

Something Like Wishful Thinking: An Appeal for Political Imagination after a Decade of War – by Levi Sikes

What follows is *not* a specific policy analysis to reverse engineer the United States' involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. What follows is an appeal from the collective mind (a commodity that's welcome in a world of “smart bombs” and “intelligence”) and the convicted heart (a lesser-used resource for wartime policy-making) of this generation.

On a peacemaking trip during the March 2003 bombings, Philadelphia-based activist Shane Claiborne found himself before an Iraqi doctor holding the shrapnel-scored body of a young girl. The doctor cried, “this violence is for a world that has lost its imagination.” Staring “square into my eyes,” as Claiborne recalls, he asked, “Has your country lost its imagination?”

This is an appeal for such imagination to whomever will be commander in chief after 2012. Each candidate vying for the youth vote should understand that the constituency stands on the other side of a fracture of trust. I contend that the wars begun during our adolescence have made the fissure. We want to trust in America's greatness of a different kind than military might, and we are skeptical of such efforts being used to nation-build, protect our interests overseas, or to preemptively defend our land from attack. Without question, our fears were real when the towers fell, but they were mostly inherited. We have a healthy skepticism of our fears' rightful permanence.

Still, having spent roughly half our lives with “The War(s)” as an Orwellian fixture of our consciousness, we have found it difficult to understand the rationale and results of them. Being children, as mystified and intimidated by long division as we were by Al-Qaeda, we largely left the discussion to the adults in the room.

My parents recently reminded me of a visit with family friends soon after the invasion of Afghanistan. As “the adults in the room,” they were sharing their reactions when the other husband offered this alternative: “I just wonder what would happen if we dropped food, instead of bombs. I just wonder.” I imagine, as I only can, that there was something like wishful thinking in his voice.

War-weary and fear-strapped, what are we to do? The conversation is now ours as well. Any leader may have the courage, as nationally-awarded essayist Wendell Berry has noted, to send the young off to a war that consigns both sides to the inevitable defeat of soldiers dying, the land suffering, and the animosities sharpening. Violence begets violence. No civil, reasonable leader will take this decision lightly, but even still, where is the leader who will have courage to decide otherwise? This imagination that begets peaceableness could very well produce nothing but good-neighborliness that then shivers at the threat of war. It must be crystalized by action.

What message would it send our enemies if the world's foremost military superpower had the audacity—the seeming foolishness—to indeed drop food instead of bombs? If we reallocated a slim percentage from the fifth of the federal budget that pours into defense to the one-percent trickling into foreign aid? This is “denounced as impractical” and “does not afford opportunities for profit,” yet it “involves danger to practitioners” and “requires sacrifice,” as Berry explains. An honest man indeed, he urges for a peaceableness that would perhaps require one's life. Ask the Amish, Berry says. Ask the martyrs and peaceful revolutionaries. Regardless, “as a

practicable method,” Berry claims, “it reduces helplessness in the face of conflict . . . [For] the peaceable person may find several solutions, the violent person only one.” Indeed, there seemed to be only one option ten years ago.

Further, let there be imagination enough to not be able to ignore the total cost of war. On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I was called on to remember what happened on that day to 3,000 Americans and to our nation. I duly remembered what happened, in all of its horror and loss. I also remembered what is *still* happening, in all of its horror and loss. This war not only on terror but *of* terror still lurches along beyond our borders—and within them, too. To not speak of the military suicides that rival and often exceed those killed in active duty, to not speak of the literally hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties, to not remember these losses in our remembrances, is tragic.

That itself signals a loss—a loss of political imagination that would entreat the president-to-be to break this logic of retribution and to insist that peaceableness as a policy is strength and intelligence of the highest order. A bomb-bursting light should *not* be the outward-going beacon of American values, and may there be courage enough in our home of the brave to realize this.