

A different response to war, by Jason Espada

People fall into three camps when it comes to America's wars: there are those who unquestioningly accept these as necessary, and unavoidable, if tragic; a second, much larger group wants nothing to do with our nation's history – having divorced themselves from any association with it, they feel removed from any responsibility for it at all; a third group sees the evils that have been committed by our government, with our tax dollars, wasting lives and depleting resources that are needed here;

Many in this last group bay for blood when new or old information comes to light about the crimes of government officials in the past, such as those of Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, LBJ, Reagan, Bush and Cheney, right up to our current president. Yet I would like to propose another response to war making that is not covered in any of the above. I would like to suggest the idea of *finding guilt without punishment*.

I know this may sound very strange, impractical, unjust, and impossible to achieve, but if there is a thread of truth to what I'm about to say, then this may offer another possibility when faced with crimes of the magnitude of what was done in South East Asia in the '60's and '70's, in Central America in the 1980's, and now in the Middle East, from the early 1990's to present.

When Obama ran against John McCain in 2008, much was made of McCain's status as a 'war hero'. This was never challenged, by Obama or in the media. If it was analyzed anywhere, it was well off the radar for most Americans. I said at the time that if he wanted to run with that as one of his qualifications to lead the country, then it should be brought out into the open. The man dropped bombs on people. How many did he kill?, and *was he fighting a just cause* in doing so?

The right or wrong of Vietnam is a debate we have not finished in this country, and, as I would like to describe here, not seeing this through on a national level leaves the way open for still more deception, for the depravity of more wars where innocents are killed abroad, and young Americans maimed and killed for no good reason.

The left is so weak now, that what passes for a public progressive here has no criticism of the modern ‘good soldier’, but only unalloyed praise. Just where did those on the left lose their moral courage? If the cause is wrong, unjust, and the government immoral, then have pity for the soldier, but don’t exalt his or her so-called ‘heroism’, or try to separate what they do from the barbarity, illegality and destructiveness of their actions. Popular newscasters and spokesmen on the left are confused, wanting to side with the soldier, and yet also wanting to oppose these wars.

When former president Ford passed away, I took it as a chance to look at his legacy. Ford pardoned Nixon, and the highest ranking criminal in our nation walked away, not only without being punished in any way, but, what was worse, with some ambiguity in the minds of American people about what it is he had done. In the years that followed his resigning from office, there have been schools and libraries named after him.

After Nixon, we got Reagan, who went much further than Nixon in the Iran – Contra scandal to subvert the constitution, and establish a new code of executive level immunity from breaking the law. After Reagan we got Bush and Cheney, who again went exponentially further than their predecessors, shredding the constitution and robbing the treasury to give to corporations. Today, Obama continues the shameful legacy of authoritarian criminality.

I know there are a lot of well meaning people who want to avoid thoughts of revolution, as the only way to change a system. In the history of revolutions, we can read the same story told over and over again, of people being pushed and exploited without limit, and exhausting every legal option, before taking up arms.

The neo cons play on people’s respect for the law and the reluctance to fight back. Yet there is nothing ethical about them. They hide behind laws, but then overrule, or find ways around them altogether. The uninformed, the misinformed, the deceived, support them, and carry out their orders. It would seem that only in playing their own game better than the right could we hope to change an unjust system.

I see one factor though that has the potential to slow, and change the course of the rule by the few, at the expense of the many; I can think of one method that can take apart the machinery of war, and that is – to tell the truth about this country’s past.

Right there, as soon as I say or think this, the thought rises up, of how what we may call justice is so often linked to retribution; that most of the time, people want those who caused suffering to suffer; we want to see them in jail or worse. This is opposed naturally by those who just want to live in peace now; the past is past, they will say, let us move forward;

It would also, without question, be opposed by everyone who had anything to do with war making – from the generals and their families, going back generations, on down to the pilots and soldiers and their families and friends; from military contractors to the politicians who were their advocates, and all those who were complicit; few would be exempt, and so there's the fear of where this would lead, were we really to open that Pandora's box.

This shows a lack of imagination, and what's worse, it leaves intact the roots of the crimes this country has committed in the past. With these factors still in play in public consciousness, political leaders and the rapacious capitalist forces they represent can again exploit and manipulate people into wars of aggression. Finding our country's leaders guilty, without seeking merely to punish those few individuals may not be emotionally satisfying for those who have felt wronged or betrayed by them, but the aim goes much further than singling out a handful of people for revenge.

Admittedly, there's no 'thrill' here, if you could call it that, but only what could be a fruitful grief over the inhumane actions done by this country. Veterans against the war show how this is possible.

If people in America had really come to terms across religious, economic and geographical lines with what was done in South East Asia; if we had really known the extent of the lies and the atrocities that were committed there, there would have been less willingness to take the government's word on anything after that, or to go to war. Maybe then the aggression against Central American people, and the people in the Middle East would not have happened as it did.

The interesting thing about both lies, and the truth is that they are perennial - always in season. Governments need people to believe in the righteousness of their cause, or no one would follow the drum beat. By the same token, telling history as it actually happened is always what we need to do, opposed as it will be.

Tell me - What other force can disarm the generals?, what other creative, non-violent power can stop the machinery of war?

Who were the Hitler's, the Mao's, the Kissengers, the Reagans, and the Bushes, other than incredibly deluded men who went on to lie and deceive a great number of people? Without the consent of the public, they would have been no more dangerous than a lunatic raving in a dark alley. To paraphrase the constitution, they derive their power from the consent of deceived people. Take that away, and they have nothing, no troops, no armaments industries, no dock workers willing to load and unload their munitions, no foot soldiers.

We can look for examples of finding a person or group guilty, without seeking retribution. It has been done before. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa comes to mind here. It's purpose has been to make a way forward out of a violent past. It did this not by ignoring what had happened, but by holding it up for everyone to see, and remember.

This is our best protection. Without knowing our history, we're at the mercy of those who would perpetuate the long night of war for profit, the holding on to and building the wealth of the few at the expense of the many. Some may argue that it's always been like this, and that nothing is going to change, but great changes have happened, in fact we're living them now. This may be hard to see, without reflection, and without a study of our history, but we're right in the middle of it.

For just one example, consider how much we as a nation have turned away from racism. We still have a long way to go to erase this stain, and to entirely eliminate racist views, true, but compared to a hundred years ago we can only describe the difference in attitudes here as a sea-change.

One sign of how far we've come is that we elected a black man president in 2008. Quite apart from the crimes he's committed since coming to office, in the 50's, 60's, and 70's, and even later than that, this would have been inconceivable. Just ask anyone who lived through those decades.

My point is that if views on race can change so substantially, in less than half a century, so can what we think about the past and present militarism of this country. Who knows what we're capable of?

Just as what we are taught about race has changed dramatically, so can we change what we teach about war, and the cruelty and violence that some Americans have done, and continue to do, right up to today. We suffer, and wars go on, for lack of any historical memory.

Another place we can look, for a response to war that goes beyond mere retribution, so that no generation repeats the crimes of the past, is to late twentieth century Germany and Japan. They institutionally, and extensively teach the immorality of the men who committed the ultimate crime of going to war. This is the best protection against it happening again. This is what we need here, though it would seem we're far from it now.

Many people here are indulgent, self-centered, unconcerned, or feel disempowered, but this is only part of the story. Remember February 15th, 2003. I'd like to see it become a national holiday, commemorating the best that's in us. That was the day when millions of people across this nation and in cities all over the world protested against the war the American leaders were getting ready to launch against the people of Iraq. To my mind, this was an incredible event, almost unbelievable, and something that deserves to be marked on the calendar and celebrated.

When in history have people ever protested, on such a scale, *before* a war even began? Not only that, but the protests took place all over the world. Overwhelmingly, as a group, as a species, we were of one mind, of one heart. That the war went forward anyway, with catastrophic consequences for the Iraqi people is a terrible fact we're all still living with now. But we shouldn't forget that, on that day, people worldwide stood up, and stood together, against militarism, and wars of aggression for profit's sake. This gives me hope, because you don't kill a thought like that – this is what is redeeming in all of this, when I remember that our story is still being written.

Can we hold up Abu G'rhab and say, 'never again'?

Can we look at drone warfare and call it immoral, and call those who bomb innocents war criminals, and, more than that, say, *we stand against this, forever?*

I want more than retribution. I want to see the end of blind allegiance to the flag and militarism in this country. We're so much better than that.

So let the truth go out. Find someone who still hasn't made up their mind on what was done in our name to the people in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, or in Central America, or in Iraq, and tell them it's important to cross that invisible boundary and be able to repudiate unjust war on innocents.

I know why people defend this government, against all reason, and it's because they still have an all or nothing mentality when it comes to war, or crimes against humanity. But how can we move forward if we don't acknowledge the past, all the right and wrong of it, all the good and evil of it? 'To move forward' means we don't repeat the mistakes of the past, forever, because we have been able at last to learn our lesson.

{reading now: A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn; listening to: Mozart Flute Concertos, and The Speeches of Martin Luther King; also recommended: Lies My Teacher Told Me, by James Louwen; and Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, by, John Perkins, and the documentary films 'Why We Fight', and 'You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train'. }