

Transforming a Country into “Collateral Damage”: US Cluster Bombs Killed Children for Decades in Laos, and Now Yemen

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Global Research, September 12, 2016

[Reader Supported News](#) 10 September
2016

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
[USA](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US
NATO War Agenda](#)

The preposterous ironies of President [Obama's unapologetic visit](#) to Laos on September 6 have not yet generated the attention they deserve, but they provide an excellent measure of the self-righteousness of the [monstrous continuity of American violence](#) inflicted on the world from Viet Nam in the 1950s to Yemen more than sixty years later.

The baldest irony of Laos is that the U.S. spent nine years bombing Laos, at a cost of more than \$100 million per week in current dollars (on the order of \$45 billion in all), powerfully documented [in Mother Jones in 2014](#). Having tried to bomb Laos back into the stone age and then walked away, now, decades later, as the bombs continue to blow up Laotian civilians, the U.S. president is promising \$90 million (the equivalent of less than a week of bombing) over the next three years to help clean up the mess the U.S. made. This promise of more bomb-removal aid was [one of the few lines in his speech](#) to elicit applause from his 1,000-person audience, who were likely more aware of the brutal context than most Americans. As the U.S. president described the bombing of Laos, then a neutral country:

At the time, the U.S. government did not acknowledge America's role. It was a secret war, and for years, the American people did not know. Even now, many Americans are not fully aware of this chapter in our history, and it's important that we remember today.

There are minor ironies in that passage. The U.S. government did not acknowledge bombing Laos then, just as it does not acknowledge now that bombing Laos was a war crime of major magnitude. The president says it was a secret war, which isn't really true, since the Laotians and the Vietnamese certainly knew, and any American who wanted to know could find out, but now the number of Americans in denial is probably larger. And in saying "it's important that we remember today," isn't it ironic that the president says this in the capitol of a country that has never forgotten, but in the U.S. his voice is as silent about these war crimes as it has been about the war crimes of his predecessor, as well as his own, in the Middle East. That allows for some future president to go to Yemen, for example, and echo President Obama by promising to help clean up the deadly debris from years of U.S. cluster bombs and drone strikes on the poorest country in the region (like Laos in Southeast Asia). The U.S.-supported atrocities in Yemen are only a few years old now but, with no end in sight, could eventually compare to the devastation dropped on Laos. In the U.S. president's words:

Over nine years — from 1964 to 1973 — the United States dropped more than two million tons of bombs here in Laos — more than we dropped on Germany and Japan combined during all of World War II. It made Laos, per person, the most heavily bombed country in history. As one Laotian said, the “bombs fell like rain.” Villages and entire valleys were obliterated. The ancient Plain of Jars was devastated. Countless civilians were killed.

In Laos, the U.S. made a whole country into collateral damage

Laos was doubly victimized by a war in which it had no part. The U.S. bombed Laos with unmerciful futility because Laos was unable to defend its eastern border with North Viet Nam, which used the mountainous region with impunity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail that was a supply route to guerrillas in the south. So when the U.S. president says with Orwellian sanctimoniousness that he acknowledges “the suffering and sacrifices on all sides of that conflict,” he’s speaking to people who were not on any side of the Vietnamese civil war or [the U.S. criminal intervention](#) in that civil war, thereby blaming the victims in Laos. Accepting responsibility for its own actions is not something the United States does. But the U.S. president has still another revision of history to offer:

And from the anguish of war, there came an unlikely bond between our two peoples. Today, the United States is home to many proud Laotian Americans.

A large proportion of those Laotian Americans are from [the Hmong tribes](#) that lived in the mountains along the Vietnamese border. U.S. Special Forces (Green Berets) recruited Hmong to help attack the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Once the U.S. lost the war and pulled out of Viet Nam, the Hmong were left to fend for themselves like so many local U.S. allies in other war zones (as in South Viet Nam, Afghanistan, or Iraq for example). Faced with the communist Pathet Lao takeover of Laos, thousands of Hmong fled, mostly to Thailand and beyond. Laos, the [Lao People’s Democratic Republic](#), remains a one-party state with close ties to China.

The U.S. is presently waging another criminal war mercilessly attacking civilians in Yemen, but this time the U.S. is on the side of the one-party state that is the lead aggressor, Saudi Arabia. Few if any American media have made the ironic connections between Laos and Yemen, but the Hong Kong based [Asia Times nailed it](#) despite running a half-wrong headline:

U.S. apologizes to Laos over cluster bombs,
then sells them to pound Yemen

The story that followed, by Johns Hopkins Fellow Christina Lin, does not mention the apology that never happened. She reports on President Obama’s speech in Laos this way:

Obama said, “Given our history here, I believe that the United States has a moral obligation to help Laos heal.” This gesture of trying to make amends for the damage U.S. caused in the past is laudable, especially since Obama is the first U.S. president to visit Laos. However, one wonders how sincere is this gesture, when U.S. turns around and sells the same cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia for a similar bombing campaign of [another poor country—Yemen](#)—that is maiming [children](#) and will likewise keep the population trapped in dire poverty and devastation for the next several decades.

The assertion, despite its relatively cautious academic prose, is as devastating and undeniable as the hypocrisy and war crimes it describes are palpable. But Lin, like others “concerned” about Yemen, keeps her rhetoric modest to the point of obscuring the truth. She describes the inhumanity of using cluster bombs without mentioning their criminality. She points out that the White House has approved another arms sale to Saudi Arabia for \$1.15 billion to benefit U.S. arms makers. She does not say that without U.S. support, weapons, and ordnance the Saudi-led war on Yemen could not continue. She does manage to hint at outrage when she notes: “As a token gesture, Secretary Kerry announced a \$189 million humanitarian aid for Yemen, a Band-Aid compared to the multi-billion dollar arms packages used to inflict harm on the very same people.” She does not connect this payment to the much smaller amount of conscience-salving money promised to the much smaller, but much more damaged Laos.

Reuters offers example of how to do journalism really, really badly

Whatever its shortcomings, this Asia Times piece is better than any of the non-coverage by most American mainstream media. For serious reporting on Yemen one has to go to this or other [sources like Dissident Voice](#). International coverage is generally consistent with the official U.S.-Saudi line that usually alleges the necessity to resist Iranian influence, for which there is precious little evidence. At its worst in “respectable” media, Yemen coverage is like [this Reuters filing](#) that begins:

Egypt will host an international conference in March to coordinate humanitarian aid for Yemen, which has been devastated by a civil war, a minister in Yemen’s Saudi-backed government said on Tuesday.

It’s bad enough that Reuters leads with a press release by one of the combatants. That’s sloppy and dishonest, but common enough, and at least the source is named for the careful reader to identify. It’s unconscionable to omit the Saudi role in bombing Yemen on a daily basis, and it’s unacceptable to hide that role behind the assertion that Yemen “has been devastated by a civil war,” when most of the devastation comes from the U.S.-Saudi criminal war. In this case, Reuters is in the tank for war criminals, which it makes clear in its third deceitful paragraph, which claims: “The conflict pits the Iran-allied Houthis and supporters of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh against President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who is supported by an alliance of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia.” This neat bit of propagandizing ignores the essential U.S. support that makes the war on Yemen possible, and also omits the reality that half the country or more is currently controlled by the forces of al Qaida and the Islamic State that are fighting each other as well as everyone else. As for that humanitarian aid conference in Egypt six months from now, Reuters reports that Egypt has said nothing about it.

[J. Michael Springmann](#) is a former U.S. diplomat who served in Saudi Arabia in 1987-1989, until he was fired in a whistleblower incident. To hear him criticize the U.S. participation in “a war of aggression” against Yemen, one has go to [an Iranian PressTV clip](#) on YouTube (which the Yahoo search engine warns against). In that clip he accurately expresses skepticism about the U.S. “withdrawing” military forces from Saudi Arabia. The incident he described in August involved moving the U.S.-Saudi command and control center for the bombing campaign from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain, which Springmann calls “political theatre.”

Opposition to U.S. war on Yemen is tepid, laced with “Moral Idiocy”

A recent [piece in Consortium News](#) discusses the century-old psychological term “moral idiocy” in the context of American war-making since 1949. Lawrence Davidson’s main point is that the rules of war, in particular the Geneva Conventions, are not widely observed and that there’s rarely any penalty for committing war crimes, a term he eschews. He blames this on moral idiocy, the inability of our leaders to understand moral behavior and act on that understanding. He does not use the word “sociopath.” And his list of moral idiots contains only Republicans like Nixon, Bush, Cheney, and Kissinger. But is Barack Obama with his drone strikes not a moral idiot? Is Hillary Clinton with her Qaddafi killing glee not a moral idiot? Is John Kerry not a moral idiot when he says, as he did in June 2016, “I think the Saudis have expressed in the last weeks their desire to make certain that they’re acting responsibly and not endangering others.” Davidson doesn’t mention Yemen or other current wars. He doesn’t even wonder why there is virtually no anti-war movement in America today. He doesn’t seem to understand that his anodyne detachment is part of the problem, not least when he concludes: “And, who are those who most often take advantage of this loophole? Ironically, it is the very people who lead our societies and those assigned to defend the culture and enforce the law. Lack of accountability makes for very poor public hygiene.”

That sounds a lot like Pontius Pilate washing his hands.

Another Consortium News writer, Jonathan Marshall, began a piece on September 2 with wan donnish wit and [profound disinformation](#):

If there were an Olympics for waging bloody wars, Saudi Arabia and its Arab coalition allies would surely win a medal for their relentless bombing of Yemen over the past year and a half to crush rebels who seized power in 2014.

This framing is tantamount to a lie, given that the “Saudi war” could not be waged, could not have begun, without U.S. intelligence, U.S. targeting expertise, U.S. mid-air refueling, U.S. pilot rescue, U.S. cluster bombs and other ordnance, U.S. planes, U.S. maintenance crews, and U.S. participation in the naval blockade that has brought roughly half of Yemen’s population of 26 million to the brink of starvation. By Marshall’s moral idiocy reckoning, the Saudis get only the bronze medal; the U.S. deserves the gold.

Marshall is not someone who could not know better. He started writing about [Yemen in April 2015](#), when he said of the war, correctly:

This naked aggression against a sovereign state has never been approved by the UN Security Council and stands in apparent violation of the United Nations charter. Congress has not approved this latest act of war either.

“Right now (the operation) does not have any foundation in international law,” complained Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, not that anyone in the United States [cared](#) what he had to say.

American disregard for international law is so complete that hardly anyone cared what UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had to say about the war in Yemen, either.

Even then, Marshall played the Iran card, claiming that “the Houthis also enjoy support from the Tehran regime,” without offering any detail or supporting evidence that Iranian

“support” amounts to much more than a cheering section. But Marshall was also clear-eyed then about White House justifications for its new war:

In a typical example of unconscious doublespeak, Secretary of State John Kerry told an interviewer that Washington was “not going to stand by while the region is destabilized,” as if bombing will somehow stabilize Yemen.

That was then. Now, after almost 18 months of unjustified carnage that has accomplished nothing honorable, Marshall is seeing it as the Saudis’ war and is criticizing Congress for its belated opposition with [a strange kind of moral detachment](#): “... the Obama administration’s support for Saudi Arabia’s criminal policies is at last beginning to trouble many legislators on Capitol Hill.” This “support,” unlike anything Iran is doing, is lethal, criminal, and crucial – without U.S. participation, Yemen does not suffer daily crimes against humanity.

Marshall ends with some quoted mild outrage from congressmen and senators [whose anti-war efforts](#) consist of trying to block the current \$1.15 billion sale of more weapons to the Saudis. This effort is pathetic, meaningless, and quixotic – unless a lot of Republicans decide to go along. Even success in blocking this sale will do nothing to help Yemen. All it could do is send the Saudis to other markets and deprive U.S. arms merchants of some undeserved profits. Yes, blocking the sale is good in and of itself, but in the context of continuing U.S. war crimes in Yemen, it’s a deceitful bad joke.

If Americans want to do something decent for Yemen, then Americans need to hold their own country accountable.

William M. Boardman has over 40 years experience in theatre, radio, TV, print journalism, and non-fiction, including 20 years in the Vermont judiciary. He has received honors from Writers Guild of America, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Vermont Life magazine, and an Emmy Award nomination from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

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