

The Jakarta Method: How the U.S. Used Mass Murder to Beat Communism

New book tracks how Washington helped the Indonesian government slaughter more than a million people because of their politics; A book review

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The so-called Long Peace after 1945 was covered in the blood of innocent people. Americans generally prefer to remember the Cold War as a mostly peaceful triumph punctuated by a handful of debacles, but for many of the people living in non-aligned and newly independent countries after WWII their experience of the Cold War was one of horror and devastation.

Those nations that had the misfortune of being deemed important in the struggle against communism tended to suffer the most. Fanatical anticommunism claimed millions of victims during the Cold War. The atrocities committed against these people are often forgotten in the West, if they were ever known in the first place. That is true most of all in the United States, since it was our government that frequently encouraged and assisted local actors in their crimes against their own people.

We generally ignore this part of the Cold War because it is ugly and because our government bears considerable responsibility for what happened to these countries. It does not square with the “liberal order” mythology that our leaders tell themselves and us. It does not comport with our flattering appraisals of our benevolent role in the world, but it is an important part of the history of our foreign policy that we cannot afford to forget. When politicians and pundits blithely threaten to pursue a new Cold War today against China, we need to understand the destruction that would unleash on unsuspecting people in many other countries. We should not make the same costly errors now.

Indonesia was considered especially crucial during the 1960s as one of the leading non-aligned countries with the largest communist party outside the USSR and China. U.S. officials saw it as a “prize” far more valuable than South Vietnam, and in 1965-66 it was violently yanked into the U.S. orbit by mass murder. The Indonesian military under Suharto and its auxiliaries carried out mass killings against communists and suspected communists, and they murdered up to one million innocent people for nothing more than their presumed political affiliations.

This mass murder and its broader consequences for the rest of the world is the subject of Vincent Bevins’ exceptional [The Jakarta Method](#). Bevins is an international correspondent who worked first in Brazil and then in Indonesia, and while in Indonesia he began to investigate the history of the 1965-66 mass murder that is still officially denied by the government there. As he dug into the stories of the survivors and tracked the consequences of Operation Annihilation (the Army’s internal name for the extermination campaign), he

found links between what had happened in Indonesia in the mid-1960s and the brutal campaigns in Latin America by U.S.-aligned dictatorships in the decades that followed. In these other countries, Jakarta became a codeword for massacring the enemies of the fanatical anticommunists, and the mass murder that occurred in Indonesia was held up as a model of what to do.

The U.S. government not only knew about the slaughter in Indonesia, but actively encouraged it and provided the killers with lists of names. Bevins writes:

But after seven years of close cooperation with Washington, the military was already well equipped. You also don't need advanced weaponry to arrest civilians who provide almost no resistance. What officials in the embassy and the CIA decided the Army really did need, however, was information. Working with CIA analysts, embassy political officer Robert Martens prepared lists with the names of thousands of communists and suspected communists, and handed them over to the Army, so that these people could be murdered and "checked off" the list.

Another million people were rounded up into concentration camps for detention, where they were subjected to starvation, forced labor, torture, and ideological re-education. It was an infamous "victory" that no one wanted to remember.

Bevins recounts this history in a dispassionate, matter-of-fact way, and he carefully weaves together the stories of the individual survivors whom he has found over the course of his investigation. He takes us to the sites of killing fields in Bali where tourist hotels now stand. He introduces us to the Indonesians who lost family and friends in the massacres, and he shows how the survivors are still ostracized and viewed with suspicion all these decades later. One of the survivors he met, an elderly woman named Magdalena, now lives in poverty after her release from prison. He tells how she was "marked for life" because of her past, and she has no family ties because all of these were severed after she was accused of being a communist. As Bevins notes, this "kind of situation is extremely common for survivors of the 1965 violence and repression." In addition to those that were killed in the violence, there are tens of millions of victims and relatives of victims still alive today.

He also traces the use of the tactics employed against innocent Indonesians to Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and elsewhere in Latin America, and reminds us that people in these countries are still living in the shadow of the U.S.-backed dictatorships that were in power there in the 1970s and 1980s. The Brazilian dictatorship that seized power before Suharto's takeover later sought to imitate what had happened in Indonesia. The Chilean government under Pinochet did so, albeit on a smaller scale, and the so-called "dirty war" in Argentina followed as well. The trail continues into Central America up to the end of the Cold War. Many of the individual elements of Bevins' story may be familiar, but he has made connections between them that most Americans do not know.

As he tries to make sense of the horrific events he has described in the book, Bevins leaves us with this grim but fair conclusion:

Looking at it this way, the major losers of the twentieth century were those who believed too sincerely in the existence of a liberal international order, those who trusted too much in democracy, or too much in what the United States said it supported, rather than what it really supported—what the rich

countries said, rather than what they did. That group was annihilated.

When he spoke to Winarso, the head of *Sekretariat Bersama '65*, the organization that advocates on behalf of survivors of the mass murder, Bevins asked him who won the Cold War. Winarso replied that the United States won. When he followed up by asking how, Winarso replied simply, "You killed us." What's more, these people were killed for nothing.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the victims in Indonesia and in the other countries that Bevins reports on were innocent people. They were killed en masse only because they held or were believed to hold certain political beliefs. Bevins writes: "They were sentenced to annihilation, and almost everyone around them was sentenced to a lifetime of guilt, trauma, and being told they had sinned unforgivably because of their association with the earnest hopes of left-wing politics." They had done nothing wrong. They had the awful luck of being caught in the middle of an international rivalry for power and influence that had nothing to do with them, and they were crushed because it was expedient for our government and its clients that they be crushed.

A few months ago, Hal Brands [wrote](#) a column in which he suggested that the U.S. might support covert regime changes as part of a rivalry with China. In one breath, he cited the Suharto takeover in Indonesia as an example of a "cost-effective" success, and then in the next acknowledged the grisly human cost measured in hundreds of thousands of lives. Here is how he described U.S. complicity in mass murder: "CIA support helped the Indonesian military consolidate power after it toppled an increasingly anti-American Sukarno in 1965, thus avoiding the prospect of Southeast Asia's most important country turning hostile." He acknowledges that this implicated the U.S. in "horrific violence," but he remains very vague about what the U.S. did there. If Indonesia is counted as a "win" for the pro-regime change crowd, the idea of promoting regime change is absolutely bankrupt and should never be employed again.

If a strategy relies on policies that lead to the wanton murder of so many innocent people, it is time to throw that strategy out and find another. Supporting regime change in another country is often held up as a quick-fix solution to some problem that the U.S. has in the world, but most of the time this fails on its own terms. Even when regime changes "work" in the near term, they inflict a ghastly toll on the people in the targeted country. The U.S. would do well to reject regime change, covert or otherwise, and to respect the sovereignty and independence of other states instead. The U.S. should also avoid another Cold War with a major power rival that leads to such monstrous crimes as the mass murder in Indonesia.

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