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Ten Reasons Why America Does Not Need to Go to War Over Syria

By John W. Whitehead

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Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, from those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. ~ Dwight D. Eisenhower

For once, I would love to hear a government official reject a call to war because it is immoral; because we have greater needs here at home that require our attention and our funds; because we're already \$1 trillion poorer due to these endless, mindless wars; because America should not be policing the world; because we refuse to enrich the military industrial complex while impoverishing our nation; because endless wars will never result in peace; because we have meddled enough in foreign policy in the Middle East and cannot risk any further blowback; because we're sick and tired of fomenting civil wars in far-flung places; because we're not going to assist rebel fighters in overthrowing a foreign government, only to later unseat those same forces when they can't be controlled; because using the overused fear tactic about "weapons of mass destruction" doesn't carry much weight anymore; because the only "compelling national security interest" right now is taking back control of our run-away government; because in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, "When the rich wage war, it's the poor who die"; because while there may be causes worth dying for, there are none worth killing for; because Gandhi was right when he asked "What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or in the holy name of liberty or

democracy?"; because all war is a crime; and because there are never any winners in war, only losers.

Instead, we hear the same sorry lines about "national security interests," "the costs of doing nothing" and "show[ing] the world that America keeps our commitments" trotted out by those who have either been bought out by the defense industry or are so far removed from war's terrible consequences—the deaths of innocent civilians, the orphans who must struggle to survive, the soldiers who return home crippled and broken, bearing the physical and mental scars of the battle zone—that the decision to go to war is reduced to little more than policy debates and those directly impacted are little more than pawns on a chess board.

It's particularly telling that Sen. John McCain, whose meeting with President Obama allegedly persuaded him that blocking the Syria strike would be catastrophic, was caught on camera playing poker on his iPhone during a U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing concerning the use of force in Syria and then laughed it off as an understandable reaction to a three-hour hearing. Or that President Obama, despite the urgency of the Syria "crisis," departed for the golf course with Vice President Biden 30 minutes after delivering his Syria speech. In other words, it's business as usual in the Beltway, with all the perks that go along with being part of the political elite that gets to declare war and then sit back and watch while others pay the price.

So, now that we're fully distracted and have forgotten about Edward Snowden's damning revelations about the NSA and the fact that the government has been paying AT&T to have its employees monitor Americans' phone calls as part of a DEA drug monitoring program, not to mention the fact that the IRS has been secretly using the DEA surveillance and then instructing its agents to cover their tracks, what *about* Syria?

First, make no mistake, whether you're talking about limited military strikes with no "boots on the ground" as President Obama and Congress are suggesting, or a full-on tactical invasion and occupation, it still constitutes an act of war. For my part, the debate is not over whether President Obama can unilaterally declare war under the Constitution (he can't), or whether it is Congress' place to do so, but whether this should be our priority at all.

Second, just as it seemed as if we might be able to bring our troops home and put an end to the \$1 trillion hemorrhaging caused by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama starts banging the war drums against Syria. No matter what the politicians say about the need for military action to set an example, send a message to terrorists, and show support for our "friends" in Israel and elsewhere, Americans are tired of these endless wars.

Third, we need to get out of the toppling dictators and empowering rebels game. Either we're not very good at it, or we're attempting to ensure that there's always a demand for the weapons we're so eager to produce and supply to the rest of the world. For example, consider that 40 years ago, we were arming some of the very Afghan rebel troops we've been fighting for the past decade with sophisticated weapons. These religious rebels constituted a convenient and useful part of our Cold War strategy against the Soviet Union. In fact, in 1979 Osama bin Laden, a guerrilla warrior for the mujahedeen, fought alongside the CIA to defend Afghanistan against the

invading Soviets. Then he moved to the top of our enemies list. Same with Saddam Hussein. Doubtless it will be the same in Syria, where we would be acting in support of al Qaeda-affiliated rebels. *Mother Jones* magazine reported in a 1999 article that the U.S.—an equal opportunity agent—“has a nasty habit of arming both sides in a conflict, as well as countries with blighted democracy or human rights-records, like Indonesia, Colombia, and Saudi Arabia.”

Fourth, we need to stop letting armament manufacturers dictate our foreign policy. It's been going on too long, and all we have to show for it is war and more war. Recognizing this, President Dwight D. Eisenhower's final advice to the incoming President in January 1961 was to beware of the military-industrial complex. The complex had, in effect, encouraged the Cold War arms race and reckless military adventures, which eventually led to the Vietnam debacle. It's no coincidence that this call for military intervention in Syria, aimed at fattening the defense budget, comes in the midst of automatic spending cuts to the Pentagon—cuts opposed by Obama, the defense industry, and McCain, among others. As *The Hill* reports: “U.S. military action in Syria could give the White House an advantage in the looming fiscal showdown with congressional Republicans...if strikes against Syria are launched, it will be ‘very, very difficult to insist’ on the defense sequester.”

Fifth, enough with the outrage over the use of weapons of mass destruction, already. Remember, that was the Bush administration's rationale for attacking Iraq, and it turned out there were no weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, as *Foreign Policy* reports, when Iraq and Iran were waging war against each other in the late 1980's, “U.S. intelligence officials conveyed the location of the Iranian troops to Iraq, fully aware that Hussein's military would attack with chemical weapons, including sarin, a lethal nerve agent.” Even if Syria does possess chemical weapons and used them against rebel fighters, the larger question is who or what supplied them? And why would we circumvent the United Nations in order to set ourselves up as judge, jury and jailer? As a Middle Eastern history professor rightly asked: “Can a government that supported the use of chemical weapons in one conflict claim any moral, political or legal authority militarily to attack another country for using the same weapons, particularly when the attack is not authorised by the UN Security Council?”

Sixth, banging the war drums and continuing to act the bully does little to advance peace or preserve national security. It will definitely result in blowback, however. As Tariq Ali noted in his excellent treatise on the Islamic mind, *The Clash of Fundamentalism: Crusades, Jihad, and Modernity* (Verso, 2002):

To fight tyranny and oppression by using tyrannical and oppressive means, to combat a single-minded and ruthless fanaticism by becoming equally fanatical and ruthless, will not further the cause of justice or bring about a meaningful democracy. It can only prolong the cycle of violence.

Seventh, we need to stop spending money we don't have on wars we can't win which leave us in hock to foreign debt-holders such as China. At roughly \$729 billion this past year (which does not include an additional \$100 billion in benefits for veterans), the U.S. military budget has skyrocketed out of all proportion. In fact, the U.S. spent more on its military in 2011 than the 13 highest-ranking nations with big defense budgets *combined*. The Pentagon, whose budget

consumes 80% of individual tax revenue, spends more on war than all 50 states combined spend on health, education, welfare, and safety. Consider that the cost of stationing the U.S. military in Afghanistan for *one day* costs more than it did to build the entire Pentagon.

Eighth, Bob Dylan was right—we *are* masters of war. Fifty years after 21-year-old Bob Dylan penned his diatribe against war profiteering, “Masters of War,” it continues to ring true in a world armed to the teeth with U.S. government-financed weapons. The United States is the leading international supplier of armaments, some of which inevitably end up in our enemies’ hands, as well as those of terrorists. As William D. Hartung, director of the Arms Trade Resource Center, pointed out in his report, “Welfare for Weapons Dealers: The Hidden Costs of the Arms Trade,” “Domestic economic considerations have emerged as a predominant factor in arms transfer decision making.” In other words, how much money private U.S. companies can make is often the determination in deciding which international agents the U.S. government approves to buy our weapons.

Ninth, our claim to the moral high ground in this Syria discussion is nothing short of hypocritical given our historic use of weapons widely condemned by the global community. As journalist Andrea Germanos reports:

From cluster bombs to depleted uranium to napalm, recent history of U.S. warfare shows a trail of weapons leaving long-lasting civilian harm... According to the Cluster Munition Coalition, from the 1960s to 2006, the U.S. dropped cluster bombs on Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Albania, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Napalm was not only widely used by the U.S. during the years of the Vietnam War but also in 2003 during the invasion of Iraq, though it only admitted to having used it in Iraq after irrefutable evidence was out.

The U.S. also used white phosphorus on Iraq and Afghanistan. White phosphorus was used in 2004 during the assault on Fallujah, and the New York Times reported its use as recently as in 2011 in Afghanistan.

And finally, as Albert Einstein recognized, “Nothing will end war unless the people themselves refuse to go to war.” This is not about what Obama wants, or what Congress agrees to—the decision to go to war ultimately rests with the American people. We need to say no to war.