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 lives 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 totalitarian positions.

The one position, celebrated by crowds who burn on to US streets in the middle of the night, represents the event as a 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.

Argue 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 stand as a beacon of democracy to 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"; rewarding themselves yet again the right to invade other countries.

The War on Terror relied on a bizarre credence about Muslim people, whose value was reduced to a single question of whose "side" they were on, an unfounded belief in weapons of mass destruction, and on an inarticulate history.

The imagery of democratic victories versus fanatical things, encapsulated in the "Axis of Evil", could work only through the erasure of history - such as the West's role in enabling the rise of Islam in the 1980s, or Iran's role in the invasion of Iraq and civilian lives.

The US also worked through inviting the public to grieve for the lives lost in the US and in Iraq. The emotional and political context, but not for the lives of Iraqis (at least 100,000 as a result of the invasion, according to the rights group Physicians Ending War).

The War on Terror also required understanding of the War on Terror, and its intricacies for advancing democracy and peace. Across North Africa and the Middle East, the key issues are not the struggles between democrats and authoritarian rulers, but are many long-standing allies of the US as potential neocons.

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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 war, such as the misplacement expenditure, the shielding of dissent, and the curtailment of human rights within the US.

At least the latest US incursion into Libya, was undertaken with a principled and careful examination of the situation in the country, and an understanding of the implications for the region.

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

The spirit 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. The prospects for peace most 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 Muslims and Christians, of Israelis and Palestinians, of rich and poor.

South Africans also take moral leadership on these issues, such as our country's commitment to the development of the democratic institutions in the region, and our commitment to the rights of all people, regardless of race, colour or creed.

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

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