

# Peace cannot be bought with a bullet

*Will Osama bin Laden's death bring an end to the cycle of violence? Or is what is needed the realisation that we cannot demonise the other side, without becoming demons ourselves? asks Crispin Hemson*

US PRESIDENT Barack Obama's announcement to the people of the United States of the death of Osama bin Laden was calculated and consummate political theatre.

Standing alone, the commander in chief spoke in terms both sombre and celebratory. He evoked grief at the loss of innocent life in 9/11 and spoke of the military action as bringing some kind of closure.

So is this a breakthrough in ending the cycle of violence, or is it just another turn of the wheel? Public comment on the killing of Bin Laden easily polarises into one or other totalising position.

The one position, celebrated by crowds who burst on to US streets in the middle of the night, represents the event as the grand triumph of good over evil. The other represents it as further proof that the US is inherently violent and anti-democratic, prepared to use violence anywhere against a challenge to its imperial power.

I argue that both positions are flawed, and that the prospects for building a world in which violence is constrained lie elsewhere.

The attacks of 9/11 handed the US a chance to form alliances with those in the Third World who were repulsed by the violence against civilians.

Instead, Bush and other Western leaders moved, as Judith Butler writes, to "make of grief a cry for war", awarding themselves yet again the right to invade other countries.

The War on Terror relied on a bizarre crudeness about Muslim people, whose value was reduced to a simple question of whose "side" they were on, on self-delusion about weapons of mass destruction, and on an inattention to history.

The imagery of democratic victims versus fanatical thugs, encapsulated in the "Axis of Evil", could work only through the erasure of history - such as the West's role in smashing the one brief flowering of Iranian democracy in the 1950s, or of the US's shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, which cost 290 civilian lives.

The imagery also worked through inviting the public to grieve for the lives lost in the US and in Israel in full personal and emotional context, but not for the lives of Iraqis (at least 100 000 as a result of the invasion), Iranians or Palestinians.

The War on Terror also required that there be no critical attention to the collusion with corrupt and violently repressive governments, Egypt, for example, got plentiful



A boy stands in front of the front gates of the compound in Abbottabad where al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed. What does his death hold in store for the world, the writer wonders?

PICTURE: REUTERS

American aid while it routinely tortured dissidents and suppressed legitimate and democratic opposition.

In reality, the fleeting military success cannot conceal the wrong-headedness of the War on Terror, and its incapacity for advancing democracy and peace. Across North Africa and the Middle East, the key issue is now the struggle between democrats and authoritarian rulers: in the latter camp are as many long-standing allies of the US as notional leftists.

That the US now spends \$75bn annually on intelligence, without understanding these dynamics which are obvious to anyone who watches news on television, indi-

cates the intellectual and ethical failure of the war.

The best one can hope for on the side of the West is that the temporary strengthening of Obama's position will enable him to represent it as the key victory that opens the way to dismantling some of the grotesque manifestations of the war, such as the misplaced expenditure, the silencing of dissent and the curtailing of human rights within the US.

At least the latest US incursion, into Libya, was undertaken with manifest lack of enthusiasm, and only because the Arab League was calling for Nato involvement.

However, this history also has problems for those who resort to

simplistic readings of America as the Great Satan.

Various governments in the Middle East and North Africa worked in active and self-serving collusion with the West - indeed, at one point, Bin Laden himself. And those regimes who set themselves most directly against the US - Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, the governments of Libya, Syria and Iran - have been as repressive and corrupt as any other.

This reading also ignores the potential for democratic organisation and resistance within US society.

If we are faced with failure on both sides, what foundations can build a world within which violence is constrained? Mahatma

Gandhi's insight was that we all have the potential for both violence and ethical greatness.

The spark of humanity is universal, and the first step to resolving violence must be to recognise the equivalent humanity of the other. Without such recognition, our actions on violence create more damage. The actions of the West, and those of al-Qaeda, have this limitation in common.

While both have demonstrated their power to destroy, their power to create sustainable and just societies is very limited.

In contrast, one poor Tunisian chose to immolate himself rather than accept the injustice of his treatment. That single act of resist-

ance was the spark that ignited action across a large and still growing area.

The lead in building nonviolent societies now lies with the activists who are emerging across the regions most affected by the war. They span a wide range of political positions from Islamist to leftwing secularists, but share a common commitment to a society that is based on democratic principles.

We do not yet know if they will succeed, both in taking power and in keeping to the democratic vision.

The prospects for peace must thus start not with a distinction between good people and bad people, but through an act of recognition of the fundamental moral equivalence

of people, of Muslim and Christian, of Israeli and Palestinian, of Iraqi and American.

South Africans also can take moral leadership on these issues, but such leadership requires that we rekindle within our political life the sense of moral equivalence of rich and poor, of South African and African foreigner.

As long as our public discourse treats one side as human and the other as lesser, the cycle of violence will continue.

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