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www.afgazad.com

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Why the Wars can't be Won

by Prof. John Kozy

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Edmund Burke's statement, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it" is frequently cited, but in truth, even history's obvious lessons are unrecognized by many who know history very well.

There was a time when every school child could recite the Gettysburg Address from memory, especially its famous peroration: "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." But that resolution has largely gone unfulfilled. So exactly what did the Civil War accomplish?

Most certainly, it preserved the union territorially and abolished slavery—two noteworthy things. But the slaves who were freed, rather than being benefited by their freedom, were left in the lurch, and the prejudicial attitudes of Confederate whites were most likely hardened; they certainly were not softened. So although the war united the nation territorially, it failed to unite its peoples, and that division is still evident today.

After the 2004 Presidential election, The Dallas Morning News ran a feature about this division titled *Beyond the Red and Blue*. Using the red states that went to President Bush and the blue states that went to Senator Kerry, it pointed out how red and blue states ranked in various categories.

People in red states are less healthy than those in blue states.

People in red states earn less than those in blue states.
People in red states are less educated than those in blue states.
More people in red states live in mobile homes than those in blue states.
The red states have higher birth rates among teens than the blue states.
More people are killed by guns in the red states than in the blue states.

And the Dallas Morning News missed a number of other inferior attributes of the red states.

The red states have higher rates of poverty, both generally and among the elderly, higher rates of crime, both general and violent, have higher rates of infant mortality and divorce, and have fewer physicians per unit of population than do the blue states.

These statistics do not paint a pretty picture. And since the red states are commonly referred to as the conservative heartland, one would think that the people who live in these states would vote against conservative candidates merely on the basis of their own rational, self interests. But they don't.

There's an obvious clash here, for the red states are the home of that group that calls itself "moral America." But how can a moral viewpoint countenance poverty, crime, and infant mortality? What kind of morality is it that doesn't care for the welfare of people? Just what moral maxim guides the lives of these people? Certainly not the Golden Rule, the Decalogue, or the Second Commandment of Christ. From what I have been able to gather, moral America needs a new moral code. The one it has is, to use a word the members of this group dislike, relative.

So what motivates the conservative nature of the people in the red states? Let's look at some history.

For a century after the Civil War, the south voted Democratic, but not because the people shared any values in common with the rest of the nation's Democrats. (Southerners even distinguished themselves from other Democrats by calling themselves "Dixiecrats.") These people were Democrats merely because the political party of the war and reconstruction was Republican. And when, in the mid-twentieth century, the Democratic Party championed an end to racial discrimination, these life-long Democrats quickly became Republicans, because the Republican party had in the intervening years become reactionary.

What motivates these people even today, though most likely they don't recognize it, is an unwillingness to accept the results of the Civil War and change the attitudes held before it. When a society inculcates beliefs over a long period of time, those beliefs cannot be changed by a forceful imposition of others. The beliefs once practiced overtly continue to be held covertly. Force is never an effective instrument of conversion. Martyrdom is preferable to surrender, and even promises of a better future are ineffective.

So what did the Civil War really accomplish? It united a nation without uniting its people. The United States of America became one nation indivisible made up of two disunited peoples; it became a nation divided, and the division has spread.

Therein lies a lesson all nations should have learned. By the force of arms, you can compel outward conformity to political institutions and their laws, but you cannot change

the antagonistic attitudes of people, that can remain unchanged for decades and longer waiting for opportunities to reassert themselves.

Any astute reader can apply this lesson to the present day's activities in the Middle East. Neither force nor promises of a future better than the past can win the hearts and minds of people. And soldiers who die in an attempt to change another people's values always die in vain.

All wars, even when carried on by the strongest of nations against weak opponents, are chancy, and their costs, in every respect, are always much more than anticipated, even putting aside the physical destruction and the lives lost.

Nations that have started wars with the psychological certainty of winning rarely have, and when they have, the results were rarely lasting or those sought. As Gandhi once observed, "Victory attained by violence is tantamount to a defeat, for it is momentary."

The Crusaders, fighting under the banner of Christ, could not make Palestine a part of Christendom. France, under Napoleon, conquered most of Europe but lost it all and Napoleon ended up a broken man. Prussian militarism prevailed in the Franco-Prussian War, but in less than a century Germany had lost all. The Austrians in 1914 could not only not subdue the Serbs, the empire and its monarchial form of government were lost. The Germans and Japanese after 1939 and astounding initial successes were reduced to ruin.

But even the winners are losers.

Americans won the Mexican War and acquired the southwestern United States, but that conquest brought with it unfathomable and persistent problems—racial prejudice, discrimination, and an irresolvable problem of immigration and border insecurity. Americans likewise won the falsely justified Spanish American war and acquired a number of colonial states but were unable to hold most of them. The allies won the Second World War, but France and England lost the colonies they were fighting to preserve, and these two powers, which were great before the war, were reduced to minor status (although both still refuse to admit it). Israel has won five wars against various Arab states since 1948, but its welfare and security have not been enhanced, and Arab hatred and intransigence has grown more common.

People need to realize that after a war, things are never the same as they were before, and that even the winners rarely get what they fight for. War is a fool's errand in pursuit of ephemera.

At the end of World War II, American leaders wrongly assumed that America's superpower status gave it the means to impose its view of what the world should be like on others everywhere. Then came Korea and the assumption proved false. Despite all of the destruction and death inflicted on the North Koreans, their attitudes went unchanged. The lesson went unlearned. It went unlearned again in Viet Nam, after which Henry Kissinger is reported to have naively said, "I could not believe that a primitive people had no breaking point." The Vietnamese never broke. Now again Americans are foolishly assuming that the peoples of the Middle East will change their attitudes if enough force is imposed for a long enough time and enough promises of a better future are made. History belies this assumption.

Unfortunately, history teaches its lessons to only those willing to learn, and the American oligarchy shows no signs of having such willingness.

So let's start singing bye-bye, Miss American Pie
Warring is nothing but a bad way to die!