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World Peace: A First Step
*Commentary for the
Special Issue on Peace, Conflict and War*

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The first step in achieving peace on earth must be the elimination of war and threats of war. Citizens of the United States are in a better position than others to make this happen. We spend significant portions of our tax dollars, and borrow money from foreign countries, to wage wars. We sell weapons and destabilize governments. We prioritize funding for war over spending on education, medical research, alternative energy sources, healthcare, housing and food for the needy, a balanced budget and almost everything else that can have a positive impact on this planet's quality of life.

The U.S. has a long history of waging war, from the Native American nations decimated by the U.S. Army to the recent bombing of tribal areas in Pakistan. During my lifetime, the U.S. has bombed more than 20 countries. Since the end of World War II, no other country has killed and injured more people living outside of its borders. We spend more on war, and have more soldiers in other countries, than any other nation.

War is glorified in our culture. The U.S. honors its military and reinforces warrior behaviors with monuments to war-time presidents, memorials to wars and to those who have served and died in wars, with medals, promotions, ceremonies, even vanity license plates and discounts at Kmart® and Home Depot®. Children are taught that soldiers are heroes and role models. These activities and symbols are all part of sustaining the culture of war. U.S. leaders continually reinforce this by

referring to those in the military as heroes.

One reason the U.S. wages so many wars is that few citizens speak out publicly against them. Most Americans remain silent while our military kills and wounds children, mothers, and other civilians. In a representative government such as ours, with members of the U.S. House of Representatives seeking election every two years, the government will be responsive to widespread antiwar sentiment, just as it eventually was to the civil rights movement. We have the power to take action. It's only a matter of changing our culture slightly so that more citizens feel comfortable speaking out.

If our goal is world peace, then we must oppose military solutions including invasion, occupation, production of weapons of mass destruction, use of weapons, and/or threats of war. Imagine the impact if one percent of the population marched in the next antiwar rally. What if one percent of voters contacted their representatives in Congress asking for an end to the Afghan war? Most people now recognize those who fought for civil rights as heroes. What if we could change our culture so that those who demand peace are also appreciated and not considered to be unpatriotic, anti-military, or un-American?

There are few indicators that American society values those who oppose war. As President John F. Kennedy wrote, "War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today" (Kennedy, n.d.). We can use simple behavioral principles to modify our culture and increase the number of people who speak out. We can encourage antiwar behavior, identify role models to emulate, reduce negative consequences, and provide positive reinforcement.

The mission of the US Peace Memorial Foundation is to demonstrate that advocating for an end to war, or for peaceful solutions to international problems, is an honorable and socially acceptable activity. We will accomplish this cultural change through three mechanisms:

1. *Award an annual peace prize for antiwar work to recognize and honor U.S. peace leaders as a reminder that our culture values their work.* Recent recipients have been Congressman Dennis Kucinich and Cindy

Sheehan.

2. *Build the US Peace Memorial* dedicated to those who have opposed war or proposed peaceful alternatives to national aggression (Knox & Wagganer, 2009a). A national monument in Washington, DC will recognize peace leadership by displaying antiwar statements of U.S. presidents and hundreds of other famous citizens from all walks of life (e.g., Margaret Mead, Helen Keller, Ben Franklin, Albert Einstein). The monument will also include electronic documentation of activities of thousands of other citizens who have taken public stands against one or more U.S. wars. The memorial will provide teaching moments for visitors that can help to change our culture by making Americans more aware of, and more comfortable with, our rich history of antiwar activity.

3. *Publish the US Peace Registry* to recognize and honor role models for peace and to document a broad spectrum of modern nonviolent antiwar behavior (Knox & Wagganer, 2009b). This ongoing scholarly work helps current and future generations understand how individuals and organizations have opposed war and promoted peace. It is hypothesized that the knowledge generated will reinforce antiwar actions, stimulate new discussions, reduce stigma, increase comfort levels, and perhaps lead to greater citizen involvement in interventions for peace.

If you are interested in world peace, your first obligation should be to demand that your own country stop invading, occupying, and bombing other countries. There are many peaceful alternatives to aggression and we must be willing to advocate for them. Please join us at www.uspeacememorial.org to recognize those who have had the courage to speak out. Significant contributions to peace on earth are within our power.

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