

No More War!

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The crisis has hit our county with a vengeance. Official unemployment over 10%. Real unemployment and part-time employment way higher. Crowds seeking scarce work at curbsides. Growing reliance on food stamps and food banks. Nine hundred foreclosures in 2008. Increasing homelessness. Failing businesses. Plunging revenues. Public services slashed anew, after years of paring down. Most of what makes life here so special – even the weather -- now seems at risk.

So it is with California and the nation; but the tragedy unfolds most visibly here at home. Lots of us haven't felt the bite personally just yet, because we still have good jobs or pensions, health insurance, paid-off homes, manageable mortgages. But many presently comfortable folks will soon enough share the hardships that several thousands of our neighbors face already; and the rest will be left wondering how best to give a helping hand to those in need.

How'd we get into this predicament? How are we're supposed to get out? Bail-outs for the culpable? Tax cuts and "stimulus" for the gullible? Too little has been said yet about the really big problem we face: the insatiable cash-guzzler that is the American military establishment, nourished by our obsession with war. To restore ourselves to well-being, we are for sure going to have to do something about that.

Since the "good war" of the 40's (which "saved the world" at the cost of fifty million mostly civilian lives, hundreds of destroyed cities and vast expenditure), we Americans have become positively addicted to war. We've squandered resources and reputation on the "superpower" delusion, on the pursuit of world (even space) dominance through the threat or exercise of military force. We've focused our economy on war. War is now our thing; bombing, the activity we're best at.

We've sacrificed the lives of many young men and some women, wrecked the lives of a great many more, and destroyed millions of American families on the altar of the God of War. Our toys and games glorify war; we think "war" even when confronting a social problem like poverty, a public health problem like drug abuse, a public safety problem like gangs or terrorism. We persist in that irrational behavior even when the evidence is overwhelming that "war is not the answer," that it solves no problem, that though lucrative to some for a while, it serves mostly to create new problems for the future.

It's hard to quantify the dollar cost of war to Santa Cruz County; but it certainly is tremendous. The National Priorities Project analyzes federal data to compute the total cost of the Iraq war alone: \$591 billion in spending authorized to date, of which no less than \$713 million has been provided by this county. That would pay a lot of teachers, fill a lot of potholes, build a lot of teen centers and affordable housing, provide a lot of health care. The point is that down-at-the-heels Santa Cruz County simply cannot afford war. We have to get beyond that decades-old addiction.

It won't be easy. Habits die hard. Many local workers make their living from war – from Lockheed and other defense contractors, from the military itself, more indirectly from the University and other employers. Pension funds are invested in war. Nobody is altogether free of entanglement, with the machine and with the addiction. Recovery can't take place overnight. But as with other addictions, it can't even begin until we acknowledge the problem and make a firm decision to beat it.

Santa Cruz County has long sustained a vigorous "peace movement," of which I'm proud to be part. But this is not the "peacenik" writing; it's the pragmatic citizen homeowner and taxpayer. We cannot continue to develop and deploy weapons of mass destruction, maintain half a million soldiers and contractors on 800 bases in 130 countries, create enemies everywhere, start a new war every whipstitch, and at the same time provide a good life to all Americans, and a viable future for our kids and grandkids. It's got to stop.

There's reason to hope that our new President will be more circumspect than most about war-making. But he'll be sorely tempted; and he'll be under relentless pressure every day he's there to increase the flow of revenues to the Pentagon and its contractors. If in the end he listens to his "better angels", it'll be because folks like us have raised up an equally relentless chorus with a single unequivocal demand: No More War!

