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This article examines US bombing of civilians—the logic, the technology, the consequences—from World War II through the Korean War, the Indochinese Wars.

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); 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.

The Tarzon bomb

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") equipped with rapid-fire machine guns capable of firing 6,000 rounds a minute; World War I– 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.

AC-47 Puff the Magic Dragon

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. 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. 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. 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). 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.

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. . . .”

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 Atlee 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.”

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. In the event, nuclear weapons were not used; the destruction of northern and central Korea had been accomplished with conventional weapons alone.

MacArthur at Inchon planning the US counterattack

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." 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."

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.

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

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 was 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." 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." 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. 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.

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.

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