

Issue and Debate

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# Efficacy of the Bombing of North Vietnam

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The resumption of sustained bombing by the United States throughout North Vietnam has revived the debate here and abroad over the efficacy of the bombing strategy.

Does the bombing of military and industrial targets significantly hamper the capacity of North Vietnam to fight the war? Does it prevent the movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies into the South? Does it make the Hanoi Government more willing to negotiate or concede, or does it strengthen resistance and determination to pursue the war?

If there are military and diplomatic benefits from the bombing, do they justify the civilian casualties? What were the provocations that triggered the latest campaign? Are the current raids different, in magnitude or in terms of the targets assaulted, from those of the past? Is it immoral, in time of war, for a large nation that itself is not under attack to drop bombs on a small nation that has no offensive capacity in the air?

These are the questions that provide the meat of the debate, although, clearly, only the North Vietnamese know precisely how badly the country, its people and its military system have been and are being hurt by the bombing.

## The Background

Early in the morning of Feb. 7, 1965, on orders from President Lyndon B. Johnson, 49 carrier-based fighter planes bombed and strafed barracks and staging areas of Vietcong guerrillas near Dong Hoi, just north of the border between North and South Vietnam. Once before—in August, 1964—there had been a day of raids on the North, in retaliation for alleged attacks on American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. But the 1965 strikes, following several guerrilla attacks on major American installations in South Vietnam, were the first involving carefully planned, concerted raids north of the border.

President Johnson declared that they represented a limited response to "provocations ordered and directed by the Hanoi regime" and did not mean a widening of the war. Nonetheless, these first sorties marked a major turning point in the Indochina conflict.

In May the United States stopped bombing the North for a week in an effort to elicit peace feelers, but there was no response, so the bombing resumed. In December, 1965, a 37-day pause began as Mr. Johnson pursued a "peace offensive."

Bombardment of the North was resumed on Jan. 31, 1966, because, according to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the only response from Hanoi had been "negative, harsh and unyielding." Mr. Johnson pledged that only lines of supply and other military targets would be bombed. As justification he asserted, "Those who direct and supply the aggression have no claim to immunity from military reply."

The bombing continued unabated for nearly three years. By 1967 the United States was flying about 300 planes a day over the North. In that year, according to the Air Force, 250 planes of all services were shot down.

In September, 1967, President Johnson, speaking in San Antonio, announced that Hanoi had been told the month before that the United States would stop the bombing of the North "when this will lead promptly to productive discussions."

Mr. Johnson startled the nation on March 31, 1968, by announcing that he would not run for re-election. He also declared that he had ordered a halt in all bombardment north of the 20th Parallel, where more than 90 per cent of the North Vietnamese live.

Seven months later, a week before the Presidential election, Mr. Johnson ended all bombing of the North. He said he believed the action would lead to a peaceful settlement.

In the first year of the Nixon Administration, the Government acknowledged only occasional incidents of "suppressive fire" by small numbers of planes against antiaircraft installations in North Vietnam that threatened American reconnaissance aircraft.

But in May, 1970, following the movement of American troops into Cambodia, the United States conducted a series of heavy raids on supply dumps and other targets north of the Demilitarized zone. The raids were described as "protective reaction." Similar attacks continued over the next two years.

In April, 1972, in response to a North Vietnamese offensive, the rule of protective reaction was officially lifted and intensive bombing resumed throughout the North. For the first time B-52's were used extensively and, for the first time since 1968, Hanoi and Haiphong were attacked.

The Hanoi government asserted, and visiting American newsmen confirmed, that civilian as well as military targets were damaged. Hanoi maintained that the American planes were deliberately bombing dikes, a charge that the United States repeatedly denied.

The Nixon Administration gave three principal reasons for the resumption. It was necessary, officials said, to choke off the movement of men and supplies into the South, to help Saigon's forces demonstrate that they could stem the most serious enemy attack in more than four years and to provide a new bargaining chip to obtain concessions from Hanoi.

President Nixon warned in May that the heavy bombing would continue, but he pledged to stop it when Hanoi agreed to a cease-fire and a return of American prisoners. The bombing was essential if a "genuine peace" was to be obtained, the President said, and it was necessary to support the dwindling American ground troops.

On Oct. 25, with peace negotiations at a delicate stage, the President ordered a bombing halt beyond the 20th Parallel as a sign of good faith. The pause lasted until Dec. 18.

In the eight years of the air war, the United States has dropped more than seven million tons of bombs on Indochina, more than three times the tonnage in World War II.

Through the end of November 1,056 American planes had been shot down by the North Vietnamese. Nearly all of the more than 430 prisoners of war in the North were airmen, as were most of the more than 1,200 men listed as missing.

## Current Bombing

On Dec. 18 waves of American B-52's began the heaviest raids of the war on North Vietnam. The strikes, which continued unabated until a Christmas halt, followed the breakdown in peace negotiations between Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser, and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's special negotiator.

Administration officials have said that President Nixon ordered the raids because he felt Hanoi was stalling at the peace negotiations. They said that he had suspended raids north of the 20th Parallel in return for Hanoi's "goodwill" in October and had reinstated full-scale bombing after the talks broke down. There has been no explanation for the massive scale of the bombing.

It was the first time that B-52's, which carry a crew of six or seven, had been used so extensively, and many military experts believed that it represented a shift in strategy.

The planes carry 20 to 30 tons of bombs and drop them from a height of five to seven miles in a pattern roughly half a mile wide and a mile and a half long. Pinpoint bombing is conducted by fighter-bombers.

According to some reports, as many as 500 planes, more than 100 of them B-52's, were being sent over the North each day. Such figures were discounted by the Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, who would characterize the level of bombing only as "a very major effort."

Some reports from Saigon suggested that 20,000 tons of munitions—the equivalent of the atomic bomb used on Hiroshima — had been dropped in the first two days.

United States officials said that some targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong regions were attacked for the first time. The official North Vietnamese press agency reported attacks on the Gia Lam area, where the Hanoi airport is situated.

The Defense Department insisted that civilian areas were not on the target list, though they might be hit by accident, and it dismissed suggestions that the United States was involved in "terror bombing."

Mr. Friedheim asserted that the military targets being hit included "such categories as rail yards, shipyards, command and control facilities, warehouse and transshipment areas, communications facilities, vehicle-repair facilities, power plants, railway bridges, railroad rolling stock, truck parks, MIG bases, air-defense radars, and gun and missile sites."

Tass, the official Soviet press agency, reported, however, that the American raids had caused "heavy civilian casualties" and had destroyed "thousands of homes." The Tass correspondent reported that bombs repeatedly fell "on densely populated blocks, main streets and suburbs" of Hanoi.

The Hanoi radio asserted that thousands were killed and wounded from Dec. 18 to 24.

## The Justification

The objectives to be gained from bombing North Vietnam have varied over the course of the war. As a staff study for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee noted earlier this year, there have been five principal objectives:

☞To reduce the movement of men and supplies into South Vietnam.

☞To make North Vietnam pay a high cost for supporting the war in the South.

☞To break the will of North Vietnam.

☞To force the North Vietnamese to make concessions in the peace negotiations.

☞To strengthen morale in South Vietnam and the United States.

As public justification for the action, the Government has generally given military reasons—the first two listed above. However, officials of both the Johnson and Nixon Administrations have acknowledged privately that diplomatic and political considerations were as important as, if not more important than, the military ones.

Explanations of the current campaign fit this pattern. The official spokesmen in Washington — Ronald L. Ziegler at the White House and Mr. Friedheim at the Pentagon — have maintained that this phase is a military necessity. Official spokesmen in Saigon have also made that point. In individual interviews, however, top Government and military officials as well as lower-ranking analysts have acknowledged that the basic reasons are diplomatic and political.

Mr. Ziegler has not deviated from his statement on Dec. 18 that "we are not going to allow the peace talks to be used as a cover for another offensive." There was grave danger of such an offensive, he maintained, adding that "the President will continue to order any action he deems necessary by air or by sea to prevent any build-up he sees in the South."

At the same time top Administration officials declared that the resumption of heavy bombing was primarily a result of Hanoi's lack of seriousness at the Paris negotiations.

One official said that the bombing served the purpose of showing American anger at what Mr. Nixon regarded as Hanoi's delaying tactics.

Knowledgeable sources here believe that, by intensifying the bombing, President Nixon hoped to show Hanoi that he could take the political heat at home and abroad. He was also trying to indicate, they believe, that he was willing to discard any past restrictions on targets. Some experts said that by using B-52's, Mr. Nixon was implicitly threatening antipersonnel bombing as well.

Administration officials are willing to concede that the American bombing of Indochina has not always been effective. But that, they said, was because of the restrictions set by the Johnson Administration.

Administration officials are convinced that the heavy bombing of last spring—together with the President's trips to Moscow and Peking—led directly to the more productive negotiations in the fall.

On the one hand, according to this argument, Hanoi feared a lack of support from its chief allies and, on the other, it was being badly hurt. Those factors almost produced a peace agreement in October, the officials believe.

By fall American bombs had knocked out about 70 per cent of North Vietnam's power-generating facilities and the major bridges on the rail lines from China. Those facilities were being rebuilt in recent weeks, according to military intelligence, and the United States hopes to destroy them again.

## The Opposition

Since the outset of the bombing eight years ago, the strategy has engendered stiff

opposition. Many opponents have argued that it is a futile tactic — that it has not and will never accomplish either its political or its military objectives. Others have argued that, regardless of effectiveness, it is immoral to wreak devastation on a small country.

An early as 1967 a group of leading Government-oriented scientists, under the auspices of the Institute for Defense Analyses, concluded that "the U. S. bombing of North Vietnam has had no measurable effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South."

As to the question whether the bombing could break the will of the Vietnamese people, the study declared:

"The expectation that bombing would erode the determination of Hanoi and its people clearly overestimated the persuasive and disruptive effects of the bombing and, correspondingly, underestimated the tenacity and recuperative capabilities of the North Vietnamese."

The study went on to cite "the fact well-documented in the historical and social scientific literature that a direct frontal attack on a society tends to strengthen the social fabric" and "to improve the determination of both the leadership and the populace to fight back."

In the Johnson Administration, proposals to bomb the Hanoi and Haiphong areas were repeatedly rejected. The Pentagon papers make clear that the principal reason was the expectation of heavy civilian casualties.

The critics of the bombing contend that it is preposterous for the Government to assert that only military targets are scheduled when vast tonnages are being dropped from great heights on extensive areas.

A leading Congressional opponent of the bombing, Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana, the Democratic leader, declared at a news conference Wednesday:

"The bombing tactic is eight years old. It has not produced results in the past. It will not lead to a rational, peaceful settlement now. It is the 'Stone Age' strategy being used in a war almost unanimously recognized in this nation as a 'mistaken' one. It is a raw power play with human lives, American and others, and, as such, it is abhorrent."

Senator Harold E. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, said in an interview that the bombing was futile and immoral.

"It is unbelievable savagery that we have unleashed in this holy season," he declared. "The only thing I can compare it with is the savagery at Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

Asked whether he would approve of the bombing if it could be proved effective in bringing concessions from Hanoi, the Senator said: "I cannot imagine the holocaust that the bombing must be causing. There can be no victory in this kind of war."

The critics of the bombing argue, furthermore, that American airmen are being killed and made prisoner and that the lives of prisoners endangered.

The staff study for the Senate committee concluded that "throughout the war, the results of the bombing of North Vietnam have consistently fallen far short of the claims made for it."

"Compared to the damage to U.S. prestige and the internal division created by the bombing policy, its meager gains must be seriously questioned," the study asserted.