

“Bin Laden Killed, Americans Celebrate” *

Are we missing an opportunity here? by Glen Gersmehl

The focus on releasing photos, timelines, retraction of details... of bin Laden's killing makes it likely – and scary – that we'll once again be distracted from our best opportunity in years to re-examine the war on terror, our place in the world, and the many and tragic ways our culture misunderstands conflict and violence.

For me, the issues raised by 9-11 and events since are neither impersonal nor distant. I worked for years in the shadow of the World Trade Center, knew people employed there, and have spent much of my life working on 9-11 kinds of concerns.

For example, most of my work in NY City was with low income elderly, largely in the highest crime areas. 80% of the seniors in a center where I worked had been mugged at least once; we regularly rehearsed safety skills and arranged groups of seniors to walk home or shop together. I faced weapons several dozen times myself (being seriously injured helps clarify how not to handle a mugging in progress). I often thought about violence and worked to learn violence prevention.

I might add, my wife and I have relatives who served in every military branch including an uncle killed overseas. Most of the students in my graduate program in conflict and security were military officers. When speaking about bin Laden's death, however, none of them had a tone of 'Americans celebrate' (the second headline on page one of the *Seattle Times* on the day after...*).

Planes taken over by al-Qaida on 9-11 killed 3000 innocent people, “the largest attack of its kind in U.S. history.” Our response was overwhelmingly military, shockingly costly, and disturbingly counterproductive. As we express our 'citizen' role in a post bin Laden world, we urgently need to ask some new questions:

For example, in Iraq and Afghanistan, the death toll from U.S. actions has often exceeded 3000 innocent deaths in a single week – did we extend to family members and survivors the same concern we expected for those impacted by 9-11? In a world that produces enough food for all, over 3000 innocent people die of starvation *every few hours*, day after day – might such poverty and our wars have contributed as much to terrorism as bin Laden, and thus merit serious attention?

Consider: less than a year's cost of our war in Iraq could have marshaled the efforts of the world's nations to end hunger – which expenditure would have made us safer? We spend 100 times as much on military means as on development aid that addresses key roots of terrorism – when will we challenge that imbalance?

What keeps us from hearing what every major religious tradition, and countless generals and peacemakers have concluded? “Violence begets violence.” “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” “Violent responses play into the hands of terrorists.” “Who takes up the sword will perish by the sword.” Could we try to ask, as objectively as we can, was killing bin Laden 'justice,' or 'vengeance?'

Sadly, even the recent uprisings in the Middle East haven't shifted the stereotype most Americans have of nonviolence: “...nicer, gentler, just not realistic.” But as events in Egypt recently showed, nonviolence is a power capable of forcing out a despot wielding vastly more brute force than the protesters. Moreover, nonviolence emphasizes empowering people and addressing the sources of conflict. Indeed, as Desmond Tutu expressed it, nonviolence is “a force more powerful than violence.”

We face our best opportunity in years to recast the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and our military dominated path for addressing terrorism. The constructive program and community-building emphases alone make nonviolence worth reconsidering. Moreover, for conflict at any level, nonviolence offers many more options and tactics, and has a far greater chance of bringing justice. On an individual level I've seen nonviolence succeed against knives and prejudice, poverty and blind anger; in several cases it led to reconciliation with a former assailant.

On a larger level, early in the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s house was bombed. He rushed home, and after seeing to his wife and 10-week old baby, he went outside and implored the angry, armed crowd, "Don't get panicky. If you have weapons, take them home." A model of nonviolent creativity and discipline, the boycott succeeded within the year and was a civil rights turning-point.

At the global end of the spectrum, nonviolence has prevailed against many of the most ruthless dictators of our time: Marcos in the Philippines, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, Pinochet in Chile, the Nazis in Denmark and Norway, Ceausescu in Romania – all overcome by nonviolence, not military power.

What next? A half dozen ideas: Suggest that your library, church, synagogue, or 'Y' host a discussion series using the superb six-part documentary, "A Force More Powerful," and offer a workshop on nonviolence. Find out why restorative justice programs have won wide support from judges and police. Watch a demonstration of self defense using Aikido, the non-violent martial art. Explore the theory and application of nonviolence to virtually any type of conflict or violence. [see notes below]

As citizens, the real lesson of "Bin Laden Killed" and 9-11 should be to push us to advocate for law enforcement and security policies at every level that emphasize addressing the causes of violence, and bringing us up to speed on the insights, tools, and creativity of nonviolence, the sadly overlooked 'force more powerful.'

Glen Gersmehl directs a project that trains and mentors volunteers at food programs serving the homeless. He represented the U.S. at meetings in India to plan the major UN initiative of the past decade on nonviolence. He coordinates Lutheran Peace Fellowship and the Peace & Justice Resource Center. His graduate degree in public policy is from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

notes

a few references, by paragraph:

6. 'justice' or 'vengeance,' see Randy Schutt article ("d." on right)
7. aid vs military: Budget Priorities Activ, www.lutheranpeace.org
8. Walter Wink offers remarkable insights on this in his discussion of the 'Myth of Redemptive Violence,' in *The Powers That Be*.
9. on the popular uprisings in Egypt & elsewhere, Stephen Zunes offers expertise and perspective: www.stephenzunes.org
10. advocacy: www.lutheranpeace.org sojo.net elca.org/advocacy www.elca.org/peacenotwalls forusa.org rethinkafghanistan.com
11. MLK story from Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*; for a superb brief biography of King: Richard Deats, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*
12. Richard Deats, "Global Spread of Nonviolence," www.forusa.org 'Wall of Hope,' pjrcbooks.org Ackerman & DuVall, *A Force More Powerful*; Cooney & Michalowski, *Power of the People*; J.Schell, *Unconquerable World*; Michael Nagler, *Is There No Other Way...*
13. "A Force More Powerful" film: www.aforcemorepowerful.org Sources of nonviolence workshops: www.lutheranpeace.org www.kirkridge.org paceebene.org afsc.org cnvc.org Aikido demo, e.g.: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsLHO8gneKo "Shalom!" overview with bibliography: www.lutheranpeace.org

a few especially useful articles with links:

- a. Chris Hedges Speaks on Osama bin Laden's Death (Hedges was the *NY Times*' Middle East bureau chief for 7 years, speaks Arabic, received a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on al Qaida...): www.truth-out.org/chris-hedges-speaks-osama-bin-laden's-death/1304343151
- b. Kathy Kelly, "Beyond Retaliation," moving stories of young women engaged with the issues: www.commondreams/view/2011/05/03-6
- c. Arthur Waskow, "Bin Laden and Beyond," www.shalomcenter.org
- d. Randy Schutt, "Relief, Not Justice," Pres. Obama called killing bin Laden "justice," but might "vengeance" be closer to the truth? www.dailykos.com/story/2011/05/02/972393/-Relief,-But-Not-Justice
- e. Rebecca Gordon, "Bin Laden Is Dead. Can We Go Home Now?" on the many costs of pursuing bin Laden: www.mailermailer.com/x?function=view&c=6322807z-28cc29b1%2a819606m-f73ad6d7
- f. John Feffer, "Jihadi Butch Cassidy" – strange as it may seem, "We have, once again, played right into bin Laden's hands..." <http://bl115w.blu115.mail.live.com/default.aspx?wa=wsignin1.0>

We'd love to hear your comments, ideas, articles you've found to be insightful or useful... ggersmehl@hotmail.com or 206.349.2501