

“WAR IS A RACKET”: WE MUST PREPARE FOR PEACE TO ENSURE PEACE

James J. Fisher

Tufts University

“War is a racket. It always has been” (Butler, 1935, p. 1). I was introduced to this quote from US Marine Corps General Smedley Butler’s 1935 book *War Is A Racket* by my uncle Roy, a Marine Corps veteran. His experiences during the Vietnam War gradually caused him to become a staunch anti-war and anti-poverty activist, influencing my own activism against the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. The knowledge that war benefitted only those who were at the top—whether due to wealth or political power—and harms the rest continues to drive my opposition to warmaking. Given the militarized violence taking place globally—such as in Israel/Palestine, Yemen, or Ukraine—General Butler’s words are more prescient than ever. A character education which centers peace, and states which meet the basic needs of children, are necessary to build a more peaceful future.

World leaders should curb their exorbitant spending on the military not just because it

only benefits a few, but also because in a time when there are numerous pressing humanitarian crises—such as seen in Palestine (UNFPA, 2024)—money spent on preparing for war could be better spent on preparing for peace; on improving access to education and enshrining peace therein; and in promoting positive youth development globally. By improving the access to and quality of education—particularly historical and environmental education—for youths, we can begin to build a more peaceful future. We should all care a great deal about the high cost of warmaking globally because, at the end of the day, this money is spent on benefiting the few and harming the many, when it could be spent on creating a more peaceful future. By spending less on warmaking and more on preparing for the future—particularly in historical and environmental education or in positive youth development—this would benefit the world.

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** James J. Fisher, j.fisher@tufts.edu

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THE COSTS OF WARMAKING: PREPARING FOR WAR, PREPARES FOR WAR

“If you want peace, prepare for war” is a common saying in international affairs, based in the Roman adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (Coyne, 2023). Globally, governments seem to have taken this to heart in recent years, as they spend a great deal on their preparations for war and not enough on preparing for peace and thus improving the average individual’s life. It might instead be better put that ‘preparing for war, prepares for war.’ Preparing for war, here, means the increased spending on arms and other military hardware and the public investment in corporations that export these materials globally. Over the decade between 2013 and 2022, the global expenditure on weapons grew by 19 percent (Tian et al., 2023)—whereas the average percent of the GDP that countries spent on education dropped from 4.4 percent to 3.7 percent in the same period (World Bank, 2024). By investing so much into warmaking, the world’s largest economies are perpetuating conflict—either directly through armed conflict or indirectly through arms sales. Likewise, public investment in corporations which profit from arms exports—such as Lockheed Martin (2022) or General Dynamics (2021)—show a commitment to further global conflict for profit.

This interest in perpetuating conflict for the sake of profit—preparing for war in order to prepare for profit—is at direct odds with the interests of our collective humanity. As the peacebuilder Daisaku Ikeda (1979) wrote, “it is the nameless masses of people who are condemned to suffer and groan and weep in the midst of the...flames,” rather than the few who profit from conflict. While defense contractors’ profits soared over the past two decades, only harm was brought to millions of people globally within the same period (Schwarz, 2021; USDOD, 2024). For example, conflicts in Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, and Myanmar have resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian

and military casualties within just the last few years (Watson Institute, 2023). The harm doesn’t end after war, either: research shows, for example, that 14–16% of US service members deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have suffered from PTSD or depression (not counting other mental and physical injuries), leading to substance abuse and run-ins with the justice system (Finlay et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2023). Ikeda (1979), too, pointed to the truth of warmaking almost 50 years ago: “What cruel and pitiful scars war leaves!” Overall, global funding devoted to warmaking—often ironically termed ‘defense spending’—only continues to increase, and primarily profits large, multinational corporations. This causes mass harm to both military personnel and civilians globally. As Butler argued, “[War] is the only [racket] in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives” (Butler, 1935, p. 1).

PREPARING FOR PEACE, PREPARES FOR PEACE

Rather than spending money on preparing for war, more funding should instead be spent on preparing for peace, such as through the impact of a peace-oriented, democratic education. As Tsunesaburō Makiguchi, the founder of Soka Gakkai peace movement in Japan, states, “Mistaken education can be...deadly. While the results may not be as immediately apparent as the effects of the mistaken treatment of a medical condition, the negative impact will become undeniable with the passage of decades” (Ikeda, 2000). This is particularly true with historical education: an uncritical teaching of history can result in a propagandistic view of one’s national history, such as by glorifying victorious armed conflicts or excluding the histories of marginalized peoples. Instead of spending money on warmaking—with its high profits for the few and broken bodies for the rest—world leaders should instead invest in our collective future, particularly through a character education based on peace. By pre-

paring for peace, rather than war, governments can pave the way to a future with less conflict.

An important element in preparing for a more peaceful future is through encouraging an education which departs from a ‘hidden curriculum’, meaning those lessons learned but not explicitly taught (Giroux, 1978; Martin, 1976). There is a hidden curriculum globally which does not prioritize peace as a core element of character, but rather “teach[es] acceptance of the status quo” (Parker, 2016, p. 24). In countries which have a history of colonialism, this is often tied to an uncritical teaching of history which centers nationalist and/or Eurocentric narratives (Darweish & Mohammed, 2018; Gillborn, 1992; Sefa Dei, 2010; wa Thiong’o, 1994). One way to counter this hidden curriculum, and instead to create “school as a place where the longing to know could be nurtured and grow” (hooks, 2010, p. 1), is through utilizing a critical approach to teaching history. This can involve a dialogic pedagogy which emphasizes students’ co-creating knowledge, such as discussed by Freire (2000), or one that “educate[s] as the practice of freedom...a way of teaching that anyone can learn” (hooks, 1994, p. 13), emphasizing justice in education. Teaching history from a critical perspective requires an approach which utilizes pedagogies like Freire’s or hooks’, seeking to educate students about historical processes through primary documents (i.e., those from the time period in question) that originate from those sources the curriculum too often hides, namely the marginalized. By centering historical education around the voices of the marginalized, particularly those who have been left out of the formal curriculum, is necessary to work towards a peace education.

A way that this peace education can be encouraged is through meeting the basic needs of children, necessitating raising budgets for educational programs. Those that have beneficial ripple effects are particularly important: free school lunch programs, for instance, can improve students’ positions in terms of education and health. USDA (2024) research has shown that “children from food-insecure and

marginally food-secure households...received more of their food and nutrient intake from school meals,” meaning these programs contribute to a child’s overall welfare. An increase in funding for these meals can be paired with a curriculum which discusses the importance of nutrition and food security in relation to peace-building through education (Cliffe, 2016). As has been discussed in the United States, these would benefit numerous children across the nation, putting them in a better position to learn, to grow healthily, and to maintain food security regardless of their home situation (FRAC, 2021). Likewise, by connecting free school lunch programs with an intentional character education which centers the environment and its importance to food security can assure students see the direct benefits of environmental protections. An international effort to boost funding towards education and food security in schools—paired with a curriculum centering the environment and peace therein—would be a true investment in the world’s future.

Another investment in meeting the basic needs of children for a peace education would be to build critical infrastructure around improving the access to, and quality of, water. This sort of investment centers a key resource which contributes to peace: as the Pacific Institute (2024) has discussed, conflict over water resources has increased over the past few decades. For example, the American Society of Civil Engineers’ (2021) most recent report on America’s infrastructure highlighted the nation’s water resource systems as suffering from “chronic underinvestment.” One can see this by simply looking at recent water crises in Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi (CDC, 2024). Likewise, we can see in the conflict over water resources in Ayutla, Mexico or Marsabit, Kenya in how this carries a gendered element that disproportionately affects women and children (Demby, 2020; Yerian et al., 2014). Other water-based resources, such as fish, are also sources of conflict in communities globally which can disproportionately affect women and children (Gatonye, 2021). Improving water resource systems, and en-

suring equitable access, can help prevent more conflicts like those in Flint, Ayutla, and Marsabit from occurring, as well as improving children’s access to safe drinking water. In a similar manner, by promoting both the conservation of existing water resources in danger and gender equality in education curriculums, the disproportionate effects of water conflict on women and children could be lessened.

THE WAY FORWARD

The average person should care about the ever-increasing funds set aside for warmaking because this money is being spent *not* on benefiting them in any material way or ensuring future peace from conflict, but rather going into the pockets of weapon systems manufacturers and defense contractors. This money would be better spent implementing a peace education which counters hidden curriculums and gives people, globally, better opportunities and services that could benefit them and their children in the long term, rather than cause harm without real benefit. But what can we do about it? Of course, one solution is to advocate for democratic voting in support for policymakers who oppose warmaking. However, this can be a difficult prospect in many countries, including those with long traditions of democracy.

Two potential approaches that could help in these endeavors are a mass peace education campaign and a grassroots listening movement. To persuade more people globally to support an anti-war movement, lower military spending, and encourage a greater global investment in peace education, a mass education campaign for peace is needed. The average person needs to understand not just the costs of war—in terms of funding and in lives—but also where that money could instead be spent to improve the curriculum and meet the basic needs of children. Action-oriented organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or the Facing History and Ourselves (2024), could launch a series of face-to-face,

public education-style meetings to engage with and educate people with an emphasis on peace. We can learn from examples of public-education campaigns focusing on misinformation that target youth in The Gambia (Fisher, 2023); through such education, the youth can then inform older generations and target a national issue that can provoke deadly conflict. International organizations could further partner with local ones to learn how to better meet and teach individuals globally.

This will help support a grassroots listening movement as another approach, one that could be led by, and focused on, students and the youth. By organizing dialogues between students, youth, and policymakers, we could increase understanding between these diverse groups on the issue of warmaking and where money could be better spent helping ordinary people. Likewise, an emphasis on collective action and listening across difference can foster positive character development toward peace. While policymakers may not always listen to a student or youth, a group of them coming together to put them in conversation with policymakers could potentially allow for a shift in views on these issues. As we have seen in countries like Senegal, when the youth organize and focus on highlighting voices not usually heard, national policy can change drastically (Fisher 2024a,b). An empowerment of the youth through listening, as well as through an education which centers peace, the environment, and a critical approach to teaching history, can help to truly build a more peaceful future. It is my hope that by better understanding the costs of warmaking, in lives and in funds, and the ways that we could instead shift from warmaking to improving our collective future, that we can push for greater change globally.

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