

EDITORIAL

A gift for the New Year: War

By Kwame Dawes

Perhaps it is just me, but I have a strong sense that since the problems began in the Persian Gulf a few months ago, American Public television has been showing many films about America at war. Since September of last year I have watched programmes about both World Wars, the Civil War, the Korean conflict and the Vietnam War. Little has been done on the more recent excursions of the American Army like those in Grenada and Panama. Despite this, there is a sense that the country is preparing itself for yet another conflict.

We are already getting used to the idea of people dying for their country in large numbers. We are also understanding something about the horrors of war particularly in the Cronkite documentaries on the Vietnam War. The programmes on the American Civil War have varied. The award winning "The Civil War" by Burns is a remarkable and moving documentary with a clear perspective on the motives of the war. Other programmes have been less successful in showing the sheer horror of day to day conflict, but all indicate that wars are truly traumatic and life-altering events. Events that a country should avoid by all means.

The Persian Gulf is not a simple black and white situation. True, Sadaam's invasion of Kuwait is brute aggression by any definition. The bigger nation has taken advantage of the smaller wealthier nation. Surely, this is unacceptable. However, the painful truth is that larger countries have been doing this very thing to smaller countries repeatedly over the past hundred years. Why should this act by Hussein have generated such interest among the Americans and their allies? The answer is obvious: economic interests. This is what complicates the issue. America has managed to bare-facedly repeat the rhetoric of fighting for freedom and equality when that is of the least importance to them in this instance. Is it not clear to American leaders that when the death toll begins to increase as a result of the fighting, Americans will begin to question their very presence in the region in the same way that they did their presence in Southeast Asia in the sixties and early seventies? Are they not aware that traditionally the values that have kept Americans fighting with full support from home have been perceived as wholly moral and based on a sense of doing the right thing and fighting for the cause of a noble ideal?

The answers will become obvious in the next few months, but at the moment America should truly examine the rhetoric it has been using to rally the nation into a sympathetic home front. The people of the Middle East have a greater problem to contend with for it is their land that is going to host the conflict starring two stubborn powers. Western presence in the Middle East has never been a very pleasant thing. The Arabs have never developed strong ties with the West and there is no reason why they will now. At the same time one must consider the assertion that the nations of the Middle East could have dealt with this dilemma in their own way with minimal intervention. Naturally, the solutions may not have been to the liking of the West, but then that is something that the West has to come to accept in this day and age.

I am reminded of the Liberian situation in this regard. When the civil war in Liberia got going in late summer of last year the bloodletting and drama of a three tiered military war was the rave. Doe's position was being threatened but his friendship to America did not seem to do him any good. America would not get involved openly. Later in the day, when the coalition of West African states decided to send in a peace-keeping force, America's reaction was skeptical. There can be no peace-keeping if there is no peace to keep, they said. Things have changed now. The fighting has been curtailed and it seems as if Taylor is becoming more cooperative. The peace-keeping force has brought some order. The lesson here, though, is that America's involvement in moral battles is very mercurial even if predictable. As long as their economic interest is not at stake their involvement is never guaranteed. This is not a bad thing. What is bad is when there is a pretence that America is always on the side of the good guys. There is no truth in that and it is this fact that will diminish support for the American intervention in the Middle East.

Despite these thoughts, I must admit that I am concerned about the potential of war in the Gulf. Iraq's promise of unconventional war-fare is not to be taken lightly and we may be seeing a curious phenomenon in America's war experience when the home front itself becomes threatened. It is not unreasonable to think that the Iraqis will attempt to hit American targets at home. Many say that America should withdraw, while others argue that Iraq instigated the problem and they should return home and leave things as they were. This is a hard call to make. The fact is Kuwaitis will be deprived of their sovereignty if Iraq is allowed to stay. There is something emotionally compelling about their helplessness.

From our perspective in Canada and in other parts of the world there are many lessons to be learnt. The most important one is that we live in a world that plays hard ball when it comes to politics. People will die. Sometimes it is impossible to remain passive about international politics because the players do not always share the same values. Surely, the increased world interest in a single international matter is indicative of a growing awareness that world powers will soon have to accept many more members by dint of their potential danger to world security. The implication is a shrinking world stage. America may be hypocritical but Sadaam is wrong. Ousting him will not change very much in the Persian Gulf and soon the Palestinian issue will have to become a central issue to be dealt with. In the mean time we must simply accept the fact that we are witnessing the beginnings of the working out of these problems.

It is a tough way to start the new year, but it is indicative of what the world will be like in the nineteen nineties. The absence of a Cold War has left a significant vacuum in the psyche of the Western World. Societies seem to thrive on the existence of a clearly defined enemy. Ironically, the existence of an enemy is incentive for a peaceful existence (albeit a cautious peace). Now the two super powers who effectively established a series of satellites through out the world have lost their influence and consequently have lost their own political control of the satellite countries. As a result, new, once quiet nation states are beginning to flex their increasingly strong muscles. If Iraq or any other Middle Eastern nation is to assume the position of Enemy Number One, it will take a few decades for both parties to develop an ethic of international political behavior that is common to both. The cultural divide between the West and the Middle East is markedly larger than was the divide between the Soviet Union and America. It is this fact that makes these days so interesting to live in.

One wonders whether further sanctions could have prompted Sadaam to withdraw. If Sadaam is a man who will not respond to reason and the safety of his people, it is likely that these may not have a great difference. America could consider covert intervention in Iraqis security, but this is also a difficult and unlikely route to follow. Does this mean war is inevitable? The United Nations has been convinced of such. Perhaps they are hoping that if Sadaam is ousted with force, it will begin a new order in world security in which the United Nations is the powerful Big Daddy - the watchdog.

I don't envy the men and women who are in the Middle East today. The Iraqis will see many of their people slaughtered and so will the Americans and the British. A generation of young people will develop the brutal psychological ailment of trauma brought on by participating in the killing of fellow human beings. It is a terrible price to pay and we are left as spectators in the midst of it all. Happy New Year? I think not. I really think not.

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