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BOMBING CIVILIANS FROM THE TWENTIETH TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

Marilyn B. Young

SENATOR FULBRIGHT: And this [reprisal raids] was interpreted to mean if we showed the will then the North Vietnamese would surrender. I mean, being faced with such overwhelming power, they would stop. Is that really the way they were thinking?

MR. THOMPSON: "Would be brought to their knees" was the phrase that was used.

—Fulbright hearings, 1968

Airpower . . . can profoundly influence the human condition. Through selective engagement, airpower can support a recovering population; encourage one element while discouraging another; monitor, deter, transport, and connect; and assist in establishing the conditions for a safe and secure future.

—Robyn Read, USAF Colonel (ret.), 2005

World War II ended with the biggest bang then possible, administered in what was believed to be a righteous cause, the defeat of Japan. A total bombing was the logical conclusion to a total war. Then and since, to many in the armed forces, particularly the air force, anything short of the massive use of available weaponry to attain American ends is immoral. "The memory of World War II," Ron Schaffer has written, "seems to have led some air force leaders to feel that all-out annihilation war was the sole tradition of America's armed forces." The possibility of "obliterating everything in the enemy country, turning everything to ash" gave U.S. Air Force generals like Ira Eaker and Curtis LeMay, wholly secure in the air and able to attack any enemy at will, a sense of irresistible power. Limited war was an oxymoron; worse, it was the world ending in an unseemly whimper.¹ The only problem the advocates of unbridled

airpower foresaw was the timorousness of a civilian leadership unwilling to use its weapons.

I shall explore in this essay the ways in which the definition of limited war fought with limited means was, in Korea and in Vietnam, slowly but certainly transformed into total war fought all out—short of nuclear weapons. Starting with Korea and undergoing sophisticated development in Vietnam, airpower was understood as a special language addressed to the enemy, and to all those who might in the future become the enemy. It was, at the same time, a language intended to reassure America's allies. And it was a language that incorporated one very crucial silence: behind all the bombs dropped was the sound of the one that *could* drop but did not . . . yet.

On June 25, 1950, North Korean tanks rolled across the 38th parallel, an echo of another blitzkrieg eleven years earlier. President Harry S. Truman's first response to the news was to prepare to wipe out all Soviet air bases in East Asia. His logic was impeccable. The North Koreans were acting as Soviet proxies, testing Western resolve as Hitler had tested it in Munich; the history of politics and warfare on the Korean peninsula prior to June 1950 was irrelevant.² His second response, upon learning that wiping out the bases would require time and the use of nuclear weapons, was to open all of Korea south of the 38th parallel to air force bombing. The goal was only in part to halt the North Korean advance. Of equal importance was conveying messages of resolve to Pyongyang and support to Seoul. A few days later, with the same goals in mind, Truman sent the bombers north of the 38th parallel, opening a campaign of destruction that, in ferocity and total tonnage dropped, rivaled the campaigns so recently concluded in Europe and Japan.

What was it about bombing that made it so attractive to U.S. policy makers as a mode of communication? The answer begins with a fallacy: World War II ended in a blaze of bombing, ergo, bombing ended the war. According to Earl Tilford, although airpower has never fulfilled the promises of its prophets, after World War II the "doctrine of strategic bombardment, like the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in Christianity, had to be accepted on faith."³ Those who doubted the efficacy of strategic bombing were committed to tactical bombing.⁴ Colonel Raymond Sleeper, contemplating the post-Korean War future, argued that the objective of a limited war was not the total destruction of the enemy but rather a means of waging "peace through air persuasion." His model

was the supple use of airpower to punish and coerce ostensibly employed by the British Royal Air Force in various colonial expeditions.⁵ Secretary of State Robert McNamara, with the experience of the Cuban missile crisis behind him, developed this idea, convinced, as H.R. McMaster has written, that “the aim of force was not to impose one’s will on the enemy but to communicate with him. Gradually intensifying military action would convey American resolve and thereby convince an adversary to alter his behavior.”⁶

What and how one bombed could convey different messages to the enemy: a restricted target list held the threat of an unrestricted one, conventional bombing the threat of nuclear possibilities. Moreover, as in Vietnam, bombing could be turned on and off with greater ease and less domestic impact than sending or withdrawing troops. The alert opponent would presumably get the idea and move toward an acceptable settlement. And if he did not? Well, that was the beauty of it: bombing could be intensified, target lists expanded, new airborne ordnance developed, and the lethality of extant weapons improved.

To garner domestic support for war, images of air war also made striking pictures, preferable to those of ground combat—thousands of bombs tumbling to earth, while their effects on impact were never imposed on the viewer.⁷ Raining down destruction has been the prerogative of the gods since before Zeus. Combat troops were as awkward as their nickname, *grunts*, suggested. They were burdened by their heavy packs, moving arduously through steaming or frozen landscapes. Pilots were *aces*, carried into the wild blue yonder at unimaginable speed.⁸ It is not surprising that President George W. Bush landed a jet on an aircraft carrier to announce the end of combat in Iraq.

Airpower embodies American technology at its most dashing. At regular intervals, the air force and allied technocrats claim that innovations in air technology herald an entirely new age of warfare. Korea and Vietnam were, so to speak, living laboratories for the development of new weapons: the 1,200-pound radio-guided Tarzon bomb (featured in Korean-era Movietone newsreels);⁹ white-phosphorous-enhanced napalm; cluster bombs (CBUs) carrying up to 700 bomblets, each bomblet containing 200 to 300 tiny steel balls or fiberglass fléchettes; delayed-fuse cluster bombs; airburst cluster bombs; toxic defoliants; varieties of nerve gas; sets of six B 52s, operating at altitudes too high to be heard on the ground, capable of

delivering up to thirty tons of explosives each. A usual mission consisted of six planes in formation, which together could devastate an area one half mile wide by three miles long. Older technologies were retrofitted: slow cargo planes (“Puff the Magic Dragon”¹⁰) equipped with rapid-fire machine guns capable of firing 6,000 rounds a minute; World War II-era Skyraiders, carrying bomb loads of 7,500 pounds and fitted with four 20-millimeter cannon that together fired over 2,000 rounds per minute.

The statistics stun; they also provide distance. They are impossible to take in, as abstract as the planning responsible for producing them. In Korea over a three-year period, U.S./UN forces flew 1,040,708 sorties and dropped 386,037 tons of bombs and 32,357 tons of napalm. If one counts all types of airborne ordnance, including rockets and machine-gun ammunition, the total tonnage comes to 698,000.¹¹ Throughout World War II, in all sectors, the United States dropped 2 million tons of bombs; for Indochina the total figure is 8 million tons, with an explosive power equivalent to 640 Hiroshima-size bombs. Three million tons were dropped on Laos, exceeding the total for Germany and Japan by both the U.S. and Great Britain.¹² For nine years, an average of one planeload of bombs fell on Laos every eight minutes. In addition, 150,000 acres of forest were destroyed through the chemical warfare known as defoliation. For South Vietnam, the figure is 19 million gallons of defoliant dropped on an area comprising 20 percent of South Vietnam—some 6 million acres.¹³ In an even briefer period, between 1969 and 1973, 539,129 tons of bombs were dropped in Cambodia, largely by B-52s, of which 257,465 tons fell in the last six months of the war (as compared to 160,771 tons on Japan from 1942–1945).¹⁴ The estimated toll of the dead, the majority civilian, is equally difficult to absorb: 2 to 3 million in Korea; 2 to 4 million in Vietnam.

To the policy makers, air war is abstract. They listen attentively for a response to the messages they send and discuss the possibility that many more may have to be sent. For those who deliver the messages, who actually drop the bombs, air war can be either abstract (in a high-flying B-29 or B-52, for example) or concrete. Often it is a combination. Let me offer an example that combines the abstract with the concrete. During the Korean War, one pilot confided to a reporter that napalm had become the most valued of all the weapons at his disposal. “The first couple of times I went in on a napalm strike,” Federic Champlin told E.J. Kahn,

I had kind of an empty feeling. I thought afterward, Well, maybe I shouldn't have done it. Maybe those people I set afire were innocent civilians. But you get conditioned, especially after you've hit what looks like a civilian and the A-frame on his back lights up like a Roman candle—a sure enough sign that he's been carrying ammunition. Normally speaking, I have no qualms about my job. Besides, we don't generally use napalm on people we can see. We use it on hill positions, or buildings. And one thing about napalm is that when you've hit a village and have seen it go up in flames, you know that you've accomplished something. Nothing makes a pilot feel worse than to work over an area and not see that he's accomplished anything.¹⁵

A “hill position,” a “building” (in Vietnam, “hooches,” sometimes “structures”)—not people. For the man with the A-frame on his back, air war can only be concrete. In 1950, in the month of November alone, 3,300 tons of napalm were dropped on North Korean cities and towns, including the city of Kanggye, 65 percent of which was destroyed by incendiary bombs. In Korea, the British correspondent Reginald Thompson believed he was seeing a “new technique of machine warfare. The slightest resistance brought down a deluge of destruction, blotting out the area. Dive bombers, tanks and artillery blasted strong points, large or small, in town and hamlet, while the troops waited at the roadside as spectators until the way was cleared for them. . . .”¹⁶

Years later, another pilot, flying a small spotter plane to call in napalm strikes in South Vietnam, told Jonathan Schell how he identified the enemy: “If they run away.” He added: “Sometimes, when you see a field of people, it looks like just a bunch of farmers. Now, you see, the Vietnamese people—they're not interested in the U.S. Air Force, and they don't look at the planes going over them. But down in that field you'll see *one guy* whose conical hat keeps bouncing up and down. He's looking, because he wants to know where you're going.” Then, Major Billings continued, “you make a couple of passes . . . and then, one of them makes a break for it—it's the guy that was looking up at you—and he's your V.C. So you look where he goes, and call in an air strike.” Once, Billings remembered, he “about ran a guy to death,” chasing him through the fields for an hour before calling in planes to finish the job. Schell thought this amounted to “sniping with bombs,” and Billings agreed.¹⁷ For Billings, the people themselves were concrete abstractions, ideas all too literally in the flesh.

In addition to the bombs that *were* dropped on Korea, there were those that were constantly contemplated but never used. On June 29, 1950, just four days after the war began, the possibility of using nuclear weapons in the event of Chinese intervention in the war was broached in the National Security Council. In June, as again when the subject came up in July at a State Department policy and planning staff meeting, the questions was not so much whether to use nuclear weapons but rather under what conditions they might be used: if there was overt Chinese and Soviet intervention; if their use were essential to victory; “if the bombs could be used without excessive destruction of noncombatants.”¹⁸ Talk of using the bomb increased dramatically after the Chinese entered the war in late October 1950, and President Truman’s casual reference to the possibility in a press conference brought a nervous Prime Minister Clement Attlee to Washington on the next plane. A joint communiqué, however, expressed only a sincere hope that “world conditions would never call for the use of the atomic bomb.”¹⁹

General Douglas MacArthur thought the conditions were ripe in December 1950 and requested permission to drop a total of thirty-four bombs on a variety of targets. “I would have dropped 30 or so atomic bombs . . . strung across the neck of Manchuria,” he told an interviewer, and “spread behind us—from the Sea of Japan to the Yellow Sea—a belt of radioactive cobalt . . . it has an active life of between 60 and 120 years. For at least 60 years, there could have been no land invasion of Korea from the North.” MacArthur’s replacement, General Matthew Ridgway, requested thirty-eight atomic bombs.²⁰ In the event, nuclear weapons were not used; the destruction of northern and central Korea had been accomplished with conventional weapons alone.

The cease-fire that ended the Korean War followed a crescendo of bombing, which was then taken as proof that airpower was as decisive in limited wars as it had been in total war. The cities and towns of central and northern Korea had been leveled. In what Bruce Cumings has called the “final act of this barbaric air war,” North Korea’s main irrigation dams were destroyed in the spring of 1953, shortly after the rice had been transplanted. “The subsequent floods scooped clean 27 miles of valley below. . . . The Westerner can little conceive the awesome meaning which the loss of [rice] has for the Asian—starvation and slow death.”²¹ By 1952, according to a UN estimate, one out of nine men, women, and children in North Korea had been killed. In the South, 5,000,000 people

had been displaced and 100,000 children were described as *unaccompanied*. “The countless ruined villages are the most terrible and universal mark of the war on the Korean landscape. To wipe out cover for North Korean vehicles and personnel, hundreds of thatch-roofed houses were burned by air-dropped jellied gasoline or artillery fire,” Walter Sullivan, former *New York Times* Korea correspondent, reported in *The Nation*. J. Donald Kingsley, head of the reconstruction agency, called Korea “the most devastated land and its people the most destitute in the history of modern warfare.”²²

Freda Kirchwey, in an essay for *The Nation*, tried to explain the general indifference of the American public to the destruction:

We were all hardened by the methods of mass-slaughter practiced first by the Germans and Japanese and then, in self-defense, adopted and developed to the pitch of perfection illustrated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the Western allies and, particularly, the Americans. We became accustomed to “area” bombing, “saturation” bombing, all the hideous forms of strategic air war aimed at wiping out not only military and industrial installations but whole populations. . . . A deep scar was left on the mind of Western man, and, again, particularly on the American mind, by the repression of pity and the attempt to off-load all responsibility onto the enemy.

Kirchwey thought that this repression explained the lack of protest “against the orgy of agony and destruction now in progress in Korea.” Nothing the North Koreans, Chinese, or Russians had done “excuses the terrible shambles created up and down the Korean peninsula by the American-led forces, by American planes raining down napalm and fire bombs, and by heavy land and naval artillery.” And now Korea, “blotted out in the name of collective security, blames the people who drop the fire bombs,” which might seem unfair to the military mind but was inevitable:

For a force which subordinates everything to the job of killing the enemy becomes an enemy itself. . . . And after a while plain horror displaces a sense of righteousness even among the defenders of righteousness, and thus the cause itself becomes hateful. This has happened in Korea. Soon, as we learn the facts, it will overtake us here in America.²³

. . .

“The American mind,” Kirchwey was certain, “mercurial and impulsive, tough and tender, is going to react against the horrors of mechanized warfare in Korea.”²⁴

The air force reached different conclusions. In 1957, a collection of essays was published whose title declared its thesis: *Airpower: The Decisive Force in Korea*. The authors of one of the essays in the collection describe an air operation they considered exceptionally successful. Late in 1952, a small group of air commanders set out to demonstrate the extent to which airpower alone could “occupy” territory. Their intention was to show the North Koreans that the United States could “exert an effective form of air pressure at any time or any place, could capture and air control any desired segment of his territory for as long as the military situation warranted.” The campaign began in January 1953. For five days, twenty-four hours a day, “a devastating force walked the earth over a 2-by-4 mile target area” and for six days thereafter nothing in the area moved. After 2,292 combat sorties, “Air forces bought a piece of real estate 100 miles behind enemy lines and ruled it for 11 days.” But on the fourteenth day, “with typical Communist swiftness,” “hordes” of “Red laborers and soldiers” began repair work; six days after the attack, a bypass was in place and rail links had been restored. The bridges attacked had been rebuilt, as had the highways and rail links. Still, the report was certain, “in the gnarled steel and wrenched earth the Communists saw the specter of a new concept in war—air envelopment.”²⁵ One might imagine that the Americans had a lesson to learn here: that bridges could be rebuilt; that a “curtain of fire” created by such raids could cost the enemy a week’s time, but not stop them. Instead, against the evidence, many in the air force concluded that had such airpower been applied earlier in the war, it would have ended earlier and on better terms.

In what turned out to be the final phase of the talks, President Eisenhower threatened to use nuclear weapons if the Chinese did not sign a cease-fire agreement. It has become part of the Eisenhower legend that this last threat broke the stalemate and, in Eisenhower’s words, gave the United States “an armistice on a single battleground,” though not “peace in the world.”²⁶ In the event, as most authorities agree, the Chinese may not have even been aware of the threat, much less responded to it. Chinese acceptance of the concessions demanded at Panmunjom (all of them relating to the issue of repatriation of prisoners of war) was granted for reasons to do with Chinese, North Korean, and Soviet politics, not U.S. atomic flashing.²⁷ Nevertheless, in addition to the Republican Party, many senior

officers in the air force were convinced of the value of such threats and the necessity, if it came to that, of acting on them.²⁸

Whatever the air force learned from the Korean War, what the politicians drew from it was more specific and could be boiled down to one dictum: fight the war, but avoid Chinese intervention. Unlike Freda Kirchwey, military and civilian policy makers (and, for that matter, the majority of the American public) never, to my knowledge, questioned the morality of either the ends or the means of fighting in Korea. The difficult question that faced administrations, from Kennedy through Nixon, was tactical: how to use military force in Southeast Asia without unduly upsetting the Chinese. President Kennedy's solution was to concentrate on counterinsurgency, which, as it failed to achieve its end, devolved into a brutal ten-year bombing campaign in South Vietnam.

Although this reverses the actual chronology, I want to deal first with the air war in North Vietnam, keeping in mind that the use of airpower in the South started earlier, lasted longer, and dropped far more tonnage than in the North. The stated goal of the Vietnam War was to create and sustain, south of the 17th parallel, a stable anticommunist regime under local leadership friendly to the United States. This is what Eisenhower had accomplished in Korea. The assumption of American policy makers, even those convinced the insurgency had its roots in the south, was that the movement in South Vietnam was dependent on North Vietnam for support and direction. North Vietnamese men and matériel fueled the struggle in the South. Sever that fuel line and the South Vietnamese government would be dealing with an enfeebled guerrilla force, well within its capacity to defeat. Some military men, like General Lawton Collins, argued that "no amount of aerial bombing can prevent completely the forward movement of supplies, particularly in regions where ample manpower is available."²⁹ President Lyndon B. Johnson also recalled the Korean experience in conversations with his close friend Senator Richard Russell of Georgia in the late spring and early summer of June 1964. No one, Johnson declared, wanted to send combat troops to Vietnam. Yet *some* sort of military action had to be taken, lest he be considered weak. "America," an old Texas friend had warned him, "wants, by God, prestige and power"; he had no choice but to "stand up for America." Johnson's advisers strongly urged a bombing campaign against North Vietnam, one that would not risk Chinese intervention.

“Bomb the North,” Russell asked, “and kill old men, women, and children?” No, no, Johnson reassured him, entering into that abstract world of air warfare in which buildings, highways, and structures are destroyed without killing people, just “selected targets, watch this trail they’re coming down.”

“We tried it in Korea,” Russell protested. “We even got a lot of old B-29s to increase the bomb load and sent ’em over there and just dropped millions and millions of bombs, day and night . . . they would knock the road at night and in the morning, the damn people would be back travelling over it. . . . We never could actually interdict all their lines of communication, although we had absolute control of the seas and the air, and we never did stop them. And you ain’t gonna stop these people, either.”³⁰

Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense Johnson had inherited from Kennedy, was among the most passionate advocates of bombing the North, of “communicating” with bombs,³¹ and he now moved to gain approval for this course. On the day of his election victory, Lyndon Baines Johnson convened a working group of the National Security Council to discuss the options in Vietnam. The president was offered three options: to maintain the current level of bombing (including the covert bombing of Laos, which began in May 1964) in which reprisal raids against the North would be flown in response to what the proposal called “VC spectacles” in the South; to move at once to “fast/full squeeze”—a rapid and powerful increase in bombing of the North; or to begin a program of “progressive squeeze-and-talk,” which would involve a “crescendo of additional military moves” against targets in North Vietnam and Laos combined with offers to negotiate with Hanoi. Bombing was a “bargaining chip” to be cashed in for a settlement on U.S. terms.³² The possibility of using nuclear weapons was raised and rejected, although General Earle Wheeler believed the question remained open and that “in extremis” it should be considered.³³ The choices were structured so that only one made sense, what Raymond Sleeper ten years earlier had named “air persuasion.”

On February 13, 1965, McNamara’s Operation Rolling Thunder began. It was the “longest sustained strategic air bombardment in history.” At lunch each Tuesday, Johnson and his advisers would select the targets, which were then communicated to Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, the commander in charge of Rolling Thunder. One example of McNamara’s effort

to hone the messages bombing communicated was reflected in a target list that included attacking “moving targets such as convoys and troops” but not “highways, railroads or bridges with no moving traffic on them.” A frustrated officer responsible for carrying out these orders pointed out the “difficulty of recognizing groups of civilians on the ground from troops. . . . I recognize this as my problem but believe that it can be better defined.”³⁴

It was especially a problem for the people on the ground. In the first year, 55,000 sorties were flown, and tonnage increased from 200 per week to 1,600 per week. (For a sense of perspective, there were 83,000 sorties in the South in that same year.) Over its course, Operation Rolling Thunder “hammered the north with 304,000 tactical sorties . . . and 2,380 B-52 sorties, which had dropped 643,000 tons of bombs.”³⁵ In an ultimate expression of the abstract nature of the bombing campaign, one presidential adviser, McGeorge Bundy, made it clear that Rolling Thunder did not actually have to work to succeed. Even if the operation failed, Bundy argued, it would “at minimum damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own.” Of equal importance, the bombing “set a higher price for the future upon all adventures of guerrilla warfare, and it should therefore somewhat increase our ability to deter such adventures.”³⁶

In December 1966 and again in 1967, the Pentagon paused and requested the Jason Division of the Institute for Defense Analysis to assess the effect of the bombing on North Vietnam. The report was a “categorical rejection of bombing as a tool of our policy in Southeast Asia. . . .” None of the administration’s goals had been met: the flow of men and supplies south continued. Indeed, since “the beginning of the Rolling Thunder air strikes on NVN, the flow of men and materiel from NVN to SVN has greatly increased, and present evidence provides no basis for concluding that the damage inflicted on North Vietnam by the bombing program has had any significant effect on the flow.” The expectation that bombing would “erode the determination of Hanoi and its people clearly overestimated the persuasive and disruptive effects of the bombing and, correspondingly, underestimated the tenacity and recuperative capabilities of the North Vietnamese.” The government had ignored the “well-documented” fact that “a direct, frontal attack on a society tends to strengthen the social fabric of the nation, to increase popular support of the existing government, to improve the determination of both the leadership and the popu-

lace to fight back, to induce a variety of protective measures that reduce the society's vulnerability to future attack and to develop an increased capacity for quick repairs. . . ."³⁷

Despite these reports, the bombing of an ever-expanded list of targets in North Vietnam continued; the bombing halt Johnson declared in March 1968 did not decrease the tonnage of bombs dropped on Indochina; the area south of the 19th parallel in South Vietnam, and Laos and Cambodia, now received the bombs that had been more widely distributed previously. Hanoi got McNamara's message—America's unparalleled military might—but did not listen. By the time it was Richard Nixon's turn to communicate with the Vietnamese, there was only one message left: the United States would continue to bomb until it had broken Hanoi's will.

Richard Nixon's contempt for his predecessors' approach to the war was most clearly expressed in a conversation with Republican delegates to the Miami convention before his election: "How do you bring a war to a conclusion?" he asked his attentive listeners. "I'll tell you how Korea was ended. We got in there and had this messy war on our hands. Eisenhower . . . let the word go out diplomatically to the Chinese and the North [Koreans] that we would not tolerate this continual ground war of attrition. And within a matter of months, they negotiated." The notion that the threat of nuclear bombs had brought the Chinese to heel in Korea was, as Jeffrey Kimball, the historian of Nixon's war, has observed, "part of Republican historical doctrine. . . ." Nixon not only believed it, he incorporated its principles into what he called his "madman" approach to negotiations in Vietnam. As he explained to his longtime aide Bob Halde- man during the 1968 presidential campaign: "[The North Vietnamese will] believe any threat of force that Nixon makes because it's Nixon. . . . I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do *anything* to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace."³⁸ Maddened by Vietnamese resistance, the president of the United States would pretend to be crazy.

Johnson's advisers had been convinced they could, as they put it, "orchestrate the violence" and through the exercise of graduated pressure bring about an acceptable end to the war. Richard Nixon brought to the negotiating table the threat of doing *anything*, which is to say *everything*, to

end the war on U.S. terms. One version of the madman approach was Nixon's 1969 full-scale SAC alert, intended to frighten the Soviet Union into bringing pressure on Hanoi to make peace on U.S. terms.³⁹ Other possible threats included a land invasion of North Vietnam, the systematic bombing of dams and dikes, and the saturation bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. After the war, a North Vietnamese diplomat explained to a reporter the flaw in Nixon's thinking. Both he and Kissinger believed there were good and bad threats: a good threat would be "to make a false threat that the enemy believes is a true threat." A bad threat was one that was true but disbelieved by the enemy. But there was a third category, Nguyen Co Thach observed: "for those who do not care whether the threat is true or not."⁴⁰ This possibility, an ongoing refusal to respond to the messages of force, introduces into the militarists' dichotomy an element of uncertainty they have never acknowledged.

The war in Vietnam came to an end, like the war in Korea, with a final act of devastation, one as irrelevant to the outcome of the war as the destruction of Korea's dams had been—an act, then, of pure abstraction. Ignoring the advice of his secretaries of state and defense, Nixon decided to act on one of the plans in his madman scenario: the saturation bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. "When you bite the bullet," he told Nelson Rockefeller later, "bite it hard—go for the big play." In a reflective mood, he compared his decision with that of Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis. "Decided," Bob Haldeman noted in his diary, "this [decision] was tougher . . . especially since it didn't have to be made." For twelve days the two cities were carpet-bombed around the clock by a combination of B-52s and fighter bombers that dropped 36,452 tons of bombs.⁴¹ General Curtis LeMay was convinced that had bombing at this level been undertaken from the start, it would have ended in "any given two week period." The Christmas bombing joined Eisenhower's nuclear threats in the sacred canon of Republic Party war-making convictions. But the final agreement signed after the Christmas bombing was virtually identical to the one on the table before the bombing. As John Negroponte, then an aide to Kissinger, put it: "We bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions."⁴² According to Jeffrey Kimball, the bombing was "aimed less at punishing Hanoi into making concessions and more at providing Saigon with incentives to cooperate." The decisive potential value of the bombing was that it would convince "hawks that [Nixon] had been tough, compelling the enemy to accept an agreement that was in reality an am-

biguous compromise” but could be sold as a “clear-cut victory for his skillful management of war and diplomacy.”⁴³ It is possible, had Watergate not cut his presidency short, that Nixon would have renewed saturation bombing in the face of a Saigon government defeat in 1975. Certainly many politicians and senior military officers, especially in the air force, remain convinced that had he done so the United States would have won the war. In 1978, General Ira Eaker, in whose mind’s eye North Vietnam had escaped unscathed, mused: “how much better it would have been, if necessary, to destroy North Vietnam than to lose our first war.”⁴⁴

This conviction has had its coda in the doctrine of “shock and awe” embraced by the Bush administration. But what the wars in Korea and Vietnam demonstrate is that immediate massive bombing does not really differ from gradually escalating bombing. It only raises the level at which bombing begins. At the heart of both policies is a genuinely mad conviction: that American power is such that it must prevail in any situation in which it has declared an interest; that the only obstacle to its triumph is the lack of determination to use that power.

In the summer of 1950, Japanese civilians at Yokota Air Base loaded the B-29s that had firebombed Tokyo five years earlier, for targets in North and South Korea. Four years later, leftover cluster bombs from the Korean War were shipped from Japanese storage facilities for use by the French against the Vietnamese. For the entire duration of the American war against Vietnam, military facilities in Japan and Okinawa (as well as troops from South Korea) were vital to the U.S. effort. In turn, Japan and Korea shifted from being targets of U.S. bombing to more profitable service as base and supplier. Recently, the United States has made an effort to draw Vietnam into its East Asian “strategic designs, focused primarily on keeping China contained.” The current situation in Korea brings us almost full circle (the nuclearization of Japan may complete the circle). Ian Bremer, a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute, recently urged that the only appropriate way for the United States to address North Korea was to “talk tough,” using the language of “the real threat of military escalation.”⁴⁵ This far into the twenty-first century, America’s twentieth-century faith in the language of violence has not changed.

Coda: “Doing it Right”—Airpower from Gulf to Gulf

The military reforms that followed U.S. defeat in Vietnam are beyond the scope of this epilogue. However, it is important to note that the turning away from counterinsurgency, currently a major charge against the military by prowar pundits, was not an oversight. According to Andrew J. Bacevich, the experience of Vietnam had persuaded senior military officials that the best way to avoid another Vietnam debacle was to avoid a future war that resembled Vietnam in any way. In the wake of the precipitate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Lebanon after the bombing of the Marine barracks in October 1983, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger issued a statement defining, and by defining, hoping to restrict, the terms under which the nation should go to war: forces should be committed to combat only when the vital national interests of the United States or its allies are involved; they should be committed “wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning”; and troops should not be sent abroad without a “reasonable assurance” of the support of U.S. public opinion and Congress. Finally, the use of force should be “considered only as a last resort.”

In 1990, as the march toward Operation Desert Storm began, Colin Powell, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under George H.W. Bush, added to Weinberger’s list. As succinctly summarized by Charles Krauthammer, the “idea [of the Powell Doctrine] was not to match Iraqi power but to entirely overwhelm it in planes, tanks, technology, manpower, and will. That would make the war short and make the victory certain.” “For decades,” Krauthammer went on, enthusiastically but inaccurately, “the United States had followed a policy of proportionality: restraint because of the fear of escalation. It was under this theory that Maj. Powell watched his men bleed and die purposelessly in Vietnam.” Under the banner of “never again,” instead of the gradual escalation of bombs and troops, both were to be deployed at full strength.

First, though, Iraq was to be “softened up” by airpower. Instead of Vietnam’s old, lumbering bombs, new high-tech precision weapons would reduce both U.S. casualties and the damage done to civilians in the course of eliminating legitimate military targets. No one opposed using the new weapons, but tactical disputes remained. The architect of a new strategy, Colonel John Warden, believed the new weapons would allow the air force to target the “central nervous system” of the modern state—electrical

power, communications, transportation, and sources of energy.⁴⁶ Warden was appalled by those air force officers who seemed to think doing Vietnam very fast was the same as not doing it at all. His opponents called for dropping large payloads ever closer to Baghdad until Saddam Hussein agreed to withdraw from Kuwait. They also insisted on targeting Iraqi ground troops. Like Warden, the officers who advocated such tactics did so in the name of “never again.” Warden was adamant: “This is not your Rolling Thunder. This is real war, and one of the things we want to emphasize right from the start is that this is not Vietnam! This is doing it right! This is using airpower!”⁴⁷

The general impression left by the use of high-tech air power in Gulf War I is that it worked very well. TV viewers could virtually merge with precision weapons as, over and over, they looked through the cross-hairs in the nose cone of a descending missile. Viewers did not merge with what happened when the missile landed. Indeed, the game-boy TV reporting of the war, Paul Walker, director of the Institute for Peace and International Security at MIT, wrote, “created an illusion of remote, bloodless, pushbutton battle in which only military targets were assumed destroyed.”⁴⁸ A Global Security report on airpower in the Gulf War described it with restrained lyricism: “In the final analysis, in its swiftness, decisiveness, and scope, the coalition’s victory came from the wise and appropriate application of airpower.”⁴⁹

A terrible sense of well-being derived also from the conviction that this, at last, was total war, as opposed to the limited, constrained, one-handed-behind-the-back experience of Vietnam. Publications from the *New York Times* to the *Air Force Journal of Logistics* trumpeted the statistics: Iraq had been pounded, in just a month and a half, more heavily than Germany in World War II, than Southeast Asia in ten years of war. The numbers were wrong, as anyone who did the math at the time could have demonstrated. Edwin E. Moise, a professor at Clemson State, did do the math and questioned the figures at the time. Afterward, when the full statistics were released, it was clear, Moise wrote, “how little had actually been dropped—88,500 tons of aerial ordnance,”⁵⁰ less than a month’s worth of Vietnam bombing in 1968. Nor were all of the bombs smart. Only 7 percent were at all intelligent, and of those, 40 percent missed their targets. The 60 percent that worked did indeed destroy information networks and Saddam Hussein’s command and control system. However, Saddam’s system “turned out to be more redundant and more able to re-

constitute itself than first thought,” and “fiber-optic networks and computerized switching systems proved particularly tough to put out of action.”⁵¹

Less discussed than the high-tech weapons was the reappearance of B-52 carpet bombing and the ongoing use of cluster bombs and napalm. Some areas of Iraq—the city of Basra, for example—were essentially free-fire zones. The military claimed Basra was entirely a “military town,” but failed to explain where the city’s 800,000 inhabitants had gone. The *Los Angeles Times* described the city under bombardment as a “hellish nighttime of fires and smoke so dense that witnesses say the sun hasn’t been clearly visible for several days at a time. . . .”⁵² Still, smart or dumb, as intense as first claimed or not, the sense that Gulf War I represented a total triumph for the air force remained. As President George H.W. Bush put it in May 1991, “Gulf Lesson One is the value of airpower.”

President Bill Clinton and his secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, were fast studies. If airpower was good in a war, it was also good in situations that did not rise to the level of war. Albright put the question to Colin Powell directly: “What’s the point in having this superb military that you’re always talking about, if we can’t use it?”⁵³ And so they used it. For a decade after the war in the Gulf ended, in the Gulf itself, in Bosnia, and again in Kosovo, the Clinton administration used air strikes, Andrew Bacevich noted, the way the Royal Navy used gunboats in the nineteenth century. As in Vietnam, the bombs and missiles were presumed to speak. President Bill Clinton was their interpreter in the fall of 1996, after Saddam Hussein had attacked the Kurdish protected zone in northern Iraq: “Our missiles sent the following message to Saddam Hussein. When you abuse your own people or threaten your neighbors you must pay a price.” In December 1998, Saddam Hussein expelled UN weapons inspectors, and the U.S. Air Force, aided by the Royal Air Force, spoke again. The statistics are impressive: for four days, 600 sorties were flown against 97 targets, 330 cruise missiles were fired from aircraft carriers, and, for good measure, B-52s dropped another 90. Saddam Hussein responded by abolishing the no-fly zone and activating his anti-aircraft batteries—to which Clinton responded with more bombs.⁵⁴

And so it went for the rest of Clinton’s presidency. Bacevich, after listing the names of the multiplying operations and the tonnage they delivered, called it an “inconclusive air war of attrition.” There were no U.S. or UK casualties, no lost planes. At the same time, Bacevich concluded,

operationally, “the results achieved were negligible.” Politically, on the other hand, there were achievements: “In the eyes of American clients in the Persian Gulf . . . the persistent sparring with Saddam affirmed the continuing need for a robust U.S. military presence in the region.” In Afghanistan and the Sudan, as in the Balkans, the Clinton administration “made long-range precision air strikes an emblem of American statecraft.”⁵⁵

If air strikes were now America’s logo, and Lesson One was airpower, the question remained, what sort of airpower? Used how? In the years between the Gulf Wars, defense intellectuals applied themselves to this subject. Among these was Harlan Ullman, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Ullman and a colleague, James P. Wade, published *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* in 1996 and seven years later watched as their theories were put into action over Baghdad. Ullman’s plan, repeated throughout the “countdown” to the war, looked forward to “showering” Baghdad with more bombs in the first forty-eight or at most seventy-two hours of war than were used for the thirty-nine days of Gulf War I, so as to “take the city down.” The idea of shock and awe is to gain “rapid dominance,” Ullman wrote. “This ability to impose massive shock and awe . . . will so overload the perception, knowledge and understanding of [the] adversary that there will be no choice except to cease and desist or risk complete and total destruction.”

In response to criticism of this frankly barbarous concept, Ullman insisted people had gotten it all wrong. He complained to a British interviewer that the phrase “has created a Doomsday approach,” and he much preferred the more technical term: “effects-based operations.” He insisted he did not mean “indiscriminate, terror-inducing destructiveness.” On the contrary, the idea is to do “minimum damage, minimum casualties, using minimum force—even though,” he conceded, “that may be a lot.” Context, Ullman told Oliver Burkeman, was all. “The question is: how do you influence the will and perception of the enemy, to get them to behave how you want them to?” The difference between Ullman’s theory and a cave-man with a very big rock was “the combination of technology and philosophy.”⁵⁶ His philosophy was explicitly drawn from the use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which were, in his words, “the maximum case of changing behavior.”⁵⁷ Baghdad would be hit by 800 cruise missiles in the first two days of the war, destroying “everything that makes life in Baghdad livable. . . . You will have this simultaneous effect, rather

like the nuclear weapons at Hiroshima, not taking days or weeks but in minutes.”⁵⁸

On Thursday, March 20, 2003, at 8:09 P.M., the effects-based operation began. “Wave after wave of explosions rolled down the Tigris valley. . . . The cadence, at once ordered and chaotic, continued as the evening drew towards midnight.” Explosions occurred as often as every ten seconds. The bombs hit their targets with greater accuracy than in 1991, but their shrapnel was more generously distributed and their impact blew out windows, shook walls, and collapsed roofs in the surrounding neighborhood. One of the few American reporters who wrote about the bombardment of the city, Anthony Shadid, described what it was like: “Perhaps the most terrifying sensations of life in a city under siege are the sounds of the bombers. In a siege, one’s hearing becomes exquisitely sensitive. Much of the time, one waits for the faint sound, the whisper that signals the plane’s arrival. The entire body listens. Every muscle tightens, and one stops breathing. Time slows in the interim.” Yasmine, one of his Iraqi friends, demanded, “Do those people up there have the faintest idea what is happening down here when they unload?”⁵⁹ Harlan Ullman was disappointed. There had not been enough shock, not nearly enough awe. This had been nothing more than the strategic bombing of Baghdad.

It is unnecessary to rehearse here how much of the mission that George W. Bush announced, on May 2, 2003, had been accomplished, remains to be accomplished in July 2008. What is necessary, however, is to point out that the air war in Iraq more or less disappeared from sight even as it continued (and continues) to be carried on. I cannot think of another use of airpower—other than spy planes or the openly “secret” bombing of Laos and Cambodia, performed so invisibly. The air war in Iraq sends no messages. Its purpose is to hunt and kill insurgents, and that it does with indifference to the consequences for those who live in or near the precisely targeted buildings. Relatively few reporters pay much attention to it, and, in contrast to Vietnam, the military does not regularly announce the tonnage dropped or the sorties flown.

Some reporters have put isolated figures together that offer some estimation of the extent of bombing. Ellen Knickmeyer, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, estimated that the number of air strikes had increased fivefold from January to November 2005.⁶⁰ In an article that ran on January 11, 2006, Drew Brown, reporting for the *Detroit Times*, listed such figures as U.S. Central Command Air Force (CENTAF) had released: there

had been 306 close-air-support strikes in 2005, a 43 percent rise over 2004.⁶¹ Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist, reported that carrier-based navy and marine planes dropped twenty-six tons of ordnance on Fallujah during the battle for that city in November of 2004. Most reports from the CENTAF are vague: "Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons flew air strikes against anti-Iraqi forces near Balad. The F-16s successfully dropped a precision-guided bomb on a building used by insurgents. F-16s and a Predator also flew air strikes against anti-Iraqi forces in the vicinity of Karabilah. The Predator successfully fired a Hellfire missile against insurgent positions."⁶²

After Fallujah, the air war seems to have gone entirely underground. Nick Turse, an investigative journalist, has tried to track it, with marginal success. "A secret air war is being waged in Iraq," he has written. "The U.S. military keeps information on the munitions expended in its air efforts under tight wraps, refusing to offer details on the scale of use and so minimizing the importance of air power in Iraq."⁶³ There was some irony, therefore, in an op-ed piece by Charles Dunlap Jr., a major general in the air force, who, in the course of insisting that defeating the insurgency in Iraq was not "all about winning hearts and mind," asked how many Americans knew that in 2007 there had been a fivefold increase in air strikes over the preceding year. The answer is, not many. Major General Rick Lynch, in a throwaway reference to airpower, remarked that during a battle on January 10 in Arab Jabour, U.S. bombers had "dropped 40,000 pounds of bombs in 10 minutes to clear an insurgent stronghold."⁶⁴

Robyn Read, a retired air force colonel, has pondered the questions of what airpower can do in counterinsurgency warfare once the period of "kinetic kill" is finished:

The answer is about finding and pursuing the path of least resistance to the political end state, caveated with a planner's full understanding that least resistance must successfully contend with collateral effects, unintended consequences, legal and moral restraints, and the well-being of the coalition's aggregate interest in the endeavor. EBO [effects-based operations] provides a functional yet flexible framework for thinking about this problem, or more correctly, this problem set.

The CIA has developed a genuinely new approach to this "problem set": targeted killings. Predator drones originally designed for surveillance

have been armed with Hellfire antiarmor missiles and used to assassinate suspected terrorists both in and outside of combat zones. No one knows how many such strikes have taken place, nor how many people they have killed. However, one former official working in the program told a reporter: "We have the plans in place to do them globally." Some problems persist: "In most cases, we need the approval of the host country to do them. However, there are a few countries where the president has decided that we can whack someone without the approval or knowledge of the host government."⁶⁵

We know most about the use of drones outside of combat areas when they go wrong, as they did in the January 2006 in an attack on the village of Damadola, Pakistan, where, it was believed, senior members of al Qaeda were attending a meeting. It remains unclear whether they were or had been in the village; what is known is that eighteen civilians, including many women and children, were killed. There was bipartisan support for the strike in the United States, though of course the deaths of innocents were regretted. As Senator Evan Bayh (D-Indiana) put it on the Wolf Blitzer show, "Now, it's a regrettable situation, but what else are we supposed to do? It's like the Wild, Wild West out there. The Pakistani border [with Afghanistan] is a real problem."⁶⁶ Andrew Bacevich, alone among the mainstream commentators I have read, thought the problem lay elsewhere: "For the United States to unleash a salvo of missiles at a Pakistani village thought to house an al-Qaeda chieftain is the equivalent of the Mexican government bombing a southern California condo complex suspected of harboring a drug kingpin."⁶⁷ Lee Strickland, who retired from the CIA in 2004, praised the deterrent power of these killings: "You give shelter to Al Qaeda figures, you may well get your village blown up. Conversely, you have to note that this can also create local animosity and instability." This is the venerable wisdom that guided the United States for fifteen years in Vietnam.