

War and its Relationship to Morality

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Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [CRIMINALIZE WAR](#)

Relevant to our fight against war and truth in media is this article first crossposted on GR in August 2012.

I spoke this past weekend at the Kateri Peace Conference in upstate New York (<http://kateripeaceconference.org>) along with Kathy Kelly, John Horgan, Ellen Grady, James Ricks, Matt Southworth, Walt Chura, and many others. Watch for the video, because a terrific discussion took place around a series of questions posed by the event organizers. The following are some of the initial responses I had prepared beforehand.

Why Work Against War

War engages me because of its unique relationship to morality. Killing is a long-standing taboo. Killing is often if not always the worst thing that can be done to someone. But killing on a larger scale, organizing numerous people to kill numerous other people is often treated very differently. When a government kills its own people, that's generally considered an outrage. But when a government kills another nation's people, that's not always viewed as a moral problem. In fact a government killing its own people is often used as a justification for another nation to come in and kill more of the first nation's people. Killing in war, and lesser crimes in war, are given a moral pass or even praised. A U.S. military sniper bragged on the debut episode this week of NBC's war reality show "Stars Earn Stripes" that he had "160 kills." Not that he killed 160 people. The people are erased in his language. "I have 160 kills." And the show itself is a dramatization of U.S. news coverage of U.S. wars, in which the only participants are Americans. The 95% of victims in our one-sided slaughters are rarely mentioned in U.S. news coverage, and on this new war-o-tainment show the heroic warriors attack empty fields, blow up guard towers with no guards, kick in doors of uninhabited houses, and spend so much time talking about how "real" it all is that none of them seem to notice that there are no enemies or victims to be found.

War used to get a moral pass as a sporting contest between two armies on a distant battlefield. Then it became the occupation of people's homes and the slaughter of those people. Now our propaganda is working to restore war's status as a sport, not against an honorable opponent but against an invisible one. Members of our government talk about wanting to make the Iranian people suffer with sanctions, but we're not to picture the Iranian people. Members of our government talk about funding killing as a jobs program, but we're not to see them as sociopaths.

War is becoming a sport to be approved of regardless of who dies, and with a blank spot for the piece of knowledge that tells us the leading cause of death for U.S. troops is suicide, and the second leading cause being shot by Afghan troops you are supposedly training. Real war is still hell. Human beings still suffer mental breakdowns from engaging in it, including

engaging in it from a drone pilot's desk. But drones are part of an attempt to avoid danger for the five percent of humanity that appears in our news-ertainment. This is an attempt to strip war of morality. Muhammed Ali wouldn't kill Vietnamese, but his daughter on the so-called reality show will blow the heads off paper targets that represent non-American humanity. We haven't created this kind of moral exemption for anything other than war, not for rape or slavery or child abuse or cruelty to animals. We lock up football stars who hurt dogs, but not Americans who torture and kill human beings in time of war — and war is without limit in time or space. Among ourselves we've become less violent — still outrageously violent, but less so — and less racist, and less sexist, and less bigoted all around. But militarism is racism's partner. The idea of making war on white people has been taboo for 65 years. Making war on non-white people draws unquestioning support of both the genocidal and the humanitarian variety.

Do we need radical love? Yes, not only of enemies, but of invisible nonentities, those distant in space and those distant in time. We must love the foreigners we are killing and the great grandchildren we are depriving of a livable environment. And we must love them as equals, as exactly as worthy as ourselves, which obliges us to take considerable risks to our own well being. If our names and our resources are being used to murder, to maim, to terrorize, and to destroy the homes of people in huge numbers, what does that oblige us to do? And if most of us do little to nothing, what does that oblige those of us who are aware to do? My answer is anything that looks most likely to succeed, an answer that results in nonviolent actions and a lot more of them.

Why Not Give Up and Whine Miserably?

I do peace activism out of habit and paid employment. But I'm miserable when I'm not doing it, so there must be something motivating me. It certainly isn't hope that we're about to succeed. But neither have I ever spent a moment worrying that we won't. If we have a moral obligation to do something, we have the same moral obligation not to waste time fretting over whether we're about to succeed.

It certainly isn't the expectation of riches and fame and glory, which are all far more easily obtained elsewhere. But a lot of what I do is write, and I enjoy writing. I enjoy reading. I enjoy the stimulation I get from other minds through books and through discussions like this one. I enjoy the process of writing. I enjoy the praise and recognition that comes from writing and giving speeches. And yet there's no sum of money or volume of praise that can motivate me to write or speak a view I oppose or even to address a topic that I find unimportant. I just can't do it.

So, what drives me is not fundamentally recognition, but I do think it's worthwhile for those of us who are always speaking on panels to put ourselves in the shoes of those who are always in the audience. Should we not give each other recognition and praise and respect regardless of whether our roles are those of spokespeople. There are equally important and more important jobs in a movement. So take a moment right now to shake the hand of someone near you and thank them for what they do. Thank them in fact for their service, because unlike soldiers they are providing a service.

What motivates the people you just shook hands with? What motivates you? And what really motivates me? I suspect the answer is the same for all of us. We want to reduce suffering and increase happiness. I'm tempted to say I'm motivated by the severity of the crisis, the likelihood that we have very little time left to avert environmental and/or nuclear

catastrophe. But this isn't true. Even a little injustice is enough. I was an activist before I knew we were destroying the atmosphere, before I knew of the level of death and trauma caused by our bombs and our billionaires, before we'd legalized baseless imprisonment, before we'd tossed out the Fourth Amendment, before we'd given presidents full war powers and personal lists of so-called nominees to be murdered. New outrages are added to old, but they weren't required to get most of us active in the first place, and we won't go silent if they're undone.

Think about a small child witnessing the death by missile of his parents and crying over their bodies in hopelessness and terror. This is not an uncommon scene. We fund it with our tax dollars. But it's in a different country far away. Were it here in this town, people would not stand for it. Undoing the policies of death would be priority number 1. But it's somewhere else. So people accept it. And that strikes me as either incredibly stupid or incredibly greedy. Stupidity offends me deeply. I have a hard time not myself offending people by mocking their cherished beliefs when I find them stupid. So, objecting to stupidity is almost certainly part of my motivation. But it's not clear to me that most people really are that stupid. I think most people go out of their way not to acknowledge what is happening because they feel ashamed and powerless and comfortable and greedy. We could have better lives without our empire, but most people don't believe that. They wish they could have the world's oil and gas and labor without killing anybody, but the next best thing is to not pay attention to the killing or the system of injustice it maintains. And that offends me. That's dishonesty — a quality far worse than stupidity.

I'm not suggesting we worship honesty and intelligence for their own sake, but that we apply them to the basic morality of which we are all capable at close range. We can all love our loved ones. We ought to be able and willing to love, in a similar but not identical manner, everyone else as well. Everyone in some sense must be our loved one. That we don't achieve this or even strive for it is an embarrassment to be outgrown. It ought to be part of every child's education. Loving those we don't know can in fact be easier than loving some of the people we do know. It's not the same sort of love, but it has to be a kind of love if we are to find it in ourselves to take appropriate actions on their behalf and in partnership with them on behalf of us all.

What Way Forward?

I have a theory that we talk about peace and justice because we don't want to talk about peace. We chant "No justice, no peace," threatening to disturb the peace if we don't get our justice. I want to disturb the war. I want to nonviolently afflict the comfortable to comfort the afflicted but I think we need to reverse the chant. I say "No peace, no justice." You cannot begin to make justice in the middle of killing and dying. You can't build a just nation with bombs. First the bombs have to stop. That's the very first priority. Then the threat of bombs has to stop. That's the second priority. Then justice and democracy can begin.

We also talk a lot about peace without meaning it. We talk about peace in our hearts and in our personal lives. We don't mean the abolition of war and the elimination of standing armies. I'm all for peace in our hearts. And I'm all for peace in our personal lives. But I wouldn't kick out of the peace movement people who are unpleasant and acrimonious. We need all the people we can get. What I mean by peace is first and foremost and almost entirely the absence of war. It's popular to say "Peace must be more than just the absence

of war,” was if the mere absence of war is talk to be reserved for the speeches of beauty queens. But, you know, living is more than oxygen — yet without reliable oxygen everything else falls apart. Without peace not much else matters.

Woody Allen said “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality through not dying.” Well I don’t want to achieve peace in my heart or in my little corner of a dying world. I want to achieve peace through putting an end to warfare.

Justice, including the redistribution of the military’s trillion dollars a year, including the liberation of nations living under our threat, including the preservation of a natural world ravaged by war making and war preparation can follow.

Now how do we make that a national priority? I’m not sure we do. I think maybe we need to make it a human priority. We have more strength in numbers and in solidarity. We need to bring the stories of others here. We need to put pressure on foreign governments that still respond to it. If we can’t close the School of the Americas, but we can help convince South American nations to stop sending students, let’s start there. If we can’t shut down our oil companies, but the people of Iraq can block their oil law, let’s help. If we can’t free Bradley Manning, but we can encourage Ecuador to protect Julian Assange, we should. We should be the U.S. arm of a global movement, with the establishment of representative government in our own country as one of our distant dreams, to be advanced perhaps by work at the state and local levels where we still have a chance.

One of our top priorities in the United States must be education, about the rest of the world, and about alternatives to war thinking. By war thinking I mean the sort of thinking that is currently asking “How can we oppose war in Syria without offering an alternative?” Now most people would oppose an individual murder even if they couldn’t offer an alternative. What is the alternative to murder? First and foremost it is not murdering. What is the alternative to supporting fanatical terrorists in Syria? It’s demilitarization. Stop arming these dictatorships for years and then turning against them. Support nonviolent uprisings like that in Bahrain rather than assisting in the brutal crackdown. Reject violent uprisings like the one our nation has helped produce in Syria. Send in nonviolent forces. Send in independent media. Not to generate propaganda for war but to generate pressure for peace. Send aid. Not weapons that are called aid.

While there may be global trends against war, our nation has empowered presidents to make wars, guaranteeing that they will, and built up a military industrial complex that generates wars at will. The top priority of civil libertarians, of opponents of poverty, of advocates for education, or environmentalists, and of everyone working for a better world ought to be the dismantlement of the military industrial complex, and if we merged these movements we could do it. Less than 10 percent of what it swallows each year could make state college free. Imagine what the other 90% could do. Imagine what all those college-educated people could imagine that other 90% could do.

What Are We Up Against?

We’re up against ignorance, including willful ignorance. We’re up against apathy, which can benefit from the fantasy that all will magically work out, that the universe has a moral arc. Things may work out or we may all die horribly. That’s why we do what we have to do. We’re up against partisanship and the widespread poisonous idea that rather than demanding representation from our government we should be cheering for one political

party within our government and forgiving all its sins. But most of all we're up against disempowerment and the ridiculous but nearly universal belief that we can't change things.

George W. Bush's memoirs recall top Republicans in 2006 secretly demanding withdrawal from Iraq under public and electoral pressure. Imagine how the peace movement would have grown if such responses to it had been public. But why shouldn't it have grown exactly the same in the face of the pretense that we were having no impact? Why should we believe such a pretense? Why should we care if it's a pretense or not? Shouldn't we push ahead as our morality requires regardless?

I recently read some memoirs by a peace activist from this part of the country named Lawrence Wittner. He participated in his first political demonstration in 1961. The USSR was withdrawing from a moratorium on nuclear testing. A protest at the White House urged President Kennedy not to follow suit. "For decades I looked back on this venture as a trifle ridiculous," Wittner wrote. "After all, we and other small bands of protesters couldn't have had any impact on U.S. policy, could we? Then in the mid-1990s, while doing research at the Kennedy Library on the history of the world nuclear disarmament movement, I stumbled onto an oral history interview with Adrian Fisher, deputy director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. He was explaining why Kennedy delayed resuming atmospheric nuclear tests until April 1962. Kennedy personally wanted to resume such tests, Fisher recalled, 'but he also recognized that there were a lot of people that were going to be deeply offended by the United States resuming atmospheric testing. We had people picketing the White House, and there was a lot of excitement about it.'" If the picketers in 1961 had had the slightest notion that Kennedy was being influenced by them, their numbers would have multiplied 10-fold.

If you work for an online activist group you discover that people will take 10 minutes to write you letters explaining why taking 10 seconds to email their lousy bum of a Congress member would be a waste of time. We've advanced to the point of actively working to disempower each other.

In 1973-1974, Wittner visited GI coffee houses in Japan including in Yokusaka, where the *Midway* aircraft carrier was in port. The Japanese were protesting the ship's carrying of nuclear weapons, which was illegal in Japan, and which the U.S. military, of course, lied about. But U.S. soldiers with whom Wittner and other activists had talked, brought them onto the ship and showed them the nukes. The following summer, when Wittner read in a newspaper that, "a substantial number of American GIs had refused to board the *Midway* for a mission to South Korea, then swept by popular protest against the U.S.-backed dictatorship, it occurred to me," writes Wittner, "that I might have played some small role in inspiring their mutiny."

In the late 1990s, Wittner interviewed Robert "Bud" McFarlane, President Ronald Reagan's former national security advisor: "Other administration officials had claimed that they had barely noticed the nuclear freeze movement. But when I asked McFarlane about it, he lit up and began outlining a massive administration campaign to counter and discredit the freeze — one that he had directed. . . . A month later, I interviewed Edwin Meese, a top White House staffer and U.S. attorney general during the Reagan administration. When I asked him about the administration's response to the freeze campaign, he followed the usual line by saying that there was little official notice taken of it. In response, I recounted what McFarlane had revealed. A sheepish grin now spread across this former government official's face, and I knew that I had caught him."

Let's not wait to catch them. Let's know they're lying. Why do you think they're spying on us? When someone tells you to stop imagining that you're having an impact, ask them to please redirect their energy into getting 10 friends to join you in doing what needs to be done. If it has no impact, you'll have gone down trying. If it has an impact, nobody will tell you for many years.

David Swanson's books include "[War Is A Lie](#)." He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works as Campaign Coordinator for the online activist organization <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@davidcswanson](#) and [FaceBook](#).

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