

War is God's Way of Teaching Geography

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I recently flew from Seattle to Seoul, South Korea and thence to Hanoi, to join a two-week tour of Vietnam with VFP—Veterans for Peace. The tour is led by American veterans of the Vietnam War who now live in that country, working to in some way atone for the damage done there during that war.

The Vietnamese are a sweet, friendly, even kindly people, and it is impressive to recall how the western countries have treated them. The French colonized Vietnam in the 1860s and enslaved the Vietnamese people, forcing them to work for the enrichment of France. We have toured the prison that the French built for resisters, which included a guillotine for those who failed to grasp the god-given right of the French to rule over them. When the French tried to regain their 'Indochina' colony (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) after WW II, the U.S. supported them (we paid most of the cost of the 'First Indochina War'), then we invaded and brutalized the Vietnamese for 20 years after the French were defeated (the 'Second Indochina War', 1955-1975).

As my plane crossed over the Japanese city of Tokyo on the way into Seoul, I realized that I was retracing a geography that I was familiar with largely from America's wars. The United States firebombed Tokyo on March 10th 1945, dropping 2000 tons of incendiary bombs on the wood and paper houses of that city, incinerating 16 square miles and killing an estimated 120,000 citizens in the worst single firestorm in history. U.S. General Curtis LeMay said, 'It was the biggest firecracker the Japanese had ever seen.' A few months later, on August 7th of that year we dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, killing an estimated 75,000 people on that day (150,000 total), and on August 9th we dropped another on Nagasaki, killing another 40,000 almost instantly (80,000 over time).

An hour later we landed in Seoul, South Korea. The United States divided Korea into north and south in August of 1945, then invaded South Korea on September 8th 1945 (note that American reports of this event always write that the U.S. marines 'landed' in South Korea, minimizing the impact of reality; all cultures interpret events in a manner favorable to themselves) dissolving the new socialist government that had just formed and installing our own man, Syngman Rhee, who had been living in Washington DC for the previous 40 years. This unwarranted and illegal interference led to the Korean War 5 years later, during which North Korea was utterly and completely devastated by American military power. 3 million North Koreans were killed out of a total population of 9 million—33% of the population. All of the cities and most of the villages, roads, dams and dikes in that country were destroyed, creating a veritable hell on Earth for those millions of peasants. In 1952 General Curtis LeMay noted with evident pleasure that, 'We have bombed every city twice, and now we are going to pulverize them into stones.'

From Seoul I flew into Hanoi where I met the rest of the VFP group. The American bombing of Hanoi in 1965 (Operation Rolling Thunder), 1968 (Operation Linebacker I) and 1972 (Operation Linebacker II) caused massive damage to this ancient city and killed thousands of people. From Hanoi we traveled to the city of Hue, in central Vietnam; Hue was completely destroyed by U.S. bombing of the city during the 1968 Tet offensive. One reporter, Robert Shaplen wrote at the time, "Nothing I saw during the Korean War, or in the Vietnam War so far has been as terrible, in terms of destruction and despair, as what I saw in Hue."

Wherever you go, you will find the land, the people, the infrastructure has been at some point bombed by the United States. Remarkably, the United States has been bombing Iraq regularly since 1990 (including during the 13 years of sanctions). Prior to 1990 the United States provided weapons to both Iraq and Iran for their 1980-1988 war. It is now a ruined nation, a failed state. The British first invaded Afghanistan in 1838, then again in 1868 and 1920. The United States took over the job in 1956, when it built an airbase in Kandahar capable of accepting intercontinental bombers. The United States supported the fundamentalist mujahedeen with billions of dollars of weapons in the Afghan war with the Soviets (1979-1987), and has now been at war with and occupying Afghanistan since 2001—14 years. Afghanistan is also a failed state, as is Libya, which we bombed to rubble in 2011, and Syria, which we are currently destroying by supply the weapons of war to various factions.

One begins to perceive a pattern here in terms of how the America relates to the rest of the world: endless bombing of other people, other societies and the Earth itself. America's pervasive aggression against others has given rise to the axiom, 'War is god's way of teaching geography.' Who knew where Hue or Pyongyang or Nagasaki or Fallujah were before we destroyed them?

What is the cause of this pathology of pandemic American brutality? We have a case of arrested psychological development on a national scale. Child psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg found that the moral development of children went through several stages. Young children's early social behavior is typically driven by a fear of punishment or and related need for obedience. In the second stage of moral development individuals are concerned with the maintenance of law and social order. As they continue to mature people recognize that rules and laws serve social functions and can be altered. Kohlberg in particular identified the highest stage of moral development as one in which individuals live, act, and think according to universal ethical principles that emerge naturally in mature individuals.

Most Americans are trapped in the first stage of moral development, fear of punishment and the need for obedience. Writer Larken Rose notes in his book *The Most Dangerous Superstition* that, 'There is a harsh contrast between what we are taught is the purpose of "authority" (to create a peaceful, civilized society) and the real-world results of "authority" in action. Flip through any history book and you will see that most of the injustice and destruction that has occurred throughout the world was not the result of people "breaking the law," but rather the result of people obeying and enforcing the "laws" of various "governments." The evils that have been committed in spite of "authority" are trivial compared to the evils that have been committed in the name of "authority.... The belief in "authority," which includes all belief in "government," is irrational and self-contradictory; it is contrary to civilization and morality, and constitutes the most dangerous, destructive superstition that has ever existed. Rather than being a force for order and justice, the belief

in “authority” is the archenemy of humanity.’

It is only when we come alive to our latent capacity for compassionate intelligence, when we care enough about the destruction of other humans and ecosystems and the widespread ‘killing of hope’ by the American military machine to question and/or reject external authority over our moral and ethical lives, we can each take the next step on our individual journeys towards becoming mature, useful and relevant human beings.

Postscript:

In the abstraction of words we lose track of just what war is. Here is a reminder of the nature of war, an excerpt from Nick Turse’s recent, well-documented work on the Vietnam war, *Kill Everything that Moves*. U.S. marines had burst into a thatch hut belonging to a young Vietnamese couple. The young mother, Huong, ‘was dragged to the side of the house. A marine held his hand over her mouth; others pinned her arms and legs to the ground. They tore off her pants, ripped open her shirt, and groped her. Then the gang rape began. First one marine, then another. Five in all. Huong’s sobs elicited more screams of protest from her husband, so the marines began beating him again, after which a burst of gunfire silenced him. Her mother-in-law’s sobs ended after another staccato burst, and her sister-in-law’s after a third. Soon Huong could no longer hear the children. Then came a crack and a blinding flash, followed by searing pain that brought her to the ground. The marines exploded a grenade to make the scene “look good,” then radioed in their results: three dead Viet Cong.’

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