

Just Say "NO" to the War in Afghanistan

by Rabbi Michael Lerner
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"Mr. President... Close down the thousand American bases around the world and use the savings to launch the Domestic and Global Marshall Plan. Act resolutely, without hesitation, and replace those advisors and those military leaders who will not actively embrace this direction. Use your power as commander and chief and ignore the right wing media barrage you will certainly face, no matter what you do."

Some people never learn. The arrogance of empire? Ignorance of history? Political opportunism? Or cowardice to confront the global challenges we face?

They probably all contribute to the incredible situation in which the United States is now debating two options about Afghanistan-escalation, or lower-level intensity relying on mechanical warfare in order to focus the war instead in Pakistan-neither of which makes any sense.

What is absent from the debate, once again as it was when the United States escalated the war in Vietnam or when it created the war in Iraq, is the perspective of the peace movement and spiritual progressives.

Instead, President Obama had the audacity and short-sightedness to declare that fighting in Afghanistan is a "war of necessity" which he claimed was "fundamental to the defense of our people." Talking about switching the war from Iraq to Afghanistan might have seemed a politically clever way to show that he was not "soft" when he sought the presidency, but restating that rationale now that he is president has boxed him in to the same misconceptions that have led the United States into losing wars for the past fifty years.

The narrow argument for war in Afghanistan, based on America's unresolved trauma from 9/11, is that if Al Qaeda through the Taliban gets control of a country in which it can train militants, it will strike again at America, perhaps this next time with nuclear weapons that it might acquire by sweeping from Afghanistan to Pakistan, which has those weapons, or by obtaining home-made or stolen atomic weapons.

It's not that it is impossible to imagine terrorists acquiring a nuclear weapon and detonating it in the U.S. The scientific knowledge and the means of implementing it are out there in the world, many countries have already built these weapons, and proliferation of them increases the likelihood that they may fall into ever more irresponsible hands. There is plenty to fear when hundreds of millions of people feel so desperate and angry that they might be willing to use such weapons. The error in the reasoning behind the "war on terror" is that this nightmare scenario cannot be prevented by the United States imposing itself on one country after another in the Middle East and every other area where terrorists might be able to steal or develop such weapons. In the short run, the United States needs to improve its defensive capacities by careful scrutiny, already in place after 9/11, of the airplanes, boats and containers that reach

this country. But the deep truth is this: there is no way to ensure that some group of terrorists will never obtain and set off an atomic bomb in an American city. As the technology of mass destruction and delivery of bombs becomes more sophisticated, the vulnerability will increase, regardless of what happens in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan or other countries in that region. The solution has to lie with eliminating the desire of people to want to destroy us.

The whole notion of a war on terrorism is fundamentally misguided. Terrorism is a tactic used by people who do not have the powerful armies of the world at their disposal, and hence they will use home-made or stolen weapons against those who they believe to be oppressing them. If you have a population of 6.5 billion on the planet, the only way to ensure that you can control terrorism is to put surveillance into every home in the world so that everyone is so terrified of the police and so scared to express their anger at their situation that they have no possibility of resorting to terror. In that case, total fascism, the solution is far worse than the problem.

The obvious alternative is to address the grievances and problems that lead people to want to strike out against the West in general and the United States in particular. We've mentioned these in past editorials:

1. The Western impact on traditional societies has been destructive. While helping to develop a small middle class, the penetration of American corporations, the Western global media, and the capitalist marketplace has fostered an ethos of individualism, materialism and selfishness. This is correctly perceived as destroying the religions and cultural communal solidarity within which people felt a sense of higher purpose and meaning to their lives. We recognize that many of those traditional societies have had a strong downside, based as they are on authoritarian and patriarchal practices that are themselves oppressive. But the way to challenge those effectively would be to support the development of spiritual and religious renewal that educates girls, empowers women, validates individual freedom within and not counterposed to commitment to a community, and affirms the humanity of others in different spiritual and religious traditions--in short, the active support for a spiritual renewal, rather than an attempt to replace those religions with the religion of the capitalist marketplace.

You cannot beat fundamentalism through atheistic materialism and the ethos of "looking out for number one"--and with that the weakening of family ties, the prevalence of pornography and the cheapening of sex into another commodity for sale and manipulation in the competitive marketplace, the elimination of any kind of economic safety net provided by people who genuinely care about you, and the obliteration of spiritual consciousness in favor of a one-dimensional version of technocratic-rationality in which the accumulation of money and power becomes the only real, because scientifically verifiable, value in life-- without expecting a powerfully angry and at times violent response on the part of those who have benefited from living in communities in which caring for each other has been the actual experience of their daily lives. If the alternative to fundamentalism is subjugation to Western values, and Western military and economic domination, people will take up arms and they will find a way to reach the United States with terrorist violence.

2. Moreover, even those who are not motivated primarily by a desire to resist Western forms of modernization are moved to violence because of the actual impact of capitalist economic penetration. One need only look at the huge belts of poverty in the ghettos and barrios of major cities around the world, to acknowledge the degree of hunger and malnutrition, to recognize the growing prostitution of young girls and boys desperately seeking some way to feed their families, and the hundreds of millions of economic migrants and refugees seeking

some place to make a living, to understand that these victims of our global economic arrangements are sitting ducks for ideologies that preach anger and violence against those Western powers that are seen as arrogantly ignoring this suffering. The fundamental disrespect and even humiliation that people in traditional societies experience when their own children begin to respond to the ethos of the marketplace, breaking away from traditional families so that they can sell themselves either in the most disgraceful ways through prostitution or in the more acceptable but still culturally estranged ways of joining in the pursuit to self-interest and material gain at the expense of connecting to their traditional spiritual communities, cannot be underestimated. Extremist forms of fundamentalist Islam or other forms of religious or political ideologies will spread and provide people with a way to express their anger at the west.

3. While claiming to bring democracy, we've actually simply imposed governments that agree to protect American corporate power. The Karzai government in Afghanistan tried to steal its recent election and proclaim itself a democracy-but fooled no one. The Iraqi democracy was imposed under occupation by U.S. troops, and is unlikely to sustain itself once the United States really withdraws (not just its combat troops, but the 80,000 "advisors" and countless independent contractors from the West). So while the West pretends that its mission is humanistic and aimed at spreading democracy and human rights, its hypocrisy becomes evident and this helps fuel a willingness to engage in violence against those who are perceived as occupiers.

Champions of the war in Afghanistan willfully ignore all this. They imagine that all this anger can be contained by yet another military intervention. They ignore the history of the Afghanis' successful resistance to one foreign occupier after another, including the British and the Soviets. They refuse to acknowledge to themselves that the U.S. occupation of Iraq increased the violence of civil war, providing the weapons that Iraqis might have had no other way to obtain.

War is not the answer, and certainly not a war run by the United States.

- The **first step** that is needed is to abandon the notion of a "war on terrorism." Drop it. Proclaim it already won. Or more honestly, acknowledge that there never can be a war against terrorism because terrorism is a tactic-the tactic of attacking civilians to spread fear. And that tactic has been used by the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and many other places in the world.
- The **second step** is to replace the notion of war with police actions aimed at protecting people from organized bunches of criminals who seek to terrorize domestic populations or to impose their own religious, political or economic rule on local communities that do not want that rule. The creation of an international police force of this sort, charged also with protecting development projects to improve the quality of life of people on the village and small town level, should be given the highest priority-and must include significant involvement in the formulation of this force by representatives of countries that together represent the majority of the citizens of the world. We should try to get this created through the United Nations. But if there is no such willingness on the part of these countries to participate in creating and financing such a police force, the United States and other Western countries should not step into that space, but should instead focus on defending their own borders, while continuing to beg the peoples of the world to step up and share the responsibility for creating an international police force whose sole aim is to protect local communities from the violence of those who seek to impose their rule by force.

- The **third step** is for the nuclear states to engage in the elimination of nuclear weapons. A careful global effort to protect every nuclear facility and to govern the creation and production of nuclear power should replace nuclear proliferation-but this will never happen if the nuclear states retain their own nuclear stashes. What, for instance, could possibly induce Arab states or Iran to eliminate the possibility of nuclear weapons when they know that Israel has close to 200 such weapons of its own that it may rely on in case of war? Or what could induce India or Pakistan to reduce their nuclear arsenals as long as they fear each other's-or China's-nuclear weapons? As long as the current nuclear powers retain their weapons, proliferation is inevitable and with it the danger of crazies obtaining those weapons and using them in terrorist attacks.
- The **fourth step** is for the advanced industrial societies, led by the United States, to launch immediately a Domestic and Global Marshall Plan that would dedicate between 2-5% of their gross domestic product each year for the next twenty to once and for all end global poverty, homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, inadequate health care and to repair the global environment. We've outlined a way to do this that would avoid the corruption that has bedevilled various aid plans, and the mistaken allocation of this aid to help the ruling elites rather than build the economic, educational, and health infrastructures that could actually succeed in permanently defeating global poverty. This step must be taken alongside of and with equal priority to the first three steps, and not as an afterthought or delayed till the other steps are shown to be effective, because they will not succeed unless they are accompanied by this step and its explicit articulation an expression of an alternative worldview. Check it out this "strategy of generosity" and the worldview at www.spiritualprogressives.org.
- **Step five**, we must give public support to the creation and sustenance of those in the religious and spiritual world who are preaching and teaching variants of their own religions that insist on the need to respect and actively provide caring for all: including members of other religions. It should be a high priority to provide training, education and media support to those who are seeking to renew their own religious traditions in ways that emphasize the equal rights and entitlements of women and girls, the need to acknowledge that there are multiple paths to salvation or to connection with God, and the need to rejoice in the diversity of religious and spiritual approaches and to acknowledge them all as potentially valid to the extent that they themselves are committed to ethical, ecological and communal values likely to enhance peace, mutual understanding, and deep spiritual connection to the universe.
- Finally, **step six**, the Western countries, starting with the United States, must publicly insist that, although they are adopting a strategy of generosity in part because doing so is in our best interests, having finally come to the understanding gthat in the 21st century our well being (both individually and as a society) depends on the well-being of everyone else on the planet, the deeper reason is because we know it to be morally right. We must recognize that the path of arrogant self-interest and self-aggrandizement that has characterized the West's interactions with the rest of the world is morally wrong. For that reason, we must start this new direction with a serious process of repentance, in which we publicly acknowledge the hurts we and other Western countries have imposed on the rest of the world. Using the South African model of Truth and Reconciliation, we should set up tribunals in which we in the United States listen to the testimony of those who have been hurt by the role of Western colonialism and imperialism, including our own Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrant groups, but extending this process to all the countries of the world where U.S. or Western economic and political involvement has caused pain and

humiliation. This process should become a center of our public discourse. It should be taught in our schools. Any media that uses the public airwaves, publicly supported electricity, public mail or public-supported streets and highways should be mandated to give some amount of prime time each day to the presentation of this information.

In short, we either pursue the same old ethically, environmentally and economically destructive policies of war, or we embrace a new path of fundamental change, based in part on repentance and atonement for how we have gone wrong, and the replacement of the capitalist ethos of looking out for number one and the commitment to "progress," understood as the endless accumulation of material goods, with a new ethos of love, generosity, ecological sanity, and awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe.

Of course, I know the impediments to this transition in American consciousness, and how they surround Obama and the other very decent people who are running the society at this moment. They include:

- **The military and its worldview.** They may know that a military strategy cannot win, but they still ask for more troops because they imagine that they can pacify a country through techniques of sophisticated counter-insurgency. No way will this work. The military lacks the appropriate ideological framework or troops. Their training is all about the most effective way to dominate others, to kill. If you train a pit bull to bite, don't get angry at them for biting. If you train a military to dominate, don't be surprised if they are not the mechanism for building trust, whether that is in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan or Israel/Palestine.
- **The greed and economic interests of America's corporate elite.** The elite has convinced itself that it really is acting in a generous and caring way in the world by spreading the capitalist marketplace. The truth is that business does in fact improve some aspects of life for people, does provide more material goods for some sectors of the population in countries around the world, and can thereby focus on the improved quality of life for the developing middle classes in many countries while ignoring the increased suffering for other sections of the population that its policies and worldview have engendered. Corporate leaders have immense power in shaping the American political discourse in ways that tend to reinforce the military option as the only "realistic" possibility. Deeply rooted in a materialist worldview, they are unable to even begin to see how their global system marginalizes other values in other cultures, like the value of connectivity to the land, to community or to God/spiritual life.
- **Public ignorance.** The erosion of political culture in the United States, the focus on short-term fixes, the dumbing-down of the population by the media, cause astounding levels of ignorance about the rest of the world and about the suffering of our own neighbors inside the United States.
- **Eight years** of undermining international law, honesty, reasoned debate, and a sense of the proper and restricted role of the military.

If you want to get out of a hole, the first thing to do is to stop digging. That's our advice to Obama: Say no to the military. Fire McChrystal, Gates, and all his major supporters who helped leak the information about what he thought was necessary, rather than going through you first, Mr. President. Announce this six point new strategy for U.S. security articulated above. Close down the thousand American bases around the world and use the savings to launch the Domestic and Global Marshall Plan. Act resolutely, without hesitation, and replace those advisors and those military leaders who will not actively embrace this direction. Use

your power as commander and chief and ignore the right wing media barrage you will certainly face, no matter what you do.

Obama could take this path. He is not doing so. Nor is there anyone in the public sphere ready to talk this language. That is why it is so very important for YOU, dear reader, to spread these ideas, to articulate them and to help us develop and refine them and their articulation, and to work with us to bring these ideas into the public arena. And come to our national conference June 11-14, 2010, in Washington, DC.

God puts it simply enough in the Bible: Behold I have set before you this day life and death. Choose life.