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# American Thinking About Violence in the Middle East

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I.      Introduction

The news from the Middle East is increasingly macabre. Everyday, we are assaulted by images of bombings, beheadings, shootings, and generalized mayhem. Over 1,000 American soldiers, and at least 13,000 Iraqi civilians, have died in dubious battle, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Afghanistan remains a war zone, while Palestinians and Israelis kill each other every week.

What is going on here? Many tangled, complex historical forces have produced this ghastly situation. The roots of violence lie buried deep in regional, European, and American history. Explicating them all would require writing a very long book.

Rather than embarking on so daunting a task, this short paper focuses on just one thread of the tangled knot of violence—our American way of thinking. Deconstructing our cognitive approach to violence in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere is similar to practicing Buddhist meditation. In meditation, we observe our minds, note what they do, try to gain some flashes of insight, and then keep coming back, over and over, looking at how our minds work, and, especially, at how they create suffering. And then we resolve to try to act in a more skillful manner, in a way which creates, perhaps, somewhat less suffering than before. Whether as individuals or as a nation, we have to analyze our own thinking before we can hope to behave differently. Changing our actions requires us to understand how we think, and how our modes of thinking lead us astray, in this case, deep into the swamps of suffering and violence.

It seems to me that there are five basic features of how we Americans think, features which contribute to the vast suffering we see in the Middle East every day. These aspects are separated here merely for purposes of exposition—they are often, even usually, profoundly intertwined. As I see it, these features include:

1. Indulging our very human impulse to revenge;
2. Framing conflict in essentialist We-are-Good-and-They-are-Evil terms (We can label this mode of thought "John Wayne Mind");
3. Failing to appreciate history;
4. Refusing to tolerate paradox; and
5. Believing that for every problem, there is a solution (This way of thinking can be called "Engineering Mind").

A summary way to put this is that A Nation of Puritan Engineers, a.k.a. the USA, is singularly ill-equipped to understand something as complicated, as paradoxical, and as deeply historically rooted as Middle Eastern violence. As the heirs of the Puritans, we tend to be self-righteous in our certainty that we have the truth. Further, we believe that the truth is singular, and we are confident that vengeful violence in defending that truth is divinely sanctioned. As engineers, we believe that all problems have solutions, and that

the past (and history) don't matter, and that our new technology, and our organizational prowess, will always find a solution.

None of these perspectives is useful if one wants to reduce the suffering spawned by violence, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere. Our mind-set repeatedly leads us astray, and we become lost in a wilderness of complexity our minds cannot comprehend. Unfortunately, for us Americans, it is just as the Firesign Theater once said: "Everything you know is wrong".

II.        Indulging Revenge

After getting over our initial shock, grief, and fear, many of us responded to the tragedy of 9/11 by baying for revenge.  Pundits and journalists alike fell over themselves advocating a Biblical "eye for an eye." Consider only two examples:

> "There is only one way to begin to deal with people like them, and that is, you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing."[1]

Or

> "The response to this unimaginable 21st century Pearl Harbor should be as simple as it is swift—kill the bastards!"[2]

The last quote is worth pondering. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki each killed some 100,000 people in 24 hours. If "terrorism" means "a deliberate attack on civilians"—a reasonable definition—then those bombings were among the bloodiest terrorist incidents in history. And how did we justify these acts? As revenge— for Pearl Harbor and for Japanese atrocities during the war in the Pacific. On August 9, 1945, after the bombing of Nagasaki, in his radio address to the nation, Harry Truman said, "Having found the bomb, we have used it…We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor…" Vengeful violence, in other words, is a bit of a national habit. We have been here before.

Of course, there is nothing uniquely American about either the impulse to revenge, or indulging that impulse. Anger, one of the three poisons of Buddhist philosophy, is a deeply human response to pain, to being thwarted, to not getting what one wants. Modern psychology tells us that anger is also very often a pain-killer. Like most narcotics, indulging in it feels good at first. Indeed, some Swiss researchers have recently confirmed experimentally that engaging in revenge activates a "reward" region of the brain (the *dorsal striatum*), which is also stimulated whenever we anticipate any

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[1] Lawrence Eagelburger, former Secretary of State, CNN, 9/11/01
[2] Steve Dunleavy, *New York Post*, 9/12.01

enjoyment or satisfaction.[3] Evolutionary psychologists argue that such feelings may have helped social animals like us to survive.

Just because wreaking vengeance on those violating social norms may have been adaptive, it hardly follows that doing so will make us happy. Indulging in revenge encounters the same problem that arises with any addictive behavior—it may feel good in the short run, but it hurts us over the longer haul. By inflicting suffering on others, we also harm ourselves. For example, habits of anger and revenge have been shown to be correlated with heart disease. No wonder the old saying goes, "Revenge is like swallowing rat poison and waiting for the rat to die."  Or as the Buddhist metaphor has it, "resorting to revenge is like picking up a burning hot coal with your bare hand to throw at your enemy".

Revenge also does not even necessarily "work", if "work" means "deter aggression".  Such deterrence occurs only under very special conditions,[4] conditions which are rarely met in the real world of confused, deluded, distracted human beings who communicate with each other, if at all, highly imperfectly. The problem, of course, is that what seems like justifiable, measured retribution to us looks like an unprovoked, outrageous and unwarranted attack to them. Indulging in revenge—one justification offered for invading Iraq, for example--typically sets off a cycle of violence, in which the other side perceives our response not as a fair response to their own wrong-doing, but as an unprovoked attack. They then lash out vengefully, we reply in kind, and so we march together down to the cemetery.

Consider a city much in the news: Fallujah, Iraq. We hear a great deal these days about the role there of foreign, Islamist fighters and of revived pro-Saddam Republican Guards. There is truth to these claims. We hear much less, however, about something arguably still more important:  the role of revenge in a deeply tribal culture. When the US Army shot demonstrators in that city in April, 2003, all Americans became "entangled in Fallujah's tribal quest for revenge... Every time they kill someone…they invite the wrath of tribes who can spend decades seeking revenge".[5] As we all know, last spring the Fallujans killed four US mercenaries, and mutilated their bodies. President Bush reportedly said, "Heads must roll!"  And so they did, and so they will continue to do, unless and until we kick our habit of revenge.

III.     John Wayne Mind: Embracing Righteousness

Of course, we Americans do not like to think of ourselves as revenge junkies. We think that we are decent, moral, and righteous. We are the good guys. We therefore believe that if we are attacked, or now it seems, if we can be persuaded that we *might* be

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[3]Dominique J.-F. de Quervain, et.al. "The Neural Basis of Altruistic Punishment", *Science*, Vol 305, Issue 5688, 1254-1258 , 27 August 2004.

[4] E.g., the conditions often assumed in game theory, such as rationality, common knowledge, and knowledge of the adversary's ranking of outcomes.

[5] "Tribal revenge fuels Fallujah's rage", Gulf News, online edition, 7/11/2003, http://www.gulf-news.com/Articles/print.asp?ArticleID=102266

attacked, the attackers, real or potential, must be evil. Such thinking pervades our culture, from Hollywood to the Oval Office. From *Star Wars* to *The Lord of the Rings* to *Lethal Weapon*, unvarnished good conquers unalloyed evil. Ronald Reagan proclaimed the Soviet Union to be the Evil Empire, and three days after 9/11 George W. Bush declared that "our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and to rid the world of evil."[6] He even described the so-called "War on Terror" as a "Crusade"—a cosmic struggle of good against evil. Once again, we saddle up to sally forth on our white horses, wearing our white hats, to protect the innocent. John Wayne rides again!

This is an exceptionally dangerous delusion. No person, no group, and certainly no nation have a monopoly on virtue, and none are immune from greed, hatred, and delusion. The folly of trying to exterminate evil has long been recognized. Twenty-five centuries ago, the Buddha is reported to have said, "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but only by not hating. This is the eternal law"[7]. Thirty years ago, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, "If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."[8] Sages everywhere have repeatedly cautioned against the folly of self-righteous anger.

Such a view generates suffering, often on a vast scale. Many of history's worst crimes have been committed in the name of the greater good. The apocalyptic notion of violence-as-purification has been practiced by Islamic and Christian warriors, by Nazis and Communists, and by Americans and Japanese armies and navies in the Pacific. Pol Pot thought that if only the evil of the Western-tainted cities could be erased, then everything could start anew. Osama bin Laden thinks that if only enough Americans are killed, then the golden age of the Islamic Caliphate can be revived. And George W. Bush believes that God tells him to smite down the evil-doers, whether in Afghanistan or Iraq, and lumps wholly unrelated countries into an imaginary "Axis of Evil."

Utopian fanatics--whether Communists, Nazis, radical Islamists, or enthusiasts of the Rapture--believe that they enjoy a monopoly on truth, and that those who disagree with them "are not merely mistaken, but wicked or mad." [9] Like all fanatics, they believe that there is only one goal for humanity, and they are ready to wade "through an ocean of blood to the Kingdom of Love."[10] Fanatics have always built towers of skulls as monuments to their fantasies. Moral clarity, of this apocalyptic sort, is a petri dish for global suffering.

Buddhist philosophy suggests that the ethical disaster of the good-versus-evil mindset reflects a failure to grasp some fundamental realities of human existence. Buddhist

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[6] Address at The National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., 9/14/2001. Cited in *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Office of the President, September, 2002, p. 5.
[7] The *Dhammapaddha*.
[8] *The Gulag Archipelago*, *1918 1956 ; an experiment in literary investigation*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974, p.156
[9] Isaiah Berlin, "Notes on Prejudice". *New York Review of Books*, October 18, 2001, p. 12
[10] Ibid.

thinking holds that all phenomena, no matter how reprehensible, have causes. Yet in the aftermath of 9/11, to suggest that terrorism and violence against Americans had causes was to invite charges of treason. A particular theology now grips our country, one in which evil is uncaused. Buddhist philosophy, like modern social science, thinks that this is nonsense. Failing to understand the causes and origins of violent acts cannot help us to lessen the suffering of violence. Pretending that other people's violence has no causes also provides a convenient justification for our own crimes and cruelties.

IV.     Ignoring History

Understanding causes requires studying history. Far too often, however, we Americans "don't do history".  If we had paid any attention to history, we would have avoided some colossal blunders and crimes, and might have spun the wheel of suffering a little less vigorously. The truth is, as William Faulkner said, "The past is not dead. It is not even past." History lives on, in the present. To put it in a Buddhist idiom, karma counts—past actions *always* have consequences.

Consider the much discussed "roots of Muslim rage" towards the U.S. A global historical perspective may be helpful. Too frequently, the question is misleadingly posed, as when highly visible analysts of the current crisis in the Muslim world ask, "What went wrong?"[11] The question implies that, somehow, developments in the Muslim world have been fundamentally different from what happened in, say, European or East Asian history. Such a view is, of course, very comforting to us, because it allows John Wayne Mind a wide range in which to roam.

From the perspective of understanding violence, however, the historical record suggests a very different interpretation. Today's Middle East finds itself enmeshed in the modernization process, an enormous, hugely complicated transformation of society. Simply stated, the transformation is from one kind of society to another:  from a society where most people are illiterate farmers, ruled by a small elite of warriors and priests, into a society where most people are educated, live in cities, and make their living from manufacturing and service industries. This process began in Western Europe, and has since spread, to varying degrees, across the planet.

Such a change has always been traumatic and violent. The transformation poses huge economic, political, social, demographic, and cultural challenges. Some people do very well, others are ruined, and nearly everyone is profoundly disoriented. Our all-too-human propensities to conflict and violence are greatly exacerbated by the strains of the transition to modernity, as the historical record amply demonstrates.

Consider the histories of the two parts of the world where this transformation has been most successful: Europe and its North American off shoot, and East Asia. Their histories often read like a horror novel:  World Wars I and II; Stalin's Gulag, and Hitler's Holocaust, or Japanese fascism, the Chinese revolution, the Great Leap Forward and its

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[11] E.g., Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. NY: Perennial Press, 2003.

attendant famine, and the Cultural Revolution.  Our own American experience has also been bloody: the extermination of Native Americans, the racial violence of slavery and Jim Crow, and the more than half-million casualties of our own Civil War. A historical perspective forces us to ask this question: "Why should we expect Middle Easterners to do better than Europeans, Americans, Japanese or Chinese?" A glance at history suggests that the answer should be: "We shouldn't, and they haven't."

Much of the violence of this transition has been inflicted by the utopian fanatics referred to earlier. Such ideologues have their greatest appeal when the dislocations of the transitions to modernity are most acute. Only the slaughter of World War I and its chaotic aftermath allowed the Bolsheviks to seize power in Russia; Hitler is inconceivable without the massacres of the trenches, the Treaty of Versailles, the hyper-inflation which destroyed the German middle class, and the despair of mass unemployment during the Great Depression.  In China, waves of famine, governmental collapse, and the horrors of the Japanese invasion set the stage for Mao. The appeal of fanatics becomes most seductive when economic, political, social, and cultural crises combine, and when people feel that they have been repeatedly humiliated.

Today's Middle East faces just such a crisis. The utopian fanaticism of radical Islamists is nourished by the deep despair of huge numbers of young Middle Easterners, two-thirds of whom are below the age of 30, half of whom are younger than 20, and 40% of whom have yet to reach their fifteenth birthday. There are some 150 million people from Morocco to Iran who are younger than 20. Fifteen years from now, another 100 million are likely to be born. "Middle Easterners", increasingly, means "young people."

What are their lives like? For the first time in history, many of these youths have received some education, although its quality may be questioned. They are no longer satisfied with the old, difficult, dirty jobs, but too often they lack the skills needed to perform successfully in the modern hyper-competitive global economy. The combination of their rapidly growing numbers, the quality of their education, government economic mismanagement, and the vagaries of the global economy have spawned massive unemployment. Unemployment rates throughout the region are usually in double digits, and real wages and living standards have declined for a generation. After ten to fifteen years of governments' tinkering with economic policy, in no country has the rate of economic growth been sufficient to reduce unemployment and to raise living standards significantly.

Most of these kids now live in cities—cities which are crumbling. For example, Karachi, which had one million people at the time of independence, now contains 11 million people, and will grow to perhaps 20 million by 2015. Housing, transportation, water and sewage, health care, and all other services are overwhelmed. In many poorer neighborhoods, only the mosque provides some refuge from the heat, filth, and chaos of the streets. Crises of public finance have forced governments across the region to retreat from providing such public goods, abandoning these areas to private, often Islamist schools, clinics, hospitals, and welfare agencies.

In short, huge numbers of semi-educated young people can't find rewarding jobs or decent housing and live in squalid surroundings. This situation alone would be enough to spark profound discontent. But, of course, economic failure is only one facet of today's regional crisis. Youth politics everywhere focus not merely on material goods, but also on questions of identity, justice, and morality. Any American who remembers the 1960s knows what I am talking about here. Impatience—and Manichean thinking—are among the burdens of youth politics everywhere.

The young look around them, and see not only economic failure, but also corruption and tyranny. They see national failure, whether of Arab states to protect the Palestinians, or of Pakistani governments to protect Muslim Kashmiris. Unsurprisingly, they often despise their governments, their representatives, and their foreign supporters— very much including the government of the United Sates. For all of these reasons, the utopian schemes of religious fire-brands are often quite appealing.

What competes with such ideologies? The simple answer is: very little. The old ideologies of these governments—some form of secular nationalism--are understandably widely  perceived as failures. The old ideas have failed to deliver either material goods or a sense of dignity either at home or abroad. Nationalism has not disappeared; far from it. Instead, it has been assimilated into the Islamists' discourse. And, as George Orwell once said, "the nationalism of defeated peoples is necessarily revengeful and short-sighted". The fusion of Iraqi nationalism with radical Islam is notable among both the Sunni and the Shi'i resistance to American occupation. Through our willful disregard of history, we have awakened a malevolent genie.

Thanks to our historical amnesia, we cannot see how we have added to this toxic stew. Throughout the Cold War, we supported any dictator and supplied any fanatic, provided only that he opposed the Soviets. We overthrew a democratic government in Iran in the early 1950s and installed a tyrant—and then were surprised that Iranian revolutionaries hated us.  We facilitated, financed, and armed the *mujaheddin* in Afghanistan—and then wondered where Osama bin Laden came from. Over a span of three decades, through many US presidential administrations, we offered ever more lethal military assistance to the Israeli armed forces—and then marveled at the rage young Arabs everywhere feel for us. We armed and supported Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the 1980s—and cannot understand why virtually all Arabs today dismiss us as hypocrites and liars. And, perhaps above all, we vigorously defend an unsustainable lifestyle, in which we, 5% of the world's people, consume 25% of the world's petroleum, at all costs, costs which include over a half-century of support for the thoroughly fundamentalist regime of Saudi Arabia, and two violent attacks on Iraq. As Chris Hedges reported from Egypt after the first Gulf War, "The message we sent them (young Egyptians) was this: We have everything, and if you try to take it away from us we will kill you."[12] And then we wonder why they try to return the favor.

If we paid more attention to history, we might have avoided some of these problems. If we had known anything at all about modern Iraqi history, we would have understood

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[12] *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, NY: Public Affairs, 2002, p. 148.

that Saddam Hussein, a brutal tyrant, violently repressed Islamists of all types. We would have realized that he was one of the last representatives of the decrepit creed of Baathism, a form of secular Arab nationalism. We would have understood that the political imagination of millions of young Arabs had been captured by radical Islamism, and that this, not an aging, Soviet-style dictator, posed the real threat to Americans--as the citizens of lower Manhattan so cruelly experienced three years ago. We would have grasped that, with Baathism discredited, radical Islam's appeal would be greatly heightened among Sunni Iraqis.

If we had known any history, we would have realized that of course the Sunnis would fight us. We would have understood that the Shi'i, while delighted to see Saddam removed, would want us to leave, very quickly. We would also have known that the country has a long history of violent resistance to foreign occupation. We would have guessed that since most Iraqis know that Donald Rumsfeld shook hands with Saddam in the 1980s, and that the sanctions regime in the 1990s killed perhaps a quarter-million Iraqi children,[13] it was most unlikely that Iraqis would love us. If we had understood anything at all about tribal culture and customs, we would have known that for every enemy you kill, you make twenty new ones. Above all, we would have understood that "What goes around, comes around": that our support for Islamists during the Cold War, and all of our other myopic policies, including our energy policies, would have consequences some day. Actions have consequences, violence has causes, and some of those causes are "Made in the USA". Karma has a very long arm, and in today's Middle East, it has seized us by the throat. But unfortunately, as George Bernard Shaw once said, "We learn from history that we learn nothing from history"--especially if we learn no history at all.

V. Rejecting Paradox

Part of the problem we have in coming to terms with history is that we tend to reject the possibility that two, apparently contradictory stories could be true at the same time. We are, after all, the children of Aristotle, whose logic rejected the notion that a phenomenon could be "both A and B". the so-called "law of the excluded middle." In the world of human affairs, however, the excluded middle has a nasty way of coming back to bite us.

Perhaps the most important paradox of all is the paradox of Israel. It is impossible to understand anything whatsoever about the modern Middle East or to have any hope of ameliorating the suffering there without squarely facing this profound, irreducible paradox. Most Americans resolutely avoid it; so do many Arabs and Israelis. This is not surprising. After all, it is decidedly uncomfortable to tell two, radically different, often opposed, stories at the same time. All of our minds rebel at doing so. But it is nonetheless necessary, if there is ever to be any hope of reducing the suffering of violence in the region.

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[13] Richard Garfield, "Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 through 1998: Assessing the Impact of the Gulf War and Economic Sanctions". Columbia University Medical School, (July, 1999). http://www.nd.edu/~krocinst/ocpapers/op_16_3.pdf

What is this paradox? Simply stated, it is that the state of Israel is *two* things: a perfectly legitimate expression of Jewish nationalism, *and also and simultaneously* a settler-colonial state. On one side of the coin, Israel is a perfectly legitimate expression of Jewish nationalism. Indeed, many Israelis would say that Zionism *is* Jewish nationalism. Nationalism has been, and remains, one of the most powerful ideologies in the world, one which covers nearly the entire globe. Only consumerism can rival it as a truly universal ideology. Nationalism is easily given to excesses, and yet it is also widely recognized as a legitimate force, throughout the world. Jewish nationalism, or Zionism, is just one more form of the world's most widespread ideology, just like Vietnamese, Mexican, American, Greek, Iraqi, or any other nationalism.

Furthermore, it is easy to see why Jewish nationalism would have taken the particular form that it did, namely, the project of moving Jews to Palestine. First, in 19th Century Europe—where nationalism, including Jewish nationalism, began—other nationalists (Germans, French, Poles, Russians, Hungarians, etc.) typically rejected Jews as members of their particular nations and indulged, in varying degrees, in disgusting and brutal manifestations of anti-Semitic racism. Second, the concept of the return to Palestine was deeply rooted in the Jewish Messianic tradition. For example, when the state of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, many Moroccan Jews (who did not suffer anything like the persecution to which their co-religionists in Europe were subjected) interpreted this as a divine signal, and moved to Israel. All nationalisms are invented, and all of these inventions draw on elements from the pre-modern culture of the people in question. Here, too, Jewish nationalism, or Zionism, is just one more example of a general historical phenomenon.

This history—and the horrifying European persecution and murder of the Jews—means that Israel is a nation state, as legitimate (and as flawed) as any other, for a people with a perfectly dreadful history of persecution. Israelis, and their American supporters, understandably view Israel as a vital (literally) refuge for the tortured, abused, and desperate remnant of massacred European Jewry during and immediately after the Holocaust, and as an insurance mechanism against any possible repeat of such a horrifying trauma.

All of this is undeniable. And there is another side of this coin. Israel is also, *simultaneously*, a settler-colonial state, an heir to the sorry history of the centuries-long European conquest and colonization of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Settler-colonial states include the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa—and Israel. Zionists were able to settle in Palestine in significant numbers only because of British imperialism. Without the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and without the presumption that the British government had the right to decide who could live in Palestine, Israel would never have come into existence.

The long, violent history of European settler-colonialism has always and everywhere been accompanied by contempt for, and violence against, the peoples whom the settlers found already living there. Here, too, the history of Israel in the past century has been

entirely unexceptional. From the very beginning, Muslim and Christian Palestinians opposed the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. They fought repeatedly for what they believed was their homeland. They were defeated many times. During one of these defeats, in 1948, a major act of what today we call ethnic cleansing occurred.  This fact is now widely recognized by historians of all nationalities, including both Israelis and Palestinians.[14]  Some 730,000 Palestinians (out of a population of about 1,380,000 at the time) were forcibly expelled or fled from the threat of violence. In defiance of U.N. Security Resolutions, they have never been allowed to return.  Their descendants number some 3.7 million today, and they have forgotten very little. Since the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after the June War of 1967, Israel has annexed East Jerusalem, which had been Arab for over a dozen centuries, implanted some 400,000 Jewish settlers in the occupied territories, and simultaneously deprived the Palestinian inhabitants of these territories of any political rights. Unsurprisingly, then, Palestinians, Arabs, and the large majority of Muslims everywhere view Israel as a settler-colonial state.

In summary, Israel is an irreducible paradox: it is *both* a perfectly legitimate expression of Jewish nationalism *and* a settler-colonial state. It is *both* a refuge for a horribly persecuted people *and* a place from which the indigenous inhabitants have been brutally expelled. *Both* stories are true. *Neither* story can be evaded.

Most of us abhor paradoxes like this. They make us uncomfortable. They force us to think. They thwart our very human tendency to want to blame someone for violence, for suffering, for pain. In this case, each side fears that acknowledging the truth of the other side's story somehow threatens the legitimacy of their own narrative. But this is true *only if* one rejects paradox. Since *both* stories are true, however, the only path towards a future with less suffering goes though the rough and slippery ground of the mutual recognition of the others' story. This point has been vigorously made by both the late Edward Said and the Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery, among others.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of ending the violence between Jewish Israelis and Muslim (and Christian) Palestinians. The continuing violence there inflames the entire Muslim world, and provides radical Islamists with a lurid recruiting poster, from London to Baghdad to Jakarta. Islam has always been a global religion. Every year, the largest gathering of human beings on the planet occurs during the pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims feel solidarity with all other Muslims, and Arabs, thanks to their shared beautiful and powerful language, are very conscious of their common identity. Jerusalem is the third holiest city in Islam. Every Muslim cares about what happens in Palestine, and so does every Arab, whether Muslim, Christian, or non-believer. For the past four years, millions of Arabs and Muslim TV viewers have seen daily images of Palestinians being shot, beaten, and detained. They see reports on increased Israeli settlement in the West Bank; they see American-made weapons used against Palestinian

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[14] See, e.g., Benjamin Morris,et.al., *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-49*, Cambridge University Press, 1987;Rashid Khalidi*, Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, Columbia University Press, 1997; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall, Israel and the Arab World*, WW Norton, 2001; Ilan Pappe, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*., Cambridge University Press, 2004.

targets. Such images fuel a profound rage at Israel and at Israel's chief ally, the United States.

There is little chance of this violence's ending without mutual recognition, on both sides, of the paradox of the history of Israel. Each side's mayhem fuels the worst fears of the other. The violence described in the previous paragraph convinces Palestinians that the Israelis intend to make all of them into 1948-style refugees. The Palestinian resort to suicide bombings of bus stations, teen-age discos, and Passover Seders persuades Israelis that the Palestinians want to kill them all, just as the Nazis so viciously attempted to do. Violence not only begets violence, but also makes each side less and less able to hear the painful cries of the other.

Violence cannot ensure the victory of either side. No one is going anywhere: Israel is here to stay, and so are the Palestinians. They must live together, and they can only do this if they each recognize the validity of the other's story. Accepting the reality of paradox is now, literally, a matter of life and death for both peoples.

Because we Americans are so deeply implicated in this conflict, it has become so for us as well. Overcoming our delusional attachment to the view that only one story can be true is essential if the violence throughout the region and beyond is to abate. Unfortunately, there are very few signs that we will do so, anytime soon. Until then, however, we may expect the cycle of violence in Israel/Palestine to continue, with ever more dreadful consequences.

VI.        Engineering Mind: Believing in Solutions

You may have noticed that in the preceding paragraph I offered no solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Instead, I alluded to something very different: a course of action designed to reduce (please note: *not* eliminate) suffering. This is because I think that the belief in solutions is the final delusion which we bring to the issues of violence in the Middle East.

Americans are among the greatest problem solvers history has ever seen. The list of American recipients of Nobel Prizes in the physical and biological sciences is long indeed; our technological achievements, from the development of computers, to medicine, to aviation, and on and on are the envy of the world. We are, in short, a nation of highly talented, hard-working engineers. "Puzzle Solvers 'R Us"!

Unfortunately, like people everywhere, we tend to keep doing what we are good at, even when it isn't appropriate. Most engineering problems have solutions: if you are smart enough and work hard enough, you can solve the problem. Our deep "technological optimism" leads us to believe that reducing violence is like building a bridge: with our good intentions and our manifold skills, we can "solve" the problems of the world. Because we have been so good at technological problem solving, we transpose this mindset to the twisted, tangled difficulties of historically rooted human suffering

But what if there are problems—such as the profound historical crises sketched earlier—to which solutions simply do not exist? What if there are only responses and policies which seem slightly more, or slightly less, likely to reduce suffering? What if the American delusion of Engineering Mind—the belief that all problems have solutions—ignores the many tragedies and cruel ironies with which history abounds? What if Solzhenitsyn is right that the line dividing good from evil runs through each of our hearts? If this is true, then conceptualizing systemic violence as a problem-to-be-solved may do great harm.

For example, opponents of the American occupation of Iraq are often asked, "Well, how would you fix this?" But this is the wrong question—the violence there is not a "problem to be solved," it cannot "be fixed". There are only responses which offer higher—and lower—prospects of *eventually* reducing violence. F rom this perspective, a continued American presence cannot help, since our presence de-legitimizes any Iraqi government which depends upon our support, thereby guaranteeing still more violence. It is also quite likely that American withdrawal will be followed by civil war, possibly of truly horrifying proportions. Indeed, it was precisely this probability that made people like President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt plead with Bush not to invade Iraq in the first place. And, of course, our continued presence there also foments violence—our own, and the violence of the nationalist/Islamist resistance. If we stay, there will be instability, mayhem, and killing, and if we leave, there will be instability, mayhem, and killing. This is an example of a problem without a solution. The very categories of "problem" and "solution" are part of the difficulty, because they pose the wrong questions.

There is a final baleful consequence of this delusion. Having set ourselves up for failure by insisting on looking for our keys under the lamp-post, we are then easily frustrated when the outcome fails to conform to our deluded views. We then rush to blame someone, look for scapegoats, and try to forget all about these situations as quickly as possible. Already pundits fume about how "ungrateful" the Iraqis are. Already people who point out the delusions of our approach are called traitors. And so, Engineering Mind loops back to join John Wayne Mind, all in a thick fog of historical ignorance. We then go back to our apocalyptic drawing boards, and get ready to do it all over again.

VII.    What Is To Be Done?

What could we do differently? What might be done to reduce the violence which plagues the Middle East? One place to begin is to notice what we are doing:  to see through the delusions of our Puritan Engineering Minds. This is, I think, a necessary place to start. Of course, we can't stop there. In very general terms, a strategy to reduce violence and suffering over the long term will require many additional steps:

1.  Our unsustainable life-style must change. This is not only because our current war in Iraq is deeply connected to our oil consumption (as the Stanford ecological economist Gretchen Daily put it, "Do you think we would have

invaded Iraq if the country's principal export were broccoli?"[15]), but also because improving the lot of the world's poor (roughly half of all people live on less than $2.50 per day) requires us to change our consumption habits: the planet's ecosystems simply cannot survive otherwise. If all people tried to live as we Americans do, we would need at least two additional planets' worth of atmosphere, water, forests, soils, etc.[16] Reducing global poverty sustainably requires us to change. Until we do, vast global inequalities, which modern communication and travel technology make highly visible, will continue to breed violence everywhere.

2.  Our country spends hundreds of billions of dollars on military hardware, nearly all of it of very dubious utility. Our nuclear arsenal is unusable, and our sophisticated weapons are proving futile, once again, against an insurgency. While we spend over four hundred billion dollars on arms ($420.7 billion for FY 2005), five million children die every year because they drink polluted water. The European Union estimates that providing safe drinking water to all people in the world would cost perhaps $10 billion more per year. Our annual contribution to fight malaria—which kills 3 million Africans every year—is less than the cost of one day's occupation of Iraq.[17] From a perspective of compassion and wisdom, we urgently need to re-examine our priorities.

3.  Nuclear weapons constitute an on-going, ghoulish danger to humanity. Current global arsenals are, in explosive power, roughly equivalent to *one million Hiroshimas*, and the US arsenal alone accounts for over half of the world's total.[18] Nuclear proliferation is, of course, extremely dangerous. It is absurd to suppose, however, that we can continue to maintain (and, indeed, to extend, as is now proposed) our own vast arsenal, demonize and vilify other states ("the Axis of Evil"), and then imagine that such governments will somehow not do everything they can to obtain nuclear weapons.

4.  In the Middle East, instead of edging our way toward war with Iran, we should recognize the government in Tehran and open an extensive dialogue with them. They are not, to say the least, particularly friendly with the likes of Osama bin Laden; after all, they almost went to war with the Taliban in 1999. Improved relations with Iran would also help us get out of Iraq.

5.  In Iraq, we need to recognize the obvious: we need to get out, as quickly as possible. Our continued presence in the country is untenable, destabilizing, and productive of much violence. We must cease pretending that we can fix

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[15] Cited in Paul Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich, *One With Ninevah: Politics, Consumption and the Human Future,* Washington: Island Press, 2004, p. 132.

[16] Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees*, Our Ecological Footprint*. Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1996, p. 15.

[17] Jeffrey D. Sachs, "A Better Use for Our $87 B*", Boston Globe*, September 13, 2003.

[18] "The World's Nuclear Arsenals", Washington, D.C., Center for Defense Information, 2004.

the deep historical crisis facing the region. We must stop arrogantly attempting to dictate the modes of governance to Arabs and Muslims.

6. From an American perspective, the best case scenario in Iraq is that somehow, an election is held. The key is not whether the election is fair, but whether the Ayatollah Sistani accepts the outcome. If he does, then a Shi'i dominated government will take over, and very likely will ask us to leave. This is the best case. The worst case is very stark: if Sistani thinks we have somehow cheated, and that we plan to stay, and that the Shi'a have been denied, once again, their role in government, he could declare jihad against us. Given his authority with 60% of the population of the country, such a scenario would make our exit from Saigon look like the film script for *The Sound of Music*. It is also highly possible that the Sunnis will boycott any election, and may reject any resulting government as illegitimate. Civil war is a distinct possibility. Whatever the exit, we must recognize that the forces of radical political Islam will have a greater role in the governance of Iraq than in any other Arab state. This is not a lovely picture, but we brought this upon ourselves. Remember: our presence in Iraq is a problem which has no solution.

7. We should vigorously lobby both Israelis and Palestinians to reach a meaningful agreement which will end the violence and remove the main political disputes between the two peoples. They are now so deeply intertwined, and the land area is so small, that any separation will be difficult. In an ideal world, it would make sense to have a South African solution, with political rights and guarantees to all, within one state. However, most Israelis and Palestinians reject this approach; separation into two states is thus the only remaining option. We are farther from this happening than we have been in many years, particularly given the dreadful psychological consequences of the past four years of killing and maiming. Nevertheless, if we wish to reduce, somewhat, the level of violence and suffering, a genuine, mutually satisfactory (or perhaps more realistically, mutually disliked) agreement must be made.

8. A very specific way that we Americans can struggle productively with the delusion of our John Wayne Mind is to reject, always and everywhere, any and all forms of racial or religious bigotry. We must oppose, always and everywhere, anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic words and deeds. We must resist our Puritan temptation to demonize others. Shakyamuni Buddha was right, after all: "Hatred never ceases through hatred, but only through not hating. This is the eternal law".

I am acutely aware that colossally powerful psychological and political forces block each and every one of these proposals. Those of us who hope to reduce, somewhat, the suffering of violence must persevere, nonetheless. As Gandhi said, "Everything we do is futile, and we must do it anyway." Or, as T.S. Eliot once put it, "For us is but the trying. The rest is not our business."