

Cluster Bombs Are as Outdated as War

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President Joe Biden's administration has taken a cruel weapon—the cluster bomb—off the shelf and sent it to Ukraine to be used in the war against Russia. Prior to being transferred to Ukraine, cluster bombs made in the United States were used by Saudi Arabia as recently as [last year](#) to devastating effect in its war in Yemen. The weapons pose such an extraordinary danger to civilians that—although the U.S. is among a minority of countries that refuses to sign the Convention on Cluster Munitions banning them, and retains such weapons in its arsenal—they have largely been gathering dust because their use and sale are [so controversial](#) on the world stage. The White House's decision to transfer the bombs to Ukraine both escalates the already horrific war and legitimizes a weapon that has no place in our world.

Cluster bombs are large bombs that contain dozens or even hundreds of smaller bombs, or "bomblets." Cluster bombs are designed to scatter the bomblets over a wide area upon detonation. At a time when the United States and its allies often claim—inaccurately—to carry out precision killing with "surgical strikes," cluster bombs are imprecise by nature.

But what makes cluster bombs even worse is the fact that, inevitably, not all of the smaller, scattered bombs explode on impact. The bomblets lie on or below the surface of the ground, potentially for years or even decades, waiting to be detonated when touched. They are, in effect, land mines. As Amnesty International's Brian Castner [concludes](#), "There's just not a responsible way to use cluster munitions."

In Laos, where the U.S. dropped cluster bombs extensively as part of its war in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and '70s, unexploded bomblets continue to litter the land even today. As veteran foreign correspondent Lewis M. Simons—who covered the war in Southeast Asia—[wrote](#) in a piece responding to the news of the weapons transfer to Ukraine, "Less than 1% of the dormant bombs have been cleared since the war ended in Laos. About 20,000 civilians been killed during the same period. Even as the numbers gradually decline,

thousands continue to be killed, crippled and disfigured.” He added, “Half the victims are children.”

Well after ceasefires and treaties formally end armed conflicts, cluster bombs continue to threaten civilians in the places where they have been used. In response to the dangers remaining bomblets present to civilians, more than 120 countries have signed the [2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions](#).

This means that by transferring cluster bombs to Ukraine, the Biden administration is violating an international law that the majority of U.N. member states are party to.

This is ironic given the attention that the White House has rightfully called to Vladimir Putin’s violations of international law in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The U.S. move to send cluster bombs to Ukraine indicts the moral position that it has claimed in the war.

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Featured image: US personnel load a cluster bomb to a jet during the bombing of Yugoslavia. (Photo: Richard Rosser / US Navy)

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