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War, Peace, and Absurdity

By Tom Engelhardt
September 22, 2016

Recently, sorting through a pile of old children's books, I came across a volume, *That Makes Me Mad!*, which brought back memories. Written by Steve Kroll, a long-dead friend, it focused on the eternally frustrating everyday adventures of Nina, a little girl whose life regularly meets commonplace roadblocks, at which point she always says... well, you can guess from the title! Vivid parental memories of another age instantly flooded back – of my daughter (now reading such books to her own son) sitting beside me at age five and hitting that repeated line with such mind-blowing, ear-crushing gusto that you knew it spoke to the everyday frustrations of her life, to what made *her* mad.

Three decades later, in an almost unimaginably different America, on picking up that book I suddenly realized that, whenever I follow the news online, on TV, or – and forgive me for this but I'm 72 and still trapped in another era – on paper, I have a similarly Nina-esque urge. Only the line I've come up with for it is (with a tip of the hat to Steve Kroll) "*You must be kidding!*"

Here are a few recent examples from the world of American-style war and peace. Consider these as random illustrations, given that, in the age of Trump, just about everything that happens is out-of-this-world absurd and would serve perfectly well. If you're in the mood, feel free to shout out that line with me as we go.

Nuking the Planet: I'm sure you remember Barack Obama, the guy who entered the Oval Office pledging to work toward "a nuclear-free world." You know, the president who traveled to Prague in 2009 to say stirringly: "So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons... To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same." That same year, he was awarded the Nobel Prize largely for what he might still do, particularly in the nuclear realm. Of course, that was all so 2009!

Almost two terms in the Oval Office later, our peace president, the only one who has ever called for nuclear "abolition" – and whose administration has retired fewer weapons in our nuclear arsenal than any other in the post-Cold War era – is now presiding over the early stages of a trillion-dollar modernization of that very arsenal. (And that trillion-dollar price tag comes, of course, before the inevitable cost overruns even begin.) It includes full-scale work on the creation of a "precision-guided" nuclear weapon with a "dial-back" lower yield option. Such a weapon would potentially bring nukes to the battlefield in a first-use way, something the U.S. is proudly pioneering.

And that brings me to the September 6th front-page story in the *New York Times* that caught my eye. Think of it as the icing on the Obama era nuclear cake. Its headline: "Obama Unlikely to Vow No First Use of Nuclear Weapons." Admittedly, if made, such a vow could be reversed by any future president. Still, reportedly for fear that a pledge not to initiate a nuclear war would "undermine allies and embolden Russia and China... while Russia is running practice bombing runs over Europe and China is expanding its reach in the South China Sea," the president has backed down on issuing such a vow. In translation: the only country that has ever used such weaponry will remain on the record as ready and willing to do so again without nuclear provocation, an act that, it is now believed in Washington, would create a calmer planet.

You must be kidding!

Plain Old Bombing: Recall that in October 2001, when the Bush administration launched its invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. was bombing no other largely Islamic country. In fact, it was bombing no other country at all. Afghanistan was quickly "liberated," the Taliban crushed, al-Qaeda put to flight, and that was that, or so it then seemed.

On September 8th, almost 15 years later, the *Washington Post* reported that, over a single weekend and in a "flurry" of activity, the U.S. had dropped bombs on, or fired missiles at, six largely Islamic countries: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia. (And it might have been seven if the CIA hadn't grown a little rusty when it comes to the drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal borderlands that it's launched repeatedly throughout these years.) In the same spirit, the president who swore he would end the U.S. war in Iraq and, by the time he left office, do the same in Afghanistan, is now overseeing American bombing campaigns in Iraq and Syria which are losing close to 25,000 weapons a year on those countries. Only recently, in order to facilitate the further prosecution of the longest war in our history, the president who announced that his country had ended its "combat mission" in Afghanistan in 2014, has once again deployed the U.S. military in a combat role and has done the same with the U.S. Air Force. For that, B-52s

(of Vietnam infamy) were returned to action there, as well as in Iraq and Syria, after a decade of retirement. In the Pentagon, military figures are now talking about “generational” war in Afghanistan – well into the 2020s.

Meanwhile, President Obama has personally helped pioneer a new form of warfare that will not long remain a largely American possession. It involves missile-armed drones, high-tech weapons that promise a world of no-casualty-conflict (for the American military and the CIA), and adds up to a permanent global killing machine for taking out terror leaders, “lieutenants,” and “militants.” Well beyond official American war zones, U.S. drones regularly cross borders, infringing on national sovereignty throughout the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa, to assassinate anyone the president and his colleagues decide needs to die, American citizen or otherwise (plus, of course, anyone who happens to be in the vicinity). With its White House “kill list” and its “terror Tuesday” meetings, the drone program, promising “surgical” hunting-and-killing action, has blurred the line between war and peace, while being normalized in these years. A president is now not just commander-in-chief but assassin-in-chief, a role that no imaginable future president is likely to reject. Assassination, previously an illegal act, has become the heart and soul of Washington’s way of life and of a way of war that only seems to spread conflict further.

You must be kidding!

The Well-Oiled Machinery of Privatized War: And speaking of drones, as the *New York Times* reported on September 5th, the U.S. drone program does have one problem: a lack of pilots. It has ramped up quickly in these years and, in the process, the pressures on its pilots and other personnel have only grown, including post-traumatic stress over killing civilians thousands of miles away via computer screen. As a result, the Air Force has been losing those pilots fast. Fortunately, a solution is on the horizon. That service has begun filling its pilot gap by going the route of the rest of the military in these years – turning to private contractors for help. Such pilots and other personnel are, however, paid higher salaries and cost more money. The contractors, in turn, have been hiring the only available personnel around, the ones trained by... yep, you guessed it, the Air Force. The result may be an even greater drain on Air Force drone pilots eager for increased pay for grim work and... well, I think you can see just how the well-oiled machinery of privatized war is likely to work here and who’s going to pay for it.

You must be kidding!

Selling Arms As If There Were No Tomorrow: In a recent report for the Center for International Policy, arms expert William Hartung offered a stunning figure on U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia. “Since taking office in January 2009,” he wrote, “the Obama administration has offered over \$115 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia in 42 separate deals, more than any U.S. administration in the history of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The majority of this equipment is still in the pipeline, and could tie the United States to the Saudi military for years to come.” Think about that for a moment: \$115 billion for everything from small arms to tanks, combat aircraft, cluster bombs, and air-to-ground missiles (weaponry now being used to slaughter civilians in neighboring Yemen).

Of course, how else can the U.S. keep its near monopoly on the global arms trade and ensure that two sets of products – Hollywood movies and U.S. weaponry – will dominate the world's business in things that go boom in the night? It's a record to be proud of, especially since putting every advanced weapon imaginable in the hands of the Saudis will obviously help bring peace to a roiled region of the planet. (And if you arm the Saudis, you better do no less for the Israelis, hence the mind-boggling \$38 billion in military aid the Obama administration recently signed on to for the next decade, the most Washington has ever offered any country, ensuring that arms will be flying into the Middle East, literally and figuratively, for years to come.)

Blessed indeed are the peacemakers – and of course you know that by “peacemaker” I mean the classic revolver that “won the West.”

Put another way...

You must be kidding!

The Race for the Generals: I mean, who's got the biggest...

...list of retired generals and admirals? Does it surprise you that there are at least 198 retired commanders floating around in their golden parachutes, many undoubtedly still embedded in the military-industrial complex on corporate boards and the like, eager to enroll in the Trump and Clinton campaigns? Trump went first, releasing an “open letter” signed by 88 generals and admirals who were bravely standing up to reverse the “hollowing out of our military” and to “secure our borders, to defeat our Islamic supremacist adversaries, and restore law and order domestically.” (Partial translation: pour yet more money into our military as The Donald has promised to do.) They included such household names as Major General Joe Arbuckle, Rear Admiral James H. Flatley III, and Brigadier General Mark D. Scraba – or, hey!, one guy you might even remember: Lieutenant General William (“Jerry”) Boykin, the evangelical crusader who made the news in 2003 by claiming of a former Somali opponent, “I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol.”

Somehow, those 88 Trumpian military types assumedly crawled out of “the rubble” under which, as The Donald informed us recently, the Obama administration has left the American high command. His crew, however, is undoubtedly not the “embarrassment” he refers to when talking about American generalship in these years.

Meanwhile, the Clintonites struck back with a list of 95, “including a number of 4-star generals,” many directly from under that rubble, and within the week had added 15 more to hit 110. Meanwhile, members of the intelligence community and the rest of the national security state, former presidential advisers and other officials, drum-beating neocons, and strategists of every sort from America's disastrous wars of the last 15 years hustled to line up behind Hillary or The Donald.

If nothing else, all of it was a reminder of the bloated size and ever-increasing centrality of the post-9/11 national security state and the military-industrial complex that goes with it. The question is: Does it inspire you with confidence in our candidates, or leave you saying...

You must be kidding!

Conflicts of Interest and Access to the Oval Office: Let's put aside a possible preemptive \$25,000 bribe to Florida's attorney general from the Donald J. Trump Foundation to prevent an investigation of a scam operation, Trump "University." If that "donation" to a political action committee does turn out to have been a bribe, no one should be surprised, given that The Donald has long been a walking Ponzi scheme. Thanks to a recent superb investigative report by Kurt Eichenwald of *Newsweek*, consider instead what it might mean for him to enter the Oval Office when it comes to conflicts of interest and the "national security" of the country. Eichenwald concludes that Trump would be "the most conflicted president in American history," since the Trump Organization has "deep ties to global financiers, foreign politicians, and even criminals" in both allied and enemy countries. Almost any foreign policy decision he might make could hurt or enrich his own businesses. There would, in essence, be no way to divest himself and his family from the international Trump branding machine. (Think Trump U. writ large.) And you hardly need ask yourself whether The Donald would "act in the interests of the United States or his wallet," given his prior single-minded pursuit of self-enrichment.

So much for conflicts of interest, what about access? That, of course, brings up the Clintons, who, between 2001 and the moment Hillary announced her candidacy for president, managed to take in \$153 million dollars (yes, that is not a misprint) for a combined 729 speeches at an average fee of \$210,795. That includes Hillary's 20-minute speech to eBay's Women's Initiative Network Summit in March 2015 for a reported \$315,000 just a month before she made her announcement. It's obviously not Hillary's (or Bill's) golden words that corporate executives truly care about and are willing to pay the big bucks for, but the hope of accessibility to both a past and a possible future president. After all, in the world of business, no one ever thinks they're paying good money for nothing.

Do I need to say more than...

You must be kidding!

Of course, I could go on. I could bring up a Congress seemingly incapable of passing a bill to fund a government effort to prevent the Zika virus from spreading wildly in parts of this country. (*You must be kidding!*) I could discuss how the media fell face first into an SUV – *NBC Nightly News*, which I watch, used the video of Hillary Clinton stumbling and almost falling into that van, by my rough count, 15 times over four nights – and what it tells us about news "coverage" these days. (*You must be kidding!*) I could start in on the constant polls that flood our lives by confessing that I'm an addict and plan on joining Pollers Anonymous on November 9th, and then consider what it means to have such polls, and polls of polls, inundate us daily, teaching us about favorable/unfavorable splits, and offering endlessly varying snapshots of how we might or might not vote and which of us might or might not do it day so long before we ever hit a voting booth. (*You must be kidding!*) Or I could bring up the way, after five years of assiduous "research," Donald Trump grudgingly acknowledged that Barack Obama was born in the United States and then essentially blamed the birther movement on Hillary Clinton. (*You must be kidding!*)

I could, in other words, continue welcoming you into an increasingly bizarre American landscape of war and peace (without a Tolstoy in sight).

Still, enough is enough, don't you think? So let me stop here and, just for the hell of it, join me one last time in chanting: *You must be kidding!*