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AFSC And The Terrorist War

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FRIENDS JOURNAL

Quaker Thought and Life Today

January 1, 2002

By J. William Frost

American Friends Service Committee was created in war, and it has nearly as much experience and—I would say—more wisdom in dealing with the side effects of armed conflict than the Pentagon. As we now confront a new kind of war, let us remember that the nature of war has been constantly changing in the 20th century, and AFSC has evolved accordingly as Friends have struggled to understand the Gospel requirements to be peacemakers.

The Context of September 11

My initial reaction to the events of September 11 was that this was not a war but a classic terrorist action, unpredictable only in choice of weapon, target, success, and impact. It was classic terrorism in that no group took responsibility and there was no enunciated political objective, no relationship between the actions and the grievance, no distinction between civilians and military, and not only no concern about human life—there seemed to be a desire to kill as many people as possible. It was a graphic example, like the Oklahoma bombing and other terrorist acts, of a kind of perverted political theater. As a criminal act it needed to be handled as a police matter and adjudicated by either the U.S. courts or an ad hoc court created by the UN that could use the precedents of Nuremberg and more recent

war crimes tribunals. Targeting civilians is a war crime. I agreed with the policy statement issued by AFSC and other Quaker organizations calling for a measured response and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

I was not prepared for the rhetoric of war mouthed by President Bush and Congress and reiterated ad nauseam in the mass media and by the general populace. The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and the "Star Spangled Banner" again showed their origins as war songs; even "God Bless America"—made popular by Kate Smith in 1939 as Europe went to war and America rearmed—has acquired overtones of spread-eagle imperialism. While willing to see God as the author of the beauty and bounty of nature on this continent, I am skeptical that America's economic system, foreign policy, and military posture are equally blessed. I can appreciate the songwriter so irritated by constant hearing of Irving Berlin's words that he wrote a song titled "God Blessed America," into which he, Woody Guthrie, put unemployment lines and prisons, and which we know by the title, "This Land Is Your Land." Rather than affirming again and again that God blessed America, we should be asking whether we have been extending brotherhood beyond our national boundaries. Let God inspire our actions instead of us boasting about our past blessings.

As we seek perspective on the tragedy of September 11, we see that whatever our hopes, the U.S. apparently is making war not just in Afghanistan but in many areas of the world; and the public will know almost nothing about the basis, the actions, or even the results until long after the events. John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite and scholar of the history of pacifism, in a debate conducted during the Persian Gulf War, argued that justified war theories assume that governments are honest. If they are not, pacifism is the only viable option for Christians. So if we were skeptical about the policy statements of the president and Pentagon before September 11, we should not drop our guard during wartime. Truth-telling is an early casualty when governments mobilize a people for war. The people crave knowledge but get slogans.

We are now bombing Afghanistan and are told that Special Forces are conducting raids in that country. We are out to destroy the Taliban and replace its government with one that will surrender al-Qaida members and Osama bin Laden. I cannot evaluate the evidence linking bin Laden with the bombing because it has not been made public; we are told that it is circumstantial but compelling. Since we have here another presidential authorization of assassination (actually, Clinton had essentially already done this), it is unlikely there will be a trial even if bin Laden is located. There is as yet no link established between the Trade Center attack and the anthrax cases. The tell-tale signatures of other alleged al-Qaida actions are not visible in the tactics used in the anthrax letters—there may be multiple perpetrators—and it is possible that the media hype of potential risk inspired someone.

The real issue is our tactics in Afghanistan. No commentary that I have seen has asserted that the Taliban leaders knew beforehand that the Trade Center would be attacked. Granting the poverty of Afghanistan, I find it unlikely that the Taliban financed the operations of al-Qaida. If bin Laden followed the strategy he used in the Sudan—where he built a highway—it

is likely that he contributed money to the Taliban rather than vice versa. I have read no columnist who has dealt in a substantive fashion (probably because few know much about Afghanistan) with whether the Taliban government, still fighting a war with the Northern Alliance and whose control of the difficult terrain is problematic, had the capacity to find, capture, and turn over bin Laden and his network that may include many hundreds of soldiers and supporters. The warlords and mujahideen armies seem to be largely self-motivated, not necessarily controllable by their governments. Afghanistan has never been a country with a strong central government and has resembled what is now called a "failed state" rather than a nation. The Taliban took power largely because the alternative was anarchy. The Taliban government may not even know for sure where bin Laden is; remember how difficult it was for the U.S. to find Noriega when the only place it was looking was Panama City? Our TV commentators tell us that we may not find bin Laden for years and the most likely method to success will be information from an insider—perhaps seeking the \$5 million reward. If this is so, why are we bombing?

The official view of the U.S. government is that international law, the support of many governments against terrorism, and a UN Security Council resolution authorize us to hold the Taliban government of Afghanistan responsible and give us the right to bomb, invade, and overthrow it. This seems novel and dubious. After all, the British never bombed the Republic of Ireland even though many IRA sympathizers and their stored weapons were located there. As enunciated, the new Bush doctrine might allow invasion of Sudan, Syria, Indonesia, Iraq, and even Saudi Arabia, which was a primary funder of the Taliban and the country of origin of 15 of the bombers.

The position of the United States is based upon the concept that a sovereign nation is able to control all actions by people within its borders. As a matter of history, this is nonsense. We are supposedly going to root out terrorists from an enormous, remote territory of central Asia by bombing Afghanistan. To apply the Bush doctrine to the rest of the world—which we claim to be doing—gives the U.S. a blank check to intervene at will in pursuit of terrorists on the basis of secret information with or without the consent of the different governments. This is a dangerous doctrine.

At the same time, because of secrecy we are not now and perhaps never will be able to assess whether the U.S. is observing either the laws of war or the moral requirements of justice in the conduct of war (both vague standards in any case). We learned once again after the Gulf War and in Kosovo that the official information about the results of bombing and missile attacks is often what governments want us to believe. Historians of World War I cannot even use the letters from AFSC workers in France to learn what the war was like because censorship was so intense. After September 11, we were first told we would strike soon, then informed that there were few important targets in Afghanistan, and now we are bombing *something*—airports, power plants, and who knows what else the Pentagon is defining as a war target.

Photos of civilian casualties reveal the imprecision of so-called precision bombing. Not even the administration asserts that it knows where bin Laden and his associates are. Previous experience shows that bombing hardens a people's resolve—think of the effect of the Trade Center attack on us. Our bombing campaign seems more likely to generate more terrorism than to suppress it.

The unintended but inevitable by-product of terrorist acts is that the public focuses on the horror of them. We all share the deep moral outrage over innocent deaths. Unfortunately, this outrage has not been accompanied by a searching analysis of why—as one of my colleagues phrased it—of the six billion people in the world, one billion hate us or at least sympathize with the objectives (if not the tactics) of the terrorists. Unlike the perpetrators, whose psychology I do not comprehend, the millions who dislike, distrust, and fear us are neither irrational, nor psychologically disturbed, nor religious extremists.

And while all religions praise martyrdom and have a miniscule minority ready to give their lives (even we Quakers have our statue of Mary Dyer on the Boston Common), most of those whom the media simplistically calls "Muslim fundamentalists" are more likely to be praying, studying, or doing good works than building bombs.

I see the September 11 bombing as a cry of rage and despair by a few at the way the industrialized West and particularly the U.S. are impacting the entire world. I see it as a defensive reaction to modern secularism (fast-food chains, Hollywood, and globalization), not an attack upon all freedom or civilization or science.

The Persian Gulf War showed Muslims everywhere that a battle-hardened, well-equipped army—the fourth largest in the world, we were told—was no match for U.S. technology. The discrepancy in casualties between the Allies and Iraq resembled 19th-century European colonial wars, as when the French in the 1890s used machine guns on the inhabitants of West Africa who were rallying under the banner of Islam to resist imperialism. Our NATO allies learned how far behind they were during the bombing of Kosovo, where the U.S. was able to bomb at will and inflict suffering while experiencing no casualties. Terrorism is a desperate response of the powerless who realize that traditional military tactics (what the U.S. considers fair war) offer them no match against a nation that spends more on its military than all its potential enemies combined. It may have seemed the only way to get the attention of a self-righteous, myopic U.S. Congress and administration for those outraged over U.S. policies that the AFSC has long condemned, like the U.S. soldiers stationed for over ten years in Saudi Arabia, the thousands of malnourished children in Iraq, or the festering conflict in Israel and the West Bank. The U.S. government is widely and correctly seen as previously having been interested in Afghanistan only as a Cold War pawn and Arab states for a guarantee of cheap oil.

The 2000 presidential election did not focus on foreign policy; the worries of France, Germany, Japan, China, Russia, and the UK about our proposed missile shield or global environmental issues have not deterred us. If the AFSC has trouble getting Americans to pay

attention because sound bites drown out analysis, how does an enraged Muslim reach an American audience? The events of September 11 achieved that and riveted our attention, but the focus switched quickly from our victims to a military response. Even discussing grievances seems like a betrayal of those who died, a giving-in to terrorists. We see our response as seeking justice, but it seems more like blind fury.

Quaker Tactics in Time of War

Friends now know the kind of isolation and lack of control that Quakers like Rufus Jones and Henry Cadbury felt at the entry of the U.S. into World Wars I and II, and why they both fell into a deep depression before engaging in constructive activity. Our gloom at events beyond our control should also give way now to Quaker action, questioning images, and supporting dissenters. Isolation enables prophets because it can help them to see clearly.

AFSC was born as a response to war, and many of its most creative actions, those that we remember with pride, came during wartime. History points us to what AFSC and Friends in general should be doing now. We are told today that this is a different kind of war. Let us remember that the 20th century is full of new kinds of war: total war as in World Wars I and II and in deterrence theory; guerrilla wars as in Vietnam and Central America; failed states as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia; genocidal war as in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. And the last century was filled with old-fashioned wars of dictators in Central America; revolutions as in Iran; wars of imperial conquest as in the Iraqi attacks upon Iran and Kuwait; and wars between imperial powers, sometimes using proxies, over spheres of influence: Korea, Kuwait, Vietnam, Central America. Because AFSC has been involved in trying to prevent, understand, and ameliorate suffering in all these and many other wars, it is logical to look at past wars to attempt to devise a strategy for the immediate future.

What follows is a list of the perspectives Friends have gained in previous wars. (I have seen several other lists, in particular a good one by the group Pacem in Terris.) These recommendations are by no means exhaustive, and I hope AFSC's actions during the present crisis will add to it and deepen our peace witness.

1. We should recognize that many peacetime fellow travelers will be far less committed to Quaker peace activities in wartime. There was a vigorous peace movement before World Wars I and II, which was reflected in Congress. Yet when the decision to fight was recommended by presidents, Congresswoman Jeannette Rankin alone voted against U.S. entry in both World Wars I and II; only two Senators voted against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; and just one person, U.S. Representative Barbara Lee, voted against the recent resolution authorizing force, even though many pointed out the blank-check language. A large minority, perhaps even a majority, of U.S. Friends in both world wars decided that supporting their homeland and its definition of freedom compelled them to join the military or support the war efforts. This was also true in the American Revolution and the Civil War. The Peace Testimony has been maintained as the official perspective of Friends because the power of tradition and weighty Quakers have prevailed, and dissenters have acquiesced.

Unanimity against war comes easier in minor struggles when the country's basic values do not seem threatened, as in the wars against Mexico, Spain, and Vietnam. When a country is attacked in a way that seems illegitimate, as with Pearl Harbor, people who love their country may conclude, with Cicero, that defense of the nation is necessary. Unlike an individual, nations do not willingly sacrifice themselves. So, do not be surprised if many traditional allies that have been with us since Vietnam do not now stand with us.

2. The second lesson is that since Vietnam the peace movement has matured and is found in surprising places. If old allies now appear lukewarm, expect warm support elsewhere. Before the 1960s the dominant Christian doctrine was justified war and pacifism was considered a heresy. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have endorsed a pacifism that is motivated by love of neighbor as a legitimate Christian response to war, side by side with justified war as recently reaffirmed by Cardinal Bevilacqua. Pope John Paul II has been a consistent voice for peace in the Middle East and elsewhere. His sentiments are echoed in European Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed, and Church of England statements. One could argue that as established churches have lost their power in the political establishment, they have recovered a prophetic voice. The same is true of the mainline churches in the U.S., though the divisions of perspective between clergy and laity may mute their voices.

My hope is also that our peace witness will find support among conservative evangelical and fundamentalist churches. Evangelicals were at the forefront of 19th-century peace movements and deeply involved in the Social Gospel movement. The most consistent pacifist witness in Nazi Germany came from Jehovah's Witnesses, but their apolitical stance will make building a coalition with them unlikely. However, we have two possible entries into a now politicized conservative movement. One is from pastoral and evangelical Quakers. The other is from our fellow peace churches: the Mennonites and Brethren. Our goal should be to re-create something like NISBCO (National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Ob-jectors, now renamed the Center for Conscience and War)—the coalition of religious peace groups that worked to defend conscientious objectors in World War II.

In Vietnam, AFSC could serve as a bridge between religious and secular peace groups. Its guiding principle, then and now, is that public demonstrations must remain nonviolent. The Seattle economic summit showed that there are numerous groups of moderates and radicals ready to make visible their protest against the environmental and social costs of globalization. AFSC programs organizing women on the Mexican-U.S. border and publications about poverty and globalization show that we share many values with the demonstrators of Seattle and Italy. AFSC should risk some of its political capital in establishing contact with these groups. They may use rhetoric that we dislike and clearly a peace witness cannot support violent actions, but AFSC (and Friends Committee on National Legislation) ought to be able to build a kind of "popular front" of opposition to bombing similar to what emerged over Vietnam. The longer the war, the more civilian casualties, the easier to build a coalition and the greater likelihood of grassroots support for it, but since we don't know either the duration or the shape of our ongoing war, we need to be flexible.

3. We should provide aid to the victims of war. British Friends in World War I began their peace work by helping Germans and German immigrants living in England. In World War II, AFSC and the Federal Council of Churches denounced the internment of Japanese Americans, or Nisei, and sought to ease their plight. In this war we will insist upon full civil rights for Arab Americans. We endorse the statements of Mayor Giuliani and President Bush insisting that Muslims in our midst be treated justly. In any case, the best guardians of American freedom in the Muslim community will be peace-loving Muslims, not the FBI or vigilantes. Just as we had Quaker meetings and sister communities in El Salvador, we could do the same with mosques here and abroad. And I hope that we would not use a strategy resembling that employed by AFSC in South Africa during apartheid (noncooperation and support for sanctions), but the one used with the Soviet Union, where AFSC did not loudly criticize the Soviet government—there were plenty of other people to do this. Rather, we sought to work even with government representatives, at the risk of being seen as misguided fellow travelers of the communists. Let others criticize Muslim rulers or so-called extremists; we will work with all Muslims.

The service committees of British and American Friends made their reputations providing aid to refugees and victims of war—in France after 1914, in Loyalist and Nationalist Spain during that Civil War, in China before and after World War II, and in Vietnam with a prosthetics clinic that continued to operate long after U.S. withdrawal. We should do no less today. There are already 3.5 million refugees in Pakistan and Iran. The U.S. is using food as a weapon to wean the people of Afghanistan from the Taliban, but dropping food and bombs at the same time sends a very confusing message.

AFSC must demonstrate that it gives food and medical supplies as a service to humanity with no strings attached. We did this with medical supplies to North Vietnam; we must do the same for the people of Afghanistan, including the Taliban. AFSC already has many friends in the Middle East who can serve as conduits or intermediaries. We should be prepared for the screams of vilification when we take these actions.

4. We should provide aid to dissenters in wartime. AFSC was originally a place to provide young men (and a few women) the opportunity to provide a "service in love in wartime," to use Rufus Jones's phrase. Young men and women worked in France during the war, and they did so well in building houses etc. that the French government gave them the responsibility for postwar relief in Verdun. In World War II, AFSC and NISBCO managed the Civilian Public Service Camps, a project that resulted in some major improvements, but which neither AFSC nor the government repeated in Vietnam. In all these wars AFSC provided draft counseling for young men, visited those who went to prison, and defended the rights of COs. Whether such projects will need to be repeated in this war seems at present doubtful, but we need to be prepared just in case.

5. We should plan for peace. British and American Friends began planning for peace long before the end of World War I, sent observers to the Versailles treaty negotiations in Paris, and devoted substantial attention in the first All Friends Conference to discussing the causes

and prevention of war. We have done similar things in World War II, the Cold War, and Vietnam. AFSC has a long tradition of producing think-tank books making policy recommendations—*Speak Truth to Power* and *Search for Peace in the Middle East* are examples.

I recommend three new think-tank books: first, one that is already in process on the Middle East. I would hope that for the first time AFSC would look at all the negotiations and literature and end with an outline of a peace settlement encompassing the issues of Jerusalem, the West Bank settlements, refugees, water, and economic development. Our previous pamphlets now appear prophetic; we should exercise the same creativity again. A second pamphlet would focus on U.S. relations with the Muslim world. It would address the reasons why many in the Arab world distrust and fear us, making policy recommendations. A third pamphlet would assess the enormous literature and practical experience of nonviolent conflict resolution across cultures. It would clarify for Friends and outsiders the relationship between nonviolence as a technique and nonviolence as a principled religious response, and lay out the successes and failures of those attempting to utilize it.

6. Finally, we should begin planning how AFSC could assist victims of war, after the bombing is over, in a different way from other aid groups and the U.S. government. The major precedent here is AFSC work with German children and groups in Russia, Poland, Austria, and Serbia after World War I. Our aim should be helping those who are suffering, not empowerment, not community-building, not changing the Taliban or Afghan ways of life, not promoting democracy—just seeing the need and responding to it.

This is an ambitious program that will require the support of all Quaker peace committees, yearly meetings, and Quaker service organizations. It should be funded in addition to, not instead of, AFSC good works and programs that over the years have been carefully planned and committed to and are now being implemented.

I close with an illustration, in the box below, of Quaker responsibility by paraphrasing the poem by Emilie M. Townes, Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, titled *Growing Up Topsy*. I would substitute "peace" for her term "solidarity":

solidarity is something that is nurtured and grown

in the yearning for and living out of justice

solidarity comes from hard work

listening

hearing

analyzing

questioning

rethinking

accepting

rejecting . . .

so as we seek to work together, we must always be working on ourselves

and perhaps this is where the comforting begins

as each of us has that dawning and then awakening in us

that the point is not some religious version of perfection

but that we live our humanity with passion and vigor—regardless

that we live our lives in justice and hope and even love—relentlessly

that we recognize that none of us has the corner on righteousness

that we are the ones we have been waiting for

and ultimately, there is no one to do this work for us

J. William Frost

J. William Frost is director of Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College and a member of Swarthmore (Pa.) Meeting. He approaches this topic as a Quaker, as an historian of Friends and of the relationship between religion and war, and as a teacher of peace and conflict studies. This article is based on an address to the annual public gathering of American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia, Pa., on November 3, 2001. Poem at the end of this article © 2000 Emilie M. Townes, reprinted with permission.