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THE LETHAL LEGACY OF U.S. FOREIGN INTERVENTION

by Sheldon Richman

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Americans seem to believe that once the U.S. military exits a foreign country, its moral accountability ends. But the deadly consequences — and culpability — continue long after the last soldier leaves.

Take Iraq, which the U.S. military left at the end of 2011 (though not before President Obama pleaded with the Iraqi government to let some American forces remain). Violence is flaring in Iraq, as Sunni Muslims, fed up with the oppressive, corrupt, U.S.-installed and Iran-leaning Shi'a government, have mounted new resistance.

Not our responsibility, most Americans would think. The U.S. troops are long gone, so “our hands” are clean. Not so fast, says University of San Francisco Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes.

“The tragic upsurge of violence in Iraq in recent months, including the temporary takeover of sections of two major Iraqi cities by al-Qaida affiliates,” Zunes writes, “is a direct consequence of the repression of peaceful dissent by the U.S.-backed government in Baghdad and, ultimately, of the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation.”

He goes on,

The U.S.-backed Iraqi regime is dominated by sectarian Shia Muslim parties which have discriminated against the Sunni Muslim minority. The combination of government repression and armed insurgency resulted in the deaths of nearly 8,000 civilians last year alone.

But can the United State really be responsible? Wasn't Iraq a terrible place before the 2003 U.S. invasion, devastation, and occupation? Iraq was certainly ruled by a bad man, Saddam Hussein, who repressed the majority Shi'a, but also mistreated Sunnis. Yet Iraq was not plagued by sectarian violence before the U.S. military arrived. “Until the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation, Iraq had maintained a longstanding history of secularism and a strong national identity among its Arab population despite sectarian differences,” Zunes writes.

Not only did the U.S. invasion and occupation fail to bring a functional democracy to Iraq, neither U.S. forces nor the successive U.S.-backed Iraqi governments have been able to provide the Iraqi people with basic security. This has led many ordinary citizens to turn to armed sectarian militia[s] for protection.

Zunes notes that “much of Iraq's current divisions can be traced to the decision of U.S. occupation authorities immediately following the conquest to abolish the Iraqi army and purge the government bureaucracy — both bastions of secularism and national identity — thereby creating a vacuum that was soon filled by sectarian parties and militias.”

So, once again, arrogant American policymakers lumbered into a foreign country thinking they could remake it in their image — apparently without knowing anything about the cultural or social context. This is hardly the first time, which is why Eugene Burdick and William Lederer's 1958 novel, *The Ugly American*, still packs so much power.

Horrible as the Iraq story is, consider what's happening today in Laos, in southeast Asia. The U.S. military bombed Laos from 1964 to 1973, during its war on Vietnam, to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh trail, the route for military personnel and equipment from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, which ran through Laos and Cambodia. According to the website Legacies of War,

“the U.S. dropped over 2 million tons of ordnance over Laos in 580,000 bombing missions, the equivalent of one planeload every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day, for 9 years.”

That would have been bad enough, but the U.S. government dropped cluster bombs, which are made up of many so-called bomblets, about 30 percent of which did not explode immediately:

At least 270 million cluster bomblets were dropped as part of the bombing campaign; approximately 80 million failed to detonate.

Data from a survey completed in Laos in 2009 indicate that UXO [unexploded ordnance], including cluster bombs, have killed or maimed as many as 50,000 civilians in Laos since 1964 (*and 20,000 since 1973, after the war ended*). Over the past two years there have been *over one hundred new casualties each year*. About 60% of accidents result in death, and 40% of the victims are children. Boys are particularly at risk. [Emphasis added.]

Thus, 40 years after America’s war of aggression against the people of Southeast Asia, American munitions continue to kill people.

Remember this the next time you hear antiwar advocates smeared as isolationists and American foreign intervention lauded as a blessing to mankind.