

INSIDE THE SYSTEM

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EDITED BY
CHARLES PETERS
AND
TIMOTHY J. ADAMS

INTRODUCTION BY
RICHARD H. ROVERE



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THE STUPIDITY OF INTELLIGENCE

MORRIS J. BLACHMAN

When all the intelligence information from Vietnam was fed into a computer, the machine calculated that the United States had destroyed all of Vietnam and had won the war two years earlier. The story is apocryphal, but it might well have happened. Certainly, the computer could have reached that conclusion on the basis of the claims made by the military about the effects of its bombing of North Vietnam.

As an Air Force officer attached to Tactical Reconnaissance in Vietnam, I saw at first hand the way the military, and especially the Air Force, gathered and reported the results of its bombing of the North. Those reports, by greatly exaggerating the effects of the bombing, misled the American public and—at least to the extent that they took the reports at face value—the military and civilian policy-makers as well. No one, except the North Vietnamese themselves, knows just how

Morris J. Blachman was awarded a Bronze Star for his service as an Air Force intelligence officer in Vietnam.

much the Air Force's claims differed from reality. Based on what I saw in my little corner of the air war, the actual destruction was often less than half what the Air Force claimed. (Whether the bombing, or indeed the war itself, was justified on military or moral grounds is a question that lies beyond the scope of this discussion.)

Yet, there was no conscious conspiracy to inflate the numbers of trucks and bridges that supposedly had been destroyed by American bombs. No one, at least no one around me, was systematically lying about the bombing. The Air Force had, in its photo-intelligence techniques, remarkably accurate methods of measuring bomb destruction. Those techniques were put to full use in Vietnam, and yet the information they revealed was consistently played down in favor of the far less accurate pilots' reports. The result was a grossly false picture of the military effects of the bombing. The explanation of this paradox lies, I believe, in the organization of the military and of military intelligence.

This was the system as I saw it. Strikes were ordered against North Vietnamese targets as selected by us in Tactical Reconnaissance, within the limits set in Washington. As soon as the pilots returned from their raids, they reported at their debriefing the effects of the bombs they had dropped. Very soon after that—sometimes within an hour or two, sometimes the next day—reconnaissance aircraft flew over the sites and photographed them. Those pictures were developed and analyzed by photo interpreters. Thus, two reports of what happened were available—the accounts of the pilots themselves and the evidence of the photo intelligence.

The general usually received a briefing about the results of the mission the next day. In some cases, only the pilots' reports were available. Even when photo intelligence was available, however, attention focused on

the pilots' accounts. This occurred during most of the briefings I knew about, even though the pilots consistently claimed far greater destruction than the more accurate photo-intelligence reports reflected.

Why the discrepancy? Much of it was inevitable. The pilots were flying at 600 miles an hour, trying to destroy their targets while dodging ground-fire, SAM missiles, and, sometimes, MIG aircraft. Their job was to drop their bombs and try to get back alive. They hardly had time to look critically at what their bombs had done, and they would be less than human if they understated the accomplishments of missions in which they had risked their lives and on which their future careers depended.

Duplication was another frequent source of error. Four aircraft, for example, would strike a column of trucks moving along a road in North Vietnam. At the debriefing, the first pilot might report that he destroyed 3 trucks and damaged 2 more. The second pilot might report 4 trucks destroyed and 3 damaged; the third pilot, 4 and 4; and the fourth pilot, 5 and 4. How many trucks were destroyed and damaged? Simple arithmetic provides a total of 16 destroyed and 13 damaged. That's what the general would be told at the briefing. But experience showed—whenever the pilots' reports could be checked against photo intelligence—that the total usually fell far short of the pilots' claims because two or more pilots would list the same trucks.

Imagine four pilots sent to "interdict" a rail line.* They drop their bombs, see them explode on the tracks, and then see what appear to be several "secondary" explosions (things that blow up after being hit by a bomb, such as ammunition, oil drums, or vehicles). Back at the debriefing, the pilots all report that the tracks were

* Details of specific incidents have been changed to avoid violating security regulations.

destroyed, interdicting the line, and that there were several secondary explosions. Later, when the aerial photos are available, the interpreters see a different picture. Nothing in or around the tracks has been destroyed. The secondary explosions turn out to have been large piles of loose dirt blown into the air by the bombs and scattered along the tracks, making the line look as if it had been destroyed. In reality, the railroad can be put back into operation with a few shovels.

For the American public, these distortions created two distinct problems.

On the one hand, press briefings about the bombing were invariably condensations of the pilots' reports and were rarely corrected to conform to the evidence gathered by photo intelligence. Sometimes, the results of photo intelligence were not made available to the public at all. When they were, the newspapers usually concentrated on today's bombing results rather than correcting yesterday's errors. So, the public simply did not have access to accurate information about the bombing.

On the other hand, the public often received strangely contradictory stories. One day a target would be reported destroyed, only to be bombed again a day or two later. A typical example was a three-span bridge that we bombed three times in six days. The first time we reportedly destroyed two spans; the second time, all three spans; and on the third strike, two more spans.

I often wondered if anyone would comment on the astonishing accomplishment of destroying seven spans of a three-span bridge. But no one said a word or ever questioned our claim; the bridge remained 233 per cent destroyed. That was the case with many other demonstrably unbelievable claims the Air Force made for the bombing. Everyone in the system who had access to photo intelligence—from our commanding general down

to the enlisted men, and from the general up the chain of command to the Pentagon—repeatedly saw evidence that our bombing reports were at worst false and at best exaggerated. Although a few of us tried to challenge the system, we made no impact. The Air Force's claims, and not what we privately knew to be the truth, became the public record of the bombing of North Vietnam.

There are two major reasons why the system operated as it did: first, intense competition among the services; and second, the system of rewards and punishments inherent in the promotion pattern.

The Air Force exists only to fight in the air or to bomb. The Air Force had to have the bombing of the North—it was the only real Air Force show in the Vietnam War. The career men around me felt keenly that their service was at a disadvantage in the war's interservice rivalries. The war in the South was an Army and Marine Corps show, with the Air Force supplying important, but little publicized, air support. The Navy had horned in on the air war, and, even if the bombing were to stop, the sailors could always go back to their ships. But for the Air Force, it was bomb or do nothing. Without the bombing, the Air Force could hope for little publicity and glory—which would mean smaller appropriations and perhaps less attention to Air Force desires. To criticize the bombing claims, therefore, was to hurt your own organization and to benefit its rivals. Stopping the bombing could be viewed as a failure for the Air Force.

Rivalry among these authoritarian systems put great pressure on those within them. On the higher levels, there was frequent sniping between the Air Force and the Navy, with each accusing the other of incompetence in the air war. Another example is the military intelligence unit whose commanding officer ordered his men

not to exchange information with a nearby unit belonging to another service. Also, the Air Force often withheld its bombing reports from the Navy.

The promotion system created exceptional pressures for conformity on career officers. Promotion depended heavily on the evaluation report of one's commanding officer; a single unfavorable mention in the report could postpone promotion for many years and perhaps permanently blight a career. For a colonel, a black mark might mean losing his only chance to become a general. So, it would have taken a certain amount of courage for a colonel to tell a general that the air strike the general had ordered—and for whose success the colonel felt he would be held responsible—was a failure. (One Air Force general who criticized the bombing was reportedly removed from command and booted upstairs.)

The career officers seemed to fear being placed in the role of the messenger who brings bad news. This, of course, is nothing new. At least since Cleopatra, messengers have been punished for bringing news that upset the commanders' preconceptions. Such fears in the Air Force may have been unfounded, or at least exaggerated, but they were real in their consequences. Some organizations compensate for the bad-messenger phobia by offering incentives for useful criticism. But I know of no Air Force officer who thought he would score brownie points by devising an intelligence system that would have reported less destruction from the bombing of the North.

This type of system can lead to distortions at all levels. For example, at some point along the chain of command, the decision is made to increase the number of potential targets. By the time the order gets to the working level—that is, to the men who will scan the films of the North for possible targets—it has changed from a stated desire to know about more potential targets to a hard-nosed

command to nominate "75 targets" within a couple of days. Once, when this happened, one of the men told an officer that they had been unable to find anything of military significance, that they only saw a few villages. The officer retorted, "I think you'd better scan the film again for 'possible military storage areas.'" Although the order was not explicit, the implication was clear: use a euphemism but produce the target. The airmen felt this pressure very strongly. I remember one of them saying that he just didn't know what to do. If he didn't do what the officer wanted, the officer might give him a bad efficiency report, and his career would be set back, or even ruined.

When I was in Vietnam, I wondered at times what the policy-makers in Washington believed about our bombing of the North. The Pentagon had access to both the inflated pilots' reports and to the much more modest claims of photo intelligence. What did the top military leaders believe? What kind of bombing evaluations did they pass on to the civilian leadership? Did the civilian leaders take the Air Force claims at face value, or did they apply some private discount, either because they knew the fallibility of pilot reports or because they had an innate skepticism of any institution's self-evaluation? Were they just allowing the public to be gulled about the effectiveness of the bombing—or were they letting themselves be gulled as well?

The answers to these questions remain shrouded. But I recently had occasion to read through some 475 public statements on the bombing by Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara, all made while they were in office. Although these statements of the leaders of the Johnson Administration, under which the bombing began and ended, do not reveal their private thoughts, they do give some insight into the level of information

the executive branch was willing to share with the public. My first impression was of the constantly shifting reasons given for the bombing. I counted thirty separate—though often overlapping and even contradictory—justifications for bombing the North.

These justifications varied from the specific military reasons, such as to “inhibit, to reduce, to deflect the movement southward of men and materiel” (McNamara, 1965), to highly generalized ones like “we are bombing North Vietnam because it is violating two solemn international agreements” (Johnson, 1967), to a claim that if we were to stop the bombing “what incentive . . . would [North Vietnam] ever have for making peace?” (Rusk, 1968).

What did it mean to talk about the bombing having met all its objectives, as Secretary Rusk did on separate occasions, when he admitted in a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in March, 1968, that infiltration had risen from an average of 1,500 per month in 1965 to 5,500–6,000 per month in 1967? Did Rusk really believe what he read in the newspapers about the success of the air war? He certainly defended the ability of the bombing of North Vietnam to accomplish its mission.

By contrast, McNamara showed himself to be skeptical about the bombing during his last year in office. Testifying before Congress in August, 1967, McNamara said that “despite very, very large increases in air strikes, the amount of traffic over the roads has increased, and, as a matter of fact, the whole road network has increased.” And, then, he went on to pull the rug out from under the whole military concept of the bombing of the North:

There are many who believe, and there is much evidence to support the conclusion, that the flow of men and materiel into the South is not determined by the air campaign

in the North . . . in other words, the bottleneck is not on the lines of communication in North Vietnam but is on the lines of communication in South Vietnam.

But, at that same hearing, McNamara was repeating some rather unlikely claims. In response to a senator's question about how many trucks the North Vietnamese had in operation, McNamara said that there were between 10,000 and 12,000 and that "we have reportedly destroyed 4,100 and reportedly damaged 4,000." Based on my experience, it is impossible to believe that the bombing destroyed anywhere near that number of trucks. The senators quite naturally wanted to know why North Vietnam had, in McNamara's words, more trucks today than when we started the bombing. McNamara had to say that the trucks were imported. This led to additional congressional pressure for bombing ports and changing the political character of the war—a consequence of the original false claims.

Fortunately, the wrong policy decision (the bombing of the ports) was not made. But such wrong decisions are continuing hazards as long as the Pentagon's civilian leadership, the Congress, and the public rely on the military's self-serving intelligence system.