

An Urgent Letter to Barack Obama

By Jean Marie MULLER

To my grandchildren
Garance and Audran
in the Hope of Nonviolence

Dear Mr. President,

As were innumerable others across the world, I was overjoyed by your election to the office of President of the United States of America. As others, I hoped that you would be in a position to finally give peace and justice their due by resolutely changing the detestable policies of your predecessor. When the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to you on October 9th, 2009, I thought that this honor was not only somewhat premature, but that it was paradoxical--given that you are a Head of State engaged in war, in fact, a Head of State engaged in two wars. Though, on one hand, you did not nominate yourself for the Prize and, on the other hand, you are not the author of these wars which you have to some extent inherited. Ultimately, I wanted to believe that this honor would reinforce your determination and would bring you some additional credibility to help you surmount the major responsibilities that are yours alone. Today, still, I would like to believe this.

Would You Be the Nobel 'War' Prize?

I listened to all of the surprised, most often confused, sometimes sarcastic if not offensive analyses prompted by the short speech that you gave on December 10th, 2009, as you received your prize in Oslo. As soon as the speech was over the major media outlets reported that you were the "Nobel 'Just War' Prize." This would thus make you the "Nobel 'War' Prize." Since, always and everywhere, States have declared--loud and clear--that their war was "just." Not one of them drew attention to the fact that the combination of these two terms, Nobel Peace Prize and Head of State-at-war, would be an oxymoron. This somewhat strange term signifies in our language an unnatural alliance between two contradictory and incompatible terms.

Therefore I wanted to attentively read that text of your short speech. I was surprised to see that not only do you approach the question of war and peace, but even more fascinating, war, peace and *nonviolence*. This is quite unexpected from a Head of State and this has therefore brought me to you in the spirit of dialogue.

I hold no title worthy of your attention other than that of a simple nonviolent activist who, for many long years, has tried to preserve the legacy bequeathed to us by Gandhi. I have the deep conviction that the fragile flame lit at one time by this Indian sage is the only hope which might still illuminate our path in a world overshadowed by innumerable forms of violence.

I am also a citizen of the world, worried, like you, to “seek a better future for our children and grandchildren.” And, like yourself, I believe that “their lives will be better if others peoples’ children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity.”

The more or less informed analysts, did they not frame your statements by retaining only your justification of war? Certainly they did. For you strived to find a balance between the demands of peace and the constraints of war. I have no interest to put words in your mouth by any means. I have no doubt of your good intentions or even of your good nature. Yet for someone in your position, it must have been quite difficult to speak simultaneously about war, peace and nonviolence. You did take certain precautions. You kept yourself from making the apology for war: “War itself,” you were careful to say, “is never glorious and we must never trumpet it as such.” Still, it is true that, when all is said and done, the concept of just war appears to be the principle idea that structures your statements. Though, if it was on this point you were critiqued, it is equally on this point you were applauded, most notably by your Republican adversaries who did not miss the opportunity to praise your speech. That, in itself, is already troubling.

War is Never Just

You affirm that over time, whereas philosophers, clerics and statesmen sought to regulate the destructive powers of war, “the concept of a “just war” emerged.” You remind the conditions put forth by these doctrinarians that for a war to be considered just: it must be declared as a last resort our in the case of a legitimate defense, the violence used must be proportionate, and whenever possible, civilians must be spared. But you immediately add that everybody knows that “for most of history, this concept of just war was rarely observed.” To say the least, it never has, wouldn’t you agree? A worthless concept then, or, more precisely, a concept to justify all wars. That should suffice to completely renounce brandishing it as a standard.

Let us make no mistake that rights in war (*jus in bello*) have never had any other goal and any other effect than to reinforce the right to war (*jus ad bellum*). War is a fatal instrument, a blind machine. Violence is not destiny. It never imposes its laws by itself. But as soon as men choose it, it becomes fatal as they succumb to its laws. These laws are relentless. Rigid. Weakening. Cruel. Ferocious. Immoral. Inhuman, beneath it all. Moreover, you repeat that, “no matter how justified, war promises human tragedy.” Though precisely, Mr. President, human tragedy would never find justification for the pure and simple reason that it is never just. You suggest that it is important to “think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace.” Nonetheless ultimately, the imperatives of peace do not lead you to question the imperatives of war, on the contrary, they lead you to accommodate them.

“Part of our challenge,” you continue, “is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths—that war is sometimes necessary, and war is at some level an expression of human folly.” Though war, if it is necessary at times, and consequently if it is the expression of human folly, would it not be an additional folly to seek any moral justification for it whatsoever?

You were certainly right to invite us to recognize “a hard truth”: “we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes.” This is sadly true. And neither will our children moreover. But you add: “there will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but *morally justified*.” Here we find the heart of the question. As well as that of the answer. It is over this crucial point that I wish to dispute (from the latin *putare*, to examine, to consider, to evaluate...) with you in the sense of the word derived from the ancients, that is to say not to quarrel with you but to confront you in order to debate and to think with you. It is precisely at the very moment that violence appears as necessary to us that we must remember that it is never just, and consequently, it can never be justified. Necessity does not entail legitimacy. To say that violence is necessary, is to suggest that violence finds itself in disaccord with man’s humanity. Everything in nature is subject to the law of necessity. Everything, that is, except the human being. For man only achieves his humanity to the extent that he has the strength to loosen the vice of necessity that is wrapped around his freedom. Violence, in all of its forms, contains an irreducible part of injustice and *there can be no form of necessity that legitimates the unjust*. When we justify violence under the pretext of necessity, we render violence unquestionably necessary and we seal off the future in the necessity of violence. As violence contradicts man’s humanity, to justify violence is to erase that contradiction. Thus man is free to be a murderer in good conscience.

The End Does Not Justify the Means

Political action can have no other finality than to introduce more justice into the disorder of the world. Moreover, everyone claims that they act for justice. The essential question is then the means. “The end,” some say, “justifies the means.” And that would suggest that a just end justifies unjust means and violent means in particular. In reality, the opposite occurs. The injustice inhering in violent means makes the just end unjust. Not only do violent means pervert the most just of ends, but they run they run the risk of actually replacing and eliminating it.

Philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) passionately maintains that what makes a war just is not a just cause but a just victory. Furthermore, the unjust means of war prove themselves incapable of offering a just victory. In all war, she clarifies, “if the cause of the victor is just, if the cause of the vanquished is just, the evil that either victory or defeat may do is no less inevitable. To hope to escape from this is unacceptable.”¹ She reiterates: “The victory of those who defend a just cause through arms is not necessarily a just victory; a victory is more or less just not in function of the cause that calls to arms, but in function of the order that establishes itself once the arms

¹ Simone Weil, *Cahiers*, Tome I, Paris, Plon, 1951, p. 46.

have been retired.”² Consequently the right method, she continues, “consists above all of examining every single human fact, taking into account much less the end pursued than the consequences necessarily implicated by the very choice of the means employed.”³ In other words, precisely no matter what the argument you might advance to claim that you are defending a just cause, you are forced to realize that you are incapable of obtaining a just victory.

In reality, war implies a radical inversion of the moral code of right conduct by questioning the universal, unconditional, and eternal obligation of the reasonable conscience: “Thou shall not kill.” This primordial requirement of philosophy, thus of wisdom, is not only suspended and contradicted, but challenged, cancelled, denied, rejected. At the outset of the declaration of war, men are called upon to obey the imperative commandment: “Thou shall kill.” And misfortune to he who refuses to obey. War is always preceded and accompanied by propaganda that justifies and honors murder. No, Mr. President, violence is never a Right of Man, it is always a crime against humanity.

Delegitimizing Murder

I now wish to invite you to join me in visiting a man who also received the Nobel Prize and whose moral integrity is universally recognized. I am speaking of Albert Camus. He was equally aware that it would be an absolute utopia to want that “no one kill any one any longer.” That would be entirely unreasonable. This is why Camus settles for “a world, not where we no longer kill, but where murder is no longer legitimate.”⁴ “I will never say,” he insists, “that we must erase all violence, which would be desirable, but utopian, in effect. I am only saying that we must refuse all legitimization of violence. (...) Violence is both inevitable and unjustifiable.”⁵ It is only by refusing to justify it does man give himself any chance of avoiding it. In his seminal work, *The Rebel*, he insists once again: “Most certainly, the rebel does not deny the history around him, it is in terms of this that he attempts to affirm himself. (...) Even though he can participate, by the force of events, in the crime of history, he cannot necessarily legitimate it.”⁶

Therefore the determining characteristic of a culture of peace is first of all the refusal to bring any such legitimization to violence despite acknowledging its historical necessity. Such a position, it is true, is at odds with the traditional teachings of the professors of moral philosophy to whom you refer. They do not fail to maintain, on the contrary, that not only does violence appear as necessary, it is *morally justified*, to use your unfortunate expression. But it is Camus who is correct before these moralists who have lost themselves in an uncertain casuistic. What

² Simone Weil, *Ecrits historiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 59. (translation SNV)

³ *Ibid.*, p. 233. (translation SNV)

⁴ Albert Camus, *Essais*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliotheque de la Pleiade, 1965, p. 335. (translation SNV)

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 355. (translation SNV)

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*. New York, Alfred K. Knopf Inc, 1956, p. 290.

professors of morality, clerics, and statesmen have not understood is that the justification of murder is a resignation of the mind and spirit, a renunciation of intelligence, a mistake against humanity. As long as we concede to any moral justification of violence, we will remain in a culture of war.

The Beauty of Compromise

Your ambition is that the United States lead the struggle for justice and freedom in the world. So be it. “Evil exists in the world,” you stated in order to justify violence. Indeed, it does exist, but if we we try to eliminate it through violence, we greatly run the risk increasing it. It demonstrates a great im-patience and a great im-prudence to wish to combat evil with evil. Abby Pierre told me one day, “You must believe that there exists something irreparable in the world’s injustice and suffering.” This thought surprised me and has remained ingrained in my mind. Reason wants to step in by equating this consent of powerlessness with a consent of weakness. But realism requires us in effect to recognize an inevitable irreparable component in the history of men and of society. To become aware of this irreparable component is neither renunciation, nor abdication, nor compliance, nor resignation, but wisdom. This irreparable component constitutes a tragedy where the unjust, violent and murderous insanity of men controls reason. We must humbly learn how to come face to face with the tragic destiny of a suffering humanity. When men believed that they no other recourse than to violence in order to erase all tragedy from their history, they only added murder upon murder. They found themselves confronted by the absurd.

It is necessary to accept this irreparable component just as one would assume a legacy. The legacy of a past that carries the mark of the inhumanity of men, the mark of the dark side of human nature. The rhetoric according to which no compromise is possible with the enemy accused of being a “terrorist” if only to better dehumanize him- is the very discourse of war itself. To choose violence is to refuse all compromise. It only serves to foster the illusion that violence will eradicate evil. Violence promises a perfect world, but even perfection is a dream. The desire for purification nurtures murder. For its desire is to see the good triumph by means of eliminating the wicked. But this is precisely the perpetual war, with all of its misfortune.

The man chasing after perfection exerts violence over others. In order to erase the violence of the violent, is it necessary to kill the violent? Yes, responds unhesitatingly he who claims to bring the reign of order to the world. For, according to him, only the murder of the violent can purify the world of violence. As the Grand Inquisitor, he goes forth to hunt down the wicked.

Peace is always a compromise. As it is with the enemy that we must make peace, it is with the enemy that we must reach compromise. “Throughout my entire life,” said Gandhi, “the obstinate cult of truth taught me to appreciate the beauty of compromise.”⁷ Lanzo del Vasto puts it this

⁷ Gandhi, *Autobiographie ou mes experiences de verite*, Paris, Presse Universitaires de la France, 1964, p. 185. (translation SNV)

way: “Beautiful is the compromise that is less ugly than yesterday’s.”⁸ Compromise is, admittedly, a relative form of justice. Yet the best compromise is the only possible peace.

Disarming the Gods

You rightly highlight the immense danger to world peace posed by these extremists who assert the guarantee of religion to “justify the murder of innocents.” With good reason, you clarify that extremists who claim to practice Islam “are not the first to kill in God’s name; the cruelties of the Crusades are amply recorded.” You remind that “No Holy War can ever be a just war. For if you really believe that you are carrying out divine will, then there is no need for restraint.” Indeed, fundamentalist ideology sacralizes violence. Religious killers are amongst the most furious and the least repentant murders. But in order to desacralize the holy war, Mr. President, it is necessary to first delegitimize just war.

The logic of fundamentalists is that while there is no cause more just than that of God, there is no violence more legitimate than that of the holy war. Fundamentalists kill indiscriminately because they believe that God is “with them.” In reality, God is never with those who resort to violence. And never are they with God. For God, in so far as we may know, abhors violence. Religious fundamentalism is one of the most powerful vectors of violence. Not only do they have the certainty of conviction that theirs is the only true religion, they can also claim that they alone possess the truth and persuade themselves that God gave them the mission to defend it. They create for themselves a duty not only to strike down heresies, but to wage battle against heretics. Without any doubt, reason alone does not permit one to know the true God, but at least it allows us to identify false gods by saying what God is not--and that is already of consequence. For the philosopher--the lover of wisdom--, the antithesis of faith is not unbelieving, but violence. Reason teaches us that gods who make a pact with the violence of men, who sanction and sometimes order violence, most certainly live in the pantheon of false gods. Thus *the god of the armed* is surely a false god. The true God can only be an *Unarmed God*. Man has always had need to justify his violence and, when he believes in a god, he needs to convince himself that his god justifies his violence. The urgency to *disarm the gods* is a philosophical, political, and cultural exigency. It affects not only believers, but all men and women desirous of building a peaceful world. While a violent history belongs only to a violent god; a nonviolent history can only correspond to the representation of a nonviolent God.

At the same time, I do not find it fair to place the violence committed in the name of religion entirely upon the extremists who would deform religion, as much they would have you believe. Fundamentalism is only possible through orthodoxy. By constructing a reasonable usage for violence, orthodoxy already justifies its abuse by fundamentalists. For violence is unreasonable and it is an abuse in itself. In order to combat the violence of fundamentalism, it is necessary to find it and remove it from the very place it is hiding in the depths of orthodoxy.

⁸ Lanzo del Vasto, *Approches de la vie interieure*, Paris, Denoel, p. 184. (Translation SNV)

Instead of attempting to make the case that they are all religions of peace, it would be necessary for religions - those of the utmost spiritual courage and intellectual honesty amongst them- to admit that they have *also* all been religions of war. And this would oblige them, not only to recognize their mistakes, but above all to recognize their errors. However, it is much more difficult for a religion to admit its errors than its mistakes. For the former only brings men into question, while the latter directly puts the religions themselves into question. It is both necessary and good to repent for ones mistakes, but it is more important still to admit that these mistakes were provoked and justified by errors, errors of doctrine, errors of thought. And the only way to repent for one's errors is by correcting them.

The Strength of Nonviolent Action

Nevertheless, it would not suffice to delegitimize murder. While that is essential, it can only serve as a precondition. The ultimate deciding factor will be in finding an alternative to murderous violence which allows us to assume our responsibilities in history. In order to cultivate a culture of peace, we must learn how to deconstruct the ideology of *necessary, legitimate, and honorable violence* that dominates our societies, and at the same time, to construct a philosophy of nonviolence. Admittedly, you do not ignore nonviolence. You do not hesitate to make reference to Gandhi and Martin Luther King. You cite your predecessor, for whom you manifestly have a real admiration, who declared while receiving the Nobel Peace Prize: "Violence never brings long-term peace. It does not resolve any social problem: it can only create new, more complicated ones." These words are crucial in delegitimizing violence. In a careful reading, in so far as Martin Luther King might agree, it appears not only that violence is not moral, but it is ineffective above all. And therefore could never be necessary. You continue, "I am living testimony to the moral force of nonviolence. I know that there is nothing weak, nothing passive, nothing naive, in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King." If one takes and understands these words literally, they are a homage to nonviolence that no Head of State has ever yet dared to give.

However, immediately after having praised nonviolence, you utter the short word through which those who claim to be realists keep their distance from this very same nonviolence: "*But.*" This short word is code word for skeptics. Yes! Yes! Certainly! Certainly! Of course! Of course! **But!...** Ah Yes! There is always a "but" that ends the praises of nonviolence! It is always the same rhetoric: nonviolence is fine and good, but!... "But," you continue, "as a Head of State sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone." And then in order to justify your statement, you say: "I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: evil does exist in the world." Do you think then that Gandhi and King remained inactive in the face of threats to their own people? Did you not just confirm the very opposite? Do you think that Gandhi and King were not also facing the world as it is with all of its challenges? Do you think that they ignored that evil exists in the world? Precisely what they proved is that in the face of evil, the choice is not only between inaction and violence. It is between inaction, violence and nonviolence.

Allow me to cite Gandhi, “I truly believe that there where the only choice is between cowardice and violence, I recommend violence (...) I would prefer that India resort to arms to defend her honor rather than to see her, by cowardice, become or remain the powerless witness of her own dishonor. But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence (...) Nonviolence is the law of the human species as violence is that of the brute.”⁹ Since the choice is between cowardice, violence and nonviolence and since nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence, it is up to us to strive to do what is necessary in order to make nonviolence become a possible option.

Reconciling the Moral with Realism

Through their nonviolent actions, Gandhi and King demonstrated that it was possible to reconcile moral needs with political action. It was not achieved by moralizing violence’s means of acting, but in assigning nonviolent means of acting to morality. “The love,” you said, “that they preached-their faith in human progress-must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey.” I myself am persuaded of this. But the force of nonviolence is not only “moral” as you would later suggest. It is not constituted simply by the force of “love.” The force of nonviolence is the force of organized action of a group of people capable of exercising a real political constraint over an adversary requiring him to give up. For love, by itself, does not possess the power to “force” oppressors to recognize and to respect the rights of the oppressed. Only the force of action can do this. And it is nonviolent action alone that does not contradict the demands of love. For there exists an irreducible contradiction between love and violence. This is why violence is never legitimate.

I will gladly admit that to some extent your task is more difficult than that of Gandhi and King. They put nonviolence to work to resist a State while you are a Head of State. It is less difficult to resist the ruling power according to the principles of nonviolence than it is to govern it according these same principles. Nevertheless, is this not the wager of the members of the Nobel Committee who chose you for your Prize; and was this not the challenge that you had accepted to take on by not refusing it? Precisely, as a Head of State, you have an higher potential in giving nonviolence a chance.

Allow me to highlight that in his Oslo speech, December 11th, 1965, Martin Luther King proposed that, in his own words, “the philosophy and the strategy of nonviolence immediately become a subject of study and of true experimentation in all domains when men are in conflict, including the relations between nations.”¹⁰ It was not, in his opinion, “an idealistic proposition.” He declared, in effect: “The maintenance of world peace through nonviolent means is neither an absurdity nor an impossibility. *All other methods have failed.*” We must consequently start from zero. Nonviolence is a good starting point. Those among us who believe in this method can make the voice of reason and understanding heard amidst the voices of violence, hatred, and strong

⁹ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Vol. 18, 1965, p. 131-134.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, *Autobiographie*, Paris, Bayard, 2000, p. 318.

emotions.”¹¹ Unfortunately, it does not seem that his call to reason and wisdom has been heard. Neither in the United States nor elsewhere have governments taken the study of the methods offered by the strategy of nonviolent action seriously. Today, more than ever, the priority must be to offer to all citizens--men and women--of our countries a training in management, regulation, and nonviolent conflict resolution and offer them the possibility to go out into the field in order to test the strategy of nonviolent action. *To research and to test*, indeed this is immediately possible. If we do not start now, then we will continue to claim that nonviolence cannot be effective. And we will have a good reason to think so.

Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping

Some time ago now, in his *Agenda for Peace*, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali emphasized the increasingly important role that civilians should play in peacekeeping operations. These situations, he stated, “require that civilian political officers, human rights monitors, electoral officials, refugee and humanitarian aid specialists and police play as central a role as the military.”¹² There is no denying that today we fall wide of the mark. It is well known, in regard to the management of the latest regional conflicts, that States and the international community lack the institutional resources at their disposal which would generate civilian peacekeeping and reconstruction missions whose significance may be critical. In order to mitigate this lack, it is urgent that policy makers as well as citizens express a strong urge to consent to the necessary investments in order to implement such means.

The strategy of unarmed civilian peacekeeping can be defined as the following: a unarmed intervention on the ground in local conflicts and outside missions, mandated by an intergovernmental, governmental or non-governmental organization, sent to engage in acts of observation, information gathering, interposition, mediation and cooperation in order to prevent or to end violence, to monitor the respect of Human Rights, to promote the values of democracy and citizenry and to create the conditions for a political solution to the conflict which maintains and guarantees the fundamental rights of each concerned party and allows for the parties to establish protocol for a peaceful coexistence.

For many long years, volunteers from non-governmental organizations have been present in regional conflicts zones and strive, to the extent that their extremely limited means allow, to add their contribution to the reestablishment of peace. These diverse investigations are rich in lessons and point to the viability of civilian intervention in conflict zones, even though combat has not yet ceased. However, these investigations have suffered from a significant lack of human and material resources. It is fitting from now on that we envision that unarmed civilian peacekeeping to be implemented by the institutional organizations of the international community.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Agenda for Peace*, reference A/47/277-S/24111, 17 juin 199, §52.

One of the major malfunctions of our society is precisely that it gives all the means necessary to allow its citizens to ready themselves to implement violence while it give practically no means whatsoever to ready them to implement nonviolence. When we analyze all of the investments used to implement military action and all of the investments not used to implement the means of nonviolent action, we can clearly understand how possible it is to use them in the latter domain.

Unlocking the Full Potential of Nonviolence

After paying homage to nonviolence, you express your doubts: “the nonviolence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance.” Of course, of course, Mr President! But... if nonviolence had not been possible, is it not essentially due to the fact that its possibilities have never been studied? Above all, the one thing that nonviolent action has lacked -so that it might one day become possible- are the actors. It is not that the action is unable to be practiced, rather, its practitioners are nowhere to be found. You are correct: we are misled in dreaming of a world without violence. But is this not then the ardent obligation of men and women of peace to unlock, beginning with an effectively violent reality, the full potential for nonviolence? Nothing less than its potential, its full potential? Let us not be partisans of “all or nothing.” But between nothing and everything, there still exists a vast space that we have not yet explored.

Nonviolence certainly has its limits. But instead of puzzling ourselves with the limits of nonviolence, it is far better to ask questions about its possibilities. Through inquiry as to its possibilities, we will naturally encounter its limits, but in questioning ourselves on its limits, we will never know its possibilities.

“The Cold War ended,” you said, “with jubilant crowds dismantling a wall.” Indeed, the Berlin Wall was not destroyed by the West’s arms of war, it crumbled under the pressure of the nonviolent resistance of men and women of civil societies in the East who, on their own, took the greatest risks to live their freedom. Even you, Mr. President, your speech on April 9th, 2009, you were sure to pay homage to to these women and men: “The Velvet Revolution taught us many things. It showed us that peaceful protest could shake the foundations of an empire, and expose the emptiness of an ideology. (...) And it proved that moral leadership is more powerful than any weapon.” In your conclusion, you insist once again and rightly so: “Those were the Czechs who helped bring down a nuclear-armed empire without firing a shot.” This was not, however, the scenario that patented realists had expected. And whenever the rest of us, poor nonviolent activists we already were, dared to evoke it, we were ridiculed for our naivety. Today we have the humility to acknowledge that history has proved us right.

Resisting Nazism

In order to better emphasize the limits of the possibilities of nonviolence, you state: “A nonviolent movement could not have stopped Hitler’s armies.” And with that, you believe to possess an absolute truth. Who could claim the contrary? Your short statement was intended to

imply that nonviolence would not be capable of surmounting the greatest challenge of history. These few words were meant to disillusion those who dare think that nonviolence is a realistic alternative to war. They meant in some ways to tell them to keep a low profile and to remain silent. In reality, your statement has no significance in so far as it claims to answer a question that was never asked. It seems to me, Mr. President, that the tragedy of Nazism deserves a less superficial consideration. Allow me to take the time to respond to you on this point that is no small detail of history.

The question of knowing how it would have been possible to resist Hitler is assuredly a very sincere question. But it implies a preliminary, primordial, essential question, that is to know how it was that Hitler was possible? The answer to this question will allow us to respond to the fundamental question: *how is it possible that Hitler no longer be possible?* Hitler was possible because the culture of the German society had not produced the antibody that would have allowed for the German people to be immunized against the ideology of violence conveyed through the criminal propaganda of Nazism. For the crucial victory of Hitler is the one he gained from the German people by obtaining their unconditional obedience. For the armies of Hitler were but the German people in arms. Only a small number of Germans had the courage to resist, and they were the first ones crushed by the Nazi system. In order that Hitler no longer be possible, the time is now for us to build a *culture of nonviolence* capable of breaking the chains of the ideology of violence dominating our human societies. A culture that is no longer a culture of obedience, but a culture of responsibility. Always and everywhere, the strength of a totalitarian regime is the servile obedience of its citizens, and the strength of a democracy is its civil disobedience. After all, if no one ever thought that a nonviolent movement could have stopped Hitler's armies, it is reasonable to think that a nonviolent resistance could have stopped Hitler while there was still time.

Disobeying the Devil

Belonging to a network of resisters, the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer is apprehended by the Gestapo in Berlin on April 5th, 1943. In December of 1942, reflecting on the tragedy lived by his people, he came to the conclusion that it was out of "duty" that the Germans accepted to collaborate with the Hitlerian regime. "Here" he writes, "an order is absolute; responsibility falls upon he who commands, not on the person following commands. But by holding onto a single duty, one never runs the risk of a responsible action that alone could reach evil at its center and overcome it. The man of duty will eventually execute the commands of the devil himself."¹³ This notion is essential. Bonhoeffer deconstructs the principle of obedience that attempts to base a citizen's duty in irresponsibility. When obedience is maintained as the supreme virtue, the individual interiorizes every order given to him as a moral obligation. Consequently, he no longer questions himself on the morality of the acts that he performs "out of duty."

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistance et soumission*, Geneve, Laboret et Fides, 1967, p. 3. (Translation SNV)

Bonhoeffer points out that the Germans entirely lacked “civil courage.” But he elaborates: “It would be naive to explain this lack simply by our personal cowardice. The deeper reason is quite different.” This key reason, he sees in the fact that the Germans had abusively practiced “the virtue of obedience.” He writes: “We have seen the meaning and the greatness of our life in the subordination of all of our desires and thoughts to the mission we were given. Our eyes were directed toward authority, not in a servile fear, but in a freely consented trust that could see a mission in the task and a vocation in the mission. (...) But, through that, we ignored the world. We had not discounted the possibility that one might abuse for evil’s sake our inclination toward submission and our preparedness. (...) We had to discover that we were still lacking a fundamental notion: that of the necessity of free and responsible action, even in opposition to the mission and command that was dictated to us. (...) Civil courage can only come spring from the freely chose responsibility of a free man.”¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be hanged on April 9th, 1945. He was thirty-nine years of age.

Allow me to add that, in so far as France is concerned, nothing is less sure than if it would have been possible to stop Hitler’s armies through the violence of arms. On the other hand, occupation being a fact, it would have been possible to organize a nonviolent resistance by undertaking actions of civil disobedience to the laws of the Vichy government. Unfortunately, for their vast majority, the French did not have the courage for this resistance for which, it is true, they were utterly unprepared. This does not make it any less true that by itself such a resistance could have served to undermine the occupation. Where it was organized, for example in Norway, it proved to be truly effective.

You see, Mr. President, if we want to learn our lesson from the history of Nazism, we must not prepare for war, but for peace; we must not cultivate violence, but nonviolence. We must not teach our children the use arms, but the methods of nonviolent resistance.

Martin Luther King in Opposition to the Vietnam War

One more thing, if you would not mind, about Martin Luther King. He did not hesitate to resolutely oppose the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the President of the United States maintained that this war was just, that its aim was to defend freedom against her enemies and to allow democratic values to prevail. Throughout all of the years of this war, the rhetoric of the United States untiringly maintained that the withdraw of American soldiers from Vietnam would amount only to a cowardly act that would represent a disaster for peace in the world. However, Martin Luther King would challenge this propaganda that justified war in the name of peace. “The lamentable but true,” he wrote in his autobiography, “was that my country never ceased to talk about peace all the while obstinately seeking a military victory. In the glove of peace was the closed fist of war.”¹⁵ It appears that these words offer you a direct challenge.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4-5. (Translation SNV)

¹⁵ Martin Luther King, *op. cit.*, p. 403-404. (Translation SNV)

On April 4th, 1967, in New York, King gives a major speech against the war: “A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, “This way of settling differences is not just.” (...) There is nothing except a tragic death wish to prevent us from reordering our priorities so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war.”¹⁶ You will undoubtedly refute me, but I am inclined to wonder whether these statements have a startling relevance to today?

While in the United States in 1972, I would attend anti-Vietnam war demonstrations. One evening, with my American friends, we were listening to President Nixon who had an important televised declaration to make on the subject of the war. The strength of the peace movement had forced the President to withdraw the troops from Vietnam territory. But the *U.S. Air Force* would continue to devastate Vietnam with napalm bombs. I can still hear Richard Nixon, addressing the anti-war constituency: “You want Peace! I want peace!” It is always the same speech: peace is used to justify war. The United States would then pursue war until defeat ensued. It does not seem that the lessons of this tragedy have been preserved.

“Some will kill and some will be killed”

“We are at war,” you said, “and I am responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill. Some will be killed.” The tragedy evoked by these few short words is terrifying. These “men”--there are also women although they find themselves as a part of these “men”...-have forsaken their human loves. They have debarked helmeted, harnessed, armed from head to toe. They have become military equipment.

For many long years, thousands of “men” are confronted daily on the battlefield by the horrendous torments of war. Day and night, they live deathly afraid. Afraid of death. At any given moment, they can feel the burning bite of this friend under their skin. They are supposed to fight against terrorism, but they are terrorized. And they terrorize. Some are filled with hatred. Others, shame. But hatred and shame are perhaps one and the same. All are frozen with anguish. At the bottom of their agony, they re-become human. Most of them shun cowardice. They attempt to confront it day by day. Often courageously. In the end, they are not guilty, but victims. Victims of their own violence, more accurately of the State violence they serve. Wounded, profoundly. Troubled, exceedingly. Sick, gravely. Mad, literally. It is heard spoken of their war induced “post-traumatic stress disorder.” In his essay, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Emmanuel Kant maintains: “to pay men to kill or to be killed seems to entail using them as mere machines and tools in the hand of another (the State), and this is hardly compatible with the rights of mankind in our own person.”¹⁷ Do these words from the philosopher not carry any validity?

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (Translation SNV)

¹⁷ Emmanuel Kant, *Vers la paix perpetuelle*, Paris, GF-Flammarion, 1991, p.78.

The Tragedy of the War in Iraq

Concerning the war in Iraq, you state that it is “in the process of ending.” I have not forgotten that you had previously voted against this war because you thought that you must “exercise restraint in the use of military force, and always consider the long-term consequences of our actions.”¹⁸ It is necessary to thank you for your clarity with this statement. this statement. And on March 18th, 2008, you declared that this war “should never have been authorized” and “should never have taken place.”¹⁹ Once you became President, you scheduled the beginning of the withdraw of your soldiers for the end of the month of August 2010. But, once the last one of them will leave Mesopotamian territory, will peace prevail among the Iraqis? There is nothing less sure. Two days before you arrived in Oslo, two car-bomb attacks left Bagdad with more than 120 dead and more than 400 wounded. The height of this tragedy is that the Iraqis are the ones who are killing one another. Everything suggests that you will leave behind you a people on the brink of a civil war.

It remains to be said that the war in Iraq, declared for reasons that have been deemed perfectly fallacious and carried out through particularly detestable methods, burdens the American people with a responsibility for which they will find it impossible to atone through the simple withdraw of its soldiers. You have forbidden torture and ordered the closing of Guantanamo Bay prison. Duly noted, Mr. President. The fact remains that American soldiers tortured their prisoners over the course of many years. This is an on-going disgrace for the United States.

The hope is that the Iraqi people have the determination to rebuild a democratic space within civil society in order to make peace, justice, and reconciliation triumph. In November 2009, I was invited to participate in the “First Iraqi Forum for Nonviolence” organized by the network *La’Onf* (“nonviolence” in Arabic) which assembled representatives from numerous non-governmental organizations from eighteen different provinces in Iraq. “In the political context of Iraq,” said Ismaeel Dawood, founding member of *La’Onf*, “if you speak of resistance, you are accused of supporting terrorists and inciting violence; but if you speak of nonviolence, you are accused of being in favor of the occupation. *La’Onf* seeks to create a third way with its message that nonviolence is a tool for resisting occupation, terrorism, and corruption.”

I am in full admiration of these women and men who have the deep conviction that nonviolence is the only possible path for the reconstruction of Iraqi society. Understanding perfectly well the perverse ineffectiveness of violence, they do not waste their time by asking themselves about the limits of nonviolence, they only ask themselves about its possibilities. It is they who are ushering in the future of Iraq. It is they who we must follow. Among us at the conference was a representative from the American organization *September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows* which connects those who have lost family members in the September 11th attacks

¹⁸ Speech December 1, 2009

¹⁹ Speech in Philadelphia

choosing to “transform their pain into action for peace and nonviolence.” (The name of this association was inspired by Martin Luther King’s statement: “Wars are bad chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows.”)

What is Terrorism?

As no one can accuse them of indifference to the suffering of the victims of September 11th, the members of *Peaceful Tomorrows* have loudly denounced the war in Afghanistan. They have challenged the logic that we effectively combat terrorism with bombs and that we can build democracy with the weapons of war. They even went so far as to visit Afghanistan to bring their support to the civilian victims of that war.

Obviously, your case for just war is not mere rhetoric. It expressly aims to justify the war in Afghanistan under your command. You have no doubts that this war is justified by a just cause. Certainly, the fight against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, as the previous one against the regime of Sadaam Hussein in Iraq, constitute in themselves just causes. But the toppling of these regimes has been nothing but the collateral effect of your wars whose proclaimed objective was to protect and defend United States and her interests first and foremost. The price of war that civilian populations have had to pay appears largely disproportionate. And the military victories against these regimes have not been just victories.

You describe this war as “an effort to defend ourselves and all nations from further attacks.”²⁰ More accurately, you intervened in Afghanistan “to destroy al-Qaeda’s terrorist network.”²¹ It must be admitted that you have not fulfilled this objective. The al-Qaeda network has not been destroyed and Osama bin Laden continues to scoff at the United States.

Certainly, democracies have the duty to defend firmly defend themselves against “terrorism.” But what is terrorism? Western rhetoric never ceases to use this word without ever taking the pains of clarifying its exact meaning. In your speech in Oslo, you note that this: “terrorism has long been a tactic, but modern technology allows a few small men with outsized rage to murder innocents on a horrific scale.” Perhaps. But if rage explains terrorism, then what explains rage? And why does this rage lead men, through the sacrifice of their own lives, to venture out toward the furthest limits of destructive and murderous violence? I fear that by presenting “terrorists” as a small gang of barbarians, it impedes us from understanding “terrorism” and thus combating it intelligently. The process is as old as time, but it is never right to attempt to barbarize and dehumanize the adversary. If it were only a matter of waging war against a gang or a group of angry men, the problem would be simple, as would its solution. The fact, however, is that the two are complicated. Very complicated. Extremely complicated. To shut oneself off inside of a simplified vision of reality that accounts for nothing and explains nothing is to refuse to actually

²⁰ Olso speech

²¹ December 1st, 2009 Speech

think about terrorism. Combatting terrorists cannot signify desiring to kill terrorists. Terrorism is an infinitely complex phenomenon and it is valuable to take this complexity into account. In order to eradicate terrorism, in order to root it out, one must first grasp the historical, sociological, cultural, ideological, political and possibly religious roots that nurture it.

The most effective manner to combat terrorism is to deprive its authors of the political reasons that they invoke to justify it. This is how it will be possible to durably weaken the popular support that terrorism greatly needs. Often, terrorism is grounded and fertilized by injustice, humiliation, frustration, misery, and despair. The only manner to make terrorist acts cease is to deprive its authors of the political reasons that they invoke to justify it. Consequently, to overcome terrorism, it is necessary not to wage war but to build justice.

The real concern is to uncover legitimate and effective means to defend ourselves against the threat of terrorism. Everything suggests that the strategy carried out up to the present by the Atlantic Alliance is not only incapable of eradicating terrorism, but fosters it. The violence perpetuated in Afghanistan runs the risk of fertilizing the ground where terrorism takes root. It runs the risk of arming the sentiments, the thoughts, and the bodies of those who would like to seek revenge for the deaths that you have caused over there--in our homes and backyards. Do you actually believe that the war in Afghanistan is capable of dismantling the terrorist networks susceptible of organizing themselves in Western cities? The war in Afghanistan did not stop the attacks in Madrid or in London. In Madrid, on March 11th, 2004, exploded bombs left 191 dead and 1 800 wounded. The group responsible for these attacks was composed primarily of Moroccans legally residing in Spain. Not one of them took advantage of any kind of training in a camp in Afghanistan or elsewhere. In London, on July 7th, 2005, four suicide attempts left 56 dead and 700 wounded. The four kamikazes were British Muslims. And war is even more inappropriate to fight against "solitary terrorism." It is the responsibility of the police, who have the precise task it is to ensure citizens' security--in a democracy, the police must be the operating force for "maintaining the peace" within cities--, and must organize themselves in scrupulous respect of the law so that they might uncover these networks and dismantle them.

Respecting the Rules

Undoubtedly, you are aware that you must always respect the rules that your adversary fails to uphold. "We have a moral and strategic interest," you say, "in binding ourselves to certain rules of conduct" and this, "even as we confront a vicious adversary that abides by no rules." The anti-terrorist rhetoric affirms loud and clear that terrorism rejects the highest values of civilization--those demanding respect for human life. So be it. Yet, precisely, the way to defend these values is first of all by honoring them through the very choice of the means used to defend them. The way to triumph over terrorism is -first of all- by refusing its logic of murderous violence. The primary vector of terrorism is the ideology that violence can justify murder. The way to defend civilization is -first of all-by not allowing oneself to become contaminated by this ideology. Otherwise, democracies strongly run the risk of becoming guilty of the very misdeeds they for which they condemn terrorists. Whenever terrorism threatens a democracy through

destabilization, it must be combated with coherent strategy with its own rules and norms without borrowing from any of incoherence of the terrorists. They must defend themselves by resolutely standing their own ground: that of the law, and by refusing to allow for any irrationality that denies the law.

You rightly maintain that “we lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideas that we fight to defend.” But your intransigence seems uncertain. In reality, it is only a matter of the uncertainty of the rules of war. “I believe,” you said, “that the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war.”

The International Criminal Court

Is it not an obligation of the United States to finally ratify the Rome Statute at the International Criminal Court (ICC) created on July 17th, 1998? The ICC is the first permanent international criminal jurisdiction. According to Article 1 of its Statute, it “shall have the power to exercise its jurisdiction over persons for the most serious crimes of international concern.” As you know, the United States voted against the text instituting the ICC not wanting that American contractors and soldiers active in military missions might one day be called to account for their acts before an International Court of Justice. Eventually, President Clinton signed the Rome Statute on December 31st, 2000, though the United States did not renounce its distrust of the ICC. This went into effect on the July 1st, 2002, but the American Congress never ratified it. This signifies a true refusal of justice, by offering impunity in advance to those who may become be guilty of illegal acts. Today, the moment has come for you to reconsider this legislation. You will certainly run up against many set-backs, from members of Congress as well as from military personnel, but it would already be a significant political gesture if you expressed that you, personally, would like to see the ratification of the International Criminal Court.

Banning Antipersonnel Weapons

On October 9th, 2009, Handicap International, co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, published the following statement: “the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Barack Obama is a strong signal sent by the Nobel committee in support of the ambitions of the President of the United States concerning disarmament and the diplomatic approach to resolving conflicts.” Handicap International invites you to “reinforce the regulation of conventional arms by signing the two conventions banning anti-personnel mines and cluster bombs.” In effect, the United States refused to sign the *Convention on the Prohibition, Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*. This convention, known as the Ottawa Treaty, was placed before the United Nations Secretary General on December 5th, 1997. It took effect on March 1st, 1999, regrouping 156 countries. Equally, your country did not sign the Cluster Munition Convention, classifying the classic munitions created for the dispersment of cluster explosives, signed in Oslo by 96 countries on December 4th, 2008.

These two international conventions on disarmament seek to protect civilian populations in situations of conflict. They take their inspiration directly from the Geneva Conventions and enunciate the rules of law which must be unalterable for every democratic nation. Your administration maintains that the United States would not be able to ensure its national defense nor fulfill its commitment to the security of its allies if it were to sign these conventions. This position is untenable. It constitutes an outright rejection of the law and as such finds itself in a flagrant contradiction with your stated desire in Oslo to ensure that the United States lead the way in respect of international law.

You have understood by now, I am not among those who believe it possible to humanize war. With that, I do concede that there are different degrees of inhumanity and different levels of the unacceptable. The recourse to antipersonnel arms, leaving thousands of civilians dead even after combat has ended is particularly ignoble. Their prohibition introduces at least *some* law into the cruelty of war. Nothing justifies your persistence of going around these rules. The time has come for you to be consistent with your values and finally sign these two conventions.

Pursuing the Taliban?

Is it not so that the rules of war, of all war, already suggest the transgression of the rules of right conduct of civilized men? And especially in this war where you are not combating a regular army. The Taliban are not soldiers--they are armed civilians. Further, it is impossible for your soldiers to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Every civilian is suspect. So you raid houses, you humiliate men, you overpower women, and you terrorize children. How many illegal arrests and detentions did your soldiers perform? And since the beginning of this war, how many civilians have lost their lives from your air strikes? How many innocent lives have been murdered? Certainly, the victims of the September 11th attacks “were innocent men, women, and children who had done nothing to harm anyone.”²² But how many victims of the war in Afghanistan “were innocent men, women and children who had done nothing, either, to harm anyone”? Under these conditions, Mr. President, how do you expect for the entire world watching you to become aware of your “ideals” in this war? All of the injustices perpetuated against the civilian population only strengthen the idea that the Americans- wishing to present themselves as liberators-have behaved in reality like invaders. This can do nothing but generate feelings of hostility toward your nation, reinforce the support of the Taliban, and consequently, foster terrorism.

“For seven years,” you stated in Cairo, the United States have pursued the Taliban.” But given all of the evidence, you have been unable to capture or to eliminate all of the Taliban. If they were nothing but a small gang, how is it that the firepower of thousands of men from the armies of the Western coalition have not yet neutralized them after so many years of war? You just decided to send 30 000 more men. 30 000, this is not an abstract number. Behind it there are 30,000 human lives upset, 30 000 families torn-apart. Do you really believe that this increase in soldiers is going

²² Speech in Cairo June 4, 2009

to change the situation? Everything suggests that it is of no use. No, Mr. President, the Taliban are not a “gang” that you can chase. They are thousands of men bearing arms, convinced that they are leading the good struggle against foreign forces occupying their country and that you are incapable of disarming them. Do not expect them to surrender. They live in the forests but control a large part of the country where they find increasing collaboration within the population at-large. Moreover, we are witnessing an internationalization of conflict with the arrival of the foreign combatants.

The Afghani Taliban benefit from base camps in Pakistan in the frontier zones, where we find the core movement of the Pakistani Taliban allied with al-Qaeda. The American army does not hesitate to threaten military operations in this region by using armed drones from guided missiles. But to what end can this deterritorialization of war serve without bringing any hope of peace? The Pakistani army received the mission from the government to “combat the terrorist threat until it has been eliminated.” But presently, there is a high-intensity civil war taking place in Pakistan opposing the Taliban and the tribal chiefs who are accused of being payed off by the United States. The attacks are multiplying, generating numerous victims from inside the population. On January 1st, 2010, a car-bomb suicide attack on a sports field left more than 90 dead.

The Taliban ideology is incontestably a curse that must be relentlessly combatted. But the error is to believe that it will be possible to appease and eradicate it through violence. In reality, the International Coalition under your leadership finds itself confronted with impossibility of winning the war. It is sufficient enough for the Taliban not to lose by simply claiming that they have already won. In terms of people in the West, it is enough to find themselves in the impossibility to render defeat to have already lost. Therefore, you and the other Western leaders will display an irresponsible obstinacy by continuing in search of an impossible military victory.

Training the Afghans for Civil War

One of the primary tasks of the Western coalition is the training of “Afghan security forces” that they may begin to take over the leadership of operations by a date that you have set in July 2011. On December 1st 2009, in your speech on “the future strategy in Afghanistan” you clearly state that the principal objective of American soldiers is to transfer the security of the country over to the “Afghan security forces” (this expression comes up six times in your speech). It is therefore necessary to “prepare,” to “build their capacities,” to “advise and to assist them,” to “train them” in order to responsibly transfer to them the “country’s security.” But in reality, these “Afghan security forces” greatly run the risk of being nothing but the instrument of a civil war in Afghanistan, since their mission will be to continue to chase after the Taliban. And the civilian populations will continue to be held hostage. Do you believe that you are building democracy by arming the Afghans against one another and by preparing them thus to kill one another? Do you think that, upon your departure, the Afghan State, today perfectly failing and discredited, will be capable of ensuring a unified command of these security forces?

The presidential election organized in August 2009 was supposed to amount to a decisive stage toward the normalization of the Afghan democracy. However, as you must have noticed, this election was “marred by fraud.”²³ President Karzai was sworn in on November 19th even though the election was not entirely brought to term. By consequent, his authority is widely discredited. Under these conditions, this election represents a political failure for the military coalition.

Your approach to conflict falls within a solution of “complete security” which closely resembles one that is “completely military” and impedes all peace processes capable of paving the way in favor of a political solution. On January 3, 2010, Kai Eide, the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN in Afghanistan demanded that the International Coalition demilitarize its presence. “What we need is,” he declared, “a strategy that is politically and not militarily driven, where political strategy is not an appendix to military thinking.” Evidently, Mr. Eide has good advice. Will he be heard?

You must be convinced, Mr. President, that the war in Afghanistan is not the solution, it is the problem. There have been some beneficial collateral effects, but, given the evidence, the overall assessment is heinous. Not only is this war unjust, it is unnecessary. Thus the question is not how to further pursue war but how to end it once and for all. Certainly, ending a war is not a simple task, especially a losing war. But you must convince yourself that you have no other choice. Social peace will not come through a military “pacification.” It is necessary for you to begin now and conceive of and carry out a strategy to pursue peace. The billions of dollars that have already been spent on creating war must from now on be invested in peace-building. You have estimated that at the time you took office “the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan approached a trillion dollars” and that your presence in Afghanistan is “likely to cost us roughly \$30 billion dollars this year.”²⁴ These numbers surpass understanding. I have no doubt that they are true, but this does not make them any less unreal. Alone they prove the disproportion and insanity of your investment in war.

You meant to bring democracy to the people of Afghanistan. Democracy has not arrived, but dilapidation, disorder, deprivation, dismantling, insecurity, chaos. You are not unaware that the opium culture has not been eradicated but conversely has been flourishing. It feeds a commerce of billions of dollars behind which there are powerful financial interests. The solution to the Afghan crisis can only be political and it only be effected by the Afghan people alone. As it is consequently unimaginable to eliminate the Taliban, it is necessary to speak with them and to construct a compromise together. I understand very well that realists are going to cry out with indignation. Negotiate with terrorists, don’t even think about it! Well, yes, exactly, it is time to think about it. History shows us that, everywhere and always, it becomes necessary to one day negotiate with terrorists. Is it not true, among other reasons, that because they believed that all of the doors of dialogue were closed off to them that terrorists lock themselves into the desperate choice of violence?

²³ Speech December 1st, 2009

²⁴ Speech December 1st, 2009

This question was on the agenda at the Conference on the Future of Afghanistan which took place in London on January 28, 2010, with the participation of close to 70 countries. Presenting a plan of “reconciliation,” President Hamid Karzai declared: “We must reach out to all of our compatriots, particularly to our disillusioned brothers who are not members of al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organization.” The final communique of this meeting clearly states: “Conference participants welcomed the plans of the Government of Afghanistan to offer an honorable place in society to those willing to renounce violence.” In spite of this, the “outreach” is happening at the same moment when many other countries of the coalition are deciding to strengthen their military presence on the ground. Under these conditions, it should be feared that no dialogue whatsoever will be possible. The previous day, the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan declared in their communique: “The war-mongering rulers under the leadership of Obama and Brown want to deceive the people of the world by holding the London conference to show that people still support them. If they make the decision to try to prolong the military, economic, cultural and political occupation of the country, this conference will be a mere eye-wish like other conferences.” Their emotion cannot come as a surprise, though they confirm in their own way that no peace process will be possible as long as the processes of war continue.

“War is easier to wage than peace”

All while devising a strategy for the withdraw of foreign forces, the international community must assist the actors of Afghan civil society in recreating a social pact. Nongovernmental organizations are already on the job on the ground and are doing a remarkable job in the domains of education, health and development. It is a matter of favoring the the construction of social, economic and administrative infrastructures that will be in a position of satisfying the vital needs of the population. Certainly, no development is possible without security and the war in Afghanistan’s aim is to reestablish security in the country. But is it not more accurate to say that there development is not possible with war? Today, it is becoming evident that the efforts of war contradict development efforts more than helping them.

One of the most urgent tasks is the establishment of a Rule of Law capable of effectively combating the endemic corruption that reigns throughout the country. It is therefore necessary to reconstruct the judiciary structures corrupted by years of war. This is why it is more urgent to train judges than it is to instruct the military. The Rule of Law equally demands a police force. Police officers should be required to undergo a rigorous training so that they become true “agents of peace.” The task is certainly daunting in a society characterized both by the absence of a central government and the importance of tribal structures. Under these conditions, it is an illusory desire to wish to impose a Western model of democracy onto the people and institutions of Afghanistan. Democracy must be built from the centers of local power and from inside of the Afghan cultural traditions and customs. The omnipotence of tribal chiefs and warlords is assuredly part of the problem, but it must also be part of the solution. The road toward Afghan democracy will be long, and there too, stagnation is always possible, but there is no other way.

In his own way, Nicolas Sarkozy perfectly formulated the unrealistic nature of the goals the International Military Coalition claims to pursue in Afghanistan: “When the circumstances demand it,” he declared on January 8, 2010, “my duty as commander-in-chief is to support the

soldiers in their mission, as is the case today in Afghanistan, where the conditions for withdraw have not been achieved. We must continue to assist the people of Afghanistan until they are in a position to take up their security and their development on their own, on behalf of a sovereign, stable, peaceful nation, as an agent of international dialogue.” These conditions were pronounced on the occasion of the presentation of wishes to the military from the President of the French Republic. They were therefore very appropriate for the circumstance since they are nothing, in effect, but wishes, pious wishes entirely detached from the reality of the war on the ground. “A bit of wishful thinking,” as they say in your language. In French, they say “to mistake one’s desires for reality.” The method of war propaganda is always the same: to exalt the end to better hide the misery of the means. How can the most perfect of societies give rise to the most imperfect of wars? If you had to stay in Afghanistan until these wishes became reality, you would have to stay there for a long time, a very long time. Needless to say you would never leave.

“Peace is indeed beautiful,” said Georges Bernanos, “except that people ask want to know how you will do it. War is easier to wage than peace.”²⁵ Until now, in Afghanistan, the West has known only how to satisfy war, while peace remains desperately cast aside. Bernanos also said: “In order to be ready to put our hopes that which doesn’t deceive us, we must first disparage of that which does.”²⁶ In order to hope for peace, it would be necessary to begin by disparaging of war.

On December 28, 2009, three days after a failed attack against an American airline, you declared: “We are going to continue to use everything in our power to intercept, destroy and defeat the violent extremists who threaten us, be they from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, anywhere they are preparing attacks against the American soil.” It seems here that you are only expressing the intention from your position as Head of State, a caricature at that. Who do you believe to impress by such assertions? You would like to show your strength, but there is sufficient reason to believe that such pronouncements in reality translate your weakness. “Anywhere,” you say? “Destroy anywhere”? You are not going to wage war everywhere, are you? After all, it may be the case that al-Qaeda wants you to fall into the trap of a military adventure in Yemen. No, Mr. President, you must cease furthering a war that is spreading already. You must reflect carefully about how to achieve peace.

The following day, however, you must have realized that if the tentative of an attack could have taken place, the responsibility did not belong to your soldiers based in Afghanistan, but to the members of your police services based in the United States who had not yet revealed the information given to them by the father of the young terrorist. You considered that the failure of the security defense was “totally unacceptable.” “I will do everything in my power,” you added, “to support the men and women working in intelligence, the police and national security, that they may have all of the resources at their disposal that they need to ensure the security of the United States.” On January 5th, you insisted once more on the incompetence of your intelligence

²⁵ Georges Bernanos, *Les enfants humiliés*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949, p.133. (Translated SNV)

²⁶ Georges Bernanos, *La liberté pour quoi faire?* Paris, Gallimard, 1953, p. 249. (Translated SNV)

services: “there was a mixture of human and system mistakes that contributed to this breach in security, potentially catastrophic.” As I mentioned earlier, it is the role of the police, and not the army, to ensure the security of citizens.

Facing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:

Allow me to approach the question of the conflict that confronts the Palestinians and the Israelis. On October 10, 2009, I received an email from a Palestinian friend who wrote: “Today, when I returned home after participating in our nonviolent protest in Bil’in, after Israeli soldiers through grenades of tear-gas, after having seen the violence of these soldiers, I heard that President Obama had received the Nobel Peace Prize. When I heard that, I thought I went crazy. I asked myself why. The Americans are still in Iraq and in Afghanistan and Palestine is still occupied. (...) I ask our friends on the Nobel Committee: “Do you think that Obama can make peace? But why then did you not wait until he really made peace? Excuse me, but we are still under occupation and it is killing us.” We hear the President making speeches on peace, but nothing has changed. We need to re-appropriate our land today, not tomorrow.” I want you to hear, Mr. President, the anger of this Palestinian friend, living each day in the terror of war and who can no longer wait for peace.

On June 4th, 2008, you gave a speech presenting the policies that you would implement concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if you were elected President of the United States. “I will bring to the White House an unshakeable commitment to Israel’s security. This *starts with* ensuring Israel’s qualitative military advantage. I will ensure that Israel can defend itself from any threat--from Gaza to Tehran. (...) And I will always stand up for Israel’s right to defend itself in the United Nations and around the world. Israel’s security is sacrosanct. It is non-negotiable.” Clearly, the people of Israel have the right to live in security. But, frankly, Mr. President, in this case, who must defend themselves against whom? Who is the aggressor and who is the aggressed? Who lives under the occupation of whom? Whose security is more threatened? Today, is the the Palestinian military colonizing Israeli territory? In Jerusalem, is it the Palestinian military chasing Israeli families from their homes? Who is pulling out the hundred year old olive trees from the land of the other? Really, Mr. President? Does it *start with* arming Israel? Would it not instead *start with* demanding that the State of Israel recognize the Palestinian’s inalienable right to live in security on their land in an independent state?

Facing such an imbalance of powers, equity demands that you make your voice heard with a call for justice on behalf of the suffering of the Palestinians, a call that will rebalance the scales of justice.

From Exhortations to Sanctions:

Once elected, you made your intention clear to contribute to opening the way for an agreement between these two populations who are tearing themselves apart from life to death. But you must also realize: “In the Middle East,” you stated in Oslo, “the conflict between the Arabs and the Jews seems to harden.” (Moreover, the Palestinians are not in conflict with the Jews but with the Israelis, which is a little different...) As you said, above all: “The promotion of human rights cannot be about exhortation alone.” Evoking the circumstances prevailing in other countries, you

state: “In dealing with those nations that break rules and laws, I believe that we must develop *alternatives to violence* that are tough enough to actually change behavior (...) Those regimes that break the rules must be held accountable. Sanctions must exact a real price.” You are certainly correct, Mr. President. But why is it that you refuse to apply these principles in dealing with Israel who, each day for several decades, has violated the rights of the Palestinian people, in disregard of the resolutions of the United Nations?

As you know, on July 9th, 2004, the International Court of Justice, the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, affirmed that “The construction of the wall being built by Israel, the occupying Power, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, and its associated regime are contrary to international law.” The Court’s decision continues: “Israel also has an obligation to put an end to the violation of its international obligations flowing from the construction of the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.” What sanctions have you imposed on the State of Israel who is in open violation the rules of international law? What sanctions are you going to impose? This is a matter of utmost urgency.

Israel is Violating International Law

Do you believe that the State of Israel respected the rules of international law when it bombed Gaza in December 2008 and in January 2009 leaving more than 1 400 dead? The State of Israel invoked its right to defend the security of its people against the Palestinian rocket-fire. Even you declared on July 23, 2008, while you were visiting the Israeli city of Sderot, the usual target of these shots: “If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I’m going to do everything in my power to stop that.” I am certainly not going to attempt to contradict you on this point, Mr. President. But if you were living in a house in Gaza and were helpless in providing for the well-being of your two daughters or their future, would you not do everything in your power to stop that?

In your Cairo speech, you declared: “Palestinians must abandon violence (...) It’s a story with a simple truth: that violence is a dead-end.” Of course, of course, Mr. President! It is not I, the lover of nonviolence, who would ever contradict you. I am convinced that the Palestinians can expect nothing from violence. The rockets hurled at Israeli territory, aiming at the zones inhabited by civilians surely violate international law. Those who neglect the harmful potential of Palestinian rockets under the the pretext that it is insignificant in relation to the potential for harm of Israeli bombs deny reality. It is not true that rockets do not kill. They kill and they threaten to kill.

If we set aside the legal records in order to take the position of efficacy, it appears clear that these rocket-firings constitute a grave strategic error on behalf of the leaders of Hamas. One of the essential principles of strategy is, before all decisions, to evaluate, predict and anticipate the reactions of the adversary in order to ensure that the costs he will make us pay will be less than the benefits that we may expect. *To combat their oppression, it is a categorical imperative for the oppressed to frustrate the repression of the oppressors.* From this point of view, no one could doubt continued rocket-fire would only provoke an extreme violence on behalf of the the Israeli military in which all of the Palestinians in Gaza and Cisjordania would be victims. The battle

waged by the Palestinians and Israelis is not proportionate in arms. It is a war of the strong against the weak. On one side, a State army, and on the other, a people without an army. It is precisely this accounting of the disproportion between the military means of Israel and those of Hamas that should have convinced the Palestinian leaders to renounce positioning themselves on violent grounds. Moreover, the decision of Hamas appears to be a fatal error. Irresponsible in some way. This does not justify by any means Israeli violence, but it allows Israel to at least pretend, to allow to itself to believe, and to a large extent make believe, that its actions are justified.

The Human Catastrophe of Gaza:

When all is said, the Palestinian rocket-fire would not be able to secure any kind of moral or intellectual justification in the least to the punitive military actions led by the Israeli army in Gaza. These actions must be clearly identified as war crimes. Israel is not protecting its population, but it is aggressing the Palestinian people. And, in doing so, it is destroying itself.

In this situation, we should not have different weights and different measures. It would be irresponsible to ask only of the oppressed to renounce violence while accommodating the violence of the oppressors under the pretext that it is good for their defense. It would simply be an inversion of roles. Equally, do you not think that the Israeli's must first be reminded of this truth that "violence is a dead-end"?

Similarly as the State of Israel maintains at the border of the Gaza territory a checkpoint which condemns the lives of its inhabitants to live in miserable conditions, it is not a matter of a humanitarian catastrophe but a human catastrophe. The end of 2009 brought Egypt, along several kilometers of the Gaza border, the construction of a concrete wall measuring 30 meters beneath the earth in order to obstruct the Gazaouis from complete suffocation. Analysts are saying that this construction work is funded by the United States. Is it true, Mr. President, that you are financially supporting the construction of this new wall of shame?

Why, then, are you satisfied by exhortation alone when it is a matter of promoting the rights of Palestinians? In Cairo, you exhorted the Israelis in these terms: "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace." Already, your demand was extremely modest, for it is the colonies themselves who are standing in the way of the peace process. And yet your exhortation remained a dead message. The Israeli government responded to it by turning it down flat and you did not insist at all. The peace process is comatose and the vital diagnostics are being read. Why is it that you do you not impose sanctions with an actual cost for the State of Israel so that they might change their behavior? Why do you continue to sell, without even a meager regulation, extraordinary quantities of arms of war to a State who is habitually violating the rules and laws of international rights? It is extremely urgent that your words match up with your actions.

A World Without Nuclear Weapons

In the Norwegian Nobel Committee's communique announcing its decision to give you the Nobel Peace Prize, it elaborates that it "attaches a particular interest to your vision and efforts for a world without nuclear weapons."

In Oslo, you bring up the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signed in 1968: "many nations agreed to be bound by a treaty whose bargain is clear: All will have access to peaceful nuclear power; those without nuclear weapons will forsake them; and those with nuclear weapons will work toward disarmament." You state that you were committed to honoring this treaty and you pointed your finger at countries like Iran and North Korea who remain uncommitted to the concluding agreement.

Article VI of the NPT spells out: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations **in good faith** on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control." However, can you ensure that this article, which is very constraining, would be scrupulously respected by the States equipped with nuclear weapons? Surely not, wouldn't you agree?

In December 1994, the Secretary General of the United Nations asked of the International Court of Justice at the Hague an advisory opinion on the question of nuclear weapons. The fourteen justices of the Court made this statement, "the Court appreciates the full importance of the recognition by Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons of an obligation to negotiate in good faith a nuclear disarmament. The legal import of that obligation goes beyond that of a mere obligation of conduct; the obligation involved here is an obligation to achieve a precise result - nuclear disarmament in all of its aspects." One has to admit that up until now, no "precise result" has been obtained which brings "nuclear disarmament in all of its aspects" into reality. One can thus maintain that the policies pursued by the five Nuclear Weapon States are contrary to the opinion of the International Court of Justice and that they are consequently illegal.

Reduction is Not Disarmament

I have not forgotten that in Prague you stated: "Clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." Here once more, I am not doubting your good intentions. But-- allow me this time to resort to this word of the skeptics--you were careful to point out: "Make no mistake: As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal to deter any adversary." You have to admit that such statements by their very nature make us doubt your willingness to respect to your obligation to uphold Article VI of the NPT. Your reasoning is strange: since weapons will exist for as long as you refuse to give up their ownership. Would you not agree? And, since you insist on your unwillingness to renounce of your nuclear weapons, what right have you to demand that others renounce their acquisition? Would they not be able to answer you with your same argument, "As long as these weapons exist, we will not renounce our own." It is what we call a vicious cycle. Certainly, you "are reducing the role that nuclear weapons have in your

national security strategy,” but these quantitative reductions do not in any way constitute a qualitative reduction. It is not as groundless accusation to suggest that you will only renounce obsolete or surplus weapons and that you will conserve all those you deem necessary to your security.

On September 24, 2009 you presided over a Summit of the Security Council of the United Nations on non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament. You came to an unanimous decision in favor of adopting Resolution 1887. According to the terms of this resolution, the Security Council “calls upon the Parties to the NPT, pursuant to Article VI of the Treaty, to undertake to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear arms reduction and disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” A quick reading of this text could lead one to believe that the resolution maintains the same terms as Article VI of the NPT. However, it is nothing of the sort. This article speaks of “effective measures relating to *cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament,*” as the resolution itself speaks of “effective measures relating to *nuclear arms reduction*” while this expression does not appear once in the Treaty. Between the “cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date,” and the “nuclear arms reduction” there is more than just a nuance. It is entirely possible for the United States armed with nuclear weapons to proceed toward a quantitative reduction of their arsenal. This being greatly over-sized, it would be at no cost at all. While at the same time, it could continue the qualitative nuclear arms race.

I will provide only one example: France. The M-51 missile perfectly illustrates the willingness of the French government to incite another nuclear arms race. The intercontinental ballistic M-51 was designed to replace the M-45 missile in order to modernize the weapons systems of the Strategic Oceanic Forces (SOF). France will produce 60 of these missiles to equip SOF’s second generation submarines starting in 2010. Evidently, the M-51 will be handsomer, more modern, and more performant than the M-45. Its range will be over 8 000 kilometers while the M-45’s was only 6 000. This program is a new illustration of the fact that the arms race follows from the research of science and technology. Given the evidence, such a program respects neither the spirit nor the letter of Article VI of the NPT. But still the President of the French Republic can state that “France respects its international commitments notably the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty” making it known that “France is the only State to have dismantled its underground nuclear missiles.”²⁷

Furthermore, who do you expect to effectively dissuade by the threat of your nuclear weapons? You evoke the hundreds of thousands of deaths that would be caused by the explosion of a nuclear weapon by a hooligan State or by “terrorists.” Certainly. But do you really think that these people would let themselves rationally be dissuaded by the threat of your own weapons? What credibility as a threat could you believe maintaining faced with men whose behavior has no rational criteria and who are ready for anything? If the worst were to happen---which is unlikely for the moment--, onto whom would you drop your missiles which would only cause thousands

²⁷ Speech March 21, 2008 (translation SNV)

of thousands of more deaths? The only way out is to renew the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. A review conference of this treaty will take place in 2010. It is your task to offer concrete propositions on this subject and not only in the reduction of nuclear arms but disarmament once and for all.

At the same time, States supplied with nuclear weapons demonstrate an absolute intransigence in regard to States not supplied with nuclear weapons. In his speech to the Security Council on September 24, President Nicolas Sarkozy evoked your “dream” of a world where there would be no more nuclear weapons by stating, “We are right to speak about the future, but before the future, there is the present, and the present consists of two major nuclear crises.” In straightforward terms, this means that States armed with nuclear weapons may perhaps disarm tomorrow, but it is today that unarmed States must renounce their acquisition. But what credibility have those who expect others to respect a treaty that they themselves do not respect?

Supporting the Iranian Resistance

In these circumstances, the repeated injunctions directed at Iran’s leaders by the international community to summon them to renounce nuclear weapons as well as the threats of sanctions that accompany them can only be interpreted by the Iranian people as an unacceptable interference in the politics of their country. It can only hurt the legitimate national pride of this great people and generate feelings of frustration among them. This Western arrogance confronted with a “Muslim country” can only serve to build a wall between civilizations.

Dialogue alone can permit to convince Iranian leaders to renounce nuclear weapons. Though Iran, you will say, refuses dialogue. Perhaps, but in order for them to accept, it would be necessary to fulfill the conditions of dialogue. For the moment, they are not. And they will not be, as long as the powers with nuclear weapons are not engaged in a true disarmament process. As for the remainder, your threats of sanctions will remain inopportune, unheeded, and you can be sure that they will be inoperative.

For many months, the major political event in Iran did not take place in laboratories, it took place in the streets. You even alluded to it in Oslo, paying respect to “the hundreds of thousands who have marched silently through the streets of Iran.” And you added: “It is the responsibility of all free people and free nations to make clear that these movements--these movements of hope and history--they have us on their side.” The repression by Iranian forces was not able to break the spirit of this citizen led resistance. On December 27, 2009, tens of thousands of people took to the streets once again in Tehran and in the major cities of the country to express their disavowal of the ruling forces and to demand democracy. Many protestors were killed, many others were wounded and thousands were arrested. But the resistance movement was not broken. Everything suggests that it overcame the challenge of duration. Iranians in larger and larger numbers are beginning to no longer fear openly defying the regime. And when the people are no longer afraid, they become capable of reclaiming power. Certainly, the road is still long, but the way is clear. We must hope that they avoid the trap of violence. Here, the strategy of nonviolent resistance used by Gandhi, founded essentially on the non-cooperation of the citizens with State institutions, is particularly pertinent. I would like to believe, Mr. President, that you would know

how to concretely express your solidarity with these women and men who are ushering in the future of Iran. It is hardly the time for sanctions, it is time for solidarity.

The Death Penalty is Murder

Lastly, I would like to approach a subject that you did not breach in Oslo: the death penalty. Although, you were not able to discuss it because, in this circumstance, it was impossible for you to say that you are in favor of capital punishment. Over the course of your presidential campaign, exemplified on July 25, 2008: “I think the death penalty should be applied in very narrow circumstance for the most egregious of crimes.” There is no need, to tell the truth, for you to affirm that the death penalty must have an exceptional character. The refusal of the death penalty is a principle that can undergo no exception whatsoever. It is the principle of the sacredness of life. If the life of a criminal is not sacred, then no life is sacred.

Allow me to cite Albert Camus once again. “No one among us is authorized to disparage of a single man, unless it is after his death which transforms his life into destiny and thereby allows for a definitive judgment. But to make a definitive judgment before death, to decree the account’s closure while the creditor is still living, is the task of no man. To this extent, at least, the man who judges absolutely condemns himself absolutely (...) Capital punishment breaks the only indisputable human solidarity, solidarity against death.”²⁸ The absolute refusal of the death penalty is the litmus test to discover whether a civilization is founded, or not, on the respect of life. All men, even the most criminal, has the right to the respect of his humanity. To justify the death penalty is to decide to deny once and for all the transcendental and sacred nature of human life. By legalizing the death penalty, the State not only institutionalizes murderous violence, it invites it. Consequently, it is the entirety of social relations that find itself contaminated by violence. “Violence begets violence,” wrote Emmanuel Levinas, “but it is necessary to end this chain reaction. Justice is likewise (...) Man is not in need of justice without passion alone. We need *a justice without an executioner*.”²⁹ Confronted with the inhumanity of a crime, a civilized society must respond with an overabundance of humanity. The criminal has the right to the respect of his life, but society above all has the duty to respect his life. The execution of a man whose hands and feet are tied is an abject murder whose horror rivals the crime itself. To invoke the respect of victims in order to kill their aggressor is foolish. If the victim cries out for revenge, society must hear him with compassion, but it must not satisfy his murderous desire. Through protecting the life of the criminal, society protects the victim from his desire for revenge and gives him the invitation to demonstrate his own humanity.

As you are well aware, Martin Luther King was a determined opponent of the death penalty. He was dismayed to see “men continuing to worship the God of revenge”: “In spite of the fact that

²⁸ Arthur Koestler, Albert Camus, *Reflexions sur la peine capitale*, Paris, Calmann-Levy, 1957, p. 168-167.

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberte*, Paris, Le livre de poche, Biblio-essais, 1990, p. 23.

the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to follow its disastrous leading.”³⁰ He wanted to contrast the law of revenge with the necessity forgiveness. He stated, “Capital punishment is society’s final assertion that it will not forgive.”³¹

It is only possible to act for peace and justice if everything be done to abolish the death penalty. It is a blood stain on the American flag that brings shame upon the United States. It is your job, Mr. President, to do everything in your power to remove it. Perhaps you will offer the pretext to justify your wait-and-see policy, that American public opinion is in majority in favor of the death penalty. Yet when public opinion is retrograde, it is not your task to follow it but to pave the way.

Over-the-Counter Firearms

The question of the death penalty is not unrelated to the over-the-counter commerce of weapons, gangrening American society. The free circulation of thousands of weapons distills the mortal poison of violence into all of the interstices of society. Each year, thousands of people die victim of firearms at large. Among them, there are many young people. This commerce is rooted in the culture of violence that dominates society and maintains the cult of violence. For as long as each citizen can assume the right to defend himself and, if necessary, to bring justice himself, by-passing the authorities, violence will continue to be worshiped as the virtue of the strong man. During this time, the law will be ridiculed and the judicial institution discredited.

It is always the same vicious cycle: everyone arms himself claiming to defend himself against others, and consequently, everyone finds himself threatened by everyone else’s weapons.

Further problematizing the issue is that the partisans of over-the-counter arms commerce claims that the citizen’s right to keep and to bear arms is written into the Constitution. This interpretation of the second amendment is quite imprecise, since, in reality, this right is given to the people, “*the right of the people*” the text precisely states--and not to each citizen, though this is what has prevailed. On June 26, 2008, even the Supreme Court decided that each citizen had in fact the right to keep a weapon.

For the time being, one has to admit that your margin of maneuvering around this subject is indeed narrow. Practically inexistent, at least if it would mean obtaining in the short-term a pure and simple ban on the over-the-counter sale of firearms. The powers by whom you would be confronted if you had even the slightest inclination to change things would be already mobilized to wage battle. Today these powers are of such a strength that they would not fail in their attempt to make you fold. Waiting for you firmly standing in the front line is the *National Rifle Association*. The ideology conveyed by this association gives me the chills.

Nevertheless, you have no right to insult the future by giving up in before a situation denying values of civilization itself. Luckily, networks of citizens are equally mobilized to deconstruct

³⁰ Martin Luther King, *The Strength to Love*, (French edition used: Paris, Casterman, 1964, p.53.)

³¹ Ibid.

the culture of arms. It is they who embody hope. On Mother's Day, tens of thousands of women are protesting to demand, in order to protect their children, a severe restriction of the sale of firearms. It is up to you to find the right way to convey to them your support.

“The universal relevance of the principle of nonviolence”

During the plenary session on June 15, 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations invited all of the Member States to celebrate the International Day of Nonviolence. This day was inaugurated as October 2nd, Gandhi's birthday. Something remarkable in the resolution of the General Assembly who chose to honor this day, is its affirmation of “the universal relevance of the principle of nonviolence.” Furthermore, the resolution “invites all Member States (...) to commemorate the International Day of Nonviolence in an appropriate manner and to disseminate the message of nonviolence, including through education and public awareness.” This resolution was unanimously passed. The representative of the United States to the UN is then one of the signatories. You are thus “invited” to implement the recommendations of this mandate. We are within the domain of what is possible. I do not doubt whatsoever that you will know how to uphold this decision of the UN.

Furthermore, in Oslo, you state the “Golden Rule” that “we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” You add: “Adhering to this law of love has always been the core struggle of human nature.” The Golden Rule, effectively, does find itself at the heart of every sapiential tradition: it is universal. Though, how would we want our neighbor to treat us? The answer is that he does not harm us by any means. Thus, the Golden Rule expresses the interdiction of violence which grounds the principle of nonviolence demanding the respect of humanity's dignity in oneself as well as in all other men. The Golden Rule establishes thus the universal relevance of the principle of nonviolence.

On the occasion of the first International Day of Nonviolence, on October 2nd, 2007, United Nations Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, published the text of a message in which he stated “more than ever before, we need the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi.” And he insisted that this day be the occasion to “promote a true nonviolence at every level, from the individual to the State.” This last expression, “from the individual to the State,” is surprising, wouldn't you agree? It is critical because it challenges in advance the idea which seems to appear in your statements that nonviolence, if it can influence the lives of individuals, would not be able to influence the decisions of States. By desiring that nonviolence be promoted at the level of the State, the Secretary General of the United Nations clearly asserts that the nature of the philosophical principle of nonviolence is to influence even the governance of the political realm. This is why your Nobel Peace Prize ardently obliges you not only to give homage to nonviolence, but to implement it in the fulfillment of your mission as a Statesman.

Taking a Risk for Peace

It is your task, nevertheless, to act in such a way that when you leave office those who are suffering from war today can believe that you have earned the Nobel Peace Prize. You received the Nobel Prize, it remains for you now to pursue Peace.

Mr. President, I wrote you a letter that I am sending off to you just as one throws a bottle in sea in the uncertain hope that it may reach the other side, that someone may find it and may wish to bring to you the message it contains.

I equally hope that some among those working for peace and justice across the world will have the opportunity to read it and perhaps, by sharing our thoughts with you, we will better understand how to uncover possibilities for nonviolence and to go beyond its limitations together.

Wishing you the courage to have the audacity to take a risk for peace, please accept, Mr. President, the assurance of my highest respect.

Translated from the French by Stephanie Nichole Van Hook