

Anthony Bourdain in Laos

A rare media examination of the US saturation bombing of Laos

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Anthony Bourdain has become a somewhat ubiquitous figure on television, having hosted a series of engaging culinary travelogues, often to countries off the beaten path. A graduate of the Culinary Institute, his career took off following the publication of his book *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*.

Bourdain started on the Food Network, but became critical of the programming increasingly populated with banal cooking competitions. He then hosted the highly successful “No Reservations” on the Travel Channel. In 2013, he was picked up by CNN, where he launched his current “Parts Unknown” series.

The personable Bourdain combines a genuine affection for people, places and foods, especially Asian, with an infectious and often bawdy sense of humor. Occasionally his banter can be mildly subversive. His politics, seemingly of the left-liberal variety, is occasionally peppered with the obligatory anti-communism, usually an uninformed reference to a Stalinist or post-Stalinist regime visited during one of his culinary excursions.

However, his newest offering, “Parts Unknown: Laos,” broadcast May 14, is a departure even from his more politicized programs on countries such as Myanmar or Iran. From the outset, Bourdain is focused on the past; the secret war waged by the United States military against the people of Laos during the 1950s and 1960s, and for good reason. This secret war was first widely exposed by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971, when he passed on to the *New York Times* what became known as the “Pentagon Papers,” revealing one of the great war crimes of the 20th century.

Three CIA agents, whom Bourdain identifies,

working out of the American embassy in Luang Prabang, were the front men for a US-sponsored counterinsurgency which enlisted Hmong tribesmen, often children, to fight against the Pathet Lao, who were allied with the government of North Vietnam, led by Ho Chi Minh.

This was followed by the infamous carpet-bombing of the country, one the size of Michigan in terms of land area. As Bourdain explains, more bombs were dropped on Laos than on Germany and Japan combined during World War II. Laos is, to quote Bourdain himself, “the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world.”

Since the war’s end in the mid-1970s, more than 20,000 people, mostly children or people born after the war, have been killed by unexploded ordnance. Villagers interviewed by Bourdain give accounts of children who were killed by unexploded cluster bombs the size of tennis balls that were mistakenly seen as toys.

When President Obama visited Southeast Asia last year, he pledged to help remove the bombs that lie buried throughout the Laotian countryside. However, as revealed in Bourdain’s visit, only a minuscule percentage of the bombs have been disarmed or detonated.

Bourdain briefly met with Obama when he visited Ho Chi Minh City, where the President was seemingly greeted warmly by the Vietnamese. However, Obama’s visit to Laos, the first ever by an American president, was a different matter, and didn’t get a lot of media coverage. According to Bourdain, the Laotian government in Vientiane warned shopkeepers about opening their door to the American commander-in-

chief.

Bourdain attributes this to the government being a “one party communist state,” in which the war represented a “painful and taboo subject.”

And why wouldn’t it be? The crimes committed by the United States in Laos were real and monstrous. Even Bourdain had to conclude, after talking to some Laotian villagers, and asking them why they thought Obama came to Laos, that there was an ulterior motive, and that Obama “needs a friend in the neighborhood”, i.e., an ally against the Chinese.

And the experience of the Laotian people is even more “taboo” in the United States, where references to the saturation bombing of the tiny country are rare. Bourdain himself states that the “American experience here is one they (the Americans) want to believe never happened.”

In the corporate-controlled media of 2017, apparently only a culinary celebrity has the freedom to discuss war crimes committed by the US military—and then only if they took place a half century ago.

There is a poignant exchange early on in Sunday’s installment between Bourdain and an 80-year-old Hmong villager who fought on the side of the Pathet Lao. The villager explains that the situation created by the war pitted Hmong against Hmong. He showed Bourdain the scars on his abdomen, caused by shrapnel from an American bomb. The man had a quiet dignity as he recounted his experience.

Even after 40 years, one is still sickened by the bestiality of US imperialism during the Vietnam War. Anthony Bourdain’s one-hour offering is both a startling reminder of the war crimes committed by US imperialism during the war, and, intentionally or not, a timely exposure and warning of the present capacity for criminality of the American ruling elite as it prepares for new and even more catastrophic wars.



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