

War: The Worst Thing Ever Invented

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In this age of supposedly fighting against rulers and on behalf of oppressed peoples, the Vietnam War offers an interesting case in which the U.S. policy was to avoid overthrowing the enemy government but to work hard to kill its people. To overthrow the government in Hanoi, it was feared, would draw China or Russia into the war, something the United States hoped to avoid. But destroying the nation ruled by Hanoi was expected to cause it to submit to U.S. rule.

The Afghanistan War, already the longest war in U.S. history, is another interesting case in that the demonic figure used to justify it, terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, was not the ruler of the country. He was someone who had spent time in the country, and in fact had been supported there by the United States in a war against the Soviet Union. He had allegedly planned the crimes of September 11, 2001, in part in Afghanistan. Other planning, we knew, had gone on in Europe and the United States. But it was Afghanistan that apparently needed to be punished for its role as host to this criminal.

For the previous three years, the United States had been asking the Taliban, the political group in Afghanistan allegedly sheltering bin Laden, to turn him over. The Taliban wanted to see evidence against bin Laden and to be assured that he would receive a fair trial in a third country and not face the death penalty. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Taliban warned the United States that bin Laden was planning an attack on American soil. Former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Niaz Naik told the BBC that senior U.S. officials had told him at a U.N.-sponsored summit in Berlin in July 2001 that the United States would take military action against the Taliban by mid-October. Naik "said it was doubtful that Washington would drop its plan even if bin Laden were to be surrendered immediately by the Taliban."

This was all before the crimes of September 11th, for which the war would supposedly be revenge. When the United States attacked Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the Taliban again offered to negotiate for the handing over of bin Laden. When President Bush again refused, the Taliban dropped its demand for evidence of guilt and offered simply to turn bin Laden over to a third country. President George W. Bush rejected this offer and continued bombing. At a March 13, 2002, press conference, Bush said of bin Laden "I truly am not that concerned about him." For at least several more years, with bin Laden and his group, al Qaeda, no longer believed to be in Afghanistan, the war of revenge against him continued to afflict the people of that land. In contrast to Iraq, the War in Afghanistan was often referred to between 2003 and 2009 as "the good war."

The case made for the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003 appeared to be about "weapons of mass destruction," as well as more revenge against bin Laden, who in reality had no connections to Iraq at all. If Iraq didn't give the weapons up, there would be war. And since Iraq did not

have them, there was war. But this was fundamentally an argument that Iraqis, or at least Saddam Hussein, embodied evil. After all, few nations possessed anywhere near as many nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons as the United States, and we didn't believe anyone had the right to make war on us. We helped other nations acquire such weapons and did not make war on them. In fact, we'd helped Iraq acquire biological and chemical weapons years before, which had laid the basis for the pretenses that it still had them.

Ordinarily, a nation's possessing weapons can be immoral, undesirable, or illegal, but it cannot be grounds for a war. Aggressive war is itself the most immoral, undesirable, and illegal act possible. So, why was the debate over whether to attack Iraq a debate over whether Iraq had weapons? Apparently, we had established that Iraqis were so evil that if they had weapons then they would use them, possibly through Saddam Hussein's fictional ties to al Qaeda. If someone else had weapons, we could talk to them. If Iraqis had weapons we needed to wage war against them. They were part of what President George W. Bush called "an axis of evil." That Iraq was most blatantly not using its alleged weapons and that the surest way to provoke their use would be to attack Iraq were inconvenient thoughts, and therefore they were set aside and forgotten, because our leaders knew full well that Iraq really had no such capability.

FIGHTING FIRE WITH GASOLINE

A central problem with the idea that wars are needed to combat evil is that there is nothing more evil than war. War causes more suffering and death than anything war can be used to combat. Wars don't cure diseases or prevent car accidents or reduce suicides. (In fact, they drive suicides through the roof.) No matter how evil a dictator or a people may be, they cannot be more evil than war. Had he lived to be a thousand, Saddam Hussein could not have done the damage to the people of Iraq or the world that the war to eliminate his fictional weapons has done. War is not a clean and acceptable operation marred here and there by atrocities. War is all atrocity, even when it purely involves soldiers obediently killing soldiers. Rarely, however, is that all it involves. General Zachary Taylor reported on the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) to the U.S. War Department:

"I deeply regret to report that many of the twelve months' volunteers, in their route hence of the lower Rio Grande, have committed extensive outrages and depredations upon the peaceable inhabitants. THERE IS SCARCELY ANY FORM OF CRIME THAT HAS NOT BEEN REPORTED TO ME AS COMMITTED BY THEM." [capitalization in original]

If General Taylor did not want to witness outrages, he should have stayed out of war. And if the American people felt the same way, they should not have made him a hero and a president for going to war. Rape and torture are not the worst part of war. The worst part is the acceptable part: the killing. The torture engaged in by the United States during its recent wars on Afghanistan and Iraq is part, and not the worst part, of a larger crime. The Jewish holocaust took nearly 6 million lives in the most horrible way imaginable, but World War II took, in total, about 70 million — of which about 24 million were military. We don't hear much about the 9 million Soviet soldiers whom the Germans killed. But they died facing people who wanted to kill them, and they themselves were under orders to kill. There are few things worse in the world. Missing from U.S. war mythology is the fact that by the time of the D-Day invasion, 80 percent of the German army was busy fighting the Russians. But that does not make the Russians heroes; it just shifts the focus of a tragic drama of stupidity and pain eastward.

Most supporters of war admit that war is hell. But most human beings like to believe that all is fundamentally right with the world, that everything is for the best, that all actions have a divine purpose. Even those who lack religion tend, when discussing something horribly sad or tragic, not to exclaim “How sad and awful!” but to express — and not just under shock but even years later — their inability to “understand” or “believe” or “comprehend” it, as though pain and suffering were not as clearly comprehensible facts as joy and happiness are. We want to pretend with Dr. Pangloss that all is for the best, and the way we do this with war is to imagine that our side is battling against evil for the sake of good, and that war is the only way such a battle can be waged. If we have the means with which to wage such battles, then as Senator Beveridge once remarked, we must be expected to use them. Senator William Fulbright (D., Ark.) explained this phenomenon: “Power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God’s favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations — to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image.”

Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State when Bill Clinton was president, was more concise:

“What’s the point of having this superb military that you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”

The belief in a divine right to wage war seems to only grow stronger when great military power runs up against resistance too strong for military power to overcome. In 2008 a U.S. journalist wrote about General David Petraeus, then commander in Iraq, “God has apparently seen fit to give the U.S. Army a great general in this time of need.”

On August 6, 1945, President Harry S Truman announced: “Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British ‘Grand Slam’ which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.” When Truman lied to America that Hiroshima was a military base rather than a city full of civilians, people no doubt wanted to believe him. Who would want the shame of belonging to the nation that commits a whole new kind of atrocity? (Will naming lower Manhattan “ground zero” erase the guilt?) And when we learned the truth, we wanted and still want desperately to believe that war is peace, that violence is salvation, that our government dropped nuclear bombs in order to save lives, or at least to save American lives.

We tell each other that the bombs shortened the war and saved more lives than the some 200,000 they took away. And yet, weeks before the first bomb was dropped, on July 13, 1945, Japan sent a telegram to the Soviet Union expressing its desire to surrender and end the war. The United States had broken Japan’s codes and read the telegram. Truman referred in his diary to “the telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace.” Truman had been informed through Swiss and Portuguese channels of Japanese peace overtures as early as three months before Hiroshima. Japan objected only to surrendering unconditionally and giving up its emperor, but the United States insisted on those terms until after the bombs fell, at which point it allowed Japan to keep its emperor.

Presidential advisor James Byrnes had told Truman that dropping the bombs would allow the United States to “dictate the terms of ending the war.” Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal wrote in his diary that Byrnes was “most anxious to get the Japanese affair over with before the Russians got in.” Truman wrote in his diary that the Soviets were preparing

to march against Japan and “Fini Japs when that comes about.” Truman ordered the bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th and another type of bomb, a plutonium bomb, which the military also wanted to test and demonstrate, on Nagasaki on August 9th. Also on August 9th, the Soviets attacked the Japanese. During the next two weeks, the Soviets killed 84,000 Japanese while losing 12,000 of their own soldiers, and the United States continued bombing Japan with non-nuclear weapons. Then the Japanese surrendered. The United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that, “... certainly prior to 31 December, 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”

One dissenter who had expressed this same view to the Secretary of War prior to the bombings was General Dwight Eisenhower. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William D. Leahy agreed:

“The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender.”

Whatever dropping the bombs might possibly have contributed to ending the war, it is curious that the approach of threatening to drop them, the approach used during a half-century of Cold War to follow, was never tried. An explanation may perhaps be found in Truman’s comments suggesting the motive of revenge:

“Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, and against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international law of warfare.”

Truman could not, incidentally, have chosen Tokyo as a target — not because it was a city, but because we had already reduced it to rubble. The nuclear catastrophes may have been, not the ending of a World War, but the theatrical opening of the Cold War, aimed at sending a message to the Soviets. Many low and high ranking officials in the U.S. military, including commanders in chief, have been tempted to nuke more cities ever since, beginning with Truman threatening to nuke China in 1950. The myth developed, in fact, that Eisenhower’s enthusiasm for nuking China led to the rapid conclusion of the Korean War. Belief in that myth led President Richard Nixon, decades later, to imagine he could end the Vietnam War by pretending to be crazy enough to use nuclear bombs. Even more disturbingly, he actually was crazy enough. “The nuclear bomb, does that bother you?...I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christsakes,” Nixon said to Henry Kissinger in discussing options for Vietnam.

President George W. Bush oversaw the development of smaller nuclear weapons that might be used more readily, as well as much larger non- nuclear bombs, blurring the line between the two. President Barack Obama established in 2010 that the United States might strike first with nuclear weapons, but only against Iran or North Korea. The United States alleged, without evidence, that Iran was not complying with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), even though the clearest violation of that treaty is the United States’ own failure to work on disarmament and the United States’ Mutual Defense Agreement with the United Kingdom, by which the two countries share nuclear weapons in violation of Article 1 of the NPT, and even though the United States’ first strike nuclear weapons policy violates yet another treaty: the U.N. Charter.

THE LIE OF THE ONLY WAY

Americans may never admit what was done in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but our country had been in some measure prepared for it. After Germany had invaded Poland, Britain and France had declared war on Germany. Britain in 1940 had broken an agreement with Germany not to bomb civilians, before Germany retaliated in the same manner against England — although Germany had itself bombed Guernica, Spain, in 1937, and Warsaw, Poland, in 1939, and Japan meanwhile was bombing civilians in China. Then, for years, Britain and Germany had bombed each other's cities before the United States joined in, bombing German and Japanese cities in a spree of destruction unlike anything ever previously witnessed. When we were firebombing Japanese cities, Life magazine printed a photo of a Japanese person burning to death and commented "This is the only way." By the time of the Vietnam War, such images were highly controversial. By the time of the 2003 War on Iraq, such images were not shown, just as enemy bodies were no longer counted. That development, arguably a form of progress, still leaves us far from the day when atrocities will be displayed with the caption "There has to be another way."

Combating evil is what peace activists do. It is not what wars do. And it is not, at least not obviously, what motivates the masters of war, those who plan the wars and bring them into being.

But it is tempting to think so. It is very noble to make brave sacrifices, even the ultimate sacrifice of one's life, in order to end evil. It is perhaps even noble to use other people's children to vicariously put an end to evil, which is all that most war supporters do. It is righteous to become part of something bigger than oneself. It can be thrilling to revel in patriotism. It can be momentarily pleasurable I'm sure, if less righteous and noble, to indulge in hatred, racism, and other group prejudices. It's nice to imagine that your group is superior to someone else's. And the patriotism, racism, and other isms that divide you from the enemy can thrillingly unite you, for once, with all of your neighbors and compatriots across the now meaningless boundaries that usually hold sway. If you are frustrated and angry, if you long to feel important, powerful, and dominating, if you crave the license to lash out in revenge either verbally or physically, you may cheer for a government that announces a vacation from morality and open permission to hate and to kill. You'll notice that the most enthusiastic war supporters sometimes want nonviolent war opponents killed and tortured along with the vicious and dreaded enemy; the hatred is far more important than its object. If your religious beliefs tell you that war is good, then you've really gone big time. Now you're part of God's plan. You'll live after death, and perhaps we'll all be better off if you bring on the death of us all.

But simplistic beliefs in good and evil don't match up well with the real world, no matter how many people share them unquestioningly. They do not make you a master of the universe. On the contrary, they place control of your fate in the hands of people cynically manipulating you with war lies. And the hatred and bigotry don't provide lasting satisfaction, but instead breed bitter resentment.

David Swanson is the author of "War Is A Lie" from which this is excerpted: <http://warisalie.org>

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