



## They Will Steal It!

*by: Thom Hartmann, Berrett-Koehler Publishers | Serialized Book*

*War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today.*

- John F. Kennedy

In 1981, in the midst of a wide-ranging conversation during a night flight across the Atlantic, I got one of the biggest foreign policy insights of my life. Ever since I heard it, it's filtered my observations of the behavior of virtually every country in the world, particularly ours.

I'd gone to Uganda in 1980 to help start a program to feed the tens of thousands of people starving as a result of the 1978–1979 war, started when Uganda's neighbor to the south, Tanzania, finally said "Enough!" to the atrocities perpetuated by Ugandan dictator Idi Amin and invaded the country. They drove Amin out (he went to Libya first, then to Saudi Arabia, where he lived to a ripe old age in a palace, courtesy of the king and our oil dollars), but the Uganda-Tanzania War produced a disaster for the people of Uganda.

Our relief program was up and running, at least in infant form (it's still there and operating), and African-American comedian and activist Dick Gregory agreed to go to Uganda with me to see it and to help publicize the starvation so we could raise funds in the United States to expand the program. As the two of us crossed the Atlantic, his first trip to the African continent and my third or fourth, we sat in the plane and drank red wine and talked of all sorts of things, including our common opposition to the Vietnam War back in the day.

In the middle of our discussion about the United States and its unfortunate military adventures abroad, Dick dropped on me the most profound comment I've ever heard about foreign policy and human nature: "I don't know why America always thinks she has to run all around the world forcing people to take our way of governance

at the barrel of a gun,” he said. He paused for a sip of wine, and then added with a sly grin, “When you’ve got something really good, you don’t have to force it on people. *They will steal it!*”

*This chapter is part of an exclusive series from America's No. 1 progressive radio host, Thom Hartmann. Throughout is publishing weekly installments of Hartmann's acclaimed new book, **Rebooting the American Dream: 11 Ways to Rebuild Our Country**. We invite our readers to join us as, chapter by chapter, we explore these groundbreaking ideas for national transformation. » [Click here for all chapters](#)*

World history from (and before) the founding of our nation validates that assertion. When the United States was founded, it was seen by the kingdoms and the theocracies of Europe as a fragile experiment all but doomed to fail. Alexis de Tocqueville, a young French nobleman and historian, visited America for six months in the early 1830s and wrote a portrait of our country titled *Democracy in America*.\* He was frankly skeptical but hopeful that we could make it work.

the rest of the world held its breath. The experiment here, the *very idea* of America, was going to fail, or so it appeared. But we emerged from it stronger and more unified than before, and in the seven generations since then we have extended the Enlightenment notions of egalitarianism and democracy on which our country was founded to African Americans (and other minorities) and to women.

It is no accident that while there were arguably a handful of “democratic” nations at the time of our Civil War, there are around a hundred countries in the world today that claim that system of governance. Only two—Germany and Japan—did so after we defeated them militarily. (The jury is still out on Iraq and Afghanistan.) The rest “stole” our good idea and made it their own—and many have actually improved on it, with strong social safety nets and political systems of proportional representation or variations on instant runoff voting.

Here’s the irony: We came to believe in the concepts of freedom, egalitarianism, justice, tolerance, and democracy without being forced to do so, and yet we repeatedly try to force that on others. Our military budget today is larger than that of every other country in the world - *combined*. Since World War II, we’ve been stuck in a rut that two of our presidents—Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy—explicitly warned us about, of relying on our military to help make the world safe for its democracies.

The saner and smarter alternative, the higher road we need to be taking, is best demonstrated by the work of a man named Greg Mortenson.

In 1993, Mortenson attempted to climb K2, the world’s second-highest mountain in the remote tribal area of northern Pakistan.

Unfortunately, he was involved in an ordeal trying to rescue a fellow climber. On his descent, he became weak and exhausted and ended up in a small village, where people took him in and for months—despite a poverty so severe they couldn't even afford to have a school in their little community—cared for his wounds, fed him, and housed him until he could return to America.

Mortenson set out to repay the debt of hospitality he'd incurred in Pakistan by building the community a school. It took some time and rather Herculean efforts, but he did it, and he has now raised enough money to build more than 130 such small schools in remote areas of northwestern Pakistan and, most recently, Afghanistan.

These areas, with their hospitality- and obligation-based cultures, are the epicenter of the Taliban. Yet in the places where Mortenson has built schools, people are friendly to Americans and reject the virulent anti-Americanism the Taliban is promoting; five of Mortenson's teachers are former Taliban. By helping provide education, especially to girls, who previously were prohibited from studying, Mortenson has both elevated the quality of life (along with the status of women) and created a debt of obligation from them to us.

Mortenson wrote two best-selling books about his experiences, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time* and a sequel, *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.<sup>1</sup> In both, with vivid prose and a compelling story, he illustrates the wisdom of what can be achieved through civic, not military, engagement. Mortenson's schools are, in fact, "promoting peace with books, not bombs."

That is the face of America we want the world to see, the face of enlightened change for the better.

But not far from Mortenson's schools, American bombs rained on villages, often mistaking wedding parties or other social gatherings as military operations, killing innocent civilians and creating a blood debt of vengeance against us.

And, ironically, the cost of a single cruise missile - we've deployed hundreds into the region and in the process killed thousands of innocent civilians - could have instead paid for the construction and the furnishing of 20 schools.

So the face of America that the world sees, more often than not, is a harsh militaristic one and not a diplomatic one. We now have a bloated military with troops and bases all over the world, and we use

them far too often—just because they are there.

Abraham Maslow, the founder of humanistic psychology, often said words to the effect that “If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” We’ve been using the hammer of military power to solve problems that, arguably, *began* because of our use of military power to defend despots in natural- resource-rich (principally oil) regions. As we saw in the previous chapter, we need to kick our addiction to oil, which in itself will reduce our need for military operations worldwide.

We also desperately need to take other measures as well. We can cut our “defense” spending drastically and redirect those resources, close most of our foreign bases and bring our troops home, and bring back the draft so that all Americans—not just the poor—have the experience and an understanding of the military.

### **Return Our Military to Jefferson’s Vision**

Many of the world’s mature democracies require every high-school graduate to serve a year or two of either military or civil service. At first blush this may seem oppressive, but history shows it’s actually one of the best ways to prevent a military from becoming its own insular and dangerous subculture, to prevent the lower ranks from being overwhelmed by people trying to escape poverty, and to keep military actions accountable to the people.

Many of our country’s Founders argued strongly against a standing army during times of peace, although they favored a navy to protect our shoreline borders (and would likely favor an air force if they had one). They believed that an army had too much potential for mischief—to oppress people or even to stage a military coup and take over an elected government, something that happened three times in Pakistan’s 63-year history as a nation and which has happened in numerous other nations over the past few centuries.

Thomas Jefferson first suggested not having a standing army, and he wrote a series of letters in 1787, as the Constitution was being debated, urging James Madison and others to write it into the Constitution. He suggested three provisions: a constitutional ban on a standing army, a provision making every able-bodied male a trained member of a local militia that could come under national control if the country was attacked, and a provision making sure every male had a weapon handy at home if that day ever came.

*When Jefferson received the first draft of the new Constitution in*

When Jefferson received the first draft of the new Constitution in 1787, he wrote that without a Bill of Rights he would recommend that Virginia oppose it. In a February 1788 letter, he noted to his friend C. W. F. Dumas:2

With respect to the new Government, nine or ten States will probably have accepted by the end of this month. The others may oppose it. Virginia, I think, will be of this number. Besides other objections of less moment, she will insist on annexing a bill of rights to the new Constitution, i.e. a bill wherein the government shall declare that, 1. Religion shall be free; 2. Printing presses free; 3. Trials by jury preserved in all cases; 4. No monopolies in commerce; 5. No standing army. Upon receiving this bill of rights, she will probably depart from her other objections...

The topic was hotly debated, and Alexander Hamilton wrote an extensive article about it, first published in the *Daily Advertiser* on January 10, 1788, an article now known as No. 29 of the *Federalist Papers*:3

If standing armies are dangerous to liberty, an efficacious power over the militia, in the body to whose care the protection of the State is committed, ought, as far as possible, to take away the inducement and the pretext to such unfriendly institutions....

[A citizens' militia] appears to me the only substitute that can be devised for a standing army, and the best possible security against it...

But while many Founders saw a standing army as a threat to democracy, others pointed to threats ranging from hostile Indians to French Canadians and Spanish Floridians as reasons to keep it. The debates led to a clumsy compromise, with the ban on a standing army and a universal requirement for membership in a militia chopped away, to be revisited at a future date. The tattered and compromised remnant of that discussion is today known as the Second Amendment, which reads, in its entirety: "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."\*\*

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After he became president in 1801, Jefferson again tried to revive his argument. He slashed the size of the army from a quarter million to just over 3,000 soldiers, closing forts and cutting costs. But he couldn't kill off the army altogether because the citizens' militia had never been formalized at a federal level (and there were still those nasty "Indian Wars" going on). After he left office in 1809, Jefferson concluded that if he couldn't get rid of the army, every man should be a member of it, if only for a brief time. This would ensure a diversity of opinions in the army and would minimize the chances of an entrenched military culture that could become so powerful as to stage a coup or tempt the president into playing commander-in-chief too often in foreign adventures.

Jefferson was also morally offended by the idea of an army that people would join only because they were too poor to afford an education and a job. For such people he wanted universal free public education, including free college tuition, which he brought into being when he founded the University of Virginia.

In a June 1813 letter to his old friend (and future president) James Monroe, he wrote:<sup>4</sup>

It is more a subject of joy that we have so few of the desperate characters which compose modern regular armies. But it proves more forcibly the necessity of obliging every citizen to be a soldier; this was the case with the Greeks and Romans, and must be that of every free State. Where there is no oppression there will be no pauper hirelings.

As history shows, Jefferson was more often right than wrong.

### **Bring Back the Draft**

The idea of avoiding "pauper hirelings" by instituting a system of citizen-soldiers is what we would now call a military draft. We should institute a universal draft, with a strong public service option—from planting trees to assisting in schools to helping in hospitals—easily and readily available for those young people who don't want to go into the military.

The result will be a generation of citizens who feel more bonded with and committed to their nation, who have experienced the critical developmental stage of a "rite of passage" into adulthood, and who have experienced more of America and the world than just their own

neighborhood.

Universal service would also help calm President Eisenhower's fears. The old general left us the following warning as he departed from office in 1960:5

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted.

And, as President Herbert Hoover (1929 to 1933) correctly noted, "Old men declare war. But it's the youth who must fight and die." When the children of our president, vice president, and members of Congress are all obliged to serve, the odds are infinitely higher that our leaders won't speak so glibly about the acceptability of "a few casualties" in optional wars of choice like Iraq.

By including women and by adding a very broad government-funded option of national public service, we can bring about a modern version of Jefferson's vision and create both a more egalitarian society and a less belligerent and poverty-driven military.

### **Downsize the Pentagon**

On April 15, 2010, Glenn Beck did a rather remarkable thing on his Fox "News" TV show. He pointed out that our military is stretched all over the world and that the United States spends 47 percent of the military spending of *the entire world*, and he called for cutting in half our annual \$700 billion-plus military budget. We don't need a military with outposts in Germany and Japan and pretty much everywhere else—the military of an empire—because, Beck said, "We are not an empire; we are a republic."

Up until recently there had basically been, at least in the public mind, only two types of people who had strong opinions about military budgets: "hawks" who want a "strong national defense," and "doves" (aka "hippies") who want "peace" and therefore don't want much military at all. Now, with the continuing infiltration of libertarian and classical conservative ideas into the Republican Party, a new breed of right-wing populist is emerging who sees our bloated

a new breed of right-wing populist is emerging who sees our bloated defense budget as wasteful and unnecessary.

Consider that just during the eight years of the Bush-Cheney administration—while they were doubling the national debt from around \$5 trillion to around \$12 trillion—annual defense spending just about doubled, with the majority of that extra spending going to “contractors” (mostly Cheney’s old company Halliburton and other Bush family cronies) as more and more military and government functions were privatized.

Back when Reagan was doing the same thing Bush Jr. did—borrowing and spending on the military, particularly directing huge amounts of money to donors and cronies\*\*\*—it was rationalized as a way of “making us stronger” and as a stimulus to the nation’s economy. Just look at all those jobs building bombs and the missiles to deliver them! But the problem with spending money on a bomb is that when that bomb is dropped on somebody (or retired to the scrap heap), the money vanishes.

But if the same money is spent on high-speed rail or schools or other physical or intellectual infrastructure (research, for example), it comes back to society and the government over and over again in the form of a more vibrant economy and a more well-paid (and thus higher tax-paying) workforce.

This is, of course, the argument real “doves” have been making since the founding of this country—that we can actually be stronger as a nation, in terms of both national defense and a vibrant economy, by spending less on defense. It’s nice to hear that “conservatives” and “libertarians” have finally caught on.

For example, in 2009, Benjamin Friedman of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor*:<sup>6</sup>

To really keep us safe, we should slash defense spending. Americans should prepare for fewer wars, not different ones. Far from providing our defense, our military posture endangers us. It drags us into others’ conflicts, provokes animosity, and wastes resources. We need a defense budget worthy of the name. We need military restraint. And that would allow us to cut defense spending roughly in half.

Instead of rational policies like this—which for the past half-century have been advocated by “doves” from President Eisenhower to Students for a Democratic Society founder Tom Hayden—we have



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been in the thrall of a military-industrial- media-lobbying complex that has been sucking the blood of this nation for generations, both figuratively and literally.

The peak result of that was seen during the Bush-Cheney administration, when senior officials actually turned their backs on previous American presidents and policy, from George Washington through Bill Clinton, and pushed our military to invade a country that presented no threat to us, kill hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, and torture (to the point of death in as many as 100 cases) “suspects.”

### **Break the Cycle Now**

Remember the Arnold Schwarzenegger action movies and the John Wayne westerns? Someone would stick a gun in the bad guy’s face, and he would break down and start blubbering, “Yeah, I did it.” Perry Mason was more successful than Arnold or John. He used psychology.

In a June 2005 *Atlantic* magazine article, Stephen Budiansky wrote about Marine Major Sherwood Moran, the most successful interrogator of Japanese prisoners of war during World War II. He spoke Japanese, he lived in Japan, and he knew the culture. He believed that the “‘first and most important victory’ is getting ‘into the mind and into the heart’ of the prisoner and achieving an ‘intellectual and spiritual’ rapport with him.”<sup>7</sup>

When the 1993 movie *Schindler’s List* came out, we were living in Atlanta and living with us was Oliver, a 16-year-old German exchange student. Oliver, who had been through the German public schools and was a high school student, went with us to see it, and midway through the movie he broke down and sobbed; he cried the rest of the way through that movie and for an hour as we drove home. When he could finally talk about it, he said: “I knew we did that stuff. We learned that in school. But I didn’t really, *really* know we did that stuff—until I saw the movie.”

When we lived in Germany, we used to go on daytrips and weekly excursions with our kids. We went to the Dachau concentration camp, where Sigmund Rascher performed his experiments on people, many of whom died. We walked through Dachau with our children, and looked at pictures of the people, the bodies stacked up to be put in the crematorium, and we walked among the furnaces.

I wonder when the day will come that a generation of Americans will walk

through a museum at the Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan, or Abu Ghraib in Iraq, or Guantánamo in Cuba, or perhaps one of the hidden detention sites inside the United States or in Poland or in Czechoslovakia, and view it as our Dachau— places where horrific acts took place.

And we will walk through those museums with our children, saying, “Yes, that’s what we did. This is what George Bush, Alberto Gonzalez, and Dick Cheney did. And we are ashamed.”

A Bush administration Schindler’s List, about the torture and the killings carried out in our name, under the guise of promoting democracy and bringing peace:

- 1 million dead in Iraq
- 4.5 million Iraqi refugees
  - Iraqi children prostituting themselves because their
  - parents are dead
- 5 million Iraqi orphans
- Tortured Iraqi prisoners
  - Aerial bombardment and murder of wedding parties and
  - civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan

And on that future day, when a film is made about America’s killing and torturing human beings, I wonder if our children and grandchildren will watch the movie and break down sobbing as Oliver did.

### **Moving Forward**

We can ensure that there are no more such atrocities done in our name by taking a series of simple, straightforward measures: cutting our defense budget in half, bringing our military forces home from bases overseas, and instituting a national service program so that every American feels that he or she has a stake when a president or Congress decides to go off on some foreign military adventure.

We need to stop dropping bombs to promote freedom and democracy and start engaging, educating, and enlightening others so that they can see the fundamental goodness of the traditional American virtues of a free and open society.

*\*Democracy in America is the name by which this work is most*

*commonly known, and that is the title of later printings. The original work, published in 1835, was titled *The Republic of the United States of America, and Its Political Institutions, Reviewed and Examined*.*

*\*\*Clearly, the intent of the Second Amendment was not to have citizens protect themselves from an oppressive government, nor was it based on the “right to self-defense in your own home” argument put forth by the National Rifle Association and other advocates of ownership of assault weapons.*

*\*\*\*In Reagan’s case it was hundreds of billions (trillions in today’s money) spent on “Star Wars,” with most of it going to companies that were big supporters of his or were headed by former officials from the Nixon and Reagan administrations.*

1. Greg Mortenson, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Mission to Promote Peace One School at a Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); and its sequel, *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, Not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Viking Adult, 2009).

2. Thomas Jefferson to C. W. F. Dumas, February 12, 1788, [http://books.google.com/books?id=2D0gAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA187&lp=PA187&dq=%22Virginia,+I+think,+will+be+of+this+number%22+jefferson&source=bl&ots=goB3NRKzou&sig=zjzsc-qRDYZEG4xVBjNDhMuC8FY&hl=en&ei=1jLZS8nrC4n-tQPIk\\_yoAQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CBEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=2D0gAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA187&lp=PA187&dq=%22Virginia,+I+think,+will+be+of+this+number%22+jefferson&source=bl&ots=goB3NRKzou&sig=zjzsc-qRDYZEG4xVBjNDhMuC8FY&hl=en&ei=1jLZS8nrC4n-tQPIk_yoAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CBEQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false).

3. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist Papers* (No. 29), <http://www.foundingfathers.info/federalistpapers/fed29.htm>.

4. Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, June 18, 1813, [http://books.google.com/books?id=ao8oG7xRRBUC&pg=PR62&lp=PR62&dq=Thomas+Jefferson+to+James+Monroe,+June+18,+1813&source=bl&ots=npJJykbZFd&sig=cImEO4ScklKoBpOn3VvxjIMyrA4&hl=en&ei=jJ\\_5S4HyNYXeNd2v9YMI&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Thomas%20Jefferson%20to%20James%20Monroe%2C%20June%2018%2C%201813&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=ao8oG7xRRBUC&pg=PR62&lp=PR62&dq=Thomas+Jefferson+to+James+Monroe,+June+18,+1813&source=bl&ots=npJJykbZFd&sig=cImEO4ScklKoBpOn3VvxjIMyrA4&hl=en&ei=jJ_5S4HyNYXeNd2v9YMI&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Thomas%20Jefferson%20to%20James%20Monroe%2C%20June%2018%2C%201813&f=false).

5. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Farewell Address to the Nation*, January 17, 1961, <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/ike.htm>.

6. Benjamin H. Friedman, “The US Should Cut Military Spending in Half,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 27,

2009, [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=10152](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=10152)">  
[http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=10152](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=10152).

7. Stephen Budiansky, "Truth Extraction: A Classic Text on Interrogating Enemy Captives Offers a Counterintuitive Lesson on the Best Way to Get Information, Atlantic, June 2005,  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/06/truth-extraction/3973>.

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