

# War in Our Collective Imagination

By [David Swanson](#)

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[War is a Crime](#)

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

*Remarks at Veterans For Peace Convention, Asheville, NC, July 27, 2014.*

I started seeing graphics pop up on social media sites this past week that said about Gaza: “It’s not war. It’s murder.” So I started asking people what exactly they think war is if it’s distinct from murder. Well, war, some of them told me, takes place between armies. So I asked for anyone to name a war during the past century (that is, after World War I) where all or even most or even a majority of the dying was done by members of armies. There may have been such a war. There are enough scholars here today that somebody probably knows of one. But if so, it isn’t the norm, and these people I was chatting with through social media couldn’t think of any such war and yet insisted that that’s just what war is. So, is war then over and nobody told us?

For whatever reasons, I then very soon began seeing a graphic sent around that said about Gaza: “It’s not war. It’s genocide.” And the typical explanation I got when I questioned this one was that the wagers of war and the wagers of genocide have different attitudes. Are we sure about that? I’ve spoken to advocates for recent U.S. wars who wanted all or part of a population wiped out. Plenty of supporters of the latest attacks on Gaza see them as counter-terrorism. In wars between advanced militaries and poor peoples most of the death and injury is on one side and most of it — by anyone’s definition — civilian. This is as true in Afghanistan, where war rolls on largely unchallenged, as in Gaza, about which we are newly outraged.

Well, what’s wrong with outrage? Who cares what people call it? Why not criticize the war advocates rather than nitpicking the war opponents’ choice of words? When people are outraged they will reach for whatever word their culture tells them is most powerful, be it murder or genocide or whatever. Why not encourage that and worry a little more about the lunatics who are calling it *defense* or *policing* or *terrorist removal*? (Eight-year-old terrorists!)

Yes, of course. I’ve been going after CNN news readers for claiming Palestinians want to die and NBC for yanking its best reporter and ABC for claiming scenes of destruction in Gaza that just don’t exist in Israel are in fact in Israel — and the U.S. government for providing the weapons and the criminal immunity. I’ve been promoting rallies and events aimed at swaying public opinion against what Israel has been doing, and against the sadistic bloodthirsty culture of those standing on hills cheering for the death and destruction below, quite regardless of what they call it. But, as you’re probably aware, only the very most open-minded war advocates attend conventions of Veterans For Peace. So, I’m speaking here backstage, as it were, at the peace movement. Among those of us who want to stop the killing, are there better and worse ways to talk about it? And is anything revealed by the ways in which we tend to talk about it when we aren’t hyper-focused on our language?

I think so. I think it's telling that the worst word anyone can think of isn't war. I think it's even more telling that we condemn things by contrasting them with war, framing war as relatively acceptable. I think this fact ought to be unsettling because a very good case can be made that war, in fact, is the worst thing we do, and that the distinctions between war and such evils as murder or genocide can require squinting very hard to discern.

We've all heard that guns don't kill people, people kill people. There is a parallel belief that wars don't kill people, people who misuse wars, who fight bad wars, who fight wars improperly, kill people. This is a big contrast with many other evil institutions. We don't oppose child abuse selectively, holding out the possibility of just and good incidents of child abuse while opposing the bad or dumb or non-strategic or excessive cases of child abuse. We don't have Geneva Conventions for proper conduct while abusing children. We don't have human rights groups writing reports on atrocities and possible law violations committed in the course of abusing children. We don't distinguish UN-sanctioned child abuse. The same goes for numerous behaviors generally understood as always evil: slavery or rape or blood feuds or duelling or dog fighting or sexual harassment or bullying or human experimentation or — I don't know — producing piles of I'm-Ready-for-Hillary posters. We don't imagine there are good, just, and defensible cases of such actions.

And this is the core problem: not support for bombing Gaza or Afghanistan or Pakistan or Iraq or anywhere else that actually gets bombed, but support for an imaginary war in the near future between two armies with different colored jerseys and sponsors, competing on an isolated battlefield apart from any villages or towns, and suffering bravely and heroically for their non-murderous non-genocidal cause while complying with the whistles blown by the referees in the human rights organizations whenever any of the proper killing drifts into lawless imprisonment or torture or the use of improper weaponry. Support for specific possible wars in the United States right now is generally under 10 percent. More people believe in ghosts, angels, and the integrity of our electoral system than want a new U.S. war in Ukraine, Syria, Iran, or Iraq. The *Washington Post* found a little over 10 percent want a war in Ukraine but that the people who held that view were the people who placed Ukraine on the world map the furthest from its actual location, including people who placed it in the United States. These are the idiots who favor specific wars. Even Congress, speaking of idiots, on Friday told Obama no new war on Iraq.

The problem is the people, ranging across the population from morons right up to geniuses, who favor imaginary wars. Millions of people will tell you we need to be prepared for more wars in case there's another Adolf Hitler, failing to understand that the wars and militarism and weapons sales and weapons gifts — the whole U.S. role as the arsenal of democracies and dictatorships alike — increase rather than decrease dangers, that other wealthy countries spend less than 10 percent what the U.S. does on their militaries, and that 10 percent of what the U.S. spends on its military could end global starvation, provide the globe with clean water, and fund sustainable energy and agriculture programs that would go further toward preventing mass violence than any stockpiles of weaponry. Millions will tell you that the world needs a global policeman, even though polls of the world find the widespread belief that the United States is currently the greatest threat to peace on earth. In fact if you start asking people who have opposed every war in our lifetimes or in the past decade to work on opposing the entire institution of war, you'll be surprised by many of the people who say no.

I'm a big fan of a book called *Addicted to War*. I think it will probably be a powerful tool for

war abolition right up until war is abolished. But its author told me this week that he can't work to oppose all wars because he favors some of them. Specifically, he said, he doesn't want to ask Palestinians to not defend themselves. Now, there's a really vicious cycle. If we can't shut down the institution of war because Palestinians need to use it, then it's harder to go after U.S. military spending, which is of course what funds much of the weaponry being used against Palestinians. I think we should get a little clarity about what a war abolition movement does and does not do. It does not tell people what they must do when attacked. It is not focused on advising, much less instructing, the victims of war, but on preventing their victimization. It does not advise the individual victim of a mugging to turn the other cheek. But it also does not accept the disproven notion that violence is a defensive strategy for a population. Nonviolence has proven far more effective and its victories longer lasting. If people in Gaza have done anything at all to assist in their own destruction, it is not the supposed offenses of staying in their homes or visiting hospitals or playing on beaches; it is the ridiculously counterproductive firing of rockets that only encourages and provides political cover for war/ genocide/ mass murder.

I'm a huge fan of Chris Hedges and find him one of the most useful and inspiring writers we have. But he thought attacking Libya was a good idea up until it quite predictably and obviously turned out not to be. He still thinks Bosnia was a just war. I could go on through dozens of names of people who contribute mightily to an anti-war movement who oppose abolishing war. The point is not that anyone who believes in 1 good war out of 100 is to blame for the trillion dollar U.S. military budget and all the destruction it brings. The point is that they are wrong about that 1 war out of 100, and that even if they were right, the side-effects of maintaining a culture accepting of war preparations would outweigh the benefits of getting 1 war right. The lives lost by not spending \$1 trillion a year in the U.S. and another \$1 trillion in the rest of the world on useful projects like environmental protection, sustainable agriculture, medicine and hygiene absolutely dwarf the number of lives that would be saved by halting our routine level of war making.

If you talk about abolishing war entirely, as many of us have begun focusing on through a new project called [World Beyond War](#), you'll also find people who want to abolish war but believe it's impossible. War is natural, they say, inevitable, in our genes, decreed by our economy, the unavoidable result of racism or consumerism or capitalism or exceptionalism or carnivorousness or nationalism. And of course many cultural patterns interact with and facilitate war, but the idea that it's in our genes is absurd, given how many cultures in our species have done and do without it. I don't know what — if anything — people usually mean when they call something "natural" but presumably it's not the provocation of suicide, which is such a common result of participating in war, while the first case of PTSD due to war deprivation has yet to be discovered. Most of our species' existence, as hunter-gatherers, did not know war, and only the last century — a split-second in evolutionary terms — has known war that at all resembles war today. War didn't used to kill like this. Soldiers weren't conditioned to kill. Most guns picked up at Gettysburg had been loaded more than once. The big killers were diseases, even in the U.S. Civil War, the war that the U.S. media calls the most deadly because Filipinos and Koreans and Vietnamese and Iraqis don't count. Now the big killer is a disease in our thinking, a combination of what Dr. King called self-guided missiles and misguided men.

Another hurdle for abolishing war is that the idea rose to popularity in the West in the 1920s and 1930s and then sank into a category of thought that is vaguely treasonous. War abolition was tried and failed, the thinking goes, like communism or labor unions and now

we know better. While abolishing war is popular in much of the world, that fact is easily ignored by the 1% who misrepresent the 10% or 15% who live in the places that constitute the so-called International Community. Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come or weaker than an idea whose time has come and gone. Or so we think. But the Renaissance was, as its name suggests, an idea whose time came again, new and improved and victorious. The 1920s and 1930s are a resource for us. We have stockpiles of wisdom to draw upon. We have example of where things were headed and how they went of track.

Andrew Carnegie took war profits and set up an endowment with the mandate to eliminate war and then to hold a board meeting, determine the second worst thing in the world, and begin eliminating that. This sounds unique or eccentric, but is I believe a basic understanding of ethics that ought to be understood and acted upon by all of us. When someone asks me why I'm a peace activist I ask them why in the hell anyone isn't. So, reminding the Carnegie Endowment for Peace what it's legally obligated to do, and dozens of other organizations along with it, may be part of the process of drawing inspiration from the past. And of course insisting that the Nobel Committee not bestow another peace prize on a war-thirsty presidential candidate or any other advocate of war is part of that.

The case against war that is laid out at [WorldBeyondWar.org](http://WorldBeyondWar.org) includes these topics:

War is immoral.

War endangers us.

War threatens our environment.

War erodes our liberties.

War impoverishes us.

We need \$2 trillion/year for other things.

I find the case to be overwhelming and suspect many of you would agree. In fact Veterans For Peace and numerous chapters and members of Veterans For Peace have been among the first to sign on and participate. And we've begun finding that thousands of people and organizations from around the world agree as people and groups from 68 countries and rising have added their names on the website in support of ending all war. And many of these people and organizations are not peace groups. These are environmental and civic groups of all sorts and people never involved in a peace movement before. Our hope is of course to greatly enlarge the peace movement by making war abolition as mainstream as cancer abolition. But we think enlargement is not the only alteration that could benefit the peace movement. We think a focus on each antiwar project as part of a broader campaign to end the whole institution of war will significantly change how specific wars and weapons and tactics are opposed.

How many of you have heard appeals to oppose Pentagon waste? I'm in favor of Pentagon waste and opposed to Pentagon efficiency. How can we not be, when what the Pentagon does is evil? How many of you have heard of opposition to unnecessary wars that leave the military ill-prepared? I'm in favor of leaving the military ill-prepared, but not of distinguishing unnecessary from supposedly necessary wars. Which are the necessary ones? When sending missiles into Syria is stopped, in large part by public pressure, war as last resort is replaced by all sorts of other options that were always available. That would

be the case anytime any war is stopped. War is never a last resort any more than rape or child abuse is a last resort. How many of you have seen opposition to U.S. wars that focuses almost exclusively on the financial cost and the suffering endured by Americans? Did you know polls find Americans believing that Iraq benefitted and the United States suffered from the war that destroyed Iraq? What if the financial costs and the costs to the aggressor nation were in addition to moral objections to mass-slaughter rather than instead of? How many of you have seen antiwar organizations trumpet their love for troops and veterans and war holidays, or groups like the AARP that advocate for benefits for the elderly by focusing on elderly veterans, as though veterans are the most deserving? Is that good activism?

I want to celebrate those who resist and oppose war, not those who engage in it. I love Veterans For Peace because it's for peace. It's for peace in a certain powerful way, but it's the being for peace that I value. And being for peace in the straightforward meaning of being against war. Most organizations are afraid of being for peace; it always has to be peace and justice or peace and something else. Or it's peace in our hearts and peace in our homes and the world will take care of itself. Well, as Veterans For Peace know, the world doesn't take care of itself. The world is driving itself off a cliff. As Woody Allen said, I don't want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen, I want to live on in my apartment. Well, I don't want to find peace in my heart or my garden, I want to find peace in the elimination of war. At WorldBeyondWar.org is a list of projects we think may help advance that, including, among others:

- Creating an easily recognizable and joinable mainstream international movement to end all war.
- Education about war, peace, and nonviolent action — including all that is to be gained by ending war.
- Improving access to accurate information about wars. Exposing falsehoods.
- Improving access to information about successful steps away from war in other parts of the world.
- Increased understanding of partial steps as movement in the direction of eliminating, not reforming, war.
- Partial and full disarmament.
- Conversion or transition to peaceful industries.
- Closing, converting or donating foreign military bases.
- Democratizing militaries while they exist and making them truly volunteer.
- Banning foreign weapons sales and gifts.
- Outlawing profiteering from war.
- Banning the use of mercenaries and private contractors.
- Abolishing the CIA and other secret agencies.
- Promoting diplomacy and [international law](#), and consistent enforcement of laws against war, including prosecution of violators.
- Reforming or replacing the U.N. and the ICC.
- Expansion of peace teams and human shields.
- Promotion of nonmilitary foreign aid and crisis prevention.
- Placing restrictions on military recruitment and providing potential soldiers with alternatives.
- Thanking resisters for their service.
- Encouraging cultural exchange.
- Discouraging racism and nationalism.
- Developing less destructive and exploitative lifestyles.

- Expanding the use of public demonstrations and nonviolent civil resistance to enact all of these changes.

I would add learning from and working with organizations that have been, like Veterans For Peace, working toward war abolition for years now and inspiring others to do the same. And I would invite you all to work with [WorldBeyondWar](#) toward our common goal.

*David Swanson is Director of World Beyond War, host of Talk Nation Radio, author of books including War No More: The Case for Abolition, War Is A Lie, and When the World Outlawed War.*

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