

We Had To Destroy [Fill in Country Name] In Order To Save It

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The classic Vietnam War statement by a US officer explaining the need to destroy a town in Vietnam in order to "save it" still resonates in left analyses, in part because it captures so well the self-righteous US brazenness in rationalizing its devastation of its victims. But it also resonates because of its continued applicability, as one country after the next is destroyed as the superpower moves from Vietnam to Cambodia to El Salvador and Nicaragua to Iraq to Panama to Colombia to Yugoslavia to Afghanistan and back to Iraq (this list is incomplete, and also doesn't include destruction by client and "constructively engaged" states like Indonesia, Israel and South Africa).

As Madeleine Albright said to Colin Powell, "What's the point of having this superb military if we can't use it?" Albright was just a wee bit impatient with Powell for dragging his feet on immediately attacking Yugoslavia, but of course his qualms were overcome and that superb military was permitted to do its work of devastation.

Certain principles and rules of destruction-to-save-the-target-population were clarified in the Vietnam War experience. One was that US military deaths and the return of body bags was politically costly (although the mistreatment of veterans once they got home was a matter of no concern). This led to the conclusion that the United States had to fight short wars and use capital intensive methods of warfare to minimize US casualties. This meant that it was best to fight small and virtually defenseless targets, which was helped along by the fact that the US public never saw beating up Grenada, Nicaragua or an economically prostrate and effectively disarmed Iraq as in any way cowardly. A second and related principle was that enemy casualties, civilian or military, were of no account in the US political system, especially where the mainstream media kept graphic details of target victimization at a minimum, as they did readily, helped by official persuasion. From Vietnam to Iraq today, it is notorious that the numbers victimized in these US assaults are not recorded by the victimizers. Chomsky points out in *Hegemony or Survival* that "the death toll of the US wars in Indochina is not known within the range of millions." This irrelevance of target casualties was also helped along by racist contempt for the "little yellow dwarves" (Lyndon Johnson), expressed sometimes as the "mere gook rule."

A third principle was that officials could claim any excuse for attacking their victim and the Free Press would allow them to get away with it. James Reston could claim that we were there to demonstrate "that no state shall use military force or the threat of military force to achieve its political objectives," and the fact that that is precisely what the United States was doing in the face of an admitted politically dominant opposition did not cause Reston to

be written off as a clownish apologist for aggression. It was simply taken for granted by the media during the Vietnam War that international law was for others, not the United States. Officials and their propagandists could claim that the US intervention was to stop China, or the Soviet Union, or “Communism” attempting world conquest, or North Vietnamese aggression, or even “internal aggression” by South Vietnamese within South Vietnam, and the Free Press would never challenge these inane claims and contradictions. Although Eisenhower admitted that Ho Chi Minh would have won a free unification election, which we blocked, and although each of our puppets and our serious analysts admitted that our puppets had no substantial indigenous support, the Free Press never once said that our invasion to support a puppet of our choice was “aggression” — it was allowed to be support of “South Vietnam” against somebody else’s aggression.

Our use of extreme violence, including napalm, chemical warfare, free fire zones, and B-52 raids on villages was never seen by the media as incompatible with our “saving” South Vietnam. We were “saving” it — for control by ourselves through our puppet regimes. But that was never seen to be an Orwellian use of “save” any more than the attempt to impose a puppet by military force in a distant place was considered aggression, when we did it.

Another feature of the Vietnam War was that after the United States left, it not only did not suffer any penalties for blatant aggression and historically unique war crimes (as in the massive use of chemical warfare to destroy food crops), or to pay reparations, which in justice would have run to hundreds of billions of dollars, it maintained and enforced an 18-year boycott on its victim. This established the familiar sequence of destruction alone without any “nation building,” but in this case, where the United States had failed to conquer, there was continued post-conflict “nation destruction.”

This Vietnam sequence of destroying to save and then further post-conflict destruction was surpassed in the case of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and its aftermath. There, after the war’s destruction of much of the Iraq infrastructure, the United States and Britain imposed the “sanctions of mass destruction” that pushed that damaged country further into the abyss of suffering, with an estimated sanctions-related death toll of a million civilians, including half a million children. In the case of Nicaragua, after that tiny victim was crushed in a US proxy war of terror in the 1980s, and a “regime change” successfully accomplished there, the United States did nothing in the way of “nation-building” even after its sponsored rightwing government was installed in 1990. In the case of Serbia and Kosovo, also, the United States did an outstanding job of destruction, especially of Serbia, but after it succeeded in regime change it did little or nothing in the way of “nation-building” in support of the new allied regimes. The United States had established that its specialty was destruction, of course in the alleged interest of saving the various populations from evil, but it was pleased to leave reconciliation and repair to other countries and to the workings of the free market.

The same was true of Afghanistan, where the work of destruction involved both extensive bombing and the mobilization of the old war lords whose rampages and drug business had been contained by the Taliban. But after the Taliban had been routed and thousands of civilians killed in “tragic errors,” and a Western puppet installed, there was little nation-building by the United States and its allies, only in small part a result of the Bush administration’s quick turn to its high priority invasion-occupation of Iraq. The administration and political class find it very easy to spend tens of billions to kill, but they find it hard to allocate large sums for constructive purposes. In fact, large sums for nation-building would be a bit inconsistent with the administration’s devoted effort to scale down

federal expenditures for civilians — that is, for nation-building — at home.

The Iraq invasion-occupation thus fits a familiar pattern: the standard US disregard for international law, internalized by members of the Free Press and population; the excuses for the attack that change over time and that are obvious lies, but allowed to fly until too late to influence policy, as in the Vietnam case; the inability of the media to call the attack and invasion “aggression;” the attack carried out against a virtually disarmed target; the press and populace once again thrilled at the ability of the United States to quickly crush a badly over-matched target; the use of civilian-costly methods of warfare that save US lives at the expense of “mere Iraqis;” the inability of the UN and “international community” to condemn or interfere with this aggression and occupation.

In addition to the destruction directly carried out by the “coalition” in its invasion, the coalition failed to prevent further massive destruction in the ensuing chaos, arson and looting, in violation of the legal obligation of the occupying power.

Even after the lies underlying the invasion-occupation as regards Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and “imminent threat” had been exposed, the Free Press and international community still failed to challenge the right of the United States to occupy Iraq and to determine its future. We were now there to “liberate” the Iraqi people, to save them from Saddam’s rule. You may be sure that the media have not featured the fact that the same crowd now in the liberation game were appeasing Saddam as members of the Reagan-Bush administration in the 1980s, supplying him with aid and even weapons of mass destruction, and protecting him against any threats of sanctions while he was viewed as serviceable to US aims.

Today the Free Press is refusing to look beneath the claim of an intention to grant “sovereignty” and to transfer power to Iraqis on June 30th, to see the ways in which a US military presence and veto power and constraints on the Iraq constitution and law would give this country continued domination. And once again, while US deaths in Iraq are solemnly recorded and read at the close of The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, the numbers of Iraqis killed or injured are hard to determine and their injuries and pain are shown on Al Jazeera but not in the US mainstream media.

The United States has wielded a heavy hand in Iraq, shooting people with minimal provocation, engaging in systematic assassinations of perceived foes, seizing and abusing thousands based on rumor and little evidence and keeping them incommunicado, trying crudely to dominate the media and political process, bringing in large numbers of foreign mercenaries from Chile and elsewhere to help police Iraq, and doing very poorly in meeting basic Iraqi needs as regards water, health care, electricity, food, jobs, and security.

By its heavy hand, and growing Iraqi recognition of its intention to dominate, the United States has stoked an insurgency that has been growing by leaps and bounds. The only Bush administration answer to this development is the application of more force. When applied to a revolt deeply rooted in the civilian population this means counterinsurgency war, with lavish use of deadly weapons, and therefore escalating civilian casualties. So, added on to an initial war of aggression we are now descending into a war of pacification. This will involve a further destruction of Iraq in order to save it — for Western ends and to save the Bush election campaign.

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