

The Psychohistory of Vengeance

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If you pay attention, as I have lately, the theme of revenge, or its synonymous or closely related concepts such as avenging, vengeance, retribution, retaliation, vindication, or vendetta, seems to be everywhere. From interpersonal relationships, to the criminal justice system, to the realms of literature, film and television, we see the drama of revenge being played out. It's a theme that permeates our culture, both high and low.

A google search on the word revenge yields 79,200,000 hits. For vengeance it's a mere 29 million. By way of comparison "guilt" gives you only 42 million and forgiveness just 24,700,000.

In the Greek pantheon vengeance was important enough to merit her own goddess - she who is known as *Nemesis*. She is the goddess of divine indignation and retribution, who punishes evil deeds, particularly *hubris*, along with undeserved good fortune. Her name is variously translated as "she who gives what is due" or "divine vengeance". She is described as an aide to *Zeus* whose job is to dispense justice. She is also known as *Adresteia*, the inescapable. She is given the epithet *Erinyes*, the implacable.

It was *Nemesis* who punished *Narcissus* for spurning *Echo*'s love by condemning him to perpetually sit and admire his own reflection in the water of a pool. She was either the daughter of *Nyx* - night and her brother *Erebus* - primordial darkness (making her the granddaughter of chaos); or the daughter of the Titan *Oceanus* (the world ocean); or the daughter of *Zeus*. She is also said to be the mother of Helen of Troy whose abduction was the cause of the Trojan War. This would make her the progenitor of one of the first great epics of revenge, the *Iliad*.

In Rome, she was worshipped by victorious generals and was the patron goddess of the gladiators who fought in the Coliseum.

The classical Greek tragedies are full of revenge. The preoccupation with the theme of revenge is most clearly seen in Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy. In order to pursue his quest for vengeance against the Trojans for the insult of stealing his brother's wife, Helen, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia for fair winds needed to sail his fleet to Troy. Upon his return from the war, his wife, Clytemnestra, takes her revenge for the murder of her daughter by killing Agamemnon. Later, she becomes the victim of her son Orestes' murderous revenge. Orestes, in turn, is relentlessly pursued by the avenging Furies for his crime of matricide.

Shakespeare was a master at exploring the permutations of revenge. In his view, taking revenge when one had been wronged was not only the natural and expected thing to

do, it was virtually an obligation. As Shylock says in his famous soliloquy from the *Merchant of Venice*:

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?”ⁱ

Hamlet, the play that has been such a prominent subject of psychoanalytic investigation, mostly concerning its Oedipal themes, is actually primarily about revenge. Hamlet’s problem is the strange inhibition that prevents him from doing what he should - killing the usurper Claudius and avenging his father’s murder. The theme of revenge is prominent in a number of other Shakespeare plays, including *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, and *Romeo & Juliet*.

In film and literature we see the basic plot line of the innocent victim being wrongfully harmed and eventually, often with considerable effort and ingenuity, either the victim himself or some third party finally succeed in punishing the perpetrator. There are numerous movies with this theme, the *Godfather* series, the *Death Wish* series, *Kill Bill I* and *II*, *Nine to Five* and *Munich*. Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Christo* and Balzac’s *Cousin Bette* are two archetypal novels depicting the revenge cycle. Numerous popular police, detective, and crime investigation programs on television, in the movies, and in crime and mystery books of stories adhere to this basic plot line.

Along with the dramatic protagonist, with whom we vicariously identify, we get to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of taking revenge. There seems to be a sense of completion, a kind of tension release that accompanies the enactment of this revenge cycle. There is a sense that some karmic balance has been restored. In describing the process we speak of the evening or the settling of the score. Most of all there is a sense that the carrying through of the act of revenge means that justice has been done. Those responsible for the injury, harm, or evil deeds have been punished. The victims have received satisfaction and can finally be at peace. Justice has been served and the moral balance has been restored.

A word about justice and its relation to revenge. Discussions of the nature of justice usually start with Plato and Aristotle, who paid a great deal of attention to this concept. Their contention is that at the heart of what we mean by justice is a sense of fairness or balance. Aristotle, in his usual fashion, creates categories and draws distinctions. He divides justice into two types: distributive and rectifying. Distributive justice deals with how things can be divided up and apportioned equitably. The focus, here, is on the second type, rectifying justice.

Others have divided the category of rectifying justice into two subtypes: retributive and compensatory. My contention is that retributive justice is, at its core, about revenge. Compensatory justice refers to making reparation and amends which will be examined later in the paper. What retributive and compensatory justice have in common, is,

as Aristotle says, they are both in the service of rectification – making things right. They are both ways of restoring the balance or making things fair or equitable.

The Joy of Revenge

It's not nice to take pleasure in the suffering of others, even if they have wronged us. There are prohibitions about allowing oneself to indulge in this form of pleasure. In some religious and legal belief systems it is forbidden, either by God (as when Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says that God reserves vengeance for himself)ⁱⁱ or by the state, which claims the exclusive right to take revenge, by punishing criminals through the legal system, while making acts of revenge taken by individuals or groups illegal. One is reminded of Freud's aphorism, in his essay *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* where he says:

“The state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrongdoing, not because of desire to abolish it, but because of the desire to monopolize it, like salt and tobacco”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Because of the disreputable aspect of taking revenge there is often some disguise or outright denial operating when vengeance is being enacted. Perhaps having it one step removed by seeing it in the movies, or on TV, or reading about it in a novel aids in this process, allowing the guilt to be avoided. We're not actually being vengeful, merely enjoying watching it being done by others.

One place where there seems to be less denial or disguise is in the criminal justice system. It is considered somewhat respectable for crime victims and law enforcement officials to express their satisfaction when perpetrators are caught, convicted, and punished by the legal system. Justice is served when the punishment fits the crime. People can get very upset when they feel criminals are being treated too leniently. The victims and their sympathizers are outraged if the jury doesn't convict.

This country, as compared to the rest of the world, has become the leading practitioner of this form of justice. The American prison population is now over 2 million. If you add those on parole or probation the total comes to more than 7 million, ranking the United States number one in the world in percentage of the population under the jurisdiction of the legal system.^{iv}

The widespread support for capital punishment in this country is another manifestation of the revenge principle. Although the rationalization that capital punishment serves as a deterrent to future crimes is often presented as a justification it is not difficult to recognize the operation of the desire for revenge.

With regard to the question of whether there is pleasure associated with revenge, there is some recent experimental data using PET and MRI brain scans, which seem to indicate that there is. A key study in this area is by de Quervain et. al. (2004) titled *The Neural Basis of Altruistic Punishment*. Altruistic punishment refers to a punishment for which the punisher receives no immediate benefit. The experiment involves a game playing situation in which the players receive or take away monetary rewards. The experimental situation is constructed such that when the first player gives some of his money to the second player the experimenter gives additional money to the second player. The second player then has a choice of keeping all the money himself or returning some of it to the first player. If the second player doesn't reciprocate the first player's generosity the first player then has the opportunity to financially punish the second player. Subjects in this condition almost always choose to administer the punishment. The most striking result is that most subjects choose to punish even if doing so costs them additional money!

Neural activation of various areas of the brain is measured during the experiment. Results show that when subjects administer punishment, brain areas associated with the anticipation of pleasure are activated.

Subjects are also given questionnaires asking about why they chose to punish. The questionnaire data show that the punishers justified their behavior primarily in terms of getting back at someone who had done them wrong; an elegant demonstration of the neural basis of the pleasure taken in enacting revenge: an experimental demonstration of the claim that revenge is sweet.

Another study by Singer et. al. (2006), using a similar game playing paradigm with neuroimaging techniques, demonstrated significant differences between men and women. Men showed more pleasure in handing out punishment to wrongdoers than did women. Women also showed more empathy towards those being punished than did men.

The researchers working in this "altruistic punishment" paradigm explain their results in terms of evolutionary biology. They contend that punishing wrongdoers or rule breakers, even when there is no immediate benefit to doing so, is an adaptive trait that serves the survival of the group.

Psychoanalytic Literature Review

The topic of revenge or vengeance, or its opposite, forgiveness, is one that has not received a great deal of attention in the analytic literature. But it has not been completely neglected. Freud had little to say directly about the subject, with one noteworthy exception; his approving citation, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, of Heinrich Heine's aphorism: "One must, it is true, forgive one's enemies – but not before they've been hanged."^v Parenthetically, it has been said [for example, see Rudnytsky (2006)] that Freud himself was capable of being quite vindictive toward those who became the targets of his enmity.

One of the key contributions to the understanding of revenge in the analytic literature is Heinz Kohut's 1972 paper *Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage*. In

this paper Kohut delineates the multiple forms of humiliation and loss that can generate narcissistic injury, which he sees as the source of narcissistic rage. Kohut describes narcissistic rage as:

“The need for revenge, or righting a wrong, for undoing the hurt by whatever means, and a deeply anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all these aims, which gives no rest to those who have suffered a narcissistic injury – these are features which are characteristic for the phenomenon of narcissistic rage in all its forms. . . .”^{vi}

Kohut calls narcissistic rage the most powerful form of aggression and/or destruction”.^{vii} He also claims that an individual in this state of narcissistic rage loses the capacity for empathy toward the offender.

Kohut, along with a number of other psychoanalysts including Kernberg (1975, 1984, & 1994), Steiner (1996), Lansky (2001), Wurmser (2002), Volkan (1988, 1997, & 2004), and Lafarge (2005) have elaborated on the close connections between narcissistic injury, the affect of shame, and the use of narcissistic rage and revenge as defenses or ways of handling the intense negative experience of feeling ashamed.

Much of the psychoanalytic literature on revenge emphasizes the primitive quality of the affects and thought processes connected to the revenge cycle. [For example, Steiner, Socarides (1996), Lansky, and Volkan (2004)]. Splitting and projective processes, characteristics of the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position, dominate. Those caught up in the dynamics of revenge live in a black and white world in which there are innocent blameless victims and evil demonized perpetrators. The predominant affects are intense hatred and rage. The retribution must be harsh and equal to the perceived experience of severe injury that is felt by the wronged victim.

Various authors, including Horney (1948), Searles (1956), Fornari (1966), Galston (1987), Socarides, and Volkan (1988, 1997) have emphasized the defensive function of revenge. Horney and Socarides see one of these functions being to externalize self-hatred and guilt, preventing it from being turned inward. Horney also emphasizes its function of restoring injured pride; a way to undo the shame and humiliation generated by the original injury or loss. Searles focuses on the function that vengefulness can serve in protecting from grief over a loss and anxiety resulting from separation or abandonment. Galston, Fornari, and Volkan point out that seeking, and exacting revenge can be used to avoid or lessen the painful aspects of mourning. Fornari uses the term "the paranoid elaboration of mourning" to describe this process of aggressive acting out as a substitute for doing the internal work of grieving.

A number of analysts have commented on the benefits and rewards which are experienced by participants in the revenge cycle. Horney, Galston, and Akhtar (2002), among others, have recognized that seeking revenge and acting on vengeful wishes can be an extremely pleasurable activity. Horney speaks of “vindictive triumph” - the feeling of

excitement and elation that can accompany the quest for and fulfillment of an act of revenge.

Akhtar, is one of the few analytical authors to give revenge its just due, so to speak. As he says:

“Although typically viewed as politically incorrect, some revenge is actually good for the victims. It puts the victim’s hitherto passive ego in an active position. This imparts a sense of mastery and enhances self-esteem .”^{viii}

There is extensive clinical literature that examines the dynamics and course of treatment with patients in which the theme of revenge plays a predominant role. Unfortunately, in much of this literature there is an inordinate emphasis on viewing the patient and his concerns with revenge as pathological. The pleasure experienced by the avenger is labeled sadistic, and the opposite of vengeance, forgiveness, is frequently treated as a higher or superior achievement and seen as a goal of treatment.

The Problem with Revenge

There is no doubt that satisfying the wish for revenge can have its down side. Self-perpetuating cycles in which each act of revenge taken by one individual, group, or nation against another generates a reciprocal act, has caused immense suffering throughout human history. Blood feuds, ethnic hatreds, religious disagreements, competing nationalisms, and rival imperial designs have all led to ongoing violent confrontations marked by vicious cycles of mutually escalating acts of revenge. There are numerous examples of mutually destructive violence and warfare between rival groups and nations. Hatfields and McCoys, Palestinians and Israelis, Serbs and Croats, Hindus and Muslims, France and Germany - to name just a few of many. Vendettas between rival gangs and criminal organizations are another example of this type of reciprocal cycle of vengeance.

In the realm of fiction Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, featuring the feuding Capulets and Montagues is a powerful depiction of the tragic consequences that befall those who indulge in the cycle of revenge.

There are numerous examples in the clinical literature of individuals whose lives are diminished and impoverished because of their preoccupation and fixation on the need to take revenge for the harm or losses they have suffered. (For example, Akhtar, Kohut, Steiner, Lafarge). The tragic consequences to those driven by the need to take revenge is also a well explored theme in literature, for example, Ahab, in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and Emma, in Balzac’s *Madame Bovary*.

Forgiveness

The debate between revenge and forgiveness has been a central moral and religious concern for quite some time. The Mosaic Law of the Old Testament says:

“Thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”^{ix}

The well-known Talion principle states that justice is served only when measured revenge is taken, when the punishment fits the crime. In contrast, the New Testament has Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.”^x

This position is often seen as an advanced or more mature moral stance compared to the Old Testament dictum; that is, forgiving is morally superior to vengeance. However, the Christian position does not really repudiate the value of revenge for as Paul says, wrongdoing must still be avenged, it's just that the agent of revenge is shifted from man to God.

Many who have explored the nature of forgiveness have pointed out that true forgiveness can only come after things have been set right. For example, Maimonides (1200) says:

“someone who injures a colleague, curses a colleague, steals from him, or the like will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him”.^{xi}

Melanie Klein (1937) argues that from the point of view of the perpetrator who experiences guilt from harming another, making reparation to the victim for the deed is necessary for the burden of guilt to be released. From the point of view of the victim, those who work with patients who have suffered trauma at the hands of another [for example, Herman (1982) and Madones (1990)] claim that acknowledgment of responsibility for the damage done is a necessary prerequisite for the victim being able to forgive the perpetrator.

Akhtar, in contrast to the evolutionary theorists mentioned earlier who argue that revenge is an adaptive trait, contends that forgiveness has survival value for our species. He cites a line of research done by evolutionary biologists studying primate behavior [de Waal (1989), de Waal & Aureli (1996), de Waal & van Roosmalen (1979), Ren et. al. (1991), and Silk (1998)] that demonstrates the prevalence of conciliatory behavior toward "victims" on the part of "perpetrators" which follows aggressive acts in monkeys, baboons, and chimpanzees. These "making amends" behaviors are responded to by both the victims and perpetrators by a resumption of nonaggressive social interaction. The contention is that this forgiveness promotes the preservation of the cooperative behavior required for species survival.

Justice and Forgoing Revenge

While making amends or reparation is in some ways the very opposite of taking revenge, they do share a common vision of what constitutes justice; that before things can be made right, or true forgiveness can occur, accounts must be balanced. The wrongdoer needs to voluntarily give up something of value to the one who has been harmed, as occurs in making amends or reparation; or, the wrongdoer must have something of value taken from him. He must be punished and made to suffer in some way as a necessary condition for justice to be served. In Aristotle's typology, these are the two aspects of rectifying justice.

Donald Carveth (2006) has suggested an interesting psychoanalytic interpretation of the notion of forgoing revenge by leaving the task to God, only God, in this context, is equated with the superego. There is no need to take revenge oneself because the person who has committed the harm will suffer the ravishes of guilt and self-inflicted punishment. As he points out, we know of many forms of self-inflicted torment – insomnia, anxiety, depression, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, as well as a host of ways we have of making life miserable for those who are close to us – all of which may plausibly be attributed, at least in some situations, to the workings of the superego. As Carveth says: Not a single thought or deed, however seemingly insignificant, is ignored or overlooked by the unconscious superego.^{xii}

Along the same lines. Consider the notion of karma – a key concept in Eastern thought, particularly in the dharmic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. The Law of Karma says that all acts have moral consequences and that the universe will see to it that matters will be set right. When the moral balance has been disrupted by an action that causes harm or suffering, events will unfold such that the moral balance will be restored.

While there are significant differences between the Christian God who takes over active management of dispensing vengeance and punishing sinners; Zeus and his able assistant *Nemesis*, who take care that no act of *hubris* goes unpunished; the Law of Karma; and Carveth's account of superego functioning what they all have in common is a belief in the existence of powerful immutable forces which are not under the control of we mere mortals. These forces operate according to the principles of retaliatory and compensatory justice. The other attribute that they all share is that they lead to the prohibition or recommendation that people, either individually or in groups, do not need to actively seek to enact revenge – someone or something else – God, the gods, the superego, or the forces of karma will see to it that justice is done.

The Psychohistory of Revenge

Now, to come to the heart of the matter, the reason why I chose to write about this topic at this time. The genesis of this paper was during the time, several months after the events of September 11, when I participated in an online discussion forum organized by Dan Hill at PsyBC, where various psychoanalysts and psychotherapists mostly from the greater New York area, posted about their responses to the events of September 11. I found myself focusing more on the affects being expressed than on the theoretical attempts to explain the attacks and people's reactions to them.

Although there was a good deal of grief, sadness, and feelings connected to loss and suffering expressed, what was most striking was the level of anger that emerged. The anger was largely contained and couched in the garb of rational intellectual discourse, but the power and intensity of the rage was palpable. Perhaps living outside of the New York area allowed me to be more detached than those who were physically closer to the World Trade Center, but I was struck and shaken by the extent of the vindictive rage directed primarily at the perpetrators, but also toward those expressing any hint of a sense that Americans or the United States might be in the least bit responsible for engendering the terrorist attacks. Any so doing were promptly accused of the heinous offense of blaming the victim, or worse, of engaging in *schadenfreude*, taking pleasure in the suffering of innocent Americans. One such example was the overwhelmingly hostile response to Susan Sontag's piece published in the New York Times expressing thoughts along these lines. But mostly, I watched as some of the smartest, most empathic, and largely politically left-leaning psychotherapists in the New York area spoke of the need to attack and punish those who were responsible. Most on the list seem to approve of the United States military attack on Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban regime.

In the months following, there were many justifications and explanations presented for the war in Afghanistan, the domestic persecution of Moslems suspected of being connected or sympathetic to Al Qaeda, and later, the conquest of Iraq. For example, the political science professor Richard Falk, a longtime peace activist, wrote an article titled *Defining a Just War* in which he lends his support to the attack on Afghanistan, saying that it was a "just war" directed at "global terrorism". There is no mention made of revenge. Todd Gitlin, the former SDS leader and self-identified leftist, put together a book of essays he called "The Intellectuals and the Flag" to justify why he felt inspired to hang an American flag from his apartment terrace in Manhattan in the days following September 11th.

However, the revenge motive was widely and openly acknowledged among the American people. For example, a February 28, 2006 Zogby poll of Armed Forces personnel, both those serving in Iraq and those stationed elsewhere, found that just under 90% believe that the chief motive for the war in Iraq is retaliation for Saddam's role in September 11.

The recent documentary film "*Why We Fight*" features an interview with a retired New York City police officer whose son was killed at the World Trade Center on September 11, in which he says:

"Somebody has to pay for this. Somebody had to pay for 9/11. I wanna see their bodies stacked up for what they did. For taking my son."^{xiii}

Later, after realizing that Saddam wasn't involved in the 9/11 attack he says with respect to the war in Iraq:

“The government exploited my feelings of patriotism, of a deep desire for revenge for what happened to my son. But I was so insane with wanting to get even, I was willing to believe anything.”^{xiv}

Robert Lifton (2005), in a recent piece titled *Americans as Survivors*, puts the American response to September 11 in a broader context. Lifton has studied and written about survivors of several large-scale traumatic events. As he points out, when individuals who have experienced a trauma are subjected to a subsequent trauma, the old wounds are reactivated. He places the September 11 trauma alongside the most recent previous national trauma in this country, the Vietnam War. He sees our current response, which he describes as:

“a sense of individual and collective fear and vulnerability and feelings of injured national pride and humiliation”^{xv}

as a reaction to the collective trauma of the Vietnam War as well as to the events of September 11.

Lifton (2003), also points out that Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and the Islamist fundamentalists are engaged in a parallel process revenge cycle of their own. For example, on Oct. 7, 2001, bin Laden said about the events of September 11:

“What the United States tastes today is a very small thing compared to what we have tasted for tens of years . . . humiliation and contempt for more than 80 years.”^{xvi}

Lifton describes the process of mutual narcissistic injury and humiliation followed by retaliatory violence as the primary way that Americans have responded to the trauma of September 11. As he says:

“America has mounted a diffuse, Vietnam style, worldwide “search and destroy mission” on behalf of the 9/11 dead. Here, too, we join the dance with our al-Qaeda “partner” which brings fierce survivor emotions and considerable false witness of its own.

The survivor’s quest for meaning can be illuminating and of considerable human value. But it can also be drawn narrowly, manipulatively, and violently, in connection with retribution and pervasive killing.”^{xvii}

Strozier & Swiderski (2005) have also recently written an article entitled *The Psychology and Theocracy of George W. Bush*. They argue that Bush, in response to the events of September 11, has taken on the role of both a delegate and leader of the American people in their quest for revenge. As he says:

“He became the avenging angel of death.”^{xviii}

Bob Woodward (2002), in his book *Bush at War*, documents a number of the president's responses on September 11 and the following few days. Bush said he remembered thinking, on first hearing the news from Andrew Card about the second plane hitting the WTC tower,

“They had declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war.”^{xxix}

Several hours later he announced to staff on Air Force I:

“We’re at war. . . That’s what we’re paid for boys. We’re going to take care of this. And when we find out who did this, they’re not going to like me as president. Somebody is going to pay.”^{xxx}

Later that morning he said to Cheney:

“We’re going to find out who did this, and we’re going to kick their asses.”^{xxxi}

During his radio address that evening he said:

“None of us will forget this day. . . We have made the decision to punish whoever harbors terrorists, not just the perpetrators.”^{xxxii}

On September 14, when he visited the World Trade Center site, he said:

“The people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us soon.”^{xxxiii}

On that same day the Senate voted unanimously and the House 420 to 1 (Barbara Lee from California cast the lone no vote) to give Bush virtually unlimited authority to use force against whoever he decided America’s enemies were. A public opinion poll taken at that time found that 90% favored “a major military campaign”, the target of which was left unspecified.^{xxxiv}

Author and Boston Globe columnist James Carroll (2004) is one writer who has given the revenge motive as central a role in explaining the post September 11 actions of our government as I have. Making a similar point about the reactivation of old traumas as Lifton does, he says:

“Pearl Harbor resurfaced in the American memory on September, 11, 2001. Again and again, the day of Infamy was invoked as the relevant precedent – the only other time the United States had suffered such a grievous blow. And just as before, there was never any doubt that the blow would be avenged . . . Bush took America to war against Iraq to satisfy that primordial need. And it worked. The United States of America clenched its fist the day the Twin Towers came down.

Against Iraq, the United States finally threw a punch. . . When we want our revenge we take it. . .^{xxv}

The politics of revenge is not a new phenomenon. There is a political label that's been in use since the 1870s, called revanchism, from the French word for revenge, *revanche*. This was the label given to those in France at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries who supported the attempt to take back Alsace-Lorraine from the Germans after it was lost in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871. The term has been applied to many intra and inter national conflicts since then to describe the motives leading to conflicts and wars including both World War I and World War II, as well as a host of others. Two of the clearest recent examples would be the Balkan wars and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Historically the term has been applied mostly to situations in which a group or nation was focused on regaining territory, which was felt to rightfully belong to them. However, other aspects of revenge such as turning the tables by defeating one's formerly victorious enemy, preferably with a good dose of humiliation thrown in, has certainly been an operative motive in revanchist conflicts. The most well-known demonstration of this was the Nazis forcing the French to sign their surrender in 1940 in the very same railroad car that the French and their allies had forced the Germans to acknowledge their capitulation in 1918.

Both Scheff (1994) and Lifton (2003) write about the importance of Hitler's championing vengeance on the nations of Europe, in order to reverse or undo the humiliation of Germany's defeat in WW I, as a prominent aspect of his appeal to the German people.

Lifton also points out the important role of vengeance in fostering atrocities in Vietnam. He says that the American troops received:

“. . .encouragement from officers to avenge the deaths of buddies and to deal with feelings of angry mourning by killing anyone or anything in sight.”^{xxvi}

Carroll has drawn attention to revenge and retaliation as potent forces motivating America's use of the atomic bombs against Japan in 1945. He cites Truman's radio address to the nation on August 9, 1945, the day after the second atomic bomb destroyed Nagasaki. Truman justified its use by saying:

“We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten American prisoners of war, . . .”^{xxvii}

Based on everything I have been saying so far in this paper, I do not see the fulfillment of the wish for revenge, and even support for acts of revenge from liberal intellectuals, as something unusual or unexpected, or particularly disturbing. After all, I've been arguing that such responses are both natural and universal. However, what is

somewhat disturbing is the reluctance to acknowledge the importance of the revenge motive in driving the policies of the United States government since September 11, 2001.

Like Carroll, I would argue that the war on Afghanistan, the war on Iraq, and the activities associated with the provisions of the Patriot Act are largely fueled by the desire to avenge the injury done to us by those who brought down the World Trade Center buildings and attacked the Pentagon.

One could speculate that one way to understand the bizarre and tortured tale of the Bush administration's attempts to justify the war against Iraq with its manufactured evidence, deception about "WMD's", and the lies told about links between Iraq and the September 11 attack were, in part, propelled by the need to disguise the naked wish for retribution for the events of September 11.

One concrete implication that follows from recognizing the importance of revenge as a motive driving much of the violence in the world, is in the area of conflict resolution or negotiation. There may well be an inherent opposition between peace and justice in some conflict situations. Well-meaning negotiators and mediators whose goal is peace – the ending, or at least lessening, of violent conflict between hostile parties - can be puzzled and disappointed when issues don't seem to get resolved and the violence continues.

For example, consider the Israeli-Palestinian hostilities, which have an 80 plus year history and have continued, and if anything escalated, despite extensive and persistent attempts to negotiate compromises which would decrease the tensions and violence.

If one takes the need for retributory justice and revenge seriously, we can perhaps understand the intractability of conflicts such as these where both sides feel that justice has not been served. Both parties feel that they have been injured, and have had something of value that they feel is rightfully theirs taken from them by the other group. When both sides feel that justice has not been done, that they are still owed, then one might predict that peace won't be possible until the parties feel that the wrongs have been righted and that justice has been done. Put in another way, the desire for justice (revenge) trumps the desire for peace.

Perhaps this is an overly pessimistic assessment but it may be one that reflects human reality more closely than the view of those who believe that conflicts can be settled simply because, rationally, it is in the best interests of both parties to do so.

Although, we need not to forget that there are other possibilities. There are historical examples where the pitfalls of revenge were successfully avoided. Ghandi's non-violent campaign to bring independence from the British to India, and the South African truth and reconciliation process under the leadership of Bishop Tutu are two well known examples. However, we should also not forget that the relatively benign political outcomes in India and South Africa are in a distinct minority in the context of the history of wars and conflicts between nations and groups.

We also know that in many traditions and belief systems, from neo-pagan to Buddhist or Christian, to psychoanalytic, there is encouragement to forego revenge. Unfortunately, the moral, ethical, or religious ideal of giving up revenge remains more a hope than a reality.

- ⁱ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, III.1.49-61.
- ⁱⁱ King James Bible, Romans 12:19-21.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Freud, SE, Vol. XIV p. 279.
- ^{iv} Carroll, p. 255.
- ^v Freud, SE, Vol. XXI p. 110.
- ^{vi} Kohut, p. 380.
- ^{vii} Ibid. p. 378.
- ^{viii} Akhtar, p. 179.
- ^{ix} King James Bible, Exodus 21:23-25.
- ^x Ibid. Matthew 5: 38-40.
- ^{xi} Maimonides (1200), p.42.
- ^{xii} Carveth (2006)
- ^{xiii} New York Times, March 1, 2006.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Lifton (2005), p. 2.
- ^{xvi} Lifton (2003), p. 105.
- ^{xvii} Ibid. p. 146-147.
- ^{xviii} Strozier & Swiderski (2005), p. 114.
- ^{xix} Woodward, p. 15.
- ^{xx} Ibid. p. 17.
- ^{xxi} Ibid. p. 18.
- ^{xxii} Ibid. p. 31.
- ^{xxiii} Carroll p. 18.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid.
- ^{xxv} Ibid. p. 218.
- ^{xxvi} Lifton (2003) p. 47.
- ^{xxvii} Carroll, p. 217.

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