

❖ REMEMBER VIETNAM ❖

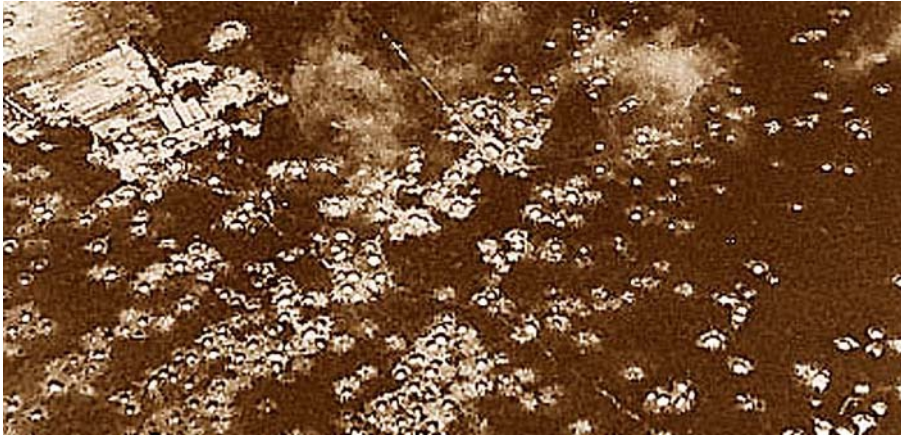


Photo: U.S. Air Force

Partial results of one B-52 raid. The United States dropped more than twice as much bomb tonnage on Indochina than the total used by all sides during World War II.

BACK TO THE STONE AGE

Lessons of the Vietnam War

Edward S. Herman

The United States has used its enormous military superiority with great ruthlessness in the post-World War II era. During the Vietnam War, it dropped more bombs on the Indochinese peninsula than were employed by all sides during World War II. The U.S. also employed vast quantities of the cruelest weaponry, including phosphorus and fragmentation bombs, napalm, and chemicals that damage humans while killing vegetation.

The U.S. attack on Vietnam was one of the great holocausts of our time. But since it was perpetrated by the United States, it is not regarded as such. It may therefore be useful to review the basic facts of the war and its long-term consequences.

Puppet dictatorship

The arrogant men who ran the United States in the years following World War II denied the Vietnamese their right of self-determination because it was incompatible with western control. The United States and England supported French reoccupation of its former colony during 1945-54. After they were once again thrown out, the U.S. refused to abide by the Geneva Accords of 1954 which stipulated the unification of Vietnam through free elections.

It was widely acknowledged at that time, and later even by the U.S., that the great majority of Vietnamese in both the southern and northern sections of the country supported Ho Chi Minh and his party. But the United States, ignored the Geneva Accords, the rights of the Vietnamese, and the U.N. Charter by installing a dictator of its choice in what came to be known as South Vietnam. Legally and morally, however, there was never more than one Vietnam.

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When the puppet government began to lose control in 1962, the Kennedy administration began pouring in helicopters and thousands of “advisors” to supervise a vicious war against the majority of the population. This included the use of chemicals to destroy crops and the establishment of concentration camps (“strategic hamlets”) in an attempt to control the rural population.

When this strategy also failed, the administration of President Lyndon Johnson fabricated a North Vietnamese attack on U.S. spy ships in the Gulf of Tonkin, then used this false episode as an excuse to begin the systematic bombing of the North and a massive invasion of South Vietnam in 1965.

During the early 1960s, U.S. officials vehemently opposed any political settlement that would mean an end to domination of the south by a U.S.-controlled faction, despite the widespread acknowledgement that this faction had no substantial political support.

Back to the Stone Age

What followed was one of the most vicious and cowardly wars in history. The greatest military power on earth, with the most technologically advanced arsenal, concentrated its full power against a poor peasant society lacking aircraft or a modern technological base. It dropped millions of tons of bombs on Indochina, raining napalm and fragmentation bombs on hundreds of peasant villages that lacked medical facilities, and used massive quantities of defoliants to

destroy forests and crops. Large areas of South Vietnam were designated as “free-fire zones” where thousands of peasants were shot in the course of military operations, or just for fun on “skunk hunts.”

The U.S. invasion force of 500,000 troops was supplemented by mercenaries from South Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, and Australia. Their assigned task was to “pacify” the country, which they did by carrying out merciless “search and destroy” operations in which domestic animals and crops were destroyed, villages burned down, and large numbers of innocent people were raped, killed and made homeless. It was soon discovered that the “enemy” had deep roots among the people, who were therefore treated as enemies.

Under the charmingly entitled “Operation Ranch Hand”, the United States used Agent Orange and other chemicals to destroy the rice crops of Vietnam’s peasants and the country’s mangrove forests. (The witty slogan of the chemical-spraying pilots was, “Only you can prevent a forest.”) Vietnam was truly bombed back into to the Stone Age, in the sense that the country was devastated— a great many of its finest men and women were killed, and a heritage of damaged land, infrastructure, and people made recovery extremely difficult.

In one of the most vicious and cowardly wars in history, Vietnam was devastated; a great many of its finest men and women were killed.

But the U.S. was not satisfied with returning Vietnam to the Stone Age: After the war, it maintained an 18-year-long embargo to prevent its victim’s recovery. Due to U.S. power over the “international community” (including the IMF and World Bank), the embargo was effective. It was based nominally on an alleged Vietnamese failure to co-operate in the recovery of U.S. prisoners of war (POWs), and personnel missing in action (MIAs). But, in fact, there were never many POWs and all of those for whom Vietnam could be held accountable were returned on schedule.¹ Needless to say, the parallel issue of Vietnamese MIA has never been of any concern to the United States.

The final toll in Indochina will never be known, but it continues to grow. The death toll may be as high as four million; the numbers injured and traumatized also run into the millions. Since the formal conclusion of the war in 1975, thousands have been killed and wounded by some of the millions of unexploded bombs still littering the ground. There are also a great many victims of the ecocidal Agent Orange program, and the land destroyed by that and other chemicals may never recover.

Lesson to the Third World

It is a conventional fallacy that the United States lost the war in Vietnam. It is true that the U.S. did not achieve all of its objectives. The Vietnamese were able to outlast the aggressor, and to prevent the permanent imposition of a minority government in the southern part of the country. But the United States won a significant partial victory: It so ravaged the land and people of Vietnam that the alternative route to development that the Vietnamese revolution had threatened was effectively cut off.

In addition, the Third World was given an early and important lesson: Don't cross the United States.

Another lesson of the Vietnam War, is that the mainstream media shine the most favorable light on U.S. actions, no matter what. In that light, U.S. intentions in Vietnam were always benevolent—based on “noble” motives (Stanley Karnow) and “blundering efforts to do good” (Anthony Lewis). The U.S. always strove for democracy and self-determination, opposing aggression, according to this perspective.

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The U.S. was never portrayed as an aggressor fighting against self-determination, although that was the reality in Vietnam. Noam Chomsky has pointed out that while a Moscow newsman, Vladimir Danchev, denounced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as aggression—calling on the rebels to resist over Soviet radio for five successive days in May of 1983, to the applause of

The obligation of the aggressor country to compensate its victims has never been viewed as a relevant issue.

Western media which became outraged at his subsequent, temporary removal—“there was no Vladimir Danchev in the United States during the American wars in Indochina. . . or since.”

Following the official line, and in accord with classic principles of atrocities management, the mainstream media found that only the enemy committed atrocities and had evil plans. The murderous acts of the United States were invariably portrayed as responses to somebody else's acts or threats, and occasionally as “errors.”

The Vietnamese enemy was quickly labeled “terrorist” and aggressor—allegedly committing “internal aggression”—and was effectively demonized. The media averted their eyes from all but a minuscule fraction of the enormous U.S. violence, focusing instead on the relatively minor and more selective acts of the “terrorists.” This helped make the almost unlimited use of force and high-tech warfare against the distant peasant society acceptable.

After the war, the media's apologetics never flagged. The Vietnamese were demonized for an alleged failure to co-operate in the matter of the MIAs, which the media interpreted as a “humanitarian issue”. But the obligation of the aggressor country to clear millions of land mines and pay reparations to the victimized people of Indochina has never been seen as a humanitarian issue for the U.S. establishment or media, and therefore has never gripped the international community.

In the United States, the post-war difficulties of Vietnam have been blamed on communist mismanagement rather than on a devastating war followed by an economic embargo.

In one classic analysis, Henry Kamm noted the “sad” fact that conditions of life in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the early 1980s were bad, in contrast with the prosperity of the nearby states “that reject communism”. But in the course of his lengthy article Kamm never once mentioned the ten million tons of bombs and the follow-up boycott as possible factors explaining the difference.

Powerful impunity

Because of its power, the real aggressor in Vietnam was never subjected to any discipline, penalty, or restraint by the international community, which co-operated in the post-war U.S. effort to keep the Vietnam “rogue state” in the Stone Age. When, under extreme provocation, the so-called rogue invaded Cambodia in 1978 and ousted the Pol Pot regime, this was not lauded as “humanitarian intervention”. Instead, Vietnam was once again castigated as an aggressor and the invasion was used as a basis for further ostracizing. Meanwhile, the United States and the “Free World” supported the Pol Pot government in exile, among other things allowing it to represent Cambodia in the U.N.

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One of the most important lessons drawn from the Vietnam War in the United States was that there are serious political costs associated with U.S. deaths in fighting abroad. Thus, there was an increasing tendency during the Vietnam War to use lavish firepower in place of manpower, in order to keep U.S. casualties down.

Enemy military or civilian casualties entail no political costs; so, if increased firepower kills vast numbers but reduces our own, that is more than acceptable. Budgetary costs for planes, bombs and napalm increase with more capital-intensive war. But in the U.S. political culture, there are virtually no limits to spending for “security” and feeding the military-industrial complex; so these heavy costs do not present a problem.

That a reliance on high tech warfare is cowardly, inhumane, and frequently in violation of the rules of war— which prohibit the use of force beyond military necessity— is no problem, either. During the Vietnam War, as now, the rules of international law are regarded as applying only to lesser and defeated powers. This can be seen clearly in the behavior of the United States wherever it has intervened in the affairs of other nations.

Principles applied in Nicaragua

The principles learned in the Vietnam War were applied in the U.S. war against Nicaragua in the 1980s. U.S. casualties were kept low by employment of a proxy army; international (and domestic) law, and World Court rulings were simply ignored; the Sandinistas were effectively demonized as “Marxists-Leninists,” etc.; and U.S. policies, with the co-operation of the “international community”, succeeded in destroying the Nicaraguan economy and pushing this poor country back into the Stone Age.

The media co-operation in this case was exemplary— illustrated by the fact that prominent news media found the 1984 Nicaraguan election to be a “sham” (*New York Times*, replicated widely) while they declared the 1982 U.S.-sponsored election in El Salvador, held under conditions of extreme terror with the left opposition excluded, to be “a triumph” (Dan Rather of CBS, also repeated very widely).

After the United States and its sponsored local terrorist army (“contras”) had devastated Nicaragua and reduced its per capita income by half, and with the United States threatening to continue the terrorist war unless the Sandinistas were removed from office, they were defeated in the 1990 election. In a marvel of propaganda service, the mainstream U.S. media greeted this as a fair election, a triumph of U.S. “patience,” the result in no way attributable to the effects of terror or the boycott on economic and social well-being. Who needs a government controlled media when a private one provides such outstanding service in the “national interest”?

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Since the ouster of the Sandinista government in 1990, Nicaragua has been permitted to sink further into the Stone Age, even though a U.S.-friendly government took power. This was partly due to the failure of the post-Sandinista government to attack the Sandinista’s political base in the same lively manner in which, for example, Pinochet attacked Chilean labor and that country’s left in 1973-1974, or as Suharto did to

the Indonesian Communist Party and its base among the masses in 1965-1966 (i.e., mass extermination). But it also resulted from the above-noted fact that, in the U.S. political culture, resources for killing are available virtually without limit. Resources for constructive efforts, on the other hand, must yield some kind of payoff for important people.

Angola and Mozambique

In southern Africa, the left regimes of Angola and Mozambique were returned to the Stone Age by South Africa during the period from the early 1970s to the 1990s, with solid support from the United States and Britain. The terrorist organization RENAMO ravaged Mozambique throughout the 1980s with South African assistance. Jonas Savimbi's UNITA did the same in Angola with aid from both South Africa and the United States. Estimated deaths in the two victimized countries, from the Western-supported terrorism of the 1980s, were on the order of one million.

During this period, South Africa engaged in frequent direct attacks on Angola from bases in Namibia, which it continued to occupy for decades after the U.N. and World Court back in the 1960s had ordered it to leave. No attempt was made by the United States, Britain, or the Security Council to enforce those rulings, despite South Africa's imposition of its apartheid system on the illegally occupied Namibia, and its use of that country as a base for aggression against Angola. U.S. officials referred to South Africa in those years as "our ally" (Ronald Reagan), and supported World Bank loans to the apartheid regime while vetoing any loans to the victims being returned to the Stone Age.

Iraq

The Persian Gulf War— or, more properly, the Persian Gulf massacre—represented an advance in the treatment of rogues. The devastation of Iraq and the killing of large numbers of helpless Iraqi conscripts went far beyond military necessity. The post-massacre system of sanctions and periodic air attacks have killed perhaps a million Iraqi civilians and kept the country in the Stone Age.

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The actual massacre followed from the mobilization and use of immense U.S. and allied military power which helped to keep U.S. casualties very low while allowing uncontested destruction and killing in Iraq. As in the case of the Vietnam War, concern for the life of active soldiers stands in sharp contrast with the Pentagon/political establishment's attempt to fend off post-war claims of medical problems by Gulf War veterans.

The media's performance in helping put a country back in the Stone Age and keeping it there has again been exemplary in the case of Iraq. Saddam Hussein has been demonized; the prior appeasement and support of Saddam throughout the 1980s has been almost entirely blacked out; and the refusal of the Bush administration to allow Iraq a negotiated withdrawal from Kuwait, after having practically invited him in, has been evaded and played down, while Bush's lie that it was Saddam who refused to negotiate has been accepted as fact.

The media have also accepted the notion that the new "surgical precision" weapons have made war clean. They have swallowed disinformation, such as the alleged Iraqi removal of incubators from Kuwaiti babies, while averting their eyes from the devastation and killing by the allied war machine; during the war, they served as cheerleaders. With regard to the post-war sanctions, they have helpfully played down or ignored evidence of the very large Iraqi death toll, which has exceeded that in all the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Yugoslavia

With the NATO war on Yugoslavia, the United States has reached a new and higher level in the fine art of returning rogues to the Stone Age. Its NATO instrument waged a war entirely from the air, resulting in zero casualties among the bold fighters dropping bombs on the new victims. The war on Serbia openly and extensively

targeted civilian facilities such as electric power grids, water-treatment plants, non-military industrial plants, and even banking networks.

This infrastructure-war violated international law and official U.S. rules of war. Attacks against such facilities in U.S. cities were characterized by a 1998 President's Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection as a form of criminal "terrorism", as pointed out by Christopher Simpson at a congressional "teach-in" in June, 1999, that was sponsored by Representative Dennis Kucinich. But performed on a wholesale basis from the air by NATO bombers against an official enemy, such targeting is not only acceptable, it is part of a moral and humanitarian crusade that has even mobilized a "war crimes tribunal" as part of its public relations arsenal.

In the war with the purported "humanitarian" aim of helping the Kosovo Albanians, the people supposedly aided suffered exponentially increased damage from the NATO actions—a result that was apparently anticipated by NATO planners. But the war managers did also succeed in returning Serbia to the Stone Age, which was clearly a more important NATO objective than helping Kosovo Albanians.

There is every reason to believe that Serbia will be kept in the Stone Age, inasmuch as President Clinton has already announced that reconstruction will be Europe's responsibility. The U.S. specializes in death and destruction, and Europe has already made any aid conditional on the ouster of Milosevic. We may be sure that other conditions will be imposed which will preclude more than nominal aid to the people who allowed Milosevic to commit his crimes.

"Exemplary" media

The media once again carried out their supporting propaganda role to perfection. At an Overseas Press Club dinner in late April of 1999, Richard Holbrooke complimented the mainstream media's performance on Kosovo as "extraordinary and exemplary"—arguably as crushing an indictment of the media as could be imagined. Prior to the NATO bombing, Milosevic was demonized by the press in almost identical fashion as in the case of Saddam Hussein before him.

There was also an intense focus on Serbian atrocities, while the multi-faceted character of ethnic cleansing was almost entirely ignored, as were the West's contributions to the break-up of Yugoslavia, and its neglect—even support—of ethnic cleansing by non-Serbs. All this helped to prepare the public for "humanitarian bombing". During the bombing, NATO's contribution to the intensified Serb violence, the escalated refugee crisis, and the illegal, terroristic quality of NATO's deliberate bombing of civilian targets in Serbia were dealt with in a very low key.

In reality, Yugoslavia had been given an ultimatum designed to be rejected so as to justify bombing.

As in the case of the Persian Gulf war, the media followed without question the official line that Yugoslavia had turned down a reasonable negotiating offer at Rambouillet when, in reality, Yugoslavia had been given an ultimatum designed to be rejected so as to justify bombing. After the June 4 agreement, the media once again accepted the official view that Milosevic was dragging his feet on implementation, when in fact NATO ignored the agreement's provision that gave primacy to the U.N., by putting itself in charge of the occupation of Kosovo.

Following the NATO occupation of Kosovo, the media were primarily concerned with eager and uncritical attempts to confirm Serb atrocities; they also looking for stories from Serbia and elsewhere regarding condemnations of Milosevic and the difficulties he was encountering. Retrospective analyses of the causes of the war, including NATO's deliberate sabotage of negotiations, have been largely off the agenda, as are the ongoing refugee crisis and the desperate living conditions in Serbia. Again, the media's service to NATO policy has been exemplary, including an *ex post facto* justification for the bombing, and the continuing demonization and pursuit of the villainous Milosevic.²

Just as Henry Kamm reflected on the strange fact that Asian countries which had "rejected communism" prospered after the Vietnam War, while the Reds suffered—without mentioning the ten million tons of bombs dropped on the latter (see page 3)—so comments today another

New York Times man, John Tagliabue, on the remarkable fact that, “The earlier [the former Yugoslav republics] broke off from Belgrade, and the weaker the Serb claim to their land, the better they are doing now.” Not once does he mention the impact of Western aid, boycotts, and bombs.

New Order = Old Order

The media are ecstatic over the New World Order of the post-NATO bombing, in which morality can be imposed by the might of the Godfather and his NATO arm. John Keegan in the London *Daily Telegraph* (June 4, 1999) spoke for many establishment pundits when he said that “no rational ruler will choose to commit the crimes that have attracted such punishment. The World Order looks better protected today than it did the day before the bombing began.”

Keegan is absolutely right in his suggestion that the New Order is protected; but he completely misses the points that crimes will continue to be committed with impunity by people like “our kind of guy” Suharto, and that “rogues” have never included folks like Marcos, Suharto, Mobutu, and the numerous heads of “national security states” who have killed vast numbers with active support from the NATO powers.

A system of massive injustice and widespread terror continues to be inflicted with impunity.

There is not the slightest reason to think that this selective perspective will change. It was manifested during the NATO war against Yugoslavia by the simultaneous NATO silence on the ethnic cleansing of Turkey’s Kurdish population, and by the use of Turkish air bases for the “humanitarian” bombing raids against Serbs.

The real rule that has now been established is that, “No rational ruler who fails to provide a favorable climate of investment and kow-tow to the Godfather can commit such crimes.” This is a rule that consolidates a system of massive injustice, as well as widespread terror that continues to be inflicted with impunity.

— Edward S. Herman
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Note: Edward S. Herman is a member of Living Future’s Advisory Board, whose members are presented in the project history at: www.nnn.se/levande/living.pdf

NOTES

1. A detailed account of the missing-in-action hoax is provided by H. Bruce Franklin in his book, *M.I.A. or Myth-Making in America*. See also: “‘Vietnam’ in the New American Century” at www.nnn.se/vietnam/franklin.pdf
2. For related information on the most recent Balkan wars, see:
 - “Propaganda and ‘Preventive’ War” at www.nnn.se/disinfo/kosovo.pdf
 - *All Quieted on the Word Front* at www.nnn.se/disinfo/ordfront.pdf

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www.nnn.se/vietnam.htm