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Massive Bombing: The Hard Choice

By Philip C. Clarke

WASHINGTON—It's far more popular these days to criticize President Nixon's bombing decision than to defend it. This is especially so when, after so many agonizing years of war, peace had seemed so tantalizingly near.

Nevertheless, those who now loudly denounce the President for wreaking destruction in North Vietnam might do well to pause and consider the consequences of a false and illusory peace.

Suppose the United States permitted Hanoi to make a mockery of our long and arduous efforts to reach a just and honorable settlement. Would not the Soviets interpret this as a sign of our weakness and raise the ante at the bargaining table for world peace and disarmament? Might they not eventually react as did Khrushchev

when he installed missiles in Cuba after the Bay of Pigs debacle?

Suppose the United States bought Hanoi's scheme for the surrender of free South Vietnam on the installment plan. Wouldn't our remaining allies lose confidence in our willingness and ability to meet our treaty commitments elsewhere? More critically still, might Americans not lose faith in themselves?

Suppose the United States simply agreed to a vague and unenforceable cease-fire and got out. Wouldn't Hanoi's rulers be emboldened to resume the war when conditions again appeared ripe? Might they not continue to hold our prisoners as pawns to gain control over the rest of Indochina—and perhaps more?

It might seem politically expedient for the President to wash his hands of the remnants of this most unpopular of wars—a war he inherited from his predecessors. After all, hasn't he

already withdrawn more than half a million American troops and ended our ground combat role? Besides, Vietnam is half a world away and the reasons for our involvement have long since been obscured by partisan passions and propaganda.

But the President clearly is aware that larger issues are at stake, that our leadership on behalf of world peace and stability now depends largely on the manner in which we discharge our responsibilities in Vietnam.

When in the end Hanoi refused all entreaties for an honorable peace, President Nixon had but three choices. He could abandon South Vietnam to the Communists, let the fighting and the bloodletting drag on interminably, or he could employ massive U.S. air power to knock out Hanoi's capability to carry on its war of aggression once and for all. In choosing the latter course, the

President has not taken the easy way out. By its very nature, aerial bombardment gives rise to vast waves of protest from friend and foe alike. All too forgotten are the years of guerrilla terror and the countless thousands of South Vietnamese systematically killed by a fanatic and ruthless enemy.

Yet, if the bombing finally succeeds in convincing Hanoi of the futility of waging war, it will end the killing sooner than later and actually save far more lives and treasure than it costs.

In thus pursuing the goal of a real and lasting peace in Vietnam, the President needs and deserves both the understanding and the support of all thoughtful Americans.

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