

Bloody uniform

By David Edwards

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“Q. You’re married?”

A. Right.

Q. Children?”

A. Two.

Q. How old?”

A. The boy is two and a half, and the little girl is a year and a half.

Q. Obviously, the question comes to my mind... the father of two little kids like that... how can he shoot babies?”

A. I didn’t have the little girl. I just had the little boy at the time.

Q. Uh-huh... How do you shoot babies?”

A. I don’t know. It’s just one of those things.”

(Mike Wallace of CBS News interviewing a participant of the US massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. Quoted Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, Pinter & Martin, 1974, p.202)

As anyone who has worked in a modern corporation will know, the people working in those corporations are good, caring people. It’s just that, in their work, they are required to obey a system of economic logic that subordinates human and animal suffering to short-term profit. They are decent, civilised people – their actions result in mass suffering and death.

It is wrong to think that evil comes with a black hat, horns, scarred face, handle-bar moustache, or even mad, staring eyes. Endless testimony has documented the banal nature of evil. Men, women and children are generally burned alive, not by grinning monsters, but by fresh-faced kids pushing throttles, raising flaps and pressing bomb releases.

Clinical psychologist, Lindsey Williams, notes that “apart from traits of authoritarianism and obedience, and ideological sympathy for the government, there is little evidence that torturers are markedly different from their peers - at least, until the point where they are recruited and trained as torturers.” (Amnesty, May/June 1995, p.10)

Bloody uniform / 2

Nobody, it turns out, ever *feels* particularly evil, or particularly responsible for the suffering of the world. Consider, for example, that when Bill Clinton celebrated his election as president by firing cruise missiles into Baghdad on June 26, 1993, he generated a popularity spike in America. Kurt Nimmo provides some detail: "Public-opinion polls showed his approval rating climbed by eleven percentage points on June 27th, the day after the attack, and more than two-thirds of those polled approved of the bombing. Americans like it when their presidents kill people in faraway lands, especially after they whop the tar out of them in lopsided wars. It is easy to stomach mass murder when it is presented as a video game on CNN and Fox News." (Kurt Nimmo 7/6/2004 'Clinton's Life: In The Grip Of Mass Murder' <http://kurtnimmo.com/blog/index.php?p=226>)

The attack killed and injured dozens of Iraqis. But who killed them? Was it Clinton? Yes. But it was also the mass media who habitually promote evil threats abroad, and who constantly laud the importance and power of violent responses to them. It was the right-wing journalists who froth at the mouth, but also the 'liberal' journalists who offer articulate 'nuanced', 'cautious' support for leaders, and who urge 'restraint' without actually condemning the violence, or exposing the cynicism at its heart. It's the liberal leader writers currently promoting John Kerry and John Edwards as 'good guys' promising to lead the world out of the darkness generated by Bush and the other 'bad guys'.

If Kerry and Edwards displace Bush and Cheney, they will surely soon be off bombing some defenceless Third World 'rogue' – and the public will have been prepared by the current propaganda to perceive this as the 'good guys' making 'tough choices' for the betterment of humanity. As the bodies burst they, again, will hit a popularity spike.

Though journalists do not themselves know it, there is nothing random about the perennial coming of the 'good guys' – Clinton, Kerry, Blair, Brown. It is essential that our faith in the goodness of our leaders be constantly revitalised and refreshed. Erich Fromm explained why: "To be sure obedience can be learned by sheer force. But this method has many disadvantages. It constitutes a constant threat that one day the many might have the means to overthrow the few by force; furthermore there are many kinds of activity which cannot be done properly if nothing but fear is behind the obedience. Hence the obedience which is only rooted in the fear of force must be transformed into one rooted in man's heart. Man must want and even need to obey, instead of only fearing to disobey. If this is to be achieved, power must assume the qualities of the All Good, of the All Wise; it must become All Knowing. If this happens, power can proclaim that disobedience is sin and obedience virtue." (Fromm, *On Disobedience and other essays*, Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1984, p.7)

This is why it has taken so very long for the public to see through Blair's sweet smile to the compulsive manipulator and ruthless dissembler beneath.

Bloody uniform / 3

The mass production of evil

In truth, the 'evil' individual is most often simply someone who unthinkingly accepts the 'superior wisdom' of others, who defers to their 'deeper understanding', and who conforms. The doors of hell are heavy, they take a lot of moving. They are not opened by the occasional damaged psychopath with an Uzi, by the rebellious teenager, by the disobedient schoolchild or petty thief. The doors of hell are almost always opened by people in uniform.

J. Robert Porter reports instructions given by a US general to the 25th Infantry Division operating in central Korea in July 1950. Referring to an area of more than one hundred square miles, the instructions read: "All civilians seen in this area are to be treated as enemy and action taken accordingly."

A radio message from the US Army's First Cavalry Division around the same time was recorded as: "No refugees to cross the front lines. Fire everyone trying to cross lines. Use discretion in case of women and children." (Porter in Borjesson, ed., *Into The Buzzsaw*, Prometheus Books, 2002, p.204)

It was in this same area at this exact same time that eyewitnesses reported 400 South Korean civilians – women, children, babies and old men – were deliberately gunned down by US warplanes and soldiers at No Gun Ri bridge. But the same media that forever focuses so enthusiastically on domestic murders and dramatic abductions was not interested in covering the atrocity. Porter writes: "There was one problem. The people who ran the AP [Associated Press]. The people I worked for. I knew they would not share my enthusiasm for the story. It turned out to be even worse." (Ibid, p.206)

Porter and other journalists who tried to break the story in the late 1990s suffered demotion and career death. Porter writes: "Bias has no place in good journalism... I do admit though: I am politically opposed to having soldiers kill babies in secret. Do you know anyone who is in favour of that?" (Ibid, p.205)

Porter was responding as a human being; his bosses were responding as corporate executives. Porter was subordinating everything to humanity and compassion; his bosses were subordinating everything to profit.

Nobody's head was separated from their body as a result of what Porter's bosses did, but decisions of this kind create the conditions that make suffering possible, in fact inevitable.

Uniform, we know, means "conforming to the standard or rule". The doors of hell are opened by those who conform to the standard or the rule. The most lethal act always has been and always will be that of obeying without thinking, of placing our responsibility for what we do in the care of people who are themselves removed from the actuality of blood and gore, so that, ultimately, no one has both responsibility *and* blood on their hands. Historian Howard Zinn writes: "More and more in our time, the mass production of

Bloody uniform / 4

massive evil requires an enormously complicated division of labour. No one is positively responsible for the horror that ensues. But everyone is negatively responsible, because anyone can throw a wrench into the machinery.” (Zinn, *The Zinn Reader, Seven Stories*, 1997, p.280)

But because in our society the powers that be have every interest in dressing us up in ideational and physical uniforms to do their bidding, the ultimate sin is declared to be, not conformity – renamed ‘discipline’, ‘duty’, ‘tradition’, ‘honour’, ‘efficiency’, ‘pragmatism’ – but retail violence and crime, the disobedient breaking of the (mythical) social contract that ‘binds’ society together.

This is nonsense but it is useful nonsense: the manifestation of criminality and violence in individuals is a bee sting to the cruise missile of conformity. Visit the blood-stained temples of Tibet, the killing fields of Cambodia, the empty villages of East Timor, the shattered streets of Chechnya, the busy graveyards of Iraq – go to Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, the craters on planet Vietnam, the bull-dozed pits of Auschwitz, and you will always, without fail, find the blood-soaked uniform in close attendance.

And yet, in our society, the great threat, the great crime that has us quaking in fear when we take a day off work or school, that has us railing against the scruffily dressed, the belligerent, the petty criminal, is disobedience.

The social reviling of individual ‘troublemakers’ and the happy acceptance of quiet obedience – of students in their exam rooms, teenagers with their regulation jeans, trainers and gelled hair, wild worship of the national football team, polite applause for royal nonsense – are all part of a mindset that facilitates mass killing around the world. It is this emphasis that allows us to ignore what is happening (because we know ‘the experts’ are in charge and know what they’re doing), to make the shooting of babies “just one of those things” we were told to do.

Moral responsibility – awareness and action

How many times last summer did we hear educated, friendly, articulate RAF pilots saying that the Iraq war and the killing it involved were “not really my scene” but “I’m here to do the job I’ve been trained to do”?

Psychologist Stanley Milgram noted that people willing to commit heinous acts on the command of authority quite often protest even as they obey, declaring their dissatisfaction with what they are being asked to do. Milgram noted: “Some derived satisfaction from their thoughts and felt that – within themselves, at least – they had been on the side of the angels. What they failed to realise is that subjective feelings are largely irrelevant to the moral issue at hand so long as they are not transformed into action. Political control is

Bloody uniform / 5

effected through action. The attitudes of the guards at a concentration camp are of no consequence when in fact they are allowing the slaughter of innocent men to take place before them.” (Milgram, op., cit, p.28)

The reality is that it is not nearly enough that we are good, decent people; that we are polite; that we take care of our kids; that we are kind, thoughtful and reasonable. These are important and good. But if, in addition, we simply do what we are told, if we don't think for ourselves – if we don't have the capacity to say 'no', to cause trouble, to be disobedient – then we may well end up the architects of somebody's hell.

I think it is useful to assume, as Zinn points out, that nobody is positively responsible for the horror in our world, but that everyone is negatively responsible because we can all act to stop it. It is no good looking outside ourselves and simply blaming others, just as it is no good transferring responsibility for our actions arguing that 'they' run the organisation, that 'politicians make the decisions' and 'I'm just doing my job.'

We are responsible for our actions. That means it is our responsibility to understand, as best we can, the meaning of our actions in the world around us. We need to become serious students of politics, economics, political history, media propaganda, and so on, so that we can judge the ethical consequences of what we are doing. If these consequences are clearly destructive – regardless of what others would have us believe – then it is our responsibility to resist that destructiveness by refusing to cooperate, by demanding change, by changing our job, actions, values. To be ignorant, to not give a damn about how the world works – to assume that our task is merely to do what we're told and otherwise lose ourselves in entertainment – is deeply immoral.

This process of working to become an informed, self-directed, compassionate and morally responsible person leads us towards an astonishing realisation. Focusing solely on our own needs, on how best to get what we want, it turns out, leads us *away* from personal happiness, contentment and peace of mind. Focusing instead on what is best for others, on how to help them, leads us *towards* happiness.

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