

Stennis Slams McNamara

In March 1965, Washington opened an air war against North Vietnam. "Rolling Thunder" was desultory, so tightly micromanaged that President Lyndon B. Johnson once boasted, "They can't even bomb an outhouse without my approval." By summer 1967, Sen. John C. Stennis was fed up. The Mississippi hawk, using hearings before his subcommittee, blasted Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara. The panel's blistering report said "overly restrictive controls, limitations, and the doctrine of 'gradualism'" had "shackled the true potential of airpower." McNamara refused to change his ways.

Earlier this year many statements appeared in the press which were calculated to belittle the effectiveness of the air campaign over North Vietnam. ...

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. ...

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 anti-aircraft 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. ...

This strategy has not brought the war to an end. ... 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. ...

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

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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.... The Joint Chiefs and other military experts believe it [the air campaign] can accomplish more—much more. ...

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 lifetimes of experience and expertise behind them, believe to be necessary to bring the war to a successful conclusion. ...

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