THE DELIBERATE WAR AGAINST CIVILIANS

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Washington

As early as the fall of 1965, the American Embassy in Saigon distributed a Rand Corporation study on the air and artillery bombardments. The study concluded that the peasants blamed the Viet Cong when their hamlets were blasted and their relatives killed; in effect, that shrapnel, white phosphorus and napalm were good political medicine.

The study was dismissed by reporters as macabre proof that the government could always find a think-tank to tell it what it wanted to think.

A News Analysis

In the summer of 1966, however, a lengthy secret study of the pacification program was done for the embassy and military headquarters in Saigon by some of the most experienced Americans in the country. One of the study's recommendations was that this practice of unrestricted bombing and shelling should be re-examined.

According to the study there was evidence that the practice was driving hundreds of thousands of refugees into urban slums and squalid camps, causing unnecessary death and suffering, and angering the peasantry. The proposal for a reexamination was vetoed.

Policy

By deciding not to reconsider, the American leadership in Saigon was deciding to ordain the practice, to establish a de facto policy. During those earlier years at least, the policy was not acknowledged in writing, as far as I know, but neither can there be any doubt that this was the way things were to be done and that those American military and civilian leaders directing the war knew the grim cost of their decision not to look.

Why did they establish the policy? Because devastation had become a fundamental element in their strategy to win the war.

I remember asking one of the most senior American generals in the late summer of 1966 if he was not worried by all the civilian casualties that the bombing and shelling were causing. "Yes, it is a problem," he said, "but it does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn't it?"

A survey of refugees commissioned later that year by the Pentagon indicated that 54 per cent of those in Dinh Tuong province in the Mekong Delta were fleeing their hamlets in fear of bombing and shelling.

Game

So this was the game. The firepower that only American technology can muster was to defeat the Vietnamese communists by outright military attrition, the body count, and by obliterating their strategic base, the rural population.

People and their homes were dehumanized into grid coordinates on a targeting map. Those other formalities, like obtaining clearance from the Vietnamese province chief before you bombed a hamlet, were stratagems to avoid responsibility, because he almost never refused permission. (Such legal fictions, by the way, are expressly forbidden by the laws of war.)

By 1967, this policy of unrestricted air and artillery bombardments had been orchestrated with search and destroy operations by ground troops, B-52 strikes, and crop destruction with chemical herbicides into a strategy that was progressively laying waste much of the countryside.

Society

That year Jonathan Schell went to Quang Nai to document the creeping destruction of the rural society in a two-part article that first appeared in the New Yorker magazine. It was later published with a title of understated irony, "The Military Half." Schell estimated that by this time about 70 per cent of the 450 hamlets in the province had been destroyed.

Did the military and civilian leaders directing the war from Washington know what was happening in Vietnam? How could they have avoided knowing? The newspapers, magazine articles like Schell's and the reports of the Kennedy subcommittee indicated the extent of what was being done in their name.

The statistics alone are enough to tell the tale: five million refugees, nearly a third of South Vietnam's population of 16 million people.

These peasant hamlets, one must bear in mind, were not being plowed under because American or South Vietnamese ground troops were attempting to seize them from the enemy in pitched battles. The hamlets were being bombarded in the absence of ground combat.

Crime

One might argue that though regrettable, though even immoral, the air and artillery bombardments of civilians in Vietnam were not a war crime.

The Allies engaged in terror bombing of Japanese and German cities in World War II. Look at the incendiary raids on Dresden and Tokyo and the nuclear holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. None of the defendants at the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials were convicted of war crimes involving the bombing of civilian populations, because the prosecutors had done the same thing. Similarly, in the Korean war, the United States Air Force bombed Korean towns and cities.

But is Vietnam the same kind of war? There is good reason to think that it is not. In World War II opposing industrialized societies were fighting a war of survival. In this context of total war, the cities inevitably became targets to be destroyed. They contained the industries that fueled their opponent's war machine and the workers who manned the factories. The worker was as much a

combatant as the uniformed soldier.

In Vietnam, however, the most advanced technological nation in the world intervened in a civil war in primitive, agricultural country. The Vietnamese communists possess negligible industry, no air force of any size, and no intercontinental missiles that pose a threat to the survival of the United States.

Moreover, as the literature amply documents, the use of the air weapon underwent a subtle and important change in South Vietnam from the previous two wars. Air power, and artillery as a corollary weapon, were directed by an occupying power, the United States, at the civilian population in the rural areas of the country under occupation.

The targets of the bombs and shells were the noncombatants themselves, because it was believed that their existence was important to the enemy. Air power became a distinct weapon of terror to empty the countryside.

One key to understanding this use of airpower in South Vietnam is to compare the unrestricted bombing in the south with the elaborate restrictions that surrounded the air campaign against North Vietnam.

Although the North Vietnamese may not believe it, in the north a conscious effort was made to bomb only military, and what limited industrial targets were available, and to weigh probable civilian casualties against the military advantages to be gained from a particular air-strike.

The ultimate objective of the air campaign against the north was, to be sure, political rather than military. It sought to intimidate the North Vietnamese into withdrawing their forces from the south and taking the Viet Cong guerrillas along with them. And undoubtedly the restrictions were also designed to escape the unfavorable publicity that would result from severe civilian casualties in the north.

Next: The clear laws of war. (DO NOT HAVE CONSTITUTION)

Neil Sheehan is a correspondent in the Washington Bureau of the New York Times. He previously spent three years in Vietnam and in 1964 received the Neiman Fellows Louis M. Lyons award for "conscience and integrity in journalism" for his coverage of the war during the previous two years. This is part of a special report on a study he made on whether the United States should have war crime trials.