

Christmas, Peace and Hope

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There is an undoubted magic to the Christmas Season. Not the magic of a conjurer's tricks, but the magic of a transcendent event, one that lifts our eyes and opens our hearts. Who among us does not have memories of a Christmas Eve when the world seemed to stand still for a moment while shivers of peace and love cascaded down our spines? Why, we ask, can't all 365 days be like this moment?

This is the theme that countless homilists will embark on in the next few days. Christmas, without a doubt, brings out the best in rhetoric. However, I have not come here to give a homily (others in the audience could do that much better). Rather, my job is to present some facts and a few observations, based on 40 years in public life, under a heading I might call: "It Isn't Enough to Talk About Peace Only at Christmas."

The first fact concerns the cost of militarism, the second poverty, and the third our public institutions.

We often feel discouraged at what appears to be a never-ending cycle of killings and violence. But the media seldom dwell on the long-term gains humanity is making. The still-young 21st century has already made a profound discovery: military force cannot bring security. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan proved to be grossly miscalculated. Their effect has

actually created a rising belief in the futility of war. In fact, a high-level panel at the United Nations noted that there were fewer inter-state wars in the last half of the 20th century than in the first half, despite the quadrupling of the number of states.

Over the past dozen years, the global security climate has changed in dramatic, positive, but largely unheralded ways. Civil wars, genocide and international crises have all declined sharply. It is true that there are still wars being fought, there are still gross abuses of human rights and deadly acts of terrorism; but it is also true that more than 100 conflicts have quietly ended since 1988. In the past two decades, more wars stopped than started. The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, headed by the Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, stated that “while people will always have their ideological and national differences, the vast majority of humanity appears to be seeking the benefits of an increasingly interdependent world and is not rallying to the idea of an inevitable clash of civilizations.”

In his new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker shows the many ways that violence is declining in modern history. Globalization, communications, and the gradual build-up of international law are all having a profound effect on the human psyche. We should not be lulled into complacency, but the forces of history are moving to the reduction of violence.

If history is moving toward a reduction of violence, why, then, are governments continuing to spend so much on armaments? In 2010, governments spent \$1.6 trillion on equipping their armies, which was a 50 percent increase over the past decade. In Canada, the defence budget is 20

times greater than we spend on cleaning up the environment. What is it that keeps governments spending so much on preparations for war, depriving people of the resources needed for their own development?

This brings me to my second point: poverty. There are one billion hungry people in the world, a figure that never seems to change much, and several reports show that the income gap between the rich and poor around the world is widening. Though, as I have noted, inter-state wars are declining, military budgets always go up because they are deemed essential, while human development programs are treated as discretionary spending.

The world is undoubtedly both over-armed and over-hungry, but military spending won't stop because it is so profitable. The world's 100 largest arms-producing countries increased their sales by \$39 billion in 2008 to reach an annual all-time high of \$385 billion. Expensive arms fairs, government subsidies, and promotion of arms exports are regular government practice. The arms trade is overwhelmingly dominated by the Western countries. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's appeal for a reversal of priorities so that money now spent on arms would be diverted to combat climate change, food production, and health and education goals fell on deaf ears.

People are infuriated by the greed and corrupt practices of the financial sector, but they are not equally infuriated by the corruption of the military-industrial complex, because they have been conditioned to think that more and more weaponry, including nuclear bombs, will solve our security problems. Thus the government accountants shovel more money into the military machine, all the while neglecting the security needs around them. The infrastructure of society at home, the hospitals, schools, and transportation systems are all weakened because of the exaltation of military values. Nobel Peace laureate Óscar Arias, former

president of Costa Rica, argues that “military spending represents the most significant perversion of world-wide priorities known today.” This misappropriation of the public’s money, let alone the deprivation of children, is what the guns versus butter argument should be about.

Now I come to my third point: public institutions. While government is foremost, I mean also academic institutions, religious institutions, legal institutions, and what might generally be called the corporate-labour fabric of our societal life. In my long public career, I have found that, generally, the institutions that guide our life are preoccupied with themselves rather than concentrating their attention, influence and resources on the human security condition. Institutions usually respond to problems after they have occurred rather than taking action beforehand to head off a problem.

Our society supports food banks to help the hungry, but shuns the idea of a guaranteed annual income. We want a cleaner environment, but refuse to make polluters pay a carbon tax. We hope there will not be a nuclear war, but countenance the modernization of the world’s 20,000 existing nuclear weapons.

Most institutions are powerful in their own right, but they are not leading in establishing the laws, rules, and format of a just and equitable society built on the ideas of a culture of peace and non-violence. They are certainly not addressing the crisis of the human spirit that is so apparent in the world today, from the Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street movement. The revolts and tensions we are seeing today stem from an institutional malaise that seems unable to focus on sustainable development for all, respect for all human rights, equality between men and women, and genuine participatory democracy. In short, institutions, particularly governments, today are failing in their duty to build a society with the structural basis of peace and human security.

This does not mean that a culture of peace is not gradually being built up.

The gains we are achieving are the result largely of civil society leadership, not the institutions'. A more human society is coming about as the result of the work of countless individuals and organizations. In fact, civil society networking, using the tools of modern communication, is prodding governments to move forward on equitable policies for food distribution, clean water availability, decent sanitation, properly equipped medical clinics, and sufficiently funded educational systems.

It is certainly civil society that is leading the way in dealing with the two over-arching problems the planet faces: global warming and eliminating nuclear weapons. Governments have the power to make laws to end global warming and nuclear weapons, but they will only do so when the public clamour is deafening.

The work of the Rotary Club, many of whose projects around the world I have seen, is testimony to the vision and courage of countless individuals who work for peace and social justice throughout the year. A new global conscience is driving us forward to a world of greater care and mutual respect. Violence, war, and greed still assault us. But the body of humanity, elevated by knowledge and communications as never before, grows stronger.

In New York last week, I saw a great sign spread around the city by Bloomingdale's: "Happy. Merry. Peace. Love." That covers a lot of bases. I just hope it might animate our institutional leaders to take seriously this message.
