

Rambo on War; Wisdom on Peace

Rambo and Stallone on War

Wisdom on Peace

by Charles Strohmer

“Old men start wars. Young men fight them. And everyone in the middle gets killed. War is natural. Peace is accidental. We're animals.” According to Joel Stein, in *Newsweek* (Feb. 4, 2008), that's what Sylvester Stallone wanted John Rambo to explain in the new Rambo film. Stallone, however, decided he would cut that dialogue, “because Rambo is a silent man, and blurting out your thesis is for college papers, not movies.”

“What I was trying to say,” Stallone told Stein, “is that the world will never come together and say we are one. Rocky represents the optimistic side of life, and Rambo represents purgatory. If you think people are inherently good, you get rid of the police for 24 hours — see what happens.” Is Rambo and his group of mercenaries meant to make audiences feel good about going to war? Viewers will have to judge for themselves. I won't be seeing a film that's reviewed as the most violent Rambo in the series, which is saying a lot. I have wiser ways to spend my time and money than sitting for ninety minutes in a comfortable theater chair imaging purgatory, hell, or even Hobbes war of all against all.

But Stallone's an interesting guy. Listening to him rap about war and the new Rambo revived a thought I've had buried: why did so many Americans who now admit that they should have known better endorse the war about Iraq in the first place? Like a particularly annoying dripping faucet, the media never tires of reminding us that Americans signed off on the war: to rid the world of a dictator, or to bring freedom to the Iraqis, or to find Saddam's stockpiled WMD, or because Saddam had helped al Qaeda with the attacks on 9/11, or to spread democracy in the Middle East. Drip. Drip.

I'm not going to recite, here, what is objectionable about those sound bites, though I would be happy to supply interested readers with a list of reputable titles which disclose just that. Instead, I want to suggest another reason why so many Americans who should have known better endorsed the war about Iraq. And why, by default, many remain willing to bless another war of the same sort, with Iran. Many people will support a war because they are personally unacquainted with the pathology of war

Here it is, in brief. Many people will support a war because they are personally unacquainted with the pathology of war. Never having themselves been to war, or been personally effected by war, they give their blessing to it out of naivety, not knowing what it is, really, they are sanctioning. Even the evening news footage coming out of Iraq, relentless as it has been in showing horrific images of carnage, may never be enough to turn some people from support of war. For war remains ever at a distance to them. For them, the intervening space will need to be replaced by a conjunction to war that brings the kind of personal knowledge that some people must have before a wiser way ahead can be argued and found. Barring that connection, is there any alternative? Perhaps. Try this.

From a distance, then, pluck up your nerve and get hold of a copy of Chris Hedges's *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Hedges was a veteran war correspondent for more than twenty years. He reported from many fronts, throughout a career in which he'd been ambushed (Central America), imprisoned (Sudan), beaten (by the Saudi Police), shot at (Iraq; Serbia), shelled for days (Sarajevo), seen children murdered for sport (Gaza), and much else. Close up like this, one comes to know the pathology of war, which for Hedges includes: the cries of the vanquished; the empty jingoism behind abstract words like glory, honor, and patriotism; the lies that victors often do not acknowledge; and the truth about war, which comes out, Hedges acknowledges, but usually too late. Hedges gained wisdom for just what one is sanctioning with war

Maybe our endorsement of war from a distance provides a vicarious sense of satisfaction about the itch for a fight that remains too latent in many of us who have never been in war. Hedges's honest, albeit disturbing, voice has earned him the right to be heard by those of us who have never personally experienced war's hell on earth, we who think we can make an intelligent decision about endorsing war. Up close and personal, Hedges gained wisdom for just what one is sanctioning with war. Those who have been to war will know, as will its remaining victims. They rest of us may have to learn it as best we can from a distance, that we may

become wiser about what our leaders are asking us to endorse.

Hedges, who holds an M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School, is a good source of wisdom for those whose psychology allows them to endorse a war out of naivety:

"War and conflict have marked most of my adult life," Hedges writes. "I have seen too much of violent death. I have tasted too much of my own fear. I have painful memories that lie buried and untouched most of the time. It is never easy when they surface. I learned early on that war is its own form of culture. The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by mythmakers, historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state, all of whom endow it with qualities it often does not possess: excitement, exoticism, powers, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates cultures, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within us all. And this is why for so many of us war is so hard to discuss once it is over.

"The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an exciting elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble. When we ingest the anodyne of war we feel what those we strive to destroy feel... It is the same narcotic. I partook of it for many years. And like every recovering addict there is a part of me that remains nostalgic for war's simplicity and high, even as I cope with the scars it has left behind, mourn the deaths of those I worked with, and struggle with the bestiality I would have been better off not witnessing. There is a part of me, maybe it is a part of many of us, that decided at certain moments that I would rather die like this than go back to the routine of life. The chance to exist for an intense and overpowering moment, even if it meant certain oblivion, seemed worth it in the midst of war, and very stupid once the war ended.

"I covered the war in El Salvador from 1983 to 1988. By the end I had a nervous twitch in my face. I was evacuated three times by the U.S. embassy because of tips that the death squads planned to kill me. Yet each time I came back. I accepted a grim fatalism that I would be killed in El Salvador. I could not articulate why I should accept my own destruction and cannot now. When I finally did leave, my last act was, in a frenzy of rage and anguish, to leap over the KLM counter in the airport in Costa Rica because of a perceived slight by a hapless airline clerk. I beat him to the floor as his bewildered colleagues locked themselves in the room behind the counter. Blood streamed down his face and mine. I refused to wipe the dried stains off my cheeks on the flight to Madrid, and I carry a scar on my face from where he thrust his pen into my cheek. War's sickness had become mine" (pp 3-6). The days when humanity can hope to save itself from force with force are over

If you're more drawn to theory than to narrative, give Jonathan Schell a go. This distinguished international relations theorist has written *The Unconquerable World*, an eloquent and thoughtful work that convincingly draws from modern history to explain why nations can more frequently choose non-martial means for solving international crises than they customarily choose to do.

Commenting on the net effect of the militarism of the past 100 years, including the invasion of Iraq, Schell writes:

"In a steadily and irreversibly widening sphere, violence, always a mark of human failure and a bringer of sorrow, has now become dysfunctional as a political instrument. Increasingly it destroys the ends for which it is employed, killing the user as well as his victim. It has become the path to hell on earth. ... "The days when humanity can hope to save itself from force with force are over. None of the structures of violence ... can any longer rescue the world from the use of violence, now grown apocalyptic. Force can only lead to more force, not to peace. Only structures of cooperative power can offer hope" (pp 3-7; 345).

There are ways wiser than war. This can be true even when our leaders present us with seemingly intractable problems, like Saddam's WMD or Iran's nuclear weapons program. But in the rush to war, the path of wisdom gets trampled under foot. Hedges and Schell, who, interestingly, at the end of the day do not consider themselves pacifist, are two emerging voices crying, each in their own way, for ways wiser than war.

"Wisdom is better than weapons of war," the sages tell us, and "all her paths are peace" (Ecclesiastes 9:18; Proverbs 3:17). Here is plea for rulers and their advisers to more consistently follow a worldview in which the one war that was truly worth the fight was fought and won by Christ on Calvary's hill, that we ourselves might be made wiser about war. Any takers?

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