

War is Not a Solution for Terrorism

by Howard Zinn via rialator - Boston Globe *Saturday, Sep 2 2006, 7:12am*

international / peace/war / other press

There is something important to be learned from the recent experience of the United States and Israel in the Middle East: that massive military attacks, inevitably indiscriminate, are not only morally reprehensible, but useless in achieving the stated aims of those who carry them out.

The United States, in three years of war, which began with shock-and-awe bombardment and goes on with day-to-day violence and chaos, has been an utter failure in its claimed objective of bringing democracy and stability to Iraq. The Israeli invasion and bombing of Lebanon has not brought security to Israel; indeed it has increased the number of its enemies, whether in Hezbollah or Hamas or among Arabs who belong to neither of those groups.

I remember John Hersey's novel, ``The War Lover," in which a macho American pilot, who loves to drop bombs on people and also to boast about his sexual conquests, turns out to be impotent. President Bush, strutting in his flight jacket on an aircraft carrier and announcing victory in Iraq, has turned out to be much like the Hersey character, his words equally boastful, his military machine impotent.

The history of wars fought since the end of World War II reveals the futility of large-scale violence. The United States and the Soviet Union, despite their enormous firepower, were unable to defeat resistance movements in small, weak nations -- the United States in Vietnam, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan -- and were forced to withdraw.

Even the ``victories" of great military powers turn out to be elusive. Presumably, after attacking and invading Afghanistan, the president was able to declare that the Taliban were defeated. But more than four years later, Afghanistan is rife with violence, and the Taliban are active in much of the country.

The two most powerful nations after World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union, with all their military might, have not been able to control events in countries that they considered to be in their sphere of influence -- the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and the United States in Latin America.

Beyond the futility of armed force, and ultimately more important, is the fact that war in our time inevitably results in the indiscriminate killing of large numbers of people. To put it more bluntly, war is terrorism. That is why a ``war on terrorism" is a contradiction in terms. Wars waged by nations, whether by the United States or Israel, are a hundred times more deadly for innocent people than the attacks by terrorists, vicious as they are.

The repeated excuse, given by both Pentagon spokespersons and Israeli officials, for dropping bombs where ordinary people live is that terrorists hide among civilians. Therefore the killing of innocent people (in Iraq, in Lebanon) is called accidental, whereas the deaths caused by terrorists (on 9/11, by Hezbollah rockets) are deliberate.

This is a false distinction, quickly refuted with a bit of thought. If a bomb is deliberately dropped on a house or a vehicle on the grounds that a ``suspected terrorist" is inside (note the frequent use of the word suspected as evidence of the uncertainty surrounding targets), the resulting deaths of women and children may not be intentional. But neither are they accidental. The proper description is ``inevitable."

So if an action will inevitably kill innocent people, it is as immoral as a deliberate attack on civilians. And when you consider that the number of innocent people dying inevitably in ``accidental" events has been far, far greater than all the deaths deliberately caused by terrorists, one must reject war as a solution for terrorism.

For instance, more than a million civilians in Vietnam were killed by US bombs, presumably by ``accident." Add up all the terrorist attacks throughout the world in the 20th century and they do not equal that awful toll.

If reacting to terrorist attacks by war is inevitably immoral, then we must look for ways other than war to end terrorism, including the terrorism of war. And if military retaliation for terrorism is not only immoral but futile, then political leaders, however cold-blooded their calculations, may have to reconsider their policies.

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