

Roots of U.S. Troubles in Afghanistan: Civilian Bombing Casualties and the Cambodian Precedent

米国アフガニスタン問題の根源——爆撃による民間人死傷とカンボディアの先例

Taylor Owen, Ben Kiernan

Roots of U.S. Troubles in Afghanistan: Civilian Bombing Casualties and the Cambodian Precedent

Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen

The U.S. war in Afghanistan is “going badly,” according to the New York Times. Nine years after American forces invaded to oust the repressive Taliban regime and its Al-Qaeda ally, “the deteriorating situation demands a serious assessment now of the military and civilian strategies.”¹ Aerial bombardment, a centerpiece of the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, has had a devastating impact on civilians there. Along with Taliban and Al-Qaeda insurgents and suicide bombers, who have recently escalated their slaughter of the Afghan population, U.S. and NATO aircraft have for years inflicted a horrific toll on innocent villagers.

When U.S. bombs hit a civilian warehouse in Afghanistan in late 2001, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld responded: “We’re not running out of targets, Afghanistan is.” There was laughter in the press gallery.



U.S. Bombing Khanaqa village outside Kabul in 2001 (AP photo)

But the bombing continued and spread to Iraq in 2003, with the United States determined to use “the force necessary to prevail, *plus some*,” and asserting that no promises would be made to avoid “collateral damage.”² Afghan and Iraqi civilian casualties, in other words, were predictable if not inevitable. The show of strength aside, didn’t the U.S. underestimate the strategic cost of collateral damage? If “shock and awe” appeared to work at least in 2001 against the Taliban regular army, the continued use of aerial bombardment has also nourished civilian support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda anti-U.S. insurgency. In March 2010, the *New York Times* reported that “civilian deaths caused by American troops and American bombs have outraged the local population and made the case for the insurgency.”³ Beyond the moral meaning of inflicting predictable civilian casualties, and

contravention of international laws of war, it is also clear that the political repercussions of air strikes outweigh their military benefits.



Cleanup following U.S. bombing of a village wedding in 2008 (EPI photo)

This is not news. The extension of the Vietnam War to Cambodia, which the U.S. Air Force bombed from 1965 to 1973, was a troubling precedent. First, Cambodia became in 1969-73 one of the most heavily-bombarded countries in history (along with North Korea, South Vietnam, and Laos).⁴ Then, in 1975-79, it suffered genocide at the hands of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge communists, who had been military targets of the U.S. bombing but also became its political beneficiaries.

Despite key differences, an important similarity links the current conflict in Afghanistan to the 1970-75 Cambodian war: increasing U.S. reliance on airpower against a heterogeneous insurgency. Moreover, in the past few years, as fighting has continued in Afghanistan supported by U.S. air power, Taliban forces have benefited politically, recruiting among an anti-U.S. Afghan constituency that appears to have grown even as the insurgents suffer military casualties. In Cambodia, it was precisely the harshest, most extreme elements of the insurgency who survived the U.S.

bombing, expanded in numbers, and then won the war. The Khmer Rouge grew from a small force of fewer than 10,000 in 1969 to over 200,000 troops and militia in 1973.⁵ During that period their recruitment propaganda successfully highlighted the casualties and damage caused by U.S. bombing.⁶ Within a broader Cambodian insurgency, the radical Khmer Rouge leaders eclipsed their royalist, reformist, and pro-Hanoi allies as well as defeating their enemy, the pro-U.S. Cambodian government of Lon Nol, in 1975.

The Nixon Doctrine had proposed that the United States could supply an allied Asian regime with the matériel to withstand internal or external challenge while the U.S. withdrew its own ground troops or remained at arm's length. "Vietnamization" built up the air and ground fighting capability of South Vietnamese government forces while American units slowly disengaged. In Cambodia from 1970, Washington gave military aid to General Lon Nol's new regime, tolerating its rampant corruption, while the U.S. Air Force (and the large South Vietnamese Air Force) conducted massive aerial bombardment of its Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge communist opponents and their heterogeneous united front, across rural Cambodia.

U.S. policy in Afghanistan has shown a similar reliance on air strikes in fighting the motley insurgency there. These strikes, while far more precisely targeted than the earlier bombing campaigns in Indochina, inflicted substantial civilian casualties in the first year of the Afghan war in 2001-02. The Project on Defense Alternatives estimated that in a 3-month period between October 7, 2001 and January 1, 2002, between 1,000 and 1,300 civilians were killed by aerial bombing,⁷ and *The Los Angeles Times* found that in a 5-month period from October 7, 2001 to February 28, 2002, between 1,067 and 1,201 civilian deaths were reported in the media.⁸ Deaths reported in newspapers should be treated with caution, but not all are

reported, and the total was undoubtedly high. And the toll has continued long after the initial U.S. invasion.⁹ According to Human Rights Watch, airstrikes by the U.S. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and its NATO-led coalition, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), killed 116 Afghan civilians in 2006, and 321 civilians in 2007.¹⁰ And the number rose again in 2008: according to a UN study on the humanitarian costs of the conflict, airstrikes accounted for 530 of the 828 civilians killed that year by U.S. or Afghan government forces. The same study found that between January and June 2009, 200 of the 310 recorded civilian deaths were caused by airstrikes.¹¹ Overall in 2009, the UN reported that 2,400 civilians were killed in Afghanistan, though the number killed by foreign and Afghan troops was down 25%.¹²

While their largescale killing of civilians presented a moral challenge to the U.S.-led coalition forces, there has also been increasing acknowledgment of strategic costs accompanying these casualties. In mid-2007, the London Guardian reported that “a senior UK military officer said he had asked the U.S. to withdraw its special forces from a volatile area that was crucial in the battle against the Taliban,” after the U.S. forces were “criticized for relying on air strikes for cover when they believed they were confronted by large groups of Taliban fighters.” The paper added: “British and Nato officials have consistently expressed concern about US tactics, notably air strikes, which kill civilians, sabotaging the battle for ‘hearts and minds’.” NATO’s Secretary-General added that NATO commanders “had changed the rules of engagement, ordering their troops to hold their fire in situations where civilians appeared to be at risk.”¹³ More recently Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Hall, the senior NATO soldier in Afghanistan, has argued that many of the insurgents being held at Bagram Air Base had joined the insurgency due to deaths of people they knew. He told the troops, “there are stories after stories about how these

people are turned into insurgents. Every time there is an escalation of force we are finding that innocents are being killed.”¹⁴ The same report cited a village elder from Hodkail corroborating this argument: “The people are tired of all these cruel actions by the foreigners, and we can’t suffer it anymore. The people do not have any other choice, they will rise against the government and fight them and the foreigners. There are a lot of cases of killing of innocent people.”¹⁵

Yet the bombings have continued and the civilian death toll has mounted. In 2008, after U.S. aircraft killed more than 30 Afghan civilians in each of two bombardments of rural wedding parties, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, “ordered a tightening of procedures for launching airstrikes,” and proclaimed that “minimizing civilian casualties is crucial.”¹⁶ In December 2008, McKiernan issued another directive, ordering that “all responses must be proportionate.”¹⁷

Again new procedures failed to stop the slaughter from the air. Following an investigation into a 2009 airstrike in Farah Province which killed at least 26 civilians (the Afghan Government reported a much higher toll of 140 dead), McKiernan’s replacement, General Stanley McChrystal, issued new guidelines meant to minimize civilian casualties.¹⁸ In earlier testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, McChrystal had stressed the strategic importance of civilian protection. “A willingness to operate in ways minimizing casualties or damage ... is critical,” he argued. “Although I expect stiff fighting ahead, the measure of success will not be enemy killed. It will be shielding the Afghan population from violence.”¹⁹ So far the cost of failure, for instance by inflicting more civilian casualties, has included a political windfall for Taliban insurgents, who by 2009 posed a much stronger threat than they had in 2005.²⁰

Since the issuing of McChrystal's 2009 directive, however, airstrikes have continued to kill civilians, the toll increasing with the escalation of the U.S. ground war in response to the greater Taliban threat. In February 2010 alone, 46 Afghan civilians were killed in just three strikes. An errant rocket attack on February 14 killed 12 civilians.²¹ Four days later a NATO airstrike mistakenly killed 7 Afghan police officers.²² Another NATO strike on February 20, 2010, killed 27 civilians.²³ In comparison to the previous year, the three-month period from March to June 2010 saw a 44% drop in civilian casualties caused by the coalition.²⁴ Yet, nine years after the U.S. went to war in Afghanistan, bombing remains part of U.S. strategy and the death toll in aerial strikes continues. In a March incident, a U.S. airstrike killed 13 civilians,²⁵ and in June, 10 more civilians, including at least five women and children, were killed in a NATO airstrike.²⁶

One reaction to the McChrystal directive has been an increased U.S. use of unmanned aerial drones to deliver air strikes.²⁷ While proponents of targeted drone strikes argue that they offer greater precision, and therefore minimize civilian casualties, it is also possible that the greater ease with which they can be deployed could instead increase the number of raids and thus the civilian casualty rates. For example, a Human Rights Watch report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan argued that most civilian casualties do not occur in planned airstrikes on Taliban targets, but rather in the more fluid rapid-response strikes mostly carried out in support of "troops in contact".²⁸ A recent US military report on a drone strike that killed 23 civilians in February found that "inaccurate and unprofessional" reporting by the drone operators was responsible for the casualties.²⁹ In response, General McChrystal repeated what he had said many times, "inadvertently killing or injuring civilians is heartbreaking and undermines their trust and confidence in our mission."³⁰ In late June 2010, in the second change of Afghanistan

commander in eighteen months, President Obama fired McChrystal and replaced him with General David Petraeus.

The resort to drones, while potentially useful for well-planned long term surveillance-based strikes, could also enable the execution of more frequent troop support strikes. More generally, any shift to increased air power, even in conjunction with ground troops, will likely inflict greater civilian casualties. The resulting local outrage could benefit an insurgency seeking civilian support and recruitment. While air strikes today can be much more accurate than they were in Indochina in the 1970s, it would be perilous to ignore a disastrous precedent: the political blowback of the U.S. air war against Cambodian insurgents.

On December 9, 1970, President Richard Nixon telephoned his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, to discuss the ongoing bombing of Cambodia. U.S. B-52s, long deployed over Vietnam, had been targeting Cambodia for only a year. In a "sideshow" to the war in Vietnam, American aircraft had already dropped 36,000 payloads on Cambodia, a neutral kingdom until the U.S.-backed General Lon Nol seized power from Prince Norodom Sihanouk in a March 1970 coup.³¹ The 1969-70 "Menu" B-52 bombings of Cambodia's border areas, which American commanders labelled Breakfast, Lunch, Supper, Dinner, Desert and Snack, aimed to destroy the mobile headquarters of the South Vietnamese "Viet Cong" and the North Vietnamese Army (VC/NVA) in the Cambodian jungle. However, these and later bombardments forced the Vietnamese communists further west and deeper into Cambodia, and ultimately radicalized Cambodian local people against Lon Nol's regime.

After the U.S. ground invasion of Cambodia in May-June 1970, which also failed to root out

the Vietnamese communists there, Nixon faced growing congressional opposition to his Indochina policy. The U.S. President now wanted a secret escalation of air attacks, further into Cambodia's populous areas. This was despite a September 1970 US intelligence report, which had warned Washington that "many of the sixty-six 'training camps' on which [Lon Nol's army] had requested air strikes by early September were in fact merely political indoctrination sessions held in village halls and pagodas."³²

Telling Kissinger on December 9, 1970 of his frustration that the U.S. Air Force was being "unimaginative," Nixon demanded more bombing, deeper into Cambodia: "They have got to go in there and I mean really go in . . . I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them. There is no limitation on mileage and there is no limitation on budget. Is that clear?"

This order ignored prior limits restricting U.S. attacks to within 30 miles of the Vietnamese border³³ and prohibiting B-52 bombing within a kilometer of any village,³⁴ and military assessments likening the air strikes to "taking a beehive the size of a basketball and poking it with a stick."³⁵ Kissinger responded hesitantly: "The problem is Mr President, the Air Force is designed to fight an air battle against the Soviet Union. They are not designed for this war . . . in fact, they are not designed for any war we are likely to have to fight."

The U.S. insistence even today on using airpower against insurgencies raises this same dilemma: perhaps even more than the civilian casualties of ground operations, the "collateral damage" from U.S. aerial bombing still appears to enrage and radicalize enough of the survivors for insurgencies to find the recruits and supporters they require.

Five minutes after his telephone conversation with Nixon, Kissinger called General Alexander

Haig to relay the new orders. "He [Nixon] wants a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. He doesn't want to hear anything. It's an order, it's to be done. Anything that flies on anything that moves. You got that?" The response from Haig, recorded as barely audible, sounded like laughing.

As in Vietnam, the U.S. now deployed massive airpower over Cambodia to fight an insurgency that enjoyed significant local support. One result was more growth in the insurgency. In recent years the impact of the U.S. bombing on Cambodia has become much better known. An apparently near-complete Pentagon spatial database, declassified in 2000 and detailing no fewer than 230,488 U.S. aircraft sorties over Cambodia from October 4, 1965 to August 15, 1973, reveals that much of that bombing was indiscriminate and that it had begun years earlier than ever officially disclosed to Congress or the American people.

A decade ago, the U.S. Government released to the Governments of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam extensive classified Air Force data on all American bombings of those countries.³⁶ This data assists those countries in the search for unexploded U.S. ordnance, still a major threat in much of the region, and it can also be analysed in map and time series formats, revealing an astounding wealth of historical information on the air war there.

We now know, for instance, that from 1965 to 1969, before Nixon's 'secret' Menu bombing even started, the U.S. Air Force had dropped bombs on, among other places in Cambodia, eighty-three sites at which the Pentagon database described the intended target as 'Unknown' or 'Unidentified.' The detailed record reveals that for these 83 cases, the U.S. Air Force stated in its confidential reporting that it was unaware of what it was bombing. It nevertheless dropped munitions on those sites which it could not identify, in a neutral country at peace.

This practice escalated after the ground war began in Cambodia in 1970. For that year alone, the number of U.S. air strikes on targets recorded as ‘Unknown’ or ‘Unidentified’ increased to as many as 573 bombing sites. American planes also bombed another 5,602 Cambodian sites where the Pentagon record neither identifies nor cites any target -- fifteen percent of the 37,426 air strikes made on the country that year. Interestingly, after Nixon’s December 1970 order for wider bombing of Cambodia, the number of such attacks fell in 1971, but that year still saw as many as 182 bombing raids on ‘Unknown’ targets, and 1,390 attacks on unidentified ones (among the 25,052 Cambodian sites bombed that year).

The longterm trend favored more indiscriminate bombardment. In 1972, the U.S. Air Force bombed 17,293 Cambodian sites, including 766 whose targets it explicitly recorded as ‘Unknown,’ plus another 767 sites with no target identified in the military database. These figures dramatically increased the next year. In the period January-August 1973 alone, the U.S. Air Force bombed 33,945 sites in Cambodia, hitting as many as 2,632 ‘Unknown’ targets, and 465 other sites where the Pentagon record identified no target.

May 1973 saw the height of the Cambodia bombing. During that month, U.S. planes bombed 6,553 sites there. These sorties included hits on 641 ‘Unknown’ and 158 unidentified targets, at a rate of over 25 such strikes per day for that month.

Overall, during the U.S. bombardment of Cambodia from 1970 to 1973, American warplanes hit a total of 3,580 ‘Unknown’ targets and bombed another 8,238 sites with no target identified. Such sites accounted for 10.4% of the U.S. air strikes, which hit a total of 113,716 Cambodian sites in less than four years.

Also unknown is the human toll that these specific air strikes inflicted on ‘Unknown,’

‘Unidentified’ or non-identified targets, and the toll from the additional 1,023 U.S. strikes on targets identified only as a ‘sampan.’ Civilian casualties from the former, at least, are properly considered U.S. war crimes (not genocide), though they remain unprosecuted.

However, it is possible to cross-check other information in the Pentagon bombing database with details that Cambodian survivors provided to Ben Kiernan in interviews he conducted in 1979-81.³⁷ We can also begin to answer important further questions concerning the strategic efficacy and political consequences of aerial bombing: Can insurgencies be beaten with bombs? What are the human and also the strategic costs of “collateral damage”? For a strategy of replacing or reinforcing ground troops with air strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan, Cambodia at least shows how strategic bombing can go disastrously wrong.

The new data transforms our understanding of what happened to Cambodia, even today one of the most heavily bombed countries in history. The total tonnage of U.S. bombs dropped on Cambodia, at least in the range of 500,000 tons, possibly far more, either equalled or far exceeded the tonnages that the U.S. dropped in the entire Pacific Theater during World War Two (500,000 tons) and in the Korean War (454,000).³⁸ In per capita terms, the bombing of Cambodia exceeded the Allied bombing of Germany and Japan, and the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam (but not that of South Vietnam or possibly, Laos).

The U.S. dropped 160,000 tons of bombs on Japan during World War Two. The Pentagon data records the bombardment of Cambodia to have been at least three times heavier (around 500,000 tons), perhaps much more. To put this massive figure in global perspective, during all of WWII, the U.S.

dropped 2 million tons of bombs, including 1.6 million tons in the European Theater and 500,000 tons in the Pacific Theater (including the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: 15,000 and 20,000 tons respectively).³⁹ In the Korean War, the total U.S. bombardment was 454,000 tons.⁴⁰ Cambodia's total thus equalled or exceeded the U.S. bomb tonnages dropped in the Pacific War and the Korean War.

Not only was the total payload dropped on Cambodia significant, and much of it indiscriminate, but also, the bombardment began much earlier than previously disclosed. The "secret" 1969-70 Menu campaign, when later uncovered, caused congressional uproar and provoked calls for Nixon's impeachment, but we now know that U.S. bombing had actually started over four years earlier, in 1965, as Cambodian leaders had claimed at the time. These early tactical strikes may have supported secret U.S. Army and CIA ground incursions from across the Vietnamese border. During the mid-1960s, the Studies and Operations Group, U.S. Special Forces teams in tandem with the Khmer Serei (U.S.-trained ethnic Cambodian rebels from South Vietnam), were collecting intelligence inside Cambodia.⁴¹ Perhaps the U.S. tactical air strikes supported or followed up on these secret pre-1969 operations.

This revelation has several implications. First, U.S. bombing of neutral Cambodia significantly predated the Nixon administration. Early individual bombardments of Cambodia were known and protested by the Cambodian government. Prince Sihanouk's Foreign Minister, for instance, claimed as early as January 1966 that "hundreds of our people have already died in these attacks."⁴² The Pentagon database reveals escalating bombardments. From 1965 to 1968, the Johnson Administration conducted 2,565 sorties over Cambodia. Most of these strikes occurred under the Vietnam War policy of then Secretary

of Defence Robert S. McNamara, which he subsequently publicly regretted.

Second, these early strikes were tactical, directed at military targets, not carpet bombings. The Johnson Administration made a strategic decision not to use B-52s in Cambodia, whether out of concern for Cambodian lives, or for the country's neutrality, or because of perceived strategic limits of carpet bombing. However, Nixon decided differently, and from late 1969 the U.S. Air Force began to deploy B-52s over Cambodia.

Why did the United States bombard a small agrarian country that attempted to stay out of a major war, and what were the consequences?

In the first stage of the bombing (1965-69) the U.S. goal was to pursue the Vietnamese communists retreating from South Vietnam into Cambodia, then to destroy their Cambodian sanctuaries, and cut off their supply routes from North to South Vietnam, through both Laos to the north and later, the southern Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. These early U.S. attacks failed to find, let alone hit, a mobile Vietnamese headquarters, or to stop the flow of weapons and supplies.

The second phase of the bombing (1969-72) aimed to support the slow pullout of U.S. troops from Vietnam, ironically by expanding the war to Cambodia in the hope of winning it faster by attacking the Vietnamese communists from behind. Lon Nol's 1970 coup facilitated much more extensive U.S. action in Cambodia, including the short ground invasion and the prolonged carpet bombing, until 1973.

In 1969, Nixon first introduced B-52s into the still secret U.S. air war in Cambodia to buy time for the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Later, as Emory Swank, U.S. ambassador to Lon Nol's Cambodia, recalled, "time was

bought for the success of the program in Vietnam . . . to this extent I think some measure of gratitude is owed to the Khmers.” Former U.S. General Theodore Mataxis called it “a holding action. You know, one of those things like a rear guard you drop off. The troika’s going down the road and the wolves are closing in, and so you throw them something off and let them chew it.”⁴³ Thus Cambodians became a decoy to protect American lives. In its attempt to deny South Vietnam to the Vietnamese communists, the U.S. drove them further into Cambodia, producing the domino effect that its Indochinese intervention had been intended to prevent. Phnom Penh would fall two weeks before Saigon.

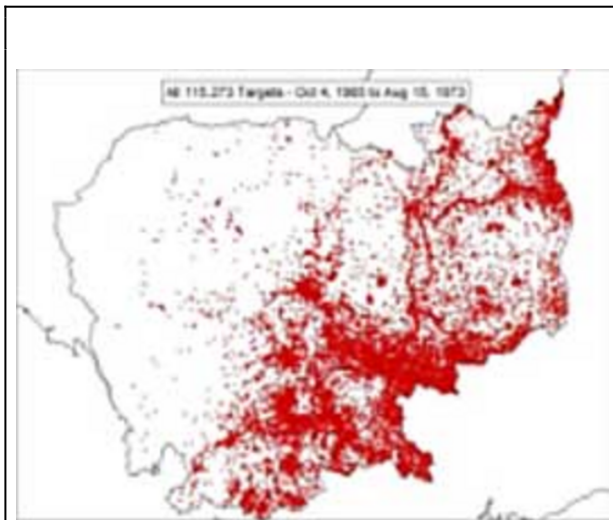
bombardment, focussed on the heavily populated areas around Phnom Penh, but also sparing few other regions of the country.⁴⁴ As well as inflaming rural rage against the pro-U.S. Lon Nol government, the rain of bombs on non-combatants also reduced the relative risk of their joining the insurgency.

The impact of the resultant increased civilian casualties may not have been a primary *strategic* concern for the Nixon administration. It should have been. Civilian casualties helped drive people into the arms of an insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970, the Vietnam War spread to Cambodia, and extensive U.S. bombing of its rural areas began.

Even before that, the initial U.S. bombardments of border areas had set in motion a highly precarious series of events leading to the extension deeper into Cambodia of the impact of the Vietnam War, contributing to Lon Nol’s 1970 coup, which also helped fuel the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge.

The final phase of the story is better known. In 1973 the U.S. Congress, angered at the destruction and the deception of the Nixon Administration, legislated a halt to the Cambodia bombing. The great damage was already done. Having grown under the rain of bombs from a few thousand to over 200,000 regular and militia forces by 1973, the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh two years later. They then subjected Cambodia to a genocidal Maoist agrarian revolution. Is there a lesson here on combating insurgencies?

Apart from the large human toll, perhaps the most powerful and direct impact of the bombing was the political backlash it caused. Because Lon Nol was supporting the U.S. air war, the bombing of Cambodian villages and its significant civilian casualties provided ideal recruitment rhetoric for the insurgent Khmer



Map showing 115,273 targets of U.S. secret bombing of Cambodia between October 1965 and August 1973. (Taylor Owen)

The final phase of the U.S. bombing, January-August 1973, aimed to stop the now rapid Khmer Rouge advance on the Cambodian capital. U.S. fear of this first Southeast Asian domino falling translated into a massive escalation of the air war that spring and summer - an unprecedented B-52

Rouge.

The Nixon administration knew that the Khmer Rouge were explicitly recruiting peasants by highlighting the damage done by U.S. air strikes. The CIA's Directorate of Operations, after investigations south of Phnom Penh, reported in May 1973 that the communists there were successfully "using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda."⁴⁵ Years later, journalist Bruce Palling asked a former Khmer Rouge officer from northern Cambodia if local Khmer Rouge forces had made use of the bombing for anti-U.S. propaganda:

Chhit Do: Oh yes, they did. Every time after there had been bombing, they would take the people to see the craters, to see how big and deep the craters were, to see how the earth had been gouged out and scorched... The ordinary people ... sometimes literally shit in their pants when the big bombs and shells came... Their minds just froze up and they would wander around mute for three or four days. Terrified and half-crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told... That was what made it so easy for the Khmer Rouge to win the people over... It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on cooperating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them ...

Bruce Palling: So the American bombing was a kind of help to the Khmer Rouge?

Chhit Do: Yes, that's right..., sometimes the bombs fell and hit little children, and their fathers

would be all for the Khmer Rouge...

The Nixon administration, aware of this consequence of its Cambodia bombing, kept the air war secret for so long that debate over its toll and political impact came far too late. Along with support from the Vietnamese communists and from Lon Nol's deposed rival, Prince Sihanouk, the U.S. carpet bombing of Cambodia was partly responsible for the rise of what had been a small-scale Khmer Rouge insurgency, which now grew capable of overthrowing the Lon Nol government, and once it had done so in 1975, perpetrating genocide in the country. The parallels to current dilemmas in Iraq and Afghanistan, where genocidal Al-Qaeda factions lurk among the insurgent forces, are poignant and telling.

Today the technology of U.S. bombing has become more sophisticated. "Unknown" targets are bombed less frequently, and collateral damage is now lower than it was. Yet it remains high, and perhaps these days, information travels faster. What are the strategic consequences of the continuing civilian death tolls that U.S. forces inflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of the outrage they spawn among rural communities there? Are they worth the risk, let alone the moral consequences, to say nothing of the implications under international criminal law?

The January 13, 2006 aerial strike by a US predator drone on a village in Pakistan, killing women and children and inflaming local anti-US political passions, seems a pertinent example of what continues to occur in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Collateral damage," in this case, even undermined the positive sentiments previously created by billions of dollars of U.S. post-earthquake aid to that part of Pakistan. Aside from the killing of innocent civilians, how many new enemies does U.S.

bombing create?

In the lead-up to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, neither the U.S. media nor the Bush administration seriously included the impact of civilian casualties in public discussion of the overall war strategy. Even with official assurances that civilian casualties will be limited, when it comes to a decision to bomb a village containing a suspected terrorist, the benefit of killing the target trumps the toll on innocents. This misguided calculus is quite possibly a fundamental threat to longterm Afghan and American security.

If the Cambodians' tragic experience teaches us anything, it is that official disregard of the immorality and miscalculation of the consequences of inflicting predictable civilian casualties stem partly from failure to understand the social contexts of insurgencies. The reasons local people help such movements do not fit into Kissingerian rationales. Nor is their support absolute or unidimensional. Those whose lives have been ruined may not look to the geopolitical rationale of the attacks; rather, understandably and often explicitly, many will blame the attackers.

Dangerous forces can reap a windfall. The strategic and moral failure of the U.S. Cambodia air campaign lay not only in the toll of possibly 150,000 civilians killed there in 1969-73 by an almost unprecedented level of carpet, cluster and incendiary bombing, but also indirectly, in its aftermath, when the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime rose from the bomb craters to cause the deaths of another 1.7 million Cambodians in 1975-79. These successive tragedies are not unrelated. It is only predictable that an insurgency in need of recruits may effectively exploit potential supporters' hatred for those killing their family members or neighbors. That Washington has yet to learn from its past crimes and mistakes is a failure of strategic as well as moral calculation. Until it does, America's hopes for

Afghanistan and for its own improved security may be misplaced.

Ben Kiernan is the Whitney Griswold Professor of History, Chair of the Council on Southeast Asia Studies, and Director of the Genocide Studies Program at Yale University (www.yale.edu/gsp). He is the author of [How Pol Pot Came to Power](#) (1985), [The Pol Pot Regime](#) (1996), [Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia](#) (2007), and [Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur](#) (2007).

Taylor Owen is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Oxford.

They wrote this article for [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#).

Recommended citation: Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen, "Roots of U.S. Troubles in Afghanistan: Civilian Bombing Casualties and the Cambodian Precedent," [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#), 26-4-10, June 28, 2010.

Owen and Kiernan are the authors of [Bombs Over Cambodia: New Light on US Air War](#)

Notes

¹ *New York Times* editorial, June 24, 2010, p. A32; see also, "Pakistan is Said to Pursue An Afghanistan Foothold," *New York Times*, June 25, 2010, p. 1.

² *New York Times*, October 14, 2002; emphasis added.

³ *New York Times*, March 4, 2010, p. A16.

⁴ *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth-century History*, ed. Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young, New York, New Press, 2009.

⁵ Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism and Communism in*

Cambodia, 1930-1975 (New Haven, second edition, 2004), pp. 284, 345, 349-57, 390.

⁶ Ben Kiernan, "The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969-1973," *Vietnam Generation* 1:1 (Winter 1989), 4-41, e.g. pp. 6, 13-14; accessible online [here](#).

⁷ Carl Conetta, *Operation Enduring Freedom: Why a Higher Rate of Civilian Bombing Casualties?* Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Report #13, January 18, 2002. Available [here](#).

⁸ "The Americans . . . They Just Drop Their Bombs and Leave," *The Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 2002.

⁹ Ben Kiernan, "'Collateral damage' means real people," *Bangkok Post*, October 20, 2002.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, 2008. [Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan](#).

¹¹ United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, 2009. "Afghanistan: Mid Year Bulletin on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 2009," pp. 10-12. Human Rights Unit, 30 July 2009. Available [here](#).

¹² Reuters AlertNet, April 15, 2010, "[Spate of Afghan civilian deaths 'disturbing.'](#)"

¹³ "British officer wants US out of Afghan zone," *Guardian*, August 17, 2007, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, March 26, 2010, "[Tighter Rules Fail to Stem Deaths of Innocent Afghans at Checkpoints.](#)"

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ "Afghan Officials Say U.S. Strike Killed 40 at Wedding Party," *New York Times*, November 6, 2008, p. A19.

¹⁷ "Civilian Deaths Imperil Support for Afghan

War," *New York Times*, May 7, 2009, p. A1.

¹⁸ *CNN*, June 23, 2009.

¹⁹ *CNN*, June 2, 2009.

²⁰ See e.g., "U.N. Sees Rise in Attacks by Afghan Insurgents," *New York Times*, June 20, 2010, p. 12

²¹ *The Guardian*, February 14, 2010; *New York Times*, February 15, 2010, "Errant Rocket Kills Civilians in Afghanistan," pp. 1, A6.

²² *AFP*, February 18, 2010.

²³ *BBC News*, February 22, 2010; *New York Times*, February 23, 2010, "NATO Airstrike Is Said to Have Killed 27 Civilians in Afghanistan," p. A4.

²⁴ "U.N. Sees Rise in Attacks by Afghan Insurgents," *New York Times*, June 20, 2010, p. 12.

²⁵ *New York Times*, March 21, 2010, "[Bombs Kill 13 Afghans; Elderly Man Dies in Raid.](#)"

²⁶ *New York Times*, June 20, 2010, "[Afghan Civilians Said to Be Killed in an Airstrike.](#)"

²⁷ *The Washington Independent*, January 14, 2010.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2008. [Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan](#). pp. 3-4.

²⁹ *ABC News*, May 29, 2010, "[US Drone Crew Blamed for Afghan Civilian Deaths;](#)" see also *New York Times*, May 30, 2010, p. 6, and June 3, 2010, p. A10.

³⁰ *The Washington Post*, May 30, 2010, "[Drone operators blamed in airstrike that killed Afghan civilians in February.](#)"

³¹ To be precise, there were 35,914 U.S. B-52 attacks on Cambodia in 1969 and 1970.

³² See Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, p. 350.

³³ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, New York, 1979, p. 145.

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, New York, 2003, p. 479.

³⁵ Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, New York, 1983, p. 64.

³⁶ The GIS database comprised data originally recovered by the National Combat Command Information Processing System (NIPS) on missions conducted between 1965 and 1975. The data was classified top secret and maintained by the Joint Chiefs of Staff until declassified and delivered to the National Archives in 1976. It was originally compiled in four separate databases. These files are Combat Activities File (CACTA - October 1965-December 1970); Southeast Asia Database (SEADAB - January 1970-June 1975); the Strategic Air Command's Combat Activities report (SACCOACT - June 1965-August 1973); and herbicide data files (HERBS - July 1965-February 1971). E. Miguel and G. Roland (2005), *The Long Run Impact of Bombing Vietnam*. Draft Manuscript, p. 45, and Tom Smith, 'Southeast Asia Air Combat Data,' *The DISAM Journal*, Winter Issue, 2001.

³⁷ See Ben Kiernan, "The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969-1973," *Vietnam Generation* (1989), accessible from www.yale.edu/cgp/us.html; Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, "Bombs over Cambodia," *The Walrus* (Toronto), October 2006, pp. 62-69.

³⁸ In *The Walrus* magazine in October 2006, we stated that newly-released Pentagon bombing data revised dramatically upwards the heretofore accepted total of 539,129 tons of U.S. bombs dropped on Cambodia. The total of the individual bombing load figures entered in

the database's records of 230,516 aircraft sorties over Cambodia indicates that from 1965 to 1975 Cambodia would have been the target of 2,756,941 tons of U.S. bombs, nearly 5 times more than previously believed. The *Phnom Penh Post* reported a similar figure: "The [data] tapes show that 43,415 bombing raids were made on Cambodia dropping more than 2 million tons of bombs and other ordinance including land mines, experimental weapons and rockets" (April 14-27, 2000). However, this tonnage data may be incorrect. In new work using the original Air Force SEADAB and CACTA databases, Holly High and others have re-analyzed the total Cambodia tonnage figures and argue in a forthcoming article that the total tonnage dropped on Cambodia was at least 472,313 tons, or somewhat higher. While both data sets derive from the same U.S. Air Force database, the one we used for Cambodia had been decoded by an independent contractor, as was the database the U.S. provided to Laos. The resulting GIS databases for Cambodia and Laos have been used extensively in both countries to guide de-mining efforts there, and have proven accurate for that purpose. As we did not ourselves decode the Cambodia data from the original Air Force tapes, and so far have been unsuccessful in our efforts to contact the independent contractor who did so, we cannot yet be certain as to how the total tonnage field was calculated. It remains undisputed that in 1969-73 alone, around 500,000 tons of U.S. bombs fell on Cambodia, one-sixth of the total bombing of Indochina (six million tons over nine years). This figure excludes the additional bomb tonnage dropped on Cambodia by the U.S.-backed air force of the Republic of Viet Nam, which also flew numerous bombing missions there in 1970 and 1971. William Shawcross reported that from 1970, "Cambodia was open house for the South Vietnamese Air Force," and subsequently "the South Vietnamese continued to regard Cambodia as a free fire zone" (*Sideshow*, pp. 174-75, 214-15, 222-23.)

³⁹ Miguel and Roland, *Long Run Impact*, p. 2

⁴⁰ Grolier, 1996, cited but not fully referenced in Miguel and Roland, *Long Run Impact*.

⁴¹ Over four years, this group conducted 1,835 missions and captured 24 prisoners, but did not find the Viet Cong command center. Shawcross, *Sideshow*, p. 64.

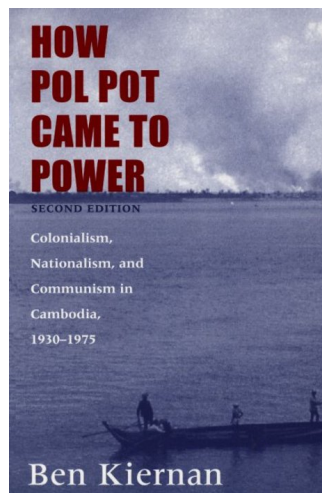
⁴² *The Australian*, Jan. 15, 1966, quoted in Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, p. 285.

⁴³ Shawcross, *Sideshow*, pp. 331, 191.

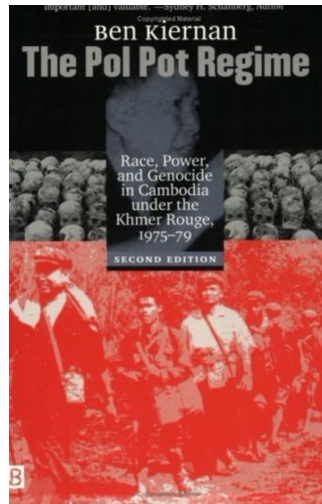
⁴⁴ Kissinger made the case for escalation,

stating “our analysis was that the Khmer Rouge would agree to a negotiated settlement only if denied of hope of military victory.” Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 476.

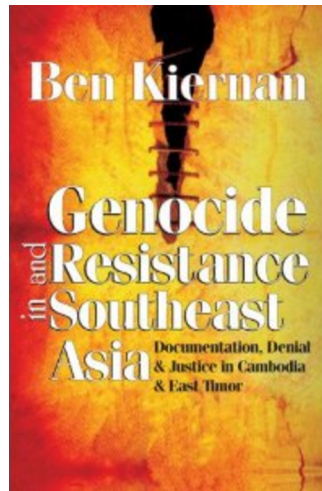
⁴⁵ “Efforts of Khmer Insurgents to Exploit for Propaganda Purposes Damage Done by Airstrikes in Kandal Province,” CIA Intelligence Information Cable, May 2, 1973; for more details see Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (New Haven, third edition, 2008), 22; and Kiernan, “The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969-1973,” *Vietnam Generation* 1:1 (1989), 4-41; see www.yale.edu/cgp/us.html



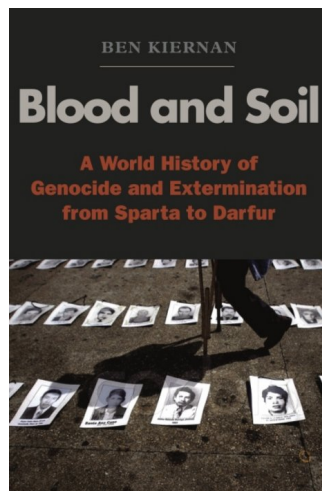
Click on the cover to order.



Click on the cover to order.



Click on the cover to order.



Click on the cover to order.