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The Price of Peace

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While waiting to be processed at the Anacostia Park Police Station, I was drawn to a mounted, post-9/11, Bush-era FBI reward poster. "The Cost of Freedom is Eternal Vigilance," propagated the sign. The unrestrained madness is as prevalent today as it was eight years ago: Obama is continuing Bush's war folly.

On October 5, 2009, 61 anti-war activists were arrested in front of the White House, calling on President Obama to end the war in Iraq, end the occupation of Afghanistan and end the drone bombings in Pakistan and Afghanistan. We also called for swift closure of Guantánamo and Bagram military prisons.

An estimated 500 protesters watched as some of us, clad in orange jumpsuits and black hoods, chained ourselves to the fence, while others carried coffins, participated in a die-in and wore shrouds bearing the faces of Iraqi and Afghan war victims. "Mourn the dead," the crowd chanted. "Heal the wounded. End the wars."

Entering our ninth year of occupation, numerous Americans oppose the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; 58 percent of the public is now against these US-led wars, while legislators across the House and Senate, from Rep. Barbara Lee to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, are calling General McChrystal's request for escalation in Afghanistan into question.

As empty political rhetoric circulates endlessly through the halls of Congress, I try not to become desensitized by daily news about deaths of US soldiers and deaths of militants. Other tragic stories tell about the torture and detention of prisoners without due process in the expanding prison at the US base in Bagram. I hear about weapon proliferation and seemingly endless war making, and I can't help but think of impoverished people, vulnerable and voiceless, treated as though they are worth less than the dust under our feet.

The cost of my freedom, I am told, is eternal vigilance. I live in the richest country in the world, the nation which monopolizes over a fourth of the earth's resources, and am still imprisoned when exercising my so-called freedom of speech. I'm to believe, instead, that our freedom depends on using the US military and contracted mercenaries as super-vigilantes in Afghanistan's impoverished provinces, targeting the loosely connected, oftentimes illiterate and highly unskilled network of the Taliban.

US military strategy commands soldiers to enter villages, raid homes, take prisoners, maim, wound and kill targeted "bad guys," possibly along with their families, and destroy all opportunity for a collective livelihood and security in Afghanistan. What's more, thousands of people are stranded in IDP camps, homeless and barefoot and uncertain as to why the US ever invaded their land in the first place. Is this the price of my freedom?

The US has been at war in Iraq and Afghanistan for over one third of my life, a time fraught with unfulfilled promises to people in both of those lands. US war and occupation has shattered the hopes and dreams of millions. I believe, deeply, that I am implicated in the crimes my country is committing against our innocent sisters and brothers. My daily complicity only reinforces Obama's - and before, Bush's - paradigm of occupation and militarism. Both presidents have established patterns that are culturally insensitive, increasingly expensive and massively destructive.

Fifty-one percent of my taxes (and yours) are spent on our country's military machine. In Afghanistan, over 90 percent of the current administration's spending is on military operations - leaving a minuscule amount to rebuild bombed schools, reconstruct neighborhoods of decimated houses, provide even excruciatingly low levels of medical care or attend generally to the common stories of desperation.

So, I did the only thing I could.

Remembering the name and family of a Guantánamo detainee cleared for release under the Bush administration and still being indefinitely detained today, I secured a chain around my wrist and then locked it to the White House fence. Like those who have been held for eight long years, like the Pakistani women mourning their dead children after an unmanned aerial drone attack, like the Afghan villagers wanting desperately to return to their fields, I am locked to the actions the United States makes on my behalf. We have the obligation to unchain ourselves from these unjust and immoral wars.

Post-scriptum :

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