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# Courageous Peace

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## Courageous Peace

“In these days of difficulty, we Americans everywhere must and shall choose the path of social justice, the path of faith, the path of hope, and the path of love toward our fellow man.”

(The end of a campaign address given by Franklin D. Roosevelt in Detroit on October 2, 1932)

“More than an end to war, we want to end the beginnings of all war.”

(President Roosevelt’s vision for the future in 1945)

These two quotations are engraved in stone on the walls of President Roosevelt’s memorial in Washington, D.C. Stated so long ago, these words of wisdom express the desires of many people today. For me, they powerfully express the goals of those working for the establishment of a cabinet level Department of Peace and Nonviolence. Since the founding of our country there have been people who understood that finding ways to reduce violence at home and prevent armed conflict abroad were the only sensible things to do.

For others peace is seen as a sign of weakness, a lack of courage. What takes more courage? Is it courageous when government leaders call up their military forces and send them into battle? Instead, is it more courageous when government leaders meet with their perceived enemies face-to-face and follow the maxim, “seek first to understand then to be understood” until there is peaceful resolution?

I propose that the second action is more courageous. Peaceful resolution requires each side to see the other as equals, and to respect one another’s sovereignty. It requires each side to let go of the idea that revenge will resolve past injustices. Peaceful resolution requires compromise and forgiveness. Peaceful resolution requires that with the absence of violent military action, there must also be justice.

Throughout the twentieth century, the United States military was deployed over ninety times in foreign countries. This reminds me of the adage, “Older men declare war (or military intervention), but it is the youth that must fight and die.” Like war, this adage is obsolete. Our brave men and women who volunteer to serve their country are still unnecessarily put in harms way, and too many return in body bags; but in addition we now have thousands of civilian casualties. Eighty to ninety percent of war casualties are civilians, most are women and children.

What is done, after thousands are killed, the country’s infrastructure, economy, and institutions of civil society are destroyed? There are negotiations, often referred to as peace talks. It is time for us to demand that our government stop promulgating the idea that we only go to war to make the world safe for democracy and secure peace. War does not bring lasting peace and freedom.

Then there is the problem of civil war. We have been witnesses to the mass killings in Eastern Europe, Sudan, Rwanda, and others. Who are the most courageous? Is it a group of armed civilians who recruit others to support their cause, acquiring weapons and then proceeding to try to kill everyone who does not support them? Is it a group of civilians who have no weapons and decide that no matter what happens they will end injustice through nonviolent means?

Citizen nonviolent action takes tremendous courage. Two of the most well known nonviolent confrontations of the twentieth century are those who followed Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the 1920s Mahatma Gandhi trained and organized his supporters to peacefully demonstrate and to take action through civil disobedience against colonial rule. Without using a weapon, the British finally agreed to leave, resulting in India becoming an independent country in 1951 after ninety-three years of colonialism.

Martin Luther King, Jr. took the leadership role with nonviolent protests that resulted in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which created the means to enforce the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments to the constitution (ratified July 21, 1868 & February 3, 1870). These laws banned discrimination in voting, employment, public accommodations, places of entertainment, commerce, public facilities and schools, and federally assisted programs.

It takes a special leader and a large group of committed followers who are willing to stand together regardless of the consequences to bring about constructive change. It hasn't happened often because it is harder and takes more courage to stand against injustice knowing the only weapon is the rightness of their cause.

Another type of violence is that of poverty. In the United States in 2007, 12.5% or 37.3 million people lived in poverty; 35% were children. It is estimated that half the world's population lives on less than three dollars per day. There is frequent violence. Many children attend schools that are mediocre at best; others have no schooling at all. They are not prepared for adulthood, so they will never be able to work themselves out of poverty. Access to health care is minimal or nonexistent. People are often hungry and their diet is inadequate. In 2005, the International Red Cross reported that 1.1 billion people around the world lacked safe water and another 2.4 billion had no access to sanitation. They live in substandard housing, shanty towns, or on the street. Are the results of poverty, this social injustice, any different than the destruction of an invading military or civil war? I think not.

In these early years of the twenty-first century I envision a president who understands the words of President Roosevelt are the goals of an action plan for a courageous peace. Committed to preventing war and violence, we help people help themselves by implementing proven programs that result in social justice. They are economic development, opportunities for adults to work themselves out of poverty, educated children, adequate health care, food, clothing and shelter, clean water, and reconciliation. This is the beginning of a more peaceful world.

Courageous peace brings us to the path of faith, hope and love toward all people – a change in consciousness where we know how to “end the beginnings of all wars” and we are determined to do so.