

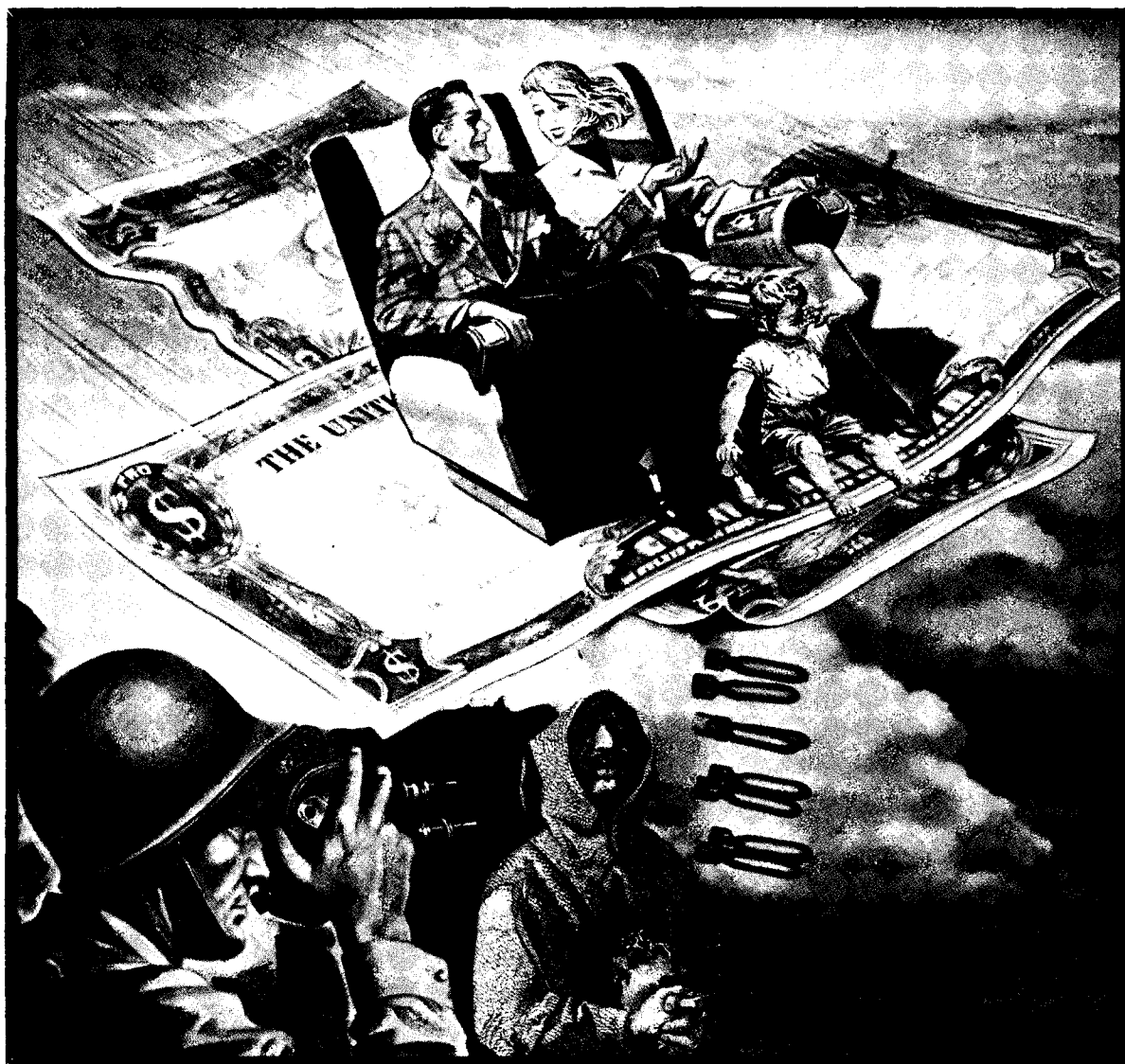
THE DIPLOMACY OF TERROR:



BEHIND THE DECISION TO BOMB THE DIKES

"A series of secret diplomatic messages, recently made known to Ramparts, tends to bear out Hanoi's charge that the Nixon Administration is systematically destroying North Vietnam's dike system. As Washington is well aware, the destruction of the dikes would cause the devastation of the North Vietnamese heartland and the slaughter of millions throughout the country. . . ."

by David Landau



THERE IS ALWAYS CAUSE FOR WONDER when an American President speculates aloud on the destruction of an entire country in a single stroke. When the President is Richard Nixon, the time mid-1972, and the country North Vietnam, wonderment alone hardly seems an adequate response. President Nixon's rather off-handed reference, in his press conference of July 27, to "the great power that could finish off North Vietnam in an afternoon," is probably the most macabre statement ever to have been made in the long history of American Presidential pronouncements on Vietnam. Of course Nixon quickly reassured the Washington press corps that this "great power" would not be used. Yet the import of the President's hooligan-esque rhetoric is clear: the obliteration of North Vietnam may not be far off. And the evidence is mounting that the Nixon Administration may already have embarked on a military adventure in Indochina before which all those

David Landau is the author of Kissinger: The Uses of Power, the first major work to appear on President Nixon's national security advisor. The book is scheduled to be released by Houghton Mifflin on October 2.

past now pale in comparison: the calculated destruction of North Vietnam's dike system.

Hanoi's representatives in Paris have told Herbert Marcovitch, an influential French scientist, and have informed Henry Kissinger and other U.S. officials in private negotiations, that American bombs falling on the Red River Delta have in fact wreaked substantial damage on North Vietnam's dikes. Yet North Vietnamese communications also show that U.S. government statements on the dike bombings, and the ensuing public debate in this country, have focused on the largely meaningless issue of whether American planes are making direct hits on North Vietnamese dikes. The greatest harm to the dikes, according to these communications, has been perpetrated not through direct bombardment, but rather through attacks on nearby targets, which cause immense shock waves to travel through the ground and slowly undermine the structural foundations of the dikes themselves. Decades old, composed of earth material, and vulnerable to even the slightest tremor, the dikes of the Red River Delta have likely been severely damaged in this way by America's mammoth air offensive against the North.

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Without an understanding of *indirect* damage to the dikes, it is impossible to evaluate Hanoi's charge that the United States is systematically destroying the North Vietnamese dike system. This understanding is vital to an informed assessment of Washington's public statements on the dike bombing issue. Indeed, a careful reading of recent official statements would indicate that the Administration comprehends the damage it is doing, that it continues its air offensive in blatant disregard of the devastation the bombs may bring to the civilian population of North Vietnam.

The deliberate nature of American policy falls quite sharply into focus against a background of private North Vietnamese communications, whose formulators never intended them to see the light of publication, and whose very nature demands that they be considered as more than elaborate propaganda schemes. A series of such messages from Hanoi, transmitted in June and July and recently made known to RAMPARTS, confirms that North Vietnam has been completely serious in its charges that American bombing has caused considerable damage to its dikes.

Toward the end of June, Herbert Marcovich, a microbiologist at the University of Paris, sought and received an audience with a number of Hanoi's representatives in Paris. With more than usual concern, he had just read several North Vietnamese releases describing the damage which had been done to individual dikes in the Red River Delta. He had also seen an article in *Le Monde* by Yves Lacoste, a Paris geographer, which carried an explanation of how indirect American bombardment had caused damage to North Vietnam's dikes during the 1965-1968 bombardment of the North, and how they might now do so again; that story had stirred unpleasant memories for him.

Marcovich was not a person unfamiliar with Vietnam; for four months in late 1967 he served as the principal intermediary in what is now regarded as the most meaningful secret exchange between Washington and Hanoi prior to the opening of the Paris peace talks. Although the exchange failed to bring about any agreement between the two sides, it resulted in the most prolonged contact between Washington and Hanoi, and the most far-reaching proposals from both sides, before the first Paris meetings in May 1968. The

negotiations began when Marcovich and another intermediary—Raymond Aubrac, a Maquis officer in World War II and a personal friend of Ho Chi Minh—traveled to Hanoi for meetings with the North Vietnamese heads of state. During his stay, Marcovich had four hours of conversation with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong; through the remainder of the negotiations, he spent considerable time with Hanoi's emissaries in Paris, becoming intimately familiar with North Vietnam's methods of negotiations and even with many of the contours of Hanoi's internal political debates. During this period, Marcovich also became well acquainted with Washington's decision-making apparatus, and, more important, came to know as a familiar figure the American contact who would emerge as a leading U.S. diplomat some 18 months in the future: Henry Kissinger, then a Harvard professor and an active behind-the-scenes consultant to Robert McNamara and other leading Washington policymakers on Vietnam.

Between July and October 1967, Marcovich acted as a go-between for Kissinger and Mai Van Bo—the leading North Vietnamese representative in Paris—and often played a role in the formulation of the messages that each side sent to the other, making suggestions about the negotiating positions, and the wording of those positions, which might prolong the dialogue between the warring powers. Subsequent disclosures revealed that these negotiations almost succeeded in bringing about an American bombing halt and initiating direct talks between the governments in Washington and Hanoi, and that they came far closer than had any other dialogue in actually doing so. That the 1967 negotiations lasted as long as they did is testimony to the trust and confidence which both governments placed in Marcovich; it is also a measure of his ability to be fair and objective about the situation of each side.

IN THE PERIOD FOLLOWING THE COLLAPSE of the 1967 negotiations, Marcovich continued an informal association with North Vietnamese diplomats in Paris, and, as ever, was an astute follower of Washington policymaking, a man in frequent contact with friends and academic colleagues in the United States. When Hanoi's representatives met last June with Marcovich, at his initiative, to discuss the issue of the dike bombings, they were not talking with a political ingenue, not one of those "well-intentioned and naive people," as President Nixon has caricatured them, who are "taken in" by "enemy-inspired propaganda"; they were talking with a seasoned observer of secret Vietnam diplomacy, a man who had had unusually extensive contact with personalities on both sides of the conflict and who will probably emerge as a leading figure in the accounts of the private negotiations as their full history is gradually unveiled. What sets Marcovich apart from every personality to have offered public comment on whether the United States has engaged in the calculated destruction of the North Vietnamese dikes, is that he is thoroughly knowledgeable about the policymaking on both sides of the war, and has had prolonged, first-hand experience in the diplomatic exchanges growing out of it.

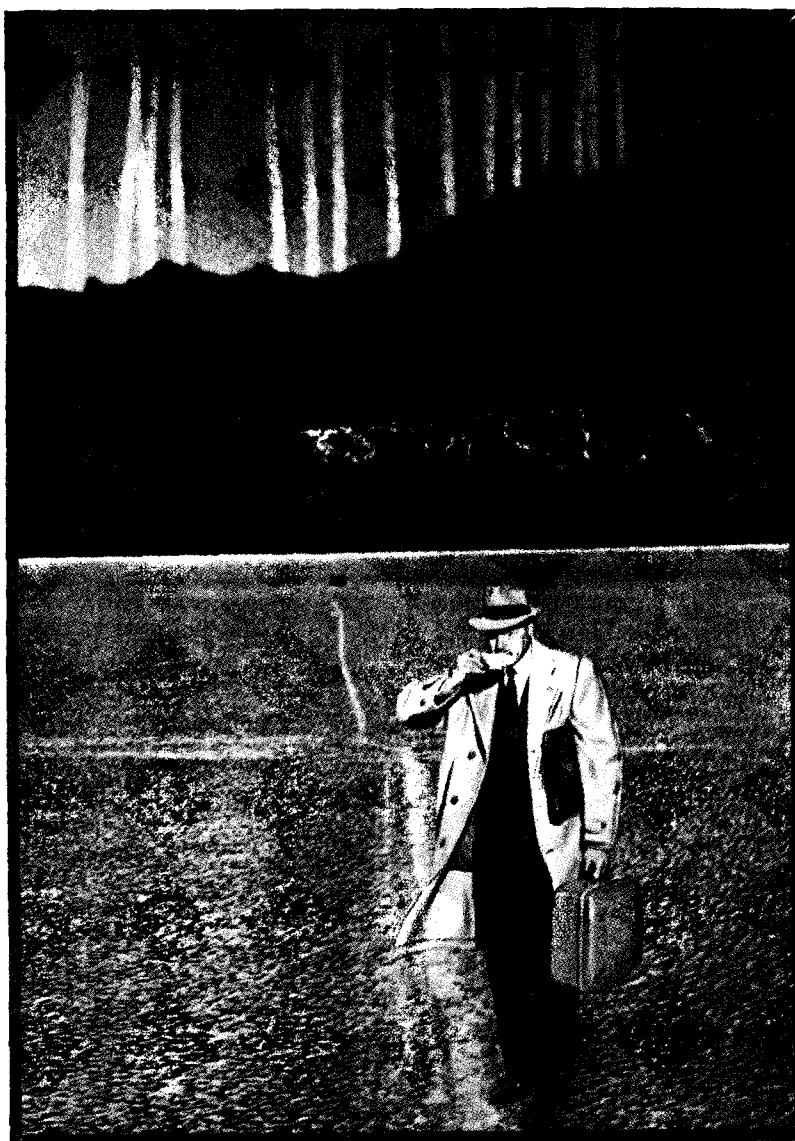
Marcovich is also aware of the damage which sustained

bombardment of the system. During his trip visited dikes pock-marked from shore, craters which, he said, had been dug by the previous American bombing campaign. Long before the opening of the "ganda offensive" on the dike bomb, North Vietnamese officials were reporting that American bombs were causing damage to the dikes; indeed, Pham Van Dong had told Mai Van Bo in Hanoi, during their July 1967 meeting, that the North Vietnamese government had earlier made what it called provisions it could for a full-scale American attack on the entire dike network. And the information which Marcovich received in Paris last June pre-dated the first North Vietnamese charges of deliberate attacks on the dikes.

What the North Vietnamese told Marcovich, who was acting on his own behalf and not as an authorized intermediary at Hanoi's beckoning, was understood to reflect the official views of their government and of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. American bombs had, as Hanoi publicly charged, been damaging North Vietnamese dikes; the bombers had also mounted anti-personnel attacks on workmen who were attempting to repair the dikes. Most important, North Vietnam's greatest fear was that the entire dike system would be gradually and subtly undermined by the shock waves from American bombs, which were falling not on the dikes themselves, but on nearby areas throughout the Red River Delta.

Significantly, the North Vietnamese had not yet published the much graver charges that the dike attacks were a calculated act of U.S. policy. Their statements to Marcovich left open the possibility that the indirect attacks on the dikes were simply a rash mistake, attributable either to unauthorized behavior on the part of U.S. airmen, or even to Washington's ignorance of how critical had been its decision to authorize air raids in the immediate area of the dike networks. The North Vietnamese disclosures to Marcovich had a tentative, almost quizzical, aspect about them. But within a few weeks' time, it is apparent, Hanoi had come to feel that the U.S. was in fact engaged in a systematic campaign to weaken the dikes. It is a feeling that Marcovich, not an easy man to fool, now shares. "For me," he recently told this writer, "it is very clear" that U.S. bombers are constantly causing damage to North Vietnam's dikes.

The North Vietnamese statements to Marcovich have also been made, in much greater detail and substance, to Henry Kissinger, and other American officials, in the recent secret negotiations. Official sources, apprised of what Hanoi's representatives told Marcovich, have acknowledged to RAMPARTS that Kissinger has been receiving the same messages in Paris—that by bombing near the dikes, American planes might as well be bombing the dikes themselves. And what makes this disclosure particularly shocking is the fact that numerous Administration spokesmen, and the State Department paper of July 28, have confirmed that U.S. bombers are authorized to hit targets bordering on the dike system, and are doing so. Yet, when speaking to their own public, Nixon Administration officials imply that there is a real difference between direct hits on dikes, which they go



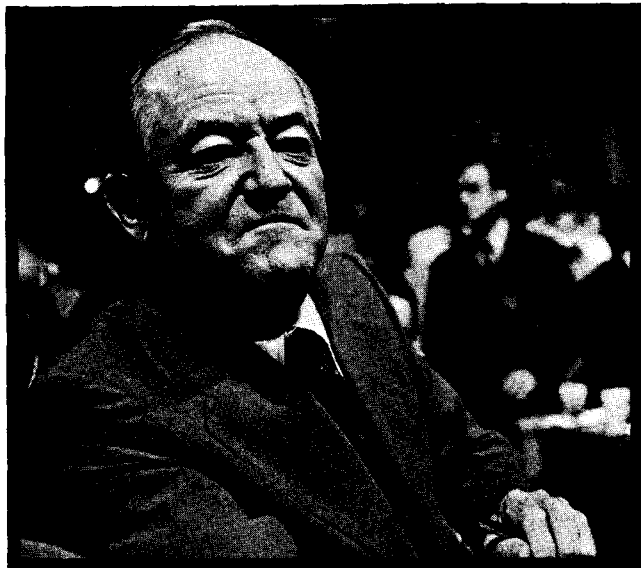
to some verbal lengths to deplore, and strikes against "military" targets near dikes, which they state are legitimate, and which cause damage to the dikes only accidentally.

Remarkably, Washington's official disclaimers on the dike bombings have never denied Hanoi's specific charges, and have even provided indirect corroboration of them. Most often, official U.S. statements have set up an elaborate series of straw men and then proceeded to knock them down. No, it is unthinkable that the American government would actually commit mass murder against the civilian population of North Vietnam by opening up the dikes. Yes, there is magnanimity and self-restraint in America's bombing campaign. After all, to quote the President once again, "We are not using the great power that could finish off North Vietnam in an afternoon, and we will not." Nuclear weapons, in other words, are not on the agenda for the immediate future. And, of course, American planes are not targeting the Red River dikes; the bombs are not making direct hits on them. "In recent weeks," the State Department paper of July 28 begins, "Hanoi has tried to convince the world that its elaborate dike system is a direct and deliberate target of U.S. attacks. This is not true." Of course

the dikes are not a *direct* target; perhaps a deliberate target, but never a direct one. (Not even the cardboard figures in Hanoi would take so mindless and simplistic a view.) And yet, at the same time, the State Department is able to report in the same paper that "Of the 12 locations where damage has occurred, 10 are close to identified individual targets such as petroleum storage facilities, and the other two are adjacent to road and river transport lines. Because a large number of North Vietnamese dikes serve as bases for roadways, the maze they create throughout the Delta makes it *almost inevitable that air attacks directed against transportation targets cause scattered damage to dikes*" (emphasis added).

IT IS POSSIBLE THAT, BY THE TIME THESE words are printed, American bombs will have caused such extensive damage to the Red River dikes that they will be broken by the torrential waters which gather through the first weeks of North Vietnam's rainy season in the mountains above the great Tonkin Plain, finally to

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Hubert Humphrey



Edmund Muskie



ELECTION '72

A PHOTO ESSAY
BY PETER KENNER



McGovern's organization men flanked by Salinger and Mankiewicz



George McGovern and Coretta King