

Dropping the (Non-Nuclear) Big One

After pounding “war on terror” targets for 15-plus years, the U.S. military dropped its “mother of all bombs” on some caves in Afghanistan, a show-off of its terrifying weapon, peace activist Kathy Kelly told Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Just back from Afghanistan, Kathy Kelly, co-founder of Voices for Creative Nonviolence, says the consequences of U.S. military interventions across the Middle East and into Africa now include the spreading of starvation to some 16 million people.

But the U.S. government’s reaction has been to drop even more tonnage of bombs on some of these countries, including the deployment of the “mother of all bombs,” the world’s most devastating non-nuclear explosive dropped on Afghanistan on April 13, the day I interviewed Kelly.

Dennis Bernstein: This is a very troubling day, in U.S. history, and for the people of Afghanistan. The U.S. military has dropped a 21,600 pound bomb on a tunnel complex it says was “used by Islamic State militants in Afghanistan” – that’s coming out of the government. The GBU-43B Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, or MOAB, known as the mother of all bombs – the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used by the U.S. in a conflict. The massive ordnance was dropped from a U.S. aircraft in Nangarhar Province. The “bunker buster” bomb is so huge it can’t be delivered by a normal bomber aircraft, but instead needs to be put in a cargo plane. Its blast radius is up to a mile.

Joining us to talk about this, and a lot that is surrounding it, is Kathy Kelly. You know a lot about what’s going on in Afghanistan. You returned from there about a week ago, and you have spent a lot of time there in the past few years. Your response?

Kathy Kelly: I came back from Afghanistan on April 6th. And I think about all the military people who have itchy fingers. They have a huge bomb and they want to experiment with it in some place other than a remote desert. It seems incredibly obscene to imagine that they would pick Afghanistan. Supposedly they have to pick a place where there’s a war going on already. And it seems like maybe the President has said I’m really not all that interested in your decisions, or the briefings in the mornings. And so, this was their chance, and they took it. The excuse given is that there are tunnels there.

But you know, many of us can remember when we were told that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and this justified the Shock and Awe bombings. And there weren’t any weapons of mass destruction to be found. And, I wonder, maybe

those tunnels would never be found because they've all been blasted away. But that kind of rationale, it seems to me is so cruel.

I mean, suppose the United States were to transport its fighters and its weapons through tunnels, weapons like the one you just described, or weapons like the AC-130 Transport planes, weapons like the Apache helicopters that fire Hellfire missiles, I mean all this weaponry has gone into Afghanistan now since 2001. Suppose it had come in through tunnels, those tunnels would have to be the size of the Grand Canyon. And I'm not saying that we should ever legitimize armed struggle on the part of fighters who might be coming across from Pakistan, or might be coming from other countries, into Afghanistan.

But I think we have to recognize that the warlord that has spent billions of dollars, massive amounts of TNT, displaced millions of people—that's the United States. And now we've hit people during a time when they're already burdened down, on their knees, flattened almost, by environmental problems, by poisoned water, by air that nearly can't be breathed, by 1.5 million refugees inside the country, 1.8 million that might be shoved back in, collapsing health care, collapsing education. And when I was there most recently, and inside refugee camps, it could break your heart to see how wretched the conditions are. And I was with beautiful, bright-eyed little girls. And I thought – what kind of future do they have?

DB: Just to say a little bit more about this bomb because this is fantastic, in the worst sense of it. Reading a little bit more, its principle effect is a massive blast wave said to stretch for a mile in every direction, created by an 18,000lb, I guess explosion, equal to 18,000lb of TNT. And they call it the bunker busting bomb. It's designed to damage underground facilities. The weapon costs \$16 million a shot. What could you do with \$16 million and that camp you were in recently, Kathy?

KK: Well, of course, the expenditure on weaponry at a time when there's so much massive need – I'm in New York because of a fast to call attention to Yemen, which is in a conflict where [there are] near-starvation conditions. And the same is true for three countries near the Horn of Africa: Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria. And for the United States to be spending money on these kinds of bombs...

You know, I think the "mother of all bombs" is greed. Greed is the mother of all bombs...I think the very notion that they would drop this bomb after one of the U.S. soldiers was killed in a special operations raid is also very frightening, this disproportionate response. And when do U.S. people ever get a chance to think about what the night raids are like for the people whose homes are broken into, whose futures might be shattered by just one night raid?

DB: This notion of disproportionate response, I mean, it really does feel like a bit of Israeli influence. You know, the Palestinians shoot a rocket across the border, it misses everything, and then there's 2,000 Palestinians dead. And it's the lesson, it's sort of, I guess, this is the new world order. Trump wants people to know he's tough and at the same time they can test a lot of their new weapons. Is that too cynical? First I'm crying, you know Kathy, first I'm crying and then the fury sets in, and it's incomprehensible. But, you've been there and you've seen who the people are that we are destroying. And, I don't know. I'm sorry, go on, I interrupted.

KK: Well, you can certainly bet that people are very, very frightened of what's going to be rained down on them from the skies above. As I mentioned, their areas are already terrible. Just on my second to last day there, little Chin, she was so excited, [... she] half pulled me up a hill, the highest hill I've ever climbed in my life. And they wanted me on top of that hill so that I could be with them as they flew kites. And each one of their kites had pictures of drones on the kite. It was Xs over it, or the consequences of drone warfare. They were so excited as those kites became little dots up in the sky. And even the youngest of the girls could tell me what a drone was. Very seriously, shaking their heads, saying "These drones can kill people."

And can you imagine the innocence of these children, and U.S. people have no exposure whatsoever to the communities of families who just want to live and raise their children. And then we pour our resources into bombs like the ones that you've described. Well, if we earn ourselves a reputation as a menacing, fearful country of warlords, we've certainly gotten what we've asked for.

So does this build security? I mean imagine how many rage-filled, angry, traumatized young people might say "Sign me up"...in the next Jihadist group that comes into town.

DB: Yeah. And this...

KK: And, Dennis, can I ask...?

DB: Yes, please.

KK: So, blowing up all the tunnels with this massive penetration bombing, does this mean, then, that they might want to drive the ISIS fighters into the cities? Because they're going to go somewhere. So then you've got...I mean Nangarhar is a very resort area near the border. But Jalalabad is not so far away. What kind of a strategy, in terms of the future, is the military thinking about?

And it's very frightening to see who's in charge of the military now. And to

know that the president seems to have just kind of walked away from being informed, or aware of, these different strategies. And I think past presidents have also done plenty of damage in Afghanistan, and in Iraq and in Syria. We should all at least acknowledge that. And they were able to maybe put a better mask on it. I think President Trump doesn't have much of a mask. But it's certainly going to arouse fury all around the world.

DB: And, just for a moment, to come back to the kids who were flying kites with pictures or paintings of drones on them, I assume that's obviously out of their own experience. I imagine some of those folks actually lost relatives and friends to drone operations...

KK: Well, the young man who organized the day, he got the bus and he helped to make the kites, and invited the children, and the older kids to come on the hilltop, Maldive has a nephew who, every time he hears a drone fly overhead, goes into something like a panic attack, and runs and hides. And so, Maldive said "I had to do something, to try to protect my nephew."

And another thing that I want to point out is that all of this aerial surveillance, it's not just drones, the United States has been experimenting with huge systems for surveillance over Afghanistan, but those systems will never, ever disclose the kinds of questions my young friends ask when they go out to the villages to try to find out who needs the heavy blankets, to try to find out who's most in need of getting a child laborer into school. And they ask "When was the last time your family had enough food" and "What's your source for water?"

And, in the refugee camp, a woman came up to me, she just sobbed on my shoulder, and she said "I have nothing to feed my children for lunch. Nothing to give them for dinner." People run from these wars, they've got nowhere to turn, nowhere to hide. They come to overcrowded cities, like Kabul, where the infrastructure is already crumbling. You begin to wonder, "Is there no mercy? Are there no ethical constraints on the United States, which allies Saudi Arabia, and these other warlords?"

DB: The kinds of comments I've been hearing since the first bombing...but now after this bombing is that—and these are from, I don't know what you'd call them, some people call them liberals—"He's [Trump] getting his act together. This is a positive reversal." I guess, "Getting to the job. Really seeing what it looks like from the inside, really does have the power to transform."

KK: Well, it certainly is the case that he was being labelled as a kind of bumptious fool, as a president, before he took the act of hitting Syria, and now this action, and if that's how you earn your way into the elite salon as a club

member, I guess we shouldn't be terribly surprised because at the top of that group are the Directors of Boeing, Lockheed, Martin Marietta, British Aerospace, Raytheon.

The stocks for Raytheon went up after. Raytheon-manufactured Tomahawk cruise missiles hit Syria. This was certainly a sad, sad statement on, I suppose, the way to corral these kinds of dangerous actions becomes more and more confusing. Because we're not really sure who is in charge of governance under the Trump administration.

DB: Kathy, you're in New York, you've said having to do with a fast. Are you fasting now?

KK: Yeah, I'm on day five of a week-long fast. It's been a real gift to be with the community across from the United Nations, at the Isaiah Wall where there's a saying "When shall come a day when they shall beat their swords into plowshares. And their spears into pruning hooks." But we feel so conscious of the alarm that U.N. workers have sounded, have been predicting that these conflict driven, near famine conditions could cost the lives, collectively, if you factor in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria, upwards of 16 million people. And what a terrible, horrible way to die, stranded in the desert with no water and no food.

And, meanwhile, the United States has supported the Saudis in blocking the Port of Hodeidah, in Saudi air strikes. The United States has made air strikes. Very, very expensive weaponry being used, while people are starving.

DB: I believe the Pentagon announced today [4/13/17] actually another air strike in Syria killed 18 of so-called rebels that they're supporting.

KK: The chaos and the upheaval that all of these strikes cause will not be over after the announcements. It will go on and on, imagine people that are maimed and wounded, and in need of health care. Imagine the families that don't have a bread winner. Imagine the desires for revenge that come. The idea that military solutions, so-called solutions, could make a difference in that part of the world is, it seems to me, insane. It seems like the military has been doing [this] decade after decade.

DB: Kathy, we just have a minute or two left, but just for a broader picture, and I always come to you with a question like this. Forgive me, but what does this say about who we are? What we've become? What our government has become? Your thoughts on that?

KK: Well, we're a nation of people who join grassroots groups to non-cooperate with murdering and killing all of the time. And these grassroots groups exist, they're sturdy, they're beckoning for more people to join, in fact they've been

more evident since President Trump was inaugurated, and the lead up to that time. And so, I think we are a group of people who can say “No, we don’t want to be identified as warlords, as menacing, fearsome people.” But, we’re going to have to do everything we can to make that very, very clear.

I think people who will be going to churches, and to synagogues, over this weekend coming up, have a responsibility to say to their communities, and their faith based leaders, “We must speak out in this time, here and now.” And not focus on the past or some kind of apocalyptic future. I think that people in universities, there’s a big responsibility right now. Educate our young people to understand the consequences of war, otherwise they’re completely being robbed of their finances, as they go to the universities.

And I think people are right to think about strikes. Strikes all over the place, working with the BDS campaigns, with Black Lives Matter, with students. I think it’s an important time to say “We don’t want to cooperate.” I haven’t paid a dime of federal income tax since 1980, and that’s one thing I can say with relief. So, as tax day approaches, what people think, what do you want to pay for? And do you get what you pay for in the USA? And sadly, you do, you get days like today, when we learn about this massive bomb dropped on some of the poorest people in the world.

DB: Kathy Kelly, Voices for Creative Non-Violence, if people want to learn more about that organization, or what you’re up to, best way?

KK: Oh, yes please, go to vcnv.org. Also, for the Afghan peace volunteers, seeing video of those kids up on the hillside with their kites at ourjourneytosmile.com. Speaking of Yemen, we’re speaking of a fast for Yemen because Yemen is starving. So, Yemen and fast and you’ll get to us.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
