

A MEDITATION ON WAR & THE LEGACY OF IRAQ

In many ways I am the least qualified person to talk about war and its consequences. Although my age qualifies me as a member of the so-called "Greatest Generation," I have never enlisted or been drafted into the armed services and I have never, as a journalist and filmmaker, experienced any war close up. My qualifications, such as they are, are solely literary and philosophical. In my late teens and a student at UC Berkeley I became serious about poetry. I wasn't the only would-be-romantic who responded to the last stanza of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach:"

Ah, love let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various,, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Of course, my Dover Beach was the Berkeley hills, but they served my purpose -- a romantic despair at the state of my world. I read the World War I British poets -- Owen, Sassoon, Brooke, and a lesser know poet. Isaac Rosenberg. Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" is regarded by many as the best of all the poems written by this group.

The darkness crumbles away
It is the same old Druid time as ever,
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet's poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies,
Now you have touched this English hand
You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between,
It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France,
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurled through still heavens?
What quaver -- what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in men's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping,
But mine in my ear is safe,

Just a little while with the dust.

At dawn, on April 1, 1918, having just returned from a night patrol, Isaac Rosenberg was killed, either by a sniper's bullet or in close combat -- the record is unclear on this point. He was buried in a mass grave in France.

As you might expect, the lines that hit the hardest in those undergraduate years were those of Wilfred Owen who was killed six months after Rosenberg and one week before the end of the war. The title and the last line of the poem are the same: "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." (literally "It is sweet and proper to die for one's country.") It is one of the more effective ironies in all of English poetry, particularly when your undergraduate studies reveal to you that the original is by the Roman poet, Horace. It is in one of the Horatian Odes and is used in a highly patriotic sense. One English translation goes "What joy for fatherland to die.

The classroom was one source of learning, but there was another source, not in Berkeley but in San Francisco, at the home of Kenneth and Marie Rexroth. It was here that one would always find a number of like-minded poets and artists, the majority of them conscience objectors gathered to look at each other's work, but mostly to listen to Kenneth hold forth on any subject to be found in the Encyclopedia Britannica, plus a world view which has been described as anarcho-pacifist. On our reading list were such books as Kropotkin's Mutual Aid; Soren Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling; Martin Buber's I and Thou; William James' The Varieties of Religious Experience; Marx; Trotsky; Emma Goldman; Isadora Duncan; Nietzsche; Mayakovsky; Vico; and Simone Weil's The Iliad, or the Poem of Force.

It was a wild ride that produced some life-long effects: a commitment to pacifism and its moral ambiguity with respect to evil, genocide for example; a commitment to non-violent disobedience as the only effective means of opposing the use of force by the state; and, lastly, a commitment to the practice of poetry which changes nothing, is a mystery to many, but without which our insight into ourselves and the world in which we live would be the poorer. Though not a result of direct experience of war, my reading and other contacts produced a visceral response to war as the greatest obscenity, rather than the greatest glory as celebrated by some poets -- Tennyson and Kipling come to mind. But even in their poems, The Charge of the Light Brigade and Gunga Din for example what is celebrated is patriotic duty and suicidal courage. -- one of the more painful absurdities of which we humans are capable.

Obscene in terms of its cost in human suffering and death, warfare has been and is a constant presence throughout history. Although statistically, as Stephen Pinker points out in a recent book, fewer people experience war today than in earlier centuries, the experience of war confirms Thomas Hobbes' assertion, made over 300 years ago, that "the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Ironically, Hobbes' solution -- the social contract and its evolution into the modern state -- has resulted in a situation in which warfare takes place, not between tribes or villages, but between states. In other words, in the history of humankind we have never been able to put an end to war.

Is such a thing (meaning peace) possible? It's a question worth asking because the answer may be the key to the survival of the species. Armageddon scenarios are a dime a dozen and I am not proposing one here. I am, however, going to put forth a proposition which, if all the conditions were met, would result in a peaceful world. If it is true that all wars, including the so-called "good wars," are ultimately destructive and merely lay the groundwork for the next war, not to engage in war becomes potentially a constructive act. I stress the word potentially because peace is more than the absence of war. A second part of the proposition introduces the concept of morality. I use the word not in the sense of a capitalist code, a Marxist code, a Christian or Islamic code, but as a standard of behavior held in common by all rational

beings. By this I mean a standard derived from fundamental necessities of life: food, shelter, security, and so on up to more abstract conditions such as a sense of self-worth in the society. All of this is meaningless so long as that moral code refers solely to oneself, one's tribe, one's nation, religion or political allegiance. And here things do get a little apocalyptic. I am suggesting a planetary morality which excludes no one but includes everyone. I am not suggesting an ecotopia, another end of history fantasy, nor am I suggesting a radical change in morality. And all the evolutionary principles of Darwin apply.

What I am proposing can be expressed in terms of self-interest; the difference, if there is any, consists in the recognition that one's self-interest is inseparable from the interests of all members of the human family. And when I say this I am aware of a final ironic twist. What I am describing is not that different from what has been described by soldiers in battle. The "every man for himself" morality is fatal. When everyone is under threat the security of the individual depends absolutely on the security of the group, with every individual doing his or her part as a matter of survival. This is a morality in which there is no rational difference between the part and the whole; the individual and the society. A lesson we have yet to learn is that in the torturous evolution of our species we must learn to live with each other or together we will fall into the abyss.

That last sentence is one of those grand generalizations that at first appears to be true but is soon fragmented by the details of daily life. Whether or not we shall ever evolve from a competitive to a cooperative species is one of those questions without a definitive answer. We live in a world where war is always an option, whether in Afghanistan following 9/11; or Iraq in pursuit of illusory weapons of mass destruction; or, as presently being proposed, Iran over oil, nuclear weaponry and the defense of Israel. Once, warfare was associated exclusively with states, recent years have witnessed the emergence of a new category: terrorism, which can be identified as the actions of a so-called "rogue state," or terrorist acts which originate outside of any state. Here, al Qaeda, becomes a convenient catch-all term. We tend to think of national defense as the use of force by a state against its enemies. And by the same token one nation's national defense becomes another state's terrorism. Both concepts however, defense and terrorism, have become the legal basis for conventionally illegal acts all the way from preemptive war; to targeted assassination of US citizens abroad; to trials before military tribunals or civil courts, whichever method offers the best chance for conviction; to the indefinite detention of those suspected of terrorism. Attorney General Eric Holder on March 5th of this year laid out the government's right to carry out assassination of US citizens overseas. He described the Obama government's position as "...an indicator of our times, not a departure from our laws and values." This is not John Yoo, the much criticized deputy attorney general in the Bush Administration, this is the top legal officer in the US.

When I read Holder's speech, which was delivered at Northwestern University law school on Tuesday of last week, I found myself remembering two things: one, the comments of Barry Goldwater during the Republican Convention in SF in 1964; and the other was an essay by Leon Trotsky and a response to the essay by the philosopher John Dewey which, in 1938, appeared in the magazine the New Internationalist and was required reading in the Rexroth anarcho-pacifist group.

You may recall the Goldwater statement: "...extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice and let me remind you that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Is there a significant difference between the Goldwater and Holder statements? The only difference that I can detect is that Goldwater uses the word extremism, while the Holder statement, chillingly writes- off extremism as "...an indicator of our times,, not a departure from our laws and values."

Since October 7, 2001 and the beginning of the Afghan war the Executive branch of our government has

increased its ability to detain, interrogate, try before military courts, and, yes assassinate US citizens suspected of terrorist activities against the US. The executive powers which George Bush so earnestly sought and received have not only been retained by President Obama they have reached beyond the powers that President Bush exercised. Remember the hullabaloo over the Patriot Act? I don't recall the same outcry when President Obama signed the "National Defense Authorization Act" at the beginning of this year. It may give you an idea of the degree of acceptance of the invasive nature of the security state that there no massive demonstration National Defense Authorization Act. President Obama even came under criticism when he questioned several features of the Act.

Among other things this Act extends the authorization granted President Bush to order the killing of anyone suspected of terrorist acts against the US, and this includes US citizens as well as citizens from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. It also signed into law that anyone suspected of terrorism can be held by the military for an indefinite period. The President can also decide whether a person will receive a trial in federal courts or a military tribunal. The President may now order warrantless surveillance, including a new capability to force companies and organizations to turn over information on citizens' finances, communications and associations. You may recall that Bush acquired this power in the Patriot Act of 2001 and again in 2011. Obama extended the power to include searches of everything from business documents to library records. Yes, library records, it's still on the books as the law of the land. The legal device which the government uses to initiate such searches is called "a national security letter."

That the government collects and uses secret evidence to detain individuals should come as no surprise. It that may surprise you a bit to learn it is next to impossible to gain access to any of this information. Under the National Defense Authorization the government is allowed to claim secret legal arguments to support secret proceedings using secret evidence.

War Crimes. In 2009 the "Obama administration decreed that CIA employees could not be prosecuted for war crimes such as water-boarding, effectively undercutting the Nuremberg principles of international law. Other nations which do not allow for prosecution include Syria, China, and Iran.

Secret Courts. In 2011 the current administration renewed the powers granted Bush is use the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance court which has expanded its secret warrants to include individuals deemed to be aiding or abetting foreign governments or organizations. The Act also allows secret searches of individuals who are not part of an identifiable terrorist organization.

Immunity from Judicial Review. Like the Bush administration the Obama administration has successfully pushed for immunity for companies that assist in warrantless surveillance of citizens. This routinely blocks lawsuits against private contractors.

Citizen surveillance. The Obama administration has successfully defended its claim that it can use GPS devices to monitor targeted citizens without securing any court order or review.

and finally, Extraordinary rendition. The government now has the ability to transfer both citizens and non-citizens to another country under a system known as extraordinary rendition. Bluntly put, it is torture at a distance because the countries they are shipped to include Syria (until recently), Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan. It should be pointed out that this practice has been discontinued by the Obama administration, but the law permitting rendition remains. Much of this information is taken directly from a January 13, 2012 article in The Washington Post by Stanley Turley, the Shapiro professor of public interest law at George Washington University.

What does all this tell us about the emergence of the security state at the expense of individual rights ranging from habeus corpus to privacy. Remember that all of this is in the name of protecting your security and that of the United States. In moral terms it is the simple proposition that the end (security) permits any means necessary to achieve security. Security at any price is another way of putting it. The usual defense for such a policy is the "special circumstance" argument. And indeed this is exactly the argument put forth by Attorney General Holder in his speech at Northwestern. Here are some of the terms he used: does the individual represent "an immediate threat of a violent attack?" If so, the president can authorize any means necessary to eliminate the potential killer. He went on to speak of a "relevant window of opportunity to act, and the possible harm that missing that window would cause to civilians and the likelihood of heading off future disastrous attacks against the United States." Holder restated the overarching reason for the preemptive use of force, the so-called special circumstance of war, and he repeated the phrase "a global war on terror." If it is your view that security at any cost is a legitimate point of view you will agree that the President should have such exceptional powers. If it is your view that the suspension of habeus corpus and governmental assassination of US citizens is a means used in the name of security the consequence of which leads to more, not less, violence, then you may not support present US policy.

There is nothing new in this debate over ends and means. As mentioned earlier I became aware of the problem in 1938 when, as part of the Rexroth group, we read John Dewey's critique of Leon Trotsky's famous essay "Their Morals and Ours." It was Trotsky's view that "morality is a product of social development; (that) there is nothing invariable about it; (that) it serves social interests; (that) and these interests are contradictory; (that) morality more than any form of ideology has a class character."

Trotsky saw things through the fixed lens of Marxist ideology and class struggle. The objective was victory of the proletariat and in that battle any means that lead to victory, including force, is justified. Here is his critique of what he considers to be middle-class capitalistic morality.: "Under 'normal' conditions a man observes the commandment 'Thou shall not kill.'" But if he murders under exceptional conditions for self-defense, the judge condones his action. If he falls victim to a murderer the judge will kill the murderer. The necessity of the court's action, as that of the self-defense, flows from antagonistic interests. In so far as the state is concerned, in peaceful times it limits itself to individualized cases of legalized murder so that in time of war it may transform the 'obligatory' commandment, 'Thou shall not kill' into its opposite. The most 'humane' governments, which in peaceful times, detest war, proclaim during war that the highest duty of their armies is the extermination of the greatest possible number of people." Leon Trotsky "Their Morals and Ours," 1938.

It would appear that what Trotsky saw as hypocrisy is not that different from current US policy. We'll leave that for the discussion following this talk. What I want to report is John Dewey's response to Trotsky's "the end justifies the means" argument. Here's what he had to say: "The relation of means and ends has long been an outstanding issue in morals. It has also been a burning issue in political theory and practice.....I hold that the end in the sense of consequences provides the only basis for moral ideas and action, and therefore provides the only justification that can be found for means employed." I should know better than to rewrite John Dewey, nonetheless, what I think he is saying here is that an end represents the consequence of multiple means and every means must be evaluated in terms of its consequences with respect to the desired result. Or put it another way: If you want a moral world you will never achieve it through immoral means.

To be even handed about this, in his essay Trotsky at one point says that the principle that the end justifies the means does not mean that every means is permissible. "That is permissible," he writes,

"which really leads to the liberation of mankind." In Trotsky's terms this meant the victory of the proletariat and the presumed abolition of the power of man over man. Dewey's critique begins with the observation about the interdependence of the end and means. He then points out that means themselves have ends which may not be consistent with the final end. In other words the means used can produce a result the very opposite of the declared end -- the suspension of civil rights in order to preserve our values which include civil rights, for example. It is something of an absurdist game with very serious consequences. If war is a special circumstance and if terrorism is the eternal enemy, there is no other outcome except perpetual war and an attempt to legalize practices which are the very opposite of the values and legal protections we claim to be defending.

I have suggested that the Obama administration has not only retained but has extended the powers of the Executive to act in an extra-legal manner in pursuing perceived enemies of the US. On such questions such as rendition and torture, President Bush was more prone to exercise his powers than President Obama. However the laws remain on the books. The secretly invasive security state acts not unlike carbon monoxide. It's colorless (you can't see it) and it's odorless, but undetected it can kill you. What puzzles me is how concerned we were over the Patriot Act and how indifferent we seem to be over the the National Defense Authorization Act. Maybe it is the wording. After all, can anyone seriously oppose the idea of self-defense? The tricky part is when that idea is broadened to include preemptive war, rendition, indefinite detention, etc.. And even more is subtle is the idea of war as a special circumstance which approves these practices. And then we come to the final stage: terrorism is always a possibility. Therefore we can never relax our guard. Terrorism is the 21st Century mode of warfare which, since terrorism is always a potential, we have no choice except to remain in that "special circumstance" of war. I want to close with this question. Most of us can recall the "Red Scare" of the Twenties, the fierce political debates of the Thirties the war years and the suspension of civil rights for Japanese American; the House un-american activities committee which lasted from 1947 to 1975. The McCarthy era. Imagine, if you will, what might have happened if the nation's Executive Officer, the President, had been granted the powers that all post 9/11 presidents have asked for and received. It would appear that the 21st century is a world of surveillance. Citizen privacy has become something the state cannot afford. Citizen protection, due process when accused, is no longer guaranteed. If it is the decision of the President that you are a threat to the security of the US and if you are abroad and out of reach of the police power of the US you may become the target of a drone attack. Is this the world we have created for our children and grandchildren? And if not, why not? Have we been so preoccupied with the economy that we were unaware of the loss of rights we thought were guaranteed by the constitution. Can the term terrorist be stretched to include anyone who disagrees with US policy. These are a few of the questions worth talking about this afternoon.