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Special Article. Commentaries on a World at War: SARS, Weapons of Mass Destruction, Preemption, the United Nations, International Respect and Confidence, and Truth.

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Abstract. This article highlights cognitive difficulties exposed by examples of contemporary security conflict.

The world is always at war, because there are always narratives of struggle that bear on matters of life and death. Struggle exemplifies conflict of two kinds. The first is the internal striving to perceive threat and to conceive tactics and strategies to manage threat even to the point of transducing threat to opportunity within struggle. The second is the externalization of perception and conception as they found and help impel behavior within the context of struggle. What follows are examples wherein both kinds of conflict expose cognitive difficulties that, in turn, impede successful resolution of struggle.

SARS. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) illustrates how a medical phenomenon can globally affect a nexus of non-medical phenomena that have psychological consequences. For example, perceptions of SARS and conceptions of confronting it are deleteriously affecting the airline industry. At least some potential airline passengers are less likely to fly. Some airline passengers will fly less often. Air crew are experiencing yet another threat that can contribute to experiencing anxiety, depression, and anger through contemplating their own health and the health of the airline industry facing a drop-off in clientele, revenue, and profits.

Part of this psychology bears on constructs of disease and contagion. Of special salience to the former are the invisibility of many causal factors and the primal insidiousness of invisible factors crossing self-other boundaries and representing a lethal conclusion. Of special salience to the latter is that means of transmission are largely unknowable in any particular case and--because of this--it may seem that there is no safe place to go. Together, disease and contagion can yield a reality wherein attack can come from within and without, at any time, with no predictability.

Yet the language and, presumably, the thinking of representatives of some airline authorities suggests an ignoring or discounting of this psychology. For example, as an airline's vice-president for safety and engineering has stated, "A flight attendant isn't going to do anything different in terms of isolating a passenger, whether it's SARS or a heart attack….It doesn't matter whether it's a snowstorm in Detroit or SARS in Hong Kong or anthrax in Baltimore, or a strike by ground workers in Paris [in] dealing with unexpected situations" (Maynard, 2003).

In defense of this airline representative, the argument may have been intended to suggest that--like any other problem or crisis--procedures can be developed and followed to the benefit of aircrew and passengers alike.

However, the arguments also belie the differences in psychology between disease and contagion on the one hand and a natural disaster or a heart attack on the other--viz., differences concerning what is understood from what is not, what can invade and infect the self from what cannot, and even what can

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be seen from cannot. If the airline industry is to contain--if not deter--the noxious non-medical effects of SARS, it must understand not only its clientele's flight-related preferences but also psychological elements that are not preferred but elementary.

Weapons of Mass Destruction. An ever-growing topic of public discourse concerns the hunt for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) within Iraq by United States Government (USG)-led teams of intelligence, weapons, and scientific experts. If WMD are not found--so one narrative goes--the very rationale for the USG-led military intervention against the Saddam Hussein government implodes as does the intervention's morality, ethics, legality, and utility.

This line of discourse, however, is less than of smoking gun quality. Even if there were no WMD within Iraq in the proximal events antecedent to the war, there certainly were sufficient knowledge, intention, materiel, and willing recipients and implementers. A WMD capability facilitated and employed by the Saddam Hussein government--regardless of the physical presence of the capability within Iraq--would seem a certainty. Here, employment would include both the direct physical use against targets and the psychological use through threat of use to achieve various political and military objectives.

The vital question should then become not whether there is a presence or absence of a smoking gun but the inevitability and omnipresence of a WMD quests coming to fruition. Faced with inevitability and omnipresence--a psychological and behavioral given--one must concede that there is no imploding rationale.

Preemption. Many opponents of the USG-led military intervention against the Saddam Hussein government point to the construct of striking first without being attacked--some combination of preemption and prevention--as being plain wrong. Instead, there is an insistence on waiting to be attacked before striking as being plain right.

The problem with this thinking is that one may not have a chance to strike if one has to wait for an attack that can preclude the intention and/or capability of striking--e.g., one's death or loss of striking intention and/or capability. This sort of an attack--characterized by unacceptable lethality an destructiveness, surprise, and perpetration by non-state actors--is a new development in the ongoing narrative about the world at war.

Are purveyors of thought about the wrongness of striking first in at least some situations courageously or even foolishly insisting that there are some things worth dying for--such as the idea that one should never strike first?   If the question becomes what is worth dying for, there is much room for argumentation. If there is no question but, instead, an assertion that one must always wait for the attack, a behavioral analysis of the opponents' personal lives will usually belie the assertion. The argument of these opponents then becomes the following: what one may do for one's own good, one cannot do for the collective good--an interesting converse of utilitarian principles.

United Nations. Many opponents and some supporters of the USG-led military intervention against the Saddam Hussein government and post-intervention activities of relief, recovery, reconstitution, and reconstruction have asserted and are asserting that all is illegal, unethical, and immoral without United Nations (UN) approval and control. These assertions (at least those that are sincerely advanced) are premised on two notions--that military intervention without UN approval is just plain wrong and that post-intervention activities are both wrong and impossible to carry out without UN resources. These assertions also are premised on an additional notion--that the USG is engaged in unilateral action.

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On the contrary, state actors can attack in self-defense, including in defense of certain values--at Issue being what is self-defense, what values apply, and whether self-defense and specific values applied in a particular case. As well, the USG may well be able to carry out post-intervention activities with the help of other countries outside of a UN imprimatur. In addition, both for military intervention and post-intervention, unilaterality has not occurred and is not occur occurring. Finally, actions and non-actions under the UN imprimatur have not always been ethical and moral--political opponents agreeing on this even if disagreeing about which specifics apply.

International Respect and Confidence. Many opponents of the USG-led military intervention against the Saddam Hussein government assert that said intervention has led to a significant loss of international respect and confidence for the USG.

This may be the case. Yet one can also argue to the contrary: that friends and foes alike are being confronted with USG actions worthy of respect and confidence. These actions exemplify seeking to achieve political objectives based on explicit values of the classical liberal tradition--e.g., more than just saying no to terrorism with global reach and more than just saying yes to representative democracy and basic human and civil freedoms. Here, statements of not respecting and being confident in the USG are actually superficial maskings of increasing respect and confidence. USG actions may be vilified as imperialist but--as with propaganda--imperialism may be for good or evil.

Showing the Truth. During the USG-led military intervention against the Saddam Hussein government and the intervention's aftermath, one skein of public discourse has focused on what to show and what not to show the global audience. At Issue are dead bodies, certain types of destruction, and certain social situations such as being a prisoner of war.

Some opponents of not showing everything and anything assert that not showing is intended to "shield the public from the full horror of war….[and] the primary vehicle for communicating and preserving the full extent of man's numbing capacity for cruelty" (Hayden, 2003). However, this thinking is based on an outmoded assumption concerning the sensory and perceptual qualities of visual and auditory stimuli. In fact, perception is constructivist in nature, objective reality but a social construct, and truth as a perceptual given but a rhetorical device. Seeing is believing is but a belief not Truth.

Conclusion. The above examples illustrate only that the world at war has a psychological foundation to resist the winds of peace.

(See Hauke, C. (2002). Jung and the postmodern: The interpretation of realities. Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, groups & organizations, 8, 558-562; Hayden, D. (April 9, 2003). Letter to the editor. The New York Times, p. A20; Hirsch, I. (2003). Analysts' observing-participation with theory. [B}Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 72, 217-240; Josephs, I.E. (2002). Self-construction in a nightly gathering of culture and person: Rendezvous or conflict? Culture & Psychology, 8, 449-458; Kinsella, D., & Russett, B. (2002). Conflict emergence and escalation in interactive international dyads, Journal of Politics, 64, 1045-1068; Maynard, M. April 18, 2003). One airline's 5 weeks with a medical threat. The New York Times, p. A9; Ooi, C.S. (2002). Persuasive histories: Decentering, recentering and the emotional crafting of the past. Journal of Organizational Change Management, 15, 606-621; Simon, J.D. (1999). Nuclear, biological, and chemical terrorism: Understanding the threat and designing responses. International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, 1, 81-89.) (Keywords: Confidence, Preemption, Respect, SARS, Truth, United Nations, Weapons of Mass Destruction.)

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