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Imperialism and the Logic Of Mass Destruction

By Carl Boggs
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As throughout much of its war-obsessed history, the United States is currently engaged in military conflict – or threatening such action – across a broad contested terrain. In the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, Washington has resorted to its familiar global *modus operandi*: sending off barrages of missiles and bombs, much of it hitting civilian populations and resources needed for their survival. Death tolls mount, the largest numbers lately in the protracted battle for Mosul. Heavier casualties are being visited upon non-combatants in Yemen, thanks to U.S.-backed Saudi aerial savagery.

We have been told by the media that President Trump has apparently relaxed the rules of warfare, thus allowing civilians to be more easily victimized the midst of armed conflict. Innocent noncombatants are being made increasingly vulnerable to ravages of the largest and most aggressive war machine in history. That, however, would be a serious misreading of the situation: Trump, like Obama, the Bushes, and Clinton before him, is simply operating within an historical pattern of imperial war making for which rules of engagement matter little, if at all. There is no deviation from the norm.

In fact Pentagon elites insist nothing has changed in their methods of warfare – and they are right. While the U.S. accuses, threatens, and attacks others for their (real or imputed) transgressions, its own apparatus of mass destruction continues with few legal or moral constraints. In particular, Washington long ago turned aerial terrorism into a normalized mode of technowar that reduces civilians to dispensable objects.

In recent weeks U.S. aerial bombardments in Syria alone have reportedly killed several hundred people, mainly civilians. Daily raids in Iraq, mostly targeting ISIS in Mosul, have accounted for more than 3000 civilian deaths, according to AirWars sources. To believe this is a departure from the past – or that civilian casualties are simply an inevitable by-product of combat – is to ignore the American history of savage warfare, which since World War II has meant bringing horrendous death and destruction from the skies.

There is actually nothing “indiscriminate” about this savagery: all too often it has been planned, deliberate, systematic – and *discriminate*. Moreover, the U.S. has far surpassed any other nation in the production, deployment, and *use* of WMD, its military doctrines now as in the past embracing the virtues of weaponry designed to bring mass destruction. Consider that WMD comes in four distinct types: nuclear, biological, chemical, conventional (mainly saturation bombing). We could add to this list economic sanctions of the sort the U.S. (through the United Nations) imposed on Iraq during the 1990s that killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. As the U.S. resorted to sanctions continuously in the postwar era – targeting Iran, Cuba, Yugoslavia, North Korea, and Russia as well as Iraq – the civilian death toll (well past a million) has far exceeded that from nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons *combined*.

Yet it is *conventional* warfare that has brought the greatest destruction, for both combatants and civilians – and it remains the most imposing threat today. The WMD threat arrives in the form of strategic (alternatively saturation, area, carpet, or scorched-earth) bombing, introduced by the British and Americans during World War II and refined across the decades. Worth noting is that the U.S. is the only nation to have manufactured, stored, deployed, and used *all five types of WMD*.

In densely-populated centers like Mosul and Raqqa – and where hundreds of drone strikes are carried out – efforts to distinguish between combatants and civilians are virtually impossible; large numbers of civilian dead and wounded tolls are inevitable. That has never deterred U.S. military decision-makers at the Pentagon or in the field, whatever “rules” are set forth in the Universal Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) or international statutes. From World War II to Korea, Indochina, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and beyond, this carnage is alternately blamed on mistakes, inescapable “collateral damage”, intelligence failures, enemy use of “human shields” – all while boasting of the latest “precision weaponry”. Unfortunately, the U.S. military rarely conducts genuine investigations into the devastation it produces, and for good reason: it does want to come face-to-face with its flagrant war crimes.

Since late 2014 U.S. (or Coalition) planes have carried out more than 20,000 strikes in Iraq and Syria, resulting in an estimated 70,000 “militant” deaths – a number that surely includes civilian losses that will never be known and based on a calculus that is routinely understated. According to AirWars, at least 3325 civilians were killed from a total of 566 air strikes in the region, but that is only where evidence is clearly available. Meanwhile, recent non-combatant deaths in Mosul alone have reached more than 2500, as reported by AirWars. Important civilian objects – residences, public buildings, markets, etc. – have been repeatedly hit with high-explosive weaponry. The bombing raids have only intensified.

What is taking place in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria replicates a familiar disregard for long-established international law, as even the corporate media unwittingly acknowledges by attributing a “loosening of rules” to the out-of-control Trump. California Representative Ted Lieu recently sent a letter to Defense Secretary James Mattis seeking clarification of American global behavior: “The substantial increases in civilian deaths caused by U.S. military force in Syria and Iraq brings into question whether the Trump administration is violating the Laws of War.” Trump is indeed violating such laws – specifically the 1949 Geneva Protocol prohibiting wanton attacks on civilians – but, as noted, he is simply following deeply-entrenched American practices.

For more than a century American imperialism has been fueled by a combustible mixture of national exceptionalism, militarism, racism, and pursuit of global supremacy. Civilian inhabitants and their necessary supports have never stood in the way of these powerful forces, even where it has meant resort to WMD. Demonized Asian populations have been mercilessly targeted, with impunity – and unbelievably savage consequences. Looking at the apparent willingness of the Trump administration to consider nuclear warfare on the Korean peninsula, with its unthinkable horrors, we can readily see that little has changed over the decades.

As Washington looks to reassert economic, political, and military leverage in the Asia-Pacific region – the so-called “Asian Pivot” to contain China – escalating U.S. threats should be taken seriously. Whether conventional or nuclear, the Pentagon is poised to strike first against North Korea. For several months, indeed years, the U.S. has done everything short of all-out war to intimidate and subvert the Kim Jung Un regime: large-scale military exercises, economic sanctions, cyberattacks, new troop deployments, constant threats of attack. There is much talk in Washington and the media of “preemptive war”, including efforts to “decapitate” the regime. A supposedly impenetrable missile-defense system (THAAD) is being installed across South Korea.

Koreans already know far more than they would prefer about the horrors of mass destruction emanating from the U.S. What can only be called a war of annihilation, carried out by the U.S. to secure battlefield victory over endless stalemate, in the face of strong Chinese and North Korean forces, left a death toll on the peninsula with estimates reaching as high as five million, nearly 80 percent civilian. Political, legal, and moral constraints were routinely tossed aside, as American military culture eagerly took up the World War II code that mass killing of civilians was legitimate – actually vital – to the kind of war of attrition the U.S. had waged against the Japanese.

When the U.S. Army was forced into a perilous retreat in fall 1950, General Douglas MacArthur ordered his air force to destroy “every means of communication, every installation, factory, city, town, and village” in Korea. Food sources and water facilities were systematically targeted and obliterated. Nonstop raids, employing napalm and other incendiary devices, left the main centers of human life (including the capital Pyongyang) in smoking ruins. Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman, in their eye-opening book *The United States and Biological Warfare*, write: “As it had been in World War II, strategic bombing was extended to the mass destruction of civilian populations, and as in World War II the reservations that the U.S. had about saturation bombing of Europeans in that earlier war were not extended to Asians.”

In December of 1950 the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed President Truman's readiness to use atomic bombs in Korea to avoid further stalemate or defeat. This "option" was retained throughout the war, finally to be jettisoned by President Eisenhower in 1953. White House and Pentagon officials also favored employing both chemical and biological weapons in a theater where mass destruction was already far advanced.

In fact the U.S. *did* launch a phase of biological warfare in Korea, a criminal project the warfare state has tried to keep secret. Evidence uncovered by the Koreans and Chinese revealed a U.S. military campaign to disseminate a wide variety of deadly biological agents, hoping to create epidemics, panic, and social breakdown in the north. In late 1950 large outbreaks of plague, cholera, smallpox, and encephalitis were reported in Pyongyang and several provinces, according to Endicott and Hagerman. This was part of a scorched-earth policy U.S. troops employed as they retreated southward throughout 1950 and 1951.

Endicott and Hagerman add: "The U.S. had substantial stocks of biological weapons on hand. Moral qualms about using biological or atomic weapons had been brushed aside by top leaders and biological warfare might dodge the political bullet of adverse public and world opinion if it were kept secret enough to make plausible denial of its use." Moreover, Washington had not signed the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning such weaponry. Later investigations and reports found the U.S. guilty as charged, a finding naturally dismissed by Americans as "Communist propaganda".

The Pentagon's biological program was kept intact until early 1953. Meanwhile, the U.S. Air Force was busy destroying every Korean target in sight, including agricultural fields and hydroelectric dams, dropping an endless supply of fragmentation bombs, napalm, and high-explosive devices. In August 1952 Pyongyang was leveled by a series of saturation-bombing raids. Still unable to break the military stalemate, the USAF transferred a large stock of atomic weapons to Okinawa as it prepared for a new phase of warfare that, fortunately, was never set in motion.

Embracing the great benefits of WMD, the U.S. military was able to revitalize its strategy of total war, understood by many at the summits of power as God's work. General Matthew Ridgway, Eighth Army commander, could say in 1951: "The real issues are whether the power of Western civilization, as God has permitted it to flower in our own beloved lands, shall defy and defeat Communism . . . [and] whether we are able to survive with God's hand to guide and lead us, or to perish in the dead existence of a Godless world." Before Korea, the God of a privileged imperial nation had similarly blessed the American takeover of the Philippines at a cost of several hundred thousand lives – and before that the massacre of Indian tribes (by Andrew Jackson's troops) at Horseshoe Bend and (by Colonel John Chivington's marauders) at Sand Creek, among many other atrocities.

An imperialist ideology that embellished, even celebrated, warfare against civilians reached its first methodical expression during World War II. In the Pacific, this meant a war of annihilation against the Japanese, who at that time stood for the "Asian masses" or "hordes". In such a war everything was permissible, starting with the deliberate and ruthless obliteration of entire cities, including those with little or no military significance. Saturation bombing launched by waves of

the most technologically-developed warplanes raised barbarism to new levels. Admiral William Halsey, U.S. Pacific Fleet commander, vowing revenge for Pearl Harbor, promised that Japanese would henceforth be spoken only in hell while ordering his personnel to “kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs.” (Worth noting: only *military* targets were hit at Pearl Harbor.) The remarkable American hatred of Japanese was destined to produce, in John Dower’s words (*War without Mercy*) “a spellbinding spectacle of brutality and death.”

On March 9-10, 1945, U.S. planes dropped 1,665 tons of incendiary bombs on Tokyo, with the aim of destroying the city; at least 100,000 civilians were instantly killed. Aerial terrorism then turned to Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe, and more than 60 other cities, targeting mostly defenseless civilian areas with vengeful frenzy. A few cities remained – Hiroshima and Nagasaki among them – until they were obliterated by the new superweapon developed at the Manhattan Project, leaving another 150,000 dead amid unimaginable mass destruction.

There could be no justification for such criminality. A.J. Grayling, in his book *All the Dead Cities*, surveyed the history of strategic bombing and concluded that World War II pilots should have refused orders to carry out such raids. (None in fact did.) General Curtis LeMay, architect of the firebombing attacks on Japanese cities, later conceded: “If we had lost the war we would all have been prosecuted as war criminals.” Allied prosecutors at the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals moved to exclude that very possibility, so aerial mass murder was exempted from wartime culpability.

World War II set in motion an elevated trajectory of imperial atrocities that would continue throughout the postwar years. While nations were generally expected to follow international law and wartime rules of engagement, and the vast majority have chosen to do so, the U.S. simply took another path: contempt for the norms of universality. To this day Washington steadfastly refuses participation in the International Criminal Court (ICC), understandably fearing prosecution of its own government and military personnel for war crimes. The plain fact is that American elites can routinely launch wars against peace and target civilian populations without even the pretense of any legal rationale.

Less than a decade after the Korean War the U.S. commenced a new phase of barbarism in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, dropping eight million tons of bombs compared to the two million tons dropped on all countries in World War II. This was equivalent to 640 Hiroshimas. Saturation bombing was perfected beyond its usage against Japan and Korea: B-52s systematically carpet-bombed large zones, followed by a torrent of anti-personnel weapons including cluster bombs, white-phosphorous, and a specially-upgraded napalm. By 1974, the U.S. military had dropped seven bombs for every person in Indochina. As for napalm, a staggering 373,000 tons was unleashed in Vietnam, compared to 32,000 tons in Korea.

In Vietnam, the Pentagon relied heavily on chemical warfare: roughly 6500 flights to spray Agent Orange and other toxic agents were carried out between 1962 and 1971, the intent being to destroy crops and foliage. Operation Ranch Hand contaminated more than 31,000 square kilometers, poisoning at least four million people and leaving hundreds of thousands afflicted with cancer, lung diseases, and birth defects. Such warfare could never distinguish combatants from civilians, nor did the U.S. military command make any real efforts to do so.

In more recent decades, civilian death tolls resulting from U.S. military operations in the Middle East and beyond have easily surpassed one million. Harsh economic sanctions imposed on Iraq, Yugoslavia, Iran, Syria, Cuba, and others could have reached that same figure. Aerial bombardments have devastated large, densely-populated areas of Iraq, Panama, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. Weapons “upgraded” with depleted uranium (DU) have left a toxic legacy in Iraq and Serbia, overwhelmingly harming civilians.

Back to Korea: the Trump administration says it has “lost all patience” with North Korean leaders and their “reckless behavior”, and has (again) “opened the door” to military attack while seemingly holding out prospects of diplomacy that, however, depend on rigid stipulations. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that for any talks to occur North Korea would first have to “exhibit good faith commitment” by jettisoning its nuclear program – a complete non-starter. Given such imperial arrogance, can mounting confrontation be avoided?

With all that is at stake – perhaps one million people killed within the first day or so of a new Korean War, vast urban centers decimated, a potential nuclear exchange – rational leadership might be expected to retreat from such a nightmarish scenario and consider a more peaceful *modus vivendi*. (For the U.S., a peaceful option is exactly what is “off the table”.) From the standpoint of Washington, “rational” pursuits are also imperial pursuits and imperial pursuits generally lead to military pursuits, as history demonstrates. Technowar managers are not especially sensitive to the prospects of massive civilian losses. Normal behavioral assumptions therefore do not apply to U.S. war calculations, whoever occupies the White House.