

## **“At Peace with War: A Call to Reclaim Armistice Day”**

UUCGV Sermon by  
Richard Hyland

November 10, 2019

Tomorrow, we will celebrate –if that is the right word—the 101st anniversary of the Armistice ending one of the worst wars in history; a war that killed or wounded 40 million people directly and may have spawned an influenza pandemic that killed at least 50 million more. It was so horrific and its effects so far-reaching that the leading nations of the world proclaimed Armistice Day as a day commemorating peace.

Ten years later, they agreed to renounce the use of war, promote peaceful settlement of disputes and use collective force to prevent aggression in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which 62 nations signed and which is still in force independently and through the United Nations charter. Twenty years later, in 1938, the United States designated November 11<sup>th</sup> as a day dedicated to the cause of world peace.

But most of you probably don't know this. For you, November 11<sup>th</sup> has always been Veteran's Day with its flags, parades and tributes to military veterans and the armed services they represented. World peace was not the focus; military service was. So, what happened?

Well, World War I had been eclipsed by World War II and Korea and then the Cold War with its insurgencies, nuclear weapons and doctrine of mutually assured destruction. War, not peace, was the new normal. Counter-insurgency was the new strategy in an increasingly unstable world that made peace-making difficult and peace-keeping all but impossible.

In 1954, at the urging of Veteran's organizations in the US, November 11<sup>th</sup> was re-designated by Congress as Veteran's Day and has remained so ever since. The horrors of World War 1 are forgotten. Few remember the global renunciation of war in 1928.

And now, there is no Cold War or Evil Empire that might have justified the moral purpose and huge expenditures on military preparedness that have dominated our lives for the better part of 70 years. We won, right?

The Soviet Union collapsed and we won the first Gulf War, both in 1991. I still remember the dazed look on Russian citizens whose lives had been turned upside down, trying to eke out a living in Perm, Russia in 1993. And I remember seeing the remnants of Scud missiles around US military sites in Saudi Arabia the year before, in 1992.

But I also remember the absence of any effort by the US or the West to help the Russian people navigate through the debris of their collapsed world as we did for the Germans and Japanese with the Marshall Plan. Instead I saw hundreds of western companies and consultants flocking in to replace communist with capitalist theories of business and economics irrespective of the history or realities of the Russian people.

Soon, former commissars would become wealthy oligarchs buying up state assets for pennies on the dollar, competing with each other for state power in the newly established Russian Federation. Had we not seen this coming?

And in Saudi Arabia, home to the two holiest sites in Islam, thousands of US and allied troops – including women--were still stationed there in open violation of Islamic customs and tradition. The presence of such infidels on holy soil was one of the top grievances articulated by Osama bin Laden and his *jihadist* al-Qaeda followers.

In our haste to display and use our new status as the sole remaining world superpower, had we overlooked this detail? In this, our first major incursion into the Middle East, did we understand the historical and cultural complexity of the region?

In both cases, was there a strategy, any strategy at all, to guide the foreign policy of our country out of its Cold War certainties and into the rapidly changing uncertainties of a post-war world? A strategy based on what we had learned –about ourselves as a country and the world around us—through the failures, successes and wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? A strategy that might lead all of us out of endless war and move all of us forward?

Judging by what I have seen in my international travels, especially after the events of 9/11, I would say “no”.

Instead, we have become embroiled in one conflict after another, seeking to either remake the world in our image or to root out the threat of terrorism whenever and wherever we find it. All justified by the sweeping *Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF)* of September 18, 2001 which expanded rapidly to become a War against Terror.

That is to say, a war against an abstraction, not an enemy; a war against a tactic, not a state. Such an unconventional war cannot be “won” in a conventional way. In such a “war”, it’s hard to distinguish friends from enemies or enemies from friends. In such a “war” there is no order of battle, only the unfocused use of force whose destructive power tends to increase rather than reduce terror. But we have not learned this. We have still not repealed the AUMF 18 years later.

Instead, wars have become routinized because foreign policy has become militarized at the same time the middle class has been immunized from military service.<sup>1</sup> At \$780 billion, military expenses account for 55 percent of federal discretionary spending, including 800 US military bases in 70 countries. The military-industrial complex Eisenhower warned us about in 1961 is alive and well in 2019.<sup>2</sup> There is no draft. There is no war tax.

We are at peace with war. We are adrift. We have lost our way.

Many yearn to go back to old certainties of faith, power and greatness or at least the myths of these, convinced that isolation from the evils of globalization will protect us. Others strive to push forward into the uncertainties ahead, convinced that faith, power and greatness lie before us and that isolation from the world is impossible. We all have friends and family on both sides of this divide. All are weary of the struggle and long for safe harbor or at least calm seas.

Which way will we go? If we are all shipmates on this tumultuous voyage, who will guide us on this uncharted sea?

A little girl's voice cuts through my despair. "Tell us a story, Mr. Hyland." She is one of my 5<sup>th</sup> graders begging me to imagine what could be but never was. And so I will, but to you, my dear friends and shipmates. It's a two-part story of "What if?" designed to unleash the power you all have: the power to imagine.

## Part 1

It was 9/11. The towers had fallen. Construction workers, firemen, policemen --our fellow citizens-- were working through a tragedy with courage and dedication. They brought us together as one through our tears. It was a connection with something larger than ourselves, that touched something noble in our country and in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> I have taken this phrasing and the title of this sermon from the latest book by one of our nation's greatest historians, Joseph J. Ellis, American Dialog: the Founders and Us (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2018). It is a book that should be required reading for all Americans in these troubled times.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Wirls, "Eisenhower called it the 'military-industrial complex. **It's vastly bigger now.** Here are four things to know about this transformation." The Washington Post (June 26, 2019). Wirls is a Professor of Politics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. See also his book, Irrational Security: The Politics of Defense from Reagan to Obama (Barnes & Noble, 2010).

**What if** President Bush had built on that connection in his speech to the nation on September 20, 2001. What if his words had been a call for compassion not revenge, an expression of anguish not anger, an embrace not a fist? What if the leader of the most powerful country in the world had called for a new vision of justice, broken free from the cycle of violence that had dominated most of human history?

Here's what he said:

*"...Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done...Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists... Fellow citizens, we'll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come."*<sup>3</sup>

Here's what he could have said:

*"Working together with all countries of the world, we will find and bring to justice those who did this. We will also investigate why they did such a despicable thing in the name of a God millions worship as a giver of peace. For if they can do this to us, they can do this to any of us. They are a band of criminals who must be caught, tried and punished under the rule of law."*

We were so close! What if? Well, for starters:

- There would have been no AUMF.
- There may or may not have been a war in Afghanistan.
- There would have been no invasion and war in Iraq.
- There would have been no Patriot Act.
- There would have been no expansion of executive power
- There would have been no expenditure—mostly off-budget—of over \$6 trillion and counting.<sup>4</sup>
- 14,792 US soldiers, sailors and airmen might still be alive.
- 490,980 Afghan and Iraqi soldiers and civilians might still be alive.<sup>5</sup>
- The Arab-Israeli dispute over Palestine -high on al-Qaeda's list of grievances-- might have been resolved
- Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its heir, ISIS, may never have arisen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bush, George W. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11" Office of the Federal Register, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, September 24, 2001, Volume 37-Number 38, pp. 1319-1355

<sup>4</sup> Brown University, Watson Institute, Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency (November, 2018). Does not include the more than 500,000 deaths from the war in Syria, raging since 2011, which the US joined in August 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

- The world community of nations—including the Russian Federation—might have learned to work more closely together to address the destabilizing impacts of globalization on traditional societies and to build the new world order that Gorbachev and Bush, Sr. talked about.

Okay, that was a warm-up. We can't change the past. But maybe we can learn from it. Had any of these things happened, where would we, and the world, be now?

## Part 2

Tomorrow is November 11, 2019. We will gather together to remember those who have served and protected us—and in some cases given their lives for us—so that we may live in peace.

While acknowledging their service, ***what if*** we focus not on the veterans or the wars they fought but on the gift their sacrifice made possible: world peace? So, as a first step, what if we reclaim Armistice Day as the day we celebrate on November 11. We know that its message of world peace is only a possibility and that much must be done by all of us to make it a reality.

But by focusing on the Armistice, we remember the cost and consequences of war and the militarism that spawned it. No sabers in the sun glory there, only the urgency, coffin by coffin, of ending war and building peace. Kind of like the aftermath of 9/11 with a twist. We also know that building peace is a difficult, complex process involving work at multiple levels as the ancient Chinese sage Lao-Tse taught us:

*If there is to be peace in the world,  
There must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations,  
There must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities,  
There must be peace between neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between neighbors,  
There must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home,  
There must be peace in the heart.*

- ***If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations.***

*What if in the world, we worked together to:*

- *Restructure the United Nations and fully implement the UN charter everywhere?*
- *Expand the Paris Climate Agreement to include a worldwide Declaration of Interdependence aimed at rebalancing human and other life on the planet?*
- *Restructure the World Trade Organization and other regulatory bodies to regulate global capitalism and rebalance development and profit?*
- *Strengthen the International Criminal Court and the use of collective force to end genocidal persecution and conflict wherever it exists.*

*What if in the United States, we worked together to:*

- *Require two years of public service by all youth following high school in which service in Americorps, Teach for America, or the Peace Corps would be as highly respected as service in the Marine Corps?*
- *End military recruiting in middle and high schools through the JROTC program?*
- *Pay our teachers, firefighters and police as much as our investment bankers and stockbrokers?*
- *Strengthen student international exchange programs such as AFS (American Field Service) formed by American ambulance drivers after World War 1 to promote world peace one student/family at a time.*

- ***If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities.***

*What if we worked together, city-by-city to make the Grand Valley a place where:*

- *Schools are as important as banks?*
- *Our faith communities were reservoirs of reconciliation?*
- *Local small town, face-to-face relationships could be innovative laboratories for making global work?*
- *Sister city networks of small, rural towns could be centers of learning for how to balance capitalism and community, development and preservation?*
- *All are aware of their interdependence on the land, air, water and other life around them and are committed to protect it, one city at a time?*

*Our peace-making could start with a modified version of the **2020 Vision** for the Grand Valley developed in 2001.*

- ***If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors.***

*What if we worked together to implement the **Proclamation of Inclusivity** our city adopted in February 2019 so that the rights of all residents and their families are respected, one neighborhood or subdivision at a time?*

- ***If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home.***  
*What if we worked together to eliminate the causes and frequency of domestic violence within our marriages and families, one household at a time, pooling the community talents and resources we already have, and adding new ones such as a secularized version of Our Whole Lives (OWL)?*
- ***If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.***  
*What if we modeled and taught our children as much about compassion and acceptance of others as we do about competition and domination of others, by learning and applying the wisdom of **Karen Armstrong**, in her **12 Steps Toward a Compassionate Life** and her International Charter for Compassion?*

Okay, ambitious, I know. But this is the future we're talking about, something we can dream about, play with, create and build in, starting right here in Grand Junction. In closing this morning, I want to share a poem I wrote earlier this year that some of you have heard. It is based on an encounter I had with a young Iraq war veteran in 2012. Consider it a reflection of where we are and where we could be, no, must be...

*He was the quiet one in my class,  
 Hollow-eyed and older than the rest  
 Who on the last day softly asked  
 If I was a veteran. "Yes,  
 I said, Vietnam," feeling the dread  
 Of what was to come,  
 Pull me down to a dark place  
 I thought I had locked away  
 But never really had,  
 Replaying the same memories over and over again  
 And always ending up sad.*

*"Me too, Iraq," he said,  
 "Two tours, Mosul, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne"  
 Then bowing his head, tells me his story,  
 And in his words I hear my story again,  
 The fear, the killing, the body count, the dust;  
 The uncertainties, the mistakes, the lack of trust;  
 The transformation of friend by day into enemy by night;  
 Eroding day after day the sense of right,  
 Or wrong, how wrong? What was right?  
 And how can I fight, how can I survive,  
 So morally compromised?*

*"You can't," I whispered with tears in my eyes,  
"At some point you break," I said, remembering the moment,  
The fire raining down from the skies,  
"Yes, and go numb, and become...reborn as a killer..  
A wound in my soul that I cannot heal," he cried.  
"The things I did, the things I saw, the war goes on and on in my head,  
And never ends," he sobbed.  
The same moral demons, his and mine, rose up in his words  
And danced for a time as we embraced and cried together  
Over what we had lost.*

*Then we parted, our stories barely started  
And as I watched him go  
My heart spoke what my mind couldn't say  
You could be my son, no, our son,  
Not the eldest, but the youngest one,  
Who served his country by taking  
Not saving, lives,  
Mostly innocent,  
Mostly civilian,  
In a just war, unjustified  
From the start.*

*And what of our other sons  
And daughters too,  
Who serve, who fight to make things right  
Trusting their leaders to think beyond black or white?  
To navigate wisely the complexity of grays  
Shaping and reshaping the ways  
We live, we love, we hate,  
In a world grown close, too close perhaps, but not too late,  
To search, to learn, to yearn for  
New ways to live,  
Beyond war;  
New ways to live,  
In peace.*