

The New Tenor of Saigon Briefings

By Jacques Leslie
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REPORTER IN SAIGON: "Aren't you a little ashamed of what you are doing? You're denying the American people information that they have a right to know."

U.S. COMMAND BRIEFER (angrily, after demanding the questioner's name): "I'm certainly not."

Saigon

Until a week ago a dialogue like this one at Saigon's daily briefing seemed inconceivable. But when American officials decided to black out information on the renewed bombing of North Vietnam, they paradoxically transformed the briefings, known locally as the "4 o'clock follies," from a dull ritual into the best show in town.

Journalists, showing a nose for drama if not exactly for news, now crowd each day into the briefing room. Whereas briefers were once able to get away without being asked a question, they are now receiving them in salvos.

The exchange above, which took place last week between CBS correspondent Donald Webster and Army Major Jere K. Forbus, symbolizes the frustrations the new policy has engendered in both briefers and journalists.

FRUSTRATING

"Although I realize quite sincerely that we must for security reasons not tell everything we know, it's still personally frustrating," said Air Force Major Gilbert L. Whiteman, who shares American command briefing duties with Forbus.

"The briefings have become a Charlie McCarthy-Edgar Bergen act," said one veteran Saigon journalist. "It's all orchestrated in

Washington. It's not so much that we're lied to, but that we haven't been told the whole truth. It's at the most vital times that we get this utter lack of information."

Journalists find the current blackout particularly troublesome because it concerns the air war over North Vietnam — a subject which, unlike the ground combat, cannot be covered by field reporters. Totally reliant on the American command for information, many now find they need inside sources to cover it.

DATA

Until the current bombing, reporters received detailed communiques at the start of each briefing. The communiques gave information on bombing, including bomb damage assessments, even down to the number of box-cars destroyed, for raids in North Vietnam, and exact locations of B-52 raids in both North and South Vietnam.

But recent communiques state only that in the previous 24-hour period "U.S. crews conducted bombing operations against military targets in North Vietnam." Aside from disclosures of

aircraft losses, no information about bombing over North Vietnam is given.

A small window was opened on recent air operations yesterday in a command summary of over-all figures and general targeting information, but in many areas it remained in what seemed purposely vague terms.

ANSWER

Forbus and Whiteman answer questions by saying, "I cannot give any further information on bombing operations."

When frustrated journalists once asked Forbus if the new policy was a "ciamp-down," Forbus instead called the policy "protection of information."

The phrase seemed to catch on, and now is probably destined to join similar euphemisms of the Vietnam war such as "protective reaction." Forbus received a congratulatory cable from the office of the secretary of defense for his good work "under pressure" at the briefing that day.

On several occasions journalists have told the briefers that the American people had a right to information they were not getting.

REACTION

"It riles me to be set aside from the American people," Forbus said later. "I'm an American. The wives of the pilots are Americans. We don't think it's in their interests to release this information."

Although orders for the current news blackout obviously come from Washington, Whiteman and Forbus assert they are still given latitude in deciding what information can be disclosed.

"We actually have a pretty open hand," Whiteman said. "We can say pretty much what we want as long

as it doesn't impinge on security."

"Information has deteriorated slowly but surely since 1968," said one experienced Saigon reporter. "This is only a reflection of the general direction at home. The military realizes the American people aren't interested in the war. With that in mind this shabby policy is maintained."