Democracy or Militarism

By Jane Addams

Address before the Chicago Liberty Meeting, April 30, 1899

None of us who has been reared and nurtured in America can be wholly without the
democratic instinct. It is not a question with any of us of having it or not having it; it is
merely a question of trusting it or not trusting it. For good or ill we suddenly find
ourselves bound to an international situation. The question practically reduces itself to
this: Do we mean to democratize the situation? Are we going to trust our democracy,
or are we going to weakly imitate the policy of other governments, which have never
claimed a democratic basis?

The political code, as well as the moral law, has no meaning and becomes absolutely
emptied of its contents if we take out of it all relation to the world and concrete cases,
and it is exactly in such a time as this that we discover what we really believe. We may
make a mistake in politics as well as in morals by forgetting that new conditions are
ever demanding the evolution of a new morality, along old lines but in larger measure.
Unless the present situation extends our nationalism into internationalism, unless it has
thrust forward our patriotism into humanitarianism we cannot meet it.

We must also remember that peace has come to mean a larger thing. It is no longer
merely absence of war, but the unfolding of life processes which are making for a
common development. Peace is not merely something to hold congresses about and to
discuss as an abstract dogma. It has come to be a rising tide of moral feeling, which is
slowly engulfing all pride of conquest and making war impossible.

Under this new conception of peace it is perhaps natural that the first men to formulate
it and give it international meaning should have been workingmen, who have always
realized, however feebly and vaguely they may have expressed it, that it is they who in
all ages have borne the heaviest burden of privation and suffering imposed on the
world by the military spirit.

The first international organization founded not to promote a colorless peace, but to
advance and develop the common life of all nations was founded in London in 1864
by workingmen and called simply "The International Association of Workingmen." They recognized that a supreme interest raised all workingmen above the prejudice of
race, and united them by wider and deeper principles than those by which they were
separated into nations. That as religion, science, art, had become international, so now
at last labor took its position as an international interest. A few years later, at its third
congress, held in Brussels in 1868, the internationalists recommended in view of the
Franco-German war, then threatening, that "the workers resist all war as systematic
murder," and in case of war a universal strike be declared.

This is almost exactly what is now happening in Russia. The peasants are simply
refusing to drill and fight and the czar gets credit for a peace manifesto the moral force
of which comes from the humblest of his subjects. It is not, therefore, surprising that as
long ago as last December, the organized workingmen of America recorded their
protest against the adoption of an imperialistic policy.

In the annual convention of the American Federation of Labor, held that month in
Kansas City, resolutions were adopted indorsing the declaration made by President
Gompers in his opening address: "It has always been the hewers of wood and the
 carriers of water, the wealth producers, whose mission it has been not only to struggle
for freedom, but to be ever vigilant to maintain the liberty of freedom achieved, and it
behooves the representatives of the grand army of labor in convention assembled to
give vent to the alarm we feel from the dangers threatening us and our entire people, to
enter our solemn and emphatic protest against what we already feel; that, with the
success of imperialism the decadence of our republic will have already set in."

There is a growing conviction among workingmen of all countries that, whatever may
be accomplished by a national war, however high the supposed moral aim of such a
war, there is one inevitable result -- an increased standing army, the soldiers of which
are non-producers and must be fed by the workers. The Russian peasants support an
army of 1,000,000, the German peasants sow and reap for 500,000 more. The men in
these armies spend their muscular force in drilling, their mental force in thoughts of
warfare. The mere hours of idleness conduce mental and moral deterioration.

The appeal to the fighting instinct does not end in mere warfare, but arouses these
brutal instincts latent in every human being. The countries with the large standing armies
are likewise the countries with national hospitals for the treatment of diseases which
should never exist, of large asylums for the care of children which should never have
been born. These institutions, as well as the barracks, again increase the taxation,
which rests, in the last analysis, upon producers, and, at the same time, withdraws so
much of their product from the beneficent development of their national life. No one
urges peaceful association with more fervor than the workingman. Organization is his
only hope, but it must be kept distinct from militarism, which can never be made a
democratic instrument.

Let us not make the mistake of confusing moral issues sometimes involved in warfare
with warfare itself. Let us not glorify the brutality. The same strenuous endeavor, the
same heroic self-sacrifice, the same fine courage and readiness to meet death, may be
displayed without the accompaniment of killing our fellow men. With all Kipling's
insight he has, over and over, failed to distinguish between war and imperialism on the
one hand and the advance of civilization on the other.

To "protect the weak" has always been the excuse of the ruler and tax-gatherer, the
chief, the king, the baron; and now, at last, of "the white man." The form of
government is not necessarily the function itself. Government is not something extraneous, consisting of men who wear gold lace and sit on high stools and write rows of figures in books. We forget that an ideal government is merely an adjustment between men concerning their mutual relations towards those general matters which concern them all; that the office of an outside and alien people must always be to collect taxes and to hold a negative law and order. In its first attempt to restore mere order and quiet, the outside power inevitably breaks down the framework of the nascent government itself, the more virile and initiative forces are destroyed; new relations must in the end be established, not only with the handicap of smart animosity on the part of the conquered, but with the loss of the most able citizens among them.

Some of us were beginning to hope that we were getting away from the ideals set by the civil war, that we had made all the presidents we could from men who had distinguished themselves in that war, and were coming to seek another type of man. That we were ready to accept the peace ideal, to be proud of our title as a peace nation; to recognize that the man who cleans a city is greater than he who bombards it, and the man who irrigates a plain greater than he who lays it waste. Then came the Spanish war, with its gilt and lace and tinsel, and again the moral issues are confused with exhibitions of brutality.

For ten years I have lived in a neighborhood which is by no means criminal, and yet during last October and November we were startled by seven murders within a radius of ten blocks. A little investigation of details and motives, the accident of a personal acquaintance with two of the criminals, made it not in the least difficult to trace the murders back to the influence of war. Simple people who read of carnage and bloodshed easily receive its suggestions. Habits of self-control which have been but slowly and imperfectly acquired quickly break down under the stress.

Psychologists intimate that action is determined by the selection of the subject upon which the attention is habitually fixed. The newspapers, the theatrical posters, the street conversations for weeks had to do with war and bloodshed. The little children on the street played at war, day after day, killing Spaniards. The humane instinct, which keeps in abeyance the tendency to cruelty, the growing belief that the life of each human being -- however hopeless or degraded, is still sacred -- gives way, and the barbaric instinct asserts itself.

It is doubtless only during a time of war that the men and women of Chicago could tolerate whipping for children in our city prison, and it is only during such a time that the introduction in the legislature of a bill for the re-establishment of the whipping post could be possible. National events determine our ideals, as much as our ideals determine national events.


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