



DECLARING WAR ON ESCALATION

BY ANDREW JONES AND ELIZABETH SAWIN

Which came first, the violence or the retaliation? That is today's somber version of the old "chicken or the egg" riddle.

On September 11, it sure felt like the violence came first. But the men who attacked the U.S. almost certainly saw their actions as retaliation for earlier violence. Osama bin Laden once offered a justification of his destructive methods: "The evidence overwhelmingly shows America and Israel killing the weaker men, women, and children in the Muslim world and elsewhere." And why had we killed people in the Muslim world? Partly in response to earlier violence such as the bombings of the USS Cole and the U.S. embassies in Africa.

Now, with U.S. leaders offering rhetoric such as, "I say bomb the hell out of them. If there's collateral damage, so be it" (Senator Zell Miller, *New York Times*, September 13, 2001), the United States appears ready to answer retaliation with retaliation.

So, blame them? Blame us? No on both counts. While those who attacked us must be held accountable, laying blame for the repeated cycles of violence will not prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Blame makes sense in a world of straight lines, where any event has a clear, single cause. But in a world of circles and cycles, where retaliation causes violence, which causes more retaliation, the idea of blame only distracts us from the real problem—all the players on both sides are deeply stuck in the trap called "escalation."

We have seen this trap before and elsewhere. In the Middle East with Israelis and Palestinians. In Ireland with Protestants and Catholics. In the exponential growth of nuclear weapons during the Cold War.

What can we do to break out of the escalation trap? Drawing from the field of system dynamics, which has analyzed escalating systems from arms races to price wars, we offer three practical escape routes.

1. We can pay attention to the long-term trends. If we respond to this attack in isolation, we doom ourselves to being solely reactive. We should see this event as the culmination of a long trend of violence on both sides of the conflict, reaching back to the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, the Gulf War, various hijackings, and multiple military strikes. Looking beyond a tragedy as large as the catastrophes of September 11 is not easy, but we need to search for patterns and then for the root causes of those patterns.

2. We can ask ourselves how our actions have helped create the current situation. If we see the recent attacks as random events or caused by evil, insanity, or religious fervor, our only solution is to exterminate everyone with violent tendencies toward the U.S., build our defenses, and hope for no more bad luck.

But we have an alternative. We can explore our role in the escalation cycle. This does not mean giving in to terrorists, but it does mean asking uncomfortable questions and not settling for simple answers.

For example, we all live with the presence of injustice and inequity in the world. But is it possible that the way we live contributes to the despair and desperation of others? Do we ask or allow our government to take actions that push people to follow extremists like bin Laden? Even asking if our own children's comfort is bought at such a price feels devastating.

Perhaps a careful look will convince us that we are unconnected to the conditions that bred the attacks

on the U.S. But, caught as we are in the dynamic of escalation, our security now depends on whether we have the courage to examine these tough questions.

3. We can focus on actions that de-escalate long-term conflict. Conflicts carry a huge payload of momentum. Ramping down the tension feels like leaning your shoulder into the front of a slow-moving train—the momentum just brushes you aside. But the same mechanics that drive escalation—misunderstanding, aggression, blame—can be tipped in the opposite direction to de-escalate tensions via understanding, engagement, and respect. We can begin the long, slow movement toward peace by demanding that those responsible for the recent attacks be brought to justice out of respect for the rule of law, not out of a reflexive demand for vengeance.

We must bring to justice the criminals who have killed innocent people in such staggering numbers. But we must do more than that. We must avoid accelerating the cycle of violence and ramp down the tensions that are the root-cause drivers of conflict. This will only be possible if large numbers of us are able to examine our impacts on the lives of people in the Arab world and explore our own impulse to retaliate.

If we can rise to this challenge, we might see a new riddle emerge—which came first, the restraint or the peace? ■

Andrew Jones and **Elizabeth Sawin** are project managers at Sustainability Institute (www.sustainabilityinstitute.org), a think-do tank founded by Donella Meadows that uses systems thinking and modeling to help create a more sustainable world.