

WAR

NPR, National Public Radio, does not have advertisers, but “supporters/” My guess is that a supporter has a contract, so that what the supporter supports is read every day, probably several times a day, for half a year, or a year. One of these supporters is a husband and wife foundation that is promoting a More Just, Verdant and Peaceful World. Every time I hear that, I cannot help but think, Don't we all want that? But even a minute's thought makes clear, No, we don't. I'm not even sure a majority of us do. According to the latest polls half of all Americans do not want a greener (verdant) world, and obviously a majority of us don't want a peaceful world. Last year's endless 'debates' showed how far some people are willing to go to destroy discussions that should be the very ground of a democracy. These “some people” may be a minority but in a country where what we know comes from the Media mayhem has a louder voice than we the people.

I had an experience with one person about words — not even concepts. I thought myself a mild person, not interested in politics, but the person's vitriolic and, to me, utterly nonsensical screaming got me to the point where I had to shout back. Obviously, after half a century in this country I still have not understood this deep gut conviction that “socialism” is another word for bad, bad, bad. Out of the blue, this person yelled at me that his government was being stolen by “that man” (in the White House), I must have looked surprised. He mumbled something about health insurance. I said something like all countries have health care for everyone. The immediate response was “That is the very reason I don't want our country to have that, I hate socialism!” I couldn't help saying (in a soft voice, actually) Do you know what socialism is? And, again, that immediate response, “No, and I don't want to know.”

To me, that kind of response speaks of an incomprehensible ignorance. I cannot imagine even a faith so disconnected from reason, or from plain information.

Am reading — one page at a time — *The Forever War*, by Dexter Filkins, 2008. A journalist writing about the wars we are fighting in the Middle East, either embedded with Marine units, or on his own.

Our Media have never given us more than statistics, never what it feels like to kill. In this book everybody has a name, they are real people. Volunteer soldiers, men and women, seeking adventure, a change from growing up in a small town. Men and women who perhaps had a high school diploma, but no further educational ambitions. Lots of male bonding. In the interviews with soldiers and officers it seems that soldiers must be brave and not show any emotion, and officers pretend to see only the bigger picture, war as it is fought in war rooms, sticking colored pins on paper maps.

Reading it brings back some personal memories of my own war —to me is still “the” War— now two and more generations back in history. A very different terrain, different cultures, but the same killing and torture (not as refined probably). In my war I was a civilian in a country occupied by a foreign army and two or three different kinds of “secret police.” I was young and

innocent. I “resisted” long before there was an organized Resistance; in the Netherlands never called that. Who would *not* rebel against a rude and ruthless occupation. Resisting started from the bottom of society. In fact it was the underworld who provided the first resisters: they had experience resisting. An organized Resistance came several years later. Even without weapons there are endless ways to resist authority as all children learn early. In a city like Amsterdam it took very little effort to push a heavily armed German soldier in a canal. On roads paved with bricks it is amazingly easy to dig up a section of the road and arrange loose bricks to make the road impassable (for a while at least) for heavy troop carriers and other vehicles. Most of us listened to the BBC although all English books, movies, news, the English language itself, were “forbidden” from the first day. The Germans were strangers, we knew our land, our house, our neighborhood. They knew nothing about us.

But, of course, they learned. Very soon the Germans were ordered to walk in pairs, Brick roads were asphalted. Searching houses became common, at first random. What we now would call “check points” emerged everywhere. Then sections of a town were surrounded and house by house searched to find illegal radios, illegal hiding places for Jews, weapons, illegal pamphlets. The Germans were very careful about first making things legal, then they could do anything. Sounds familiar?

The occupation became a war. An asymmetrical war we would say now, but nevertheless a war between the occupiers and the occupied. Halfway through the war all universities were closed, as “hotbeds” for resistance. All men between 18 and 35 were told to volunteer -- which meant register -- to be sent to Germany to help the war effort. I was 20, suddenly had to be 36. We became expert at falsifying IDs and I grew a moustache. True artists learned to slice a thin layer off the picture on the stolen ID of a 36 year old and paste over it the top thin layer of a picture of me that was darkened, then the issuing half of the stamp was drawn by hand. Great artists! I had three such IDs, each a different name, different persons, so I had to learn some facts about each of these strangers, job, name of wife, children, the village, neighbors...

Today we call resisters insurgents, which gives them a semi-official enemy status. Armies fight nations; armies are not good fighting guerilla wars, as we should have learned by now. As the book I am reading now says, “Today a farmer, tomorrow an insurgent, an hour later a farmer again.” In my war I was never a farmer, but a teacher, a banker, a baker... an enemy without uniform and in the beginning without weapons.

Early in the war I was in a coffee house on one of the canals with two friends. We were sitting way in the back, a dark corner. A young woman stumbled in, disheveled hair, torn blouse, deathly pale; obviously in shock. She knew one of the boys, sat down on the edge of the fourth chair. After a few moments she told us, in a totally flat whisper that two German officers (from her description perhaps SS, Hitler's private army) had asked her questions, Where was her husband. She did not know. It was about 10 in the morning, he had gone to work. She had been nursing, then holding her 3 months old baby. One of the officers kept walking around her, so that she had to continually turn around, this way, that way. Suddenly he snatched the baby out of her arms,

turned, the baby flung through what happened to be an open third floor window. The officer looked surprised holding the severed arm of the baby in his hand.

We were speechless. For minutes nobody moved. Then she walked out, crossed the street, we heard the splash from the canal. As one, we stood up. And slowly sat back down, hunched over.

I never thought I could ever write that story. Today this story is so common that nobody takes notice. I was innocent; I learned. War is an excuse for unbridled violence, for unthinking acts of madness, for doing things all humans know are evil but “I was obeying an officer.” And when the highest authority in the land says it is legal and necessary to hold people in cages for years on end without being given a reason, or a trial, we the people accept that. Why the next president continues the practice I cannot understand.

There are many questions I have about the concept of war. How did it begin; what has it become Who invented the idea of war? But mostly, Why?

I do not believe that Man was a warrior at first. The caveman dragging his woman by the hair while brandishing a club is pure Hollywood. Being violent and ruthless is not in our DNA. We have to learn to kill. From my study what some anthropologists tell about a few “primitive” tribes, their “wars” are mostly a manly sport, a ritual. What they describe as war was not to steal women or to conquer the next valley. As I read it there was no enmity between neighboring tribes. I’ve known very ancient people who made it a point to avoid any confrontation with others. And it seems obvious to me that we, homo sapiens, would never have survived the first one or more hundred thousand years of our existence as a species if we had made war on neighboring groups.

I am certain that killing my fellow man has to be taught; it is not something that comes natural. Modern soldiers get training not only in shooting a variety of lethal weapons or operating even more lethal machines. Soldiers also get taught shooting at a face, imagining an enemy. It is an important part of government propaganda to create, in some detail, an enemy. In both Middle Eastern countries where we went to war, it was never against the Iraqi people or against the Afghan people, but to topple an evil dictator or to get our hands on an evil man who found refuge in Afghanistan, Yet, after many years we are still there. Doesn’t that suggest we always intended to occupy those countries? Now that I think of it, why do we have 10,000 Marines in Haiti?

Does anyone really understand WHY? To install valid democracies? Did anyone ask us to make democracies, and our kind of democracies, everywhere? Who asked us to be the world's police? Not even we, the American people. We rescue banks for endangering our (and the world's) economy. How about our expensive wars? They cost us trillions — although I would not be surprised if someone looked into where those trillions went, and finds that almost all of it went right back to the U.S. Called wealth distribution. From tax payers money to rich corporations.

I have great trouble with wars. More trouble because few others seem to question what troubles me. A few days ago I learned that 60% of all arms sold in the world come from the U.S. What we spend on “defense” is more than what all other countries together spend. For what?

I am ignorant about high politics, but I am curious. Is anybody else curious why our new president seems to have embraced (or have been embraced by) the Military-Industrial complex? Nobody really talks about why we have such an enormous war machine. We have the largest military-industrial complex in the world because we must fight wars — is that why we must fight wars *because* we have the largest, and very lucrative, military-industrial complex in the world?

Many people all over the world, including some very famous American leaders, even generals, have expressed the thought that all wars are evil. In the second half of the 20th and now in the 21st century wars are waged to kill civilians. And for at least half a century we should have learned that an angry population always wins in the end, even against the biggest weapon manufacturer and the biggest weapon user on the planet. And yet, we seem to be stuck in the idea of ever more fire power. Faster jets, larger ships, more troops staggering under 70 pounds of protection and the latest in weaponry. Doesn't anybody up there listen when voices from all sides keep reporting that a heavy military occupation never “wins the hearts and minds” of a people.

We think that in the end force always wins. Not true, not true at all. In the end killing is wasting; it's the poor and the meek who survive, helping each other survive.

Killing makes enemies. We think we make war because there is an enemy. Maybe it is the other way round, wars *make* enemies. The most dangerous and destructive wars are wars that change enemy in midstream. We go to war because of dangerous weapons of mass destruction (that weren't there), but then we stay in the war because we now have to build the nation we destroyed. And now we stay to... What? Oversee the elections? We make war because a country allows a bad man to live there. The bad man flees somewhere else, but we stay in the country anyway. Every time making a new enemy. The forever wars. Wars with lost goals. We're not clear any more who we are fighting. The enemy hides behind civilians, we say. Then civilians are the enemy. Our enemy is whoever is in the wrong place at the wrong time.. But we should know by now that civilians cannot help but fight back. They know why they are fighting: they want us to go away. We don't know who we are fighting: farmer today, insurgent tomorrow, farmer the day after. We put thousands of people in prisons, because they might, perhaps, possibly, be terrorists. Then we release them. Maybe or maybe not. They are too dangerous to release but we don't quite have the evidence for thinking that. Or we move them to another prison because — we cannot tell you why, but they might be dangerous to the security of our country. I can think of leaders in high places who might well be dangers to the security of this country, and they are not “enemy combatants.”

Two thousand five hundred years ago we were given Ten Commandments. One of these Commandments says (translated in an older version of English *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, Can it be

said any more simply? But for 2500 years devout Jews, Christians and Muslims and many versions of each of these religions have interpreted that simple statement to have nuances, conditions. We kill in the name of God, we kill for the greater glory of God, we kill because we are the chosen of God — and we all exist there is but one God, but every religion, and every version of each religion insists they are the only ones who worship that only God. I don't know what that says about humans, except that it is embarrassing.

And still I don't believe humans are born killers. But we are suckers for leaders and interpreters who tell us we must fight to the death who they tell us are enemies. We and them; I and other.

Look at the wild almost endless variety of Nature. Why shouldn't human beings not show a wide variety of shape and color and size and belief and custom and language. Humankind is amazing, a wonder. Imagine what we could learn from each other! We might even learn to live in peace.

robert wolff, 2010