

WAR AND LIBERTY: WISDOM FROM LEONARD E. READ AND F. A. 'BALDY' HARPER

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*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 60 years ago.*

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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 it being six decades since the pamphlets were first published, the USA is currently engaged in two ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On 7 June 2010, the war in Afghanistan became the longest war in US 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 some of the key themes. These themes are as important and relevant today as they were 60 years ago.

Historical context of 1951

US foreign policies regarding the Cold War and Korean War were the motivating factors behind Read's 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' (Read, 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. Furthermore, 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 emphasised 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, they argued, but would threaten the very foundations of such a society. Their pamphlets were attempts at explaining this cost of war.

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.

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, neither pamphlet can be said to advocate non-resistance pacifism. Instead, what they advocate is the principle of non-aggression. Both do so by arguing against the use of US-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 Brigadier General Adler to call for the cessation of the distribution of the pamphlet. As he wrote to Henry Hazlitt on 31 July 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 advocating a position of non-resistance and pacifism. After reading the pamphlet, Hazlitt sent Read a copy of Herbert Spencer's short essay 'The Ethics of War', which upholds war for self-defence. Read was not pleased with the claims made by Hazlitt and others. In a series of letters to Hazlitt on 11 July 1951 and 20 July 1951, Read accused him of not carefully reading the pamphlet. For example, in the 20 July letter Read wrote that, '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-defence. For Read, it is certainly a stretch to call the prevention of *potential* future aggression self-defence. In contrast to rejecting self-defence 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' (Read, 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-defence and concludes: '... 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' (ibid.).

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.'

Read does make clear that individuals are free to assist others if they so voluntarily choose. However, when the US government forces its citizens to protect the lives of others, this act of 'protection' is, in reality, an act of aggression.

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 emphasises 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 (1951), '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 believed that liberty, if properly understood, would be defended by individuals who valued that liberty and freedom.

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 on 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. However,

arguments for protective war typically go far beyond mere self-defence and involve pre-emptive military interventions to address potential threats. Pre-emptive war, according to this logic, is necessary to maintain peace. A central theme of both pamphlets is that this line of reasoning is misguided because it overlooks the cost of war in terms of lost liberty at home. For example, in addressing US military interventions to prevent the spread of communism, Harper (1951) noted that, '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 the name of protecting liberty. Harper (ibid.) realised 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".' As Robert Higgs (1987) has argued, governments are able to utilise 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 foreign aggression were often met with retaliation, which would lead to the escalation of conflict. He noted that, 'killing merely agitates the process, as a poke on the jaw usually evokes a retaliatory poke on the jaw' (Read, 1951). 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 an initial act of aggression is met with a cycle of retaliations from all parties involved.

What's our defence? 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', Harper (1951) writes, '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 emphasised the importance of unity around a shared ideology of liberty. There is strength in unity, as the saying goes, but what ultimately matters are the ideas that people believe and share in common with others. Unity around 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 is often quoted as saying, '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 defence against threats to liberty and freedom.

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 USA 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 foreign aggression, but also of the idea that outsiders must initiate social change toward freedom through force.

Consider that the USA has now been in Afghanistan for nearly ten years and has 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 Mubarak'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 who 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 F. A. 'Baldy' Harper. The ideas in these pamphlets are as relevant as when they were first written in 1951, and the stakes are just as high – our liberty and freedom.

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