

Bombing: The Damage at Home [Companion articles, one by Michael Getler and one by Josiah Lee Auspitz]

By Michael Getler

Staff writer Getler studied the Indochina air war for a recent series of articles.

IT IS EASIER to do. It is quicker. It is harder to verify the results. It is more impersonal. Ordering planes to drop bombs—it's not the same thing as sending American troops into combat, seeing the daily pictures and reports of suffering and death. Probably it is an easier order to give.

The order to bomb has been given for more than eight years in Indochina now and it was given again last week, with the public and the Congress kept largely in the dark about the purposes.

Questions about the military effectiveness of the bombing—the impact of more than 7 million tons of explosives on the land and people of South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, its role in eventually bringing the war to a settlement—will be debated for years to come. They are legitimate questions whose answers can influence future American war policy, tactics, defense budgets and the types of planes we buy.

But there are other questions about the war that have nothing to do with military assessments. They have to do with control in a democracy over the exercise of military power by both military and civilian authorities.

Looking back over history's longest aerial assault yields a collection of incidents, facts and impressions. But it does not yield many answers. Mostly there are more questions, troubling questions about the unleashing of massive firepower without the people, the Congress or the press fully aware of what has been happening or why.

Confusing Claims

THE INCIDENT that touched off the massive U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and accounted for the first major aerial reprisal—the Tonkin Gulf incident of August, 1964—is itself still clouded in doubt as to exactly what happened.

Last week waves of American B-52 bombers began attacking the outskirts of Hanoi and Haiphong in retaliation for what the White House claims is a Hanoi stalling tactic at the negotiating table, designed to cover up a supply buildup and possible new offensive against South Vietnam. Privately, though, some top-ranking administration officials are telling newsmen that the unprecedented B-52 raids are much more of a political shock weapon, being

used to try to jolt Hanoi's leadership into an agreement rather than as part of any strictly military operation. The targets being aimed at are "military" ones, but they are close enough to Hanoi and Haiphong to bring the shock effects, death and destruction of B-52 bombing home to much of North Vietnam's people clustered in those areas.

Prior to the renewed bombing, no U.S. military commanders were expressing any fears of a new North Vietnamese assault. In fact, there was widespread agreement that the North had lost so many troops (an estimated 120,000) and so much equipment and had been so badly battered in the past eight months that it would take a minimum of a year and a half for them to rebuild their forces.

Thus the current bombing campaign, in the opinion of many of these top officials, is essentially a political operation. That may be a valid use of military power, as some see it, but it is not the way it is being explained publicly.

Undoubtedly, there is some truth to the U.S. claim of bad faith by Hanoi at the bargaining table. But the United States has also proposed changes in the tentative peace agreement reached in October, and the public basically has no way to judge what has really happened at those talks except from confusing and often self-serving leaks to the press by those on all sides of the issue.

The renewed bombing comes at a time when many top officials believe that the United States has in fact already completed its objectives in Vietnam. It has stopped a Communist invasion, decimated much of Hanoi's army, prevented the forcible overthrow of the Thieu regime, armed South Vietnam to the teeth and given it about as much a chance to survive on its own as it will ever have. If North Vietnam has not really changed its objectives in the South, then the fine print on a paper treaty may not hold up in the long run anyway, according to this view.

The Word Games

BETWEEN THE FIRST air campaign and the new one begun last week, there also lie numerous other incidents where it has been difficult to find out where and why American air power was being applied.

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In Laos, the air war began secretly in 1964 and was not discussed openly and before Congress for several years thereafter. In Cambodia, there were numerous reports of U.S. bombing by B-52s and tactical fighter-bombers dating back to mid-1969, yet officially military spokesmen link the first U.S. bombing operations to the cross-border invasion by U.S. and South Vietnamese troops in May, 1970.

After that invasion, journalists sparred with the Pentagon for months, trying to find out the scope of American close air support for the Cambodian Army after the U.S. troops had pulled out. Finally, the Pentagon conceded that bombing of enemy supplies moving through Cambodia toward Vietnam could have "ancillary benefits" if some bombs happened to fall in support of Cambodian troops battling the Communists.

The real bombing policy in Cambodia, as expressed privately in the Pentagon, was to hit the Communists wherever they could be found. But somehow the Pentagon, or perhaps the administration, decided it could not trust the public with that simple an explanation, and thus "ancillary benefits" was born.

Other word games have also been used to obscure what was going on in the skies over Southeast Asia. "Protective reaction," for example, will linger as one of the more famous, flexible and at times misleading phrases to grow out of the war. First used to describe quick counter-attacks by small numbers of escort planes against missile or anti-aircraft sites that had fired on U.S. reconnaissance planes, "protective reaction" grew to

cover at times raids by hundreds of planes against supply areas as well as air defense sites. And as with Cambodia, where the public could be expected to understand the real circumstances, in some cases the reason for their strikes and the actual targets struck were obscured in official explanations.

The Lavelle Case

THE ULTIMATE MISUSE of this phrase was the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam, under the guise of "protective reaction," carried out by former Air Force Gen. John D. Lavelle. Lavelle was found guilty by the Air Force of essentially making a private and unauthorized interpretation

of the rules. But the Lavelle case can also be viewed as almost predictable, considering the juggling act that was done with the private and public versions of air war.

The Lavelle case also brought out other peculiarities of this air war. It focused attention on the fact that the Navy and Air Force divide Vietnam into seven geographic segments—with targets sometimes swapped between services and with different types of weapons used.

It further showed that the first real air boss, or single commander, of all Navy and Air Force operations in Vietnam is in Honolulu at the U.S. Pacific Command, and not in Saigon. In most cases, this set-up has worked well. But the situation in Saigon at times has been reminiscent of a negotiation among rival Navy and Air Force air barons, which weakens rather than strengthens proper control.

The Lavelle case is looked upon as an aberration by most military men. But some top Air Force commanders privately express deep concern that it took a sergeant to blow the whistle on falsified bombing reports ordered by Lavelle while a few hundred officers in his command stood silent.

Where the Bombs Fell

THROUGH MORE THAN eight years of air war, the Pentagon has refused to disclose how many bombs the United States has dropped on the individual countries of Southeast Asia. The total for all of Southeast Asia is released, but there is no way for anyone to know officially that almost 5 million tons of bombs have been dropped on South Vietnam, which we are trying to save, while more than 1 mil-

lion have been dropped on North Vietnam. The rest is divided unevenly and unofficially between Laos and Cambodia.

Other factors have also served to weaken what would normally be considered checks on the use of military power in a democratic society. The air war is not only remote and impersonal, but the men who fight it are professionals not given to protest. The casualties are fewer, and they apparently are acceptable to a public that has rejected the higher costs of a continued American land war in Southeast Asia—although the recent heavy loss of B-52s, each with a six-man crew, in a bombing campaign linked to a fuzzy dispute in Paris could change things.

Because air war is so remote, so hard to visualize, and because so much of it takes place out of reach of inspection of any kind, it is a form of fire-power that is much easier for a President, any President, to invoke.

Thus far, the invocation of American air power has not been met by any similarly dramatic escalation by the other side. There have been no air attacks, for example, on Saigon or Danang or anywhere in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese have waged their war on the ground and do not have much capability to strike from the air even if they wanted to.

But they could be given that capability in the form of bombers or surface-to-surface missiles should their backers in Russia and China be sufficiently outraged by B-52 attacks.

The use of air power undoubtedly played a role in turning back Hanoi's major offensive launched last April. But attention still must be given to the questions of control over such power and the requirement to explain how and why that power was and is being used. In the long run, those questions and answers are more important than whether the bombs landed on target.