

Moral Aspects of Bombing Vietnam



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IF A MAN keeps dangerous animals running wild on his estate, and one mauls a guest's child, he cannot escape responsibility by saying that he had no intention of letting a child be hurt. That is generally the law now, and common sense, subjective intent does not have to be proved, because keeping wild animals where people go makes it likely that someone will be hurt.

The same common-sense view cuts through the argument about whether the United States is "deliberately" bombing dikes and other civilian targets in North Vietnam. When the greatest power on earth pours bombs on a small, backward country, it is a necessary consequence that people and things of an innocent character will be destroyed. In the legal phrase, the great power will not be heard to argue that it meant no harm.

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IT IS BAD enough to deny responsibility for the human costs of a policy of mass destruction. And that is what the United States government is doing: putting on a show of amazement at the notion that American bombs actually kill people.

Consider, for example, an episode last December, when four American Phantoms were shot down in Laos, the U.S. retaliated by 1000 bombing sorties against North Vietnam in five days. Most of the time the weather was so bad that the pilots could not even see the ground. Yet the official claim remained that only military targets were being hit. President Nixon called the raids "very successful."

The propaganda from Washington and Saigon makes it sound as though every

American raid is hitting the Ruhr or some mighty military installation. There is talk of destroying "industries" and "naval bases."

Naval bases! For what — sampans? As for industries, there is hardly a factory in North Vietnam that an American businessman would have looked at twice in 1890.

It is on this backward country that the United States is dropping thousands of tons of bombs every month. Necessarily, then, inevitably, bombs in that volume destroy things not remotely related to the North Vietnamese war effort.

First-hand reports of civilian bomb damage have in fact been available for years, but American officials continued to react to them with an injured innocence.

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THE EXPLANATION given by Washington for the bomb craters have been seen in the dikes is that the damage was incidental to attacks on nearby military targets such as "road and river transport lines." If you bomb roads and "river transport lines" in North Vietnam, you will hit dikes.

The United States has now dropped on Indochina three times the tonnage of bombs that it used in all theaters of World War II. Those bombs have hit, among other things, dikes and hospitals and schools and peasant villages. Washington knows about that destruction.

In those circumstances a judge in the Common Law tradition would not allow the American government to wash its hands of responsibility for the civilian damage. Or the American people.

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