

Viet Bombers Sow Bitter Seeds

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SAIGON.

While air power is vital to the U. S. war effort in Viet Nam, there is a feeling in some quarters here that indiscriminate use of this power could jeopardize the political war.

Air raids have been stepped up perceptibly in recent weeks, with frequent missions by B-52 tactical bombers and often a couple of hundred sorties a day by fighter-bombers carrying high explosives and napalm.

At the same time, U. S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge seeks to win the minds of the people with the help of counter-insurgency expert Gen. Edward Lansdale—a difficult task made harder by the fact that some of these people may be the innocent victims of the bombing raids.

Gen. Lansdale wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine recently that the Communists had set loose an idea in Viet Nam that would not be destroyed by bombs and bullets; and, while a military source in Saigon says there is no conflict between the Lansdale viewpoint and the orthodox military viewpoint at the moment, the political strategists may attempt to force an easing-up of the bombing raids.

"You can carry a military program so far that it will create political hatreds," the source said. "We could win the war, then hold a referendum and lose that."

The use of air power in South Viet Nam falls into three categories. The first is the saturation bombing of known Viet Cong strongholds by B-52 bombers—giant, high-altitude jets based on Guam that can carry a payload of at least fifty 750-pound bombs.

The second category is called close tactical air support, which means air power used to support troop action or to defend Vietnamese or American units encircled by

the Viet Cong. Such action has turned the tide in some battles and has prevented the annihilation of some government units—the besieged defenders during the battle at Duc Co., for example—until the arrival of ground combat relief forces.

It is the third category that some quarters feel could hurt Mr. Lodge's plans for social revolution in the countryside. This is the program of "combat sorties" by U. S. and Vietnamese fighter-bombers which hit suspected Viet Cong structures and troop concentrations.

Unlike the B-52 raids, these air strikes are not solely in Viet Cong stronghold areas.

And not always do ground

troops follow up the combat sorties to determine exactly what structures have been hit and who has been killed or wounded. The results are often adjudged on reports by the pilots or, at best, surveys by spotter aircraft.

While the B-52 raids are made in areas that contain the sparsest civilian populations, this is not so with the combat sorties. These are often launched against guerrilla bands, which are able to merge quickly and easily with the civilian population.

A further problem is that the B-52 raids are driving the Communists out of their strongholds, to infiltrate their headquarters elements into the areas nominally controlled by the government.

The Vietnamese government

controls only a small fringe of villages surrounding each of the major population centers. The remaining villages in the countryside are considered by counter-insurgency experts to be partially or totally dominated by the Viet Cong—not only by guerrillas but by political cadres as well.

Here is a problem that air power cannot solve. While air strikes can prevent large Viet Cong troop concentrations from forming, they cannot discriminate good from bad and hit the guerrillas in the villages where they do most harm.

"The basic problem on our side is that we have not yet found the answer for guerrillas in small groups," the U.S. military source in Saigon said.