

**LI3-- "MAKING AMENDS FOR INDOCHINA'S CALVARY",
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We live in a time in which truth is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Reality is indistinguishable from spin, not only from politicians but sports figures, church leaders and business executives. It seems almost pointless to note the latest untruths - who has the time to research the facts amidst the welter of accusations, attacks, ripostes and counter-attacks?

There are certain lies so monstrous, so odious, so malignant, and so significant, however, that they cry out to heaven for rectification. One of these is the claim of the "Swift Boat Veterans" in their latest ad: that John Kerry lied when he noted that the U.S. had committed widespread war crimes in Indochina as a matter of policy as well as individual wrongdoing. Those who shape opinion in this country have no higher duty than to research the facts of U.S. war crimes in Indochina, and to educate our nation and children about them.

The clearest U.S. violation of the rules of war was the widespread U.S. bombing and use of artillery against villages throughout Indochina, in violation of Article 25 of the U.S.-ratified 1907 Hague Convention which states that "the attack of bombardment, by whatever means, of towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings which are undefended, is prohibited."

Jonathan Schell described, in his classic book The Village of Ben Suc, which had a strong influence upon the young John Kerry, how U.S. bombing was conducted: U.S. planes would fly over vast inhabited areas declared "free fire zones" by U.S. officials, and bomb villages and villagers alike. Equally devastating bombardment of undefended towns and villages occurred from the millions more tons of ground artillery fired from army bases and ships upon undefended towns, villages, dwellings and buildings.

I personally interviewed over 2,000 peasants who had escaped from U.S. bombing in Laos. Every single one said that their villages had been leveled by American bombing, and the evidence of this is still

apparent for those who visit the Plain of Jars today. Most of this bombing was directed at undefended villages, since Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese guerrillas moved easily through a forest so thick that their movements could not be detected from the air.

In Cambodia, U.S. officials claimed that they would not bomb a village unless the "Bombing Officer" at Nakhorn Phanom airbase in Thailand certified that enemy soldiers were present. This was a bald lie. I tape recorded conversations between pilots and their controllers while bombing was being conducted that showed definitively that the Bombing Officer was not consulted before villages were bombed, as reported by Sidney Schanberg in the New York Times in May 1973. I later interviewed the Bombing Officer at Nakhorn Phanom airbase. He said his only task was to ensure there were no CIA teams in the area where the bombing occurred. Villages throughout vast areas of Cambodia, inhabited by two million people according to the U.S. Embassy, were leveled by U.S. bombing.

The United States dropped 6,727,084 tons of bombs on Indochina, more than triple what was dropped on all of Europe and the entire Pacific theater in World War II. We will never know how many innocent Indochinese peasants died from these illegal bombardments, but former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara has estimated that 3.4 million Indochinese died during the war. Since the vast majority of these perished from U.S. firepower, it is likely that the innocents who died from U.S. bombardment and shelling is to be numbered in the hundreds of thousands or even millions.

John Kerry stated on Meet the Press in April, 1971, that "I committed the same kinds of atrocities as thousands of others in that I shot in free fire zones, fired .50-caliber machine bullets, used harass-and-interdiction fire, joined in search-and-destroy missions, and burned villages. All of these acts are contrary to the laws of the Geneva Convention, and all were ordered as written, established policies from the top down, and the men who ordered this are war criminals."

There is no serious doubt that this is a factual description of what occurred in Indochina. The dozens of soldiers who testified to

having committed war crimes at the Detroit "Winter Soldier" hearings, which so affected Kerry just prior to his Meet the Press appearance, had no conceivable reason for implicating themselves other than a desire to tell the truth. Swift Boat veterans insult these brave young men, who so emotionally and movingly described their participation in war crimes at considerable personal cost to themselves, by claiming that they were lying.

The Toledo Blade recently won a Pulitzer for not only reporting that elite Army paratroopers committed warcrimes in Vietnam, but that high U.S. officials including Donald Rumsfeld knew about them but failed to bring charges against the guilty.

As a result of "victor justice", no high-ranking U.S. official has ever been punished, or even reprimanded, for the crimes of war that they ordered in Indochina. We do not teach our children that our nation is capable of the same kinds of violations of the rules of war as those we despise.

This is not only an insult to the innocent who died and to history. It also harms our national self-interest. Had high officials been punished for their war crimes in Indochina it might have made today's crimes like the prison scandal at Abu Ghreib less likely. This would reduce the growing Muslim hatred of America which causes - and will cause - so much anti-American violence.

But there is a far deeper issue at stake here. America's future ability to influence the world for good - or retain the loyalty of its youth - rests, in the end, on its moral authority, on its ability to remember that not only we but the others with whom we share this planet have inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Post-war Germany acknowledged its responsibility for World War II crimes of war not only for the sake of its victims, but for itself. It understood that a nation that does not admit its failings to its children and the world cannot regain its moral center.

Tring Cong Son, the poet-troubador of Vietnam's Calvary, has written these words: "Corpses float on the water, dry in the field, on

the city rooftops, on the winding streets. Corpses lie abandoned under the eaves of the pagoda, on the road to the city churches, on the floors of deserted houses. Oh, springtime, corpses will nourish the plowed soil. Oh, Vietnam, corpses will lend themselves to the soil of tomorrow."

America will not regain its moral standing in the world or finally put the ghosts of Indochina to rest until we teach our children that we created many of these corpses in violation of the rules of war, and that each had a name, a family, dreams and aspirations, and as much of a right to live as do we. If America is to become a nation based on truth again, let it begin with one of the most important verities of all: that we bear responsibility for the civilian deaths we caused in Indochina and need to make amends for them.