

Vietnam's Lessons and the U.S. Culture of Violence

In the wake of another deadly school shooting in Florida, the lessons of past massacres in Vietnam can teach us about U.S. violence and the need to reform unchecked gun culture, discusses Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Back in October 2016 I wrote an analysis entitled "Are Humans Natural-Born Killers?" It described and commented on research on the origins of human violence published in the science journal *Nature*. The conclusion offered in the article is that humans come from an evolutionary line that has the capability for violent behavior genetically built into it. It is a reasonable hypothesis. As just about every serious historian knows, the human propensity for lethal violence goes back as far as the evidence can take us – so far that there can be little doubt that this trait is inherited from our pre-human ancestors.

Yet, as the *Nature* scholars also point out, in the case of our species, culture has the ability to "modulate our bloodthirsty tendencies."

I bring this up now because there is new interest in the slaughter and massacres that took place during the Vietnam War. This may in part be a response to the fact that last month marked the 50th anniversary of that war's Tet offensive.

America waged war in Vietnam roughly from 1961 to 1975. The starting date is a "rough" one because the United States never actually declared war. In this 14-year span it is generally accepted that the turning point in the struggle came during the Tet offensive of 1968. Tet is the term used for the Vietnamese new year, and that celebratory time in 1968 was when the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong launched attacks in some 100 South Vietnamese towns and cities, in an effort to change the course of the war in their favor.

Though very costly (there were an estimated 50,000 Vietnamese casualties) the offensive worked, at least in the long run. Within a year the United States started a gradual withdrawal from the country. Although the fighting dragged on for another seven years (until the fall of Saigon in 1975) it was Washington's stubborn search for face-saving terms that largely kept it going.

By the time of the Tet offensive, the war had degenerated into mutual slaughter. The U.S. ended up killing some 3 million Vietnamese, many of them civilians. The massacre at My Lai on 16 March 1968, has often been cited as the "singular" American example of such criminal behavior. It was on this date that a company

of soldiers of the 23rd Americal Division murdered, without provocation, 504 peasant villagers of all ages and both sexes.

The massacre itself, and its background year of 1968, have been accurately described in a recent book, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968 and the Descent into Darkness*, by Howard Jones (Oxford University Press, 2017). In turn the book has been expertly reviewed and elaborated upon in the popular *London Review of Books* (LRB) (25 January 2018) by Max Hastings.

It is to be noted that both the publisher and the reviewing magazine are located in the United Kingdom. The reviews of the book offered in the United States have been, to date, in academic journals, including the U.S. Army's own *Army University Press*. Just about all of them have described Jones's work as definitive and a seminal important read. Whether this will translate into public attention in the U.S. is doubtful.

Explaining Wartime Massacres

Modern efforts to explain happenings like the My Lai massacre usually bring up the problem of waging war when it has become hard to know who the enemy is – in other words, when not everyone is wearing a uniform and a lot of resistance is coming from irregular forces. The *Army University Press* review raises this issue.

Another possibility is that such behavior is an “inevitable consequence of combat.” In his *LRB* review, Max Hastings gives a long introductory account of a number of other massacres committed by soldiers in modern times, including in Vietnam. As a consequence one comes away with the feeling that, within a war zone, these criminal acts are almost common.

While it is no doubt true that a combat situation (or perhaps we can say the culture of combat) does raise the probability of massacres, they do not make them “inevitable.” Suggesting that they are, sounds more like an excuse than an explanation. After all, most combat soldiers are not participants in massacres.

This brings us back to the judgment of the research published in *Nature* – we all might well be potential natural born killers who are restrained or encouraged by cultural variables. Within the combat scenario, Hastings suggests that a culture of self-restraint accepted and enforced by the officer corps can forestall mass killings.

This is of particular interest when it comes to the peculiar culture of the United States. In Vietnam many of the massacres (My Lai was by no means unique) were perpetrated by soldiers as well as their officers from the so-called “land of the free.” I use this descriptive term intentionally because one of the

things that is often declared to be constitutionally “free” from rational regulation in the U.S. are guns. And, as a consequence, these troops came out of a “gun culture.”

It should be kept in mind that the American gun culture, with its accompanying violence, is not new. The 2014 book *Gun Violence and Public Life* documents this history. If anything has changed from the 1960s to today it is that the public now has access to military grade weapons. What also existed then as now is a culture of bigotry and racism. In the 1960s this was just being confronted by the Civil Rights Movement. It all made for an explosive mix that carried over to influence perceptions of and behavior toward the Vietnamese.

Manipulating Culture

If the *Nature* study’s conclusions can be believed, modern violence both of military and civilian origin can be moderated by manipulating culture. In the American case this means overcoming the gun culture as well as racism. There are many ways to do this. It can be done through public education as well as the way a society designs and applies its laws.

However, if any of these approaches to a safer, less violent society is to work, citizens must commit to a consistently enforced, long-term, indeed multi-generational, effort of reform. None of this will happen until politicians and the courts understand the Second Amendment of the Constitution (the present interpretation of which underpins the nation’s gun culture) in a more literal and reasonable way. And that won’t happen until public opinion overwhelms the ideological rigidity of the U.S. gun lobby.

In the United States the desire for rational reform of the gun laws goes up after each mass shooting and then is stymied by a rigid, but very politically influential, gun lobby. This scenario is part of a “culture war” that is ongoing within the American body politic. It involves not only the issue of gun control but also other issues such as abortion, gay rights, the promotion of racial equality and immigrant rights. So heated is this “culture war” that one might see it as a (so far) non-violent form of civil war.

The lessons of Vietnam, and a greater awareness of the massacres that occurred during this war, speak to the need to reform U.S. culture – to make it less violent and more tolerant. Thus the Vietnam experience should be incorporated into the current debate about guns in America. It would be a major achievement if the 1968 slaughter at My Lai could help stop today’s slaughter on the streets of the U.S.

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Korean Olympic Diplomacy Moves Forward Despite U.S. Intransigence

An interview by Dennis J. Bernstein with writer, activist and regional expert, Kay Jay Noh, about the big-power politics swirling around the Olympic Games now being held in South Korea.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

By many accounts, the Koreans – North and South – have prevailed over the disruptive desires of the United States, coming together in a series of very public actions, clearly meant to turn down the political heat generated by President Donald Trump and the U.S. pressure for military action. This pressure can be seen as a continuation of President Barack Obama's "Asia Pivot," a policy that called for full U.S. dominance in the region, including by containing China and the new emerging regional powers through a set of expansive, coordinated, and aggressive military alliances with Japan and other Pacific Rim countries.

The high-profile actions taken by the North and the South – both acting independently of Washington – left U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pouting and twiddling his thumbs on the sidelines during some very effective international diplomacy. In this regard, there does indeed seem to be a new and genuine desire on the part of the president of South Korea to forge a more peaceful and cooperative relationship with the North, even though U.S. officials and commentators seem to be dead set against it, portraying the warming relations between North and South as an attempt by the North to subvert the long and close relationship with the South.

In congressional hearings this week, the moves toward North-South de-escalation were dismissed by a leading Republican, Sen. James Risch of Idaho, as a "smile campaign."

"The South Korean people seem to have been charmed to some degree, some of them seem to have been captivated by it," Risch fretted.

Meanwhile, on the media front, CBS reported that its rival network NBC "was

forced to fire one of its Olympic analysts after he inexplicably said Koreans are grateful for Japan's role in their economic development – while ignoring the one-time imperial power's brutalization of the peninsula.”

I spoke to writer and regional expert, Kay Jay Noh, about the Olympics and the big-power politics swirling around the Olympic Games in Seoul. Noh is a special correspondent for Flashpoints show on Pacifica Radio.

Dennis Bernstein: Welcome back Kay Jay Noh. We want to get to some of the bigger political issues but let's start with a media story. We've heard that NBC fired one of its analysts because it turned out he didn't have a clue about Korean history and ended up insulting Koreans while trying to somehow curry favor with Japan.

Kay Jay Noh: This commentator, Joshua Cooper Ramo, is the Co-CEO of Kissinger Associates and a supposed expert on the geopolitics and culture of Asia. The history is that Korea was brutally colonized and subjugated by Japan for three and a half decades. As the Japanese athletes were coming in, Ramo said “Now representing Japan, a country which occupied Korea from 1910 to 1945. But every Korean will tell you,” he went on to say, “that as a technical, cultural and economic example, Japan has been so important to the transformation of Korea.”

This didn't go over well with Koreans. As one Korean put it, “After decades of human rights violations, exploiting our resources and attempting to destroy our heritage, Japan is not in a position to expect our gratitude.” This is just one example of the extraordinary ignorance surrounding Korea, by so-called “experts.”

DB: What do you think was the significance in terms of diplomacy between the North and the South? You have the United States swearing up and down that this is a ploy by the North to get in the way of our tight relationship with the South Koreans.

KJN: As you know, the Winter Olympics are usually not as well attended as the summer games and not as much a source of interest for the general global audience. But these Olympics, held in the South Korean county of PyeongChang, have reached out to the North Koreans. And the North Koreans have responded.

In fact, they responded very rapidly, sending over 500 of their citizens, including a cheerleading squad, an orchestra, a Taekwondo demo team, the head of the North Korean assembly, 22 athletes, and most surprisingly, Kim Yo Jong. Kim Yo Jong is a high-ranking politburo member, and Kim Jong Un's younger sister. Just the fact of the North Koreans defying expectations and showing up was a propaganda coup.

The allegation was that the North Koreans were going to use the Olympics as a propaganda offensive. Actually, that battle was lost before it even started, because so much of the Western media has gone overboard to portray the North Koreans as brainwashed zombies or belligerent monsters. So when these representatives of North Korea show up and they are not cowed zombies or desperate monsters, but rather vivacious, congenial, and self-possessed women, that shattered a lot of received stereotypes.

DB: It does seem that there is a strong spiritual push by the new leadership in the south to bring the two countries together. There have been some pretty warm words, haven't there?

KJN: Absolutely. To give some more background, although technically North Korea and the US are still at war, North Korea and South Korea signed a Treaty of Reconciliation, Cooperation, and Non-aggression in 1992. The letter of that agreement has not always been observed and, especially during conservative administrations, the hostilities have escalated. But the current president of South Korea, Moon Jae In, was the chief of staff of Roh Moo Hyun, who headed a progressive administration and worked very actively toward reconciliation with the North in a program known as the "Sunshine Policy."

To a certain extent, this small break in the clouds is an attempt to return to that policy of reconciliation. What is notable is the congeniality with which the hand was extended toward North Korea. For example, when the North Korean and South Korean athletes entered the stadium as one team, under a single flag, a standing ovation erupted as 35,000 people rose to their feet in a celebration of this very powerful coming together.

DB: Just watching on my TV, I was totally moved.

KJN: The other thing that was notable was that Vice President Pence was the only person who did not stand up. Here's a man who criticized African American football players for "taking the knee" and has said that sports should not be politicized. An American writer in the centrist Korean Times described Pence's gesture as "mean-spirited and stupid arrogance, making America look bad in the eyes of the world." Professor Alexis Dudden at the University of Connecticut, called it "a new low in American bullying."

DB: These Olympics come in the context of some pretty crazy policy on the part of the United States government. The permanent war government wants this kind of policy because it helps the weapons industry. Can these meetings at the Olympics mean anything in this context?

KJN: It's hard to say right now. There seems to have been a bit of an about-

face on the part of Pence, some have said because the enormous criticism he has received. He has now said that he is willing meet and talk with the North Koreans without preconditions. At the same time, he has said that he intends to maintain maximal pressure and that there are even more extreme sanctions in the pipeline. Meanwhile, South Korean President Moon met with the sister of Kim Jong Un on four occasions over three days, including a performance by the North Korean Orchestra. During a state luncheon, Kim Yo Jong extended an invitation to President Moon from Kim Jong Un to visit North Korea for a summit meeting “at the earliest date possible.”

In the visitor’s book, she wrote: “I hope Pyongyang and Seoul get closer in people’s hearts and move forward for the future of a mutually prosperous unification.”

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Iraq’s ‘Liberation Day’

From the Archive: Today is the 15-year anniversary of what was described as “the largest protest event in human history” – the Feb. 15, 2003 coordinated day of demonstrations against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. On this occasion we republish an article by Nat Parry detailing the concerns driving millions of people to take the streets.

By Nat Parry (first published on Feb. 5, 2003)

Iraq’s “Day of Liberation” – as George W. Bush calls it – is set to begin with a bombardment of 3,000 U.S. missiles delivered over 48 hours, 10 times the number of bombs dropped during the first two days of the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Officials who have been briefed on the plans say the goal is to so stun the Iraqis that they will simply submit to the overwhelming force demonstrated by the U.S. military.

Along with the destruction of buildings and the death of thousands from the explosive power of the weapons, the U.S. invasion force intends to paralyze Iraq’s electrical and water systems, supposedly leaving Iraqi soldiers and civilians alike with no choice but to throw up their arms and surrender.

Never before in world history will a dominant world power have struck at a much weaker nation in a preemptive war with such ferocity. The strategy could be called liberation through devastation.

But the war plan also carries with it the potential of spiraling out of control, as Bush secretly brandishes nuclear weapons as a threat against the Iraqi government if it unleashes biological or chemical warfare against U.S. troops.

Civilian Dead

Even if the war does not bring the world a big step closer to the apocalypse, it is certain to mean the death of hundreds, if not thousands, of Iraqi non-combatants, no matter how targeted or precise the U.S. weapons. For those civilians, their end may come in the dark terror of crushing concrete or the blinding flash of high explosives, as it did for about 1,500 Iraqis who were crushed and incinerated in the early morning hours of Feb. 13, 1991.

These civilians were hiding in the al-Amariyah bomb shelter in a suburb of Baghdad at 4:30 a.m. when the first U.S. bomb ripped a hole in the shelter's roof. Neighborhood residents heard screams as people – mostly women and children – struggled to push aside rubble and escape. Then, the second bomb zipped through the hole created by the first bomb. That explosion was followed by silence, with fewer than two dozen people surviving.

Although there are no precise figures on the total number of civilians who died during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, most estimates put the toll at between 5,000 and 15,000. Besides the civilian dead, Iraqi military casualties are placed at between 100,000 and 300,000. [See [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#).]

According to international relief agencies, the suffering has continued over the following decade. Since the war's end, Iraqi civilians have continued to die as a result of a badly damaged civilian infrastructure, crippling economic sanctions and high cancer rates attributed to hazardous chemicals released during the war, including the Pentagon's use of radioactive depleted uranium shells.

The United Nations predicts that the civilian casualties of a new war will likely be even higher than in 1991, since the impoverished population is heavily dependent on government handouts to survive and those supplies will be disrupted by a U.S.-led invasion. In a confidential report, UN planners say the coming war and its aftermath could injure more than 500,000 civilians and leave nearly 1 million as refugees. About 3 million Iraqis – out of a population of 23 million – will suffer severe hunger, [the UN report](#) said.

As many as 7.4 million people will need immediate humanitarian relief. "The

nutritional status of some 3.03 million persons countrywide will be dire," the UN report said, adding that beyond hunger, disease will sweep the country in "epidemic, if not pandemic" proportions.

Other Warnings

Those warnings are echoed by other independent studies.

A report by the International Study Team, a Canadian non-governmental organization, says "because most of the 13 million Iraqi children are dependent on food distributed by the Government of Iraq, the disruption of this system by war would have a devastating impact on children who already have a high rate of malnutrition."

The report says the physical state of Iraqi children makes them much more vulnerable to war than they were in 1991. Besides their physical weakness, the children are already fearful, anxious and depressed, with many suffering from nightmares. The report concluded that war on Iraq will cause a "grave humanitarian disaster," with potential casualties among children in "the tens of thousands, and possibly in the hundreds of thousands."

According to a Boston Globe article, the combination of the 1991 war and a decade of UN sanctions has transformed Iraq from a relatively prosperous Middle Eastern country – where a chief health concern had been childhood obesity – into a Third World nation where even casual observers can't miss how Iraqis struggle to survive.

"In Baghdad, women with babies in their arms beg on the streets," the Globe reported. "In cities like Basra to the south, poverty is inescapable. Raw sewage and trash choke the streets of a city once known for its glimmering, Venetian-style canals."

"Iraq was not a Third World country in 1990," said Denis Halliday, a former UN assistant secretary general who quit over UN sanctions. "Now you have this vulnerability out there."

"We are already in a humanitarian crisis," said Margaret Hassan, Iraq director for CARE, the U.S. relief organization. "Frankly, these people can't take another one." [Boston Globe, Jan. 31, 2003]

Attacks on Infrastructure

Even in a short war, the civilian population will be put at risk. Pentagon planners have confirmed that shutting down important city services, such as water and electricity, will be one of the early goals of the U.S. assault. The

planners say the strategy calls for using high-powered microwaves and other high-technology weapons to disable these vital services without permanently destroying them. [NYT, Feb. 2, 2003]

If the war doesn't end quickly, however, the interruption of these services can be expected to spread disease and death among the civilian population. If Iraqi troops withdraw into Baghdad and other major cities, forcing the U.S. military to wage time-consuming urban warfare, the lack of clean water and the absence of medicines could prove as deadly as the U.S. armaments.

The U.S. bombing campaign also will surely claim many civilian casualties. While the Bush administration stresses that its planned bombardment of ancient Baghdad and other cities will concentrate on military and government targets, the Pentagon's track record for precision bombing doesn't instill confidence. In recent conflicts, U.S. warplanes have inflicted substantial civilian death, either accidentally or on purpose.

For instance, in 1999 during the Kosovo crisis, U.S. warplanes killed non-combatants when going after civilian targets in Yugoslavia, such as bridges and even a television station that was deemed a government propaganda outlet. The lethal attack on the TV station was intentional. An international uproar followed the apparently accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy. The CIA blamed an "outdated map" for that fatal attack.

In the Afghan bombing campaign, U.S. warplanes struck two wedding parties and twice bombed the headquarters of the International Red Cross. It is estimated that the U.S. bombardment of Afghanistan has killed about 4,000 civilians.

A major difference between Afghanistan and Iraq, however, is that Afghanistan consists of a mainly rural population and Iraq has a largely urbanized population, with Baghdad alone crammed with about 5 million people.

The Nuclear Option

There is also no telling how out of control the war could spin, with Bush determined to destroy Saddam Hussein's government to avenge what many conservatives view as George H.W. Bush's failure to finish the job in 1991.

The younger Bush even has approved the use of nuclear weapons if Iraq uses chemical or biological warfare. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Bush's Nuclear Gamble.](#)"]

Bush's order, signed last September, reverses a decades-old U.S. policy of creating deliberate ambiguity about how Washington would react to a situation in which unconventional weapons were deployed against U.S. forces or their allies.

"The United States will continue to make clear that it reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force – including potentially nuclear weapons – to the use of [weapons of mass destruction] against the United States, our forces abroad, and friends and allies," the presidential document states. [Washington Times, Jan. 31, 2003]

In addition to an "overwhelming" retaliatory nuclear strike, Bush also is considering plans to use "tactical" nuclear weapons to destroy underground bunkers and similar critical targets.

The Los Angeles Times reported that the Pentagon is hastily developing computers to help decide when nuclear weapons would be used against fortified bunkers and how to measure collateral effects from radiation and fallout.

"From the start of the Bush administration, we have seen increasing interest in 'usable' nuclear weapons," said Christine Kucia, analyst at the Arms Control Association, a research group that studies proliferation issues.

By tailoring nuclear weapons for tactical warfare situations, such as bunker-busting, Kucia said the Bush administration is changing the status of nuclear devices that "have been reserved for decades as the absolute weapons of last resort. ... To put them in the realm of usable weapons is to take on a whole new definition that has never been explored and, frankly, should not be explored." [L.A. Times, Feb. 3, 2003]

'Poor Man's MAD'

Bush also may find that his goal of destroying Hussein and his government has been countered by Iraq's suspected pre-positioning of chemical and biological weapons outside Iraq for use only if the United States invades. In other words, Bush's strategy might touch off precisely the nightmare scenario that he says he is trying to prevent.

Last October, the CIA judged the likelihood of Iraq attacking the United States without U.S. provocation as "low" but rising dramatically if the U.S. prepared for a preemptive strike. "Baghdad for now appears to be drawing a line short of conducting terrorist attacks with conventional or C.B.W. [chemical or biological warfare] against the United States," wrote CIA director George Tenet in an Oct. 7 letter to Congress. "Should Saddam conclude that a U.S.-led attack could no longer be deterred, he probably would become much less constrained in adopting terrorist actions." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Misleading the Nation to War.](#)"]

Since the CIA's assessment, the Bush administration has received specific warnings from abroad that easily transportable stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons indeed have been moved outside Iraq so they can be deployed

against Western targets as retaliatory weapons.

Though the U.S. news media has largely kept this devastating possibility away from the American people, the Washington Post made an oblique reference to this potential danger in a Feb. 4 article entitled "CIA, Allies Tracking Iraqi Agents." The article states, "U.S. allies also are on alert for signs that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has sent agents abroad to arm Iraqis or terrorist groups with conventional, chemical or biological weapons, officials said. They said some of the weapons may already be in place outside Iraq's borders."

This "poor man's MAD" – for mutual assured destruction – should be a major element in an informed debate inside the United States especially since Bush outlined the ease with which these weapons can be moved and deployed. In his State of the Union address on Jan. 28, Bush said "it would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known."

But what if the vial, canister or crate is already en route? Might that "day of horror" actually be precipitated by Bush's invasion of Iraq, not delayed or prevented by going to war? Certainly, if one accepts the "evil" portrait of Saddam Hussein as painted by Bush, you'd have to assume that Saddam has long ago moved these dangerous weapons into positions where they can be of the most use to him – as a retaliatory weapon against a U.S. invasion.

The Aftermath

Yet even assuming U.S. forces succeed in eliminating Saddam Hussein and his army without a catastrophic escalation, the post-war period promises to be complicated and dangerous. The Bush administration has sent out mixed and confusing signals about what a "liberated" Iraq will look like.

At times, the administration has outlined plans to occupy Iraq for at least 18 months, possibly installing a military governor in the style of Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Japan after World War II. But it is not clear how the U.S. will police a population that is certain to include anti-American radicals ready to employ suicide bombings and other terror tactics against an occupying force.

Some of Bush's political allies also have urged pumping Iraqi oil to compensate the U.S. government for the war's cost. While this idea might play well with Americans wary about paying billions of dollars in scarce tax dollars to occupy a foreign country, it won't sit well with many Iraqis and millions of others across the world, especially Islamic populations that already suspect a Western imperialist motive behind the war.

The war's devastation and the U.S. occupation also could play into the hands of

the terrorist leader who had been the focus of the war on terror before Bush shifted his attention to Iraq.

The still-at-large Osama bin Laden spelled out in a recent message that he plans to gain a propaganda advantage from any U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, by presenting himself as the defender of the Arab people.

“Anyone who tries to destroy our villages and cities, then we are going to destroy their villages and cities,” the al-Qaeda leader said. “Anyone who steals our fortunes, then we must destroy their economy. Anyone who kills our civilians, then we are going to kill their civilians.”

George W. Bush drew his own line in the sand during his State of the Union address. “Trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy, and it is not an option,” Bush declared as the U.S. built up a vast military force surrounding Iraq.

With that buildup in mind, Bush addressed what he called the “brave and oppressed people of Iraq.” He told them, “Your enemy is not surrounding your country – your enemy is ruling your country.” He then added, “the day [Saddam Hussein] and his regime are removed from power will be the day of your liberation.”

Bush also pledged that while he would use the “full force and might of the United States military” to disarm the Iraqi government, the U.S. will fight “by just means – sparing in every way we can, the innocent.”

How many of those innocents are *not* spared in the impending invasion – and the numbers of dead are likely to horrify the world – may become the new measure of how dangerous the post-war period will be for both the American and the Iraqi people.
