

The American War in Indochina: Injustice and Outrage.

La guerra del Vietnam: Injusticia y Ultraje

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Resumen

Muchas de las acciones del ejército de los Estados Unidos durante la guerra de Indochina, en las que se utilizó la capacidad de disparo en una escala sin precedentes, eran potenciales generadores de indignación en Indochina, en los Estados Unidos y en otros lugares. El examen de tres aspectos interconectados de las operaciones militares de los Estados Unidos en la guerra de Indochina (los bombardeos, el Programa Phoenix y la masacre de My Lai) proporciona numerosos ejemplos de cómo trató el gobierno estadounidense de impedir que sus acciones generaran indignación. Los métodos usados se pueden clasificar en cinco categorías: ocultamiento de la acción; minusvaloración del objetivo; reinterpretación de la acción; uso de canales oficiales para hacer parecer justa la acción; finalmente, intimidación y soborno de personas implicadas. El presente análisis muestra que la reducción de la indignación ciudadana es una tarea fundamental para quienes hacen la guerra; además, señala diversos modos de enfrentarse a quienes fomentan la injusticia.

Palabras clave: injusticia, ultraje, Indochina.

Abstract

In the war in Indochina, with its unprecedented scale of firepower, many U.S. military actions had the potential to generate outrage in Indochina, the United States, and elsewhere. Examination of three interrelated aspects of U.S. military operations in the Indochina war — the bombing, the Phoenix Program, and the My Lai massacre — reveals numerous examples of how the U.S. government tried to inhibit outrage from its actions. The methods used can be classified into five categories: covering up the action; devaluing the target; reinterpreting the action; using official channels to give the appearance of justice; and intimidating and bribing people involved. This analysis shows how minimization of public outrage is a key task for war-makers and also points to a variety of ways to challenge the perpetrators of injustice.

Keywords: backfire, injustice, outrage, Indochina.

1. Introduction

Wars would be unsustainable if enough soldiers and civilians were so shocked and disgusted by killing, maiming, deprivation and destruction that they withdrew their support. Therefore, a key part of war-making is the process of managing outrage, either containing it or directing it towards the enemy. Techniques for containing outrage are especially important when obvious injustices occur, such as blatant aggression, use of banned weapons, massacres of civilians, and massive killing. Social historian Barrington Moore, Jr. observed that a sense of injustice can be found in virtually every culture, and that certain actions by rulers regularly arouse this sense of injustice (Moore, 1978).

Our aim in this paper is to explore the techniques used by the U.S. military and government to contain outrage in the war in Indochina (known by the Vietnamese as the American war). There are several reasons why the Indochina war is ideal for this sort of analysis. Firstly, many different actions by the U.S. military in Indochina could and often did cause shock and anger. Secondly, there is a great deal of documentary evidence about the war. Finally, the significance of the Indochina war continues to be an issue in policy and public debate today. Analyzing the war from a new perspective can contribute to both historical understanding and public debate.

We examine the war in Indochina using a framework for analyzing the dynamics of backfire from injustices. In brief, actions seen as unjust may cause outrage among targets and observers and consequently backfire against the perpetrator. We use the term outrage as a surrogate for a range of adverse reactions such as concern, shock, disgust and revulsion. Five methods are commonly used by perpetrators to inhibit outrage; these methods thus have the potential to prevent or moderate backfire. They are: covering up the action; devaluing the target; reinterpreting the action; using official channels to give the appearance of justice; and intimidating and bribing people involved. In turn, action can be taken to counter each of these five methods of inhibition.

In the following section, we outline the backfire framework. Next we give an overview of the three interrelated aspects of the war in Indochina we will analyze: the bombing; the Phoenix Program; and the My Lai massacre. Then, in five sections, we look in turn at each of the five methods for inhibiting outrage from injustice, giving examples of how these methods were used by the U.S. government and military forces in the Indochina war. In the final section we discuss ways to counter the five methods of inhibiting outrage.

Most studies of warfare, when they examine techniques, focus on military effectiveness, perhaps noting their political side effects. The backfire model offers a different perspective on warfare, giving central stage to political dynamics, specifically the creation or minimization of public outrage. In our attempt to present a different way of looking at warfare, we rely on secondary sources. There is a surfeit of information about the war. The challenge is to make sense of it in a way that offers insights for future campaigns against injustice.

2. The Dynamics of Backfire

It is commonly believed that superior force — in particular, violence — will always be victorious over opponents with inferior force. Contrary to this belief, though, there are many examples in which the exercise of violence against peaceful opponents has been seriously counterproductive. Gandhi developed the strategy of *satyagraha* or nonviolent action, and showed in practice how this could undermine the strength of attackers. For example, in the 1930 salt *satyagraha*, the beating of nonresisting protesters led to a tremendous increase in support for Indian independence within India, Britain, and other countries (Weber, 1997). Other examples include the 1905 “bloody Sunday” killings in Russia that undermined support for the Czar and the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa that increased international opposition to apartheid. There are many such examples (Sharp, 1973).

The same process can be observed in cases outside the framework of violence used against peaceful protesters. For example, the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991 led to an enormous public reaction against the police after a video of the beating was broadcast (Martin, 2005). In 2004, publication of vivid photos of humiliation and torture of prisoners by U.S. guards in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq caused outrage internationally.

There are two key requirements for such actions to arouse increased opposition. Firstly, actions must be perceived as unjust, disproportionate, or otherwise inappropriate. Secondly, information about the actions must be communicated to receptive audiences. Without the video, the beating of Rodney King would have passed virtually unnoticed.

Examination of a range of cases reveals that techniques commonly used by perpetrators to inhibit outrage can be conveniently grouped into five categories (Martin, 2007):

- Cover-up of the action;
- Devaluation of the target;
- Reinterpretation of the action;
- Use of official channels to give the appearance of justice;
- Intimidation and bribery.

Consider for example the 1991 Dili massacre, in which Indonesian troops opened fire on a funeral procession just as it was entering Santa Cruz cemetery (Kohen, 1999). There had been many previous massacres in East Timor during the Indonesian occupation, but they had not caused serious repercussions because of Indonesian censorship. But in 1991, several western journalists were present, including filmmaker Max Stahl who captured the killings on videotape. Indonesian censorship failed to prevent the videotape getting out of the country; once shown internationally, it led to a huge increase in international support for East Timor’s independence. The attempted *cover-up* failed.

Indonesian officials denigrated the East Timorese; one, for example, called them “agitators” and “scum”. But attempts at *devaluation* had little salience for international audiences.

Indonesian authorities *reinterpreted* the events in several ways. Initially they reported 19 deaths, a figure later raised to 50. (An independent investigation came up with a figure of 271.) Indonesian authorities also blamed the events on the protesters.

Because of the international outcry, the Indonesian government set up an inquiry, which gave token sentences to several officials. Similarly, the Indonesian military set up an inquiry, with similar results. But these efforts to use *official channels* to give an appearance of justice had little credibility internationally.

Immediately after the massacre, Indonesian troops arrested, beat, and killed many East Timorese independence activists. This would have *intimidated* many within East Timor, but only caused more outrage internationally.

In summary, the Dili massacre was an atrocity, and information about it was communicated widely. The Indonesian government used all five methods to inhibit outrage but, unlike previous massacres, was unable to cover up the killings or significantly dampen the adverse reaction (Martin, 2007: 23-33).

Just as perpetrators can act to inhibit outrage, so opponents can act to express it, by countering each of the five methods of inhibition: exposing the action; validating the target; interpreting the action as unjust; avoiding or discrediting official channels; and resisting and exposing intimidation and bribery.

The backfire model has been applied to a wide range of issues, including censorship (Jansen and Martin, 2003), defamation (Gray and Martin, 2006), electroshock weapons (Martin and Wright, 2003), refugees (Herd, 2006), industrial disasters (Engel and Martin, 2006) and sexual harassment (Scott and Martin, 2006). Tactics used by perpetrators in these and other areas (Martin, 2007) fit into the same five categories, which are fairly general and need to be interpreted according to the case study. For example, the method of devaluation includes any means of reducing the status or reputation of the target, ranging from scurrilous gossip in academic dismissals to dehumanisation in genocide.

This approach can readily be applied to war, such as the struggle between those supporting and opposing the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Martin, 2004). In this paper, we focus both on the rationale for the war in Vietnam and more extensively on the acts carried out in the war itself.

In warfare, unlike events such as the salt satyagraha beatings or the Dili massacre, both sides use violence. For many observers, this undermines the sense of injustice: if the other side uses violence, it is widely considered acceptable to use violence in response. This is true even when there is a great disproportion between the violence used by the two sides. Nevertheless, even in warfare some actions are widely considered outrageous and have the potential to backfire. Hence we can expect war-makers will, if necessary, use all five methods to inhibit outrage.

Blowback, which can be roughly defined as the adverse and often unforeseen consequences of government policies, especially covert operations (Johnson, 2000; Simpson, 1988), is one type of backfire. Backfire is a broader concept than

blowback: backfires can occur as a result of wide range of actions, from censorship to genocide, and as a result of action by a variety of perpetrators, not just governments. Backfire analysis, including the study of methods of inhibiting and expressing outrage, gives insights into tactics mostly absent from the concept of blowback. For example, the tactics used by the Los Angeles police in relation to the beating Rodney King can be analyzed using backfire categories (Martin, 2005), whereas the outcome would not normally be described as blowback, because the beating was not part of government policy and certainly was not covert.

3. The Indochina War

The war in Indochina (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970; Gavel, 1971; Karnow, 1983; Porter, 1979), commonly referred to as the Vietnam war, can be seen as a nationalist and anticolonialist war, as a revolutionary war, and as a hot point of the cold war. As our focus is on tactics used by U.S. leaders for the containment of outrage, we do not dwell on the driving forces behind the war except to note that anticommunism was a major factor behind U.S. government policy in Indochina.

Indochina was mainly rural; rural support for revolution was the key to the way the war was fought on all sides. The relationship between guerilla fighters and the people in a rural revolution has been characterized as being like fish in the ocean (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 80). In response, U.S. planners devised their own theory and policies to counter such a revolution. Basically, this involved the use of massive force to either destroy the people or to force them to move into the areas under the control of the U.S.-supported side. This U.S. policy of destroying and displacing the civilian base of the enemy, by “drying up the ocean,” was one aspect of the overall counterinsurgency policy known as the Pacification Program.

Bombing

In Vietnam the majority of U.S. bombing was in the South of the country in the rural areas. (In the North the bombing was largely targeted on urban areas and the population had to decentralize: Miguel and Roland, 2005). Much of the U.S. bombing of Indochina was integrated into the Pacification Program, primarily as part of what were called “search and destroy missions.” These missions have been graphically described as “typically [beginning] with B-52 saturation bombing of an ‘objective’ area ... [followed by] long range artillery fire ... aerial bombing by smaller, lower flying attack bombers which are armed with half-ton bombs, ... and huge canisters of gelatinous napalm ... Last to arrive and devastate the ‘objective’ from the air are helicopter gunships firing rockets and M-60 machine guns ...” (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 104; see also Schell, 1967). After these bombing attacks, any people left alive were either forced to move to the cities or were herded into “strategic hamlets,” set up and financed by the United States, surrounded by high barbed wire fences to separate the “ocean” from the “fish.” Between 1965 and 1970, 5,000 hamlets, with an estimated population of four million people, were destroyed.

The use of chemicals (such as CS gas and napalm) and herbicides (such as Agents Orange and Blue) against the people, forests, and crops was also part of this overall Pacification Program of destroying the capacity for people to support the guerilla

fighters, rather than primarily, as the Army generally claimed, to destroy the opposing military forces or to destroy their forest cover. According to the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (1970: 112), “The army denies that herbicides were used in populated areas. But there is ample documentary evidence to the contrary, even from government sources.”

This was the policy throughout Indochina. In Laos, from 1965 to 1973, the U.S. Air Force dropped over 2,000,000 tons of bombs. Most of the victims were civilians. In Cambodia in March 1969, the U.S. military increased to “intensive” the secret bombing program: 3,630 B-52 bombing raids annihilated the country (Kiernan, 1989; Shawcross, 1987: 28).

The U.S. bombing in Indochina was the “heaviest aerial bombardment in history” (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 97).

The Phoenix Program

If bombing was the “blanket” method of eliminating support for the guerillas, then the Phoenix Program was the more “targeted” method (Valentine, 1990). Set up, funded, and organized by the CIA in South Vietnam in 1967, the program was, according to official documents examined, “aimed at ‘neutralizing’ — through assassination, kidnapping, and systematic torture — the civilian infrastructure that supported the Viet Cong” (Valentine, 2006; see also Browne, 1965: 260-63). Carried out by both U.S. and its allied Vietnamese forces, the Phoenix Program worked on blacklists, compiled through intelligence, of the people in the villages considered to be working in any capacity lending support to the National Liberation Front, referred to by U.S. officials as the Viet Cong or VC. These people were then hunted by special units and “neutralized.” Many thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, were killed through the program (Vietnam’s Policy and Prospects, 1970). According to the U.S. mission in Saigon, in the year of 1969 alone some 19,500 civilian “infrastructure” had been “neutralized” with 6,000 killed (Karnow, 1983: 602). The program was riddled with corruption and chaos (Davidson, 1988: 480; Karnow, 1983: 602). As one commentator on U.S. intelligence observed, “it was easier to fabricate progress than to achieve it.” Nevertheless, so many of the civilian “infrastructure” were jailed, tortured, and killed that Pham Van Dong, the Premier of Hanoi, said at the war’s end the political structure in the South had been all but destroyed (Snepp, 1984: 57).

The My Lai Massacre

The My Lai massacre is essentially a local example of what resulted generally from the Pacification Program, which targeted whole regions, and the Phoenix Program within this, which targeted specifically identified people and villages. My Lai was a hamlet known as “Pinkville,” as it was in a pink-colored area on the military map. All who lived there were considered, by the U.S. forces, to be sympathizers of communists or the VC, and therefore open targets. On 16 March 1968, U.S. troops attacked My Lai. There was no resistance; only women, children, and old men were there. Over a period of hours, the soldiers shot the inhabitants, after first raping some of the females, burned all the homes, and destroyed possessions, crops, and wells (Belknap, 2002; Bilton and Sim, 1992; Hersh, 1972). (On My Lai and backfire, see also Gray and Martin, 2008.)

The bombing, the Phoenix Program, and the My Lai massacre are examples of actions during the Indochina war that policy makers well knew had the potential to generate outrage. In order to continue with the war, the U.S. government needed to prevent or contain such adverse reactions, which could lay the foundation for effective opposition to U.S. policies. In the following five sections, we examine the five standard methods for inhibiting outrage from injustice: cover-up; devaluation of the target; reinterpretation of the action; use of official channels to give the appearance of justice; and intimidation and bribery. We discuss each method separately, noting as we proceed the links and overlaps between the different methods.

4. Cover-up

Because people cannot react against something unless they know about it, secrecy is a powerful technique for preventing adverse reactions. There are various audiences to consider, including members of the public in the United States, foreign governments, and foreign populations. Even within the U.S. government and military, cover-up can be important to reduce dissent and to prevent leakage to wider audiences. Cover-up can even be important in relation to the targets of attack: villagers might know they are being bombed but not know about what is happening elsewhere in the country. In atrocities such as My Lai, every surviving witness increases the risk of exposure.

In practice, cover-up was carried out in a variety of ways, including (to name a few): systematic secrecy at all levels of the State Department and the Defense Department; the culture in the army of “denying everything”; the destruction of documents; the use of internal consulting within the Defense Department to withhold important information from the public and Congress; the use of “non military” forces to carry out military actions (relabeling); and restrictions placed on reporting both officially and through the media.

The cover-up was both in prospect as well as retrospect. For example, in late 1963, prior to the Tonkin Gulf incident, official planning for a secret war against North Vietnam included, on President Johnson’s direction, estimates of “the plausibility of denial” of such actions (Gettleman et al., 1995: 242).

The Pentagon Papers, a retrospective collection of official materials about policy and planning of the war, are perhaps the most well known documents about the Indochina war. The U.S. government attempted to keep these papers secret from the public (Ellsberg, 2002). The U.S. government tried to cover up overall activities in Indochina as well as specific actions on the ground.

For example, the Geneva Accords of 1962 declared Laos a neutral country and the U.S. government agreed officially to remove all military personnel. In reality it used the civilian Agency for International Development (AID) as a cover for continued involvement by the U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Ellsberg, 2002: 445). Use of mercenaries, “advisers,” “special forces,” green berets on contract to CIA/AID, and U.S. Air Force bombers taking off from Thailand and South Vietnam, enabled U.S. officials to deny any military involvement.

All this was hidden from the U.S. public and Congress; it was kept as a “diplomatic secret” that the U.S. government was breaking the Geneva Accords in what were acts of war (Ellsberg, 2002: 446). Finally, in 1969, when the public learned enough about these secret actions through *New York Times* reports and demanded

change, there was a Congressional Hearing, though this was also behind closed doors. At this hearing, some government officials refused to testify and President Nixon, under pressure, only allowed the release of a heavily censored version of the evidence. Senator William Fulbright observed that, “What strikes me most is that an operation of this size could be carried out without members of the Senate knowing it — and without the public knowing!” (Burchett, 1970: 99).

The comprehensive nature of cover-up processes is evident in reports of U.S. military actions on the ground in Laos. Names were changed: U.S. forces in Laos were labeled “Special Forces” and called “Study and Observation Groups” under the aegis of AID. Places were changed: casualties occurring in Laos were recorded as being inside Vietnam. Disguises were worn: “reconnaissance teams didn’t go out with U.S. weapons, carrying instead ‘sterile’ ones, communist-made Ak-47 automatic rifles or Swedish K submachineguns ... They even wore modified jungle boots, the cleated soles having been replaced with tire rubber so the prints resembled those of the enemy’s Ho Chi Minh sandals” (Nolan, 1986: xiii-xiv).

Even the word “secret” was avoided. William Sullivan, former U.S. ambassador to Laos, said in an interview that the herbicide program was not appropriately described as secret, but instead as “not admitted or confirmed” (Severo, 1982, cited in Wells-Dang, 2002). In a memo to the State Department, Sullivan wrote that, “We can carry on these efforts only if we do not, repeat do not, talk about them, and when necessary, if we deny that they are taking place” (Telegram from the U.S. Embassy, Vientiane to the Department of State, 30 November 1965, cited in Wells-Dang, 2002).

U.S. military actions in Cambodia followed similar patterns of secrecy. To prevent any knowledge of the saturation bombing programs of 1969 from leaking to the public or to Congress, normal reporting systems for top-secret bombing operations were “not enough.” General Wheeler cabled General Abrams setting out the ways in which the bombing was to be concealed from the public. “In the event press inquiries are received ... as to whether or not U.S. B-52s have struck in Cambodia, U.S. spokesmen will confirm that B-52s did strike on routine missions adjacent to the Cambodian border but state that he has no details and will look into this question” (Shawcross, 1987: 22).

“[F]ew senior officials were told” about the bombing and no Congressional committees were notified (Shawcross, 1987: 29). Although it was the public duty of Congressional Committees to authorize spending for any armed actions, in this case the President was making war on another country without going through the appropriate channels of public oversight. For the military, a system of dual reporting was organized to cover the tracks of bombing runs against Cambodia by giving a second set of (false) grid references for the target areas where the bombs were dropped (Shawcross, 1987: 30).

The role of the U.S. government in the organization and funding of the Phoenix Program was continually denied. The name Phoenix itself obscured the actual purpose of the program. The assassination activities of its “operatives” were carried out by “counter terror teams” or improbably named Provincial Reconnaissance Units. When Congress tried to investigate the program, the Defense Department denied the

Committee access to records necessary to carry out an audit of funds used for the program (McGehee, 1996).

The events of My Lai illustrate how layered the processes of cover-up can be. The massacre was initially unreported by the military. When the details of what had happened were eventually undeniable, it was presented to the public as an “isolated incident,” as an “unfortunate” once-only event. That it was a typical outcome of the general strategy of pacification, and that there was evidence that the people in the villages attacked were listed on the Phoenix Program’s black lists of Viet Cong infrastructure marked for “neutralization” or “elimination” was denied (McGehee, 1996).

The actions of the U.S. army taskforce at My Lai and other villages on the day were fed into the army reporting mechanisms that listed body counts as a measure of the success of the “sortie.” My Lai was diffused as another set of statistics until an ex-GI named Riddenhour wrote letters reporting what he knew to the Pentagon, to members of Congress, and to other government officials (Hersh, 1972: 4). As described later in the section on official channels, censorship of the My Lai events continued during and following official inquiries.

5. Devaluation

Devaluing people makes it easier to attack them without arousing concern. In wars throughout history, the enemy has commonly been portrayed in extremely negative ways, for example as a faceless being, criminal, torturer, or agent of death (Keen, 1986).

In a survey of U.S. television coverage from 1965 to 1973, Daniel Hallin found the NLF and North Vietnamese were characteristically portrayed as “cruel, ruthless, and fanatical” (Hallin 1986: 148). Their actions, including military operations, were called terrorism. They were referred to as “‘fanatical,’ ‘suicidal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘halfcrazed’.” Metaphors of disease were used: “Television reports routinely referred to areas controlled by the NLF as ‘Communist infested,’ or ‘Vietcong infested’” (Hallin, 1986: 158). The investigations into the My Lai massacre highlighted the way U.S. forces referred to Vietnamese as, among other such terms, “gooks,” “chinks,” “Orientals,” and “dinks.”

The use of the body count as a measure of success or progress in winning the war had the effect of reducing people to numbers, with no humanity. The actual process of killing was blanked out as “elimination,” “neutralization,” or “strikes” on “objectives.” Civilians became Viet Cong infrastructure or VCI; terror squads became Provincial Reconnaissance Units or PRUs.

The ultimate in dehumanization is evident in the bombing raids. In modern technological war, another form of devaluation is to treat the enemy as an abstraction, for example as a set of coordinates for bombing (Keen, 1986). The targeting was of “areas” or map coordinates visible only as blips on screens. The remoteness and distance had the effect of detaching actions from their consequences, and served to reduce potential revulsion felt either by perpetrators (Grossman, 1995) or by those to whom these actions were reported.

6. Reinterpretation.

Consider an action, such as torture, that is widely perceived as wrong. Cover-up means hiding the torture: if outsiders don't know about it, they can't be outraged. But if cover-up fails and the torture is exposed, it is still possible to dampen concern. One way, as discussed, is to devalue the victim. Another way is reinterpretation, which includes a variety of techniques to change the meaning of the action. For example, it could be said the action was not really torture, that the action didn't cause much damage to the victim, or that someone else was to blame.

Often reinterpretation overlaps with cover-up, as when deaths are admitted but details about the number killed or the manner of death are omitted. Reinterpretations can be genuinely held beliefs or calculated disinformation. Two important forms of reinterpretation are to change the meaning attached to an event and to change the allocation of responsibility for the event.

Reinterpretation operated in relation to the actions on the ground and in relation to the overall justification of U.S. military involvement in Indochina. We begin with actions on the ground, using the categories of relabeling, choice of language, misleading information, and decontextualizing.

Relabeling

South Vietnamese peasants were referred to pejoratively as the Viet Cong and were said to have infiltrated into their own land (South Vietnam), as if they were outside military forces.

In Laos, the U.S. government referred to Pathet Lao troops as North Vietnamese troops (Burchett, 1970: 176). U.S. forces were called "special forces," by which the use of air force helicopter units, bombers, mercenaries, and green berets on contract could be used without acknowledging them as "military" involvement. To this effect, on 6 March 1970 President Nixon stated that, "There are no American ground combat troops in Laos — We have no plans for introducing ground combat forces into Laos" (Gettleman et al., 1995: 449). Yet U.S. special forces had been operating in Laos since 1964, were then operating in Laos, and continued to do so: according to subsequently released Congressional hearings, tens of thousands of U.S. personnel were involved in Laos (Gettleman et al., 1995: 449n14).

Choice of Language

The bombing raids over South Vietnam were claimed to be "tactical" against military targets or the VC forces, mainly on the Ho Chi Minh trail, and not on populated areas. In reality, they were aimed "strategically" at the rural population.

The Phoenix Program, itself a euphemism, was said to target the VC infrastructure as a military objective when the VC infrastructure was actually composed of civilians. As CIA operative Nelson Brickham reported, "When we speak of the VC infrastructure, we are speaking of the VC organizational hierarchy, the management structure, as opposed to guerrillas, for example VC troops" (Brickham, 1996).

Language used by supporters of U.S. policies in Indochina presented an interpretation of those policies as benevolent ("they terrorize," "we pacify"), whereas others saw this as masking atrocities. According to a study of 28 U.S. high school

textbooks, the word terror was never used in referring to U.S. military actions (Griffen and Marciano, 1979: 49).

Misleading Information

The massacre at My Lai was initially reported as a conventional military firefight. Understatement of the numbers killed and announcement of a battle victory was the standard official and press position. Internal investigations gave erroneous reports. It was revealed later, in testimony to the Peers investigation into the cover-up of the massacre, that even body counts were made up in the army hierarchy. As one of the soldiers (Congleton) being questioned stated, “Captain Michles ‘told me to make it look good’” (Hersh, 1972: 20).

A key defender of the Phoenix program, U.S. government official William Colby, testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1970. Douglas Valentine reports that,

Colby defined Phoenix as an internal security program designed to protect “the people” from “Communist terrorism.” And by defining “the people” apart from the VCI, as the object of VCI terror and as voluntarily participating in the program, he established a moral imperative for Phoenix (Valentine, 1990: 316).

Decontextualizing

My Lai is a prime example of an “isolated event” interpretation, which removes the wider context. Many higher-ranking officers and officials reported to the Senate Armed Services Committee that “what apparently occurred at My Lai is wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations in Vietnam.” President Nixon reiterated this interpretation at a press conference, saying he believed it was “an isolated incident” (Belknap, 2002: 135). But as the testimony to the Peers investigation showed, the soldiers at My Lai were just doing what everyone else was doing.

We now turn to overall justifications of U.S. military involvement in Indochina, listing here a variety of the ones more commonly used.

The Domino Theory

In a 1954 press conference, President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, in reference to the U.S. support of the French in Indochina, “You have a row of dominos set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences” (quoted in Gustainis, 1993: 3). The domino theory, as it became known, made every individual nation a separate “key” to the region. In this vein, then Senator John F. Kennedy stated in June 1956: “Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the Keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike. Burma, Thailand, India, Japan, the Philippines and, obviously, Laos and Cambodia are among those whose security would be threatened if the red tide of Communism overflowed into Vietnam” (Chomsky, 1993: 45). This mechanistic theory generalized the significance of any one country across an entire region.

External Aggression

In line with the domino theory, it was put that the U.S. military was fighting a war to “defend” Vietnam against aggressors from the North. These aggressors were variously argued to be the Russians, the Chinese, and later the Vietnamese themselves, referred to as the “North Vietnamese” as if they came from a country separate from the South. Although U.S. policy makers recognized among themselves that the independence movement in Vietnam was essentially nationalist, the public face of U.S. policy was defending South Vietnam, as Hanson Baldwin of the New York Times reported, “against proxy armies of Soviet Russia” (quoted in Chomsky, 1993: 2).

Civil War/Internal Aggression

Another presentation of the war in Vietnam was as a civil war. According to Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the war was against “internal aggression” (Chomsky, 1993: 41). However, as Daniel Ellsberg observed, “To call a conflict in which one army is financed and equipped entirely by foreigners a ‘civil war’ simply screens a more painful reality: that the war is, after all, a foreign aggression.” with the foreigners being U.S. forces (Ellsberg, 1972: 33).

Democracy versus Communism

President Eisenhower admitted that everyone he knew thought Ho Chi Minh would have been elected by a vote of some 80 percent of the Vietnamese people (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 146). The U.S. government intervened to prevent general elections in Vietnam scheduled for 1956, yet subsequently couched the war as one of democracy versus communism. The U.S.-supported side, it was claimed, represented democracy in the fight against communism. That the people of Vietnam were likely to vote for communism did not appear to interfere with this position.

Inadvertence/Bumbling

Overall U.S. policies were not acknowledged as being thought out and intentional, instead being referred to as having been arrived at in an inadvertent, bumbling manner. For example, Samuel Huntington wrote that “In an absent minded way the United States in Viet Nam may well have stumbled upon the answer to ‘wars of national liberation’,” namely the process of “forced-draft urbanization and modernization” (Huntington, 1968: 652).

Lack of Information/Expert Opinion

When the war collapsed as a result of sustained Vietnamese resistance, increasing public opposition in the United States, and resistance among U.S. troops, those most responsible for designing the war brought forward self-serving interpretations of their actions.

Robert McNamara, a key architect of the war who later became head of the World Bank, is now well known for claiming the United States was “adrift” in Vietnam with little expert opinion about the historical, political, or social profile of the country. Yet McNamara is also famous for having ordered the collection of the documentation of the war in what became known as the Pentagon Papers. This

documentation alone dispels such claims. In his autobiography, McNamara (1996) says the government didn't have experts to consult, but as the Pentagon Papers and the documents released later under FOI demonstrate, there was no shortage of reliable and detailed expert analyses available within the State Department, the Defense Department, and the CIA (Sarris, 1995).

Quagmire/Tragedy/Mistake/Best of Intentions

The position that the U.S. administration — and the country — was “sucked” deeper and deeper into the war unwillingly, as if into a quagmire, has been regularly advanced (Ellsberg, 1972: 42; Halberstam, 1987). U.S. actions in Indochina have commonly been referred to as a “tragedy” or a “mistake,” presenting the war as unintentional. The “best of intentions” just went wrong. But as has been pointed out, the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 demonstrated “how consciously and willingly most of the decisions to escalate had been made” (Shawcross, 1987: 129n).

7. Official Channels

By “official channels” we refer to any process promising to deal with issues authoritatively and fairly, such as grievance procedures, formal inquiries, assessments by experts, and court trials. The use of official channels offers the expectation that justice will be done and thus serves to reduce public anger from injustice. Sometimes official channels do indeed provide justice but in many cases they give only the appearance of justice. Furthermore, even when the outcomes reached are fair, almost all official channels are slow, procedural, and dependent on experts (such as lawyers), all of which can muffle and delay an urgent cry for justice. Some official channels operate in partial secrecy, further reducing the potential for outrage.

Throughout the period of the war in Indochina there were many calls in the United States for governmental inquiries. Even the few Congressional Hearings that eventuated were frequently blocked by the administration's lack of cooperation.

Throughout its long years of financial and military involvement in Vietnam, the U.S. government never declared war, using the Tonkin Gulf resolution of 1964 to give the appearance of legislative endorsement for all military action.

When setting up inquiries, governments typically want to maximize credibility while minimizing the risk of damaging disclosures and adverse findings. Internal inquiries and closed hearings are more likely to follow the official line and reduce bad publicity, but they have less credibility than open hearings by independent panels. Therefore, it often happens that the government's initial response to concern about an issue is to establish a closed internal inquiry and only move to open independent investigations if the pressure becomes too great. The official responses to revelations about the My Lai massacre followed this pattern.

The initial investigation of My Lai was conducted within the army by Colonel Henderson and underestimated the numbers killed. After Lieutenant Ridenhour's public revelation of what had occurred at My Lai, a further investigation, by the army's Criminal Investigation Division, was made. As a result of this investigation, a single soldier, Lieutenant William Calley, was convicted of the murder of Vietnamese civilians. (Eleven others were prosecuted and none convicted. Calley, originally sentenced to life imprisonment, served only a limited time in prison (Belknap, 2002; Goldstein, Marshall and Schwartz, 1976: x-xi).) The army made few details public,

releasing an “inaccurate and misleading statement” that gave no idea of the number of people massacred (Hersh, 1972: 4).

Even so, public anger at what little was then known was so strong the Pentagon held meetings to consider tactics. The Army command decided it was necessary to hold a further, more public, investigation, charged with discovering why the previous investigations had not revealed the details of what had happened. This investigation into the earlier investigations was popularly known as the Peers Panel after General William R. Peers, its director (Peers, 1979).

Following the appointment of the Peers Panel, public demand from both conservatives and liberals for an independent inquiry continued and increased. Seymour Hersh, the journalist responsible for exposing the details of the My Lai massacre, commented that his source had told him the army had become aware of this credibility problem and had responded by appointing “two prominent New York attorneys” to help allay public unease (Hersh, 1972: 232).

Calls for further independent investigation continued. Congressmen and court judges joined these demands. In response, Chairman Rivers of the Armed Services Committee ordered an investigation by his subcommittee. However even this was a closed hearing, with its report only released in partial form eight months later (Hersh, 1972: 233).

The public outcry against the “secret” U.S. operations in other parts of Indochina also led to Congressional inquiries. The hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad in 1969 on U.S. incursions into Laos was held behind closed doors and the release of its findings was opposed by the White House. The following year, only part of the investigation was made public (Gettleman et al., 1995: 446-47).

The Peers Panel investigation into the My Lai massacre, beginning in 1969, was comprehensive, with 401 witnesses and tens of thousands of pages of testimony (Goldstein et al., 1976; Peers, 1979). The Panel concluded that charges should be laid against 15 members of the armed services. However, initially the Panel would not allow the public to see this material, claiming that it would provide potentially damaging pretrial publicity for those involved and that material potentially damaging to U.S. foreign policy was not to be released (Goldstein et al., 1976: 6). The final (censored) report was only released after concerted public pressure. In 1971 a section of the report and the volumes of testimony and other material were made available to journalist Seymour Hersh, although these left out essential chapters on the actions of the responsible task force (Barker), the cover-up, and the conclusions and recommendations of the investigation (Hersh, 1972: 247).

8. Intimidation and Bribery

People may feel concern, disgust, or revulsion about certain events but, as a result of threats, attacks, opportunities, or the promise of safety, decide not to act on their feelings. Intimidation and bribery are powerful tools to prevent backfire from injustice, especially in war, when the use of force becomes normalized. In war, the targets of intimidation and bribery can be the enemy, third parties (such as journalists, foreign governments, or the domestic population), and core executors of the war, including dissident soldiers and policy makers. But there is a risk in using intimidation and bribery, as these techniques, if exposed, can themselves cause outrage

and generate greater backfire. Therefore these techniques are commonly used in conjunction with cover-up. There are numerous examples in the Indochina war, of which we select just a few.

Bombing, assassination, destruction of villages, and removal to camps are potent methods of intimidation, all used against the Indochinese in the long brutal war. The Pacification Program, the bombing, and the Phoenix Program were all intended, as stated policy, to intimidate surviving villagers in order to weaken their support for the resistance (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 100-1).

U.S. military actions in Indochina were also intended to intimidate people in other countries, both in the region and around the world, who were organizing to follow a similar path of rural revolution. As researchers have pointed out, the contention by policy makers, such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk, was to “crush this ‘people’s war’ in order to prevent others in the future” (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 101). While this intention may have been apparent to the people of Indochina, it was less clear to U.S. citizens.

The application by the U.S. forces in Vietnam of “massive mechanical and conventional power” was an overwhelming physical attack on the country. But in what has been described as a “dual war,” the country was also subject to psychological warfare on a scale not equaled in history. Every variety of communication was employed in this aspect of the war including posters, newspapers, cartoon books, television and radio broadcasts, and loudspeakers from planes. Over a period of seven years, the United States Information Agency, in conjunction with the U.S. armed forces, airdropped across the countryside in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia “nearly 50 billion leaflets — more than 1,500 for every person” in Vietnam” (Chandler, 1981: 3).

This effort could be seen as part of the method of reinterpretation, but it also played a key role in intimidation, given that these communications were designed, in large part, to promote fear. For example, leaflets dropped on villages, before and after they were bombed, exhorted the villagers to get out and come over to “our side” before being destroyed. Former intelligence officer Robert Chandler, in his study of these massive propaganda campaigns, reported that the “fear appeal was used to convince the individual soldier or civilian” with a message along the lines of, “There are just two choices — more of this hell which can only end in death for you” or joining the U.S.-supported side. Chandler reported that, “brutally macabre leaflets ... were used to scare Communist troops into giving up. ... Death themes were repeated over and over in virtually all enemy-oriented communications” (Chandler, 1981: 44, 48).

Bribery is an alternative, and often a supplement, to intimidation. The U.S. government established specific programs of bribery in Vietnam, for example the “Chieu Hoi” program, which offered the Vietnamese sums of money to defect (or “rally”) to the U.S.-supported side in the war.

Bribery can work both by promising something and by making people fear the loss of something. For example, Seymour Hersh reported that for most U.S.-supported “Vietnamese military officers ... careers and promotions depended to some degree on how well they got along with their [U.S.] counterparts ... Many officers apparently decided to solve the problem by hiding their feelings — and disturbing information — from their counterparts” (Hersh, 1970: 189).

This threatened loss of valued position and financial security is evident throughout the armed forces of the United States as well. Lieutenant William Calley is reported to have said that when the company was being briefed to go into My Lai, his commanding officer Medina had said “‘Our job ... is to go in rapidly and to neutralize everything. To kill everything.’ ‘Captain Medina? Do you mean women and children, too?’ ‘I mean everything.’ Now, I know Medina denies this, and I know why. He’s married. He has children, and their benefits end if Medina is sentenced for it.” (Sack, 1971: 89-90; see also Belknap, 2002: 88-89).

An illustration of the more direct use of bribery was in the workings of the notorious “body count.” The Pentagon would claim victory if the number of “enemy” killed was greater than the number of “our” troops lost. To help achieve the desired kill ratio it has been reported that the soldiers who killed the greatest number of Viet Cong during a designated time period would be given a reward of either cash or the opportunity to take a Rest & Recreation vacation (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 129-30).

The mass media often follow the agenda set by government, in part because government policies and pronouncements are considered inherently newsworthy according to the news values governing decisions by journalists and editors. In the main, the reporting of the war that was published or broadcast was largely uncritical reproduction of the official military line (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 169-296). Although many journalists made accurate reports, these would often be changed by publishers, a process referred to by journalist David Halberstam as “the hamburger machine” (Anderson, 1998: 66). Journalists were also constrained by the possible loss of their jobs or of loss of access to official sources of information if they reported on the secret wars the U.S. military was carrying out against the peoples of Indochina particularly in Laos and Cambodia.

To the daily internal processes encouraging conformity can be added the intimidation of journalists. For example, three journalists — writing for the *New York Times*, *Life*, and *Agence France Presse* — were able to make their way into Laos during the U.S. bombardment. When their presence was detected, they were arrested, interrogated, and, at the direction of the U.S. embassy, forcibly placed on a plane out of the country (Burchett, 1970: 181).

Public opposition in the United States to the Vietnam War built up throughout the early sixties. In the following years this opposition rose to a groundswell. Many large public rallies across the United States were met with riot police and water cannon. Protesters were arrested and draft resisters were jailed. In some instances, police opened fire on protesters at university campuses, most prominently at Kent State University where four students were killed.

Prominent intellectuals and professionals were punished for their support of the antiwar movement, such as Dr. Benjamin Spock, Marcus Raskin, Michael Ferber, Mitchell Goodman, and the chaplain of Yale University, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., who in 1968 were indicted for conspiracy to aid and abet draft resistance.

Inside the military, intimidation is routinely used to deter any form of resistance or rebellion: abuse, punishments, and court martial are typical tools. As the Vietnam war proceeded, resistance within the U.S. military increased, sometimes reaching such a scale that normal methods of social control were abandoned, because a

crackdown might incite even greater resistance (Cortright, 1975; Moser, 1996). Meanwhile, within the higher levels of the U.S. military and policy-making apparatus, strong pressures existed to prevent expression of dissent, with the main penalty being exclusion from the inner circles of decision making, and lack of promotion (Buzzanco, 1996; Halberstam, 1972).

9. Conclusion

The foundation of the backfire model is the idea that an action has the potential to backfire if two basic conditions are satisfied: it is seen as unjust, inappropriate, or excessive; and information about it is communicated to receptive audiences. According to this framework — and contrary to popular belief — the possession of overwhelming force does not guarantee victory, because using it can generate increased opposition. In the Indochina war, many of the actions of the U.S.-supported forces resulted in greater opposition, from the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians, from U.S. citizens, from U.S. soldiers, and from people in other countries. Without this process, the overwhelming U.S. military superiority would have prevailed.

Backfire is not an automatic process. In war, the use of violence becomes normalized: it seems legitimate to use violence because the enemy is using it too. Therefore, only some violent and gruesome actions in war cause outrage, such as the intentional killing of civilians. The backfire model gives five main methods, used by perpetrators, that inhibit outrage: cover-up, devaluation of the target, reinterpretation, use of official channels to give the appearance of justice, and intimidation and bribery. We have noted many examples of each of these methods used by the U.S. government and military in the Vietnam war. It would be easy to provide many more examples.

The significance of the five methods is also shown by the lack of counterexamples. There are many examples of cover-up, but very few examples in which U.S. soldiers killed civilians and freely offered pictures to journalists. There are many examples of devaluation of the enemy but few cases in which U.S. leaders praised the Viet Cong for their patriotism, commitment, and valor. Similarly, there are few examples in which the U.S. government officials interpreted the war using non-self-serving perspectives or used official channels to indict senior policy makers and military commanders.

The primary methods used for outrage-containment depend on the type of injustice involved as well as the circumstances. For example, cover-up on its own is sufficient to minimize outrage in many cases, so other methods are not needed; if cover-up fails, though, the other methods are brought into play. Official channels sometimes are used only after devaluation and reinterpretation have been tried and found inadequate. In some types of injustices, such as abusive treatment of refugees, devaluation is a key technique. In others, such as torture, cover-up is central. But there are exceptions to such patterns. For example, the idea of torture is so offensive to some people that there can be no justification for it. For others, though, torture of a nonviolent dissident is reprehensible but torture of a terrorist is not, in which case devaluation by labeling and false allegations becomes a more likely tactic. Until

comparative studies are carried out, it is not possible to be definite about when different methods are most likely to succeed.

Each of the five methods of inhibiting outrage can be challenged. The obvious counter to cover-up is exposure, for example documenting atrocities and communicating the information to receptive audiences. In terms of the U.S. population as an audience, contributors to this process included military and civilian whistleblowers, investigative journalists, courageous editors, and tenacious members of Congress. Similarly, there were many who helped document and communicate information within Vietnamese communities, to international audiences, and within the U.S. military forces. Exposure is most important when few people know about an injustice. When exposure becomes widespread, perpetrators often turn to other methods.

To counter devaluation, it is vital to humanize the targets of injustices. It is far easier to justify assault on a faceless enemy than a flesh-and-blood person with feelings and family ties. Given the language barrier, cultural differences, and the physical distance of Indochina from the United States, photography provided a powerful tool to challenge devaluation. The famous photograph of a Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm raid both exposed an injustice and portrayed a human face.

To counter reinterpretation, it is important to repeatedly emphasize the unacceptability of bombing, assassination, and massacres. It is vital to present carefully researched analyses of the war and its effects and to challenge spurious explanations. It is also important to assign responsibility when blame is offloaded, such as when senior officials blame a few rogue soldiers for atrocities. The struggle over interpretations continued throughout the Indochina war, with government statements, intellectual justifications, and disinformation countered by critical articles, talks, and teach-ins. Indeed, the struggle over interpretation of the Indochina war continues today.

Sometimes an exposure is so vivid and compelling that it cuts through devaluation and reinterpretation as well as cover-up. Some photos, such as those taken at My Lai, can humanize the target, countering devaluation, and allow the viewer to judge the situation directly, countering the explanations given by perpetrators.

There are two main ways to counter official channels: to discredit them or to ignore them and proceed with other means such as publicity and campaigning. The biggest challenge in countering official channels is to deal with their continuing appeal despite the predictability that their use will defuse outrage. For example, for years, peace negotiations offered the promise of an end to the war, but, as it has been revealed, the antiwar movement would have been unwise to rely on these negotiations. The key message is that continued campaigning is needed even when it seems like official processes are dealing with a problem.

Finally, intimidation and bribery can be opposed by refusing to be intimidated or bribed and by exposing these methods. This is easier said than done: only some people are in a situation where they can take the risk of standing up to intimidation. Resistance is much easier when many are involved. The more people who speak out, the easier it is for yet others to do so.

Our aim in this paper has been to show how a diverse range of methods used in war — including censorship, propaganda, official inquiries, and the use or non-use of

force — can be understood as related processes within a single framework. Injustices can potentially backfire on those who are perceived as perpetrators: the elaboration of this simple dynamic helps to explain the tactics used by supporters of war and can give guidance to opponents.

In analyzing techniques for containing public outrage, we have not tried to make a judgment of their success. In other words, we have not tried to assess whether or to what extent bombing, assassination, and the My Lai massacre actually backfired on the U.S. government. There are many contingencies affecting the scale of backfire, including the media environment and public receptivity (which is affected by antiwar campaigning).

As in warfare itself, choice of a suitable tactic can improve the odds of success, but within limits imposed by resources, circumstances and counter-tactics. To evaluate the strength of tactics, it would be necessary to establish measures of success and collect data to test whether specific tactics are linked to these measures, a major research project well outside the scope of this paper.

It is quite typical for one atrocity to pass virtually unnoticed and another — such as My Lai — to cause tremendous abhorrence. Instead of trying to analyze the scale of backfire, we have focused on revealing the common techniques used in struggles over actions perceived as unjust in wartime. Understanding these techniques can offer insight to those who oppose injustice.

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