

Chris Hedges: The Lie of American Innocence.

from Consortium News, 22march22

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The branding of Vladimir Putin as a war criminal by Joe Biden, who lobbied for the Iraq war and staunchly supported the 20 years of carnage in the Middle East, is one more example of the hypocritical moral posturing sweeping across the United States.

It is unclear how anyone would try Putin for war crimes since Russia, like the United States, does not recognize the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. But justice is not the point.

Politicians like Biden, who do not accept responsibility for our well-documented war crimes, bolster their moral credentials by demonizing their adversaries. They know the chance of Putin facing justice is zero. And they know their chance of facing justice is the same.

We know who our most recent war criminals are, among others: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, General Ricardo Sanchez, former CIA Director George Tenet, former Asst. Atty. Gen. Jay Bybee, former Dep. Asst. Atty. Gen. John Yoo, who set up the legal framework to authorize torture; the helicopter pilots who gunned down civilians, including two Reuters journalists, in the “Collateral Murder” video released by *WikiLeaks*. We have evidence of the crimes they committed.

But, like Putin’s Russia, those who expose these crimes are silenced and persecuted. Julian Assange, even though he is not a U.S. citizen and his *WikiLeaks* site is not a U.S.-based publication, is charged under the U.S. Espionage Act for making public numerous U.S. war crimes. Assange, currently housed in a high security prison in London, is fighting a losing battle in the British courts to block his extradition to the United States, where he faces 175 years in prison.

A Different Set of Rules

One set of rules for Russia, another set of rules for the United States. Weeping crocodile tears for the Russian media, which is being heavily censored by Putin, while ignoring the plight of the most important publisher of our generation speaks volumes about how much the ruling class cares about press freedom and truth.

If we demand justice for Ukrainians, as we should, we must also demand justice for the one million people killed — 400,000 of whom were noncombatants — by our invasions, occupations and aerial assaults in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan. We must demand justice for those who were wounded, became sick or died because we destroyed hospitals and infrastructure.

We must demand justice for the thousands of soldiers and marines who were killed, and many more who were wounded and are living with lifelong disabilities, in wars launched and sustained on lies.

We must demand justice for the 38 million people who have been displaced or become refugees in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Libya, and Syria, a number that exceeds the total of all those displaced in all wars since 1900, apart from World War II, according to the Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs at Brown University.

Tens of millions of people, who had no connection with the attacks of 9/11, were killed, wounded, lost their homes, and saw their lives and their families destroyed because of our war crimes. Who will cry out for them?

Every effort to hold our war criminals accountable has been rebuffed by Congress, by the courts, by the media and by the two ruling political parties. The Center for Constitutional Rights, blocked from bringing cases in U.S. courts against the architects of these preemptive wars, which are defined by post-Nuremberg laws as “criminal wars of aggression,” filed motions in German courts to hold U.S. leaders to account for gross violations of the Geneva Convention, including the sanctioning of torture in black sites such as Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib.

Those who have the power to enforce the rule of law, to hold our war criminals to account, to atone for our war crimes, direct their moral outrage exclusively at Putin’s Russia.

“Intentionally targeting civilians is a war crime,” Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said, condemning Russia for attacking civilian sites, including a hospital, three schools and a boarding school for visually impaired children in the Luhansk region of Ukraine. “These incidents join a long list of attacks on civilian, not military locations, across Ukraine,” he said. Beth Van Schaack, an ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, will direct the

effort at the State Department, Blinkin said, to “help international efforts to investigate war crimes and hold those responsible accountable.”

This collective hypocrisy, based on the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves, is accompanied by massive arms shipments to Ukraine. Fueling proxy wars was a specialty of the Cold War. We have returned to the script.

US Crimes Don't Count

If Ukrainians are heroic resistance fighters, what about Iraqis and Afghans, who fought as valiantly and as doggedly against a foreign power that was every bit as savage as Russia? Why weren't they lionized? Why weren't sanctions imposed on the United States? Why weren't those who defended their countries from foreign invasion in the Middle East, including Palestinians under Israeli occupation, also provided with thousands of anti-tank weapons, anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, helicopters, Switchblade or “Kamikaze” drones, hundreds of Stinger anti-aircraft systems, Javelin anti-tank missiles, machine guns and millions of rounds of ammunition? Why didn't Congress rush through a \$13.6 billion package to provide military and humanitarian assistance, on top of the \$1.2 billion already provided to the Ukrainian military, for them?

Well, we know why. Our war crimes don't count, and neither do the victims of our war crimes. And this hypocrisy makes a rules-based world, one that abides by international law, impossible.

This hypocrisy is not new. There is no moral difference between the saturation bombing the U.S. carried out on civilian populations since World War II, including in Vietnam and Iraq, and the targeting of urban centers by Russia in Ukraine or the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. Mass death and fireballs on a city skyline are the calling cards we have left across the globe for decades. Our adversaries do the same.

The deliberate targeting of civilians, whether in Baghdad, Kyiv, Gaza, or New York City, are *all* war crimes. The killing of at least 112 Ukrainian children, [as of March 19](#) [according to the Ukrainians], is an atrocity, but so is the killing of 551 Palestinian children during Israel's 2014 military assault on Gaza [according to the U.N.]. So is the killing of 230,000 people over the past seven years in Yemen from Saudi bombing campaigns and blockades that have resulted in mass starvation and cholera epidemics. Where were the calls for a no-fly zone over Gaza and Yemen? Imagine how many lives could have been saved.

War crimes demand the same moral judgment and accountability. But they don't get them. And they don't get them because we have one set of standards for white Europeans, and another for non-white people around the globe.

The western media has turned European and American volunteers flocking to fight in Ukraine into heroes, while Muslims in the west who join resistance groups battling foreign occupiers in the Middle East are criminalized as terrorists. Putin has been ruthless with the press. But so has our ally the de facto Saudi ruler Mohammed bin Salman, who ordered the murder and dismemberment of my friend and colleague Jamal Khashoggi, and who this month oversaw a mass execution of 81 people convicted of criminal offenses. The coverage of Ukraine, especially after spending seven years reporting on Israel's murderous assaults against the Palestinians, is another example of the racist divide that defines most of the western media.

Abandoning the Laws of War



The bombing of Dresden, 1945. (Deutsche FotothekDresden)

World War II began with an understanding, at least by the allies, that employing industrial weapons against civilian populations was a war crime. But within 18 months of the start of the war, the Germans, Americans and British were relentlessly bombing cities. By the end of the war, one-fifth of German homes had been destroyed. One million German civilians were killed or wounded in bombing raids. Seven-and-a-half million Germans were made homeless.

The tactic of saturation bombing, or area bombing, which included the firebombing of Dresden, Hamburg and Tokyo, which killed more than

90,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo and left a million people homeless, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which took the lives of between 129,000 and 226,000 people, most of whom were civilians, had the sole purpose of breaking the morale of the population through mass death and terror. Cities such as Leningrad, Stalingrad, Warsaw, Coventry, Royan, Nanjing and Rotterdam were obliterated.

It turned the architects of modern war, all of them, into war criminals.

Civilians in every war since have been considered legitimate targets. In the summer of 1965, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called the bombing raids north of Saigon that left hundreds of thousands of dead an effective means of communication with the government in Hanoi.

McNamara, six years before he died, unlike most war criminals, had the capacity for self-reflection. Interviewed in the documentary, “The Fog of War,” he was repentant, not only about targeting Vietnamese civilians but about the aerial targeting of civilians in Japan in World War II, overseen by Air Force General Curtis LeMay.

“LeMay said if we’d lost the war, [we’d all have been prosecuted as war criminals](#),” McNamara said in the film. “And I think he’s right ... LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose, and not immoral if you win?”

LeMay, later head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War, would go on to drop tons of napalm and firebombs on civilian targets in Korea which, by his own estimate, killed 20 percent of the population over a three-year period.

Industrial killing defines modern warfare. It is impersonal mass slaughter. It is administered by vast bureaucratic structures that perpetuate the killing over months and years. It is sustained by heavy industry that produces a steady flow of weapons, munitions, tanks, planes, helicopters, battleships, submarines, missiles, and mass-produced supplies, along with mechanized transports that ferry troops and armaments by rail, ship, cargo planes and trucks to the battlefield.

It mobilizes industrial, governmental and organization structures for total war. It centralizes systems of information and internal control. It is rationalized for the public by specialists and experts, drawn from the military establishment, along with pliant academics and the media.

Industrial war destroys existing value systems that protect and nurture life, replacing them with fear, hatred, and a dehumanization of those who we are made to believe deserve to be exterminated. It is driven by emotions, not truth or fact. It obliterates nuance, replacing it with an infantile binary universe of us and them. It drives competing narratives, ideas and values

underground and vilifies all who do not speak in the national cant that replaces civil discourse and debate.

It is touted as an example of the inevitable march of human progress, when in fact it brings us closer and closer to mass obliteration in a nuclear holocaust. It mocks the concept of individual heroism, despite the feverish efforts of the military and the mass media to sell this myth to naïve young recruits and a gullible public. It is the Frankenstein of industrialized societies. War, as Alfred Kazin warned, is “the ultimate purpose of technological society.” Our real enemy is within.

Historically, those who are prosecuted for war crimes, whether the Nazi hierarchy at Nuremberg or the leaders of Liberia, Chad, Serbia, and Bosnia, are prosecuted because they lost the war and because they are adversaries of the United States.

No Nuremberg This Time



The Nuremberg trials circa 1945-46. (U.S. National Archives)

There will be no prosecution of Saudi Arabian rulers for the war crimes committed in Yemen or for the U.S. military and political leadership for the war crimes they carried out in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya, or a generation earlier in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The atrocities the U.S. commits, such as My Lai, where 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians were

gunned down by U.S. soldiers, which are made public, are dealt with by finding a scapegoat, usually a low-ranking officer who is given a symbolic sentence.

Lt. William Calley served three years under house arrest for the killings at My Lai. Eleven U.S. soldiers, none of whom were officers, were convicted of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. But the architects and overlords of our industrial slaughter, including Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Gen. Curtis LeMay, Harry S. Truman, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Lyndon Johnson, Gen. William Westmoreland, George W. Bush, Gen. David Petraeus, Barack Obama and Joe Biden are never held to account. They leave power to become venerated elder statesmen.

The mass slaughter of industrial warfare, the failure to hold ourselves to account, to see our own face in the war criminals we condemn, will have ominous consequences. Author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi understood that the annihilation of the humanity of others is prerequisite for their physical annihilation.

We have become captives to our machines of industrial death. Politicians and generals wield their destructive fury as if they were toys. Those who decry the madness, who demand the rule of law, are attacked and condemned. These industrial weapons systems are our modern idols.

We worship their deadly prowess. But all idols, the Bible tells us, begin by demanding the sacrifice of others and end in apocalyptic self-sacrifice.

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