Grand Valley State University
ScholarWorks@GVSU

Ask Gleaves | Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies

12-14-2004

Nixon and the Christmas Bombing

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves

Recommended Citation
Whitney, Gleaves, "Nixon and the Christmas Bombing" (2004). *Ask Gleaves.* Paper 37.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Nixon and the Christmas Bombing

I recall that President Richard Nixon was associated with Christmas bombings during the Vietnam War. What led the president to do that, and was it something he did to the North Vietnamese more than once?

The so-called Christmas bombing refers to a one-time event: the massive eleven-day air campaign in December 1972 that President Richard Nixon unleashed to make the South and North Vietnamese sit down at the bargaining table to negotiate the end of the Vietnam War.

As an act of *realpolitik*, the Christmas bombing helped achieve the short-term objective of forcing South and North Vietnamese negotiators to reach an agreement, thereby giving the U.S. a face-saving escape from Southeast Asia. Earlier that autumn all parties involved had become extremely frustrated. A seemingly workable agreement had almost been concluded in October 1972. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger even announced, "Peace is at hand." Both the U.S. and North Vietnamese had come to terms. But Saigon balked and the agreement was scuttled. After hopes had been raised so high only to be dashed, Nixon became piqued with Saigon. Much to the chagrin of South Vietnamese leaders, he threatened to conclude a separate peace with the North Vietnamese. The war, after all, was already the most protracted in U.S. history and had become a national nightmare that was exacting terrible costs in American blood, treasure, and morale:
- some 58,000 U.S. servicemen had been sacrificed to resist the communist takeover of South Vietnam;
- the cost to American taxpayers was topping $150 billion -- in what ultimately was a futile cause.

Alas, as the end game was being played out, American leaders knew that Vietnam was a futile cause and wanted to get out as quickly but with as much dignity as possible.

President Nixon had his own reasons to quit Vietnam. In November 1972, he was still highly popular among the "silent majority," as evidenced by his landslide re-election over the hapless George McGovern. The Republican president did not want his second term or his legacy to be burdened by the Vietnam albatross. In the weeks between his re-election and his second Inauguration, Nixon decided to bring the conflict to a climax. To force both sides in Vietnam to conclude an agreement, the commander in chief ordered a massive bombing campaign against the North.

In fact, it was 32 years ago today, on December 14, that Nixon issued the command for sustained bombardment of the North Vietnamese cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, as well as heavily populated areas between them. More than 200 B-52s were mustered for a round-the-clock assault from December 18-28. On the day after Christmas alone, Nixon personally ordered 116 B-52 sorties against the North's largest cities.[1]

In essence, there were three objectives in the Christmas bombing: (1) to pummel the communist North Vietnamese back to the bargaining table, (2) to get the South Vietnamese back to the bargaining table by reassuring them that the U.S. was capable of enforcing any agreement that Saigon signed with Hanoi, and (3) to get the U.S. out of Vietnam as expeditiously as possible.

At one level Nixon's campaign worked. The Christmas bombing inflicted up to 1,600 North Vietnamese deaths and brought psychological pressure to bear against leaders in Hanoi. [2] First on December 22 and again on December 28, the communist regime agreed to resume talks. Within a week of the Christmas bombing, South and North Vietnamese negotiators were back in Paris preparing to talk to each other. Within a month of the Christmas bombing (January 27), an agreement was concluded and signed. Within three months of the Christmas bombing (March 29, 1973), the last American troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. The U.S. achieved a major foreign policy objective: to get out of Vietnam expeditiously and in a face-saving way -- "peace with honor," at Nixon often put it.

The cost of the 11-day Christmas bombing to the U.S. military: 15 B-52s shot down and 93 airmen officially listed as missing.[3] The cost to Nixon politically: that's harder to assess. Some Democrats, frustrated by the president's recent landslide re-election, overreacted. "The only thing I can compare with it," railed Democratic Sen. Harold Hughes, "is the savagery at Hiroshima and Nagasaki."[4]

Yet the Christmas bombing was seized upon in an increasingly divisive political culture. Nixon made a serious error in judgment when he chose not to give the American people or the media much of a rationale for the air campaign. That sin of omission caused Nixon to be further alienated from American opinion-makers; in the *New York Times,* columnist James Reston called the Christmas bombing "war by tantrum."

Indeed, the growing culture of distrust helps explain the media reaction to another storm gathering on the horizon in 1972, Watergate. By August 1974, Nixon, despite stubborn pockets of popular support, would be forced to resign from the presidency.

But that was almost two years in the future. In December of 1972, a newly re-elected president was looking to secure his legacy. He could not do so without finding a face-saving way out of Vietnam. It would take diplomatic alchemy. The U.S. did not cotton to the idea that all its military might had failed to bend a Third-World country to its will. Some 7.8 million tons of bombs were dropped during the conflict, more than all the belligerents of World War II dropped on each other; but bombs had not broken the will of the North Vietnamese to resist. Further, more than two million North and South Vietnamese had been killed; it has been estimated that, "In its proportional impact on Vietnamese society, the Vietnam War, 1955!! 75, was the fourth most severe in the world since 1816." Still, a nation of peasants had successfully resisted America's will. It was a humiliating impasse for the U.S. to find itself in.

Both the U.S. and North Vietnam concluded that it was more important to achieve short-term objectives than to bring about lasting peace. Historian Steven Wagner in a review article observed: "Since 1968 the war had settled into a stalemate that neither side could break. With both sides facing domestic difficulties, by 1972 they had come to the conclusion that finalizing an agreement that served their immediate objectives was more important than actual peace. For Washington, those objectives included the release of American POWs and the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam without capitulation. For Hanoi, they included the withdrawal of American forces, preservation of the revolution in the North, and improving the chances for reunification with the South. Once these objectives were achieved, the other terms of the agreement could be ignored. Actual peace, therefore, was doomed."[7]
(Question from Daryl P. of New York City)

---

[1] Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 608.

[2] Wicker, *One of Us*, p. 608.

[3] Wicker, *One of Us*, p. 608.

[4] Reston quoted by Wicker, *One of Us*, p. 609.