

Harrison Salisbury and the Vietnam War

—The Significance of His Coverage on Civilian Damage in the War—

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Introduction

This paper investigates the significance of Harrison Salisbury's Vietnam War coverage in the debate over the conduct of the war in the United States. Salisbury's dispatches from Hanoi challenged the Johnson administration's official representations about the war in Vietnam, and generated an explosive debate about the bombing of North Vietnam in the United States due to his revelations regarding civilian damage caused by the American bombing. He questioned not only the "surgical" precision of bombing runs targeting military facilities in populated areas, but also the basic purpose of the strategy itself. In Salisbury's view, civilian casualties were being inflicted deliberately to break the morale of the populace, a course he believed to be both immoral and doomed to failure.¹ Even before Salisbury's coverage broke, the December 13-14 U.S. raids of 1966 were controversial among the American public. The major issue was the credibility of the United States government and people questioned whether Johnson administration officials had been truthful in its reports on level of destruction and death among civilians in North Vietnam. Throughout this period, Johnson administration officials repeatedly said that they bombed only military targets, that they had not bombed Hanoi, and that any civilian damage was purely accidental. Such statements created the false impression that "the bombing operations were executed with such "surgical" precision that they had dropped bombs only on the military targets."² Salisbury's reports from North Vietnam, however, disclosed the reality of civilian casualties and damage to residential areas in North Vietnam.

Among earlier studies dealing with Salisbury's Vietnam War coverage, Lawrence Mark Atwood's article "Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury's Trip to Hanoi and the Limits of Dissent against the Vietnam War,"³ should be noted. However, Atwood did not refer to enough primary sources now available in order to verify the significance of Salisbury's coverage which disclosed the reality of civilian damage. While his research is useful, I used much more primary sources here to discuss the issue extensively.

This paper is structured in the following three chapters. In Chapter 1, the nature of Salisbury's reportage will be examined from two perspectives. The first perspective is Salisbury's background. What were Salisbury's motives in visiting North Vietnam? In answering this question, how deeply Salisbury was concerned about North Vietnam at the time will be examined through his background. The second one is Salisbury's new perspective on the war in Vietnam, that is, the view from the enemy side. In Chapter 2, the circumstances of Salisbury's trip to North Vietnam will be examined. Chapter 3 will take an in-depth look at Salisbury's challenges to the Johnson administration's claims about the war in Vietnam.

Chapter 1 The Nature of Salisbury's Reportage

An assistant managing editor at *The New York Times*, Harrison Salisbury was the first American journalist allowed into North Vietnam and he covered conditions there from late 1966 to early 1967. Salisbury was an accomplished journalist working for *The New York Times*, one of the most prestigious and influential newspapers

¹ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, The Senator Gravel Edition, Vol. IV, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 388.

² Phil G. Goulding, *Confirm or Deny: Informing the People on National Security* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 52.

³ Lawrence, Mark Atwood, "Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury's Trip to Hanoi and the Limits of Dissent against the Vietnam War," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No.3 (2006), 429-459.

in the United States and his revelations regarding the damage caused by the American bombing campaign in North Vietnam gave rise to a fierce controversy in the United States. The controversy over Salisbury's coverage stemmed from the way he challenged the Johnson administration's claims about the war in Vietnam. His reports from Hanoi had a great impact on the American public and aroused people's suspicion regarding the Johnson administration's statements of the conduct of the war in Vietnam.

Prior to his visit to Hanoi, Salisbury had spent much of his life visiting "difficult, inaccessible, impossible countries—Communist countries for the most part."⁴ During World War II, as a *United Press* correspondent, he reported from London during the Blitz and Moscow during the Nazi advance across western Russia. After transferring to *The New York Times* in 1949, he became the first correspondent to visit post-Stalin Siberia and Central Asia. Salisbury subsequently won permission to report from other off-limit countries—such as Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Mongolia as well as the Soviet Union—and he won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Soviet bloc in 1955. In addition, Salisbury also sought, but never received, permission to enter Communist China (the People's Republic of China, PRC). Salisbury described himself as "an intrepid traveler to the secretive communist capitals"⁵ for his achievements in visiting Communist countries. In spite of his self-proclaimed position, Salisbury ultimately failed to finish his exploration of Communist nations.

While attempting to secure a visa from the PRC government, Salisbury grew increasingly interested in North Vietnam and North Korea, which he described

as the "two other hermit kingdoms on my list."⁶ North Vietnam, in particular, held Salisbury's attention, for reasons he makes clear in the following passage:

Korea had drifted further and further out of world interest but Vietnam, bloody, desperate, nagging, Vietnam the quagmire, bottomless reservoir of trouble, breeder of tension, eater of manpower, omnipresent danger, loomed larger and larger over the American scene.⁷

Salisbury began his campaign to visit North Vietnam by first sending a letter to the North Vietnam Premier Pham Van Dong proposing that "Hanoi permit an American journalist, a representative of the country's greatest newspaper, to come and take a first-hand look at what was going on."⁸

What were Salisbury's motives in trying to visit North Vietnam? By 1966, President Johnson had rapidly escalated the U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam. As American troop levels rose and the bombing of North Vietnam intensified, relations between the United States and the rest of the world became increasingly strained. Nations in Asia and Europe, for example, criticized the escalation of the American intervention in Vietnam. Even in the United States, criticism emerged and debates over the conduct of the war galvanized politicians and policymakers in Washington. Among the American public, on the other hand, there was a growing disbelief in official statements, which led to the so-called "credibility gap"—a public relations phrase conveying the lack of trust the American people had in official government statements.

In his book, Salisbury commented on his serious reservations regarding the U.S. escalation of the war in

⁴ Harrison E. Salisbury, *Behind the Lines: Hanoi, December 23, 1966-January 7, 1967* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 2.

⁵ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

Vietnam, writing “Why, when France finally called it quits in Indochina, had we picked up the commitment? We had done this by our own positive action. It was not a casual deed. . . . Like most Americans I knew only in the vaguest of ways how we had gotten involved in Indochina.”⁹ Later in the book, Salisbury continues, “At first in such a small way that few even realized we had taken a stake in the conflict or the area, but which each year like some cancer had grown and grown until it now dominated the whole horizon of our concern.”¹⁰ As President Johnson escalated the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and the “credibility gap” increasingly grew among the American public, Salisbury keenly hoped at least that “Out there on the ground I might gain some comprehension of what we were doing—and how we had gotten there.”¹¹ It was against this background that Salisbury had tried to get permission to visit Hanoi.¹²

In the spring of 1966, Salisbury made two-and-a-half month trip around the periphery of China in an attempt to find an opening to Hanoi. After he returned to New York, Salisbury received an unexpected but influential supporter for his project—Anne Morrison Welsh, widow of Norman Morrison, the American Quaker who had burned himself to death in front of the Pentagon in protest of the war in Vietnam. Morrison sacrificed his life in an attempt to rouse the conscience of the American people against the war in Vietnam. Norman Morrison, as Salisbury found when he arrived in Hanoi, was regarded “as a saint, an object of almost holy worship”¹³ for his actions. “His name was revered”¹⁴ in North Vietnam

and Salisbury was told by the North Vietnamese that “Every North Vietnamese child knew his [Morrison’s] story.”¹⁵ Salisbury did not know Morrison or his widow, Anne Morrison. In his book, Salisbury described how he came to gain Anne Morrison’s support, writing “John Corry, a warm and sympathetic Times reporter, knew Anne Morrison. Through Corry’s good glances, she wrote a letter supporting my hopes for reporting from North Vietnam. She vouched for me.”¹⁶ Anne Morrison wrote a letter of inquiry to Hanoi on Salisbury’s behalf supporting his efforts to obtain a visa. Later in the book, Salisbury continues, “Anne’s words, I am certain, won my entry into Hanoi.”¹⁷ Her commitment to educating Americans about the conditions in North Vietnam is evident in a letter she wrote to Salisbury on April 12, 1966:

At this critical time in international affairs, there is great need here for accurate information about conditions in Vietnam. . . . it is my belief that truth itself contains power to evoke change. Presenting Americans with a clearer and truer explanation of the Vietnam tragedy should increase the possibilities for a peaceful settlement. . . . We Americans have an equally acute need to sensitively understand the attitudes and aspirations of the North Vietnamese people, to know what they are experiencing in this war conducted in their territory. . . . I believe these needs can be met by first-hand reporting from within North and South Vietnam by newsmen such as you who have a

⁹ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ Harrison Salisbury, *A Time of Change: A Reporter’s Tale of Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 119.

¹⁴ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Salisbury, *A Time of Change*, 119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

reputation for objectivity and honesty.¹⁸

Anne Morrison respected the integrity of Salisbury's writing and was willing to do what she could to support his efforts.¹⁹

On December 15, 1966—after an intense effort and with help from an unexpected supporter—Salisbury finally received word from Hanoi granting him permission to enter North Vietnam. Salisbury could have gone to Hanoi a month earlier if the North Vietnamese invitation had not been curiously delayed in Paris business office of the *Times* international edition.²⁰ This strange delay caused some controversy later, when U.S. officials, critical of Salisbury's reports, argued that the North Vietnamese government wanted to exploit for its own propaganda purposes by allowing Salisbury to cover the results of the American raids of December 13 and 14. The bombing raids, which inflicted heavy civilian casualties, were already controversial in the United States and policymakers feared the impact of negative reportage on domestic audiences. In a confidential memorandum, then Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, said to Philippe Husson, a consular of French Embassy, "If Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times*, for example, had received his visa only recently, then I supposed Hanoi's main motives was connected with the current campaign on US bombing."²¹

In reality however, Hanoi's decision to permit Salisbury to visit North Vietnam was made earlier than the December raids, and was not connected with the bombing campaign. Regardless of such behind-the-

scenes circumstances, Salisbury appreciated his lucky break, writing that the "visa could hardly have arrived at a more auspicious moment."²² For months, from early 1965 when American bombing campaign started, the U.S. government stated that the bombing of North Vietnam was directed at strictly military targets and was highly accurate. Contrary to the U. S. government reports, the North Vietnamese argued that on December 13 and 14, U.S. aircraft had penetrated into the center of Hanoi and dropped bombs within the principal urban areas, rather than the industrial outskirts. The U.S. government denied the Hanoi's charge, even while the State Department admitted that the "possibility of an accident could not be ruled out."²³ Keenly aware of the situation in Hanoi, Salisbury was determined to provide a first-hand account:

Now, if all went well, I should reach Hanoi in time to make an eyewitness examination of the bombing charge. It should be possible to determine whether American planes had bombed the city or whether the North Vietnamese were just making propaganda as the Pentagon contended. The Defense Department declared that if damage had occurred within the city it must be due to misfiring of the powerful SAM's—the surface-to-air missiles that the North Vietnamese employed against American bombers.²⁴

Realizing that "It might not be easy for a non-expert to

¹⁸ Anne Morrison Welsh, *Held in the Light: Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for Peace and His Family's Journey of Healing* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 110-111.

¹⁹ Morrison, *Held in the Light*, 110.

²⁰ Salisbury, *A Time of Change*, 143.

²¹ Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Philippe Husson, Consular, French Embassy, the Department of State, December 30, 1966, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966, Political & Defense, POL 27, Military Operations Viet-S, box 3014, National Archives and Records Administration II (hereafter NARA II), College Park, Maryland.

²² Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 9.

²³ Harrison E. Salisbury, "A Visitor to Hanoi Inspects Damage Laid to U.S. Raids," *New York Times*, December, 25, 1966.

²⁴ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 10.

determine whether damage had been caused by a missile or a bomb,” Salisbury was nonetheless determined that “he could try to find out and he would, in any event, be the first American to make an on-the-scene inspection.”²⁵ On the other hand, admitting that the American people carry a certain nationalist bias, America, he wrote, “had been free of the foreign invader or the threat of foreign conquest; this was the pride of our society, the product of our philosophy, of our own individual and stubborn American way of life.”²⁶ Just as Salisbury wondered what chance “a small, alien, Asian nation fighting in its rice paddies against a foe whose only tangible presence was the quick flash of silver wings, the high-pitched whine of super-jet engines, the thunderous crash of bombs,” he also questioned “one reporter’s skill [could] bridge this chasm in experience, comprehend the totality of an Asian and an American life which hardly shared a single point?”²⁷ Nevertheless, Salisbury expressed his expectation for the timing of his arrival in Hanoi:

There was another dramatic aspect of the December 13-14 bombing. North Vietnamese officials contended that the attacks signaled a new step in American escalation. Now, they said, the United States was extending the bombing offensive right into the capital itself. It seemed possible that I would arrive in Hanoi at a significant turning point in the war.²⁸

Chapter 2 The Circumstances of Salisbury’s Trip to North Vietnam

His past experiences in communist countries aside, however, why was Harrison Salisbury granted permission to visit Hanoi by the North Vietnamese government, which until then had been almost entirely off-limits to Western reporters? What were Hanoi’s motives behind allowing Salisbury’s visit? Vietnamese sources show that the timing of the decision to admit Western journalists was due largely to Hanoi’s increasing anxiety in 1966 over the escalation of the American bombing campaign.²⁹

On why Hanoi chose Salisbury, there are two likely reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Salisbury worked for *The New York Times*—the most prestigious and influential newspaper in the United States—and whatever story he chose to write would undoubtedly attract the attention of U.S. policymakers and the American public. Secondly, Salisbury had more experiences than many of his colleagues in reporting from Communist nations. Hanoi officials likely regarded Salisbury as a reporter relatively sympathetic to their cause and they may have expected him to write stories favorable to North Vietnam. Furthermore, North Vietnamese leaders, who favored a negotiated end to the war, may have regarded Salisbury as a likely candidate to relay secret messages from Hanoi to Washington.³⁰ Salisbury, himself, guessed that Hanoi’s decision “must mean a change in [the North Vietnamese] position even though [I am] darn sure they will talk tough in Hanoi.”³¹ Although Salisbury did not know if his assumption was accurate or not, he

²⁵ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ Lawrence, “Mission Intolerable, 433.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 434.

³¹ Harrison Salisbury Notebook, undated, box401, Harrison E. Salisbury Papers (hereafter Salisbury Papers), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

nonetheless believed that Hanoi would want to project an attitude of defiance and non-compromise toward the United States. According to Salisbury, “the visa was to be understood as a show of self-confidence: they were willing to let even an American journalist see what was going on behind their lines, how strong they were, how resolute their determination to fight to the end.”³² If these were indeed Hanoi’s motivations, Salisbury’s visit satisfied North Vietnamese expectation. On January 4, 1967, when Salisbury was still in Hanoi, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported on the North Vietnamese reaction to the journalist’s visit:

The North Vietnamese were very pleased with the result of the visit by Harrison Salisbury, assistant manager of “The New York Times.” The North Vietnamese are now considering additional visits of this kind by “sympathetic” correspondents.³³

Regardless of Hanoi’s reasons, Salisbury notated his own motivations in his diary on the Air France flight bound for Paris on December 19, 1966:

I think my trip is supposed to convey an image of confidence, of hardihood in the face of U.S. bombing; of horror at what we have done; a positive image of North Vietnam but at the same time it is designed to bring peace or a truce or talks nearer, in part by assuring the U.S. and U.S. opinion that the present policy is not winning; in part by showing a reasonableness on the part of North Vietnam.³⁴

Chapter 3 Salisbury Challenges the Johnson Administration’s Claims about the War in Vietnam

Salisbury was an accomplished journalist working for one of the greatest and influential newspapers in the United States. Perhaps because of his status, or in spite of it, his revelations regarding civilian damage caused by the American bombing campaign in North Vietnam generated a fierce controversy in the United States. Salisbury wrote a series of twenty-two detailed stories, fourteen of which were based on his time in North Vietnam between December 23, 1966 and January 7, 1967 (published in *The New York Times* between December 25 and January 9). He wrote an additional eight stories during a stopover in Hong Kong (published between January 11 and 18). Critical and supportive readers were both disturbed by Salisbury’s challenge to at least five of the Johnson administration’s claims about the war in Vietnam.

First, Salisbury’s on-the-spot inspection revealed that American bombs had caused civilian damage, which contradicted the Administration’s statements claiming that the bombing campaign targeted purely military installations. A day after his arrival in Hanoi, on December 24, 1966, Salisbury inspected several damaged sites in Hanoi attributed to the United States raids of December 13 and 14. He revealed the damage in his first article from Hanoi, which appeared in the December 25, 1966 issue of *The New York Times*. In the article, Salisbury wrote the following:

United States officials have contended that no attacks in built-up or residential Hanoi have been authorized or carried out. They have also

³² Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 23.

³³ CIA cable, “North Vietnamese Reaction to Harrison Salisbury Visit,” January 4, 1967, National Security File (hereafter NSF) Country File, Vietnam, box 39, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter LBJL), Austin, Texas. The source of this information is unknown because the part of the description of the source is blotted out in black.

³⁴ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 24.

suggested that Hanoi residential damage in the two raids could have been caused by defensive surface-to-air missiles that misfired or fell short. . . . This correspondent is no ballistics specialist, but inspection of several damaged sites and talks with witness make it clear that Hanoi residents certainly believe they were bombed by United States planes, that they certainly observed United States planes overhead and that damage certainly occurred right in the center of town . . . the Yenvien rail yard, which was listed as one of the targets in the raids Dec. 14 and 15, is in a built-up area that continues south west to the Red River with no visible breaks in residential quarters. Much the same is true of the Vandien truck park south of the city, which was another listed target. . . . It is unlikely that any bombing attack on such targets could be carried out without civilian damage and casualties.³⁵

Contrary to Washington's press release, Salisbury's vivid descriptions of the bombings of nonmilitary sites in Nam Dinh, situated forty miles southwest of Hanoi, highlighted the problem of distinguishing between civilian and military targets. He disclosed the ground-level reality of the bombings in an article printed in *The New York Times* on December 27, 1966:

The cathedral tower looks out on block after block of utter desolation . . . 13 percent of the city's housing including the homes of 12,464 people, have been destroyed; 89 people have been killed and 405 wounded. . . . No American communiqué has asserted that Nam Dinh contains some facility that the United States regards as a military objective. It is apparent, on personal inspection, that block after block of ordinary housing particularly surrounding

a textile plant, has been smashed to rubble by repeated attacks of Seventh Fleet planes. The town lies only 20 miles inland, which may explain why the Seventh Fleet seems to have made it its particular target. The textile plant, whose most dangerous output from a military point of view would presumably be cloth for uniform, has been bombed 19 times.³⁶

Salisbury concluded that the Johnson administration's statements contradicted the reality in Hanoi. "Contrary to the impression given by United States communiqués," Salisbury wrote, "on-the-spot inspection indicates that American bombing has been inflicting considerable civilian casualties in Hanoi and its environs for some time past."³⁷ Salisbury took his condemnation one step further in an article published on January 12, 1967:

President Johnson has stated American policy in simple terms. He said that the United States was bombing "steel and concrete" and that he was convinced American pilots were carrying out their orders. The North Vietnamese contended that the United States is pursuing a deliberate policy of terror bombing, with civilian population and nonmilitary objectives as the target. Wherein lies the truth? After two weeks of painstaking observation and inquiry on the ground in North Vietnam, this correspondent can report only what he saw and what he hear.³⁸

Salisbury's stories challenged another of Washington's official representations of the war by questioning the strategic impact of the bombing campaign on North Vietnam. The Johnson administration defended the bombing as essential to destroy the North Vietnamese

³⁵ Harrison E. Salisbury, "A Visitor to Hanoi Inspects Damage Laid to U.S. Raids," *New York Times*, December 25, 1966.

³⁶ Harrison E. Salisbury, "U.S. Raids Batter 2 Towns; Supply Route Is Little Hurt," *New York Times*, December 27, 1966.

³⁷ Harrison E. Salisbury, "A Visitor to Hanoi Inspects Damage Laid to U.S. Raids," *New York Times*, December 25, 1966.

³⁸ Harrison E. Salisbury, "Bomb Controversy; View from the Ground," *New York Times*, January 12, 1967.

will to fight and to disrupt the flow of troops and war materials to the South. The President and his advisors believed that crushing morale and resupply routes would force the North to move toward negotiation. Salisbury's ground-level inspection emphasized that the effect of American bombing on transportation had been minimal, and his reports suggested that disrupting supply movements was impossible when manpower offered alternatives to vehicles:

The railroad and highway have been bombed again and again and again, but it is doubtful that rail traffic has ever been held up more than a few hours, and the highways seems capable of operating almost continuously regardless of how many bombs are dropped. . . . A basic flaw in the bombing policy from a military viewpoint would seem to be its failure to take into account the nature of the country and the people to which it is being applied. . . . Traffic and supplies simply flow around and past the point of interruption and the damage to rail or highway is quickly made good.³⁹

Salisbury also asserted that the bombings, contrary to the Johnson administration's claims, seemed only to strengthen the North Vietnamese will to fight. He observed that, "to the Vietnamese air alerts and air raids are deadly serious business. The pretty waitresses with rifles are part of this serious business," and he insisted that "Being trained to man posts gives the populace a feeling of participation and of fighting back—important in maintaining morale and counteracting the feeling of helplessness and defenselessness that civilian populations often experience."⁴⁰

These descriptions show that despite the rise in the intensity of bombing, and contrary to the U.S. government's position that the American bombing campaign offered an effective solution, the morale of the

North Vietnamese had not been weakened and they were continuing to supply forces in the South. In other words, the bombing seemed to devastate North Vietnamese industry, such disruptions were only temporary. Rather than crushing the will of the people, the bombings strengthened North Vietnamese nationalism and the public's enthusiasm to resist the U.S.

Salisbury's reportage also challenged the administration on the relationship between the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front (NLF). The Johnson administration based U.S. policy on their belief that the NLF was Hanoi's creation and had a strong relationship with the North Vietnamese government. Such assumptions led policymakers to assume that the conflict in South Vietnam was a case of Northern aggression, which legitimized U.S. intervention and justified anti-Communist rhetoric. Salisbury's reportage, however, suggested that the NLF was an independent organization struggling to establish Southern independence, and that its policies differed significantly from those of the North Vietnamese government. Salisbury interviewed a member of the Central Committee of the NLF, Nguyen Van Tien. "Most Americans," Salisbury wrote, "have assumed that the Liberation Front is a puppet of the North that was created by the North." "Most Americans," he continued, "believed that it is the creature of the North and that it is directed by the North." Salisbury described the picture of the NLF and its role in Vietnam in an article printed in *The New York Times* on January 5, 1967:

As described by Mr. Tien, the Front is an independent entity . . . The Front and the North would have to discuss reunification on the basis of equality, he insisted, and the Front would then decide all matters for the South as far as reunification is concerned . . . Mr. Tien's picture of the Liberation Front differed sharply from

³⁹ Harrison E. Salisbury, "U.S. Raids Batter 2 Towns; Supply Route Is Little Hurt," *New York Times*, December 27, 1966.

⁴⁰ Harrison E. Salisbury, "Hanoi During an Air Alert: Waitress Take Up Rifles," *New York Times*, December 28, 1966.

that held by many in the United States that it is an organization created and directed by and subservient to the Hanoi regime.⁴¹

Salisbury's fourth challenge centered on the U.S. characterizations of the North Vietnamese people. U.S. officials tended to consider the entire population of North Vietnam as the enemy, and they described the North Vietnamese as "a weak-willed, conformist people exploited by a ruthless, cunning leadership, a pattern that two decades of the Cold War had conditioned Americans to expect of Communist insurgents."⁴² In the conversation with Salisbury on January 2, 1967, the North Vietnamese Premier, Pham Van Dong mentioned that he had in mind "the persistent view in the United States that North Vietnamese was a 'puppet' of the Soviet Union or China or both."⁴³ In other words, U.S. officials were blinded by their own anti-Communist ideology in the context of the Cold War, misreading the national liberation movement of Vietnamese as a form of aggression by the Communists. Contrary to the Johnson administration's stereotypes of North Vietnamese people, however, Salisbury described the earnestness and spiritual intensity of the spirit of the North Vietnamese. The war effort, Salisbury concluded, was due in large part to the fierce independence of the North Vietnamese people:

The spirit of the North Vietnamese people seems to be a combination natural vitality and intense patriotism, a determination to run Vietnam for and by Vietnamese and an element of teen-age cockiness and daredevilry . . . The Vietnamese are warm, direct people . . . No one in Hanoi's diplomatic

colony believe that the North Vietnamese are anyone's puppets. In fact it is their determination to be independent of both the Soviet Union and China that often drives their closest friends to despair.⁴⁴

Lastly, Salisbury's dispatches challenged Washington by suggesting a willingness in Hanoi to negotiate a peaceful end to the war. The Johnson administration blamed the escalation of the war on Hanoi's reluctance to explore a settlement. In a draft of response to a group of student leaders dated January 4, 1967, Secretary Rusk asserted:

We know that the effort at armed conquest which we oppose in Viet-Nam is organized, led, and supplied by the leaders in Hanoi. We know that the struggle will not end until those leaders decide that they want it to end. So we stand ready—now and at any time in the future—to sit down with representatives of Hanoi, either in public or in secret, to work out arrangements for a just solution.⁴⁵

Similarly, in a draft statement for President Johnson's 1966 Union message which was filed by Rusk as well, the Johnson administration's effort to achieve a negotiated settlement was reasserted:

We are, of course, ready to send a representative to discuss with the governments of South Vietnam and North Vietnam the question of a cessation of hostilities. . . . I [President Johnson] have sent our representatives to the end of the earth over and over again to seek every possibility of a peaceful settlement.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Harrison E. Salisbury, "Aide Says Liberation Front Is Independent of the North," *New York Times*, January 5, 1967.

⁴² Lawrence, "Mission Intolerable," 438.

⁴³ Harrison E. Salisbury, "North Vietnamese Spirit Found High," *New York Times*, January 11, 1967.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Memos to the President from Walt Rostow, January 4, 1967, NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, Vol. 18, box 12, JBJL.

⁴⁶ Walt Rostow to President Johnson, December, 31, 1966, NSF Memos to the President, Walt W. Rostow, box 12, LBJL.

As is obvious in above statements, “the Johnson administration frequently declared itself open to talks with North Vietnam and blamed Hanoi for obstructing progress toward a peaceful resolution.”⁴⁷ The North Vietnamese that Salisbury encountered, however, seemed open to negotiations. In a four-and-a-half-hour conversation with Salisbury on January 2, 1967, the North Vietnamese Premier, Pham Van Dong, discussed Hanoi’s four points for ending the war, which fundamentally indicated Hanoi’s willingness to talk. Salisbury described the detailed discussion in an article appeared in the January 4, 1967 issue of *The New York Times*:

In a detailed discussion of North Vietnam’s views on the war in Vietnam, Premier Pham Van Dong emphasized that once hostilities were brought to an end, it would be possible to “speak of other things.” “The moment the United States puts an end to the war, we will respect each other and settle every question,” he said. “Why don’t you [The United States] think that way?”. . . “The big question,” he added, “is to reach a settlement which can be enforced.” “The party which has to make first step is Washington,” he continued, “We have no doubt on this point.”⁴⁸

As mentioned above, the controversy over Salisbury’s coverage stemmed from the way he challenged the Johnson administration’s claims about the war in Vietnam. His vivid on-the-spot reports from Hanoi had a great impact on the American public and aroused people’s suspicion regarding the Johnson administration’s statements of the conduct of the war in Vietnam.

Furthermore, I believe that the debate over Salisbury’s reportage provides a unique opportunity to examine the U.S. government’s failure to recognize the civilian damage of the bombings and to reconsider its conduct of the war in Vietnam.⁴⁹

Conclusion

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Salisbury challenged at least five of the Johnson administration’s claims about the war in Vietnam. First, Salisbury’s on-the-spot inspection revealed that American bombs had caused civilian damage, which contradicted the Administration’s statements claiming that the bombing campaign targeted purely military installations. Second, his coverage questioned the strategic effectiveness of the bombing campaign on North Vietnam. Third, Salisbury’s reportage challenged the administration on the relationship between the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front (NLF). Salisbury’s fourth challenge centered on the U.S. characterizations of the North Vietnamese people. Lastly, Salisbury’s dispatches challenged Washington by suggesting a willingness in Hanoi leaders to negotiate a peaceful end to the war.

Regarding to civilian damage, as demonstrated in the CIA documents declassified later, Johnson administration had intensive CIA studies and other secret appraisals around the same time based on post-strike photography. Those studies reported on civilian damage and casualties inflicted by U.S. bombings of North Vietnam.⁵⁰ Johnson administration officials, however, claimed that they were bombing military targets and that possible measures were being taken to minimize civilian damage while acknowledging that

⁴⁷ Lawrence, “Mission Intolerable,” 440.

⁴⁸ Harrison E. Salisbury, “Hanoi Premier Tells View; Some in U.S. Detect a Shift,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1967.

⁴⁹ See in detail Akemi Kuzuya, “The U.S. Government’s Response to Harrison Salisbury’s Vietnam War Coverage,” *Kokusai Chiiki Bunka Kenkyuu*, Nanzan Daigaku Daigakuin Kokusai Chiiki Bunka Kenkyuu-ka, No. 7, 2012, 245-275.

⁵⁰ See in detail Kuzuya, “The U.S. Government’s Response to Harrison Salisbury’s Vietnam War Coverage.”

civilian casualties would inevitably occur in connection with the bombing of military targets.⁵¹ On the other hand, in 1967, the International War Crimes Tribunal (the Russell Tribunal) proved the American bombing of civilians, of the systematic and deliberate bombing of the civilian population of North Vietnam and took the decision that the United States of America has committed a war crime.⁵² However, during the Tribunal, the Johnson administration ignored the Tribunal and repeatedly said that they were bombing only military targets, and that any civilian damage was caused accidentally.

Regarding to the strategic effectiveness of the bombing, Johnson administration also had several CIA reports that emphasized that “it seems clear that the air campaign by itself cannot persuade Hanoi to abandon the war.”⁵³ In addition, In December 1966 and again in 1967, the Pentagon paused and requested the Jason Division of the Institute for Defense Analysis to assess the effect of the bombing on North Vietnam. The report was a “categorical rejection of bombing as a tool of our policy in Southeast Asia…” The expectation that bombing would “erode the determination of Hanoi and its people clearly overestimated the persuasive and disruptive effects of the bombing, and correspondingly, underestimated the tenacity and recuperative capabilities of the North Vietnamese.” Despite the reports, the bombing of an ever-expanded list targets in North Vietnam continued.⁵⁴

The Johnson administration ignored the “well-documented” assessment. CIA reports were deliberately hidden within the Johnson administration as well as from

the American public to maintain the U.S. credibility and to justify U.S. policy in Vietnam. In addition, the Russell Tribunal failed to have expected effect partly because it was not an institution but a private tribunal and did not replace any established body.⁵⁵ Though the U.S. government officials fully recognized civilian damage caused by their bombing, the reality of civilian damage was never disclosed to the American public.

However, Salisbury disclosed that cities and civilian constructions had been hit and many civilians were killed throughout the country by American bombing in contradiction to the U.S. government’s statements. His revelations generated a fierce controversy in the United States. Because of his status, an accomplished journalist at *The New York Times*, one of the greatest and established newspapers in the United States, Salisbury’s coverage could provide an opportunity for the American public to acknowledge the reality of civilian damage. Furthermore, his revelation had the potential to reorient the debate over the conduct of the war in Vietnam and to force a fundamental reconsideration of American policymakers’ understandings of war. It was what Salisbury expected. He notated in his diary on December 19, 1966 that “... it [my trip] is designed to bring peace or a truce or talks nearer, in part by assuring the U.S. and U.S. opinion that the present policy is not winning; in part by showing a reasonableness on the part of North Vietnam.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, 135. President Johnson made a statement to the press on December 31, [1966] that “the bombing was directed against legitimate military targets and that every effort was being made to avoid civilian casualties.”

⁵² John Duffett ed., *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the International War Crimes Tribunal* (New York: A Clarion Book, 1968).

⁵³ See in detail Kuzuya, “The U.S. Government’s Response to Harrison Salisbury’s Vietnam War Coverage.”

⁵⁴ Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young ed., *Bombing Civilians: a Twentieth-Century History* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 164-165.

⁵⁵ Duffett, *Against the Crimes of Silence*, 43.

⁵⁶ Salisbury, *Behind the Lines*, 24.

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