

01/19/2007

Find this article at:

http://www.statesman.com/opinion/content/editorial/stories/01/19/19palaima_edit.html

COMMENTARY

Palaima: Understanding the language of violence

Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR
Austin American-Statesman Friday, January 19, 2007

'This world is ruled by violence/ But I guess that's better left unsaid.'
- Bob Dylan, "Union Sundown"

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Lesbos said that all things change. But what changes things in our world is often violent force.

My plan in accepting a six-month Fulbright position at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona was fairly simple. The last time I had been away from the United States or the University of Texas for more than a month was when I was a Fulbright Gastprofesor at the Universität Salzburg in Austria in 1992-93.

It is good to step outside of one's normal life, to view it from a vastly different perspective. In my case, I had a strong sense that my concerns about U.S. foreign and domestic policy and the educational policies of the University Texas were threatening to engulf me. I hope to get some distance and to see what the United States and the larger world look like from here.

We arrived in Spain on Jan. 3. Every day for weeks, the newspapers here covered the political and practical consequences of Spain's domestic terrorist problem, the Basque separatist movement known as ETA, the acronym for "Basque Homeland and Freedom." On Dec. 30, ETA blew up a parking garage in the T-4 terminal of Madrid's Barajas International airport.

ETA has a perverse sense of courtesy. According to the Basque newspaper Gara, ETA declared on Jan. 9 that "the aim of this armed attack was not to cause victims." They "condemned the fact that the car park was not evacuated despite three calls, more than an hour beforehand, giving exact details of the location of the explosive device." And they stressed that the cease-fire, announced on March 24, was still in place.

The world of violence has its own twisted logic. A cease-fire covers a massive explosion that destroys a huge building and leaves behind 2,000 charred and twisted metallic skeletons, virtually unrecognizable as cars. A cease-fire covers the two corpses of innocent Ecuadorians exhumed from the mangled building wreckage.

Those two luckless people bring the official death count from ETA shootings and bombings to 819 human lives. Spain's political parties debate how or whether to conduct relations with the ETA terrorists, or with the outlawed Batasuna party, considered by many to be the political wing of ETA.

Do Spaniards want "peace, life and liberty and a repudiation of ETA's actions"? Do they want "peace and a dialogue with ETA and ETA's assurance of an end to violence"? Or do they want a complete refusal to include ETA or Batasuna in any political negotiations?

Besides bombings and assassinations, terrorists here use extortion, threats and kidnappings. Firsthand experience with terrorism in Spain makes the idea that the United States can prevail in Iraq by "surging" in 20,000 more troops seem to one Spanish editorial writer plain stupid. And White House claims that Shiite-run Iran wants to destabilize Iraq's Shiite government are viewed with skepticism.

When a bombing that causes two deaths and well over \$40 million in property damage is part of a cease-fire, it is small wonder that another Spanish commentator quotes Shakespeare's Hamlet about the meaninglessness of "words, words, words." Indeed, Thucydides tells us that in times of civil violence "words change their meanings."

It is an even smaller wonder that one Spanish word I have come across often in a fortnight of newspaper reading is matanza, or slaughter. It is used for the brutal gang assassination of 21 prisoners in an El Salvador prison. It is used for Saddam Hussein's gassing of 100,000 Kurds. It is used for the killing of 50 insurgents in Baghdad by joint Iraqi-U.S. forces and for the possible killing of innocent civilians - what our military officials call collateral damage - in U.S. air strikes on Somalia.

Be grateful for the peacefulness of Austin tonight. But be aware that in our shrinking world, it is less likely than ever that we will escape the consequences of the violence we employ in our own foreign policy.

Palaima is a University of Texas professor. This is the first in a series of columns from Spain.