

Bombing the Peace Talks

By DAVID SCHOENBRUN

Nowhere has air power failed so significantly to win a war as in Vietnam. Not only has air power failed to win here, it has failed, at great cost, to accomplish its most specific missions: to interdict enemy supply lines, to weaken the enemy's capacity and will to resist.

This reporter was an eyewitness to that failure. In 1967, I covered a very wide area of North Vietnam, to the west and south of Hanoi, down Highway 1, and along the canals and dikes leading to the southern front. As I rode down the highway, I heard our planes coming in on a bombing run. The road was crowded with thousands of bicycles, ox-and donkey-carts, pedicabs, the swarming mob of Asian communications. Within seconds the road emptied as the bikes and carts moved swiftly into the thick bamboo-grove cover just off the highway.

Our planes came down, blasted huge craters in the roadway, then went zooming off. It only took a few seconds more for the anthill traffic to resume. The trundle-bikes, with boards attached over front and back wheels, each carrying huge straw baskets, with a total load of about 300 pounds apiece, simply weaved their way around the craters, while thousands of coolies, shovels in hand, filled the craters. The raid had failed utterly to stop the flow of supplies down to the southern front, but two highly trained crews and two very expensive fighter-bombers were lost in the futile attack.

Twenty miles further south, we came to a river crossing. There was no bridge in sight. But a whistle from a traffic officer sent a team of Vietnamese running to the bushes on the river-bank. They pulled out a contraption built of planks lashed to gasoline drums, and tugged it by row-boat to the other side. Swiftly the traffic began to cross. I stood and watched and then heard the sirens go off. Out came the coolies again, untied the bridge, folded it back upon itself, and hiding it inside the bushes. Our planes came over, dipped down, saw nothing and flew off.

I drove on and everywhere I saw almost total devastation, the land looking like moon-craters. Every city was levelled. Every bridge was down. But supplies kept flowing and the people fought on, their capacity and will to resist unimpeded.

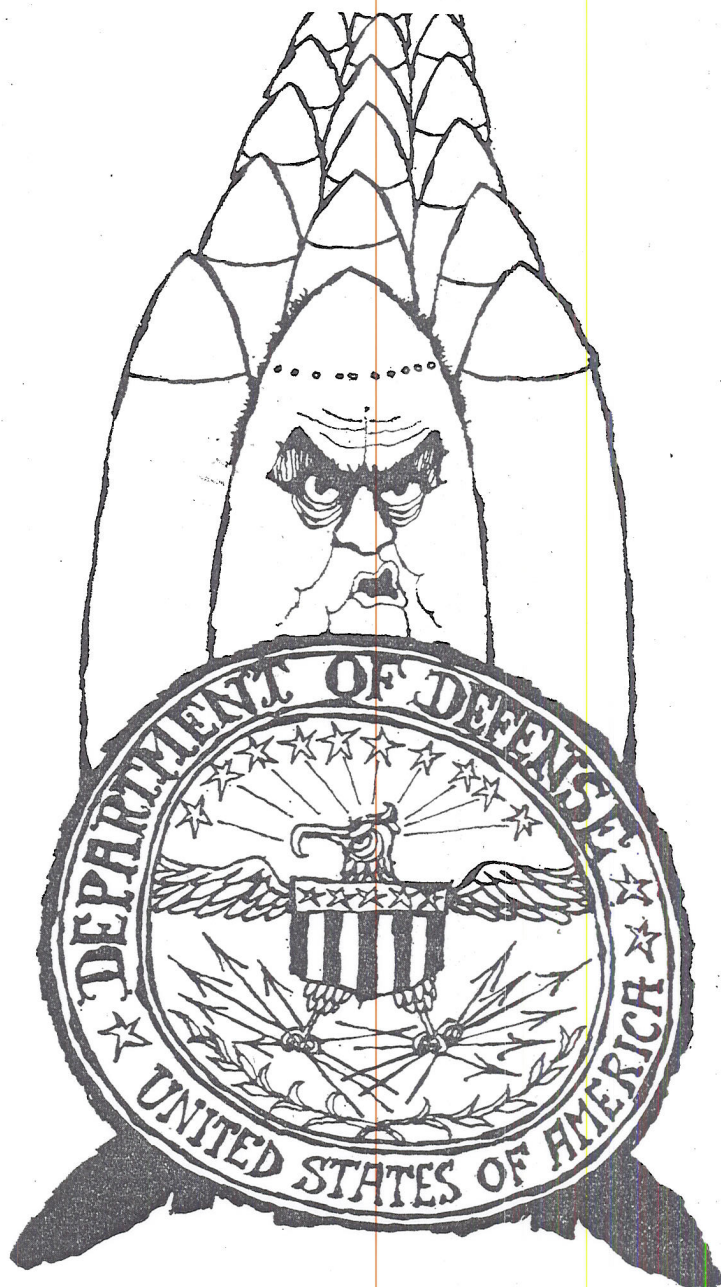
None of the justifications advanced for the bombings could be substantiated: reprisals did not force the adversary to stop shooting down our planes; anti-aircraft bases were not knocked out; supply trails had not been interdicted. But the drain of blood and money in lost pilots and planes never stopped, with a cost far in excess of any achievements.

Now a new threat has loomed in the North Vietnamese announcement that our latest raids hit prisoner-of-war camps. We have no effective intelligence network operating inside North Vietnam. The latest, theatrical "rescue operation" to free prisoners

underlines the lack of intelligence, since the Pentagon has admitted there were prisoners there.

I, personally, have reason to doubt that we actually knew that a prisoner camp existed where our raiders thought it did, for I was the first American to be allowed to visit prisoner camps in North Vietnam. I remember with eagerness for information I was questioned by American officials upon my return.

One must take very seriously the warning that our raids may result in the death of American prisoners. I was in a prison camp the day of an air raid over Hanoi. The fear our young Americans suffered that day was painful to witness. They were not only afraid of being hit and burned in locked cells, they feared reprisals against them if Vietnamese were killed by the raid. The North Vietnamese officials assured me they would never take reprisals against prisoners, but we all know how war can make men beasts, even for a moment, and that in a moment many people can be massacred.



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On August 22, 1967, bombs fell inside Hanoi, five blocks from the Thong Nhat Hotel where correspondents were quartered. I was on the scene in minutes and saw the burning house and dead bodies scattered throughout the street. I also saw the grief and anger of the survivors and I hastily left before anyone saw that an American was there. I, too, felt the fear our prisoners felt and I was free.

Why now, when presumably the war is being wound down, are we again taking terrible risks by bombing which have been proved to be futile? Or James Bondian feats of derring-do which at best could free a few prisoners but bring reprisals to the some 400 the enemy holds?

Although the bombing is futile militarily, it did hit with great impact one important target: the Paris peace talks. That is the only target that air power can destroy effectively, and with it our hopes for peace.

David Schoenbrun, is the author of "Vietnam: How We Get In—How To Get Out."