Waging Peace

When we look around the world we see governments and armies intent on waging war in order to establish order, control, and even to "bring peace" to an area. Some of these conflicts have been going on for decades without resolution and seem to have the character of some kind of perpetual motion machine which creates its own fuel and never comes to rest. Seemingly endless amounts of money are spent to wage war and no one ever seems to question this "investment" of resources, both human and economic. And no one seems to either be able to find a way out of this cycle of endless violence, or else, they do not have the will to do so. War, we are told, is popular. Any political leader who tries to run on a platform of peace simply does not have a chance, we are told. Of course, war is much more popular when it is being waged somewhere else than in one's own homeland.

When we look at the results of all this warfare, we find that war in fact has a dynamic and life of its own. War breeds intense suffering, pain, death, and grief. People who suffer grief of losing loved ones and seeing their families ripped apart, their communities destroyed and their economic livelihood jeopardized or decimated become angry, and desire revenge. This desire for revenge breeds attacks and counter-attacks. With war comes pillage and rapine, and the phenomenon of systematic destruction of the civilian authority and infrastructure. In some of the worst cases we see actual attempts to demonize the opponents and thereby justify carrying out mutilation, rape and ethnic cleansing as tools of intimidation and war.

Rational individuals find it difficult to even discuss these issues in public because of the overwhelming dynamic of emotion that wars create. So it is difficult to conceptualize or discuss alternatives to war.

War, however, is an extremely inefficient and outmoded form of human interaction. In a modern society that depends heavily on a technological infrastructure, the free movement of goods and information, and a highly fragile grid, war can wreak havoc on anyone, wherever they are located. War is able to utilize such weapons and powers that it can threaten existence on the planet, regardless of who is fighting the war and where they are fighting it.

It therefore becomes both necessary and appropriate to raise the question whether there is some viable alternative to waging war. The answer is the extremely simple, but powerful, concept of waging peace.

Waging peace has virtually never been attempted due to the entrenched interests that exercise control and reap financial and political gain from maintaining a state of war. In today's world, these forces continue to pursue the ever less successful and ever more dangerous policy of waging war, without taking into account the changing nature of warfare and the world within which we wage it.

It is interesting to note that we can spend billions, even trillions of dollars waging a war and the political leadership never questions the assumption that this is both necessary and appropriate. But whenever anyone suggests a strategy that is tantamount to waging peace, the opponents tell us that we cannot afford these investments.

Waging peace, however, is becoming more of a necessity as the planet becomes smaller and the consequences of war become more devastating. The impact on the environment, the squandering of the limited resources of the planet, and the sheer amount of suffering and dislocation make waging war no longer a tenable option for the long-term future of humanity.

Waging peace is actually starting to gain credibility in places where one would least expect it. The nature of modern warfare is creating what is known in military circles as "counter-insurgency" or COIN. The underlying premise of COIN is that a purely military victory is not achievable without "winning the hearts and minds" of the population by providing safety, security, economic opportunity and developed infrastructure with a government that is both representative of the people and responsive to the people.   COIN strategy also recognizes that grief and suffering in the population caused by the effects of warfare tend to create a cycle of unending violence and fuels recruitment for the insurgency.

The concept of COIN is in fact the first recognition of the power of waging peace; unfortunately, it has thus far been short-changed due to the historical mindset in favor of waging war. It is time for these priorities to change.

Waging peace needs to become our top priority. If we invest even a fraction of what we spend on death and destruction in war on bringing support and infrastructure to a population, we will find that an enormous reservoir of goodwill, rather than resentment, will be built up. We will also find that the population will want to protect their community and families rather than engage in warfare out of despair and hopelessness.

The tools employed in waging peace should be in harmony with the needs of the local population and under their control. Solutions imposed from outside generally do not solve local problems. In many cases the best results are obtained through less costly support to allow local populations to develop their own responses rather than through top-heavy investment from outside.   For example, if a water project is needed in an area, it is far more effective to provide support for the local population to take charge of and develop the project according to their needs. Waging peace requires good will and support to the people, without any attempt to control, dominate, proselytize, convert or manipulate the people. The party waging peace should refrain from taking its own advantage from the situation and should use compassion and good will as the guiding lights of the action taken.

In extremely polarized environments, the process of peace may wind up taking several generations, and patience needs to be exercised in the recognition that it took time to reach that stage of polarization, and it will take time to unwind it as well. The generation already traumatized by the impact of warfare is unlikely to unclench their fists quickly, while those who are born and grow up in an environment of opportunity and peace are more likely to open their hearts and minds to cooperative, harmonious and mutually respectful ways of interaction with others.   During this process, the traumatized country may still have individuals or groups who resort to violence. Care should be exercised to use minimum necessary force to keep violence in check and not get sucked back into the vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence while the peace-building efforts take hold.

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