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Sputnik-like event—a technical achievement that could establish the United States as undisputed leader in defense-related technology.

Smernoff doubts that either Russia or the United States would tolerate the open deployment of such a weapon by the other. But he warns that there are broad gray areas between high energy laser systems designed only to *track* satellites and the lethal laser weapon systems. This blurring is likely to increase as high energy laser technology advances, producing severe problems for arms control negotiators. On the other hand, Smernoff suggests, perhaps the primary task of long-term arms control should be to seek a smooth transition from the instability of nuclear deterrence based on offensive weapons to reliance on non-nuclear (laser) defensive weapons.

Reassessing War Crimes

“Vietnam: New Light on the Question of American Guilt” by Guenter Lewy, in *Commentary* (Feb. 1978), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Critics of American involvement in the Vietnam War, notably participants in the 1967 Stockholm International War Crimes Tribunal organized by the late Bertrand Russell, condemned as criminal such U.S. actions as relocation of civilians and the use of napalm and herbicides, and broadly indicted the U.S. military for atrocities.

However, Lewy, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, after combing through classified Pentagon archives, concludes that charges of officially condoned crimes and grossly immoral U.S. conduct in Vietnam are without substance.

Those charges, Lewy argues, were based on a distorted picture of battlefield conditions, ignorance of the U.S. and international rules of military engagement, and a tendency to construe every lapse of discipline and mistake of judgment as a wanton breach of the laws of war. Evacuation of civilians from combat areas to create “free-fire” zones, for example, not only enhanced civilian safety but could be seen as *required* by the 1949 Geneva convention on the treatment of civilians in wartime. Combat in populated areas stemmed from a Viet Cong tactic of converting hamlets into fortified strongholds (itself a violation of the Geneva accords). American bombing of North Vietnam from 1965 to 1968 was hedged about by so many precautions against damage to civilian life and property that the effectiveness of the missions was jeopardized.

Furthermore, says Lewy, a faulty impression of American conduct emerged from the news media and the willingness of many Western intellectuals to accept almost any allegations of U.S. wrongdoing at face value. A widely-published photograph of a young girl burned by napalm near Saigon in 1972 helped create the false notion that thousands of children suffered napalm burns; a photograph of a “prisoner” being thrown from a U.S. helicopter turned out to have been staged using a corpse; and accounts of the “tiger cages” at the Con Son island

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prison proved to be inaccurate and sensationalized.

Accusations that American conduct amounted to genocide, as charged by the Russell tribunal, are "grotesque" and "absurd," says Lewy. The Vietnamese population increased during the war; American aid substantially improved medical care and (temporarily) raised the Vietnamese standard of living. The proportion of civilians killed—45 percent of all war deaths—was no higher than in other conflicts of this century and less than some, including Korea (70 percent of all war deaths).

These "cobwebs of mythology" that contribute to the sense of moral outrage about Vietnam felt by many Americans, especially the young, must be cleared away, Lewy concludes—not just for the sake of historical truth, but also for the sake of our national self-confidence, moral strength, and "future capacity to act responsibly in world affairs."

Dangerous Illusions

"Outwitting 'Smart' Weapons" by Jeffrey Record, in *The Washington Review* (April 1978), Transaction Periodicals Consortium, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

In the early days of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, an Israeli tank brigade operating near the Suez Canal was virtually wiped out by Arab infantry armed with antitank rockets. This opening battle, says Record, legislative assistant for military affairs to Sen. Sam Nunn (D.-Ga.) has encouraged the "dangerous" illusion among U.S. light infantry forces (e.g., the Marines and the Army's 18th Airborne Corps) that the "latest generation of so-called smart antitank weapons can neutralize if not defeat the powerful Soviet and Warsaw Pact tank armies."

Of the approximately 3,000 Arab and Israeli tanks destroyed or damaged in the entire October war, says Record, at least 80 percent were knocked out by other tanks. The use of antitank guided missiles by both sides exerted only a marginal influence on the war's outcome.

Today's "smart" antitank missiles, whether guided to the target by wire or by laser beam, are a vast improvement over the recoilless cannon. But they are "line-of-sight" weapons that can hit only those targets which are visible to the naked eye. Soviet military planners have therefore put special stress on night operations and the use of smoke and camouflage. "Virtually every first-line Soviet tank and armored fighting vehicle has been equipped with externally mounted smoke dispensers which can render an entire armored column invisible within a few seconds," Record notes.

The Warsaw Pact countries, which surpass the NATO forces in antitank guided missiles (4,200 to 3,200) as well as in tanks and other armored fighting vehicles (40,000 to 11,000), would use self-propelled artillery to suppress NATO's antitank defenses. The bulk of U.S. ground forces, Record concludes, are simply not organized or equipped for this kind of European conflict.