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Washington: Vietnam and the Press

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WASHINGTON, June 28 —

President Johnson is reported to be furious about several recent disclosures in the press about his military plans in Vietnam, and this time he has some reason to complain.

In recent days the papers have been full of speculation that the bombing of the enemy's oil refineries and power plants in the Hanoi and Haiphong regions was imminent, and this goes beyond the proper bounds of public military information.

Public discussion of the wisdom or stupidity of extending the bombing to the populous areas of these two cities is fair enough, but public disclosure of the timing of operational military plans is not.

Johnson's Tip

Inevitably, it puts the enemy on tactical alert for a military exercise that depends largely for its success on tactical surprise, and if the carrier-based pilots and bombardiers have protected this disclosure, they are well within their rights.

Most of the North Vietnamese antiaircraft equipment, supplied by the Soviets, is mobile. With a few days' advance notice, it can be moved into

position to defend the critical targets around Hanoi and Haiphong, thus raising the risk to the American planes, which have had enough trouble with the enemy's ground-to-air missiles, and particularly its radar-controlled antiaircraft guns, in the past.

Ironically, President Johnson himself started the speculation in the press by the statement in his last news conference that "We must continue to raise the cost of aggression." This could mean only one thing — that the long campaign by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to hit the refineries and the power plants had finally succeeded, and it was so interpreted in most papers.

War always raises delicate and even dangerous complications in the relations between officials and reporters, but Vietnam has raised more than most. The normal restraints of a declared war have not always been present in this conflict. The private conferences between Gen. George C. Marshall with the Washington bureau chiefs in the last World War which did so much to keep this problem under control, have not been repeated as regularly or effectively in this one.

Also, the Administration's re-

lations with reporters in the Vietnam war have been poisoned by a long record of misleading statements by generals in the field and officials in Washington about how well the war was going, how well the various Saigon Governments were doing, etc. The result is that there is now little faith here in the press about the official pronouncements on the war.

Finally, the policy of raising the level of the bombing and extending it to targets around Hanoi and Haiphong has been bitterly contested here and in other world capitals for months, and those who have been advocating such a policy have not been able to conceal their satisfaction that the President has apparently now agreed to take the larger risk.

Habits of the Past

The question of printing a good story has been a problem ever since the beginning of the cold war. Allen Dulles, former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, illustrates it in his book "The Craft of Intelligence." "I recall," he wrote, "the days when the intelligence community was perfecting plans for various technical devices to monitor Soviet missile-testing

and space operations. The technical journals exerted themselves to give the American public, and hence the Soviet Union, the details of radar screens and the like, which for geographic reasons, to be effective, had to be placed on the territory of friendly countries close to the Soviet Union.

No Need to Know

"These countries," Mr. Dulles continued, "were quite willing to cooperate as long as secrecy could be preserved. This whole vital operation was threatened by public disclosure. . . . Except for a small number of technically minded people, such disclosures added little to the welfare or happiness or even to the knowledge of the American people. Certainly this type of information did not fall in the 'need to know' category for the American public."

The same is undoubtedly true of the actual battlefield plans of the Government in Vietnam. Some of us think it is a tragic blunder to extend the bombing to Hanoi and Haiphong, but the right of dissent does not extend to publishing operational plans that help the enemy and increase the risk to our own files.