

# Reinforcing the Mindset of War

During Campaign 2008, Barack Obama promised to “end the mindset” that led to the Iraq War, but more than six years later, he has failed to live up to that commitment as the same belligerent “mindset” continues to grow and to spread, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

As I wrote this essay on the 12th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq (March 19-20), the news was filled with its violent repercussions across the Middle East and the world. The latest atrocity was a multiple suicide bombing at two mosques in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, that have killed at least 137 people. Two days ago, 24 people, mostly foreign tourists, were killed in Tunis.

War rages on in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia and Nigeria. Our leaders seem paralyzed, unable to contain or control the seemingly endless and spreading storm of violence they have unleashed. Their stated reasons for their own use of violence – yes, Western use of military force is a form of violence too – ring increasingly hollow: security, stability, democracy, humanity. They have failed catastrophically to deliver any of these anywhere.

My mind drifts back to Martin Luther King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech at the Riverside Church in New York in 1967. He listed several reasons for speaking out against the Vietnam War at that moment, but I am thinking about one in particular. He explained:

“My third reason moves to an even deeper level of awareness, for it grows out of my experience in the ghettos of the North over the last three years, especially the last three summers. As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action.

“But they asked, and rightly so, ‘What about Vietnam?’ They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this government, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands trembling under our violence, I cannot be silent.”

Today the dilemma Dr. King described has been globalized. If it was legitimate or effective for our government to use massive violence in pursuit of its political objectives, how would it be wrong for others to do likewise?

Nobody can deny the failures and frustrations that drive young men to join Islamic State or its affiliates. BBC reporter Safa AlAhmad filed an extensive report on the crisis in Yemen just before the suicide bombings in Sanaa. She warned that even educated young Yemenis are turning to the Islamic State (also known as IS, ISIS or ISIL) as a radical solution to their problems, after all else has failed them. She wrote:

“In other parts of Bayda (formerly Al-Qaeda territory), some people say al-Qaeda isn’t tough enough. Ahmad Khamis, a prominent local jihadist, says he loves Islamic State. ‘IS is a reality and they control land. They will take over districts and will engage in direct battle. They won’t retreat from battle, just like in Iraq,’ he says. ‘This is our hope to be ruled by Islam and freed from Shia occupation.’”

But this logic of violence is not so different from that of our own soldiers, generals and politicians. Once war is unleashed, the prescribed response to setbacks and defeats is to use even greater violence. America’s unrivaled military budget and endless investment in more advanced and more destructive weapons is predicated on that assumption. We must have “military superiority.” We must be able to militarily defeat any enemy. Anything less will leave us vulnerable. This is the same logic that draws young people to join the Islamic State, the strongest Islamist fighting force.

It is easy to see that this logic leads only to total, endless war on all sides. This is the very nightmare that world leaders confronted in 1945 when they stepped back from the abyss and signed the United Nations Charter, prohibiting the use of military force except in self-defense or at the request of the UN Security Council.

Will our leaders finally admit that they reneged on that commitment, seduced by the same mirage of security through strength and military supremacy as past aggressors like Nazi Germany?

At the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev warned that the “the world is on the brink of a new Cold War.” He went on to place the blame squarely on U.S. and Western leaders:

“The West, and particularly the United States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage

of Russia's weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination in the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here."

Many Americans now understand that it has been a terrible folly to confuse the power to destroy with the power to build a better world. The two are quite distinct, and building a better world requires neither air strikes nor "boots on the ground" but working together, talking through problems and, even more important, listening to others.

In 2008, Americans went to the polls and elected a President who told us during a debate, "I don't want to just end the war, but I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place That's the kind of leadership that I think we need from the next President of the United States. That's what I intend to provide."

That is still the kind of leadership we need from the President of the United States. Barack Obama's failure to provide it for the past six years has compounded the problem and spread untold violence and misery across even more of the world.

Proxy and covert war may be more politically palatable to President Obama and his colleagues, but death and violence are the same whether Americans blame them for it or not. A Houthi woman in Yemen told BBC reporter Safa AlAhmad how her three children were killed by artillery fire from the Yemeni armed forces that the U.S. armed, trained and conducted joint operations with.

She collected her children's bodies in small, bloody pieces and is still distraught that the only part of their faces she could find was a single ear. No wonder the Houthis, who now control Sanaa, write "Death to America" on walls all over the city.

Ending the mindset that unleashes such horrors requires a genuine renunciation of America's post-Cold War triumphalism, myths of military supremacy and record military budgets. In their place we need a new commitment to peace, diplomacy and international cooperation, and a serious recommitment to the letter and spirit of the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force.

**Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. Davies also wrote the chapter on "Obama At War" for the book, *Grading the 44th President: A Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader*.**

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