

A Veteran ReLooks at War

We have collectively learned much in the last couple years about a secret and frightful new war machine – Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, aka drones. That is a topic for another day, however. The new awareness has generally increased since 2011, a year which witnessed the unexpected assassination of America's greatest terrorist nemesis, as well as the official conclusion of the American military presence in Iraq. Afghanistan has long been regarded by public opinion as the 'good' or 'necessary' war, while Iraq is mostly called (quite rightly) a war of 'choice' or even 'American adventurism', etc. Osama bin Laden and his rogue al-Qaeda network were based out of Afghanistan (after relocating from other less-than-desirable places such as Somalia and Sudan), which provided the rationale for a bombing campaign (what is there to bomb there, anyway?) followed by a seemingly interminable occupation of that unfortunate country. Here are the agreeable official euphemisms for these actions (which are without a doubt not "wars", since war has not been declared by Congress per the Constitution; in fact, the last "War" that America officially declared was World War II): "Operation Iraqi Freedom", which lasted from 2003-2011 (a *mere* 9 years), and "Operation Enduring Freedom", which began in late 2001 and will apparently continue until *at least* 2014. This last one, 'OEF', is already America's longest war at 12 years and counting. Any sense of "progress" cannot be measured except by often-misleading statistics, and, as usual, civilians have suffered the most (while, as usual, arms producers have benefitted the most). It did not have to be like this.

During my career as a US Army Officer, I spent two years in Afghanistan (between 2005-2008) as a part of 'OEF VI' and 'OEF VIII' (the Roman numerals signifying the change of command from one Army unit to another). On my second tour, I discovered and read a book by Italian journalist Tiziano

Terzani called *Letters Against the War*. It is no understatement to say that it began to open my eyes to the nature of the conflict I was personally (and quite voluntarily) involved in, since it had, at that time, long been a taboo subject to criticize the war in Afghanistan (once again, the 'good' war). In fact, it was not until roughly 2008, after years of political mismanagement (by the Bush administration as well as Congress) and neglect (by the media and populace at large), that public attention began to change and people began to question why we are still sending money and soldiers to kill and be killed in Afghanistan. Terzani wrote his letters in the months immediately after September 11, 2001, and he died less than 3 years later in 2004 at the age of 65. I find that even now, 12 years after their first publication during those heated months which followed 9/11, they still remain relevant and are well worth reading by anyone with even a passing interest in world affairs. They are short, and here you can read a [free English online edition](#).

Terzani was never well-known in Italy until his last years. He left Italy to study Chinese in America, and for the rest of his career worked as a journalist for the German magazine *Der Spiegel* and traveled around every part of Asia. He was often a war correspondent and reported on virtually every conflict in Asia from the 1970's until post- 9/11. He witnessed both the fall of Saigon to the Vietcong, and the fall of Phnom Pehn to the Khmer Rouge. Obviously, he was no stranger to bloodshed. That is exactly why he was a pacifist who spoke strongly against war.

This is the context that underlies his *Letters Against the War*. Rather than being swept up by the raw emotion (and a generous amount of bloodlust) of 9/11 like most of the West (including and especially the media), and passively accepting blanket Manichean dichotomies such as "with us or against us", he appealed to reason and understanding. He argued that the solution to violence is not to create more violence.

Especially when much of that violence comes in the form of bombs dropped from nearly invisible airplanes onto largely civilian populations who have no idea what the Twin Towers were or what happened there. The letters were originally published in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* as Terzani's rebuttal of a violent anti-Muslim invective by fellow journalist and Florentine Oriana Fallaci. Terzani traveled through Pakistan and into Afghanistan in the weeks after 9/11, and reports firsthand the mood of the people there and the situation on the ground. He demonstrates his encyclopedic knowledge of Asian history and politics to explain how things work in a society that is so different from our own, and how we can trace the historical evolution behind radical Islam. While I may not agree with every opinion in the book, it is written with wisdom and circumspection, and I would recommend everyone read it.

At the very least, the point of reading and pondering such opinions is an important step for every citizen in a free society for any political action, but especially in the case of imminent war. We vote only for politicians, but cannot vote for each policy they enact after elected, and certainly not for wars or bombings or secret defense expenditures. Politicians will use every tool at their disposal to start a war if that is in their interest, regardless of the cost to the country, and the world, as a whole, not to mention human life. Methods to manipulate the public discourse are used as much as possible, with propaganda and misinformation the sharpest tools, in order to justify decisions that the electorate might not otherwise support (and cannot directly vote on). Would people still unquestioningly advocate the path towards war in the days after 9/11 if they knew the full costs that would be borne many years later? How many lives of Afghans and Iraqis and Americans (and other global citizens) is it worth to "avenge" the nearly 3000 mostly American lives lost on 9/11 (the true number will never be known, but must surely be at least two orders of magnitude higher)? How much

money are we willing to spend on over a decade of war-making (an unthinkable percentage of which is for defense contractors, corrupt officials, or is still “unaccounted for”), when there are plenty of people in our own country and around the world who need food, medical care, and a fair chance to get an education? I think there are occasions in which war is either necessary or inevitable, but this is not very often, and should always be debated beforehand and entered into with caution and great reluctance (and not with emotion or bloodlust – the cheers following the death of Osama bin Laden attest to the latter). According to Steven Pinker’s recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, conflict and violence are gradually decreasing in the human species. I think and hope that this is generally correct, and gives us extra reason to question the need and circumstances of any new potential war. Iran and Syria are the latest examples. We should always be, by default, in the opposition to any political scheme that attempts to entangle us in wars, which are by nature destructive and unpredictable. Terzani made the case for peace (and still does so through his writings), and I think with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that he was one of the few voices of reason.

[TED talk of Alberto Cairo, an Italian doctor who has helped war wounded in Afghanistan since 1990 and who Terzani met and wrote about in Letters Against the War](#)

On a lighter related note, my favorite book by Terzani is probably his most popular, *A Fortune-Teller Told Me* (*Un indovino mi disse*). This 1995 book tells about how in 1976 in Hong Kong, a Chinese fortune-teller told Terzani that he would face mortal danger in 1993 and should not use airplanes in that year. Terzani didn’t pay much attention (as none of us would for a prediction 17 years in the future), but at the end of 1992 he remembered it once again and, either out of fear or as a game, he decided to travel around Asia that year only by ground (or sea) transportation. Over the course of trains,

boats, donkeys, and other means, he makes his way around Laos, Thailand, Burma, China, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, Russia, and India recounting local history and legends, and testing each type of fortune-teller everywhere he goes. He is not a believer in superstition, and discusses in detail the many types of tricks of the trade of various astrologers, palm readers, etc, all of which are apparently quite popular in Asia. Most of all, he writes convincingly of the benefits of slow travel by ground, and how much deeper one feels a place with this method as opposed to hurried hops from one sterile airport to another. I have not succeeded in totally making all of my travels so ideally slow and plane-free, but I have tried it on occasion when I can (such as a bus trip from Wales to Italy in one case), and it is a richer experience (not to mention avoiding the annoyances of the post-9/11 airport security). Terzani is an expert in all matters of Asia, and this book is worth reading for his anecdotes and unique perspective alone.

I recently had occasion to visit a place called Orsigna in the beautiful hills of northern Tuscany which was the setting for a film. The film was a German production based on the memoirs and final book of Terzani, *La fine è il mio inizio* (*The End is My Beginning*) (co-written and published posthumously by his son, Folco, in 2006). Terzani was born in Orsigna, and returned there from meditation in his Himalayan mountain hut shortly before his death (his stomach cancer caused his health to deteriorate rapidly). It is a very nice book, and the setting of the film itself is inspiring.

Thanks for reading, welcome to the new website, and please leave comments at your pleasure.

To put a hopeful paraphrase on a quotation of George Santayana: "Only the *future* has seen the end of war."

(please watch John Lennon's video below for a look at the true face of war)