

In the next 14 minutes I will try to link the subject of perpetual war with education at Stanford. 7 minutes on perpetual war, 7 minutes on Stanford.

As we’ve seen, powerful forces keep moving the US back into the curve to more war, continuing war, new war. In a recent speech Chris Hedges cited Orwell’s 1984, in which perpetual war was a sine qua non for the superstate Oceania. The people observed a daily ritual called “two minutes hate” in which everyone looked at a huge television screen depicting the current enemies and loudly expressed their hatred.

Just this week, former chief editor of the New York Times Jill Abramson broke a story about herself and Condoleeza Rice. Rice had put heavy pressure on her not to publish an investigative piece by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist James Risen, a piece that exposed a botched CIA mission to stop Iran’s nuclear program. Abramson now regrets that she did not run the story. The DOJ has indicted Risen, trying to force him to reveal his sources. Risen has refused, risking years of imprisonment. Instead of keeping quiet, he has written a new book called Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War.

How quickly things change when the Sirens of war begin to sing to us. Was it only last year that Obama pulled back from bombing Syria after Syria stepped over his red line and used chemical weapons? At that time our country was middle-east-war-weary and against a new military campaign.

Was it only four months ago that the President gave a speech at West Point, outlining an Obama Doctrine that was supposed to differentiate him from his predecessor? “To say that we have an interest in pursuing peace and freedom beyond our borders is not to say that every problem has a military solution. Since World War II,
some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences, without building international support and legitimacy for our action, without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required. Tough talk often draws headlines, but war rarely conforms to slogans. [The president promised the West Point grads, I would not send you] … into harm’s way simply because I saw a problem somewhere in the world that needed to be fixed, or because I was worried about critics who think military intervention is the only way for America to avoid looking weak. ... America must always lead on the world stage ... but U.S. military action cannot be the only—or even primary—component of our leadership... Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail."

Today all that is erased. Provoked by beheading videos put out by the enemy, we’re off again. Our President goes to the United Nations with tough talk and slogans. He puts forth a compelling and seemingly lucid case to send out the bombers, to arm and train the “good” rebels in Syria. Only the good ones of course.

And then--once the resolute speech is delivered, once the coalition partners have been assembled, once the grim accusations have been arrayed (spiced by references to unspeakable videos), once the adjectives have been lined up (barbaric, cowardly, murderous, monstrous), once the rhetoric is in place (with Bush’s axis of evil replaced by Obama’s network of death—that’s good, network of death is classier than axis of evil)—once all this has happened, the airstrikes begin.
And then the lucidity ends. Then it’s unclear what our strategy and endgame are, or if we have any. Then we start hearing about civilian casualties. Then we hear about failures of intelligence that didn’t properly assess the strength of ISIS. Then we hear from military leaders that we shouldn’t expect quick results. Then we hear that the White House has exempted Syria airstrikes from tight standards on civilian deaths.

On the first day of attacks on IS headquarters in Raqqa, we learned that IS leaders had abandoned the area before the bombs fell—“the United States has gone in to bomb largely empty buildings in northern Syria.” Two weeks later we saw the headline: US BOMBS BACKFIRE. “The U.S.-led air war in Syria has gotten off to a rocky start, with even the Syrian rebel groups closest to the United States turning against it, U.S. ally Turkey refusing to contribute, and the plight of a beleaguered Kurdish town exposing the limitations of the strategy. U.S. officials caution that the strikes are just the beginning of a broader strategy that could take years to carry out. … The main beneficiary of the strikes so far appears to be President Bashar al-Assad…”

For a break, we watch Colbert’s brilliant satire of “boots on the ground.”

Or we tune in to Jon Stewart, who says our solution to ISIS is to “wave a magic bomb.” He lines up statistics, all documented, showing the change in public opinion. Now, in September, 91% of Americans view Islamic State as a threat to the US. 65% are in favor of airstrikes on Syria.” “65%!” remarks Stewart, “That’s a full 15% more than can correctly identify Syria on a map.”

Many commentators chorus that this new war will lead to no good, that our policies and warmaking since 9/11 have been disastrous, and they’ve been saying and saying this, analyzing, investigating, and reporting on this, for many years. Mostly these commentators are not invited to CNN.
As a sidelight, Pres. Obama’s UN speech came two days after the greatest climate change protest in history. On “Democracy Now,” Amy Goodman’s guest Medea Benjamin observed, “Isn’t it sad that the day that the world should be coming together to say, ‘How do we address the climate chaos that can really destroy our entire planet?,’ instead, the eyes will now be on the U.S. bombing campaign in Syria?”

So what is the solution? Do we do nothing in the face of the horrors perpetrated by IS? No one disagrees that great horrors are taking place. What should we do? It’s not my job to answer that. I’m going to shift the focus now to Stanford, and ask some new questions. These questions arise from the work of the Stanford Peace+Justice Studies Initiative. They are not comprehensive but represent my particular interests in the project as they are relevant to tonight’s discussion of perpetual war.

Before proceeding to my examples, I would like to invoke Martin Luther King’s great April 1967 speech known as “Beyond Vietnam.” King described the US as the greatest purveyor of violence in the world. He spoke of racism, poverty, and militarism as intertwining evils that must be resisted together. He was excoriated in the press and many former friends deserted him. He was hounded and harassed. The last year of his life was dogged by depression and a sense of failure. But he never backed off of his position. And he was right.

Stanford has many courses, programs, departments, institutes and centers whose work is vital to the inquiry into peace and justice. But are we imbalanced? Are we still missing something very important? I say yes.

Where at Stanford are students learning in depth about how to draw back from militarism and from the misguided imperial designs that have shaped our foreign policy from the Vietnam war to the overthrow of Allende to the Contras to the deceptive and
incalculably destructive invasion of Iraq? Where are they applying Stanford’s fabled rigor and resources to the study of how to fight nonviolently? Does any political scientist teach a course on the theory and practice of nonviolent action? Should somebody be doing that? Does any economist or other social scientist teach a course called “The Real Costs of War,” measuring beyond budgets and effects on business? Who is teaching about the terrible harms done to our own people by our incessant warfare, particularly affecting our military members and their families, and spreading like a sickness through our whole society? Who is teaching about the ecological devastation caused by war? Who is teaching about healing and reconciliation after great violence? Are these important subjects or not? Could our Peace & Justice Studies initiative play a valuable role in inspiring and coordinating such courses?

Here’s another example. A course on US Foreign Policy, taken by many Stanford students, offers a very creative learning situation in the form of simulations where students and faculty role-play decision makers in crisis situations. The last one I heard about was focused on the question of bombing Syria because of its chemical weapons use. It was set in the White House Situation Room. The professor played Pres. Obama and students were cabinet members and military leaders. The assumption is perhaps that Stanford students are going to be in powerful positions, in rooms like this, weighing decisions like this.

I wonder if anybody ever thought about an equally creative and deeply prepared simulation of a grassroots nonviolent civil resistance movement. Hong Kong or Egypt or Serbia, from the point of view of the people in the streets. How could those movements be better strategized, more effective? I am not against the White House simulation. But how about other imaginative ways of understanding and conducting large-scale conflict?
I offer one final example to suggest an imbalance in what our students may be able to learn in our present institutes and curriculum at Stanford. Over the last several years at the FSI’s Center for International Security and Cooperation, there have been a number of National Security Scholars and Distinguished Lecturers who were high-ranking military officers with experience leading troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. These include Karl Eikenberry, former ambassador to Afghanistan and former commander of forces in Afghanistan. In 2012 Eikenberry and other military scholars at CISAC organized a trip to Fort Irwin National Training Center in the Mojave Desert, where about twenty Stanford historians, political scientists, and doctors were introduced to the sophisticated combat training our soldiers receive before being sent to Afghanistan and Iraq. A vivid illustrated article on the FSI website describes the visit.

<http://fsi.stanford.edu/news/through_explusions_and_gunfire_stanford_scholars_see_troops_train_for_afghanistan_combat_20120430>

The professors quoted are generally enthusiastic about their experience. And the Fort Irwin leaders are excited about having the Stanford professors. A 5-minute video accompanies the article. Beginning and ending with the sound of automatic weapon fire, it shows realistic combat situations and provides comments by Stanford participants. The article says, “Trips like this inform a scholar’s work. And the papers produced, the lectures delivered, and interactions with other academics and policymakers can help shape the way politicians, government officials and military leaders think about wars.” “It’s always very helpful to get out of the ivory tower and into the trenches,” says --, a CISAC affiliate and senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. Karl Eikenberry comments that the Fort Irwin commanders were terribly excited to have a group of “very prestigious Stanford professors, including people like a Pulitzer Prize-winner in History,” come
down to the training site and spend a whole day with them. “Eikenberry sees a higher value to this new association between soldiers and scholars,” says the voiceover.

Am I against this field trip? No, I’m not. I’d be interested in going myself. Am I against scholars being in dialog with military people? No, I’m not. Actually I’m for it. But I have questions.

How many of those twenty professors could be convinced to go on a field trip to the East Point Peace Academy in Oakland? Check out its website. From the mission statement: “The US military prepares many of its leaders for war at the Military Academy at West Point. At the East Point Peace Academy, we invest in creating leaders working for peace. We believe that in order for us to create a peaceful world, we need to invest as much into peace as the military invests into war. Investments not only in money, but in time, commitment, strategy, unity and training.” If the faculty members who went to Fort Irwin would not want to go to Oakland, why wouldn’t they? Should the founder of East Point Peace Academy be a Distinguished Security Fellow at CISAC? If not, why not?

Are we at Stanford, wittingly or unwittingly, influenced by a mindset that continually defaults into military solutions, that is losing flexibility and vision, that focuses too single-mindedly on entry into the corridors of power? Are we still rejecting the truth that Martin Luther King told us in 1967—that poverty, racism, and militarism are inextricably entwined and, if not addressed, will be our nation’s undoing?