

War and Liberty: Wisdom From Leonard E. Read and F. A. “Baldy” Harper

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Abstract: This year marks the 60th anniversary of Leonard E. Read’s “Conscience on the Battlefield” and F.A. “Baldy” Harper’s “In Search of Peace.” This article reviews the main themes of these anti-war pamphlets and argues that the ideas contained within are as important and relevant today as they were sixty years ago.

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1. Introduction

This year marks the 60th anniversary of two very important classical liberal pamphlets on the role of war in a free society— Leonard E. Read’s “Conscience on the Battlefield” and F.A. “Baldy” Harper’s “In Search of Peace.” Published in 1951, the ideas contained within these anti-war pamphlets still hold very important lessons for today. In addition to being six decades since the pamphlets were first published, the U.S., and the U.K., as its main ally, is currently bogged down in two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On June 7, 2010, the war in Afghanistan became the longest war in U.S. history. With no end in sight to either of these wars, let alone the trans-national “War on Terror,” it makes sense to revisit the lessons Read and Harper sought to impart. In what follows, we review the historical context of the two pamphlets, as well as the some of the key themes. These themes are as important and relevant today as they were sixty years ago.

2. Historical Context of 1951

U.S. foreign policy regarding the Cold War and Korean War were the motivating factors behind Read and Harper’s pamphlets. Many feared that unless America defended itself and the rest of the world through the use of force, communism would quickly spread across the globe. Both Read and Harper made the bold conjecture that the communist threat would not be thwarted by the use of force, but instead by winning the battle of ideas.

As Read said in the preface to the 1981 reprinting of his pamphlet, “of course, it does not follow that an unpopular analysis would be right merely because of its unpopularity. But it does follow that unless it is highly controversial, and challenging to a great number of persons, it cannot be consistent with the advancement of human freedom. For popular ideas and liberty are now not in accord. Indeed, they are at odds” (1981). This is as true today as it was in 1951 and

1981. With the financial crisis and resulting economic downturn, many are losing their confidence in free markets, and signs of ever-increasing government paternalism are all around us. Further, among those who support markets and freedom, many still find room for the use of military power, whether it is to help spread ‘democracy,’ to protect our freedoms from perceived threats abroad, or to engage in humanitarian interventions.

Randolph Bourne (1918) once said that war is the health of the state. Read and Harper emphasized this as well, and they traced the implications of engaging in war on freedom. America’s foreign policy was not only incompatible with a free society, but would threaten the very foundations of such a society. Their pamphlets were attempts at explaining this cost of war.

3. The Pamphlets—Background and Motivation

On the surface, Leonard E. Read’s “Conscience on the Battlefield” is a morality tale told through a conversation between a fictional 19-year-old Leonard, dying on the 38th parallel of Korea, and his conscience. Such a situation was not pure fiction for Read, as he was almost killed in World War I when his ship was sunk by an enemy submarine. In addition to exploring the morality of war, Read’s pamphlet also makes positive claims about why war creates a sickness within society that leads us away from freedom and towards, as F.A. Hayek put it, the road to serfdom.

F.A. Harper saw the same problems as Read in America’s foreign policy of engaging in wars to prevent communism and preserve liberty. He also argued that these policies had the negative unintended consequence of eroding the very liberties they claimed to protect. His pamphlet presents the libertarian case in opposition to aggression and large-scale wars against others in the name of peace. For Harper, conflict is indeed a real problem societies must face,

and one which they can never fully resolve. However, the use of aggression to solve such a problem is not only doomed to fail, but also doomed to erode liberty and freedom.

4. Non-Aggression, Not Pacifism

Opponents often accuse anti-war advocates of ‘extreme pacifism’ and ‘non-resistance’ in the face of threats to peace and liberty. While the anti-war sentiments in both pamphlets can be called radical even today, never mind in 1951, neither pamphlet can be said to advocate non-resistance pacifism. Instead, what they advocate is the libertarian principle of non-aggression. Both do so by arguing against the use of U.S.-driven aggression in the first place and by providing an alternative, namely a liberal ideology.

With the publication of “Conscience on the Battlefield,” Read created controversy in conservative circles over what many readers perceived as the advocacy of pacifism. Read’s argument does take a radical position, claiming that all those who take up arms in government wars are acting immorally. This led Brig. Gen. Adler to call for the cessation of the distribution of the pamphlet. As he wrote to Henry Hazlitt on July 31, 1951,

I am sure you did not approve this scurrilous little pamphlet, and I wonder if you have seen it. In my opinion it is more than excessively pacifistic; it is evidently intended to disrupt the morale of our fighting forces, particularly our Soldiers in Korea. It practically indicates them to mutiny. If it were anonymous, I would be quite willing to believe that it was a communist “plant.”

Even Hazlitt himself initially charged Read with non-resistance and pacifism. After reading the pamphlet, Hazlitt sent Read a copy of Herbert Spencer’s short essay “The Ethics of War,” which defends the use of self-defense. Read was not pleased with the claims made by Hazlitt and others and even accused Hazlitt of not carefully reading the pamphlet in a series of letters to Hazlitt on July 11, 1951 and July 20, 1951. The July 20th letter even says, “if you care to take me to lunch I

think I can prove to you on the basis of your writings and my “Conscience on the Battlefield” that I am closer to Spencer’s position than you are. And I think it should be your lunch.”

Read was certainly not advocating non-resistance, but instead attempting to put parameters on the notion of self-defense. For Read, it is certainly a stretch to call the prevention of *potential* future aggression against the U.S. self-defense. In contrast to rejecting self-defense altogether, Read was concerned about the negative effects of an active foreign policy on the very freedoms these wars claimed to protect. As Read’s (1981) conscience tells his dying self in the pamphlet, “Can you not see that gunners, *except when acting in self-defense*, have contracted the very disease they are bent on destroying?” (emphasis added). For Read, the crucial issue is the initiator of violence. He notes that “...if another initiates violence against you, and if he dies in the process of your protecting your life, does he not, in reality, suffer death at his own hand, as in suicide? He initiates the action in the course of which he is killed. He, not you, is the author of the equation that destroys him” (1981).

Harper (1951), on the other hand, anticipated the claims of pacifism. As he starts “In Search of Peace,”

Charges of pacifism are likely to be hurled at anyone who in these troubled times raises any question about the race to war. If pacifism means embracing the objective of peace, I am willing to accept the charge. If it means opposing all aggression against others, I am willing to accept that charge also. It is now urgent in the interest of liberty that many persons become “peacemongers.”

However, Harper makes clear that he is not an advocate of non-resistance. Later in the pamphlet, he addresses whether the libertarian has a right to self-defense: “...So far as my rights are concerned, the right to life carries with it the right to defend my life. And since my property is the economic extension of my person, it is likewise within my rights to protect property from theft or destruction” (1951).

But what if the use of military force is meant to protect the liberty of others? Both writers reject the notion that individuals are obligated to help protect the life and liberty of others. For Read (1981) the question is a matter of effectively being able to judge the initiator of violence:

It is, therefore, next to impossible for you to determine the just from the unjust in cases that are remote to your experience, between peoples whose habits and thoughts and ways of life are foreign to you. Thinking only of yourself you recognize your own scope and proper limits of your own actions. But interference in strange areas may make you the initiator of violence rather than the protector of rectitude.

Individuals are, of course, able to assist of their own free choice, but the U.S. government forcing its citizens to protect the lives of others is a form of aggression itself.

Similarly, for Harper there needs to be a voluntary agreement between individuals to provide assistance. Individuals must voluntarily offer to provide assistance and those in need must voluntarily accept it. Harper also emphasizes that people should not be obligated to come to the aid of those who are themselves unwilling to risk their lives in order to protect their own liberty. For Harper, “one who believes in liberty and who understands it enough to act in its defense does so because he considers liberty to be superior to its alternative – slavery in its various forms.” Harper understood that liberty, if properly understood, would be defended by society as a whole.

5. Fighting Fire with Fire

The world will always have some form of conflict. Even in a liberal society, disputes will emerge now and then. But the ability to transform conflict into war requires something else. As Harper (1951) points out, “a neighborhood squabble between two persons in China, for instance, might lead to one of them murdering the other. But if we are left to our individual judgment, not many

of us would volunteer in behalf of one or the other and cause it to grow to a war. Numbers do not become prevalent enough to be featured in history books.”

If another country’s government forces its citizens to attack us, then we should defend ourselves, but arguments for protective war typically go far beyond mere self-defense. War as a means to peace was a worldwide fallacy 60 years ago and still remains one today. As Read put it in the 1981 reprinting of “Conscience on the Battlefield,” “It is strange that war, the most brutal of man’s activities, requires the utmost delicacy in discussion...War is liberty’s greatest enemy, and the deadly foe of economic progress.”

The problem with war as a means to achieving peace is that it runs the very real risk of threatening liberties in the name of spreading liberty. For example, in 1951 the U.S. engaged in wars and military interventions in order to prevent a domino effect of ever-increasing communism. In fighting the rise of communism, the U.S. used the same means as communist countries use against their own citizens. As Harper (1951) noted, “There is no sense in conjuring up in our minds a violent hatred against people who are the victims of communism in some foreign nation, when the same governmental shackles are making us servile to illiberal forces at home.”

It is hard not to see the parallel with today’s ‘War on Terror,’ where significant liberties have been traded off in order to protect liberty. Harper realized the confusion in this logic when he wrote that, “By some strange twist of reasoning, fear of losing liberty drives persons to enslave themselves and surrender their liberty in the hope of keeping it. It is argued that this is necessary ‘to protect the people’ (1951).” As Robert Higgs (1987) has demonstrated, governments are able to utilize crises—perceived and actual—and the associated fear to

permanently expand the scale and scope of their activities. This process leads to the erosion of individual liberties and freedoms.

Another important insight from Read was that acts of aggression were often met with retaliation, which would lead to the escalation of conflict. Read noted that, “killing merely agitates the process, as a poke on the jaw usually evokes a retaliatory poke on the jaw.” In the limit, relying on war as a tool to promote peace can result in what Harry Elmer Barnes (1953) called the “perpetual war for perpetual peace” as one act of aggression is met with a cycle of retaliations from all parties involved.

6. What’s Our Defense? Ideology

Read and Harper argued that the use of war as means of attacking the enemy of liberty was misguided because it misspecified the true enemy. Both understood that the true enemy of liberty was not something that could be killed by force. “The enemy,” as Harper (1951) notes, “is basically an idea, which is an abstraction. It has no nose to be punched and no heart to be pierced.” Read (1981) similarly states, “The belief in coercion is an idea just as much as the belief in freedom is an idea. It is for this reason that I think you have mistaken the nature of the conflict. It is ideological, not personal; it is of the intellect, not of the flesh.”

Both Read and Harper emphasized the importance of unity around a shared ideology of liberty. There is strength in unity, as the saying goes, but what matters is what people are unified around. Unity backing the use of coercion by the government is only a false strength. As Read (1981) explains,

There is strength only in that unity which results from like-mindedness. This originates with an individual’s actions being in unity with his conscience. In short, the type of unity that has lasting strength is born of integrity. Its extension depends on the consciences of men being similar. The result is similarity in action – action dictated by conscience

instead of by Caesars. This is the kind of unity voluntary service produces. Involuntary unity, however, will do even more harm than that of merely making its practitioners weak. Its false show of strength tends to create fears in other nations, developing a like-mindedness in them as to what they should do to resist and assuage their fears. Coercion thus generates a voluntary unity and a real strength among the very people at whom the involuntary unity is aimed.

As Harper often said, “The man who knows what freedom means will find a way to be free.” A central lesson from both pamphlets is that the ideology of freedom, and not war and aggression, is the ultimate defense against threats to liberty and freedom.

7. Read and Harper’s Message Today

Sixty years after their initial publication, Leonard Read’s “Conscience on the Battlefield” and F.A. “Baldy” Harper’s “In Search of Peace” are as relevant as ever. The U.S. is currently bogged down in two occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq with no end in sight. The failure of these efforts has been highlighted by the revolutions that are currently taking place throughout the Middle East. These revolutions are an indictment not only of the ‘war for peace’ justification for aggression, but also of the ideas that outsiders must initiate social change toward freedom through force.

Consider that the U.S has now been in Afghanistan for nearly 10 years and have been unable to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of Afghan citizens. In Egypt it was a matter of weeks between the initial indigenous uprising and President Hosni Mubarek’s resignation. While it is too early to tell what the outcomes of these social uprisings will be, the fact that they are spontaneous in nature provides some support for Harper’s claim that those that long to be free will find a way.

The issue of war has always been controversial among conservatives and classical liberals. No matter where one stands on these issues, it is our hope that on the 60th anniversary of these two important pamphlets, all supporters of freedom and liberty will take the time to consider the arguments raised by Leonard Read and Baldy Harper. The ideas in these pamphlets are as relevant as when first written. After all, what is at stake are our liberties and freedoms.

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