

December 8, 1965

Dear Harry,

Your letter of Dec. 2 arrived only hours after I had cabled we hadn't heard from you. Anyhow, this is the first letter we have received from you since the Operation Starlight exchange. Does this stack up with your records?

Regarding the story about V. C. bodycount and the official v. real version of what's really happening, it will be very difficult and I don't know exactly how to tackle it. The official version of the story is easy.

But, there are only two "real" sources which can be used with validity. One of these is the low-ranking officers actually involved on the spot during the battle. Now, these officers and NCO's involved in the past actions are scattered around and it will be difficult, if not impossible to find them all--and they will already be ~~immediately~~ informed exactly what the official version is and they're unlikely to counter it at this point. The other alternative regarding this category is that we can wait for another good-sized battle and use that as the example of the discrepancy. The second set of "real" sources is the press; among all of them there is a long list of discrepancies. But then, the story becomes more of a press ~~story~~ vs. officialdom story, which is really immensely complicated. There's really no other third set of sources. To use the press as a source is probably the best way, knowing that undoubtedly another example will popup before we actually get around to writing the story. I'll also poke around on this during my trip up north. There is one good line, which I doubt that John Wheeler used in his story--and we probably can't use either. The low-ranking ^{U.S.} officers have coined several new words regarding the V. C. body-count...the WAG report (Wild-Assed Guess) and SWAG (Stupid Wild-Assed Guess)....and that is how the bodycounts are determined and that figure is hitting the front pages of every American newspaper.

I'm sure that the American officialdom is still using the word "bodycount," and they've also used "confirmed dead." Maybe we should draw up a glossary of official definitions. There's also many

taboo words, which the American press officials will never use and refuse to admit...one of them is ambush. They never say that American troops are ambushed. Another word is withdraw or retreat...instead they've coined nice, but vague phraseology...namely to "adjust their positions." Maybe you've also noticed that the press reports rarely refer to the Saigon military "junta"... "collegium" is the nice word that has been dreamed up to replace it.

Regarding the incident of impaling the humans near Danang, the version I understand is somewhat more nebulous than yours. While the town was still under siege, the American pilots saw what they said were humans impaled on sticks and then some of the observer planes took pictures of these, which MAC-V later released to UPI, AP etc. Suddenly, MAC-V realized they really couldn't prove the bodies were real, and fearing they'd be accused of peddling hot photos, ordered the wires to kill the pictures. The next day, the ground forces went in to relieve the town—but found no poles whatsoever, and no bodies. So, there was no confirmation that the bodies were real—or that they were dummies. I can check this again when I get to Danang.

We here are never told anything that is released in Washington, except occasionally we see a transcript of a McNamara press conference if it pertains to Vietnam. We don't know what figures Washington releases or anything else. There's one figure I'm very interested whether Washington is releasing or not....that of the non-battle injured. All of a sudden that figure has become unavailable here. This would include all diseases, all accidental injuries. I think it is important since it would be much higher than the battle casualties. Maybe Washington can check if that figure is available there.

On why the battle figures and bodycount has become a fetish, partly as you suggest is that the South Vietnamese used it, then the Americans picked it up etc. However, my judgment, which no official would probably ever verify, is much more basic. That is that the numbers game is the only measure of a tactical victory or defeat that official sources have to rely upon. For example, in World War II, victory was determined whether you seized the objective—Iwa Jima for example—and defeat was if you didn't or if you withdrew. The losses of the Americans—or the loss of the Japanese were not important.

or relevant, as standards.

But, in Vietnam, in a battle such as the Ia Drang affair, once the American troops withdraw from an area, the Viet Cong can again control it, sometimes only hours later. So, how can you call it a victory, even if you have achieved the objective? Having been denye denied this barometer of victory, then the next measurement to be used would be the battle casualties. The battle casualties themselves are open to two interpretations--one can look at the proportion of American losses, as the press is now howling that the officials are fudging on, or one can look at the higher proportion of enemy killed, which the officia officials are inclined to do, ot to camouflage known American battle losses--but to do this they must say that the enemy dead are confirmed etc., thus getting themselves into another box.

Having established the standard of bodycountx and enemy dead a s a means of defining victory or defeat is a fragile measure of affairs in itself. My judgment is that this in itself is a distortion. Even if the official version of American losses were accurate and even if the enemy dead were actually counted, the fact that this is--and maybe must be--the standard nfx used to determine victory and or defeat is very superficial. The simple fact, in my viewpoint, is that all of this controversy is a camouflage to the real issue--that the over-all situation, including economic and political as well as the military, is absolutely critical.

In other words, the point of all the news management is to hid the fact that the situation is critical--and in my judgment, that the Americans are still losing the war. This may be only a semantical difference with McNamara's judgment, but I think the Americans are still losing...and most of the press corps does, and more low-ranking officers that have been in country for awhile, like the Marines, think so too and so do some of the low-ranking people in the civilian agencies. The crux of the problem is that militarily, the Americans are in the same position as the French--with the exception that they have more of everything and they have helicopters, and politically, we are in a worse position than the French, because we do not have a colonialists power internally, yet we suffer from all the accusations of possessing it. There are no statistical measures for the increased corruption of the Vietnamese government or the rising anti-Americanism, but anyone with any sensitivities and a few Vietnamese contacts can see it.

Anyhow, the point of all the newsmanagement, it seems to me, is to ~~an~~ deny to the American public the most central truth in the whole picture--that the situation is exceptionally serious and that for the first time in current American history the nation faces the possibility of losing a war it has decided it must win.

All of this is beyond the scope of your requested article on bodycount, but maybe glimmerings of it will come out in the proposed year-end series of articles.

The thing I have in mind is a four-article review, but not an exact chronology, of 1965, plus a size-up of where we sit at the end of 1965. I don't think it will be necessary to predict what will happen in 1966.

I think the thread for the series might be "America's Inscrutable War." These are briefly an outline of the four articles:

Article 1: Begin the article with ~~x~~ the dramatic meeting of Bundy and Khanh on the ~~xx~~ mortared Pleiku airstrip, which lead to the bombing of North Vietnam; then moving to the arrival of the American "defensive forces" and then the combat units etc., with a brief explanation of why--going back to the increasingly deteriorating situation with the fall of Diem and the collapse of the strategic hamlet program and the increased North Vietnamese infiltration. The bit on American combat units would have to include references to the flipflop from the advisory role. One basic point we must make is that while ~~this~~ the arrival of U. S. combat units meant a direct conflict between the free world and the Communist world, which was the obvious interpretation, it was also a conflict between the ~~minimum~~ two systems of power...the massive physical power of the U. S. versus the power to manipulate the masses by the Communists. (We'd pick up this theme again in article three). The article would end with the Santo Domingo crisis, which is an extension of the Vietnam-type of war in the underdeveloped Third World.

Hence, this first piece would be a review of the one hundred-some days following Feb. 7th, revolving around the three pivotal dates of the bombing of the North, the arrival of American ground troops and the Santo Domingo crisis at the conclusion of the piece.

Article 2: In the first article, we will omit or sluff over one other key date--the Feb. 19th coup which toppled Khanh, and use this as the lead for the second piece, which would review in depth the internal developments within the south. We must look at these developments at several levels--the villages and the cities and, on the government side, the government at the Saigon echelon and at the village level. The effect of American troops within the cities then, is the inflation, the prostitution, the rising tide of anti-Americanism,--the creation of a new monied elite; in effect, the lack of political and economic precautions laid out for the arrival of American troops, which have turned the cities into potential hotbeds of revolt, rather than the anchor of anti-Communist support. The Buddhist affair in Danang.

Article 3: A look in depth at the U. S. Marines operating in the villages outside of Danang...the crux of this piece is that unless the Marines can pacify the villages in their rear, they can't push forward. The policy of pacification is the one area where the Americans are attempting to move beyond the French position, attempting to re-conquer the villages. If this fails, it is doubtful there will be any satisfactory success in Vietnam. We will use the Marine enclave as a microcosm of the problem throughout the country, even though the Marines are the only ones really working at pacification. This piece is the reason for going to Danang.

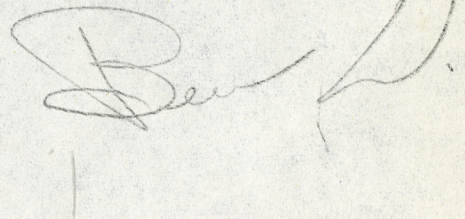
Article 4: Red Ryle in the 'Pink' Delta. This is An's sotr story, which he got last week-end in the delta. Officially, the Americans are saying that the delta is in great shape--but An did a beautiful reporting job detailing how the Viet Cong have isolated all the outposts--even those six miles from a regular army division headquarters--how the V. C. control the people, how they are in effect the government--~~taxing~~ leveling taxes, issuing permits for travel to Saigon--including permits to the relatives of generals and Saigon ministers. It's a superb story, which in personal, graphic terms details the illusions which Saigon is operating under, and how the Viet Cong have woven together the political, economic and military factors to become a de facto government--even under the government noses. Article 3 & 4 would attempt to include many more of the economic, political factors involved in the war--and where we sit at the end of 1965. (Pink is the color used to designate the contested areas).

Article 4 would be a geographical counter-balance to Article 3--the ~~highland~~ northern provinces.

There will be some difficulty in doing all of this in 1000-word chunks, but I think we can do it.

Please let us know your thoughts about all this.

Sincerely,



Troops are not a political strategy.

Not positive answer to Comm.
no response to revolutionary warfare.

S. Control of S.

- 1) 1 yr. tour.
- 2) Prohibit.
- 3) A Decade.