

WAR WELL FOUGHT

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The war well fought persisted as my father's most poignant memory throughout his latter years. In more ways than one, I'd shown my gratitude over the years, not the least which was quitting high school and enlisting at seventeen.

Looking back, I've concluded that in self-defense or the defense of the right ideals can be virtuous, but war never is.

Partly we accept maiming and killing in times of war, because we give our beloved country the benefit of the doubt, in its efforts to fight in our defense, for principles we uphold and the like. We accept maiming and killing in times of war as reasonable fallout in support of our leaders, and our sons and daughters in armed conflict.

Accepting the consequences of war seems to engender a dearth of mercy or lack of empathy for those caught up in war's wake. The United States government keeps confidential the statistics on civilians killed in places such as Afghanistan or Iraq. And, people do not ask. The nightly news about war becomes so familiar that it raises no more an emotion than do soap commercials.

A society that lacks compassion for those caught up in war, famine, disease and pestilence creates the predicate for alienation. And, alienation leads to hatreds that lead to cycles of retaliation. Indifference also marginalizes the downtrodden; puts them out of sight, so that otherwise good people do not have to look at them. I am taken by television programming these days that honor dead soldiers by showing their photographs and the towns they came from. However, I have not seen the face of one civilian casualty.

And, the law does not require empathy; certainly on more than one occasion, it has notably supported those that openly hated and those that showed indifference through their deafening silence. This happened when the Nazi's executed on their final plan, when the United States burned villages during the Vietnam War, when Pol Pot harvested killing fields in Cambodia, when the United States backed the Contra in Central America (El Salvador law), when opposing tribes in Rwanda practically annihilated one another, and when the United States preemptively exacted retribution on both Iraq and Afghanistan for the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Governments that retaliate in the spirit of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" must rationalize the innocent killing of civilians when it uses deadly force. The

law, our cowardice and our detachment support nearly any rationalization a government chooses to proffer and propagandize for its actions in these circumstances. Such, in my view, has been the case to support the United States war against Iraq. Ultimately, we must test our intentions and actions against a moral and a legal standard. In respect of the later, a society's law represents a social construct that plainly justifies a cultural and political predilection. But, Antigone reminds us that a standard for law does exist: "For me, it was not Zeus who made your order, nor did that justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could overrun the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws. Not now, not yesterday: They always live, and no one knows their origins in time."

So, by what authority do we transgress upon that which has the force of so fundamental a law? On what legal or moral grounds do we levy revenge and redemption? Perhaps the drum beat for nationalism, zealotry or patriotism beguiles us. Following the drummer leads to a deafness, where we fail to hear the *mea culpa*, "we were only following orders". Perhaps not our hearing, but our vision clouds in times of war, a kind of blind obeisance, so that we fail to see those that do our bidding, those we send off to sacrifice life, mostly our youth, our proxies in khakis, who inevitably kill or die. What follows is not an anthem to glorify war, but a prayer to listen and to see the consequences of our action.