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**Punishing the conscientious**

In this world of narrow nationalism and blind patriotism, it is difficult to follow the dictates of one’s conscience. Most people are influenced by state propaganda and the rhetoric of their leaders, failing to realize that states are created by human beings that can commit mistakes, sometimes even grave blunders, plunging humanity into an abyss of barbarism.

Veneration of national political entities and obeisance to populist demagogues pushed the world towards the verge of destruction several times in the past 100 years. The fanatical personality cult of the 1930s and 1940s turned Germans and Italians into mobs of hero worshippers while chauvinism blinded the Japanese and other modern nations that pushed the world towards a terrible conflagration during the two world wars.

The English, French, American and other nations were not immune to this collective insanity that had swept through Europe and several other parts of the globe. The consequences were catastrophic: more than 10 million perished during the first mass slaughter – also known as World War I; the second mass bloodshed claimed around 70 million lives.

Amidst this hysteria of nationalism, few individuals dared to challenge the myopic view of their people, questioning the rationale of waging an insane war that had the potential of wiping out the entire humanity. Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre and a number of other conscientious individuals did not succumb to the frenzy of chauvinism, refusing to justify the annihilation of cities, blitzkrieg of towns and devastation of villages in the name of protecting petty national interests. Those who could not take to streets against the horror of wars, penned heart-wrenching accounts of atrocities committed by all sides during the battles or depicted the inhumanity of humans through their art, drama and poetry.

It was the valour of these noble personalities that established the basis of the anti-war movement in modern times. Their spirit of resistance inspired successive generations in the West who staged massive demonstrations against the Vietnam War, besides speaking against the possible horrors of any nuclear wars, prompting people to mobilise themselves against the plans of the Western ruling elite to annihilate the world in a war of total destruction. It was this awareness that prompted the Russian leadership to back out amidst the tensions that arose from the Cuban Missile Crisis, reminding Washington as well that people would not support any militaristic adventure that could jeopardise their very existence. This defiance by people also deterred the two global powers in the decade of the 1980s from plunging the world into a nuclear holocaust.

The spirit of anti-war sentiment did not fade away with the demise of the Soviet Union. In fact, it got momentum during the first Gulf war and the bombardment of Yugoslavia. The illegal invasion of the US against Iraq also prompted millions of people who vehemently opposed the US aggression, reminding the sole superpower that opposition to war-mongering still matters.

Although such movements could not prevent the invasions, they created a strong revulsion against military adventures in different strata of Western society. Perhaps it was this abomination and horrors of atrocities committed during the conflict that encouraged people like Bradley Manning, Edward Snowden and many others to expose obnoxious plans of American ruling elites of imposing wars and conflicts on the world. Journalists like Julian Assange helped the gullible American people see the real face of their civilized leaders who not only destroy state after state under false excuses but also order civilian killings in the name of protecting national interests and the country’s security. It seems that the Western ruling elite considers such individuals a great threat, forcing Snowden to flee the country, imprisoning Assange and teaching a tough lesson to Manning.

Recently another conscientious American has been punished for venting his anger against the killing of innocent civilians in Afghanistan. Daniel Hale Nashville, a former air force intelligence analyst, was handed down a 45-month imprisonment on Tuesday for leaking top secret information about the US government’s drone strike programme to a journalist.

It seems that Nashville refused to buy the argument of his ruling elite which asserts that drone strikes were meant to only target terrorists. He told the court that he was motivated by guilt and a desire for transparency when he disclosed to an investigative reporter details of a military drone programme that he believed was indiscriminately killing civilians in Afghanistan far from the battlefield.

His statement in court should be incorporated into the syllabus of schools not only in the West but across the world because it reflects the desire of an altruistic person to prevent killings in general and that of innocent civilians in particular. According to Western media, he said, “I believe that it is wrong to kill, but it is especially wrong to kill the defenceless.” He claimed that he had shared what in his view was necessary to dispel the lie that drone warfare ‘keeps us safe, that our lives are worth more than theirs’.

Charges against the air force officer had been brought by the administration of Donald Trump, an erratic chief executive of the US who also dropped the mother of all bombs on one of the poorest countries of the world where Nashville was posted in August 2012, witnessing the horrors of the conflict himself. Disregarding Nashville’s conscience, the judge – blinded by dictates of national interests – sent the air force officer behind bars, saying that it would deter others.

The drone strikes had been ordered by the sagacious Barack Obama, the first black chief executive in the US whose victory had triggered euphoria among many doves who had hoped that the US would be dictated by the norms of international law and not the whims of any powerful incumbent of the Oval Office but such hopes were dashed to dust when the Obama administration ordered one of the largest drone operations in recent US history. Instead of the former chief executive being summoned for ordering such killings, a conscientious officer has been punished for speaking truth to power.

Such punishment is a blot on the American judicial system. It will create an impression that the lives of Americans are more important than those of others. How can revelations of such illegal activities harm America's national interests? How can they undermine American security? Which terrorist used this information to harm Americans? His revelations only belied the tall claims of the American administrations that drone strikes were precise. Is it not a fact that it targeted hundreds or possibly thousands of innocent civilians in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and others? Is it not true that such strikes carry no legal weight and are illegal under international laws?

It is very unfortunate that the corporate media is busy fawning over billionaires for shooting into space, while ignoring their real job – which is to search for the truth. They however prefer to highlight celebrity gossip and futile errands of the super rich instead of at least following up on such revelations. The world has witnessed more than 240 conflicts since 1945. Washington has been involved in most of these conflicts on one or another pretext, which turned out to be completely concocted.

If the world is to avoid more deaths and destruction, we need conscientious people like Nashville not only in the streets of the mighty state but in all parts of the Western world. Punishing the conscientious is shameful. It is rather the war-mongers who caused the destruction of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and other states that should be behind bars.

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