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Are Human Rights Becoming a Tool of US "Smart Power"?

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Some nonpartisan commentators finally recognize that current US foreign policy continues to escalate militarily as though on steroids. It has become evident that use of deadly force by a US-dominated NATO is not only outside the parameters of international and constitutional law, but also in some cases outside basic legal principles that have stood the test of time not only for decades, but for centuries. One explanation, however, for why American civil society, in general, has not pushed back is the "better rhetoric" now being used to sell war.

What is this better rhetoric and newly minted impetus for US-NATO's same dumb (actually insane) war agenda, what used to be blurted out as "We must bomb the village to save it"? Constantly flitting through the revolving doors of their official appointments, foreign-policy think tanks and directorships of "human rights" organizations, proponents of "Smart Power" make their compelling case for more (endless) war in successfully urging us to "recast the fight against terror and nuclear proliferation... from a dark, draining struggle into a *hopeful, progressive cause* aimed at securing an international system of liberal societies and defeating challenges to it."

David Swanson, author of *War Is a Lie*, speaking at the 10th annual Peacestock gathering, sponsored by Veterans for Peace in Hager City, Wisconsin, this summer, commented while dissecting the newest "progressive-led" war propaganda: "That wars must be marketed as humanitarian is a sign of progress. That we fall for it is a sign of embarrassing weakness. The war propagandist is the world's second oldest profession, and the humanitarian lie is not entirely new. But it works in concert with other common war lies..." See videos Part 1 and 2 at: http://vimeo.com/user11898489/videos [1]

Lies about war, in humanitarian disguise, were clearly evident in Chicago last March. Peace activist Ann Wright (a former Foreign Service State Department official and retired U.S. Army colonel); Ann Galloway, a member of Women Against Military Madness, and myself were among the thousands of antiwar activists who were in Chicago for the protest of NATO wars. There we noticed, in billboards and announcements, the new campaign of Amnesty International-USA: "Human Rights for Women and Girls in Afghanistan––NATO: Keep the Progress Going."

Unwilling to let this go unchallenged, we packed into a taxi along with a few other antiwar activists, to head to the Chicago hotel where AI-USA's "Shadow Summit" was being held—a conference billed as a feminist cause regarding the supposed improved status of women and children under US-NATO occupation. The summit featured former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and other US State Department officials and Council on Foreign

Relations figures. We weren't allowed to carry in our "NATO bombs are not humanitarian," "NATO Kills Girls," and anti-drone bombing posters that we had with us for the protest march later that day, but we did witness enough of the event to prompt Ann Wright and me to issue a warning about the exploitation of women's rights as a cover for war: "Amnesty's Shilling for US Wars." 2

The United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) later issued a *Statement on NATO Claim of "Progress" for Women and Girls in Afghanistan,*as well as a*Statement Condemning Amnesty International USA's Campaigns in Support of U.S./NATO Wars.* UNAC condemned Amnesty's pro-war stance and propaganda efforts supporting continued occupation in Afghanistan and intervention in Syria, and asked for Amnesty to reaffirm its commitment to human rights, not war, and remove those responsible for their current pro-war policies and campaigns.

Human rights seen as a "tool" of US "Smart Power:" Suzanne Nossel, the current executive director of Amnesty-USA, previously worked at different times as a State Department official for Richard Holbrooke and Hillary Clinton and is personally credited with having coined the term "Smart Power," which Clinton announced as the defining feature of current US foreign policy. "Smart" indeed—certainly better-sounding—to project a contrast with the formerly unabashed Bush-Cheney reliance on "Hard Power." "Smart power" employs "Soft Power:" diplomatic, economic, and cultural pressures, which can be combined with military force, to "work our will" upon foreign nations, as described by Nossel:

> "To advance from a nuanced dissent to a compelling vision, progressive policymakers should turn to the great mainstay of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy: liberal internationalism, which posits that a global system of stable liberal democracies would be less prone to war…"

Washington, the theory goes, should thus offer assertive leadership—diplomatic, economic, ***and not least, military*** [*writer's emphasis*]—to advance a broad array of goals: self-determination, human rights, free trade, the rule of law, economic development, and the quarantine and elimination of dictators and weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Even more relevant to the issue of human rights and peace and justice organizations being co-opted, however, Nossel also described Smart Power, in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, March/April 2004, as "*knowing that the United States' own hand is not always its best tool: U.S. interests are furthered by enlisting others on behalf of U.S. goals*." 3

The question that emerges is, how could otherwise highly effective human rights organizations, respected for their good work largely *because of their independence from* powerful, self-interested governments, so easily fall into being used as tools of what Nossel once referred to as US "Superpowerdom"? When Amnesty-USA invited Madeleine Albright and other State Department officials to speak at its NATO women's forum, it was not the first time it had reached out to the architect of harsh economic sanctions—and the deaths of a half million Iraqi children. Shortly after becoming executive director of AI-USA in January 2012, Suzanne Nossel moderated a panel at Wellesley College, during which she goaded fellow panelist Madeleine Albright as follows:

"Now as the head of Amnesty International-USA, one point of great frustration and consternation for human rights organizations and civil society organizations over the last eight or nine months has been the failure of the UN Security Council to address, in any way,

the deaths of now five thousand civilians in Syria at the hands of President Assad and his military. Last spring the Security Council managed to forge a majority for forceful action in Libya and it was initially very controversial, [causing] many misgivings among key Security Council members. But Gaddafi fell, there's been a transition there and I think one would have thought those misgivings would have died down. And yet we've seen just a continued impasse over Syria and a real, almost return to cold war days and paralysis in the Security Council. How do you explain that and what do you think is the missing ingredient to break that logjam and get the Security Council to live up to its responsibilities on Syria?" 4

Even the savvy Madeleine Albright seemed genuinely taken aback by the Amnesty director's push for a US-NATO Libya-like intervention in Syria. Albright and the other speaker responded skeptically as to what could be achieved through bombing or military force. What shouldn't have been surprising, however, was Nossel's minimalizing the thousands of NATO bombing sorties on Libya by calling them a "forceful action," and her urging a potential UN Security Council authorization to do the same to Syria, referring to this as "living up to its responsibilities." She was already on record, in her prior think tank capacity, lamenting that failure in Iraq might mean Americans would lose their "*willingness to use military force* [writer's emphasis]—Iraq as a failed state is likely to herald an era of deep reservations among the U.S. public regarding the use of force—a kind of post-Vietnam, post-Mogadishu hangover." 5

Little skepticism, mostly just applause for "Responsibility to Protect" and "US Atrocity Prevention Board": Sadly, Amnesty is far from being the only human rights or peace and justice organization being misled in varying degrees by the US State Department's newly-minted "Responsibility to Protect (R2P)" doctrine—otherwise known as "humanitarian intervention"—and its newly created "Atrocity Prevention Board," chaired by Samantha Power, one of the main architects of US-NATO's bombing of Libya.6 Human Rights Watch, Physicians for Human Rights,7 the Peace Alliance, Citizens for Global Solutions**,** Think Progress, and AVAAZ are just some of the groups that seem to have swallowed that particular Kool-Aid.

This is not entirely new, as neo-con war hawks years ago co-opted the various big "liberal" think tanks: Brookings; the US Institute of Peace, the Carnegie Endowment for Peace; etc. NATO war hawks also hijacked the Nobel Peace Prize decades ago.8

Jean Bricmont noted in his book, *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War*:

"Since the end of the Cold War, the idea of human rights has been made into a justification for intervention by the world's leading economic and military powers—above all, the United States—in countries that are vulnerable to their attacks. The criteria for such intervention have become more arbitrary and self-serving, and their form more destructive, from Yugoslavia to Afghanistan to Iraq. Until the U.S. invasion of Iraq, [a] large part of the left was often complicit in this ideology of intervention—discovering new 'Hitlers' as the need arose, and denouncing antiwar arguments as appeasement on the model of Munich in 1938." 9

In connection with his "groundbreaking critique of the troubling symbiosis between Washington and the human rights movement": *Ideal Illusions: How the U.S. Government Co-opted Human Rights* author James Peck stated:

> "The war in Libya today, and calls for intervening in Syria tomorrow, epitomize a tragic development in the human rights and humanitarian ethos: War and

> various other kinds of overt and covert intervention are being re-legitimized through Washington's human rights rhetoric. Libya tells us everything we should not be seeking to do in Syria and why humanitarian war is a monstrous illusion. The widespread support in the human rights community for all kinds of interference from 'democratization,' to 'nation-building' to promoting the 'rule of law' now risks blending into rationales for war itself. This is suggestive of nothing so much as a profound failure of the human rights community to expose how and why the U.S. government has fashioned human rights for over four decades into a potent ideological weapon for purposes having little to do with the rights of others—and everything to do with furthering Washington's strategic objectives and global reach."10

Veering (or steering) to war will never be humanitarian or smart:

Jus ad bellum (the right to go to war) is concerned with Just War theory, the Nuremberg Principles (crimes against peace), the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Treaty (outlawing war), and even, to some extent, the "Powell Doctrine" (evaluating reasons to go to war)—but its main proposition has been forgotten or ignored, especially since 9-11—that is, at a bare minimum, wars of aggression are the supreme crime because they give rise to blatant violations of the Geneva Convention and other international *jus in bello* crimes (committed *while* conducting war) such as spawning further wars, ethnic genocide, torture, human rights abuses, killing of prisoners, and targeting civilian populations.

US violations of both types of international law of war, as well as violations of its own constitution have, paradoxically, served to further erode whatever legitimate, pre-existing "Soft Power" it once possessed. America's "moral authority," its legitimate ability to educate, its leadership by example in pushing other countries to adhere to international law was quickly sacrificed by the deceitful means it used to launch the bombing of Iraq and Libya, as well as its institutionalizing an endless, ever-expansive "global war on terrorism."

If war is a lie generally, if institutional wars have historically been instigated, ratcheted up, waged, and later falsely ennobled through pretext and propaganda, if "Smart Power," "Responsibility to Protect" and "humanitarian intervention" serve as little but better rhetoric and therefore an effective guise to sell military force to American citizens as a "last resort," after having checked off diplomatic efforts (set up to fail) and harsh economic sanctions that starve civilians and kill children, doesn't it make sense for human rights and peace and justice groups *to renounce instead of embrace*attempts of powerful governments to use them as "tools" of such policies?

What would truly be smart and could reduce atrocities in the world would be for "nongovernmental" groups and organizations professing human rights and peace as their cause to regain their independence by disentangling themselves from US-NATO governments' national interest agendas and reliance on military force. Once that's accomplished, it might be easier for civil society to reverse direction away from the use of war and might-makes-right to what is actually smarter: the power of ethical and legal norms.

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Notes

1 “Abolishing War: One Last Step” talk given by David Swanson at Peacestock 2012 http://davidswanson.org/node/3736 or see Videos Part 1 and 2 at: http://vimeo.com/user11898489/videos

2 http://consortiumnews.com/2012/06/18/amnestysshilling-for-us-wars/

3 “A public relations pro, Nossel has constantly flitted back and forth through the revolving door, depending upon the party in power, between official State Department positions working at the UN as assistant to Richard Holbrooke and Hillary Clinton but also at different times working for Human Rights Watch, Bertelsmann Media Worldwide and the *Wall Street Journal* as well as being a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, the Center for American Progress and the Council on Foreign Relations.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smart_power

4 https://sites.google.com/a/wellesley.edu/albrightinstitute-2012/ (at 46 minutes)

5 Her other significant concerns were . . . U.S. military morale; and that America’s image as a “superpower” would be tarnished: “The combined impact of Iraq’s emergence as a failed state on America’s image, military, credibility influence in the Middle East, and on our battles against terrorism and WMD will be profound. In both bilateral and multilateral relations, most countries’ dealings with the U.S. are predicated on the idea that we are capable of accomplishing whatever we set out to do. That notion is so well understood that we rarely have to prove it. The prevalence of this belief has made it immeasurably easier to rally others behind our causes, thwart opposition and work our will. While failure in Iraq won’t change that overnight, it will open a question about what superpowerdom means in an era of terrorism and insurgency.”

“Top 10 List: Consequences of Iraq Becoming a Failed State” by Suzanne Nossel
http://www.democracyarsenal.org/2005/08/top_10_list_10_.html

Joe Emersberger in “Debating Amnesty About Syria and Double Standards” notes in his recent correspondence with Amnesty-USA: “Before being hired by Amnesty, Nossel supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq and even three years after the illegal invasion of Iraq led to hundreds of thousands of deaths, advised the U.S. government that the ‘military option cannot be off the table’ in dealing with another ‘menacing state’––namely Iran.”
http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2012/emersberger060712.html

Philip Weiss writes: “Former State Department official Suzanne Nossel triangulates Hillary, Madeleine, Samantha, Susan Rice, and the Atrocity Prevention Board. See her 2007 blog on negotiations with Iran as a tactical necessity (the Dennis Ross view)––i.e., we must go through the motions because we have to prove them futile before we do what needs to be done. It is strange and unfortunate that such a person now leads Amnesty International USA.”
http://mondoweiss.net/2012/06/amnesty-intl-collapsenew-head-is-former-state-dept-official-who-rationalized-iran-sanctions-gaza-onslaught.html

6 If there were global justice, NATO would be in the dock over Libya. Obama’s New Atrocity Prevention Board: Reasons for Skepticism
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/15/global-justice-nato-libya

7 Starving the Syrians for Human Rights––Physicians for Human Rights Supports Tougher

U.S. Sanctions on Syria. http://antiwar.com/blog/2012/05/09/starvingthe-syrians-for-human-rights-physicians-for-humanrights-supports-tougher-u-s-sanctions-on-syria/

8 Nothing "Purist"—Just Everything Hypocritical About Awarding Nobel "Peace" Prize to Promote Western Militarization. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ coleen-rowley/nothing-puristjust-everyt_b_1321915.html

9 http://www.amazon.com/Humanitarian-Imperialism-Using-Human-Rights/dp/1583671471

10 http://www.accuracy.org/release/libya-and-syriahumanitarian-war-is-a-monstrousillusion

http://www.powells.com/biblio?isbn=9780805083286

Also see: Are Your Humanitarian Heartstrings Being Tugged in the Name of Empire? http://www.alternet.org/world/151707?page=2

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