

ALSO BY CHRISTIAN G. APPY

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AMERICAN RECKONING

The Vietnam War and
Our National Identity

CHRISTIAN G. APPY



PENGUIN BOOKS

Even America's most sophisticated aircraft routinely missed their targets. Take the air force's F-105 Thunderchief. Flown from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam, the F-105 dropped almost three-quarters of the one million tons of bombs used against North Vietnam. According to military statistics, the F-105 missions had a "circular error probability" of 447 feet, meaning that half the bombs they dropped fell at least 447 feet away from their target. Only 5.5 percent of the F-105 bombs were "direct hits."

Moreover, there were few targets of military significance in North Vietnam. The Pentagon could identify only ninety-four, and even those paled in comparison to the vast transportation networks, military bases, naval shipyards, and munitions factories of industrialized military powers. Vietnam was overwhelmingly agricultural and rural. The third-largest city in North Vietnam—Nam Dinh—had a population of only about ninety thousand. War-related manufacturing and storage were also dispersed throughout the land. Briefers in Saigon talked about bombing strikes on "POL" storage areas as if North Vietnam had hundreds of gigantic tanks of petroleum, oil, and lubricants. In fact, most of those products (along with guns, ammo, and everything necessary to carry on the war) were distributed in small quantities throughout the country. In a tiny village two hundred miles from Hanoi you might stumble upon a few well-hidden fifty-five-gallon drums of oil and boxes of ammunition.

Even the "significant" targets proved not to be very significant. If U.S. bombs destroyed a bridge, for example, the movement of troops and supplies from North Vietnam to the battlefields in the South might be interrupted, but never permanently halted. Within hours, alternative crossings were devised—ferryboats were moved in or pontoon bridges were created out of lashed-together flat-bottom canal boats covered with bamboo. Or, if bombs knocked out a section of railroad tracks, hundreds of Vietnamese would arrive at the stalled railroad cars to transfer the cargo onto bicycles. They had figured out a way to load up to six hundred pounds on a single bicycle. The loaded bikes, steered with a long wooden pole across the handlebars, were walked to the undamaged side of the tracks where another railroad car would be waiting to continue the journey.

Even when the United States finally succeeded in knocking out North Vietnam's most important rail and highway link to the South—the Thanh

Hoa Bridge—it had no impact on the war. But to the U.S. military, the bridge had become an obsession. Nearly nine hundred American warplanes attacked Thanh Hoa. And because the North Vietnamese surrounded the bridge with anti-aircraft guns, more than a hundred airmen were shot down near the site. Finally, in 1972, the U.S. managed to destroy the bridge using new laser-guided bombs. Yet it was a meaningless triumph. Communist forces quickly found alternative routes over the Song Ma River before repairing the bridge a year later. The story of the Thanh Hoa Bridge vividly reveals the failure of U.S. airpower in Vietnam, despite official claims to the contrary.

Some of these realities came to public light in the winter of 1966–1967, when Harrison Salisbury became the first U.S. reporter to gain admission to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). The fifty-eight-year-old Salisbury was a seasoned journalist. He had been the *New York Times* bureau chief in Moscow from 1949 to 1954 and had traveled to many other Communist countries prior to his arrival in Hanoi. During his two-week visit, his dispatches for the *Times* were picked up by newspapers around the world and represented the first major media challenge to Washington's claim that U.S. bombing was effectively curbing the North's support for the Viet Cong while avoiding civilian casualties.

Salisbury's initial look at the North Vietnamese countryside led him to assume that U.S. bombing could hardly fail. After all, there was only one major highway and one major railroad. How hard would it be for the world's greatest superpower to destroy them? "The railroad and the highway, running side by side, across the completely flat terrain crossing and recrossing canal after canal and river after river" represented a "bombardier's dream." But after witnessing how quickly the Vietnamese repaired the bomb damage or created alternative routes, he could not ignore the obvious: "I could see with my own eyes that the movement of men, materials, food and munitions had not been halted. . . . The traffic flowed out of Hanoi and Haiphong night after night after night."

Salisbury was right. In fact, the more the United States bombed, the more troops went south. In 1965, when the United States flew 25,000 sorties against North Vietnam, some 35,000 North Vietnamese troops moved to the South. By 1967, the U.S. had quadrupled the air war against North Vietnam, flying

108,000 sorties. Nonetheless, some 90,000 NVA soldiers arrived in the South.

Salisbury also documented North Vietnam's extraordinary efforts to minimize the impact of the bombing. In his first *Times* dispatch, published on Christmas Day 1966, he described Hanoi as a city "going about its business briskly, energetically, purposefully . . . hardly a truck moves without its green bough of camouflage. Even pretty girls camouflage their bicycles and conical straw hats." A few days later he reported that hundreds of thousands of individual bomb bunkers—concrete manholes—had been dug on sidewalks throughout the city and that many residents had evacuated to the countryside. "Everything dispersible has been dispersed. The countryside is strewn with dispersed goods and supplies. The same is true of the people."

Despite these measures, Salisbury reported, the bombing had taken a substantial toll on North Vietnamese civilians. Although U.S. officials had repeatedly insisted that only military targets were hit, Salisbury discovered that many residential neighborhoods had been struck, along with schools, shops, nonmilitary factories, Catholic churches, Buddhist temples, and dikes. And in many cases there were no discernible military targets in the area. "The bombed areas of Nam Dinh possess an appearance familiar to anyone who saw blitzed London, devastated Berlin and Warsaw, or smashed Soviet cities like Stalingrad and Kharkov."

In response, the administration and its supporters did their best to discredit Salisbury's dispatches. They especially attacked him for reporting casualty figures provided by the North Vietnamese, as if that itself were an act of disloyalty. According to *Time* magazine, Salisbury presented a "distorted picture" that would "reinforce the widely held impression that the U.S. is a big powerful nation viciously bombing a small, defenseless country into oblivion, and thus spur international demands for an end to the air war."

Evidence of civilian casualties put the Johnson administration in an embarrassing position. Even as Salisbury's reports were coming out, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy had an article in *Foreign Affairs* claiming that "the bombing of the North has been the most accurate and the most restrained in modern warfare."

A substantial number of Americans agreed with Bundy and were appalled. They wanted to eliminate all restraints. A Gallup poll in October

1967 found that 42 percent of Americans would support the use of nuclear weapons to win the war in Vietnam. That was the highest percentage ever recorded on that question, but other polls routinely found 20–25 percent willing to embrace atomic warfare against North Vietnam. Like retired air force general Curtis LeMay, who once recommended that the U.S. bomb Vietnam "back into the Stone Age," many pro-war hawks railed against President Johnson for micromanaging the air war against North Vietnam and limiting the targets. Why weren't American bombers allowed to blast and mine Haiphong harbor, where Soviet ships delivered crucial war supplies? What about the rail lines near the Chinese border? Or why not simply firebomb all of Hanoi as the United States had done to Tokyo and more than sixty other Japanese cities during World War II? Even during the Korean War, U.S. bombing had utterly destroyed most of the major population centers of the Communist North.

By contrast, the bombing of North Vietnam *was* restricted, especially during the first two years of Operation Rolling Thunder (1965–1966). And LBJ *did* micromanage the air war in the North, once bragging, "I won't let those Air Force generals bomb the smallest outhouse north of the 17th parallel without checking with me." His personal oversight was based on one overriding fear: that a more aggressive campaign against North Vietnam might compel the Chinese, or even the Soviets, to enter the war. Johnson well recalled how 300,000 Chinese troops poured into Korea after the United States attacked past the 38th parallel and fought all the way up to the Chinese border.

By the time Lyndon Johnson finally ended the bombing of North Vietnam in 1968, the claim that Operation Rolling Thunder had been “restrained” was less and less credible. Every significant military target except the ports had been hit, many of them repeatedly. And when Nixon renewed the bombing of North Vietnam in 1972, it was even more systematic, with the ports mined and B-52s used in round-the-clock attacks. All told, according to air war historian Mark Clodfelter, the bombing killed about 55,000 North Vietnamese civilians.

As destructive as it was, the bombing of the North was not nearly as sustained or deadly as in the South. South Vietnamese and U.S. pilots began bombing the South in 1962 and did not stop until the war ended in 1975. No other country in world history has been attacked with so many explosives. South Vietnam was struck by almost twice as many bombs as the United States dropped in all of World War II (four million tons). Nonetheless, many Americans believed—and still believe—that the major target of U.S. bombing was North Vietnam. Perhaps it was simply impossible to fathom that the United States would so massively bomb the country it claimed to be saving.