

Valerie Elverton Dixon

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A Response to President Obama's Speech at West Point

Truth. Respect. Security. These are the three broad categories of just peace theory as I interpret it. In his West Point speech regarding the war in Afghanistan, President Obama articulated a strategy grounded in the need for security – in the United States, Afghanistan/Pakistan, and in the world. I support President Obama's strategy to send an additional 30,000 U.S. warriors to Afghanistan for 18 months.

This is not an easy position for me to take. I opposed both the Afghan and the Iraq wars. After 9/11, I thought the Bush administration should have called the Taliban's bluff and agreed to have Osama bin Laden tried in an international Islamic court. There is nothing in Islam that sanctions mass murder. I thought the United Nations should have sent an army of teachers, doctors, nurses, farmers and engineers to Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. This army could have strengthened the people from the ground up. A more vigorous people could then challenge the cruel and repressive Taliban.

Now, here we are eight years, hundreds of thousands of lives lost in two wars, hundreds of billions of dollars spent, hundreds of thousands suffering with physical and psychological wounds, God only knows how many families displaced, damaged and destroyed later, faced with only bad choices. I am persuaded that President Obama was right to take his time and to think through a strategy. I am persuaded that he made the best possible decision given the economic realities facing this country at this moment. It is a just peace decision from a just peace president.

Just peace stands upon the middle ground between pacifism and just war theory. Unlike pacifism, it holds that there may be times when a situation requires military force. Unlike just war theory, it understands that just peace is an ongoing, every day effort to work to prevent violent conflict. Just peace reasons from the premise that there is no such thing as victory in war. The minute the first bullet flies, everyone loses. War itself is failure.

Just peace theory intersects with just war thinking on the matter of military force for the sake of the protection of innocents. Just peace theory intersects with pacifism on the matter of the necessity for human rights, economic development, grassroots peacemaking and regional and international cooperation to prevent and to end war. The strategy that President Obama articulated allows the military to create a safe space for aid workers and for the Afghan people to build their own structures of security. The strategy is regional in that it includes Pakistan. He said: "These are the three core elements of our strategy: a military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan."

President Obama recognizes that this is a new day in war and peace. The old ideological divisions of military deployment or disengagement are not workable in a world of “disorderly regions and diffuse enemies.” In his speech, he articulated a subtle paradigm shift from America as the world’s singular superpower able and willing to demonstrate its military might for the sake of a *pax Americana* to a moment where “we show our strength in the way that we end wars and prevent conflict.” He spoke of the power of our moral suasion, a kind of soft power. This is a positive power that works alongside the negative power of violence.

He is talking about a strategy of stability. This is a strategy where the military partners with civilian entities both inside and outside the government toward a unified effort to bring order out of chaotic situations. The aim is to provide for the basic needs of the people of the host country. These basic needs include security. And, in my opinion, President Obama is correct when he says that our lives and the lives of our children “will be better if other peoples’ children and grandchildren can live in freedom and access opportunity.”

As Martin Luther King JR taught us that we live in a network of mutuality.

It is good that he reminded us that our values are important. He said: “And we must make it clear to every man, woman and child round the world who lives under the dark cloud of tyranny that America will speak out on behalf of their human rights, and tend to the light of freedom, and justice, and opportunity, and respect for the dignity of all peoples.”

I am hopeful that this determination to live our values of human rights and respect for human dignity will compel President Obama to end CIA secret wars and drone attacks that kill innocent people. I know that this will be a difficult thing to do. Nothing about keeping a nation secure in a complex and violent world is easy.

President Obama has made a difficult decision. He is sending more of our sons and daughters into harm’s way. They all deserve our support. They deserve our own willingness to sacrifice. Therefore, let us fast and pray for a successful conclusion to this conflict. Some people are fasting on Wednesdays for the end of local and global violence. Peace activists have been fasting on Fridays for years. Let us join the Wednesday and/or Friday fasts. Let us sacrifice a meal or two in solidarity with our warriors and peace workers, with the Afghan people and with all those who hope and pray and strive for peace.