

**Value Human Life, Not  
American Power**

## Value Human Life, Not American Power

By Alfie Kohn

Stop the next ten people you see and ask them how many lives were lost in the Vietnam War. Chances are you'll get answers of about 50,000. This, however, is just the number of Americans who died during the decade-long invasion of that country. Nearly two million Vietnamese were killed before the U.S. stopped the bombing.

The confusion between lives and American lives is on display once again. With all the talk about "a miraculously low number of casualties" in the Persian Gulf War, it is worth considering how recent events might be framed if nationalism were not now eclipsing basic human values. Imagine the headlines: U.S. KILLS TENS OF THOUSANDS, MOSTLY TEENAGE SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS; HIGH-TECH WEAPONRY DEVASTATES THIRD WORLD COUNTRY.

Even if a war *had* been necessary to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait – and there is ample reason to doubt this – the merciless attack on Iraqis, including the destruction of Baghdad's water supply, suggests that our proper response now is profound regret, if not shame and horror. But the twin forces of militarism and nationalism have instead produced an atmosphere of celebration. In place of sober reflection about the carnage just created, we hear shouts of triumph and see flags and ribbons and parades.

What just happened in the Middle East was not a triumph of Good over Evil, however much we wish things were that simple. The fact that Saddam Hussein is a bad guy doesn't mean that Americans were the good guys. That conclusion emerges when the U.S. attack on Iraq is viewed in the context of all the aggression for which our government has been directly or indirectly responsible around the world – and all the Saddam-like tyrants (including Saddam himself) whom our government has supported.

The United States has used its armed forces abroad more than 150 times since 1850, according to a conservative estimate by the Congressional Research Service. To say that we have done so as the world's policeman is not only arrogant but grossly unfair to real police officers, whose job is to enforce the law and keep people from harm.

The U.S., by contrast, has contempt for international law – witness its blatant defiance of the World Court's 1984 rulings against the war of terror against Nicaragua – and has visited harm on people around the globe, invading here, bombing there, arming this dictator, installing that puppet regime.

The only thing new about the New World Order is the prospect of fewer restraints on such activities. Today the U.S. government feels freer to attack whomever it pleases since victory can presumably come quickly, and loss of American life can be kept low. This is not good news for most of the world.

When the President says we have "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all," compassionate people can only shudder. If that syndrome – and notice that the reluctance to start a war is made to seem like a disease – has really been laid to rest, then the only restraint on the government's use of force is us.

Our job now is not just to rain on the victory parades but to examine what it means to kill human beings in the name of this, or any other, state. To work for peace is to work against the dehumanization of people who don't look like us. It is to remember that a war widow in Baghdad suffers exactly as her counterpart in Boston.

We can't go back in time and insist that President Bush make a serious effort to solve the crisis through negotiation. Nor can we restore life to the tens of thousands killed in our name and with our money. All we can do is try to restrain the frightening prospect of the world's only military superpower, drunk with its newfound ability to kill without being killed. We have to act so that we are ready to answer our children and grandchildren when they ask us, "What did you do back in '91, when the President ordered the deaths of thousands of people in the Persian Gulf? Did you wave the flag and cheer or did you stand up and speak out against the horror? And what did you do to prevent other high-tech wars by a government that values American power more than human life?"

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