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Jim Hoagland

Ramsey Clark: Wrong Again

Once right about Vietnam and civil rights, Ramsey Clark has been wrong about most other big issues since he left government. After reading his recent "Report on United States War Crimes Against Iraq," you have to wonder if the former attorney general has lost his marbles or has merely misplaced them in the service of a cause.

I was reading Clark's citizen's indictment, published in book form, as two official documents about real war crimes were released to the public last week. One was the Pentagon's long suppressed report on Iraqi atrocities during the gulf war. It contains many of the inconvenient facts that the Clark "investigation" purposefully ignores.

The other document is a report on El Salvador by a three-member fact-finding panel sponsored by the United Nations. Deeply critical of American actions in that civil war, the U.N. report is as serious as Clark's diatribe is frivolous. The panel treats the truth with a respect that both Clark and some of his adversaries in government have scorned.

The U.N. report illuminates how the Reagan and Bush administrations used partial truths and outright falsehoods to sway public opinion in the battle against communism in Central America.

The Pentagon report illuminates how Clark and the other activists whose statements are included in his book carry out their distortions in the name of anti-imperialism in the Persian Gulf.

Despite the hubris of its name, the U.N.'s Commission on the Truth credibly demonstrates that U.S. officials systematically withheld or distorted information about massacres and political assassinations by Salvadoran government forces and right-wing death squads in the 1980s. Also critical of the Marxist guerrillas who sought to overthrow the

government, the report makes clear that the heaviest burden of atrocities lies with the government.

In El Salvador, Washington played fast and loose with the facts to keep public opinion behind U.S. military aid to the government. Cuban and Soviet support for the guerrillas drew the United States into that civil war, which ended with a peace accord last year.

The fact that the patient lived—El Salvador today functions under democratic rule and human rights abuses have largely ceased—was offered as a defense by former U.S. officials confronted with the U.N. findings last week. Elliott Abrams, President Reagan's point man on Central America, declared his Salvador policy, "a fabulous achievement."

That will be decided by the people of El Salvador, who paid the price of their conflict in blood and destruction. But Americans paid as well, in part in the subtle coin of credibility. The duplicity practiced in El Salvador and elsewhere in the recent past creates the climate in which Clark and his ideological soul mates operate.

Clark serves as honorary chairman of

an anti-Establishment Establishment that thinks of and portrays American intervention abroad as evil per se. Caught in a Vietnam-era time warp, Clark acts as if Lyndon Johnson, the man who appointed him attorney general, were still president, with Richard Nixon and Watergate waiting in the wings.

In the indictment he framed for a self-styled International War Crimes Tribunal, Clark accuses George Bush of having tricked Saddam Hussein into invading Kuwait so America could smash Iraq and control world oil supplies. The media then tricked you into thinking that Saddam's forces set fire to the Kuwait oil fields and polluted the gulf. "Attacks by U.S. aircraft caused much if not all of the worst oil spills in the Gulf," Clark writes. And so on.

To make his case, Clark has to duplicate the feat that Abrams, his then-colleague Thomas O. Enders and others accomplished in El Salvador. All ignored a clear, pervasive and consistent pattern of brutal and repressive behavior by their clients when that pattern became inconvenient.

What Saddam's forces did in Kuwait differed little from what they had done repeatedly to Kurds and Shiites in Iraq itself for nearly two decades. The Pentagon's report is filled with meticulously researched, stomach-turning detail about the atrocities Iraqi forces committed against Kuwaitis (including the death-causing theft of incubators) and against U.S. prisoners of war. In Clark's report, Saddam and his men are blameless. Everything is America's fault.

The Bush administration is said to have withheld publication of the Pentagon war crimes report because it was politically inappropriate. Saddam is still in power and still committing as much crime as he can. No need to remind Americans of that. To the last, the Bush team covered itself in shame with its political judgments on Iraq.

The State Department and the Pentagon are now in the hands of Democrats who have no interest in defending the Reagan and Bush records. On El Salvador, Foreign Service officers have been encouraged to speak frankly about things they have known and hidden for a decade. Let us hope Secretary of State Warren Christopher will show the same commitment to transparency in controversies that occur on his watch.

Better yet, he could act on a truth that previous administrations neglected: The lesser of two evils is still evil. It should not be embraced and whitewashed, even to serve a greater good. Democracies that try to manipulate evil for their own ends do themselves more damage than their most rabid critics ever could.