

Ironically, the Bush administration has adopted as its policy the question posed by then UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright to then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell: what's the use of having this fine military you keep talking about if we don't use it?

The negative practical consequences of this policy are all too evident. Ugly foreign governments from Iran to North Korea have an incentive to arm themselves, quickly, with WMD to deter a U.S. preventive assault.

Iraq has become a magnet for terrorist attacks while becoming a long-term dependent under U.S. military occupation.

Anger towards—indeed, hatred of—Washington is likely to continue growing, even in once friendly nations. It will be difficult to maintain an imperial foreign policy with a volunteer military.

Liberals should identify with the Bush record. He is increasing the size and power of the U.S. government both at home and abroad. He has expanded social engineering from the American nation to the entire globe. He is lavish with dollars on both domestic and foreign programs. For this the Left hates him?

The tendency to hate, really hate, opposing politicians surely is not good for American democracy. It is not rational to hate George W. Bush, just as it was not rational to hate Bill Clinton. But after spending eight years hating Clinton, conservatives who complain about the Bush-haters appear to be hypocrites.

George W. Bush enjoys neither royal nor religious status that would place him beyond criticism. Whether or not he is a real conservative, he is no friend of limited, constitutional government. And for that the American people should be very, very angry. ■

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Been There, Bombed That

An American revisits the Indochina we “lost.”

By Fred Reed

VIENTIANE, LAOS—The Mekong flows brown and ugly past the beer stalls and restaurants across the street from the Lane Xian hotel, a slightly decomposing pile, but comfortable enough. The country is green, perhaps not hopelessly backward but nearly so, and rattles with motor scooters. The people are small and brown. When female, they are often quite pretty. Westerners are common: a sizable current of backpacking tourists comes through, often *en route* to Luang Prabang. Laos is the sort of place writers invariably call “sleepy,” so I won’t.

It is a backwater, and was during the years of the war in Vietnam. Today it contains preserved traces of those receding times, like fossilized tracks of forgotten dinosaurs.

I met a reasonably English-speaking young Lao woman in a stall on the river and recruited her as tour guide. I liked her. She was studying to the extent she could in a business school in hopes of getting into hotel work. Waitressing in a Lao beer chute is a dead end. Our deal was that I’d pay for the cab on forays into the countryside, correct her English, and buy lunch. She would be a factotum.

During a temple crawl she mentioned in passing that life had been difficult for her family after they had lost her father. How had that happened, I asked unwisely. He died fighting the Americans, she said. Oh.

Maybe it is better not to go back to where your wars were. Perspective is corrosive of causes unless they are very good ones. I’m not sure ours were.

Three decades have passed since we were bombing the Laos. It is hard to remember why they were a threat to the United States. The Lao communists won, at least in the sense that they kept the country, and nothing bad happened to the United States. The communists won decisively in Vietnam, and nothing bad happened to the United States. They won in Cambodia, and nothing bad happened to the United States.

The shifting alliances are baffling to my non-actuarial mind. The hated Japanese and Germans are our friends, the hated Russians help us build the space station and talk of joining NATO, and the recently evil Chinese have most-favored-nation status and make everything we own. We have conquered Afghanistan, which we once helped defend against conquest by Russians, and we are on good terms with the British, who burned the Capitol in the War of 1812. (If encouraged, do you suppose they might do it again?)

I, my guide, and two taxi drivers were looking at another temple, which Laos has lots of, when I asked about the French. They were gone, said one of the drivers with approval. After them came the Americans, he said, who were also gone, and then the Russians, who too were gone. They clearly thought that gone was the proper condition for all of these groups.

I don’t think that Americans quite grasp that countries don’t like having foreigners bomb them. We tend to justify our wars in terms of abstractions: we are attacking to defeat communism, impose democracy, overcome evil or,

now, to end terrorism. The countries being bombed, devastated, and occupied usually think they are fighting invaders who have no business being there. The distinction is lost on many. I know aging veterans who to this day do not understand why the Vietnamese weren't grateful that we had come to help them fight communists.

Southeast Asia is full of the moldering offal of deceased foreign policy. In Siem Reap in Cambodia a couple of weeks ago I was delighted to find a thriving tourist economy based on the ruins of Angkor. The schools were full. Hotels went up. The countryside is poor yet well fed, and people have every expectation of waking up alive the next day. Yet you still see one-legged men. For years, Cambodia's chief crop was land mines. The killing fields were real.

I lost acquaintances to the Khmer Rouge after the fall of Phnom Penh and tend to be disagreeable when I think about it. Perhaps I should reflect stoically on the necessity of breaking eggs to make omelets. The wisdom of this is more apparent to those who are not eggs.

In Cambodia, the United States, exercising its God-given right to meddle catastrophically anywhere it can reach, had destabilized a puzzled country of thatch huts and water buffalo and facilitated the arrival of Pol Pot. The Americans then went back to California to surf.

The communists, exercising the mindless brutality common among them, had then killed huge if uncertain numbers of people for no reason and wrecked the country. This showed that the Russians and Americans could cooperate when they wished. Call it non-peaceful co-extirmination. Or call it synergy or convergence or conservation of parity. The Khmers died.

On the train from Bangkok to the Thai-Lao border at Nong Khai I had shared a compartment with a Lao, per-

haps in his sixties, from a comparatively rich family. He had spent 30 years in business in Paris. We became casual friends, and he invited me to dinner at his house, where some 50 of his relatives were having a Buddhist commemoration of something or other. Members of the family had returned for the event from several countries.

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They were hospitable and spoke I have no idea how many languages among them. The children were well mannered, the food excellent and accompanied by that traditional Lao drink, Pepsi. I supposed that they were the enemy, or had been, but wasn't sure why. I sometimes think the State Department needs to get out more and the CIA, less. The notion of devout Buddhist atheistic communist businessmen scoured around my mental craw, but I could never get a handle on it.

While eating breakfast at the Lane Xian, I was surprised to hear Spanish. The two fellows at the next table were Cubans, doubtless in Vientiane because of party solidarity or something equally as tiresome. I chatted with them briefly about nothing in particular. They were friendly, having the notion that the American government hated Cuba but that the American public did not. To a considerable extent this is true. The analysis is complicated by the inability of many to distinguish between Cuba and Castro.

I don't understand our embargo of Cuba. When the Russian empire was trying to turn the island into a military base aimed at the United States, the embargo made sense. Now it doesn't. As near as I can tell, it continues because

of the petrified vindictiveness of Cold Warriors without a Cold War. It's funny: we don't like Castro because he oppresses his people, so we maintain a pointless embargo that also oppresses them. More co-operation.

If you get to Laos, the reclining Buddha a half hour from Vientiane is worth the trip. The little countries of the

region were not always backwaters, or not so backwaterish anyway. In brief respites from killing each other, which they did as relentlessly as everyone else, they made some remarkable things. If you are in the business of building hotels, you might put one hereabouts. The country could use the money. I can recommend a young lady to help you manage it. ■

Fred Reed's writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Harper's, and National Review, among other places.

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California's Burning Again

The Golden State has known fires before. The latest won't be the last.

By Roger D. McGrath

THOUSAND OAKS, CALIF.—I could smell it upon awakening. It usually began that way—merely an offshore flow that changed the air in my coastal community from moist and marine-scented to dry and flavored with the aromas of the Great Basin. This always excited me because it meant that waves would not be crumpling from onshore winds by midmorning but would retain their shape throughout the day. By afternoon the flow had usually become a wind. Called a Santa Ana by everyone in Southern California since the late 19th century, the wind burst through the passes of the San Gabriel Mountains and swept across the Los Angeles basin and out to sea. It brought temperatures in the 100s, and its offshore direction could turn ordinary waves into surfers' dreams. It usually arrived in September and would reappear intermittently until the end of November or December. We kids who surfed were stoked.

If the wind blew too hard, though, not only did it undo the good it had done in shaping waves, but it also fanned the smallest fires into holocausts. Raging brush fires are nothing new to California. The Indians had taken advantage of Santa Ana winds to ignite tinder-dry brush during the fall and send panic-stricken animals fleeing down canyons to the sea. Waiting at the mouth of the canyons were Indian hunters who dispatched the fire-driven

deer and other game with ease. The Indians seem to have engaged in the practice for centuries before Spanish explorers first reported it during the 18th century. The fires had another benefit for the Indians: hillsides and canyons were cleared of dense undergrowth, nutritious grasses and plants sprang up with the first rains, and deer browsed to their heart's content, growing sleek and strong.

Although the Indians were simply intent on driving game out of the hills, they were practicing a kind of fire ecology. Repeated burns prevented a buildup of fuel, and the fires were usually not able to burn with the heat and intensity necessary to kill trees. The bark of healthy trees is amazingly resilient and is able to protect the trees from long-term damage. This is especially true of the several varieties of oaks that dot California's coastal mountains and valleys. The Spanish *ranchero* continued the practice of burning, although he did it to improve grazing for his longhorn cattle. As long as man-made structures were not consumed, the practice seemed to have nothing but beneficial effects.

It was on a *ranch* that one of California's first great rural homes was consumed by a Santa-Ana-driven brush fire. Frederick Rindge was the scion of a wealthy New England family who bought Rancho Topanga, Malibu, Sequit

—the area known simply as Malibu today—from the Kellers in 1893. Friction immediately developed between the backcountry homesteaders, living just beyond the ranch's boundaries, and Rindge. The previous owner, Matthew Keller, an open-handed Irish immigrant who had once studied for the priesthood, had built a road through the property—the basis for Malibu's portion of the coast highway today—and allowed local homesteaders to use it. Rindge erected locked gates and hired armed patrols to guard access. At the time he lived in a home in Santa Monica and visited the ranch only occasionally. Then, in 1903, he built a grand ranch house near the mouth of Malibu canyon. Before he and his wife, May, could fully settle in, a Santa Ana began to blow, and a fire erupted high in the canyon. It took only hours for the fire to race to the sea and consume everything in its path, including the Rindge ranch house. Arson was suspected, and suspicion rested upon the backcountry homesteaders. Rindge moved back to Santa Monica and died not much more than a year later.

Ever since the loss of Rindge's house, Malibu has seen, again and again, the destruction of homes in Santa-Ana-driven brush fires. The first great blaze that I remember erupted on a night just after Christmas in December 1956. Starting near Lake Sherwood in Thousand