

Words and Wars

By Atle Hetland

How important are words and language on the road to peace?

Can words move mountains? Can words, concepts and talks change reality? Is reality what we see and do, what we say and believe? Is it individual or objective? And then: Can words change wars? Can words change reality? The answer is 'yes'. But reality is not only subjective and perceived. It is also objective. Still, the fundamental force for change, for political change, is based on concepts, understanding, will and wishes. When all this is in place, when old ways become politically, morally and socially unacceptable, we will be surprised to realize how easy it is to mobilize the required means to implement change.

War on terror?

Since 2001, we have been told that we live in the time of 'war on terror'. Many believe this is true, and most heads of state and other political leaders, at least in the rich countries, seem to believe it. They talk about it, they allocate funds for it, and they even send military troupes to far away countries where the 'war' is said to take place.

The 'war on terror' started after the '9/11' tragic events in New York and Washington in the United States in 2002, in many ways based on statements in response to the attacks by the American President George W. Bush. Forgotten was that terrorism has always existed, also in recent decades, before '9/11', in many parts of the world and in 'acceptable' magnitude. '9/11' was the first time a major attack took place on American soil, the only superpower left, and a country which has never experienced foreign invasion on its territory. America and all the other countries in the NATO alliance and a number of other friendly countries saw the '9/11' attacks unacceptable to such a degree that a 'war on terror' was declared. Thus, we can fix the time for when the 'war on terror' started. But when will it end, or, will it ever end? And what exactly is that 'war' about?

Correct use of language?

Many words and issues about the so-called 'war on terror' are unclear. The founder of the New York and Oslo based network, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, *Professor Evelin Gerda Lindner*, says that it is entirely wrong to use the term 'war on terror' as it easily contributes to more anger and frustration and can lead to escalation of terror incidents rather than the opposite.

The Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs *Hon. Jonas Gahr Størhe* said at the *2008 Oslo Forum* that the next American President should call an end to the 'war on terror', not only change the terminology. *Hon. Størhe* dislikes the term that President Bush started using so casually after '9/11', a term we have been stuck with ever since. He says that conflicts and wars cannot be painted with one, broad brush. The causes for insurgencies and conflicts in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Latin America are different and we cannot just use one broad term for all of them, he says. Serious crime must be stopped and lawbreakers brought to justice, but it is wrong to use military language.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs welcomed the more diversified means of action used by the superpower USA after *Condoleezza Rice* became Secretary of State. She began to emphasize more than before the use not only of military means, but also diplomatic and economic means, such as in the case of North Korea, a country which was said to belong to the 'axis of evil', alongside Iran and Iraq. Can you believe a less psychologically and strategically unfortunate term to use than 'axis of evil' if we genuinely want to engage countries

in dialogue and hope they will toe the line and possibly even become friendly to those who set the terms, the super power and the leaders of the world?

Lack of accuracy

Let us underline that the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs certainly makes good points. But such points are easy to make and they are not at a level of great accuracy and specificity. This should make us worried. How come that the leaders in the world's only superpower and a NATO country like Norway do not have a more sophisticated thinking and clearer operational plans for how countries should relate to each other? How come we do not have clearer plans for how to avoid conflicts? And when conflicts have started, for how long should they be allowed to go on? If such analyses and plans do indeed exist, this writ would indeed be glad to learn about them.

Afghanistan

We are here in particular thinking of Iraq and not least Afghanistan, being Pakistan's next-door neighbour with long-running conflicts. The country has been at war since the end of 1979, and before that, there was internal strife for almost a decade, and before and after, great underdevelopment, poverty and structural violence.

The current foreign occupation seems to lead to more reluctance to accept the new order, and the new leaders, introduced by the occupiers. And those who came to occupy mix the cards and say they want to carry out development work, too, well, mostly on their terms. But how can someone who came as an occupier become a friend? It takes more that increased development aid, which should be implemented by entirely separate bodies from the army, or even other government agencies of the occupying countries. Perhaps their money is even a problem to receive because the recipients may find that the money comes with conditions. No wonder, after seven years, that resistance groups and movements try to regroup and take charge of their own country. Would and should not the people of any country do that?

Name-calling

And again, if words make or end wars and conflicts, why do we use the word Taliban so indiscriminately, often mixed with up with Al Quaida? It is tantamount to name-calling, and it is factually wrong to talk about the Taliban as one group of people, and only in negative ways. How often do we discuss the underlying reasons for the existence and reoccurrence of resistance groups such as the Taliban? Are they not nationalist groups concerned about their country, yes, even if some of their ideas are outdated in the West?

Our common use of words can only lead to stronger internal opposition to the current Afghan government, which is supported by the foreign occupying powers. Recently, the Afghan President Hamid Karzai has begun to emphasize this more vigorously, but it may be that it is too late for him to do that. Yet, dialogue, inclusiveness and cooperation is probably the only way towards peace in Afghanistan. It is 'take and give', not unconditional surrender by the weak, and not excessive use of power by the strong. The strong must also accommodate the minorities, give room for those with whom there is disagreement, and then there must be some common ground and fundamental principles that all must abide by. There is need for many words and a lot of discussion to reach this situation, and no violence, attacks by foreign forces, terrorists, or government.

Language to suit reality

If we all wanted peace, we would have used words that would contribute to peace, and we would have supported actions that would lead to reconciliation, cooperation and development. Indeed, we would have ended the Afghan occupation long ago. Besides, the invasion was probably not justifiable in the first place. Many have said that about the Iraqi war, which was even termed illegal by *Kofi Annan*, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, and then he fell out of favour with Washington.

Development not destruction

Good now that Barack Obama, the American President-elect, wants to end the Iraq war. And when he deepens his knowledge about foreign policy issues, let us hope that he will change the foreign expenditures in Afghan away from military to civilian purposes, again if the Afghans will accept American money, if it is not too late. Today the ratio is something like 1:8 in favour of the military expenditures. It should at least have been the other way around. Foreign funds should go to development and practical security for ordinary people, not for war and destruction against ill-defined enemies, affecting poor people hardest. And the President-elect's understanding of Pakistan and the border areas with Afghanistan will have to improve – to include the causes of the problems. I still believe that Obama's real thinking is about dialogue and cooperation, not blunt use of power in a war which cannot be won. Where is his change we can believe in, or is he pushed to do things he and we cannot believe in?

Obama's real thinking as expressed most of the time during his election campaign focused on dialogue and peace. Now is the time to plan for putting into practice the words. It is time for the West and Russia to pay back what it contributed to destroying during earlier decades and recent years in Afghanistan, and even in Pakistan. The Cold War was part of the geopolitical power struggle that time, but we are frequently told that time is behind us.

If we talk about peace, we will find peace

Can words change reality and put us back on track? Not words alone. But words, terminology, concepts and approaches can help get us started, and make us analyze realistically and idealistically. If we talk about peace, we will find peace.

There is nothing as practical as a good theory, our university teachers told us when we were students. There is also nothing as powerful as positive thinking and positive language. In other words, the unthinkable can be done if we work towards realizing it and if we frame words and concepts that make people believe in a better future.

The opposite can also happen, that negative words are used, such as the blame India used against Pakistan after the recent terror attacks in Mumbai. It takes maturity, on both sides, to defuse unreasonable blame, and continue on a positive road.

Change and peace we can believe in

Barack Obama's campaign slogan was an eloquent example: '*Change we can believe in*'. And Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was even bolder in his so-called 'dream speech' forty-five years ago, when he proclaimed his wish for the abolishment of all racial segregation, at a time when we were only beginning to be judged on our character, not color of our skin. It sounded just like a dream that time, but the dream caught fire in people's hearts and minds, and America's apartheid became history. Obama himself, who is of mixed African and white American background, is an example of how fast change can actually take place. In South Africa, where the apartheid was even deeper, it became politically and morally unacceptable, and it had to be abolished, not least thanks to the example and the *simple words* by that country's first 'rainbow government', under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, who this summer celebrated his 90th birthday. His words were simple, human and powerful. They are not always many and complicated, but they make us all think and look into our hearts – as we all try to become better human beings, with the blessing and help of the God we believe in. Hopefully we can even empower people and help them get out of poverty, structural violence, not only direct violence and war. Words can change the world in positive ways. Alas, wars change the world too, but not in positive ways.

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