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A Close Look at Aerial Bombing

How Effective Is U.S. Air War Policy?

(Robert Kleiman is a member of The New York Times Editorial Board. This essay is based on the book, "The Air War in Indochina," the report of a Cornell University study group report edited by Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, published by Beacon Press, Boston.)

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New York

One of the indestructible myths about the Vietnam war is that the nation's leaders drifted into it, unaware of where step-by-step decisions were leading. But as the scenario starts to unroll all over again, with massive bombing mounting toward the peak levels of the past, the myth needs close re-examination.

It was the introduction in February, 1965, of American air power on a large scale into the guerrilla war within South Vietnam that first transformed the role of the United States, from giving arms and the advice of a 24,000-man military mission into direct involvement in combat. Within weeks there began the sustained bombing of North Vietnam; organized units of the North Vietnamese Army invaded the South, and the United States committed ultimately more than half a million ground troops.

The week the American air war began, a visitor asked General William C. Westmoreland, the United States military commander in Vietnam, whether the death and destruction already inflicted on the South Vietnamese countryside by American-built planes, some with American pilot-advisers aboard, would not escalate enormously now and prove self-defeating.

Could the oft-proclaimed American objective of "winning the hearts and minds of the people"—in what was more a political than a military conflict—be achieved through the application of murderous firepower, which inevitably would kill innocent civilians as well as Vietcong?

STUDY

"We've looked into that problem," the General replied, "with the help of a study group sent out by Rand the civilian research organization). Our conclusion was nutshelled at lunch the other day by the head of the team:

" 'We've got the onus; let's get the bonus.' "

Seven years and almost seven million tons of bombs later—more than three times the tonnage dropped by American planes in all theaters during World War II—the undoubted ones and the alleged bonus can be evaluated.

The Cornell University Air

AP Wirephoto

The bombing of North Vietnamese positions in embattled Quang Tri — in South Vietnam

War Study Group, a team of 21 scholars of many disciplines led by Raphael Littauer, professor of physics at Cornell, analyzed all the significant official and unofficial reports available on the American air war in Southeast Asia, its policies, its methods, its effectiveness — and its cost, both to the United States and the peoples of Indochina. They distributed their findings privately in November, 1971, and then revised and updated them for publication by Beacon Press.

DEVASTATION

"The Air War in Indochina" is a cold, clinical study. But its revelations—many extrapolated from piece-meal data, then assembled like a jig-saw puzzle—are startling. Some of its most striking estimates were recently corroborated by a leak of the secret 548-page National Security Council study memorandum on Vietnam (NSSM-1)—drafted in 1969 for President Nixon by eight government agencies and coordinated by Henry Kissinger and his staff. NSSM-1 was printed in the Congressional Record of May 10 (p.E.-4975) and May 11 (p.E.-5009).

Littauer and his colleagues devote considerable attention to the bombing of North Vietnam. But what stands out in their study even more than the damage done to the enemy in the North is the devastation inflicted on our friends in the South.

Of the 6,300,000 tons of bombs dropped on Indochina from 1965-71, the Cornell group estimates that 600,000 tons were dropped on North Vietnam, while 3,900,000 were dropped on the South. (The remainder went into Cambodia and Laos, much of it on the Ho Chi Minh trail.)

Allied artillery, mortars, rockets, other ground weapons and naval guns pounded Indochina with an added seven million tons of munitions in the same period, most of it in South Vietnam. South Vietnam is smaller than the state of Missouri.

The number of civilian casualties in North Vietnam was estimated by a 1967 C.I.A. study cited in the Pentagon Papers at 29,000 for 1965-66. Two years later, in 1969, the Defense Department said in NSSM-1 that "it has been estimated that approximately 52,000 civilians were killed in North Vietnam by U.S. air strikes."

CASUALTIES

In South Vietnam the casualties have been much higher. Senator Edward Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees, relying on official reports, has estimated noncombatant casualties through April, 1971, from military action by the United States and the Saigon government at a minimum of half a million persons, about one-third of them killed, a percentage of population that is more than double that suffered by German civilians under Allied bombing in World War II.

The original rationale for the large-scale use of air power was that it would save the lives of Allied troops.

Close air support of troops in action, often decisive in a conventional battle, can even be effective against guerrillas. But civilian casualties then mount. Guerrillas are highly mobile and hard to distinguish from the population — especially from fast-moving jet aircraft. Intelligence is often faulty.

Nevertheless, efforts were made, at the start, to limit civilian casualties. In August, 1966, after revelation of a dozen bombings of friendly troops and villages, General Westmoreland appointed a board of senior officers to improve control procedures. "One mishap — one innocent civilian killed, one civilian wounded or one dwelling needlessly destroyed — is too many," his directive states.

VOLUME

But long before this review, which led to no known result, the whole character of the air war had been altered by its sheer volume. From about 1000 sorties in the month of January, 1965, before American air units were engaged, the tempo had soared more than tenfold by the end of that year, and then doubled again by 1968 to over 20,000 a month.

What was being struck?

One of the extraordinary discoveries of the Cornell researchers was that in the end less than ten per cent of the United States fixed-wing air activity in South Vietnam went into close air support of troops in combat. More than 90 per cent was used for "interdiction," a term that has been stretched far beyond attacks on supply routes to encompass harassment, reprisal, area saturation in Communist staging zones and, in regions where the Viet Cong has been predominant, attacks "to influence the population: to cause them to move into areas under government control, or to make them stop supporting the insurgency."

'We've got the Onus--let's get the Bonus'

In a guerrilla war, the study points out, the enemy "may live intermingled with the population or may actually be the population . . . To interdict such an enemy means to blanket all possible areas with fire-power . . . Seen in this light, generalized interdiction in Vietnam takes on the character of strategic warfare. The targets are not wzll enough defined to qualify as tactical objectives. Rather, the attacks are directed against the over-all reserves of the insurgents, which are in the population itself, and against the will to continue the fight."

During the peak years of the air war in South Vietnam, when fighter bombers accounted for as many as 20,000 strike sorties a month, B-52's flew less than 1600 sorties monthly. But the Cornell team discovered that about half the actual tonnage of aerial munitions dropped on South Vietnam was delivered by B-52's. (It undoubtedly is far higher now, with some 200 B-52s (about half the Strategic Air Command (SAC) force) now engaged in bombing Indochina — a five-foldincrease since February and twice the peak number engaged pre-1972).

The penultimate in discriminate bombing is the area obliteration attack by giant B-52 stratofortresses of the SAC, each dropping about one hundred 500-pound bombs within a fraction of a minute. Four typical six-plane missions can demolish an area equal to that destroyed by the Hiroshima atom bomb.

By the very nature of air warfare, human error and a wide variety of technical factors take their toll. A major element is euphemistically called "contingent ordnance," bombs dropped outside the target area.

ERRORS

"Contingent ordnance" includes "navigational errors" common during bad weather and instrument bombing; "target misidentification" that sometimes destroys a friendly village (indicating that the planned target itself was a village); "surplus ordnance," left after the primary target has been attacked, that is used against secondary targets, less carefully selected; "antipersonnel weapons" that are the most effective means of suppressing antiaircraft fire in North Vietnam, but which wreak heavy civilian damage; and "emergency dumping" of ordnance when planes are attacked by hostile fighters or damaged by ground fire. Finally, there is the "armed reconnaissance" mission, trying ot hit &'targets of opportunity" at high speed.

All in all, it is estimated that more than half the ordnance delivered falls outside the intended target area.

Ironically, greater precautions were taken at one time to avoid civilian damage in North Vietnam than in the South. Targets in the North were approved by the White House. No attacks in 1965 were permitted within a 30-mile radius of Hanoi and a ten-mile radius of Haiphong. Attacks on minor military facilities in populated areas were barred.

But such careful restrictions were rarely applied after that. Last December's five-day, 1000-sortie, series of "protective reaction" strikes against North Vietnam, in retaliation for the downing of four Phantoms over northern Laos, was almost entirely in bad weather with the ground invisible. Pilots later called it "a farce" and "sheer insanity" not to await better weather. President Nixon called it "very successful."

LIST

"When North Vietnam was first targeted, the Joint Chiefs of Staff found only eight industrial installations worth listing," the Defense Intelligence Agency reported to Secretary McNamara in November. 1965.

Military-Congressional pressure later made the target list a political football in what the Cornell study describes as a "highly cynical numbers game." Early in 1967, on Joint Chiefs of Staff urging, President Johnson added a number of industrial targets within urban areas previously barred, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs reported that there were no important military targets left in the North; the only escalation possible would be the mining or bombing of ports and irrigation dikes and a land invasion of North Vietnam.

Nevertheless, in July-August, 1967, presumably to blunt criticism from the Senate Armed Services Committee, President Johnson expanded the area subject to armed reconnaissance and somehow found 44 new fixed targets.

Of all the tragedies in the devastation of Indochina from the air, perhaps the deepest lies in its overwhelming futility. The impact on the war of most of the bombing has been marginal at best and, more often, self-defeating.

The Joint Chiefs and the United States Command in Saigon claim in NSSM-1 that the bombing of North Vietnam and Laos was effective because it destroyed 12 to 14 per cent of the trucks and 20 to 35 per cent of the supplies on the infiltration trails. But the C.I.A. and the Office of the Secretary of Defense punctured that claim.

The Kissinger summary noted: "OSD and CIA find that the enemy needs in South Vietnam—ten to 15 trucks of supplies per day

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More than Indochina Is Involved

(carrying 30 to 50 tons of weapons and ammunition)—are so small and his supply of wa rmaterial so large that the enemy can replace his losses easily, indrease his traffic flows slightly, and get through as much supplies to South Vietnam as he wants to in spite of the bombing."

STRENGTH

A study by the Pentagon's Office of Systems Analysis showed that while American attack stories against North Vietnam increased about fourfold between 1965 and 1968, Communist main forces in South Vietnam increased 75 per cent in strength and ninefold in overall activity.

That the bombing stiffened North Vietnam's will to fight and reduced dissent at home is something on which all analysts agree. Economically, North Vietnam paradoxically also gained. Official Pentagon and C.I.A. estimates that aid from other Communist countries totaled four to six times as much as was destroyed.

With vigorous road and rail building, even the capacity of the North Vietnamese transport network — a main target — increased under the bombing, the C.I.A. reported in NSSM-1. But the dollar cost to the United States in lost aircraft alone (almost 1100 planes) was ten times the. damage inflicted on North Vietnam by the 1965-68 bombing. And many crews were lost as well.

The military advised that a gloves-off bombing policy would solve the problem — advice President Nixon now has adopted. The mining of Haiphong and other ports and the removal of bombing restrictions on overland transport from China (accepting "high risks of civilian casualties") would have a decisive effect on the war, the generals insisted in NSSM-1.

But the C.I.A. and the Office of the Secretary of Defense argued that "the overland routes from China alone could provide North Vietnam with enough material to carry on, even with an unlimited bombing campaign." Events seem to have proven them right, despite the laser. homing devices and other "smart bombs" that recently have knocked out bridges and other difficult targets.

CAUTIONS

President Johnson was shown in the Pentagon Papers to have received similar cautions about his military advice as early as the fall of 1965 from Defense Secretary McNamara and in 1966-67 from the Jason study group of 47 of America's most distinguished weapons scientists. After analyzing nine alternative bombing strategies, which included mining the ports and attacking the irrigation and flood-control dikes, the Jason study concluded: "We are unable to develop a bombing campaign in the North to reduce the flow of infiltrating personnel into South Vietnam."

In South Vietnam, the bombing has also been marginal in value. or self-defeating, except for the ten per cent or less devoted to close air support. The latter evidently has been decisive in enabling the South Vietnamese Army to avoid a major defeat in the recent Communist offensive.

A particularly futile use of air and artillery power has been in "unobserved fire," bombs and shells used against places where the enemy might be, but without reliable information that he was there. Thus two of the Pentagon's former top systems analysts, Alan Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith disclosed in their "How Much Is Enough?" (Harper & Row, 1971) that probably fewer than 100 Communist troops were killed by unobserved fire in 1966, when 65 per cent of the total tonnage of bombs and artillery shells was expended against such nontargets — at a cost of $2 billion and significant alienation of Vietnamese civilians.

For irony, one systems analysis study calculated that the 27,000 tons of dud bombs and shells from such attacks could have provided the enemy with more explosives than he used in the mines and booby traps that killed more than 1000 American troops that year.

They note that detailed international law is lacking or outdated for air warfare. But grave violations can be inferred from the principles that govern the agreed rules of land and naval warfare. The most serious such violation, they point out, is of the rule requiring a reasonable "proportionality" in warfare between the damage caused and the military gain sought or anticipated.

There is no sign in the air war report of the fear, hatred and racial contempt for the Asian that played a role in the My Lai massacre by American ground troops. Nevertheless, the unstated conclusion that shrieks out of Cornell's deadpan study is that the American air war in South Vietnam has included a long list of both officially-sanctioned and officially-ignored aerial My Lais.

How did this abuse of air power originate? Professor Littauer and his colleagues believe it was not deliberate decisions that led to the vast overemployment of American airpower in Vietnam as much as it was a case of the vast "availability of airpower ... setting the United States on the path it has followed." The historic evolution of strategic air warfare has also been a factor.

IMPERSONAL

Killing from the air is a distant, impersonal affair to the pilot, not to mention the whole chairborne chain of command, back to the White House.

Somehow, even as the ferocity of the air war has mounted, the military and civilian leaders of the United States have managed to look the other way. A news report noted as early as mid-1966 that no regular tabulation of civilian casualties was being kept in South Vietnam. In early 1969, when the Kissinger staff drafted the 28 questions that produced the NSSM-1 study for President Nixon, Question 19 asked: "How adequate is our information on the over - all scale and incidence of damage to civilians by air and artillery?"

The responses from the eight agencies questioned took up less than six pages of the 548 - page document.

Now, three years later — with civilian casualty estimates in South Vietnam exceeding the top figures of 1967-68 — it is evident from the Cornell study that the indifference continues.

Littauer and his colleagues finished their book before the case of General John D. Lwvelle exposed the repeated bombing of North Vietnam — perhaps with wider military complicity — in violation of Presidential orders. But it would be unlikely to alter their conclusion that official American policy, rather than the aberrations of individuals, is primarily to blame for the air war's "unjustified devastation, reprisals, collective penalties, and grave breaches of the proportionality rule, as well as widespread destruction of food crops" — all war crimes to land battle.

The Cornell scholars urge a public investigation of bombing policy, rather than war crimes trials.

Beyond the war crimes issue, there is a crucial - Constitutional question that is pointed sharply in a brilliant preface to the Vornell study by Neil Sheehan, The Times reporter who brought the Pentagon Papers to publication.

He notest that the low visibility of the air war (no journalists accompany the planes), its relatively low cost in dollars and American casualties, is responsiveness to centralized control and its enormous destructive force have now made it possible for an American President "to conduct war with little reference to the wishes of the body politic at home."

More than Indochina is involved. The 1969 Nixon Doctrine for all of Asia seeks to fulfill military commitments with air and sea power in support of local ground forces. Sound though this strategy may be for conventional war, it has little value in an insurgench.

It can only lead again to the kind of tragedy whose epilogue is being acted out in thi year's re-escalation of the air war: the destruction of Vietnam in the effort to "save" it. The bonus, so far, has proved illusory. The bonus we will all live with nor the rest of our lives.