

Letters

North Vietnamese Science

Galston and Signer (22 Oct. 1971, p. 379) have no doubt rendered a valuable service in bringing information back from the closed society of North Vietnam, however meager and biased that information may be. Nevertheless, it is disheartening to read in their article evidence of their acceptance of blatantly propagandistic material.

With reference to the selection of persons who may attend centers of higher education in North Vietnam, we learn that "Candidates are screened to eliminate those with unusually poor political records, and to select those with unusually good records for new fields, but there is said to be no other systematic political selection." This hallmark of a totalitarian society is not even commented upon. Galston and Signer's failure to make critical, discriminative judgments continues throughout the article.

The authors are shown wounds from "antipersonnel" weapons, such as pellets and "flechettes," from which they conclude that "... it was quite clear from their [North Vietnamese] research that chemical and other types of antipersonnel weapons are being used against civilians, and that teratogenic and carcinogenic effects may result from the use of herbicides in addition to their severe and possibly sometimes irreversible effects on plant and animal ecology." Since pellets and "flechettes" were not used in the bombings of North Vietnam, there is an inference that these casualties were aggressors from North Vietnam sent to the south to fight in the alleged "civil war." If some of these aggressors were women, this is not surprising and does not mean they were civilians.

With regard to the increased incidence of birth defects, the authors' statistical proof can't be challenged, since they offer none. Often, simply looking for conditions will markedly increase their incidence. The authors assure us that the North Vietnamese are seriously

"... cataloging the effects of the war." A cynic might suspect them of doing so for propaganda value and in hopes of indemnification after a settlement of the war, rather than, as is inferred, to make an epidemiological study of carcinogenesis.

The authors marvel at the humanitarianism of a government that allocates such a large amount of resources to medical research. Since the largest group of military casualties of the North Vietnamese soldiers are victims of malaria and tuberculosis, and since the Soviet Union and China are graciously taking care of research and development of weapons, this just makes good military sense.

Finally, throughout the article are disparaging comments about the South Vietnamese: "... it is reported that in South Vietnam less than half the children are in school" and "Unlike Saigon, Hanoi has no plague." These comments are probably true; after all, there is a war going on in South Vietnam, unlike North Vietnam. More accurate comparisons might have been made between North Vietnam and South Korea, Australia, or the United States, since, like North Vietnam, they have soldiers fighting a foreign war.

I don't wish to belittle the sacrifices of the North Vietnamese people. My cohorts and I came to respect highly the intelligence, tenacity, and dedication of the enemy. The statement of the Minister of Higher Education of North Vietnam that, "We are in some sort of great Skinner box and trying to find reinforcement," is incorrect. The operant conditioning of the North Vietnamese soldiers we met had been skillfully accomplished.

FRANKLIN DEL JONES

*Psychiatry Services,
Walter Reed General Hospital,
Washington, D.C. 20012*

... Galston and Signer seem to have forgotten that the most important aim of education and science, far above going to the moon and making life in

a test tube, is to make man freer and more humane. A system of education which screens students on a political basis can hardly serve man's freedom. It seems that the authors are very cleverly trying to make the measure somewhat palatable by saying that "there is said to be no other systematic political selection." ... But one political screening is enough to make us shiver with anticipation.

With regard to weapons and the bombings in North Vietnam, the authors forgot to ask their hosts if their side had not also used the most deadly weapons they had on hand like the "AK's" [AK-47 rifles], the "B's" [B-40 rocket launchers], and the rockets. They also forgot to ask if anything that had happened in the north was comparable to the Hue massacre during their Mau-than attack.

LE VAN THAN

*32 Ly thai To,
Dalat, Vietnam*

One wonders to what extent Galston and Signer have had the rice hulls pulled over their eyes. At least in the fields of nutrition and food science, their information is woefully incorrect. The absence or presence of kwashiorkor in the population could not be even remotely related to the degree to which rice is polished, and the limiting amino acids in rice protein are lysine and threonine, but not methionine and tryptophan. Neither of these errors is trivial.

One also wonders at their bland acceptance of the statement that the degree of rice polishing is controlled. If most of the milling is done, as it is in most rural societies, at the village level, what form of control is exercised? If, on the other hand, the information in the article is raw, unevaluated data, why did *Science* publish it?

STEVEN R. TANNENBAUM

*Department of Nutrition and Food
Science, Massachusetts Institute of
Technology, Cambridge 02139*

Jones, Than, and Tannenbaum criticize us for "acceptance of blatantly propagandistic material" (Jones), "[forgetting] the most important aim of education and science" (Than), and "[having] the rice hulls pulled over their eyes" (Tannenbaum). The same passage in our article is for Jones a "failure to make critical, discriminative judgments," while for Than it is "very cleverly trying to make the measure somewhat palatable."

If we leave aside the *ad hominem* tone of the criticisms, Jones, in fact, has come closest to the mark. Conscious of our limited time and inability to verify all details, we tried in our article to avoid editorial comment—whether about “totalitarianism” or “capitalist imperialism”—and specify what we saw and what we were told, leaving the reader to make his or her own judgment. We still feel this is the best approach.

As recently as 1½ years ago it was considered impermissible to describe in the U.S. press any favorable aspects of life in the People's Republic of China. Now that the political winds have shifted, reporters compete in extolling the urbane civility of Chou En-lai, the health and well-being of Chinese workers and peasants, and the cleanliness and freedom from crime of Chinese cities. In the same way, it has been drilled into us over the last decade that the North Vietnamese are savage enemies who must be dealt with by bombs and chemical warfare rather than by diplomacy and negotiation. Yet isn't it now clear that we shall ultimately have to talk with and come to understand the North Vietnamese people? When we do so, we shall find Pham Van Dong, their premier, as able and admirable a patriot as Chou En-lai, and the scientists and people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) at least as worthy of our compassion and friendship as the people of China. The “operant conditioning of the North Vietnamese soldiers” (Jones) may be translated as “enthusiastic support of a popular cause.”

Jones is not correct about pellets and flechettes. They have been used many times against the DRVN, notably in such urban centers as Hanoi (where we noted having seen damage from pellet bombs at the Polytechnic), Haiphong, Vinh, and Nam Dinh, and they are now being used there more heavily than ever. We may not have stated clearly enough that herbicides have thus far been used only in the south; however, victims living in areas of the south controlled by the Provisional Revolutionary Government are often brought north for treatment because of superior medical facilities.

In response to Jones's comment on cynicism, perhaps only a cynic would think we believe that the North Vietnamese study war effects only as epidemiology. Of course they do it also for reasons of information and propaganda, aimed first at ending the attacks on their territory, and then at reparations for

what they consider violations of their sovereignty.

Given the incidence of malaria and tuberculosis in the DRVN, and the extent of the bombing and shelling by the United States since 1965, Jones's statement that these diseases are the largest cause of North Vietnamese military casualties is difficult to credit. Furthermore, our impression is that the great bulk of medical care is preventive rather than curative, and designed for civilians rather than the military. This does of course make good military sense—but in the context of a war on home soil, not in the context that Jones implies.

Jones seems to imply the astounding syllogism that countries with troops on foreign soil have their children in school and little disease, whereas countries with no troops on foreign soil have poor school attendance and much disease. Although there are examples that fit the syllogism (the United States and Haiti), there are also those that deny it (China). For Vietnam—as for Laos and Cambodia—given the Geneva Accords, the Pentagon Papers, the Kissinger Papers, and the rest of the public record, it is difficult at this point to understand the Indochinese war as anything but a civil war in which victory of one side is unacceptable to the U.S. government.

We share Jones's and Than's concern about political screening in education. But both imply that such screening does not occur in our own country. It does occur here, of course, and takes a variety of forms, from tracking in elementary schools, which biases education strongly away from the socially and economically disadvantaged, to pressures in university and professional education that reinforce dominant sociopolitical values set by a minority, to the dismissal of some Marxist scholars from university posts on political grounds. Screening is generally implicit here rather than explicit, as in the DRVN, but does exist and is effective politically.

Of course the DRVN uses the deadliest weapons at its disposal, as Than points out. But a comparison of their AK-47's and rocket launchers with our pellet bombs, flechettes, lethal gas, napalm, anti-personnel mines, and laser-guided and TV-guided bombs makes it clear that the technological disparity between the two sides is staggering, and that our government expends considerable resources to make it even more so. Despite our advanced tech-

nology, the Indochinese continue to resist strongly, even when their area is being “bombed back into the Stone Age.” We can kill these people with better and better weapons and destroy their cities and farms, but that doesn't seem to be winning the war. How much further along the road of increased destruction by better technology are we prepared to go?

When Than cites the Hue massacre, he would do well to note the evidence that the great majority of the damage was inflicted not by the DRVN but by U.S. ordnance (1). Even President Nixon's oft-quoted estimate of “more than a half million” North Vietnamese massacred during land reform in the 1950's has been shown to be based on author Hoang Van Chi's extrapolation from 10 people in his village of about 200 who died during that time, one from execution and nine from other means, such as starvation (2).

The apparently incorrect sentence about kwashiorkor, mentioned by Tannenbaum, is rectified by restoration of the comma omitted after the word, thus: “. . . there is no kwashiorkor, and little beriberi in the DRVN because the government controls the degree to which rice is polished.” Concerning the question of which amino acids are missing from rice, either the DRVN scientists gave us incorrect information, or we transcribed incorrectly, or their variety of rice is different. We will ask this question of them and perhaps provide the answer in the future.

Rice is grown primarily in the Red River area, not everywhere in the DRVN. Hence the government distributes much of it and *can* control its polishing. In any case we did not “accept” the statement, we reported it. Our data are indeed raw and incomplete. That they are useful is a sad reflection of the extent to which the DRVN is kept “closed” (in Jones's sense) by the reluctance of most U.S. news media to report anything that portrays it favorably.

ETHAN SIGNER

*Department of Biology,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
Cambridge 02139*

ARTHUR W. GALSTON
*Department of Biology,
Yale University,
New Haven, Connecticut 06520*

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2. *New Haven Register*, 14 Sept. 1972, p. 21.