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Indochina air war failing, report says

By John B. Wood
Globe Staff

While American ground troops are coming home in increasing numbers, the air war in Indochina, destructive but ineffective, grinds on.

That is the conclusion of the first detailed analysis of American activity over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, written by professors at the Cornell University Center for International Studies and released this morning.

The 200-page document reports that:

• By the end of 1971, American and South Vietnamese planes will have dropped 6 million tons of bombs on Indochina, twice the tonnage used in World War II and Korea combined.

• Although bombing often achieves its immediate military goals, it is not winning the war. The casualties, civilian dislocation and random destruction caused by the air war are detrimental to "nation building," our professed goal in Indochina.

• No end to the air war is in sight. The South Vietnamese army cannot stand alone, nor is it being prepared to do so; Defense Secretary Melvin Laird has said American air and naval power will be required in Indochina for at least a decade to maintain a policy of "realistic deterrence."

"In summary, the success of individual air operations have not, in the aggregate, resulted in major progress toward the achievement of stated US goals in Indochina," the study says.

"On the other hand, they have inflicted grievous damage on the nations of the region, leaving a scarred countryside and torn societies for whom the task of political accommodations and reconstruction will have been made not easier, but more difficult."

Although it is billed as a sequel to the Pentagon Papers, the Cornell study is based entirely on non-confidential sources.

Its most telling quotes are from Laird and former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara; ethical considerations and wide implications of the air war are relegated to a future report.

The tone of the study is military and dispassionate, weighing the effects of the air war against stated American objectives in Indochina.

It concludes succinctly: "A reassessment of our position is long overdue."

Aerial bombing is becoming more important, the study says, as the United States turns increasingly to "capital-intensive warfare" substituting massive aerial firepower for manpower.

Mechanized warfare saves American lives, but it is proportionately more destructive of Asian lives and resources.

Aerial bombing has undeniable military advantages in conventional warfare, with massed bodies of troops.

In guerrilla warfare, the study concludes, it is inefficient and indiscriminate.

Concentrations of enemy resources are rare in Indochina.

Viet Cong generally do not mass in the jungle; they are more likely to infiltrate civilian villages, where they are indistinguishable from friendly Vietnamese to the American eye.

"The best weapon against a guerrilla is a knife, the worst is a bomber; the second best is a rifle, the second worst, artillery," the study says.

Even where bombing is militarily effective, it may help defeat broader American designs.

"Mechanically concentrated firepower can destroy objects and people, but it cannot always bend wills to conform with American aims; nation building is a subtle process. "Just as the senseless brutality of the Battle of Britain, designed to break the British will, was psychologically counterproductive, so the use of airpower in Indochina may have similar consequences," the study says.

By any standards, the amount of bombing in Indochina is staggering. The study notes that while "no single set of numbers conveys the full picture... the trends reveal such emphatic features that errors of interpretation are unlikely to result."

A hand grenade contains about one pound of high explosive. A typical mission of six B-52s employed in "saturation bombing" drops 300,000 pounds of similar explosive in less than a minute.

In ten years of successful counterinsurgency in Malaya, the British used 33,000 tons of aerial munitions. In six years of fighting in South Vietnam alone, air ordinance has totalled 3,600,000 tons.

Elsewhere, American and South Vietnamese planes have dropped 200,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia, 500,000 tons on North Vietnam, 500,000 tons on Northern Laos, and 1,400,000 tons on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, predominantly in Southern Laos.

In 1967, relatively intense bombing of North Vietnam required 200,000 tons of bombs per year. Despite elaborate civil de-

Aerial Power Substituted For Troops

By WILLIAM BROOM
Herald Washington
Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON — The United States is substituting massive aerial firepower for the troops it is withdrawing from Indochina, a group of Cornell University scholars reported Sunday.

"Contrary to reports and impressions," the report said, "the air war is not being 'wound down' like the ground war."

The study was sponsored by the Center for International Studies at Cornell. More than 80 faculty members contributed to it. The group worked without access to classified data, basing

its study on published material and interviews. Their findings were compiled by a group of 29 academicians, many of them scientists.

Bombing in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos today continues at about 60 per cent of the war's peak bombing period in 1968, the report said. In the first eight months of 1971, more than 500,000 tons of munitions were dropped, comparable to the bombing rate in all theaters of World War II.

"Vietnamization has brought no new restrictions on the use of American airpower," the report said. "Indeed, the trend has been in the opposite direction."

For 1971, the report estimated that the tonnage of air munitions used in Cambodia, the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, and for reprisal raids against North Vietnam will increase over 1970 levels. The rate will drop in South Vietnam to about 300,000 tons, approximately the same as 1968, year of the war's big buildup, and increase to about 90,000 tons in Cambodia. Bombing along the trail will hit about 400,000 tons and another 90,000 tons will fall in northern Laos.

"By the end of this year, the Nixon Administration will have deployed in three years, as much tonnage of bombs as the

Johnson Administration did in four," said the study.

U.S. air activity in South Vietnam has been cut back, with the South Vietnamese Air Force taking up most of the slack on tactical assignments. U.S. air activity is concentrated on saturation bombing by B52 Stratofortresses.

In six years of the Indochina War, the United States will have used 6.2 million tons of air-dropped munitions. By comparison U.S. planes dropped about two million tons in World War II, and one million tons in Korea. Air war cost was placed at about \$50 billion, or one-fourth the war's total.

Yet the report found that the military effectiveness of the bombing has been scant. One of its main conclusions is that air war is basically mismatched to the guerrilla warfare by the enemy in Indochina.

During the three years of bombing in North Vietnam, about \$500 million in economic damage, and 100,000 casualties (80 per cent civilian) were inflicted. But CIA and Defense Department studies were cited showing no measurable reduction in North Vietnam's will or capability for contributing to the war in the south.

The credibility of the U.S. government was called into question by a number of disclosures in the report.

In 1969, when 200,000 tons of bombs were dumped on northern Laos, Washington officially admitted to flying "reconnaissance" flights. B52 raids in northern Laos went on for more than a year before official acknowledgment.

It was stated that U.S. planes were not giving close tactical ground support when in fact they were.

It was discovered that the 1968 bombing halt, in pursuit of the Paris peace talks, did not reduce air activity in Indochina

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but only shifted it to Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Despite Nixon Administration denials, the report said, U.S. bombing in northern Laos during 1969 was as intense as previously in North Vietnam, about 200,000 tons annually. Yet the massive bombing effort failed to dislodge the Communist Pathet Lao, who now control more territory than before.

In terms of military effectiveness, the report found that although air power achieved narrowly-defined military missions, these successes did not add up to an overall position of strength. It attributed the failure to the "indiscriminate destruction resulting from the use of air power amidst civilian populations . . . contributing to the continuing weakness of friendly regimes."

In one way, the bombing was counterproductive. A Defense Department study was found showing that massive American bombing gave the enemy more than enough explosives from dud bombs (27,000 tons in 1968 alone) to fulfill its needs for making mines and booby traps.

The report raises questions about the value of continued bombing. With American troops rapidly withdrawing a renewal of Communist ground war activity would leave the United States little option other than re-escalating the air war, it said. Yet, the report points out, such re-escalation is unlikely to scare off the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) or North Vietnam, having failed to do so earlier in the war.

The conclusions of the report were:

1. "Almost all air missions can be called successful in terms of their immediate operational criteria . . . the existing technology virtually guarantees that the mission can accomplish its immediate objective . . . where the target is human and mobile, repeated bombing is

often necessary to deny use of an area, trail or village for any extended time. The amount of destructiveness required can be immense in comparison with the objective achieved."

2. "Air war is economical in terms of American lives and dollars. The direct costs are far lower, per ton of ordinance delivered, than for ground warfare . . . more importantly the number of American lives lost in the air is only about 10 per cent of the total . . . this favorable evaluation rests on two gross simplifications: that the effectiveness can be evaluated through counting successes in military operational terms alone, and that only the direct costs in American lives and dollars are to be counted, not the costs borne by others (the indigenous population)."

3. "Costs of air war to the people of Indochina are very high. The damage includes civilian dead and wounded, refugees, villages and crops destroyed, cultural treasures lost, and ecological damage to the countryside."

4. "While the costs of the war mount cumulatively, military actions, though successful individually, may in the aggregate fail to achieve the overall policy objectives. In Indochina where 'nation building' was described as the ultimate goal, this dictum applies with special force. As a result of its extensive and costly efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia, the U.S. had gained: (1) time to recruit and equip the South Vietnamese and Cambodian armed forces, with as yet uncertain military capability; (2) time to consolidate military-political regimes whose stability is not assured, and (3) an apparent military stalemate, dependent on an indefinite continuation of American air action. Whether these gains are worth the enormous costs . . . is an open question."