

Revenge, listening and deep democracy

by Tom Atlee

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The Lords of Vengeance

by William Rivers Pitt

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truthout

Dear friends,

The article below -- "The Lords of Vengeance" by William Rivers Pitt -- is not only timely and well-written. It does a very rare thing. Although it comes from an anti-war position -- which it maintains to the end -- it powerfully honors and acknowledges the truths and passions that underlie many pro-war positions. In that regard, it is a tremendous gift to us all.

In an ideal democracy, we would receive a similar gift -- a similarly respectful, reasoned, passionate statement -- from the pro-war side.

And then we would hear from the voices of ambivalence, the voices of principle, the voices of pained human experience, and the voices of expertise in history, military affairs, nonviolence, diplomacy, culture, ethics, law and a host of other urgently relevant fields.

Diverse sources of information, perspective and wisdom would be available to us for examination, comparison, challenge and reflection.

And then we would talk together. Ideally, we would talk in a spirit of inquiry and exploration, searching together for greater truth and deeper guidance that we've had before.

If we were too polarized in our positions to explore together with open minds and hearts, we would have expert facilitation available to ensure that each of us was fully heard. In the midst of our passionate disagreements, we would all be safe, and what we said would be taken seriously, at first by the facilitator and then by each other.

Being safe and heard would free our souls, our hearts and our minds. Defenses and assertions would soften. The sun would come out. Bit by bit the solid glaciers of opinion would start to melt into trickles of insight, streams of understanding, rivers or realization, converging into a deeper ocean of common sense-ing and shared wisdom.

And suddenly we'd know what we, as a society, should do. Simply because it made so much sense, from so many perspectives.

Many indigenous cultures are rooted in the power of such a conversational process. "We meet and just keep talking until there's nothing left but the obvious truth," says Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onandaga Iroquois. "Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can make for our children," said Sitting Bull.

So it is time to expand our view of democracy to embrace this pursuit of truth. Fair and free elections are only one face of democracy. The other face is public discourse to continually plot a course together for our communities and societies, a course that serves "the common welfare."

The motto of the United States -- *E pluribus unum* -- means "out of many, one." This is a process, an emergence. It happens over and over, never reducing the many to one, nor the one to many. This is the deep insight of democracy.

Deep democracy involves the discovery of deeper truths and possibilities for our lives. Deep democracy comes to life through hearing diverse perspectives and exploring together, in shared reflection, the larger territory that such real listening leads us into. Out of many, one. This is also the essence of peace in a world of differences.

Deep democracy is becoming critical as we move toward what feels like a great watershed in the history of the United States. I think in the very near future things will look very different than they do now. The heat will be on and the inevitable complexity of life will begin to seriously and obviously assault the elegant simplicities of polarized positions.

At that moment two immense historic impulses will become stark alternatives. One will carry the forces of fascism, empowered by mass media, powerful technologies of manipulation, and new high-tech tools of repression. The other will be a great upswelling of desire by people to stop hurting each other, and a growing hunger for better choices than we've been given. The impulse for the dark simplicities of fascism . . . and the impulse for deep democracy and peace.

At that point, the outcome may well depend on our capacity to talk to each other, to really hear each other, and to make brilliant use of the highly developed technologies currently available to empower such talking and hearing.

I offer the article below as one model for how each of us as citizens can talk and hear with greater respect and better results.

I offer also a question -- especially to everyone involved in any form of dialogue and deliberation -- as a participant, a professional, an activist, a convenor, an academic -- in every country, but especially in the United States. I think it may be an urgent question. I think when the fruit is ripe it needs to be plucked before it falls and breaks:

What could we do now
that would make
the power
of high-quality dialogue and deliberation
available to We the People
everywhere
to transform the emerging crisis
into a better world?

How, where and with whom might we explore this question in ways that would make a difference?

Coheartedly,
Tom

[In response to Tom's question, explore and experiment
with Dialogue - A proposal, by David Bohm, Donald
Factor and Peter Garrett --ratitor]

The following is mirrored from its source at: http://truthout.org/docs_03/032503A.shtml

The Lords of Vengeance

By William Rivers Pitt

truthout | Perspective

24 March 2003

We have become, with a sudden jolt, a divided nation in this time of war. Demands that Americans leave aside protests, accusations and anger in order to support our military work in Iraq have gone unheeded by great segments of the population. Millions of people have poured into the streets of virtually every city in the country to demand that the bombing be stopped, and that the troops be brought safely home. Those protests have been met by equally enraged citizens who see these protests as an aid to terrorists and an act of treason. Americans scream obscenities at Americans across lines created by armored police.

This will only get worse, as both groups are hardened in their opinions and beliefs. In the final analysis, questions of who is right and who is wrong fall by the wayside, as both sides stand secure in their rectitude. In such a polarized situation, right and wrong will be determined between these groups when one side quits.

Caught in the middle is a group far larger than the combined mass of the citizens described above. This group may be unsure, may fall to one side or the other on a daily basis, but essentially support the war. It is to this group in particular that I address my words.

I understand why you support this engagement. At bottom, you do so because you are loyal. The President has said it must be so, and so it must be so. The loyalty of this nation's citizenry is now and has always been our greatest strength. Many of you who support the war are veterans of other conflicts, and so your support is based upon a desire to stand with the troops now in harm's way. This is more than honorable.

Many of you believe this must happen because you have been told, time and again, that Saddam Hussein possesses an awesome arsenal of mass destruction weapons that he will gladly give to terrorists for use against us. Your belief that this is so stems from your loyalty -- the President has told you it is true, and so it must be true. It is fearful indeed to consider weapons like this in the hands of terrorists.

You must know, however, that no proof of either prohibited weapons possession or connections to terrorism on the part of Saddam Hussein has been offered by the administration. They have made many accusations, and offered chunks of evidence, but over the last weeks and months each and every bit of evidence put forth has been debunked. Sometimes, the press has proven them wrong, sometimes the weapons inspectors in Iraq proved them wrong, and sometimes our own intelligence services proved them wrong. No proof offered by the Bush administration has stood up. None.

Likewise, many of you support this war because of the deplorable suffering Saddam Hussein has inflicted upon his own people. There is no denying the barbarous nature of this dictator, and no one worth a damn would ever lift a finger to defend his actions. You have been told that the Iraqi people will be freed by this conflict, that democracy is coming to that tired and torn nation. For many of you, this is more than enough reason to support this action.

Unfortunately, it is all but certain that the Iraqi people will see neither freedom nor democracy because of the cultural divisions within that nation. Iraq is divided into three groups: Shia, Sunni and Kurd. The Shia make up over 60% of the Iraqi population, and are ideologically and theocratically aligned with the hard-liners who rule Iran. Should we bring western-style majority-rules democracy to Iraq, we would be setting the stage for a debilitating alliance between Iran and Iraq. The Kurds will never be allowed to rule Iraq or anything else; we have already promised Turkey this. Only the Sunnis remain as the viable future leaders of Iraq. Saddam Hussein is a Sunni, and the tribal politics of the Iraqi Sunni guarantee that whoever replaces Hussein will be as bad as he was to the other Iraqi groups, or worse.

I fear that too many of you support this war because you have relied upon our mainstream television news media for information about this whole issue. It is telling indeed that, in an age where news comes in 24 hour chunks, where viewers have a galaxy of channels to watch and become informed, some 40% of Americans believe that Saddam Hussein was directly responsible for and involved in the attacks of September 11. This simply isn't true; virtually every non-partisan and objective source considered credible in America dismisses said connection out of hand. The fact that this glaring misconception is held by such a large group of Americans shines a nauseating light upon the level of journalism being practiced by those who come on our televisions to provide us with the facts. It is also worthwhile, and disappointing, to note that the Bush administration has done little, if anything, to disabuse Americans of this very incorrect connection.

At the end of the day, though, I think I know the true reason why you support this war. You still see September 11th when you close your eyes. You still fear blue skies and airplanes. You tremble when your subway dives down into a tunnel, you grip the wheel tighter when you drive across a bridge, and your stomach sinks when you know that, again tomorrow, you must face a day of work in a high-rise office building. You, a mighty American, citizen of the greatest nation that has ever existed, have been made to fear on your own soil.

Somehow, somewhere, someone has to pay for that. Afghanistan was not enough, though our forces destroyed at least as many civilians in driving out the Taliban as were lost in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania. It does not satisfy, because you know that in some place under the stars right now, Osama bin Laden is walking around alive and free.

George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and the generals and soldiers who now wage war in Iraq are your lords of vengeance. They bring the hard fist of retaliation down upon a nation we have despised for over a decade now. You speak of fearing chemical weapons, you speak of standing with the troops, you speak of bringing freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people, but when all is said and done you watch the terrible blooming of fires and explosions in Baghdad and a voice whispers within you, "There. Payback. Finally, payback."

I cannot, and would not, judge you for this, for I feel the same way about 9/11. Few Americans, even after the time that has passed, can contemplate that day without feeling a desire to see someone bleed for it.

Yet even that dark and ancient reason must bend to the consequences. Seventy two hours of war on Iraq have passed, and in that short time a number of incredibly bad things have happened. We shot down a British plane with one of our Patriot missiles, killing the crew. An as-yet uncounted number of American Marines have been killed and wounded in clashes near Nasiriya, and others have died in a helicopter crash. Twelve Americans have been captured by Iraqi forces and are being held in an undisclosed location. Images of their faces were broadcast on the *Al Jazeera* network, and it was clear that many were wounded.

Several American missiles have struck targets in Iran, including a government building that housed the Iranian Oil Ministry. Iran has reacted to this with anger, and if they decide to roll tanks and engage in this fight, our forces will be in grave trouble. To the north, Turkish forces have poured across the border into Iraq. Turkey has for years coveted the oil fields around Mosul and Kirkuk, and has likewise wished to crush for all time the Kurds and their hopes for an independent state.

A soldier with the 101st Airborne apparently went mad and attempted to assassinate his brigade commanders in a grenade attack that killed one person and wounded a dozen others. The Vietnam war gave us a term for such an atrocity: "Fragging." The soldier in question has been detained, and there is an investigation underway, but the blow to morale among Airborne troops is incalculable.

Baghdad, Basra and several other cities have been bombed repeatedly, setting ablaze neighborhoods and killing scores of civilians. Perhaps most frightening is the fact that the Marines who fought in Nasiriya came under fire from Iraqis wearing civilian clothes. It has been posited that these were Iraqi troops dressed as common civilians, and this may be true. It could also be true that the Iraqi people are not greeting American forces with the joy we were expecting. The fact remains, however, that from this point on every civilian in Iraq will be considered hostile. This was the darkest aspect of the Vietnam war, when troops were unable to tell friend from foe. The confusion led not only to great strain among our soldiers, but to terrible acts of violence perpetrated against innocent non-combatants.

Basra has not fallen. Umm Qasr has not fallen. Nasiriya has not fallen. Resistance has grown exponentially, and our casualties mount. Looming in the distance is Baghdad and urban warfare, which may begin as soon as Tuesday. The death toll among our fighting men and women will rise in horrible fashion if we become engaged in a street-to-street fight for the capitol city. After that comes Tikrit, family seat and final stronghold for Saddam Hussein and his supporters, and another potential urban clash.

This wretched list of dreadful news will grow longer with each passing day. Our brave men and women in the armed services will continue to die, along with untold numbers of innocent civilians. There is no end in sight; Bush administration officials who have organized this conflict have stated clearly, in documents stretching as far back as 1997, that Iraq is only the beginning of a wider war to reorganize that entire region. You may have noticed that there has been no exit strategy offered by the administration for this conflict.

There isn't one, because we have no intention of leaving.

The polarization and anger within this country will strain us to the breaking point. Across the world, anger at America's actions in this conflict will rise and rise and rise until we are, truly and at last, completely despised and completely alone.

Never forget, also, that there are other lords of vengeance in the world. They have proven, vividly, that they can strike us to the heart at the time and place of their choosing. None of them are in Iraq, but all of them will seek our blood in payment for the Muslim civilians who die in this war. Should this conflict inspire them to act, many Americans will die within our borders. The resulting constitutional lockdown will end, forever, the ideas that formed the basis for this country. The war should be taken to these groups, in their secret places and their bank accounts, and not past them to Baghdad.

The choice is yours to make. Vengeance comes from the stomach, and hope from the soul. In this matter, use your eyes and your mind to decide where you stand. Many terrible things will resolve themselves in a far better fashion if you can find it within yourself to say six simple words.

Stop the bombing. Stop the war.

William Rivers Pitt is a *New York Times* best-selling author of two books -- *War On Iraq* (with Scott Ritter) available now from Context Books, and *The Greatest Sediton is Silence*, available in June 2003 from Pluto Press. He teaches high school in Boston, MA. Scott Lowery contributed research to this report.

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