

Briefings of Congressmen

FORMER MICHIGAN GOVERNOR GEORGE ROMNEY effectively, if unintentionally, ended his 1968 Presidential campaign hopes by confessing he had been "brainwashed" by deceptively optimistic briefings in Vietnam.

It was years before the accuracy of Mr. Romney's remark began to be fully understood. It wasn't until a third visit to Southeast Asia in April 1971 that I myself began to understand the enormity of the Defense and State Departments' deception of visiting Congressmen.

Jerome Waldie (D—California) and I decided to visit Vietnam and Laos on a privately financed inspection trip during the 1971 spring recess. I had been in Vietnam twice before, in January 1968 and February 1970, seeking to understand and appraise counterinsurgency and pacification tactics and progress in the country's rural areas. I was particularly interested in the northern coastal provinces, where a number of Marine Corps friends and colleagues had served and some had died. Congressman Waldie and I took with us two ex-Marines—Colonel Paul La Fond, who had retired from the Corps after two tours of duty in Vietnam, and Chuck Daly, now Vice-President of Harvard University with whom I had served in Korea twenty years earlier.

Almost immediately, it became apparent that we were to learn only such information as we dug out ourselves. In both Vietnam and Laos we were given deceptive briefings

by high-ranking military and foreign-service officers; these briefings were geared to demonstrate the successes of U.S. programs and to disguise their failures. Incomplete and misleading information was given in the presence of officers who knew such information to be incomplete and misleading; we were given incorrect facts on several occasions in the presence of officers who knew that such facts were incorrect, yet stood mute.

The deception was clearly not a matter of protecting secret information from the enemy; the intention was to conceal information from members of Congress as if *we* were the enemy. The facts which were concealed from us were not facts which needed to be withheld from the North Vietnamese or the Pathet Lao. The purpose in concealing these facts could only be that they might cause the American people and the Congress to demand a more rapid withdrawal from Southeast Asia than the Defense and State Departments felt was appropriate. As one young private told me, it was a "big joke" with the combat troops how visiting Congressmen were deliberately taken down the primrose path, ushered to "showcase" units, villages and projects, and kept from seeing or hearing the balanced information which might cause doubt over continuing policies ordered by the Commander in Chief. A career army officer later wrote me that military personnel had received *orders* that Congressman Waldie and I were to be deceived and denied full information whenever possible. Bureaucracy and government seem incapable of admitting mistake or failure.

During my 1970 visit to Vietnam I had learned that in one of the country's forty-four provinces, Quang Nam province, 307 out of 555 hamlets had been destroyed by American infantry forces and firepower. On our most recent visit, Congressman Waldie and I visited cities and hamlets in each of the six northernmost provinces of South Vietnam,

from Quang Tri just south of the Demilitarized Zone down to Binh Dinh. We confirmed that the pattern of destruction in Quang Nam province was not unique. In all six of the northern provinces, we flew over vast areas where only hedgerows remained to indicate where hundreds of thousands of people had once lived in quiet rural villages. It appeared that at least half of the hamlets in these six provinces had been deliberately destroyed by American firepower. These were once lovely places to live. The rural hamlets of Vietnam, enjoying good soil, excellent weather, a long history of self-government, family solidarity and community good will, represent a way of life in peacetime which a growing number of urbanized Americans might like to emulate.

In our zeal to separate the guerrilla from his base of support in these hamlets, we pursued the tactics we called "search and destroy," "free fire zone" and "generation of refugees" in every rural area where we could not otherwise prevent the villagers from supporting enemy cadres. This was the same "wanton destruction of villages" and "forcible relocation of civilian population" that we had expressly defined and denounced at Nuremberg as a crime against humanity, a definition of crime which we likewise insisted at Nuremberg should be applicable to *all* nations, not just Nazi Germany. I could find no American officer or statesman, from Ambassador Bunker on down, who could tell me of any consideration given by American decision-makers to the question of whether we ourselves, in our search-and-destroy, free-fire-zone policies, were violating our own war-crime precedents established at Nuremberg. Worse yet, American officers assigned to brief us or to escort our inspection trip either did not know or chose to deliberately conceal the fact that American forces and American firepower had destroyed the hamlets in question.

In Thua Thien province, we flew over the lovely valley of the Song Bo River, noticing the burned-out hedgerows of dozens of hamlets now surrounded by overgrown fields which must have once been productive rice paddies and orchards. We flew on for some fifteen kilometers to a refugee camp with square, tin-roofed huts lined up inside a rectangular barbed-wire compound, located in barren coastal and dune country, where the refugees of one of those Song Bo River valley hamlets, Xuan Loc hamlet of Ap Thanh Tan village, were gathered to meet us. With a circle of American advisory-team members, Vietnamese government officials and our own escort officers listening, we were first told by the local hamlet chief and one of the elders (through both Vietnamese and American interpreters) that the houses in his village of Ap Thanh Tan had been destroyed by the Communists in May of 1969, and that the people had fled the village. A number of Vietnamese police stood behind the chief and the village elders as they talked, and the Vietnamese and American advisers and escort officers present nodded approvingly or remained silent as this story unfolded.

A young AID official, Frank Scotton, happened to tape-record part of the conversation. The following excerpts are verbatim from his notes on the transcription.

At this point Congressman McCloskey began to ask questions of some of the residents. I assisted with interpretation.

McCLOSKEY: Where are you from?

ELDER: Xuan Loc. . . .

McCLOSKEY: Why did you leave?

MAJOR NGHI (the army officer who served as district chief in that area): They left because the security was bad, too many VC in 1966.

McCLOSKEY: Was the original village destroyed?
 ELDER: Yes.
 McCLOSKEY: By whom?
 ELDER (prompted by Major Nghi): Viet Cong.
 McCLOSKEY: Do you want to go back?
 TRAN VAN BINH (hamlet chief): When the area is secured.
 McCLOSKEY: Where are you from?
 BINH: Also from Xuan Loc.
 McCLOSKEY: What was the population of the hamlet?
 BINH: Twenty-eight families.
 McCLOSKEY: How were they employed?
 BINH: Farming.
 McCLOSKEY: How do people live here?
 MAJOR WRIGHT (U.S. district adviser): Charcoal, tobacco, vegetables. . . .
 McCLOSKEY: How can that be enough for livelihood?
 MAJOR WRIGHT: Some are in RF and PF [regional and popular forces]. Some five or six work at Camp Evans. They help with their salary.
 McCLOSKEY: Before, were your lands sufficient to feed everyone?
 ELDER: Yes.
 McCLOSKEY: Your old land was better?
 ELDER: Yes. . . .
 McCLOSKEY: In your old village had you seen U.S. forces?
 ELDER: Yes. U.S. soldiers helped us move.
 McCLOSKEY: Voluntarily?
 ELDER: Yes.
 McCLOSKEY: Were there Viet Cong in your village then?
 ELDER: At night they came from the hills.
 McCLOSKEY: When was that?
 ELDER: In May 1966. . . .
 McCLOSKEY: When you left, were your houses still standing?

ELDER: Yes, some were.
 McCLOSKEY: When were they destroyed?
 ELDER: After we left. (Prompted by Major Wright)
 By the Viet Cong.
 At this point a soldier thrust himself forward and insisted that this was not what had happened at all. The elders smiled and the district chief gazed into the distance.
 McCLOSKEY: What is he saying?
 SCOTTON: He says that he knows it wasn't like that.

The new arrival's name was Ho Le; he was the assistant platoon leader of the Seventeenth Popular Forces Platoon, which operated in the area. Ho Le had a far different recollection of the destruction of Xuan Loc hamlet.

The Viet Cong had occasionally come into the village at night, but in May of 1966, he said, Marines of the Third Division had ordered the villagers to leave. Thereafter, the *Marines* burned the village to the ground. Ho Le stated he had participated since 1965 in military operations in Thua Thien province and that his platoon had been assigned to the second battalion of one of the Marine regiments operating in the area. He stated unequivocally that the Viet Cong had not burned any villages, and that no homes had been burned until the Marines ordered that the villagers move out, at which time the hamlets were burned down by the Marines.

Had Ho Le not volunteered this information, I am satisfied that the United States military and civilian officers assigned to our party would have permitted us to leave the area with a wholly false impression of the history and circumstances of the people of this one small hamlet in Thua Thien province. On both occasions when false information had been tendered, it was at the specific prompting of either the U.S. military adviser or his Vietnamese counter-

part. It is remotely possible that the army adviser was actually not aware of the truth when he prompted the village elder to tell us that the Viet Cong, not U.S. Marines, had destroyed Xuan Loc hamlet. The tour of duty for U.S. advisers is generally only thirteen months maximum, and apparently no records are passed on to one's successor of prior military operations in a particular area.

The key point, however, is that the major wanted a visiting Congressman to believe that the enemy had burned down houses; otherwise there would have been no reason to prompt the elder's response. Congressmen were supposed to hear only good about U.S. actions and progress, and only bad about the enemy.

Multiplied a thousand times with hundreds of Congressmen, these little deceits, the exaggerated reports of success and the minimization of failure, do indeed constitute attempts to "brainwash." Who is to say what Congress might have done had the officers of the State and Defense Departments been candid and truthful from the first in their factual reports and evaluations to individual members? Would we have acquiesced in the war? Would we have allowed it to continue this long? The American system of government was not intended to be operated on falsehood or the unwillingness of government employees to admit mistake and failure. There is need to recognize a duty on the part of federal employees to insist on the truth—particularly in advice and information placed before Congress.

The case of Xuan Loc hamlet as described by Ho Le is typical of hundreds of other hamlets which have been completely destroyed by U.S. forces during our operations in Vietnam since 1965. At Nuremberg we condemned German General Albert Jodl to death for moving 100,000 Norwegians from their homes, which were then destroyed. General Jodl's purpose was to deny the area as a base of

partisan activity for the Norwegian underground, and as a potential area of operations for commando raids. We defined it as a crime against humanity—"the wanton destruction of villages" and "the forcible relocation of civilians." It is hard to see any difference in our purposeful destruction of thousands of villages in Vietnam and the forced relocation of the surviving inhabitants to refugee camps many miles away. It appears we have violated not only our own definition of war crimes, but also the basic principle that a legal precedent, once established, furnishes a sound basis for insisting on future behavior under law.

I am reminded of a comment by Daniel Webster in his address to the Massachusetts constitutional convention in 1820. Webster was urging the validity of reposing legislative representative power in the rural towns of New England because of their great patriotism in supporting the Revolutionary War.

Nobler records of patriotism exist nowhere. Nowhere can there be found higher proofs of a spirit that was ready to hazard all, to pledge all, to sacrifice all, in the cause of the country. Instances were not infrequent, in which small freeholders parted with their last hoof, and the last measure of corn from their granaries, to supply provisions for the troops and hire service for the ranks.

The villages of Vietnam apparently offered a similar sacrifice in the cause of independence, first from France and then from the successor government in Saigon. The American answer was to burn the villages and force the inhabitants to move elsewhere.

I wonder how Americans would have reacted during our own Revolutionary War had the British systematically destroyed every town whose population could not be prevented from providing support to the Continental Army.