

Join the World, not the U.S. Empire

David Swansons's remarks upon acceptance of Real Nobel Peace Prize, in Oslo, Norway, on November 10, 2024.



It's wonderful to be here with many of you whose work I've known but whom I've rarely if ever been with in person. I am very grateful to John Jones and Tomas Magnusson for arranging this event. I am thrilled to be here at the start of what I expect will be years of terrific work by the Lay Down Your Arms Foundation — an appropriate name here in the House of Literature. The great Fredrik Heffermehl, who has been gone from us for nearly a year now, often stressed the influence on Alfred Nobel in the creation of the Nobel Peace Prize by Bertha von Suttner, the author of the 1889 novel *Lay Down Your Arms*.

The impact of that book was not, I think, due to the characters or the plot or any depiction of how horrific war can be, but rather to the way the book framed war abolition within a story of advancing civilization. Humanity was developing, according to this story, after endless eons of fighting off ferocious beasts and fighting off ferocious humans. Violence was on the wane. The beasts were gone, and the humans were learning to speak and negotiate. City states were united as nations. Blood feuds were left behind. Dueling among individuals was being replaced by discussions, arbitrations, courts of law, and —



more importantly — by a new conception of honor. No longer would disgrace fall on the man who tolerated an affront so much as on the buffoon who delivered it. There were indigenous cultures that had never had to recover from the madness of war as it had been developed in the West, but the West always likes to think of itself as humanity, and its recoveries from its most depraved behaviors as new developments for the species.

In 1889, war itself was being civilized. The Red Cross was seeking to tend the wounded. Atrocities were being banned. Disputes among royals were

being mocked by republicans as proper grounds for wars. Arbitration was proving itself as an alternative to slaughter. With slavery and pillage being left behind, with religion beginning to fade, with the technology of weaponry rapidly advancing, war was losing its economic motive, its theocratic justification, and its suitability as a test of individual skill or courage. The ending of war was an idea that went from fringe craziness to mainstream popularity during Bertha von Suttner's lifetime, and in great measure because of her.

And here we are, well over a century later, with many forms



of violence fading fast, capital punishment banned in much of the world, Norwegian prisons focused on rehabilitation, small-scale fighting scorned, physical punishment of children abhorred, sexual violence deeply condemned, mass-shootings and bombings thankfully rare outside of the United States, and the connection between gun deaths and guns generally recognized. Such absurdities as dueling are nearly forgotten, and the notion of humanitarian dueling or defensive dueling or an obligation to support one side of any duel is usually deemed as risible as attributing noble valor to one rooster in a

cockfight. And yet, war is on the rise, the risk of nuclear war is on the rise, and the weapons business through which a small number of countries fuel war around the world has lost all shame, replacing it with the pride of performing a laudable public service. Worst of all, the vision of successful war abolition has been set aside by a too easily discouraged public. In the words of Fredrik Heffermehl, “the main obstacle to global peace is the common belief that it is impossible.”

What went wrong? Corrupt governments went on waging wars, whether people wanted



them or not, but that should have been expected. Tomorrow is 106 years since World War I was ended in Europe (while it continued for weeks in Africa). It was ended at the scheduled moment on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month — with an extra 11,000 people dead, wounded, or missing after the decision to end the war had been reached early in the morning. In many countries, the day was made into an annual anti-war holiday for decades before being gradually transformed into a day for celebrating militarism. Western public support for war abolition reached its height following World War I,

but governments still did not listen.

Instead, they went back to war and dragged more of the world along. U.S. and other western nations prioritized opposing the Soviet Union to such an extent that they supported and funded and armed the Nazis, who studied genocide and segregation laws and eugenics in the United States, not to mention the history of European assaults on non-Europeans documented in *Exterminate All the Brutes* by the late Swedish author Sven Lindqvist. Western governments held public meetings in places like Evian, France, where they



announced that they would not save the Nazis' intended victims. The U.S. and British governments made that same decision repeatedly through the war. But after World War II, too much had been lost to scorn the enterprise. The profiteers had been too entrenched for societies to wriggle out of their grasp. The propaganda agencies had developed too far for facts to be in charge anymore. Myths became foundational: the myth that the war had been fought to prevent genocide, the myth that nuclear weapons had saved lives, and most importantly the myth that more war was inevitable, together with the myth that preparing for more

war wouldn't make war more likely but that, on the contrary, precisely preparing for peace would make war more likely. These myths have been supported by one more: the myth that if the U.S. government does it, it isn't really happening: if it puts troops in your country, your country is not occupied; if it tells your government what to do it isn't an empire; if its bases poison your land, air, and water, if they steal land from the Inuit in Greenland, or Aleutian Islanders, Pacific Islanders, Hawaiians, Okinawans, Chagossians, Koreans, Palestinians, that's not stealing land; that's spreading freedom. In the words of Harold Pinter, "it's a brilliant,



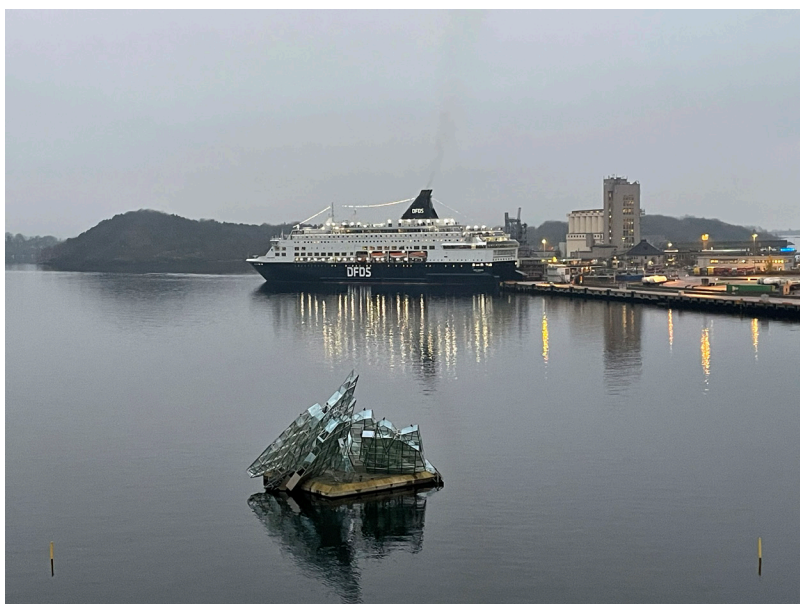
even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis.”

There have always been sensible people around, even in our militarized culture, people who have said “If you keep expanding NATO to Russia’s border, if you keep putting missile bases on Russia’s border, if you keep fueling violence by rightwing forces in Eastern Ukraine, if you keep tearing up treaties and abandoning disarmament agreements, you’re making war more, not less, likely.” Others have pointed out that if the U.S. government and NATO support and arm the Ukrainian government and refuse to allow peace

negotiations, even while blowing up Russian pipelines, ending communications with Russia, and expanding NATO further yet, peace will be very difficult.

But the clever retort has always been heard: “What do you mean the Russian government is a saintly force for peace and prosperity that has never harmed a soul?”

Of course, it isn’t. A blatantly provoked illegal immoral attack is still an illegal and immoral attack. Russian warmaking must be condemned, just as both sides of a duel must be condemned. War is, after all, less,



not more, intelligent than dueling. But condemnation of Russia elicits the immediate response: “What do you mean NATO is a saintly force for peace and prosperity that has never harmed a soul?”

It’s easier for people to oppose war in the abstract. Or if it’s a little bit farther away. Or if we’re only asked about one side of it. Some people are able to oppose Israeli warmaking and warmaking by Hamas. They don’t worry that one cancels out the other or that the two are somehow being equated despite their different scales. Many are able to oppose Western warmaking in Iraq,

Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, and to simply avoid the question of the morality of the approaches taken by the other sides. There wouldn’t be much point in having an opinion on what Iraqis should do, and one would be accused of blaming the victims merely for thinking about it. But what to do with an endless deadly stalemate here in Europe that puts all life on Earth at risk while slaughtering thousands for gains of inches as in World War I?

In most cases, people either declare all blame to lie with Russia or all blame to lie with Ukraine and NATO — an obvi-



ous oversimplification of a sort that most children have learned to reject on the playground, but that governments promote heavily. In reality, both sides in this war are forcing people to fight against their will, locking up resisters, censoring freedom of speech and press, avoiding fair and open elections, using banned weapons while condemning the other for doing so, rejecting negotiation, insisting on control of territories rather than on the right of local residents to determine their fate democratically, and failing to develop unarmed resistance in their populations chiefly because people so trained can resist not only invaders but their own governments as well. Both the United States and Russia oppose the International Criminal Court and defy the rulings of the International Court of Justice. Of 18 major human rights treaties, Russia is party to only 11, and the United States to only 5. Both nations violate treaties at will, including the United Nations Charter, not to mention their abuse of the veto in the Security Council. While most of the world upholds disarmament and anti-weapons treaties, the United States and Russia

refuse to support and openly defy major treaties. Russia and the United States stand as rogue regimes outside the Landmines Treaty, the Arms Trade Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and many others. Neither supports the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons or complies with the disarmament requirement of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The U.S. and Russia are far from being the same, but if either of them is taken as a model for the world, then the world will be doomed.

The fact that there's no good solution easily available in Ukraine does not justify continuing to increase the risk of nuclear apocalypse. In fact, nothing ever justifies war, and nothing ever justifies preparing for war. Even if we imagine a war that has never been, a necessary and noble war that does more good than harm, that protects against subhuman monsters, that does not slaughter the innocent for the gleam in a politician's eye . . . even if we imagine such a war, the fact will remain that keeping around the bases, weapons, ships, and personnel that make war pos-

sible does more harm than war itself — and will until war goes nuclear. The institution of war wastes money that could save many more lives than are lost in wars. War preparation, like war, is a major destroyer of the environment, and the chief impediment to international cooperation on the environment, on disease, on poverty, on homelessness. War is, of course, the chief cause of homelessness. War preparation is the justification for government secrecy and surveillance. It is a major source of bigotry and hatred, and the biggest influence in our culture in favor of continued violence. It concentrates wealth, corrupts politicians, erodes liberties, and celebrates sadism.

Fredrik Heffermehl understood the need to abolish the entire institution of war. I think he would probably have cheered for this year's Nobel Peace Prize recipients and considered them the first such recipients in at least six years to have merited the award based on the purpose for which it was created. Abolishing nuclear weapons is essential to our survival. But when some nations maintain nuclear weapons as a misguided

response to the dominance of another nation in non-nuclear warmaking, we are faced with the need to abolish the entire war enterprise if we are going to abolish its worst weapons. Reforming war isn't going to work. Taboos on certain weapons aren't going to hold. Restrictions on war's cruelty are not going to be honored. During each war in recent years, we have heard the cries of the outraged: "This is not a war, it's a genocide!" "This is not a war, it's an occupation!" "This is not a war, it's terrorism!" "This is not a war, it's a crime!" And so forth. All perpetuating the myth that there ever has been or can be a war that isn't cruel, that doesn't terrorize, that kills only the proper people for killing. The desire to reform war has always been a noble one, but survival requires that we End it, Not Mend It.

Our heroes should not be those who kill to enrich Lockheed Martin and Boeing and Kongsberg Gruppen. Our heroes should be those Norwegian teachers and others who refused to be occupied. We should recall what gave the world the word "Quisling" to describe an official who obeys a foreign govern-

ment, something every NATO member does. We should remember the nonviolent movements in the Baltics that took apart the Soviet Union without the use of F35s. We should celebrate the history of neutrality in countries like Finland, so beneficial to the world. Perhaps we should even celebrate the peace efforts that produced something like the Oslo accords, although the secrecy and one-sidedness, and the circumventing of the actual leaders of the first intifada, show that such things could be done better. We should thank national governments like Norway's and Sweden's for supporting the International Criminal Court and recognizing the state of Palestine.

While it's not my place to suggest what anyone outside the United States do — even though my loyalty is to humanity and not to the U.S. government, and borders are maintained against my will — it is a shame that Norway and Sweden do their bits in exporting weapons to the world, ranking #16 and #13 respectively. Sweden even got into NATO by agreeing to sell weapons to Hungary. Both also do more than their bit in

military spending. Norway ranks #7 in the world in military spending per capita. Some of us in the United States have always wished we could have things that people have in Scandinavia, things like healthcare, public transit, retirement, vacations, and long lifespans. Now I imagine there are people at Raytheon and Northrup Grumman laughing as the unelected leader of NATO travels the globe instructing presidents and prime ministers to pull money out of human and environmental needs and dump it into war preparations. At the Pentagon too, I imagine a great deal of levity. After all, they're building their own bases here — dozens of new bases across Scandinavia. Their troops can go anywhere they want here. They can even drive drunk, vandalize, and rape without being subject to local laws. They can poison the drinking water with forever chemicals and not tell anyone. They can refuse to tell anyone whether they are bringing nuclear weapons in and out. Australians have asked and been told it's none of their business. They can use bases here to assist in some future war quite regardless of what anyone here thinks of that war.

They can use bases here to sabotage pipelines or whatever else they like. All things are justified. And all things can be sacrificed — the bases make this beautiful place a target, and good intentions won't change that.

Where I live, in Virginia, opposing a particular U.S. war is relatively acceptable. Pushing to de-fund the U.S. military is looked a bit down upon. But questioning the sanctity of NATO is absolute heresy. This is partly because nobody has much of any idea what NATO is, and partly because Donald Trump is said to oppose NATO, thereby supposedly requiring that one either support NATO or support Trump. In reality, Trump badgered NATO members into more military spend-

ing than Biden did, and Biden had the help of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Biden wants your country to spend 2% of its economy on war, Trump wants 3%, and there's no logical reason someone won't soon say 4%. With enemies like Trump, NATO doesn't need friends.

But what is NATO? It's an institution that has expanded in great part, especially in the 1990s, through the corruption of weapons dealers promising membership to nations if they would buy weapons, and then insisting that elected officials whose campaigns they had funded support those nations' memberships. Nations are also pressured to privatize their economies to become NATO members.



NATO members and NATO partners need not even pretend to be democracies. NATO's first additions were undemocratic Greece and Turkey, in both of which nations coups also had no impact on their membership. NATO has no human constituency, makes decisions at odds with its member governments, and wages wars in violation of international law. NATO partners with and arranges weapons deals for such governments as Israel, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The war minister — or so-called defense minister — of Sweden agreed to fill Sweden with U.S. military bases a half a year before the Swedish parliament considered the matter, which has never gone to the Swedish people. Nowhere are the people asked.

NATO has no internal democracy, and only has transparency to the extent of its shamelessness. On various occasions, carrots and sticks are used to achieve "consensus." For example, when Turkey objected to Anders Fogh Rasmussen as Secretary General, Turkey backed down after a deal was made to shut down an

international television network disliked by the Turkish government. NATO's preference has always been for a government that agrees with NATO over a government that agrees with its people.

NATO has never fought a war in defense of one of its members, and for the first 45 years of its 75-year existence did not fight any wars at all. Since NATO's first war-making in Yugoslavia, it has waged war in various ways in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine. NATO had been in danger of lacking any excuse to exist, after the dismantling of the Soviet Union. It manufactured a reason to exist as a rogue global police force. It developed "humanitarian" war, a line of propaganda that would eventually lead to the "responsibility to protect" (by bombing). NATO had no UN authorization in Bosnia and Kosovo, but discovered that it could self-authorize. The world could be told that NATO had itself legalized its crimes. It had no ability to generate "consensus" for wars among all of its members, but found that it could move ahead with just some members.

Only once — in the case of Afghanistan — has NATO even pretended that one of its members was waging war in defense. Although every NATO member has experienced foreign terrorism, when the United States did, a war on an impoverished distant land — already begun by the U.S. alone — became a NATO war. But the wars have all been the same in their lawlessness, their murderous destructiveness, and their counterproductive results.

In the United States NATO is used as cover for crimes. The Congress can't investigate if NATO did it. And people, it seems, can't question it if NATO did it. Placing a primarily-U.S. war under the banner of NATO

prevents Congressional oversight of that war. Placing nuclear weapons in "non-nuclear" nations, in violation of the Nonproliferation Treaty, is also excused with the claim that the nations are NATO members. By being part of a war alliance, NATO's members legitimize the wars that alliance engages in. By pulling nations into NATO, the U.S. government claims the right to act on behalf of "The International Community," even if most people on Earth are still not in it.

NATO's members should withdraw, not to create a balance of warmongers, not to support a different empire, not to build up a European military, but to turn instead to the rule of law, to dis-



armament, to compliance with the treaty on nuclear nonproliferation, to compliance with the UN Charter (which the NATO charter grossly violates), to upholding the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and to the democratization and universalization of institutions, including — first and foremost — through demanding the elimination of the veto in the UN Security Council.

What can we do to move the world in that direction?

Some of us try, as Fredrik Heffermehl did so well, to nudge the world along through books, as well as articles and speeches. I work for two organizations — RootsAction.org and World

BEYOND War that, like many others, have an impact through online actions, organizing, and webinars. At World BEYOND War we also create in-depth online courses that provide an education often missing in schools. And we work with universities and schools to change that.

Most importantly, we organize local chapters with volunteer organizers who get assistance from our paid staff. World BEYOND War chapters hold meetings, book clubs, rallies, demonstrations, protests. They pass resolutions through local governments. They persuade institutions to divest from weapons profits. They put peace messages into local media. They oppose new and existing military bases.

NATO Members and Partners 69.4%

Rest of World 30.6%

Global Military Spending

NONATOYESPEACE.ORG

On the World BEYOND War website we've created a tool that lets you spin a globe and zoom in on any of 917 U.S. military bases outside of the United States. We need your help with making sure we've got all the new ones. But we're also taking them off when they're closed, and never adding them when they're planned but those plans are stymied. We've helped people in Montenegro prevent a major new NATO base from being built. People in the Czech Republic have kept a U.S. base out of their country. In Colombia, activists have blocked base construction on one island and are now protecting another. In Italy, activism failed to prevent a new base but kept it to a smaller size than planned. People have

gotten bases out of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Ecuador. The president of Ecuador told the United States that it could keep a base in Ecuador if Ecuador could have a base in the United States. Now there's a new president who wants to bring U.S. bases back, so the struggle never ends. But can you imagine the Norwegian government demanding a Norwegian military base in Wisconsin in exchange for the U.S. having bases here? I certainly cannot imagine the U.S. government allowing it.

The lesson I draw from having worked to oppose bases in several countries while based in the Washington, D.C., area or not too far from it, is that we are stronger when we have

NO TO NATO

YES TO PEACE

solidarity across borders, and in particular when we are working together both at the location of a base or a proposed base and at the location of the heart of the empire in Washington. A number of times now I have worked with opponents of U.S. bases in distant corners of the globe and watched as they were asked the inevitable question by U.S. Congress members or staffers, namely: "Well, if you don't want the base there, then where do you want it?" And in each case, to their everlasting credit and praise, these good people have responded "We do not want it anywhere."

That kind of principled opposition should be coordinated globally. We should have days of protest at U.S. bases across Scandinavia, together with protests delivering the same message in Washington, D.C. We should put our organizers, but also our writers and video producers and photographers, artists and song writers to work building a movement to get the bases out. But not because war will be better without a particu-

lar base, rather because closing a particular base can move us a bit closer to the total abolition of war.

That's what we need to recover from the days of Bertha von Suttner, the vision of success ahead. That we've had more wars, that we've seen more years go by, is really not relevant. This is now a matter of survival. We desperately need to turn our attention to non-optional crises instead of these ginned up festivals of the lowest depravity that Russia calls special military operations and the U.S. calls overseas contingency operations or Israel's right to defend itself, but the rest of us call war. No more now than in 1889 is there anything in our genes or the laws of physics requiring war. There is just something in our culture that says the most useful thing you can do, as done in virtually all Hollywood movies, is to pick up a weapon. We need a culture in which the most admirable and courageous thing you can do is to Lay Down Your Arms. Let's work on getting there.