

After the Paris Attacks, a Call for Justice—Not Vengeance. A lesson from the US: “an “all-out war” on terror only creates more terrorism”

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The years after September 11 are a powerful reminder that an “all-out war” on terror only creates more terrorism.

France is in mourning and in shock. We still don't know how many people were killed and injured. In fact, there's a lot we still don't know—including who was responsible. The ISIS claim of responsibility tells us virtually nothing about who really planned or carried out the attacks; opportunist claims are an old story. But the lack of information hasn't prevented lots of assumptions about who is “obviously” responsible and what should be done to them. Already the call is rising across France—“this time it's all-out war.”

But we do know what happens when cries of war and vengeance drown out all other voices; we've heard them before.

A few days after the 9/11 attacks, we at the Institute for Policy Studies and some of our allies organized a public statement whose lead signatories included Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover, Gloria Steinem, Rosa Parks, and many more. The statement reflected the deeply-rooted fear we all shared, that however horrific the attacks of September 11, it was George W. Bush's statement in response to those attacks that threatened the world. That was the moment he announced that the response to this enormous crime against humanity would be a war—that he would lead the world to war “against terror.”

Wars of vengeance won't work for France anymore than they worked for the US. We know how that played out. It didn't work out so well. Already we're hearing French officials and commentators and pundits calling for more of the same. “This time it's all-out war” is the French version of Bush's “you're either with us or with the terrorists.”

But wars of vengeance won't work for France anymore than they worked for the United States.

The public statement we issued back in 2001 was a call for “Justice, Not Vengeance.” It began:

“Our hearts and prayers go out in compassion to the victims and their families who have suffered so greatly from the unspeakable acts of brutality committed on September 11, 2001.

We share the shock, anger, and grief of so many people in the U.S. and around the world and call for a response that is prompt, just, and effective. We foresee that a military response would not end the terror. Rather, it would spark a cycle of escalating violence, the loss of innocent lives, and new acts of terrorism. As citizens of this great nation, we support the efforts being made to find those behind

the acts of terror. Bringing them to justice under the rule of law—not military action—is the way to end the violence.

We note that although the terrorist acts of September 11 were aimed at the United States, citizens of over 50 nations are counted among the victims. The carnage of terrorism knows no borders. Our best chance for preventing such devastating acts of terror is to act decisively and cooperatively as part of a community of nations within the framework of international law to root out terrorism and work for justice at home and abroad.

We affirm that the United States is a nation of laws, rooted in fundamental American values of democracy, justice, human rights, and respect for life. The laws that protect our civil liberties and freedoms in the United States are part of what define us as a nation. They must not be abridged; to do so would offer victory to those who wrought these vengeful acts."

But those laws, the laws rooted in "democracy, justice, human rights and respect for life" were, of course, abridged. Worse than abridged, they were crushed—by torture at Bagram and Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, and by airstrikes and drone attacks that killed scores of Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani, Yemeni, Somali, or other civilians for every alleged bad guy they took aim at. The laws were sidelined by racial profiling and round-ups of Muslims and Arabs and Arab-Americans, violated by NSA spying on a scale so massive as to be virtually unfathomable, ignored by craven members of Congress content to allow presidents unlimited funds to wage unilateral wars.

There was another possible response, the one reflected in the French newspaper *Le Monde* just hours after the 9/11 attacks. "*Nous sommes tous Américains*," the headline read. We are all Americans now. It was a sentiment reflected in candlelight vigils, in handwritten letters, in the human solidarity of crowds pouring into the streets from Tehran to Tokyo. And it was squandered by the wars that followed—the wars for which Bush told the world and lied to Americans with the claim that the choice was to either go to war, or "let 'em get away with it." And since no one wanted to let "them" get away with such a heinous crime, a vast majority of the American people supported war. At first. But then, as a powerful anti-war movement rose, more people began to see, to understand, the cost—human, economic, environmental, legal, diplomatic, and beyond—of these wars, and their failure to achieve any of the powerful goals we were assured they would accomplish.

Because now everyone knows the devastating wars that killed so many hundreds of thousands of ordinary people didn't work to wipe out terrorism. Terrorism survives wars; people don't. We saw the proof of that again last night in Paris, and we saw it the day before in Beirut. We were hearing sounds of victory from US war-makers. The Obama strategy was working, they said. ISIS was being pushed back from Sinjar by Kurdish militias. A US airstrike assassinated Mohammed Emwasi, known as "jihadi John" from the ISIS videos. Yet the war—a new version of that same "global war on terror"—is still being waged, and clearly it still isn't working. Because you can't bomb terrorism—you can only bomb people. You can bomb cities. Sometimes you might kill a terrorist—but that doesn't end terrorism; it only encourages more of it.

It didn't have to be that way. A day or so after the 9/11 attacks, we at the IPS received a message from a colleague of ours, the great Bolivian water-rights activist Oscar Olivera. "We still believe another world is possible," he wrote. "We are with you." Global solidarity with us—with Americans—was real. No longer, not since our government took the world to war.

It doesn't have to be that way in Paris. It isn't too late. "We stand with Paris" is our cry today—as "*Nous sommes tous Américains*" was the cry of our French comrades 15 years ago. Maybe they can get it right.

Phyllis Bennis

P.S.

* “After the Paris Attacks, a Call for Justice—Not Vengeance”. THE NATION NOVEMBER 14, 2015:
<http://www.thenation.com/article/after-paris-attacks-a-call-for-justice-not-vengeance/>

* Phyllis Bennis is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies and of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. She is active in the US and global Palestinian rights and peace movements, and her books include *Challenging Empire: How People, Governments, and the UN Defy US Power* and *Ending the US War in Afghanistan: A Primer*.