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11-70

# What's Behind Viet Bombing?

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It appears now that the underlying purpose of the new wave of bombings in North Vietnam and Laos is to preserve a somewhat stalemated condition on the ground in South Vietnam and Cambodia so that U.S. troop withdrawals can continue on schedule. The attacks appear to have been inhibitory, planned with an eye to that time next summer and fall when U.S. troop strength in Vietnam will drop low enough to tempt the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to inflict punishment raids on those troops remaining.

The Pentagon has worried about this problem since early 1969. The President justified the invasion of Cambodia in May on the ground that it would protect American troops during the long phase-out period. Only last Friday, hours before the new air raids started, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird told reporters that a refusal by Congress to approve \$155 million in special aid to Cambodia could inhibit the continued withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam. Now the military talks about the success of the air raids in destroying war materials stockpiles in North Vietnam.

Such a strategy can be criticized, and it ought to be. But it is one which could have been presented to the American people in understandable terms. Thus it is hard to understand why the raids were ordered without consultation with congressional leaders, or why the Pentagon insisted throughout the weekend that the bombings were made in retaliation for the shooting down of a U.S. reconnaissance plane nine days earlier. Not many people, considering what has happened in this war, will readily believe the Pentagon's assertions that civilian targets were not hit. And the revelation of a search mission into North Vietnam in an effort to free Americans held prisoner, while it is a good war story, has nothing to do with what the war is all about.

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Punitive air raids make no sense if this country is really serious about ending this war. And any talk of retaliation is bound to get the Administration in trouble with Congress and the people; too many remember

that national broadcast by former President Lyndon E. Johnson on Aug. 4, 1964, in which he announced limited retaliatory raids against North Vietnam. By now we have been retaliating for one affront or another through the longest war in our history.

The war appears to be less intense than it was a couple of years ago; but it is a wider war; it has been spreading throughout the peninsula. Further, all our experience since 1964 indicates that increased belligerency in any form tends to breed increased fighting from the other side. After six years, the people of this country must be somewhat skeptical about the effectiveness of force, or about the purposes the government is pursuing in Asia. It is more than a little immoral, then, for the Pentagon to claim that the raids were intended to punish and bludgeon North Vietnam, for this claim involves the assumption that we can use any means we choose to accomplish our uncertain ends.

Intelligence estimates are periodically leaked to the press and no layman is in a position to argue with them. The claim now is that war stocks were piled up in North Vietnam for movement soon into Cambodia and South Vietnam. Some in the intelligence community claim that infiltration from North Vietnam into combat zones has doubled during the summer, and that large infiltration forces were ready to move when the rainy season ended.

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American commanders are becoming concerned about the morale and efficiency of U.S. ground troops during this long withdrawal period; it would be hard to convince men to risk their lives in a situation like this. President Nixon himself has acknowledged the tactical dangers during troop withdrawals. Those dangers are real. Also real is his twice repeated threat to use "any means" at his disposal to protect the withdrawing troops.

Time is revealing what is involved in the program to get us out of Southeast Asia. We are financing Thai troops; we underwrite the huge South Vietnamese army and the government; we are supporting both government and army in Cambodia. We have the testimony last April of the secretary of state that such support for Cambodia could get us ever more deeply involved. We are flying bombing missions all over the peninsula not only in support of our troops, but in support of these others. We seem to be coming into a situation in which our ground troops will leave Asia and the war will evolve into endless air strikes—punitive, destructive, to no purpose.

That, when you come down to it, is not peace; it is very cruel war and it is our war.