

AFTER THE WAR

BY HOWARD ZINN

"There is no good war and no bad peace."

~BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

The war against Iraq, the assault on its people, the occupation of its cities, will come to an end, sooner or later. The process has already begun. The first signs of mutiny are appearing in Congress. The first editorials calling for withdrawal from Iraq are beginning to appear in the press. The antiwar movement has been growing, slowly but persistently, all over the country.

Public opinion polls now show the country decisively against the war and the Bush Administration. The harsh realities have become visible. The troops will have to come home.

And while we work with increased determination to make this happen, should we not think beyond this war? Should we begin to think, even before this shameful war is over, about ending our addiction to massive violence and instead using the enormous wealth of our country for human needs? That is, should we begin to speak about ending war — not just this war or that war, but war itself? Perhaps the time has come to bring an end to war, and turn the human race onto a path of health and healing.

A group of internationally known figures, celebrated both for their talent and their dedication to human rights (Gino Strade, Paul Farmer, Kurt Vonnegut, Nadine Gordimer, Eduardo Galeano, and others), will soon launch a worldwide campaign to enlist tens of millions of people in a movement for the renunciation of war, hoping to reach the point where governments, facing popular resistance, will find it difficult or impossible to wage war.

There is a persistent argument against such a possibility, which I have heard from people on all parts of the political spectrum: We will never do away with war because it comes out of human nature. The most compelling counter to that claim is in history: We don't find people spontaneously rushing to make war on others. What we find, rather, is that governments must make the most strenuous efforts to mobilize populations for war. They must entice soldiers with promises of money, education, must hold out to young people whose chances in life look very poor that here is an opportunity to attain respect and status. And if those enticements don't work, governments must use coercion: They must conscript young people, force them into military service, threaten them with prison if they don't comply.

Furthermore, the government must persuade young people and their families that though the soldier may die, though he or she may lose arms or legs, or become blind, that it is all for a noble cause, for God, for country.

When you look at the endless wars of the past century you do not find a public demanding war, but rather resisting it, until citizens are bombarded with exhortations that appeal, not to a killer instinct, but to a desire to do good, to spread democracy or liberty or overthrow a tyrant.

Woodrow Wilson found a citizenry so reluctant to enter the First World War that he had to pummel the nation with propaganda and imprison dissenters in order to get the country to join the butchery going on in Europe.

In the Second World War, there was indeed a strong moral imperative, which still resonates among most people in this country and which maintains the reputation of World War 2 as "the good war." There was a need to defeat the monstrosity of fascism. It was that belief that drove me to enlist in the Air Force and fly bombing missions over Europe.

Only after the war did I begin to question the purity of the moral crusade. Dropping bombs from five miles high, I had seen no human beings, heard no screams, seen no children dismembered. But now I had to think about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the firebombings of Tokyo and Dresden, the deaths of 600,000 civilians in Japan, and a similar number in Germany.

I came to a conclusion about the psychology of myself and other warriors: Once we decided, at the start, that our side was the good side and the other side was evil, once we had made that simple and simplistic calculation, we did not have to think anymore. Then we could commit unspeakable crimes and it was all right.

I began to think about motives of the Western powers and Stalinist Russia and wondered if they cared as much about fascism as about retaining their own empires, their own power, and if that was why they had military priorities higher than bombing the rail lines leading to Auschwitz. Six million Jews were killed in the death camps (allowed to be killed?). Only 60,000 were saved by the war — 1%.

A gunner on another crew, a reader of history with whom I had become friends, said to me one day: "You know this is an imperialist war. The fascists are evil. But our side is not much better." I could not accept his statement at the time, but it stuck with me.

War, I decided, creates, insidiously, a common morality for all sides. It poisons everybody who is engaged in it, however different they are, turns them into killers and torturers, as we are



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seeing now. It pretends to be concerned with toppling tyrants, and may in fact do so, but the people it kills are victims of the tyrants. It appears to cleanse the world of evil, but that does not last because its very nature spawns more evil. Wars, like violence in general, I concluded, is a drug. It gives a quick high, the thrill of victory, but that wears off and then comes despair.

I acknowledge the possibility of humanitarian intervention to prevent atrocities, as in Rwanda. But war, defined as the indiscriminate killing of large numbers of people, must be resisted.

Whatever can be said about World War 2, understanding its complexity, the situations that followed — Korea, Vietnam — were so far from the threat that Germany and Japan had posed to the world that those wars could be justified only by drawing on the glow of "the good war." A hysteria about communism led to McCarthyism at home and military interventions in Asia and Latin America — overt and covert — justified by a "Soviet threat" that was exaggerated just enough to mobilize the people for war.

Vietnam, however, proved to be a sobering experience, in which the American public, over a period of several years, began to see through the lies that had been told to justify all that bloodshed. The United States was forced to withdraw from Vietnam, and the world didn't come to an end. One half of one tiny country in Southeast Asia was now joined to its communist other half, and 58,000 American lives and millions of Vietnamese lives

had been expended to prevent that. A majority of Americans had come to oppose that war, which had provoked the largest antiwar movement in the nation's history.

The war in Vietnam ended with a public fed up with war. I believe that the American people, once the fog of propaganda had dissipated, had come back to a more natural state. Public opinion polls showed that people in the United States were opposed to send troops anywhere in the world, for any reason.

The Establishment was alarmed. The government set out deliberately to overcome what it called "the Vietnam syndrome." Opposition to military interventions abroad was a sickness to be cured. And so they would wean the American public away from its unhealthy attitude by tighter control of information, by avoiding a draft and by engaging in short, swift wars over weak opponents (Grenada, Panama, Iraq), which didn't give the public time to develop an antiwar movement.

I would argue that the end of the Vietnam War enabled the people of the United States to shake the "war syndrome," a disease not natural to the human body. But they could be infected once again, and September 11 gave the government the opportunity. Terrorism became the justification for war, but war is itself terrorism, breeding rage and hate, as we are seeing now.

The war in Iraq has revealed the hypocrisy of the "war on terrorism." And the government of the United States, indeed governments everywhere, are becoming exposed as untrustworthy: that is, not to be entrusted with the safety of human beings, or the safety of the planet, or the guarding of its air, its water, its natural wealth, or the curing of poverty and disease, or coping with the alarming growth of natural disasters that plague so many of the six billion people on Earth.

I don't believe that our government will be able to do once more what it did after Vietnam — prepare the population for still another plunge into violence and dishonor. It seems to me that when the war in Iraq ends, and the war syndrome heals, that there will be a great opportunity to make that healing permanent.

My hope is that the memory of death and disgrace will be so intense that the people of the United States will be able to listen to a message that the rest of the world, sobered by wars without end, can also understand: that war itself is the enemy of the human race.

Governments will resist this message. But their power is dependent on the obedience of the citizenry. When that is withdrawn, governments are helpless. We have seen this again and again in history.

The abolition of war has become not only desirable but absolutely necessary if the planet is to be saved. It is an idea whose time has come.

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PEACE IN THE REAL WORLD

It is incongruous to speak of peace without its evil twin war — not unlike concentrating on *yang* without including *yin*.

Peace and war are joined at the hip, human inventions that have no parallel in nature, which is of course violent as well as simultaneously nonviolent from weather to predator/prey relationships. Somehow we inventors of war think we can have life without it — which we call peace, defined as a period without war, or more apropos, a lull between wars (a time to bury the war dead, heal wounds, produce more modern weapons, sow newer crops of human fodder to resume the genocides of their fathers).

People who are unconditionally for peace are known as pacifists. Pacifists wish to live not only their own lives in peace but wish for it to become the normal condition of humanity. They are sneered at in times of war fervor and told to live in the real world. Yet the real world, the human world, is of our making and threatens more than ever to be our undoing.

Pacifists have been imprisoned, exiled or executed for centuries when they raise the issue of abolishing war. Pacifists exude an odor of weakness and appeasement to their detractors and are accused being agents or dupes of an enemy.

Pacifists are themselves in conflict. The central most agonizing question is whether some principles are worth the risk of annihilation. Human life and possibly all organic existence is conceivably so rare in the universe that its loss as a result of conflict over abstract principles peculiar to a point in time would be more intolerable than the loss of those principles, which, being human in origin, would as surely be evaporated in the holocaust. "What difference does it make to the dead," Gandhi said, "whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy."

Pacifists usually look down the long road instead of being gripped by the frenzies of the moment, and they have grim visions of humanity's future if it continues to make war upon itself. Pacifists seem to hope we might at least elevate to a higher plain of thought and compassion before we blow ourselves out of the cosmos.

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