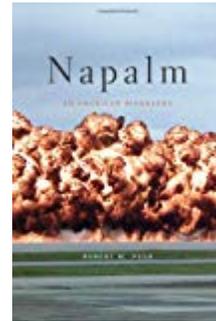




Robert M. Neer. *Napalm: An American Biography*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. viii + 310 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-07301-2.



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If Old Napalm Sticks To Kids, What About New Napalm?

A few short years after the fall of Saigon this reviewer spent most of a U.S. Army hitch with the 1st Ranger Battalion. The legacy of Vietnam permeated the Jody calls we Rangers sang during our morning PT runs. As might be expected, napalm was the theme of some of this macho poetry. One version went: “F-4 Phantom flying low / VC village down below / Dow Chemical don’t give a shit / napalm sticks to kids.” We would repeat the latter line, shouting with extreme callousness while emphasizing the word *sticks*: “napalm *sticks* to kids, napalm *sticks* to kids.” Here we were seemingly accusing the military-industrial complex of indifference.

Another version of the song, however, blamed the Vietnamese for exposing their children to the fighting. That rendition referenced two Vietnamese in a fifty-caliber machine gun pit and a “baby sucking on mama’s tit.” The conclusion was that the Viet Cong, who would allow a mother and baby to man an anti-aircraft position, “will never learn” that “napalm *sticks* to kids, napalm *sticks* to kids.” I did not ruminate over the words (as all that mattered was finishing the run in order to return to

the barracks, shower, and head for breakfast chow), but that Jody call, in its various renderings, suggests moral uneasiness over the use of napalm as a weapon of warfare.

Anyone who reads Robert M. Neer’s *Napalm: An American Biography* will be forced to consider whether napalm bombing is ethically justifiable. This is an excellent work, providing a definitive history of a controversial instrument of war. However, like a similar volume on the atomic bomb, the title of this monograph suggests that a lethal invention has lifelike characteristics.[1] Biographies are supposed to be about people, not inanimate objects. The concept of “biography” suggests autonomy and agency. The concept of “American” biography is all the more problematic, at least for an American reader who has a healthy appreciation for Americans. Personification is evident in Neer’s pronouncement, “Napalm was born a hero but lives a pariah” (p. 4). Later, when pointing out that the 1967 Israeli attack on the USS *Liberty* was carried out with napalm bombs (representing the first time napalm had ever been used against the

United States), the author proclaims, “Napalm had turned upon its creator for the first time” (p. 90). Such imaginative language can be like the napalm Jody calls, deflecting responsibility.

When a weapon of warfare gets endowed with heroic or villainous qualities, there is the risk of the moral gaze fixing on the wrong thing. To Neer’s credit, by the time his work finishes unpacking the history of napalm—from the lethal gel’s first test explosion in a pond on the campus of Harvard University to the United Nation’s Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), Protocol III, which declared as a war crime the use of incendiary weapons against a “concentration of civilians” (p. 165)—the reader is forced to consider the ethical aspects. Shockingly, prior to Neer’s work the best source to read up on napalm was Wikipedia.[2]

Predictably, Neer begins with Nick Ut’s 1972 AP photograph, “The Terror of War.” This black and white photo documents the tragic incident in which Phan Thi Kim Phúc, a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, was hit with napalm. This haunting still image shows the victim running down a dirt road, arms stretched out at her sides and mouth open in what everyone recognizes to be evidence of excruciating pain. The image is eerily reminiscent of *The Scream*, the modernist painting by Edvard Munch. Ut went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for best spot news photograph of the year while the cruelty of napalm seared the collective consciousness of humanity. Many are probably unaware that this napalm attack was carried out by South Vietnam and not the United States, but everyone knows Americans were the suppliers of the jet and the napalm that made the attack possible.

Unlike the Jody call mentioned above, Kim Phúc was not behind a machine gun with her mother—rather, the little girl and her family, all noncombatants, had sought cover at a temple complex. According to Neer, the importance of Ut’s photograph is how it serves as “an intimation of [American] national defeat, as much as a record of individual tragedy” (p. 148). However, the photograph reinforces the refrain that “napalm sticks to kids.” Outrage preceded this incident, as in January 1967 when the general American public first learned about napalm attacks on South Vietnamese civilians after articles appeared in the New Left periodical *Ramparts* and women’s magazines such as *Redbook* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

The fallout from such media attention was Dow Chemical suffering damage to its name brand. “By 1968,” Neer explains, “napalm’s identification with the horrors of the Vietnam War, and by extension Dow Chemical,

was complete” (p. 142). In May of that year protesters, led by clergy, showed up in force at Dow’s annual meeting to voice moral outrage. In March of 1969 a group led by Catholic priests broke into Dow’s Washington, DC, office, sabotaged equipment, splattered human blood on the walls, and posted photographs of children who had been injured by napalm strikes. Neer suggests that when the napalm contract came up for renewal later that year, Dow Chemical purposely submitted a losing bid in order to get out of the business of manufacturing the controversial gel substance.

Although invented at Harvard in 1942, napalm has a genealogy that dates back to ancient times because it is a type of incendiary substance. Flaming arrows and cauldrons filled with coals, sulfur, and pitch were part of warfare in the days of old. In 69 BCE “liquid fire” (p. 18) was used for the first time in combat; the defenders of Samosata, a city on the Euphrates in what is present-day southeastern Turkey, threw “flaming mud” (or *maltha*) to successfully repel a Roman assault. Incendiaries were later used by both Byzantine and Arab commanders. By the mid-1200s, however, the introduction of gunpowder via the Chinese largely rendered liquid fire obsolete. Some five centuries later, inspired by Indian rockets, the British inventor William Congreve developed a shell with incendiary capability. Subsequent British attacks on the French, the Danish, and the Americans were conducted with the ever-advancing incendiary rockets. The British bombardment of Baltimore’s Fort McHenry in 1814 inspired the “Star-Spangled Banner,” with the words “the rockets’ red glare” being a direct mention of the incendiary attack. But subsequent developments—improved artillery accuracy with greater range (due to the rifle grooving inside gun barrels)—made rockets with incendiary devices less useful in warfare.

Neer seems to date the modern era of incendiary warfare to World War I with the German invention of *Flammenwerfer* (flamethrowers) and Zeppelin aircraft that dropped incendiary bombs on London. The British invented flaming bullets to shoot down the German dirigibles. British, French, and American inventors developed firebombs made of thermite and powdered aluminum. Overall, these developments were not as important as men in the trenches. However, during the subsequent Spanish Civil War, “Airplanes restored incendiary weapons to their medieval pride of place” (p. 24). The infamous 1937 Nazi bombing of the Basque town of Guernica, perhaps most remembered from the angry Pablo Picasso painting (titled *Guernica*), was a case of an incendiary air attack on civilians. That same year the Japanese

firebombed Shanghai, killing “tens of thousands” (p. 24). The first sustained incendiary bombing was the London Blitz of September 7, 1940, which was carried out by the Nazis. Later that year the Coventry Cathedral in London was reduced to a gutted-out shell after an attack of over 1,000 firebombs across the city. British analysts determined that the firebombs made of oil, thermite, and magnesium shavings were five times more deadly than conventional high explosives. And water could not extinguish the fires they set.

As explained by Neer, this is the context in which napalm was developed. Although an incendiary, what makes napalm different is that it is a gel incendiary. Generally, the gel substance is made from soap, which is mixed with thickened petroleum and magnesium. The gel enables the fire produced from an explosion to stick on targets and burn at extremely high temperatures. Louis Fieser, the Harvard chemistry professor who is credited with inventing napalm, was inspired by an explosion at a DuPont paint factory involving a sticky substance that was mixed with paint pigment: divinylacetylene. Fieser, with assistance from E. B. Hershberg, first thought this material might have some hidden explosive capability, but what was discovered was its unusual stickiness. In the words of Fieser: “The experience suggested the idea of a bomb that would scatter large burning gobs of sticky gel” (p. 15).

Meanwhile, the German paratroopers effectively made use of flamethrowers—weapons largely considered a failure during WWI—to capture a fort in Belgium in 1940. Taking note, Americans developed a flamethrower that shoots a long stream of burning napalm. This weapon was first used during the Sicily campaign (August 1943). Four months later, on an island near Papua New Guinea, Americans introduced the napalm flamethrower in the Pacific theater (burning Japanese defenders hiding in a cave). During the war Americans, using nearly 8,000 portable flamethrowers, expended one million gallons of napalm. Near the war’s end the United States developed “Satan,” the nickname for a flame tank, which one Pacific ground commander hailed as “the most important single weapon” (p. 59). (At one point during WWII, the American military was experimenting with the possibility of using bats to deliver napalm to target sites. The plan called for using a B-25 bomber that would drop twenty-five shells consisting of 26,000 individual bat bombs. This secret project was abruptly cancelled without explanation.)

Shortly after the introduction of the napalm

flamethrower, Americans began dropping M-47 napalm bombs on Germany. By the war’s end, some 20,000 tons of incendiary gel had been used against the Nazi fatherland. On February 15, 1944, the M-69 napalm bomb (made by Standard Oil) was first used in the Pacific during an aerial attack on Pohnpei, the capital of the islands of Micronesia. Despite the American official policy of precision bombing, any attack using incendiary bombs naturally resulted in area-wide destruction. This is what happened in Germany and more so in Japan. In chapter 5 (titled, apparently with sarcasm, “The American Century”), Neer tells the story of the firebombing of Japan, which was done with napalm. On March 9, 1945, there was the massive B-29 raid on Tokyo, involving the use of 6,500 M-69 bombs. The tally of destruction was nearly ninety thousand killed, over forty thousand injured, one million made homeless, and fifteen square miles of urban area burned (which was larger than the destruction of the atomic bomb). Japan, Neer asserts, was defeated because of napalm, the weapon that cost five thousand times less to develop than what was spent on the Manhattan Project. However, as Neer writes, “The Bomb got the press, but napalm did the work” (p. 86).

The history of the use of napalm on Japan is an important context for explaining the atomic bombings. Neer is careful to explain that it was virtually impossible to attack Japan with precision bombing due to the long periods of cloud cover and shifting jet streams. Moreover, since the buildings in Japanese cities were typically made of wood, air raids were inevitably going to cause major fires. The mass destruction caused by napalm bombing made the use of the atomic bomb seem logical at the time. As another author explains, “These [firebombing] raids prepared the way for the atomic bomb in the sense that mass destruction had become commonplace.”[3] But as noted above, the firebombing attacks in Europe had set a precedent for indiscriminate killing (hence civilian deaths).

More philosophical discussion is needed here. For instance, the advent of aerial bombing makes less likely the battlefield as a separate place. And some originally saw air power as a good thing, a way of preventing the repeat of WWI with its stalemate of horrifying trench warfare. As Daniel Swift writes with derision, “The doctrine of bombing is touchingly optimistic: the skies may be the antidote to armies locked in muddy battle; machines may solve the manmade problem of war.”[4] Curtis LeMay, the air commander who oversaw the napalming of Japan, was ordered by his superiors to “get results” with firebombing or it will “cost probably a half million

more American lives” in a land invasion (p. 69). There is also the philosophical question of how much force: “the moral reckoning of war is the principle of proportionality.”[5] And how does one decide one method of killing is permissible, but another is not? A senior American military officer complained in 1965, “The public seems to have an aversion to napalm because people think it’s kinder to blast a man’s head off than to fry him to death” (p. 115). Finally, with air power there is the blurring between combatant and noncombatant. In times past, there was a strict dichotomy between civilian and soldier; perhaps the chief reason was because technology was not advanced enough to put civilians within reach.

During the Cold War, and prior to the Vietnam War, napalm was used in many conflicts. This was largely due to the U.S. Patent Office issuing in 1952 a patent certificate for incendiary gels, which made the formula for napalm universally available. The Greeks were the first to take advantage of this development, using napalm against communists in their civil war. The French used napalm in Tunisia in its desperate attempt to stave off decolonization. In the Philippines napalm was used against the Hukbalahap rebels. In Cuba, Fulgencio Batista dropped napalm on Fidel Castro’s rebels. Turkey used napalm in Cypress. In truth, all major conflicts featured the use of napalm.

Most readers will be shocked, however, by the extent of napalm bombing during the Korean War: 32,357 tons of napalm would eventually be dropped on the Korean peninsula, which was double what fell on Japan in 1945. The author paints a grim picture of how in that conflict napalm had reduced the country to the point where there were no more targets: “Biblical devastation resulted” (p. 100). Yet the effectiveness of the weapon is to be questioned since it did not bring Americans (and UN forces) complete victory. At one point Washington gave serious consideration to using atomic bombs. Nonetheless, the use of napalm in Korea served as an unfortunate prelude to Vietnam. Many Korean civilians were injured. There was some media attention given to these incidents, but Neer writes, “As the ink dried [on the armistice document in 1953], napalm, and the points of debate it inspired, disappeared almost entirely from public discourse” (p. 104).

The French used napalm in their failed attempt to hold on to Vietnam. Most people are probably unaware that it was the Vietnamese who first used napalm during the American phase of that conflict. This was during the 1962 attempted coup against Ngo Dinh Diem, when the presidential palace was strafed with the flammable gel.

Even so, Americans went on to heavily rely on napalm in fighting that war. Beginning in 1965, the first legal objections to the use of napalm were raised by the Soviet bloc countries, in reaction to events in Vietnam. Three years later the United Nations held the first International Conference on Human Rights, which raised the issue of the killing of civilians in armed conflicts and the questionable use of certain conventional weapons. “A curtain began to lift on napalm,” explains Neer (p. 175). In chapters 11, 12, and 13, the author (a lawyer by training) deftly explains the legal discussions that culminated in the framing of Protocol III in 1980. Although some argued that napalm is too cruel to be used in any circumstance, Protocol III determined that its use against a concentration of civilians constitutes a war crime. The United States put off signing this protocol until 2009. Today 106 nations are signatories.

Neer also discusses the popular culture aspect of napalm. The napalm Jody calls this reviewer recalls from his Ranger past had long before been revised into a protest song by Covered Wagon, an antiwar group of Air Force personnel. But probably most people know the call-and-response song from the banal film *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982). Undoubtedly more famous is Robert Duval (portraying a cartoonish Lieutenant Colonel William Kilgore) in the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and his pronouncement, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” (p. 150). Although many artists have offered harsh judgment on napalm, such is not the case with computer games or the novel *Napalm Dreams* (2004). Also, a British punk band adopted the name Napalm Death and a record label went by Napalm Records. One author used napalm “as a metaphor for passion” (p. 157). A small company in Florida marketed a hair dye called Napalm Orange. The popular culture embrace of napalm can be compared with the unabashed glorification of the mushroom cloud.[6]

But any bravado of loving napalm often subsides beyond the fantasy world. For years in Southern California there was “Napalm Park” (p. 202), a sixty-seven acre storage site of Vietnam-era napalm canisters, some 23 million pounds of gel. The plan had been to decommission the material by sending, over a two-year period, the material to East Chicago for processing. When this plan came to light in the late 1990s, brouhaha ensued. Politicians raised concern over napalm trains traveling near residential areas. Since East Chicago has a large black and Hispanic population, there were accusations of environmental racism. Later, with Congressman Tom DeLay’s blessing, the contract was changed and awarded to Texas. After being processed, the material was sent to Louisiana

to be refined into fuel for industrial furnaces. By 2001, the year all the material had been decommissioned, the cost of the disposal contract had nearly doubled to \$48 million.

Some people thought the decommissioning of that stockpile meant the end of napalm for the American military, but Neer states that only the term “napalm” disappeared. In December 2011, when questioned about the bombing during the Battle of Tora Bora in Afghanistan, General Tommy Franks stated, “We’re not using—we’re not using the old napalm in Tora Bora” (p. 207). The key word in that statement was “old.” Napalm became “The Weapon That Dare Not Speak Its Name” (p. 208). New or old, napalm was also used in the Iraq War. Napalm came in the form of Mark-77 firebombs. When confronted about this by the news media, military officials argued that this “fuel-gel mixture” (p. 210) is not the same as napalm. The difference, they argued, is that napalm is made of gasoline and benzene whereas the new firebombs are made of kerosene-based jet fuel. The different petroleum distillate, critics retorted, does not change the fact that napalm is napalm. As could be argued, “not old napalm” sticks to kids.

Nell ends his book by quoting Kim Phúc, who as an adult defected to Canada. Along the way she married, had a family, and converted to Christianity. Her faith, she says, helped her overcome the “hatred and anger and

bitterness” (p. 227). This was achieved through the power of prayer. “Faith and forgiveness are much more powerful than napalm could ever be,” she adds (p. 228). But in 2011, she was still feeling pain from her injuries. So she would agree with Pak Jong Dae, the North Korean who in 1989, some four decades and thirty-six operations after being hit with napalm, said, “I do not think there should be any more victims like me in this world” (pp. 226-227). Forgiveness is in the tradition of the priest, but justice is the demand of the prophet. The question is whether the new napalm will go uncontested.

Notes

[1]. Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[2]. Peter Monaghan, “The Weapon That Sears Flesh,” *Chronicle Review*, February 22, 2013, B13.

[3]. DeGroot, *The Bomb*, 71.

[4]. Daniel Swift, “Conjectural Damage: A History of Bombing,” *Harper’s*, November 2011, 65.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 68.

[6]. See A. Costandina Titus, “The Mushroom Cloud as Kitsch,” in *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, ed. Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2004), 101-123.

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