

FIRING INTO A CONTINENT

There is an almost profligate disparity between the huge quantities of U.S. bullets and bombs poured from the air upon targets in Vietnam and the military and economic damage the bullets and bombs do, in the aggregate. In North Vietnam the United States has debarred itself from attacking economically valuable targets such as port facilities and manufacturing plants. From bases in Thailand, F-105's fly over North Vietnam and drop their mighty payloads on or near roads, rail lines, ferry facilities, bridges. The costs to the enemy of repairing the damage are picayune compared to the costs to the United States of doing the damage. In South Vietnam the guerrillas seldom present concentrated targets. Machineguns mounted on helicopters and on A-47's (elderly C-47's, modified and fitted with three guns) fire streams of bullets into expanses of jungle and brush that are believed to conceal Vietcong guerrillas. The thought of an A-47 firing up to 18,000 rounds per minute into treetops brings to mind that bizarre image in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, of the French warship off the African coast: "There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush * * * firing into a continent."

B-52's, operating at a cost of more than \$1,300 per hour per plane, fly a 10-hour round trip from Guam to South Vietnam to strike at an enemy that has no large installations or encampments visible from the air. The B-52's have been fitted with extra racks that increase their payloads to more than sixty 750-pound bombs, about \$30,000 worth of bombs per plane. "The bomb tonnage that is resulting is literally unbelievable," said Secretary McNamara at a Senate hearing last January. Several weeks later, at a press conference, he said: "Our consumption in February * * * of air-delivered munitions alone in South Vietnam was two and a half times the average monthly rate in the 3 years of the Korean war." But much of that "literally unbelievable" bomb tonnage merely smashes trees and blasts craters in the earth.

Only a rich nation can afford to wage war at ratios so very adverse. But the United States is a rich nation. If there is a great disparity between the bomb power dropped and the economic value of the targets, there is also a great disparity between the wealth and power of the United States and of the enemy. The cost of the bombs is small in relation to the GNP of the United States, and the damage they do is sometimes substantial in relation to the GNP of North Vietnam, or to the resources available to the Vietcong. But the costs of winning are going to be unpleasantly large.

The official position of the Defense Department is that it does not know what the costs of the war are, and that it does not even try to compute them. As a Pentagon official put it: "We have no intention of cost-accounting the war in Vietnam. Our business is to support the conflict there. Our business is not cost accounting. We have no estimates of costs. It's not practical to say the war has cost x dollars to date."

The Defense Department argues that the war costs are commingled with those of a military establishment that existed before the U.S. troop buildup in South Vietnam began. And that, of course, is true. Still, a meaningful total can be arrived at by analyzing and adding up the various war costs, regardless of whether they translate