

Wars That Aren't Meant to Be Won

By [David Swanson](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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[War is a Crime](#)

In [War Is A Lie](#) I looked at pretended and real reasons for wars and found some of the real reasons to be quite irrational. It should not shock us then to discover that the primary goal in fighting a war is not always to win it. Some wars are fought without a desire to win, others without winning being the top priority, either for the top war makers or for the ordinary soldiers.

In [Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars Is More Important Than Winning Them](#), David Keen looks at wars around the world and discovers many in which winning is not an object. Many of the examples are civil wars, many of them in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, some of them dragging on for decades. Wars become sources of power, wealth, and prestige. Exploiting civilians can take precedence for both sides over combatting each other. So can exploiting international "aid" that flows as long as wars are raging, not to mention the international permission to commit crimes that is bestowed upon those fighting the communists or, more recently, the terrorists. Of course a "war on terror" is itself blatantly chosen as an unwinnable goal around which to design a permanent emergency. President Obama has just waived, again, sanctions on nations using child soldiers. Those child soldiers are on our side.

"The weak (or nonexistent) criticism by aid agencies of human rights abuses in Afghanistan and Iraq in the context of a 'war on terror' — for example, the massacres of prisoners of war in Afghanistan in November 2001 and the torture at Abu Ghraib — was used by the government in Sri Lanka (as well as by governments in Russia, Colombia, Algeria and Pakistan) as evidence of 'double standards' on the part of aid agencies that tried to criticise them."

Keen treats Western wars with the same analytical eye as any other wars, and with similar results. The wars to combat "terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq have actually increased terrorism. If the overriding goal were to reduce terrorism, we wouldn't continue making war on Muslim nations. Killing Afghan farmers for supporting the Taliban turns more of them to the Taliban. And so, more of them are killed. Paying for safe passage for U.S. materiel funds the Taliban. Humanitarian aid is tied to the military occupation and resisted as such, fueling corruption and resentment rather than good will. It also fuels an interest in prolonging a war without end on the part of locals profiting from it.

Is winning the objective? Sometimes appearing to be winning in the short term overrides and actually impedes the work of winning in the long term. One reason this goes unnoticed, I think, is that there is no coherent concept of what winning would look like. We're less aware, therefore, of not having reached it. Rather than winning or losing, we think of wars as merely "ending." And if they end following a "surge" by our side, we imagine they've

ended well, even while averting our eyes from the results.

Do U.S. war makers want their wars to end? Perhaps if they can end without slowing the flow of war spending, and if they can end violently — that is, in a manner seeming to justify war. Leading up to the recent NATO war on Libya, a U.S. weapons executive was asked by NPR what would happen if the occupation of Afghanistan ended. His reply was that he hoped we could invade Libya. During President Clinton's second term, this ad was posted on a wall in the Pentagon:

“ENEMY WANTED: Mature North American Superpower seeks hostile partner for arms-racing, Third World conflicts, and general antagonism. Must be sufficiently menacing to convince Congress of military financial requirements. Nuclear capability is preferred; however, non-nuclear candidates possessing significant bio chemical warfare resources will be considered. . . .”

Jokes? No doubt. But not funny ones and not meaningless ones.

Drastic increases in U.S. military spending in the early 1950s, early 1980s, and early 2000s all followed economic recessions. Money could have been spent on schools or solar panels or trains, and the economy would have benefited significantly more, but that would have been Socialism.

One reason for the U.S. bombing of Laos: the halting of the bombing of North Vietnam left a lot of planes and bombs without targets. One reason that Keen offers for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait: Iraq had an oversized military in desperate need of a war. And when the U.S. occupation recklessly disbanded that military, fuelling the resistance, the goal may not have been to fuel the resistance, but clearly an irrational drive to de-Baathify took precedence over achieving peace.

Beyond profits, wars create support for rightwing politics, and excuses to eliminate civil rights. This is true at home, but also abroad. Sanctions on Iran are moving the Iranian government away from where liberal reformers claim to want it. Providing limited aid to a hopeless opposition in Syria that does not aim for democracy won't produce democracy, but it will produce war. And not just immediately, but lastingly. U.S. backing of jihadists in Afghanistan in the 1980s fueled war in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, the Philippines, and the attacks of 911, just as the recent war in Libya is fueling war in Mali.

What lessons can be drawn? Aid should go first and foremost to places free of war. Rather than prioritizing the militarization and bombing of areas suffering human rights abuses (militarizing Bahrain when it backs the Pentagon, bombing Libya when it doesn't), our top priority should be disarmament and demilitarization, that is to say: conversion of economies and societies to peaceful sustainable production. One part of this work should be the enforcement of laws against war. This week we can look to [Guatemala](#) and [Italy](#) for signs of hope, and to Washington for evidence that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

David Swanson's books include "War Is A Lie." He blogs at <http://davidswanson.org> and <http://warisacrime.org> and works for <http://rootsaction.org>. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@davidcnswanson](#) and [FaceBook](#).

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