

# The Fuel-Depot Issue

During the spring of 1966, the Pentagon study says, the question of bombing North Vietnam's oil-storage tanks became a "major policy dispute."

"Before the question was settled," the account goes on, "it had assumed the proportions of a strategic issue, fraught with military danger and political risk, requiring thorough examination and careful analysis."

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had advocated bombing North Vietnam's oil tanks as early as the fall of 1965, the narrative says, adding:

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff pressed throughout the autumn and winter of 1965-66 for permission to expand the bombing virtually into a program of strategic bombing aimed at all industrial and economic resources as well as at all interdiction targets."

"The Chiefs did so, it may be added,

despite the steady stream of memoranda from the intelligence community consistently expressing skepticism that bombing of any conceivable sort (that is, any except bombing aimed primarily at the destruction of North Vietnam's population) could either persuade Hanoi to negotiate a settlement on U.S./GVN terms or effectively limit Hanoi's ability to infiltrate men and supplies into the South."

In a memorandum to Secretary McNamara on Nov. 10, 1965, the Chiefs asserted that the only reason the bombing campaign had not worked thus far was because of the "self-imposed restraints:"

"We shall continue to achieve only limited success in air operation in

Continued on Following Page

Continued from Preceding Page

D.R.V./Laos if required to operate within the constraints presently imposed," the Joint Chiefs said. "The establishment and observance of de facto sanctuaries within the D.R.V., coupled with a denial of operations against the most important military and war supporting targets, precludes attainment of the objectives of the air campaign."

The Joint Chiefs added: "Now required is an immediate and sharply accelerated program which will leave no doubt that the U.S. intends to win and achieve a level of destruction which they will not be able to overcome."

In a separate memorandum the same day, the Joint Chiefs said that an attack on North Vietnam's P.O.L. — petroleum, oil and lubricants, in military terminology — "would be more damaging to the D.R.V. capability to move war-supporting resources within country and along the infiltration routes to SVN than an attack against any other single target system."

"The flow of supplies would be greatly impeded," the Joint Chiefs said. And they contended that "recuperability of the D.R.V. P.O.L. system from the effects of an attack is very poor."

## Arrival at Haiphong

"It is not surprising that the J.C.S. singled out the P.O.L. target system for special attention," the Pentagon analyst says. "NVN had no oil fields or refineries, and had to import all of its petroleum products, in refined form.... Nearly all of it came from the Black Sea area of the U.S.S.R. and arrived by sea at Haiphong, the only port capable of conveniently receiving and handling bulk P.O.L. brought in by large tankers. From large tank farms at Haiphong with a capacity of about one-fourth of the annual imports, the P.O.L. was transported by road, rail and water to other large storage sites at Hanoi and elsewhere in the country. Ninety-seven per cent of the N.V.N. P.O.L. storage capacity was concentrated in 13 sites, 4 of which had already been hit. They were, of course, highly vulnerable to air attack."

In support of the Joint Chiefs' view, Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, the commander of American forces in the Pacific, in a cablegram to the Joint Chiefs in January, 1966, made the evaluation that bombing North Vietnam's oil would "bring the enemy to the conference table or cause the insurgency to wither from lack of support." Admiral Sharp also wanted to close North Vietnam's ports, presumably by aerial mining.

But from the outset of the debate over bombing North Vietnam's oil tanks, the study discloses, the intelligence community had been skeptical that such bombing would have much effect on Hanoi.

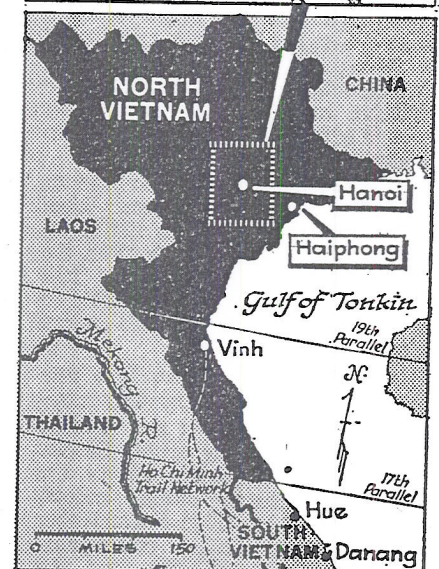
Replying to a query from Secretary McNamara on what the effect of oil-tank bombing would be, the Central Intelligence Agency said in November, 1965: "It is unlikely that this loss would cripple the Communist military operations in the South, though it would certainly embarrass them."

"We do not believe," the agency's evaluation added, "that the attacks in themselves would lead to a major change of policy on the Communist side, either toward negotiations or toward enlarging the war."

## Outline of Enemy Policy

"Present Communist policy is to continue to prosecute the war vigorously in the south," another agency estimate, on Dec. 3, 1965, said. It added:

"The Communists recognize that the U.S. reinforcements of 1965 signify a determination to avoid defeat. They expect more U.S. troops and probably



The New York Times July 2, 1971

Explosion symbols on the upper map indicate fuel-oil depots among those struck in the controversial attacks.

anticipate that targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area will come under air attack. Nevertheless, they remain unwilling to damp down the conflict or move toward negotiation. They expect a long war, but they continue to believe that time is their ally and that their own staying power is superior."

If the United States bombed all major targets in North Vietnam, Secretary McNamara asked, how would Hanoi react? The C.I.A. replied: "The D.R.V. would not decide to quit; PAVN infiltration southward would continue."



In March, 1966, after months of hesitation, Mr. McNamara accepted the Joint Chiefs' requests and recommended bombing North Vietnam's oil, the study relates. But President Johnson did not immediately go along with the Secretary's recommendation.

#### Several Reasons to Hesitate

There were several reasons for the President's hesitation, the account goes on.

The continuing chaotic political situation in South Vietnam, with rumors of a change in government, made any further escalation seem unwise for the moment. There was also a widespread campaign by several world leaders during the spring to get Washington and Hanoi to the negotiating table. President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Britain separately traveled to Moscow to try to start negotiations.

President Charles de Gaulle of France was in touch with President Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi, and Secretary General Thant of the United Nations appealed to both sides to come to the Security Council. President Johnson could not afford to escalate the war during these peace efforts, the Pentagon record says.

An important influence on President Johnson's thinking, the account goes on, was a memorandum he received

from Mr. Rostow on May 6. Mr. Rostow, who as a major with the Office of Strategic Services during World War II had helped plan the bombing of Germany, recalled in his memorandum the damage done to that country's war effort through the bombing of oil-storage facilities. He then asserted:

"With an understanding that simple analogies are dangerous, I nevertheless feel it is quite possible the military effects of systematic and sustained bombing of P.O.L. in North Vietnam may be more prompt and direct than conventional intelligence analysis would suggest."

#### Not Even Sharp Was Told

It was late in May when President Johnson decided to order the oil bombing, the narrative says, and he apparently set June 10 as the target day. But his decision "was very closely held," the analyst writes, and not even Admiral Sharp or General Westmoreland was told.

The Central Intelligence Agency, in a last-minute evaluation ordered by the "Vietnam principals," reiterated its skepticism about the effects of oil-tank bombing.

"It is estimated," the agency's report said, "that the infiltration of men and supplies into SVN can be sustained."

The sequence of events was interrupted on June 7, the study relates, when Washington learned that a Canadian diplomat, Chester A. Ronning, was on his way to Hanoi to test North Vietnam's attitude toward negotiations, a mission for which he had received State Department approval.

Secretary Rusk, who was traveling in Europe, cabled President Johnson to urge that the oil strikes be postponed until it could be learned what Mr. Ronning had found out.

"I am deeply disturbed," Mr. Rusk said in his cablegram, "by general international revulsion, and perhaps a great deal at home if it becomes known that we took an action which sabotaged the Ronning mission to which we had given our agreement. I recognize the agony of this problem for all concerned."

#### No Opening or Flexibility

President Johnson, responding to Mr. Rusk's request, suspended the oil raids, the study discloses. When Mr. Ronning returned, Assistant Secretary Bundy flew to meet him in Ottawa, but quickly reported that the Canadian had found no opening or flexibility in the North Vietnamese position.

While Mr. Ronning was in Hanoi, Secretary McNamara had informed Admiral Sharp by cablegram of the high-level consideration of oil attacks and told him:

"Final decision for or against will be influenced by extent they can be carried out without significant civilian casualties. What preliminary steps to minimize would you recommend and if taken what number of casualties do you believe would result?"

Admiral Sharp "replied eagerly," the study declares, with a list of precautions: The strikes would be carried out only under favorable weather conditions, with experienced pilots fully briefed, and with especially selected weapons. He predicted that civilian casualties could be held "under 50."

With Mr. Ronning's return and Admiral Sharp's assurances, the stage was set for the oil-tank strikes.

On June 22, Washington gave the execution message [see text, Joint Chiefs' order] authorizing strikes on the oil targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. The Pentagon analyst terms the execution message "a remarkable document, attesting in detail to the political sensitivity of the strikes." The message said:

"Strikes to commence with initial attacks against Haiphong and Hanoi P.O.L. on same day if operationally feasible. . . . At Haiphong avoid damage to merchant shipping. No attacks authorized on craft unless U.S. aircraft are first fired on and then only if clearly North Vietnamese.

"Decision made after SecDef and C.J.C.S. [Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff] were assured every feasible step would be taken to minimize civilian casualties. . . . Take the following measures: maximum use of most experienced Rolling Thunder personnel, detailed briefing of pilots stressing need to avoid civilians, execute only when weather permits visual identification of targets and improved strike accuracy, select best axis of attack to avoid populated areas,

maximum use of ECM [electronic countermeasures] to hamper SAM [surface-to-air missiles] and AAA [antiaircraft artillery] fire control, in order to limit pilot distraction and improve accuracy, maximum use of weapons of high precision delivery consistent with mission objective, and limit SAM and AAA suppression [bombing] to sites located outside populated areas.

#### The 'Never on Sunday' Order

"Take special precautions to insure security. If weather or operational considerations delay initiation of strikes, do not initiate on Sunday, 26 June."

It is not clear, the Pentagon account says, why what it calls the "never on Sunday" order was issued.

Because of bad weather, it was June 29 before the oil strikes were finally begun, reportedly with great success. The Haiphong dock facility appeared about 80 per cent destroyed, the study says, and the Hanoi "tank farm" was apparently knocked out. Only one United States aircraft was lost to ground fire.

A report from the Seventh Air Force in Saigon called the operation "the most significant, the most important strike of the war."

"Official Washington reacted with mild jubilation to the reported success of the P.O.L. strikes and took satisfaction in the relatively mild reaction of the international community to the escalation," the Pentagon analyst recounts. "Secretary McNamara described the execution of the raids as a 'superb professional job,' and sent a message of personal congratulations to the field commanders involved in the planning and execution of the attacks."

In early July, Mr. McNamara informed Admiral Sharp in a cablegram that the President wished the first priority in the air war to be given to the "strangulation" of North Vietnam's fuel system. And he ordered Admiral Sharp to develop a comprehensive plan to accomplish this.

Throughout the summer of 1966, Operation Rolling Thunder was concentrated on destroying oil-storage sites, the narrative relates. By the end of July, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported to Secretary McNamara that 70 per cent of North Vietnam's original storage capacity had been destroyed.

But "what became clearer and clearer as the summer wore on," the account discloses, "was that while we had destroyed a major portion of North Vietnam's storage capacity, she retained enough dispersed capacity, supplemented by continuing imports (increasingly in easily dispersable drums, not bulk) to meet her ongoing requirements."

In August, the study says, with the large storage sites already destroyed and the small, dispersed sites hard to find and bomb, "it was simply impractical and infeasible to attempt any further constriction of North Vietnam's P.O.L. storage capacity."

And, it adds, the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam to the Vietcong continued "undiminished."

### Difficulties Overestimated

"It was clear," the study says, "that the P.O.L. strikes had been a failure. . . . There was no evidence that NVN had at any time been pinched for P.O.L. . . . The difficulties of switching to a much less vulnerable but perfectly workable storage and distribution system, not an unbearable strain when the volume to be handled was not really very great, had been overestimated. Typically, also, N.V.N.'s adaptability and resourcefulness had been greatly underestimated."

"McNamara, for his part, made no effort to conceal his dissatisfaction and disappointment at the failure of the P.O.L. strikes," the study continues. "He pointed out to the Air Force and the Navy the glaring discrepancy between the optimistic estimates of results their pre-strike P.O.L. studies had postulated and the actual failure of the raids to significantly decrease infiltration."

"The Secretary was already in the process of rethinking the role of the entire air campaign in the U.S. effort," the Pentagon study says. "He was painfully aware of its inability to pinch off the infiltration to the South and had seen no evidence of its ability to break Hanoi's will, demoralize its population or bring it to the negotiation table."

"The attack on North Vietnam's P.O.L. system," the study goes on, "was the last major escalation of the air war recommended by Secretary McNamara."