

By John Dower

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How Americans Remember (and Forget) Their Wars

Some years ago, a newspaper article credited a European visitor with the wry observation that Americans are charming because they have such short memories. When it comes to the nation's wars, however, he was not entirely on target. Americans embrace military histories of the heroic "band of [American] brothers" sort, especially involving World War II. They possess a seemingly boundless appetite for retellings of the Civil War, far and away the country's most devastating conflict where American war deaths are concerned.

Certain traumatic historical moments such as "the Alamo" and "Pearl Harbor" have become code words — almost mnemonic devices — for reinforcing the remembrance of American victimization at the hands of nefarious antagonists. Thomas Jefferson and his peers actually established the baseline for this in the nation's founding document, the Declaration of Independence, which enshrines recollection of "the merciless Indian Savages" — a self-righteous demonization that turned out to be boilerplate for a succession of later perceived enemies. "September 11th" has taken its place in this deep-seated invocation of violated innocence, with an intensity bordering on hysteria.

Such "victim consciousness" is not, of course, peculiar to Americans. In Japan after World War II, this phrase — *higaisha ishiki* in Japanese — became central to leftwing criticism of conservatives who fixated on their country's war dead and seemed incapable of acknowledging how grievously Imperial Japan had victimized others, millions of Chinese and hundreds of thousands of Koreans foremost among them. When present-day Japanese cabinet members visit Yasukuni Shrine, where the emperor's deceased soldiers and sailors are venerated, they are stoking victim consciousness and roundly criticized for doing so by the outside world, including the U.S. media.

Worldwide, war memorials and memorial days ensure preservation of such selective

remembrance. My home state of Massachusetts also does this to this day by flying the black-and-white “POW-MIA” flag of the Vietnam War at various public places, including Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox — still grieving over those fighting men who were captured or went missing in action and never returned home.

In one form or another, populist nationalisms today are manifestations of acute victim consciousness. Still, the American way of remembering and forgetting its wars is distinctive for several reasons. Geographically, the nation is much more secure than other countries. Alone among major powers, it escaped devastation in World War II, and has been unmatched in wealth and power ever since. Despite panic about Communist threats in the past and Islamist and North Korean threats in the present, the United States has never been seriously imperiled by outside forces. Apart from the Civil War, its [war-related fatalities](#) have been tragic but markedly lower than the military and civilian death tolls of other nations, invariably including America’s adversaries.

Asymmetry in the human costs of conflicts involving U.S. forces has been the pattern ever since the decimation of Amerindians and the American conquest of the Philippines between 1899 and 1902. The State Department’s Office of the Historian [puts](#) the death toll in the latter war at “over 4,200 American and over 20,000 Filipino combatants,” and proceeds to add that “as many as 200,000 Filipino civilians died from violence, famine, and disease.” (Among other precipitating causes for those noncombatant deaths, U.S. troops shot most of the water buffalo farmers relied on to produce their crops.) Many scholarly accounts now offer higher estimates for Filipino civilian fatalities.

Much the same morbid asymmetry characterizes war-related deaths in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War of 1991, and the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq following September 11, 2001.

Terror Bombing from World War II to Korea and Vietnam to 9/11

While it is natural for people and nations to focus on their own sacrifice and suffering rather than the death and destruction they themselves inflict, in the case of the United States such cognitive astigmatism is backlit by the country’s abiding sense of being exceptional, not just in power but also in virtue. In paeans to “American exceptionalism,” it is an article of faith that the highest values of Western and Judeo-Christian civilization guide the nation’s conduct — to which Americans add their country’s purportedly unique embrace of democracy, respect

for each and every individual, and stalwart defense of a “rules-based” international order.

Such self-congratulation requires and reinforces selective memory. “Terror,” for instance, has become a word applied to others, never to oneself. And yet during World War II, U.S. and British strategic-bombing planners explicitly regarded their firebombing of enemy cities as terror bombing, and identified destroying the morale of noncombatants in enemy territory as necessary and morally acceptable. Shortly after the Allied devastation of the German city of Dresden in February 1945, Winston Churchill, whose bust circulates in and out of the presidential Oval Office in Washington (it is [currently in](#)), [referred](#) to the “bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts.”

In the war against Japan, U.S. air forces embraced this practice with an almost gleeful vengeance, pulverizing [64 cities](#) prior to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. When al-Qaeda’s 19 hijackers crash-bombed the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001, however, “terror bombing” aimed at destroying morale was detached from this Anglo-American precedent and relegated to “non-state terrorists.” Simultaneously, targeting innocent civilians was declared to be an atrocity utterly contrary to civilized “Western” values, and prima facie evidence of Islam’s inherent savagery.

The sanctification of the site of the destroyed World Trade Center as “Ground Zero” — a term previously associated with nuclear explosions in general and Hiroshima in particular — reinforced this deft legerdemain in the manipulation of memory. Few if any American public figures recognized or cared that this graphic nomenclature was appropriated from Hiroshima, whose city government puts the number of fatalities from the atomic bombing “by the end of December 1945, when the acute effects of radiation poisoning had largely subsided,” at [around 140,000](#). (The estimated death toll for Nagasaki is 60,000 to 70,000.) The context of those two attacks — and all the firebombings of German and Japanese cities before them — obviously differs greatly from the non-state terrorism and suicide bombings inflicted by today’s terrorists. Nonetheless, “Hiroshima” remains the most telling and troubling symbol of terror bombing in modern times — despite the effectiveness with which, for present and future generations, the post-9/11 “Ground Zero” rhetoric altered the landscape of memory and now connotes American victimization.

Short memory also has erased almost all American recollection of the U.S. extension of terror bombing to Korea and Indochina. Shortly after World War II, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey [calculated](#) that Anglo-American air forces in the European theater had dropped 2.7 million tons of bombs, of which 1.36 million tons targeted Germany. In the Pacific

theater, total tonnage dropped by Allied planes was 656,400, of which 24% (160,800 tons) was dropped on the home islands of Japan. Of the latter, 104,000 tons “were directed at 66 urban areas.” Shocking at the time, in retrospect these Japanese numbers in particular have come to seem modest when compared to the tonnage of explosives U.S. forces unloaded on Korea and later Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

The official history of the air war in Korea (*The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*) [records](#)

that U.S.-led United Nations air forces flew more than one million sorties and, all told, delivered a total of 698,000 tons of ordnance against the enemy. In his 1965 memoir

Mission with LeMay

, General Curtis LeMay, who directed the strategic bombing of both Japan and Korea, offered this observation: “We burned down just about every city in North and South Korea both

... We killed off over a million civilian Koreans and drove several million more from their homes, with the inevitable additional tragedies bound to ensue.”

Other sources place the estimated number of civilian Korean War dead [as high as](#) three million, or possibly even more. Dean Rusk, a supporter of the war who later served as secretary of state, [rec](#)

[alled](#)

that the United States bombed “everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another.” In the midst of this “limited war,” U.S. officials also took care to make it clear on several occasions that they had not ruled out

[using nuclear weapons](#)

. This even involved simulated nuclear strikes on North Korea by B-29s operating out of Okinawa in a 1951 operation codenamed Hudson Harbor.

In Indochina, as in the Korean War, targeting “everything that moved” was virtually a mantra among U.S. fighting forces, a kind of password that legitimized indiscriminate slaughter. Nick Turse’s extensively researched recent history of the Vietnam War, for instance, takes [its title](#) from a military order to “kill anything that moves.” Documents released by the National Archives in 2004 include a transcript of a 1970 telephone conversation in which Henry Kissinger

[relayed](#)

President Richard Nixon’s orders to launch “a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves.”

In Laos between 1964 and 1973, the CIA helped direct the [heaviest air bombardment per](#)

[capita](#) in history, unleashing over two million tons of ordnance in the course of 580,000 bombing runs — equivalent to a planeload of bombs every eight minutes for roughly a full decade. This included around 270 million bomblets from cluster bombs. Roughly 10% of the total Laotian population was killed. Despite the devastating effects of this assault, some 80 million of the cluster bomblets dropped failed to detonate, leaving the ravaged country littered with deadly unexploded ordnance to the present day.

The payload of bombs unloaded on Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos between the mid-1960s and 1973 is commonly reckoned to have been between seven and eight million tons — well over 40 times the tonnage dropped on the Japanese home islands in World War II. Estimates of total deaths vary, but are all exceedingly high. In a *Washington Post* article in 2012, John Tirman [noted](#) that “by several scholarly estimates, Vietnamese military and civilian deaths ranged from 1.5 million to 3.8 million, with the U.S.-led campaign in Cambodia resulting in 600,000 to 800,000 deaths, and Laotian war mortality estimated at about 1 million.”

On the American side, the Department of Veterans Affairs places [battle deaths](#) in the Korean War at 33,739. As of Memorial Day 2015, the long wall of the deeply moving Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington was inscribed with the names of

[58,307](#)

American military personnel killed between 1957 and 1975, the great majority of them from 1965 on. This includes approximately

[1,200 men](#)

listed as missing (MIA, POW, etc.), the lost fighting men whose flag of remembrance still flies over Fenway Park.

North Korea and the Cracked Mirror of Nuclear War

Today, Americans generally remember Vietnam vaguely, and Cambodia and Laos not at all. (The inaccurate label “Vietnam War” expedited this latter erasure.) The Korean War, too, has been called “the forgotten war,” although a veterans memorial in Washington, D.C., was finally dedicated to it in 1995, 42 years after the armistice that suspended the conflict. By contrast, Koreans have not forgotten. This is especially true in North Korea, where the enormous death and destruction suffered between 1950 and 1953 is kept alive through endless official iterations of remembrance — and this, in turn, is coupled with a relentless propaganda campaign calling attention to Cold War and post-Cold War U.S. nuclear intimidation. This intense exercise in remembering rather than forgetting goes far to [explain](#) the current nuclear saber-rattling of

North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un.

With only a slight stretch of the imagination, it is possible to see cracked mirror images in the nuclear behavior and brinksmanship of American presidents and North Korea's dictatorial dynastic leadership. What this unnerving looking glass reflects is possible madness, or feigned madness, coupled with possible nuclear conflict, accidental or otherwise.

To Americans and much of the rest of the world, Kim Jong-un seems irrational, even seriously deranged. (Just pair his name with "insane" or "crazy" in a Google search.) Yet in rattling his miniscule nuclear quiver, he is really joining the long-established game of "nuclear deterrence," and practicing what is known among American strategists as the "madman theory." The latter term is most [famously associated](#) with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger during the Vietnam War, but in fact it is more or less imbedded in U.S. nuclear game plans. As rearticulated in "Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence," a [secret policy document](#)

drafted by a subcommittee in the U.S. Strategic Command in 1995 (four years after the demise of the Soviet Union), the madman theory posits that the essence of effective nuclear deterrence is to induce "fear" and "terror" in the mind of an adversary, to which end "it hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed."

When Kim Jong-un plays this game, he is simultaneously ridiculed and feared to be truly demented. When practiced by their own leaders and nuclear priesthood, Americans have been conditioned to see rational actors at their cunning best.

Terror, it seems, in the twenty-first century, as in the twentieth, is in the eye of the beholder.

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