

"US Has Own Record of Atrocities," *Boston Globe*, December 23, 2000;
"Time for a US Cold War Truth Commission," *Chicago Tribune*, December 24, 2000;
"US Needs Its Own Truth Commission," *Montreal Gazette*, December 28, 2000.
"Une 'commission verite' pour les Etats-Unis," *Le Monde*, January 11, 2001.

By James Ron & Charles T. Call

DURING SERBIA'S FORCED depopulation of Kosovo in 1999, Slobodan Milosevic, the former Yugoslavian president, acknowledged that irregular Serbian forces were committing excesses while fighting Kosovar insurgents. He claimed, however, that these were mild when compared with US war crimes in Vietnam.

Slobodan Milosevic was a deceptive autocrat responsible for the deaths of thousands, but he had a point. Compared with the US record in Vietnam, Serbia's Kosovo atrocities were far fewer.

Remember My Lai? In just a few hours, Lieutenant William Calley's men shot or knifed more than 400 men, women, and children, raping and mutilating some victims. Even that chilling episode, however, pales alongside US tactics in the Vietnamese and Cambodian countryside, where high explosives, napalm, and defoliant were the methods of choice.

Serbian forces killed some 10,000 Kosovars, but in Southeast Asia the United States and its allies slew 1 million, many of whom were civilians. More than twice that number were wounded or forcibly displaced.

Direct US involvement in war crimes continued even after the Vietnam conflict. CIA operatives mined Nicaragua's main harbor in the 1980s, and until the 1990s, US Army courses for Latin American soldiers included torture. In the early 1990s, CIA agents created a right-wing group in Haiti that killed hundreds of civilians.

Although most Americans barely recall those events, others elsewhere have not forgotten. For them, the contemporary US fascination with human rights seems empty and cynical. If the United States does not investigate its past misdeeds, these suspicions will ring true.

In addition to directly participating in abuses, the United States also covertly aided brutal authoritarians abroad. Just as Milosevic pulled the strings during Bosnia's ethnic cleansing, the United States secretly sponsored cruel allies to advance political goals.

Consider Chile, where CIA operatives helped overthrow an elected leftist leader in the early 1970s, creating the long nightmare of Pinochet's rule. The

Chilean judiciary is now investigating Pinochet's crimes, but the CIA is only reluctantly opening its files.

Or recall Iran, where US operatives in the 1950s helped depose an elected government that was threatening Western oil profits. They then installed the Shah, a dictator who relied on torture to maintain control.

The same is true for Guatemala, where UN-backed investigators found that government counterinsurgency forces killed 90 percent of an estimated 200,000 civil war victims.

President Clinton recently called the substantial, clandestine US role in that war wrong, but did nothing to investigate those responsible.

The US government offered widely accepted reasons for its behavior during the Cold War years. It was fighting global communism, which to many seemed a noble and worthwhile goal. Yet wouldn't men like Milosevic supply similarly reasonable explanations?

Governments are skilled at justifying abusive policies, citing overwhelming threats to national security. Milosevic defended the Serbian nation, Pinochet battled subversives, and South African whites were fighting communism. Although the rhetoric of justification shifts with time, the realities of abuse remain constant. When states use indiscriminate force to get their way, innocents usually suffer.

In the post-Cold War environment there is increasing cause for optimism.

Many countries, including Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Ethiopia, Chad, El Salvador, Chile, Haiti, and Guatemala, have tried to expose the truth about their past, often at great political cost.

Yet the United States still refuses to practice what it preaches. As supreme Cold War victor, its representatives lecture others about human rights without stopping to consider their own past crimes. For both moral and political reasons, the United States should create a commission to investigate its own involvement in Cold War misdeeds. The methods of an official US "truth commission" should be professional and nonpartisan in order to avoid narrow political agendas.

Despite these precautions, a US inquiry would be painful and divisive. Presidential fortunes might suffer, and congressional careers could be hurt. Yet recall that these are only some of the powerful risks run every day by politicians promoting truth-telling elsewhere, from South Africa to Argentina. How long can the United States promote accountability for others if it itself is unwilling to do the same?

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