

America Must Seek Alternatives to a Military Response to Terrorism (2001)

Joyce Neu (b. 1950)

INTRODUCTION *The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America left three thousand people dead and led President George W. Bush to state that America was entering a "war on terror." However, there remained dissent within America on whether a military response to the terrorist attacks was the right one. The following viewpoint is taken from an article written a few weeks after the September 11 attacks by Joyce Neu, then executive director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego. She contends that while Americans are understandably and justifiably angry at the terrorists behind the attacks, their support of military reprisals is misguided. The United States should seek alternatives to war, which inevitably kills innocent bystanders and civilians, in seeking to bring the September 11 terrorists to justice, she contends. She concludes that a restrained and magnanimous response by the United States could help build a better and more tolerant world and reduce terrorism. President Bush ultimately decided in October 2001 to use military action against Afghanistan, a country that was harboring the leaders of the terrorist network. More controversially, Bush also ordered military action against Iraq in March 2003, arguing that such action was necessary to forestall the possibility of other terrorist attacks.*

What argument does Neu make about the deterrent potential of military action as it relates to terrorism? What messages should Americans be thinking about sending to the rest of the world, according to Neu? What prediction does she make about the results of military action against Afghanistan and Iraq?

In the last decade [the 1990s], I have seen firsthand the consequences of armed conflict in Bosnia, Congo, Georgia, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda. As a professional in the field of conflict resolution, I have met with government and rebel leaders who argued eloquently, in the words of Bob Dylan's famous sixties song, that "God was on their side."

Joyce Neu, "Extracting Vengeance or Building a Lasting Peace," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 27, 2001.

While each conflict may be different in its history and causes, each conflict is the same in causing the deaths of innocents. Of the several million people who have been killed in wars in the last decade [1990s], estimates are that 80 percent to 90 percent of these are civilians. No matter how just the cause, these people did not deserve to die.

HOLDING AMERICA TO A HIGHER STANDARD

As a result of the tragic events of Sept. 11, our government is examining possible responses, including military action. Polls show that most Americans favor military action; but there are those of us who believe the United States is capable of being held to a higher standard. If we believe, like the terrorists who struck the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, that our cause is just, and that innocent lives may have to be lost to extract "justice," then we become moral cowards, defining justice in terms of retribution and revenge and we perpetuate a cycle of violence all too familiar to those who perpetrated the brutal actions of Sept. 11.

The tragic loss of life of Sept. 11 has torn the mask of civility off many of our faces. We are justifiably angry and frustrated at our inability to have predicted or prevented the deaths on our soil of so many good people, Americans and others from around the world.

What kind of response can we have that will demonstrate to the world that we mean business in fighting this campaign against terrorism? Rather than look to military might as our answer, we might seek more creative, sustainable ways to ensure justice is done and that the causes for such violence are extinguished. As patriotic Americans, we may want to demonstrate to the world the power of a free society by acting internationally the way we see firefighters, police officers, and volunteers acting in response to the World Trade Center destruction—with perseverance, generosity and concern.

Why would we choose to respond magnanimously instead of militarily? Would this be seen as weakness? While military power serves as a deterrent to the threat of war between nations, it clearly has not served as a deterrent to terrorism.

Children growing up in the developing world look to the developed world, particularly the United States, as a model. Will Afghan and Iraqi children, having been subjected to hunger, disease and oppression, look at the United States as a model of what they want for their country or as the enemy on whom to seek revenge? This is within our power to decide. Responding magnanimously will sow the seeds of friendship; striking their homelands will give rise to a new generation of terrorists.

Perhaps just as importantly, if we respond militarily, what does it say about us as a people? Does it say that

because we have the power to destroy, we must do so? That faced with an attack against us, we have no recourse but to respond in similar fashion? Wouldn't restraint reveal our true nature better?

That our ability to develop sophisticated weaponry does not mean that we are eager to use it? We should be clear that no matter how powerful our military is, it cannot guarantee that we can go into Afghanistan or Iraq without incurring the deaths of our own troops and those of innocent civilians.

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DIFFICULT CHOICES

We are a nation of the people and by the people, and we are facing difficult choices: do we rationalize the deaths of innocents abroad as the cost of fighting terrorism? Do we make clear to the world that we hold human life sacred only if it is American life? Or do we find ways to safeguard our lives and property in a way that honors the foundations of our society: rule of law, human rights, and the dignity of each person?

The reactions of families whose loved ones were killed or are still missing seems to be that they do not want a military action taken in the name of their loved ones. They do not see that violence will get anything but more families torn apart in grief.

Americans should demonstrate that we are not like the terrorists and do not take the lives of innocents. We need the strength of character and moral authority to pursue a campaign to eradicate the causes of terrorism. While it may involve determining those responsible, routing them out and seeing that they are brought to justice, the campaign against terrorism must seek to pull out the roots that spread the hatred, fear and desperation that give rise to suicide and destruction.

We must begin a campaign of inoculating people against despair by taking on the economic and social disparities that give rise to hopelessness and frustration, whether in our country or outside. Americans are a generous people. The TV images of the work of firefighters, police officers and volunteers in New York City make us all proud to be Americans. We need to take this selflessness to those in need in our own country as well as outside our country.

Just as we export goods, so should we export our know-how, our decency, and our conviction that working together, we can make a difference. One part of our covert campaign against terrorism therefore should consist

of rebuilding schools and hospitals, providing training and skills for responsible leadership, and in the short-term, making sure that there are refugee camps ready with food and shelter to accept people fleeing from the feared U.S. military attacks.

Another part of the campaign is to make clear the distinction between religion and fanaticism. Just as many wars are supposedly waged in the name of religion, there are usually other, more material reasons for the violence. Islam is not the enemy just as Arab countries are not the enemy. These acts were the acts of terrorists. Not Islamic terrorists, not Arab terrorists—just terrorists. Our leaders have started to make this clear and we need to continue to emphasize that these acts had nothing to do with any religion or belief system. God was not on their side just as God is not on the side of anyone who perpetrates the killing and destruction of innocent people.

ESTABLISH AN INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT

The United States should also re-engage in the dialogue to establish a permanent International Criminal Court. Although discussions in the United Nations and other international arenas often take positions that the U.S. government believes are antithetical to ours, if we are not part of the debate, then we cannot complain when we do not like the outcome. . . .

Without an International Criminal Court, we will have to create ad hoc tribunals for people like Osama bin Laden. The world deserves a permanent, standing court where terrorists and war criminals, regardless of country or conflict, can be tried.

Finally, we need to take time to mourn the dead and the missing. Before we react in a manner that undermines our character as a strong and proud people who believe in the rule of law and justice, our leaders should take the time to remember the lessons of U.S. involvement in Japan and Germany post-World War II.

By helping those countries and peoples rebuild and develop, we gained loyal allies that are still with us today. Let us create new allies out of enemies so that our children and grandchildren will remember Sept. 11, 2001 and its victims as giving rise to new understandings and tolerance, not to more violence and death.

FOR FURTHER READING

Mary Buckley and Robert Singh, eds., *The Bush Doctrine and the War on Terrorism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy and a New Era*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*. New York: Scribner, 2004.