Why Names Count

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By Dr. Konrad Von Moltke

I. Introduction

Dr. Konrad Von Moltke is a Senior Fellow of the Institute on International Environmental Governance at Dartmouth College and a Senior Fellow for the International Institute for Sustainable Development. This piece asserts that the Bush Administrations response to the September 11 attacks as an act of war rather than as an international crime against humanity is ineffective and puts new forms of institutional governance, such as an international court of criminal justice, at risk.

II. Essay By Dr. Konrad Von Moltke

"Why Names Count"

Why should we not call this a "war"? The events of September 11 were not an act of war, they were a crime against humanity. But by framing the attack as a casus belli, the Bush Administration is giving the perpetrators heightened status on the world scene, and opening the way for a fearful escalation of violence. In fact what the attackers did was to murder people from many nations in an amoral act of violence.

Was there an alternative to calling this a war? Of course there was, except that "war" was apparently the first word that came to the lips of George W. Bush when he heard what had happened in New York. And "war" seemed like a useful rallying cry in a stunned America. By now it is clear that no "war" will take place but something quite different. The Administration is backtracking furiously from its belligerent talk, speaking of a "different" war, the need for patience, and a "war unlike any other." But it has foreclosed the option of calling the hijackings and the ensuing destruction by their right name. They were criminal acts-crimes against humanity indeed. Calling them a crime against humanity would have put them in the right context from the outset. That context is international civil society.

Many of us have worked hard to establish individual rights-from basic human rights to rights of

participation in environmental decisions-at the international level. Those with economic interests have promoted globalization. The result is what we now call "international civil society," a social construct that transcends the international order of states. The attack of September 11 was an international crime that drew on the institutions of the new international order: open communications, freedom of movement, the ability to associate across national borders, the banking system, the education system, even free trade. It is vital to demonstrate that there is a legitimate response to such crimes rooted in this order itself, and not in the old system of wars between states.

The US Administration was unable to give the events of September 11 their proper name and continues to attempt to fashion a response out of the practices of war. The United States has resisted the creation of an international court of criminal justice, where the perpetrators and those who sent them could have been judged. By giving the events their correct name-a "crime against humanity"-the US Administration would have had to acknowledge that it was wrong in resisting the creation of the ICCJ.

The most important thing a politician can do is to say the right thing at the right time. To hold public office is to be responsible for calling important events by their right name. All politics is indeed "just talk" -the process by which people take events and make them comprehensible in a social context. Politicians talk all the time, because that is what they do. It is the ability to say the right words when it really counts that distinguishes real politicians from time servers.

The consequences of using the wrong names can be dire. Talk of "war" suggests tanks and cruise missiles, and carpet bombing, maybe even airborne troops. Yet none of these will serve where detective work, police action, and courts of justice are called for. The United States already appears to have feet of clay. By threatening fierce retribution while unable to bring the perpetrators to justice it will be inviting new attacks. By insisting that the future of freedom and democracy are at stake, the U.S. Administration has put those values into play in an arena where it is ineffective. It may end up engaging in murder and assassination ("dead or alive!"), undermining the values that it claims to defend.

The events of September 11 were criminal acts of confounding proportions, but not ones that should have put the institutions of governance at risk. By raising the response to the level of a "war" the President has risked just that.

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