On: The relevance Of Psychoanalysis to an understanding of terrorism

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In their ‘controversies’ debate, both Twemlow (2005a, 2005b) and Friedman (2005) claim Freud's legacy. Twemlow asserts his activist ideas are embedded in psychoanalytic scholarship, which Freud saw as desirable (2005a, p. 961), and Friedman states that his advocacy of cold and unsentimental investigation is consistent with Freud's scientific practices (2005, p. 964). In my opinion, these assertions of inheritance both miss the truth; it is Friedman who can justly assert that he is Freud's scion, but not for the reason he gives.

In a well-known correspondence exchange, Freud addressed the menace of war from a psychoanalytic perspective (Einstein and S. Freud, 1933). In the end he believed what he wrote was of little value, according to an editor's note (p. 198) and text in the body of the letter: ‘The result, as you see, is not very fruitful when an unworldly theoretician is called in to advise on an urgent practical problem’ (p. 213).

But even more significant is that in 1921 the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) undertook a study of World War I, with the practical aim of preventing future wars (Josephson, 1975). Freud was asked to write a monograph on ‘The psycho-analytic problem of the war’. What happened was that very quickly, just two months after signing a contract to write the monograph, Freud gave up completely. He had concluded that he could make no headway, and asked to be released from the contract. The contract, and the letter in which CEIP noted its abrogation, appear on the web at: www.ijpa.org/sonnenberglett.htm. I encountered these documents accidentally, while working as a psychoanalyst on a project at CEIP, and to my knowledge no group of psychoanalysts has ever seen them. This piece of history is not documented in either Freud's correspondence or biographies (Jones, 1953-7; E. L. Freud, 1960; Schur, 1972; Gay, 1988) or the Standard Edition (Strachey, 1974). Despite constructing a very elaborate theoretical social psychology, Freud felt unable to address the challenge of ending warfare. That is his legacy, and the absence of any sustained effort by him to address the prevention of war in a practical way has influenced many of our colleagues to not even try.

Friedman (2005) is profoundly pessimistic, without specific suggestions as to how an analyst might study terrorism (which to him is a form of war), and prevent it in the future. In that way, he embraces Freud's legacy. In completely ignoring practical ways psychoanalysis might help the world master the problem of terrorism and war, like Freud in 1921, Friedman doesn't even try.

I commend Twemlow for trying; I believe his strategies for research and the practical application of psychoanalysis to solving the problems of terrorism and war hold much promise (2005a, 2005b), and his example should inspire all of us to use our wisdom outside our consulting rooms to make the world a safer place in which to live.

2 September 2005

References
