

INSIGHT

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Diabolical. Demonic. Absolutely evil. The words we find for the terrorists of Sept. 11 somehow fail to satisfy, no matter how potent their condemnation. We yearn to grasp how it works. How does a person live with himself, feel pride even, after coolly causing the suffering and deaths

of so many innocents?

David Beers



Offering us a framework for such understanding is Dr. Albert Bandura of Stanford University, a towering figure in psychology who visited Vancouver last month for a conference

of the international Association for Moral Education. Bandura's specialty, honed for decades, is the study of how people slip into "selective moral disengagement." Which means Bandura is not in the business of studying raving psychopaths. Rather, he wants to explain how a person can behave humanely for the most part, consider oneself to be pious even. And then, under certain conditions, feel little or no distress when confronted by the anguish of others — anguish brought about by one's own actions, either directly or indirectly.

Speaking to 400 rapt listeners filling a convention centre ballroom, the Canadian-born Bandura synthesized what he and other researchers have identified as loopholes in the human conscience. Here are some ways people allow themselves to be party to inhumane acts while shielding themselves from self-condemnation.

Moral justification — a noble cause "sanctifies" ugly deeds. "Over the centuries, much destructive conduct has been perpetrated by ordinary, decent people in the name of righteous ideologies, religious principles, and nationalistic imperatives," Bandura said. "Adversaries sanctify their militant actions, but condemn those of their antagonists as barbarity."

In this certainly we recognize Osama bin Laden, who construes his jihad as self-defence against non-Muslim infidels. "If God's help is with us," Taliban Supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar told a radio interviewer Thursday, "keep in mind this prediction. The real matter is the extinction of America, and God willing, it will fall to the ground." Consider, too, the words Pope Urban used to launched the Crusades against Muslims: "What a disgrace if a race so despicable, degenerate, and enslaved by demons, should overcome a people endowed with faith in Almighty God." As Voltaire wrote: "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities."

Euphemistic labelling. Studies show "people behave much more cruelly when assaultive actions are given a sanitized label than when they are called aggression," Bandura notes. Thus, "soldiers 'waste' people rather than kill them. Bombing missions are described as 'servicing the target,' in the likeness of a public utility. The civilians the bombs kill are linguistically converted to 'collateral damage.'"

Advantageous comparison. "How behaviour is viewed is coloured by what it is compared against," Bandura notes. "Terrorists see their behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify." The U.S.

leadership that visited destruction upon Vietnam engaged in advantageous comparison by asserting that life under communism would be worse than a sky raining napalm and Agent Orange.

Such utilitarian logic rests on two sets of judgments. First, non-violent options won't work. And two, the injuries one imposes will prevent more human suffering than they cause. While noting the appeal of such logic, Bandura observes that it often rests on shaky ground. The future is unpredictable, enemy intent can be unclear, and bias might skew any equation weighing long-term human costs.

Displacement of responsibility.

In the famous Milgram studies of the 1970s, regular folks were placed in a lab, told to turn a dial and tricked into thinking they were cranking up the level of electrical shocks on human guinea pigs. That didn't faze a lot of the recruits, which demonstrated that many people will inflict harm on strangers when told to do so by an authority figure, as long as the one giving the orders takes responsibility for the act. "Just following orders" is the horrifying mantra behind Nazi Germany's death camps and countless battlefield atrocities.

Diffusion of responsibility. Wherever the trail of responsibility disappears into a cloudy murk, blame is difficult to pin.

This is why those who direct inhumanity on a large scale tend to break the process into discrete tasks that seem harmless in and of themselves. Someone had to double-check the schedule of trains carrying Jews to Auschwitz.

A corollary lies in decisions made, actions taken, by the group as a whole. "Where everyone is responsible no one really feels responsible ... any harm done by

a group can always be attributed largely to the behaviour of others," Bandura notes.

Disregard or distortion of consequences.

Cruelty inflicted at visceral close range is far more likely to give pause than suffering delivered from a great distance, or rendered invisible. Bandura showed his audience the Pulitzer prize-winning photograph of an anguished, naked Vietnamese girl fleeing her napalmed village, and said: "This single humanization of inflicted destruction probably did more to turn the American public against war than the countless reports filed by journalists. The military now bans cameras and journalists from battlefield areas to block disturbing images of death and destruction that can erode public support."

Dehumanization. Perhaps the strongest bar against moral disengagement is the ability to identify with one's potential victim. "To perceive another as human activates empathic reactions through perceived similarity," Bandura says. "It is difficult to mistreat humanized persons without risking personal distress and self-condemnation." If that's the way we're wired, a surefire way to short-circuit empathy is by "stripping people of human qualities," continues Bandura, who goes on to offer a quick, sadly familiar catalogue of subhuman categories that enter the official lexicon in times of war: "savages," "gooks," "satanic fiends," "degenerates," "infidels," "worms."

He concludes: "It requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce atrocious deeds. Given appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can do extraordinarily cruel things." And so we have a chilling portrait of how it must be labor with satisfaction within al-Qaida, helping along the next obliteration of

human beings so conveniently "dehumanized." We can see how, for them, "moral justification" makes murder seem a holy act, how "euphemistic labelling" swaths the process in religious rather than concretely blood-thirsty language, how "advantageous comparison" turns on the mother of all victim complexes, how "displacement of responsibility" invites all involved to let the final decision lie with Allah and his highest clerics. We recognize all too clearly the attempt to erase our souls by labelling us minions of Satan.

Such devices allowed an Osama bin Laden and the Taliban leadership to gain the support they needed, not only from their functionaries but from enough of the general populace to afford them power and authority.

Now, as those architects of terror flee and their formal power structure melts away into the rugged Afghanistan landscape, we are left to wonder whether their hold on a populace, their ability to summon support for their campaigns of cruelty, is not also evaporating. If so, we are beginning to truly win, because

that struggle, to re-humanize non-Muslim Westerners in the eyes of the Taliban's past and potential supporters, is just now reaching its critical juncture.

Defining a "just war."

There are many signs that American strategists understand what is at stake.

Thus, the official promises to deliver humanitarian aid along with bombs.

Thus, the official emphasis on the precision of the air weapons used, and professed efforts to avoid civilian targets. Thus, the scramble now to assemble an ethnically inclusive government after the Taliban. Clearly, the U.S. wants to assure the Muslim world and its Western allies that it is conducting a just war, and winning, by its methods, the moral high ground.

So far, the visible contour of the war seems to roughly reflect moral guidelines that even a dovish professor writing in a left-wing magazine might endorse. "I have never since my childhood supported a shooting war in which the United States was involved," begins Richard Falk, professor emeritus of international law at Princeton University, writing in *The Nation*. Falk goes on, however, to rule out, in this shooting war, the "Anti-war/Pacifist Approach." Neither non-violent spirituality, nor lambasting America's role in global injustice will counter, *right now*, a global network bent on crimes against humanity.

Falk rejects, as well, two other potential responses. The "Legalist/UN Approach" would have bin Laden and his associates captured and put on trial under the authority of the United Nations. Falk finds it unrealistic to expect a besieged America, rightfully claiming self-defence, to relinquish military or legal control to the UN, which "lacks the capability, authority and will to respond to" this "new form of terrorist world war."

Falk is no more enamoured with the "Militarist Approach" urged by U.S. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and some other key Bush advisers, who would greatly widen the war to destroy the pro-Palestine organizations Hezbollah and Hamas and, it is speculated, attack Iraq, Libya and possibly even Syria,

Iran and Sudan.

Falk shudders at the fallout that would ensue, the lives lost, the anti-American sentiments inflamed, the blurring of who is our terrorist enemy, the probable crumbling of the current Western coalition.

Falk lands in a stance he terms "Limiting Ends and Means." He asks that the war's goals be explicitly stated and limited to "both the destruction of the Taliban regime and the al-Qaida network, including the apprehension and prosecution of bin Laden." These remain the official goals of the Americans, as espoused by U.S. State Secretary Colin Powell whose views, for now at least, reportedly hold sway within the Bush administration.

Falk goes further to insist upon four principles drawn from "the 'just war' doctrine, international law and the ideas of restraint embedded in the great religions of the world." They are:

The principle of discrimination.

Force must be directed at a military target, with damage to civilians and civilian society being incidental.

The principle of proportionality. Force must not be greater than needed to achieve an acceptable military result and must not be greater than the provoking cause.

The principle of humanity.

Whenever possible, take prisoners rather than kill.

The principle of necessity.

Force should only be used if non-violent means to achieve military goals are unavailable.

So. Apply these principles to our war waged so far in Afghanistan. How are we doing? Well, because the reality of the war is shrouded from view and heavily spun by all sides

involved, it's hard to know for sure. Take the principle of discrimination: attack only military targets. As noted, Pentagon analysts claim great precision for their high-tech arsenal unleashed in surgical strikes against "Taliban front lines" and military infrastructure. But gut-wrenching evidence to the contrary has cropped up in the photographs of injured women and children, news of a Red Cross depot twice bombed, hospital facilities reportedly destroyed.

Or consider the principle of proportional use of force. If hundreds of thousands of uprooted Afghan civilians starve, is that "collateral damage" not severely disproportional to the approximately 5,000 lives lost in the U.S. on Sept. 11? On the other hand, there is evidence that bin Laden has tried to acquire nuclear weapons, and little doubt he'd use them if he could.

Given the apocalyptic destruction such weapons would wreak, what level of force would be out of proportion in the urgent quest to disable his network?

Some would argue it makes no sense to wring our hands about our own moral responsibilities in Afghanistan, that to do so is to equate the profound immorality of the terror attack of Sept. 11 with the counter-attack it inevitably demanded.

But to search one's own conscience in measuring a just response to cruelty is the opposite of moral relativism. This is the moment when we can least afford to "selectively morally disengage" from what happens next in Afghanistan and beyond.

After his talk, on a day when the bombing campaign was gaining ferocity, Albert Bandura told me he worried about the "war fever" gripping the U.S. He guessed the bombing would harden most victims' hearts against America and its allies, feeding the very kind of moral disengagement in Afghanistan and its region that a bin Laden and Mullah Omar require to replenish their recruits. And yet, to raise such concerns publicly

in the United States was to invite widespread derision, he said, and to risk being labelled unpatriotic.

Bandura noted that the U.S. military is well-practised at controlling and censoring information about how the war is actually being waged and who is

bearing the brunt of it, and in this he saw a page right out of his own research. We cannot bear responsibility for what we do not know, right?

But we must demand to know and we must seek out the information that allows us to feel connected to the actions being carried out, so far away, in our names. For even now that the Taliban are on the run, what lies ahead in Afghanistan is a thicket of moral decision-making. What do we owe the starving refugees of that land? What number of ground troops will we place in harm's way in order to assure the protection of human rights there? What further "collateral damage" will we exact in our pursuit of bin Laden and his network? Emboldened by success to date, will those Bush advisers advocating the "militarist approach" get the widened war they want? And here at home, as we rewrite civil liberty protections, what new moral balance is being struck between the need to be safe, and to be free?

The temptation, as Albert Bandura would remind us, is to disengage from the fresh moral considerations that arrive with each morning newspaper. We are invited to embrace the clean simplicity of moral righteousness, or throw up our hands and pull free of debate altogether, to leave the war to the technocrats and check in later, when the dust has settled, the bad guys caught dead or alive.

But citizenship within a democracy is not meant to be that easy.

And at this moment, when it is imperative to victory that the United States and its ally Canada be seen to occupy the moral high ground, it serves no good for any of us to let our consciences rest easy.

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Richard Falk's article titled

Defining a Just War can be found at <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20011029&s=falk>