

Andrew Kopkind on Wartime Washington



“I WILL NOT WAR against women and children. I have ordered my air force to restrict itself to attacks on military objectives.” For weeks now, the atmosphere in Washington has been heavy with such promises of humanity and restraint. That *particular* promise happened to be made by Adolf Hitler, on the occasion of his declaration of war against Poland in September 1939, but it serves to illustrate the universal desire of statesmen to make their most monstrous missions seem like acts of mercy. In the case of President Johnson, the quality of mercy is not strained; it drops on Ho Chi Minh and General Ky, on pacified Vietnamese villages and the Thai Nguyen steel works, on Senators Robert Kennedy and Edward Brooke, Premier Kosygin and U Thant, Governor Romney and Buddha. If mercy burns like napalm or stings like rebuke, that’s not his fault. The President—as Senator Kennedy said early in his annual speech on the war—has a “grave and painful responsibility,” and is entitled to our “sympathy, understanding and support.”

It is not easy to give him that due; nor is it always clear what he expects. He pulls benign and malign faces like an actor rapidly alternating the classic masks of Comedy and Tragedy. In Tennessee he bristled with threats of wider war. At Guam, he talked about Vietnam under pacification as a green and pleasant New Jerusalem. In mid-Pacific, he released the record of his correspondence with Ho to indicate the extent of Washington’s willingness—and Hanoi’s reluctance—to negotiate a settlement. Soon afterwards, Johnson achieved Senator Brooke’s conversion to hawkdom; in a moving display of blue-eyed soul, Brooke burst into real tears and announced that he dug the war. Finally, Johnson instructed Secretary Rusk to “accept” U Thant’s truce proposals, pending preliminary talks before bombing of the North stopped, and provided assurances of reciprocity were given. With an acceptance like that there was no need of a rejection.

Such is the state of the President’s credibility, that both critics and supporters of U.S. policy assume his behavior to be disingenuous. After Rusk’s embrace of the Thant peace plan, the New York Times concluded that the groundwork was now laid for “further military pressure against Hanoi.” The important question was what form the escalation would take. The Wall Street Journal guessed that there would be bombing of North Vietnamese airfields (Secretary McNamara said there wouldn’t be), or some sort of assault on Haiphong. Former Strategic Air Command *Kapo* Curtis LeMay delighted an Air Force Association convention by advocating the use of tactical nuclear weapons; but the idea found little favor in the White House. There was speculation about a rapid buildup of troop strength (now about 435,000 in Vietnam and untold multitudes in the Pacific area as a whole), or an

attack on rail lines closer to China, or bigger and better raids of the type now employed against North Vietnam. In any case, the general idea was *more*.

Early in March, it began to occur to the most paranoiac—that is, the more realistic—analysts of the war that the coming escalation would be one of kind and not simply of degree, a change of policy as dramatic as the President’s post-Goldwater “retaliation” bombings had been in February 1965. For a few days, there were rumors of an imminent invasion of North Vietnam. New York peaceniks prepared to descend on Congress after the Easter recess, to what purpose it was not immediately clear. Fortunately, reports of the apocalypse were premature, although not entirely discountable. For the escalation jitters did have some basis in the crazy logic of the war.

The Administration’s objective in Vietnam is now “victory”—interpreted in a variety of possible ways, perhaps, but all within the common sense meaning of the word. There is no more talk of finding a means to “save face” so that the troops can leave. The minimum requirement is a “stable” non-communist government in South Vietnam, the security of the vast United States fortress in Thailand, and the establishment of an American veto over changes in the status quo elsewhere in Asia. The maximum gain would be counterrevolution in China and North Vietnam, Christian democracy in the South, and alliances for America everywhere. Although there are those in the Pentagon who hanker after that gold ring, the President would no doubt be willing to settle for less. But that is academic: neither the U.S., for its part, nor North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, for theirs, is willing to compromise basic positions. Much less is either side willing to surrender. In that case, it is hardly worth arguing about conditions or unconditions for a settlement. Nothing will happen until both sides are convinced that they cannot possibly gain by fighting.

The history of proposals for a negotiated settlement of the war is little more than the account of a tiresome game that long ago lost interest for the spectators. The pattern has been for a new act of escalation to follow every diplomatic move. In December 1965, the Fanfani-La Pira message (that Hanoi might not insist on recognition of its Four Points for negotiation) was followed by the first bombing of the Haiphong area. On June 20, 1966, U Thant put forward his Three Points, which called for a cessation of bombing in the North after a scaling-down by both sides; on June 29, the U.S. bombed oil storage depots in Hanoi and Haiphong. Last December, the Polish peace initiative was frustrated by the bombings of Hanoi proper.

Senator Kennedy, among others, pointed out that the U.S. could have fastened onto any number of acts of

apparent de-escalation by North Vietnam as a “signal” to end the bombing and begin talks toward negotiation. (President Kennedy did something of the kind during the Cuban missile crisis: he chose to respond to those offers and statements by Khrushchev that seemed most conciliatory, and ignored the belligerent ones.) Whether Hanoi meant to de-escalate is not the point. But at the beginning of the year, there seemed to be a reduction in communist main force military activities, a drop in the infiltration rate, and a temporary withdrawal of North Vietnamese divisions from the South. At the same time, Hanoi’s foreign minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, said in an “interview” with a friendly journalist, Wilfred Burchett, that talks with the U.S. could begin after a cessation of bombing, regardless of American compliance with the other points. But President Johnson wasn’t buying it. When the Têt produced no communist surrender, he charged that Hanoi had used the respite for a military build-up, and ordered the raids resumed and intensified.

THE ONLY “CLEAR SIGNAL” either side will recognize is a white flag. Since none are unfurled, the war will continue, and the President feels he is bound to pursue it. But despite some rather ambiguous and altogether minor “victories,” the war is not going at all well for the U.S. command. The generals predict the imminent collapse of the enemy, but they are unable to produce that god from the military machine. “I wish I could report to you that the conflict is almost over,” the President said in his State of the Union message. “This I cannot do . . . I cannot promise you that it will come this year—or the next.” In the recent Senate hearings on a supplemental military appropriation, Secretary McNamara admitted that the balance of military control of South Vietnam had not changed appreciably in a year: the Ky government controlled about half the population, the Viet Cong about a quarter, and a quarter was disputed. (Even that was wildly over-optimistic; U.S. intelligence uses very flexible criteria for “control.”) Desertions from the communists are said to be high, but reporters say that the deserters are from the “soft-shell,” not the hard-core of the main force. And desertions from South Vietnamese government forces are much higher.

The recent U.S. “beachhead” in the Mekong Delta was high farce; the NLF knew the Americans were coming, slipped out of sight, and returned when the invaders left. The huge area-wide sweeps have been more productive of casualties, but not of victory. Operation Junction City, the largest U.S. attack of the war, used 30,000 troops, cost \$25 million to launch, and caused more losses to the U.S. than to the enemy. Paradoxically, the Viet Cong have been launching smaller attacks, but

they are inflicting more casualties on U.S. forces than ever before in widespread guerrilla raids. In the last week of March, 274 Americans were killed, a record, the papers said, for the war. (Preserving the theoretical ten-to-one kill-ratio, 2774 communists obligingly dropped. It was the kind of statistical coincidence that suggests Army PIO’s in Saigon are getting lazy about their work.)

The pacification program has been sold to the American public as a kind of modified COFO Vietnam Summer Project. It seems to have a great deal of success in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, but less in the field, where 20,000 armed community organizers putter around villages trying to convince the inhabitants to support the Saigon government. Lately they have been doing voter education work (“Y’all come to the votin’”), but in their spare time they turn over “suspected Viet Cong” (i.e., young men in the villages who get in the way) as prisoners to the government troops. Most of the pacifiers are afraid to spend the night in the villages; exceptions are so rare that the head of the program, General Nguyen Duc Thang, personally commends the courage of sleep-in cadres as American reporters rush to write stories about them.

At best, the U.S. effort in Vietnam (and indeed in the whole Southeast Asian “theater”) is a mixed bag of costly advances and even more costly frustrations. Although the newspapers often give the impression that the U.S. military is on the verge of total victory, in fact the war is still deeply stalemated. The bombings, the big sweeps, the beachheads, the “search and destroy” and “clear and secure” missions are immensely destructive (to both sides) but they do not change the nature of the war from a guerrilla campaign inspired by nationalism against an invading imperialist power. It doesn’t make sense to talk about victories and defeats in the terms that were invented for the wars of European nation-states of the 19th century. The NLF and the North Vietnamese do not decide to make war or peace on the basis of industrial production statistics or even casualty lists. They are not playing Diplomacy. They are in the process of making their nation, and while that process can be brutal and painful and often contradictory, it cannot be turned off except by total annihilation. Sir Robert Thompson, head of the British Advisory Mission in South Vietnam, formerly secretary for Defense in Malaya and the author of the insightful *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, put it all very cogently in a recent Washington Post article:

Time is the key to [North Vietnamese General] Giap’s present strategy in Vietnam. He now holds that he cannot defeat the United States forces militarily and certainly not in a war of movement within Vietnam. He must, therefore, let time do his work for him.

The battles of the last two years have been a perfect

example of this. By maintaining high-scale guerrilla warfare he has traded manpower for space and time, so far at an acceptable cost. In assessing cost there is an unfortunate tendency to compute insurgent losses optimistically in terms relevant only to a Western industrialized democratic society.

The 50,000 Viet Cong killed in 1966 were only a fraction of one year's age group, where all are subject to the draft. Two or three hundred thousand deployed to repair bomb damage to communications and services in North Vietnam are only a small part of the male, and female, labor force which could be made available without damaging the war effort. Revolutionary war is very cheap in terms of material and production in a society which only has to exist to breed.

If South Vietnam is to win, the country must in the end be restored as politically and administratively stable and economically expanding, capable of standing on its own feet. That alone is winning and will inevitably take time—10, 15, or even 20 years.

FOR HALF A DECADE the U.S. has been misunderstanding the war, and pouring more resources into Vietnam in a futile attempt to get the better of an elusive situation. Each new escalation, every build-up of troops is promised as a final solution, but the stalemate is maintained: the beat goes on. Secretary McNamara talks about a "leveling off" of troops at the 475,000 mark by the end of the year (he used to talk about leveling off at 125,000, but then he also said the boys would be home for Christmas by 1965), but the military knows that it will take a great deal just to keep things from degenerating.

The only strategy the Administration sees possible is further escalation, and it now appears unavoidable. More bombing of the North may be the easy way out, even if it does not do much good. Infiltration of North Vietnamese troops into the South continues undisturbed. McNamara recently said in a Congressional hearing, "I don't believe that the bombing up to the present has significantly reduced, nor any bombing that I could contemplate in the future would significantly reduce, actual flow of men and materiel to the South." Estimates of how many North Vietnamese have been diverted from other activities to reconstruction work vary widely, but the effort does not appear to be killing to North Vietnam. If the World War II strategic bombing surveys are any guide, the diversionary advantages are smaller than military chiefs expect.

Other "conventional" steps of escalation offer no more assurance of success for U.S. strategy. Clear-and-secure operations amount to little. "Our progress has not been satisfactory," McNamara said recently. "In fact, we have

found that it is very difficult to clear, completely and permanently, any area in which the Viet Cong guerrillas were once well established." Putting more troops in U.S. bases produces more casualties than anything else; the soldiers get cut up the minute they leave the bases.

There are thought to be several "next steps" under consideration, but they involve military as well as political drawbacks. Even if the political decision were made to mine Haiphong harbor (and risk destruction of Russian or even Western European ships), the military advantages would not be great. Alternate means of supply are available (and could conceivably contribute to a temporary accommodation between China and Russia). Bombing raids on untouched specific targets (rail links with China, for instance) would be of marginal importance. Beyond those, there are the "terror tactics"—destroying the Red River dikes or bombing civilian targets on a massive scale—and they may be used.

Eventually, it may occur to U.S. strategists that nothing they have done so far really "works." At that point, a new order of escalation might be tried—not just more, but different. At that point, thoughts would turn North. In late winter and early spring, there were some scattered (and unconnected) indications that an invasion of North Vietnam was in fact on the U.S. military's mind. First of all, Junction City tested the first parachute combat jump of the war, and proved (to the generals, at least) the ability to organize offensives with 20,000 to 30,000 men at a time. Then the Marines began amphibious operations in South Vietnam's northernmost province, Quang Tri; there were estimates of about 75,000 Marines in the "I Corps" close to North Vietnam. In February, the U.S. began mining selected rivers in North Vietnam, and on the same day American cruisers and destroyers began shelling targets in North Vietnam. Just then, the U.S. Army's largest guns started firing across the Demilitarized Zone some 20 miles into North Vietnam.

For some reason, the U.S. felt the time was ripe to announce what everyone had known for years: that planes based in Thailand were bombing North Vietnam. It was reported (that is, leaked) that B-52s would soon be moved to Thailand from Guam. The Thais, fearing retaliation raids, asked the U.S. for surface-to-air missiles. In early March, General Westmoreland was given "carte blanche" to direct air and naval bombardment from the 17th parallel 60 miles northward to Donghoi, and there were reports that he would soon be made a "theater" commander for Southeast Asia. The coordination of military activities over the whole region is no sure indication of an invasion, but it is a necessary precondition for one.

What form an invasion would take involves a great deal of guesswork. Perhaps the most convenient route would

be through the DMZ into the long, narrow southern panhandle of North Vietnam. Senator Symington reported recently that opinion among intelligence, diplomatic, and military officials in the Far East was divided as to the likelihood of Chinese intervention if an invasion were confined to the panhandle. Such a strategy would “seal off” North Vietnam somewhere near Vinh, and make the enclosed area vulnerable to attack from U.S. guns offshore and U.S. planes based in (nearby) Thailand. Access to the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” (such as the U.S. thinks it is), would be denied to the North Vietnamese, and that in itself might form the basis of the political justification for an invasion. Anyone could write the Presidential speech: “We have acted today to stop the infiltration which the enemy has launched in order to kill our boys . . .” Or the rationalization could invoke the right of “reprisal” or “hot pursuit.” The speech for *that* has already been given. President Johnson said in a press conference in March:

“I don’t think it’s fair to ask an American commander-in-chief to say to your men, ‘Ground your planes, tie your hands behind you, and sit there and watch division after division come across the DMZ, and don’t hit them until they get within a mile or two!’ ”

Less probable, although not inconceivable invasion plans might call for an “Inchon-type” beachhead far in the North, or a landing at Haiphong (which would be much more pleasant if the harbor remained un-mined) and a drive on Hanoi. U.S. operations in Laos suggest that there is some interest in keeping that country open for use in an invasion, either as an attack route or a “corridor” between the 35 U.S. airbases in northeastern Thailand and North Vietnam.

The logic of the strategic situation in Southeast Asia does not alone compel an invasion, even if it suggests to the generals that escalation is desirable. But there are strong arguments for decisive action—or what looks like decisive action—in the Administration’s political and economic position at home, and to some extent in its diplomatic situation elsewhere in the world.

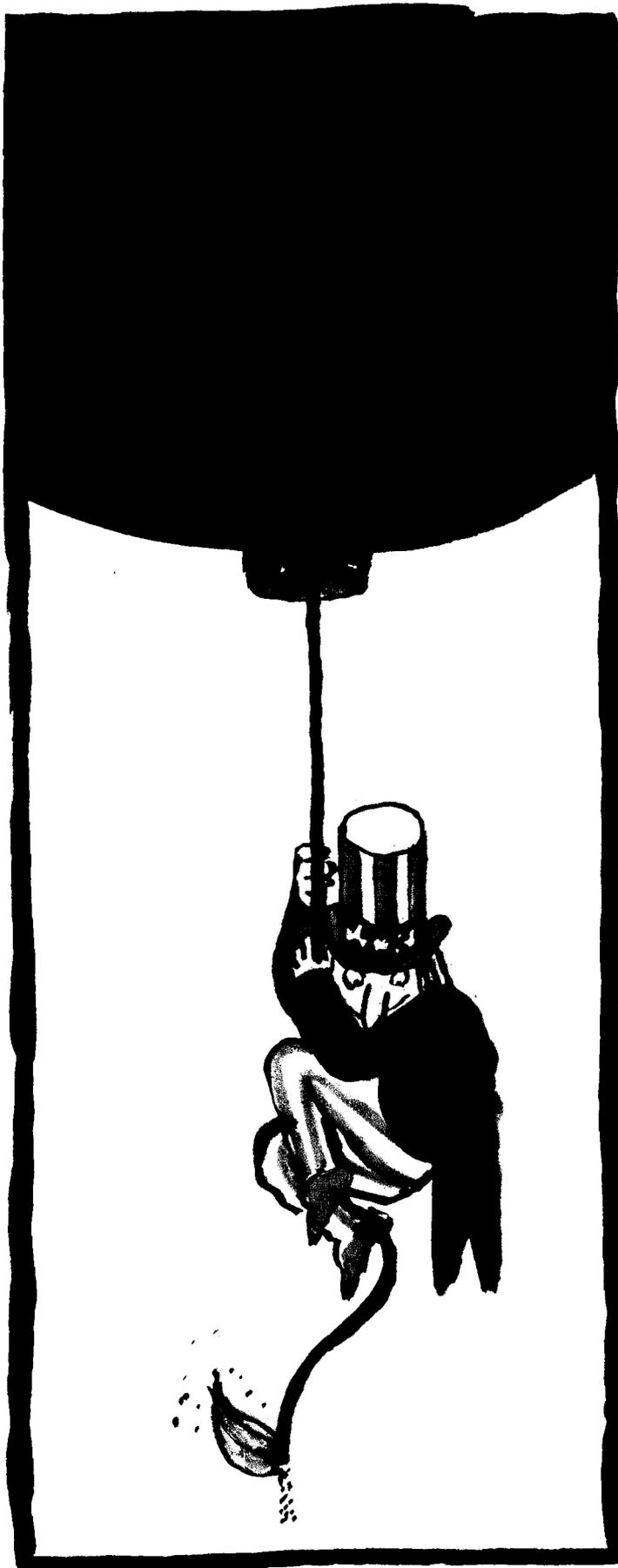
THE WAR is costing at least \$25 billion this year—and maybe as much as \$40 billion, if Senator Russell Long can be believed in his unguarded moments. That amounts to not much more than three or four per cent of the Gross National Product, which is fairly cheap as wars go. But as a lump sum it is larger than it looks in the macroeconomic model. War money is highly visible. It is spent in the big states, and it is appropriated in special acts of Congress that draw more publicity than much larger money bills. The three or four per cent works outside the normal dynamic of demand and production; it creates imbalances and dislocations.

More important, it is being spent at a time when articulate blocs of the population are looking for ways to criticize the Administration—and not necessarily directly on the war issue. The fabric of consensus is torn. Labor will no longer settle for a statesmanlike image in exchange for its acquiescence on basic economic questions. Negroes and the poor may be no worse off than they were two years ago, but they are no better off either, and now at least they want to attack. Republican businessmen who went along with Kennedy-Johnson Keynesianism will find it hard to swallow the bigger deficits (\$20 billion next year?) that the war will cause in the federal budget. The \$25 billion for the war may be a small bone, but it sticks in everyone’s craw.

It would be easier for the President to slip it by if the economy were in better shape. But by early spring, the secret word in Washington was “recession.” Talk about it or not (“sluggishness” is the official euphemism), something was happening to the six-year boom, and its direction was *down*. The late winter economic indicators were falling like wet snow. Although the stock market seemed jauntier than it had been for a long time, there were widespread predictions of a crash-let in the months ahead. Economic advisors talked optimistically at first of an upturn by summer, and then not so optimistically. The Administration packaged a bizarre formula of tax credits for businessmen (reinstatement of the seven per cent investment bonus) and tax debits for people (a six per cent surcharge), but Congress was interested primarily in the former. The President said the income tax rise was to cure the inflation which would follow normalcy which was just around the corner. It seemed more probable that he was worried about what the size of the deficit would look like in the Wall Street Journal during the 1968 campaign.

Johnson was willing to try all the orthodox Keynesian methods of re-igniting the boom, except the obvious one of ending the war. Rather, his theory favored expansion of it. The example of mobilization as an antidote for depression in 1939, and for recession in 1950, was perhaps not applicable but it was still attractive. In any event, it is impossible to separate the question of war escalation from the operation of the economy. Economics is largely a question of perceptions; economic man always gums up the macro-model by developing fears, anxieties, frustrations. All the finagling in the world will not cure them.

Political man is even less predictable, and the interplay of the war with domestic politics is more confused and confusing than the economic muddle. The hawks-and-doves thing has gotten completely out of hand. Hawks are out of fashion and doves are out of office, and it’s every bird for himself. In the peculiar universe of Republicanism, there are as many positions as politicians.



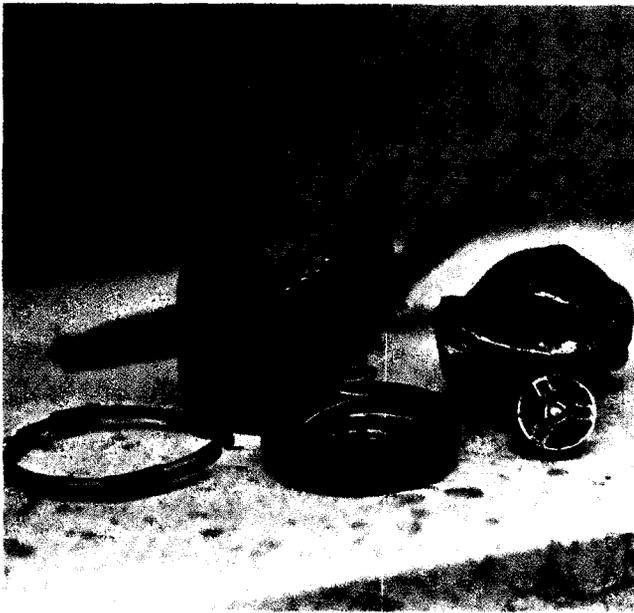
Senator Hatfield is now resoundingly against the war, which would be encouraging if it were at all certain that he knows what he's talking about; it isn't. Governor Romney's Hartford speech, anticipated lo! these many months, was the political non-event of April. In Washington, Senator Thruston Morton was spending a great deal of time steering his ambitions through the Scylla of Everett Dirksen and the Charybdis of demon bourbon, and foundering on both. The Americans for Democratic Action, in Congress assembled for the 20th time (it seems like centuries) threatened to take their millions and minions out of the Democratic camp in 1968, if anyone cared. The President may; but he has probably given up the liberals and left wing labor as a bad gamble, and is concentrating on the great middle class which he can more easily manipulate into jingoism.

Although he is doing poorly in the polls, the President thinks he can win again and many Democratic politicians tend to agree. They *have* to agree, after all; better that than starve. Even Robert Kennedy now declares himself, on an empty stomach, to be behind the Johnson-Humphrey team in '68. The President's plan is said to be escalation now, negotiation later. He would make a big show of it in Vietnam until six months before the campaign, win a few headline victories, get the Reds on the run, and then magnanimously offer a compromise or two, suspend bombing, and campaign as a man of peace. It is a good plan, and might even work if he could control the dynamics of the war, which he cannot. The enemy's counter-gambit is just as ingenious: hold out until the elections in the hope that Johnson will be defeated, then take advantage of an "I will go to Vietnam" Republican.

It is far too early to tell what effect the "peace politicians" on the one hand, and the George Wallace types on the other will have. Speculation now involves the silliest kind of scholasticism: how many liberals can dance on the head of Dr. Spock? But it is fair to say that the President reads the omens as favoring a tough line. Whether that means an invasion of the North (as favored by General Nguyen Van Thieu, the Pentagon, and perhaps China) or more of the status quo (supported by Governor Romney, the State Department, and perhaps Russia) is unknown. It is, after all, Mr. Johnson's war, and he is playing it all for himself. "By his own lights, he did his best," Samuel Eliot Morrison once wrote of George III of England, and the characterization applies equally to President Johnson: "but his lights were few and dim, and his best was none too good."

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“AND BLESSED BE THE FRUIT..”



Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;*
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part . . .*

[DEFINITION OF GENOCIDE; UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY GENOCIDE CONVENTION, DECEMBER 9, 1948]

PRESIDENT JOHNSON and Secretary McNamara have publicly stated time and again that our planes in Vietnam bomb only military targets. We have been assured that extreme care is exercised to avoid civilian casualties, often at risk to the pilots concerned. The sole purpose of the bombing, we have been told, is to destroy factories, interdict roads, railways, supply vehicles and bridges, but at no time do we deliberately attempt to bomb civilians.

When 500-, 750- or 1000-pound HE (High Explosive) bombs are dropped on factories, the military is on relatively safe grounds defending its intent. White phosphorous can also be defended (militarily) as an incendiary used to destroy military structures. By stretching a point, it can also be said that napalm burns wooden bridges, twists

steel with its heat, and can burn off jungle cover to expose enemy troops.

But what can be said of a bomb that cannot burn a bridge or a factory, will not penetrate or blow up cement structures, does not penetrate roadways, causes little damage to vehicles and less to trains? We have at least two such types in common usage in Vietnam and possibly a third. They are variously referred to as bomblets, cluster bombs, pineapple bombs or guava bombs. The prototypes were called “Lazy Dogs” or LD’s. When there is no way to avoid the subject, our military refers to these weapons as “Ordnance, Fragmentation.” Everyone else calls them anti-personnel bombs.

The Lazy Dog prototype was first used in Vietnam in 1954, dropped from French Navy *Privateer* planes—gifts to the French from the United States. Bernard Fall commented that the French “had been equipped with new American ‘Lazy Dog’ anti-personnel bombs, whose thousands of razor-sharp splinters have a deadly effect on unprotected humans. . . . They are still used in Vietnam in 1965-66.”

The pineapple and guava, so dubbed by the Vietnamese, appear to be refinements of the LD. The pineapples are carried in tubes under jet aircraft, with 25 bombs to the tube. Depending on the aircraft, each plane can carry up to 20 tubes. When released, the pineapples sprout winglets which either stabilize their descent or increase the dispersion pattern. The pineapple explodes on contact and spews 240 steel balls ten meters in all directions. The steel balls are 6.3 millimeters (approximately 1/4 inch) in diameter and hit with a velocity comparable to shotgun pellets fired at a distance of three to four yards. The discharge from one aircraft creates an elliptical killing zone five football fields long by two and one half football fields wide.

The steel balls have no effect on military structures. They cannot pierce cement and can penetrate earthen or sandbag military revetments only to a depth of two or three inches. The one thing they can penetrate effectively is human flesh. Because of their shape and/or velocity, once they tear into the body they move in a complex path, doing great damage and complicating removal. There are cases where people have been hit by as many as 30 pellets.

Evidently developed in 1962, the first reports of usage of these bombs date back to January 1965. The justification for their use was to knock out anti-aircraft positions.

by Don Duncan

Photograph by Robert Scheer