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John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. 408. ISBN 978-0-19-538121-4.

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If you ask American students how many people died in the Vietnam War, the usual response is fifty-eight thousand, which is, of course, the American military death toll. The correct answer, which includes soldiers and many more civilians from North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (and some Korean and Australian soldiers), is in the millions. This experiment, part of my teaching routine at the US Military Academy, offers a salutary validation of the claims by political scientist John Tirman of MIT's Center for International Studies about American ignorance of the lethal consequences of our wars for noncombatants. In *The Deaths of Others*, he interweaves the answers to three worthy questions: have American wars inflicted undue suffering on enemy civilians? why has the mistreatment of civilians persisted? why do Americans seem not to care?

Tirman's response to the most important of these questions is one that every American of conscience ought reflect on—that the United States has indeed made war with callous disregard for its impact on civilians. After a brisk trip through earlier American history that would have been much strengthened by reference to Adrian Grenier's concept of "extirpative wars,"<sup>1</sup> Tirman offers increasingly detailed discussions of deliberate US attacks on civilians during World War II and in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. To give only the most recent example, by the spring of 2006, American military operations in Iraq had caused about 655,000, mostly noncombatant, deaths (10). Even more shocking are Tirman's descriptions of US participation in a wide range of horrific events in Korea, beginning with collaboration in President Syngman Rhee's massacres of political opponents even before the North Korean invasion. After the war started, 737,000 bombing sorties with napalm and high explosives leveled "just about everything in northern and central Korea" with immeasurably awful consequences for civilian inhabitants (99-102). American forces also killed many refugees for disobeying orders to stay off roads and bridges (105-8).

All of these points are true, but Tirman unfortunately does not present or explain them in the context of military operations. Still, he is right to add unacknowledged civilian deaths to the balance sheets of America's wars. Since the Korean War had the greatest ratio of civilian to military deaths of all American wars (109), one can hope that Allan Millett's otherwise excellent new history of that conflict will be the last to skirt around mistreatment of South Korean refugees and to summarize the North Korean civilian death toll, without further explanation, as "perhaps as a high as one million."<sup>2</sup>

Some of the book's most interesting sections deal with the complicated problem of counting civilian deaths. Tirman, formerly Senior Editor and Director of Communications for the Union of Concerned Scientists, makes a compelling case for the validity of epidemiological methods of analysis, which yield dramatically higher totals of civilian deaths.

He concludes this one thread of the book with a somewhat repetitive summary chapter using three specific atrocities—at No Gun Ri, My Lai, and Haditha—to demonstrate that US rules of engagement have facilitated attacks on civilians and that the American people in each case sympathized with the perpetrators, not the victims. Because he does not adequately link the atrocities to specific rules of engagement, Tirman fails to prove they were necessary consequences of US military policy.

1. *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607-1815* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2005).

2. *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2010) 16.

The book's second thread explains American willingness to make war on civilians, by combining Richard Slotkin's theory of the American frontier<sup>3</sup> with US commitment to a policy of "rollback." Having first cleared their own soil of competitors, Americans then killed foreign civilians in order to liberate the world from communism (and later from the forces of tyranny or terrorism) without much considering whether those suffering under undesirable regimes actually desired liberation, especially when achieved by "massive air power or invasion" (78). Quoting Bruce Cumings,<sup>4</sup> Tirman connects the rollback policy with both the ideology of the frontier and the capitalist drive for raw materials (78). Indeed, he writes, one of the three pathologies that vitiated US intervention in Afghanistan "was coping with the active remnants of 'rollback'—the Reagan Doctrine's religious warriors, weapons, and Pakistani intrigue" (284).

We read more here on the issue of US entry into wars than on the book's ostensible subject, the war-time fate of civilians. Even a card-carrying left-wing ideologue must admit that Tirman's evocation of the frontier myth reduces complex US foreign policy to cowboys and Indians. It is unfair, for example, to write of President McKinley's negotiating with Spain to secure a peaceful settlement over Cuba in 1898 that "For McKinley, the decision to go to war and the lure of overseas expansion were fortuitously wedded" (41). Tirman reveals his shallow understanding of Cold War politics when he observes that "the Republican Party, oddly, was all over the map" (113) on the Korean War. That a party containing so many different constituents (Tirman himself identifies isolationists, "right wing" anti-appeasers, and "fiscal hawks") lacked a consistent position on the Korean War is odd only to someone convinced that rollback was the monolithic goal of American Cold War foreign policy.

Tirman rightly charges the United States with callously contemplating the use of nuclear weapons against Korean and Chinese targets, but acknowledges their role in the Cold War world only in a single paragraph (66–67). Americans were frightened as well as belligerent, and rollback's advocates took the Soviet threat seriously enough to plan to sacrifice the lives of Americans—many of whom preferred to be dead rather than red. The first two threads of Tirman's argument cannot be separated: the frontier mentality that drove America to wage wars explains its behavior during them. But many readers will embrace the first thread while dismissing Tirman's theory of the origins of war<sup>5</sup> as a distracting caricature of US foreign policy. His potted American history does not satisfactorily account for the killing of German, Japanese, and (often overlooked) Italian civilians in World War II. Even those who reject "Cowboys and Indians" foreign policy have shared the nearly universal American disregard for noncombatant casualties.

The general acceptance of civilian deaths constitutes the book's third thread. Tirman trenchantly observes that in the trajectory of American public opinion during major wars since World War II—patriotic enthusiasm followed by disillusionment and then demands for a rapid end to US involvement—revulsion against the methods of US troops or the resulting civilian deaths (337–38) has never been a significant factor. Indeed, poignant pages here describe the hostility directed at soldiers who testified to acts of violence against civilians in Vietnam (176–81).

Tirman's explanation for this troubling American indifference to the suffering of others has three components: racism, the frontier myth, and psychological aversion. Though part of the story, racism has in fact been "central to every modern empire" (344) and cannot explain American lack of concern for civilian deaths in the Soviet Union, "a white nation with strong Christian roots" (349). Tirman prefers to highlight the influence of "the frontier myth" with its intrinsic notion of US exceptionalism. Again following Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, he reasons that Americans are violent because they see themselves as engaged in a righteous struggle against outward threats and inner weakness (351–51). Earlier generations proved their moral

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3. See *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1974; rpt. Norman: U Okla Pr, 2000); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (1985; rpt. Norman: U Okla Pr, 1998); *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992; rpt. Norman: U Okla Pr, 1998).

4. *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1991) 30.

5. Rooted in his education during the 1970s under the mentorship of Howard Zinn, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Frances Fox Piven at Boston University.

worth by the conquest of the frontier; since World War II, communists and terrorists have replaced Native Americans as targets in the process of, in Slotkin's words, national "regeneration through violence."

The native populations, then, whether friend or foe, are bit players in this drama and scarcely of concern: the applied violence is not about them, in the American view, but about us—our ability and our willingness to stop or reverse communism or Islamic fundamentalism, the costs of doing so (in U.S. blood and treasure), the lessons we will teach the rest of the cowering world, and our own sense of self-worth. If large numbers of civilians die, that is a moral debt on the ledger of the North Koreans and Chinese, the North Vietnamese, and the Muslim jihadists, since the United States is reacting to their provocations. (354)

But there is something facile about Tirman's movement from the western movie archetype, where conflicts are "always resolved by a 'singular act of violence'" (121),<sup>6</sup> to a willingness to use the atomic bomb to end the war in Korea. For one thing, the classic westerns are always ambivalent about violence. As Shane puts it "There's no living with a killing."<sup>7</sup>

Tirman's psychological explanation of American insensitivity to the pain of others rests on Melvin J. Lerner's "Just World" hypothesis:<sup>8</sup> that is, people structure their understanding of events to make their world seem as orderly and fair as possible, editing out evidence that suffering may be random or undeserved.

Such factors, in Tirman's view, foster a tendency to blame civilian victims and reinforce the identification of the behavior he explains as distinctively American (357–58). He may be content to address the narrow question "Why do Americans ignore the fate of civilians in their wars?" but a broader perspective might bring more useful answers. What if Americans are less exceptional than they like to think? How would he account for the Allied blockade of Germany in World War I, a calculated campaign against civilians that caused 763,000 German to die of malnutrition?<sup>9</sup>

Given Britain's central role in the starvation of Germany, it is ironic that Tirman cites British sources to criticize US methods and, in general, attributes to Europeans a more civilized attitude toward warfare (see 98, for example, on Korea). Such comparisons distort centuries of European history. That Western Europeans today would not countenance the level of violence that US forces inflict on civilians might best be explained by the notion of "differential contemporaneity,"<sup>10</sup> which posits that industrialization did not affect the various regions Europe uniformly or simultaneously. In the nineteenth century, the military "modernizing" effect of the American Civil War led the United States to share with Europe a common vision of wartime violence. Thereafter, the ineffable horrors of 1914–45 and the bloody embarrassments of decolonization (during which Europeans showed their own callousness toward the deaths of others) separated Europeans and Americans into different time zones.

Tirman does not strengthen his case by finding a damning interpretation of every American action. For example, he misremembers "a memorable phrase"—Gen. Tommy Franks's "we don't do body counts"—as referring to civilian rather than Al Qaeda and Taliban casualties (316).<sup>11</sup> Franks's tone reflected frustration at Operation Anaconda's failure to produce the body that mattered most—Osama bin Ladin's—as well as un-

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6 Quoting Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 152.

7. *Shane*, dir. George Stevens (Paramount 1953), based on the novel of the same name by Jack Schaefer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949). For a discussion of the western film as evidence for American attitudes towards violence, read Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1977).

8. See *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (NY: Plenum Pr, 1980).

9. See C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915–1919* (Athens: Ohio U Pr, 1985) 145.

10. See Sidney Pollard, *Peaceful Conquest: The Industrialization of Europe, 1760–1970* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1981) 184–85; James J. Sheehan explores Europe's disavowal of war since 1945 in *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone: The Transformation of Modern Europe* (NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

11. Cf. Edward Epstein, "Success in Afghan War Hard to Gauge," *San Francisco Chronicle* (23 Mar 2002) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1208.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1208.htm)

ease with a metric thoroughly discredited in Vietnam. Whatever the general thought about civilian deaths, Tirman's juxtaposition of "we don't do body counts" with the crusade of activist and aid worker Marla Ruzicka<sup>12</sup> to count civilian deaths in Iraq is misleading.

More generally, while Tirman exonerates "the individual soldier, marine, sailor, or airman" as the product of "acculturation, training, vulnerability, and command" (15), he downplays the intensity of the struggle of many combatants with the very issues he addresses: specifically, the contradictions between ideals and practice, law and circumstance, and discourse and reality. Soldiers naturally value their own safety above that of enemy civilians. Just as frightened countries go to war unnecessarily, frightened soldiers spray munitions where they should not. Every army has its share of moral cretins, fools, and psychopaths as well as far greater numbers of decent people trapped in fundamentally indecent situations.

Military leaders have not been forthcoming about civilian casualties, and Americans have not wanted to know. These are not morally admirable positions, but, at least on the soldiers' side, reticence may stem from moral qualms. The Duc de La Rochefoucauld reminds us that "hypocrisy is the homage vice owes to virtue" (Maxim 218), and we would not, presumably, prefer an army that reveled in carnage.

All military historians should read Tirman's account of American war-making, but one wishes he himself had read more military history and eliminated the sorts of errors that can discredit an important book. Tirman does not much concern himself with the motives of soldiers or their efforts to mitigate war's horror. He does not know, for example, that the chemical weapons he describes as one of the "great scourges" of World War I (52) caused only a tiny percentage of Great War deaths and, for many postwar theorists, constituted a more humane alternative to high explosives. The World War II Allied bombing campaigns against German and Japanese civilians had their doctrinal origins in the notion that precise attacks on selected economic and industrial "bottlenecks" would spare military and civilian lives alike. The actual results of this "surgical" approach to warfare were appalling, but the predictable consequences of an Axis victory facilitated cognitive dissonance.

It would have been easy for Tirman to learn that the My Lai massacre was not the only US atrocity in Vietnam that resulted in prosecution (301).<sup>13</sup> Tirman is not to blame for the regrettable title of the great historian Russell Weigley's ill-conceived chapter "A Strategy of Annihilation: U.S. Grant and the American Civil War," but it is unfortunate that he puts so much weight on a book that misconstrues both Grant's strategy and Hans Delbrück's concept of *Niederwerfungsstrategie* (annihilation-strategy) (32).<sup>14</sup> West Point cadets learn that "annihilation" is one of three "forms of strategy" and better historians than Tirman have ignored actual military practice and written as if generals seeking rapid battlefield victories intended to annihilate enemy populations. Still, "annihilation doctrine" (313) is neither an accurate nor a useful description of how the United States makes war.

Tirman also unreflectively discriminates between wars fought with some effort to maintain noncombatant immunity and "total wars," which make no distinction between soldiers and civilians. However, his confusion over the status of the American Civil War, which "most historians depict as a 'total war' but is not a total war in the more recent definition" (32) suggests he has not thought through the implications of the distinction. World War II was a "total war" (52), involving the deaths of "hundreds of thousands"<sup>15</sup> of innocent civilians" (56). But Tirman's conception of total war as one in which belligerents deny noncombatant immunity—and civilian participants in the war economy may be no more innocent than conscripted cannon fodder—jeopardizes the very epistemological basis of his whole project. If twentieth-century war is to

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12. She founded the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict in 2003 and was herself killed in a suicide car bombing near Baghdad in 2005.

13. Or to have cited S.L.A. Marshall's *Men against Fire* (1947; rpt. Norman: U Okla Pr, 2000) rather than referring vaguely to "a famous study" (15).

14. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (NY: Macmillan, 1973). Tirman cites chapter 7 and none of the later literature on Weigley's use of the term "annihilation."

15. A gross understatement: scores of millions is more like it.

tal war, then American attacks on civilians were in keeping with the spirit of the age. Tirman would do better to discard the category “total war” as one that precludes the possibility of moral argument about warfare.<sup>16</sup>

The inclusion of a bibliography would not in itself have ameliorated these technical problems, but it would have helped readers spot gaps in Tirman’s research and situate his argument intellectually. One also wonders how many of his sources are websites rather than printed materials and why he tends to use secondhand rather than original sources.

The passion behind the work lends itself to breezy and imprecise prose.<sup>17</sup> Describing the composition of the Philippines expedition, Tirman observes that “a number of key U.S. military leaders in the ‘expeditionary force’ of 20,000 were veteran Indian fighters, no less, accustomed to a certain strategic objective—annihilation of the enemy” (43).

If the prose is sometimes distracting, the first thread of Tirman’s case is nevertheless riveting. And, given the US projection of military power around the globe, the question asked in the third—why do Americans kill without compunction?—is a matter of life and death for untold numbers of “others.”

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16. See Eugenia C. Kiesling, “‘Total War, Total Nonsense’ or ‘The Military Historian’s Fetish,’” *Arms and the Man: Military History Essays in Honor of Dennis Showalter*, ed. Michael S. Neiberg (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 215–42.

17. Including the irritating misuse of the word “redolent” at least six times.