

Terror From the Skies

Asked whether civilian centers would not inevitably be hit during the resumed massive air assault on North Vietnam, a Pentagon spokesman replied: "No. We don't strike civilian targets." He then amended his comment to say: "We do not target civilian targets."

The difference is crucial.

The big B-52 bombers that are being used for the first time over the heavily populated Hanoi-Haiphong area are not precision weapons. Normally they operate in flights of three that lay down a pattern of bombs—20 tons to a plane—which scatter over an area more than half a mile wide and more than a mile and a half long.

Even if the "targets" were strictly military, a great deal more than military would inevitably be caught up in such sweeping devastation, especially in a blitz that in the first two days alone is estimated to have dropped 20,000 tons of explosives—the equivalent of the Hiroshima bomb. Imagine what would happen to New York or any other American city if a comparable enemy force were unleashed to attack such targets on the Pentagon's authorized list as rail yards, ship yards, command and control facilities, warehouse and transshipment areas, communications facilities, vehicle-repair facilities, power plants, railway bridges, railroad rolling stock, truck parks, air bases, air-defense radars and gun and missile sights.

It requires no horror stories from Hanoi radio to deduce that the destruction and human suffering must be very extensive indeed. And to what end?

Officials in Washington and Saigon have suggested that the raids are intended to disrupt a Communist offensive. But military men in Saigon say they have seen no indication that the North Vietnamese are preparing for such a strike.

Administration spokesmen have also reported that this brutal assault is intended to convey to North Vietnamese leaders President Nixon's displeasure over Hanoi's intransigence at the Paris peace talks. Only last week, however, a responsible American official in Paris indicated that the impasse centered on President Thieu's insistence, backed by President Nixon, that any agreement specifically recognize Saigon's authority over all of South Vietnam. This amounts to a demand that the Communists acknowledge a defeat they have not suffered on the battlefield.

No matter who is to blame for the breakdown in talks, this massive, indiscriminate use of the United States overwhelming aerial might to try to impose an American solution to Vietnam's political problems is terrorism on an unprecedented scale, a retreat from diplomacy which this nation would be the first and loudest to condemn if it were practiced by any other major power. In the name of conscience and country, Americans must now speak out for sanity in Washington and peace in Indochina.