

## **Richard Koenigsberg's Workshop at the Church Center of the United Nations**

**Presented on November 9, 2006**

# **SOMETHING TO KILL AND DIE FOR: The Psychology of War and Terrorism**

### **Workshop Description**

What are the causes of collective political violence? What events or motivations bring religious and political leaders—and the people they represent—to give over lives and resources to armed conflict? What justifies the sacrifices made in war and terrorism?

In 1994, Dick Cheney appeared on “Meet the Press” and stated that Haiti was “not worth American lives.” Senator Glenn suggested that the case for intervention could not pass the “Dover Test”—the televised return of body bags. In the twenty years since Viet Nam, only about 400 U. S. soldiers had been killed in action. For a time, it seemed that the grand narrative of warfare had lost its appeal.

Then, the events of September 11th, 2001 changed everything. The United States responded—not only to the actions of the terrorists, but to the taunting words of Bin Laden, who addressed Americans declaring:

“Your most disgraceful case was in Somalia. When tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American pilot was dragged through in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you. The extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear.”

The American response to Bin Laden’s provocation served to demonstrate—in no uncertain terms—that the United States was not weak; that Americans too possessed ideals and strength of conviction for which they were willing to kill and die. We now find ourselves—again—in the midst of a world of political violence—a world that we seemed to be on the verge of leaving behind.

Were the events of September 11, 2001 responsible for the world-wide struggle in which we now find ourselves? Or is a deeper psychology at work, driving people on all sides of the conflict to seek out “something to kill and die for?”

John Lennon asked people to imagine a world with “nothing to kill or die for.” Post-modernism proposed the “death of grand narratives,” while multiculturalism and globalization articulated the desire to abandon rigid boundaries. Now we seem to have returned to the bipolar, cold-war narrative of a global clash between antagonistic ideologies.

Using case studies from history—as well as contemporary examples—this workshop will explore the dynamics of collective forms of violence such as terrorism and war; the motives that generate killing and dying in the name of religious and national ideals.

## **Learning Objectives**

**Through presentation and discussion, participants will explore:**

- The nature of attachment to “sacred objects” that transforms violence into a form of virtue.
- The human tendency to bifurcate the world into categories of "good" and "evil."
- The need for and symbolic meaning of enemies.
- The relationship between martyrdom and sacrifice.
- Why wars are difficult to end.