

A Parable of (All-American) Violence

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As a religious studies professor, I know a parable when I see one. Consider the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and the final events in this country’s war in Afghanistan as just such a parable taken directly from the history of our moment.

The heart-wrenching last days of that war amounted to a cautionary tale about the nature of violence and the difficulty Americans have honestly facing their own version of it. As chaos descended on Kabul, and as the Biden administration’s efforts to evacuate as many Afghans and Americans as possible were stretched to the limit, one more paroxysm of senseless violence took center stage.

A suicide bomber sent by the Islamic State group ISIS-K struck Kabul’s airport, killing and maiming Afghans as well as American troops. The response? More violence as a Hellfire missile from an American drone supposedly took aim at a member of the terror group responsible. The U.S. military announced that its drone assassination had “[prevented another suicide attack](#),” but the missile actually [killed](#) 10 members of one family, seven of them children, and no terrorists at all. Later, the Pentagon admitted its “[mistaken judgment](#)” and called the killings “a horrible tragedy of war.”

How to react? Most Americans seemed oblivious to what had happened. Such was the pattern of the last decades, as most of us ignored the [staggering number](#) of civilian casualties from our country’s bombing and droning of Afghanistan. As for the rest of us, well, what else could you do but hold your head and cry?

In fact, those final events in Afghanistan crystallized an important truth about our post-9/11 history: the madness of making war the primary method for dealing with potential global conflict and what’s still called “national security.” Throughout these years, our leaders and citizens alike promoted delusional dreams of violence (and glory), while minimizing or denying the nature of that violence and its grim impact on everyone touched by it.

With respect to the parables of the New Testament gospels, Jesus of Nazareth is reported to have said, “Those who have ears, let them hear.” In this case, however, Americans seem unable to listen.

Parables are compact, supposedly simple stories that, upon closer examination, illustrate profound spiritual and moral truths. But too few in this country have absorbed the truth about the misplaced violence that characterized our occupation of Afghanistan. Our culture remained both remarkably naïve and blindly arrogant when it came to widespread assumptions about our violent acts in the world that only surged thanks to the further militarization of this society and the wars we never stopped fighting.

The Costs of War in Well-Being, Money, and Morality

Over the last 20 years, according to a [report](#) from the National Priorities Project, the U.S. dedicated \$21 trillion to an obsessive militarization of this country and to the post-9/11 wars that went with it. Nearly [one million people](#) died in the violence, while at least [38 million](#) were displaced. Meanwhile, more than a million American veterans of those conflicts came home with “[significant disabilities](#).” Deployment abroad brought not just death but [devastation](#) to all-too-many military families. Female spouses too often bore the brunt of care for returning service members whose needs were unfathomably wrenching. The [maltreatment of children](#) in military families “far outpaced the rates among non-military families” after increasing deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq and children of deployed parents showed “high levels of sadness.”

Many analysts have pointed to the culture of [lies and self-deceit](#) that characterized these years. American leaders, political and military, [lost](#) their own moral grounding and were dishonest with the citizenry they theoretically represented. But we citizens also share in that culpability. Andrew Bacevich [recently asked](#) why the American people didn’t hold their leaders to a more stringent accounting of the wars of the last 20 years. Why were Americans so willing to go along with the unrelenting violence of those conflicts year after year, despite failure after failure? What he called the “Indispensable Nation Syndrome” was, he suggested, at least partially to blame — a belief in American exceptionalism, in our unique power to know what’s best for the world and grasp what the future holds in ways other nations and people couldn’t.

In the post-9/11 period, such a conviction mixed lethally with a deepening commitment to violence as the indispensable way to preserve what was best about this country, while fending off imagined threats of every sort. Americans came to believe ever more deeply, ever more thoughtlessly, in violence as a tool that could be successfully used however this country’s leaders saw fit.

The unending violence of our war culture became a kind of security blanket, money in the bank. Few protested the outlandish Pentagon budgets overwhelmingly approved by Congress each year, even as defeats in distant lands multiplied. Violence would protect us; it would save us. We couldn’t stockpile enough of it, or the weapons that made it possible, or use it more liberally around the globe — and increasingly at home as well. Such a deep, if remarkably unexamined, belief in the efficacy of violence also served to legitimate our wars, even as it helped conceal their true beneficiaries, the corporate weapons producers, those titans of the military-congressional-industrial complex.

As it happens, however, violence isn’t a simple tool or clothing you can simply take off and set aside once you’ve finished the job. Just listen to [morally injured](#) military service members to understand how deep and lasting violence turns out to be — and how much harder it is to control than people imagine. Once you’ve wrapped your country in its banner, there’s no way to keep its barbs from piercing your own skin, its poison from dripping into

your soul.

Canaries in the Coal Mine of War, American-Style

Listening intently to the voices of active-duty service members and veterans can cut through the American attachment to violence in these years, for they've experienced its costs and carried its burden in deeply personal ways. Think of them as the all-too-well-armed canaries in the coal mine of our post-9/11 wars, taking in and choking on the toxicity of the violence they were ordered to mete out in distant lands. Their moral injuries expose the fantasy of "[using violence cleanly](#)" as wishful thinking, a chimera.

Take [Daniel Hale](#) who, while serving in the Air Force, participated in America's drone-assassination program. Once out of the service, his moral compass eventually compelled him to leak classified information about drone warfare to a reporter and speak out against the drone brutality and inhumanity he had witnessed and helped perpetrate. (As the *Intercept* [reported](#), during five months of one operation in Afghanistan, "nearly 90% of the people killed in airstrikes were not the intended targets.")

Convicted of violating the Espionage Act and given 45 months in prison, he [wrote](#), in a letter to the judge who sentenced him, "Your Honor, the truest truism that I've come to understand about the nature of war is that war is trauma. I believe that any person either called upon or coerced to participate in war against their fellow man is promised to be exposed to some form of trauma. In that way, no soldier blessed to have returned home from war does so uninjured." Having agonized about "the undeniable cruelties" he perpetrated, though he attempted to "hold his conscience at bay," he eventually found that it all came "roaring back to life."

Or listen to the voice of former Army reservist and CIA analyst [Matt Zeller](#). Having grown up in a family steeped in the American military tradition and only 19 years old on September 11, 2001, he felt "obligated" to do something for his country and signed up. "I bought into it," he would later say. "I really believed we could make a difference. And it turns out... you don't come back the same person. I wasn't prepared for any of that. And I don't think you really can be." Describing his post-service efforts to assist Afghans "endangered by their work with the United States" who were fleeing the country, he said, "I feel like this is atoning for all the shit that I did previously."

Such voices disrupt the dominant narrative of the post-9/11 era, the unshakeable belief of our military and political leaders (and perhaps even of most Americans) that committing violence globally for two decades in response to that one day of bloody attacks on this country would somehow pay off and, while underway, could be successfully contained, distanced, and controlled. There was a deep conviction that, through such violence, we could purchase the world we wanted (and not just the weapons the military-industrial complex wanted us to pay for). Such was the height of American naïveté.

The Inequality and Inhumanity of Violence

Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung has [defined violence](#) as an "avoidable assault [on] basic human needs and more generally [on] *life*." But how many Americans in these years ever seriously considered the possibility that the violence of war could be avoided? Instead, in response to that one day of terrible violence in our own land, perpetual conflict and perpetual violence became the American way of life in the world, and the consequences at

home and abroad couldn't have been uglier.

Who bothered to consider other avenues of response in the wake of 9/11? The U.S. invaded Afghanistan five weeks after that day, while the Bush administration was already preparing the way for a future invasion of Iraq (a country which had nothing whatsoever to do with 9/11). I'll never forget the confusion, shock, and fear in the early weeks after those attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The world was grieving with us, but the dominant urge for violent revenge took shape with breathtaking speed, so quickly that it all seemed the natural course of events. Such is the nature of violence. Once it's built into the structures of human society and government planning, it all too often takes precedence over any other possible course of action whenever conflict or danger arises. "There's no other choice," people say and critical thinking shuts down.

We in the United States have yet to truly face the personal as well as national costs of the violence that was so instantly woven into the fabric of our response to 9/11. Within a few days, for instance, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was already talking about a global war on terror targeting [60 countries](#)! Most Americans blithely believed that we could strike in such a fashion without being truly affected ourselves. People generally failed to consider how such a recourse to endless violence would conflict, morally speaking, with the nation's own deepest values.

But philosophers know that such violence almost invariably turns out to be [grounded in inequality](#) and so sharply conflicts with this country's most basic values, especially the idea that human beings are equal. To act violently against the other, people must believe that the object of violence is somehow less worthy, of less value than themselves. In these years, they had to believe that the endless targets of American violence, like those seven dead children in Kabul, not to speak of the future lives and psychic well-being of the soldiers who were sent to deliver it, didn't truly matter. They were all "[expendable](#)."

No wonder military training always includes a process of being schooled in [dehumanizing others](#). Otherwise, most people just won't commit violence in that fashion. The sharp assault on their own values, their own humanity, is too great.

The commemorations of the 20th anniversary of 9/11 spotlighted the limits of the world that two decades of such wars have embedded in our national soul. With [rare exceptions](#), there was a disparity when it came to grief. Countless reports mourned the victims and first responders who died here that day, but few were the ones who extended remembrance and grief to the hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions who have died in our wars in distant lands ever since. Where was the grief for them? Where was the sense of regret or introspection about what 20 years of unmitigated violence has wrought around the world and what it has undoubtedly changed in the moral character of this country itself?

For, believe me, all of us have been impacted morally by our government's insistent attachment to violence. It's helped destabilize our own core humanity, its toxicity penetrating all too deeply into the soul of the nation.

Recently, I was asked whether I agreed or disagreed with the statement, "I can be trained to kill and participate in killing and still be a good person."

As a theologian, an American, and a human being, I find myself filled with dread when I attempt to sort this out. One thing I do know, though. I may be a civilian, but along with the

members of the U.S. military, I can't escape sharing complicity in the killing that's gone on in my nation's name, in that war on terror that became a war of terror. I remain part of the group that committed those crimes over so many seemingly endless years and that truth weighs ever more heavily on my conscience.

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Featured image: U.S. jets bombing Afghanistan. These attacks will not end despite the formal U.S. withdrawal by September 11th. [Source: wired.com]

[America's "War on Terrorism"](#)



by Michel Chossudovsky

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In this new and expanded edition of Michel Chossudovsky's 2002 best seller, the author blows away the smokescreen put up by the mainstream media, that 9/11 was an attack on America by "Islamic terrorists". Through meticulous research, the author uncovers a military-intelligence ploy behind the September 11 attacks, and the cover-up and complicity of key members of the Bush Administration.

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According to Chossudovsky, the "war on terrorism" is a complete fabrication based on the illusion that one man, Osama bin Laden, outwitted the \$40 billion-a-year American intelligence apparatus. The "war on terrorism" is a war of conquest. Globalisation is the final march to the "New World Order", dominated by Wall Street and the U.S. military-industrial complex.

September 11, 2001 provides a justification for waging a war without borders. Washington's agenda consists in extending the frontiers of the American Empire to facilitate complete U.S. corporate control, while installing within America the institutions of the Homeland Security State.

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