

When the World Outlawed War

Review of David Swanson's New Book

By [Bruce Levine](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Global Research, January 12, 2012

Huffington Post 12 January 2012

David Swanson, since serving as press secretary in Dennis Kucinich's 2004 presidential campaign, has emerged as one of the leading anti-war activists in the United States. Swanson is not satisfied with just stopping current U.S. wars. In his previous book *War is a Lie*, Swanson made the case for the abolition of war as an instrument of national policy, and his new book, [When the World Outlawed War](#), provides an historical example of just how powerful war abolitionism can be.

Although polls today show that a large majority of U.S. citizens [oppose](#) recent and current U.S. wars and want to cut military spending to reduce the federal deficit, few Americans are engaged in anti-war activism. This political passivity is due, in part, to Americans' sense of impotence at having any impact on the U.S. government, especially when it comes to the military-industrial complex. Many of us feel powerless to stop the ever-increasing bombings, invasions, and occupations of nations which pose no threat to us.

Anti-war Americans have not always felt so defeatist. *When the World Outlawed War* tells the story of how the highly energized peace movement in the 1920s, supported by an overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens from every level of society, was able to push politicians into something quite remarkable — the Kellogg-Briand Pact and the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy. The 1920s "War Outlawry" movement was so popular that most politicians could not afford to oppose it.

The history of the 1920s that most Americans are taught is restricted to excesses of the Roaring Twenties and the failure of Prohibition. Few Americans are taught that in that decade there was also a peace movement that mobilized millions of people to get the U.S. government and the world's major powers to formally renounce war. This strong anti-war movement was supported across the political spectrum, from international isolationists to peace activists. Many Americans came to resent the governmental manipulations that had convinced them World War I was a noble cause when it was unnecessary and catastrophic in terms of casualties.

For "War Outlawrists," the institution of war was an immorality like dueling and slavery, both of which had once been considered legal and practiced but had been abolished. And so by outlawing war, this would change an entire cultural perspective on another immoral institution. They hoped, at the very least, to open the world's eyes to war's status as an immoral institution and to stigmatize it.

The American Committee for the Outlawry of War was the creation of Salmon Oliver Levinson, prominent Chicago attorney and one of the prime movers for the Kellogg-Briand

Pact. Levinson [wrote](#): “The principle underlying the outlawry of war is this: The law should always be on the moral side of every question. But the law of nations has always been on the wrong side of the war question.” In December 1919, Levinson met with Republican Sen. William Borah of Idaho, and Borah was excited by Levinson’s plan for Outlawry of War.

Borah, in contemporary terms, was similar to Congressman Ron Paul of Texas in the area of foreign policy, though Borah had far more power. In 1917, Borah had supported World War I, but he later said that his vote for World War I was the one vote he regretted. At the time of Levinson’s meeting with Borah in 1919, the Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations was Republican Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge. Lodge had promoted the Spanish American War as well as World War I, and supported a massive build-up of the Navy. However, Lodge died in 1924, at which point Borah became Chair of Foreign Relations. And Borah, who had become a major opponent of imperialism and militarism, now had significant power to influence national policy.

U.S. anti-war politicians such as Borah attained such power in the 1920s because anti-war was a popular position. *When the World Outlawed War* reminds us how very different American culture was in the 1920s. In contrast to today, in the 1920s, peace was patriotic. Swanson notes that in the 1920s, peace “did not require opposing the central agenda of the U.S. government. It did not require going up against today’s powerful military industrial complex. In the 1920s, farmers had more pull than weapons makers.”

The Kellogg-Briand Pact (named after Frank Kellogg, the U.S. Secretary of State and Aristide Briand, the French foreign minister) was signed on Aug. 27, 1928 by the United States and France, as well as world powers United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, Germany, and by several other nations. In 1929, the Kellogg-Briand Pact was ratified by the U.S. Senate by a vote of 85 to 1, and it is still on the books, as part of supreme law of the United States. The Kellogg-Briand Pact states:

The High Contracting Parties solemnly [sic] declare in the names of their respective peoples that they condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies, and renounce it, as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another.

The High Contracting Parties agree that the settlement or solution of all disputes or conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin they may be, which may arise among them, shall never be sought except by pacific means.

What good did the Kellogg-Briand Pact do? Obviously, it failed to stop wars. A common criticism of it is that it had no teeth, as it contained no sanctions against nations that might breach its provisions. The Kellogg-Briand Pact did, however, establish the practice of not recognizing territorial claims gained through war.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the War Outlawry movement is that it was a time in American history when people were still confident that they could compel politicians to take popular actions. Swanson points out:

They took a popular demand to the government. They did not go to government officials of one party or the other and ask, “What should we tell our members to ask you to do?” That inversion of representative government has become the norm, leading to public disillusionment with activist groups,

labor unions, and other organizations that purport to lobby public servants while actually treating us as the servants of the public servants. That mindset is also internalized by many U.S. residents who believe their duty is to a party or a politician, rather than the politicians' duty being to majority opinion.

If any one piece of American history can re-energize the American people to again push their politicians, David Swanson's meticulously documented *When the World Outlawed War* can do it.

Bruce E. Levine is a clinical psychologist the author of [*Get Up, Stand Up: Uniting Populists, Energizing the Defeated, and Battling the Corporate Elite*](#) (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011).

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