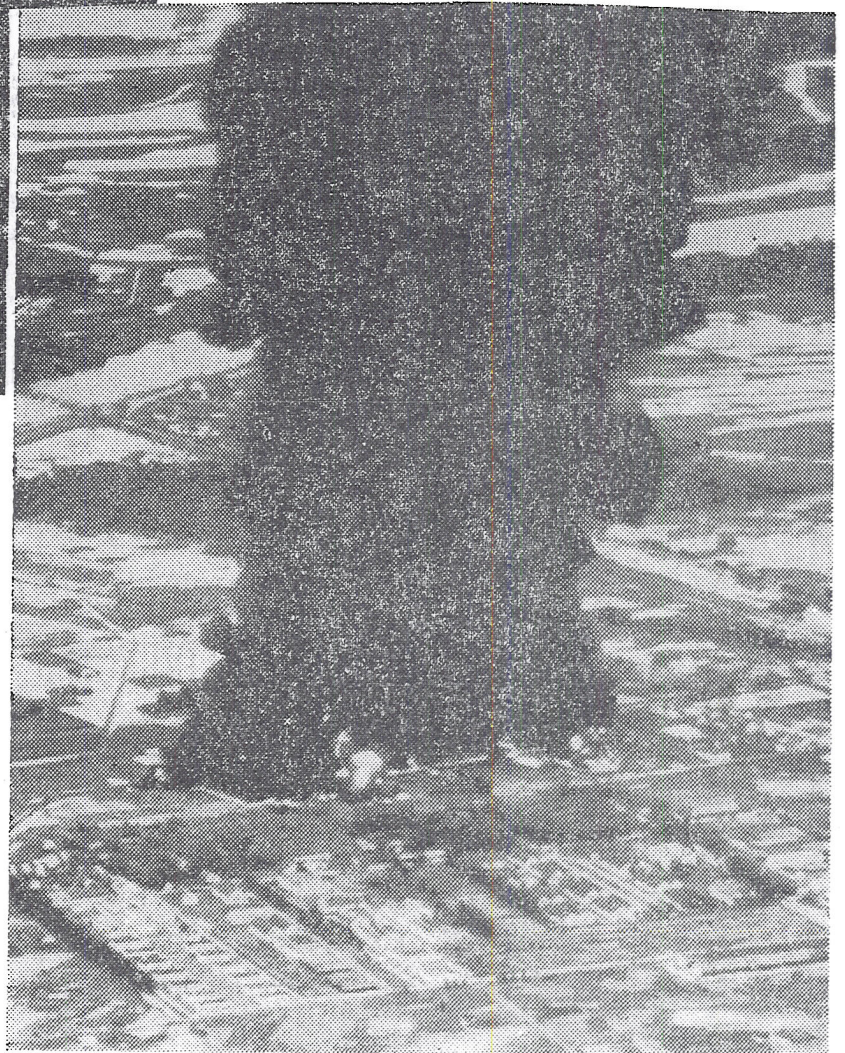


FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 1971

The Story Behind The Bombing



United States Air Force
Summer 1966—After American bombers hit oil tanks in Hanoi.

By U.S. GRANT SHARP

SAN DIEGO—There has been so much discussion about the Pentagon papers recently that I thought I had better get my comments in while the subject is still hot. It is important to begin by defining exactly what we are talking about when we say "The Pentagon papers."

In the middle of 1967 Secretary of Defense McNamara commissioned a group to do a history of the United States' role in Indochina. The group was made up of State and Defense Department civilians, a few military officers, and defense-oriented individuals from Government-financed research institutes. Some thirty-odd persons contributed to this history; most of them were in the office of the Secretary of Defense and worked on this just part-time.

The current discussions of the so-called Pentagon papers are not discussions of the total 3,000 pages of narrative and 4,000 pages of appended documents. People are discussing the information which has been obtained by reading the Pentagon papers as published by The New York Times. This history, which appeared in several editions of The Times and has now come out in a paperback, does not, of course, comprise a summation of the information which is available in the total narrative.

In reporting the Pentagon history The Times writers said they tried to keep the articles within the general limits set by the narrative analysis and the documents as a whole. Material was brought in from the public record only when it seemed necessary to put the papers into context for the general reader. Mr. Neil Sheehan, one of the writers, states in the book's introduction that the very selection and arrangement of the facts, whether in a history or in a newspaper article, inevitably mirrors a point of view or state of mind. Thus, the articles as written by The Times undoubtedly reflect some of the conceptions of The Times reporters.

So what we have here is not necessarily an objective history, but rather a distillation of a large document written by people who have a definite point of view. What is the point of view of The Times reporters? Well, certainly the editorial view of The Times, as frequently expressed, is that the war in Vietnam was a great mistake and that our actions have been ineffective.

We might also ask what is the point of view of the various historians appointed by Mr. McNamara to develop this history. As revealed by the history itself, a great many civilians in the Defense Department in the middle of 1967 were disenchanted with the war, convinced that the bombing of North Vietnam was ineffective and that we should get out of Vietnam as quickly as possible. Thus, the history from which The Times writers distilled their summary may also be lacking in objectivity. My study of The Times version leads me to believe that it is indeed lacking in objectivity.

Nevertheless, it is interesting reading, contains much information that I knew about quite intimately, and also some with which I was not familiar.

You can be sure that this document is required reading for some people. It certainly is required reading in Hanoi, in Moscow, and in Peking, for this book contains information on the decision-making processes of our Government which is of distinct aid and benefit to the enemy. The Times has made the job of the enemy intelligence services quite simple. All they have to do is go to the nearest newsstand.

I want to comment on the air war over North Vietnam because as Commander in Chief, Pacific, I was running the air war, with not much help from certain sectors in Washington. I believe that the air war was the most misunderstood part of our whole engagement. It was especially misunderstood by the civilians in the Pentagon who were making the broad decisions and many of the smaller decisions of the air war. The severe restrictions under which our Air Force operated resulted in markedly decreased effec-

tiveness of the tremendous power we had available and resulted in wide misunderstanding of the effectiveness of air power when properly used.

In February of 1965 the decision was made to conduct a bombing campaign against North Vietnam. From the very first there was a wide divergence of opinion as to how our air power should be used. The Joint Chiefs of Staff desired that we hit hard at Hanoi's capabilities to carry on the war in order to convince Hanoi that the course of action it was pursuing would be unprofitable, and to let them know early in the game that we were willing to apply the force we had available.

Numerous civilians in the Department of Defense, however, desired that air power be used very sparingly, in limited doses, well spaced to give the other side opportunity to contemplate the seriousness of their acts. The civilian advisers won, so our air raids against North Vietnam started with minuscule doses of air power, applied to targets which hardly were worth the effort. Our air power was never used to its full effectiveness. I should say that throughout the war I got complete cooperation from the Joint Chiefs. They backed me on every recommendation I made.

I wouldn't want to leave the impression that it was only the military that advocated a strong policy on the air war. Mr. John McCone, who in 1965 was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, recommended in April that unless the United States was willing to bomb the North, with minimum restraint, to break Hanoi's will, it was unwise to commit ground troops to battle. Mr. McCone expressed these views to the President at least twice in the month of April.

On the other side of the picture Mr. George Ball, Under Secretary of State, from the very beginning believed that neither bombing the North nor fighting the guerrillas in the South, nor any combination of the two offered a solution to the problem. He believed that we should cut our losses and withdraw from South Vietnam. Mr. Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State and Mr. Ball's boss, advocated a strong policy in the air war.

The air campaign of 1965 was characterized by excessive restrictions from Washington which limited us to piddling strikes against generally unimportant targets, although toward the end of the year we were beginning to get a few better targets and the num-

bers of planes we were able to use was beginning to be useful.

The Times article says that the Pentagon study of the 1965 period discloses that high-level civilian authorities, including Secretary McNamara, began to have serious doubts about the effectiveness of both the air and ground war as early as the fall of 1965. I must say that I have difficulty understanding how they expected the air campaign to show any measure of effectiveness when it was so heavily restricted, both as to targets and as to numbers of strike aircraft.

A feature of the account of the bombing campaign in 1966 was the intense policy dispute that took place over the question of bombing North Vietnam's oil storage tanks. After much hemming and hawing, I was finally granted permission in June of 1966 to strike the Haiphong and Hanoi storage sites. The strikes were quite successful but I am sure the North Vietnamese knew that we would eventually make these strikes and had dispersed their fuel supplies as much as possible. The enemy knew that we did not strike populated areas so the streets of many towns were lined with oil drums in plain view from the air but safe from attack because of our restrictions on striking in any populated area.

In the summer of 1966, Secretary McNamara had a panel of scientists studying the over-all results of Operation Rolling Thunder and this panel, as might be expected, concluded that the air campaign would not achieve the results desired. This panel of scientists recommended an electronic barrier which at that time was so super-secret that very few people knew about it. We called this barrier the "McNamara Line," or sometimes the "Edsel Line."

Mr. McNamara hoped that this electronic barrier would make it unnecessary to continue with the bombing of North Vietnam and so a great deal of effort was put into the project, which cost well over a billion dollars.

In the meantime the surface-to-air missile threat was increasing and a few planes were shot down. Thus, our dilly-dallying with the air war had allowed the enemy to build up a very efficient air defense which was taking an increasing toll of our planes and pilots. Throughout 1966 and into 1967, I sent message after message to the Joint Chiefs trying to get the restrictions on our air campaign lifted and trying to get better targets assigned.

In 1967 we were allowed better targets than in '66 and were allowed to use more strike sorties, so that the air war progressed quite well. Of course, ships were still allowed to come into Haiphong and we weren't allowed to hit close to the docks. We were able to cut the lines of communication between Haiphong and Hanoi so that it was difficult for them to get material through. If we had continued the campaign and eased the restrictions in 1968 I believe we could have brought the war to a successful conclusion.

I regret that we lost the major leverage that we had for bringing the war to a conclusion by successful negotiations. Now the war has dragged on for three more years and the negotiations in Paris have accomplished nothing.

President Nixon's strategy of turning the fighting over to the Vietnamese as fast as they are able to accept the responsibility has been successful so far. I hope the American people, and especially Congress, will permit him to carry out this operation in an orderly fashion so that the Vietnamese will be capable of defending themselves by the time our forces are withdrawn.

There is at least one lesson that we should learn from this war. That lesson is that we should never commit the armed forces of the United States to combat unless we have decided at the same time to use the non-nuclear power we have available to win in the shortest possible time.

Adm. U. S. Grant Sharp (retired), Pacific commander during the height of the Vietnam war, made these remarks before the Navy League in San Diego.