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Was the Bombing Story True?

Two of the country's leading newspapers told their readers on Sunday, June 8 that the biggest news of the day was a report of theretofore undisclosed heavy bombing raids in South Vietnam while Americans were being evacuated at the end of April.

That story was published as the leading page one item in The Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times and was distributed to papers that subscribe to the Times-Post news service. It raises significant questions about the press view of the credibility of government officials, the responsibilities of newspapers to their readers and, finally, the credibility of the press itself.

The story was datelined Hong Kong and was written by George McArthur, a Los Angeles Times reporter. It quoted unnamed "authoritative sources" as saying that American planes conducted heavy raids the day

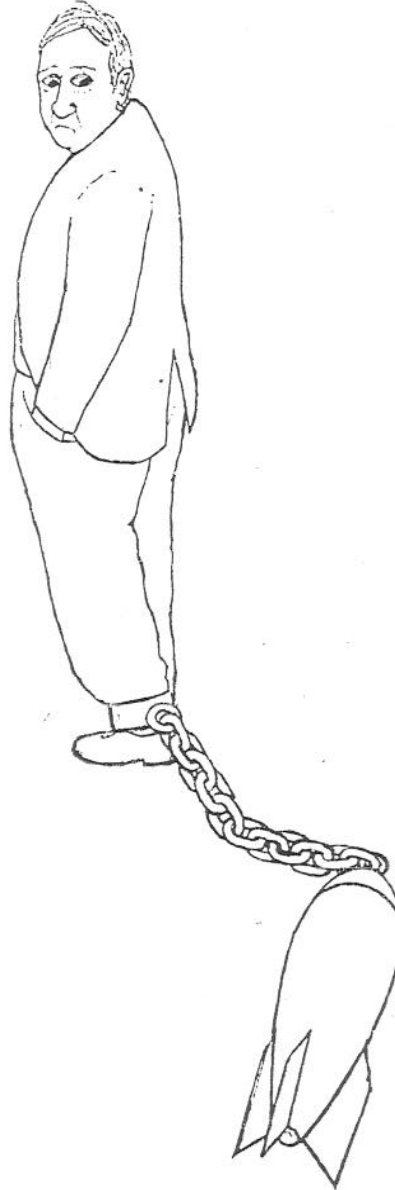
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of the Saigon evacuation. The purpose: to show Hanoi the United States meant business.

The raids, the story said, were of such magnitude and "sensitivity" that they almost certainly were cleared by President Ford. They were conducted, it continued, despite congressional strictures against military action. A source, unidentified but with access to "official after-action reports," was quoted as saying that "it was a very heavy commitment."

By coincidence both papers gave the story a major headline and the best position on page one, the day before having been a dull news day. "U.S. Bombing in Viet Exit is Reported," read The Post's headline. "Heavy Raids at War's End Reported," read the Times', with a subheadline reading: "Bombings, Denied by the White House, Seen as Effort to Protect Evacuation."

Yes, the story was denied by the White House, and the Pentagon as well, before publication. Ron Nessen, the President's press secretary, denied it to a Times reporter who called him. He also told the reporter that the National Security Council said the story "is absolutely not true." Assistant Defense Secretary Joseph Laitin told the



By Tom Kleh

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als were reported parenthetically, starting at the fifth paragraph. They were not reflected in the rest of the story which was "hard"—that is, after quoting the "authoritative sources" the story treated the raids as fact.

So this was the picture: Sources who could not be identified made an extremely serious charge carrying implications of defiance of Congress and an official coverup. Two identified responsible government officials issued the strongest denials. But the denials were relegated to parenthetical inserts and the story was displayed with great emphasis. To the reader this could mean only one thing: His newspaper was saying, "We believe our sources. We don't believe the denials, but in the tradition of journalistic fairness we publish them (in parentheses)."

Los Angeles Times editors say that they are satisfied with the way they handled the story and displayed it, and that they are still convinced it is true.

The source—apparently there was only one basic source, although "sources" are quoted—was "excellent," they say, a man who knew what he was talking about. One editor admits he was somewhat shaken by the firmness of the denials, but he says he was reassured when he detected a softening as they were reiterated. (Laitin and Nessen say there was no softening. They say they still deny the story categorically and that they have checked with all possible sources, from the President down. On Tuesday, Secretary Schlesinger told reporters that the raids "did not occur" and that the story was "invented out of whole cloth.")

Times reporter who called him that the story was not true, making it clear that he had checked with Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger. Both acknowledged that U.S. planes had provided cover for the evacuation and that several bombs had been dropped to subdue anti-aircraft fire, as had been reported earlier. But they acknowledged nothing approaching the "heavy raids" alleged in the McArthur story.

Nessen and Laitin say their denials were flat and unequivocal. Nessen adds that he urged the Times to check the story again with its source in view of the flat White House denial.

As the story was published, the deni-

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The Post's editors did not know the identity of McArthur's source when they decided to publish the story and they still don't. They were and are relying on McArthur's reputation as a responsible, accurate reporter and on the judgment of the editors of the Times.

Nessen and Laitin are frustrated and indignant as a result of their experience with the bombing story. They can't understand why the most categorical denials they could express failed to deter The Post and the Times from giving the story prominent display and were relegated to parenthetical inserts.

It isn't hard to contain one's sympathy for them. They must, after all, carry the sins of their bureaucratic forebears—Ron Ziegler, of "just a third-rate burglary" fame, in Nessen's case, and the late Arthur Sylvester, who made history as a Pentagon spokesman when he declared the government's right to lie to "save itself," in Laitin's.

But what about the readers of The Post and the Times and the other papers that carried the story? Where are they left?

Having printed the story and the denials, The Post and Times turned to other things. Except for a three-paragraph item on page 14 of last Tuesday's Post, in which Nessen's denial was repeated, they have been silent on the subject. So has their news wire.

Questions cry for answers. Was the story wrong? If so, certainly a page one acknowledgement of that is called for. Were Nessen and Laitin lying—or lied to? Certainly an affirmative answer on either point would make an important story with post-Watergate implications. Did the raids occur but word of them never reached the President and the Secretary of Defense? That certainly would be a good story.

But neither paper has published a follow-up on the story. Further, there is no evidence that their reporters are hard at work on one.

So at this writing the questions stand: Did we give Vietnam one final pasting? Is official Washington trying another massive cover-up? Did someone in the field pull a fast one on his superiors? Or, heaven forbid, did The Post and the Los Angeles Times bite on a sour one?

Maybe the history books will tell your children or their children. So far, it appears that the papers that raised those questions aren't going to tell you.