

ALWAYS WAR – September 2006

— By Richard L. Kiniry

More war — this time between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah. Or is it between Israel and Lebanon, or is it Israel against the entire Muslim world, or is Israel working with the United States in the war on terrorism? By the time you read this it may have cooled down into an unsatisfying cease-fire or it may have gotten much worse. Either way, hundreds, thousands of human beings will be dead and we must ask, why? Is life better off? Always war, war, war. Isn't there a better way?

As we look at the death and destruction of this newest war and to the absence of any positive return on the war, it is easy to just declare yourself a pacifist. No more moral or intellectual hairsplitting, just no war. As a pacifist you make a personal decision against all war and you hope for the best but live with the worst. The more pragmatic of us accept that this is an imperfect world full of people who feel abused and who will attack others. In such situations military response may be necessary.

That said, I repeat, isn't there a better way? Has imagination died completely? It is amazing what governments such as Israel and the United States and semi-governments such as Hamas and Hezbollah feel free to do in the name of the Nation, or the Homeland, or the Fatherland, or the Promised Land. No government such as Israel's should sit back and allow its people to be killed but since governments too often make unjust, self-interested decisions that make enemies of other peoples, how can they, without shame and embarrassment, expect their people to participate in the killing and destruction of another nation?

Well, the people do participate and this new war highlights one of the consistent causes of war — human need for a sense of identity, and our need to protect that identity. Presently we are stuck in the blame game, justifications in the form of history and stories of serial abuse. It is the usual story. The chants are similar worldwide: remember the Maine, Pearl Harbor, September 11th or remember the Holocaust, Moses, the Six Day War, or remember our Homeland, the Caliphate, Sabra and Shatilla. Behind war there is always a fragile sense of identity. You are not just you, you are.....(fill in the blank). Who are you? Are you your gender, your skin color, your sexual orientation? Are you the religion, the ethnicity, the language of your parents or great grandparents? Yes, each one of your identities expects and deserves respect but who are you beyond your identities and when do you become only a fellow human being?

We are never alone. We always have our group, our tribe, our identity wrapped around us. It is a feeling of connection, of membership, of belonging that is deeply part of a person's identity as a self. Problem is, it is also a sense of "us versus them," an emotional lever that governments can pull as they justify and legitimate the killing.

Democracies may encourage the sense of internal equality (I said “may”) but as nations they continue to reinforce “our” story in contrast to “theirs.” How is it that democracies that supposedly respect life can revert so easily to the ultimate tool, war, which kills more civilians than combatants? The answer is sadly simple: governments depend on the people’s attachment to identity. Protecting identity makes us stupid. Our actual self interest and the interest of the group or nation get lost as we defend our myths and excuses. We would rather defend the histories, the stories that legitimate our sense of moral superiority, than accept that life is a dialogue and that the other side also has needs, has grievances, has stories just like ours.

It doesn’t matter who is right. The “right” just becomes another tool in the argument. Presently the “enemy” may use terror as a tool but we always seem able to kill more of them than they of us. They do wrong, they do evil, but we also sometimes do wrong and do evil. They are not evil. Primarily, they are just different, they see the situation differently, and until we accept that their interest is as legitimate as ours, there will be no peace, only war.