

Book Review

Eternal Harvest: The Legacy of American Bombs in Laos. Karen J. Coates. Photos by Jerry Redfern. San Francisco, CA: ThingsAsian Press, 2013. 377 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1934159491 (pbk). \$12.95.

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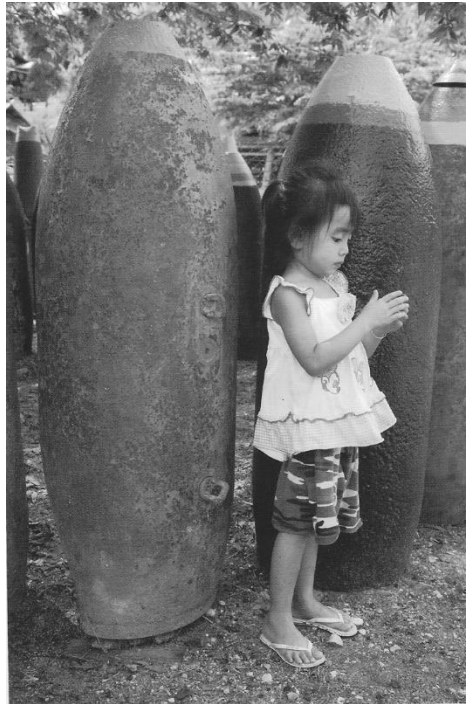
In 1961, just when the United States began to intensify its military offensive against nationalist and communist forces in mainland Southeast Asia, President John F. Kennedy warned the world, ‘The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all’ (p. 20). At the time, Laos, 14,000 kilometers from the White House, was (and remains) one of the least developed countries in the world, with a land area the size of the United Kingdom, but with a population of only 5.5 million. By the time Kennedy read his speech, Laos’s neutrality had already been compromised: initially by North Vietnam cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the forests of northeastern Laos and, then by US attempts to obliterate the Trail. The Trail’s extensive network of footpaths and roads also ran through Laos and Cambodia, and was the main military supply line sustaining the communist Viet Cong who were fighting to overthrow the Republic of South Vietnam and defeat its guarantor, the US.

President Lyndon B. Johnson inherited the Second Indo-China War (Vietnam War, 1954-1974) from his predecessor and immediately launched ‘Operation Barrel Roll’ to quash the flow of supplies along the Trail. From 1964 to 1973, the US military flew 580,000 bombing missions over Laos and dropped 6 billion pounds of bombs which included 270-million sub-munitions called cluster-bombs or ‘bombies’. These cricket-ball sized explosives were packed by the hundreds into bomb casings that would split open just before they hit the ground so that the ‘bombies’ could disperse more widely. Of the ordnance dropped during these missions, it is estimated that 30% failed to explode, leaving roughly 80 million unexploded ordnance (UXO) lying dormant in Laos. This is the kernel of the country’s *Eternal Harvest*.

Author Karen J. Coates and photojournalist Jerry Redfern spent a good part of eight years (2005-2013) documenting what has been reaped from this particular harvest sown once again from the ultra-dexterous techno-rational mind and hands of earth’s super predator whose propensity for domination and violence can only be matched by its inclination towards care and empathy. The latter is the primary motivation that yields this volume, but also helps to shape the transcultural complex that has evolved from such a harvest which has, since the end of the War, killed 50,000 people and maimed 20,000 in Laos, one of three countries in Southeast Asia where UXO remain a brutal feature of the landscape.

The authors begin to reveal this cultural complex – though they do not employ such academese– by briefly describing the early stages of US involvement in region. Then, through what seems to be casual conversations with a few who survived the eight-year onslaught (which included the use of poisons such as white phosphorus and defoliants), they tap into a sense of place that becomes even more visible with Redfern’s photographs of war remnants and their assimilation into daily life. When Coates writes, ‘the war took place in black and grey’ because on the ground – in the villages and caves – most ordinary activities occurred at night to avoid detection by US

bombers, she delivers poignant insight on life under this rain of death and destruction. Villagers lived through ‘nine years of no color’, even the ‘chickens could not be white’ (p. 72). The war goes on – in black and grey, as Redfern reveals in his leaden images.



Jerry Redfern (2013)

There are two problems, however, with the representation of the*Legacy of American Bombs in Laos*. And, this is surprising especially since those in the business of reportage and publishing know full well that the ‘medium is the message’ no matter how noble the cause. Of course, these problems cannot detract from the authors’ major achievement which is overcoming the tremendous difficulties they faced in order to gather this kind of information, both in words and in pictures. But, photographs that spread over two contiguous pages and have their centers sinking into the gutter of the book are less stirring, less informative. The size of the book is small; its width and length are 5.5 x 8.5 inches, respectively. Shouldn’t a photo essay be given ample room for exhibition? And, yet, the other issue is, ironically, that the book has a number of empty pages here and there. Perhaps, just perhaps, these are spaces for reflection where we pause to consider our relationship to the people of Laos and to the conditions in which they live.

Personal anecdotes, alluring scenes, telling portraits and essential facts merge to resemble the conditions of life in northeastern Laos and indicate the cultivation of a unique and interrelated set of artifacts, relationships and perceptions. For example, the authors take us on a journey through the semi-formal scrap-metal industry kept alive by children who dig into the ground in search for an anonymous segment of military hardware and shards of metal from shattered bombs. A 2,000 pound shell scatters 900 pounds of scrap onto the ground. Those remaining intact but defused can be used to shoulder houses, build fences or enhance décor. Bomb craters can be converted to rice paddies and fish ponds, or offer dramatic backdrops for tourist selfies and usies.



Jerry Redfern (2013)

Authorities discourage the collecting of scrap, but villagers are poor. Small-scale refineries smelt and reshape fragments into eating utensils, jewelry and rebar, and even into hunting knives sold in the US. Often times foragers step-on or handle UXO which sometimes cause them to explode. The death or maiming that follows usually have devastating and lasting impact on the social and economic integrity of the victim's family. Many of those who lose limbs gain prosthetics donated from abroad or made locally.

National and international organizations and their forces of volunteer and paid staff are also part of this life-world. The book profiles organizations and their teams who remove UXO, specifically, Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and Phoenix Clearance Limited. And so we learn about: the logistics of this formidable task; the technologies used to detect and destroy the deleterious kernels; the financing and bureaucracy that more often slows progress; and, the agonizingly slow process of clearing an area to make it 100% safe – theoretically. The authors also allow us to catch a glimpse of the personalities of those who dedicate themselves to such a taxing and dangerous endeavor, one which will take 1,777 years to complete if funding, obtained mostly from the US government, remains at present levels.

For me, the high point of this portion of the book is the unfolding of two different but converging peripatetic senses of place. One is conveyed by a demolition expert who just learned that a few youngsters had found a bombie in a nearby rice field.

The problem with piling kids into a truck is if it's their first ride in a truck, suddenly the whole world looks different to them. They get disoriented. Landmarks become unrecognizable and distances shift. It becomes harder to trace the land, which they know best by foot and feel (p. 222).

Coates and Redfern develop their own feel for the unreliable ground: ‘I’ve grown so accustomed to stepping with caution, at times I forget what it’s like to walk without thought’ (p. 222), writes Coates.

Then, near the end of the book, the authors set up a remarkable juxtaposition by retelling the story of the first time a human being ever set foot on the lunar surface, declaring: ‘one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind.’ They also mention that on the same day, the US military flew 159 bombing missions over Laos, dropping about 700 general purpose bombs and many cluster bombs. More than fifty years later, we take the small steps; war and its accoutrements are still fashionable, however, those insidious cluster bombs will be outlawed once all nations of the world ratify the Convention on Cluster Munitions which ‘prohibits using, producing, stockpiling, transferring’ (p. 316) such devices. The ‘giant leap’ is taken when the largest manufacturers and retailers in the global cluster bomb trade – China, Russia, Israel, Singapore and the United States – sign on.



Jerry Redfern (2013)

Because of the authors’ precise and thorough reporting, and engaging representations, *Eternal Harvest* offers a giant leap forward for those who want to learn about the effects of the Second Indo-China War on people living and working in and around its residual war zones. The book’s deep insights on how the war has affected Laos is peerless. I especially recommend the book for supporters of the military industrial complex who seem to have lost touch with ‘the better angels of our nature.’ Moonscapes are no place to wander.