

Notes on War and Freedom

Written by Ramsey Clark, as published in The Voluntaryist, August 1992.

War is more destructive of freedom than any other human activity. Any violation of civil liberties is easily justified in times of war and the threat of war, however unnecessary for security, harmful to its victims, irrational, unfair, or even detrimental to the war effort itself.

The unity of purpose war requires is intolerant of any dissent or failure to subordinate individual conscience and desire to military command. Absolute obedience to authority is the first rule of war.

Dehumanization and hatred of enemies are essential to create a human capacity for the horrors of war and the assault on liberty alike. A people willing to support killing will not hesitate to crush freedom.

Sometimes government will derive satisfaction from interfering with liberty as a way of showing its support for war. This may be understandable when the activity suppressed is directed against the conduct of the war. But government intervention also occurs when the hated activity is purely an affirmation of freedom, as when Upton Sinclair was arrested for reading the Bill of Rights. Freedom after all is an enemy of war. Sadly the American people more often than not have applauded the assault on liberty by the war lover.

There is little room for freedom when a people are under fire. Liberty will keep her head down when she is being shot at like everyone else. We can hear a lonely Eugene Debs observe on his way to prison for opposing U.S. involvement in World War I: "It is extremely dangerous to exercise the constitutional right of free speech in a country fighting to make the world safe for democracy."

The antagonism between war and freedom is inherent. War is rule by force. Freedom, as Robert Maynard Hutchins helpfully defined it, is the negation of force. A war-time government will act to crush freedom because a people who wants freedom will resist war.

It follows that in freedom is the preservation of peace. The very quest for freedom involves finding ways of preventing war. It ought to be clear that the ultimate subversion of the Bill of Rights and the more comprehensive idea of freedom is the misbegotten belief that freedom can be either defended or obtained by force. In war all participants seek to have their way by violence. Whatever the intentions of the combatants or the policy of the prevailing party after war, freedom has been diminished.

Far from recoiling at war's inhumanity, the victor and the vanquished seek superior force as the only way to win. Each prepares for the next war while liberty is held in thrall to

militarism. Jorge Luis Borges in his powerful story "Deutsches Requiem" depicts a captured Nazi concentration camp commander awaiting execution who declares ecstatically that although the Fatherland was destroyed, Nazism prevailed because its faith was in the sword and those who destroyed the fatherland adopted its faith.

Throughout history, nation-states have spoken of their commitment to freedom and desire for peace while planning war. In Plato's dialogue *The Laws*, the anonymous Athenian Stranger argues that the good legislator orders "war for the sake of peace." The more candid Cleinas of Crete observes of his own country, "I am greatly mistaken if war is not the entire aim and object of our institutions." The Athenian Stranger, thought by most scholars to represent Plato himself, by others Socrates, by all the wisdom of Attica, saw war as a means with peace as its end. Cleinas, with greater simplicity, saw a world in eternal struggle among nations for domination.

For both views the result has been the same. War has been the dominant experience of nearly every generation for virtually every nation, culture and civilization that history records. And the little bit of uneasy peace and partial freedom that has been known was found despite, and not because of, war.