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Ending One War, Ending All Wars

By David Swanson
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Theme: US NATO War Agenda

Remarks on September 21, 2013, at the Nashville Festival for Peace, Prosperity, and Planet.

Thank you to Elizabeth Barger and the Nashville Peace and Justice Center and to all of you, and happy International Day of Peace!

From a certain angle it doesn't look like a happy day of peace. The U.S. government is engaged in a major war in Afghanistan, dramatically escalated by the current U.S. president, who has been bizarrely given credit for ending it for so long now that a lot of people imagine it is ended. The same president goes through a list of men, women, and children on Tuesdays, picks which ones to have murdered, and has them murdered, often with missiles shot out of unmanned drones, drones that circle people's villages endlessly threatening immediate annihilation moment after moment for weeks on end, missiles that often miss their targets and often kill random people too close to their targets. The CIA with war powers.

Secret military operations in dozens of nations. Expansion of U.S. troop presence in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Some 90 percent of the world's nations with U.S. troops in them. Prisoners force-fed in Guantanamo. Black sites. Iraq ruined without reparations. Libya thrown into anarchy without apology. Activists treated as enemies. Journalists treated as spies. Whistleblowers locked up in cages. Our Constitutional rights treated as dispensable. The United Nations used, abused, and circumvented. U.S. weapons provided to dictatorships and democracies around the globe. Tennessee's U.S. Senator Bob Corker going on television repeatedly for weeks to tell us that the United States is covertly aiding one side of a war in Syria. Does he not know what "covertly" means, or does he not know how television works?

But I believe that, despite all of that and much more, there is huge reason to celebrate a happy international day of peace. At most events where I speak there is a time for questions, and almost always there is someone whose question is really more of a speech to the effect that war opposition is delusional and hopeless; if the government wants a war, it gets a war — so this person always tell us. Well, no more. From this day forward, that person's comments should be no match for the laughter that greets them, because we just prevented a war.

Congress members heard from many thousands of us, and what they heard was over 100-to-1 against attacking Syria. When it became clear that not even the Senate would authorize such an attack, talk shifted immediately from the inevitability of war to the desirability of avoiding war.

Secretary of State John Kerry said that President Bashar al-Assad could avoid a war by handing over all the chemical weapons his government possessed. Russia quickly called that bluff and Syria agreed to it. Syria had tried in the past to negotiate a Middle East free of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, but the United States had been opposed, not wanting to stop arming Egypt and Israel.

Secretary Kerry, apparently panicked by the possible delay or prevention of missile strikes, put out a statement that he had only been making a "rhetorical argument," not a real proposal. But when the White House saw the writing on the wall in Congress, Kerry claimed to have meant his comment seriously after all. He was for his own idea after he'd been against it.

Of all the many ways in which John Kerry has tied himself in knots before, this is the first time he's had to do so because the people of this country and the world rejected a war. Remember when Kerry asked how you could ask someone to be the last man to die in the war on Vietnam? We have it in our power to reject the next war and the next war and the next war and make John Kerry the last man to have tried to sell us a dead idea.

War is a dead idea, an idea whose time has gone. The abolition of war is an idea whose time has come. But the government isn't ready to announce that for us. That's why we need to celebrate this victory. And not just us at this festival. This was everybody. This was the people of Syria who spoke against an attack on their nation. This was the people of Iraq and Afghanistan who said don't do to others what you've already done to us. This was the people of the world and of Russia and of China who said you won't paint this crime as legal with our help. This was the people of Britain who moved their House of Commons to reject a prime minister's request for war for the first time since the surrender to the French and Americans at Yorktown. This was low and high ranking members of the U.S. military saying "We didn't sign up to fight for al Qaeda." This was government experts risking their careers and their freedom to say "If President Obama's excuse for a war happened, he's guessed it right, because the evidence doesn't establish it." This was the majority of the U.S. public telling pollsters, yes, we care about suffering children; send them food and medicine, don't make it worse by sending in missiles."

This was the victory not of a moment but of a decade of cultural enlightenment. When you've got the Pope and Rush Limbaugh on your side you've built something very broad. Remember when they called resistance to war "The Vietnam Syndrome" as if it were a disease? What we've got now is the War on Terror Inoculation. This is health, not sickness. War is the health of the state, said a World War I resister. But war resistance is the health of the people. The people are the world's other super power.

So, yes, I say celebrate! Start seeing successes. Drone attacks are down dramatically. Environmental groups are beginning to oppose military base constructions. States are beginning to work on conversion of war industries to peaceful industries. Larry Summers has been denied a chance to do more economic damage.

Imagine the euphoria — or don't imagine it, just remember it — when this country elects a new president whose main redeeming feature is that he isn't the previous president. For personality fanatics that's big stuff. And there are big parties. For policy fanatics — for those of us interested in seeing policies change rather than personalities — that kind of moment is right now. The first step in overcoming an addiction, whether to war or alcohol, is recognizing that you have a problem. The second step is believing that you can shake it if

you try. We've just taken the first two steps! The war addicts said Syria needed an intervention. We gave the war junkies an intervention instead. We pointed them toward the path of recovery and showed them a preview of what it will look like.

Now, if you don't want to celebrate because there's too much work to do, because Syria is in greater danger without its weapons (look what happened to Iraq and Libya), and because the pressure for war is still on, I can respect that. I'll be with you starting tomorrow. But it's hard to imagine we'll find the most effective strategy, much less motivate all the doom and gloomers to work their hardest, if we refuse to recognize when we've actually made progress, no matter how limited.

If you don't want to celebrate because you don't think public pressure made any impact and don't think it ever can, I've looked at enough of the recent history and distant history to say, with all due respect: I don't believe you. And if you believed yourself you wouldn't be here today.

Now, there is endless work to be done when we get back to it in the morning. Congressman Cooper was pretty noncommittal, I understand, as quite a few Congress members were. He kept an open mind. Maybe, just maybe, he must have thought, it makes sense to deescalate a war by escalating it, maybe these magic missiles with Raytheon pixie dust on them will kill only the people who really need killing while empowering fanatic heart-and-liver eaters who execute their prisoners to establish a secular democracy, and perhaps we really can uphold the norm against chemical weapons that our own nation violates with some regularity by blatantly violating the norm against attacking other countries with missiles, and maybe we'll enforce the Chemical Weapons Convention against a nation that never signed it by shredding the UN Charter and the Kellogg-Briand Pact as long as we call ourselves "The International Community" and if we can't get France to help maybe Puerto Rico would count as a Coalition of the Willing, and perhaps, perhaps just maybe Assad really is out to get us and just might be a threat to Nashville, Tennessee, and if not isn't the only thing that really matters President Obama's manhood and the respect he can only maintain if he behaves like a sociopath? Some part of this must be roughly how undecided members of Congress looked at this thing. Senator Harry Reid said Syria was the return of the Nazis, and he himself looked just like Elmer Fudd warning of a dangerous wabbit, but maybe he was right, think our elected representatives. There is work to be done.

Republicans in Congress turned against war more than they might have with a Republican president. And some Democrats, including a co-chair of the Progressive Caucus, cheered for war. The Black Caucus told its members to shut their mouths and not speak about Syria. But they didn't all listen. The leadership of the two parties pushed for war, and most members of both parties said No Way. That's something to build on. Anything that has happened is automatically acceptable and respectable, and in that category now is war rejection, regardless of who is president in the future.

Senator Corker thinks the United States has lost credibility. I think it's gained it. The United States claims to use war as a last resort. When an occasion finally arrives in which it doesn't use war as a first resort, that boosts the credibility of its claim. The U.S. justifies its wars with the word "democracy." When it listens to its people for once, it demonstrates democracy by example rather than by dropping cluster bombs or napalm or using those depleted uranium weapons giving the workers who make them cancer over in eastern Tennessee. The world was skeptical of the U.S. case for war because of past U.S. lies, not because of past U.S. failures to bomb people.

The threat to attack Syria is still on the table. If you listen to these people enough you really come to hate tables, by the way. The White House claims Syria has signed the Chemical Weapons Convention under threat of attack, even though any signing of any treaty under threat of attack is illegal and invalid. Meanwhile, if we wanted to find a stockpile of chemical weapons, there's 524 tons of poison gas at the Blue Grass Army Depot, just up the road toward Lexington, Kentucky, from here. The United States wants 10 more years to destroy that, although maybe it can go a little faster since John Kerry seems to think a week is more than enough time for Syria to destroy its stockpile. The Army spokesman in Kentucky says the delays there are a sign of democracy and public input. Our leading spreaders of democracy to the rest of the world, on the other hand, believe the most important consideration is that nothing ever be credited to diplomacy if it can be credited to violence. The U.S. has a stash five times the size of Kentucky's out in Colorado, where climate-induced floods and fires pose a danger of combining with the madness of militarism if we don't switch soon from preparing for wars to preparing for a sustainable existence — If we don't start paying attention to Fukushima and global warming and keep laughing, as we have been, at the idea that Assad is going to kill us.

But, our government also has peculiar views about different types of weapons that I don't claim to understand. Chemical weapons are good, apparently, when the U.S. uses them on Iraqis, or Iraq uses them on Iranians, or Israel uses them on Palestinians, but they're bad if Iraq uses them on Iraqis or the Syrian government uses them on anyone — although they aren't so bad if it is Syrian rebels using them. In cases of bad chemical weapons use, missiles could fix the problem. But with missiles you have to ask Congress. So, instead, you can fix the problem of people getting killed with chemicals by making sure that more of them get killed with guns. With guns, for some reason, you don't have to ask Congress. Senators can even chat on TV about what they're doing "covertly," and we're supposed to say "Oh, well that's OK then, as long as it's covertly."

Only . . . when people bleed and scream in agony and turn cold do they do it covertly? Because I think the entire operation needs to be done covertly, not just parts of it.

Maybe the problem is that we just don't think guns are weapons of mass destruction. Guns must be weapons of minimal destruction, I guess. Guns only kill 30,000 people in the United States each year, ten times the number of people killed on September 11, 2001. Imagine the size of the war we'd have started if someone had killed 30,000 people with airplanes. Would we have had to kill 10 million Iraqis instead of 1 million? But with guns, deaths are OK, and 60% of them don't really count because they're suicides.

Only . . . why are people desperate enough to kill themselves in the wealthiest nation on earth when we have a bigger military and more billionaires than any other society in the history of the world? Shouldn't that satisfy us? Anyone too dense to appreciate that great good fortune, well, at least we've made sure there's always a gun or two within easy reach.

I'm being sarcastic, but I'm not joking. We have a serious problem with acceptance of violence. This past Sunday night on "60 Minutes" John Miller of CBS News said, "I've spoken with intelligence analysts who have said an uncomfortable thing that has a ring of truth, which is: the longer this war in Syria goes on, in some sense the better off we are."

Now, why would that be uncomfortable, do you suppose? Could it be because encouraging huge numbers of violent deaths of human beings seems sociopathic?

The discomfort that Miller at least claims to feel is the gauge of our moral progress, I suppose, since June 23, 1941, when Harry Truman said, "If we see that Germany is winning, we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible."

On Monday, *Time* magazine's Aryn Baker published an articleunder the headline "Syria's Rebels Turn on One Another, and That's Not a Bad Thing." Baker's point wasn't that more would die this way, but that this would allow the U.S. to escalate the war (which of course would mean more dying).

Remember that President Obama's reason (Preview) for wanting to attack Syria is to "confront actions that are violating our common humanity." How is it that support for mass killing rarely seems to violate our common humanity if it's that other 96 percent of humanity getting killed, and especially if it's this 4 percent doing it? Why is the excuse to kill more people always that people are being killed, while we never starve people to prevent them from starving or rape people to protect them from rape?

The uncomfortable "60 Minutes" interviewer addressed his remarks to a former CIA officer who replied by disagreeing. He claimed to want the war to end. But how would he end it? By arming and aiding one side, just enough and not too much — which would supposedly result in peace negotiations, albeit with a risk of major escalation. While nobody ever extends peace in order to generate war, people are constantly investing in war in the name of peace.

As this man may be very well aware, arming one side in this war will encourage that side's viciousness and encourage the other side to arm itself further as well. But suppose it were actually true that you could deescalate a war by escalating a war. Why are the large number of people who would be killed in the process unworthy of consideration?

We've seen lawyers tell Congressional committees that killing people with drones is either murder or perfectly fine, depending on whether Obama's secret memos say the killings are part of a war. But why is killing people acceptable in a war? We've just watched public pressure deny Obama missile strikes on Syria. Those strikes were optional. Had they happened that would have been a choice, not an inevitability. What of the immorality involved?

The best news is that we're beginning to feel uncomfortable. We're even feeling uncomfortable enough to doubt the tales we're told about justifications for wars. The fact is that, were the White House telling the truth about the need for an attack on Syria, it would be a first in history. Every other case for war has always been dishonest.

The United States sought out war with Mexico, not the reverse. There was never any evidence that Spain sank the *Maine.* The Philippines didn't benefit from U.S. occupation. The *Lusitania* was known to be carrying troops and arms. The Gulf of Tonkin incident never happened. Iraq didn't take any babies out of incubators. The Taliban was willing to turn bin Laden over to be tried in a neutral court. Libya wasn't about to kill everyone in Benghazi. And so on.

Even wars that people like to imagine as justified, such as World War II, were nonetheless packaged in lies; FDR's tales about the *Greer* and the *Kearney* and supposed secret Nazi maps and plans were a step on the steady trajectory from Woodrow Wilson to Karl Rove.

The idea that Syria used chemical weapons is more plausible than the idea that Iraq had vast stockpiles of chemical, biological, and (in some versions) nuclear weapons and was working with al Qaeda. But the evidence offered in the case of Syria was no stronger than that for Iraq. It was harder to disprove merely because there was nothing to it: no documentation, no sources, and until the UN report came out, no science. Congress members who have seen the classified version of the White House case say it's no better than the declassified. Experts within the government and reporters in Syria who have seen more than that say they don't believe the White House's claims.

The assertions masquerading as a case come packaged in dishonest claims about the make-up of the rebels, and how quickly Syria gave access to inspectors. And the claims are written in a manner to suggest far greater knowledge and certainty than they actually assert on careful examination. The latest claims follow a series of failed claims over a period of months and stand to benefit a Syrian opposition that has been found repeatedly to be manufacturing false propaganda aimed at bringing the United States into the war. It seems, at this point, unlikely that the Assad government used chemical weapons (as opposed to the rebels or someone in the Syrian military defying Assad by using them), but it seems certain that if Assad did it, Obama and Kerry don't know that — they've only guessed it at best. It also seems certain that escalating the war makes everyone worse off regardless of who used chemical weapons. Attacking Iraq would have been immoral, illegal, and catastrophic (and probably more so) if all the weapons stories had been true.

Then there are the depictions of Assad as a threat to the United States, at which moments President Obama has almost begun to sound like his predecessor. But, as he came on stage second, nobody believed him. Assad is guilty of horrible crimes, but he's not yet-another new Hitler. There's a cute story about Assad from 11 years ago this week that some of us may have forgotten. A Canadian man named Maher Arar had been born in Syria. U.S. officials nabbed him for the crime of switching planes in New York City. They interrogated him for weeks, denying him access to a lawyer or to the Canadian government. They asked Arar to go to Syria, and he refused. So they stuck him on a CIA plane, flew him to Jordan, beat him for 8 hours, and then delivered him to the Syrian government of Bashar al Assad. President Assad's government beat and whipped Arar for 18 hours a day for weeks, asking him similar questions to those the Americans had asked. For 10 months he was kept in a 3 by 6 by 7 foot underground cell, then released with no charges. Four years later, the Canadian government, which had done nothing, apologized to and compensated Arar. Former CIA case officer Bob Baer said, "If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear—never to see them again—you send them to Egypt."

The Syrian government is, like any government the United States wants to attack, a brutal government that the United States worked with until recently, situated in a region full of brutal governments the United States still supports. In this case, the brutal governments still armed and supported by the U.S. government include Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, and Yemen. If the US. government wanted to reduce violence, it could end its 2001-begun war on Afghanistan, it could end its drone strikes, and it could stop supplying Saudi Arabia with cluster bombs and Egypt with tear gas and Bahrain with ex-police chiefs. Wars are not driven by generosity, despite what you'll often — and increasingly — hear.

Syria needs humanitarian aid, not weapons that threaten the good aid work being done by Americans among others. The Iraqi Student Project was bringing Iraqis to study in U.S. colleges. Its office was in Syria, where many Iraqi refugees had fled from the U.S.

liberation. Now that office is closed, and Syria has its own refugee crisis to rival Iraq's. Our government should be urging both sides to stop providing arms, to agree to a ceasefire, and to open negotiations without preconditions. Syria has needed help for years, but our government tends to wait until missiles look like a proper solution to get serious about solving a problem.

Syria's crisis was brought on in part by climate induced drought and water shortage. The solution of sending in missiles (blocked for now) or of sending in guns (underway as we speak) misses that source of the problem and in fact exacerbates it. The U.S. military is our greatest consumer of petroleum, which it consumes in the course of fighting wars and occupying countries to control petroleum. The roughly $1 trillion spent by the United States and roughly $1 trillion spent by the rest of the world on militarism every year could coat the planet with sustainable green energy sources beyond the wildest imaginings of those sources' proponents.

As long as we continue to view war as an acceptable institution, serious reductions in the military will be impeded by the desire to win wars when they happen. Instead of reduced war making, we need war abolition. 180 million people died in wars in the 20th century. Enough is enough. War has not brought security. War endangers us rather than protecting us. War has failed as a tool for ending war. War is draining our economies, eroding our civil liberties, devastating our natural environment, and stealing resources away from critical human and environmental needs.

Nonviolent tools have proven themselves more effective and less costly than war. War's unpredictability and existing weaponry including nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction threaten our very existence, while the reallocation of resources away from war promises a world whose advantages are beyond easy imagination. We could even stop paying farmers not to farm and start paying weapons makers not to make weapons while they convert their factories to begin making something useful. Cutting $40 billion from food stamps will kill more people than spending it for a few months of occupying Afghanistan will kill.

Anti-war sentiment, at least in some key parts of the world, is at a high point now, relative to other moments in recent decades. We need to direct that sentiment into a movement for abolition. Resisting each new war is not enough. We must be for peace and by peace we must mean, first and foremost, the elimination of the institution of war. We're all fond of saying that peace is more than just the absence of war. True enough. And freedom is more than just the absence of chains. But first you had to abolish slavery. Then new possibilities opened up. So, today I'm not going to say, "No Justice, No Peace." Today I say, "With No Peace, There Is No Justice." Stop the wars. End the slaughter. Dismantle the weapons. Abolish the military. Build a sustainable peaceful prosperous world. Make this point in time a turning point. Thank you for being here. Happy International Day of Peace!

David Swanson's books include "War Is A Lie." He blogs at http://davidswanson.org and http://warisacrime.org and works for http://rootsaction.org. He hosts Talk Nation Radio. Follow him on Twitter: @davidcnswanson and FaceBook.

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