There are no census takers of the barbarism of the 20th century, and there has been far too much of it to measure. The executioners are not willing, and the victims are rarely able, to provide exact details. What is certain in Vietnam, save to those who have neither the will nor the interest to confront truth, is the general magnitude and quality of the United States' combat against the Vietnamese. This relationship necessarily has a logic and structure which leads to war crimes as the inevitable consequence of a war that is intrinsically criminal. More important, the war is the outcome of post-World War II American policy toward the world and its efforts to resolve the United States' greatest dilemma.

Gabriel Kolko is Professor of History at the State University of New York. He is a recognised authority on American diplomatic history, and author of a number of books including The Roots of American Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Power and Purpose (see John Playford's review, A.I.R No. 6, 1969).

This report was first presented to the Congressional Conference on "War and National Responsibility", held in Washington February 20-21, 1970. It was then presented to the Fifth Stockholm Conference on Vietnam, March 28-30.
in the second half of this century: to relate its industrial power to the political and ideological realities of popular revolutionary movements in the Third World.

After the Second World War the United States pursued its diplomacy on the traditional postulate of military power ultimately being based on physical plant, economic capacity and the ability to destroy it. This assumption was also a definition of the nature of the world conflict, which prior to 1950 had always been between industrial nations, and after 1945 designated the Soviet Union as the primary threat to American security and interests. Such a premise, which not so much discounted as ignored the mobilising potential of ideology and the capability of Third World guerrilla and liberation movements, gave the United States supreme confidence in the efficacy and strategic doctrines of its own military. This armed force was designed essentially to operate against a centralised, industrial society, a reinforcing proposition Washington thought the military and diplomatic facts, as well as its own economic priorities, warranted. Every strategy has a price tag, and strategic bombing has a predictable and relatively low cost, but it also necessitated a convenient and vulnerable industrial enemy.

The Korean war, which almost resulted in an American defeat in Korea, shattered a half-century of conventional wisdom and raised a critical dilemma. It immediately proved the limits of existing military strategy and technology against decentralised, non-industrial nations. Apart from political or humanitarian considerations, there were no decisive targets against which to employ the atomic military technology on which the US had pinned the bulk of its hopes and money.

After weakening its power everywhere else in the world, and embarking on what was to become the second most expensive war in its history, the United States waged the Korean war with “conventional” arms intended for combat between industrial nations. Fought against comparatively poorly armed peasants, it was a war unlike any in modern history, and the Korean precedent reveals the principles and tactics to emerge in Vietnam in a more intensive form. Within three months the US destroyed all usual strategic targets in North Korea and over the last two years of the war it dropped about six times the tonnage used during the first year. Camps for non-combatants contained over 400,000 persons under guard, one-eighth of whom died of disease and starvation. Half the South Korean population was homeless or refugees by early 1951, 2.5 million were refugees at war’s end, twice that number were on relief, over one million South Korean civilians died, and estimates of North Korea’s losses are greater yet. As Major
General Emmet O'Donnell Jnr., head of the Far Eastern Bomber Command, reported to the Senate in mid-1951: “I would say that the entire, almost the entire Korean Peninsula is just a terrible mess. Everything is destroyed. There is nothing standing worthy of the name.”\textsuperscript{1} The Korean war, in brief, became a war against an entire nation, civilians and soldiers, Communists and anti-Communists alike, with everything regarded as a legitimate target for attack. By 1953, when the US was farther from military victory or mastery than in the fall of 1950, the most important undamaged targets were the 20 irrigation dams so vital to the rice crop and civilian population of the North. Restraints operated until mid-May 1953, when five of these dams were destroyed, in one instance resulting in a flash flood that scooped clean 27 miles of valley.

For the Koreans, the war’s magnitude led to vast human suffering, but the United States learned that it was unable to translate its immense firepower into military or political victory for itself or its allies. There was, in brief, no conceivable relationship between the expenditure of arms and political or military results obtained. As the official Army history relates, utilising high mobility, decentralisation and tunnel defences, the North Korean and Chinese armies greatly improved their equipment and logistics and ended the war “a formidable foe who bore little resemblance to the feeble nation of World War II.”\textsuperscript{2} Massive firepower had resulted in enormous civilian casualties and barbarism, but inhumanity was not victory.

The implications of Korea to the United States’ future were monumental, conjuring up the prospect of political and military defeat in Asia and vividly revealing the limits of its power. Massive land armies were both very expensive and of dubious utility, and it was in this context that John Foster Dulles attempted to break


through the enigma with his “massive retaliation” doctrine — never satisfactorily translating it into a coherent and relevant strategy. Not only did Soviet nuclear power rule out attacking Russia with impunity, but even Washington in spring 1954 doubted whether Vietnamese peasants could be made to stop fighting if Moscow were destroyed, and the debate over employing atomic bombs at Dien Bien Phu only revealed that in close combat and mixed battle lines atomic bombs indiscriminately destroy friend and foe alike.

The dilemma of relating American technology to agrarian and decentralised societies was not resolved by the time President Kennedy came to office. Without delving into the “counter-insurgency” planning and assumptions which the President immediately authorised General Maxwell Taylor to co-ordinate and study, it is sufficient to observe not only that the US began making its commitments in Vietnam keenly aware of the failures of the past, but it was still encumbered with the same limitations which might only repeat the Korean precedent of mass firepower, wholesale destruction of populations, and political-military failure. Nor is it necessary to review the familiar history of how the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations intensified their involvement in Vietnam. More relevant is the distinctive character of that war, and the assumptions and manner in which the United States has employed its military might. I propose to outline the political and environmental structure of the war and to show why the United States consciously employs a technology that is quantitatively far greater than that used in Korea but inevitably requires the same outcome in Vietnam: the destruction of untold masses of people and their society, and the concomitant moral immunisation of the American civilians and soldiers called upon to sustain and implement the Government’s grand strategy.

A War Without Fronts

One of the most significant realities of the war in Vietnam, a fact which makes “legal” combat impossible and necessitates endless crimes against civilians and combatants alike, is the absence of conventional military fronts and areas of uncontested American control. The Tet Offensive proved once again that combat can occur anywhere and that the military initiative rests with the NLF. American forces, in reality, form enclaves in a sea of hostility and instability, able temporarily to contest NLF physical control over large regions but incapable of substituting Saigon’s political infrastructure to establish durable control by winning the political and ideological loyalties of the large majority of the people. Perhaps most ironically, the NLF has been able to transform this American presence, which it has not been able to remove physically, into
The Pentagon's statements notwithstanding, there now exists more than sufficient documentation proving that the US claims to "control" 67 per cent of the South Vietnamese population, as before Tet 1968, or 92 per cent as of late 1969, bear no relationship to reality. Suffice it to say, the Pentagon also maintains private figures, data that simply reinforces the inescapable conclusions of a logical analysis of its own releases, that a very substantial majority of the South Vietnamese are not under the physical "control" of either the Saigon regime or US forces. Apart from political loyalty, which claims on hamlet control ignore, the supreme irony of the war in Vietnam is that hamlets labelled "secure" for public purposes, such as Song My, are often the hardest hit by American arms. The reason is fundamental: areas, villages, and large population concentrations the NLF operationally controls frequently co-operate in Saigon-sponsored surveys and projects to spare themselves unnecessary conflict with US and Saigon forces. To lie about the presence of the NLF to a visiting pacification officer is a small matter in comparison to the certain military consequences the truth will invite. What the Pentagon describes as the "secure" area in Vietnam is often a staging and economic base as secure and vital to the NLF as its explicitly identified liberated zones.

Therefore we read innumerable accounts of trade and movement between Saigon-"controlled" areas and those of the NLF, and of "friendly" villagers and Saigon's Popular Forces (only one-eighth of whom are trusted with arms) who fail to report NLF combat units and infrastructures. Hence, too, the existence of at least 5,000 NLF political workers in the greater Saigon area, to use minimal American figures, and the undoubted accuracy of the NLF claim to have parallel governments in all major cities and towns. American admissions that three-quarters of the NLF budget in 1968 was raised from taxes collected from one-half the Vietnamese population, that Saigon's eight largest corporations paid an average of $100,000 each in taxes to the NLF, or that it purchases vast quantities of supplies from "secure" towns, is much more to the

---

point. To some critical measure, “secure” areas are both a part of, and vital to, the NLF. And to be “secure” is not to be a continuous free-fire zone. The question is not who claims “control” but who really possesses it. For the most part, such control as the US may have is temporary and ultimately is based on its ability and willingness to apply firepower, and certainly is not a consequence of any popular support for its financed and universally corrupt regimes in Saigon.

The refugee camps and program are good examples of the NLF’s ability to turn what the US intends as adversity into a dual-edged institution from which they may gain as much as a repressive situation allows — so long as it retains the respect and political loyalties of the people. These camps were both the inevitable by-product of America’s massive firepower applied to all Vietnam and its explicit desire to reconcentrate the population so as to better control it. “You have to be able to separate the sheep from the goats,” to quote one Pentagon-sponsored analyst in 1966. “The way to do it is harsh. You would have to put all military age males in the army or in camps as you pacify the country. Anyone not in the army or in camp is a target. He’s either a Viet Cong or is helping them.”

By May 1969 the war had produced 3,153,000 refugees since 1965, 612,000 still remained in camps and with only a tiny fraction having been resettled in their original villages. The large majority of the refugees, as every objective account agrees, were seeking to escape the free-fire zones and rain of fire the Americans were showering on them. Their political loyalties were anti-Saigon in the large majority of cases, and the intense squalor, degradation, and corruption in the camps undoubtedly mitigates such small sympathy for the anti-NLF cause as may exist. No less significant about the camps is the very high percentage of old men, women, and children in them — that is, non-combatants. In this sense, by entering the American camps refugees escape the American bombs while the younger men generally remain in the combat areas. Roger Hilsman put it another way in 1967: “I think it would be a mistake to think that the refugees come toward the Government side out of sympathy. . . (They) come toward the Government side simply because the Vietcong do not bomb, and that they will not at least be bombed and shelled. I have greater

---

worries that some of the refugee camps are rest areas for the Vietcong, precisely because of this.”

Refugee camps therefore become incubators of opposition as well as potential shelters for it, just as many reported NLF defectors, very few of whom are regular combatants, are now suspected of returning to NLF ranks after a period of recuperation. Such integration of the institutional structure of “secure” areas with that which the NLF dominates, this profound lack of clear lines and commitments among the Vietnamese, attains its ultimate danger for the Americans when it is revealed that the Vietnamese support for the NLF extends to parts of the highest levels of the Saigon regime. We know little of the process by which Vu Ngoc Nha, Huynh Van Trong, and their 39 associates penetrated the intimate circle of the Thieu regime and became privy to its secrets, but it is certain that many officers, soldiers and administrators of the Saigon regime are secretly committed to the NLF cause, and it is no less certain that most other Saigon leaders are deeply dedicated to enriching themselves, even via trade with the NLF regions, and are totally unreliable for the US’s ultimate purposes. Such an army of unwilling conscripts, corrupt officers and politically unreliable elements in their midst is a dubious asset to the US and alone scarcely an unmanageable threat to the NLF. Hence the chimera of “Vietnamisation”. The various Administrations have known all this, and much more.

It is one of the lessons of 20th century history that repression and social disintegration generate forces of opposition that otherwise would not have existed and Vietnam is no exception. No one can comprehend the development and success of the NLF without appreciating this fact. Vietnamese forced out of their villages by air and artillery strikes and into decrepit and unsanitary camps know full well that the Americans are responsible. The army of prostitutes are aware of the source of their degradation. The peasant whose crops are defoliated knows who to blame. Apart from its attractive political program and land reform policy, the NLF has successfully capitalised on the near universal Vietnamese hatred of foreign invaders, a fact that has made its political infrastructure

---


and loyalties of the people to it increasingly durable even as growing firepower is inflicted upon them. "They say this village is 80 per cent VC supporters," one American officer commented last September as his men combed a village. "By the time we finish this it will be 95 per cent." Such insight is scarcely atypical, but appears to be universal in the available documents on this aspect of the war.

This realism on repression intensifying resistance, as well as every other phase of the struggle in Vietnam I have mentioned, sets the indispensable context in which the US applies its military power, for it long ago abandoned operating within the acknowledged political limits of South Vietnam. More precisely, by employing sheer physical might, the US has sought to compensate for and transcend its unavoidable political weaknesses in its Vietnam adventure. The various men in the White House and Pentagon know better than any of us that the lines are indeed everywhere, and that the Vietnamese people are overwhelmingly real and potential enemies. And since the Vietnamese long ceased to be promising ideological targets, tractable to successive corrupt regimes, they have virtually all become physical targets everywhere. Quite apart from the results — for the United States is slowly learning that its efforts have become both militarily insufficient and politically self-defeating — the necessary logic of American military strategy in Vietnam is to wage war against the entire Vietnamese people, men, women and children alike, wherever they may be found. So long as it remains in Vietnam, it cannot fight another kind of war with any more hope of success.

Machines Against People: American Military Premises

The original theory of counter-insurgency in White House circles in 1961 was that a limited number of men, wise in the ways of guerrilla ideology and tactics, could enter the jungles with conventional small arms and win. Given the political, military and ideological realities, this premise by 1964 was utterly discredited, and there followed a major scramble to develop new "miracle" weapons intended to overcome the NLF’s clear military superiority. The problem, however, is that it requires five to seven years to translate a sophisticated weapons concept into adequate field deployment, and in 1965 weapons ideas already in progress were designed overwhelmingly for a war in Europe. A mass of exotic crash research

---

proposals proved, on the whole, to be expensive miscarriages, and it was already commissioned projects in helicopters and gunships that were most readily transferable to the Vietnam context. The helicopter’s distinctive value pointed to the defining objective condition of the military phase of the Vietnam war: decentralisation and a lack of military targets. Without the mobility the helicopter provided, General Westmoreland has estimated, one million more troops would have been required to fight the same war on the ground.  

While the United States has sought to discover and procure weapons uniquely designed for the decentralised agrarian and jungle environment, it has also attempted to utilise existing weapons first designed for such concentrated strategic targets as industry and air-missile bases. This, by necessity, has required employing weapons, such as the B52, originally constructed for intensive, nuclear warfare against stationary targets. It has adjusted for decentralised mobile targets simply by dropping much greater quantities of explosives of immense yield on vast regions with very few permanent military installations. Militarily, the United States has therefore fought the war with whatever decentralised-style weapons it could develop as well as the sheer quantity of firepower which “conventional” weapons employ. The pre-eminent characteristic of both these approaches is that they are intrinsically utterly indiscriminate in that they strike entire populations. And while such strategy violates all international law regarding warfare, and is inherently genocidal, it also adjusts to the political reality in South Vietnam that the NLF is and can be anywhere and that virtually the entire people is Washington’s enemy.

I am not contriving something the Pentagon does not already know. “The unparalleled, lavish use of firepower as a substitute for manpower,” writes one of its analysts in an official publication, “is an outstanding characteristic of US military tactics in the Vietnam war.” From 315,000 tons of air ordnance dropped in Southeast Asia in 1965, the quantity by January-October 1969, the peak year of the war, reached 1,388,000 tons. Over that period, 4,580,000 tons were dropped in Southeast Asia, or six and one-half times that employed in Korea. To this we must add ground munitions, which rose from 577,000 tons in 1966 to 1,278,000 tons in the first 11 months of 1969. And to these destruction-intensive


weapons applied extensively we must also add the wide-impact decentralised weapons that are employed in ever greater quantities alone or in conjunction with traditional explosives. For the family of cluster bomb weapons and flechette rockets, which the Air Force rates as "highly successful", I have no procurement data. Suffice to say, these are exclusively anti-personnel weapons covering much wider areas than bombs. CS (a type of advanced tear gas) procurement is one example: from 1965 to 1969 the amount purchased went up 24 times. Procurement for defoliants and anti-crop chemicals is erratic because of inventory and production problems, though the Air Force's far too conservative data on acreage sprayed has risen quite consistently from less than 100,000 acres in 1964 to an adjusted annual rate of 15 times that in 1969. Procurement in 1964 was $1.7 million and $15.9 million in 1970, with an inventory in 1970 almost equal to new purchases.11

Translated into human terms, the US has made South Vietnam a sea of fire as a matter of policy, turning an entire nation into a target. This is not accidental but intentional and intrinsic to the US's strategic and political premises in the Vietnam war. By necessity it destroys villages, slaughters all who are in the way, uproots families, and shatters a whole society. There is a mountain of illustrations, but let me take only one here — that of the B52 which reveals how totally conscious this strategy is.

The B52s cost about $850 million to operate in Southeast Asia in fiscal 1970, a bit less than 1969 but far more than 1968, and they drop about 43,000 tons a month. On what? The one official survey of actual hits that I have been able to locate states that "enemy camps", often villages full of civilians, “were where intelligence said they would be” in only one-half the cases. In the other half, intelligence was faulty, and the camps were either not there or the VC had not been in the target area when the bombs fell.12 Then on whom did the bombs fall? On Vietnamese peasants in both cases, on thousands of Song Mys.

Stated another way, in 1968-69 the US used about 7700-7800 tons of ground and air ordnance during an average day. At the time of the 1968 Tet offensive, the Pentagon estimates, NLF forces were consuming a peak of 27 tons of ammunition a day, and half that amount during an average day in April, 1969. Roughly,

12 Kipp, Air University Review, p. 17. See also DOD, 1970, Pt. 2, pp. 748-49.
this is a ratio of 250 or 500 to one. Inequalities of similar magnitude appear when one compares overall supply, including food, which for all NLF and DRV forces in the south was 7,500 tons per month at the end of 1968. At the beginning of 1968 American fuel needs alone were 14 million tons a month.\textsuperscript{13} Out of this staggering ratio of conspicuous consumption has come only conspicuous failure for the US, but also a level of firepower that so far exceeds distinctions between combatants and non-combatants as to be necessarily aimed at all Vietnamese.

In an air and mechanical war against an entire people, in which no fixed lines exist and high mobility and decentralisation give the NLF a decisive military advantage, barbarism can be the only consequence of the US's sledgehammer tactics. During Tet 1968, when the US learned that the "secure" areas can become part of the front when the NLF so chooses, US air and artillery strikes destroyed half of My Tho, with a population of 70,000, four-fifths of Hue's inner city, more than one-third of Chaudoc, killed over 1,000 civilians in Ben Tre, 2,000 in Hue — to cite only the better known of many examples.\textsuperscript{14} But what is more significant to the ultimate outcome of the war is that such barbarism is also accompanied by an ineffectuality — entirely aside from the question of politics and economics — which makes the US's failure in Vietnam certain.

Indiscriminate firepower is likely to hit civilian targets simply because there are many more of them, and directly and indirectly that serves the US's purpose as all Administrations define them. But we know enough about mass firepower and strategic bombing to know not merely that it is counter-productive politically but also an immense waste militarily. As a land war, the Vietnam campaign for the US has been a mixture of men and mobility via helicopters, with the NLF generally free to fight at terms, places and times of its own choosing. And because of ideology and allegiance, the NLF always fills the critical organisational vacuum the Americans and their sponsored Saigon regime leave behind. But even when in the field, the US soldier lacks both motivation and a concept of the ideological and political nature of the war, which makes him tend toward terror and poor combat at one and the same time. Had he and his officers the will and knowledge to win — which, I add, would scarcely suffice to attain victory — the American army would not be repeating the tale of Song My over and over again. For Song My is simply the foot soldier's direct expression of the axiom of


\textsuperscript{14} Hoopes, \textit{Limits of Intervention}, pp. 141-42; NYT, January 22, 23, 1970.
fire and terror that his superiors in Washington devise and command from behind desks. No one should expect the infantryman to comprehend the truths about the self-defeating consequences of terror and repression that have escaped the generals and politicians. The real war criminals in history never fire guns, never suffer discomfort. The fact is, as the military discussions now reveal, that morale and motivation are low among troops, not merely toward the end of tours of duty, or when combat follows no pattern and "morale goes down and down", to quote one Pentagon analyst, but also because an unwilling foreign conscript army has not and cannot in the 20th century win a colonial intervention.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{WE CAN SCARCEL Y COMPREHEND} the war in Vietnam by concentrating on specific weapons and incidents, on Song My, B52s or defoliants. What is illegal and immoral, a crime against the Vietnamese and against civilisation as we think it should be, is the entire war and its intrinsic character. Mass bombing, the uprooting of populations, "search-and-destroy" — all of this and far more is endemic to a war that can never be "legal" or moral so long as it is fought. For what is truly exceptional and unintended in Vietnam, from the Government's viewpoint, are the B52 missions, defoliants and artillery attacks that do not ravage villages and fields. Specific weapons and incidents are deplorable, but we must see them as effects and not causes. The major undesired, accidental aspect of the entire Vietnam experience, as three Administrations planned it, was that the Vietnamese resistance, with its unshakable roots everywhere in that tortured nation, would survive and ultimately prevail rather than be destroyed by the most intense rain of fire ever inflicted on men and women. For the history of America's role in Vietnam is not one of accident but rather of the failure of policy.

Given what is so purposeful and necessary to the United States' war in Vietnam, and the impossibility and the undesirability of America relating to that nation by other than military means, there is only one way to terminate the endless war crimes systematically and daily committed there — to end the intrinsically criminal war now, to withdraw all American forces immediately. And while the Vietnamese succor and heal their wounds, Americans must attempt to cure their own moribund social illness so that this nation will never again commit such folly and profound evil.