

Gene Dialessi:

“The very existence of armaments and the great army psychologically accustoms us to accept the philosophy of militarism. They inevitably increase fear and hate in the world.”

I met and talked with the author of that quotation in a radio studio in San Francisco 7 years ago. I found him to be one of the most cordial and warm and genteel human beings I have known. My name is Gene Dialessi and this program is a talk recorded for Pacifica Radio. The talk is delivered by Mr. Norman Mattoon Thomas, Socialist. The 83 year old man of young ideas. It occurred on February 28th in Cubberley Auditorium on the Stanford California University campus. It was part of a symposium concerning a Great Society, circa 1967. Mr. Norman Thomas.

Norman Thomas:

Mr. Chairman and my friends, you are having a very interesting series of discussions about problems related to a Great Society and they are all important and they are, almost all of them - if they are all of them - inter-related. But if one must choose the most important subject relating to Great Society, is the possibility of peace, even in the sense of the absence of war, the great wars in the world, and unless that possibility can be fulfilled, well within your lifetime, there will not be a Great Society in the United States. And there will not be a Great Society in the United States unless there is a Greater Society than is now appearing in other parts of the world. And there will be no appearance of Great Societies here or elsewhere, unless we find alternatives to war in foreign policy and substitutes for war as a way of settling the quarrels that arise among men.

I want to make this clear: I am going to speak largely about Vietnam. But I am not speaking exclusively about Great... Vietnam, I am speaking in general about foreign policy. And since I will not have time to do in one lecture what ought to be done, I will have to be somewhat dogmatic, and you can ask questions about it afterwards. I want to say that the desperate importance of the end of the war in Vietnam is that while that war goes on there will be no real approach to the general bases for peace.

Right now, there is need of a great deal of new thinking and acting about the situation in Europe. It's absurd for the United States to keep so many soldiers in a Europe that is very doubtful whether it wants them or not. It's absurd to think that we have to spend the money that's now being spent on the greatness of the armaments that we have in the world. These things are simply true. There are crises pretty nearly all over the world, and with none of these crises can we give intellectual, moral or other leadership as we ought while we are caught in Vietnam. That is one of the reasons it is important.

Nor do I think it's impossible to have a really Great Society in the United States in the limited sense in economics, guns and butter, that kind of thing. I am one of the many who endorsed that very interesting budget for freedom, that cost of freedom, which was drawn up at the suggestion of a civil rights organization, the [inaud], and was drawn by good economists, [inaud] and [inaud]. On the whole, I think it a very admirable document, which I like to recommend when I go around showing what could be done on the economic side of the Great Society - a comprehensive budget for the fight that must be made against slums for better education and all the rest.

I challenge, however, the seeming acceptance in that document of the notion that it will be politically or even economically possible to carry out this kind of a budget and at the same time carry on not only the war in Vietnam, but the enormously costly budget that we have for the Cold War. It will not be possible to carry on that-that program, for instance, if we should be persuaded by the Pentagon or the Congress should be persuaded by the Pentagon that we shall have to magnify the arms race by going in for thirty or forty billion dollar alleged anti-missile defense, which will stimulate greater activity in the war between us and Russia at a time when it would be quite possible to develop a détente that does, in an uneasy

fashion, exist. These are things that I shan't have time to talk about much, but I want you to know that – that the importance of getting a settlement in Vietnam is, its relation to the whole problem.

Now, I have lived through two World Wars and more wars besides. And I have known what it was to have two simple hopes. I believed, at least I wanted desperately to believe, that after the first World War - that war of mud and blood, that war of great stupidity - that we would have learned by the magnitude of the suffering and the minimum of results that anyone could praise. My hope vanished very early. War was not conquered; the world was not made safe for Democracy at all. And then with less hope, I viewed the end of the second World War, less hope, but a little better base. I thought, as a great many did, that almost automatically, the Bomb would make war obsolete. I thought that the growing spirit of interest in the – in what came to be the U.N. would offer a pretty good alternative to war. I wasn't too confident, but I hoped. And that hope has gone, very badly gone. We live in a world of – of – of madness, really. I don't like to repeat myself, but I must, to make my point. I've said it here, I think before. If there are any people in flying saucers that come near enough the world to see what's going on and understand it, they don't land. On the contrary, the commander says, "Home, James, this madness is contagious."

(Audience laughs.)

Because observe the kind of a mad world we live in. We live in a world in which three-- two-thirds of the people are on a narrow borderline between hunger and starvation and who cannot use or get at the material which could help to change this situation. We live in a world in which the same world, with all its suffering, and actual hunger, spends – or did spend a year or so ago – a hundred and thirty three billion dollars – nations rich and poor – on Cold War. It's greater now, because of our greater expenditures. We are far the most profligate expenditure on war.

We, we, who for so many generations thought we were leaders in peace and boasted on the smallness of our our military establishments and all the rest of it – we, we lead in this terrible expenditure of money. We waste not only money, but what money represents. We waste the labor of our most skilled scientists and skilled workmen on arms. We waste copper and other metals which are in short supply on arms. We make it practically impossible to do what could be done. In a hungry world, in a cold world, where we have so much technological and scientific skill and knowledge, we make it practically unusable, except for the purpose of getting ready for mutual destruction. In the hope contradicted by everything we know, that by preparing for war, you will get peace.

Yes! You may have a period of deterrence. There may be a balance of terror, which works for a while – I use the phrase of Winston Churchill – but look back at history and you will see no case whatever where a persistent balance of power resulted in peace. On the contrary, the rivalries in that balance of power made for war.

And that makes me talk a little about the circumstances that make war possible among us. I do not think that in my younger days I fully realized this of the story, but it's worth my spending a little time on. We human beings have got through the evolutionary process, a very strong, impressive instinct. It plays its role, perhaps its useful role in life. I would [inaud] to that remarkably interesting book on – on aggression by Dr. Carl Laurenz. Dealing with aggression in animals as well as in men. By and large, we are the most aggressive animals that live on the face of the Earth. We're practically the only animals, there are two or three or four exceptions, but we are the only animals that carry on anything like organized war, in our own ranks, and in order to kill off each other satisfactorily. This capacity for aggression goes along with a great capacity for cruelty. And the history of mankind is the history of the most cruel animals that live on the face of the earth. Oh, well, you may find some – some of you biologists, but tigers are tame beside us. This is simply a fact, if you look back at history. And we have magnified and glorified the

cruelties that go with the wars that have been almost incessant since we were, there were enough of us to fight.

War is one of the oldest of social institutions. Only some form of the family is probably older. As soon as there were enough families and enough divergences of interest, there was war. Crude war, more polished types of war, but war. And history has taught, for instance as I remember it in high school and evening college, was very largely history of wars and even more a history of chronic exploitation. This is the history that man is responsible for. This was not dictated by any necessity of evolution. The [inaud] of forces alone would not have forced us into war, though they make it possible - the aggressive instinct. We fought because we devised no other way of settling our problems between groups, between clans, between tribes, between nations, between empires, and all the rest. We fought with all sorts of weapons. And many loyalties were developed in the process of that fighting. Men loved their country especially when it was at war. They loved their country and they loved their countrymen much better at war than when they were at peace. You'd have California Farm or United and [inaud] governor [inaud].

(Audience laughs.)

If there was a war of great magnitude, and I am not one to decry some of the virtues that came out of this kind of loyalty, but it was so limited. It was a loyalty within a group, it was a loyalty within a tribe or a nation, not a loyalty that really believed what we have come slowly to say that above all nations is humanity. We have never organized life on that principle at all. And what we learned in two World Wars have put us only a little on the way to organizing for that principle. A little on the way, but only a little on the way. Nevertheless, there has been a development.

There have been two developments of a technological sort, relating to war, which are of enormous importance to our thinking about foreign policy and everything else. The first is of course, the invention and perfection of the Bomb, the thermonuclear weapon. This makes it possible for mankind to commit suicide. We already have piled up enough weapons, we and the Russians, and the English, some, we have piled up enough weapons to wipe out life upon this planet if all of them should be used. This [inaud] is a statement of fact. President Kennedy once said in one of his fine speeches about peace that a war between the United States and Soviet Union would cost three hundred million lives. I often add that Secretary MacNamara, being devoted to economy, reduced it, I think he said two hundred and forty million.

(Audience laughs.)

Lies, literally that. And this is what we live in a world that contemplates what this – there. And whereas all our Presidents until recently said “War is unthinkable,” we thought about it, we’re taxed for it all the time. And war necessarily, with thermonuclear weapons, because it’s incredible to believe that you’ll pile up thermonuclear weapons and never use them. The arguments that justify the use of bombs in Vietnam as horribly as they are used, will be used to justify the use of thermonuclear weapons, whenever it seems to suit our interests. Now it doesn’t suit our interests or the interests of the great powers to use thermonuclear weapons too freely. There’s always the fallout and there’s the fact that to use them would destroy lands that ought to be conquered and used. And we have found far more difficulty than our immediate ancestors found in dealing with what we now call the emerging nations, the colonial peoples. As I look back at history, one of the things that surprises me is that it’s only until comparatively modern times that gorilla war has been used as effectively as it has been used since the second World War. I now marvel retrospectively that the European nations, maintained such vast empires with such comparatively low expenditure of men and money on the arms and the rest to hold the world, but you

have now got a development, that gorilla war, which makes the old fashioned imperialism far from profitable and causes other things to be considered.

So that you see, we do have two things that make war scientifically and technologically pretty nearly obsolete except for our passion for settling everything by violence. That capacity for cruelty and violence stays with us. And we rationalize it, we don't do it for ourselves, we do it for God, you know, for home, for country, for liberty, you know, we conscript you boys to send you to fight for liberty as exemplified under Marshall Key, and solve Vietnam...

(Audience laughs)

...and aren't even aware, apparently, what a nasty joke it is. That, that is the kind of thing that happens. Only yesterday, my companion and secretary was reading me the introduction to a book that Edmond Wilson wrote some four or five years ago. He was writing about [inaud] and literature and just ordinary writing during the period of the Civil War in America. It's a very interesting book, and his introduction is quite a remarkable document. For Mr. Wilson goes to great lengths to strip dignity and glory from war. It is in every case, and he goes over one after another, the wars – it's a war for profit, it's a war for power – even the Civil War, he minimizes, I think somewhat [inaud], the role of opposition to slavery in making it. I personally believe that he goes a little too far in eliminating the role of ideology in wars and in ignoring the fact that so far as one can tell, historically, in the kind of times in which men lived and the kind of beings men are, there probably were times it was better to fight for freedom or for something else that sounded better than we really believed it. It was better to fight for it than not. At least this is a possible contention. But there is no possible justification to a war that will practically wipe out mankind, and it's to that kind of war that we go by the policies that we now confront. And the fact that we have these instincts of aggression and this capacity for cruelty, makes it possible to hold a war, the fact we're so irrational makes it possible to hold the habit of war. It does not make it necessary.

We have pretty well wiped out war as between clans for justice, or whatever they call justice. We have substituted law, and imperfect thing, but certainly better than war. This at least, having been done in our domestic economy and domestic politics, gives hopes it can be done in the whole world, which is now so closely bound together. It is closely bound together, of course, but the differences are great, and the economic status of the different nations is – is ghastly in its divergence and its disproportion. These things we know and they add the difficulties. But we have no right to say that we can't do in the world in the base of the imminent danger of extinction, perhaps of mankind, certainly of a decent civilization, we have no right to say that we can't do it the world if we have done it in a smaller thing after some fashion in the respective nations in which we live.

We'll not do it until we come to a better understanding of the hypocrisy of a great deal of this talk of war and glory. We will not do it until we come to have a better feeling for humanity, the thing we talk about. We will not do it, I think, while it's possible, for sixty seven percent of the American people to approve of bombing in Vietnam, which is the current figure, to which I recur later in another connection. We have got to attack this plan, not just in terms of policy, in terms of religion, in terms of any kind of individual or popular ethic or social ethic, we have to tackle this problem. And we have to tackle it with imagination and courage and intelligence. It is absolutely necessary. It is not a question of more or less. It is not a question of war "well, we'll survive, and so on," it's a question of war that will come close to the extinction of what's decent in life, if not of life itself. It's that we face. And we haven't got indefinite time. We have to base it in terms of years. And at most, decades, and not in centuries, and this is just a fact, which I am understating, rather than overstating in asking your attention to what I have to say.

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