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Not World War III **by Sheldon Richman**

When a war breaks out somewhere, two sound principles for civilized people are: (1) demand an immediate ceasefire and, failing that, (2) keep the war contained — do not broaden it, do not join in.

We can gauge the civility of the Bush administration's neoconservative boosters by the fact that they reject both principles. They oppose an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East, even though it would spare the lives of hundreds of Lebanese and Israeli men, women, and children, because Israel would be thwarted in its ambition to remove an opponent of its occupation policy. And they are doing their best to expand the conflict by pronouncing it World War III or IV and urging U.S. participation — specifically, by bombing Iran or Syria. Instead of seeing this ultimately as a dispute between the Israeli government and the Palestinians, the neocons insist on twisting the latest violence into a global war of “Islamofascists” against the “free world.” This is nonsense.

When governments make war, innocents get killed. The heads of governments may say they don't intend this, but they take measures they *know* will have that effect. At best they are guilty of criminal negligence.

The current conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, of course, is not between two governments. But it's close. In its rocketing of Israeli civilians, Hezbollah is behaving like a government. The strikes on civilians are not only criminal, they are stupid, although we should bear in mind that ten times more Lebanese civilians have been killed than Israeli civilians. Hezbollah could have held the high ground by abstaining from such immoral conduct. Imagine how President Bush and Israel would look if Hezbollah declared a cessation to all offensive actions. Nevertheless we should judge the Israeli government's and Hezbollah's respective crimes in light of the context: Israeli's 40-year occupation of Lebanon's Shebaa Farms, Syria's Golan Heights, the Palestinians' Gaza Strip and West Bank. By any reasonable definition, the so-called provocation by Hezbollah — the seizing of two Israeli soldiers — was part of a continuing military conflict, not an act of terrorism.

Thus stopping the threat to innocents is imperative. That cause should not wait until issues are sorted out. But Bush is not content merely with opposing a ceasefire. He is shipping precision bombs to Israel. The Lebanese will know where those bombs were made. This guarantees anti-American violence in the future. Thanks for looking out for us, Mr. President.

If a ceasefire can't be achieved, the least the rest of the world can do is keep the conflict contained. The more governments that join in, the greater the threat to innocents is likely to be. This principle exposes the iniquity of the bomb-Iran World War III crowd, such as Newt Gingrich and the *Weekly Standard* folks. The root of the conflict is the Israeli occupation of Arab land. Hezbollah didn't exist before Israel invaded and occupied Lebanon beginning in 1982. And Israel invaded Lebanon to root out Palestinian refugees, who had moved there via Jordan after they were forced to leave their homes, first, when Israel was being established, culminating in formal nationhood in 1948, and again during its 1967 preventive war against its Arab neighbors.

This is not "our" fight, unless we foolishly insist on making it so. There is one way to turn the current conflict into World War III: self-fulfilling prophecy.

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