

# What War Are We Fighting?

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September 19, 2001

These days I have been reading the news, watching the news, hearing the news, and living the news. While most of it is a heartening evidence of the qualities that make this nation strong and great, there are some voices that trouble me deeply. I am not talking about the racist bigot fools who cannot seem to distinguish between a religious majority and a vocal radical minority, or who find an excuse in the horrendous aftermath of the attacks to instill terror in the hearts of their fellow citizens just because they are different. These are execrable deeds that should be punished swiftly for it is tolerance, acceptance, and understanding that are the virtues of this land, and not misconstrued jingoism.

I am talking about the pundits who have shouted to all that would care to hear about the purported evils of the US foreign policy, implying or stating that the US is somehow to blame for what has happened. Although I refuse to associate with the rabid right, which seems bent on creating a Christian version of the Taliban if given half a chance, and which wants to nuke into oblivion anyone that disagrees, I must say that the extreme leftist misinterpretations trouble me even more. Perhaps some of that has to do with my firm belief that while America can handle its religious zealots pretty well, it has been helpless against the surge of self-loathing that comes from popular public personae, like Chomsky, among others.

The basic thesis of these people is that with its purported disregard for the plight of Arabs, Palestinians, Muslims, Afghans — pick your favorite disenfranchised foreign group — and with its support for Israel, all in pursuit of some grand "imperialist" design, the US is somehow guilty of the terrorist attacks itself. You see, according to this logic, the suicidal maniacs have somehow been justified in their excess, and the US has somehow deserved it. Even more troubling, as evidenced by reports coming in from various institutions of higher education, such as San Francisco State, many students lap up these myths, criticize the government, plan to evade an improbable draft, and hoist slogans that proclaim that the administration, whom they never supported, should reconsider its policies. Of course, this echoes the statements of the Palestinian minister, who appeared on the news to deconstruct terrorism, vilify Israel, and by extension the US, and proclaim that the only way to stop the violence is to grant the demands of the Palestinians. At the same time, radical Pakistanis and Afghans along their countries' border seem ready to fight a holy war against the US and any supporting country should there be any attempts at reprisals. The US appears the villain here by the virtue of it being a convenient scapegoat for Afghanistan's inability to cope with

internal strife. I have no doubt that any and all discontent groups can find faults with the US. But are they correct? Has the foreign policy been misguided and abuse to such deplorable extent? I think not.

I think that what we are hearing are just excuses and justifications. One should not forget that during the cold war the US was the friend of the Muslims. It helped the Afghani people in their struggle against the invading Soviet Union. This was a war that plunged the country into the destruction and chaos which bore the Taliban. Back then, America was their friend. Of course, the moment the Soviet Union withdrew, the strategic interests of the US were met and so most of the aid ceased (although the UN has been working there to this day). The reaction? "Ah, these imperialist bastards have left us to our own devices!" And left to their own devices, the Afghani tribes slaughtered each other, losing over 50,000 people in a civil war, which did not end even as the Taliban took power in 1996. The country, still poor, still tormented by economic disaster, is still in the throes of that civil strife, with the government (recognized by only three other states; Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) fighting enemies on three fronts. Is this the fault of Americans? Maybe the problem is that the US is not an imperial power. Had it been so, it would have conquered Afghanistan, imposed its rule, and governed in peace and prosperity, building up the economy, enfranchising women, and doing all these things that advanced colonial powers sometimes did. Maybe Afghanistan could have been happier with some sort of foreign rule? At least the people would not have to suffer under the militant and bizarre extremism of the Taliban.

So there. Afghanistan is not a conflict between Islam and America, regardless of what the Taliban may say. That's why it makes no sense to declare our own jihad against them. There's no need for crusaders to kill or convert nonbelievers. Why should this nation succumb to the propaganda rhetoric of a foreign entity? Why should we buy Taliban's line that this is holy war? I can see why they are doing it: this is the only way to shore up the crumbling support of the tribes and perhaps a hope to frighten the US with the prospect of an Islamic jihad against it. But why should we buy it? Why should we treat it as more than it actually is. And what is it? A bald-faced lie. It would have been nice if the US could rid Afghanistan of the Taliban. I am sure ordinary Afghans would like it. That way they can stop the exodus from their ravaged land and go back to rebuild it.

What about the Palestinians? Well, it has been a mystery to me how a terrorist like Yasser Arafat could have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but then again there are many mysteries in life that I will never know the answer to. What is more puzzling is the claim that the US is somehow to blame for the cycle of violence that never seems to end there. I should remind readers that it was the Palestinians who rejected the eminently reasonable Israeli peace proposal recently. Why? It is really very simple: there can be no compromise and no bargain there because what Israel's neighbors want is the elimination of Israel. The Palestinians are unfortunately trapped by the support of the surrounding countries. This support encourages them to resist any attempt to find a solution and while their "government" prefers to sacrifice Palestinians to peace, there will be no peace. It is odd that the conflict should be described as religious when Israel is a secular democratic state. I don't see Israel converting neighbors to Judaism and

in fact I see no prospect of it ever happening. So what is the threat? The holy places? We can share them. I am sure they can share them. The point here is not that the US should abandon Israel — and maybe even then Israel will be able to defend itself — but that the Arab states should yank their support for the extremist Palestinian claims so that moderate Palestinians can prevail and find a formula for the peace that would be welcomed by that tortured people as well. I realize that the hope of this happening is remote, and so my sad conclusion is that we might not see peace in the region until drastic changes occur.

So what is driving all these problems? Where does all that resentment come from? Two words: economics and ideology. It really is not too hard to figure out that dire economic circumstances produce frustration, which leads to anger when the situation does not seem to change. This phenomenon is common everywhere and has nothing to do with religion, continent, nationality, or race. During such times people look for explanations, they look for scapegoats. Sometimes anger can be turned inwards and produce revolution or an internecine civil war. At other times, especially when there is an easily identifiable target, it can turn outward. Why is the US such an "easy" target? For Palestinians, it is the support of Israel. I doubt that ordinary Palestinians realize how much their own governing authority is responsible for their misfortune. Therefore, the enemy is Israel, and therefore, the enemy is the US. For the Afghans, it is the lack of support for Afghanistan and the resulting power of the Taliban. I should stress that the Taliban, much like the Communist party in the years following the Revolution of 1917 in Russia, is a well-armed but small group who is laying waste to their land in an effort to consolidate their rule, killing off anyone who would resist, and using an extreme ideology to do so. It is also worth noting that they have never declared jihad against America, although they have done so against the Soviet Union and their internal opponents.

So it is not a case of "damned if you don't and damned if you do." Rather, it is the case of politically powerful groups using the misery of their people to advance their own agenda and exploiting the high profile of the United States in an effort to rally support around their cause. Islam in this sense is convenient only because it provides a rallying point, a battle cry, like Lenin, Stalin, and Mao provided the banner for Communists. The West was the enemy because such causes need an enemy to survive. The only way to justify the terror, the exploitation, the oppression of one's own people is to claim that it is done in the name of something higher, in the name of a bigger struggle. The higher the cause, the more victims it requires. That is why the Taliban will not yield Osama bin Laden. It has nothing to do with Islam, but it has everything to do with their survival. If they could find other ways to ensure it, they would get rid of him in a second. America is not an enemy of Islam, it never has been. It has never persecuted Muslims, both within its borders and without. And it has poured billions in helping the suffering. Was it not NATO who helped the Muslim Kosovars? Or the Muslim Bosnians? Yet, the results there are similar. Because the economic situation has not improved, now the same beneficiaries are resentful of America. It won't be long until they clamor for vilifying it too. If America is the aggressive exploitative force in the world that some picture it to be, then it has been remarkably inept as an imperialist.

All this means one thing, and it is very distressing. We are not at war with terrorism,

although it is part of it. We are at war to win the minds and hearts of people, who have been indoctrinated to fear and hate us. This is a war that can only be won when prosperity comes to these economically depressed regions. Any attempt to rid their lands of the pernicious governments that rule them would invariably be interpreted as an attack on Islam, on the very soul of these nations, and they will defend themselves to the end. The Soviet Union crumbled without a frontal assault, it was overspent and exhausted. Such an approach will not work for these already poor lands. What they need is more support, more help, more resources, more development so they can get out of their misery and have no need for devils to fight. I am afraid that this message will now be lost amid the rush to punish terrorists. Maybe the administration should heed to the cooler heads of the Europeans, who have busily built goodwill with the Arab world despite the colonial past and despite the religious differences.

We should realize that this is not a war between America and Islam. It is not a war between America and Afghanistan. It is not a war between America and the Palestinians. It is not a war between America and the Arab world. It is a war between civilization and misery, and it is a war that we can win. It is a war that should not be waged with troops or bombs, although both troops and bombs will be necessary to find and eliminate the dangerous terrorists, who incite violent conflict. We should not approach this war with self-loathing or desire for revenge. We should understand that Islam, Christianity, and atheism are all equally likely to produce their share of fanatics. Some call it jihad, others call it crusades, yet others call it purges or Cultural Revolution. It always takes millions of lives. We should understand that while US foreign policy has blundered here and there, it is not the force of evil that it has been made out to be. We should recall that it is thanks to America that we are not wearing red stars and singing the Soviet anthem. We should recall that it was thanks to America that Europe and Japan rose from the ashes. There were errors that sometimes were costly. Hindsight, however, is 20/20. It is easy now to criticize the Korean and Vietnam wars. But they did contain communism. Maybe (just maybe) the second one was unnecessary, but was there a way of knowing it before that? Certainly not. Therefore, it could not have been avoided. Our generation has seen only peace in America and (mostly) in Europe. Most of us have only played war on TV. And many tend to place blame where the result of a "mistake" may seem to make the action a mistake.

Still, history has given us a good share of lessons to learn from. Ordinary Germans may have been complicit in Hitler's crimes, but it only took several years to turn them around into the model social democrats that they are today. Japan may have fought with the fanaticism of a kamikaze pilot, but it did not take long to make this country a supporter of democratic peace and prosperity. Even Communist China is softening, eager to trade and do business more than confront the West. Where prosperity goes, peace follows. Recall Khrushchev's peaceful co-existence? All in the name of economic prosperity. Of course, I am simplifying here but I want the conclusion to be loud and clear. The huge problem is how to build prosperity in the midst of war. This is what we should busy our minds with. And while we are at it, maybe we should stop calling this a war?