

Peace in the 21st Century

Written by John Gittings

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JOHN GITTINGS, FEB 29 2012

One might suppose that the prospects for peace in the 21st century must be better than they had been for the 20th century – or at least that they could hardly be worse. We look back today on a previous century eight out of whose ten decades featured prolonged war, hot or cold, covering much of the globe for most of the time. We see the period between the two world wars as a temporary interval of peace, and the whole history of this period as a continuum in which conflict between nation-states became globalised, and in which the means of war reached their height of destructiveness. Today by contrast it is economic and cultural intercourse which have become globalised, not war. There is a greater shared sense of international obligation towards inequality and poverty than ever before. Such wars as do take place, vicious though they may be, are localised. Colonialism and imperialism belong to the past, war is no longer glorified, and peace is a universal goal: what more could we want?

And yet it would be hard to find any contemporary observer willing to predict that this will be a century of peace. To the contrary, the mood of optimism – perverse at times – which kept hopes of a better future alive throughout the great upheavals of the 20th century – has completely dissipated. The reasons for this are clear. The expectation, or at least hope, that peace could be maintained through the collective efforts of an international body has waned to almost zero. Technological innovation is no longer seen as a reliable source of answers to any new economic or environmental challenge which may emerge. The end of the cold war, contrary to predictions, did not clear the way for finding solutions to hitherto intractable problems such as the Israel-Palestine crisis: instead, new conflict-prone issues arose in central Europe and the Middle East as the grip of the superpowers was loosened. A new war has begun, so it is claimed, between Islamist extremism and liberal democratic values, which will be of a “generational” nature. Talk of reforming the United Nations – a necessary prerequisite for giving that organisation the peace-making powers which had been intended for it but never realised – has soon faded.

The “peace dividend” which was supposed to accrue from the easing of international tension never materialised. Great aims were proclaimed – to take serious steps towards global nuclear disarmament at the Geneva Conference; to tackle world poverty more effectively through the Millennium Goals – but not achieved. The victory of one economic system over another proved to be a Pyrrhic triumph: unrestrained capitalism and marketisation looks likely to plunge the world into a worse economic disaster than that of the Great Depression. Sooner than we think, environmental disasters provoked by global warming and other human-made phenomena – which we humans seem powerless to reverse – will have an even more dire effect on the world economy. And the threat of nuclear devastation has not disappeared with the cold war. The nuclear powers have failed to honour the implicit bargain in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty that they should move credibly towards nuclear disarmament in return for restraint by the non-nuclear powers.

If this analysis is correct, then at some point in the unfolding 21st century we shall find ourselves confronted by a perfect storm of catastrophe on all these fronts. So what is to be done? The starting-point must be the belief that human action and endeavour *does* make a difference. The world would be an even more dangerous place – and perhaps would no longer exist – if it had not been for the efforts of those campaigning in different ways for peace and disarmament during the cold war. As President Eisenhower himself once acknowledged, nuclear weapons are “not as powerful as popular opinion today”.

It may sound slightly old-fashioned to campaign for peace these days: the p-word has never really recovered from

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being misappropriated for propaganda purposes by both the US and the Soviet Union. – and discredited by them when it was used by genuine campaigners for peace. But peace in its fullest sense means meeting these many challenges in a coordinated way, with a coherent, unified, agenda. The cause of nuclear disarmament, on its own, will never overcome the status quo defended by the nuclear weapon states. The case for renewable alternatives to current energy sources will never prevail, in isolation, against global demand for ever more energy. The need for trade and aid policies to narrow the gap between rich and poor will be out-trumped by the globalising market forces which widen it. The search for ways to strengthen international peace-keeping and arbitration will be no match for the dominance of national interest and dependence on worst-case scenarios.

We need to rediscover and enlarge the art of peace, which is or should be as complex a science as the art of war. Its essential principles have been elaborated over past millennia, by the ancient Chinese philosophers, by the early Christian fathers, by humanist peace scholars and those of the Enlightenment, by the peace advocates of the 19th century into the 20th, and they remain as valid as ever today. First, the hidden costs of war will almost always outweigh its anticipated benefits (a lesson brought home by Iraq and Afghanistan). As Erasmus put it, “Hardly any peace is so bad that it isn’t preferable to the most justifiable war”.

Second, one needs to persevere in negotiation and conciliation, and to have the appropriate mechanisms (in the present day, a more effective UN) for doing this effectively. In the words of St Augustine, “It is a higher glory still to stay war with a word, than to slay men with a sword”. Third, national peace will only be secured in a wider environment where injustice, inequality, and poverty are tackled effectively. As Mikhail Gorbachev said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, “Peace is the movement towards globality and universality of civilization. Never before has the idea that peace is indivisible been so true as it is now.”

The goal should be to put peace back on the popular agenda, in a post-cold war climate where terrorism and conflict have too often become the default mode of discourse. This will require a more explicit and coordinated effort bringing together the academic world of peace research and conflict resolution, the NGO world of governance and human security, the relatively weak pro-UN/internationalism lobby, the environmental movements, the new networks of trans-national civil society and the more progressive sections of the media. A globalised world requires a globalised effort for peace.

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