

What About War?

by Bob Weekley

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Unitarian Universalists, whose principles dedicate them to “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” and to “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” have long had a conflicted relationship with the practice of waging war. How do we, as a peace-loving people, resolve this tension with military service and the choice of war as national policy?

Memorial Day, the holiday that kicks off summer, is seen as a day for hot dogs, beer, and potato salad. Observed on the last Monday of May it was formerly known as **Decoration Day**. Decoration Day originated after the [American Civil War](#) to commemorate the [Union](#) and [Confederate](#) soldiers who died in the war. By the 20th century, Memorial Day had been extended to honor all Americans who died while in the military service.

My talk is not about hot dogs and beer. You may dread the reminders I bring to you today. No day passes that we are not reminded that conflict between and among nation states and groups – WAR – continues as it has since the very beginning of recorded history. But I offer no apology for this intrusion on our preference to think happy thoughts. As moral citizens we must reflect on this, at least today.

Just this week: Russia said it will increase its build up of offensive weapons including nuclear weapons because Russia says it fears aggressive actions by the U.S. and NATO. The U.S. says that Russia is in violation of the treaty on intermediate range nuclear weapons and must be punished. North Korea says they want to launch an ICBM that can reach the U.S. We have learned that China has made the decision to equip her long-range ICBMs with multiple independently targeted nuclear warheads that can reach the U.S. The self-proclaimed Islamic State has captured major cities in Iraq, a nation that the U.S. spent thousands of lives to bring peace to. Around the world thousands of refugees, fleeing their homes because of war, are seeking refuge – wherever it can be found. We have U.S. politicians and pundits calling for more war. And all that, just this week.

War is an evil of the human race. From the earliest excavations of prehistoric peoples we find evidence of warring between groups. As human organization developed from small tribes to larger tribes, to city-states, then to nation states -- at each increasing stage of civilization we observe new levels of waging war. From clubs, to bows and arrows, to swords and spears, to guns and artillery, to mines, tanks, and to nuclear weapons, technology has increased in deadliness -- but the tendency to engage in conflict has remained constant. Whether we study the history

of Europe, or Asia, or North America, or South America, or Africa, we are confronted by war after war after war.

The long-running debate within societies has been between the idealists and the realists. I know this debate well.

- Brother Richard and I speaking on the same subject today ...
- Experience of meeting with pacifists and anti-war counselors ...
- Experience of meeting with protestors at West Point ...
- And of having to walk across the bodies of thousands of protestors blocking entrances at the Pentagon...
- Of wearing my uniform in public and being tearfully hugged, and also of being reviled by others as a “baby killer”.

The ancient Tao Te Ching illustrates how long this debate between the idealists and the realists has continued:

Weapons are instruments of coercion and devils of death. Resort to them only in dire necessity. Peace is our natural state of being.

If weapons must be wielded to defend ourselves and we are victorious, never rejoice. Can there be joy over the slaughter of others?

On joyous occasions we attune with the yang side.

On sad occasions, with the yin.

Thoughtful men and women have shared their views on war with us. Let’s hear some quotations from them. [Congregants will read the quotation I handed to them at the beginning of the service.]

WAR QUOTES

1. I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.

-Dwight D. Eisenhower, U.S. general and 34th president (1890-1969)

4. Non-violence leads to the highest ethics, which is the goal of all evolution. Until we stop harming all other living beings, we are still savages.

-Thomas Edison, inventor (1847-1931)

6. Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must

realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.

-Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister during World War II (1874-1965)

7. Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

-Dwight D. Eisenhower, US general and 34th president (1890-1969)

8. I'm sure that someday children in schools will study the history of the men who made war as you study an absurdity. They'll be shocked, just as today we're shocked with cannibalism.

-Golda Meir, Israeli Prime Minister (1898-1978)

9. Man can be the most affectionate and altruistic of creatures, yet he's potentially more vicious than any other. He is the only one who can be persuaded to hate millions of his own kind whom he has never seen and to kill as many as he can lay his hands on in the name of his tribe or his God.

-Benjamin Spock, pediatrician and author (1903-1998)

11. There's never been a true war that wasn't fought between two sets of people who were certain they were in the right. The really dangerous people believe they are doing whatever they are doing solely and only because it is without question the right thing to do. And that is what makes them dangerous.

-Neil Gaiman, writer (b. 1960)

12. The only way human beings can win a war is to prevent it.

-General George Marshall, US Army Chief of Staff, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Nobel laureate (1880-1959)

13. Though I have been trained as a soldier, and participated in many battles, there never was a time when, in my opinion, some way could not be found to prevent the drawing of the sword.

-Ulysses S. Grant, military commander, 18th US President (1822-1885)

15. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

-Carl Sagan, astronomer and writer (1934-1996)

17. Of course the people don't want war...that is understood. But voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That's easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and for exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.

-Hermann Goering, Commander in Chief of the German Luftwaffe, World War II

18. If there be one principle more deeply rooted than any other in the mind of every American, it is that we should have nothing to do with conquest.

-Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) letter July 28. 1791

19. Anyone who has ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war.

-Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of the German Empire (1815-1898)

20. To delight in war is a merit in the soldier, a dangerous quality in the

captain and a positive crime in a statesman.

George Santayana, U.S. philosopher, poet (1863-1952),

21. I gave my life for freedom -- this I know:

For those who bade me fight had told me so.

W.N. Ewer (1885-1976), British journalist

22. If any question why we died,

Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), British author, poet

23. War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children.

-Jimmy Carter, 39th US President, Nobel laureate (b. 1924)

25. To be prepared for war is the most effectual means to promote peace.

-George Washington, in an address to Georgetown students in August 1797

26. The wars of the twentieth century teach us that victory in war is only possible through sacrifice. In World War II alone, the U.S. military sustained almost 300,000 battle deaths and about 100,000 deaths from other causes. The war lasted 2,174 days and claimed an average of 27,600 lives every day, or 1,150 an hour, or nineteen a minute, or one death every three seconds.

-Rick Atkinson, historian

Unitarians have always been on the side of peace and nonviolence. Our principles dedicate us to "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all," and we advocate "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." But also, we UUs are citizens of a nation that was born out of armed rebellion, that has fought numerous wars to defend and maintain our nation and our freedom. We fought a long and horrible war to maintain the integrity of the United States. How have we,

as Unitarian Universalists, handled this conflict of spirit? The answer: with inconsistency.

Historically Unitarians and Universalists have opposed war as well as supported it. UUs have been pacifists as well as soldiers -- and all shades in between. During the Vietnam War many UUs were caught up in the anti-war movement. Unitarians provided assistance to men who wanted to avoid the draft and military service. The UUA withdrew its chaplains from serving our military services. Now the tide has turned.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has, it seems, repented. Rev. William Sinkford as UUA president in 2008 changed the tone. At the UUA General Assembly that year he called out and honored servicemen and veterans. Veterans who were shunned are now welcomed. The UUA has restored its support of the military services by providing military chaplains – some 25 are now on active duty or in training to be. A “Military Ministry Tool Kit” has been made available to assist congregations in meeting the needs of military members. Chaplains have handed out over 20,000 *Bless All Who Serve* booklets. **[show booklet]** This booklet has been adopted by the chaplains of other denominations.

Last July a UU chaplain, Rev. Rebekah Montgomery, was named Chaplain of the year by the Military Chaplains Association. She deployed to Afghanistan during the early days of that war, then one of only 3 chaplains, to serve 3,000 soldiers there. She served for 18 months in Afghanistan and received a bronze star for her service in combat. This year, another UU minister, Rev. Sarah Lammert, has been elected to the Executive Committee of the National Conference of Ministry to the Armed Forces.

Can we hate war and, at the same time, support the military of our country? We need to think clearly about the subject of war, not simply react emotionally. In a recent speech by General McMasters, a remarkable soldier and scholar, he said:

There is a tendency in the United States to confuse the study of war and warfare with militarism. Thinking clearly about the problem of war and warfare, however, is both an unfortunate necessity and the best way to prevent it. As the English theologian, writer, and philosopher G.K. Chesterton observed, ‘War is not the best way of settling differences, but it is the only way of preventing them being settled for you.’ As George Washington, who addressed Georgetown students in August 1797 observed, ‘To be prepared for war is the most effectual means to promote peace.’ One of the patterns of American military history is to be unprepared for war either because of wishful thinking or a failure to consider continuities in the nature of war – especially war’s political and human dimensions.

So why do we Americans join and serve in the military, with all of its sacrifices and dangers? Our former Virginia senator, James Webb, a combat hero, recently wrote about the Vietnam generation.

My heroes are the young men who faced the issues of war and possible death, and then weighed those concerns against obligations to their country. Citizen-soldiers who interrupted their personal and professional lives at their most formative stage. In the timeless phrase of the Confederate Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery, 'not for fame or reward, not for place or for rank, but in simple obedience to duty, as they understood it.'

The current president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Peter Morales, challenges us this way:

Veterans sacrifice in tremendous ways to put the best interests of future generations ahead of themselves. That is honorable and deserving of our respect. Morales asks: How do you honor and welcome veterans into your faith community? How do they freely share their stories and unique perspectives on war and peace?

That is quite an about-face. I think it is a wakeup call for us, as citizens and as people of faith, to honor those who have sacrificed on behalf of all of us.

So on this Memorial Day may we pause to remember and honor those who sacrificed their all for love of country. And also, let us stand and support the efforts of our government and our charitable organizations that are working to help those who have returned from our wars with deep wounds in mind or body.

So be it.