

XXXVII – The War Against Anger

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Butler Shaffer, this argument runs

But if this is true, are not acts of murder, rape, arson, mayhem, and assault also the fulfillment of our violent nature? If we are not critical of nation-states for mobilizing destructive tendencies, why should we punish individuals who engage in similarly motivated actions? Indeed, why do we heap the severest of punishments on those who do, individually, what we so blithely accept when done – in greater numbers – by political systems?

The answer to this question is found in the psychological practice of projection, a phenomenon about which I have written on numerous occasions. We are uncomfortable with the awareness — albeit subconscious — that "who we are" includes various dark side attributes inconsistent with the virtuous qualities around which we have built our self-image. Were we courageous enough to look deeply within, we would discover that we do have capacities for violence, dishonesty, anger, sloth, cowardice, and other characteristics that conflict with the image of goodness we have created for ourselves.

We unconsciously believe that the way to purge ourselves of these undesired qualities is to project them onto scapegoats, against whom we proceed to take punitive action. Those who desire to understand 9/11 and its aftermath must begin with an awareness of the psychological dynamics of projection. Contrary to the self-righteous posturing that comprises political rhetoric, there are no objectively "good" and "bad" nations or other groups of people in our world. We have, however, divided ourselves into mutually exclusive "us-versus-them" categories — whether based on race, religion, nationality, economic interests, or other factors — ascribing "goodness" to our group, and "badness" to others. Such dichotomous thinking becomes a perfect setup for the projection of our unwanted "dark side" traits onto one another. Divisiveness is not simply an unintended consequence of political behavior, but its essential nature.

It should be evident that this contributes to the means by which we bring about wars. "They" mean us harm, so "we" must take forceful action to protect our interests. Once we do so, "they" become mobilized against "us"; a response that confirms, in our mind, their malevolent intentions and is used as a justification for our renewed efforts.

Let me illustrate the point this way: the United States not only created nuclear weapons, but is the only nation to have employed them against civilian populations. As a result, other nations began their own collections, ostensibly as a deterrent against such weapons being used upon them. The United States government has the biggest collection of nuclear weapons in existence, and recently announced that it would not foreclose the possibility of

their use in any future war. If Americans and Israelis believe that deadly weapons are necessary for their defenses, why should we be surprised that other nations might regard similar weapons as essential to theirs? Given the historic record and the Bush administration's war against "axis of evil" nations as well as those who "are not with us," what other response would you expect?

Don't mistake the point I am making. I am not defending the use of such weapons: to the contrary, I am desirous of ending such insane behavior. But to do so, we must begin by giving up our childish schoolyard thinking that poses "us" as the unvarnished expression of "good," and "them" as the unmitigated agents of "evil." The divisiveness of our thinking has produced the political madness that threatens to overwhelm the world in a kind of warfare that could destroy all of human life. But we must understand the nature of what our thinking has created. Instead of joining George Bush's frenzied mob of war-lovers who, drunk with power, want to behave like an unruly gang of soccer fans, we need to withdraw our energies from their madness.

What is the source of the anger that has generated this world-engulfing conflict? Contrary to the twaddle put forth by neocon jingoists, the "terrorists" who planned and attacked the World Trade Center, knowing they would die in the process, did not do so in order to show their contempt for MTV, Calvin Klein jeans, burqualess women, and other attributes of our "freedom." They did so out of anger over years of arrogant American and Israeli policies that have dominated their lives and homelands. One brief study indicated that some 95% of suicide bombings have taken place in an effort to force these nations to withdraw from occupied territories. Unable to attack the source of their anger, these "terrorists" settled on the WTC as their targets, turning some three thousand innocent victims into "scapegoats" for their unresolved wrath.

All nineteen men who participated in this attack were killed in the process, a result that has generated an unfocused anger on the part of most Americans. This was a terrible atrocity, committed against men and women who had no more to do with the conduct of American foreign policy than do you or I. Against whom can this reactive rage be vented? Who is to "pay" for a crime for which all known perpetrators are dead? Dividing ourselves up into mutually exclusive camps of "us" and "them" tends to generate an avenging sense of self-righteousness that requires an object upon whom punishment can be visited. Since the actual transgressors of these crimes are unavailable, however, a surrogate — a "scapegoat" — must be found.

Scapegoating has long been used as a means of directing anger at someone when there is no discernible agent to attribute the cause of such anger. There was a sharp increase in lynchings during the depression of the 1930s, not because blacks were responsible for the economic crisis, but because they were convenient targets for unfocused rage. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 served the same purpose. The dynamics and dangers inherent in such behavior were well explored in the now classic film The Ox-Bow Incident, a western in which

a group of innocent strangers were lynched by a self-righteous posse convinced of their having killed one of their friends.

The events of 9/11 did far more than bring the daily lives of Americans onto the battlefields of wars that have dominated this planet for over a century. Trying to put the WTC attack into perspective, one Englishman stated that he had lived through the "blitz" of World War II, when London was subject to such attacks on a nightly basis. But World War II was fought against traditionally defined enemies: other nation-states. Governments declared wars against one another; there were identifiable political and military officials to whom one could look for decisions and responsibility for actions taken.

All of that has changed. As 9/11 demonstrated – wherein nineteen men armed with nothing more than plastic box-cutter knives were able to place the world on the brink of World War III — war, itself, has become thoroughly decentralized. In this new age of suicide bombers, suitcase nuclear weapons, and other forms of guerilla tactics, any angry individual or group has the technological capacity to inflict death upon tens of thousands — or even millions — of men and women who have been selected as scapegoats for unfocused anger. As political systems expand the scope of their divisive practices, we should expect increased frustration and anger. With a world population of some five billion people, it would take only one one-thousandth of one percent of humanity, if sufficiently provoked, to produce fifty thousand dispersed agents of mass destruction. We should have learned, from Newton's third law of motion, that state terrorism — in the form of threats, punishments, and death itself to compel obedience — generates reaction from its victims. Labeling such responses "terrorism," and intensifying state violence to address it, ignores this symbiotic relationship that continues its destructive escalation.

The world is rapidly becoming decentralized, not only in terms of economic, political, and other social systems, but in the dissemination of information. The very power of the state is rapidly rendering it powerless, as its tools of control and violence radiate outward into private hands.

Governments continue to be significant players in these games of death and destruction, but their monopolies on the use of force — which have traditionally defined their natures — are evaporating. The United Nations, NATO, and other statist trade associations are, like cartels generally, collapsing into ineffectiveness in the face of competition from centrifugal sources.

The very divisive thinking upon which all political systems depend for their existence has come full circle to foster a generalized, unfocused anger in the world that erupts into violent acts of sheer desperation. It is this anger — the child of politics — that now turns upon the parent. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein monster has come alive, and the efforts of comic opera martinets — whether in the White House or Number 10 Downing Street — will be unable to

subdue it. The rigid stance of George Bush reminds me of nothing so much as General Burgoyne marching his British redcoats — four-abreast, and in close-order drill — down a country road to be met by a dispersed and hidden colonial "rabble."

The war into which so many politicians and militarists seem intent on plunging the world is, of course, yet another expression of the *raison d'etre* of the state. But this will not be your eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century style of war that pits one state against another, for the "enemy" has become anger itself. "Anger" has no jugular vein that can be made the target of warfare; no leaders to whom terms of surrender can be offered. Dropping bombs on Afghans and Iraqis because we have no visible perpetrators of the 9/11 wrongs we wish to avenge, is as irrational as the WTC attacks themselves! To believe otherwise is like trying to end urban street gang violence by bombing Los Angeles or Detroit!

The only way to end this war against anger is to end the thinking — and resulting systems and behavior — that generates the anger. Patriotic flag-waving and appeals to "support our troops" are as irrelevant to the crisis confronting all of humanity as an insistence upon rules of dining room etiquette and passenger class priorities on a rapidly sinking *Lusitania*!

The Best of Butler Shaffer

