

Georgists are infamous for claiming to have the solution for *everything* — the single tax will cure the common cold, the boom/bust cycle, the tragedy of poor taste, the heartbreak of psoriasis — and, yes, even war. “Wars,” a Georgist will say, “are always fought over land” — and we have the solution to the land problem, so... There you are.

Yet, when faced with yet another war, our enduring truths start to sound hollow, or even irrelevant. There’s got to be something we can *do, now!* We yearn for some tangible thing we can accomplish toward stopping the violence and sharing out world in peace. We think, “Forget about the Law of Rent — *We’ve got to stop the war!*”

But what does it mean to stop a war? What *is* war, anyway? Our usual mental picture of “war” is really a large and an (oddly) comforting oversimplification.

Building Peace

Once the tanks are in the street or the planes are in the air, things are already way, far out of whack. When we say that a country is “at war”, what we mean, unfortunately, is that its endemic state of violence and injustice has become whipped into such a frenzy that actual battle can no longer be put off.

If we steel ourselves and pursue this disconcerting line of thought, we come to realize that the difference between an army and a mob, or between a soldier and a terrorist, is much smaller than we had thought. The army is better-equipped than the mob. The terrorist usually provides his own clothing, and so is harder to spot in a crowd than the soldier.

I have no idea how there could truly be such a thing as an “honorable war” — or its evil reflection, a “war criminal”. For if, let’s say, we believe our nation’s cause to be just and our enemy to be on the side of evil, then is it not our job to win, by any means necessary? Who are the war criminals? War is always criminal.

But, now — some would argue — what about a soldier who brutally and summarily mows down innocent civilians, is that not a war criminal? Well, where is the line? Innocent civilians are always killed in war — just as innocent civilians are always killed in conditions of abject poverty during what we normally call “times of peace”. With a small fraction of its annual military expenditure, the United States could eliminate deaths from cholera and dysentery worldwide, by providing safe water supplies. If the people of the US choose instead to build advanced fighter planes, are they war criminals?


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There is much more to war than battle, and there is certainly much more to peace than simply trying to stop the pitched fighting. If we can save people's lives by marching in demonstrations, or sitting in front of the tanks, then of course we must do those things. It's always a good thing to stop war. But: if we stop *this* war, will there be peace?

Not hardly. Peace is not just the absence of overt war. If we stop whatever shooting adventure happens to be going on, there will still be all the injustice, poverty, hatred, hopelessness — and still all the callous over-indulgence. War is big news — but violence goes deep.

"If you want peace, work for justice." That's an old movement saw that is just as true as it ever was, and yet — I suspect that many of the people who have rallied around that call have been, nevertheless, in their heart of hearts, unclear about what justice actually entails. Surely Georgists have a contribution to make in that area, one that could go far toward truly building peace. We recognize that justice is not simply a matter of Robin-hooding and welfare; it is about the moral basis of ownership. Justice is about every human being's right to live and work on the earth, and to keep the fruits of one's own labor.

Our most important work is to teach justice. Sometimes it's appropriate, to be sure, to discuss a groovy way of invigorating cities by shifting the property tax. But we must also develop a vision. We must be able to articulate a clear, vibrant conception of what justice is and how it actually works. We must spread that message as quickly and efficiently as we possibly can; we must say it, not just over and over again because we're in the habit, but with passion.

And, of course, one is tempted to ask, "Is that enough?" But that isn't the relevant question, is it? — it's really, "What else will work?" If one person to whom you have spread the message goes out and faithfully spreads it to others, then you have accomplished work to build peace. That's how it's done; there's no shortcut. 

Wars become possible when lots of people on both sides persuade themselves to believe what their common-sense tells them is false: that it is worth sustaining infinite inconvenience and danger oneself; and inflicting infinite suffering on others, in order to sustain some vaguely-stated objective — political, religious or economic — which not one man in a thousand can explain.

— Roy Douglas