

Presidents and the moral accounting of war

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Holidays evoke moments of reflection. Americans just celebrated Memorial Day, a time to honor those who have fought and died in wars for the nation. Traditionally, people hold parades, gather in cemeteries and rally around monuments to fallen soldiers.

Perhaps it was fitting, then, both that [President Barack Obama delivered a signal speech](#) on the war on terror last week and that Google bestowed the honor of [“Google doodle of 2013” to Sabrina Brady](#), a Wisconsin teenager who depicted her father’s return from a tour of duty in Iraq. While quite different things, Obama’s address and Brady’s illustration do ask a common question: How do we as a nation come to terms with the moral implications of war?

Obama sought to justify the sacrifices made by American soldiers in this time of war, as he must do. Brady’s “doodle” personalized those sacrifices.

The convergence of Obama’s address and Brady’s illustration suggest to me that our present time of war has entered a new phase. If the last phase began with President Bush’s speech at the National Cathedral just after 9/11—in which the nation found a moral basis for going to war—it is coming to an end with President Obama identifying a way to bring some closure to this period of war. The difference between Bush’s moral moment and Obama’s came home clearly near the end of Obama’s address. It wasn’t what the president said, but what was yelled at him.

Medea Benjamin—of the activist group Code Pink—interrupted Obama by shouting questions about the [use of drones](#), the interminable detention of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay, and the death of thousands of people in America’s wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In response, Obama told his audience that while he didn’t appreciate her outburst, he did think Benjamin’s statements were worth addressing. The question now becomes, how?

Obama might consider Jimmy Carter’s attempt at a moral reckoning in the wake of the Vietnam War. Carter took the occasion of his first National Prayer Breakfast to

[address the kind of sentiments](#) Medea Benjamin expressed to President Obama.

President Carter revealed in the first few minutes of his remarks that he had wanted to include 2 Chronicles 7:14 in his first inaugural address:

If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from Heaven and forgive their sins and heal their land.

He admitted that he had dropped this idea after his staff “rose up in opposition” because it sounded like Carter was condemning Americans as “wicked.” Carter observed that this episode taught him that there wasn’t much chance that the nation would actually understand the significance of being contrite:

We as individuals—and we as a nation—insist that we are the strongest and the bravest and the wisest and the best. And in that attitude, we unconsciously, but in an all-pervasive way, cover up and fail to acknowledge our mistakes and in the process forgo an opportunity constantly to search for a better life or a better country.

He admitted that it was easier for individuals to admit their sin of pride than it was for a nation to do so. And so, he concluded, “in effect, many of us worship our nation.” Carter’s antidote to this problem was to rededicate the United States as a nation “under God”—to remind Americans that they “are not superior . . . and ought constantly to search out national and human individual consciousness and strive to be better.”

Obama has not gestured toward Carter’s kind of moral evaluation. Instead, he ended his address with the hope that American sacrifices in this time of war will simply produce a period of normalcy. “Victory,” the president declared,

will be measured in parents taking their kids to school, immigrants coming to our shores, fans taking in a ballgame, a veteran starting a business, a bustling city street, a citizen shouting her concerns at a president.

Presidents as diverse as Lincoln, Truman, Carter and Reagan all approached the moral accounting of war in different ways and with various consequences. We wait to see if Obama’s call for normalcy will adequately call Americans to account for the wars of the last decade.

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