

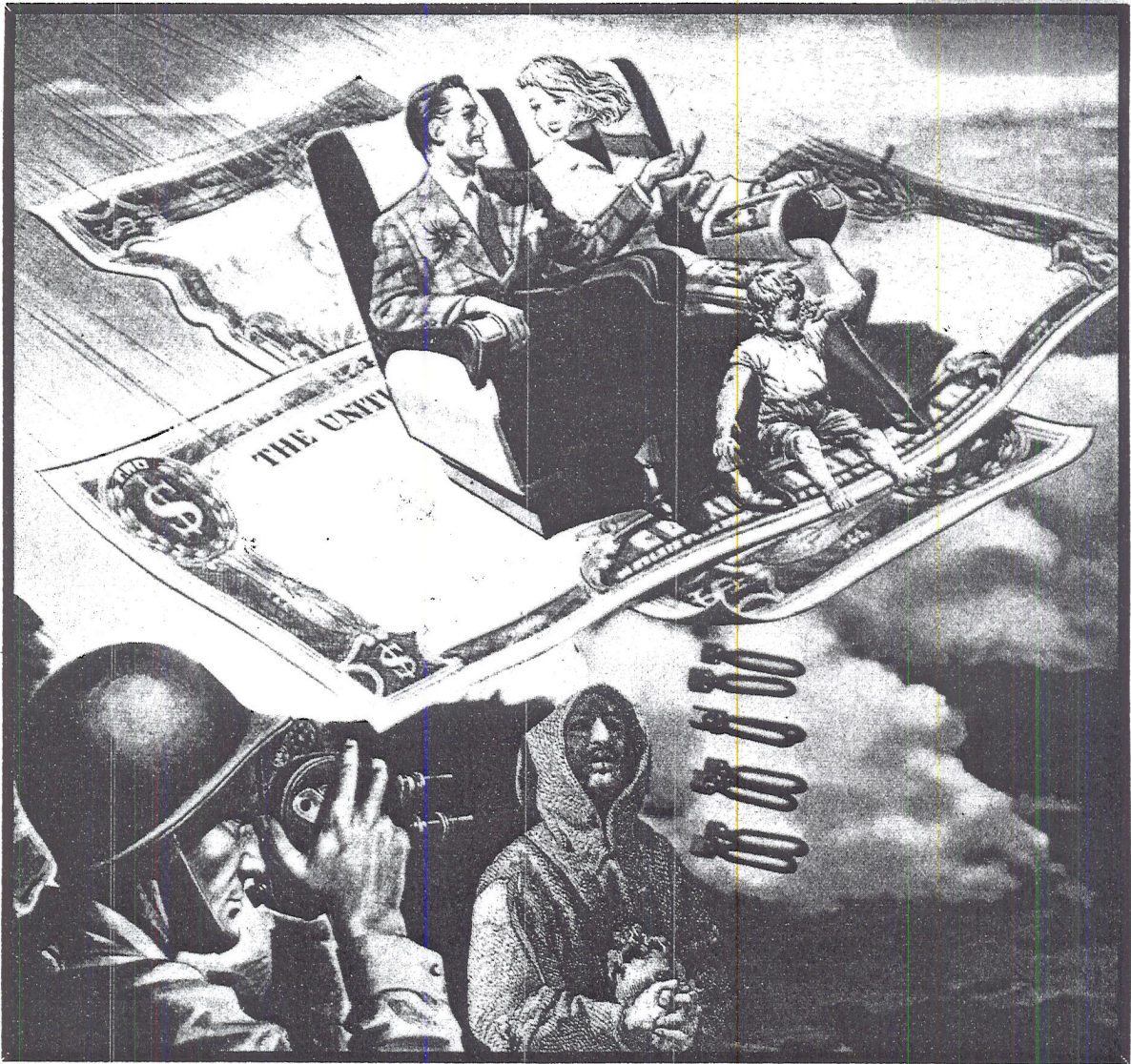
THE DIPLOMACY OF TERROR:



BEHIND THE DECISION TO BOMB THE DIKES

"A series of secret diplomatic messages, recently made known to Ramparts, tends to bear out Hanoi's charge that the Nixon Administration is systematically destroying North Vietnam's dike system. As Washington is well aware, the destruction of the dikes would cause the devastation of the North Vietnamese heartland and the slaughter of millions throughout the country. . . ."

by David Landau



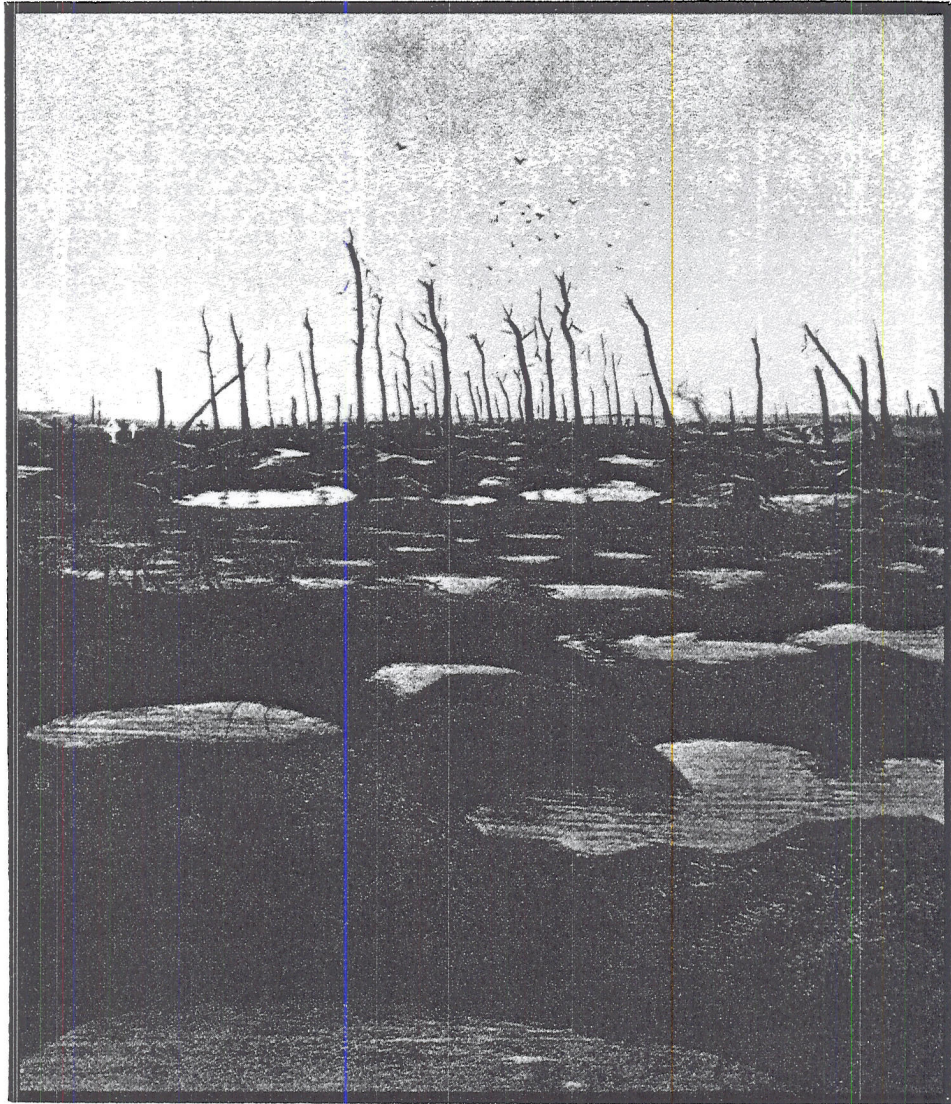
THERE IS ALWAYS CAUSE FOR WONDER when an American President speculates aloud on the destruction of an entire country in a single stroke. When the President is Richard Nixon, the time mid-1972, and the country North Vietnam, wonderment alone hardly seems an adequate response. President Nixon's rather off-handed reference, in his press conference of July 27, to "the great power that could finish off North Vietnam in an afternoon," is probably the most macabre statement ever to have been made in the long history of American Presidential pronouncements on Vietnam. Of course Nixon quickly reassured the Washington press corps that this "great power" would not be used. Yet the import of the President's hooligan-esque rhetoric is clear: the obliteration of North Vietnam may not be far off. And the evidence is mounting that the Nixon Administration may already have embarked on a military adventure in Indochina before which all those

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past now pale in comparison: the calculated destruction of North Vietnam's dike system.

Hanoi's representatives in Paris have told Herbert Marcovitch, an influential French scientist, and have informed Henry Kissinger and other U.S. officials in private negotiations, that American bombs falling on the Red River Delta have in fact wreaked substantial damage on North Vietnam's dikes. Yet North Vietnamese communications also show that U.S. government statements on the dike bombings, and the ensuing public debate in this country, have focused on the largely meaningless issue of whether American planes are making direct hits on North Vietnamese dikes. The greatest harm to the dikes, according to these communications, has been perpetrated not through direct bombardment, but rather through attacks on nearby targets, which cause immense shock waves to travel through the ground and slowly undermine the structural foundations of the dikes themselves. Decades old, composed of earth material, and vulnerable to even the slightest tremor, the dikes of the Red River Delta have likely been severely damaged in this way by America's mammoth air offensive against the North.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM A SERIES ENTITLED "IS THIS WHAT WE WANT?" BY SÄTTY



Without an understanding of *indirect* damage to the dikes, it is impossible to evaluate Hanoi's charge that the United States is systematically destroying the North Vietnamese dike system. This understanding is vital to an informed assessment of Washington's public statements on the dike bombing issue. Indeed, a careful reading of recent official statements would indicate that the Administration comprehends the damage it is doing, that it continues its air offensive in blatant disregard of the devastation the bombs may bring to the civilian population of North Vietnam.

The deliberate nature of American policy falls quite sharply into focus against a background of private North Vietnamese communications, whose formulators never intended them to see the light of publication, and whose very nature demands that they be considered as more than elaborate propaganda schemes. A series of such messages from Hanoi, transmitted in June and July and recently made known to RAMPARTS, confirms that North Vietnam has been completely serious in its charges that American bombing has caused considerable damage to its dikes.

Toward the end of June, Herbert Marcovich, a microbiologist at the University of Paris, sought and received an audience with a number of Hanoi's representatives in Paris. With more than usual concern, he had just read several North Vietnamese releases describing the damage which had been done to individual dikes in the Red River Delta. He had also seen an article in *Le Monde* by Yves Lacoste, a Paris geographer, which carried an explanation of how indirect American bombardment had caused damage to North Vietnam's dikes during the 1965-1968 bombardment of the North, and how they might now do so again; that story had stirred unpleasant memories for him.

Marcovich was not a person unfamiliar with Vietnam; for four months in late 1967 he served as the principal intermediary in what is now regarded as the most meaningful secret exchange between Washington and Hanoi prior to the opening of the Paris peace talks. Although the exchange failed to bring about any agreement between the two sides, it resulted in the most prolonged contact between Washington and Hanoi, and the most far-reaching proposals from both sides, before the first Paris meetings in May 1968. The

negotiations began when Marcovich and another intermediary—Raymond Aubrac, a Maquis officer in World War II and a personal friend of Ho Chi Minh—traveled to Hanoi for meetings with the North Vietnamese heads of state. During his stay, Marcovich had four hours of conversation with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong; through the remainder of the negotiations, he spent considerable time with Hanoi's emissaries in Paris, becoming intimately familiar with North Vietnam's methods of negotiations and even with many of the contours of Hanoi's internal political debates. During this period, Marcovich also became well acquainted with Washington's decision-making apparatus, and, more important, came to know as a familiar figure the American contact who would emerge as a leading U.S. diplomat some 18 months in the future: Henry Kissinger, then a Harvard professor and an active behind-the-scenes consultant to Robert McNamara and other leading Washington policymakers on Vietnam.

Between July and October 1967, Marcovich acted as a go-between for Kissinger and Mai Van Bo—the leading North Vietnamese representative in Paris—and often played a role in the formulation of the messages that each side sent to the other, making suggestions about the negotiating positions, and the wording of those positions, which might prolong the dialogue between the warring powers. Subsequent disclosures revealed that these negotiations almost succeeded in bringing about an American bombing halt and initiating direct talks between the governments in Washington and Hanoi, and that they came far closer than had any other dialogue in actually doing so. That the 1967 negotiations lasted as long as they did is testimony to the trust and confidence which both governments placed in Marcovich; it is also a measure of his ability to be fair and objective about the situation of each side.

IN THE PERIOD FOLLOWING THE COLLAPSE of the 1967 negotiations, Marcovich continued an informal association with North Vietnamese diplomats in Paris, and, as ever, was an astute follower of Washington policymaking, a man in frequent contact with friends and academic colleagues in the United States. When Hanoi's representatives met last June with Marcovich, at his initiative, to discuss the issue of the dike bombings, they were not talking with a political ingenué, not one of those "well-intentioned and naive people," as President Nixon has caricatured them, who are "taken in" by "enemy-inspired propaganda"; they were talking with a seasoned observer of secret Vietnam diplomacy, a man who had had unusually extensive contact with personalities on both sides of the conflict and who will probably emerge as a leading figure in the accounts of the private negotiations as their full history is gradually unveiled. What sets Marcovich apart from every personality to have offered public comment on whether the United States has engaged in the calculated destruction of the North Vietnamese dikes, is that he is thoroughly knowledgeable about the policymaking on both sides of the war, and has had prolonged, first-hand experience in the diplomatic exchanges growing out of it.

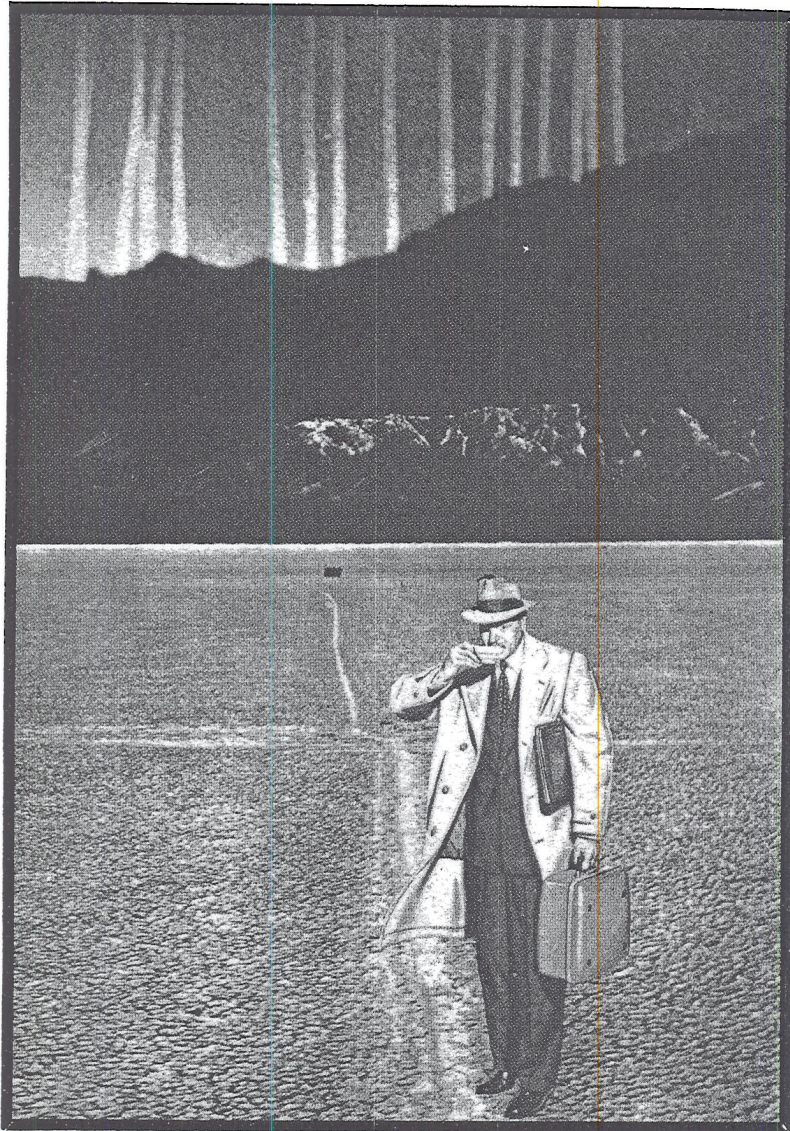
Marcovich is also aware of the damage which sustained

bombardment of the Red River Delta can cause to the dike system. During his trip to the North in July 1967, he had visited dikes pock-marked with craters only a few yards from shore, craters which, his hosts had then explained to him, had been dug by the pressure from bombs falling nearby. Long before the opening of Hanoi's alleged "propaganda offensive" on the dike bombings early last July, North Vietnamese officials were reporting privately that American bombs were causing damage to the Red River dikes; indeed, Pham Van Dong had told Marcovich and Aubrac in Hanoi, during their July 1967 meeting, that the North Vietnamese government had earlier made what limited provisions it could for a full-scale American attack on the entire dike network. And the information which Marcovich received in Paris last June pre-dated the first North Vietnamese charges of deliberate attacks on the dikes.

What the North Vietnamese told Marcovich, who was acting on his own behalf and not as an authorized intermediary at Hanoi's beckoning, was understood to reflect the official views of their government and of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. American bombs had, as Hanoi publicly charged, been damaging North Vietnamese dikes; the bombers had also mounted anti-personnel attacks on workmen who were attempting to repair the dikes. Most important, North Vietnam's greatest fear was that the entire dike system would be gradually and subtly undermined by the shock waves from American bombs, which were falling not on the dikes themselves, but on nearby areas throughout the Red River Delta.

Significantly, the North Vietnamese had not yet published the much graver charges that the dike attacks were a calculated act of U.S. policy. Their statements to Marcovich left open the possibility that the indirect attacks on the dikes were simply a rash mistake, attributable either to unauthorized behavior on the part of U.S. airmen, or even to Washington's ignorance of how critical had been its decision to authorize air raids in the immediate area of the dike networks. The North Vietnamese disclosures to Marcovich had a tentative, almost quizzical, aspect about them. But within a few weeks' time, it is apparent, Hanoi had come to feel that the U.S. was in fact engaged in a systematic campaign to weaken the dikes. It is a feeling that Marcovich, not an easy man to fool, now shares. "For me," he recently told this writer, "it is very clear" that U.S. bombers are constantly causing damage to North Vietnam's dikes.

The North Vietnamese statements to Marcovich have also been made, in much greater detail and substance, to Henry Kissinger, and other American officials, in the recent secret negotiations. Official sources, apprised of what Hanoi's representatives told Marcovich, have acknowledged to RAMPARTS that Kissinger has been receiving the same messages in Paris—that by bombing near the dikes, American planes might as well be bombing the dikes themselves. And what makes this disclosure particularly shocking is the fact that numerous Administration spokesmen, and the State Department paper of July 28, have confirmed that U.S. bombers are authorized to hit targets bordering on the dike system, and are doing so. Yet, when speaking to their own public, Nixon Administration officials imply that there is a real difference between direct hits on dikes, which they go



to some verbal lengths to deplore, and strikes against "military" targets near dikes, which they state are legitimate, and which cause damage to the dikes only accidentally.

Remarkably, Washington's official disclaimers on the dike bombings have never denied Hanoi's specific charges, and have even provided indirect corroboration of them. Most often, official U.S. statements have set up an elaborate series of straw men and then proceeded to knock them down. No, it is unthinkable that the American government would actually commit mass murder against the civilian population of North Vietnam by opening up the dikes. Yes, there is magnanimity and self-restraint in America's bombing campaign. After all, to quote the President once again, "We are not using the great power that could finish off North Vietnam in an afternoon, and we will not." Nuclear weapons, in other words, are not on the agenda for the immediate future. And, of course, American planes are not targeting the Red River dikes; the bombs are not making direct hits on them. "In recent weeks," the State Department paper of July 28 begins, "Hanoi has tried to convince the world that its elaborate dike system is a direct and deliberate target of U.S. attacks. This is not true." Of course

the dikes are not a *direct* target; perhaps a deliberate target, but never a direct one. (Not even the cardboard figures in Hanoi would take so mindless and simplistic a view.) And yet, at the same time, the State Department is able to report in the same paper that "Of the 12 locations where damage has occurred, 10 are close to identified individual targets such as petroleum storage facilities, and the other two are adjacent to road and river transport lines. Because a large number of North Vietnamese dikes serve as bases for roadways, the maze they create throughout the Delta makes it *almost inevitable that air attacks directed against transportation targets cause scattered damage to dikes*" (emphasis added).

IT IS POSSIBLE THAT, BY THE TIME THESE words are printed, American bombs will have caused such extensive damage to the Red River dikes that they will be broken by the torrential waters which gather through the first weeks of North Vietnam's rainy season in the mountains above the great Tonkin Plain, finally to
(Continued on page 52)

damned to their nine-to-five jobs and paying off their mortgages in the rat-race of modern society. I've always experienced a resentment on the part of other people toward the kind of life I lived, even before this. But I could never see myself as an outlaw or revolutionary because I never have lived in terms of an image about myself. I was just me writing my books, sailing my boat, playing with my kids, reading and rapping with people, and enjoying as much as I could.

Q. You attach no political significance to your . . .

A. No, I don't. There may be political significance, but it's not coming from me. History is probably wiser

than I am and maybe able to see what happened in a perspective that I can't. I can only see it from inside. I don't see myself from the outside as a lot of people do.

Q. Do you have a sense of why you're being punished?

A. I interrupted the social contract, and as far as the law is concerned I defrauded McGraw-Hill. As far as federal law is concerned, that is. As far as the state is concerned I committed grand larceny. I understand the necessity for laws, starting with the simple concept that you have to have traffic lights or everybody would be piling up on the street and killing each other. Yes, I do understand why I'm

being punished, and I do view it as punishment. I don't think I need rehabilitation. I don't think the fact that I'm serving a sentence in prison is going to serve as a deterrent because I don't think anyone will try this sort of stuff again. God knows, I won't.



DIKES (From page 25)

surge angrily down through the Delta in late summer and empty into the sea. It was to prevent these waters from flooding over the banks of the Red River, and inundating the arable lands of Tonkin, that the dikes were first constructed by the peasants of North Vietnam several hundred years ago. But whatever happens to the dikes in coming weeks, the least that can now be said with certainty is that American officials have again demonstrated to Hanoi that they can threaten, and begin to carry out, still another escalation of their war against Vietnam, and yet at the same time remain blameless in the eyes of their own people. True, there has been no shortage of popular personalities, right up to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, to draw attention to Hanoi's allegations; the problem is that the opinion-makers in this country have not been astute enough, or courageous enough, to ask the hard questions that would reveal another upward turn in Washington's ferocious escalation of the war.

It's not even any longer a question of instinctively trusting, or being unwilling to discount, the word of the President; a simple casual glance at Nixon's statements over the past few months would instantly reveal that American attacks on the North Vietnamese dikes are a far from remote possibility. It is, rather, an unwillingness to confront directly what this country has done, and is doing, to the people of Indochina; a refusal to acknowledge that it is within the

capacity of an American President to bring destruction to an entire civilization in order to uphold what he considers the honor of his office. Too often, the political analysts, and even the antiwar activists, in America have said that there was a limit beyond which even this most bellicose of Presidents would refuse to go in his attempts to win his goals in Indochina, that there were transgressions which would be beyond the scope of any American Administration to commit. Such an exercise in self-hypnosis is now taking place on the issue of whether American planes are causing damage to North Vietnam's dikes. For the President has stated repeatedly that there are *no* limits he will not breach in his efforts to bring about an "honorable" American departure from the war. Rather than disbelieving Nixon, we should take him at his word.

What would it mean for the people of North Vietnam if the United States were to mount a full-scale attack on the dikes? In a word, catastrophe. The destruction of the dike system—or even of the key links in it—would cause the devastation of the North Vietnamese heartland and the slaughter of millions throughout the country. Along with the less important system of locks and dams, which provide the farmers of the North with irrigation water during the dry season of the year, and the tidewater walls which hold back the sea, the dikes serve as the harness of North Vietnam's great waterways. Ever since their construc-

tion in the Middle Ages, they have saved the Tonkin Plain—now the home of some 15 million people—from being flooded during the rainy season. Each year, after the monsoons, the major rivers are inundated by mountain floods which carry with them large quantities of silt. Settling in the river beds, this earthen substance has after thousands of years elevated the rivers to a height of several yards above the plain itself. Only the dikes stand between the rivers and the plain. If the dikes were to collapse, the plain would be submerged, its homes would be washed away, and many of its inhabitants would be drowned. Even more critically, the arable land on the plain would be rendered useless. North Vietnam, an area which even under the best of possible conditions has never produced enough food for its own population, would be exposed to the specter of mass starvation. With the American blockade now in effect against its harbors, the North would be cut off from a food supply of any appreciable size. The consequences for its civilian population would be endless, the death and the suffering unimaginable in scope.

It may, or may not, be too soon for such dire predictions. But indirect American bombardment of the dikes—which the State Department paper of July admits has taken place—portends a possible all-out effort to destroy the dikes, and it is almost certainly intended as a threat to Hanoi's leaders that, if they do not sue for "peace" on

American terms, such an effort may soon occur.

For the time being, indirect bombardment carries with it a number of special advantages from Washington's point of view. It enables the United States to initiate, and to continue, the destruction of the dikes in so piecemeal a fashion that it will not stir political opposition either domestically or on the world scene. Such bombardment also causes damage which cannot be perceived or calculated with very much certainty, and must therefore go unrepaired. Even if their current manpower shortage were not plaguing them, the North Vietnamese would be hard-pressed to cope with dike damage below water level, or with a more widespread weakening of the entire dike structure. As a result, the repairs which the North Vietnamese could make on dikes which have been directly bombed, and have sustained visible, calculable damage, cannot be made on dikes which have merely been shaken to their roots.

It also appears that the North Vietnamese have met with another obstacle in whatever efforts they have made to repair the dike damage: air attacks, by means of anti-personnel "pellet" bombs, which Hanoi charges America has launched against repairmen working on the dikes. Official statements from Washington have alleged that the North Vietnamese are not attempting to repair the dike damage, yet nowhere do they deign to comment on Hanoi's charges, even in the context of a denial. And if the necessary repairs cannot be made, it may then be that when the rivers reach their peak levels in late August and September, the weakened dikes will collapse under their torrential pressure. And it is even more certain that, if that happens, the United States will disclaim any involvement in the catastrophe because the indirect damage to the dikes would be extremely difficult to link with a deliberate act of U.S. policy. Instead, the collapse of the dikes would be attributed to some other factor, possibly the alleged North Vietnamese refusal—for "propaganda" purposes—to repair the dikes at a time when such repair would have been possible, or, more probably, the aftermath of the floods which toppled several of the dikes and

inundated much of the Tonkin Plain during the summer of 1971. Indeed, the recent State Department paper lays the groundwork for such a claim: "The prolonged inundation during the floods may have caused subtle undermining of the primary dike system that will not show until late this summer. The possibility that the dike system has been weakened thus adds to this year's flooding threat." The State Department paper does not speculate on the "subtle undermining" of the dikes which has probably been a result of the most gargantuan air offensive in history—the massive, unrelenting U.S. bombardment of the Red River Delta since the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive six months ago.

IN AN IMPORTANT WAY, indirect bombardment of the dikes has permitted the State Department and other official agencies to underestimate the extent of the damage done to the dike system. The State Department release on the dike bombing issue claims that American surveillance has verified only a dozen instances of actual bomb damage. But this ignores the fact that the release draws on photographs taken only in mid-July, and omits any treatment of the photographs that were surely taken during the three-and-a-half months before, photographs which might have revealed more extensive damage and might have indicated that workers in the North were indeed making repairs on damaged dikes. And then, even more critically, there is often no way to record or measure the "subtle undermining" of dikes brought about by indirect bombardment, no way to account for it in aerial photographs. Despite its numerous admissions, the State Department paper is essentially a whitewash of U.S. policy, a drastic understatement of the damage that American planes have caused to the dikes.

Why would American policymakers contemplate, and threaten, an attack on the dike system? Because, to put it bluntly, every other measure which they have taken to humble Hanoi's leaders and bring the Vietnamese revolution to its knees has been a miserable failure. An extended three-year bombing campaign under President Johnson, and the dispatch of half a

million American troops to South Vietnam, did not produce an American victory or establish a viable non-Communist regime in Saigon. Indeed, they did not even bring Hanoi to negotiations; only the halt of most American bombing in April 1968 was able to bring about the Paris talks. An even greater range of military adventures has disappointed President Nixon in his attempts to extract an "honorable" settlement: daily bombing of civilian targets in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, prolonged devastation of the Ho Chi Minh trail by America's entire Southeast Asia fleet of B-52s, land invasions of Cambodia and Laos, and the resumption of daily bombing against North Vietnam.

And finally, last April, when it became clear that these measures could not forestall Washington's most dreaded premonition, a massive offensive against the army and the puppet regime of South Vietnam—that the legacy of three years of raining slaughter and destruction from the skies over Indochina was the appearance of North Vietnamese artillery and main-force units a day's march from Saigon—the American Administration resorted to the most desperate escalation of all: bombing of the North at levels barely contemplated even under Johnson, and the mining of North Vietnam's harbors, coupled with an effort to render her land borders impassable from the air. Yet even the escalation of last spring has not yielded America a favorable settlement; and now, by threatening direct attacks on the dike system, Washington is attempting—to paraphrase President Nixon—to gain a victory that it cannot possibly win on the battlefield.

American officials have maintained in the recent past, and will probably argue with increasing insistence in the future, that the dike system is in some way a military facility and, as such, a proper target of American air attacks. But the dikes are a military target only in the sense that every part of North Vietnam's infrastructure has, at one time or another, been singled out as an appropriate subject of American bombardment. And there is a certain bizarre half-truth in the proposition that the dikes are indirectly an instrument

of North Vietnam's war effort, in the sense that Hanoi's war is one which draws on every productive segment of its own society, which depends directly on the involvement and support of its population; that, after all, is the meaning of people's war. But to maintain in any serious way that the dikes constitute a military target would fly in the face of human logic, and it would defy every precept of international law, especially the Nuremberg judgments under which the Nazi High Commissioner for Holland was sentenced to death for having ordered the opening of the Dutch dikes in 1944. The same criminality is present in indirect U.S. bombardment of the North Vietnamese dikes, which differs from direct attack only in the realm of theoretics. The damage which the dike system sustains from shock waves can be as severe, or even more severe, than that resulting from the full force of American bombs, and U.S. officials know it. For the President and other Administration officials to discount Hanoi's accusations by saying that the bombers are simply hitting targets which happen to be located near the dikes, that the dikes themselves are only peripherally affected by the U.S. air campaign, is little short of hypocrisy.

As this magazine has learned, Hanoi's negotiators have repeatedly informed U.S. officials that the indirect bombardment of the dikes is tantamount to bombing the dikes themselves. And yet, official U.S. statements continue to draw a chimerical distinction between a full-scale attack on the dike system and the "incidental" damage done to a number of dikes by the bombing of nearby targets. If it were U.S. policy to avoid hitting the dikes, the bombing of targets near the dikes would have stopped with Hanoi's first private reprimand. But instead, North Vietnamese officials have had to communicate the same message over and over, with apparently little effect.

PRESIDENT NIXON HAS let it be known again and again that he will stop at nothing to obtain a Vietnam settlement which meets his own terms. On April 26, in his first public statement after the opening of North Vietnam's spring offensive, he

told a nationwide television audience that his war against the North would continue until "meaningful" negotiations began—that is, until Hanoi expressed some willingness to discuss the perpetuation of the Thieu regime in Saigon. "A military victory on the battlefield," the President said, was something that the other side "cannot be allowed to win." And since the United States was not prepared to discuss a change of government in the South, it would be up to Hanoi to alter its negotiating position if talks were to succeed. And succeed they must; Nixon announced that he was sending his representative back to the semi-public Paris talks, which he himself had cut off the month before, and expressed his "firm expectation" that fruitful exchanges would rapidly ensue. If they did not, Nixon implied, another escalation was around the corner.

Four days later, speaking to reporters at John Connally's Texas ranch, Nixon was first asked about the possibility of bombing the dike system as a means of inducing Hanoi to be reasonable. The opening of his reply carried an implicit threat that the dikes would indeed be bombed if the offensive in the South were to reach a critical juncture:

Now, the problem that is raised with regard to dams or dikes is that, while it is a strategic target, and indirectly a military target, it would result in an enormous number of civilian casualties. That is something that we want to avoid. It is also something we believe is not needed.

Just let me say that, as far as the targets in North Vietnam are concerned, that we are prepared to use our military and naval strength against military targets throughout North Vietnam, and we believe that the North Vietnamese are taking a very great risk if they continue their offensive in the South.

In these few sentences, Nixon said a number of quite revealing things. He asserted that the dikes were in fact a legitimate target of U.S. bombing. He warned that the leaders in Hanoi were, by fighting against the Saigon regime, taking "a very great risk" of provoking the American war machine into action against *all* military targets in their country—including the dikes. And fi-

nally, Nixon stated almost literally that he would not refrain from imposing "an enormous number of civilian casualties" on North Vietnam if he should deem it necessary to achieve his purposes. To be sure, he noted as a gesture of his magnanimity that he would not sanction these casualties lightly, that they were "something that we want to avoid." Yet there is no natural law which demands that the United States decimate the populace of the North, nothing in Nixon's karma which makes his ordering that slaughter inevitable. He can avoid it simply by not allowing it. In his statement, however, he made clear that he has placed his own diplomatic ambitions above the survival of the North Vietnamese people.

Had the President stopped with those words, he would still have left a small measure of doubt about precisely what he intended to say. It would still have been remotely possible that he was not making the threat he seemed to be making, that he was simply engaged in an off-the-cuff conversation with a few friendly newsmen. After all, he could have erred on the side of overstatement. He could have been speaking from fatigue or overexhaustion. But, no, that was not enough. Nixon did not mean to leave loose ends or to behave in an un-Presidential way. In uttering these next few words, he erased any doubt that he was talking not so much to American newsmen but, more importantly, directly to Hanoi: "I will just leave it there, and they can make their own choice."

Ever since the episode at the Connally ranch, each Presidential statement has echoed the same theme; every pronouncement more bold and strident than the one before it. And yet, even as each threat rings clear to Hanoi, it is enveloped in vague platitudes about restraint and magnanimity and avoiding civilian casualties, which are designed only for the purpose of popular consumption in this country. "We have tried to hit only military targets, and we have been hitting military targets," Nixon said on June 29 in discounting reports of *direct* hits on dikes. And yet, even if one were willing to lay aside the issue of military targets near dikes, the President had already made clear

that he considered the dike system itself "a strategic target." "I do not intend to allow any orders to go out which would involve civilian casualties," Nixon said on the same occasion—and yet, in the lawyer's fine print which he has by now nurtured to perfection, rapidly added the brief disclaimer "if they can be avoided." And even as other government spokesmen took pains to emphasize the extraordinary nature of any decision to destroy the dike system, even as the State Department prepared its release which stated that the dikes "could be substantially affected only by a large-scale, coordinated air offensive," the President, in an effort to cloak his increasingly violent threats in an aura of humaneness and generosity, was pointing out that, after all, if it *really* wanted to, the United States could open the dikes almost as an afterthought: "If it were the policy of the United States to bomb the dikes, we could take them out, the significant part of them, in a week." And so on. Would the U.S. bomb in areas where surface-to-air missile sites are located near dikes? "We would do so only if we had to do

so in order to protect American fliers who otherwise would be hit down by the SAMs." In other words, whenever we feel like doing it. Meant quite obviously to be accepted as denials that American policy now contemplates the destruction of the dike system, these statements, on closer examination, sound more like forewarnings of that destruction.

BYOND THE GRADUAL devastation of the North Vietnamese dike system, and the continuing deception of its own people, just what is it precisely that the U.S. government seeks to accomplish in Vietnam? What political ambitions, what diplomatic goals, have propelled the rulers of a civilized people to engage in years of mass murder, and have now brought them to the brink of wiping out an entire society? The deeply perplexing answer to that question is that, at the bottom of everything they do, lies the notion of preserving their honor. Avoiding failure. Clinging to stability. Upholding their prestige. They are not even fighting for the reality of an anti-Communist regime in Saigon. The

strength and the durability of Vietnam's revolution have convinced them that a victory of that kind is not possible. What they are fighting for is a period of time between an American withdrawal and the collapse of the Saigon government, so that it will not appear that the United States failed in the defense of an allied regime. They are fighting and killing for a chimera, for a piece of imagery.

For the past four years, the American negotiating position on the war has been what Henry Kissinger has privately called a "decent interval." Before America promises to withdraw, Hanoi must guarantee in some way that it is prepared to allow the South Vietnamese regime to stay in place for some fixed period so that the blame for its collapse can be fixed on Saigon instead of Washington. And the "decent interval" is not simply a Kissinger concoction. It has, for the most part, been the policy of the President as well. His public statements to the contrary, Nixon has long been privately skeptical about America's ability to defeat Vietnam's insurgent movement. A former Nixon speechwriter, Richard Whalen,

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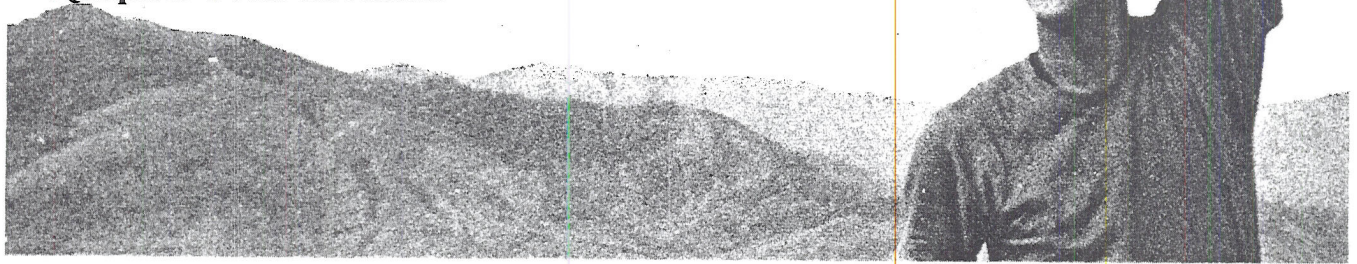
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quotes the President in a recently published memoir as having said in March 1968, "I've come to the conclusion that there's no way to win the war. But we can't say that, of course. In fact, we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage." With the notable exception of several months after the militarily successful U. S. invasion of Cambodia, when he was blinded by bureaucratic propaganda and became convinced that the U.S. and the South Vietnamese together were powerful enough to install an anti-Communist regime permanently in Saigon, Nixon has rarely departed from the "decent interval" formula.

Yet as reasonable and as generous as it sounds on paper, the decent interval has long posed insurmountable problems for the Vietnamese. Since by its very nature it can be negotiated and agreed on only under conditions of extreme privacy, it has been impossible for Washington to propose except in the camouflage of a demand that Hanoi acquiesce in a rigged re-election of the Thieu regime. And since the United States can never have devised effective public guarantees that it is willing to sanction the collapse of the Thieu government at some period after its own withdrawal, Hanoi, in the absence of any real safeguards, has looked on the decent interval proposal with skepticism and mistrust.

Under any circumstance, it would have been difficult for North Vietnam's leaders to accept the notion that the United States, after all its spending and bombing and dying and killing, was perfectly prepared to allow what it had come to prevent in the first place. And the unique nature of Hanoi's prior experience with the West at the negotiating table made it fairly impossible for her leaders to grasp Nixon's and Kissinger's admittedly bizarre version of what they were doing in the war: killing only because they wanted to save face. On two occasions, with France in 1946 and with the Geneva powers in 1954, the North Vietnamese had relinquished many of their gains to allow their enemies a face-saving departure in exchange for what they took to be promises of eventual national independence and reunification with the South; short-

ly afterward, on both occasions, they had been basely betrayed, their gains denied, the promises erased. What Hanoi faced with the "decent interval" diplomacy of Nixon and Kissinger was a flashback to 1946 and 1954, and they chose this time around not to play. Not that the North Vietnamese would in principle have rejected such an accommodation; as Joseph Kraft wrote during his visit to Hanoi last August, "I have repeatedly been assured that North Vietnam is prepared to wait a long time (several years) before actually moving to take over in the South." But the President and Kissinger have not conducted their policy in such a way as to make Hanoi confident that they can be taken at their word.

Now, in late summer, as the waters of North Vietnam and Hanoi's offensive in the South are both coming to their peak levels, Nixon and Kissinger are particularly anxious to impose their terms on the Vietnamese and strike a successful bargain at the negotiating table. For, despite all that has passed in America's tortuous efforts to wring "peace" from the other side, it is still Vietnam that stands in the way of the President's pretensions of being the master global diplomat, still Vietnam that exposes the bankruptcy and inner brutality of American foreign policy. Now is a time of feverish and desperate activity in Washington; in Paris, as in the heartland of North Vietnam itself, Nixon and Kissinger are pressing their demand for a "decent interval" on Hanoi with ever-greater insistency, with ever-escalating threats and uses of force. The Administration still does not understand that the only way to peace is not through military success, but through withdrawal. The dike system of North Vietnam has already become Washington's newest hostage. And on what grounds can one deny that America is willing to destroy the dikes? If, in pursuit of a goal so vapid, so chimerical, as the preservation of her honor, the United States has bombed, invaded, and killed in Indochina for the past four years, blockaded North Vietnam's harbors, and threatened to bring final devastation to her civilian population, then how are we to doubt that the President is prepared to use any means at his disposal

to achieve his goals, including "the great power that could finish off North Vietnam in an afternoon"?

CHINATOWN (From page 38)

That spelled it out pretty clearly. Busing became linked to Communism. The conservatives now have gone further. They're now charging that many of the young Chinese volunteer teachers are either leftists or Communist sympathizers. And with that charge leveled, the three groups have declared that they will have to carefully re-evaluate allocation of funds that have been collected. That means that most of the schools might close down.

The anti-busing movement in San Francisco's Chinatown is a curious study in community politics. Many parents bear deep prejudices against blacks. Many others merely feel that it would be dangerous to send their children to schools outside the community, whether white or black. With community schools they enjoy the comfortable knowledge that their sons and daughters are in school just down the street. They know that Chinese-run clinics are nearby for health care. They know that their children can walk home, surrounded by other Chinese who speak Cantonese, who bear the same skin color. And they know that their children will be sitting next to desks and romping on playgrounds occupied by other Chinese.

As the superintendent of the freedom schools, Mrs. Faith Fong, put it, "Let's face it. Human beings do have prejudices." Mrs. Fong, 34, a thin, attractive woman, would not allow her children to be bused either.

The young liberals and radicals of Chinatown who taught for Mrs. Fong are aware of the mothers' prejudices, and yet for their own reasons many of them have joined in the anti-busing cause. Some, like Bryant Fong (no relation to the superintendent), a 24-year-old teacher who worked in one of the freedom schools, are quick to admit that racial prejudice plays an important part in the community's resistance to busing.

"A lot of parents are racists," said Fong, "but we can't come out and just call it racist. You have to realize that there has been no gradual effort to pre-