

WAR IN THE BACK PAGES

BY TOM OLIPHANT

ONCE A MONTH, THE RITUAL BEGINS with a phone call to the Southeast Asia section of the public information office of the Defense Department. Phone, peace, and other freaks would perhaps be interested in the phone number—202-OX7-5331.

Usually, Specialist Bragg answers the phone, but sometimes Major Kane is in. Despite scores of telephone calls, over six months, I've never felt relaxed enough to breach the formality of the ritual long enough to ask these perfectly polite fellows what their first names are.

The question is always the same: Have you got the number yet?

It all starts each month on the tenth, and for as long as two weeks after that, the answer, twice a day, is No, and they never know when they'll have it.

Then one day, anywhere from the tenth to the twenty-fifth of the month, they have it, and after five or, more often, six digits are called out over the telephone wire, the ritual ends until the next month.

Specialist Bragg and Major Kane, at least as far as I know, do not operate the policy game in their wing of the Pentagon. The ritual we go through every month involves another number—the total tonnage of the bombs that have been dropped on Indochina during the previous month.

To those unfamiliar with the ways important official information is dispensed in Washington, the tonnage ritual must appear odd; at least it did to me when I was first exposed to it back in January. It would be natural to assume that, for a number like this, the script would call at least for a news release from some recognizable name in Saigon

or Washington, if not for a press conference, complete with charts showing all the latest trends and breaking the number down in every possible way.

But this is the Nixon Administration, and the subject is the Indochina war, or, more specifically, the Indochina air war, so maybe the tonnage ritual isn't that odd after all.

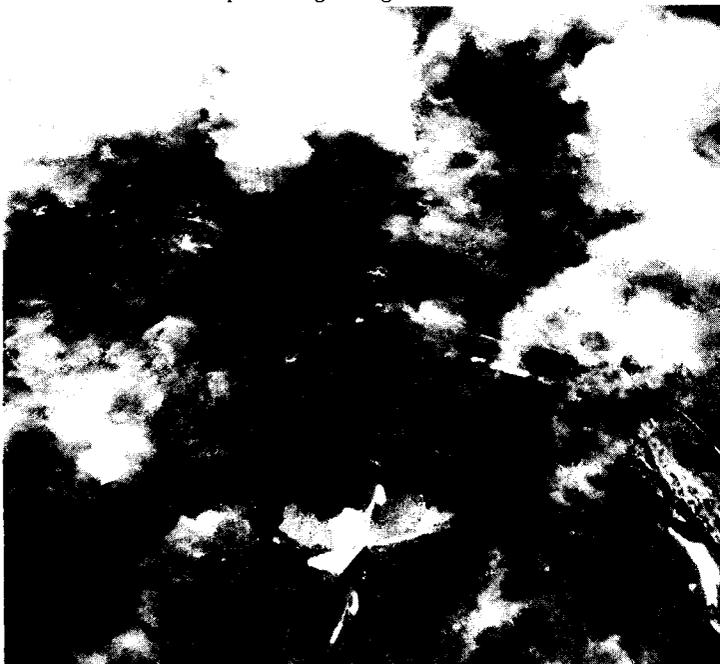
For the simple fact is that, if you want to bury a fact so no one will really pay attention to it, the most effective technique, in Washington as well as in every state house and city hall, is not to announce it. At least 90 percent of every daily newspaper is composed of "information" that has been dispensed at a psuedo-event—a press conference, an official report, or a simple news release. If you don't tell this country's press people about something, the odds are excellent that they won't write about it, at least not regularly, and it is only those things that are written about regularly that make their way into the public consciousness.

All this, of course, is gospel at the White House and Defense Department—hence the tonnage ritual. What it boils down to is this: the United States government does not tell the public what it is doing to Indochina from the air. All it does is add a number once a month to those already on file in the information office, without in any way letting it be known that it is available. If no one bothers to call to get it, and hardly anyone ever does, it doesn't get reported.

As it is, no national newspaper, no broadcast network, and no wire service sends out a story each month that begins: The United States and its allies dropped X thousand tons of bombs on Indochina last month. If I hadn't stumbled into a self-righteously naive reaction to the tonnage ritual in January of this year, there would be no monthly record of "the number" at all in the public press.

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U.S. warplane beginning bomb run



Vietnam landscape



And what a meaningless number it is. All it tells you about is Indochina. In the entire history of the overt air war since 1965, there has never been released a number for a month or a year which refers individually to South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam.

The number is made even more meaningless, from the standpoint of giving people a regularly available yardstick for measuring the scope and intensity of the bombing, by its monthly "release." The society which gave the world the weekly body count is fully capable of collecting, and indeed it does in fact collect, weekly bomb tonnage statistics—not just by country, but by fighter wing and bomber squadron, and even by type of bomb. Not one of those numbers has ever found its way into print.

To belabor the obvious for a moment, all this happens, or doesn't happen, by design. Ever since Nixon made his first decision on the war early in 1969—namely, not to end it on any but his own terms—the Administration has steadily worked to enhance the secrecy around it, beginning with the post-Inauguration action to classify the annual cost of the war.

That, in turn, suggests a fatal flaw in the great Indochina war cliché mouthed so often by Nixon's minions: to wit, that the American people will accept an indefinite conflict as long as only a handful of Americans are being killed and wounded in it every week. What the Administration at the highest levels really believes is that the great cliché is only accurate as long as hard information about its horrifying, brutal, but de-personalized war is successfully suppressed.

Reduced to a somewhat over-simple sentence, if the air war ever got the kind of saturation coverage the American ground war got—on the tube, in the papers, day in and day

Time out from loading bombs



out—the apathy Nixon needs so desperately could be transformed.

That, ultimately, is why only one tonnage number a month is sneaked into the public record. And even that amounts to only one small part of the whole story, for virtually every scrap of useful information about the air war is effectively suppressed.

The entire process begins in that citadel of suppression, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Each day, in what the Defense Department insists is an orgy of openness, the Saigon people will say how many attack sorties (missions by a single plane) have been flown in South Vietnam; and on a monthly basis, sortie figures in the South are available for fixed-wing planes—broken down further into attack and "other combat" (usually a euphemism for B-52s) categories—and helicopters, with sub-totals for attack and combat assault sorties.

But that's it. No tonnage figures, the most graphic of all non-visual descriptions, are given out. Moreover, in its daily announcements, the command in Saigon will not even say where air strikes have occurred, but only that such-and-such an air strike occurred, say, in Military Region I—useless information to a newsman who, for example, might like to check out an area right after an announced bombing raid to investigate the extent of damage to non-combatants and civilian property.

As for the countries to the west, Jerry W. Friedheim, the Pentagon's day-to-day PR man, wrote in a letter to anti-war Rep. Robert L. Leggett (D-Calif.) earlier this year that "air operations in Laos and Cambodia are announced daily in Saigon."

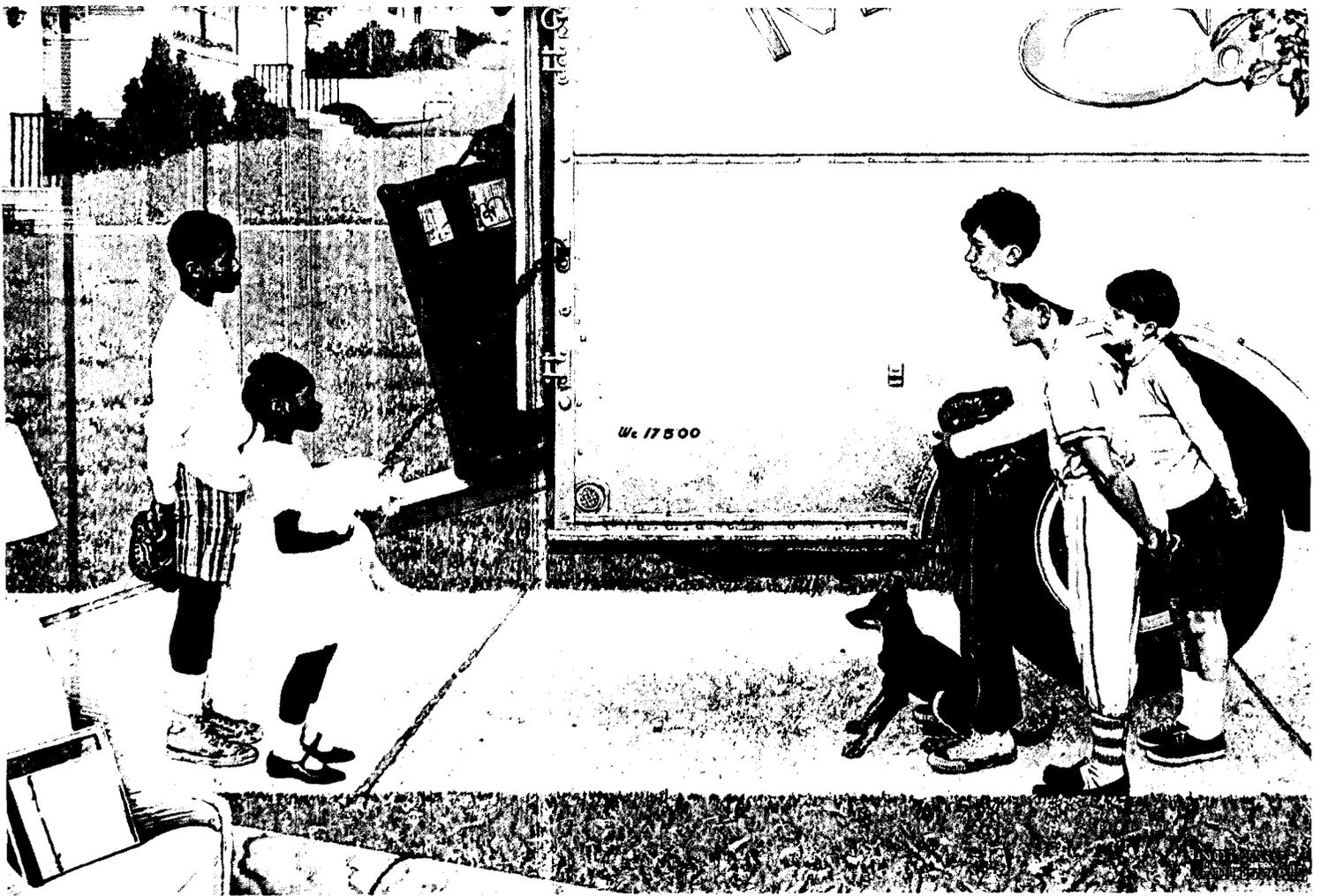
In a sense, he's right, but to see how this policy is carried out you have to read a typical daily announcement, like this one, which may be found in MACV evening press release #70-10, dated March 10 of this year: "Yesterday, U.S. aircraft, including U.S. Air Force B-52s, continued air operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. In addition, U.S. aircraft flew combat missions in support of Royal Laotian forces in Laos. Yesterday, U.S. aircraft, including U.S. Air Force B-52s, continued air operations against enemy forces and their lines of supply and communications in Cambodia."

That's it, two sentences a day, for one of the most brutal military actions in the history of man.

The air war on North Vietnam is far more secret than is generally realized. Let's pass up the "protective reaction" period and move right to the spring of this year, when Nixon ordered resumption of round-the-clock, unlimited bombing of the North.

(Continued on page 62)

PHOTOS BY JUDITH COBURN



Moving In

CAPITALIST REALISM BY NORMAN ROCKWELL

FOR YEARS, NORMAN ROCKWELL has been a representative American. His vision of middle America, eternalized on hundreds of *Saturday Evening Post* covers, became as much a part of the temper of the times as old Mail Pouch signs painted on barns. It was America before the apocalypse, America as it would like to see itself: white, middle-class, untouched by carnal or other knowledge, droll and warm-hearted.

He wavered uncertainly between being camp and simply being embarrassing. To be a Rockwell partisan was immediately to mark oneself off as a part of Mencken's booboisie. As America discovered guilt, the painter became identified with the product: a self-righteous old fool whose job it was to create whimsical lies. This was as wrong as the other view, but the art critics went one step further

and triumphantly pointed out that the supreme realist cowered in his studio, painting from *photographs*.

Norman Rockwell is having a second coming. A sixty-year retrospective of his paintings is now touring the nation's museums. It is a moveable feast of wonder, wholesomeness and fantasy. There could be no surer sign that the 1960s was merely a brief interlude connecting the '50s and '70s than the Rockwell retrospective. His later work contains attempts at a greater "relevance"; but his is one world where nothing has really changed. Rockwell is Rockwell, possibly the only one who sincerely believes in his vision of things. This retrospective is vintage nostalgia. It holds up a mirror to America; not the America that was, or the America that should have been, but the sugar coating that sweetened the bitter pill.—MARSHALL SINGER