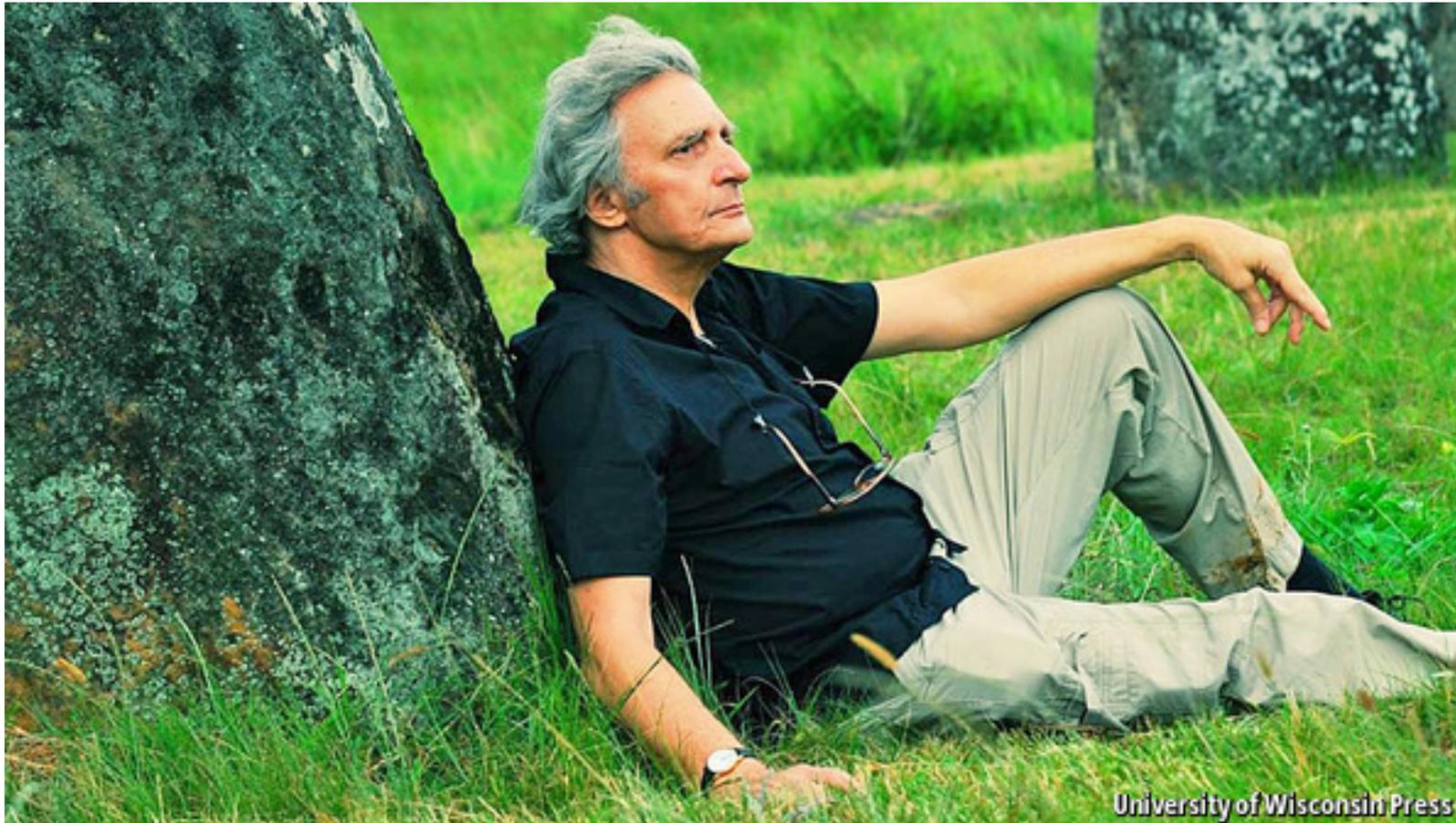


Obituary: Fred Branfman

An inconvenient truth

Fred Branfman, exposé of America's secret war in Laos, died on September 24th, aged 72



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THE peasant refugees, camped outside Vientiane in Laos, did not want to speak to him when he first approached them, in 1969. They were wary of the big, earnest, bespectacled young American. And they were wretched. They had left behind their paddy fields, pigs and buffalo, their fresh air and forests, and pined for them. Many were injured, too: blinded, or missing limbs, or riddled with metal pellets that showed through their skin.

Over the months, as Fred Branfman gently urged them, they began to talk of war planes over their home region, the Plain of Jars. At first, in 1964, they had watched them with interest, much as they watched the rockets at the spring festival of *boun bang fai*. Then the planes dived close and aimed at them directly. They went on doing so, flying up to 200 sorties a day, for five years. When Mr Branfman visited the plain at last in 1993 (pictured), droplets from cluster bombs were still exploding.

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The thatch-and-timber houses burned like candles, the villagers told him. All that was left was the red, bare earth. The paddies and ponds were poisoned, so the ducks died. Children picked up bombs, and their arms blew off. Everyone dug holes to creep into during the day, emerging at night to try to plant rice unseen, but bombs fell into the holes too. An old woman was struck as she carried food to market, and a boy found his father killed, alongside his buffalo, in a field he was ploughing. Imagine, Mr Branfman thought, if that was his own father, the gentle textile sales executive from Great Neck, Long Island, whose toil and sweat and ambition for his sons had been instantly snuffed out by a plane that, in the repeated mantra of the villagers, “didn’t stop”.

He had gone to Laos to teach in his 20s, mostly to avoid the draft for Vietnam. In that war Laos was officially neutral, though it was fought over by right- and left-wing groups and supply-routes to the Vietcong ran through it. The American government denied it was conducting a war there, for conventional warfare was outlawed. Congress and the public were in the dark. It seemed that only Mr Branfman knew.

As a Jew he was inevitably reminded of the Holocaust, another clumsily concealed atrocity. It was “as if I had discovered Auschwitz when it was still going on”. His fury was never hard to ignite; like many of his contemporaries, he had burned to change the world since high school. He had been brought up to believe America was good, and triumphed in just wars. Now everything was upended. America had betrayed him: it was not merely socially unjust, especially towards blacks, but also brutal and criminal abroad.

He had to get the story out. It was easier than he thought, for the villagers could read and write as well as draw, with chilling accuracy, T-28s and F-105s strafing their hills. Their anonymous memories and sketches became “Voices from the Plain of Jars”, published in 1972. By then, President Nixon had admitted that America was at war in Laos; but not that it was targeting civilians. That was still denied outright by America’s former ambassador to Laos, in front of a Senate committee to which Mr Branfman, too, gave evidence.

The senators deferred to the ambassador, he noted. And his book, though it blew open the secret, did not sell. Few

seemed to care how America's so-called democracy worked: the executive branch and corporate elites uniting to do what they liked, and damn the consent of the governed. Mr Branfman decided to stoke the fire by starting Project Air War and the Indochina Resource Centre, both aimed at ending the conflict, and did not rest until it was over. In the 21st century his list of executive outrages grew long again, this time provoked by the war on terror: surveillance of Americans by government agencies, the growth of biometric databases, expanded powers of detention, pervasive secrecy. In newspaper columns he appealed to Americans to resist the growth of a police state.

He warned them, too, that the world was changing for the worse. In Laos he had heard repeatedly how huge machines had dealt out death from afar. The use of drones in Iraq and Afghanistan was merely a refinement of this remote, arrogant way of killing. In Laos he had heard of peaceful, ancient ways of life, in tune with nature, obliterated by human greed and barbarity; now global warming, again spurred by greed, was threatening mankind as a whole. As before, he hoped that if he shouted loudly enough, people would hear. Some did, but once again America's leaders proved stone deaf.

Singing against death

The problem with the human race, he concluded, was that it blocked out pain. Uncomfortable facts, inconvenient truths, other people's suffering, were all denied as long as possible. And nothing was denied as vigorously as death, though he knew—from a brush with it when he was 48—that to face it squarely was also to draw from it life-affirming strength. This was the blown-open secret of his last years, spent in Budapest beside the Danube. But he had heard it first, like so much else, in Laos. A 14-year-old boy told him how he had sung in the ricefields, even as the planes passed over. "I felt that although I might have to die, it did not matter; that I just had to be happy in the midst of all the sadness of war, of the airplanes dropping bombs."

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