

The Irrelevance of Human Rights in US and British Foreign Policy

A Brief History of Human Rights Atrocities and Deception

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“We have to reserve the right to bomb N...” (British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, 1932(1))

Historical human rights abuses are not explained well in most school textbooks or by the mainstream media. They celebrate Columbus as an explorer, failing to note that the purpose of his voyage was plunder, and that he should be remembered for helping to start the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the genocide of the people of Haiti. Britain’s human rights record is appalling. Some of Britain’s most famous seafarers, such as Sir Francis Drake, were actually pirates (notice the Sir – being a criminal does not affect your chances of receiving an honour if your crimes are committed on behalf of the government). The explorer Henry Stanley (famous for the line “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”) assisted King Leopold II of Belgium in controlling the people of the Congo, so that he could steal their rubber. King Leopold is most famous for cutting off the hands of the native population. One of Stanley’s key roles was in persuading local chiefs to sign treaties they did not understand.(2) Commerce was (and still is) more important than human rights.

Gradually, there has been a steady improvement in how governments from many nations treat their citizens. In most countries slavery has been abolished. Women and minorities are supposed to have equal rights, and we have agreements on how prisoners are treated. Each year, a couple of countries removed the death penalty.(3) Many of us recognised that our earlier exploitation of some groups of people was no longer acceptable.

In 1947 the United Nations came up with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.(4) This is a surprisingly long list of rights that every person is entitled to. The right to life perhaps being the most important, but also freedom from slavery and torture. However, the Declaration was flawed from the beginning because the five most powerful nations at the time (US, Britain, Russia, China and France) violated the rights of their citizens or their colonies on a regular basis, even whilst the declaration was being created.(5) British negotiators were aware that the authorities in some British colonies carried out murder, torture and rape. Authorities in other British colonies regularly detained people, hindered freedom of movement and controlled the holding of meetings. British colonies were therefore being governed in ways that contradicted the declaration.(6)

Whatever progress we had made came to an abrupt halt following the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11th, 2001. We have gone backwards significantly for the last 20 years.(7)Steadily increasing standards of human rights and personal freedoms have been set aside as we fly people abroad for torture, and destroy multiple countries in the Middle

East.

Mass Murder Is Not A Crime If You Call It War – And You’re British or American

“The American army’s use of its massive fire-power is so unrestrained that all US military operations are in reality the collective punishment of whole districts, towns and cities.”
(Patrick Cockburn, 2005(8))

An important part of the propaganda system in Britain and the US is that we have been conditioned over many years to assess a country’s human rights record based on the treatment of its own people. However, it is more accurate to also include human rights violations committed by our governments and their armies in other countries. When we do this, it becomes clear that many of the worst human rights atrocities are committed by the US and British governments when they go to war, or when they supply weapons or provide assistance to murderous dictators. The version of war that we see in the US and British media bears little relationship to what actually goes on when the US and Britain invade another country. The media shows us videos of precision bombs hitting their targets. What they rarely show is the mass slaughter and maiming of human beings, and the destruction of entire cities using the most devastating weapons available.

We have also been conditioned to think of human rights as what are known as political rights, such as the right to vote, freedom of speech (which means the right to criticise your government), and the right to a free press. These rights are regularly violated in many countries. However, there are even more important rights within the 1948 declaration, such as the right to life. In other words, the right not to be shot by an invading army. It is these more important rights that are violated by the US and British governments when they invade other countries.

If we examine the activities of US soldiers in wartime, we find that they commit mass murder on a regular basis. A good example was the ‘Highway of Death’. In 1991, the Iraqi army had just invaded Kuwait, but they agreed to a ceasefire and were withdrawing their troops. The US White House Press Secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, stated that “The United States...will not attack retreating Iraqi forces.”(9) Two thousand Iraqi vehicles were returning on the main highways between Kuwait and Iraq. US planes destroyed vehicles at the front and rear of the column, so vehicles in-between could not move. They then methodically destroyed everything, killing thousands of people, not discriminating between civilians and the military. The people on the ground were defenceless. The pilots described this as a ‘Turkey Shoot’.(10) Eyewitnesses report US soldiers burying the bodies quickly to hide them before journalists arrived.

Also in 1991, when the US military invaded Iraq, they were equipped with armoured bulldozers, and they fitted bulldozer blades to the front of some tanks. These were used to push sand into the Iraqi trenches. Iraqi soldiers, most of whom were conscripts, were buried alive in their trenches, including many who were trying to surrender. The conscripts were poorly equipped and had no weapons that were effective against the US armour. Others were just burned alive by dropping napalm bombs on the trenches. The staff of the US commander, General Schwarzkopf, privately estimated that 50-70,000 Iraqis were killed in approximately 70 miles of trenches.(11) These massacres went almost unreported by the mainstream media.

It is interesting to compare media reporting of slaughter committed by US troops with other atrocities committed elsewhere. The Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, was accused of genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, where 8,000 people died. The media made him out to be a monster. In contrast, when US forces slaughtered large numbers of people in the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, the mainstream Western media offered virtually no criticism. Fallujah had been cut off so that none of the men could leave, and then bombed from the air. One observer compared Fallujah to Dresden, the German city that had been destroyed by firebombing during World War Two.(12) According to eyewitnesses, the use of incendiary weapons that could not be put out with water had melted some of the victims.

One Set of Rules For Everyone Else – No Rules For The Powerful

From 1945-1949 the German leaders from World War Two were tried for their crimes at the Nuremberg Trials. They were found guilty of three sets of crimes. Crimes against peace, which means going to war in the first place; crimes against humanity, such as mass murder; and breaking the rules of war (see below). This whole procedure was hypocritical, because the US and Britain had regularly committed all three sets of crimes before the trials began, and they have committed all three sets of crimes on numerous occasions since.(13)

The conclusion at the end of the trials was that invading another country is one of the worst crimes any group of people can commit, because it encompasses every violent act that follows. However, many of the military actions carried out by the US since 1945 and listed in earlier posts are crimes of this type. If we judged US crimes by the standards of Nuremberg, every US President since WW2 would have been found guilty of serious crimes.(14) Despite the US and Britain being responsible for, or actively supporting, many of the world's worst war crimes and human rights violations throughout the last seventy years, the notion of holding these governments to account is rarely discussed by politicians or the mainstream media. In practice we have 'victor's justice', where the losers can be prosecuted for war crimes, but the victorious side is not. The US is now so powerful that it is not prosecuted for any of its crimes. Neither is Britain.

Over the years, legal experts have created 'rules of war', which most people think of as the rules that apply after the war has started. These are discussed regularly by the media when other countries violate them, but are mostly ignored by decision-makers in the US and British governments. In the real world, once war begins, there are no rules. There is an expression, 'in time of war, law is silent' and former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said "In the struggle for life and death there is in the end no legality".(15) The former US representative at the UN, John Bolton, has made it clear that International Law does not apply to the US.(16) The historical evidence clearly shows that in any war, both sides ignore the rules as and when they choose. Discussions about the rules, after a war has started, are analogous to debating whether a violent rapist wore a condom.(17) Going to war in the first place is the real crime. Once war begins, debating the rules within that war is a propaganda technique to shift responsibility for wrongdoing onto individual soldiers, rather than the politicians who created the war.

The Iraq and Afghanistan war logs that were released by Wikileaks show clearly that once war begins, soldiers commit human rights abuses on a daily basis. They murder, torture and injure civilians, then cover up those crimes.(18) War is death, destruction, mutilation, violence and rape on an enormous scale. When our politicians vote for war, they are voting for the industrial-scale slaughter of human beings.

Human Rights Are Currently Just Public Relations

Politicians and the mainstream media present the world in a simplistic way, which has been described as the '3 V's division of humanity - villains, victims and victorious saviours', where the US are always presented as the victorious saviours.(19) The evidence shows this is just propaganda. We have already seen in earlier posts that the US has come close to genocide in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq; has killed large numbers of people in Afghanistan, Libya and many other countries; has supported dictators committing genocide in Indonesia; and it has also supported regimes in central Africa that have fought wars where upwards of 4 million people have died. The US and British governments have ignored human rights whenever it has suited them. They have never taken human rights seriously. When they criticise another governments' human rights record, it is not because of a genuine concern for human rights.

Useful Websites

Wikileaks Iraq war logs <https://wikileaks.org/irq/>

Wikileaks Afghan War Diary <https://wikileaks.org/afg/>

Further Reading

Kirsten Sellars - *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*

Jean Bricmont - *Humanitarian Imperialism*

Notes

1) David Lloyd George, cited in Mark Curtis, *The Great Deception*, 1998, p.135.

2) Francis Drake is discussed in Krzysztof Wilczynski, 'The Gentleman Pirate', at www.piratesinfo.com/biography/biography.php?article_id=32

Henry Stanley is discussed in Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 2012

Christopher Columbus is discussed at Dylan Matthews, '9 Reasons Christopher Columbus was a murderer, tyrant and scoundrel', Vox, 12 Oct 2015, at

<https://www.vox.com/2014/10/13/6957875/christopher-columbus-murderer-tyrant-scoundrel>

3) Amnesty International, 'Death Penalty Facts and Figures', April 2019, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/04/death-penalty-facts-and-figures-2018/>

4) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, at

<https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

5) Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, 2002, p.7

6) Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, 2002, p.95

7) <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/united-states>

8) Patrick Cockburn, 'We must avoid the terrorist trap', *The Independent*, July 11, 2005, at

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/patrick-cockburn-we-must-avoid-the-terrorist-trap-5346486.html>

9) Michael K. Duffy, *Peacemaking Christians: The future of just wars, pacifism, and nonviolent resistance*, 1995, p.65

10) Joyce Chediak, 'The Massacre of Withdrawing Soldiers On The Highway of Death', in Ramsey Clark et al, *War Crimes: A Report on United States War Crimes against Iraq*, 1992, at http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/International_War_Crimes/Massacre_JChediak_WC.html

See also Geoff Simons, *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice*, 1996

There were actually multiple massacres carried out by the US military on different highways. Most mainstream news sources have tried to play down the severity of these events, but there were some mainstream eyewitnesses:

Journalist Robert Fisk arrived very quickly and said he saw bodies everywhere

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highway_of_Death

Journalist Peter Turnley said he saw US soldiers burying many bodies in large graves before other journalists arrived.

Peter Turnley, 'The unseen gulf war', Dec 2002, at http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0212/pt_intro.html

see also Seymour Hersh, 'Overwhelming Force: What happened in the final days of the gulf war?', *The New Yorker*, 22 May 2000, pp.49-82, at

<https://cryptome.org/mccaffrey-sh.htm>

11) Maggie O'Kane, 'How To Tell Lies And Win Wars', *Muslim and Arab Perspectives* 2:11-12, 1995, pp.31-43, at

www.missionislam.com/nwo/gulfwar.htm

See also, Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, 2003, footnotes at

<http://www.understandingpower.com/>

12) Rory McCarthy and Peter Beaumont, 'Civilian cost of Battle for Fallujah Emerges', 14 Nov 2004, at

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/14/iraq.iraq3>

For more on Fallujah, see also Dahr Jamail, 'What I Saw In Fallujah', 5 Nov 2007, *The New Statesman*, at

<http://www.dahrjamail.net/2007/11/05/what-i-saw-in-fallujah/>

David Cromwell and David Edwards, 'Some Matter More - When 47 Victims Are Worth 43 Words', *Medialens*, 22 July, 2008, at

<https://www.medialens.org/2008/some-matter-more-when-47-victims-are-worth-43-words/>

13) Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, 2002, p.34

14) Noam Chomsky, 'If the Nuremberg laws were applied...', 1990, at

https://chomsky.info/1990____-2/

15) Kirsten Sellars, *The Rise and Rise of Human Rights*, 2002, p.36

16) Fred Kaplan, 'Send Bolton Wandering: Why The Senate Should Reject Bush's UN Nominee', Slate, 5 April 2005, at

www.slate.com/id/2116264/

17) Jean Bricmont, *Humanitarian Imperialism*, 2005, p.147

18) Wikileaks, 'Iraq war logs', at <https://wikileaks.org/irq/>

Wikileaks, 'Afghan war diary', at <https://wikileaks.org/afg/>

19) Diana Johnstone, 'Why the French hate Chomsky', Counterpunch, June 12, 2010

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2010/06/14/why-the-french-hate-chomsky/>

Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the ninth in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

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