

A proposal for peace

In 1931 the League of Nations arranged for an exchange of letters between intellectuals to promote discussion of its concerns. One of the first to be approached was Albert Einstein; the person he, in turn, chose to correspond with was Sigmund Freud. Although the building of the atomic bomb was still some years away, Einstein had already discovered the science that would make it possible. He believed that Freud could shed light on “a question which seems the most insistent of all the problems civilization has to face.”¹ And so it was that the scientist who redefined for 20th-century humanity its understanding of the physical world posed the following question to the physician who had changed its perception of the psychological one: “Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?”¹

In his reply, Freud described war as futile and shared Einstein’s concerns regarding the role of elites in promoting war and that the League of Nations lacked “the necessary power to act” in the face of “a future war [that] might involve the extermination of one or perhaps both of the antagonists.”¹

Most of recorded history is about men killing other men. What does it matter if the battle was 1884 or 1885? If the heavy artillery was fully deployed or not? Who won and who lost? What have we learned from all this beyond keeping score? One thing that is apparent, is that war entralls us. It is the morning story and the evening news. It is the marching band and jet fighters overhead. It is heroes and villains. It is the awe of weaponry and the beauty of destruction.

And no other social structures perpetuate the institution of war more than national armies and military alliances. Too sheepish in this modern age for the moniker Ministry of War, they are now euphemistically referred to as the Department of Defence. One might ask, however, if no country has a Department of Offence, why do we require a Department of Defence?



The proposal for a Canadian Department of Peace and Conflict Resolution (www.departmentofpeace.ca) is an antidote to this institution. It rests on 3 broad principles: peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace building. Peacekeeping is a militarily conducted policing function, regulated by international law and required to keep combatants apart. Peacemaking uses legal and political processes to resolve conflict through nonviolent means. And peace building entails creating a cultural mindset that leads to the conditions for peace —as opposed to war.

Domestically, the department’s responsibilities and activities would include consulting with governments on matters relating to peace and conflict resolution; developing studies and research in conflict resolution in our educational system from primary to doctoral; converting our military industries to nonmilitarily based production, including new technologies required for environmental protection; and promoting conflict resolution skills in all facets of Canadian society.

Internationally, it would work with other countries toward democratic reform of the United Nations, and then work within that institution to develop, promote and participate in peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building activities including disarmament.

War is sold through the illusion of

logic. It is sold through the easy vilification of the other, the false belief in our own righteousness, the presentation of false choices, the demanded pledge of patriotism. War is a phenomenon that, as Einstein and Freud were presciently aware, threatens all our lives, most obviously through the deployment of nuclear weapons. But war is also killing us softly. It kills us through the trail of environmental degradation left by both its preparation and its execution, and it directs our considerable capital and intellectual resources toward the destruction as opposed to preservation of the planet.

As Einstein understood, the answers to the puzzle we must solve to ensure our survival do not only lie in the physical sciences and their technical creations. They must also be sought in Freud’s field of inquiry: the mysteries of human self-deception and conflict.

We must choose between 2 paths: the path of maladaptation or adaptation. One will lead us to the distraction and destruction of war, the other to cooperation, ingenuity and true environmental stewardship. Our choice is extinction or survival.

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REFERENCE

1. Strachey J, editor. Why war? In: *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol 22. London: Hogarth Press; 1964. p. 197-215.

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