



4TH ANNUAL FRANK K. KELLY LECTURE ON HUMANITY'S FUTURE

America and the Human Future:
Surviving Vietnam, 9/11, and Iraq

by Robert Jay Lifton

FRANK K. KELLY LECTURE ON HUMANITY'S FUTURE

The Frank K. Kelly Lecture on Humanity's Future was established by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in 2002. The lecture series honors Frank Kelly, a founder and senior vice president of the Foundation, whose vision and compassion are perpetuated through this series. The lecture is presented annually by a distinguished individual to explore the contours of humanity's future and what we can do today to help shape a more positive and promising future for our planet and all its inhabitants.



The lecture presented in this booklet is the fourth Frank K. Kelly Lecture on Humanity's Future. It was presented by Dr. Robert Jay Lifton at the University of California at Santa Barbara on February 16, 2005.

The 2004 lecture in this series was presented by Dame Anita Roddick on "Kindness as a Key to Humanity's Future." Professor Richard Falk presented the 2003 lecture on "American Civil Liberties and Human Rights Under Siege." Frank Kelly, for whom the lecture series is named, gave the inaugural lecture in 2002 on "Glorious Beings: What We Are and What We May Become."

Frank Kelly has had a remarkable life. He has been a science-fiction writer (later inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame), a journalist, a soldier in World War II, a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, a speechwriter for Harry Truman, the assistant to the US Senate Majority Leader, vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and a leader in the campaign to create the US Institute for Peace. He co-founded the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in 1982. He is the author of nine books and uncounted articles.

Beyond all of his achievements, Frank has a remarkable faith in humanity and its future. He has lived with a spirit of optimism and hope. He has been a visionary advocate for humanity and has inspired many people through his writing and teaching to take action on behalf of humanity.

The lecture series is endowed to carry forward Frank's vision. If you would like to help support the lecture by adding to the endowment, please let us know. We also invite you to learn more about the Frank K. Kelly Lecture series and about the work of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation by visiting our website. Prior lectures in this series are available through the Foundation.

AMERICA AND THE HUMAN FUTURE:
SURVIVING VIETNAM, 9/11, AND IRAQ



Robert Jay Lifton

4th Annual Frank K. Kelly
Lecture on Humanity's Future

A Project of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation

Introduction

By Richard Falk

Chair, Nuclear Age Peace Foundation



The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation has annually recognized individuals who have made outstanding contributions in the form of dedicated and courageous leadership in the cause of peace. Over the course of the

last 20 years, many extraordinary individuals have been acknowledged for their roles in this regard, most recently Walter Cronkite and Jonathan Schell. On rare occasions the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation has presented a Lifetime Achievement Award to an individual who has exhibited a particular dedication to the goals of the Foundation. I have two happy tasks tonight: to introduce the lecture and to make the presentation to our guest.

I should say in the spirit of full disclosure that Robert Lifton has been a close friend for more than 30 years. We have shared many courts, including tennis courts, but also courts of law, and have even spent time in jail together. Given the circumstances, I consider that experience a positive credential. We have twice collaborated as co-authors of books and, in the spirit of fearlessness, are about to embark on a third such venture.

In my view, no one on the planet better exemplifies the goals of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation than Robert Jay Lifton. Ever since

his book on Hiroshima survivors, *Death in Life*, which won the coveted National Book Award in 1969, Dr. Lifton has been carrying on a struggle against the most severe forms of human wrongs that afflict the peoples of the world. He has written notable books on a range of issues that chronicle the extremities of human wrongdoing, including the psychic ordeal of war endured by American G.I.s in Vietnam, the perverse professionalism of Nazi doctors, the genocidal mentality associated with any contemplated reliance on nuclear weapons, and the historical emergence of what he has insightfully been calling apocalyptic terrorism. In these studies, Dr. Lifton has also forged new methods of research and interpretation that have exerted a very wide influence here and abroad. He has combined the knowledge and approaches of psychiatry with a sophisticated use of social science inquiry relying on in-depth interviews and an interpretive approach to his subject matter that is informed by a deep sense of historical and cultural context. The combination of these approaches has given his writing a unique quality of depth and richness that has made it so valuable to many of us over the years as an intellectual resource for understanding the most perplexing and disturbing issues associated with outbreaks of mass violence and collective evil.

But Dr. Lifton has done more than achieve an enviable record as a distinguished scholar with a worldwide reputation. He has act-

ed as an exemplary citizen, expressing his views on the most controversial issues of the day, from the atomic attacks on Hiroshima to the ongoing current torment arising from the American presence in Iraq. His own words, expressed in an interview just prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, convey powerfully the wide arc of his personal and political engagement. He said then, "I feel a mixture of fear, rage and deep absurdity. This war we are about to embark upon seems to me to be both illegitimate and self-defeating, harmful not just for the world but for ourselves." Dr. Lifton, while being a chronicler of the most extreme evils in our world, is personally engaged in the full spectrum of life experience. Again in his illuminating words, "You look into the abyss, but you don't want to be stuck there. So you want to look beyond

receipt of a Nobel Peace Prize in the middle of the 1980s.

And so, from the perspective of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, Robert Lifton is an ideal recipient of its Lifetime Achievement Award. In giving Robert this award, we are certainly not intending to signal the end of Dr. Lifton's lifetime of achievement. Indeed, as we will shortly witness, we count on him continuing to achieve for a long, long time. I want to just say a few words to introduce Robert Lifton as the fourth Kelly lecturer. It is wonderful that we have Frank Kelly with us tonight. He is a prominent and much beloved local presence in the Santa Barbara community. He inaugurated this lecture series with a lecture of his own in 2002. In some ways Frank and Robert seem to be contrary

"In giving Robert this award, we are certainly not intending to signal the end of Dr. Lifton's lifetime of achievement. Indeed, as we will shortly witness, we count on him continuing to achieve for a long, long time."

it to other human possibilities." And so he has done throughout his life, revealing his worldview in an important scholarly contribution, *The Protean Self* that is full of hope and potentiality, a guidebook to a fulfilling and satisfying life carried forward in the face of dispiriting gathering forces.

Dr. Lifton played a leading role in the organization Physicians for Social Responsibility that was so active during the 1980s in opposing the nuclear arms race. This organization then became the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and its singular contributions were recognized by the

personality types, Frank continuously immersed in a virtual ocean of bright-eyed optimism, while Robert seemingly habituates the darkest of human landscapes. But on closer inspection, I think these two citizens of the world are engaged in the same struggle to improve the human condition. Robert Lifton likes to quote the poet Theodore Roethke, especially the line, "In a dark time the eye begins to see," while Frank always seems happily comfortable in the light and never has trouble seeing the silver lining.

Robert Lifton was trained as a psychiatrist, attending medical school and had as his

mentor the famed and innovative follower of Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson. He spent time in the air force during the Korean War working as a psychiatrist and produced an important book on thought control as a technique of warfare and an instrument of rule in totalitarian societies. For some 25 years, Robert Lifton was a research professor on the medical faculty of Yale University. Since the mid-1960s, Robert, together with his wife, have hosted an annual psychohistory seminar at their summer home in Cape Cod that has brought together many of the best minds in America to discuss the most pressing issues of the day. In 1978, he moved to New York City where he founded and established the Center on Violence and Human Survival that, although renamed after his departure for Cambridge, remains part of the City University of New York (CUNY). This Center became an important gathering place for all those concerned with the forces endangering the future of the human species and what constructive steps might be taken to meet these challenges by bringing about desirable change.

In 2001, Robert made a further move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he now lives and is associated with the Harvard Medical School as a lecturer and runs a faculty seminar on mass violence. Robert has been celebrated for his achievements during his long and continuously productive career, winning prizes for his books and receiving a large number of honorary degrees from important universities. It is obvious that I could extend this introduction unbearably if I were to enumerate the high points of Robert Lifton's career. I only want, in closing, to call attention to two of his recent books that

bear on the lecture theme of the evening and provide us all with essential tools for understanding some of what is happening in the world around us.

For a precursor of the 9/11 experience and the al Qaeda organization, I would commend Robert's truly prophetic study of the Japanese terrorist organization, Aum Shinrikyo, with the revealing title, *Destroying the World To Save It*, published in 1999. The book at once recognized the extremism and absurdity of this cult dedicated to unleashing massive violence in order to purify the world. But Robert Lifton also acknowledges, "something closer and more dangerous to all of us. The extremist leader of the cult, Shoko Asahara, now seems to me to have been a caricature of present day leaders of normal countries who deal with ultimate weaponry and must thereby struggle with or surrender to a psychological mix of fear, control and fantasy that could annihilate us all." In this sense, the message of the book, and Robert Lifton's insistent plea, is to mobilize the action needed to rid the planet of the dreaded weaponry of mass destruction before it rids the planet of the human species.

The other book I would mention is *Superpower Syndrome: America's Apocalyptic Confrontation With The World*, published in 2003, warning us all that meeting terror with terror is the surest path to self-annihilation, but also informing us that change is possible and that a hopeful future is within our reach, if we take advantage of transforming inner and outer potentialities present in our individual and societal circumstances.

AMERICA AND THE HUMAN FUTURE: SURVIVING VIETNAM, 9/11, AND IRAQ

By Robert Jay Lifton

I'm deeply moved by that generous, indeed overly generous introduction, and I appreciate this award very much, especially in light of its source and tradition. However, one needs ways of preventing oneself from believing all these excessive things that are said about one, and my way of doing that is to draw bird cartoons. I don't have any artistic talent, but I can have these little stick figures of birds say things more directly than I can in my other writings, and I've even published a couple of collections of them. The particular bird cartoon that's relevant for this moment, and which I'd like to consider my existential classic, goes this way: A small, young, enthusiastic bird looks up and says excitedly, "All of a sudden I had this wonderful feeling I am me." And an older, bigger, more jaundiced, more skeptical bird looks down at him and says, "You were wrong." On that note I begin.

close friends for close to four decades. Richard and I were young men when we began our collaboration, and we seem to still be at it. We are graying a bit, but we remain rebels with a cause.

We Are All Survivors

We meet here tonight as survivors, one might say as historical survivors, not only of American wars but of a recent presidential election. My argument this evening is that the way we survive, the meaning we as Americans give to the survivals that we are in the process of experiencing, has much to do with the future we create.

Richard mentioned Erik Erikson, the gifted psychoanalyst whom I worked closely with and who was a kind of informal mentor to me for many years. Erikson described how

***"My argument this evening is that the way we survive...
has much to do with the future we create."***

I'm very grateful to the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation for this award and for its hospitality and sponsorship of the event. It means a great deal to me to be joining Richard Falk on this occasion. You heard from him about the length and closeness of our friendship. Really we've been peace colleagues and

his young-adult patients had to hit "rock bottom" before they could show signs of health and recovery. We may be in the process of hitting rock bottom as a nation, given the dangerous directions our leaders are taking us. We may also be hitting rock bottom in ourselves as passionate opponents of these

policies. Perhaps, like Erikson's patients, we first have to allow ourselves to experience that pain and foreboding and then to emerge from that state in order to reassert our efforts at personal and national health. But to do that we need to confront our historical and psychological actuality. We can't do it without that confrontation.

on the worldwide epidemic of apocalyptic violence, and what I call *superpower syndrome*; and a reexamination—and this is the theme of my talk—of the state of the psychology of the survivor in this country. I will look not just at Holocaust survivors or survivors of Hiroshima but at ourselves as Americans. By doing that, we can finally move toward

“I will look not just at Holocaust survivors or survivors of Hiroshima but at ourselves as Americans. By doing that, we can finally move toward directions of hope....”

I sometimes feel, given the draconian subjects I've worked on, that when I'm in demand the world is in trouble. Richard mentioned the metaphor of the abyss, which I continue to return to. We must always look into the abyss in order to see beyond it, and the present abyss is our war in Iraq and the policies that brought it about. This was neither a defensive nor a preemptive war. It was a preventive war, and we must be particularly cognizant in the nuclear age of the dangers of preventive wars. Some of you may be old enough to remember the talk of preventive war in the 1950s and early 1960s when it was learned that the Soviet Union was acquiring nuclear weapons and testing them. There were many voices advocating a preventive war before the Soviets could get more weapons and endanger us. Had we listened to those voices, millions or tens of millions of people, or more, would have been killed. There's nothing more dangerous than preventive war in the nuclear age.

I want to take you on a bit of a journey that will include a brief look at past work I've done in terms of its bearing on our present entrapments and dilemmas; some remarks

directions of hope—modest ones, but having some importance.

Psycho-historical Method

My method is psycho-historical, which means nothing more than applying psychological perspectives to historical questions. The recent psychohistorical approach dates back to the work of Erikson, who studied the great man or great person in history. My work has been to interview people involved in significant historical events, either as acted upon by these events or as having contributed to them, or some combination of the two. What I call *shared themes* encountered in these people tell us much about them, but also about their time and era, and about our present era in this case. This approach requires looking not just at the nitty-gritty of human behavior but also at an ultimate level of larger human connectedness. As creatures who know that we die, we have a need to live on in, and feel connected with, forces that began prior to and that will continue after what we know to be our limited lifespan: whether biologically or biosocially, through families and communities; through

some religious vision of an afterlife; through “eternal nature”; or through creative modes in our influence as teachers, writers, or ordinary human beings. This ultimate level is part of a model of symbolization of life and death, a departure from the classical Freudian model of instinct and defense. It is from this model of the continuity of life that all of my work has evolved.

In telling you something about the relevance of my past work to our present entrapments, let me say that there’s something about the present situation that’s different from the subjects of my other studies. It has to do with the fact that we are still in 9/11—it’s not over. Little happens in this country that doesn’t have some connection or association with 9/11. And of course those associations are shamelessly manipulated by the Bush administration. Other events that I’ve studied, like the bombing of Hiroshima, the Vietnam War, and Nazi doctors’ involvement in genocide, were grave and had reverberations, but I was studying them in retrospect. I’m now studying events, and you’re considering them, as participants in a process that continues to affect all of us.

I studied Chinese thought reform in the mid-1950s in Hong Kong, interviewing people who were coming out of China. This work raised for me the problem of totalism, of all-or-none belief systems, which has haunted all of my subsequent work. In retrospect, I realized that both the totalism and the thought-reform process represented what could be called an apocalyptic revolutionary impulse to destroy the existing Chinese mental or spiritual world in order to recreate it with a complete new purity. I didn’t take that to be something unique to the Chinese.

This impulse toward what I called *ownership of the mind* has been expressed elsewhere; I related it then to McCarthyism in the United States, and we can see parallels to it now as well. We don’t have systematic thought reform in our country at this time, but under the Bush administration we see an attempt at controlling information, and not just spin but direct reversals of reality, which are constructed and acted upon. In that sense, the thought-reform process has considerable bearing on what we’re in the middle of right now.

But there’s hope in this despite its dark side. The Chinese turned out to have over-reformed and did much to turn the population against them by that overcontrol. Some of that is going on in this country, too. Freud memorably stated that “The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it will not rest until it has had its hearing.” We can say that the voice of reality is a soft one, but it will not rest until it has had its hearing.

The Prism of Hiroshima

I continue to see the world through the prism of Hiroshima. From my study of Hiroshima survivors in 1962, I learned a lot about survivors in general and began to think about the psychology of survivors. I also began to think about the impact of this revolutionary weaponry and how, just by its dimensions, nuclear weaponry is apocalyptic in its essence. We tend to bring religious symbols to the weaponry in justifying its use, to sacralize it to the point of worship. We know something about what nuclear weapons can do, and that knowledge inhabits us and affects every kind of conflict and interaction in this world.

My study of Vietnam veterans in the 1970s revealed the phenomenon of what I came to call the *atrocious-producing situation*—an environment so structured, militarily and psychologically, that ordinary people, no better or worse than you or me, can enter it and commit atrocities. This socialization to atrocity has to do with military policies and with

In my study of Nazi doctors during the late 1970s and early 1980s, I found a reversal of healing and killing, a kind of apocalyptic biology. There was perverse idealism to the effect that if you could get rid of all of the bad genes you could also get rid of not only mental illness but all wrong behavior in the world. It had an absurdity, but elements of

“We tend to bring religious symbols to the weaponry in justifying its use, to sacralize it to the point of worship.”

psychological reactions. In the case of Vietnam, there were free-fire zones and body counts, along with the angry grief of soldiers who were losing buddies in very dangerous situations without being able to identify the enemy. The apocalyptic phrase “destroying a village to save it” came from Vietnam, and it inspired the title of my subsequent book about Aum Shinrikyo, *Destroying the World to Save It*.

Also in relation to Vietnam, we saw the emergence of the phenomenon of veterans and soldiers opposing their own war while it was in the process of being fought. That opposition had a tremendous impact on the country and contributed greatly to ending the war. We now see a similar process operating in a small but highly influential number of Israeli reserve officers and soldiers who are refusing to fight in the Occupied Territories. Some have told me that they were much influenced by antiwar Vietnam veterans, and by those of us who wrote about them. So this process of opposing one’s war or opposing war-making, when one is being called on to fight that war or afterward, can be contagious in the struggle for peace.

it were believed. Most Nazi doctors whom I interviewed weren’t ideologues; they had been socialized to atrocity. In a phenomenon I call *doubling*, there was the formation of what was functionally a second self, so that a Nazi doctor could be killing people from nine to five, six days a week, at Auschwitz, and then go back to Germany on weekends or while on leave and be an ordinary husband and father. Doubling can occur in relation to any killing process, and I’m sure it is pervasive in Iraq. The idea of killing to heal is an overall theme of all apocalyptic phenomena, of all efforts to destroy on a large scale in order to spiritually purify.

It has been my sad recent observation that American physicians have colluded in torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. In a short piece published recently in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, I described the failure of American medical personnel to report injuries that could only have been caused by torture. They also turned over records to interrogators and cooperated with them, and they falsified and delayed death certificates. This behavior should not be equated with that of Nazi doctors. But the extremity of the

Nazi example can help us to uncover less extreme but nonetheless unacceptable medical violations.

My study of Aum Shinrikyo in the late 1990s became all too relevant in connection with 9/11. Here was this relatively small Japanese cult, with less than 10,000 members and only 1,400 so-called monks close to the guru, who not only killed about 100 people but also planned to initiate mass violence through the release of sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system (they had unsuccessfully sought nuclear weaponry) in order to bring about World War III. They hoped to involve Japan, America, and other countries in a planetary struggle that would culminate in a biblical Armageddon. This was, of course, wild fantasy, but it was fantasy accompanied by the production of biological and chemical weapons, even if in impure and limited form. The cult had a vision of apocalyptic purification based on a long-standing but little commented on phenomenon that the ancient rabbis called “forcing the end.” Gershom Scholem, the noted scholar of Jewish mysticism, described great debates among the rabbis about whether, in order to facilitate the coming of the messiah, it was permissible to engage in violence, since it was known that violence had to precede his return. For-

more vivid by the contemporary technology of destruction, particularly nuclear destruction.

Throughout my work, I’ve been concerned with alternatives and have written about the protean self—the many-sided contemporary self characterized by fluidity, flexibility, and the capacity for transformation and change. I’ve addressed that protean self’s struggles to emerge, and the conflicts between it and what can be called the fundamentalist self with an antithetical impulse toward totalism and a potential for apocalyptic violence.

Apocalyptic Violence

I’ll say a word about the larger question of apocalyptic violence and then turn to the psychology of the survivor. Apocalyptic violence involves imagining the end of the world, or a large piece of it, in order to bring about total purification and spiritual renewal. I see a kind of epidemic of apocalyptic violence throughout the world, and have found it in many disparate places: in connection with Timothy McVeigh and his bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, in the Middle East among both Israelis and Palestinians, and in relation to American policies and behavior.

“It has been my sad recent observation that American physicians have colluded in torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere.”

unately, they decided that it was heretical to do this, because only God could take such actions. Groups like Aum Shinrikyo are less restrained and feel free to enter into the process of bringing about Armageddon, the image and vision of which have been made

If one asks what bin Laden wants and what al Qaeda stands for, there’s a political dimension, which has been increasingly evident in the effort to bring down America and get it out of the Middle East. But there’s also an apocalyptic and more amorphous aspect in

which they seek to destroy all that is not sufficiently Islamist in order to create a perfect and pure Islamist state and world. In terms of the terrorist dynamic, clearly there can be real grievances associated with an apocalyptic project of this kind. The apocalyptic project must be opposed, but the grievances should be recognized. They include a couple of centuries of imperialism, the carving up of the Middle East, and certain aggressive American policies which fed the agendas of radical Islamist groups, so that there is mutual participation in an apocalyptic process.

In connection with recent American behavior—and with what I have called *superpower syndrome*—one can look at the “war on terrorism” and its apocalyptic dimensions—that is, our responding to apocalyptic violence with apocalyptic tendencies of our own. The war on terrorism has no limits in time or place—it’s an endless process, imparting a sense of continuous war. This kind of definition of the war on terrorism was put forward from the beginning, and it has a lot to do with superpower humiliation—the sense of superpower omnipotence punctured by 9/11. The issue of humiliation looms large in

carrying out a grand design—what author Bob Woodward described as “God’s master plan.” There are many indications of an impulse to destroy much of the world that we find unsatisfactory in order to reconstitute it in our own image. And there is the polarization of the world and the “axis of evil” —that kind of language and approach.

Superpower Vulnerability

There is also the issue of superpower vulnerability—the strongest military power in the world is probably the most fearful. In this kind of apocalyptic projection, we seek absolute security, which is impossible—that quest is part of superpower omnipotence—and any threat to that security renders us fearful. Moreover, we’re on a project or mission or even a crusade to carry through our policies and control much of the world. This is based on a certain degree of fantasy and is also impossible to achieve; it is therefore a constant source of frustration and enormous fear. The nuclear issue enters greatly into that fear, because our policies, especially those in relation to nuclear weapons, stimulate nuclearism in other countries, which we

“The apocalyptic project must be opposed, but the grievances should be recognized.”

the American experience. What results is a back-and-forth process, a duty dance with death into which both sides enter.

In our own country, we also see a kind of military fundamentalism combined with Christian apocalypticism, and its influence on the administration. Our leadership, including the president himself, has a sense of

in turn feel threatened by. Nuclear proliferation remains an overwhelming problem for the world, but it cannot be dealt with by relying on military threats, which may, in fact, have the opposite effect.

All this is part of what I call *fluid world control*. Our empire is different from previous ones. We don’t systematically install bureau-

crats on the ground to establish enduring institutions, as the British did. Rather, we move in and out in our efforts to control history, while maintaining our military bases, in Iraq and elsewhere. The National Security Strategy document of September 2002 refers to the control of various regions of the world

tendency for survivor emotions to blend is one reason why the Bush administration has been able to perpetuate certain falsehoods, such as the claim that Iraq was in some way involved in 9/11. It's our task to distinguish between these various survivor emotions, as I'm attempting to do in this talk.

“Two large violent events have affected Americans since the middle of the twentieth century: the Vietnam War and 9/11. Now we have a third such event, the war in Iraq.”

and to a form of military dominance that ensures that no nation will imagine itself capable of challenging us. A superpower on this kind of mission must be haunted by a fear of weakness, because fluid world control—the control of history—can never really be achieved.

In order to look toward the future with the hope of extricating ourselves from the situation I'm describing, it's useful to turn to the collective psychology of survivors, and, specifically, that of Americans as survivors. Two large violent events have affected Americans since the middle of the twentieth century: the Vietnam war and 9/11. Now we have a third such event, the war in Iraq, which may come to be known as the centerpiece of the George W. Bush era. How we survive those events—the meanings we give them—are major questions confronting us.

All of us have ordinary survivals in our lives, of deaths of people close to us and other losses, and our emotions about these events intermingle with our feelings about surviving Vietnam, 9/11, and Iraq. Our feelings about those individual events intermingle as well; that is the way our psyches function. This

If one undergoes a direct survival, there's a threat to the entire psychic structure, in which mental forms tend to break down. Survivor psychology in that sense includes an indelible death imprint. But what I want to emphasize is the profound requirement of survivors to find meaning in what they have survived and, based on that, to often embark on some kind of mission. It is a form of debt to the dead. The dead have ultimate authority, and survivors try in some way to respond to it. Survivors feel that the dead must not be allowed to have “died in vain.”

Levels of Survivors

There are levels of survivors. Direct, or immediate, survivors include those who fought in Vietnam or Iraq or who were trapped in the Twin Towers on 9/11. Other Americans, in contrast, are survivors from a distance who nonetheless can feel these events strongly. Direct survivors experience things viscerally, whereas distant survivors tend to experience them more ideologically or intellectually. Nonetheless, distant survivors often are the ones who lay out the meaning structures that society embraces. Reactions to these events are invested with a life-death

intensity, but the events themselves have no inherent meaning. Rather, meaning is constructed by survivors and others. The interaction between immediate and distant survivors is always evident. During the latter part of the Vietnam War, for instance, the favorite song of many American soldiers fighting there was the “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag,” by Country Joe and the Fish, the most bitterly powerful antiwar song of that era. There was increasing interaction between the peace movement in the U.S. and the soldiers who were beginning to turn against their war, between distant and immediate survivors of the war. That kind of interaction is now going on in connection with the Iraq war as well.

Looking at Vietnam, 9/11, and Iraq, we find polarized meanings given to each of these events. And that’s where we have to articulate our own stand. In the case of Vietnam,

war: “By god, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!” And James Mann, in his fine book *The Rise of the Vulcans*—who included Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Armitage, and Condoleezza Rice—tells us that these influential advisers to George W. Bush embraced a survivor mission of belligerence in relation to the Vietnam War. The impact of that debacle was similar for all of them, whether they had fought in that war or not. (Most didn’t.) According to Mann, “The defeat in Vietnam led to a preoccupation with regaining and then maintaining American military power.” In other words, their survivor mission was to reassert American military might all the more powerfully as a response to Vietnam. It’s something like fighting the war over again and winning it, but in a new war. In that sense, both Gulf wars can be seen as connected to survivor missions stemming from Vietnam.

“Looking at Vietnam, 9/11, and Iraq, we find polarized meanings given to each of these events. And that’s where we have to articulate our own stand.”

a crucial survivor meaning and mission took shape over the course of the war and afterward. Mainstream opposition and the American defeat led to a survivor meaning and mission of showing restraint to avoid wars with dubious purposes, fought in faraway places against nonwhite populations.

Less visible then was a survivor mission at the opposite pole of policy, which grew out of a feeling that any such restraint was part of a syndrome of American weakness. You may recall the ringing words of President George H.W. Bush at the end of the first Gulf

Survivor Missions

If you look at 9/11, there are also different survivor missions. The war on terrorism, which I mentioned earlier, was the survivor mission of the Bush administration. It was apocalyptic and all-enveloping. So you have this tandem relationship between the apocalyptic perpetrators of 9/11 and the responders. But there was an alternative survivor mission that many of us tried to explore, which was to limit the use of force to that necessary for bringing the perpetrators to justice. This alternative survivor mission

also required examining the sources of apocalyptic violence and the kind of historical dynamic that sustains it, in order to diminish such violence or prevent it from recurring. Many Americans have felt themselves to be caught between these two responses, but the administration has been able to draw upon a reservoir of belligerence from 9/11, in pursuing its aggressive version, the war on terrorism.

Nonetheless, family members of some of those killed in the 9/11 attacks undertook an alternative survivor mission. Through their efforts, the commission investigating 9/11 came into being and had its work extended.

Turning to the war in Iraq, we know it was planned at least a decade ago. In a way, 9/11 was a release for that war. In any case, it became a survivor mission of 9/11, and it was also a survivor mission of Vietnam in the way that I have mentioned—the Vulcans' embrace of an aggressive policy to reverse the outcome of that earlier war.

Once embarked on, the Iraq war created survivor missions of its own. The traditional survivor mission in wartime is to emphasize that soldiers must not be allowed to have died in vain and that their work must therefore be completed by pursuing the war ever more vigorously. That's the attitude of the administration in connection with the Iraq war.

But despite administration claims of achieving stability and democracy there, images of extreme chaos and extensive killing have made their way to the American people. These have contributed to an alternative survivor mission, which questions the justifica-

tion of the war and of all of the killing and dying. The only way that the deaths would not have been in vain, according to that alternative survivor mission, is if they taught us the futility of such war-making. Polls suggest that a majority of Americans are affected by this alternative survivor meaning, and the country as a whole is struggling with these two versions of the Iraq war. During the 2004 presidential campaign, John Kerry had a great opportunity to bring forth the powerful alternative survivor mission he had expressed in connection with Vietnam, when he had so eloquently asked, before a Congressional subcommittee, "How can we ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" Unfortunately, he did not bring that clarity to addressing the war in Iraq.

Looking at events in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere in Iraq, you have an atrocity-producing situation parallel to the kind that I described in connection with Vietnam. Iraq is also a counterinsurgency war, fought in alien, hostile territory against a nonwhite enemy who is both everywhere and nowhere and can't be pinned down. There's a kind of fantasy that if we just do enough interrogation and break down enough people and get them to confess, we'll somehow extract truths that would justify what is an unjustifiable war.

There are encouraging signs, though. Constant comparisons are now being made, not just by outspoken critics like me but by mainstream journalists, between Iraq and Vietnam. And there's an important new development that has received little attention—the emergence of antiwar Iraq veterans, some of them in collaboration with antiwar Vietnam veterans. They've formed a

new organization, Iraq Veterans Against the War, modeled on the similar Vietnam anti-war organization. This is another expression of the alternative survivor mission that I've been describing.

An Alternative Tradition

Of course, this alternative survivor meaning has a noble tradition. Even in Homer's *Iliad*, along with the glorification of the heroic warrior, you find an undercurrent of sadness, loss, and meaninglessness in reference to the Trojan War, and that's been true of just about any war fought subsequently. World War I spawned a vast literature out of an alternative survivor mission about the war being wrong and unjust, and this also has occurred in connection with Vietnam.

The possibility of what can be called survivor illumination must constantly be kept in mind. Garry Wills, in his powerful book *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, describes a kind of survivor illumination that Lincoln extricated from that dreadful battlefield when he called for the meaning of that survival being a new birth of freedom. And there is a rich post-

create from his death encounter, and derive a certain wisdom from it. In our present world, our hope, and our possibility, is that we can do the same.

We're capable of wiser, more measured approaches, of more humane applications of our considerable power. We can remain strong without having to delude ourselves about being an omnipotent superpower. By reclaiming our moral compass, we would also be liberating ourselves from the extraordinary pressures connected with this illusory project.

Lord Acton famously said that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But what really corrupts is the quest for absolute power. The vision or fantasy of absolute power is totally corrupting. We've become Sisyphus with bombs, trying to climb the hill of Hades but never quite getting to the top. This happens at a time when there's a decline in the nation-state and we seek to fill the vacuum with American control, which is not recognized as legitimate but rather the opposite. Everything that we do to oppose this futile

"But what really corrupts is the quest for absolute power. The vision or fantasy of absolute power is totally corrupting."

World World II literature; writers such as Albert Camus, Kurt Vonnegut, and Günter Grass brought great illumination from having been direct survivors of the horrors of that war. As the talented postwar German novelist Heinrich Böll put it, "The artist carries death within him like a good priest his breviary." The artist-as-survivor can

project counts; even the most modest action enters into the collective consciousness.

On one of my trips back to Hiroshima, I was very moved to hear survivors' reflections on what they called exaggerated victim consciousness. They said that this could be a real danger because people could become obsessed and lose their balance.

One way they tried to overcome this was to meet with other survivors, including Holocaust survivors, in order to share experiences with various forms of suffering. We must overcome our exaggerated victim consciousness in connection with 9/11. It was a dreadful event, even, in Nuremberg language, a crime against humanity. But it has to be viewed in terms of preventing the occurrence not only of similar events but of various forms of violence in which we ourselves are immersed. Islamist extremist groups such as al Qaeda also see themselves as victimized and humiliated, and again we have this back-and-forth dance in relation to victimization.

We need to surrender the claim to certainty or ownership of truth. Nobody owns truth. In his book *Plurality and Ambiguity*, David Tracy, the brilliant Jesuit philosopher, describes how great visionaries have always had elements of ambiguity and doubt in putting forward their faith. There may be more tolerance for ambiguity than we realize, as I have tried to illustrate in connection with the protean self. Recognizing ambiguity means also recognizing vulnerability. Vulnerability is an aspect of the human condition—we can't rid ourselves of it—and it has to do with accepting the fact that we die. It means rejecting immortality projects on the part of people who require the destruction of others. We do well to heed the advice of Albert Camus, who wrote: "To live and die as human beings we need to refuse to be a god" and to embrace "thought which recognizes limits." Camus also said, "He who does not know everything cannot kill everyone." There's a lot of survivor wisdom in that.

Survivor Choices

Survivors can close down, numb themselves, and be preoccupied with fantasies of revenge. Or they can open themselves to the pain they are undergoing, and to that of others, and in the process learn more about life and death. The same can be said about our own experience as survivors now. We can close down our collective imaginations and stay fixed in our polarization of good and evil. Or we can open our psyches and our collective imaginations to probe the sources of our pain and the origins of our crises, and take steps toward diminishing rather than increasing the world's violence.

I close with two quotations. The first is from Seneca, who, more than 2,000 years ago, said, "Power over life and death—don't be proud of it. Whatever they fear from you, you'll be threatened with." And the second is that line from Theodore Roethke that Richard mentioned, which has to be put forward again and again: "*In a dark time the eye begins to see.*"

Robert Jay Lifton

Robert Jay Lifton is Lecturer in Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School and the Cambridge Health Alliance, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Psychology, The City University of New York. He was formerly Director of The Center on Violence and Human Survival at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He had previously held the Foundations' Fund Research Professorship of Psychiatry at Yale University for more than two decades. The overall themes of Dr.



Lifton's work have been holocaust and transformation. He has studied many of the most destructive events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and has played an important role in the development of the field of psychohistory. His books include *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (which won a National Book Award), *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (awarded a Los Angeles Times book

prize), *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans* (finalist for a National Book Award), *Destroying the World to Save It* (about the fanatical Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo), and *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. He has applied these studies to the contemporary world in his most recent book, *Superpower Syndrome: America's Apocalyptic Confrontation with the World*. He was a founding member of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (from 1980), which was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He has received many awards and honorary degrees, and has sought always to combine scholarship and social activism.



NUCLEAR AGE PEACE FOUNDATION

Innovative thinking, Broad public education, Committed action

About the Foundation

The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation is a non-profit, non-partisan international organization. Since 1982, it has initiated and supported worldwide efforts to enhance both global and human security and is a voice for millions of people concerned about the fate of the planet. The Foundation has consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council and is recognized by the UN as a Peace Messenger Organization.

Vision

Our vision is a world at peace, free of the threat of war and free of weapons of mass destruction.

Mission

To advance initiatives to eliminate the nuclear weapons threat to all life, to foster the global rule of law, and to build an enduring legacy of peace through education and advocacy.

Web Presence

We invite you to learn more about the Foundation's programs by visiting our websites.

www.wagingpeace.org | www.nuclearfiles.org

Headquarters:

PMB 121, 1187 Coast Village Road, Suite 1
Santa Barbara, CA 93108-2794
Tel: (805) 965-3443
Fax: (805) 568-0466

Washington, DC office:

322 Fourth Street NE
Washington, DC 20002
Tel: (202) 543-4100, ext. 105
Fax: (202) 546-5142



NUCLEAR AGE PEACE FOUNDATION

Innovative thinking, Broad public education, Committed action

WWW.WAGINGPEACE.ORG

NUCLEAR AGE PEACE FOUNDATION

PMB 121 • 1187 Coast Village Rd, Suite 1

Santa Barbara, CA 93108 -2794

Change Service Requested

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Santa Barbara, CA
Permit No. 553