Air War Against North Vietnam
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Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee
Washington, D.C.

I. Introduction

Earlier this year many statements appeared in the press which were calculated to belittle the effectiveness of the air campaign over North Vietnam. Many of these statements alleged, or at least implied, that all military targets of significance had been destroyed, that the air campaign had been conducted as effectively as possible, and that continuation of the air campaign was pointless and useless--possibly even prolonging the war itself. At the same time, reports were being circulated that serious consideration was being given in high places to a cessation of the air campaign over North Vietnam, or a substantial curtailment of it. Many of these reports were attributed to unnamed high government officials.

In view of the importance of the air campaign, on June 28, 1967, the subcommittee announced it would conduct an extensive inquiry into the conduct and effectiveness of the bombing campaign over North Vietnam.

Since commencing hearings on August 9, 1967, we have heard the most knowledgeable and qualified witnesses, including both military leaders and the Secretary of Defense. In order of their appearance, the witnesses were Adm. Ulysses S. G. Sharp, Commander in. Chief, Pacific Forces; Adm. Roy Johnson, Commander of the Pacific Fleet; Gen. John Ryan, Commander of the Pacific Air Forces; Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Lt. Gen, William W. Momyer, Commander of the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam; Gen. John P. McConnell, Chief of. Staff, US Air Force; Adm. T. H. Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations; Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara; Gen, Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff, US Army; Gen. Wallace M. Greene, Commandant, US Marine Corps, and Maj. Gen, Gilbert L. Meyers, US Air Force (Ret.), formerly Deputy Commander of the Seventh Air Force in Saigon.

We believe that we now have the basic and fundamental facts which underlie the air campaign against North Vietnam. In view of the fact that this is one of the most crucial and critical problems confronting the ration, this report is being issued so the Congress and the American people can have the benefit of our findings at this time. A formal and more detailed report will be issued at a later date.

II. Purposes of the Air War

It must be emphasized that the air campaign against North Vietnam is a highly important, integral, and truly indispensable part of the overall strategy involved in the conduct of the war in Southeast Asia. Its major objectives are (1) to obstruct, reduce, harass, and impede the flow of war-supporting materiel and personnel, within North

Vietnam and from North Vietnam to South Vietnam; (2) to destroy those military and industrial resources of North Vietnam that contribute most to the support of its aggression; (3) to reduce the flow of external assistance being provided to North Vietnam; and (4) to cause North Vietnam to pay an unacceptable price for its aggression.

The subcommittee has always recognized that the air war in the North is not a substitute for the ground war in South Vietnam. We have always considered it to be only one phase, albeit a highly essential and important one, of the overall integrated war effort. Those who suggest otherwise merely create a straw man and waste their energy upon the destruction of it.

That the air campaign has not achieved its objectives to a greater extent cannot be attributed to inability or impotence of airpower. It attests, rather, to the fragmentation of our air might by overly restrictive controls, limitations, and the doctrine of "gradualism" placed on our aviation forces which prevented them from waging the air campaign in the manner and according to the timetable which was best calculated to achieve maximum results.

III. History and Development of the Air War

The bombing campaign against North Vietnam was authorized in February 1965. Shortly thereafter our military leaders, notably the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended a list of ninety-four fixed targets for strike which they considered militarily significant. These targets were not approved. Instead, strikes were limited to a relatively small section in the southern area of North Vietnam and initially only a small weight of effort was employed.

Throughout, the tempo of the air campaign has been based on a gradual and carefully controlled application of power. Through 1966, the great bulk of the effort was expended on attacking the enemy's lines of communication well south of the vital areas of Hanoi and Haiphong, while these important targets in the vital northeast quadrant of North Vietnam, where the bulk of its war-supporting resources are concentrated, remained relatively untouched. Only twenty-two of the 242 targets on the Joint Chiefs of Staff list were struck in 1966, and less than one percent of the sorties flown were directed against fixed targets on the JCS list.

While it is clear that, at least through January 1967, the careful controls and restrictive ground rules had resulted in the application of our airpower in a manner which as of limited effectiveness, commencing in January 1967 the use of our airpower was gradually extended. More consistent attacks were authorized against the enemy's more important military targets, such as its transportation network and war-supporting industries, particularly in the areas surrounding Hanoi and Haiphong. This important northeast area of North Vietnam contains industrial facilities, important military complexes, and key elements of the transportation system which are most important to North Vietnam in enabling it to support the aggression against South Vietnam.

In the spring of 1967, certain important targets were approved for strike and the weight of our air campaign was intensified, particularly with respect to the vital northeast quadrant, including the Hanoi-Haiphong complex. Targets such as electric power systems, the steel industry, airfields, and some important segments of the transportation system were authorized for strike. Thus, military leaders stated that more had been done in the past three months than was achieved in the previous eighteen months--all because significant targets were being approved, largely for the first time.

Admiral Sharp testified on August 9, 1967, "During the last three months, with an expanded target list but with no "significant departure from the broad restraints under which, we have long operated, we have begun to hurt the enema in his home territory." He quickly added that: "Now when the enemy is hurting, we should increase our pressures."

The weather over North Vietnam has been unusually good this spring and summer. It must be borne in mind that the northeast monsoon from mid-October to April cuts down severely on the number of targets that can be struck. Hence, in July, the military needed many profitable targets to employ its air forces effectively.

It was with gratification that the subcommittee learned that on August 8, 1967, one day before the hearing commenced, additional important targets were approved, many for the first time. Notably the list included targets in the buffer zone along the Red Chinese border in which strike had long been prohibited. In addition, the vital Hanoi bridge over the Bed River was hit for the first time. This bridge handles the rail traffic from Red China over the northeast railway and the vital shipments from Haiphong to Hanoi.

It should be noted that since our air attacks began the enemy has accomplished a tremendous and very formidable buildup of his air defenses. The North Vietnamese air defense environment overall, including antiaircraft fire, surface-to-air missiles, and MIG aircraft over the heavily ended targets in North Vietnam, has been described as the most deadly that the world has ever seen, The massive air defenses have exacted a heavy toll of American aircraft and pilots. More than 660 planes have been shot down over North Vietnam. The long delay in approving targets in North Vietnam has almost certainly contributed to our aircraft and pilot losses since it gave the North Vietnamese the time to build up formidable air defenses. Moreover, the long delay enabled the enemy to prepare for a response to the anticipated loss of installations, such as petroleum storage, by dispersal of facilities and building reserve stocks.

An important area of controversy and difference of opinion between Secretary McNamara and the military experts lies in the evaluation of the impact of the air campaign in the North on US casualties in the South. General McConnell's was typical of all military testimony when he stated: "It is my opinion that that is correct," in response to the question, "Would not the converse be true in that we probably would have suffered fewer casualties in the South if the air campaign against the North had not been burdened with restrictions and prohibited targets?" All other military witnesses asked the question had the same view.

Secretary McNamara is in clear and complete disagreement with this assessment. He was asked: "Would we in all probability have experienced fewer casualties in the South had those restrictions and prohibitions not been imposed against the bombing of the North?" Secretary McNamara responded: "It is my very firm opinion that regardless of what other merit there might have been for following different practices of air activity against the North in the past, it would not have reduced our casualties in the South."

He continued: "I am simply saying that I have seen no evidence of any kind submitted by any agency that is involved in analysis of our North and South operations that indicates that an accelerated campaign of air attacks against the North in the past would have reduced our casualties in the South, and I have seen considerable evidence that points to the opposite conclusion that it would not have."

As stated above, the overwhelming weight of the testimony by military experts is to the contrary.

IV. Nature and Effect of Restrictions

Formerly both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander in Chief of the Pacific forces maintained target lists which were used as the basis of planning for attacks on fixed targets. Targets on the JCS list could not be hit without the approval of the Secretary of Defense and other high civilian authority. As a result, during the entire year of 1966 less than one percent of the total sorties flown against North Vietnam were against fixed targets on the JCS target list. This clearly demonstrates the previous difficulty in obtaining approval for striking the more meaningful fixed targets. The Secretary of Defense has endeavored to leave the impression that the fixed targets on these lists are generally industrial-type targets. The fact is that some of the most important are key bridges, railroad repair shops, storage areas, vehicle repair shops, concentration yards, and other targets which are vital to the enemy's transportation network and which be utilizes in moving materiel and supplies from the Port of Haiphong and the border of Red China through North Vietnam to South Vietnam for use against our troops and those of our allies.

Recently the JCS and CINCPAC target lists have been combined into the operating target list. This now contains a total 427 targets and, as of August 25, 1967, 359 of these had been recommended for strike and strikes had been authorized against 302. Thus, there were fifty-seven targets recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff against which strikes have not been authorized.

This addresses itself to only part of the picture. Many long-recommended targets were authorized for the first time in August 1967. As a matter of fact, Admiral Sharp had recommended 129 targets to Secretary McNamara when he briefed him in Saigon in July 1967. General Wheeler stated that as of August 9, 1967, there were 111 unauthorized targets and that the JCS recommended that seventy of them be authorized for strike. The remaining forty-one, while retained on the target list, were not recommended at that time.

It is important to stress that the target list discussed above by no means contains all of the fixed targets in North Vietnam. Targets are added from time to time as they are recognized as profitable and important military targets, and other targets are dropped from the list as they become inoperative.

In addition, the authority to make an initial strike upon a target is not always sufficient. The North Vietnamese have shown a great and increasing capacity for repairing and restoring targets so that many targets, even though previously struck, are quickly regenerated, restored, and require restrike. Restrike authority was often not allowed, particularly with respect to important targets around Hanoi and Haiphong and in other sanctuary areas.

Further, there are sanctuary areas in North Vietnam in which strikes are prohibited except with express prior approval from Washington civilian authority. These sanctuary areas obviously cannot be discussed at any length in this unclassified report. However, we do call attention to press reports of air strikes in recent weeks on targets in the buffer zone along the border of Red China for the first time. Many of these targets are vital to North Vietnam's transportation net.

The existence of the sanctuary areas in North Vietnam are not based exclusively on military considerations. These sanctuaries have enabled the North Vietnamese to concentrate their war-making materiel in these areas, which are safe and secure from bombing, and ready them for the dash southward over vulnerable land, rail, and water routes under cover of darkness and bad weather. Whether warranted or not, it is clear that the sanctuaries have reduced and curtailed the effectiveness of our air operations and reduced the impact of the bombing campaign upon the enemy's ability to support the war and infiltrate men and materiel to the South. This is one of the reasons why, through January 1967, the application of our airpower was relatively ineffective, and much more ineffective than it should have been.

V. Remaining Militarily Significant Targets

On August 25, 1967, there were fifty-seven targets recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff against which strikes have not been authorized, Another sixty-eight targets on the operating target list are not currently recommended by the Joint Chiefs. The Secretary of Defense in his appearance before the subcommittee took great pains to minimize and deprecate the significance of the fifty-seven recommended targets which have not been approved. He said, "The present importance of such targets as these has not been shown to warrant risking the loss of American lives." Yet in the past many American lives have been lost by striking approved targets which were clearly of much less significance than many of those recommended but not approved.

It was clearly implied by the Secretary of Defense that few, if any, important military targets remained unstruck. The great weight of the military testimony was to the contrary. General McConnell stated: "There are many valuable targets remaining unstruck." General Wheeler stated that the fifty-seven targets under discussion were worthwhile targets and said: "There is no question about that." Admiral Sharp said:

"There are many lucrative targets that have not yet been struck ... that we consider important." As late as August 28, General Greene said: "The key targets have not even yet been hit."

Obviously, high on the list, from the standpoint of priority of importance, is the closure or neutralization of the Port of Haiphong. As the Secretary of Defense said, the great bulk of North Vietnam's imports now enter through Haiphong, perhaps as much as 4,700 out of 5,800 tons per day. This, the Secretary of Defense said, includes most of the war-supporting materiel, such as trucks, generators, and, construction equipment. However, in weighing the risks involved in closing this port, he discounts the value of closing Haiphong and asserts that Hanoi's present heavy reliance on it reflects convenience rather than necessity. He concludes that cutting off seaborne imports would not prevent North Vietnam from continuing its present level of military operations in the South and would not, in fact, eliminate seaborne imports. He said that North Vietnam could sustain its required import rate by way of land, rail, and water from Red China.

This position contrasts sharply with the views of military experts. For example, Admiral Sharp testified: "I have seen studies that say that the roads and the railroads have sufficient capacity even if you mine Haiphong that they would still get enough done. I frankly do not believe it,"

Supporting the present level of enemy forces in South Vietnam is not the only problem posed by imports into North Vietnam. Large quantities of war materiel are needed to support enemy forces in the DMZ, and thousands of tons of antiaircraft ammunition are needed to support the air defenses in the North: Practically all of this is imported.

All military witnesses stated that the closure, neutralization, or isolation of the Port of Haiphong was the single most important thing which could be done in North Vietnam from a military standpoint. They felt that this measure, if accomplished, would have a substantial impact on the course of the war and the American and allied casualties in the South.

Not only did they feel that it is necessary from a military standpoint, but they think that it is entirely feasible. They also feel that closure of the port would have a very substantial impact on the flow of goods and supplies into North Vietnam.

Obviously, the question of closing or neutralizing Haiphong has important policy and political considerations over and above the pure military requirements, including the reaction, if any, of the USSR or Red China. This is a serious and legitimate question, but it does not justify the Secretary in taking the position that closing or neutralizing this vital port is unimportant from a military standpoint, a position which is entirely at odds with the unanimous judgment of all of our military experts. The subcommittee does not believe the Secretary's position on this matter is valid.

VI. Impact of Previous Bombings

Despite the restrictions and controls placed on our air campaign, it has had a substantial impact on North Vietnam, particularly in the last several months. During this latter period our aviation forces have been able to achieve a level of effort not previously possible. The growing weight of our efforts has brought an extensive destruction or disruption of North Vietnam's war-supporting resources.

The constant attacks on rail lines, truck routes, trucks, railroad rolling stock, and ocean barges have eroded the country's transportation capabilities. As a result, the air campaign held down the infiltration of men and materiel into South Vietnam and significantly restricted the level of enemy forces that can be sustained there, it is important to emphasize that a complete stoppage of the infiltration was never anticipated. However, it is clear that the bombing campaign has reduced the level of infiltration--especially of materiel, well below that which would be possible if the traffic had been left unimpeded. This has served to reduce the enemy's ability to conduct major sustained operations in South Vietnam and, thus, has resulted in the reduction of American casualties.

Members of the Joint Chiefs told us that if the air campaign in the North had not been initiated, the scope of the ground war in South Vietnam might have been greatly expanded. General McConnell said that Hanoi had the potential manpower to build the combined Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam to nearly double what they are today. He pointed out that coping with such a buildup and capability would have required a large increase in our own ground force commitment, "perhaps more than 800,000 additional US troops at a cost of $11 billion over what we have already spent."

In addition, as Secretary McNamara himself testified the North Vietnamese have had to divert over 500,000 people to maintaining and repairing the lines of communication such as roads, rail networks, etc.--not an insignificant number in a country totaling 18.5 million. What they could have done in South Vietnam with 500,000 men freed from shackles of maintaining lines of communication in North Vietnam is not pleasant to contemplate.

Thus, weighed against the situation which would have existed had the air campaign not been mounted, it a clear that the air effort against North Vietnam has borne substantial fruits and has been as effective as might be expected considering the restrictions and inhibitions place upon our airpower by civilian authorities in Washington. That greater results have not been achieved is attributable in our judgment to these restrictions rather than to a lack of skill or ability of our aviation forces or of ingenuity, courage, and dedication of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen.

We believe the air campaign has been crucial and vital in saving many American and allied lives in South Vietnam. We believe also that the enemy has been hurt in ha homeland and, while be is thus hurt, the pressure should be increased and not reduced to persuade him that his continued support of the war in South Vietnam is definitely not in his best interests. The propaganda campaign from Hanoi designed to stop the bombing is strong evidence that the enemy is paying a price he does not wish to pay.

VII. Proposals To Suspend or Restrict Air War

Many proposals have been heard recently calling for a curtailment of our air campaign against North Vietnam, including a complete cessation of the bombing in certain vital areas. It is clear from the record that all of these proposals have received some discussion in official circles. It is less clear that they are dead at this time.

Each of these proposals has the serious fault that, if adopted, the inevitable result would be an increased infiltration of men and war goods into South Vietnam and increased casualties among US and allied troops. The impact of a complete cessation of the bombing is clearly apparent. As Admiral Sharp testified: "It generally would be a disaster for the United States, in my opinion," as "we would immediately face a large increase in loss of American troops in South Vietnam," and "in my opinion extend the war indefinitely."

A territorial limitation on the bombing would also be a perilous course because it would afford the North Vietnamese many vital sanctuaries and enable them to expand the ground war in South Vietnam with a lesser penalty than is now being exacted. As an illustration, General Wheeler testified that a reduction of our bombing or imposition of additional restrictions on our air forces would cause increased US and allied casualties in South Vietnam.

Those who propose a temporary bombing lull, as evidence of our good intentions in the hope that it would bring Hanoi to the conference table, overlook the hard facts of increased US casualties and past history. The net effect of such truces was shown clearly by the Tet stand-down in early 1967. We were told that during the four-day lapse in air attacks during that period North Vietnam pushed through a volume of supplies that would have required at least thirty-eight days to move during periods of air activity. As a matter of fact, the tonnage figures reveal that supplies flowing southward during this four-day lull were at least 600 per cent greater than the figures cited by Secretary McNamara.

Conceding that these proposals are well-meaning, we feel that they ignore the facts of life. Hanoi continues to demand the unilateral and unconditional suspension of the bombing campaign without any offer of reciprocal reductions of military action on its part. It does not even guarantee that meaningful talks would ensue if we suspended the bombing. It only suggests the possibility of such talks.

The subcommittee is firm in its belief that the desire for an early end to the fighting which we all share must not cause us to be so naive or foolish as to throw away one of our principal military advantages for shortening the war. There is no evidence whatever that North Vietnam has lowered or softened in any way the demands contained in the four-point stand originally proclaimed by Premier Pham Van Doug on April 8, 1967. These four points were that the United States must stop the bombing and other acts of war against North Vietnam permanently and unconditionally, withdraw all free world troops from South Vietnam, recognize the National Liberation Front as the sole genuine

representative of the South Vietnamese people, and let the Vietnamese people settle their internal affairs themselves. These four points were reaffirmed as recently as July 1, 1967, by the North Vietnamese Communist Party's official newspaper, Nhan Dan.

VIII. Necessity for Continuing and Making Air War More Effective

In our hearings, we found a sharp difference of opinion between the civilian authority and the top-level military witnesses who appeared before the subcommittee over how and when our airpower should be employed against North Vietnam. In that difference we believe we also found the roots of the persistent deterioration of public confidence in our airpower, because the plain facts as they unfolded in the testimony demonstrated clearly that civilian authority consistently overruled the unanimous recommendations of military commanders and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a systematic, timely, and hard-hitting integrated air campaign against the vital North Vietnamese targets. Instead, and for policy reasons, we have employed military aviation in a carefully controlled, restricted, and graduated buildup of bombing pressure which discounted the professional judgment of our best military experts and substituted civilian judgment in the details of target selection and the timing of strikes. We shackled the true potential of airpower and permitted the buildup of what has become the world's most formidable antiaircraft defenses. This approach had considerable support from those who hoped to accomplish our objectives with minimum force and who feared that a greater use of airpower risked a confrontation with the USSR and Communist China. It was adopted over contrary recommendations of the military leaders, but, true to their tradition, they faithfully supported and implemented the orders of their civilian superiors.

This strategy has not brought the war to an end. It is true that we have (1) held down the flow of men and materiel infiltrated to the South; (2) raised the morale of the South Vietnamese people; and (3) required North Vietnam to pay a price for their continued aggression. Had we not taken the air action in the North and injected large-scale US ground forces into the battle in the South, the communists would surely have prevailed and freedom would have perished in South Vietnam. We have not lost, but we have not achieved our objectives and war goes on. The price we have exacted from North Vietnam for its continued aggression is one that it is still willing to pay, and the level of interdiction of the southward flow of men and materiel has permitted enough infiltration to enable the enemy to continue the fight in the South.

It is not our intention to point a finger or to second guess those who determined this policy. But the cold fact is that this policy has not done the job and it has been contrary to best military judgment. What is needed now is the hard decision to do whatever is necessary, take the risks that have to be taken and apply the force that is required to see the job through.

For reasons which are apparently convincing to him, although not to us, the Secretary of Defense deprecates the impact of a continued and more effective air campaign on Hanoi's ability and will to support the aggression in the South. The top military leaders of this country are confident that the Port of Haiphong can be closed, the land lines of communication to China interdicted, and Hanoi's receipt and distribution by sea and

land routes of war-sustaining materiel greatly reduced by Air Force and Navy aviation, if they are permitted to do so.

The subcommittee is of the opinion that we cannot, in good conscience, ask our ground forces to continue their fight in South Vietnam unless we are prepared to press the air war in the North in the most effective way possible. This requires closing the Port of Haiphong, isolating it from the rest of the country, striking all meaningful targets with a military significance, and increasing the interdiction of the lines of communication from Red China. The Secretary of Defense testified that he does not believe that such a campaign can stem the flow of supplies and goods sufficiently to prevent support of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong combat activity in South Vietnam at its present level. The Joint Chiefs and other military experts believe it can accomplish more--much more. It is their judgment that a less restricted air campaign which interdicts war materiel at the point of entry and major arteries of supply will result in reduced support for aggression in South Vietnam and at the DMZ, curtailed activity by enemy units, and reduced casualties for American and allied ground forces.

As between these diametrically opposed views, and in view of the unsatisfactory progress of the war, logic and prudence require that the decision be with the unanimous weight of professional military judgment. From the record made before us, this appears to offer the best and, very possibly, only hope for a successful end to the war as quickly as possible.

IX. Concluding Statement

We emphasize again that nothing in this report is meant to suggest the indiscriminate bombing of civilians or civilian population centers. No witness favored this. Certainly, the subcommittee does not recommend it. It is clear from the testimony, however, that, within this limitation, many military actions already discussed which have thus far been withheld or restricted can and should be taken which are calculated to have a direct and adverse effect upon Hanoi's ability and willingness to continue to support the war.

Nor do we derogate in any manner the principle of civilian control of the military. We recognize this as one of the truly great bulwarks of our system of government. The best traditions of the military uphold this principle and it has been scrupulously adhered to both in the conduct of this war and during these hearings. However, as the subcommittee said in a report issued on October 3, 1962, "If war should come, it can be conducted fully only by professionals in that art, and, if strategy and tactics come under the influence or direction of unskilled amateurs, sacrifice in blood is inevitable and victory is in doubt."

All must agree that we are in a major war. More than 500,000 of our fighting men are engaged in deadly combat. We believe that, within the broad policies and objectives laid down by the Commander in Chief, unless policy reasons to the contrary exist, this requires that greater weight be given to recommendations for military actions which our high-ranking military experts, with life times of experience and expertise behind them, believe to be necessary to bring the war to a successful conclusion.

When the decision was made to commit American fighting forces to South Vietnam, certain risks became inevitable. They were assumed at that time; otherwise, we would not be in South Vietnam at all. Further and needless risks should not be incurred recklessly, but within that framework, it should be our purpose to support our fighting men to the greatest extent possible and, within reasonable limits, to do that which is necessary to bring the war to an end as quickly and successfully as possible. That is the major thrust of this report.

Every military witness who testified emphasized that the air war has been waged under severe handicaps which were contrary to military principles. Complex and complicated rules and controls, plus the necessity to obtain approval in Washington for even relatively insignificant actions and tactics, have been the order of the day. We note that in recent months many of these restrictions have been eased but that others, vital to the success of the war, remain in effect.

It is high time, we believe, to allow the military, to be heard in connection with the tactical details of military operations.