

The Error on Terror

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I only ever knew one of my grandfathers. He was, among other things, a Queensland Lightweight Boxing Champion and a disabled Gallipoli veteran. At about the age of eight, I remember accidentally bouncing a beach ball on his head. I floored him.

This taught me to be careful with Grandad. I'd known about his mangled arm but hadn't realised bits of his skull were still in the Middle East.

But it could have been worse. One long-dead uncle was never the same after being buried alive for 36 hours. His official diagnosis was shell shock. These days we'd call it post-traumatic stress disorder, although it could also be known as thinking too much.

My uncle wrote a memoir while trapped in the foxhole. I'm told it's almost unreadable - not because it's illegible but because the contents are deeply disturbing. The memoir's elderly keeper seems reluctant to let others view it, perhaps fearing that readers will be possessed by the same demons. I expect it will one day be buried. May the demons rest in peace.

My father served in New Guinea during The-War-Straight-After-The-War-To-End-All-Wars. It wasn't an experience he'd talk about. As a child, I would no doubt have been thrilled by tales of glorious heroics in defence of the homeland. I didn't get them.

It's said that those who don't learn from the past are condemned to repeat it. Perhaps my Dad tried to teach me a thing or two. When I was in primary school, during the Vietnam War, I was given a T-shirt that read "War is not healthy for children and other living things". A more obviously true statement there never could be.

Over the years, I've also seen T-shirts that assert another truism - "Shit happens". Everyone knows it's happening in Iraq. (And if you wonder why that conflict started, try googling "He tried to kill my Dad".) It's also happening in Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Chechnya, Bali and the list goes on.

Recently, it's happened in London too. There were many deaths, including a sort-of-Islamic-looking man executed by sort-of-civilian-looking police. He was collateral damage in The War Against Terror.

Perhaps I'm getting old, but fighting terror with terror seems absurdly Orwellian. Why not instead just call the current power struggle Gulf War III: Attack of the Texas Cretin?

We're told that young Muslim guys are blowing themselves up to get their hands on 72 virgins - or, according to some Islamic scholars, 72 raisins. I don't get that, but it's no weirder than lots of stuff in the Bible. If al-Qaeda provide an email address, in the interests of world peace I'll happily forward every spammed offer I receive of virgins or dried grapes.

Of course, in reality, suicide bombings can't be statements of lust or gluttony. They are statements of anger - and anger is always based on a perception, whether valid or not, of injustice.

People can get angry about injustices either to themselves or to others. In general, getting constantly angry about injustices to yourself means you're a pain in the butt. In contrast, getting angry at injustices to others can make you a hero... or a monster.

Contrary to common intuition, research suggests that suicide bombers are not particularly poor, uneducated, miserable or psychopathic. They're vulnerable, and the kind of people who, once they make a commitment to their group, must fulfil it. Suicide bombers might be stirred to anger, but they're too compliant to consider telling a power-tripping cleric where he can stick his dynamite. Like Samson collapsing the Philistine temple, they'll fight perceived injustice, whatever the consequences.

Many children have an instinctive dislike of goodie-goodies. Humans want social stability but don't want the power of their rulers - like childhood school teachers - to be too overwhelming. Suicide bombers are the ultimate goodie-goodies. That's why rebellious thrill-seekers might sometimes be dangerous, but aren't suicide bomber material. David Hicks, the Australian detainee at Guantanamo Bay, could well fit into this category.

Meanwhile, our leaders play their own games.

Half a millennium ago, a remarkable little book was written on political psychology. Its author is to power-brokers as Randi the Magician is to spoonbenders. Revealing the tricks of a trade is no recipe for popularity.

Machiavelli wrote that rulers could control their subjects with either love or fear - but fear was more readily arranged. This means the switch never gets flicked to vaudeville.

So here's a survival tip for our species: when you look in the mirror, see the chimp. And don't be afraid.