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The United States Needs a Broad-Based Anti-War Movement

By Kevin B. Zeese

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There has to be a better way to stop wars and reduce military spending. Polls show U.S. voters at worst divided on current wars and more often show majority opposition to them. Yet, when Congress “debates” war the widespread view of Americans is muffled, not usually heard.

For the last decade, with President Bush in office the peace movement has been politically left and Democratic leaning. The right-wing has been kept off the stage; as a result the antiwar movement does not reflect the breadth of American opposition to war. For too long the peace movement has been like a bird with only a left wing. It can barely fly and when it does it seems to go in circles. Perhaps a bird with two wings will fly better?

This past weekend Voters for Peace sponsored a meeting of 40 people from across the political spectrum who oppose war and Empire. The people attending see the U.S. military as too big and too expensive and recognize spending \$1 million to keep a soldier in Afghanistan for one year is a symptom of mistaken militarism that weakens U.S. economic and national security.

The purpose of the meeting was to see if we could work together. Could we put aside our differences on other issues and focus on reducing American militarism and in the long run ending reliance on war?

The conversation began with discussions of the history of antiwar advocacy in the United States and what we can learn from it. One point repeatedly made by people on the left and right was

that historically there have been conservatives who opposed war and empire. Today those voices are heard in a whisper, if at all. Before the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II, strong opposition to foreign intervention not only came from progressives but also from traditional conservatives rooted in the recommendation of George Washington's farewell address – "avoid foreign entanglements." How can we reawaken that common-sense conservatism and forge a broad-based antiwar movement?

What would a broad based antiwar movement look like? Some of the conservatives in the room warned against this 21st-century movement looking like the anti-Vietnam war protests of the '60s. Many on the left and right acknowledged that the mass weekend protests against Iraq were large in size but ineffective in result. While there is a role for such protests, they are not sufficient for the task at hand. Some conservatives warned against describing the United States as imperialist – that would get up the hackles of many Americans. But, they were comfortable describing the United States as an empire.

Personally, I found that of interest. Americans never hear discussed in the media whether or not our country is an empire. And, if we were to have such a discussion, the critical questions would be: Is empire good for us, for our national security, for our economy, for our democracy? Having those questions debated would be a breakthrough in political dialogue.

It is hard to deny the American Empire. The U.S. has more than 2,500,000 Dept. of Defense personnel deployed across the planet and 761 military bases on foreign soil, not counting more than 100 in Iraq and more than 400 American and NATO bases in Afghanistan. U.S. troops are now stationed in 148 countries and 11 territories according to the DoD's "Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and Country." America has spawned a military network larger than the Roman Empire, which at its height had 37 major military bases, and the British Empire which had 36. More bases are planned; billions spent building bases in far off lands while large swaths of American cities degrade into impoverished zones and the infrastructure of the nation crumbles.

When the Cold War ended, rather than reducing troops in Germany, Japan, Korea, Italy, the Philippines, and so many other nations; ending the NATO alliance which was designed to combat the now non-existent Soviet Union; and shrinking the weapons and war budget, the U.S. decided to seek to become the sole superpower on Earth. U.S. military spending is now as much as the whole world combined. The U.S. Navy exceeds in firepower the next 13 navies combined. When all the budgets are accounted for – the Pentagon, the wars, the 16 intelligence agencies, the super-sized embassies – total Empire spending is more than \$1 trillion annually.

And the Empire has deep roots. General Smedley Butler, the most decorated Marine in history, joined the Marines in 1898 and served 34 years in China, Nicaragua, Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, and other nations as part of the early American Empire. When Butler retired and thought about his career, he described himself as a "racketeer" for U.S. business interests around the world, and said "war is a racket."

But, this massive Empire is not discussed. It is the elephant in the living room of American foreign policy. And, the entrenched military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower

warned us about in 1961 is now so powerful that cutting the military budget is off the table in Washington, DC – despite cost overruns of hundreds of billions in weapons contracts, the GAO consistently describing the Pentagon as un-auditable and budgets filled with waste, fraud, and abuse. The war budget grows and grows despite a fragile if not collapsing economy at home.

After a long day of discussion it became evident that people from across the political spectrum, despite differences on other issues, could in fact work together to challenge American militarism. Some in the room who had been working on these issues for forty years thought such a coalition was decades past due. Some of the students in attendance had their eyes opened to the history of traditional conservative antiwar efforts — in their lifetimes it had not been heard from.

In discussing this publicly, so far I have only heard from one person on “the left” who opposes it. He was a co-founder of Progressives for Obama and he lumps everyone on the conservative side into what he calls “racist populism.” Such broad-stroke descriptions of people are prima facie evidence of prejudice and certainly not consistent with people I have met from across the spectrum. But his opposition shows the challenge on “the left” – too many are unwilling to stop their support for the Democrats and Obama.

The challenge on the right is also difficult. The neocons have taken over almost all significant conservative organizations. How can we attract traditional conservatives to antiwar advocacy? The day after the conference, the surprise land slide victory of the antiwar conservative, Ron Paul, at the CPAC convention gave hope that there were more right-wing peaceniks than we may have imagined.

While our task is urgent – something which the 1000th death of a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan and the weekend’s killing of two dozen more civilians in an aerial attack brings home – our job is immense. Undoing a century-old empire that is larger than any that ever existed is no easy task, but for citizen patriots it is an essential one for the survival of the nation and the benefit of the world.