

A Year After the Bombing Halt, Balance Sheet Is Still Unclear

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 31—A year ago today President Johnson, then in the closing weeks of his Administration, ordered a halt in the air, naval and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam, raising strong hopes for a negotiated peace in Paris and for a reduction in the acute political tensions at home.

Since then those who expected to see progress in the Paris talks on Vietnam have been bitterly disappointed.

Those who argued that the decision not to bomb would produce higher American casualties have been proved wrong. The losses of the United States forces this fall have been half those in the corresponding period in 1968.

The situation at the end of October, 1969—as it emerges from interviews with Nixon Administration officials, former Johnson aides and military and intelligence specialists—is one of paradox and uncertainty.

The consensus in Washington is that Hanoi considers the antiwar sentiment in the United States as one of its most powerful weapons.

Conflict of Attrition

On the battlefield the fighting has unquestionably diminished during the year except for the enemy's February-March offensive and for occasional flurries. The character of the war has changed to a conflict of attrition, with an overall, gradual de-escalation in the last year.

The stated Communist policy as defined in articles in North Vietnamese military publications and captured documents, is to "inflict maximum losses to the enemy with minimum losses" to its own forces while insisting in Paris that a settlement may come only from the acceptance of the "basic solution" of the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong, calling for withdrawal of all allied troops from Vietnam.

The Communists have held to this demand in Paris despite President Nixon's decision to reduce the number of American troops in Vietnam by 60,000, or more than 10 per cent, this year.

The enemy, in applying the tactics of "economy of forces," seems to be concentrating on South Vietnamese rather than American units. The casualty statistics show that American losses have been steadily decreasing while South Vietnamese losses have remained constant if they have not grown.

Foe's Losses Fluctuate

North Vietnamese and Vietcong losses have been fluctuating since 1968, not always matching the pattern of those of the allies.

By way of accounting for the South Vietnamese casualties, one group of analysts believes that the "Vietnamization" of the war—the gradual replacement of American combat units with South Vietnamese troops—is the reason for the new pattern. But others think that the Communists have hit South Vietnamese units because they are usually weaker and less



An underground factory in Hatinh province. Bomb halt has unquestionably aided North Vietnam's industrial recovery. Michael Macrae.

well equipped despite the United States policy.

The view held among some high officials is that Hanoi believes that the lower the American casualties and apparently more promising the prospects of peace, the stronger will be the domestic pressure on President Nixon to wind up the war. One qualified observer remarked that "there is no reason for the North Vietnamese to fight hard against the troops they know will be pulled out sooner or later."

The opposite view is expressed too: that antiwar sentiment in the United States — the Hanoi radio described the Oct. 15 Moratorium Day as the "autumn offensive of the American people" — will be stimulated by renewed fighting and rising casualty lists.

In the opinion of the Washington experts, however, Hanoi faces a political and military dilemma. They believe that the relative success of the pacification program in South Vietnam — an illustration was the Nixon Administration's report that about 250,000 villagers had returned home in the last nine months — would force the enemy to react even at the risk of incurring serious losses.

Impact on Paris Talks

These experts also believe that the North Vietnamese must seek a position of strength on the battlefield so that their negotiating posture in Paris will remain viable.

Those considerations, many officials here suggest, may lead to a renewal of intensive hostilities. Intelligence reports indicate that 3,000 to 4,000 North Vietnamese troops have been moved into the Mekong River Delta southwest of Saigon in recent months and that they

may launch attacks when the monsoon season ends next month.

Further, the experts do not rule out a major offensive on several fronts next January or February.

Whatever the trend on the battlefields, where the United States has been active since 1961 and in strength since 1965, both the Johnson and the Nixon Administrations have assumed that an "essential understanding" — this was the expression used by Mr. Johnson in announcing the bombing halt — exists between Washington and Hanoi despite angry North Vietnamese denials of any "secret agreements."

Hanoi greeted the bombing cessation as an "unconditional victory," but it is said that in exchange the enemy made a commitment not to send new troops through the demilitarized zone and not to shell South Vietnamese cities heavily.

The United States is satisfied that there has been no infiltration through the six-mile-deep demilitarized zone, but intelligence reports say that four North Vietnamese divisions are poised immediately north of it. It is noted that there has been no necessity to commit additional troops in South Vietnam since 100,000 are already there.

Opposition to the bombing halt was based on the view that a considerable amount of manpower would be released for military and economic activities.

Capacity Cut a Third

Assessments here are that the bombings reduced North Vietnamese industrial capacity by a third and that farm production dropped 15 to 20 per cent. Major damage was caused to rail lines and roads. Freed from constant emergency repair of roads, bridges and tracks, the North Vietnamese are concentrating on more permanent repairs and the slow rebuilding of industry, especially in the power, cement, textile and food-processing fields.

North Vietnam, then, is in a better position than a year ago to sustain a protracted war of attrition.

But the experts here note that the disruption of agriculture and food distributions by the bombing had not seriously affected the country because of aid from the Soviet Union and Communist China. In fact, experts say, wheat and other substitutes for rice delivered by the two countries improved the North Vietnamese diet.

The end of the bombing has also allowed the departure from North Vietnam of some 50,000 Chinese construction troops that, under the protection of their own antiaircraft units, period.

concentrated on repairing roads and rail links to China. Assessments of morale in North Vietnam a year after the bombing halt are conflicting.

Some speak of war weariness and attempts to bolster morale through warnings that the bombing may resume at any time. Others say that after a period of consternation and fear following President Ho Chi Minh's death in September, morale has improved and the regime, headed for all practical purposes by the First Secretary of the Workers' (Communist) party, Le Duan, is confident that it can support that, under the protection of the war effort for an indefinite period.

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'Overzealous' Meter Maids Hurting Business in Boston

BOSTON (UPI)—City Councilman Frederick C. Langone thinks Boston's Meter Maids have been too enthusiastic in ticketing automobiles on Saturdays.

Mr. Langone said the Meter Maids had been hurting downtown business by "overzealous tagging."

He suggested to the traffic and parking commissioner that the women "be called off" and that parking violations be relaxed on Saturdays.