

The Real Face of War

We live in the Matrix of War. Not the cyber world depicted in the Keanu Reeves movie, our matrix is shaped by our culture, education, life experience and media. After more than half a century travelling this world and the experience of some thirty conflicts, each one leaving an indelible imprint on my mind, I am certain that our perception of war and its impact on civilians and combatants is largely false. There are no words to describe the full horror of war.

I have looked into a school piled high with thousands of corpses, seen stakes driven into the womb of mothers frozen in death clutching their babies, children with heads split open by machetes, heads of villagers impaled on stakes, boy soldiers aged ten who have raped old women, combatants who have murdered people of their own skin colour, religion and home village, and others who have cut down whole communities of people as if they were not human at all.

Sometimes the battlefield has looked like a human abattoir. War is slaughter.

You will barely believe that soldiers could skin a man alive or rape a young girl in front of her mother. What robs a soldier of so much humanity that he could crush a baby's skull on rocks?
War does this to us.

I have seen the land of the living mutants in Kazakhstan, the radiation poisoning from Soviet nuclear weapons testing that has left children born with two heads, no eyes or twisted tails like mermaids.

I tell you there are no words.

I discussed this with Stephen Spielberg whose films including *Schindler's List* (7 Academy Awards) and *Saving Private Ryan* (Oscar for Best Director) are among the best-known efforts by one of the most successful communicators of our age to convey the cruelty and the terror of war. After talking to many veterans Spielberg felt that some of his scenes caught the butchery and the panic, the heavy dread that drains all energy from the legs and pins some men to the ground in an overwhelming fear. Yet this master storyteller knew that no single account of war, whether on the frontline or at the graveside, captured the full measure of the devastation caused by our predatory species behaviour. Spielberg told me that after all of his struggle to render an authentic experience of war in cinema he believed that his most important filming was the *Shoah Project* which simply recorded unadorned the almost matter of fact accounts by numerous Holocaust survivors of terror on a scale that defies belief. This is his effort to preserve the truth for humanity.

Working against the truth is the Big Lie machine switched on in wartime. As the late and great playwright, Arthur Miller, observed the mark of modern political leadership has been the willingness to send men into war and to lie to your people about why you are doing it.

The shock and awe of propaganda about ‘weapons of mass destruction’ clearly obscured the truth about Australian commitment to the war in Iraq. Long after the death toll had climbed disastrously our impulse was to withdraw from the pain of that reality and retreat into our own comforting amnesia. As the American political strategist Karl Rove bragged, Government’s could create a new political reality before the public had even come to grips with the previous one.

The way the Soviet Government orchestrated its information campaign during the Cold War to convince Russians that a nuclear blast could somehow be a peaceful initiative was Orwellian in its grandeur. In what was then the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan a bomb blast created the so-called Atomic Lake, joining two small rivers but massively irradiating the region for at least 250,000 years.

You can imagine why they chose Kazakhstan and the Asian brigades of the Red Army for testing their radioactive weapons. It is the same reason the French opted for South Pacific nuclear testing, the Americans went to their western states and the British were invited down to ‘isolated’ parts of Australia, irradiating troops, Air Force and Naval personnel and Aboriginal settlements.

The men who have been planning nuclear war, frankly, are delusional. There is no other way to explain the violence they have inflicted on the human family and the earth. Could any psychiatrist certify as reasonable or sane the policy of developing enough nuclear weapons to destroy most of humanity and much of life on earth?

In 1984 I travelled with 50 American physicians in an attempt to bridge the chasm of the Cold War and tell the world the truth about the threat posed by the nuclear arsenals. I was reporting for the ABC’s Four Corners program and my crew and I were struck by the fact that we were the only journalists in the world who felt that this extraordinary effort by eminent physicians was worthy of significant film coverage from beginning to end. Even after the physicians were honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts I could look back and ask why were these men virtually ridiculed by some sections of the media who saw them as mere puppets in a naïve and misguided peace movement?

We met inside the Soviet Union with Russian doctors, led by Dr Yevgeny Chasov, personal physician to most of the Soviet leaders in that era and co-founder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. The renown Harvard cardiologist, Professor Bernard Lown, had forged a strong friendship with Chasov. Bravely these physicians gathered evidence to challenge the conventional military doctrine we all called MAD, belief in the deterrence of mutually assured destruction.

On my trips behind the Iron Curtain to many previously hidden corners of the old Russian Empire I saw the cruelty of their Big Lies. When the Soviet Union became a superpower on 29 August 1949 by detonating its first atomic bomb, the 20 kiloton blast scattered a vast plume of radiation over surrounding villages in Kazakhstan.

Between 1949 and President Gorbachev’s moratorium on nuclear testing in 1990 some 470 nuclear devices were exploded in the northern part of Kazakhstan near the secret military citadel of Semipalatinsk. I led a Sixty Minutes film crew into those irradiated villages in 1993 as the Soviet Union was falling apart.

Kazakh doctors had informed me secretly that many of those nuclear tests, especially 116 detonated above ground, had irradiated villagers and members of the Red Army who were sent across a mock nuclear battleground with no more than gas masks and ponchos for protection. A Russian specialist at the Radiation Institute in Semipalatinsk showed us their chamber of horrors including the Cyclops child, staring at us with a single eye from a laboratory bottle. There were more such bottles than I could count. Each one held a mutant baby destroyed by the weapons of war.

I can still see the hospital wards with Kazakh children dying of radiation related illnesses. The Russians admitted that the nuclear fallout had caused numerous miscarriages, long lasting genetic damage and nightmarish birth defects among some of the living.

In the most remote villages that still had over a thousand times the safe level of radiation I saw twisted cripples shut away in back rooms. Their mothers claimed that when pregnant they had been told by local authorities to stand in front of their homes as the nuclear devices were detonated. Not far away on a lonely treeless plain the Army had built its version of human civilisation, multi-storied concrete buildings, bridges, roads dotted with trucks and even locomotives, to be blown to stardust by nuclear weapons.

I was able to confirm from a Russian scientist and a Health Commission doctor that one 13 year old boy, Berik Syzdykov, had most certainly been taking shape in his mother's womb when there was a deadly venting of radioactivity from Ground Zero.

When I followed Berik's mother into their crumbling mud brick house I saw that the boy's face was so badly disfigured that his features were barely recognizable. He was crowned with huge tumours. Through my translator Berik's mother said, "The bomb did this to my child. His eyes are closed forever. He will never see."

In his imagination Berik was far from Ground Zero, the Atomic Lake and all of the poison caused by nuclear weapons. He lived for music, his only great pleasure. Before we left we found him a tape player and an armful of music from around the world. I will never forget that boy with no eyes. Was this the real face of war?

Presidents and Prime Ministers are far more familiar with that onerous duty of saluting flag draped coffins or trying to comfort the families of young warriors sent to kill or be killed. As Steven Spielberg would understand, there are certain universal moments in war, the poignancy of a military messenger standing at the front screen door, the collapse into numbness when you learn that *your* son, daughter, husband or mother, has been killed in war. Even so, nothing really prepares you for this profound sense of loss. All over this world I have watched people crying hopelessly as a loved one dies in their arms.

In Nicaragua during the civil war between the Sandinistas and Counter-Revolutionaries in 1983 I had seen a man eulogizing his son after the body of the 19 year old was lifted from the back of a pick up truck in the village of Cua. He swore that his son had died for the homeland and by God, he would give the lives of his

three remaining sons in the army to defend the Sandinista Revolution. As the day faded, so did the old man's resoluteness.

His grief and his deep fear of what could very well happen to his other sons found its way to the old man's heart. No one could comfort him. The Sandinista fighters would not look him in the eye. Clutching a bottle he came weaving across the dirt square towards me. I could not look away. I just held out a hand.

I thought of my father, an RAAF airman who had fought in the Malaya Emergency. How would any of us feel if we had lost our soldier son? The old man flung his arms around my neck and sobbed uncontrollably. His sense of loss is one of my many enduring memories of the real pain of war. It is stored in my head and my heart. It informs my work and gives me hope to treat each day as an opportunity to work for a better world. There are so many unforgettable strangers, each one carrying the weight of the tragedy of war.

The combatants I have met around the world, men and women, boys and girls, are conditioned by circumstances and training to suspend their humanity long enough to cut a throat or squeeze the trigger. This is not easily done. The conditioning starts very young. We play war games, parade in uniforms and glorify the endless battle. The media fixes on winners and losers, often missing the tragedy that we are all losing, that civilians and combatants are being scarred. Our approach to history too has this heavy emphasis on heroic victory or defeat but struggles to convey the authentic experience of war. Living in the Matrix of War we are dangerously desensitized.

Despite the death in conflict of 160-180,000,000 human beings in the 20th Century we have not grasped the essential threat war poses to our species. We wage war against other people and against the earth itself.

Many recent conflicts, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Bosnia, East Timor, Sri Lanka, the Civil Wars of Central America and the general pattern of violence in the Middle East and Africa as a whole, show the dangerous link between severe overpopulation and critical stress on badly depleted environments. Everywhere I have roamed since my childhood on the edge of the Malaya Emergency I have witnessed this connection. Conflict over the most basic life-sustaining resources – water, food and fuel – now threatens to dominate our children's lifetime.

British earth scientist Norman Myers calculates that since the end of World War II we have devoured more raw materials than all of our ancestors combined. By 2100 one third of living species may be gone. Watch the birds now on the wing because of the extant 10,000 species, 7000 are in drastic decline. Take a long walk through a forest and drink deep on its beauty because up to 50,000 of the world's 250,000 kinds of plants are expected to disappear over the next few decades. Some of our finest land under cultivation is threatened by rising salt. Global warming could increase the incidence of drought. If sea levels do rise there could be widespread displacement of coastal populations adding to the rising number of refugees now crossing borders.

Our real security will require an understanding of the Big Picture.

We must shatter the Matrix of War and understand the underlying causes of violence to ease the threat to our species and others.

Instead of responding to each crisis as it happens Government leadership and policy must invest time, money, knowledge, technological innovation and wisdom on a 21st Century Strategy for Peace. Without this our species is likely to reduce its time on earth. None of us can comprehend the full consequences of failure. We must act wisely to reduce the fear of difference and the causes of conflict or future generations may not exist.

Military strategies of deterrence, defence or pre-emptive war are all in varying degrees an admission of failure. Re-thinking everything in the measure required for human survival demands new priorities, dialogue and planning for peace.

Individuals, soldiers and civilians, must be led away from the inevitability of conflict to the idea of cooperation and a clear sense of the common good, enlightened self-interest that reduces the chance of violence.

As religion remains the world's most profound cultural divide and often creates the language of conflict, religious leaders need to drop their dogma of exclusivity and stress instead our common humanity.

The world's richest nations are still reneging on their promises made at the UN International Conference on Population and development in Cairo in 1994. Without birth control programs the likelihood of conflict will increase.

Environmental action, including reduction of global warming and a far greater global effort to ease the growing water crisis, are also essential to reduce the risk of war.

Investing in the health of struggling nations to combat preventable diseases such as malaria, cholera and HIV-AIDS not only reduces the instability that fuels war, it strengthens the bonds of the human family.

With around thirty million people now adrift around the world, investing more in providing genuine refuge can also help ease some of the most dangerous population pressures.

We are united by DNA and destiny.

Dare we say it aloud or are we living in fear of being seen as weak? Peace is a superior strategy to war.

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