

= 1964 Brinks Hotel bombing =

The Brinks Hotel in Saigon , also known as the Brink Bachelor Officers Quarters (BOQ) , was bombed by the Viet Cong on the evening of December 24 , 1964 , during the Vietnam War . Two Viet Cong operatives detonated a car bomb underneath the hotel , which housed United States Army officers . The explosion killed two Americans , an officer and an NCO , and injured approximately 60 , including military personnel and Vietnamese civilians .

The Vietcong commanders had planned the venture with two objectives in mind . First , by attacking an American installation in the center of the heavily guarded capital , the Vietcong intended to demonstrate their ability to strike in South Vietnam should the United States decide to launch air raids against North Vietnam . Second , the bombing would demonstrate to the South Vietnamese that the Americans were vulnerable and could not be relied upon for protection .

The bombing prompted debate within the administration of United States President Lyndon B. Johnson . Most of his advisers favored retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam and the introduction of American combat troops , while Johnson preferred the existing strategy of training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to protect South Vietnam from the Vietcong . In the end , Johnson decided not to take retaliatory action .

= = Background and planning = =

Following World War II , the communist @-@ dominated Vietminh fought the French colonial forces in an attempt to gain Vietnamese independence . After the French defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 , Vietnam was partitioned at the 17th parallel , pending national reunification elections in 1956 . The elections were canceled , resulting in the long @-@ term existence of communist North Vietnam and anti @-@ communist South Vietnam as separate states . In the late @-@ 1950s , South Vietnamese guerrillas known as the Viet Cong ? covertly supported by North Vietnam ? began an insurgency with the aim of forcefully reunifying the country under communist rule . With the Cold War at its height , the United States ? the main backer of South Vietnam ? sent military advisers into the country to help train and guide the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in their fight against the Vietcong . By 1964 , there were 23 @,@ 000 American military personnel in the country . The communists viewed the Americans as colonizers and the South Vietnamese as their puppets , and attacked both with force .

The bombing was planned and performed by two Vietcong agents who escaped uninjured and were never captured . Nguyen Thanh Xuan recollected his involvement to historian Stanley Karnow after the war had ended . In late @-@ November , Xuan and his comrade received orders from a Vietcong intermediary to bomb the Brinks Hotel . The building housed United States Army officers , including lieutenant colonels and majors , and attracted off @-@ duty personnel with its highly regarded food and drink , rooftop seating areas and movie screenings . It was a six @-@ story building and had 193 bedrooms . The Vietcong duo observed their target over the next month , mixing with the crowds in the busy street outside . Noting that South Vietnamese officers mingled freely with Americans , they obtained ARVN uniforms from Saigon 's black market , enabling them to get closer . Xuan disguised himself as a military chauffeur , while his partner dressed as a South Vietnamese major . They mingled with the real officers so that they could copy their mannerisms , speaking style and even their way of smoking . The Vietcong pair then procured the two cars and explosives needed for the operation .

The Vietcong commanders had planned the venture with two aims in mind . Firstly , by attacking an American institution in the heart of the heavily guarded capital , the bombing would demonstrate the Vietcong 's ability to strike against the Americans in Vietnam , should the United States decide to launch air raids against North Vietnam . Secondly , the attack would demonstrate to the South Vietnamese public that the Americans were vulnerable and could not be relied upon for protection . Xuan added that " all the crimes committed by the Americans were directed from this nerve center " . He recalled that the number of American officers at the Brinks Hotel had swelled on Christmas Eve because they were using the building to coordinate their celebrations , and that the attack would

therefore cause more casualties than on a normal day .

= = Explosion = =

The bombers stashed explosives weighing approximately 90 kilograms (200 lb) in the trunk of one of the cars , and set a timing device to trigger the bomb at 17 : 45 , during the happy hour in the officers ' bar at the hotel . The pair drove their vehicles into the hotel 's grounds . Knowing from their intelligence that a certain American colonel had returned to the US , the " major " lied and told the hotel clerk that he had an appointment with the American officer , claiming that the colonel would be coming from Da Lat . The clerk correctly replied that the colonel had left the country , but the " major " insisted that the clerk was mistaken . The " major " then parked his vehicle in the car park beneath the hotel , before ordering his chauffeur to leave and fetch the American with the other vehicle . He then left the hotel grounds , asking the guard to tell the American colonel to wait for him . The " major " claimed that he had not eaten all day and was going to a nearby café .

While the " major " was at the eatery , the bomb detonated , killing two Americans . The only officer killed was Lieutenant Colonel James Robert Hagen , who had served in the army for 20 years and was working for the MACV . The second victim was Staff Sergeant Benjamin Beltran Castañeda serving with the MACV and an army veteran of 20 years , who died of his wounds on January 23 , 1965 .

The injury reports are conflicting . Karnow reported that 58 people (military and civilian) were injured , Mark Moyer reported that 38 American officers were wounded along with 25 Vietnamese civilians , while journalist A. J. Langguth reported that 10 Americans and 43 Vietnamese were injured . Apart from the steel girders , which supported the building , the explosion completely destroyed the ground floor . The bottom four floors were all punctured by the blast and sustained significant damage . The damage was accentuated because several trucks were in the underground car park , with gas canisters ready for delivery . As a result , the explosion detonated the gas , creating a fireball . At the time , American entertainers , including Bob Hope , were in Saigon to perform for US personnel . It is unclear whether Hope was a target ; Moyer reported that Hope was targeted , but was delayed at the airport due to a luggage mishap , while Lawrence J. Quirk reported that the comedian and his troupe were staying in a hotel across the street and were not in range of the blast .

= = Reaction = =

The attack surprised American officials and policymakers on Vietnam , who were confident that the South Vietnamese government was in control in Saigon and that the Vietcong were only a threat in rural areas . The South Vietnamese government was unstable , as it was the latest in a series of military juntas that had ruled for brief periods before being deposed . The infighting exasperated Maxwell Taylor , the US ambassador to South Vietnam and former Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff , who felt that the disputes between the junta 's senior officers were derailing the war effort . Less than two weeks before the bombing , the generals had dissolved the High National Council , a civilian advisory body , prompting Taylor to summon the generals to his office . The ambassador then angrily denounced the generals , and the next day advised General Nguyen Khanh , the president , to resign and go into exile , as he had lost Taylor 's confidence . Khanh threatened to expel Taylor , who said that his forced departure would mean the end of US support for South Vietnam . On December 22 , Khanh announced on Radio Vietnam that " We make sacrifices for the country 's independence and the Vietnamese people 's liberty , but not to carry out the policy of any foreign country " . Khanh explicitly denounced Taylor in an interview published in the New York Herald Tribune on December 23 , and on the day of the bombing , he issued a declaration of independence from " foreign manipulation " . At the time , Khanh was also secretly negotiating with the communists , hoping to put together a peace deal so he could expel the Americans from Vietnam . As a result , there was a suspicion among a minority that Khanh and his officers had been behind the attack , even though the Vietcong had claimed responsibility through a radio broadcast .

General William Westmoreland , who was the U.S. Army commander in South Vietnam , Taylor , and other senior U.S. officers in Saigon and Washington , D.C. urged President Lyndon B. Johnson to authorize reprisal bombings against North Vietnam . Taylor messaged Washington on Christmas Day , saying , " Hanoi will get the word that , despite our present tribulations , there is still bite in the tiger they call paper , and the U.S. stock in this part of the world will take sharp rise . Some of our local squabbles will probably disappear in enthusiasm which our action would generate . " Taylor recommended that the US take unilateral action , citing the animosity between himself and Khanh 's junta .

Johnson called his U.S.-based advisers to his Texas ranch for discussions on Christmas Day . Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara advised Johnson to reject Taylor 's proposal . Johnson declined to act , stating that an escalation during the Christmas period would be inappropriate , as it would damage public morale . He also noted that because of the political instability in Saigon , the international community and the American public were unlikely to believe that the Vietcong were behind the attack , feeling that they would instead blame local infighting for the bombing . This was despite the fact that the Vietcong had already claimed responsibility . Johnson administration officials concluded four days after the bombing that the Vietcong were responsible . Johnson believed that it was too late to retaliate and that any action taken more than 36 hours after the event constituted unprovoked aggression . The State Department cabled Taylor and the embassy , saying that " In view of the overall confusion in Saigon " , public U.S. and international opinion towards an American air strike would be that the Johnson administration was " trying to shoot its way out of an internal [South Vietnamese] political crisis " . Johnson said to Taylor that " Every time I get a military recommendation it seems to me that it calls for large @-@ scale bombing . I have never felt that this war will be won from the air . " At the time , Johnson was reluctant to accede to his officials ' calls for large @-@ scale bombing of North Vietnam , a strategy that eventually became policy .

In January 1965 , the Vietcong secretly held their 3rd Conference in South Vietnam and concluded that in failing to retaliate , " the Americans lacked the will to strike North Vietnam or shield South Vietnam from the mortal blow " . At the time , North Vietnam vigorously denied ever sending troops or equipment into South Vietnam . In reality , both sides violated the 1954 Geneva Accords by covertly infiltrating the other 's borders to carry out hostile military activity . Meanwhile , South Vietnam 's government had imposed media censorship in November 1964 and closed ten newspapers for sympathizing with the communists .

The attack fomented feelings of insecurity among American policymakers about communist attacks . Johnson hoped that the continuing presence of American military advisers would be sufficient to strengthen the ARVN so that it could stabilize the Saigon government , but many of his defense department advisers felt that American combat troops were needed on the ground . This increased the tension between the president 's civilian and military officials , before the Americans became directly involved in fighting in 1965 . David Tucker of the United States Army War College said that the bombing was " insignificant for the conventional military balance but important for the political struggle that was the primary focus of the enemy [Vietcong] " . The facility was repaired and American officers continued to stay there until the fall of Saigon on April 30 , 1975 , when the communists overran South Vietnam and reunified the country under their rule .

Today , the site is a Park Hyatt hotel built along French Colonial architectural lines , and there is a memorial to the bombing on site .