

Who Wants Peace anyway?

By Mari Fitzduff

To believe that peace suits all of us better than war on this, the designated international day of peace, is a misguided truism that we ignore at our peril.

When the war ended in Northern Ireland, the British squaddies were unhappy. They complained of boredom and wanted to be moved to Kosovo, where an active war was still in progress and they would get a decent chance of using their fighting skills. The paramilitaries, too, were bored – some entered politics, some set up businesses, some entered, or continued, in crime. As the bombs faded, many police, reporters, builders and glaziers lost their jobs. Quietly, and often in their cups, you would hear them nostalgically talking about the good old adrenaline-filled days. Some even moved elsewhere in search of the highs they had found in war.

There is little to match the life-and-death adrenalin and the bonding of war. Legal and illegal soldiers alike will confess that they rarely felt more alive than when on a night of 'action,' be it hand-to-hand combat, the thrill of the bomb button, or the power of the AK47 in their arms. This seduction applies to spectators, too. Which of us was not gripped by the theater of the Gulf War, or the 'shock and awe' of Iraq?

The dirty secret many of us share but rarely talk about is that war often brings us alive, and binds us to our neighbors and our nation like no other force. Depression figures often go down at the beginning of wars. It gives many of us – young men most of all - a chance to be heroes, to lose our sense of insignificance, to feel the greatness of a noble cause.

Yes, war eventually palls. The cost in blood begins to seem too high, the budgets strain, and we are not quite so sure we will win. The long, slow compromises begin as we try to make our way out of the mire with as much dignity as possible. Until the next time, when the bruises have healed enough for us to feel the seductive adrenaline arise again...and again.

It's important to remember this seduction of war on this, the international day of peace, which is set aside to think of ways of making and maintaining peace other than our usual military ways. I know too much about our world not to know that there are indeed times when our need to protect our own, or those who are helpless elsewhere, may mean that we have little choice but to use our military power to defend, or to protect. But I also know that many of the best of our military are increasingly frustrated by our limited repertoire of responses to our fears, and that they are often the best supporters for other ways of making peace. They know too often and too well what a high price we all pay for wars that are ill conceived, ill thought out, and often counterproductive for the very ends for which they are fought.

Let's be honest and judge ourselves by what we do, and not by what we say. We say that we want peace but we spend almost all of our time designing war strategies – and not strategies to help us coexist more peacefully. Or on training to win the war – but not on how to manage our increasingly diverse world. We have no peace academies to match our war academies. And we spend, spend, spend on war. World military expenditure was over a trillion dollars in 2004, which is ten times more than what we spend on development, and 250 more times what we spend on peace operations.

Those cynics among us who say we don't know enough to stop wars, or end them constructively, are wrong. Those of us working in the field of coexistence and conflict management know that there are often hundreds of possible interventions to forestall wars. But, alas, we usually don't do them. Suggesting conflict prevention to politicians is like suggesting a pension to a teenager. Their time lines don't allow for such – the time line for many politicians, as we know, is far too often their own survival or victory at the next election.

All over the world, from Amsterdam to Iraq, every country in the world is having problems with coexistence, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Assuming we now know that the Iraqi model may not be the best way to proceed, we should be paying a lot more attention to designing more creative ways to deal with North Korea and Iran, with Kosovo (no - the war is not yet over), or Darfur (the genocide continues), Haiti (getting even worse), Israel/Palestine (a lot, lot more work needed) the Congo (still mired in crisis), Colombia (whose war is now kept going mainly by US drug consumers), Chechnya (remember Beslan?) and so many more – all of which have a capacity to affect us in these globalizing times. If we actually take the business of peaceful coexistence as seriously as we take the waging of our wars, we can make our future world a lot safer for all of us...and a world in which the terrible tragedies of more such wars are much less likely.

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