How Do We Assess the True Cost of War?

by Bailey Schnur

War is back in town. It is ravaging and leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Shrill warning sirens pierce the still air and fall heavily on the deaf ears of the fallen. Their broken bodies are blanketed with debris and shrapnel, while their grime-stained faces look towards a darkened sky choked with smoke and fire. Their glassy eyes cannot see the town falling to pieces on top of them and their noses cannot smell the stench of their own fresh blood. This is war and the losses are great. When the last landmine has exploded, when the last camouflaged soldier has taken his or her dying breath, and when the last words of the formal surrender have been uttered, we begin to assess the cost of our actions. Some will be blinded by economic loss, while others will grieve for the destruction of infrastructure as it crumbles and smolders. But such losses cannot justly epitomize the true costs of war, because those things are replaceable. The true costs are not.

The cost of war is first measured by the level of cultural damage done. This is an aftereffect of war that is often overlooked. When war ravages a country, it affects life on a very deep level in a manner that is unparalleled. Only can something as indifferently violent as war nearly erase an entire ethnicity in a matter of months. Only can war set fire to banned literature and cultural artwork, both of which represent meticulously crafted symbols of a people’s history and heritage. War seeks to destroy such cultural masterpieces, to mercilessly strip away the identity of a people, and to ultimately eradicate their kind from the Earth. In the process, churches are condensed to piles of ash. Children are dragged from their parents, never to be seen again. Individuals are displaced from their homes, forced into the destitute life as a refugee in a foreign country. The loss of a culture due to war is nothing new. History watched it happen to the Native Americans in the New World, to the Jews in WWII, and more recently to the Syrians. If we do not encourage peace more strongly, cultural deaths will continue.

Another cost of war is directly related to the state in which it leaves politics. After war, a power vacuum forms and the far too common result is the formation of a strong, centralized
government taking control of the war-ravaged country. With a blank slate and a nation of exhausted citizens, nothing stands in the way of tyrannical forces that seek power over the oppressed. The best opportunity for such offenders to claim that power is directly after a war when politics are muddled and citizens are preoccupied with mourning. Such a situation is so costly because it threatens individuals’ freedom and rights. No longer can families feel safe, no longer can they speak freely or practice their religion. War-damaged politics open new worlds of morbid possibilities where communism and dictatorships can become living nightmares for citizens who are simply trying to mourn and rebuild. It has happened all over the world from China to Argentina, and once a people have lost their inherent rights, it is extremely difficult to reclaim them.

The most obvious cost of war, perhaps the ultimate cost an individual may pay for his or her beliefs, is death. No one escapes it for death is impartial. Soldiers, civilians, children, and other innocents. They fall victim to injury, disease, starvation, and to outright murder. Those victims once held a place in the world, each one possessing unique talents and dreams, things that will never be shared with the rest of society because those people are gone for good. They cannot be rebuilt like bridges or reestablished like money. Human lives are irreplaceable and something as ugly as war should not be permitted to permanently erase such beauty. The thought itself is sinful and disgusting, but it happens. Mothers and fathers lose children to foreign conflict every day. Wartime death is an insidious endemic, one whose cold fingers stretch to all corners of the Earth claiming victims during times of violence. It is such losses as these that people remember the most. The dead are always remembered for their sacrifice, for paying the ultimate price.

In the devastation of war, we notice the little things. Our eyes focus on the little boy, skin stained black with smoke, calling for his lost parents. We see the family photo in the dirt, charred by an explosion. Though he tries to hide his emotion, we notice the streams of tears rolling down the muddy cheeks of a soldier. At times like that we do not care about monetary damage or how long it will take to rebuild. Instead, we focus on the true disasters; the things that put an uncomfortable ache in your heart and a pinch in your stomach. There is only one thing that can eradicate such pain and it is the consistent appeal for worldwide peace. The effects of
war are too costly and taxing on everyone involved, from soldiers and enemies to civilians and bystanders. To stop war it is imperative that we speak out against the imminent injustices that always accompany it. We must fight violence with peace, no matter how daunting it may be. Cures for disease are usually discovered with time and the time has come to cure the disease of war. We owe it to the abandoned children wandering the street, to the crying soldier, and to everyone who gave their all.