

Fifty years since the US Christmas bombing of North Vietnam

Andy Thompson
29 December 2022

Fifty years ago, in the last weeks of December 1972, the United States military carried out one of the most brutal and barbaric attacks on a civilian population in history. Beginning December 18 and lasting until December 29, American bombers dropped over 40,000 tons of ordnance on Hanoi and Haiphong, the two largest cities in North Vietnam. At least 2,000 people were killed, most of them women and children.

In one of the most heavily bombed areas, Kham Thien street in Hanoi, 287 people were killed in just one night. Almost all were women and children. Nguyen Vinh Ha, a worker who survived the bombings when he was 17 years old, said in a 2017 interview with the Vietnamese newspaper *VN Express International*, “Many people didn’t think the Americans would bomb us on Christmas Day, but most of those who did not leave died the next morning.”

Over 2,000 buildings in the area were destroyed. Press reports in the aftermath of the bombings portray horrific scenes of bodies strewn in the streets. Survivors report that even years later they can remember the smell of their neighbors’ bodies burning. In the aftermath, the North Vietnamese government counted 1,624 civilians killed by the Christmas bombings. Later estimates placed the total at more than 2,300.

The bombings destroyed nearly every piece of significant industry and infrastructure in the North that had survived previous bombing raids. Some 80 percent of electrical stations were lost, over 1,600 military facilities, and factories of all kinds were totally destroyed. By the end of the operation it became difficult for the US military planners to select targets because so little remained standing.

The scale of the bombing can be illustrated by a few statistics. There were 957,000 inhabitants of the two cities in 1972. The 40,000 tons of bombs works out to 84 pounds of lethal high explosive for every man, woman and child. The scale of the bombardment, 40,000 tons, is double that of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, estimated at 20,000 tons.

The bombings were the final major attack by the United States of the Vietnam War, which saw the US military drop more than double the amount of bombs dropped during the entire Second World War. With 7.6 million total tons of bombs dropped from January 1962 to December 1972, the Vietnam War saw the most bombings of any conflict in history, the equivalent of 380 Hiroshima bombs, all by one side.

While nowhere comparable to the levels of destruction and suffering heaped onto the Vietnamese population, the US Air Force and Navy took heavier than expected losses to their bombers and support planes. Vietnam’s cities had been more heavily defended with anti-aircraft weaponry and the Peoples Army of Vietnam (PAVN) inflicted significant losses against the B-52 bombers, at least 16 of which were shot down according to statistics from the US, while the PAVN claimed to have downed 34 bombers.

Ordered by President Richard Nixon as US participation in the Vietnam war had been dramatically wound down over the prior two years, the Christmas bombings were a global political shock, since they took place

just when it had appeared the war would soon end.

Just two months earlier, in October 1972, Nixon’s national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, had announced to the American public, “Peace is at hand.” He had just concluded a secret meeting and reached an initial agreement with North Vietnam on the terms of US withdrawal.

Desperate to present progress in the peace negotiations to the American people in the runup to the presidential election, Nixon had authorized Kissinger to make his deal without consulting South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu. After Nixon won reelection and the terms of the agreement were shared with Thieu, the leader of the puppet regime was outraged.

The government of South Vietnam had been since its formation totally propped up by the United States. The deal cut by Nixon and Kissinger would inevitably result in the collapse of Thieu’s regime in the South, Thieu believed (correctly, as it turned out). Initially, he refused to go along with their plans and rejected the agreement, submitting his own proposal, which drastically differed from that which Kissinger had agreed to.

These new terms were unacceptable to the North. By this point in the war it had become clear that the North had the upper hand and had no reason to discuss anything less than the total US withdrawal that was promised in the October agreement. Believing Kissinger had tricked them in order to give Nixon an electoral boost, the representatives from North Vietnam walked out of the discussions on December 16, 1972.

To save face and not appear to be turning his back on an ally, Nixon gave the North an ultimatum: return to the negotiating table within 72 hours or face “grave consequences.” After the deadline passed and the North had not returned, Nixon ordered the Christmas bombings, officially known as “Operation Linebacker II,” to begin.

As the *Bulletin* newspaper, US forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, reported at the time:

Nixon ordered unprecedented bombing raids against men, women and children in the residential areas of Hanoi. US planes attacked without interruption at low altitudes, dropping tons of bombs.

The bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong were the heaviest raids of the war. Nixon has ordered a reminding of the harbors as well as a broadening of the bombing raids to areas never hit before. What the US has been unable to achieve at the bargaining table, it now tries to achieve by mass murder.

The crisis of the anti-war movement and the 1972 election

By the end of 1972, the number of US troops in Vietnam had gradually been reduced from its high point in 1968 of over 530,000 soldiers to only 24,200. With over 58,000 US soldiers and at least 3 million Vietnamese killed, the war had become deeply unpopular both within the United States and globally.

The mass anti-war movement that swept through the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, combined with a major strike wave across industries and mass rioting in major urban centers, was part of a global revolutionary eruption of the international working class and youth that characterized the period 1968-1975.

The Vietnam war coincided with anti-colonial struggles in Africa and the Middle East that resulted in the ousting of imperialist-backed governments, and workers' movements in Europe like the May-June 1968 general strike in France, which threatened the ruling class with the specter of socialist revolution.

The American capitalist class had become deeply alarmed that the anti-war movement, which had millions of participants, mainly youth, might turn to the working class, which was already engaged in a wages offensive. Since 1969 there had been major strikes in the auto industry and among dock workers, teachers, nurses, steelworkers and many others.

One of the most powerful was a three-day strike by railroad workers that began on May 17, 1971. The strike, which brought the economy to a screeching halt, was only stopped when the Democratic-controlled Congress intervened and passed strike-breaking legislation that was immediately signed by Nixon.

In this rebellious environment the ruling class relied on two forces: the AFL-CIO bureaucracy—to prevent the strike movement from turning in a political, anti-capitalist direction—and the Stalinists (Communist Party) and Pabloite anti-Trotskyists (Socialist Workers Party)—which directed all their efforts to keeping the anti-war movement within the straitjacket of the Democratic Party. Their role was to keep the radicalizing youth and students, many from the middle class, away from the working class and away from Marxism.

Following major political-military setbacks for Washington like the 1968 Tet Offensive, it had become clear that there was no situation in which the war could be ended with an outright US victory. What remained for Nixon was to navigate a way out of the war that did not appear on its face to be an outright defeat, even if that is what had actually occurred.

In early 1969, Nixon announced a policy of “Vietnamization” of the war. This meant that direct US involvement would be reduced and replaced by South Vietnamese forces trained by the US military. Over the next few years, hundreds of thousands of US soldiers were withdrawn from Vietnam and sent home, although this process of draw-down alternated with sudden acts of brutal aggression, such as the US invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 and subsequent operations in Laos in 1971.

At the same time, Nixon ramped up the use of bombing raids and other forms of US air power that were more difficult for North Vietnam to counter, while also limiting the number of American deaths. While these bombing campaigns were brutal, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians, militarily they were unsuccessful in their stated goal of cutting the supply routes to liberation forces in the South, which passed through Laos and Cambodia.

The winding back of the US troop presence in Vietnam, especially after the huge protests which followed the National Guard murders of anti-war students at Kent State University in May 1970, had some effect in demobilizing the anti-war movement. Even more important was the slashing of draft calls, which Nixon reduced to zero in 1972, calculating that the draft had become an unnecessary flash point.

The subordination of the anti-war movement to the Democratic Party completed this process. While the Stalinists and Pabloite revisionists backed South Dakota Senator George McGovern, the eventual nominee, as an “anti-war” candidate, the 1972 Democratic National Convention

was extremely contentious, with the party deeply divided.

McGovern had made the cornerstone of his campaign a pledge to immediately end the war, but the second- and third-place candidates at the convention were Washington Senator Henry Jackson, a war-hawk and vicious anti-communist known as the “senator from Boeing,” and the segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace, who was now paralyzed after surviving an assassination attempt in May.

The bulk of the party establishment, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the corporate media joined forces in a “Stop McGovern” campaign before the convention, and when that failed, they organized a wrecking operation. The latter had considerable assistance from McGovern himself, who was a run-of-the-mill corporate Democrat who only belatedly challenged the Vietnam War after it had clearly become a disastrous failure from the standpoint of US imperialism.

It was revealed that McGovern's running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton, had previously undergone electroshock therapy for depression. This was considered a great scandal at the time by the media, while the Watergate break-in, which took place in June 1972, drew less attention. McGovern had to go begging for a substitute running mate after Eagleton withdrew, which accelerated his rapid decline in the polls.

“Peace is at hand”

In 1968, negotiations were opened in Paris between the United States and North Vietnam to discuss terms for ending the war. For years the negotiations stalled, with virtually no progress as each side remained irreconcilably opposed. The North insisted that that it was the sole legitimate government and that the Communist Party must be allowed to freely operate in the South, while the US rejected anything that would threaten to topple the unstable, anti-communist South Vietnamese government that Washington had created.

It was not until October 1972 that anything approaching an agreement had been made. However, that occurred not in the official negotiating room, but in a series of secret meetings between Kissinger, the lead negotiator for the US, and Le Duc Tho, a high-ranking member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Earlier in the year, the North's military, the People's Army of Vietnam, had made significant advances during the Easter Offensive of March and April, but at a heavy cost. Estimates put PAVN casualties at 100,000 or more. In addition, the PAVN lost the great majority of its tanks and armored cars.

Despite these losses, the near-collapse of Washington's puppet forces, the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN), made it clear that a total victory by the PAVN was inevitable. But how soon the North could prepare another major offensive remained unclear. What was clear, based on the experiences of both the Tet and Easter offensives, was that if it came while the US was still directly engaged in the fighting or in providing air support, the human toll would be immense.

Having accepted privately that a US victory was impossible, the Nixon administration maneuvered to stave off a total collapse of the South Vietnamese government by reaching an agreement in which North Vietnam would recognize the Saigon regime. While previously these terms had been unacceptable to Hanoi, in the secret meetings Kissinger told Le Duc Tho that the US was prepared to withdraw its forces from Vietnam without the North agreeing to exit the territory it had secured in the Easter Offensive.

Nixon had begun a policy of “détente” towards the Soviet Union and China, both of which had backed the North in the war and provided military aid. Earlier in the year, Nixon visited both Moscow and Beijing to

meet with Leonid Brezhnev and Mao Zedong to discuss normalizing relations and to offer lucrative trade deals. Nixon wagered that by offering to ease relations with the Stalinist regimes, they would in turn pressure North Vietnam to sign a less favorable agreement to end the war.

While the government in Hanoi never publicly admitted that this pressure was a factor, the fear of losing its main suppliers of weapons certainly played a role in its new willingness to cut a deal.

In the October secret meetings, Kissinger proposed to Le Duc Tho that the US would agree to withdraw all its forces from Vietnam if the North would officially recognize the Thieu regime and negotiate with it. Le Duc Tho found these terms agreeable on the condition that the borders of the countries be based on the current front lines, where the North had made recent gains, and that new elections in the South be held that would include the Communist Party, which had previously been banned. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho also agreed to establish a council with representatives from both Hanoi and Saigon to oversee postwar reconstruction.

The two returned to their respective countries with the news that a breakthrough had been made. Kissinger, eager to announce to Americans preparing to vote that the Nixon administration had all but ended the war, immediately gave a public address in which he made the now infamous "peace is at hand" proclamation.

Speaking at a separate press conference on October 26, 1972, Nixon bragged that his administration had made "more progress toward true peace in the world than any year since the end of World War II." He added that the agreement in Vietnam was part of his foreign policy goal of shaping a new "world order" in which "the United States of America will never be number two."

However, once the news of the agreement reached South Vietnamese President Thieu it became apparent that it was not a done deal. Calling the agreement a "North Vietnamese Communist trick to create suspicion between the Republic of Vietnam and our United States ally," Thieu stated that he would not agree to any deal that did not see "the complete withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops to North Vietnam." Radio messages from Saigon broadcast reminders to the population that assisting the Northern government or harboring personal communist sympathies was a crime punishable by death.

Discussions between the US and South Vietnam followed, with dramatic changes made to the October agreement. On November 20, after Nixon had been reelected, the US and South Vietnam submitted to the North a new peace proposal that walked back all the significant pledges Kissinger had previously made.

This new proposal demanded that all PAVN forces be withdrawn behind the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and that the DMZ become the mutually recognized border between the North and South.

Negotiations continued for another month with no progress made on the new agreement. Furious that the US had backed out of its earlier promises and refusing to accept terms that would essentially mean forfeiting its military gains, on December 16 the North Vietnamese delegation walked out of the discussions in Paris.

Under pressure to appear that he was not abandoning his ally, Nixon responded to the walkout by giving the North the "grave consequences" ultimatum and demanded their return to the negotiating table within 72 hours. After Hanoi refused to concede to the threat, Nixon ordered the Christmas bombings to begin.

What the Christmas bombings revealed

The Christmas bombings were the second major bombing campaign

ordered by Nixon in the course of 1972. The first, "Operation Linebacker," was a response to the May Easter Offensive and targeted routes that provided supplies to the PAVN advance. These bombings attacked the so-called "Ho Chi Minh Trail" supply route, which crossed through portions of Cambodia and Laos.

However, the new, Christmas bombings, dubbed "Linebacker II," were intended to be a "maximum effort" and inflict as much pain upon the North as possible. The bombings targeted military, industrial and civilian centers alike in the two largest Northern cities of Hanoi and Haiphong.

The results were brutal and demonstrated the utter hypocrisy and barbarity of the Nixon administration. The war that was sold to the American public as a war to assist the democratic strivings of the Vietnamese people was being concluded by the United States through the use of mass murder as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations.

With the exception of a brief 36-hour pause for Christmas itself, once begun the bombing raids ran continuously from December 18 to December 29. The first missions targeted airfields, warehouses, railroads, power plants and radio stations just outside of Hanoi, and continually drew closer to the city center.

Hoping that the North could be bombed into submission, Nixon found that the bombing had the exact opposite effect. The Vietnamese population, which had been fighting wars for independence and self-determination since the country's colonization by the French in the late 19th century, responded to the Christmas bombings with the same brave resistance they had maintained throughout the war.

Nixon realized that there would be no capitulation by the North and feared that the bombing campaign could not be maintained for an extended period without sustaining even greater losses among American airmen. He eventually sent a message to Hanoi indicating that if the North returned to negotiations the October agreement would be on the table for discussion.

The Hanoi leadership agreed to return, adding in their message that the bombings played no role in the decision. Finally, on December 30, 1972 Nixon ordered the bombings to cease.

The bombings were not only a savage and barbaric attack on a civilian population, but also a political failure for the United States. In the aftermath, Kissinger is reported to have remarked, with typical cynicism, "We bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions."

Many commentators and historians have taken the position that the bombings convinced Thieu to accept the October agreement, since now the United States had proved that it would continue to support his regime in the event of a future invasion by the North.

The reality, however, is that the bombings were a desperate attempt to save face before the total military defeat of the US puppet government in South Vietnam. Even after the bombings ended and negotiations were set to resume in January, Nixon had to browbeat Thieu into going along with the October agreement by threatening to make a separate peace with the North and cut his government off from all future US aid.

But, of course, the US withdrawal from Vietnam did mean the end of Thieu. No parties involved, including Thieu himself, maintained any illusion that the Saigon government could survive without the US occupation.

On January 27, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed along the same basic terms as the October agreement. By the end of March 1973, the last US combat troops would leave Vietnam.

In the two years that followed, the "peace" brought about by the accords rapidly deteriorated and fighting resumed between the liberation fighters and what remained of an army still loyal to Thieu. After rebuilding their forces and critical infrastructure destroyed by the bombings, the PAVN mounted a final offensive in March-April 1975 and captured Saigon, leading finally to the reunification of Vietnam.

It was a colossal and historic defeat for American imperialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact