

The Grotesque Immorality of the US War Against Vietnam. Veterans For Peace Brian Willson

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Celebration of Memorial Day in the US, originally Decoration Day, commenced shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. This is a national holiday to remember the people who died while serving in the armed forces. The day traditionally includes decorating graves of the fallen with flowers.

As a Viet Nam veteran, I know the kinds of pain and suffering incurred by over three million US soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen, 58,313 of whom paid the ultimate price whose names are on The Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC. The Oregon Vietnam Memorial Wall alone, located here in Portland, contains 803 names on its walls.

The function of a memorial is to preserve memory. On this US Memorial Day, May 30, 2016, I want to preserve the memory of all aspects of the US war waged against the Southeast Asian people in Viet Nam, Laos, and Cambodia – what we call the Viet Nam War – as well as the tragic impacts it had on our own people and culture. My own healing and recovery requires me to honestly describe the war and understand how it has impacted me psychically, spiritually, and politically.

Likewise, the same remembrance needs to be practiced for both our soldiers and the victims in all the other countries affected by US wars and aggression. For example, the US incurred nearly 7,000 soldier deaths while causing as many as one million in Afghanistan and Iraq alone, a ratio of 1:143.

It is important to identify very concretely the pain and suffering we caused the Vietnamese – a people who only wanted to be independent from foreign occupiers, whether Chinese, France, Japan, or the United States of America. As honorably, and in some cases heroically, our military served and fought in Southeast Asia, we were nonetheless serving as cannon fodder, in effect mercenaries for reasons other than what we were told. When I came to understand the true nature of the war, I felt betrayed by my government, by my religion, by my cultural conditioning into “American Exceptionalism,” which did a terrible disservice to my own humanity, my own life’s journey. Thus, telling the truth as I uncover it is necessary for recovering my own dignity.

I am staggered by the amount of firepower the US used, and the incredible death and destruction it caused on an innocent people. Here are some statistics:

- Seventy-five percent of South Viet Nam was considered a free-fire zone (i.e., genocidal zones)
- Over 6 million Southeast Asians killed

- Over 64,000 US and Allied soldiers killed
- Over 1,600 US soldiers, and 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers remain missing
- Thousands of amputees, paraplegics, blind, deaf, and other maimings created
- 13,000 of 21,000 of Vietnamese villages, or 62 percent, severely damaged or destroyed, mostly by bombing
- Nearly 950 churches and pagodas destroyed by bombing
- 350 hospitals and 1,500 maternity wards destroyed by bombing
- Nearly 3,000 high schools and universities destroyed by bombing
- Over 15,000 bridges destroyed by bombing
- 10 million cubic meters of dikes destroyed by bombing
- Over 3,700 US fixed-wing aircraft lost
- 36,125,000 US helicopter sorties during the war; over 10,000 helicopters were lost or severely damaged
- 26 million bomb craters created, the majority from B-52s (a B-52 bomb crater could be 20 feet deep, and 40 feet across)
- 39 million acres of land in Indochina (or 91 percent of the land area of South Viet Nam) were littered with fragments of bombs and shells, equivalent to 244,000 (160 acre) farms, or an area the size of all New England except Connecticut
- 21 million gallons (80 million liters) of extremely poisonous chemicals (herbicides) were applied in 20,000 chemical spraying missions between 1961 and 1970 in the most intensive use of chemical warfare in human history, with as many as 4.8 million Vietnamese living in nearly 3,200 villages directly sprayed by the chemicals
 - 24 percent, or 16,100 square miles, of South Viet Nam was sprayed, an area larger than the states of Connecticut, Vermont, and Rhode Island combined, killing tropical forest, food crops, and inland forests
 - Over 500,000 Vietnamese have died from chronic conditions related to chemical spraying with an estimated 650,000 still suffering from such conditions; 500,000 children have been born with Agent Orange-induced birth defects, now including third generation offspring
- Nearly 375,000 tons of fireballing napalm was dropped on villages
- Huge Rome Plows (made in Rome, Georgia), 20-ton earthmoving D7E Caterpillar tractors, fitted with a nearly 2.5-ton curved 11-foot wide attached blade protected by 14 additional tons of armor plate, scraped clean between 700,000 and 750,000 acres (1,200 square miles), an area equivalent to Rhode Island, leaving bare earth, rocks, and smashed trees
- As many as 36,000,000 total tons of ordnance expended from aerial and naval bombing, artillery, and ground combat firepower. On an average day US artillery expended 10,000 rounds costing \$1 million per day; 150,000-300,000 tons of UXO remain scattered around Southeast Asia: 40,000 have been killed in Viet Nam since the end of the war in 1975, and nearly 70,000 injured; 20,000 Laotians have been killed or injured since the end of the war
- 13.7 billion gallons of fuel were consumed by US forces during the war
- If there was space for all 6,000,000 names of Southeast Asian dead on the Vietnam Wall in Washington, DC, it would be over 9 sobering miles long, or nearly 100 times its current 493 foot length

I am not able to memorialize our sacrificed US soldiers without also remembering the death and destroyed civilian infrastructure we caused in our illegal invasion and occupation of Viet

Nam, Laos and Cambodia. It has been 47 years since I carried out my duties in Viet Nam. My “service” included being an eyewitness to the aftermath of bombings from the air of undefended fishing villages where virtually all the inhabitants were massacred, the vast majority being small children. In that experience, I felt complicit in a diabolical crime against humanity. This experience led me to deeply grasping that I am not worth more than any other human being, and they are not worth less than me.

Recently I spent more than three weeks in Viet Nam, my first trip back since involuntarily being sent there in 1969. I was struck by the multitudes of children suffering from birth defects, most caused presumably by the US chemical spraying some 50 years ago. I experienced deep angst knowing that the US is directly responsible for this genetic damage now being passed on from one generation to the next. I am ashamed that the US government has never acknowledged responsibility or paid reparations. I found myself apologizing to the people for the crimes of my country.

When we only memorialize US soldiers while ignoring the victims of our aggression, we in effect are memorializing war. I cannot do that. War is insane, and our country continues to perpetuate its insanity on others, having been constantly at war since at least 1991. We fail our duties as citizens if we remain silent rather than calling our US wars for what they are – criminal and deceitful aggressions violating international and US law to assure control of geostrategic resources, deemed necessary to further our insatiable American Way Of Life (AWOL).

Memorial Day for me requires remembering ALL of the deaths and devastation of our wars, and it should remind all of us of the need to end the madness. If we want to end war, we must begin to directly address our out-of-control capitalist political economy that knows no limits to profits for a few at the expense of the many, including our soldiers.

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This article was originally published on the author's blog site, [S. Brian Willson](#).

S. Brian Willson, as a 1st lieutenant, served as commander of a US Air Force combat security police unit in Viet Nam's Mekong Delta in 1969. He is a trained lawyer who has been an anti-war, peace and justice activist for more than forty years. His psychohistorical memoir, “Blood On The Tracks: The Life and Times of S. Brian Willson” was published in 2011 by PM Press. His book “Don't Thank Me For My Service: My Viet Nam Awakening to the Long History of US Lies” was published in 2018 by Clarity Press. A documentary was produced in 2016, “Paying the Price For Peace: The Story of S. Brian Willson (and Others in the Peace Movement) by Bo Boudart Productions. A long time member of Veterans For Peace, he currently resides in Nicaragua.

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