

Overview on Bombing

By Herbert Mitgang

There is no shortfall of threatening talk in Washington about the resumption of bombing, if necessary, in Vietnam. Explaining why more cluster bombs are needed this year than last, an Air Force general said that the aim of the new stockpiling is to maintain "our Southeast Asia contingency capability." The relation of the heavy bombing of North Vietnam to the peace negotiations a year ago is interpreted in some strategic corners of the Pentagon as meaning that the gunboat diplomacy of the past can be translated into dominant bomber diplomacy today.

Such assumptions are natural in military quarters; more than ever the preparedness summed up in the ironic slogan, "Peace is our profession," is linked to political and diplomatic contingencies. Yet in a civilian-oriented society, the decisions about future arms and commitment of armed forces must, by tradition and law, be made by the people's elected representatives. Now is the moment—in the uncertain twilight of the Vietnam experience—to begin to assess the facts and the damage and the lessons.

An idea borrowed from a self-critical time in our history keeps insinuating itself: The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, a remarkably objective study of the devastating nature of the Second World War in Europe and the Pacific. Even though it had a martial aim to begin with, in scope it went far beyond the effects of bombing. The survey took place because, in the autumn of 1944, President Roosevelt suggested: "It would be valuable in connection with the air attacks on Japan and for postwar planning to obtain an impartial and expert study of the effects of the aerial attacks on Germany."

A broad spectrum of talented individuals from different disciplines and professions—social scientists, educators, bankers, lawyers, economists, engineers, diplomats—dug into the project with fervor and vision. This civilian-run show included independent-minded persons who could not be easily snowed, among them George W. Ball, Paul H. Nitze and John Kenneth Galbraith. Generals, admirals and military specialists gave of their knowledge, too, in advisory and support roles.

The Strategic Bombing Survey examined the role of air power and, for the most part, found it effective in disrupting industry and morale. Enemy records were studied and government and military officials interrogated. Some two hundred reports across two-and-a-half years led to conclusions

and warnings such as this: "If any written evaluation of the war against Japan were to leave with civilian or military leaders the impression that another world war may be waged economically and successfully by the United States along World War II lines, it were better that that evaluation had never been written." Several relays of White House national security managers might have read these reports profitably during the Vietnam war.

A new version of the Strategic Bombing Survey could extend the reach of thought—especially in preventing rather than pre-emptive war—in many important directions in this era of large-power nuclear standoff and small-power wars. The Air Force has been weighing the effects of its electro-optical and laser-guided weaponry through an internal study labeled "Corona Harvest." But it is not enough to look only at what one general calls "the art of aerial bombardment." People live below the art.

Among the subjects that could be investigated in a major civilian-run undertaking with the cooperation of the military are the implications of political constraints on bombing; motivations of revolutionary forces and at what stage they threaten American interests; the role of refugees whose lives are smashed by aerial and conventional bombing; the environmental, agricultural and defoliation damage caused by bombing—and if these should be outlawed in international conventions; how to report and apply the experience of the prisoners of war into new codes of conduct within the military and by treaties formulated in international organizations. These are military and diplomatic and humanistic matters that could enlist many outstanding talents—in universities, foundations and the armed services.

At the Pentagon the other day an Air Force general, with straight face, declared that the thousands of craters caused by B-52 bombing had a positive effect. "We have helped to create a fish farming industry in the watered holes for the Vietnamese peasants," he said.

The interpretation of Vietnam's meaning is too important to be left to generals or technicians of the bombing arts or the aerospace industry. A modern equivalent of the Strategic Bombing Survey could serve as a textbook of future military behavior as well as of military restraint. Right now the unwritten lessons are twisting slowly in the wind.

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