

The Great Lie: “You Will Not Die” A Book Review Essay

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Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York, Penguin Press, 2007), 308 pp.

Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 559 pp.

Robert W. Brimlow, *What about Hitler? Wrestling with Jesus’s Call to Nonviolence in an Evil World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006), 192 pp.

Edward Tick, *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation’s Veterans from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 2005), 330 pp.

William P. Mahedy, *Out of the Night: The Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets* (Cleveland, Ohio: StressPress, 2005), 243 pp.

One of my earliest memories is a childhood dream in which a German soldier—dressed in full military uniform, his arms bracing an assault rifle across his chest, his right leg fully extended as if he were an athlete taking

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the next hurdle—crashes through my bedroom window. I can see him now fifty-seven years later as clearly as I saw him that night. For me, he was death itself. My life hung in balance in an event fully beyond my control, and I knew only primal fear.

That German soldier burst through my bedroom window in the middle of Iowa, six years after the end of World War II. He was the result of a waking nightmare formed by the terror of World War II. At my young and innocent age, I was subject, as millions were, to the fear of death that permeates the soul when nations are at war.

In the same way, on September 11, 2001, the deliberate and premeditated mass murder of World Trade Center noncombatant civilian office workers penetrated our normal denial of death. In a moment, the serpent's lie "You will surely not die" lay disrobed for what it is—an appeal to our desire to be like God, a proposition to deny our finitude, an invitation to be seduced into believing that we can finally know and determine good and evil and avoid death.

HOW WE ARE INFLUENCED BY OUR FEAR OF DEATH

Senior editor of *The New Republic*, John B. Judis, states in his article "Death Grip: How Political Psychology Explains Bush's Ghastly Success," that "human beings defend themselves against this fundamental anxiety (the fear of death) by constructing cultures that promise symbolic or literal immortality to those who live up to established standards."¹ Because we want to believe the great lie (we will not die), we allow ourselves to be seduced by those who promise to stand for the good and destroy those whom they declare are evil. When politicians make broad explicit and implicit references to our vulnerability to death at the hands of extremists, our fear of mortality is aroused. When those same politicians say in effect, "you will not die if you just elect me to be your leader," our voting is swayed. This confirms, in the political arena, what psychologists have long told us: our actions are often based on perceptions outside our awareness.

In *The Assault on Reason*, Al Gore explores the consequences of fear. When fear crowds out reason, he writes:

Many people feel a greater need for the comforting certainty of absolute faith. And they become more vulnerable to the appeals of secular leaders who profess absolute certainty in simplistic explanations

portraying all problems as manifestations of the struggle between good and evil. (p. 47)

Political and economic elites, according to Gore, have tightened their grip on communications systems, using television in particular to shape messages of fear in order to exert control over the populace. For the sake of promised security, we overlook ways in which President Bush has violated the balance of powers intended by our forebears, often signing into law legislation that he says he will not follow. Rights and laws once taken for granted by American citizens are now subsumed under the rhetoric of protecting the nation against terrorism.

Gore laments the dissolution of public discourse into sound bites and calls for a return to open, protected, fact-based, free-flowing, respectful, and reasoned dialogue. Public debate is muted and the free flow of information withers when the public is presented with urgent and fear-laced messages from our leaders. Television does not encourage dialogue, because it is a one-way medium and few people have the money or expertise to create programming to counter what they see on television, let alone the money or expertise to distribute it.

Furthermore, when politicians keep the nation's focus on terrorism, we are distracted from seeing and discussing other threats, such as global warming, water scarcity, international crime, corruption, illicit drugs, and pandemics. HIV/AIDS alone may kill more people in the first ten years of this century than all who died in all the wars of the last century. Few citizens realize that the local healthcare facilities they count on for routine medical care have neither the funding for, nor clear policies to address, an avian flu pandemic that could encompass the world in a matter of weeks, leading to the death of millions. Clearly such threats urgently call for global cooperation, not domination.

Politicians have discovered that they can sway our political opinions and voting by covert and overt references to external threats. Frequent references to a war on terrorism by politicians impact our voting and tempt us to ignore a growing infringement on basic privacy rights. The focus on these external threats also prevents us from seeing how we have perpetuated terrorism in order to advance democracy and capitalism. Our fear of death is instinctive, pervasive, and outside our awareness. Those who promise that we can be protected from death tempt us. It is as old as the biblical story of our origins:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:1-5 NIV)

HOW WE USE DEATH AND THE FEAR OF DEATH TO MANIPULATE OTHERS FOR OUR SELF INTEREST

In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein lays out a chilling thesis. Our premeditated crafting of political unrest, economic collapse, and military juntas to create "shock and awe" among citizens of other nations is aimed at immobilizing resistance to the imposition of extreme free market capitalism. Leaders of those nations not only use words to create fear, but secretly kidnap protesters, and torture them to gain the names of other resisters. Torture techniques are taken from a notebook compiled by our government. Finally resisters are killed, leaving the population shocked by the trauma of revolution; economic turmoil; and the fear of abduction, torture and murder, with no recourse to the law. Under these conditions, social programs that previously protected the vulnerable are privatized or abolished. Immune to previous safe guards, corporations and political leaders are free to extract wealth from the populace.

Klein gives documented example after documented example of the reign of terror in multiple South American nations over years. For example, Orlando Letelier, former Chile ambassador under Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, returned to Washington D.C. in 1976, as an activist with a progressive think tank. He was adamantly opposed to the rule of General Augusto Pinochet, who had seized power in 1973 in a military coup. Letelier also criticized Milton Friedman, Nobel-Prize-winning economist of the "Chicago School," whose economic theories many nations followed. The "establishment of a free 'private economy' and the control of inflation à la Friedman," Letelier argued, could not be done peacefully:

The economic plan had to be enforced, and in the Chilean context that could be done only by the killing of thousands, the establishment of

concentration camps all over the country, the jailing of more than 100,000 persons in three years....Regression for the majorities and 'economic freedom' for small privileged groups are in Chile two sides of the same coin. (p. 99)

There was, 'an inner harmony' between the 'free market' and unlimited terror. Michele Townley, a senior member of Pinochet's secret police, was convicted of killing Letelier in 1976, using a remotely controlled bomb planted under his driver's seat.

This book might be dismissed as sensational, in part because Klein clearly demonstrates what we do not want to believe: as a nation, political leaders, the Central Intelligence Agency, and corporations have been agents of the evil we fear and deplore, and as citizens we have been hiding from this truth. Klein documents her thesis with examples from Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil, China, Russia, the Falklands, Poland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, New Orleans, and Israel, making it difficult to dismiss the reality of the use of fear, terror, and shock to create "free markets" that reward corporations and politicians at the expense of citizens. She reveals that actions taken in the name of "free market" capitalism have wrecked and are wrecking havoc on the lives of millions in other countries. She reveals that politicians are invoking fear, engendered during and intentionally fed after the World Trade Center attacks, to encroach upon the laws protecting the rights of American citizens.

Whatever we feel about the death of innocent Americans through terrorist activities or the plight of other citizens caught in the calculated shock and awe of military, economic, and political exploitation, torture and killing, we are confronted by one simple question: "How will we respond to evil?"

HOW WILL WE RESPOND TO EVIL?

How we respond to perceived evil past and present will determine the near and distant future of nations. In *What about Hitler? Wrestling with Jesus's Call to Nonviolence in an Evil World*, Robert W. Brimlow uses the frame of the Holocaust to consider Christian pacifism as a serious option in the face of 9/11. Retaliation is a natural response to unprovoked attack. When we feel powerless in response to violent death, retaliation is something we can do that diminishes powerlessness. It is a human instinct to protect our loved ones, our country, and ourselves. However instinctive, however satisfying it may feel at the time, revenge is neither ethical nor finally effective.

According to Robert Brimlow, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was a part of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, came to believe that success against such an evil force could not be found in a neutral pacifist stance, but only in the elimination of Hitler. However, Bonhoeffer did not seek to justify killing Hitler. Rather, it was a necessary and even responsible action that nonetheless required seeking God's forgiveness. In a similar way, Brimlow considers George Orwell's contention that pacifism hampers the war effort and therefore aids the enemy. Both Bonhoeffer and Orwell stress that neutrality or apparent withdrawal from conflict is not at all neutral. Every action or inaction impacts the whole. Pacifism at best is ineffective in confronting evil and at worst abets the enemy.

Brimlow, a pacifist, pushes back against Bonhoeffer and Orwell by saying their critique does not go far enough. The issue is our conditioning to accept violence as an inescapable and foundational aspect of human nature. Ultimately, Brimlow argues, violence comes from power, the ability to act the way one wills. This view assumes that my survival is more important than anything or anyone else and that I am therefore justified in doing anything to any one to ensure my security. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, he emphasizes that any time we think we can act unilaterally, even if it is what we perceive to be a good and kind act, if that act is without collaboration or empathic connection to the other, we do violence. "War, then, is the expression of an egotistical violence performed in the name of a group that has made itself God" (p. 135).

From this perspective, making war is an inevitable consequence of unlimited narcissism. This inclination to act as if we were the only one is as old as the story of our origins. In the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, the woman (or was it the man?) wanted to act as if she were the only one there. She was tempted to believe that her action would have no consequence except for her benefit. She was tempted to believe that she could be like God. And she was tempted to believe she would not die. It is a longing that lingers.

I once read that no one commits an evil act without somehow justifying it as a good act. We choose to blind ourselves from the negative consequences of our actions. We engage in war and violence because we intend to do good, believing that our actions will end evil. When we believe we know good from evil with certainty, we are also inclined to believe "the great lie that we shall not die." The seduction that has been going on since the beginning longs for a mythical Garden of Bliss or a permanent summer

resort, free from ethical and moral struggle. The seduction of the Garden is such that we willingly sell our conscience and our consciousness to those who promise us a pseudo-garden of false security after they have intentionally induced terror and the fear of death. We know that such security is not possible, that we will all die, yet we long for certainty, to know the good from the evil, in order to protect ourselves from death.

Those who have been trained by Nobel-Award-winning economist Milton Friedman believe that security consists of pure capitalism and shock and awe was the quickest way to achieve the success of the free market, devoid of government regulation, free for privatization. Along the way, students of Friedman have advocated policies that devastated economies of many South American nations. What has animated Friedman's counter-revolution, according to Klein, is the kind of freedom that is only available in times of cataclysmic change.

Believers in the shock doctrine are convinced that only a great rupture—a flood, a war, a terrorist attack—can generate the kind of vast, clean canvases they crave. It is in these malleable moments, when we are psychologically unmoored and physically uprooted, that these artists of the real plunge in their hands and begin their work of remaking the world. (p. 20–21)

How then shall we deal with evil? Robert Brimlow begins his book by saying this: "Fundamentally, what I have to say in the book is absurd, and once I admitted that to myself, the writing of it became a little bit easier" (p. 10). He is clear that the Christian's call to be a peacemaker only ceases to be absurd when "it is embedded in a life of faithfulness and the practices that arise from our faithfulness" (p. 13). Jesus seemed intent upon announcing a Kingdom of God where evil is repaid with good, where enemies are loved, where one turns the other cheek when one is struck. Followers of Jesus disavow every personal right including the right of revenge or retaliation.

We must live faithfully; we must be humble in our faith and truthful in what we say and do; we must repay evil with good; and we must be peacemakers. This may also mean as a result that the evildoers will kill us. Then, we shall die.

That's it. There is nothing else—or rather, anything else is only a footnote to this. We are called to live the kingdom as he proclaimed it and be his disciples, come what may. We are, in his words, flowers flourishing and growing wild today, and tomorrow destined for the furnace. We are God's people, living by faith. (p. 151)

It may be that fear is the motivation that makes pacifism seem so irrational; fear of our own death. If we follow the example of Jesus, death may be a consequence of loving one's enemy.

For what would I be willing to die? For Jesus, it was to be faithful to God's call. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it was to rid the world of Hitler. For the faithful of al-Qaeda, it is to strike against the agents of evil defiling the faith. For military personnel, it may be saving the life of a buddy or defending the homeland. In each case, deliberate consideration of giving one's life is a soul-searching exercise resulting in the discovery of a cause greater than self-preservation.

Would such a conscious embrace of death make a nation less susceptible to political manipulation by implicit and explicit references to our vulnerability to terrorist activity? If we claimed certain values to be higher than self-survival, a value not to be assigned just to military personnel, but to the general population, could we stem the tide of knee-jerk, disproportionate, and generalized military response to terrorist activity? If the people of this nation were able to accept death as a part of what may come in living for higher values than self-survival, could we clearly see and expose efforts of leaders, media, or corporations to use fear of death as a means to manipulate us toward their self-interests? Could we dare to expose the efforts of our nation to manipulate the economies and politics of other nations to serve the self-interests of certain corporation and government interests, as Klein claims?

SPIRITUAL WARRIORHOOD AND SPIRITUAL MATURITY

In *War and the Soul*, Edward Tick approaches our response to the fear of death differently. Instead of suggesting (as Brimlow does) that we only perceive war as inevitable because of the conditioning of our minds and spirits to accept violence as "natural and fundamental to human nature," Tick suggests that:

Throughout history, warfare has provided both the container and the means of expression for war's mythic themes: doing God's work, undergoing rites of passage by which boys become men, and realizing the full expression of the warrior archetype. (p. 30)

In other words, war is not the result of some social conditioning that makes violence seem natural and fundamental to human nature. Rather the soul

strives to realize an innate warrior archetype, and war provides a vehicle to fulfill this drive.

With such an understanding, it becomes clear that a persuasive rational argument stating the advantages of peace and the disadvantages of killing, destruction of cultures, rape, civilian "collateral damage," or any of the horrific consequences of war, will not be the end of war. Tick states that archetypal needs drive warriorhood. Yet what once may have served as a rite of passage, a spiritual path, has become so fierce, so unfettered, so vicious that souls are not enhanced but rather deeply wounded in today's wars.

As a chaplain, I have had many veterans tell me that after what they saw and did in combat they can no longer believe in God. Fear for their own survival drove them to commit acts they could never have imagined doing. Furthermore, they had not been prepared to integrate into their identity their desire and ability to commit such acts. As a nation, we have only added to their shame by shunning them in order to avoid our complicity. In that way, we remain naive and innocent of our own capacity to inflict horrific suffering on others. At the same time, we isolate those we have sent to war from the very community they need for healing. Edward Tick suggests that healing can only come through retelling the battle story to an empathic community. If, however, our nation does not want to listen, the war wounded can only isolate themselves.

There is a path of hope. Edward Tick suggests that with community support the mythic warriors can seek a fully developed personality in "inner warriorhood." The mature warrior uses his gifts and abilities toward transpersonal goals, protecting life, serving the nation in peace, persuading her people not to pursue war unless absolutely necessary. The true warrior disciplines the violence within himself and serves spiritual and moral principles higher than herself. The warrior has come to understand that he will die, but he has a choice as to what he will give his life for. In that choice, the fear of death loses some of its power. In this understanding, a nation of warriors, resolute in their spiritual maturity, not easily manipulated by explicit or implicit references to death, might be the best hope to envision and live and die for such a future world. Jesus made it clear that spiritual maturity evolves not out of denying or seeking protection from death, but rather out of embracing death. Could it be in the church that such warriors are cultivated?

In his book *Out of the Night*, William P. Mahedy states that when the Viet-nam veteran prayed “deliver us from evil” he was praying for DEROS—the “date of estimated return from overseas.” That date was the expected freedom from the necessity of killing, the date one’s soul would be freed from the knowledge of good and evil, freed from the loss of innocence in having found that one had a limitless capacity for violence. The further expectation was to be welcomed into community and the healing that would come from that embrace. In reality, while Vietnam veterans were met by many religiously oriented folks who saw the moral outrage of Vietnam, the veterans were soon categorized as those who were the epitome of evil—“baby killers.” They became the scapegoats of America’s desire to divide the world into good and evil, of America’s inability to acknowledge its own culpability. It has been so since the beginning. How quickly the man and the woman in the biblical story of our origins also assigned blame rather than accepting responsibility for their actions:

The man said, “The woman [read veteran] you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent [read veteran] deceived me, and I ate.”
(Gen. 1:12–13).

Ironically, the community that both Tick and Mahedy say is necessary for soul healing becomes the community that extends and deepens the wound. Healing is possible because God continues to walk with those who have been wounded. Mahedy recounts a Vietnam veteran who “tried to exorcise [sic] God from my life, but his presence would not leave me alone... God’s mystic presence would not leave me alone so I decided to give his ‘dirty Bride’ (the Church) another look” (p. 181–182). This veteran was able to give the Church another chance in part because a chaplain visited his unit, walked among the troops, daring to be in the midst of the smell of dead buddies piled into empty bunks, whose only sermon was the distribution of communion.

For William Mahedy, the Church is called to renounce three centuries of embracing a culture and a mythology focused on “personal and national well-being at the expense of every other value.” The Church is called to dare to embrace those it has called sinners—those who have gone to war. In so doing, the Church will come to understand the deep moral and religious

issues in war-making and be moved to take a prophetic stand. Only when the Church dares to embrace the sinner and love the enemy will the Church join God in God's walk with the wounded. Only when the Church recognizes its own sinfulness and its own complicity in promoting a culture focused on survival and driven by the fear of death will the Church be able to embody the grace it proclaims—the resurrection. Then we might recognize the dangers we face in seeking self-preservation as we succumb to the seductive promise that politicians will save us. Then the Church might become a prophetic voice calling us to confess our own complicity in war-making, to confess our own profit making through stocks in multinational corporations, to confess our own living in luxury at the expense of the impoverished, to confess our own reluctance to hold politicians and corporations accountable, and find a way to forgive them, for they are us.

The German soldier burst through my bedroom window in the middle of Iowa, six years after the end of World War II. In a concrete sense he was not real, but the terror I felt was real. Even at my young and innocent age I was the subject, as millions were, to the fear that war breeds. Without knowing it, I absorbed that fear, and it conditioned my response to the world.

Our danger today is the temptation to acquiesce to our fears without awareness. Our danger is that fear leads us to believe that we can be God and dominate others to assure our own safety. Our danger is in believing that we can definitively know the difference between good and evil and always act for the good, even if it is at great cost to others

Ironically, our hope resides in the knowledge of good and evil, being able to let ourselves become aware of our own complicity in self-serving actions, bringing to justice individuals and corporations that betray the public trust, in daring to embrace the enemy as we learn to accept our own finite and fallible natures. Thus our hope is both within and yet beyond us, in daring to see ourselves as we are—complex, prideful, self-focused creatures. We will dare to act on our capacity of altruistic caring when we trust in the grace of God to sustain and empower us to be faithful to the One who calls us to live beyond our fears.

NOTE

1. John B. Judis, *The New Republic*, August 27, 2007, 17–20.