

Service Views on the Bombing Halt

The service chiefs would, of course, support the President's decision, although they had opposed a bombing halt. General Wheeler had argued strongly against such a step on the grounds that it would prove costly to the allies, would prolong hostilities, and could be interpreted by the Communists as an "aerial Dien Bien Phu." The Air Staff and the JCS had agreed that a bombing halt promised Hanoi's leaders many advantages, as they would interpret it as a weakening of American resolve, and be encouraged to redouble their war efforts. It would thus preclude a favorable outcome for the allies. General McConnell, in August 1967, had told a Senate subcommittee that limiting the bombing to below the 20th parallel would, after a short period, "certainly be disastrous." Throughout 1967 the JCS had expressed opinions that air and naval bombardment should be stepped up, not halted; that target areas should be expanded, not narrowed. Consequently, in the eyes of the services, it appeared that the President sacrificed a tremendous military advantage as an enticement for peace.⁴

Two weeks after the 31 March decision, PACOM completed a study on the effect of the bombing halt. The study confirmed that Hanoi had gained a military advantage and that in light of apparent American and free world weakness, Communist intransigence in negotiations could be expected. Further restrictions on bombing--below the 18th parallel or the DMZ--would reduce the number of available targets in the North and expose allied positions in South Vietnam to a greater danger from MIG's, artillery fire, and rockets. If the bomb line extended to the provisional military demarcation line (PMDL)--i. e., to all of North Vietnam, the enemy's advantageous position would be "militarily unacceptable."⁵

Nevertheless, a reorientation in bombing strategy was producing more salutary results. The administration had authorized only unescorted photo and visual reconnaissance sorties to fly above the 19th parallel. Below it, however, Air Force, Marine, and Navy combat sorties nearly doubled over those flown during previous months, increasing truck "kills" nearly fourfold by May. Aircraft losses over the North decreased. Following a visit to South Vietnam, Secretary Brown reported that the "substantial increase in (bombing) effectiveness" in the North's panhandle below the 19th parallel was contrary to what he had anticipated.⁶