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A Voice of Conscience

The noted peace activist Fred Branfman passed away this past week after suffering the effects of ALS (Lou Gherig's disease). In 2002, while researching the history of the Vietnam War, I came across Fred's slim volume, [Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War](#) in the Brandeis library and the book had an immediate effect on me. It was one of the few books written from the vantage point of the victims of the US air war in Indochina, or of US bombing and covert intervention carried out anywhere in the world. As a means of evading the Vietnam-era draft, Fred had signed on to work as a volunteer in Laos with the International Voluntary Service (IVS) and developed a deep attachment for the country's people. Unlike many of his peers, he did not subscribe to the dominant US cold war ideology or to a paternalistic attitude towards the Lao, but loved and respected them. He struck a particularly close friendship with a village elder where he stayed, Paw Thou Douang, a devout Buddhist, farmer and medic whom he later found out was a local leader of the pro-communist Pathet Lao (the organization which had led Laos' liberation struggle against the French and had sunk deep popular roots as a result of their commitment to nationalist principles and land reform).

After traveling into northern Laos, Fred was horrified to discover that the US government was carrying out a massive bombing campaign that had resulted in the killing and displacement of thousands of rice farmers. Fred interviewed many of the refugees who told him horror stories about having to live underground in caves for months and even years, and being only able to field their farms at night. Many suffered from malnutrition and disease, with a majority having lost loved ones. Pathet Lao soldiers were able to escape into the forests, so the main victims of the bombing were civilians, some of whom had never even heard of the United States before. The US strategy, Fred later discovered, was to "destroy the social and economic infrastructure of the civilian society" in northern Laos, which had emerged as a stronghold of the revolutionary Pathet Lao. The US government deployed its most sophisticated weaponry in the attempt to achieve this end, including computer censor devices and cluster munitions

designed to penetrate the flesh. The US at the same time mobilized Hmong soldiers to serve essentially as cannon fodder in the war, with General Heine Aderholt noting: "it's easier to lose your Hmong people than to lose Americans. It doesn't make for bad publicity at home."

Deeply distraught by what he had witnessed, Fred researched the source of the bombings, using his charm to penetrate a major US air command center in Thailand where the bombings were launched. In a testament to the banality of evil, Fred observed that the command center resembled a stock market exchange, with Generals plotting bombing strikes oblivious to the human ramifications of their work. The pilots were most concerned about padding their kill ratios, and enjoying their free R&R time and the area's nightlife. In a stunning commentary on the bureaucratic imperatives driving the war, Branfman quoted Monteagle Stearns, US deputy chief of mission in Laos from 1969 to 1972 who told Congress that the US rapidly escalated its bombing after President Johnson had ordered a halt over North Vietnam in November 1968. "We had all those planes sitting around and couldn't just let them stay there with nothing to do."

To get the story of the secret war out to the public, Fred came up with the novel idea of recording the refugee's drawings, providing readers a graphic depiction of the horrors of modern automated war. *Voices From the Plain of Jars* was dedicated to Sao Doumma, a lovely twenty five year old woman from the Plain of Jars killed in a bombing raid in August 1969, and all the others who had perished. The book included songs, poetry and testimonials written by the victims of the US air war. One woman proclaimed that her life had become like that of a "hunted animal desperately trying to escape their hunters....Human beings, whose parents carefully brought them into the world and carefully raised them with overflowing love, these human beings would die from a single blast." Another stated: "war causes a flood of blood, let us help build peace oh human beings of this world."

The anguished voices from the Plain of Jars, Branfman pointed out were "also the voices from Ben Suc and Kratie, Sam Neua and Quang Ngai, Snoul and My Lai and a thousand lesser known communities whose inhabitants have seen things that we can barely begin to imagine." These communities now include places like Fallujah, Bola Baluk and Waziristan whose peoples have suffered from the latest military interventions and bombing.

In the introduction to *Voices From the Plain of Jars*, Branfman detailed his encounters with visiting journalists and academics, including a young Noam Chomsky who was one of the few to show emotion when meeting the refugees. By contrast, a visiting congressman, Lester Wolff (D-NY), refused to meet any of them, telling Fred that he could not criticize any policy carried out by Lyndon Johnson, whose support he needed for his reelection. Fred later witnessed how

Senator Edward Kennedy, the “liberal lion,” refused to subpoena the US Ambassador to Laos, William Sullivan after he had lied to his subcommittee about the bombing. Under oath, Sullivan said that no civilians had been targeted in the bombings. Kennedy knew very well that they had, as his committee had issued a report validating this charge, however refused to follow it up. His behavior showed how government officials cared more about their careers than the fate of the Laos people. It further demonstrated the takeover of the US government by the executive branch which had carte blanche to wage illegal wars causing the deaths of tens of thousands of people.

The secret war generally represented a new kind of warfare, a technical exercise in which machines rather than men did most of the killing, and people were completely inured to the human consequences. “If the Nazi activities represented a kind of apex to an age of inhumanity,” Branfman wrote, “American atrocities in Laos are clearly of a different order.....Not so much inhuman as a human. The people of Na Nga and Nong Sa were not the object of anyone’s passion. They simply weren’t considered. What is most striking about American bombing in Laos is the lack of animosity felt by the killers to their victims. Most of the Americans involved have little if any knowledge of Laos or its people. Those who do rather like them.”

In a new foreword to *Voices of Plain of Jars*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 2013, both Branfman and historian Alfred W. McCoy point to important parallels with the modern war on terror and drone attacks on the Af-Pak frontier which have also killed and maimed scores of innocent civilians. McCoy writes that Branfman “predicted, with uncommon prescience, that American soldiers would no longer fight and die on the ground as they had in Vietnam, but Washington would, in future wars, engage in automated warfare, using airpower to take and hold ground by sheer force of aerial bombardment.”

Towards the end of his time in Laos, Branfman was hounded by the CIA and Laotian secret police and then deported. He went on to work in the US peace movement, marrying a Vietnamese woman and courageously sneaking into South Vietnam where he investigated the conditions in South Vietnam’s prisons, run by the United States Agency of International Development’s Office of Public Safety (OPS). He wrote several important articles for *Rampart’s Magazine*,

including one entitled “Vietnam: The POW’s We Left Behind” to counter the political fixation with the plight of US POW’s. The piece detailed the torture and record number of political prisoners in South Vietnam (estimated at 200,000), and profiled freedom fighters like Nguyen Thi Manh, imprisoned at sixteen while helping to care for war orphans, who wrote to a friend: “Even if I must die in prison in the end it will be worthwhile. All human beings must die once. But if we have the chance to die for an ideal, I think that we would all choose this kind of death.”

After the Vietnam War ended, Branfman was deeply disappointed by the corruption in the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese governments. He became involved in California politics, serving in the Cabinet of liberal governor Jerry Brown, where he wrote a pioneering blueprint for transitioning to a clean energy economy. After a decade in politics, he became disillusioned, telling me that what disturbed him most was that in every meeting, the discussion centered on “what we can get away with” and whether or not specific policies would enhance the governor’s image, rather than on how they might assist the people of California. In the early 1990s, Branfman decided to quit his job and undertook a spiritual journey around the world, reading deeply in philosophy and psychology, and establishing a website called Truly Alive which encouraged people to explore their inner psyche and to renounce materialist goals and get the most out of life by cherishing their fellow human beings. He remained active in speaking out against societal injustices, writing columns for progressive websites on the terrible human consequences of the drone war and US warfare state, and on the dangers of climate change. His writings frequently touched on the compromises made by people in power, those like Hillary Clinton and Henry Kissinger who had sold their souls, and the banality of the human condition that could tolerate repeated injustices and massacres. He often delved deeply into human psychology to frame his contemporary political analysis. Many essays discussed the unfortunate continuities between the secret war in Laos and Global War on Terror. A poignant piece following Israel’s assault in Gaza in 2014 (Operation Protective Edge) noted that the United States had used similar propaganda to the Israelis in claiming that enemy forces (North Vietnamese and Hamas) had used human shields to justify bombing civilian areas. Branfman wrote that nothing could ever justify the mass killing of innocent civilians including children, and that society needed to renounce war and violence as a means of reclaiming our humanity. This in an era where the policies we are pursuing are threatening our own children as a result of catastrophic climate change.

Just six months ago, I was lucky to have spent time with Fred after inviting him to speak at my university. Fred was able to engage the audiences with his talk detailing his experiences in Laos and challenge their worldview, showing all the while a genuine interest in students and their lives. Overall, Fred was a gentle soul, a wise and sensitive man and visionary. He was the antithesis of the banality of evil that he chronicled in his writings, a man who cared deeply about all humanity and fought against societal injustices all his life. Through his writings he lives on as a voice of conscience and inspiration to all those who seek a more just and peaceful world.