

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

The \$7 Billion We Wasted Bombing a Country We Couldn't Find on a Map

May 17, 2025

Listen to this article · 6:49 min [Learn more](#)

By Nicholas Kristof
Opinion Columnist

The Signal scandal drew howls of outrage for the way Trump administration officials insecurely exchanged texts about military strikes on Yemen. But dig a little deeper, and there's an even larger scandal.

This is a scandal about a failed policy that empowers an enemy of the United States, weakens our security and will cost thousands of lives. It's one that also tarnishes President Joe Biden but reaches its apotheosis under President Trump.

It all goes back to the brutal Hamas terrorist attack on Israel in October 2023, and Israel's savage response leveling entire neighborhoods of Gaza. The repressive Houthi regime of Yemen sought to win regional support by attacking supposedly pro-Israeli ships passing nearby in the Red Sea. (In fact, it struck all kinds of ships.)

There are more problems than solutions in international relations, and this was a classic example: An extremist regime in Yemen was impeding international trade, and there wasn't an easy fix. Biden responded with a year of airstrikes on Yemen against the Houthis that consumed billions of dollars but didn't accomplish anything obvious.

After taking office, Trump ramped up pressure on Yemen. He slashed humanitarian aid worldwide, with Yemen particularly hard hit. I last visited Yemen in 2018, when some children were already starving to death, and now it's worse: Half of Yemen's children under 5 are malnourished — “a statistic that is almost unparalleled across the world,” UNICEF says — yet aid cuts recently forced more than 2,000 nutrition programs to close down, according to Tom Fletcher, the U.N. humanitarian chief. The United States canceled an order for lifesaving peanut paste that was meant to keep 500,000 Yemeni children alive.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Girls will be particularly likely to die, because Yemeni culture favors boys. I once interviewed a girl, Nujood Ali, who was married against her will at age 10. Aid programs to empower Yemeni girls and reduce child marriage are now being cut off as well.

I suspect that Elon Musk, who boasted of feeding aid programs “into the wood chipper,” would say that we can't afford to help little girls in Yemen. He's the world's richest man, so he may have special insight into the optimal use of \$1, the daily cost of a six-week course of peanut paste to save a starving child's life.

Meanwhile, the real money America is spending in Yemen is on bombs — but Musk's team of Department of Government Efficiency cost-cutters appeared oblivious to that expense. While the United States saved modest sums by allowing

little girls to starve, it escalated the Biden bombing campaign in Yemen, striking targets almost every day. The first month alone of Trump's bombing campaign cost more than \$1 billion in weapons and munitions.

The Houthis in six weeks shot down seven MQ-9 Reaper drones, which cost about \$30 million each, and the United States lost two F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter planes, at \$67 million each.

Defense Priorities, a Washington think tank, plausibly estimates that between Biden and Trump, the United States wasted more than \$7 billion on bombing Yemen over a little more than two years. Most of that appears to have been spent on Biden's watch.

Know someone who would want to read this? Share the column.



Linda Bilmes, a Harvard expert on the cost of military conflict, agreed that \$7 billion is a reasonable estimate when including the cost of deploying aircraft carriers, combat pay and other factors. "The U.S. spending versus Houthis is asymmetric," she said. "We spend \$1 million missiles to respond to Houthis' \$200 to \$500 Iranian-made drones."

What did the \$7 billion achieve? The U.S. bombing degraded Houthi capabilities to some degree and also killed at least 206 civilians in April alone, according to the Yemen Data Project, a nonprofit. The bombing campaign also degraded America's military capacity, burning through scarce munitions. Over a bit more than two years, the Houthis appear to have shot down some 7 percent of America's entire stockpile of MQ-9 Reaper drones.

Trump declared in March that his bombing campaign would leave the Houthis "completely annihilated." But this month he backed off, announcing a "pause" in offensive operations. He saved face with a Houthi promise not to target American

ships, but that wasn't the central problem, for a vast majority of ships in the Red Sea aren't American. The Houthis, feeling understandably triumphant, declared victory with the hashtag "Yemen defeats America."

In retrospect, Trump essentially ramped up a failing Biden policy — but also showed a greater capacity than Biden to self-correct.

What could Trump do to stop the Houthi attacks on shipping? The obvious step would be to press Israel much harder to accept a deal providing for the return of all hostages and a lasting truce in Gaza.

Meanwhile, Trump has not restored humanitarian aid, so Yemeni children are dying of starvation.

Michelle Nunn, the president of CARE, told me that American aid cuts mean that her organization can no longer assist more than 730,000 Yemenis with clean water and other services. She told me about a 2-year-old girl, Maryam, who arrived at a mobile clinic weighing just 11 pounds and near death from malnutrition. CARE health workers were able to revive Maryam, and she began to recover — and then U.S.A.I.D. terminated the program. Aid workers don't know if Maryam survived.

I understand American skepticism about humanitarian aid for Yemeni children, for the Houthis run an Iran-backed police state with a history of weaponizing aid. Yet our campaign of bombing and starvation probably strengthens the Houthis, making their unpopular regime seem like the nation's protectors while driving them closer to Iran.

"Cutting humanitarian aid into Yemen is likely only going to benefit the Houthis that much more," Gregory D. Johnsen, a Yemen expert with the Arab Gulf States Institute, told me. "As the cuts further exacerbate an already horrendous humanitarian situation, families in Houthi-controlled territories will have little choice but to align themselves with the group in a desperate attempt to survive."

The upshot, Johnsen said, is that the Houthis will be "more deeply entrenching themselves in power, which will make them harder to uproot later." Yemen never presented us with good options. But in our unusually poor choices I see a

cautionary tale of the cost of bumbling foreign policy, for this has been the result: starvation, dying girls and boys, weakened American security and a triumph for our adversaries, all at a cost of \$7 billion in our taxes. Now, that's a scandal.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, WhatsApp and Threads.

Nicholas Kristof became a columnist for The Times Opinion desk in 2001 and has won two Pulitzer Prizes. His new memoir is "Chasing Hope: A Reporter's Life." @NickKristof

A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: \$7 Billion on Useless Bombing