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World Politics

The last time the US launched 'fire and fury' on North Korea, a third of the population died

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Numerous commentators in the US and elsewhere have poured cold water on the idea there could be a short term war.

As the Guardian says:

"But despite two unpredictable nuclear-armed leaders trading barbs, most observers believe the possibility of conflict remains remote, with the North Korean leadership using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip rather than an offensive weapon." [1]

But the unpredictability of two megalomaniac leaders is just the point. Trump's threat of 'fire and fury like the world has never seen' appears to be a radically different approach to that of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who just a few days ago was telling Kim Jong-un and the North Korean leadership that the US did not seek regime change and "we are not your enemy".

But Trump's interests are not exactly the same as the whole US capitalist class, or even of the majority of right wing Republicans who control Congress. Trump has seen an unprecedented fall in his approval ratings down to around 30% since taking office and it was absolutely predictable that he would try to use the military card to shore up his base.

US presidents may be sometimes stymied on the home front by Congress, but as 'commander in chief' they have wide-ranging powers to launch wars, declared or otherwise. And domestic critics in the US largely fall into line when the military are involved. As Phil Ochs said in his song Love Me I'm a Liberal, "When it comes to times like Korea, there's no one more red white and blue".

Kim Jong-un's nuclear sabre rattling seems irrational, indeed lunatic, but that too has a domestic rationale. In the past brinkmanship has led to deals which got North Korea huge amounts of (largely unpublicised) economic aid, for example the 1994 deal between Bill Clinton and Kim Jong-il, the present leader's father.

But even in a brutal dictatorship, the ideological mobilisation of the population matters. Sheer terror and a permanent state of emergency in relations with South Korea and the US, are what whip North Koreans into line.

The danger of course is that the two main forces in play are commanded by unpredictable megalomaniacs. Calculations of rational state interests don't necessarily win out when such people call the shots. The war danger is very real.

For the people of North Korea, warnings from their leadership about the United States seem all too real. During the Korean war (1950-53) the whole of the North was bombed flat and according to some estimates a third of its population died.

A Washington Post journalist Blaine Harden explains that although much of the propaganda of today's North Korean regime is preposterous and idiotic, the hatred of America is often genuine and based on memories of the Korean war:

"The hate, though, is not all manufactured. It is rooted in a fact-based narrative, one that North Korea obsessively

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remembers and the United States blithely forgets.

"The story dates to the early 1950s, when the U.S. Air Force, in response to the North Korean invasion that started the Korean War, bombed and napalmed cities, towns and villages across the North. It was mostly easy pickings for the Air Force, whose B-29s faced little or no opposition on many missions.

"The bombing was long, leisurely and merciless, even by the assessment of America's own leaders. Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War, told the Office of Air Force History in 1984 that "Over a period of three years or so, we killed off what 20 percent of the population'.

Dean Rusk, a supporter of the war and later secretary of state, said the United States bombed "everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another." After running low on urban targets, U.S. bombers destroyed hydroelectric and irrigation dams in the later stages of the war, flooding farmland and destroying crops. "Although the ferocity of the bombing was criticized as racist and unjustified elsewhere in the world, it was never a big story back home. U.S. press coverage of the air war focused, instead, on "MiG alley," a narrow patch of North Korea near the Chinese border. There, in the world's first jet-powered aerial war, American fighter pilots competed against each other to shoot down five or more Soviet-made fighters and become "aces." War reporters rarely mentioned civilian casualties from U.S. carpet-bombing. It is perhaps the most forgotten part of a forgotten war." [2]

Curtis LeMay's casual estimate of 20% of the population killed by US bombing doesn't account for all deaths among the North Korean civilian population, as the fighting flowed back and forth along the peninsula. According to Brian Wilson:

"It is now believed that the population north of the imposed 38th Parallel lost nearly a third its population of 8 - 9 million people during the 37-month long "hot" war, 1950 - 1953, perhaps an unprecedented percentage of mortality suffered by one nation due to the belligerence of another." [3]

A Daily Telegraph journalist has exposed the massacre of civilians in South Korea during the war, especially those with left wing sympathies.

"Authorities in the country have discovered mass burial sites containing thousands of bodies, including scores of children. Trawls of records including declassified files in Washington have uncovered evidence of the massacres of at least 100,000 people suspected of having sympathy with the North Koreans.

"In some cases, American forces are alleged to have been present and in at least one case an American officer authorised a massacre of prisoners believed to have left-wing sympathies....

A major massacre of civilians took place on Wolmi Island, adjacent to Inchon where American troops landed in September 1950. According to Choe Sang-hun, "When American troops stormed this island more than half a century ago, it was a hive of Communist trenches and pillboxes. Now it is a park where children play and retirees stroll along a tree-shaded esplanade.

"But inside a ragged tent at the entrance of the park, some aging South Koreans gather daily to draw attention to their side of the conflict, a story of carnage not mentioned in South Korea's official histories or textbooks.

"When the napalm hit our village, many people were still sleeping in their homes," said Lee Beom-ki, 76. "Those who survived the flames ran to the tidal flats. We were trying to show the American pilots that we were civilians. But they

strafed us, women and children." [4]

Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos

It would take a book to detail all the civilian deaths during the Vietnam war in the 1960s and 1970s, which involved aerial bombardment on an unprecedented scale, in South Vietnam, against North Vietnam and in Cambodia and Laos.

Several million people died in Vietnam, the majority civilians who died at the hands of US and South Vietnamese forces. But the US extended its air war into Cambodia and Laos, which had their own Communist insurgencies and where sections of the Ho Chi Minh trail, which routed aid from North Vietnam to fighters in South Vietnam, were located.

No one really know the human cost of the bombing campaign in Cambodia, but 500,000 is among the lower estimates. However the bombing of Laos, much less known by the public, was even more devastating.

From 1964 to 1973, the U.S. dropped more than two million tons of bombs on Laos during an astonishing 580,000 bombing missions - equal to a payload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years - making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. No one knows how many people died there, but it must be in the hundreds of thousands. Since the war more than 20,000 people have been killed or injured by the mass of unexploded cluster bombs that litter the countryside.

And after 9/11...

The mass slaughter of innocents by US air power continues to this day. Unknown thousands have been killed by the profligate use of airborne mass violence in Iraq and Syria, the latter of course joined by Syrian and Russian air power. Even in recent weeks the cruel bombardment by US planes of civilians in the Isis last strongholds in Mosul - including with white phosphorous, banned under international law - has cost many hundreds of lives.

Donald Trump's threat of using "fire and fury the like of which the world has never seen" can't be literally true, unless he was actually threatening the use of nuclear weapons. The world has seen plenty of aerial destruction, mainly by the US military, including the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The consequences of attempting any sort of attack on North Korea are likely to be disastrous for people throughout the peninsula and beyond. Threatening war with Pyongyang makes it more likely. The world has not been closer to nuclear war since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

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[1] Guardian, 9/8/2017

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[2] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opin...>

[3] Quoted in Brian Willson, Korea and the Axis of Evil, Global Research, October 2006.

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wor...>