

Each Soldier a Thread



The violence that reached our shores left me at a loss—every attempt to conceptualize these tragedies failed to capture the emotions moving me. I tried to make sense of San Bernardino and Orlando by writing, but after a dozen drafts I realized that failure is at the heart of my shock and sorrow. We bore witness as attacks ravaged Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. I watched each attack unfold, felt each death defeat me. We fought for Afghanistan, for America, but it was for nothing.

My friends that served in Iraq echoed similar sentiments in the spring of 2014 when Daesh captured swathes of Iraq and Syria. They watched everything they struggled for fall apart. It was a cruel turn to watch ISIS flags fluttering from American Humvees. We were warriors in the world's most powerful military, but most of us were helpless to act. More than six thousand of our brothers and sisters died, more than fifty thousand wounded—what will their legacy be?

Like many of my brothers and sisters that served in Iraq and Afghanistan, I poured my heart and soul into this war. I knew we were fighting an uphill battle when I joined, but I thought if we fought for the Afghan people, maybe the terrorism they faced wouldn't come home with me. I failed. I remember reading a [Washington Post article](#) about my area of operations—the Jalrez Valley in Wardak Province—mere months after we returned

home in the fall of 2011. When we arrived, two girls' schools thrived just outside our outpost, our Afghan counterparts enjoyed good relations with the locals, and many local villagers helped us fight the Taliban shadow government. One girls' school is ruined now, the other beset by drive-bys and bombings. The article said Jalrez was named "the Valley of Death." My Afghan comrades—with whom I broke bread and bled alongside—despair that the population threw their lot in with the Taliban. The valley is theirs now, how long until they seize the province? The nation?

The day after Orlando was warm and sunny—the summer felt garish and irreverent against my frustration. I tried to explain to a civilian colleague what I felt, and she asked me how I could feel responsible for the attack. She said it seemed so removed from my deployment in 2010. Many of us were brought up in the military schooled in counterinsurgency, which taught us that what the "strategic corporal" did on the ground impacted the whole war. Indeed, leaders on the local level like Colonel H.R. McMaster influenced national policy. I learned that war is not just red and blue symbols on a map, but a complex and entangled system that includes every one of us. Each raid, each dollar, each soldier a thread in a web. It connects a rifle to a villager, a villager to a valley, a valley to a nation—each strand leading to another variable, another effect. What implications did losing Jalrez have on the war? I can't pretend to know what Omar Mateen thought of the war on his family's country, but if it was mine I would be full of rage and sorrow. I can't say where those feelings would take me, and maybe that's why I can't make Omar into the enemy no matter how hard I try. Every attempt to understand his decisions dropped me into a void. I told my colleague that I couldn't draw a line from Jalrez to a mass murder, only that I felt responsible.

In a society so divorced from the implications of war and foreign policy, veterans not only bear the physical and

emotional costs of war, but shoulder the moral responsibility as well. Only during the Global War on Terror has the term “moral injury” entered into the lexicon of [mental health and trauma](#). One need only look to the International NGO Safety Organization or Team Rubicon to see veterans’ commitment to duty and social responsibility. If one thing can be said of veterans it is our need to act, but there’s something else driving us. In the words of Chris Hedges, war is a force that gives us meaning. Danger makes life simple—survival supplants wardrobe choices and cocktail selections. There is a singularity of purpose and a definition of clarity I have found nowhere else. It joins us irrevocably. Sebastian Junger’s new book *Tribe* examines the bonds that come from collective hardship in wartime—one woman in the book, Nidzara Ahmetasevic, was evacuated from Bosnia only to make a harrowing return trip back to Sarajevo because it was too hard to keep going while her family suffered. “We were the happiest,” she told Junger. “And we laughed more.”

Like her, I miss much of my war. My brother, an active duty Infantry Sergeant and OEF vet, says he wishes he was back in Afghanistan. He holds out hope for another deployment, another opportunity to get back into the fight. The thought terrifies me, I don’t know what I would do if I lost my little brother. At the same time, another part of me wishes I could go back with him. War gave me camaraderie and meaning, but it was an addiction. Karl Marlantes called combat the crack cocaine of adrenaline highs, with crack cocaine consequences.

I look at the attacks at home and abroad, and I wonder if the source of my despair isn’t the tragedy of each event, but a yearning for combat. We said we were in Afghanistan to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, but when fighting season came I savored the fighting. It came to eclipse the desire to build infrastructure, capacity, and governance in Afghanistan. It even eclipsed the beauty of the little girls that welcomed us into their schools. I lost Jalrez because I

was too intoxicated by the smell of gunpowder and the power of calling Apache gunships to raze the valley. I kept the Afghans I was supposed to serve at rifle's length out of fear, alienating them. When I came home I tried to pay penance for my blood lust by working for veterans non-profits and by working with refugees to the U.S. I thought if I could save enough lives, make a big enough difference, then I could eventually make up for leaving Jalrez in chaos. For a while I told myself I was doing good work, making a difference. Then a car would backfire or the neighbors would set off a string of firecrackers—I would break into a sweat, my glands taking me out of reality and back into the fight. After that the pathways addicted to adrenaline reactivated like reopened wounds, a bitter reminder of internal war between my compassion and savagery.

After Orlando, it feels as if there may be no way of erasing my guilt because we brought home the dualism we took to war. In many ways, the contradiction of duty and conscience against violence and war reflects the contradictions in our national narrative. When we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, we said it was to liberate the oppressed. At first that held true: many Afghans and Iraqis welcomed us, welcomed the opportunity we appeared to herald—though our collective desire for revenge colored the decision to engage in both wars. The product is the despair of a failed enterprise of our own making. We say that all men are created equal, but black Americans are still murdered with impunity. We call for an end to violence in Iraq and Syria, but our only action is to drop bombs. We brought other things home—our police forces mutated into paramilitary organizations, our xenophobia morphed into something that politicians actively encourage to win elections with. Perhaps this will be the legacy of the war on terror that so many of us veterans and countless more civilians suffered for.

My good friend and confidant Kristen is a fellow vet, a Florida native, and identifies as part of the LGBTQ community.

In the days following Orlando, she said,

“I fought for them. For the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. And it’s come to this.” Her tears fell.

I projected all my guilt, all my failure onto those words. In my head, I listed people I left behind in Afghanistan, the people that have to live with my mistakes. My guilt was immobilizing me into inaction, another failure. Kristen said something else.

“Why aren’t we celebrating the resilience of gay communities? Why aren’t we celebrating the lives of the people of color killed in this hate crime?”

I despair because I am complicit. We all are, yet despair and failure alone cannot define us. We must take ownership of our wars and their effects to face the future. We saw the consequences of war because we answered the call. For us, duty doesn’t end when we take off the uniform. We must share our experiences lest we leave the nation deaf and blind. Tomorrow, we build. Leading voices like Phil Klay, [call on veterans to make art](#) for the urgent cause of cultivating a more responsible body politic. Our definition of community must shift from the brotherhood of warriors to include voters, fighters, and victims of these conflicts. Then, we avenge the victims of these hate crimes, these terror attacks.

Then, when we fight it won’t be for nothing.

Are We Still Charlie Hebdo?:

The Growing Dissonance between Extremism and Free Speech

I started preparing this essay a month or two ago to collect my thoughts about the after effects of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and how the limits of free speech are being tested as extremism and intolerance increase in Europe and America. Now, the latest attacks in Paris on November 13th have made me reevaluate my original thoughts and given them new urgency, but have not substantially changed my views. The key issues I will discuss are the nature of Daesh, the refugee crisis, climate change, media hypocrisy, right-wing extremism, and free speech. These are complicated issues, obviously, with many interwoven factors at play, and I will do my best to make sense of the situation as I see it.

Let's begin with a brief look at what Daesh is (one thing I have learned from philosophy is that linguistic terminology matters; I don't like the term ISIS because it was chosen by them and it disparages the ancient Egyptian goddess and Roman cult figure Isis; the term used by the French government and Secretary of State John Kerry is "Daesh", which is more useful because it delegitimizes the group and they hate it). From what I can gather, the purpose of this self-declared Islamic Caliphate is to gain and hold as much territory as possible in order to establish a haven for what they consider pure Islam, all while making incessant war against neighbors and non-Muslims until their awaited apocalypse. For brevity's sake, an apocalyptic death cult that happens to follow the words of the Koran literally. [This long article](#) in *The Atlantic* by Graeme Wood does a good job explaining the rationale behind the erstwhile Caliphate. One of the conclusions is that, despite how it looks from Western eyes, Daesh is a very reasonable and consistent group of people; it just happens that their reasons

and consistency spring from a bloody and black-and-white ideology deriving from 7th century Arabia. Up to now, Daesh has seemed content to wage war only in its own neighborhood of Syria and Iraq. Unlike al-Qaeda (which was responsible for the Charlie Hebdo attack), Daesh is not primarily a terrorist organization but an actual government, however illegitimate and doomed to failure. (It is also highly relevant that the two groups have [long been feuding](#) for the soul of Islamic jihad, and are in no way allied). The attacks in Paris could have two possible interpretations: Daesh is branching out to international terrorism for the first time, either out of desperation after recent setbacks or to further their apocalyptic aims; or, the attacks were claimed by Daesh only after the fact, and were actually carried out by desperate European-based sympathizers who were unable to reach Syria themselves. As far as its origins, it is not too hard to trace the rise of extremism wherever violence and instability holds sway. Four years of a bloody civil war in Syria, combined with over a decade of bloody war in Iraq, created the perfect conditions for an organization such as Daesh to thrive. One of the lessons of history is that, in spite of some rare exceptions, periods of violence and revolution do not suddenly end in peaceful and stable governments.

If we are to attach blame to the creation of Daesh, it must be said that the US and its allies bear no small part of it. First and foremost for the illegal and disastrously managed war in Iraq, but more indirectly from the decades of unquestioned alliance and support for Saudi Arabia, a country which has almost single-handedly allowed the extreme Wahhabi sect to spread and produce jihad across the Middle East and the World (the US has an extremely long history of supporting authoritarian regimes in the name of business; Saudi Arabia is different from many of the historical examples in that the support continues today with virtually zero public backlash). There is enough blame to go around, however; do not think that I absolve the dictators and mullahs and imams who have

themselves actually done the most killing (it is almost too obvious, but I don't want to come under the familiar charge of being anti-American just because I point out the facts). The Saudi royal family, the Iranian Ayatollah and Revolutionary Guards, Israel and its increasingly hardline and rightward skew, the Palestinians who resort to violence and terrorism, Russia, and Britain and France and the greedy and racist colony legacy they created all play a part in brewing up the toxic sludge that represents the modern Middle East.

One group that does not bear any responsibility whatsoever for the Paris attacks or the existence of Daesh are refugees. Syria had a population of around 22 million before the war, and nearly half of these have been dislocated by force or desperation. At least four million have found shelter abroad, mostly in refugee camps in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. There are another three million refugees from Iraq trying to escape Daesh (figures [here](#)). The refugees seeking shelter from wanton violence and destruction of homes are not themselves terrorists trying to kill Westerners. As we will see, the big political winners from terrorism, besides the terrorists themselves, are the far-right political parties that wallow in and cater to extremism and xenophobia of any kind. This includes the French National Front, which will probably see yet another surge of support for its anti-immigration and Islamophobic platform. Every country in Europe and the Americas has a political party of this sort, which have generally grown both [more popular and mainstream](#) as the wars and subsequent refugee crisis have grown in inverse proportion to economic stability: UKIP in the UK, Lega Nord in Italy, the Republicans in the US, Dutch Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Pegida in Germany, Golden Dawn in Greece, True Finns in Finland, Jobbik in Hungary (which has been instrumental in physically stopping the largest numbers of refugees into the EU), and several others all follow the same rancorous script. Though these parties are comparatively small in some cases, they have an outsized voice

and influence on the public and political discourse, which they help to poison. They must be denounced loudly and immediately as soon as they use hatred fear, and intolerance of other races and religions to further their selfish political and economic ends. It is encouraging to see, now almost a week after the latest Paris attacks, that there has in fact been such a large pushback against extremism. It must continue unabated, however.

On a deep level, if Europe and America want to ameliorate both the immediate and long-term situation in the Middle East, one of the two best things they can do is to accept many more refugees (as in, all of them). Countries like Germany and Sweden are acting responsibly and charitably in the refugee crisis. Every other country leaves something to be desired after setting extremely low thresholds for asylum applications and doing as much as possible to discourage refugees (and immigrants in general). It is not only the only moral and humanist solution to such a tragedy, but the best way to economic and political security. After all, no country benefits by having a failed state and terrorist breeding ground on its doorstep. In addition, Europe and the US should do much more to provide assistance to internally displaced refugees in Syria and Iraq, and create safe zones. Whatever is being done is not even remotely enough. It goes without saying that if the Middle East is ever to emerge from its miasma of retributive violence into something vaguely resembling the more modern liberal democracies that most of you (readers) enjoy, it will need a strong and educated middle-class. Not only does this generally not exist now, but every month of war, destruction, and privation over a huge swathe of this territory is preventing entire future generations from the possibility of ever attaining a peaceful and prosperous life. This is very important and typically gets lost in the fog of war and apathy.

Digression on Climate Change: It is well-known that there will

be a crucial international conference on climate change in Paris next month in which virtually every nation in the world will attempt to come to an agreement on how to combat the warming of the planet. The stakes were already high enough, considering the consequences of continued indifference in the face of climatic upheaval, but the terrorist attacks in Paris occurring less than a month before the conference raises the pressure even more. It has long been well-known and documented by scientists and historians that environmental issues like deforestation, drought, overpopulation, and resource scarcity heavily contribute to human conflict. Before the outbreak of a genocidal killing spree in Rwanda in 1992, for example, the population carrying capacity was at the absolute limit, meaning that way too many people were competing for not enough resources (Jared Diamond discusses this and related issues convincingly in his book *Collapse*, which I reviewed [here](#)). In Syria, it should be noted that there were four years of [extreme drought](#) which ruined farmers and forced more people into overcrowded cities, all prior to the peaceful uprising by restive Syrian citizens against a repressive and indifferent government. It was only after months of peaceful protests and brutal government suppression that the real civil war started, and we know well that peaceful moderates do not long survive in bloody civil wars. Thus, the conditions were ripe for the formation of a group like Daesh. Though climate change's very existence is denied by Republicans in America, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders [recently spoke](#) for the growing number of people who not only accept the reality of the crisis, but see the direct link climate change has on political and military conflicts. Lest you still see this as just a liberal fantasy despite overwhelming evidence, the Pentagon and military leaders in America and NATO see [climate change as an immediate risk](#) to national security as well.

Voltaire said, or is supposed to have said, something along the lines of "Though I hate what you say, I will defend to the death your right to say it." This can be seen as an early

defense of the right of Freedom of Speech, later adopted in the new country of America as the First Amendment to the Constitution. Although it would appear to be an unlimited right, it has been challenged over the years and its limits have often been tested. Nowhere are the limits pushed and tested as much as in the face of intolerance and violence, or the mere threat of violence.

Let's now take a trip back in time and revisit the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris of January 2015. Besides the murders themselves, an act of outrageous maliciousness, I was troubled by the reaction to the event by the media and the world at large. It need not be said that violence and murder are inexcusable under any circumstances; I say this anyway because it has been discussed around the edges of the event that because Charlie Hebdo mocked Islam and drew pictures of Mohammed, such a tragic outcome was somehow expected or even preordained. The mindset that produces such thought is one lacking in critical thinking skills, perspective, empathy, and intelligence. I can understand the series of causes and effects that can produce mass murderers, religiously motivated or otherwise. The killers were Muslim outsiders in a secular society that limited their economic possibilities, and often expressed prejudice against them, even by the government. They were also of Algerian descent, like a majority of France's Muslims, which can only remind us of the lingering effects of the [long and brutal Algerian war](#) which ended only two generations ago. To understand broader context is not to excuse or even sympathize with violence of any kind. Most of the world's peaceful Muslims will agree. Though they are often just as disenfranchised or economically limited as the killers, yet they do not curse the world and go on murderous sprees.

Another troubling thing about the media coverage and public outcry of the Charlie Hebdo murders is the total saturation of the news coverage itself and the unprecedented knee-jerk

support for Charlie Hebdo by politicians who would condemn the magazine in their own country, and support for France by many of the same politicians who would never come close to supporting France's culture of free speech. Thinking back to the worst massacres that we have witnessed in the last few years, there are several that stand out in my mind as even more appalling than Charlie Hebdo. One is the [2011 Norway massacre](#) where a white right-wing Christian terrorist single-handedly killed 77 people and injured hundreds more in two separate attacks on the same day. Most of the victims were children and teens at a summer camp. Though this prompted an outpouring of sympathy and condemnation from around the world, there was not nearly as much as there was after the Charlie Hebdo killings, nor was there a show of solidarity in Oslo by world leaders and a viral slogan. Even more disturbing and tragic are the continued massacres and atrocities by the Nigerian jihad group Boko Haram (by far [the deadliest terrorist group](#) in the world), and specifically an attack [only four days before](#) the one on Charlie Hebdo in which thousands of people were reportedly murdered, with subsequent information saying that perhaps it was "only" a few hundred people instead (though no reporting has ever been able to confirm). This was an event mentioned in the world news, but quickly forgotten by most people even more quickly than they forget about the [weekly school shootings](#) in towns across America. A third incident which happened only three weeks before Charlie Hebdo was the [massacre at a school in Peshawar](#), Pakistan, by the Taliban which killed 145 people, 132 of which were young children. There are two possible reasons why Charlie Hebdo was a much bigger deal for people around the world, much more well-known and publicized in the media, and attracted much more sympathy than the other three massacres I mentioned which were all much more violent: Charlie Hebdo's victims were white Europeans who were killed in the name of free speech by French-Algerian Muslims, which means that white and non-white people from all across the political spectrum had reason to be shocked and angered. In the Norway massacre

the victims were also white Europeans, but the perpetrator was counter-intuitively (according to the narrative we are used to hearing from the media) a white European male as well, thus diminishing the duration and strength of the shock and public outcry, while the Boko Haram attack four days before Charlie Hebdo was already out of the news cycle by the time of the Paris attack, most obviously because even though the terrorists were also African jihadists, the victims were black Africans, thus diminishing the sympathy and interest by a large segment of the western media and population that now openly condemns racism but still engages in it; likewise with the Peshawar attack perpetrated by the infamous Taliban on schoolchildren. This troubling comparison tells me that to much of the media and large parts of western society black and brown lives matter less, and that white terrorists are written off as exceptions while Muslim terrorists are seen as a representation of the entire world population of Muslims. The way these type of events are shown in the media is both a cause and an effect of these biased opinions.

One more bit of hypocrisy is the fact that the Charlie Hebdo attack was clearly and unambiguously an act of terrorism in which 12 people were killed in Paris, but many more people are killed every week by the US government in drone strikes, which must feel like terrorism to the people who live in fear. We know that missiles are rained down on supposedly high-value targets in uninteresting and out-of-the-way places like Pakistan and Yemen without any due process or guarantee that innocent men, women, and children will not be killed (they may be a majority of the victims for all we know, though all males are officially classified as "military-aged males" and assumed to be guilty). A [detailed report](#) by The Guardian has concluded that US drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen killed a total of 1147 people in hundreds of failed attempts to kill just 41 men. When a missile blows up houses and cars full of people and kills at least as many as the Charlie Hebdo attack, that seems like terrorism to me. And such violence is likely to

create many more terrorists than were possibly killed in the original attacks ([a fact conceded](#) by former Air Force drone operators themselves), thus increasing the probability of more strikes such as the one on Charlie Hebdo in the future (and just as such attacks are likely to make more and more westerners see all Muslims as enemies or terrorists).

The Charlie Hebdo attack prompted the trendy show of solidarity "Je suis Charlie" by millions around the world, which is not a bad thing in itself, but I am afraid that much of the solidarity was a superficial and knee-jerk response to the tragedy, not one which examined the sources and possible solutions to the set of circumstances that led to this attack and could lead to more in the future. From my personal point of view as a long-time resident in Europe, people across Europe as a whole are somewhat more thoughtful about such tragedies than the American people as a whole were after 9-11, but the fact that we have witnessed wars and terrorism in the past 14 years since then has created for many people a perspective either more empathetic or more cynical. At the same time Europe is still in the midst of economic troubles which have helped fuel the rise of a slew of right-wing xenophobic and anti-Islamic parties in every country, a large number of Europeans are also seeing that the absolute protection of free speech and tolerance is the only way to peacefully maintain an increasingly multicultural and globalized society. The question of tolerance is one that has not always been correctly understood or handled by either political leaders or citizens. There are limits to both tolerance and free speech, though it is admittedly difficult to tease out these limits, especially when faced with real-world tragedies that prompt unthinking reactions.

Just as there was a media double standard during the Charlie Hebdo massacre, likewise for the November 13th Paris attacks. The scale is much greater in the latter case, with at least 136 deaths and hundreds more injured. But the reaction was

similar in that Daesh itself conducted other attacks on civilians in other countries within 24 hours of the Paris attacks, but with little reporting by the media and little interest by the public. 26 people were killed in two [suicide bombings](#) perpetrated by Daesh in Baghdad, while 43 people were killed and hundreds wounded in two [suicide bombings](#) perpetrated by Daesh in Beirut. Neither of those have the high death toll of Paris, but does it matter? After all, as I have shown, “only” eight people were killed in Charlie Hebdo attack but that was a bigger news story by ten or hundredfold than greater massacres of the same time in other countries. Some of this is cultural, and the fact that Paris is a central city in Western civilization, and one that many Western people have visited and feel a connection to. But still, does that matter? I love Paris as much as anyone, as well as free speech, and I hate terrorism and any kind of violence, but that does not make me feel more rage and frustration in either the case of Charlie Hebdo or the November 13th attacks as the ones in Beirut, Peshawar, Nigeria, Baghdad, Oslo, or the [weekly school shootings](#) in America. My rage and frustration is the same, and comes from the same source, directed at the same cause. I do not think Islam is the root of the problem, nor do I think that closing borders and blocking asylum and aid for refugees is the solution. These are just two of the ways I have complete and fundamental difference of opinion with the intolerant bigots in our own countries (such as my very own Congressional Representative in South Carolina, a Republican named Jeff Duncan, who [blamed refugees and Muslims](#) for the attacks before the blood had even congealed on the streets of Paris, or [every single Republican](#) presidential candidate and [most of the Republican state governors](#)).

Let’s look at some more case studies in tolerance and intolerance. Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel [once declared](#) the idea of multiculturalism in Germany to have failed. I do not know if she was just trying to appeal to her conservative voters, but such a statement is irresponsible and untrue. This

idea that immigrants cannot be integrated into a society only feeds the xenophobic bigots who have now become quite vocal and strong in most European countries. The fact that the rise of these groups has coincided with economic recession and unemployment is in fact no coincidence. Blaming outsiders is an appealing message to certain types of people who feel economic strain and see a threat to their traditional way of life. That does not mean that it is the fault of the immigrants, who are almost always under much more economic strain than their detractors, but of the political and economic elite who create the conditions that the people will either succeed or fail in. Whatever she meant by citing the failure of multiculturalism, Merkel has at least proven to be a courageous leader in leading the way for European countries accepting refugees. It is still not enough.

On the other hand, the right-wing nationalist and xenophobic parties have been spreading hate and intolerance. They grow stronger when people become fearful of violence and terrorism. It is well-known that toxic public discourse and intolerant speech by political leaders directly leads to violence by their troubled followers. It happens [time](#) and [time again](#) that some misguided soul takes out murderous aggression on an innocent party that had been vilified by some right-wing hate-monger. This point cannot be stressed enough. One clear limit to free speech exists at the first instance of violence, the threat of violence, or even the mere hint of violence. This goes not just for physical violence but for anything that qualifies as unnecessarily extreme aggression, intimidation, emotional bullying, etc. There is a paradox of tolerance, which is that one must be intolerant of intolerance in order to maintain a civil and open society (I have previously discussed this paradox at greater length [here](#)).

Let me indulge in a thought experiment, and let us imagine a growing fringe political party that doubles as a hate group. One of their keys beliefs is that beards are evil and

unwelcome in their country. While this is a ridiculous position to hold, it is merely an opinion that happens to be small-minded and wrong (my sense of morality tells me that opinions can sometimes be wrong just as facts can). An invisible line is crossed, however, when the anti-beard group's legitimately free speech turns to calls for violence, retribution, or even economic and social sanctions for people with beards. This is intolerance that cannot be tolerated in an open society, since it operates outside the bounds of civility and freedom from fear and violence that are the foundation a free society is built upon. In other words, though I hate what the anti-beard group says, I will defend their right to say, but only insofar as it is exercised as one particular opinion and way of life but not as a call for violence and intolerance against others who do not hold that opinion or other varying attribute (such as religion, sex, sexuality, skin color, or facial hirsuteness).

I would further argue that a fully democratic nation whose voting citizens are composed almost wholly of illiterate idiots is always preferable to a nation ruled by the most benevolent dictator but where freedom of speech is limited. The limits of democracy are seen insofar as its *demos*, or people, take active and informed interest in the decisions of the nation. So in the former case, though the ignorance or indifference of a sufficiently high percentage of voting citizens in a democracy could easily lead down the road to fascist dictatorship, the fact that it was firstly and presently still democratic weighs conclusively in its favor. This shows the promise and the limitations of democracy: nothing is guaranteed except what the citizens enable; everything is possible; but it can still be corrupted by propaganda and the preying on of the basest human emotions of hate, greed, and intolerance.

In the years after 9-11 in America, the people made the mistake of allowing fear and the illusion of security eclipse

their freedoms. There is still much work to do to dismantle the security and surveillance state that was erected during those years of democracy in its lowest ebb. Similarly in Europe, leaders feel pressure from the right-wing parties that scream for closed borders and a stop to immigration, and for added security measures that will sacrifice hard-won freedoms for an illusion of safety. It must not be. Just as free speech must be protected at all costs, Western countries must not give in to the fear that terrorists aim to create. As Franklin Roosevelt famously said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." That is still true in that our society remains fundamental strong, free, and open, and there is nothing that terrorists can do to change that other than make us fear them so much that we remake our society in their image, and waging more endless wars of their choosing.

Wise men are able to say things that echo long after they are gone, and it's the same once again with Voltaire, one of my favorite Parisians, who said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities." It was hard to miss the fact that one of the six Paris attacks was on a theatre on Voltaire Boulevard. Though this could be coincidental, it is not hard to imagine the attack planners targeting such a symbol of everything they hate: music and drama, philosophy, satire, reason, and enlightenment. The quote applies quite easily to the insanity that is Daesh, but let's not hesitate to look at our own recent past. European civilization is easily the bloodiest in history, and that is why it is crucial for us to remember our own past in order to forge a new future.

Let me close with the words of another wise humanist and antiwar activist, Bertrand Russell, whose message to the future (which is the present for us) was the following: "The moral thing I should wish to say to them is very simple: I should say, love is wise, hatred is foolish. In this world which is getting more and more closely interconnected, we have

to learn to tolerate each other, we have to learn to put up with the fact that some people say things that we don't like. We can only live together in that way – and if we are to live together and not die together, we must learn a kind of charity and a kind of tolerance, which is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet.”

Killing is Easy



Killing is the easiest thing in the world, easier than sex. Easier than raising a family or bringing a child into the world, or building a house. Easier than painting or writing or music. Killing is easier than sleeping.

Before November 13th I couldn't have told you how 9-11-2001

felt. Watching the attacks in Paris, the killing, I remembered helplessness and a physical desire for vengeance, like fourteen years were gone. As I texted, instant-messaged, and emailed friends in the affected zone, desperate for news of their safety, I felt alternately overwhelmed by great sadness and murderous rage. It was clear then, as it is now, who was responsible for the injustice. And I wanted payback.

For those who have not felt the call to kill in the name of humanity and justice, it is a godly thing. Reading through the initial reports, I choked back tears, heading—where else?—to the gym, hoping to direct this urgent compulsion toward the noble desire for blood somewhere, *anywhere* else. On the stationary bicycle and then at the weight machines watching the President express solidarity for France, I fantasized about my phone buzzing with news from a friend in the military calling me back into service. In the interests of honesty, I must admit that this fantasy involved him telling me that the time had come to clean the Middle East once and for all. From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, and then the vast Atlantic Ocean off North Africa, we would impose the final, drastic justice this situation demanded. That's what I *felt*.

That's what the ISIS terrorists in Paris must have felt reading news of defeat after emasculating defeat for their movement in Sinjar, in Syria, and in Iraq. *We have to do something, and the time has come to martyr ourselves.* They must have believed that they were correct to act, and enjoyed the doing of the deed. Killing is the easiest thing in the world.

That seems to be what Francois Hollande was feeling when he implicitly committed France to military action against ISIS, [saying, among other similar things: "It is an act of war that was committed by a terrorist army, a jihadist army, Daesh, against France,"](#) and "we will lead the fight and it will be merciless." As the attacks in Paris unfolded, I felt the same way.

And that's the end of civilization. It's popular to joke about France and Europe being weak, now, being militarily incompetent in the aftermath of WWII, but things are stable in Europe and mostly safe as a result of progress, the horror our grandfathers felt when they saw the red gurgling aftermath of their deeds stain their hands, uniforms, and relationship with the natural world. Until 1945, Europe and Eurasia had been by orders of magnitude the most violent place in the world. Mechanisms for killing on an industrial scale never imagined anywhere else were [pioneered in the USA and perfected in Europe](#). When it comes to violence, Europeans are not just masters—historically, they transcended mastery, elevating it first to the realm of [art](#), then, later, incorporating it. It took us *seventy years* to suppress the natural European inclination toward violence on a level that would make even a hardened ISIS fighter's stomach turn and head spin—seventy years, which, in the balance, doesn't seem like enough by half.

The end of civilization is when one acts based on feeling, and especially that low, barbaric feeling to hurt or murder. I know, because I felt it last night—can still feel it in waves. In Afghanistan, over 26 months, the two infantry units I was with killed hundreds of Taliban, Haqqani and Al Qaeda operatives (over 1,000?), taking 15 deaths in return—killing is easy. But what gives me and people like me our reason for being in the liberal West—the evolution of liberal arts education, pioneering human and then civil rights, the components that make us superior to ISIS terrorists, dogs, spiders, and lizards, is that we aspire to be *reasonable*—we are capable of thinking out the logical conclusion of our actions, and acting differently given different stimuli, acting generously and altruistically although our bodies may tell us that killing or hurting would be more satisfying. This was the lesson the West drew in the aftermath of World War II, on the bodies of so many Germans, Russians, Japanese Ukrainians, Polish, French and more—enough bodies to make

Syria again three times over. This is the lesson I drew from war, as well. Killing is easy, but it only leads to more killing. And there's always more blood than you know. Blood that's sticky, and gets everywhere.

No, people who believe that France and Europe are weak because they do not act sufficiently violently for their tastes (a) don't [know the region's extraordinarily bloody history](#), and (b) don't believe in [biology](#). Civilization and modern western society—cultural constructs that encourage cooperation and altruistic behavior—are fragile things, to be nurtured and protected at all costs. They're the product of peace—in times of war, people become callous, cease caring about others, wantonly indulge in the brief satisfaction of vendetta. Small acts of humanity and grace become acts of heroism.

After finishing my time at the gym and hearing from most of my friends, I returned home, showered, and headed out to dinner with a photojournalist friend to discuss the night's events, process what I was feeling. Fielding phone calls on the drive into the city, drinking beers over Turkish kabab, then calling other friends on the way back home, I was able to stabilize the urge to hurt and hate, to ameliorate it with that greatest benefit of living in a developed, safe, modern country—generosity.

Even though it feels now like hurting the people responsible will provide satisfaction, will solve the hurt, logic as well as a brilliant, counterintuitive moral imperative unearthed by Christianity instruct us that the answer in this situation is to open our arms wider, to “turn the other cheek” to the despicable insult, rather than to deliver injustice for injustice, which other cultural traditions and tribal societies would demand. The parasites that are ISIS feed on blood and violence. Let us, by our actions, demonstrate our moral and intellectual superiority. History instructs that we can go down a very different path—we could, if we desired, exterminate them—but then, wouldn't we just be descending to

their primitive, animalistic level?

Some reactionaries in European and Western society would have us do precisely that—would turn Europe back into the brutes they were 70 years ago, or would indulge America's more recent penchant for "shock and awe." This is a popular anti-intellectual idea on the right: we should do what feels good, and to hell with civilization. To beat the thugs we must become thugs ourselves. Here's [one such confused hot-take](#). Suffice it to say, if someone is advocating for violence, that person is not civilized, nor do they support humanistic values like charity, magnanimity, and (ultimately) the precious elements that separate humans from apes or lower forms of animals. They are the enemy.

On the other side are people who over-intellectualize the problem, and would stifle any action—those of the extreme left, who have already begun stating their belief that one should experience a similar emotional reaction to the bombing of Baghdad as one does to the terrorist attack on Paris. As a humanist, I am more sympathetic to a call for widespread empathy than I am to kill (empathy is harder than killing), but it is unsympathetic at best (and inhuman at worst) to claim before the bodies are cold that one must feel for all humans or for none at all. It is a truism among this group that Westerners don't react to tragedy outside their community (this type of reaction is already common on Facebook and Twitter), as though feeling for anyone besides oneself were a bad thing if one does not immediately think to feel for everyone. Insisting that others should have to always feel empathy for everyone all the time (that they should behave like bodhisattvas or saints) or never at all (that they should behave like sociopaths) exhibits an interesting symmetry, but doesn't seem like a useful or productive philosophical or human stance, although I suppose it must make the claimer feel satisfied on some level or they wouldn't do it.

For the 95% of Westerners affected by the tragedy who aren't

on the extreme left or right, it is okay to feel something about this tragedy without needing to take on the problems of the world. If you have a personal connection to Paris, as many do, rage or grief is perfectly natural. If you don't have a personal connection to Paris but do to the event, rage or grief is perfectly natural. And in either case, regardless of how one's natural and appropriate feelings on the subject (I certainly felt like exerting violent vengeance on behalf of a city in which I have lived, visited often, and to which I have longstanding and deep cultural ties), the next step is to divorce thought from feeling, and to act in keeping with our cultural, humanist heritage: reasonably.

This means collectively and individually helping other humans (the refugees of war, the migrants, the aspirational and the cursed), because it's within our power to do so. We of the developed world are not infected with that ideological disease one finds so often among the mad, the disaffected, and those living in chronic poverty—the cultural *imperative* to kill—as are these ISIS psychopaths. No—let us this once demonstrate our laudable willpower and the unquestionable superiority of our civilization by letting the sword fall from our hand—let us show our strength by not doing what is easy, and easier for Americans and Europeans than anything else (for we are the best at that easy task of killing)—let us show the world mercy. Otherwise we risk losing what was bought with an ocean of our own blood.

The Wrath of Islam

I read [a piece on Vox](#) recently (compliments of former roommate and exceptional human being Damien Spleeters) the point of

which was to disabuse readers of “myths” surrounding the Islamic State. The piece had a useful goal: to educate readers about the Islamic State, presumably so the reader could make more reasonable decisions about whether or not to support military engagement, or how to help resolve the problem of the Islamic State. I read the piece, twice, and while I found it better than much of the analysis elsewhere in mainstream media, it failed to disrupt the broader myth of the Islamic State. I want to continue the dialogue here, by examining what we hope to accomplish, and why.

Fact number one: Americans love violence. We love it in our movies and literature. We buy it en masse. The best television dramas aren't just *full* of violence – they depend on it, without violence (and especially that most acceptable acts of violence – revenge, or retributive, or just violence) much of our entertainment would cease to make any kind of sense. This is true for American-made, American-written stories in a way that it is not for almost every other culture in the world, with the current exceptions of Chinese and Japanese cinema and literature, which are similarly saturated with violence, rape, and murder. Unsurprisingly, Japanese art has a large and enthusiastic following in America – unsurprisingly given our politics, Chinese art does not.

Fact number two: American love for violence extends into the political sphere. This is accomplished by adventurers who are wearied by peace, and bored by long-term projects to increase sustainability in communities, foreign and domestic. It is accomplished by cynical career politicians like Hillary Clinton and Karl Rove, both of whom understand that being seen as a powerful leader is part of what makes a good political candidate. And whereas there used to be a dominant isolationist, business-oriented, violence-sublimated strain to American politics – the old Republican Party, the boring, sober, clear-eyed realists of American politics that largely went extinct in the 70s and 80s, replaced by the current group

of wild-eyed missionaries and Kulture-zealots. The Democratic Party still benefits from the perception that its constituency helped end the Vietnam War – they did not, it was the old, extinct Republican Party, Democrats began and expanded our involvement in Vietnam – but utopians on the left have always been the biggest proponents of foreign intervention on a small and large scale. Only recently, again, have utopians on the right begun to appropriate that narrative for themselves. For personal and professional reasons, as well as owing to the fact that journalism is a profession like any other, and there is no licensing process for thinking or talking or writing, most of the media coverage of every international event will be slanted toward creating the perception that American intervention is absolutely necessary.

Fact Three: American military intervention in other countries' affairs usually makes things worse – occasionally much worse. Sometimes it doesn't make things awful. That's what we're playing for, in the real world. It's like that time on *The Simpsons* when Homer is asked to relate the particulars of some event – in his mind, he's a tall, buff man, talking with the President of the United States, while (for no good reason) he is surrounded by aliens. Marge is exasperated by this obviously impossible account of events, and shuts him down. Advocates for military intervention are *always* prone to being Homer. Marge doesn't exist. Let's glance over big-ticket American military interventions over the last century:

Spanish American War – we freed Cuba and Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spanish hegemony. That was such a staggering success for us and for our foreign policy that each of those three countries are... *oh, right*. Currently in shambles.

WWI – we beat the Germans, so the English and French could win WWI, because we liked their uniforms better (or something – there is actually no good reason we became involved in WWI and anyone who wants to dispute that is welcome to do so in the comment section), and then Europe was peaceful forever after

that. WWI kicker – intervention in Soviet Revolution, against Lenin. Huge win for U.S., made everything better.

China in the 30s and 40s – we helped the Chinese resist the Japanese, which was cool, by supporting a monomaniacal tyrant who was happy to exterminate large swaths of the Chinese population, which was confusing because Chiang Kai-shek could've looked like Tojo with glasses. What, they all look the same! Anyway, our support for the Chinese made everything better in China forever.

In **World War II**, we armed and equipped the Soviets and British to fight against Germany, then fought on the Allied side when Japan declared war on us. Defeating the Japanese actually did make things better over there – the Japanese may be the one place and time where our intervention actually helped. Our interest in doing so was tied to fear of the Soviets, who, despite our help during WWII, didn't like us very much, as anyone with half a brain could've predicted going in. Germany's life did not get better as a result of our intervention in WWII, they lost more of their territory, which made France and England happier, were split into two, and occupied. Sadly, everyone with some exposure to Soviet documents now understands that the Soviet Union was expecting us to attack them, and were never in any position to take over Europe, making the Cold War at least 50% our fault. Crazy when you think about it that way, but there you go.

Korea was a push – we made South Korea, run by a brutal dictator into the mid-eighties, look a lot like Japan. Life in North Korea after our military intervention did not improve – it actually got worse, to the point where it is actually a cliché that describes how awful life could be.

Iran – If you want a really sad, depressing accounting of how overseas, please read [the official account](#) of the Iran coup of 1953. Makes you feel bad for Iran, and bad about us. Eisenhower's weak link as a president was British, and despite

history assigning the responsibility for this one to us, it really was a British screw-up.

Vietnam – the less said, the better. We intervened militarily and things got so much better, it hurts even to think about it. Excruciating irony kicker – after arming or allying with South Vietnamese to fight their North Vietnamese cousins in order to protect them against Chinese and Soviet communism, the newly-reunified Vietnam fought a bitter, vicious war with China just a year after we closed our embassy. How's that for gratitude – they could've at least pretended to be friends so as not to hurt our feelings. I mean, that's one insanely useless war!

Cambodia & Laos – I don't know much about these places, but am told that what happened after we intervened militarily helped their tourist industry. You're welcome, Cambodia and Laos. Can't wait to visit.

Africa – strongest continent on earth!

Iraq I – made things better for Kuwait, by keeping that territory out of Saddam Hussein's hands. Were it not for our actions, the one quarter to one half of Kuwait's population that's actually Kuwaiti, and not some kind of slave, would have had to call themselves Iraqi instead. And as everyone knows, being an Iraqi sucks.

Somalia – We did not improve Somalia.

Afghanistan – Has life gotten better since the Taliban left? Well – it hasn't gotten much worse. That's gotta be worth something.

Iraq II – Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator who terrorized the Middle East until we deposed him. He massacred 30,000 Kurds, which is awful. Unfortunately, things didn't get better in Iraq while we were there, until we hired 20% of their population as security guards. Sort of disingenuously,

Republicans and neo-conservatives have made it sound like it was having U.S. soldiers on the ground that was keeping Iraq safe. All I'm saying is, we had a lot of soldiers on the ground there while not paying off 20% of the population and we got attacked all the time. Had a lot of soldiers there while paying off 20% of the population and things got real quiet. In any case, shit's out of control there right now.

Libya – Don't bring up Libya. It's fucking horrible there right now. A nightmare in every sense of the word.

Iraq III and Syria – shipping arms to militant groups we like at the moment has a way of burning us. It's always the same story, too – they're heroes when they need weapons, and then they're awful, raping, human-rights-violating criminals afterward. Putting boots on the ground will not lead to a long-term deterioration in security, it will do so at the expense of American lives. Airstrikes are worse than useless, although they seem to make us feel better about ourselves. The Islamic State is a group that is using Western-style propaganda videos, and speaking to us, and encouraging us to become involved in Iraq and the Middle East right when it looks like we've extricated ourselves. Why? Because they know that our involvement in the Middle East will make things better for their cause! *Why can't we see this? Why do so many believe, against all visible proof to the contrary, that involvement in Iraq or Syria will improve anything in those countries?* The counterargument – well, we can't leave them to the Islamic State, that'd be horrible, distorts reality. However horrible it will be for Iraqis, Kurds, and Syrians to face the Islamic State alone, it will *only be worse* if we intervene by arming proxies, or by deploying soldiers and carrying out air strikes. I know this, and can say so definitively, because I have two eyes, and a brain, and am literate, and was paying attention to what happened over the last fifteen years.

Meanwhile – just so we know how the Middle East perceives us –

the place we want to stabilize through the creation of a client-state in Kurdistan, or through Iraq, or – I'm not sure what our plan is because all the options are so bad – in any case, our reputation is so shitty in the region that as *The Huffington Post* reported recently, Middle Easterners believe that the [CIA is funding the Islamic State](#). We are a myth to the very people we insist on helping – a nightmare – why are we so insistent on participating in yet another bloodletting? When they're both expensive, and do no long-term good?