

Is There a Right Way to Wage a Wrong War? Why are We Here?

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On Saturday, during her national radio response to the president, Senator Dianne Feinstein accused the Bush administration of “incompetence” in the Iraq war.

What would be a competent way to pursue the war in Iraq? How would you drop huge bombs on urban neighborhoods in a competent way? How would you deploy cluster munitions that shred the bodies of children in a competent way? How would you take hundreds of thousands of people from their home land and send them to a country to kill and be killed — based on lies — in a competent way?

How do you ravage the housing and health care and education of communities across the United States, while war-profiteering corporations post bigger profits — how would you do that in a competent way?

Senator Feinstein went on to say that it’s so important, for the war in Iraq, for the United States government to “do it right.”

How does one do this war right, when every day it brings more carnage? The only way to do this war right is to not do it at all.

Last Friday, reporting on a new assault by the U.S. military in Iraq, a headline on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle said: “Biggest air attack since the invasion seen as delivering a message.”

Delivering a message.

Forty years ago, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara said it was necessary to drop bombs on North Vietnam in order to deliver a message to the Communist leaders in Hanoi. The former war correspondent Chris Hedges, in his book “War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,” recalls that when he was reporting from El Salvador, one morning he and other reporters woke up at their hotel and discovered that death squads had dumped corpses in front of the building overnight, and in the mouths of those corpses were written messages threatening the journalists.

In Yugoslavia, during the spring of 1999, the bombs fell with the U.S.-led NATO forces delivering a message. And when, at noontime one Friday in the city of Nis, cluster bombs fell courtesy of U.S. taxpayers and ripped into the body of a woman holding a bag of carrots from the market, that too was an instance of sending a message.

Time after time, leaders send messages by inflicting death. On September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden sent a message at the World Trade Center. And in the fall of 2001 the U.S. military sent a message to Afghanistan, where the civilians who died, if we are going to count numbers, were at least as numerous as those who died at the World Trade Center.

And now, George W. Bush continues to send a message with the bombs and the bullets. And we're encouraged — if not to avidly support — to be passive. To defer. To be inactive.

When people across the United States gather to oppose this war, they are refusing to participate in sending the message of death.

Almost 40 years ago Martin Luther King talked about what he called "the madness of militarism." And it's with us, here and now; it's with us in the United States every time a child is malnourished, every time people need medical care and don't get it and suffer and sometimes lose their lives, while the military budgets of this country — over half a trillion dollars a year — are spent not on defense but on military expenditures, which dwarf anything that could be accurately described as defense. The madness of militarism that Dr. King talked about is expressed every day by the likes of Senator Feinstein, who demands "competence" in war and says that it must be done right.

We need a peace effort, not a war effort, from the United States. Instead of doing a better job of killing, there's a movement around this country to compel what is said to be our own government to do a much much much better job of sustaining life — instead of taking it.

The problem isn't that this war may not be winnable. The problem is the war was and is and always will be wrong, and must be stopped.

At every demonstration for peace and social justice, why are we here? Because those are values we want to live for.

And why are we here on this earth? Why are any of us here? Not an easy question to answer. But activism is a way of insisting that we're not here to be part of war machinery. We're not here to be part of the killing, we're not here to aid and abet or enable those like George W. Bush who lead the charge to slaughter in the name of freedom to serve profit. We're here with a very different mission.

This article is excerpted from Norman Solomon's speech to an antiwar rally in Sebastopol, California, on Sunday, March 19.

Norman Solomon is the author of War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.

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