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in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Ghosts of Christmas Past: The Christmas Bombing of Vietnam

By Roger Pulvers

Christmas brings to mind many wonderful memories for most of us. But history has bequeathed to some a most awful little two-word phrase blackening those memories like a stain. That phrase is "Christmas bombing."

From Dec. 18 until Dec. 30 in 1972, the United States conducted a campaign of intensive aerial bombing, using massive B-52s, over North Vietnam. In the approximately 4,000 sorties flown in what was termed Operation Linebacker II, American pilots concentrated on the major cities of Hanoi and Haiphong. The missions executed so-called area bombing, never precise or pinpoint. Their goal: To kill as many civilians as possible.



B-52 bombing of North Vietnam

Now, when the U.S. is finding itself in a similar situation in Iraq as it was then in Vietnam -- searching for a way to extricate from its own misguided policies -- it may be time (this being Christmas after all) to look ahead to an era when peace will return, one way or another, to Iraq. As it was in Vietnam, the withdrawal of American and allied forces is surely a prerequisite for the establishment of peace in Iraq. Iraqis, like the Vietnamese more than 30 years ago, cannot create a peaceful order under the boot of the American occupier.

When Iraq regains its independence, in whatever form and under whatever political system, will the U.S. and its "coalition of the willing" take responsibility for the immense destruction that the occupation caused? Judging by the postwar Vietnam example, the answer is "no." Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam "not helpful." But, actually, they are very helpful. They form a guide not only to what Americans should do in the present -- admit defeat and withdraw -- but also to what they must do in the future -- make amends with the new government and re-establish relations. The U.S. has, indeed, resumed relations, and quite friendly ones at that, with the Vietnamese government.



Baghdad in flames

Dioxin-loaded chemicals

But has it made amends? A remarkable film, shown earlier this month at the Center for the Study of World Civilizations at Tokyo Institute of Technology, goes a long way to addressing and answering this question.

"Agent Orange -- a personal requiem" is a 70-minute documentary by Sakata Masako. In this film (in English, Japanese and Vietnamese, with either English or Japanese subtitles), Sakata delves deeply into the effects of the use of the herbicide known as Agent Orange. That dioxin-loaded chemical was, for 10 years beginning in 1961, rained on Vietnam, primarily to rob Vietcong soldiers of hiding places in the country's extensive forests.



A UH-1D helicopter on defoliation mission in 1969

The "personal requiem" element of Sakata's film about this tragedy inflicted on a massive scale by one country on another, comes about because she suffered a singular tragedy very close to home.

Greg Davis, a famous American photojournalist who died on May 4, 2003, age 54, was her husband, and their home was in Japan. Davis, whose brilliant work was featured in leading magazines and newspapers all around the world, contracted liver cancer that was, Sakata is convinced, caused by his exposure to Agent Orange while serving with U.S. forces in Vietnam. Sakata, having lost her life partner, whom she met when they were both living in Kyoto in 1970, decided to

honor Greg's life with a film on a subject that both of them were passionate about: the millions of Vietnamese who suffered and continue to suffer from the aftereffects of America's chemical weapons assault on their country.



Vietnamese Agent Orange Victim
Photograph P.J. Griffiths

Agent Orange, so called because of the orange stripe on the drums in which it was stored, was a powerful herbicide and defoliant. More than 72 million liters of Agent Orange were sprayed over Vietnam. The cruel thing about this highly toxic chemical is that its effects reach forward across the generations. Vietnamese children born with birth defects now are the grandchildren of men and women who were victims of the spraying in the 1960s.

Footage of the spraying of Agent Orange appears in Sakata's film. The voice of a U.S.-government spokesman at the time informs us that there is "no harm" to human beings in this, and that the agricultural land becomes safe and fertile again in one year's time.

In fact, the effects of dioxin on animal and plant life are enormous, as the tens of thousands of Vietnamese children with congenital disabilities prove. In areas of the country not sprayed with Agent Orange, rates of deformity are as low as one-twentieth of those in regions that were sprayed.



P.J. Griffiths photograph

In recent years, soldiers who served in Vietnam from the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Korea have been awarded compensation through the courts from companies that were involved in the manufacture of Agent Orange. In the U.S. alone, about 10,000 veterans have received medical disability benefits. And yet, not a single Vietnamese has been able to extract a penny from either the governments involved in the war crime or the firms responsible for the manufacture of the chemical. (Firms in Canada, New Zealand and Australia were also active in its manufacture.)

Lawsuit dismissed

A lawsuit on behalf of some 100 Vietnamese victims, naming 37 firms, with Dow Chemical and Monsanto the most prominent among them, was brought before the Brooklyn (N.Y.) Federal Court in 2005. On March 10 that year, the judge, Jack Weinstein, dismissed the lawsuit, stating that there was no legal basis for the claims and that the use of Agent Orange did not constitute chemical warfare.

If it was not chemical warfare, then what, indeed, was it?

In a world where the poisoning by dioxin of a Ukrainian politician, Viktor Yushchenko, and the murder by radioactive Polonium-210 of Russian emigre, Alexander Litvinenko, garners monumental coverage in the media, surely the fate of what the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange estimates to be more than 4 million sufferers of the effects of Agent Orange rates our attention, our contrition and our amendable action.

Sakata's moving film brought back to me memories of the Vietnam War, the war of my generation, with great poignancy and power. It reminded me that Christmas can have myriad associations, some of them, as in the case of the Christmas bombing of 1972, sickening and immoral. Although that area-bombing campaign was unrelated to the use of Agent Orange, it is nonetheless a symbol of a last-ditch effort on the part of the U.S. to extricate itself from a catastrophe of its own making.

There's the parallel to Iraq; and a Christmas message to the U.S. and its allies: The havoc you have wreaked will take generations to ameliorate, and you will only be able to purge your guilt if you come to terms with its consequences.

I'd like to think that this is a message of light and hope. But judging by the way the U.S. has treated its Vietnamese victims, the real meaning of Christmas -- forgiveness, penitence and honorable reparation -- will, I fear, be lost in darkness and hopelessness for millions of people for many years to come.

*Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, novelist, playwright, theater director, and professor at Tokyo Institute of Technology. His thirty books published in Japanese and English include a newly completed collection of 12 stories from the bible updated for this century, *The Honey and the Fires* (ABC Books, Australia).*

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