

Don't Mention the War. "The Trillion Dollar Silencer". An Interview with Joan Roelofs

Transformations of Political Language, Part V

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Clarity Press recently published Joan Roelofs' latest contribution to the movements for peace in the United States, The Trillion Dollar Silencer (TDS). She has been a peace activist all her life and a scholar who always worked to bridge the gap between activism and academia that despite that effort seems to have widened rather than narrowed, at least since the 1990s. Part of the reason for this can be found in the activity of pseudo-academic institutions in the private sector, foundations and their appendages, think tanks. Naomi Klein may not have been the first to so describe them but her characterization cannot be disputed: places where people are paid to think by those who make tanks. After reading Joan Roelofs' new book, it seemed more useful to talk to her about it rather than simply review it.

Dr T P Wilkinson: Some years ago you published a book called *Foundations and Public Policy*. In it you give a substantial overview of the tax-exempt foundation landscape in the US and how these institutions have not only shaped but also created public policy in the US. As I understood the work your concern was not necessarily to condemn these efforts but to call attention to this exercise of political power by unelected institutions largely beyond public oversight and unknown to most citizens. Of course you also show that some policies that may be very controversial in fact originated in the foundation sector and owe their adoption and implementation to it. One suspects a sympathy with C Wright Mills but as a political scientist you concentrate on the perspective from your own discipline.[1] Now in

this new book you start from the question “why is there no anti-war movement?” and proceed to show how much influence the “war movement” has on the potential for “anti-war movement”. This seems an extension of your argument in the earlier book: namely that many important policies are made beyond the scope of open political discourse and action—essentially hidden from the constitutional processes available to citizens. Does this book simply cover another sector or is it also an indictment of a general erosion of those constitutional processes and public control over the State?

Joan Roelofs: Foundations try to fix up our political and economic system without threatening capitalism and US world dominance. However, radical change is needed, for the sake of justice, protecting the environment, lessening the threat of war, and ensuring the basics of the good life for all. Foundations divert these goals, replacing them with reformist measures that often are only stopgaps. In the process, they removed incentives for radical activism, especially by creating a world of nonprofit organizations with decent staff income, doing obviously good things. They, along with government agencies, acted as soft cops in the Cold War, aiming to dispel the attraction of socialism throughout the world.

Democracy today, i.e., a truly representative system without corruption and bought representatives, would not necessarily produce justice, equality, peace, and environmental regeneration. It would reflect the self-interests of the majority, who are not poor. In earlier times the majority was poor, so democracy might have worked to produce major changes in wealth distribution. I’m not so sure that it could produce a rational economic system or anti-war fervor. In my old age I have more sympathy with Plato, especially because the semi-democracy of Athens voted for war.

TPW: Do I understand correctly, the majority is not poor today? Certainly the majority is not poor like those who live in Indonesian shantytowns or in Guinea Bissau. But with wages that have stagnated and declined for nearly 40 years now and a recognizable expansion of the gap between income and assets held by the majority and the minuscule segment of super-rich, surely there is growing poverty. Do you mean poverty as a fact or poverty as self-perception? How do you define poverty? Economist Michael Hudson has said that since the last major housing crash the last bastion of working middle class assets—home ownership – is rapidly deteriorating. This is equivalent to massive expropriation, turning homeowners into quasi-feudal tenants. Are you saying there is no democracy to counter that trend? People like Hudson and Jeffrey Sachs practically say that what makes China a democracy is that its system of government really responds to the needs of the vast majority of the people. Is the problem perhaps with the definition of democracy in the US?

The official poverty rate in the US is 11.6%. Of course it is a disgrace, and especially the homeless, even in Keene. Many of these people do not vote. Many of the poor are tied into the social service system, government and NGO with housing, food, etc. Not in the mood for protesting. I live in a very mixed neighborhood and see how various poor people cope. Some own their homes (with their property taxes forgiven or unpaid), however run down; other in Section 8. The odd thing is that some of these decrepit houses have slate roofs, and even the landlords can’t afford or find people to repair them. My house was built in the 1850s, like much of the neighborhood.

Mao Zedong said during the Chinese Revolution “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” He was arguing that not only the revolution but also any accomplishments, such as land reform, that the Chinese people (particularly the peasantry) were able to accomplish could not survive without the armed force to defend it against enemies. In the 1930s that

meant not only the reactionary forces gathered around the KMT and European colonial powers but also the Japanese. He specifically said that China— unlike Europe or the US— had no constitutional structures capable of protecting the peasantry or workers and their achievements.

Nonetheless when I finished reading your book I could not help thinking that it coincides with Mao's dictum. The political power in the US grows out of the barrel of guns made by the enormous military-industrial-complex. At the end of your book you propose steps to take to oppose this power over American life and society. Allowing that one should use every tool available to oppose militarism in the US (or anywhere else) the impression one gets is that the power of the military is so pervasive that very few constitutional means are available. On the other hand the sheer mass of US military force seems more irresistible in the US than abroad. Does this mean that the US is really a military regime? If it is aren't Americans faced with the same problem that countries ruled by warlords elsewhere in the world face? Are there examples from other countries that might strengthen attempts to reduce the power of the gun in US politics and society?

JR: I didn't say there was no anti-war movement—but that it is very small. I listed a number that are doing good work. What is remarkable is that the progressives, academics, minorities, immigrants, religious institutions, et al have so little participation in anti-war causes and are mostly silent about ongoing overseas exploits. At election time foreign and military policy are barely mentioned by candidates or the press. Support or silence, not covert politics, maintains militarism.

TPW: So there is an anti-war movement that is very small. That means it is a niche issue. The difference must be that it has no "lobby" since the US Congress is no stranger to niche issues. One cannot help observing—especially from outside the US—that given the extent of US engagement, whether political, military or business, even people working beyond the US borders exhibit what might be called "geographical impairment". We have even seen political leaders who apparently do not know where on the map to find the places they want to invade or sanction. Is it possible that the size of the anti-war movement is also a factor of the general ignorance in the population about the world beyond US borders? The instruments for maintaining this ignorance are the schools and mass media but also the latent feeling of superiority in the best of all possible worlds—in other words, complacency. What does it matter what happens to people or countries I cannot even find? To put the point positively: how much influence or potential does the anti-war movement have for raising the level of basic education about the world in which the US Empire exerts its power?

One thing the antiwar movement can do is raise the awareness of what is going on, which is the aim of my book. There are planned marches in DC and Times Square. A demonstration was held in a Harvard class. The divestment movements inform workers and NGO patrons about the MIC. It is important to inform people on a local level, difficult but I have been trying. For many decades there has been a weekly vigil in Keene, as in other places.

There is a heritage of violence and its glorification in the US, perpetrated by propaganda, the educational system, and the adoration of family members who have been in the military. In addition, there are other reasons for supporting the military, including fear (of being considered unpatriotic, etc.), distractions, and interests. My book is mainly about the *interests* and the military connections pervading our social, educational, cultural, and economic institutions. Rust belt communities must be saved from destitution, and military

contractors prop up ballet and classical music.

TPW: Does the Constitution have any practical bearing on contemporary US politics? In particular regulating the activities of the war departments? What about the militarization of the police and other institutions, after Vietnam and after 2001? Doesn't this kind of militarism fall through the cracks?

JR: The *Constitution* doesn't prevent demilitarization. The *UN Charter* makes war illegal, so "declaring war" needs to be amended. However, *Article I* states that no appropriation of money for armies shall be for longer than two years, and requires Congress to define and punish offences against the law of nations.

Courts have generally refused to question foreign policy or war activities, whether they are said to be in violation of laws or the *Constitution*.

This despite the provision that treaties are the law of the land.

TPW: Some years ago I argued that there was such a thing as military culture. This culture emerged in the late 19th century when, especially influenced by Positivism, militaries in Europe and Latin America saw themselves as the modernizing forces in society. They were at the vanguard of science and technology and management structures. As such they offered a vision of a rational, efficient society that abandoned the superstition of the past and the irrationality of populism or mass politics. In fact the National Defense University and its constituent colleges have had a very significant role in propagating this image of civil-military affairs and governance. Since 2020 there has been another push for "rational" governance, supposedly managed according to science (or medicine). National security ideology has been expanded to a global system of public health ostensibly embodying the same benevolent principles of good governance.

Shouldn't we welcome the capacity of the military-industrial complex to propagate such a rational model for political and social management? If not, what is the alternative.

JR: Some aspects of the military favor rationality, science, and meritocracy—not the ideal system but better than nepotism, corruption, etc. for achieving both competence and justice. The irrational part is war, especially where nukes are involved. Victor Considerant (see my translation of his *Principles of Socialism*)[2] was a graduate of the École Polytechnique in Paris, joined the military engineering corps. He and many of his fellow students were socialists, (St. Simonian at first), and their goals were projects such as creating a national railway system. In the *TDS*, I recognize the positive side of military organization.

Science has been distorted for destructive ends. It should be concerned above all with how to provide the good life for all without destroying the planet.

Fletcher Prouty, in *The Secret Team*, explains how the military establishment was invaded by CIA Cold War covert action people.[3] There is also a revolving door between the Department of Defense and military contractor personnel.

One reason for the massive military budget is that a "free market" economy is not sustainable. The invisible hand was always a myth, and now, because of automation, outsourcing, agribusiness, consumer satiation, and extensive poverty and disability, the economy requires massive government intervention even to go along in its irrational way.

The Cold War prompted US deindustrialization policies in order to build up capitalist industrial powers in Southeast Asia.

TPW: I heard and also read Tony Benn say he found it incredible that when he was drafted to fight in World War 2 the government gave him everything he needed for the job of just going out and killing Germans, but was unwilling to guarantee these things for me to do productive work.[4] It has been said enough, I suppose, that the reason corporations prefer their own health and pension plans to socialized health care and pensions is for the simple purpose of labour discipline. Now much of that old corporate “welfare” has been turned over to the big five funds or derivative speculation. Those who dare to demand what soldiers and sailors get as hired killers, just for paying taxes and being good citizens, enjoy very little support. Does this mean that killing is just seen as a greater economic good than anything else workers could produce in the US?

Funding the DoD is much easier for Congress than civilian intervention (there is some), which is considered socialistic.

Now rural and small towns are desperate for any government contracts, and Congress is fine with giving the military trillions to play with. [5]

You mention that one of the effects of all this soft intervention by the military is to promote single-issue activity or movements. For some the anti-war movement, like pacifist movements, are all single-issue movements too. In a 1967 interview German student leader Rudi Dutschke was asked, not long before he was shot in April 1968, if he would engage in guerrilla warfare in Germany to change the conditions there.[6] Gunter Gaus referred to priests participating in liberation struggles in Latin America. Dutschke responded that were he in Latin America he would fight with a rifle— but he is in the Bundesrepublik and therefore has to fight with other means. Is there anything in the massive US military apparatus that offers an opportunity for those inside to oppose the destruction of the country they are constitutionally sworn to defend? Or is this a closed culture that must continue to feed itself?

There are some people in the military, at all levels, who question the fateful path of US policy and operations, and also fine organizations such as Veterans for Peace. However, today’s troops are pressured and wooed with benefits. Psychology is certainly utilized, as Merrill (see part 2) describes in your previous interview.

How do you see the impact of US military culture in rest of world? There was a time in the 80s still when people in Germany actually demanded that the US military leave— and certainly not install medium-ranged atomic missiles. However those days seem to be long gone. Does the “silencer” also silence abroad? Is there any relationship between the way US military-industrial power is exercised in the US and the way it is exercised among its “allies”? Do you see potential for cross-border action or is the differences embedded in US military culture too great to allow people to see the relationships to the rest of the empire?

JR: I mention some of these factors in Europe in TDS. There is a military industrial complex in Europe and much civilian manufacture is outsourced. NATO has many connections with civilian society, ministries of defense and foreign policy, and EU institutions. Bases are of economic importance, often situated in depressed areas. One important work on the topic is *The Globalization of NATO* by Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, another Clarity Press book.

I wish others would extend my research on the military at the ground level, in the US and elsewhere. There is so much more, and visibility might help to activate people, perhaps to figure out how to change the system of wars and the ever-present threat of nuclear winter.

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Notes

[1] C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956)

[2] Victor Considerant, *Principles of Socialism*, trans. Joan Roelofs, Maisonneuve Press (2006)

[3] Fletcher Prouty, *The Secret Team* (1973)

[4] At a luncheon given in the Savile Club, London, shortly before his death, presenting *Letters to my Grandchildren* (2009)

[5] "The Retail Carrion Feeders of Rural America," Jeffrey St. Clair, *Counterpunch*, November 25, 2022.

[6] *Zu Protokoll: Günter Gaus im Gespräch mit Rudi Dutschke*, SWF (1967).

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