

Book Review

Ernie Regehr

Disarming Conflict: Why Peace Cannot Be Won on the Battlefield

Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 2015

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Let me begin with a comment about the question of war in the United States of America. It is intended to illustrate how greatly the context for discussion of intrastate conflict has changed in the past seventy years or so. An appreciation of this change will help show how important it is to “re-think” warfare in general and to prompt awareness of the rather desperate need for all countries and international bodies from the United Nations to *the* signatories of treaties to become innovative in their approaches to local, regional and global confrontation and armed struggle.

The USA last declared war when it commenced hostilities on Japan and Germany in 1941 (on December 8 and December 11, respectively). It has not, technically, been “at war” since September 2, 1945 when Japan signed its official document of “unconditional surrender” aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay. Americans, however, have continued to use the language of war constantly ever since.

Everything is what it is, and not any other thing.”	– Joseph Butler, 1726
When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean	– Humpty Dumpty, 1872

Chief among the usages was the so-called “Cold War.” It was arguably begun with Sir Winston Churchill’s far-famed “Iron Curtain” speech on March 2, 1946 in Fulton, Missouri and concluded at the Malta Summit on December 3, 1989, when Soviet head of state Mikhail Gorbachev and US President George W. Bush declared that an abiding era of peace between the two “superpowers” had begun. Less dramatically, the “war on poverty” (1964), the “war on drugs” (1971), and the “war on terror” (2001) are only the most obvious examples, of the deployment of the metaphor. They have recently been supplemented by the ongoing Republican Party’s “war on women” and the Fox News inspired “war on Christmas.” Apart from these dubious rhetorical tropes, however, the USA hasn’t formally been at war on anyone since the end of World War II.

At the same time, the USA has experienced very few days and fewer weeks and months when it hasn’t been involved in some foreign conflict, whether overt (through bombing, invasion and occupation) or covert (by enabling and assisting in assassinations, kidnapping of heads of state, sponsoring insurrectionist groups, military *coups d’états* and civil wars in dozens of countries on at least four continents plus Central America). All that’s been missing are formal declarations, but the US Congress, which holds exclusive constitutional authority to declare war, has long since effectively ceded that responsibility to the Chief Executive and Commander-in-

Chief of the US Armed Forces, which is arguably a severe breach of the intent of the Constitution of the *United States* of America and its primal doctrine of “separation of powers.”

Oddly, at least to an *outsider*, no authority—executive, legislative or judicial, or even the sovereign citizenry—seems especially worried about *that*.

“Through a combination of executive initiative and congressional abdication,” writes US military authority, Joseph V. Gallagher III, “the United States has engaged in large scale offensive wars absent *congressional* war declarations ... [involving over 160] notable military deployments [in which] the nation failed to articulate political objectives commensurate with its sacrifice of blood and resources” (Gallagher, 2011: 22).

Gallagher’s highly regarded and expert opinion highlights the ambiguities of military action. He backgrounds the degree to which violent conflict among sovereign nations has been replaced by uprisings, *revolutions*, civil wars, warlords, guerrilla forces, covert operations, terrorism, counter-terrorism, paramilitary initiatives and old-fashioned assassinations of dissenters, government officials and heads of state. In the process of devolving into hostilities involving both state and non-state actors far more complex relations emerge than were typically seen when soldiers in brightly coloured uniforms ...

...took a military stand.
There was sling shot, chain shot, grape shot too
Swords and bayonets thrusting through
- Steeleye Span, 1976.

Actual “battlefields” now share attention with “black sites,” “enhanced interrogation” (a rather disreputable *euphemism* for torture), suicide bombers, drone strikes, improvised exploding devises, and computers both as missile navigators and as instruments of full-scale cyberattacks.

Consider also the fact that, although counting civilian casualties is an uncertain and highly contested process, non-combatant killings between 1990 and 2010 are commonly said to outnumber military deaths by a ratio of 10 to 1. Higher rates are estimated in *Lancet* (Roberts, L., Lafta, Garfield, Khudhairi, & Burnham, 2004) and *The New England Journal of Medicine* (Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group, 2006), though somewhat discounted by others (Roberts, A., 2010). In any case, a likely guess can be made that the gap has widened considerably even since those studies were performed and, moreover, that the number of displaced persons in North Africa, the Near East and the Middle East alone is in the millions. Then, if economic weapons such as sanctions, currency *manipulations* and the current well-planned depression of the oil market by Saudi Arabia and its associates were added, then the obsolete notion of a “fair fight” restricted to a “battlefield” and using comparable weapons (whether spears, muskets, tanks or aircraft) is reduced to an antique illusion.

<p>"I am not just making a moral, ideological argument against trying to settle arguments by dint of force. I am saying that the evidence shows that it is virtually impossible to do it." – Ernie Regehr</p>

I

Into this (post)modern normless, boundaryless terrain steps Ernie Regehr, valiant peace activist, meticulous researcher and passionate writer. He merits close *attention*.

If innovation is needed anywhere, then it is surely most immediately required in domains where human life is both most at risk and also within human power of control. Our individual mortality and collisions with interplanetary objects such as comets and meteors are not (or at least not yet) manageable; however, there are great perils that we can keep in check. In the long term, the most important is environmental sustainability which raises subsidiary questions *from* overpopulation to air, soil and water pollution and climate change—all interconnected, of course. In the shorter run, however, self-inflicted and lethal violence—undertaken with stunning self-righteousness covering a quivering paranoia, and both masking crass material ambitions—is paramount.

If, that is to say, we do not address these species-threatening perils, no tweaking of social regulations, no fine-tuning of administrative techniques, and no implementation of best practices in any field of public policy will matter a great deal.

Ernie Regehr's analysis of warfare and recommendations for winning the peace is a good place to begin the massive but crucial rethinking of the nature, goals and prospects for foreign and defence policies in the modern state system (or what's left of it).

In the last quarter century our world has hosted 98 wars, 26 of these are ongoing. Of these wars, over 85 percent are not settled on the battlefield; they are fought to desperately hurting stalemates, eventually being turned over to diplomats and politicians who go in search of whatever face-saving outcomes may still be available.
– Ernie Regehr

Regehr, it should be noted, is an Officer of the Order of Canada and laureate of the Pearson Peace Medal. A long-serving peace researcher, a security and disarmament specialist and a co-founder of Project Ploughshares (an ecumenical peace initiative sponsored by the Canadian Council of Churches), he is a *widely* respected advocate and expert on military and diplomatic policy, foreign affairs, human rights and global development. *Disarming Conflict* is his eighth major book in the field and it is one that should be especially welcome at this time. After all, he is one of the few commentators who have not been consistently and persistently wrong on the main matters of international relations as we have transitioned from the unprecedented slaughter of the twentieth to the potentially more devastating twenty-first century.

Whether enduring the viciousness of extremist *jihads*, watching the rise of Marine Le Pen and her neofascist National Front in France, listening to the apparent front-runners for the Republican nomination for the US presidency—currently Donald Trump and Ted Cruz—it is hard to accept the fact that a rational mind such as Regehr's would be so marginalized and willfully ignored by those who occupy positions of power and authority. There seems to be, nonetheless, little hint of a pause in the global pattern of permanent war and the singular self-evident sanity of Ernie Regehr.

The indifference and often outright contempt for good sense is particularly disconcerting since, as British analyst Paul Rogers (2015) put it following the attacks on Paris on the evening of November 13, 2015: “in blunt terms, ISIS is actually being strengthened by the air war, and it can be assumed it wants more.” And, as Ernie Regehr added: “If we don’t know the solution to the IS menace, and we manifestly don’t, we should at least stop fuelling it” (2015).

Unfortunately, this is evidently to be a time when bellicose leaders and potential leaders of a number of Western countries, with ample assistance from the corporate media (Boehlert, 2015), are lining up to serve as “useful idiots” for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the ISIS/ISIL/IS/Daesh (call it what you will) campaign for a fundamentalist Islamic caliphate. There is little evident interest in taking advice from Ernie Regehr or any of the few commentators who haven’t been horribly wrong *about* North Africa, the Near and the Middle East.

Instead, our great preference has been to rely on the same sort of strategists and tacticians who have been making both ethical and practical mistakes at least since Kermit Roosevelt led the successful CIA mission to remove the progressive Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 (a “success” to which all subsequent failures can be usefully linked). So it is, that US Democratic Party presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, both an influential supporter (as a New York Senator) of the original attack on Iraq in 2003 and a tremendous booster (as US Secretary of State) of the catastrophic bombing, “regime change” and consequent chaos in Libya, receives enormous media coverage and support, while Bernie Sanders, an unsparing critic of *both* failed policies is *mulishly* snubbed. Regehr examines this pathology, diagnoses the problem and presents an effective plan for treatment ... if only there was the political will to follow it.

II

Ernie Regehr’s argument sets off from the foundational and factually indisputable premise that “wars fought over the past quarter-century have been spectacular failures. The overwhelming majority end in military stalemate and are settled at the negotiating table with the grievances that led to the war still unresolved.”

<p><i>Disarming Conflict</i> is warmly recommended for those who still cling to the stereotypes of dreamily idealistic peaceniks and hard-nosed warriors – for after reading Regehr’s calm, rigorous, and utterly persuasive analysis, they will find their worldview permanently and usefully unsettled. – Ian McKay</p>

From that basic and incontestable fact, he builds an elegant case for the proposition that military adventurism is nothing more or less than futile—at least if the justification is any of the ones to which we have become accustomed: namely, keeping ourselves safe from external aggression; expanding the reach of freedom, democracy and human rights; degrading and defeating bloody and *bloodthirsty* aggressors motivated by irrational ideologies, fanatical religions and delusional ambitions; and dislodging tyrants who commit (or threaten to commit) genocide against their own (or some of their own) people; and so on.

The futility of war as a means of achieving political ends is disconcerting to the alleged “realists,” who are inclined to predismis criticisms that rely on moral and ethical arguments.

Moral claims are said to be naive and those who advance them are said to be in denial about “human nature,” “innate aggression,” the “territorial imperative” and other pseudo-Hobbesian articles of faith. However admirable such sentiments “in theory,” they say, “the reality is” that there are “bad guys” out there and that anything less than vigilance and violence (when needed, which is pretty much all the time) will lead to everything from random attacks on innocent civilians in New York, London and Paris (for starters) to the end of what passes for Western Civilization as we know it.

Regehr, of course, does not indulge in utopian fantasies. Instead, he adopts an evidence-based approach to make the case that those who go to war in pursuit of *any* objectives are likely to fail. International conflict—whether offensive or defensive, in pursuit of noble or ignoble objectives—just doesn’t work. The “realists” are wrong. There are other, better and more eminently practical ways to achieve national, regional and global interests.

III

Disarming Conflict begins with a helpful introduction to Regehr’s theme and four thoughtful, well-researched and well-written chapters that explain why recent wars have failed to accomplish the goals of the combatants. He explains how wars start and end, the limits to force in the constrained circumstances of “proxy wars,” wars with multiple participants, wars without “front lines,” wars with shifting loyalties, wars out of the control of clear authorities and chains of command, wars in which the mere definition of soldiers and civilians is fluid—in short, almost all contemporary conflicts defy traditional descriptions, meanings and explanations.

Ernie Regehr then proceeds to apply his central theme of “disarming” conflict with lucid analyses and prescriptions involving the substitution of active diplomacy in the primary interest of “prevention” of warfare, arms control, nuclear disarmament and, in the last resort, humanitarian assistance in protecting the most vulnerable victims of conflict.

<p>Ernie Regehr ... lays out the methods and means of a more promising alternative ... Following this approach the international community would invest less in military hardware and far more in the infrastructure of positive peace and the political capacity to bring relevant parties to relevant political processes.” – Peggy Mason, President, Rideau Institute</p>
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Throughout this compelling and persuasive book, the clear emphasis is on *practical* and (to me) obvious ways in which wars, elastically defined, can and not merely should be avoided. Regehr’s approach reminds me that the best, most effective thinking in any field from crime prevention to addiction treatment and control to positive innovations in education, community empowerment, personal and public health and wellness is the kind that can lead to concrete results. That kind of thinking also involves constructive processes that aim at harm reduction, conciliation and the resolution of competing interests. Open conflict is merely evidence that those processes have not worked or, more likely, that they haven’t even been tried. It is a testament to failure, not a rallying cry for success.

The end of every war is the spawning ground for the next and preparation for the next war is the guarantee that it will occur. Philosophies of pacifism, pleas for unilateral disarmament and spiritual homilies from religious and secular leaders alike have little or no effect in the absence of pragmatic strategies. Or, as I recall George Grant telling an arena full of aspirant world changers back in 1965: “Moral outrage is too precious a commodity not to be used in the service of reality.” The same applies to moral appeals, entreaties and petitions, whether spoken by a Pope in a Vatican mass in St. Peter’s Square or gathered as a list of virtual signatures on an online petition from *Avaaz* or *Change (.com)*.

Whether or not this is an auspicious time to imagine the kind of change that would be necessary to divert our species from its almost *thanatotic* will to universal degradation is up for grabs. What’s less unsure is whether the world is in a historically dangerous and critical moment. Ernie Regehr offers a sensible, workable framework for a sort of redemption. He presents a thoroughly reasonable plan for relief and rescue from the darkest imaginable future.

Like Judas of old You lie and deceive A world war can be won You want me to believe But I see through your eyes And I see through your brain Like I see through the water That runs down my drain. – Bob Dylan (1963)

What remains for us is a more forceful appreciation of the nature and power of those who are actively driving us toward the precipice. General Eisenhower’s warning about the dangers inherent in the growth of America’s “military-industrial complex” may be the single most enduring part of his legacy as the thirty-fourth president of the United States. Of all the issues that Ernie Regehr addresses, this seems to me to be the most important. At the moment, the arms sales originating in the United States of America rival those of the other permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom) combined. The United States, however, is not alone.

Even Canada (not a country that traditionally stands out as a merchant of death and, incidentally Ernie Regehr’s home base) was recently brought up short when Canadians learned that their former Prime Minister Stephen Harper had roiled the pot in the Near East by brokering a \$15 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia—a putative but decidedly devious “ally” and a regime with a dreadful human rights record (Chase, 2015).

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches Cultural Anthropology and Modern Political Thought at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com

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