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# The Ultimate Liberation

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Maybe, someday, somebody in the Pentagon will actually step toward a mike in a briefing room and say we had to kill our own prisoners of war in order to liberate them.

Whatever the rationalizations they ought to be rich. We'll hear that the North Vietnamese violated the conventions of warfare by deliberately putting the POW camps where they knew they might be bombed—or the White House may fall back on the old SAM missile ploy—it wasn't our bombers, it was their missiles falling back to earth. Or, how about accusing the North Vietnamese of blowing up the POW camps to make us look bad?

If you worm through the Pentagon Papers, Volume IV, the Gravel edition, you'll find on page 250 that we have known perfectly well for years that B-52 bombing of Hanoi would probably result in killing our own people:

"Although the North Vietnamese do not mark the camps where American prisoners are kept or reveal their locations, we know from intelligence sources that most of the facilities are located in or near Hanoi. . . . Heavy and indiscriminate attacks in the Hanoi area would jeopardize the lives of these prisoners and alarm their wives and parents in vocal opposition."

That quotation is from a 1967 Pentagon document. The Nixon administration isn't worried about the vocal opposition of wives and parents. Pick 'em up, fly 'em to Washington and bed them down for a couple of days at the Statler-Hilton while you have a lot of brass coo over them, and they'll step before the cameras and tell the television audience the best way for them to get their husbands and sons back is to have the Air Force bomb the beejeebers out of them.

So what the hell? If Nixon doesn't mind bombing our own people, and the relatives don't object, the rest of us can remind ourselves that they're well-paid, mostly non-draft, career type officers. An officer can resign. So let those antique, obsolete B-52s the North Vietnamese are using for target practice get shot out of the skies. Then give the resupply contract to Lockheed or Litton Industries and the air war's over.

Whether you can ascribe virtue to a bunch of mass bombers, this last and most lethal resumption of air war and naval blockades is being carried out without the usual bushwa about "military necessity." If they don't spare the North Vietnamese death and disfigurement, they are sparing us ugly mendacious phrases like "protective reaction strike." They're admitting that they're doing away with those people to make them sign a piece of paper, and not because "our boys' lives are in danger" except from their fellow countrymen.

Again, if you don't mind herniating your eyeballs to find the appropriate passage, the truth was long since published in the Pentagon Papers. Better to put that rotter Ellsberg in jail than have the public read, "The remaining issue on interdiction of supplies has to do with the closing of the Port of Haiphong. Although this is the route by which some 80 per cent of North Vietnamese imports come into the country, it is not the point of entry for most of the military supplies and ammunition . . . it is likely that North Vietnam would be more influenced by a threatened resumption of a given level of destruction—the 'hot-cold' treatment—than by a threat to maintain the same level of destruction: getting 'irregularity' into our pattern is important." (Vol IV, pp. 251 and 45).

If our boys in the camps get the hot and cold treatment too, it shows you how phony are those charges of racism leveled against the Administration. It's just as willing to knock off a Wasp Air Force major as a gook peasant. But the wives and mothers of American POWs shouldn't be distraught. They'll save enough to give Bob Hope a minion on his next tour.

But, really, how bad is all this bombing? Isn't it all exaggerated? If the North Vietnamese would just move our boys out to the country away from military targets, they'd be almost as happy as they would be at home.

To prove it, here is the testimony (as quoted from "Voices from the Plain of Jars," compiled by Fred Branfman, Harper-Colophon Books, 1972) of a 27-year-old Laotian peasant. The bombers came to his village: "My village used to have hills, forests and homes next to our rice fields . . . But then came the airplanes to strike at our houses . . . we were afraid because the planes came almost every day. It was as if we were in jail. We couldn't go anywhere. All we could do was sit in the mouths of our holes . . . and still there were people who were killed. . . . They died like animals in the forest."

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