and make up the most determined American effort yet to deny North Vietnam the supplies—particularly those shipped over water from other nations—either to maintain the war in the South or to sustain civilian needs and morale in the North.

Naturally, the dollar cost is going up, too. At a time when potential political opponents like Senators McGovern and Humphrey are talking about the need to reduce defense expenditures, the cost of waging Mr. Nixon's lethal new air campaign is probably going to double the war budget, according to Secretary of Defense Laird—and may drive it even higher, some other experts believe.

All this may satisfy some of those war hawks who wonder only why it wasn't done earlier, but in the minds of others it raises some questions—or it ought to, if the length, cost and horrors of this war have not yet numbed their sensibilities.

If Mr. Mohr is correct, for instance, that American air power was the primary ingredient in slowing Hanoi's Easter offensive (that it has been stopped is not yet certain), then all

Mr. Nixon's efforts do not mean that South Vietnam is any more viable as a nation or Saigon's army any more effective in defending that nation than they were before the long, costly process of Vietnamization began nearly three years ago.

In order to achieve whatever is being achieved, moreover, the most incredible and wanton destruction is having to be delivered wholesale, not just in North Vietnam but in South Vietnam, which we are supposed to be saving. It is not for nothing that the word "ecocide," in reference to American operations in Vietnam, drifts insistently about the Stockholm conference on world environmental matters.

Of the millions killed or made homeless, there seems to be little if any thought at the Pentagon or the White House. Since only seven American Navy men had been lost during the current bombing campaign, Admiral Mack was even able to say at his briefing that "this is a pretty good way to fight a war." Do only the American dead matter?

There were two indications of what was afoot in Mr. Nixon's May 8 speech, when he announced that he was mining the harbors of the North. First, in what was later billed as a generous peace offer, he offered to withdraw all Americans from South Vietnam and cease all acts of force in Indochina, in return for release of American P.O.W.'s and a cease-fire. Many overlooked that this meant the North Vietnamese would have to lay down their arms in a cease-fire under international supervision, while the Saigon Government remained in power. That would have been, in effect, for Hanoi to surrender its own objective and to concede the American objective.

The other indication was Mr. Nixon's analysis of his own options—"immediate withdrawal of all American forces, continued attempts at negotiation or decisive military action to end the war." Rejecting the first two, he said he had chosen the latter—which now is being seen in action.

So, in the end, Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign plan to "end the war and win the peace" has become an effort to bomb North Vietnam into submitting to Washington's terms; given the tenacity Hanoi and its people have shown in the past, and apparently still show, that may prove to be about the same as General LeMay's celebrated formula: "Bomb them back into the Stone Age."