

“Bin Laden Killed, Americans Celebrate”*...beyond the disputes

Issues, Implications, Options...by Glen Gersmehl

The retraction of many key details of bin Laden's killing makes it even more likely – and scary – that we'll once again be distracted from what we most need to face about 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 most 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 at which 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 often thought about violence and worked to learn violence prevention. I faced weapons several dozen times (being seriously injured helped clarify how not to handle a mugging in progress).

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 of the page one story in Monday's *Seattle Times* *).

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 engage our post bin Laden tasks, we desperately need to ask some new questions:

For example, could we try to ask, objectively as we can, was killing bin Laden 'justice,' or 'vengeance?' In Iraq and Afghanistan, the death toll from U.S. actions has regularly exceeded 3000 innocent deaths in a single week – do 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, deserving serious attention?

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? When will we notice and challenge the fact that we spend 100 times as much on military means as on development aid that addresses such key roots of terrorism?

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.”

Moreover, 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 military force than the protesters. 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 explore the real lessons of 9-11 and 'Bin Laden Killed.' The community building and constructive program emphases of nonviolence alone make it a far more fruitful alternative than military power. For conflict at every level, nonviolence offers many more options and tactics than violence, and has a far greater chance of bringing justice. I've seen nonviolence succeed against knives, prejudice, and blind anger, in several cases leading to reconciliation with a former assailant, and cooperation in peacemaking.

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 Nazis in Denmark and Norway, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, Ceausescu in Romania, Pinochet in Chile – all ousted by nonviolence, not military power.

In January 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. rushed to his home on hearing it had been bombed. After seeing to his wife and 10-week old baby, he implored the armed and angry crowd gathered outside, "Don't get your weapons. If you have weapons, take them home."

What next? Six suggestions: Suggest that your library, church, synagogue, or 'Y' host a discussion series using the superb six-part documentary, "A Force More Powerful," and plan a workshop on nonviolence. Check out why restorative justice programs have won the support of 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.

The real lesson of "Bin Laden Killed" and 9-11 for us, as citizens, should be to insist that police and security policy at every level of society emphasize addressing the causes of violence, and come up to speed on the insights, tools, creativity, and skills of nonviolence – truly 'a force more powerful.'

Glen Gersmehl directs a project assisting volunteers at food programs serving the homeless. He represented the U.S. and Canada at meetings in India to plan the major UN initiative on nonviolence of the past decade. 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.

a few references, by paragraph

6. 'justice' or 'vengeance,' see Randy Schutt article ("c." on right)
7. figures on cost of ending hunger, and on levels of development 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
11. "Global Spread of Nonviolence" Richard Deats: 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*;
12. MLK story, from Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*. A superb, brief MLK biography: Richard Deats, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*
13. "A Force More Powerful" film: www.aforcemorepowerful.org Sources of nonviolence workshops: www.paceebene.org [kirkridge.org](http://www.kirkridge.org) [afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org) [lutheranpeace.org](http://www.lutheranpeace.org) [cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org) Aikido demo, e.g.: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsLHO8gneKo "Shalom!" A general article from a Christian viewpoint with an extensive annotated bibliography, www.lutheranpeace.org

a few especially useful articles with links...

- a. Chris Hedges Speaks on Osama bin Laden's Death (Hedges was Middle East bureau chief, the NY Times for 7 years, speaks Arabic, received a Pulitzer Prize for 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 But Not Justice," Pres. Obama called the killing of bin Laden "justice," but isn't "vengeance" more accurate? www.dailykos.com/story/2011/05/02/972393/-Relief,-But-Not-Justice
- e. "Bin Laden Is Dead. Can We Go Home Now?" by Rebecca Gordon: how damaging pursuing bin Laden has been: www.mailermailer.com/x?function=view&c=6322807z-28cc29b1%2a819606m-f73ad6d7
- f. "Jihadi Butch Cassidy" by John Feffer: "We have, once again, played right into bin Laden's hands," strange as it may seem.... <http://bl115w.bl115.mail.live.com/default.aspx?wa=wsignin1.0>

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