



THOMAS PAINE (1737-1809), the QUAKERS, and the ABOLITION of WAR

Presented by

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The Preparing for Peace Project

In 2000, Westmorland General Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, began a PEACE initiative, called Preparing for Peace, to explore these questions with international experts and witnesses. This is one of the papers.

The themes were:

- Can we demonstrate that war is obsolete?
- Is war successful in achieving its objectives?
- Can war be controlled or contained?
- What are the costs of war?
- What are the causes of war?
- Can the world move forward to another way?

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In 1991 the distinguished Oxford historian, Alan Bullock, published his powerful, double biography on, "Hitler & Stalin". Bullock, in his concluding analysis, noted the common view held by most people in Europe as they emerged from the horrors of the Second World War, only twenty years after the awesome brutalities of World War 1.

"The age of Hitler & Stalin", he wrote, "represents one of the blackest periods in Europe's history, which many at the time believed meant the end of European civilization".

In an off-chance remark, it was Hitler himself who had explained why Europe had been driven to the brink of such disaster. As if to excuse his own bizarre excesses, he once said, "How fortunate it is for rulers that men don't think for themselves".

Tom Paine, one of the most complex & enigmatic of men, born in 1773 to become the apprenticed son of an impoverished corset maker, a citizen of the second & third Georges of England, & having been in early life, a lowly excise officer, is the quintessential epitome of the "man who thinks for himself".

Tom Paine offers a model as to how & why free women & men should always "think for themselves". No authority in church or state, in politics or the media, in science or law, in education or culture, offers a substitute for thinking & reasoning for oneself.

Yet the Englishman who ignited the American Revolution with his pamphlet, "Common Sense", wherein he contrasted civil society with the State, the man who inspired Jefferson's draft of America's Declaration of Independence & then, on his return to London wrote one of the most influential books of modern times which he called, "The Rights of Man", & which frightened the English establishment beyond measure; who then set off for Paris & the French Revolution where he was elected to the Convention as the Deputy for Calais, & who, in 1793, helped to write the new Constitution of France, but then, on being incarcerated in the infamous Luxembourg prison for trying to restrain the violent excesses of Robespierre, was moved to write, "The Age of Reason"

– this astonishing, self taught man, Tom Paine, was & is without recognition in England.

The French erected a gold statue to him in Paris; the Americans printed his head on their postage stamps & hung his portrait in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, but the English withheld recognition & continue to deny tribute. His proper place, of course, is alongside Cromwell within the perimeter wall of our Palaces of Westminster.

So let us consider this man & his Quaker roots - despite the fire in St Louis over a century ago, which destroyed so many of his personal papers.

What we know for certain is that his father, Joseph, was a convinced Quaker at a time when only one Englishman in every five hundred was a Quaker, & when the Society of Friends was in decline as it slipped into “quietism”, erecting what it called “a Quaker hedge” between itself & the rest of British society.

In the year 1800, out of a total population of six & a half millions, Quakers numbered some 24,000 members in England & 32,000 in G.B. They comprised, therefore, only 0.5% of the population, but they had a seminal influence on the evolving nature of British society.

Father Joseph had married an Anglican woman called, Frances Cocke (June 20th, 1734). She came from a privileged family of lawyers. Tom’s most recent biographer, John Keane, considers that baby Tom was baptised an Anglican, although there remains a mystery because the event is not recorded in the parish register. Tom’s baptism - if it happened - would have dismayed the Thetford Quakers & probably would have led to local disquiet. Despite being born of a mixed marriage however, Father’s Quaker influence, & his way of handling conflict through inner quietness, would have impressed the growing boy. So would silent grace before meals, regular bible reading, & silent meditation reinforced by the teaching through example of Quaker insights in a hundred & one different instances.

Joseph Paine’s family friends, including visitors to the house, would be mostly Quakers. We know Tom attended & worshipped in the Quaker Meeting House at Thetford from the age of six. At least 6 hours each week were given over to meditation & learning the art of listening to the inward voice of God. Tom would be taught not only that, “there is that of God in each person”, & that what was variously called the “Spirit”, or the “Light”, or the “Spark”, or the “Seed”, would help him to reach out to that of God in every person - he would also learn that women are self-evidently equal to men, that justice & integrity are the natural fruits of a good life, that liberty should be the goal of social evolution, & that freedom in all things is a right - rather than a gift bestowed by those who rule. “Privilege”, in Tom’s opinion was the key flaw in the governance of his time. “The idea of hereditary legislators is asabsurd as an hereditary author”. From the outset, a hundred years earlier, George Fox had insisted on his revolutionary insight

of equality – not just in respect of male & female, but as between husband & wife, servant & master, commoner & aristocrat, priest & worshipper – all were equal to one another. This had never been said before, let alone practised. Such powerful, Quaker insights would influence Tom throughout life. They were balanced by a keen, personal sense of “responsibilities”.

Tom paid tribute to those influences when he wrote, “My Father being of the Quaker profession, it was my good fortune to have an exceedingly good moral education, & a tolerable stock of useful learning.”

In time the impact of such powerful Quaker insights absorbed in childhood & adolescence would contribute to the shaping & moulding of Tom not just as a revolutionary, but something of a Quaker revolutionary.

John Keane challenges this deduction & you must make up your own mind. Like most commentators who stand outside Quakerism, Keane tries to assess the traditional beliefs of the Quaker to make his point. He finds these wanting for hard evidence in Tom’s adult life. Yet such beliefs are definable despite the Quaker’s rejection of doctrine & dogma. They include our peace testimony & our total, or qualified, rejection of violence for settling political disputes; the assumption of our common equality regardless of birth, race, gender, politics or religion; the need for simplicity in all things, but particularly in dress, speech, adornments including titles, language & possessions including wealth; a commitment to doing good reinforced by a willingness to “speak truth to power”; clarity as to the gross injustice of divisions between rich & poor; &, of course, hitching one’s star to the dissenting tradition which puts the King & his court, the High Court Judge, the General, the priest, the aristocrat & the emerging men & women of science, on exactly the same level as the common man or woman – the “Third Estate”, as Tom originally called us.

Such characteristics are the fruits of the Spirit & are not, of course, in any way limited to Quakers. But they are Quaker characteristics par excellence. Do they spring from any common root? The answer, I feel, will be found in the Quaker’s search for “insightful understanding”. Or, in the language of the day, the insight that true religion requires each person to be a “seeker” after the truth, & to follow the inward Light, through a mix of conscience & reason, & always experientially – even if it leads to the rejection of the church with its doctrine & theology, or of the state with its social code, class divisions & self-reinforcing laws, designed to protect & enhance those divisions.

Historically, what Quakers called “discernment”, “clearness” & “convincement” were key words. They still are. Creed & dogma were to be replaced by an experiential search for truth, which in the fullness of time becomes a way of living. Quakerism cannot be defined, therefore, as a set of coded beliefs, much less of dogma or canonical instruction. It is a way of life, an attitude towards life &, in so far as it is essentially experiential, it is by definition, personal & deeply individualistic.

For Tom this life-long journey showed itself in his commitment to what I would call his “evolving humanitarianism” – a consciously disciplined commitment to “seek the truth” in each of life’s situations – but with “freedom” as a high index of that truth. Always you should ensure that your “nay” is seen to be “nay”, & that your “yea” always means “yea”.

Transparent personal integrity does seem to motivate & distinguish the genuine social pioneers which Quakerism throws up from time to time. It seems to have inspired Tom, irrespective of his multifarious attachments in later life which, at one time or another, included, for example, acting for John Wesley as a Methodist local preacher, being a polemicist, an educator, a banker, a writer, a thinker, a farmer, a ship’s hand, an inventor, a war correspondent, a revolutionary, & even a soldier of sorts.

Tom married twice. His only daughter died at 9 months & her mother (nee Mary Lambert) was soon to follow her. Tom married again – only to separate amicably from his new wife, Elizabeth Ollive, in 1774, but without issue.

There was more. To his commitment to “seek the Light”, he decided early in life to embrace the great dissenting tradition, rampant not least in Norfolk – his home territory. His first job, as a Customs Officer – where he was largely a failure - had brought him face to face with the abject poverty & misery of the slums of London. Like everyone else he was obliged to reflect on the Wilkes’ controversy with its Commonwealth ideology focusing on the protestant ascendancy of England. Later, he would note with some feeling, “Rich men make bonny traitors”. He ruminated on the entrenched class system nurtured by the Kings of England & their privileged aristocracy. “The contrast”, he wrote, “of affluence & wretchedness continually meeting & offending the eye, is like dead & living bodies chained together.” (Agrarian Justice. 1797).

The intellectual impact of eighteenth century Whiggery also helped to shape Tom. He became convinced of the imperative “to extend the rights of Englishmen to all mankind”, to freedom of thought, to religious toleration & to the classical form of a republican government under the English theory of a mixed constitution. (cf. Wm Kashatus iii. 1984.)

In America, in mid life, (1774), Tom now 37 years old, fell in with William Penn & the Free Quakers of Philadelphia. This led him to modify his absolute pacifism to one of conditional pacifism. Commentators, including Keane, are wrong to assume that because Tom was not now an absolute pacifist, he could not be a Quaker. It is inconsistent with Quaker tradition to reach such judgments. Quakers did not disown or “read out” conditional pacifists like Isaac Pennington, or William Penn, or for that matter Tom Paine.

Consider a less well known Friend of good standing, who lived at much the same time as did Tom Paine – the Quaker doctor John Coakley Lettsom. Lettsom’s father was the wealthy owner of a Caribbean plantation, who sent his son to England for his education & the study of medicine. When his father died in 1767, Lettsom returned to the Caribbean to face the prospects of a life dedicated to the accumulation of wealth. Instead, his first act was to free all the plantation’s slaves, thereby bankrupting him – as an act of deliberate moral imperative. He returned to England to become a successful medical doctor with a strong bent for philanthropy. In 1770 he set up, for the poor, the first “General Dispensary” in Aldersgate Street. Four years later he helped to found the (Royal) Humane Society to pioneer techniques to save people from drowning. To his credit there followed a convalescent home for those with T.B., the Royal Bathing Infirmary at Margate, & the Medical Society of London. In Camberwell, Lettsom laid out a museum, library & botanical garden. He embraced the “new” sciences & became their knowledgeable advocate. He wrote extensively on poverty, prostitution, infectious illnesses & penal reform – the latter in concert with John Howard. He provided soup kitchens out of his own pocket for the poor, advised on education, & physical fitness via diet, exercise, games, attire & cleanliness. He even campaigned for 50,000 bee hives to be maintained in & around London for “ornament & utility”, as well as for small-pox vaccination. The whole of his life, therefore, was a testimony to the best in Quakerism. But in 1803 he became physician to the Camberwell Voluntary Infantry, declaring, “May I fall by the sword rather than live to see this free country the domain of a Corsican murderer & usurper”. Friends did not disown Lettsom, nor, do I think he was a lesser Quaker for his decision. (Porter. “Enlightenment, Britain & the Creation of the Modern World”).

Even today, through the record of “Quaker Faith & Practice”, Quakers, whilst rejecting “all forms of war” & violence, continue to agonise over the moral dilemmas of pacifism. During their Meetings for Worship, Quakers still remind each other of the words of Isaac Pennington written in 1661 – “I speak not against any magistrate or peoples defending themselves against foreign invasions; or making use of the sword to suppress the violent & evil-doers within their borders – for this the present estate of things may & doth require, & a great blessing will attend the sword where it is borne uprightly to that end, & its use will be honourable..... But yet”, he then goes on, “there is a better state, which the Lord has brought some into, & which nations are to expect & to travel towards.” Pennington then urges individuals to seek this “better state” – in what Tom was to call, “God’s season”, that is, “When the power of the Gospel spreads over the whole earth.....”.

The test, it seems, is not so much pacifism, but one’s willingness to seek the light in humility, & to follow it in faith. If that journey leads to conditional pacifism - as it does for some Quakers in times of conflict - that may be a source of disappointment for the Quaker who has been led to embrace absolute pacifism, but it does not lead to automatic disownment by the Society of Friends.

Quakers today remember with humility that George Fox had worn a sword for long enough & had sided explicitly with Cromwell in the Civil War. They recall that redoubtable, Quaker pioneer, Margaret Fell, who eventually married George Fox & who is sometimes called “the mother of Quakerism”, but who described Cromwell’s army as, “the Battle-Axe in the hand of the Lord”. Edward Burrough, (1632 – 1663), another early Quaker, told Cromwell that it was God working through the army, who, “overthrew that oppressive power of kings & lords.” Recent research confirms that of the first 33 men, excluding priests & JP’s, appointed by George Fox, 20 had military rank or had army connections. (“Gerrard Winstanley & the Republic of Heaven”. David Boulton, 1999.). Early Quaker pacifism offers at best a somewhat blurred picture on this point. It does not, however, detract from the broad vision of the moral wisdom of non-violence for people & their communities.

Tom’s first major political statement in 1776 - “Common Sense” - triggered the American Revolution. It has been described as “the corner-stone of American democracy” (Keane). It critiques the monarchy, draws a clear distinction between civil society & the state, argues for colonial independence, & offers wise advice on the nature & structure of representative, democratic governance. It ran to 150,000 copies - not one of which brought a penny into Tom’s bank account. That, too, is very Quakerly. Whilst clearly the work of a genius, “Common Sense” reflects a typically Quaker view of life & its values. Nor would Quakers expect a fellow Quaker to make a profit from his or her spiritual insights.

A year earlier in July 1775, Tom had made his position in respect of pacifism explicit. It was one the Society of Friends would understand. He begins his pamphlet, “Thoughts on Defensive War”, subtitled, “a lover of peace” (1775), with his celebrated cri de coeur – “These are the times that try men’s souls”. In his pamphlet, “The American Crisis” (1778), he was to write, “If there is a sin superior to any other it is that of wilful & offensive war.” As the revolution gathered momentum he confessed that, “...violence is a difficult horse to ride”, concluding, as a realist, that the defence of liberty was the only cause that could legitimise the use of State directed force. Tom recognized that those who live by the sword are likely to die by the sword, but also he understood that those who deny the sword may be crucified on the Cross, or may themselves be the cause for others having to sacrifice their lives.

Therefore, he wrote plainly, “I am thus far a Quaker, (in) that I would readily agree with all the world to lay aside the use of arms, & settle matters by negotiation: but unless the whole will, the matter ends & I take up my musket & thank heaven he has put it in my power”. (“Thoughts on Defensive War”, 1775). In a word, force must serve liberty, or it is indefensible. Quakers who joined the British army in 1914 or in 1939 would echo that point of view.

I also think that commentators who argue that Tom’s move towards deism in later life, when he was 57 years of age, best articulated in his final pamphlet, “The Age of

Reason” (1794), but already apparent in “Common Sense”, somehow denies his Quakerism – are too simplistic. Modern Quakers would entirely understand Tom’s celebrated claim that “my own mind is my church”. Tom embraced deism because it confirmed his experience of the ordered beauty of the natural world. Today, I suspect the majority of Quakers in Britain are Deists, rather than Theists - experiencing the presence of God in creation, & in the ongoing history of the world. But even in the eighteenth century, when English religion was Christo-centric, provided your honest response to the inner light led you down a different path – say that of the emerging idea of deism – the Religious Society of Friends of the Truth – to give Quakers their full name - would be reluctant to disown you as a member.

At the end of his life (1809) & given his brilliant record of service to humanity, it is heart-rendingly shameful that a handful of American Quakers refused Tom’s gentle, but urgent, deathbed plea to be laid to rest in a Quaker burial place. Only six mourners attended the funeral of one of England’s greatest of men. Not one was Quaker. That is a commentary not on Tom, but on 19th century Quakerism. In the end it was left to his admirer William Cobbett to transport Tom’s bones to England, where, tragically, they were lost.

However you judge his Quakerism, Tom certainly had the strengths & weaknesses of the common man. John Keane summarizes these neatly in the Prologue (page xvii) to his excellent biography, “Tom Paine. A Political Life” (1995). Keane notes, “He loved oysters, cared little for money, despised hypocrisy, & suspected men who lived richly. He liked stirring things up, rarely knew love or sex, considered hypocrisy the homage vice pays to virtue, & did all he could to keep his life private. He was humble & conceited, generous & dogmatic, ironic & serious. He faced dilemmas, failed to resolve problems, made misjudgements, & rarely pleased everybody”. What a man!

Against this biographical thumb nail sketch, let us ask the question, “Had Tom been reborn 200 years later, let’s say, in 1930, what might he have said & done in our time?”

I think that post 1945, he would have opposed the idea of national “sovereignty”, & its handmaiden modern war, as the twin determinants of the millennium age. That would be his principle focus. Being Tom he would commit himself to various contemporary issues including, I suspect, modern slavery, the arms trade, & the transparency or opaqueness of modern democracy; but war & sovereignty would surely be his principal concerns.

Now, it was the Romans who decided that the source of the law must be above the law. The Emperor was unimpeachable. He maintained his supreme authority by the sword. By the end of the first century this Roman idea had supplanted the older & wiser idea fostered by the Greeks who understood how important it was to restrict their rulers by law. Plato in his Republic, & Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics had argued that the

law was more valid than either the ruler or the community. Once Pax Romana had asserted its power that idea was lost to the known world.

The power in the structure of international relations". Yet the family, the tribe & the City State, throughout history, have progressed perfectly adequately without reference to sovereignty. It appears today that the modern state needs sovereignty as a crutch. Whilst the idea of sovereignty is an abstraction, it also has the power to become absolute & therefore untouchable. It is this unassailable position which allows dictators or corrupt regimes to deny human rights without interference, in all sorts of ways - from war to famine, from terror to torture, from assassination to racial or ethnic suppression. Sovereignty prohibits intervention; without intervention cruel rulers prosper whilst abusing human rights.

Because the UN itself reflects the unassailable power of its nation states pay- masters, the entire international system is dangerously close to being a hindrance, rather than a help, to the cause of liberty & the pursuit of happiness. Tom would have no difficulty in recognizing his old enemy.

of the state from the first century onwards, therefore, rests on the assumption that some person or some office, is above the reach of the law, or of any other restraining principle. That person is usually the King. Now this King should not be confused with the God Kings of ancient India or the east. They also had great power, but they governed by the grace of the Gods to whom they were accountable, & hence subordinate. This, by virtue of the laws of the universe - the "dharma". Those God Kings were, & are, closer to the Greeks than to the Romans.

Today, historians date the emergence of the modern, sovereign, nation state, from the Treaty of Westphalia, which closed off the Thirty Years war in Europe in 1648. Historically, therefore, sovereignty is a recent formulation. Culture is not dependent on it. Westphalia separated the powers of the mediaeval church from that of the state. But in doing so it transferred to the nation state the mystical, godlike features of church authority. That is a fatal flaw, which would be readily recognised as such by a modern Tom Paine.

Chopra & Weiss make the point well in their paper, "Sovereignty Is No Longer Sacrosanct" (1992. "Ethics & International Affairs" Vol. 2). They write, "Nation States inherited the pedigree of sovereignty & an unassailable position above the law that has since been frozen

The last fifty years have seen spectacular erosion in the power of the nation state as a viable tool for decision-making. Modern sovereignty struggles to maintain the fiction that it is all-powerful - but it is a fiction, allowing us to conclude that, "sovereignty is no longer sovereign". The Emperor has no clothes.

Consider some of the forces which have eroded sovereignty in our time. The first lies in the realm of international law. The most important step was the Nuremberg trial following the Second World War. Despite state sovereignty, the allies decided to use international law to bring the German leaders to account for their crimes against humanity. This was a defining moment in the development of international human rights law. As Geoffrey Robertson writes in his scholarly book, "Crimes Against Humanity" (1999, page 202) - "its Charter defined crimes against humanity & its procedures proved by acceptable & credible evidence that such crimes had been instigated by some of the defendants".

Robertson poignantly describes the tribunal, "The spontaneous drama of the courtroom provided the defining moment of de-natzification on the afternoon when the prosecutor showed newsreels of Auschwitz & Belsen & the defendants, spotlighted for security in the dock, averted their eyes in horror from the ghastly screen images of the emaciated inmates of their concentration camps. Some sobbed, others sweated, or put their heads in their hands; they sat in stunned silence until the court rose, their individual & collective guilt & shame brought home to them for ever & beyond reasonable doubt. This was the moment..... of absolute truth, but it came after months of meticulously translated documentary evidence, showing the defendants' signatures on "night & fog" decrees, on orders for the extermination of "useless eaters", & of "lives unworthy of living" - a record the judgment accurately described as one of "consistent & systematic inhumanity on the greatest scale".

Then in 1948 came the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Tom Paine, I suggest, would have campaigned for Nuremberg; and I can well imagine him drafting the Declaration itself. What was happening was that diplomacy - the offspring of sovereignty - was being forced to give way to justice. Gradually we begin to understand that only the law should be sovereign. (Robertson). The first Article sets the tone - & how Tom would have rejoiced - "All human beings are born free & equal in dignity & rights. They are endowed with reason & conscience & should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood".

Article 3 goes on to assert, "Everyone has a right to life, liberty & security of person". And the Charter then lists 28 other Articles, all of which would have brought deep satisfaction to a modern Tom Paine. Slowly, progress was made. Over five decades an impressive raft of new international laws came into being, from the 1949 Geneva Convention to the 1998 decision by 120 nations to approve the setting up of the International Criminal Court - designed to consider, genocide & crimes against humanity.

The 1949 Geneva Convention built on the Hague Conventions of 1899 & 1907. In 1988 the decision of the Inter American Court that Honduras had a legal obligation to investigate & prosecute the phenomenon known as the "disappearances" opened the way to a new future. There followed the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child,

the 1995 Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, the 1997 Ottawa Convention on banning anti-personnel land mines & the 1998 decision by 120 nations to approve the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court.

At last men & women were beginning to think for themselves. They begin to recognize that the real determinant in human history is not sovereignty, which divides this family from that family, but human “inter-dependence” & our common “inter-relatedness”. That is the rock on which to build.

Consider some of the typical factors that make a mockery of the nation state & its sovereignty. Electronic communications bring the malnourished African child into our family homes. Unshackling the energy of the atom makes war untenable, for the destroyer is destroyed by his own weapon. By flying into outer space & by putting a man on the moon, we can no longer extend the idea of sovereignty into space itself. Already, it’s a broken tool. By globalising the market place through the electronic chip, we cannot protect either our currency, or our economic way of life, from the so-called “unfriendly” movement of capital. The IMF has identified at least 69 off-shore, tax havens through which rich people avoid tax imposed by sovereign states. Capital moves across sovereign borders electronically & without benefit of passport. So do computer viruses, which can paralyse a nation. When Chernobyl melted down, within three days we had to declare large parts of agriculture in Wales, Cumbria & Scotland as “hot spots” from which no food could be eaten. They remain in place today & we are powerless to do anything about them.

Next, are the new threats explicit in environmental change which make nonsense of sovereignty. Our sea defences under global warming are powerless against the more extreme danger of the rising oceans, with some nation states like Vanuatu disappearing altogether. The whole of Europe has already lost two thirds of its protective ozone layer despite sovereignty. The legitimate movement of people around the world ensures the transgression of state boundaries by powerful diseases like HIV/ AIDS.

The change in the nature of war – the most fundamental since 1945 - whereby the civilian is now ten times more at risk than the full-time soldier, must sooner or later have a profound impact on the nature of politics & even, perhaps, re-direct the evolution of our culture. The ability of “smart” weapons, including Star Wars, decided unilaterally by a mere 200 self selected Americans, to hit the enemy, now defined as the civilian population, from outer space, without the intervention of the soldier, makes sovereignty ridiculous – for all of us.

When faced with such powerful, political realities Tom would use one of his favourite words – “absurd”. Sovereignty, now as porous as a sieve, is an “absurd” concept, on which to base political decisions, or on which to base the life, happiness & prosperity of the British, or any other, people. Better that our common humanity should take centre stage in our decision- making.

The UN - for that is the only global structure we have - has to be one of our chosen instruments for stimulating a quantum shift in our concept of the value of the nation state. Janus like the UN offers two unacceptable faces. Tom, who first conceived the idea of what he called an "Association of Nations", & regularly referred to himself as, "a citizen of the world", would attack both.

First, he would recognise that the UN is itself a projection of the notion of "sovereignty". It is controlled by "sovereign states", for their own convenience. It talks of the violation of "state rights", even when it is "human rights" that are violated. "Some of its classic doctrines - sovereign & diplomatic immunity, non intervention in internal affairs, non compulsory submission to the International Court of Justice, equality of voting in the General Assembly - continue to damage the cause of human rights". (Robertson).

Secondly, whilst the power of the veto, vitiates the sovereignty claimed by all other member states of the UN, this so-called right, nonetheless, cascades down the decision making process enabling each nation to deny the will of the international community as each shelters behind its own sovereignty.

Within hours of directing the eruption of the land war in Zimbabwe, President Mugabe reminded the UN, that this was an internal, sovereign issue, in which no one had authority to interfere. Tom would recognize the falsity of Mugabe's position just as he recognized the falsity of Farmer George's posturing when faced with American republicanism.

The Anglo-French invasion of Suez in 1956, China's action between 1958 & 1962, when she starved to death at least 30 million of her own peasants in a vain attempt to prove that Chinese Marxism was economically superior to Russian Marxism, America's wars in Vietnam & Cambodia in the sixties & France's war in Algeria, President Pinochet's reign of terror in Chile, or the hatred unleashed in South Africa under the late apartheid system which included, as the Tutu Truth Commission revealed, scientific experiments designed to create bacteria that would kill only black people - are representative of the unacceptable half-face of the international system we have tried to sustain since the 1930's. Each crime is a product of "sovereignty", because each shelters behind the terrible fiction that in the eyes of the law as presently conceived & practiced, individuals do not exist independently of nation states. (Robertson).

"That idea", Tom would say, in another of his favourite comments, "needs to be blown out of the water".

Tom Paine today, I suggest, would have written & campaigned tirelessly to fight injustices through international law based on justice. He would have rejoiced at the

decision of the Law Lords in 1998, & supported two years later by the Chilean people, to put President Pinochet into the dock for his crimes against humanity in Chile. He would welcome the prosecution of Milosevic at The Hague, regardless as to whether the Court judges him guilty or not guilty. One can imagine Tom advocating that Dr. Kissinger might be arraigned for crimes in Vietnam & Cambodia, Mrs. Thatcher for her personal decision to sink the retreating Argentinean destroyer, the “Belgrano” during the Falkland’s war, Mengistu for his crimes against his fellow Ethiopians, UN representative Khieu Samphan for his part in the killing fields of Cambodia, Ariel Sharon for his merciless war against the civilian population of Palestine, & Osama bin Laden for directing terrorist activities around the world.

The second unacceptable face of the international system is the concept of “neutrality” in international relations, not only in respect of the decision making machinery of the UN, but of leading NGO’s like the International Committee of the Red Cross, or the Save the Children Fund. This is a difficult point especially for adherents to non-violence. Tom Paine would point out, however, that when evil is deeply entrenched & seductive, neutrality can become a prime hindrance to justice & to commonsense. In due course it becomes an ally of the evil it is designed to oppose. With his common sense & plain speaking a modern Tom Paine would campaign against neutrality when it shields the gross violation of basic human rights.

We can imagine him recalling Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence & which, in paragraph two, states, “whenever any form of government becomes destructive... it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new government, laying its foundations on such principle & organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety & happiness”. How can this vision be applied to the UN & its charter for daily decision-making?

On the other hand, Tom would support, I think, the growing consensus, first articulated in 1992 by the then Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs - Barbara McDougall - that in all areas of modern conflict at least one of three factors are at play - & more often than not all three. Namely, the abuse of human rights, the absence of a developed system of democratic institutions at national & local levels, & the absence of good governance. The latter expresses itself, primarily, as rampant corruption in the highest levels of public life, as in Cambodia or Zimbabwe. Western aid & defence policies should be redesigned, therefore, so as to be conditional on the removal of each of these threats to human dignity.

Tom Paine, I suggest, would support the UN Secretary General’s, “Preventative Diplomacy” policy, & the UN’s need for an effective, independent, early warning system for anticipating conflict. He would want the training of UN officers in preventative diplomacy to be properly funded. He would encourage the UN to define what really constitutes a threat to international peace; how it’s own, international surveillance capacity, including an independent UN satellite, could be established so as

to monitor its work efficiently. This might include an international fund for the exploitation of modern technology in pursuit of freedom & liberty. The UN should have the ability to monitor every radio station in the world to alert it to trouble brewing, instead of the eight hours a day currently afforded. This would include the ability to understand & interpret the meaning of low intensity conflict arising from ethnic & religious developments around the world, which increasingly lie at the heart of modern conflict. (1995 report, "How to Abolish War" by "The International Commission on Peace & Food").

Politically, regionalisation would be encouraged so as to de-fuse local conflicts. Tom would encourage the attempt to understand the dynamics of the preventative deployment of UN forces in the early stages of conflict - a difficult area for any peace making body. The question of how to use the powers of intervention under Chapter vii of the UN charter, & which erupted after the intervention of NATO in the Balkans, would be debated with rigour. By definition, so would the UN rules of engagement. He would ask us to be fearless in addressing the need for a UN permanent & professionally trained army, with both peace-keeping & peace-making responsibilities. The restructuring of the Security Council & the role, if any, of the veto, would tax Tom's dissenting instincts. So would the urgent need to find effective ways of raising revenues for the UN.

Tom Paine would recognize the defining moment today - although now with hindsight - of the French revolution which released "the passions of the people" - as Clausewitz put it, & which thereby changed the nature of war. He would accept the definition of modern soldiers offered recently by the Oxford historian Michael Howard ("War Against Terrorism", RUSI conference, 30.10.01.) as, "specialists in violence". In this new, borderless scenario, Tom would argue that our "common humanity" should become the sole touchstone for replacing the old but obsolete formulations aimed at explaining, justifying or curtailing conflict.

He would recognize that at the beginning of our new millennium we live in a kind of "no-man's land". We are neither community based as Northern Ireland, Rwanda & Zimbabwe illustrate, nor are we internationally based as the Falklands, Bosnia & Afghanistan indicate. We know how to get into wars for what appear to be good reasons - but we don't know how to get out of them. We have no reliable "exit" strategy.

One approach, foreshadowed by Tom in "Common Sense", is to explore & develop the concept of "a civil society", as a viable alternative to the nation-state. Civil society is a "good". Government or the State is not.

Michael Edwards in his paper, "Civil Society & Global Governance" (UN University, Tokyo, 19-21 January 2000), offers the following definition - "civil society is the arena in which people come together to advance the interests they hold in common, not for profit or political power, but because they care enough about something to take

collective action. It includes all networks & associations between family & state, except firms”.

One can imagine Tom considering these words in the light of his own response to Edmund Burke in his “Rights of Man” - “The world is my country, to do good my religion”.

Let me turn briefly now to the third theme in my subject – the abolition of war.

Two points seem incontrovertible. First, is the demonstrable fact that accelerating social change on a global scale leads inevitably to increasing complexity & therefore poses escalating risk to humanity.

Secondly, is the reality of change in the technology of the “engine of war” & the threat this poses to the human species. Both trends, I think, are self evident. What is new, however, is that as the complexity deepens, so does the inherent threat to the future stability of humanity. Sensible men & women will conclude, therefore, that war has already become obsolete as a tool of diplomacy. It is redundant now in the same way that slavery, or the guillotine, or treating women as chattel, are redundant. It has outlived any usefulness it may ever have had.

Increasingly, modern war cannot achieve its objects, as Afghanistan has illustrated. The political & social outcome of alleged “success” in war is entirely unpredictable - as the Americans found in Vietnam, (“In Retrospect”, Robert S. McNamara, 1995), & as the French & British discovered in Suez.

Next, & because of the unpredictable nature of modern war, war can neither be controlled nor contained in any meaningful way. Truth still remains the first casualty, hate & irrational behaviour are promoted, wealth is destroyed, the side effects on the environment are likely to be catastrophic, and the spread of so-called “collateral” violence to the front line civilian population as on the West Bank, or in Rwanda, or in Cambodia, ensure the unreliability of war as a sensible tool for resolving conflict.

Thirdly, the human, economic & environmental costs of modern war, which include the potential destruction of all life on our planet, are now incalculable. If embarked upon they will leave a legacy of hatred which malign influence will persist for generation after generation as we have surely discovered in our own war in Northern Ireland. War, in a word, is “unsustainable”, just when the realization has sunk into the human consciousness, that “sustainability” should become the template of all human decision making in the 21st century.

Fourthly, the consequence of these three factors lie in the manifest imperative to evolve a new ethics which distinguishes force from violence, reduces the concept of

sovereignty, elevates the authority of International Law, & which is designed to replace the Christian doctrine of the “Just War” & its Muslim, Hindu & Chinese equivalents. International law & the definition of crimes against humanity are the keys to this new dispensation.

In summary, war in the first instance needs to be rejected from minds of ordinary people as a viable tool of diplomacy. The idea – that war today is redundant & hence obsolete - should be introduced into young minds, as well as old minds, so that at some point in this 21st century, war at last, will be no more.

Let me close with two quotations. First, Tom’s own response to Benjamin Franklin’s proud assertion that, “Where freedom is there is my country”. To which claim Tom replied quietly, “Where freedom is not, there is mine”.

But, finally, a twentieth century vision of society, which recaptures much of Tom Paine’s vision. Maxim Gorky wrote it, between the two world wars.

“There will come a time when people will take delight in one other, when each will be a star to the other, & when each will listen to his fellow as to music. Then free men & women will walk upon the earth, people great in their freedom. They will walk with open hearts, & the hearts of each will be pure of envy & greed, & therefore all humankind will be without malice, & there will be nothing to divorce the heart from reason. Then we shall live in truth & freedom & in beauty, & those will be accounted the best who will the more widely embrace the world with their hearts, & whose love of it will the profoundest; those will be the best who will be the freest, for in them is the greatest beauty. Then will life be great, & the people will be great who live that life.” (“Mother”).

To which Tom Paine would say, “Amen”.

Brian W Walker
1.8.02.





Westmorland General Meeting

Westmorland General Meeting is a Meeting for Worship and Business of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), comprising Friends from the Swarthmoor, Kendal and Sedbergh, Lancaster and Preston areas in the north-west corner of England. George Fox, founder of the Society, made his first visit to these towns, villages and dales in 1652, and the region continues to be known among Friends as the birthplace of Quakerism.

Quakers seek "that of God" in everyone, worshipping together in silence without doctrine or creed. For three hundred and fifty years Friends' Peace Testimony has been at the centre of a corporate witness against war and violence, through conscientious objection, conflict resolution, service in the Friends' Ambulance Unit or alternative paths of conscience. In the 21st Century we face fundamental changes to the 'engines of war', and new social and international challenges in a changing world, yet the Peace Testimony of 17th Century Friends still bears powerful witness.

In 1660 Friends declared:

All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world.

Today the Society's book of 'Advices and Queries' advises members:

We are called to live 'in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of wars'. Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are children of God.

