

Reviewing the Picture “The Napalm Girl”

Joseph Nguyen

On Nick Ut, a Vietnamese photographer, universally regarded as the author of the notorious picture “The Napalm Girl”, many laudatory articles were written, mostly by the Viet Cong (VC) and the anti-war activists. He is currently residing in LA, USA. In 2015, he returned to Vietnam with The Napalm Girl Phan Thi Kim Phuc, living in Canada, to receive the award given to them by the VC for their activities against the war. In summary, during the Vietnam War, Ut was working for AP, along with many other US and international photographers in Vietnam. In the area of professional talent, he was a second-class photographer, barely recognized in Vietnam, let alone the world, until he “captured” The Napalm Girl – the very picture which led him to the prestigious Pulitzer prize in 1973. I put “captured” in double quotation marks to mean that Ut would have had the malignity to make it up, because in my humble personal opinion, I have, like President Nixon himself has, doubt about the authenticity of “The Napalm Girl” picture.

For this article, to be cautious in my judgement, I have also watched the video filming a South Vietnamese plane which mistakenly dropped, in 1972, a load of napalm on a Trang Bang Cao Dai pagoda area where was, allegedly, hiding a cell of VC guerillas. I have seen, in the video, a lot of fire and smoke, and the panic-stricken villagers running in different directions. But I found nowhere the scene of the five terrified children (including Kim Phuc) fleeing from the danger and a group of soldiers peacefully walking behind, as it was claimed to appear *in toto* in Nick Ut’s picture –that shocked the entire world and was absolutely exploited by the VC and peacenicks hungering for propaganda against a war that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) did not start, but had to fight back to defend their country. I am trying to demonstrate why I think it could be a fake picture.

I. An “intermixed” picture?



The picture of the little naked girl, Kim Phuc, was real, as well as that of the other persons (five soldiers and four children). However, it is possible that they would not have

Bức ảnh 'Em bé Napalm' được báo chí dùng nhiều trong Cuộc chiến Việt Nam.

been taken in the same place, at the same time, but there would be two separate, different pictures. I mean, it is highly probable that Kim Phuc’s picture could be pasted, purposely, to a preexisting picture – which, as a result, made the girl look like an isolate lone “stranger”, but also stand out in relief, for a dull, yet too familiar background that offered no special interest capable to move the viewers’ hearts? In other words, had Kim Phuc not been

there, “The Napalm Girl” would be too normal, or, worse, too banal for a picture, and too ineffective for a tool of VC propaganda. Why?

- a) The background of the well-known picture (with Kim Phuc) showed an area engulfed by a sea of thick black smoke from the napalm bombing. On the picture, one realizes that the distance between Kim Phuc and that smoke area was rather long. While the four other children were comfortably dressed, all of a sudden, how, one may ask, and from where, could a Kim Phuc happen to appear among them, like that? Besides, if the five children came from the same location, the same direction, and at the same time, why only Kim Phuc was burnt, and none of the four other children?

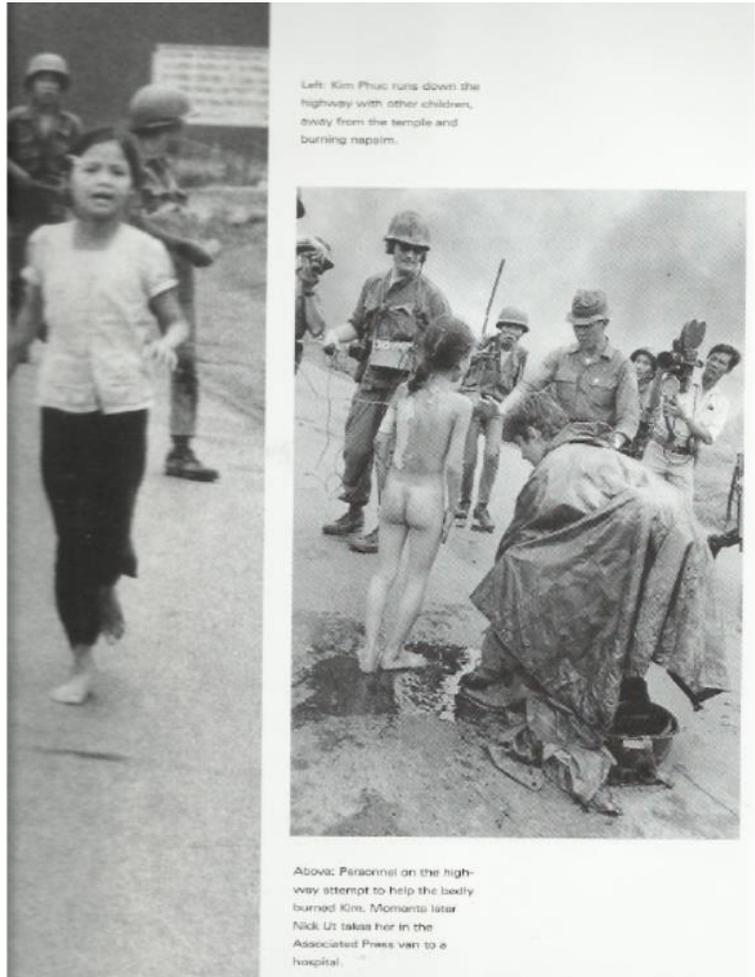
By the way, Pham Dinh Khuong, a former major and fighter pilot of the Vietnamese Air Force, in the January 9, 2018 talk show, episode 186, on the Hon Viet TV (cf. tienghathauphuong@yahoo.com, or (714) 933-7877), while mentioning “The Napalm Girl” picture, said that he had sometimes, in the past, dropped Napalm bombs (but not on Trang Bang that year) and that those who were hit by Napalm (he

meant the VC) didn't look like Kim Phuc at all. The consequence would be more, more terrible, even deadly...

- b) The attitude of the soldiers (whose face was unclear) slowly walking behind was very calm, relaxed, if not indifferent, as if they went on a routine road patrol. However, at the view of a naked and burnt little girl, running and screaming and stretching her arms in such a way, they still kept walking nonchalantly, and didn't bother to come to her assistance, or at least just to inquire about what had happened to her, simply out of curiosity. Was that an act of extreme insensibility, if not cruelty? I don't think so, for, based on my own experience, there were so many cases and pictures showing compassionate US and ARVN troops who assisted and protected civilians when they were in trouble or danger.

- c) Of the picture, viewed from the closest angle, Kim Phuc was at second row, alone in the center. In a technical perspective, and by the distance between them, it is OK if she is smaller than the boy seen at first row. But the girl who is at third row, in white shirt, looks taller, more distinctive, compared to Kim Phuc (second row) –which seems aberrant and intriguing. Moreover, Kim Phuc's arms were too long, disproportionate with the rest of her body, and compared to those of the four other children.

Congenital abnormality or result of something else, a photomontage, for instance? Anyway, I would like to say this: Photomontage, i.e. photoshop, is a common practice, since many moons, in photography, mostly in today photography. Let's take an example: the so-called photo of Nguyen Ai Quoc, alias Ho Chi Minh, speaking at the Tours Communist Congress, in France, December 1920, has been proven as a fake, or fixed, or doctored, picture, cf. *Les photos truquées, Un siècle de propagande par l'image*, by Gérard Le Marec, Editions Atlas, Paris, 1985, p. 93 (on Ho Chi Minh). But this must be the subject for another article.



- d) Let's go back to Nick Ut. According to information I found on the Web and Internet, the AP, at first, did not want to publish Kim Phuc's nude picture, chiefly from the front – which was a taboo for AP in 1972, regardless of the person's age or gender. But out of need for propaganda, they made an exemption, on condition that no close-up or separate individual picture could be published (cf. *“with the compromise that no close-up of the girl Kim Phuc alone would be transmitted.”*). The word *alone* in the quoted sentence led me to this reasoning: (1) if Kim Phuc had been “present” and naked in the picture taken together with all four other kids, this condition (*alone*), imposed by AP, would be a ridiculous nonsense: indeed, either you have to publish the whole integral photo, or you don't have to publish it, (2) or Nick Ut, otherwise, would have already had an available separate *close-up* or intimate view of Kim Phuc, taken *alone*, and again, nude, sometime, somewhere, in the past, which AP would have rejected or asked him to retouch suitably and to insert in a common photo having a background filled with fire and smoke, and the presence of all other persons, ready to make the propaganda against US and ARVN more efficacious?

II. A “fixed” picture?

- a) With more attention, you can see, in the picture, published by Nick Ut, a Kim Phuc running with some clearly white big spots on her two arms, and on her right foot. In the book *We were there Viet Nam*, Eyewitness Battlefield stories, edited by Hal Buell, Tess Press, 2007, p. 249, we see another large picture of hers (above included) which covers two entire pages, and on a small corner of page 2, a Kim Phuc, badly burnt, being somehow treated by the soldiers on the highway, and having white spots on her naked back, similar to those found on her arms and foot in Nick Ut’s picture. So, it is obvious that Kim Phuc has got first help from the soldiers (not later, from the hospital where she was presumably taken by Nick Ut in his AP van). Afterward, those soldiers would have allowed her to join the group of four children running nearby (and not after her visit to the hospital, because, there, I assume, she would have been given clothes, just to cover temporarily her nudity and her white spots would have been cleaned up)?

Under the management of Nick Ut the photographer? Otherwise, how could you explain those white spots appearing on Kim Phuc’s still naked body, in both Hal Buell’s and Nick Ut’s photos?

- b) Moreover, in reference to Nick Ut’s possible involvement, it was not by pure chance that Kim Phuc could be running at the center (in both concrete and abstract meanings) of the road and of the picture, while all the four other kids were “relegated” to the sides? I may go further, by supposing, on the other hand, that the panic look on the crying boy’s face, at front row, and of Kim Phuc, at second row, would have been “fixed”, too, i.e. fake. Unlike the girl of the third row, looking more calm, and the last two little boys (or a girl and a boy?) not crying at all, how comes? In fact, as the children, and above all Kim Phuc, have already fled, far away from the bombing scene and area, under the protection of the soldiers walking behind, the level of emotion and fear in them must have diminished, and panic, unless arranged, seemed then to be excessive on the face of the first boy and of Kim Phuc (who had received first aid from the soldiers).

III. Nixon connection:

President Nixon was the first person to have doubt about the veracity of the photograph, and to wonder whether it may have been fixed: *“Audiotapes of then-president Richard Nixon in conversation with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, show that Nixon doubted the veracity of the photograph, musing whether it may have been ‘fixed’”* (cf. Internet). Of course, when a president doubted, he would have had enough reasons, enough talks and consultations with his aides (here, H.R. Haldeman, his chief of staff), specialists, and other photographers who could give him enough opinions and proofs. Unfortunately, I don’t have access to that audiotape to get explanations supporting his doubt.

Knowing all that, Nick Ut tried to retort haughtily, but showed no convincing proofs to defend the integrity of his photo: *“Even though it has become one of the most memorable images of the twentieth century, President Nixon once doubted the authenticity of my photograph when he saw it in the papers on June 12, 1972.... The picture for me, and unquestionably for many others, could not have been more real. The photo was as authentic as the Vietnam War itself. The horror of the Vietnam War recorded by me did not have to be fixed. That terrified little girl is still alive today and has become an eloquent testimony to the authenticity of that photo. That moment thirty years ago will be one Kim Phuc and I will never forget. It has ultimately changed both our lives”* (cf. *ibid.*)

Of course, no one denied the fact that Kim Phuc, the other children, and the soldiers in Nick Ut’s picture were real persons, and the bombing scene at Trang Bang was authentic. But Nixon said nothing but only that the photograph may have been fixed. In any case, Kim Phuc was not a phantom. Nor was Nick Ut, our alleged fixer. That’s all.

IV. The Summit of charlatans:

On April 26-28, 2016, a flock of infamous, old, cacophonous, and musty peaceniks, such as Tom Hayden, John Kerry, Peter Arnett, Dan Rather and co... went to Austin, TX, for a meeting called *The Vietnam War*

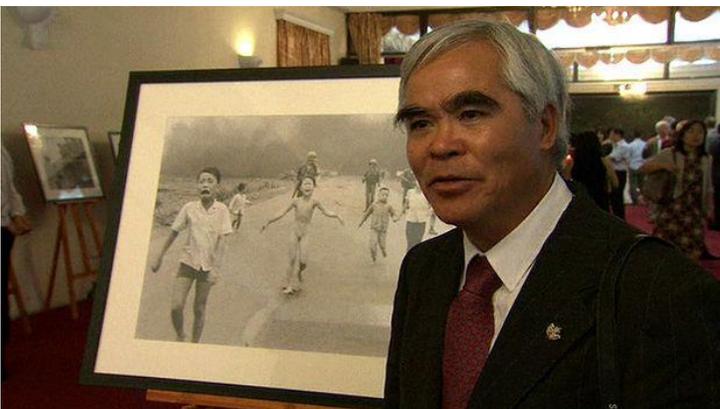
Summit, under the giant silhouette of the betrayer-in-chief, Henry Kissinger, who had, like them, in 1975, sold his soul and his ally, the Republic of VN (RVN), to the demon VC. In that reunion was seen Nick Ut, boasting along with David Hume Kennerly, his fellow photographer, the so-called “Power of pictures”. I would say more, “destructive power of pictures”. Because, most of pictures taken by reporters during the war, e.g. Eddie Adams’s picture of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing publicly on a Saigon street, in 1968, a VC guerrilla accused of killing the whole family, including women and children, of a ARVN retired colonel, or the very picture of *The Napalm Girl*, in 1972 –all having been exploited in view of a sordid propaganda against the war and ARVN by the antiwar movement in the USA and over the world, and the VC.

Was “The Napalm Girl”, I wonder, the real power of pictures *per se*, or merely a deceitful instrument, cheap and despicable, schemed by jackals to transform Kim Phuc, a pitiful little victim of the war into a blunt and despicable tool of propaganda? On the contrary, have people seen any picture taken or published by those “war photographers”, about the VCs’ huge and blatant crimes, for example, their savage attack of Hue in The Year of the Monkey 1968 and their hideous massacre of thousands of innocent residents, or their firing mortars at a Cai Lay primary school, which killed many children, right after the Paris Accord was signed, in January 1973? How to explain such a sudden blindness, or muteness of those ferocious and noisy peaceniks? Clearly, with the complicity of Nixon and Kissinger, who wanted to end the Vietnam War at any cost, a cohort of vile politicians, journalists, reporters, photographers (including Nick Ut) in USA, Europe, and the world, have put up on sale their cheap conscience, and have shamelessly directed their accusations toward the victim, ARVN, instead of the culprit, VC.

Portland, August 15, 2018
Joseph Kim Quy Nguyen



Nick Ut (first from right) in his voyage back to VN, June 2015 --- Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the little Napalm Girl in Nick Ut’s picture, has become an active and tireless tool of propaganda for the VC



*Nick Ut standing in front of his *The Napalm Girl* picture, in the 2007 exhibition in Hà Noi*

NOTE: The last three pictures (#3, 4, 5) have been excerpted from the article in Vietnamese, “Is there anything to be proud about the picture ‘The Napalm Girl’”? sent by author Duc Hong from Saigon to BBC (published in *Monthly Vietnam*, online, 6/18/2015).