

The enduring war: history's lessons

*Human Rights
The News
24-12-07*

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War-time breeds amnesia and denial on a startling scale. Even some long-standing critics of US foreign policy have declared guarded support for the US bombings in the name of rooting out terrorists. We've got to do something, it is said. It seems everyone is blindly ignoring the grim history of US war-making. Our government says it aims to make Afghanistan a better place, and to minimise civilian casualties. But America's track record is far from compelling on this score. Consider this much-abridged tally:

* The dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in August 1945 caused 210,000 civilian casualties.

* The war in Vietnam from 1964 to 1975 claimed 1-2 million people, most of them civilians.

* The United States supported and armed a government linked to death squads in El Salvador's civil war from 1980 to 1992, which left 75,000 people dead.

* The war against Iraq in 1991 killed 200,000 people and the subsequent economic sanctions have spelled death for some 350,000 to 500,000 children. (Our sources include the US Central Intelligence

Agency, The Guardian (UK), BBC, Agence France-Presse, UNICEF, Lancet medical journal, and The New York Times. The Afghanistan figures come from a recent study of international press accounts by University of New Hampshire economics professor Marc Herold.)

Each war had its own cause and context; in some cases, such as Vietnam, limiting civilian casualties was never on the agenda. But ultimately that's the point: US military actions, history shows, have consistently compounded misery, death and enmity. After the bombings, typically, come American declarations of "peacetime" - while America's victims abroad endure decades of aftershocks, including debilitating diseases, economic dependency, and ecological devastation. The repeated result across the globe is not sustainable peace, but rather increased inequity and volatility. Take for instance President Nixon's secret illegal bombings of Cambodia beginning in 1969, destabilising a peaceful nation with which the US was not at war - and helping to usher in the fascism and genocide of the Khmer Rouge.

Only through declassified and leaked documents did the American public learn about this top-secret foreign policy. But even official wars are highly secret operations - and the record almost invariably shows offi-

cialists lie to the public about both the policy objective and the true scope of destruction. It took the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 to unmask the misinformation campaign perpetrated by the US government in the Vietnam War. Fifteen years later, the Iran-Contra scandal unravelled, revealing that high-level officials in the Reagan administration secretly and illegally dispatched weapons and money to right-wing Nicaraguan rebels, fuelling that country's bloody civil war.

Yet another deception has recently come to light. After 26 years of denying that it approved Indonesia's bloody invasion of East Timor in 1975, the US government now must take partial responsibility for the estimated 200,000 deaths caused by that action. The Washington Post revealed transcripts of a conversation in which President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger gave the fateful green light to Indonesian President Suharto.

We cannot know how many civilian casualties the US bombing campaign against Afghanistan will yield (a recent study of international press reports put the figure at 3500), but years from now the picture won't be pretty. Historians will debate why the US government did not do more to alleviate suffering.

The US, awash in Cold War politics, aided the Taliban's rise to power,

just as our government long nourished Saddam Hussein, Manuel Noriega and innumerable right-wing dictators, usually at the expense of democracy and human life. These perilous alliances are not isolated tactical errors - they are elemental components of US foreign policymaking. Less seemly objectives trumped humanitarian concerns.

There are real alternatives, such as addressing the intense poverty and powerlessness which germinate hatred and vicious terrorism (while punishing terrorists but sparing innocent civilians). But sustainable peace-making is not in our government's tradition, and will not come without massive public pressure. One can be a patriotic American upholding the traditions of democracy and equality while recognising the US government's well-documented history of undermining these principles here and abroad. Changing that history is the war at home.

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A version of this piece originally appeared in the December 19 San Francisco Bay Guardian, where Mr Cook has worked as news editor