Memorial Day Speech
Progressive Editor Assails Obama’s Selling of War and Empire

Prepared remarks of Matthew Rothschild, the editor of The Progressive magazine, delivered at the Veterans for Peace rally in Madison on Memorial Day.

I’d like to thank Veterans for Peace for inviting me to speak this Memorial Day, and I’d like to thank you all for coming.

On Memorial Day, it’s customary to honor soldiers who have lost their lives. And so we do so.

And while it may not be customary, it’s necessary on Memorial Day to ask what did they lose their lives for, and whom did they lose their lives for.

In almost every war, they did not die for their country. They died for their country’s rulers, the politicians who lie about the real reasons for war. They died for the corporations that profit from war and for the top 1 percent of Americans who run this country. They died for a concept, the concept of nationalism, which enables people to kill and to give up their own lives for an inflated sense of their own country’s mission.

Or they died for the concept of religion, which enables people to kill and to give up their own lives for a phantom god.

And while it may not be customary, it’s necessary on Memorial Day to honor the innocent people killed in our wars.

John Tirman’s new book, The Deaths of Others, tallies them up. In the Korean War, about three million civilians died.

In the Vietnam War, about three million civilians died. In Bush’s Iraq War, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians died.

And while it may not be customary, it’s necessary on Memorial Day to honor the duped or conscripted soldiers of our so-called enemies. The 100,000 Iraqi soldiers in the first Gulf War, for instance, many of whom the United States mowed down in the so-called Turkey Shoot.

And while it may not be customary, it’s necessary on Memorial Day to honor not just war veterans but peace veterans who have lost their lives.

Adam Hochschild’s new book, To End All Wars, points out what University of Wisconsin history professor Harvey Goldberg taught us, also: that the real heroes of World War I were not the soldiers but the peace activists like Bertrand Russell and Eugene Victor Debs.

So today I honor the memory of peace veterans whom I’ve known and who’ve had an influence on me.

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"Good War" an Oxymoron

For some time now, when somebody learns that I am a veteran of World War II he or she makes a big deal out of thanking me profusely for my service to my country. Setting aside that the war in question provided a rationale for developing what I consider to be an unthinkable category of weapons, I take no particular pride in having participated in the war and I have difficulty with all this adulation. Let me try to explain why.

To begin, one has to examine the circumstances. Out of a population of 140 million Americans, 16 million, overwhelmingly males, served in the armed forces. This was 11% of the population. In other words, a whole generation of American men (my generation) participated. Our fathers had fought what they were told was the "war to end all wars." But the vindictive provisions of that war’s peace treaty, made it inevitable that we would have to go to war again “to make the world safe for democracy.” Our fathers’ generation presented us with a major economic collapse and then a diplomatic disaster.

We didn’t actually have much choice in the matter. Furthermore, although there was an euphoric welcome for the returning veterans, it didn’t last; one out of every nine Americans was a veteran who was seeking employment, education and a home. By the time I returned to civilian life in 1948, many people were expressing open annoyance with them. I can’t help asking, “Where was all this adulation 60 years ago?”

Recently, I started to enumerate all the friends and classmates I had lost in that war. The list was getting pretty long when I decided that the task was pointless and gave it up. American casualties in World War II were 590,000. Granted, that’s not quite four percent, but they were real young people with great potential, not just numbers. Was this what happens in a “good war?”

Of course, it’s a given that soldiers and sailors die in wars. But World War II, to an extent far greater than any previous war, ratified the mass annihilation of civilian, non-combatant populations. Was this the policy of a “good war?”

I have always said that World War II was won by the overwhelming productivity of American factories. Military contractors were awarded “cost plus ten percent” contracts, which just encouraged waste. As a consequence, manufacturing the instruments of war became, and remains to this day, an extremely profitable endeavor. Was this what you would hope for with a “good war?”

Finally, and most grievously, the war produced a feeling of superiority with many of the characteristics of what Theodor Adorno identified as the "authoritarian personality"—an inability to recognize the validity of any culture, or view of the world, that differs from ours and a tendency to over-react to any deviation from what they perceive to be right. Ultimately this is translated into a desire to remake the world in our image. As a consequence we have experienced “the cold war,” and today’s “pax Americana.” Is there any way you can attribute this to a “good war?”

So, let’s think more carefully about whether we should refer to World War II as “the good war!”
Dr. James C. Allen (1928-2011)

Jim Allen was a lifetime member of Veterans for Peace, joining the national organization many years before Chapter 25 was founded. He was always supportive and active, and generously made it possible for board members to attend national conventions. He also donated a stipend assisting both the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice and Veterans for Peace.

He wrote the Dr. James C. Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act (HR 797), which was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2007. The bill was sponsored by Tammy Baldwin and provided much needed additional compensation for veterans of any era who lost vision in one eye while serving in the military.

I will greatly miss Jim's presence at our meetings. He was always quiet and listened carefully. His advice was unfailingly accurate. His acceptance of his illness late in life and his humility were examples for me.

When I first asked to interview Jim for the book Long Shadows: Veterans’ Paths to Peace, he said that he wasn't important enough to be included. "I didn't do anything special," he told me, regarding his service during the war in Korea and during the years he served veterans as an ophthalmologist at the Madison VA Hospital from 1967 to 2000. Finally he agreed to an oral history, and Jim's story is preserved in the book.

For years, during controversial times, one of my favorite experiences was to give Jim a ride to and from VFP meetings when he didn't ride his bicycle or take the bus. I miss Jim Allen very much. He was a wonderful friend and perfect example of a veteran who followed a path to peace. He was small in stature but left a large legacy of selfless service for peace.

On Memorial Day 2010, Chapter 25 presented Jim with a small tribute for his work for peace and justice. It contained a simple statement he made during the interview for Long Shadows, when he said: "We must do the best we can to promote peace."

Jim Allen did his best.

David Giffey
We all have heard the famous slogan that says, “War is not the answer.” We all have taken it and digested it and even made it a part of our own. But do we really know why war is not the answer? Do we even know what the question is? In the following paragraphs I will explain what the question is and what the real answer is.

I never sat down to think about what “the question” was until I joined a philosophy class and stumbled upon the application question for this scholarship. Both events could not have occurred at a better time. I read The Republic by Plato in which he proposes an alternative world order and then I looked at our world. Whether Plato’s Republic would be possible or not is not the subject at hand—it’s why there is war.

Plato claims that it is desire in the human soul that creates selfishness and therefore clashes between humans. Siddhartha Gautama (otherwise known as Buddha) claimed that the reason people suffer is because they don’t stop wanting things. I could continue to quote well-known thinkers to make my statement but instead I will be clear on what the question is: Why do we have desires that are consuming us?

Needs are not the same thing as desires. Needs are basic requirements any human has to live well and be happy. Human needs are essentials such as food and shelter, health and love. Anything beyond that spectrum is not required—it is an excess. We get accustomed to excesses and suddenly can’t stand being without them. If a man only needs about eight hours a day to sleep but then starts sleeping an hour more because he is lazy and can afford it, he will eventually end up sleeping up to eleven or twelve hours a day. He will get so used to those unnecessary hours of sleep that he won’t be able to function again with just eight hours of sleep.

Succumbing to desires is easy and we are willing to do anything to keep up our excesses, even the suffering of others. Our appetite for excess and denial of any sacrifice is our own downfall and war is just another byproduct.

Our society is a massive nursery for desire. Little girls are socialized into thinking they have to achieve inhuman, digitally-edited bodies in order to please boys. Teenagers are socialized into thinking that their ultimate purpose is to be different even if it means taking extreme measures in doing so. Our methods of transportation are degrading the very air we breathe. Humanity today has a monstrously energetic appetite, unmatched in history and it is consuming the world at an alarmingly exponential rate. The United States government has released a statement that they will use military force to access foreign oil. The government is about to fight and kill in order to keep our country’s inhumane lust for energy alive. We want more than what we have and, if we consume more than what we need, we will always want more. It is our human nature.

Now how does this world of desire tie in with war? Wars are the defense of our desire by the suffering of our fellow men and women. Let’s look at some classic examples: World War II was triggered by a man who had ambitions of dominating other people. The American Revolution was fought because other men wanted to exert their power over us. The wars in the Americas ended the Aztec and Mayan empires centuries ago were caused because of the insatiable hunger for gold and by the Spanish monarchs. Even today, the conflicts in the Middle East are disguised as the defense of freedom when in reality they are wars to keep our interests safe in the oil-producing Middle East.

Wars are rampant and inevitable if we maintain our desires, so reducing our desires is necessary. We have the wrong idea that more means better and we equate this with happiness. Our pursuit of happiness does not require war. If we practice temperance and realize that we, as humans, have exceeded what we need, we will be on the road to ending war. Temperance seems like a colossal task but we can achieve it by changing our society.

War is always unethical and unnecessary and impossible to eliminate in a society that allows it to flourish.

We humans have to change our mindsets and lives in order to socialize people back into believing that we can be happy by just meeting our needs. Penthouses and Bugatti cars don’t provide happiness. What we need is to switch back to a simpler lifestyle. Not one as simple as we can get, but simpler. We need to change the world, so that we only want what we need, not what we don’t.

(Ed. Note: Ulises plans to attend Madison College in the Fall then transfer to the UW for his last two years.)
(Rothschild ,Continued from page 1)

I honor Clarence Kailin, veteran of the Abraham Lincoln brigade and longtime Madison peace and justice activist, who is honored in this park.

And today I honor the memory of Sam Day, the great Madison anti-nuclear activist and practitioner of civil disobedience, and Erwin Knoll, my predecessor at The Progressive and a fierce opponent of all war.

And today I honor the memory of Midge Miller, who, by organizing Eugene McCarthy’s campaign, helped bring down LBJ.

And today I honor the memory of Nan Cheney, who helped put together the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice.

And today, I honor the memory of Linda Farley, who stood for peace and for universal health care.

And today I honor the memory of Ben Masel, who stood for peace, and civil liberties, and the legalization of marijuana.

And in the national peace community, I honor Molly Ivins, who used all of her writing energy while fighting cancer to oppose Bush’s Iraq War.

I honor June Jordan, a warrior for peace.

I honor Andrea Lewis, a peaceful presence behind the mic at KPFA.

I honor, most dearly, Howard Zinn himself.

So where are we, this Memorial Day, as a nation?

We’re a nation that is creating more tombstones for next year’s Memorial Day.

We have a President much more adept in the rhetoric of war and more agile in the governing of empire than his goonzo predecessor.

More bombs, less bombast is Obama’s motto.

Obama has just this weekend violated the War Powers Act for the second time with his bombings in Libya.

The first time was by sending bombers there when there was no imminent risk from Libya.

And this second time was by not getting approval from Congress within 60 days, as required by statute.

He said, on Friday, the 60th day, in a letter to Congress that “it is better” to get Congressional support, but he knew it was too late for that.

And note the phrase “it is better.”

Obama acts as though getting approval from Congress is a mere option, a mere preference, not the law or the Constitution that he’s obliged to follow.

This is the audacity of power.

So that’s Libya, the third war he is waging.

“More bombs, less bombast is Obama’s motto.”

The second is Afghanistan, the war he has escalated by tripling the number of U.S. troops there to 100,000. Already, 1,571 U.S. troops have died in Afghanistan, and the entire reasons for them being there—to overthrow the Taliban, find bin Laden, and rout Al Qaeda—have been accomplished. But we’re still there because Obama and the Pentagon see the strategic value of a country sandwiched between Iran and China.

The first is still the war in Iraq, which has taken the lives of 4,442 of our soldiers and wounded more than 30,000.

Today, we still have 50,000 U.S. troops there, and Obama had vowed to bring them home by now and then extended it until the end of this year, and now wants an extension on the extension. Can you say a permanent military presence, anyone?

So he’s started one war, against Libya. He’s escalated another, in Afghanistan. And he hasn’t ended the third in Iraq. But his rhetoric has been less bellicose than Bush’s, his manner less cowboy.

Obama is a sophisticated warmonger, a smooth manager of the empire.

But like his predecessor, he feeds the American people the drivel that we are the greatest country on Earth with a “special burden” to carry the torch of freedom around the world. Unfortunately, the historical record does not bear that out and many of the graves being visited today are graves of soldiers who went not to fight for freedom but to fight for the U.S. empire.

When he won the Nobel Peace Prize Obama went to Oslo and gave one of the most inappropriate speeches ever delivered at that podium. He used the occasion to justify war. He said war is sometimes necessary “because of the imperfections of man.”

We are here today to say that war is unnecessary.

We are here today to say that war comes about not because of the imperfections of man but because of the unequal distribution of power and the force of irrational ideas.

We can challenge that unequal distribution of power.

We can combat those irrational ideas.

So that a generation from now, or two generations from now, it won’t be necessary to salute our war dead, but it will be customary to salute our peace activists.

Please consider contributing to Madison Veterans for Peace.

We are a 501 (c)(3) tax deductible non-profit organization. Send contributions to the address below.
High Schoolers given Alternatives to the Military

by David Giffey

The need to inform high school students and their families about alternatives to joining the armed forces grows with each year of continued and new U.S. wars around the globe.

Two important reasons for providing young people with information about alternatives to the military are:

• For many high school students, graduation means hitting the wall of unemployment because jobs don’t seem to be available, and conversely,

• As more Americans tire of wasting lives and money on wars, they are more willing to consider alternatives to joining the military.

This is a dilemma for many citizens because both points are true. There aren’t any jobs and the wars are unpopular.

However, any serious consideration of educating ourselves and others regarding alternatives to the military is threatened by the unlimited resources available to military recruiters ($7 billion annually), and the manner in which many public school administrators and teachers welcome recruiters into schools and classrooms.

For the past nine years, the No Child Left Behind Act has provided an intimidation factor that sets the standard for turning student data over to recruiters unless the parents opt out. Since every school district policy differs—and there are 424 public school districts in Wisconsin—we are required to approach schools one-by-one, a daunting project.

Members of Veterans for Peace, with the help of other peace groups and individuals, have worked in the area of counter-recruiting in Wisconsin for most of the last decade. While our impact is difficult to evaluate and the work can be frustrating, some very positive gains can be identified. We have learned some things.

A critically important part of reaching high school students is our scholarship program. It has grown incrementally from offering a scholarship in one high school to five, and we plan to add one or two more next year.

The scholarship program has the effect over time of making more students and families aware of the peace movement through acquainting them with Veterans for Peace.

To apply for our scholarships, we set the criteria by asking for an essay on the topic “Why I Believe War Is Not the Answer.” Because the students see Veterans for Peace counter recruiters in the lunchroom several times during the school year, and because we provide information about the scholarships, the number of applicants continues to grow. This year seven students, 5 percent of the graduating class, wrote essays for the VFP scholarship in a small, rural school where our program has been present for four years.

Most of the schools, especially the small rural schools that have become prime military recruitment targets, have annual awards programs to present the scholarships. The programs enable us to describe

The programs enable us to describe Veterans for Peace and our mission of abolishing war to an audience of hundreds of students, family members and friends, and then to present our scholarship check and certificates or other prizes to the student essayists. I can’t imagine a better forum for reaching such a cross section of citizens.

Next year should be even better for advancing the cause of peace and justice in high schools because we have been assured by leaders of the building and trades unions in our area that they will join us when we visit high schools to talk to students about apprenticeship programs.

In the past, we’ve tried to appeal to ideals and good judgment while being unable to focus on actual job programs and careers as alternatives to the military. With the help of trade unionists, many more doors might be opened.

As the scholarship essays written by students prove, young people have their heads on straight about the costs of war. Their heartfelt essays are the foundations for growth in their personal lives and for the cause of peace and justice. With encouragement and support, young people can become firmly committed peace activists able to flourish in a complicated world.
We Must Abandon The Old Fashioned “War Machine”

By Sam Lechnir

War is a centuries-old way to settle a dispute. It is a way of saying, “I’m better and stronger because I can kill more of your people.” This concept of war seems ethically wrong to me. As children we were taught to settle our disputes with words, not violence. Yet, in order to solve the biggest conflicts in the world, we resort to violence. Continuing violence is not the way to bring peace on earth obviously, so why not create a new plan?

If we, the people, can avoid violence and war, then we will be able to move forward as a whole race of human beings and we will be able to focus on things that will be beneficial to all of us.

The solution, of course, will not be an easy one to come up with. As stated before, this has been the way to solve conflicts from very early in human history all the way up to today. But as time goes on, we continue to find better solutions to obsolete objects that benefit everyone; for example, the tractor has replaced the horse and the car has replaced the buggy. I do believe that the “war machine” can be undone by a more efficient and beneficial method. There are too many up-sides to ending war. The ending of all wars will lead to the abolishing of most international tension, which will definitely help everyone in the world economically. It will also lead to the end of countless innocent people dying every day from conflicts around the world.

Even the United States is guilty of this as we showed in World War II when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. The money that would be saved from not going to war would be a tremendous amount. The billions and billions of dollars spent on wars could go to much better conflicts. This money could be used to help the fight against poverty and hunger. Our economy would be greatly benefited. Why waste money on a war when sometimes, as in the case of the Vietnam War, people forget what they are fighting for and they only fight to stay alive? While the leaders of the wars are sitting behind desks giving orders, the young men fighting the wars for them are being destroyed, and for what purpose? They create all of the bombs, all of the guns for the young men to fire, but they themselves will not see a bit of what actually goes on. These days, the presidents say that they want to get the troops home as soon as possible. Well, they have been saying that for a while now and we continue to send troops overseas. We need to find a better solution, and soon. If there happened to be another World War, it would be catastrophic. With the technology available today, who knows what destruction would take place? So for the sake of mankind, a new solution needs to be obtained. If not, the world as we know it will possibly be changed forever. (Ed. Note: Sam intends to study green technology at the University of Wisconsin in the Fall)

Anti Nuke Display
Set For Aug. 15-16 at Capitol Lakes

Veterans For Peace’s working group on nuclear weapons has a traveling exhibit called Hiroshima-Nagasaki Legacy. Chapter 25 and Capitol Lakes Retirement Center have cooperated in bringing this exhibit to Madison. This exhibit is comprised of some forty panels containing photographs, graphics, poetry and artwork, designed “to inform, remind and educate about the use of nuclear weapons through the eyes of those who witnessed the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945 (66 years ago).

Since its original display in 1996, two panels, illustrating the negative aspects of nuclear weapons tests during the “cold war” period, have been added. This display is designed to emphasize the possible devastating consequences of any possible use of the ever more powerful nuclear weapons available today.

The exhibit will be in Capitol Lakes Retirement Center’s Grand Hall at 333 W Main Street, Madison and will be open to the public from 9 AM to 8 PM on Friday and Saturday, July 15 and 16. Lincoln Grahlfs, VFP member and Capitol Lakes resident, will give a brief talk about the display at 10 AM on July 15.

VFP volunteers are also needed at 6:15 pm July 14 to help setup the display and at 8 PM on the 16th to help take it down.

A Power Point slide show of the exhibit can be found at www.scpeacecenter.org, the website of the Peace Center in State College, Pennsylvania.
Veterans for Peace

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