

## CHAPTER 7

# American Bombing of Civilians since 1945

### Introduction

This chapter assesses the nature and consequences of American air campaigns since 1945, and their impact upon people and urban places. The Korean War from 1950 to 1953 and American involvement in the Vietnamese War from the mid-1960s until 1973 witnessed extensive air raids whose efficacy and legitimacy has been interrogated by historians since. The broader contexts of these conflicts were the legacy of European and Japanese imperialism, and the polarisation between communism and capitalism

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**How to cite this book chapter:**

Clapson, M. 2019. *The Blitz Companion*. Pp. 147–172. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book26.g>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

that defined the Cold War. Following the collapse of Soviet Communism in Eastern and Central Europe, however, the Americans also participated in the NATO air raids during the Balkan Wars (sometimes referred to as the Yugoslavian Wars during the 1990s). So did the British and other member countries of NATO but the USA has been the target of most of the criticism of the bombings since. In the Middle East following the terrorist attacks on New York in September 2001, the USA also took the lead in UN actions to defeat the dictatorship in Iraq, and later in Libya and Syria. The USA has also been active in attacking the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, sometimes with tragic consequences for the local populations.

## **The Korean War**

The causes of the Korean War are complex. As the world was divided between capitalist and communist blocs, Korea became a site of brutal conflict in the war for hegemony between western and communist expansionism. The Korean Peninsula had been fought over by both the Chinese and the Japanese, and Korea became a Japanese 'protectorate' during the early years of the twentieth century. From the Korean perspective the Second World War was effectively a war of liberation from Japanese occupation, but following the defeat of Japan, Soviet Russia installed the North Korean guerrilla leader Kim Il-sung as the new head of state. He had fought the Japanese both before and during the Second World War, an unlikely ally of the Americans who from 1945 supported South Korea. In other words, a former ally became the new enemy.<sup>330</sup>

Some five years after the horrors of the Second World War came to an end, the Korean peninsula was thrown into a terrible conflict that cost millions of lives, caused hundreds of thousands

of casualties and created an eastern version of the Iron Curtain between North and South Korea. The crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel into North Korea, by UN forces led by the American General Douglas MacArthur, was rebutted by a Chinese invasion across the Yalu River, forcing the Americans south.<sup>331</sup> Subsequently, the USA successfully helped to defend South Korea from the communist invasion during the summer of 1950, but from the winter of 1950–1 the situation deteriorated, leading the USA and their allies to engage in an aggressive and prolonged air campaign over the Korean peninsula. A Movietone newsreel in 1950 was titled *Korea: Air Blitz Checks Reds* is further evidence of transnational application of the word during the early Cold War.<sup>332</sup>

‘What hardly any Americans know or remember’, argues the American historian Bruce Cumings:

is that we carpet bombed the North for three years with next to no concern for civilian casualties. [The] air assaults ranged from the widespread and continual use of fire-bombing (mainly with napalm) to threats to use nuclear and chemical weapon, finally to the destruction of huge North Korean dams in the last stages of the war.<sup>333</sup>

Cumings goes on to argue that the air war on Korean civilians was an extension of the air campaigns against Germany and Japan during the Second World War, but in contrast to those urban-industrial societies, North Korea was an agrarian third world country.<sup>334</sup> One such example was the attack on the German dams by the RAF and the USAF destruction of dams in North Korea toward the end of the war. In May 1953 the Americans bombed five large dams, causing major flooding, wiping away roads and railways, saturating rice fields and drowning many people.<sup>335</sup>

A further criticism points to American hypocrisy, and the US condemnation of German and Japanese atrocities against civilians while claiming justification for Allied bombing raids in the Second World War. Now from 1950 it applied a conventional bombing strategy to North Korean cities. American military leaders, including General MacArthur, expressed reservations about civilian casualties and the resultant negative propaganda, calling for precision bombing of military targets. Despite a strategic distinction between legitimate military objectives and the need to avoid civilians, 'a dynamic of escalation' led to the mass bombing and burning of key cities such as Sinuiju, Kanggye, Manpojin and the later capital of North Korea, Pyongyang.<sup>336</sup>

In his magisterial history of the Korean War, Hastings comes to similar but less condemnatory conclusions. He agrees that airborne destruction of almost all towns and cities of any size in the Korean peninsula, the bombing of industry and infrastructure, and the terrible losses of civilian population caused by air raids, failed in the most important sense, because there was no victory of the UN in North Korea. Hastings concludes that the lessons from the Second World War were being unlearned as 'intensive strategic bombing could kill large numbers of civilians':

without decisive impact upon the battlefield or even upon the war-making capacity of an industrial power. Bombing could inflict a catastrophe upon a nation without defeating it. North Korea was a relatively primitive society which contained only a fraction of the identifiable or worthwhile targets of Germany or Japan.<sup>337</sup>

The inevitability of mass civilian deaths in the context of mass bombing led to a parallel propaganda war between communists and western governments. Communists in Britain, for example,

tried to persuade public opinion that the aggression was the sole preserve of the USA and their British allies. The *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), ran many articles on the barbarity of American and British military actions in North Korea. One of its contributors, Monica Felton, an outspoken critic of American and British bombing. A civil servant and town planner, in 1951 Felton famously walked off the job as 'Chairman' of Stevenage New Town Development Corporation to travel to North Korea with the Soviet-backed Women's International Democratic Federation. In her self-published pamphlet *What I Saw in Korea* (1951), she countered what she saw as the cynical reluctance of British newspapers to 'tell the truth' about the Korean War. She elaborated in merciless detail on the destruction of towns and villages, the slaughter of women and children, the wrecking of Christian churches, the bombardment of hospitals, schools, public buildings and shops, the institutions of everyday life that were vulnerable against the might of American air power, claiming 'we did not see one place that that had not been completely and utterly destroyed'. She described the deaths and devastation in the city of Sinuiju, 'about as large as Wolverhampton', which was in complete ruin.<sup>338</sup> The comparison with Wolverhampton, a sizeable industrial city in the Midlands, was to indicate the scale of the destruction to her British readers through a familiar reference. 'Korea today is a ruin so absolute' she wrote, 'that no one can see it without getting the most clear and terrible warning of what a third world war would inevitably mean.'<sup>339</sup> In linking the American bombings in Korea to the spectre of nuclear catastrophe, just six years following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Felton strengthened her position a leading woman peace campaigner, with a growing following in Japan.<sup>340</sup>

How did the North Koreans respond to this sustained assault from the air? The American historian Bradley K. Martin shows that just as North Korean and Chinese soldiers built a network of military tunnels, 'civilians likewise dug into mountainsides to construct underground factories that could withstand bombing raids. Children, according to official accounts, kept going to school during the war "while their pencil cases rattled"'. As Martin also argues, however, according to the testimony of defectors from the subsequent regime, most North Koreans were so war-weary they just wanted the conflict to end, no matter which side prevailed.<sup>341</sup>

For some US historians the terrible death toll resulting from the Korean War amounted to nothing less than an 'American holocaust'.<sup>342</sup> Over 40,000 Americans were killed, a figure that includes over eight thousand missing in action. South Korea endured over 1.3 million casualties including 415,000 deaths, while North Korean casualties numbered about 2 million, including 1 million civilians and over 520,000 soldiers. About 900,000 Chinese soldiers perished in the conflict.<sup>343</sup> Many of the civilians in the North were killed by bombing, but many were also killed by soldiers, illness and starvation.

As with previous modern wars, widespread destruction presaged renewal. North Korean urban areas became the context for a massive programme of reconstruction, financed partly and with some practical assistance from communist allies. Pyongyang and other cities were planned according to the Soviet theory of the 'microdistrict' which emerged in Russian town planning during the mid-1950s. This resulted in model housing estates based around 'an integrated model' that emphasised standardised modern housing, and the social control of everyday life based on the

arrangement of urban public space. Built from the mid-1950s until the mid-1970s, North Korean residential dwellings took the form of row-housing or large Soviet-style blocks of medium-rise flats organised around open spaces and communal facilities.<sup>344</sup> Beyond these modern developments, however, much of small-town North Korea and the rural areas remained mired in inadequate housing, while the elite enjoyed superior residential conditions.<sup>345</sup>

The American bombing left other legacies, one being a lasting hatred of the USA in North Korea, which has since been continuously exploited and stimulated by the regimes of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and now Kim Jong Un. As a number of writers, including Christopher Hitchens have observed, North Korea is the closest approximation to the totalitarian hell that George Orwell described in his novel *1984*, where the television is a propagandist tool of the state, constantly mobilising its people to hate and to prepare for war with the USA.<sup>346</sup> This oppressive totalitarian society is also overlaid by hideous levels of poverty.<sup>347</sup>

It is pause for thought that had the United Nations successfully destroyed the communist forces in Korea by 1953 – the counterfactual scenario – the entire peninsula might have followed the path of South Korea. While the North placed itself on permanent war footing, repeatedly reminding its citizens of the threat of American nuclear or conventional attack from the air, the South became a strong ally of the USA. Since the end of the Korean War, it transitioned through authoritarian regimes to the greater levels of social and political freedoms enjoyed since the 1980s, the decade when the South Korean economy became one of the fastest growing in Asia. These achievements helped to explain the International Olympic Committee's decision to award the

Olympic Games to the South Korean capital, Seoul, in 1988, despite the background threat of North Korean air strikes. Such threats have lasted to this day.

### **From Korea to Vietnam**

The Korean War was a relatively short-lived conflict compared with the history of military intervention in Vietnam. The origins of the Vietnam War predated the Korean War and lasted long after the DPRK and South Korea ceased direct hostilities. The Vietnam War was in no small part a legacy of French colonial rule, which was followed by the occupation of Vietnam by the Japanese during the Second World War. The French collaborated with the Japanese in a colonialist echo of Vichy betrayal. During that conflict the communist Ho Chi Minh had assisted the Allies in fighting the Japanese in Vietnam but as with Korea, those who fought for liberation now turned against Western imperialism. In the years after the Second World War, Vietnam was divided into two countries, the communist North and the American-backed South.

In 1946, less than year following the end of the Second World War, the First Indochina War began. Despite collaborating with the Japanese occupation, following the Potsdam Conference France was reinstated as the colonial ruler with the assistance of Britain and the USA. The Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh and supported by Soviet Russia, resisted. So too did the People's Army of Vietnam (PAV), led by Vo Nguyen Giap. The Viet Minh had been fighting during the Second World War against the Japanese occupation of the French colony of Vietnam, and on VJ Day even initiated a short-lived government in Hanoi, the Democratic



Republic of Vietnam. This was routed by the French, leading to a guerrilla war which the Viet Minh fought from their strongholds in the villages of rural North Vietnam while French forces occupied the cities. A decisive turn came in 1949 when Communist China also began to support the Viet Minh against perceived French imperialism. Despite support from the Americans, the French lost the war to the communist forces in 1954 following the ignominious defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. A lack of air support from the USA for French forces helps to explain this defeat, as did significant Chinese support for the Viet Minh.<sup>348</sup> In 1955, the Vietnam War began. It would last for nineteen and a half years, and cost 3.8 million lives.<sup>349</sup>

The Geneva Accords signed between France and Vietnam established a communist government in North Vietnam on one side of the demilitarised zone, and transitional arrangements for the South on the other. French forces withdrew completely from Vietnam. From 1956 South Vietnam came under the authoritarian government of Ngo Dinh Diem, causing Vietnamese communists in the South, the Viet Cong, to fight a clandestine war for unity with the North. In 1960 North Vietnam set up the National Liberation Front, mostly made up of Viet Cong combatants. The United States, which had been assisting the Diem government, became increasingly drawn into the war on communism in the North, and increasingly frustrated with the Diem government. The USA was party to the assassination of Diem in 1963, and when Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, the subsequent Gulf of Tonkin Resolution escalated the American military campaign in Vietnam.<sup>350</sup> Further civilian catastrophes lay ahead.

## **The Bombing of Vietnamese Military and Civilian Targets**

Air power was crucial to the escalation of the US war in Vietnam. Given its superior economic and military might the USA appeared to have a significant advantage over the Vietcong. American soldiers were better equipped, trained and fed than their enemies, but more importantly, the USA waged a hi-tech war: its B-52 bombers were superior to the B-29, and supplemented by fleets of combat helicopters. During its major air campaigns in Vietnam the USA deployed an aerial arsenal comprising dumb bombs, guided bombs and missiles, air explosive devices, napalm and the defoliant 'Agent Orange'. The first significant American bombing campaign in Vietnam began in March 1965 and terminated in October 1968, Code-named 'Operation Rolling Thunder', it was dubbed 'The Vietnam Blitz' by Movietone.<sup>351</sup>

### **Operation Rolling Thunder**

President Lyndon B. Johnson had been sworn into office following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. His Secretary of Defence was Robert J. McNamara, an advocate of air power. During his time at the White House he presided, sometimes reluctantly, over Operation Rolling Thunder, the longest bombing campaign in the history of the United States Air Force (USAF). Its key intention was to disrupt and degrade supplies to the enemy by targeting fuel storage facilities, power plants, warehouses, steel works, military installations and army barracks, and infrastructure.<sup>352</sup> From 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder was accompanied by the first boots-on-the-ground deployment of

American troops, who fought simultaneously against communist forces in South Vietnam.

With assistance from the USSR, the North Vietnamese managed to construct an air-defence system and a civil defence apparatus. Using surface-to-air missiles, and with the support of Russian MIG fighters, the North Vietnamese brought down hundreds of American B-52s. Civilians and active combatants created an improvised network of tunnels and shelters, a continuation of the defensive strategy witnessed in earlier total wars. Civilian workers also assisted emergency workers to repair infrastructure damaged by bombs, a further manifestation of the 'people's army' trope used in 1939–45. This demonstrated a degree of resilience in the face of heavy odds.<sup>353</sup>

American peace activists were keen to report the tragic consequences of air raids on the very people the bombs were intended to liberate. In October 1966 David Dellinger visited Phyl Ly, a city with a population of over 10,000 people, described as a 'Vietnamese Guernica'. That Guernica was bombed by the airplanes of a fascist dictatorship at the behest of a fascist leader, while the USA was a democracy raises many moral questions, but the main point Dellinger wished to transmit was that when women and children were killed and horribly maimed, when straw huts, temples and churches were destroyed by the USAF, the Viet Cong gained in support, as did anti-American sentiment.<sup>354</sup>

Dellinger was not the only peace activist in Vietnam during Operation Rolling Thunder. The American folk singer and peace activist Joan Baez was in Hanoi during a major air raid. Her attempt to sing the Lord's Prayer at a Christmas Service in 1966 was interrupted by the wail of an air raid siren. It was the first of twelve days of air raids that the Vietnamese were subjected to,

with Baez as their sympathetic witness. In her interview with *Rolling Stone*, magazine Baez recalled her recent experiences of debris, bomb craters, of dead and dismembered people. She painted a picture of Vietnamese citizens carrying bicycles to negotiate the rubble; an old man hobbling with difficulty through the wreckage; of women crying but defiant: 'Nearby there was a bomb shelter that had taken a direct hit. Everyone was dead.'<sup>355</sup>

Rolling Thunder has been mostly adjudged a failure by military historians when measured against its intentions to destroy the military, industrial and communications capacities of communist forces in Vietnam.<sup>356</sup> The USAF suffered significant losses of air crew and aircraft, and many Americans were captured to endure the hell of becoming prisoners of war. In 1968 President Johnson called for a termination of the campaign, as its lack of success became cruelly apparent in harrowing spectre of American servicemen returning in body bags from the conflict. Despite this very recent and humbling lesson, however, his successor in the White House viewed bombing, and lots of it, as an essential strategy to winning the war.<sup>357</sup>

## Operation Menu

President Richard M. Nixon took office in November 1968. Robert McNamara was replaced by Henry Kissinger as Defence Secretary. Nixon had promised to end the war within months, but as 1969 progressed he became deeply frustrated at the failure of the American military to end the ongoing North Vietnamese offensive. Taking advice from Kissinger, Nixon considered that the neighbouring countries of Cambodia and Laos were aiding the People's Army of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong, Nixon

authorised Operation Menu, a prolonged and supposedly secret air campaign that lasted from March 1969 to May 1970. Targeting Laos and mostly eastern Cambodia, the campaign extended the sphere of conflict beyond Vietnam. The operation partly ran alongside an unsuccessful US-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia to capture or destroy North Vietnamese positions.<sup>358</sup>

Operation Menu was subdivided into smaller raids aimed at specific bases code-named as 'Lunch' 'Snack', 'Dinner', 'Supper' and 'Dessert'. Historians disagree on the military achievements or otherwise of Operation Menu, but some firm conclusions have been drawn by social historians: the Cambodian bombing led to terrible consequences for the people of Cambodia in the subsequent regime of Pol Pot; reinvigorated the anti-war protests in the USA, and gravely damaged the American image across the world.<sup>359</sup>

### Operation Linebacker

By 1971 Nixon was increasingly frustrated with the lack of success and the growing unpopularity of the war in the United States. A policy of 'Vietnamization', of increasingly allowing the Vietnamese to take control of the conflict as the USA pulled back, was also undermined by the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese army. As Nixon shouted during a taped Oval Office conversation between himself and Kissinger on 2 June 1971, 'we're not gonna go out whimpering ... we're gonna take out the power plants, we're gonna take out Haiphong, we're gonna level that goddam country.'<sup>360</sup>

The almost impotent rage of the world's most powerful man became tragi-comically apparent as the North Vietnamese launched the Spring Offensive of 1972 against American ground

forces. Nixon opted for an intensification of the bombing campaigns on the capital Hanoi, its chief port city of Haiphong and other key cities and battlefields where the North Vietnamese were holding sway. B-52 bombers fighter bombers attacked Haiphong Harbour and petroleum storage facilities near Hanoi.<sup>361</sup> In a recorded Oval Office conversation between the president and Kissinger on 25 April 1972, the potential consequences of bombing the docks and key oil and petroleum plants had been laid bare:

Kissinger: That will drown about 200,000 people [unclear]... [The volume of Kissinger's voice perceptibly drops at this point].

Nixon: Well, no, no, no, no, no. I'd rather use a nuclear bomb. Have you got that ready?

Kissinger: Now that, I think, would just be, uh, too much, uh...

Nixon: A nuclear bomb, does that bother you? [I] just want you to think big Henry, for Christ's sake [said in an animated, angry-sounding tone of voice].<sup>362</sup>

The Linebacker campaign was in two phases, culminating in the Christmas bombings from 18 December to 22 December 1972. Nixon was angry that the ongoing pattern of hostilities and negotiations had achieved little, arguing that 'only the strongest action would have any effect in convincing Hanoi that negotiating a fair settlement with us was a better option for them than continuing the war.'<sup>363</sup> The Christmas bombings, a term with distant echoes of the Luftwaffe strikes on London some thirty-two years earlier, was made up of over 700 sorties by the B-52s, targeting railways stations, storage depots, rail lines, and the electricity supply. According to both Mark Clodfelter and Tucker, over 15,000 tons

of bombs were dropped in a fairly accurate campaign that hit military targets while leaving adjacent residential areas mostly intact. Nonetheless, civilian mortalities still numbered 1,138 in Hanoi and 305 in Haiphong. Witnesses said that many buses evacuated the citizens of Hanoi into the nearby countryside, an echo of the trekking seen in so many air raids.<sup>364</sup>

Linebacker II 'did unsettle the North's urban populace.' Many North Vietnamese people were disorientated and suffering from sleep problems, 'their nerves strained by the continual attacks.'<sup>365</sup> Clodfelter was writing during the 1980s. Some years later a revisionist teaching text argued that the Christmas bombings saw 36,000 tons of explosives, more bombs than were dropped during the fourteen months of Operation Menu. According to this revisionist estimate, about 1,600 civilians were killed in Hanoi and Haiphong, and many were injured. Whatever the exact figures, the Christmas attacks contributed to a resuscitation of peace talks, but also led to a sharp fall in the popularity of Nixon, who was increasingly seen by many critics of the war as a madman.<sup>366</sup>

Such was the view of the actress Jane Fonda who visited Hanoi in August 1972 during the Linebacker bombings. In common with Joan Baez some years before her, Fonda sheltered with the Vietnamese. Her testimony also reveals patterns of civilian behaviour under the bomb witnessed by many previous visitors to war zones. Yet Fonda possibly had more in common with Monica Feltton during the Korean War than Baez, speaking out against American imperialism at a time when many captured US soldiers were enduring suffering and torture, and drawing upon a more explicitly politicised language than the folk singer. She wrote of the defiant militia girls who kept singing as US imperialists bombed their country; of an evacuee from Hanoi who offered her the safety

of a bomb shelter while all around she witnessed 'the systematic destruction of civilian targets- schools, hospitals, pagodas, the factories, houses, and the dike system.' And in words partly echoing those of another American expounding his impressions of a civilian population under the bomb, namely Quentin Reynolds during the London Blitz, Fonda stated:

[One] thing that I have learned beyond a shadow of a doubt since I've been in this country is that Nixon will never be able to break the spirit of these people; he'll never be able to turn Vietnam, north and south, into a neo-colony of the United States by bombing, by invading, by attacking in any way.<sup>367</sup>

Fonda has since regretted some of her antics in Vietnam.<sup>368</sup> Yet while her use of the language of imperialism to describe American bombings reflected the other side in the Cold War, her prognosis of the consequences of mass bombardment was broadly correct, certainly more so than that of the American president. As noted in previous chapters and above in this one, heavy and continuous bombing wrecked buildings, infrastructure, and killed and maimed many fragile human bodies. But it did not crush the collective morale of the Vietnamese people, whether they lived in cities or villages.

Despite their impressive arsenal, the United States lost the air war in Vietnam. Clodfelter argues that American air commanders mistakenly believed that strategic bombing campaigns during the Second World War had been essential to ultimate victory.<sup>369</sup> Unlike the defeated German and Japanese, whose urban centres had been soundly reduced to ruins, the rural Vietcong had ultimately triumphed over the USA, while the urban populations of Vietnam remained mostly unbowed by American air raids.



## American Movies and Vietnam

The American bombing war in Vietnam has featured in a number of compelling scenes in Hollywood representations of the conflict since 1975. As the B-52s flew on and away, they left behind a legacy that was both immediate and longer term. Images of mothers carrying the twisted bodies of their infants or of little children running from their destroyed villages, their skin burning with napalm, their faces contorted with fear and pain, were common in transatlantic and European news reports of the Vietnam War during the 1960s. Such images influenced not only public opinion and media criticism against the USA; they shaped a post-1975 discourse that saw America not as a defender of Western values against communist belligerence, but as an imperialist, even demotic country whose guiding principle of manifest destiny had tragically become globalised. The same contempt for Native American cultures during the westwards spread of the Frontier in the nineteenth century, was now writ into American foreign policy. Older films about General Custer had depicted him as a hero defeated by treachery and inhuman Native Americans. In the film *Little Big Man* (1970), however, directed by Arthur Penn, the Vietnam metaphors come thick and fast: vulnerable tepees and animals are torched, an allegory for napalm, while Indian children and young woman are brutally raped or slaughtered by the men in uniform. A simple rural lifestyle is put to death by flames and the barbarism of the so-called 'civilised world'.

Popular perceptions of the American war on communism in Vietnam and Cambodia have been shaped to a considerable degree by the American film industry. In *The Deer Hunter* (1979) disproportionate aerial firebombing of simple agricultural communities provided another vivid picture of the disproportionate

might of American air power. The aerial shots in Frances Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) depict deadly fleets of USAF planes dropping napalm onto a vulnerable jungle landscape. The 'Ride of the Valkyries' sequence in the same movie depicts a swarm of attack helicopters machine gunning many helpless innocent civilians in the coastal villages. In Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) both American and Vietnamese soldiers are victims of an American air strike. The Vietnam war films of the late twentieth century are very different from the early post-war representations of the Second World War from 1939–45, where death and injury was not graphically depicted. Interestingly, the bombing of Vietnamese cities is rarely represented in the genre of Vietnam War films. The more vulnerable, innocent rural landscape is perhaps a more emotive landscape than the city to critique the alleged brutality of American air power.

One of the most compelling films about the Vietnam War, however, was *The Fog of War* (2011), a series of interviews with the former Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara. His emphasis upon the need for air superiority prefaces a sequence of heavy bombing raids from 1965, in which falling bombs and explosions below almost seem detached from their consequences. In his earlier memoir, McNamara accepted some responsibility for errors made in the fog of war, but ultimately placed blame for the terrible death toll on the Cold War and the threat of communism.<sup>370</sup>

### From Destruction to Reconstruction

Much of Hanoi, Haiphong and other Vietnamese urban centres lay in varying degrees of desolation as the Americans retreated. But while the USA had been instrumental in the reconstruction

of post-1945 Germany and Japan, they were absent from the post-1975 Vietnamese reconstruction. In fact, as William Stewart Logan has argued, the growing Soviet influence in North Vietnam from 1972 was accompanied by urban renewal schemes in Hanoi and other Vietnamese cities hammered by American bombing. Following American withdrawal in 1973 reconstruction began in earnest, but as had so often happened in other countries, the rebuilding of Vietnam was beset with practical problems. The USAF had destroyed about 70 per cent of Vietnamese industrial capacity, and large swathes of infrastructure lay in ruins. Hundreds of thousands of urban homes needed to be built to address the post-war housing shortage. A shortage of materials hampered reconstruction, however, and the country lacked a skilled corpus of architects, planners and civil engineers. The Americans also refused to honour their commitment to financial and practical aid for reconstruction as laid down by the Paris Peace Treaty, and even imposed an economic embargo on Vietnam in 1978.<sup>371</sup>

In common with North Korea some twenty years earlier, the new urban landscape of communist Vietnam was to reflect the ideology of the ruling elite with practical support and ideological input from the USSR. According to a leading Vietnamese social scientist and government advisor in 1980, existing towns and cities were to be transformed and modernised to reflect the communist future, not the past, while bomb-damaged cities, notably Hanoi, were to be constructed to promote worker productivity, while eliminating any Western-influenced 'consumer town aspect'.<sup>372</sup> In addition to Soviet Russian influences, utopian urban designs from the GDR also influenced the rebuilding of post-war Vietnamese cities, bringing into being suburbs of apartment blocks arranged around putatively communitarian spaces and

facilities.<sup>373</sup> Ironically, the USAF had once more, as with North Korea, unwittingly assisted in the post-conflict creation of modern socialist cityscapes.

### The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia

The Balkan Wars of the 1990s demonstrated once again that large regions of Europe were politically unstable. As the Former Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated into nationalist and sectarian conflict between Orthodox Serbs and Muslim minorities, and as news of Serbian atrocities against Muslim men began to be widely reported in 1998–9, international pressure grew for a ‘humanitarian’ bombing campaign to protect Kosovar Albanians from Serbian aggression. NATO launched an offensive against Serbia on 24 March 1999 which lasted for 78 days. Kosovo was effectively liberated 12 June when NATO and Russian troops moved in from Macedonia, and Kosovo soon regained its autonomy.

In February 2000 the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) published its report *Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign*. Concerned with the targeting of civilians and non-military facilities during the air campaign of 1999, and by the deployment of cluster bombs, HRW felt that a case should be answered by NATO, and of course the USA. It was particularly keen to investigate incidents including the bombing of refugees, of displaced civilians, and raids on a prison and a Serb radio station.<sup>374</sup>

In common with earlier major conflicts, destruction caused reconstruction, and key themes re-emerged. Some fascinating recent historiography on architecture and heritage in the Balkans has uncovered the fact that most people wanted to see a rebuilt urban landscape that reminded them of their home, community

and city prior to the destruction. They prefer facsimile rebuilding, an emphasis upon history, an imagined past and familiar traditional structures, to modernity. Hence in Bosnia and Herzegovina many thousands of listed and public buildings that were destroyed in the wars of the 1990s, for example municipal buildings and mosques, were rebuilt 'with these sentiments of continuity and identity in mind.'<sup>375</sup> This rebuilding of historical landscapes was shaped by historical memory, cultural identities, social values, and political conflicts in the Balkan region, but similar influences are germane to all reconstructions in different contexts.<sup>376</sup>

### **The Middle-East and South Asia Since 1991**

Criticism of American bombing in the Middle East began with the Persian Gulf War of 1991, and the American-led coalition campaign to free Kuwait from the murderous Iraqi occupying forces. This was Operation Desert Shield, described by the US Defence Secretary Dick Cheney as 'the most successful air campaign in the history of the world'. Following the liberation of Kuwait from the murderous intentions of Saddam Hussein, the United States attacked Iraqi forces as they retreated. Tragically, many civilians were killed in Iraq as 'collateral damage'. One of the most disturbing events was the loss of over 400 civilian lives in the Amiriyah shelter bombing in February 1991. Human Rights Watch was again on the case, highlighting the 'needless deaths' to non-combatants, not only as a consequence of coalition air attacks, but also the Iraqi Scud missiles launched in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.<sup>377</sup>

During the present century, American interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia and Syria have all pursued military objectives, claiming to minimise civilian casualties but

often wilfully accepting this as an inevitable consequence of aerial warfare.<sup>378</sup> Non-combatant deaths from drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan have caused anti-war activists to question the legitimacy of the bombing, and invite opprobrium against the United States. In Iraq and Syria, Islamic State (ISIS) and other fundamentalist groups also coexisted with (and terrorised) the local population, meaning civilian casualties of bombing were inevitable.<sup>379</sup>

### American Criticisms of US Bombing Campaigns

The American bombings during the Vietnam War led to a growing internal criticism of the aggressive so-called 'imperialism' of the United States. The peace protesters during the Vietnam War continued to condemn American military conduct, but increasingly, critical academic interpretations of American air raids during the Vietnam War began to interpret these the latest tragic historical phase in a continuity of American atrocities since the Second World War.

The most famous opponent of American air warfare has been the linguist and Marxist academic Noam Chomsky. His *American Power and the New Mandarins* was first published in 1968 when the air war was raging. Blaming the conflict in no small part on American imperialism, Chomsky bitterly attacked the loss of life caused by the American bombing of Cambodia and Laos, and in the same year the Americans pulled out of Hanoi, he denounced American attacks on Vietnamese society as criminal, an unnecessary aggression in which 'the conduct of war was an indescribable atrocity':

The US goal was to eradicate the revolutionary nationalist forces which, US officials estimated, enjoyed the support

of half the population. The method, inevitably, was to destroy the rural society. While the war of annihilation partially succeeded in this aim, the US was never able to create a workable system out of the wreckage.<sup>380</sup>

In many articles held on his website, Chomsky views US foreign policy during and since the Second World War as an extension of American geopolitical expansionism for the purposes of economic and cultural hegemony.<sup>381</sup> In his view, the terrorism of 9/11 can in large part be viewed as consequent upon the USA's support for Israel, for condoning the alleged 'terrorism' of the Israeli state, and the wider alienation and anger of Muslims in the Middle East caused by American interventions in the region.<sup>382</sup>

Another passionate and biased critic of American bombing policy is William Blum, an ex-federal government employee and Left-liberal writer who asserts a deadly continuity in US foreign policy and air wars since 1945. His widely-read polemic *Rogue State* bizarrely draws upon the mass society insights of Adolf Hitler to castigate Americans for their 'primitive simplicity' in accepting the legitimacy of the US bombing of Hiroshima.<sup>383</sup> Listing almost all American bombing campaigns since 1945, including Korea, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, South America, the Middle East and Afghanistan, Blum dismisses these as an imperialistic project to dominate the world and choke off communism (Korea and Vietnam) or rid the world of terrorism (the Middle East, Afghanistan) while perpetrating bombing campaigns which he argues were terrorist in and of themselves: 'a terrorist is someone who has a bomb but doesn't have an air force.'<sup>384</sup> Few people would now argue that the Vietnamese bombing campaigns were always proportionate and successful, but for Blum Korea and Vietnam were simply at the worst end of a spectrum of unjustified American aggression. He sees the USA is the biggest terrorist on the

planet, and American culpability has been exacerbated by the use of high-tech weapons such as cluster bombs and drones which have killed and maimed many thousands of innocent civilians. However Blum is unable to attach relative weights to those who committed the atrocity in September 2001, Islamist attackers who bomb or gun down civilians, and the US government. The major culprit remains the American military complex.<sup>385</sup>

Continuities between American air raids have been emphasised by younger historians with similar views to Blum and Chomsky. Writing in the *Asia-Pacific Journal* they have attacked American indifference to civilian mortalities and casualties in air raids. Roosevelt's condemnation of the air raids during the 1930s have been mobilised to question the subsequent morality of US bombing campaigns, initially thrown into relief by the role of the B-29 plane in conventional and atomic bombings.<sup>386</sup> The lessons learned by the USAAF were adapted for the Korean War, where American military commanders sought to avoid civilian casualties but tacitly accepted that there would be death and maiming of innocents during air raids on industrial centres. Similar precepts informed the 'Nixon Doctrine' and the bombings of civilians in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.<sup>387</sup>

A problem with these arguments can be identified in the following sentence about the Second World War: 'Although Americans were quiet about the harm to civilians resulting from US bombing, they spoke out loudly against German and Japanese atrocities.'<sup>388</sup> This begs a number of questions. Surely, when loved ones and service personnel are fighting for their country, such emotions are easily explained? The Americans were fighting for democracy, moreover, whereas the Axis powers attempted to brutally impose fascism upon the world. The use of bombs was also a far cry from



the hand-to-hand atrocities committed by the Germans and Japanese. Yet none of these articles on American bombing policy since the 1940s detail the fact that the USA was fighting enemies whose *conduite de la guerre* was hardly modelled on the Geneva Conventions. American air raids on civilians did not take place in a neutral context, and civilians in fascist dictatorships were often ruthlessly sacrificed by their own side.

## Conclusions

Undoubtedly and tragically wasteful of civilian lives, and devastating to towns, cities and villages, the Cold War conflicts and post-1992 wars have been used by critics of the USA as evidence of American imperialism and of a callous indifference to cultures and peoples of which they knew little. Among the most vocal British opponents of American air raids is the Stop the War Coalition (STWC). On its website, the STWC blames the United States for every global conflict from Korea to the bombing of Syria: 'Since the Korean War (1950-53), the United States has controlled vast regions of the world through first establishing and then continuing a military presence.'<sup>389</sup>

This judgement implies there is no consent from 'controlled' countries, which was not the case for millions of people who opposed communism. It also begs counterfactual questions for both Korea and Vietnam: if the USA had not intervened, would the entire Korean peninsula now be a dynastic dictatorship mired in the oppression and poverty that blights the people of North Korea? And had the Americans and the South Vietnamese been victorious, would Vietnam now be a freer and more prosperous country? And how long and in what directions would the

Balkan conflicts of the 1990s have taken without NATO intervention from the air? Yet such questions are hidden behind the terrible images caused by the atrocities against civilians in both conflicts, for which the USA bears the brunt of responsibility. This chapter has, hopefully, provided a more nuanced and historically-informed approach than those offered up by anti-American interpretations aerial warfare since 1945. Yet no account of the American bombings during the Cold War should ignore the terrible legacy of unexploded bombs and the deaths and injuries they have caused since. In 2016 President Barack Obama expressed regret, but offered no apology, for the bombing of Laos during the Vietnam War, and increased compensation for the victims. About 20,000 people have been victims of unexploded ordnance since the war ended. Many were children, fascinated by the small size and shape of unexploded cluster bombs.<sup>390</sup>

## Coda

Most readers of this book will be aware of the conflicts in Syria and the Ukraine. In common with the website of the Stop the War Coalition, the online articles by both Chomsky and Blum offer little criticism of the Russian bombing of the Ukraine in 2015 which killed innocent bystanders, and led to an illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. While in Syria since 2015, air strikes on Aleppo and other cities by the Russians have killed innocent civilians, in order to support a barbaric regime that uses chemical weapons on its own citizens. This raises a serious question mark over the integrity of their arguments.