

Blood Does Not Wash Away Blood

Why we owe future generations our renunciation of all war and our continued vigilance to save this planet from further grief and destruction.

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The extraordinary March 10, 2023 announcement that China's top diplomat, Mr. Wang Yi, helped broker a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran suggests that major powers can benefit from believing that, as [Albert Camus](#) once put it, "words are more powerful than munitions."

This concept was also acknowledged by General Mark Milley, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff who said on January 20th, 2023, that he believes Russia's war in Ukraine will [conclude](#) with negotiations rather than on the battlefield. In November of 2022, asked about prospects for diplomacy in Ukraine, Milley noted that the early [refusal to negotiate](#) in World War One compounded human suffering and led to millions more casualties.

"So when there's an opportunity to negotiate, when peace can be achieved ... [seize](#) the moment," Milley told the Economic Club of New York.

Twenty years ago, in Baghdad, I shared quarters with Iraqis and internationals in a small hotel, the Al-Fanar, which had been home base for numerous [Voices in the Wilderness](#) delegations acting in open defiance of the economic sanctions against Iraq. U.S. government officials charged us as criminals for delivering medicines to Iraqi hospitals. In response, we told them we understood the penalties they threatened us with (twelve years in prison and a \$1 million fine), but we couldn't be governed by unjust laws primarily punishing children. And we invited government officials to join us. Instead, we were steadily joined by other peace groups longing to prevent a looming war.

In late January 2003, I still hoped war could be averted. The International Atomic Energy Agency's report [was imminent](#). If it declared that Iraq didn't have weapons of mass destruction (WMD), U.S. allies might drop out of the attack plans, in spite of the massive military buildup we were witnessing on nightly television. Then came Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 5, 2003, United Nations briefing, when he [insisted](#) that Iraq did

indeed possess WMD. His presentation was [eventually proven to be fraudulent](#) on every count, but it tragically gave the United States enough credibility to proceed at full throttle with its “Shock and Awe” bombing campaign.

Beginning in mid-March 2003, the ghastly aerial attacks pounded Iraq day and night. In our hotel, parents and grandparents prayed to survive ear-splitting blasts and sickening thuds. A lively, engaging nine-year-old girl completely lost control over her bladder. Toddlers devised games to mimic the sounds of bombs and pretended to use small flashlights as guns.

Our team visited hospital wards where maimed children moaned as they recovered from surgeries. I remember sitting on a bench outside of an emergency room. Next to me, a woman convulsed in sobs asking, “How will I tell him? What will I say?” She needed to tell her nephew, who was undergoing emergency surgery, that he had not only lost both his arms but also that she was now his only surviving relative. A U.S. bomb had hit Ali Abbas’s family as they shared a lunch outside their home. A surgeon later reported that he had already told Ali that they had amputated both of his arms. “But,” Ali had asked him, “will I always be this way?”

I returned to the Al-Fanar Hotel that evening feeling overwhelmed by anger and shame. Alone in my room, I pounded my pillow, tearfully murmuring, “Will we always be this way?”

Throughout the Forever Wars of the past two decades, U.S. elites in the military-industrial-Congressional-media complex have manifested an insatiable appetite for war. They seldom heed the wreckage they have left behind after “ending” a war of choice.

Following the 2003 “Shock and Awe” war in Iraq, Iraqi novelist Sinan Antoon created a main character, Jawad, in [The Corpse Washer](#), who felt overwhelmed by the rising numbers of corpses for whom he must care.

“I felt as if we had been struck by an earthquake which had changed everything,” Jawad reflects. “For decades to come, we would be groping our way around in the rubble it left behind. In the past there were streams between Sunnis and Shiites, or this group and that, which could be easily crossed or were invisible at times. Now, after the earthquake, the earth had all these fissures and the streams had become rivers. The rivers became torrents filled with blood, and whoever tried to cross drowned. The images of those on the other side of the river had been inflated and disfigured . . . concrete walls rose to seal the tragedy.”

“War is worse than an earthquake,” a surgeon, Saeed Abuhassan, told me during Israel’s 2008-2009 bombing of Gaza, called [Operation Cast Lead](#). He pointed out that rescuers come from all over the world following an earthquake, but when wars are waged, governments send only more munitions, prolonging the agony.

He explained the effects of weapons that had maimed patients undergoing surgery in Gaza’s Al-Shifa Hospital as the bombs continued to fall. [Dense inert metal explosives](#) lop off people’s limbs in ways that surgeons can’t repair. White phosphorus bomb fragments, embedded subcutaneously in human flesh, continue to burn when exposed to oxygen, asphyxiating the surgeons trying to remove the sinister material.

“You know, the most important thing you can tell people in your country is that U.S. people paid for many of the weapons used to kill people in Gaza,” Abuhassan said. “And this also is why it’s worse than an earthquake.”

As the world enters the second year of war between Ukraine and Russia, some say it's unconscionable for peace activists to clamor for a cease-fire and immediate negotiations. Is it more honorable to watch the pile-up of body bags, the funerals, the grave digging, the towns becoming uninhabitable, and the escalation that could lead to a world war or even a [nuclear war](#)?

U.S. mainstream media rarely engages with professor Noam Chomsky, whose wise and pragmatic analysis rests on indisputable facts. In June 2022, four months into the Russia-Ukraine war, Chomsky [spoke](#) of two options, one being a negotiated diplomatic settlement.

"The other," he said, "is just to drag it out and see how much everybody will suffer, how many Ukrainians will die, how much Russia will suffer, how many millions of people will starve to death in Asia and Africa, how much we'll proceed toward heating the environment to the point where there will be no possibility for a livable human existence."

UNICEF [reports](#) how months of escalating devastation and displacement affect Ukrainian children:

"Children continue to be killed, wounded, and deeply traumatized by violence that has sparked displacement on a scale and speed not seen since World War II. Schools, hospitals, and other civilian infrastructure on which they depend continue to be damaged or destroyed. Families have been separated and lives torn apart."

Estimates of Russian and Ukrainian [military casualties](#) vary, but some have suggested that more than 200,000 soldiers on both sides have been killed or wounded.

Gearing up for a major offensive before the spring thaw, Russia's government announced it would [pay](#) a bonus to troops that destroy weapons used by Ukrainian soldiers which were sent from abroad. The blood money bonus is chilling, but on an exponentially greater level, major weapons manufacturers have accrued a steady bonanza of "bonuses" since the war began.

In the last year alone, the United States [sent](#) \$27.5 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, providing "armored vehicles, including Stryker armored personnel carriers, Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, and High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled vehicles." The package also included air defense support for Ukraine, night vision devices, and small arms ammunition.

Shortly after Western countries agreed to [send](#) sophisticated Abrams and Leopard tanks to Ukraine, an adviser to Ukraine's Defense Ministry, Yuriy Sak, [spoke confidently](#) about getting F-16 fighter jets next.

"They didn't want to give us heavy artillery, then they did. They didn't want to give us Himars systems, then they did. They didn't want to give us tanks, now they're giving us tanks. Apart from nuclear weapons, there is nothing left that we will not get," he told Reuters.

Ukraine isn't likely to get nuclear weapons, but the danger of nuclear war was [clarified](#) in a *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* statement on January 24, which set the Doomsday Clock for 2023 to ninety seconds before the metaphorical "midnight." The scientists warned that effects of the Russia-Ukraine war are not limited to an alarming increase in nuclear danger;

they also undermine global efforts to combat climate change. “Countries dependent on Russian oil and gas have sought to diversify their supplies and suppliers,” the report notes, “leading to expanded investment in natural gas exactly when such investment should have been shrinking.”

Mary Robinson, the former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, says the Doomsday Clock sounds an alarm for all humanity.

“We are on the brink of a precipice,” she said. “But our leaders are not acting at sufficient speed or scale to secure a peaceful and livable planet. From cutting carbon emissions to strengthening arms control treaties and investing in pandemic preparedness, we know what needs to be done. The science is clear, but the political will is lacking. This must change in 2023 if we are to avert catastrophe. We are facing multiple existential crises. Leaders need a crisis mindset.”

As do we all. The Doomsday Clock indicates we’re living on borrowed time. We needn’t “always be this way.”

Over the past decade, I was fortunate to be hosted in dozens of trips to Kabul, Afghanistan, by young Afghans who fervently believed that words could be stronger than weapons. They espoused a simple, pragmatic proverb: “Blood does not wash away blood.”

We owe to future generations every possible effort to renounce all war and protect the planet.

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