

"A Progressive Realist's View: Why War may be Necessary for Long- Term Peace and Justice"

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The progressive message is extremely important during this pivotal time in world history yet it is in danger of being marginalized. Some progressives are promoting approaches based on idealistic, yet unrealistic perspectives. On the extreme fringe, many are implicitly justifying the horrible acts of September 11th through inappropriately equating them to actions and policies by the United States. Though I am going to make the case that it is appropriate for progressives to view war as a reasonable and necessary response, I also hope to identify the actions and messages that I believe all progressives, both pacifists and just war advocates, should embrace to promote a more peaceful and just world.

Let's start by examining our current predicament. The United States and, indeed, the whole world are now facing a danger that is as great as any that they have ever faced. The attacks on September 11th, as they stand, were the worst terrorist incidents in history. Not only did they result in the immediate and tragic loss of thousands of lives but the World Bank estimated that the financial impact to the world economy will result in the deaths of over 40,000 additional children through disease and malnutrition and over 10 million additional people will fall below the extreme poverty line of \$1 a day. If the attack had achieved all of its apparent objectives, it would have been several times more devastating. Even more ominous, this attack was only the latest battle in an ongoing war that Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda view as a religious duty. The world that these Islamic fascists envision has no room for Jews, Christians, atheists, emancipated women, or even tolerant Muslims. Even more chilling, this fanatical hatred is increasing in the Middle East cultivated by a biased press and fundamentalist schools. As one student in Pakistan told a reporter, "we are all Osamas here".

What is the appropriate response to this threat? I believe that there are two key objectives we must have:

- 1) Neutralizing the immediate threat to safety and peace
- 2) Eliminating the root causes that create an environment that breeds this type of hate

Notice that I didn't focus on justice as the objective. It is not that justice is not desirable but justice is often a code word for revenge and retaliation. One person's justice is another person's terror. Timothy McVeigh believed his act was justice for Waco and Ruby Ridge. The desire for justice can feed the cycle of violence even more than the act of violence itself. Justice can be a very powerful and valuable tool to achieving our objective of peace but it can also be pursued at the cost of peace. No amount of justice will return a child's father or mother killed in the World Trade Center or, for that matter, a Palestinian or Israeli child who died in senseless reprisals in that area of the world.

To neutralize the immediate threat to our safety, the response of the US government has been to declare war on Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda and, even more broadly, on terrorism itself. The focus of the war effort is to destroy the al Qaeda network and any safe havens for terrorism. A very aggressive campaign has begun on numerous fronts: financial, diplomatic, intelligence,

and military. The people in the US and their elected representatives overwhelmingly support military action. Although I am uncomfortable with some of the rhetoric coming from the Bush administration, I believe military action is, unfortunately, both justified and needed. I also believe that the administration is taking great pains to avoid civilian casualties and mitigate, as much as possible, the harm done to the people of Afghanistan. I have also been heartened that this administration is now focused on international collaboration and coalition building and even become focused on nation-building, much to the chagrin of the some in the extreme right. If successfully executed, the war will crush the capability of these terrorists to execute sophisticated operations such as the September 11th attacks and, perhaps even more importantly, discourage other rogue nations from harboring or supporting terrorist activities. There are both great costs and risks but I see no reasonable alternative.

Let me specifically address three key points that I have repeatedly read against the war:

First, the most consistent message has been that the US should seek justice not war. The institutions of international law should be used to try the accused perpetrators and obtain justice. The suggestion is that the US should gather more evidence and present it to the World Court or a similar tribunal. If enough evidence is found to indict bin Laden and others, the United Nations would ask the Taliban to extradite him. If they refused, an international police force would be established under the control of the UN to arrest the accused by force if necessary.

The problems with this scenario are numerous:

- The above process would take years if not decades. In the meantime, bin Laden and associates continue to train terrorists and build greater and greater capabilities. Today, he even claimed to have nuclear and chemical weapons. The lack of reprisals would actually tend to embolden the terrorists.
- Even if an indictment took place, it is extremely unlikely that the Taliban would turn over the perpetrators with the weak threats mounted by an international police force of infidels. The Saudis have been trying to get the Taliban to turn bin Laden over to them for years without success and they are common spiritual brethren and their key financial backers. As in most cases of international crimes against humanity, it is usually after a war has been won that a criminal can be brought to justice (such as in the former Yugoslavia).
- It may be very difficult to convict bin Laden in a court. Terrorist cells are set up in ways that limit traceability. It is difficult enough to convict organized crime bosses in the US, where there is much greater visibility into their activities. It also may be impossible to reveal intelligence sources that would convict him. An acquittal would greatly increase the feeling of immunity that the terrorists feel and the risk of violence.
- Finally, by asking these international institutions to do more than they are capable of doing or have ever done, we will actually weaken them. People will lose confidence in them altogether when they see they fail to achieve results in a reasonable time.

A second point that is frequently made is that the war will increase the risk of terrorism. Violence will beget more violence and will not stop the cycle of violence.

In the short term, there is indeed increased risks, as there is in any war. But, unfortunately, an effective short-term response to a violent attack meant to destroy your nation has been force. The real threat of force has also proven to be a significant deterrent as well. The use and threat of force has silenced the significant threat of terrorism that had come from Libya and others. The unrelenting and devastating bombing of Germany and Japan during World War II, led mostly by the US, can be viewed among the most violent acts of against any nation in history. That violence did not breed additional violence. Actually, the opposite happened. Both of those countries are among the most peace-oriented in the world and very strong US allies. The important key to long term recovery in any war effort is to give the defeated nation a way back into the family of nations and actively support them in their return. That was the failure of the Versailles treaty at the end of WW I. It is also the failure in the Persian Gulf war.

The forces of hate and intolerance in the region are lying about US intentions and representing this war as a fight against Islam. Though it is true that this will initially bring more recruits into their camp, an effectively executed campaign by the US will expose their lies and their new adherents will turn on them. If other peaceful ways are provided to move towards prosperity and freedom, they will be among the most fervent and convincing advocates, inoculated against the siren song of terrorism.

The third point frequently cited against the war is that the war will intensify a humanitarian nightmare in Afghanistan.

This is indeed true. The humanitarian situation was dire before September 11th and, as a result of the war, millions more are at risk. The difficulty is that the more that this becomes a driving factor in our efforts, the more that it can be used by the Taliban and al-Qaeda to manipulate us. They do not share our same reticence for civilian casualties or suffering. A successful (and quick war), may actually be a key to relieving the humanitarian nightmare caused not only by the drought but also the horrendous policies of the Taliban.

Many of you will find my arguments unconvincing or, for religious or philosophical reasons find any type of violence abhorring and unsupportable. Let me now focus on where I believe we can make common cause and align our messages.

Our nation is now at a teachable moment. The attack of September 11th has awakened us and sent us searching for answers. By promoting “enlightened self-interest,” progressives could immensely broaden their base of support and move the progressive agenda to the forefront. “Enlightened self interest” is furthering our objectives through taking actions to better the condition of others. Here are some of the ways that we could make these events a springboard towards a more peaceful and just future, rather than a downward spiral to increased violence:

- Americans now know how important the stability of an extremely remote nation can be to their welfare. Let us help them “connect the dots” between increasing humanitarian aid and development assistance to building stability and security. American development aid has steadily dropped over the last 40 years. Though by far the richest country, we are, by far, the lowest provider of development assistance as a percentage of GNP at less than 0.1% (the UN guideline is 0.7%). We are a generous country, let’s encourage that

generosity to be focused on the addressing these dangerous chronic problems in creative ways. We rescued Europe and Japan at the end of WW II and helped rebuild their economies. We can now do the same with these countries as our partners.

- Americans now know how dangerous the voices of intolerance and hate can be. In this country, hate-filled fanatics have been trying to use these events to promote their agendas and as an excuse to persecute those that are different. The government and the people have resoundingly rejected these voices and embraced our diversity. We need to continue to cultivate this trend. Outside of this country, especially in the Middle East, there is a great need to promote tolerance and understanding. We should encourage these governments to counter this scourge of religious hatred, not through oppression but through communication and cultivation of tolerant voices. This is particularly important in allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority.
- Americans now know how important good international relations and treaties are. We are now relying on the UN, NATO, and other coalitions to achieve our objectives on many fronts. We should encourage this trend and use it to strengthen international institutions and international law. Through the coalitions that have been forming, we are now in a position to work constructively to solve some of the most intractable conflicts in the world and build bridges to historical adversaries such as Iran and Russia.
- Americans are again painfully aware of how the dependence on foreign oil puts them at risk and increases tension in a very volatile region. Progressives should use this as an opportunity to promote the benefits of increased conservation that reduce our oil dependency far more effectively than new oil drilling.

Over the last couple of months, George Bush has dramatically shifted from a “government is bad” isolationist to much more of an internationalist, promoting government programs to facilitate peace and prosperity both here and abroad. We need to keep him and the government’s policies moving in our direction. At this very teachable time, we must not let the war (whether we support it or not) become the issue, but focus on the types of initiatives that will make future wars unnecessary.