

CXL – Marathon Dancing

lewrockwell.com/1970/01/butler-shaffer/cxl-marathon-dancing

By Butler Shaffer

I just returned from a conference in Prague, where I met a group of young attendees from Spain. Perhaps it was my Spanish sister-in-law — with whom I share opinions about the destructive and dehumanizing nature of the state — who predisposed me to liking these simpaticos; in any event, meeting them was one of the highlights of the conference.

In a discussion of the war system, they raised a point that requires a continuing awareness and emphasis: that in criticizing Americans' wrongdoing in Iraq we must not overlook the fact that the opposing organized forces have political ambitions of their own; and are just as prepared to inflict death, suffering, and destruction on innocent people as is the United States.

I couldn't agree more with their comments — and they understood, from my other writings, that I held to this view — but it does need reaffirmation from time-to-time. For those of us who oppose war as a matter of principle — i.e., all wars, not just this war or that war — it is sometimes easy to get trapped into criticizing just your own government, lest the same criticism of the opposing side be misinterpreted as creating some moral — or immoral — equivalency from which an observer is invited to select sides.

Throughout the world and human history, men and women have been conditioned in the view that, because their political system is aligned with the forces of good and opposing groups are the epitome of evil, there must be a good and a bad side in every war. President Bush recites this mantra with nary a break in meter, reminding the booboisie that an axis of evil threatens their lives. But Osama bin Laden and the forces of al Qaeda are peddling the same mindset to their followers. While the United States employs sophisticated weaponry to kill and maim innocent civilians, al Qaeda recruits suicide bombers to carry out the same insanity. But what is important to understand is that each side is playing the same deadly game and for the same purposes: to control — and, in so doing, aggrandize power over — their own populations.

The vigor that one sees poured into the war system reminds me of marathon dancing, a craze that infected the minds of many in the 1930s. While war is destructive and dancing only tiring, each benefits from a total commitment by its participants. As with fighting, marathon dancing is done only by the young, who have both the energy and innocence to see it through. At the outset, there is a clarity of purpose to it all but, as the action continues, doubts begin to settle into the minds of the participants. But doubt must not beget thoughts of withdrawal from the contest. An enervated spirit combines with a growing

uncertainty of purpose to increase the frenzy of one's participation. One-by-one, the dancers fall by the wayside, until there is a general collapse. In total exhaustion, and anti-climactically, the last-standing couple is declared the winner. The observers — having cheered on their favorites — take advantage of the temporary respite to return to the conduct of their daily lives, while the dance organizers busy themselves with plans for yet another contest in another venue.

War is an activity coolly organized by masters of the state machinery to manipulate — through fear and self-righteous indignation — the populations of their respective states into a frenzied effort to destroy more of u201Cthem201D than of u201Cus.201D Wars require the participation of two or more state systems willing to pair off into the dualistic roles of u201Cgood guys201D — with which to amass the support of their countrymen — and u201Cbad buys201D — around which the other state will mobilize its populace. That tens of millions will die in the bloody processes of a war is of no relevance whatsoever either to state officials or, amazingly, to the citizenry who eagerly and proudly send their own children into the slaughter! Parents who worry that a sexual predator might be prowling schoolyards looking for victims, express no concern for military recruiters using the same school facilities to enlist more cannon fodder for the war machine!

One cannot understand the war system without realizing the symbiotic nature of the undertaking. As in the more peaceful field of sports, there is no purpose to having a baseball or football team, unless there is an opponent to play. Every state requires a threat, an enemy, with which to control its own people. In order to keep the u201CCold War201D going, the United States needed the u201Cevil empire201D of the Soviet Union for the same reason that the Soviet Union needed the u201Ccapitalist exploiters201D of the United States.

I first became aware of the carefully-orchestrated nature of the war system when I was a child. I was ten years old when World War II ended and, up to that time, I had been carefully indoctrinated in the view that Russia and China were my u201Cfriends,201D while Germany, Japan, and — for awhile — Italy, were my u201Cenemies.201D No sooner was this war over, than members of the repertoire company switched roles to perform in a succeeding play. Now, Germany, Japan, and Italy were my u201Cfriends,201D while Russia and China had become my u201Cenemies.201D It was enough of a paradox to engage an adolescent's mind but, sadly, not the thinking of adults who made their costume changes and memorized their new lines with the same unquestioning ease that allowed them to support American involvement in World War II. In time, I began to wonder if there were any children in Germany or Russia who experienced the same transformation of u201Cfriends201D and u201Cfoes.201D

Wars are intentionally put together by two or more states to enhance their power interests. To be effective, they must be conducted at least every twenty to twenty-five years in order to (a) not totally exhaust a society's productive base in endless fighting and destruction, and (b)

reinvest the minds of the next generation in the u201Cgloriesu201D and u201Cnecessityu201D for war. Any warring culture must always have an abundance of military veterans around to instruct the youth in such matters.

In connection with the abattoir now raging in the Middle East, a clear distinction must be made regarding the legitimate role for self-defense. The Iraqi father who, in an effort to protect his family, shoots armed storm-troopers breaking into his home, is engaged in an act of self-defense, as are militia groups whose sole purpose is self-protection against invading forces. But so-called u201Cinsurgencyu201D groups may have appetites for political power that go beyond matters of self-defense. This is certainly the case not only with al Qaeda forces, but with such groups as Hezbollah, each of which has ambitions to exercise power over local populations.

How would we know into which category any particular group might fall? An answer may be found by looking to the tactics of a given group. If its members confine the targets of their attacks to invading forces, it may well be a self-defense group. But when a group engages in indiscriminate attacks upon the general population — such as suicide-bombers killing people on a bus, or in a mosque or shopping area — you can rest assured that the purposes of its acts of terror are no different from the terrorism practiced upon the same people by the United States: to reduce the Iraqi people to obedience through u201Cshock and awe.u201D

It is a deadly mistake for any decently principled person to put himself or herself in a position of choosing between one side or the other in a war. Wars are creatures of state planning and, for this reason alone, cannot be thought of in terms of u201Cgoodu201D or u201Cbadu201D sides. This was a mistake that Jane Fonda — and many others like her — got into during the Vietnam War: that the United States was a clear wrongdoer did not confer any sense of righteousness on the North Vietnamese who, like the Americans, wanted nothing more than to subdue the Vietnamese people.

When the Israelis and Hezbollah go after one another; when the Indians and the Pakistanis conduct their periodic forays into each other's territories; when American and al Qaeda forces shoot at and bomb one another in Baghdad streets, it serves no principled purpose to take sides. Identifying ourselves with one side or the other is the mindset into which state systems have conditioned our thinking. There never has been, and never will be, a u201Cgoodu201D war. The warped minds who think otherwise are telling us that some end they value is worth the deaths of millions of people — as long as they are not among the casualties. When the twisted thinking of a Madeleine Albright can regard the boycott-induced deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children as a u201Cpriceu201D she was willing to pay — even though it was the children, not Ms. Albright, who paid the price — you can rest assured that the state has abandoned even the pretense of moral direction.

Those who value both peace and liberty should see the death and destruction of war as a signal to withdraw one's support from all political systems, regardless of who is running them, or under what rationale, or the duration of their respective claims upon the bodies and souls of people. When all casualties of the war system have been accounted for — not only in terms of the dead and the wounded, but those whose lives have been severely affected in other ways — it will be necessary for each of us to assess our contributions to such organized insanity. We may then discover a truth that pervades all of our relationships with others, namely, that anarchy means never having to say you're sorry!

Meanwhile, the marathon continues, and may soon be coming to a dance hall near you. As with so many other dance teams that have paired off into their deadly choreography, you may select your own partner or allow the state to choose one for you. In the alternative, you may discover more peaceful and productive ways of investing your energies, ways that your children and grandchildren may live to appreciate.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

