

WIN WITHOUT WAR



Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

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SL: Secret War, Forgotten War

The Takeaway:

- On this day, six decades ago, the United States and the Soviet Union began negotiations on an agreement to stay out of the civil war in Laos. But driven by a militarist Cold War mentality, the United States would not uphold its end of the bargain.
- From 1964-1973, the United States conducted a secretive bombing campaign that razed vast swathes of the country, killed tens of thousands, and continues to cause death and destruction today.
- The Secret War in Laos is forgotten to most people in the United States today. It's time to remember it – both to honor its many victims, and to heed its lessons.

Secret War, Forgotten War: The U.S. Bombing of Laos

60 years ago [today](#), Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy began a historic meeting. The small Southeast Asian country of Laos had become embroiled in a civil war that quickly turned into a Cold War battleground. Soviet-backed communist insurgents, the U.S.-backed monarchical government, [CIA-trained guerilla units](#), and neutralist militias vied for control in an increasingly bloody conflict that the United States saw as inseparable from the contest for power in Vietnam and Cambodia. Wary of the risk of further escalation, the United States, the Soviet Union, various Lao factions, and others agreed to a policy of neutrality and non-interference. But it wasn't to last.

While each side [blames](#) the other for breaking the agreement first, one thing is clear: as soon as neutrality no longer suited its Cold War interests, the United States showed no hesitation in launching headlong into a catastrophic military intervention — one that would leave the people of Laos suffering to this very day.

The Secret War

Beginning with the resumption of CIA arming and training operations, by 1964, the United States had escalated its involvement in Laos into an unprecedented, covert bombing campaign. In what has since become known as the Secret War, the United States dropped two million tons of ordnance on the country — the equivalent of an entire [planeload](#) of bombs “every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years” on an area the size of Oregon. As one survivor [recounted](#): the bombs “fell like rain,” wantonly razing entire villages to the ground and rendering farms and

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fields unusable. It was not until the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 (thank you Daniel Ellsberg!) that the U.S. public was made aware of the extent of U.S. atrocities, and not until two years later that the campaign formally ended. By the end, tens of thousands had been [killed](#) by U.S. bombs, and a full quarter of the population was displaced from their homes. Until this day, Laos remains the [most heavily bombed](#) country in history.

A Deadly Legacy

But the suffering did not stop in 1973. One of the main tools of the U.S. campaign of destruction of Laos was the “cluster bomb” — a large container filled with hundreds of smaller, baseball-sized munitions that spread explosives indiscriminately across vast distances. Since the end of the war, an additional [20,000 civilians](#) — 40% of whom were children — have been killed or severely injured by this Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) that, to this day, mar the landscape. Almost fifty years later, there are still [dozens](#) of people injured or killed by UXO every year, and countless more left to bear the emotional scars of surviving the U.S. bombing. On top of it all, while 110 countries have now ratified a [treaty](#) to ban the indiscriminate killers that are cluster bombs, the United States has so far adamantly refused to join.

“I stand with you in acknowledging the suffering... on all sides of the conflict.”

In 2016, President Barack Obama made a historic visit to Laos in which he [acknowledged](#) the tragic costs of U.S. actions to the Lao people, and [pledged](#) some \$90 million to assist in UXO removal. What neither he nor any other U.S. leader has done is apologize, provide adequate reparations, or, seemingly, learn their lesson from this sordid chapter in U.S. history.

Lessons From The Forgotten War

Though the U.S. bombing of Laos took place half a century ago, its lessons remain all too relevant today. Here are just a few:

- *A Long History of Endless War* — While many trace back the errors of U.S. foreign policy to September 11, 2001, the United States’ wanton destruction of other nations — particularly those populated by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in the Global South — is nothing new. The roots of U.S. militarism run deep.
- *The Rules-Based Order* — Whether commitments to neutrality in Laos or global agreements not to use indiscriminate weapons, the United States has long seen itself as the *exception* to the [rules-based international order](#) that it purports to defend. That remains a key failure of U.S. foreign policy today.
- *Secrets of U.S. Foreign Policy* — The nearly decade-long bombing of Laos was enabled in part by the fact that it was kept a secret from the U.S. public. Today, too, U.S. officials deliberately [hide the truth](#) of U.S. foreign policy, to disastrous effect (a task made easier by the grossly imbalanced presidential powers of [warmaking](#)). Whether 1964 or 2021, U.S. foreign policy should not be made by unaccountable officials behind closed doors — it should be made by and for the people.

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- *Don't listen to Henry Kissinger* — Okay, Kissinger was not instrumental in starting the war on Laos, but he *did* continue it. And yet, despite this and countless other atrocities, he remains an influential commentator on U.S. foreign policy today. Simply put: he and other people implicated in similar atrocities (cough: Elliott Abrams) shouldn't be.

Though the U.S. bombing of Laos is no longer a secret, all too few are aware of the extent of the horrors of U.S. involvement. The Secret War has become a forgotten war. For both *its* victims and survivors, and those impacted by U.S. militarism today, it is our responsibility to change that.

BURIED LEDES

The Biden administration has [announced](#) plans to donate 25 million doses of the Covid vaccine abroad. It's a welcome step, but in the face of a devastating global vaccine apartheid, it's — to [quote](#) our friends at Public Citizen — “woefully inadequate.”

🤯 “Joe Biden is [Filling](#) Top Pentagon Positions With Defense Contractors” and we are *shocked*. SHOCKED!

While many in the U.S. return to mask-free socializing and brunch, most of the world is still suffering not only the health impacts of the pandemic, but also its economic effects. One way to help: rich countries should [donate](#) their upcoming windfall of IMF Special Drawing Rights.

The growing acknowledgment of the need to revamp the global tax system is welcome. But as the G7 countries meet to discuss solutions, let's make sure we [actually solve the problem](#) rather than making tweaks around the edges.

Joe Biden ended U.S. involvement in the war in Yemen...right? Right? **Listen to Win Without War Policy Director Kate Kizer talk U.S. Yemen policy — what's changed, and what hasn't — on the [Crashing the War Party](#) podcast.**

Germany has formally [offered](#) the government of Namibia over a billion dollars in reparations for its colonial-era genocide in the country, prompting the UK, U.S., France, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Japan to quickly look away and start whistling.

Hot take, but two boats [traveling](#) thousands of miles away, totally legally, in international waters, just isn't that scary.

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The Israel-Hamas ceasefire seems to have stopped the escalating cycle of violence for now. But what it hasn't done is address the roots of apartheid, occupation, and the dispossession of Palestinians. **To do that, Biden will have to take [an entirely new approach](#) to Israel/Palestine.**

Members of Congress are up in arms about a [request](#) to cut a few of the Pentagon's more outdated weapons systems made by the notorious peaceniks at... the Pentagon? (Rule of thumb: if you love weapons spending even more than the Pentagon, something has gone terribly wrong.)

Ahead of his meeting with Putin this month, **60+ former military officers and government officials have called on Biden [to make](#) missile reduction a top priority.** It's a small step, but after withdrawing from Open Skies, it's the least he can do to help slow the global arms race.

And finally, **[live footage](#) of me standing in front of an open fridge at midnight.**