

# The Color of Peace

The interwoven history of racism and militarism – and the racialization of war

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*Remarks by Brian Corr at the Peace Action 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event  
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Thank you for being here tonight, and I appreciate this opportunity to share a few thoughts with you in the company of such thoughtful and committed peace activists – including the people I am sharing this stage with.

I will be stepping down from the board at the end of this year – to make way for new leadership – and I want to leave you inspired – and issue a challenge to you all – a challenge for how we can be even more effective in our work to build a world, a society, and communities that live in peace and justice.

We all speak from our personal experience and from our own situation in society – our “station” so to speak – and I speak to you as an African-American man, born in 1966 in Detroit, who grew up there in the late Sixties and the Seventies, and who began my work in the peace movement in Ann Arbor as a volunteer with the Freeze in 1982 and then as a canvasser there with SANE in 1986 – this is part of the lens through which I see and understand the world.

So tonight, I would like to talk with you about a topic I am calling, “The Color of Peace.” What that means in the context of looking back the last 50, 60, 70 years – and looking forward to the next 50 – that I will tell you in a moment. First, however, let me tell you why I’m using that phrase – The Color of Peace.

Earlier this year, Prof. Lawrence Wittner – editor and co-author of *Peace Action: Past, Present, and Future* – wrote an essay for *Foreign Policy in Focus*, entitled “How the Peace Movement Can Win”. In it, Larry addressed a number of issues facing the peace movement – structural issues, a “traditional whiteness”, and most of all the movement’s lack of unity, he argued, is handicapping its effectiveness. Eleven peace activists were asked to respond in an online roundtable: “What’s Next for the Peace Movement.” Of those commenters, four of us were people of color – one Filipino, one Arab, and two African-Americans – and there was a striking difference in the sets of comments from the people of color and the other seven.

Most of the white activists largely reacted against the idea of a “highly centralized” and unified peace movement. Instead, they promoted more effective messaging and electoral work; decentralized, local, ad hoc activism; entrepreneurship; a lack of central planning; having federations, rather than one large organization – in short they cited autonomy and independence as the best recipe for “success”.

On the other hand, we four people of color were unified in our analysis:

The fundamental challenge for the peace movement as we look forward to the future—and for the progressive movement as a whole—is this: if we are serious about building political power and effecting social change, if we are serious about dismantling militarism and creating a world of peace and justice, we must do exactly that: we must incorporate working for racial justice, economic justice, and human rights – and therefore against oppression – into all of our work.

Here, in the United States of America, we are — *by far* — the most militarized society on the planet. We spend more than the rest of the world combined on guns, tanks, bombs, and war. We drive military vehicles — the Hummer — down our highways, guzzling \$100 worth of gasoline at every fill-up. We have a national fetish for guns — and for violence in general — and so we consume countless TV shows and movies about the police, about hospitals, about murder and criminals and lawyers and the courts, and about the military and war.

We compulsively watch football and describe it in completely military metaphors. Coverage of the Olympics, self-described as “representing the best of humanity, where nations put aside their differences to celebrate athletic grace and achievement” in the U.S. consists profiles of our proud warrior-athletes followed by listings of victories over lesser nations and people, accompanied by sound-bite-size highlights of how many “Americans won gold.”

In “These United States,” although we live in the wealthiest nation on the planet — with the largest and most powerful military *by far* — our political discourse is dominated by the politics of scarcity and fear. Politicians and governments so often speak of cutting budgets and reducing services for “those less fortunate” — i.e., those who live at the margins of our vast wealth — that politically it’s “common sense” that we can’t afford to provide healthcare for the 50 million people in our nation who don’t have it — while spending \$700 *billion* each year on the military.

We are a nation that lives in self-imposed poverty and in fear: fear of the future, fear of the unknown, fear of our neighbors, and fear even of ourselves. And most “Americans” feel that they are (currently, today, right now) victims of terrorism, or at least very likely to become victims at any moment.

The claims that our government makes about terrorism (and before that communism) say much more about our own society and history than it does about our so-called enemies. Our government has a reactionary anti-revolutionary stance when it comes to popular, democratic movements for national liberation and self-determination — and has for more than 200 years: Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Greece, Indonesia, Vietnam, Chile, Venezuela — and next Iran, perhaps to be followed by Colombia....

But let me be explicit – the history our nation’s wars is the history of an interwoven racism and militarism – what one can refer to as the racialization of war. From the beginnings of colonization of what became the United States through the Civil War through WWII through Vietnam into through Iraq and perhaps Iran, there is parallel history.

First, there was more than two centuries of what are often called “Indian Wars” – including some very brutal ones such as the Second Seminole War in Florida from 1835 to 1842: in this war bloodhounds were used to track down Seminoles, despite public outrage at the thought of what those dogs might do to “women and children”. These wars occurred almost without a break until 1890 when the complete subjugation of the indigenous people of the United States was accomplished: commonly referred to as the “Closing of the American Frontier.” I will note that “Indian massacres” were just as effective as “undeclared war” and “terrorist attacks” for justifying decades of warfare.

Then in the middle of that period was the Mexican-American War in 1848 (our first war of out-and-out conquest – and it is important to remember that 25 years previous to that In 1824, the United States and Mexico were similar in size and population: Mexico had 6 million inhabitants on 1.7 million square miles of land. The United States had 9.6 million inhabitants on 1.8 million square miles.

In 1898, just eight years after the “Closing of the American Frontier,” the Spanish-American War took place. In that war, the U.S. conquest of the Philippines was justified by the need to “Christianize our little brown brothers,” according to the President William McKinley: Somehow, our nation seemed to forget that Spanish missionaries had been converting the islands people since the 1570’s. The U.S. then began the lesser-know Philippine-American War in 1899 to overthrow the newly declared Philippine Republic. In that three years war more than one million Filipinos were killed out of a population of nine million.

Moving forward to World War II brings us to events people are more familiar with: the fact that U.S. citizens of Japanese descent were placed in internment camps, while immigrants from Italy and Germany were never seriously considered a threat. And we should remember the war propaganda that certainly demonized the leaders of the Germany, Italy, and Japan as evil and ruthless, but never with the same level of dehumanization and “otherness” that was applies to the Japanese.

And then there was Korea, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Nicaragua and El Salvador, and the First Gulf War.

And looking, finally, at the Cold War as compared to the “War on Terror,” I want to point out that with all of the similarities – if you take a moment to think about

all the things that were said about communists, “they don’t value human life,” “they don’t think the way we do,” “they hate Freedom,” “they are Godless” – how does that compare to what is said about “terrorists” or even generally about “Muslims”.

There is one important difference, however. When the enemy was defined as “communism” there was a central leadership, there were communist states, and the definition of “defeating communism” was clear.

With the focus on Terrorism it is decentralized – or should I just say “diffuse” (despite Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda being cast in that role), there is no clear target and no clear definition of victory – especially if you consider that terrorism is a form of warfare rather than a foe – and this allows indefinite and potentially endless war, unlimited militarization, and is combined with racialized fear and the dehumanization of those considered “the enemy”

So what does this brief look at the racialized nature of war and the militarized nature of race tell us about the future of the peace movement?

Unless and until the peace movement articulates and addresses the connections between the three evils of economic injustice, racism, and militarism, we cannot create a world of peace AND justice, because one cannot exist without the other.

The Rev. Martin Luther King called for this, most famously in his April 4, 1967 speech at the Riverside Church – from the same pulpit where William Sloane Coffin delivered so many stirring sermons. In this speech, usually called, “A Time to Break Silence”, Dr. King linked the fight for peace to the fight for civil rights and created a movement that aimed to destroy both war and inequality.

“Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America.

A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings.

Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive

suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.”

Prof. Dale Bryan of the Peace and Justice Studies Program here at Tufts has written of that speech and placed it in its historical and political context.

“This initial sermon was immediately considered by some of his closest friends, and since by many historians, to have been his virtual death warrant. One year later to the day, April 4, 1968, Rev. King was murdered in Memphis while supporting city sanitation workers during their strike for fair wages and better working conditions, for what is now considered environmental justice.

It is during that last year of his life, when he preached about the immorality of the war and the ‘spiritual death’ awaiting America from the government’s massive investments in militarism rather than in social needs and, that he became inconvenient.

Rev. King saw that his work for racial justice would never succeed without economic justice and without global justice. With remarkable accuracy and prescience, his analysis of the historical context for our war on Vietnam led him to challenge Americans to forgo empire as a way of life, to transform ourselves, and our society.”

Starting with the historical reality that Europeans conquered and colonized most of the world, we must connect the history of people of color and racial oppression to the history of “whiteness” and military conquest. We need to examine and articulate how race and militarism – rather than just discrimination and war – shape U.S. history, society, and the dominant militaristic worldview that is used to scare, intimidate, divide, and dominate people. This is not to minimize the importance of confronting and eliminating all forms of discrimination and oppression in our society, but it is necessary to acknowledge the specific historical nexus of racism and militarism in the formation of the United States, as well as our global society.

Just as importantly, it is unlikely that we can reframe the role of government—and of militarism, the military, and war—unless we challenge racism and the ways in which war, terrorism, religion, and race have been linked. At the same time, the challenge we face is how to enough build political power to truly transform our militaristic society, and move to a society based on deeply democratic and egalitarian structures and practices.

We must ensure that our movements and our efforts look like our country. Although there are unprecedented numbers of people of color, working-class people, and youth involved in social change, we still have far to go. We must

bridge old divides of race and class, of young and old, and between the cities and suburbs.

And we must recognize that the violence in the streets of America is of a piece with the violence our government has wrought in Iraq, and with the violence that globalization is doing to peoples and nations the world over – and with the violence that is done by denying basic human needs to tens of millions of people here at home.

We must ensure that our movement is prefigurative in its internal *and* external politics – that it reflects the society we wish to build. We have to insist upon democracy, transparency, justice, fairness, and effectiveness inside our movement as strongly as we insist on it in our country.

I want to end with a short excerpt from the founding document of SNCC – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – written *nearly* 50 years ago -- in 1960”

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

I believe the future of Peace Action – and the peace movement as a whole – lies within those few words.