From Kant to John Lennon: A Christmas Story

WAR IS OVER! (If Only We Really Wanted It)

By Timothy J. Freeman

It was thirty eight years ago today,
that John and Yoko gave us all something to play,
a message that’s never really been in style,
though its guaranteed to raise a smile. . . .

. . . and maybe even save the world, if only
we really listened. . . .OK, sorry about that
(Oh, and I know its not even a Lennon
song).

Thanks to a recent viewing of the film, The U.S. vs John Lennon, the simple message in John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s campaign for peace at Christmas 1969—later turned into the song Happy Xmas (War is Over)—keeps playing over and over again in my mind. At Christmas in 1969 over 47,000 American soldiers had already perished in Vietnam, and over 10,000 more would die before the war was really over. Yet in seven different languages in eleven different cities around the world, Lennon and Ono had posted on giant billboards the bold declaration: “WAR IS OVER!” along with, of course, the whispered proviso in small print: “If you want it.”

Now thirty eight years later, with the U.S. mired in a “war on terrorism” in Afghanistan and Iraq which seems to have no end in sight, and which—despite the recent National Intelligence Estimate refuting Iran’s purported nuclear threat—still could escalate into a wider and far more dangerous war, the plaintive plea in Lennon and Ono’s message might seem to raise only a painful smile. With conflict over shrinking resources—oil and water especially—surely inevitable in the century ahead, and with the current direction of U.S. power almost certainly bound to lead to confrontation with China and Russia in the future, the thought that war really could be over if only we really wanted it to be seems hopelessly naive, at best a quaint idealism completely out of step with the demands of the real world. “Sure, a nice thought,” most Americans probably think, “war could be over, but only if they wanted it—those terrorists, Islamo-fascists, communists, and whatever other “ists” who haven’t recognized the value of freedom and the God-appointed destiny of the American way.” War is a part of human nature anyway, its been a part of human history from the beginning and that isn’t likely to change. Its just a pie in the sky to think that war really ever could be over.1

So maybe I, too, am hopelessly naive; but I can’t get John and Yoko’s words out of my head—especially as sung in the chorus by the children of the Harlem community choir in Happy Xmas (War is Over)—and thus I am led to this further reflection. Could war really be over if only we really wanted it to be? Is it really possible to “give peace a chance”? 
Give Peace a Chance?

This question leads me to reflect on the essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* written by Immanuel Kant at the end of the 18th century. Kant’s philosophy is something like a watershed in the history of Western thought, marking a turning point which influences all subsequent philosophy. Kant has been described as both “the paradigmatic and culminating figure of the European Enlightenment,” which, of course, is that intellectual movement noted for its optimistic faith in human reason, and which gave us, among other things, our faith in democracy. Kant is a paradigmatic figure of the enlightenment both for his defense of reason against the skepticism of Hume, which required a theory of knowledge which revolutionized the understanding of the human mind, and for his ethics, which is founded on the conviction that the freedom of choice and action in accordance with the dictates of reason is our highest value, that which Kant holds to be even the very definition of humanity. He is also the culminating figure of the Enlightenment in drawing the limits to human reason, both in his theory of knowledge and his ethics. For Kant, the freedom to choose implies the freedom to do evil as well as good, and thus there are no laws of nature or dialectic of history which can guarantee that good will triumph. That hope will always depend upon human choice.

Both of these paradigmatic and culminating Enlightenment convictions surface in *Toward Perpetual Peace*. Kant actually begins the essay with something of a little joke, telling us about a Dutch Innkeeper’s sign which had the inscription ‘The Perpetual Peace’ next to a picture of a graveyard. Kant is clear that there is certainly no guarantee that humanity will be able to avoid the perpetual peace of the graveyard, but the gist of his essay is that if humanity really wants a lasting peace in this world—if humanity really wants to give peace a chance—this is what the nations of the world ought to do.

Now maybe in our post-Enlightenment, postmodern times it might be easy to dismiss *Toward Perpetual Peace* as it betrays as much of the Enlightenment’s naivete as well as hope. It would at least be interesting, however, to reflect on the merit of the ideas Kant puts forward, and then to consider what it is that stands in the way of giving them a chance.

Kant presents what he considers to be the necessary conditions of a perpetual peace as if it were a peace treaty among the nations of the world. The treaty is divided into two sections. The first part, consisting of six “preliminary articles of a perpetual peace among states,” are to be considered as *prohibitive laws* which aim to reduce the probability of warfare. The second part contains the “definitive articles” which aim, not just at eliminating potential provocations to war, but at establishing a permanent federation of states, thus providing a foundation for international law. It is here, of course, where Kant’s essay has proved most influential, as we find the first articulation of the idea which came to fruition with the establishment of the United Nations.

*The Preliminary Articles of a Perpetual Peace*

Three of the preliminary articles Kant specifies should be treated as strictly prohibitive laws and thus the abuses which are prohibited should be abolished immediately if the nations of the world
really wanted peace. The first article prohibits any peace treaties made with “secret reservation of the material for a future war.” It’s easy to understand Kant’s reasoning here as any peace agreement is not likely to last if the parties involved were secretly preparing for another war of aggression. We know, of course, what a threat to world peace Saddam’s secret stockpiles of WMDs were, as well as the secret nuclear ambitions of the Iranian mullahs are today. Oh, that’s right, they weren’t and aren’t—but at least Americans do understand what a threat to world peace secret preparations for wars of aggression can be. I guess peace might really have a chance if all those other nations stopped making secret preparations for war. Of course, ours is a just nation and our leaders would never think of doing such a thing. Oh, that’s right, I’d forgot about all those secret preparations for the invasion of Iraq before the Bush Administration even took office. I guess it was just naive of Kant to include this article in his world peace treaty. Actually, it’s interesting that Kant acknowledges that the prohibition of secret preparations for war “will certainly appear academic and pedantic” if “in accordance with ‘enlightened’ notions of political expediency, we believe that the true glory of a state consists in the constant increase of its power by any means whatsoever.”

The next thing that Kant recommends should be abolished immediately is any forcible interference by one state in the “constitution and government of another state” (article 5). Well this one is certainly not hard to understand either, as Americans surely wouldn’t stand for any external interference in our constitution and government. I guess it’s easy to see that peace really could have a chance if the nations of the world could agree to this article; but, of course, this doesn’t seem possible in our world, and for reasons of ‘enlightened’ political expediency, the U.S. in the last century has certainly mastered the art of such interference. Well, at least we can say that the U.S. has had plenty of experience in this regard, from San Juan Hill and the numerous more recent interventions in Latin America and Southeast Asia to the current interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unfortunately, few Americans have really understood what the political expediency really amounts to.

The last of the strictly prohibitive laws in Kant’s treaty forbids any “acts of hostility as would make mutual confidence impossible during a future time of peace” (article 6). Here Kant refers explicitly to things like the employment of assassins and poisoners, the breaking of treaties and the instigation of treason within another state; but we can extrapolate from what Kant says to understand that he has in mind any acts of hostility that would make mutual trust impossible. Once again, the idea is certainly not hard to understand, though, once again, for reasons of political expediency, the U.S. has certainly had a lot of experience in assassinations and attempted assassinations, the abrogations of treaties, and other such acts of hostility. I wonder if the Iraqi people will ever trust the U.S. again after the obliteration of much of their cultural heritage in the aftermath of the fall of Baghdad, after the torture palace of Abu Ghraib, after the wholesale slaughter of civil war that has ensued in the wake of our ‘liberation’ of Iraq.

The other preliminary articles of a perpetual peace, Kant states, “allow some subjective latitude according to the circumstances” and though they “need not necessarily be executed at once,” their execution should “not be put-off to a non-existent date.” The first of these articles prohibits the acquisition of independently existing states as if they were private property (article 2). I suppose Kant found it impractical to call for the immediate prohibition of such acquisitions as it
was such a commonplace practice in the Europe of his day for states to be acquired through marriage and other family alliances among the ruling class. Of course, if such a prohibition were to be a part of any global peace treaty today, considerable latitude would have to be allowed to the U.S. as it is essentially the product of the acquisition of territory as private property, and, at least in the case of Hawaii, of the acquisition of an independently existing state. But at least we might be able to say that this is a problem of the past, as political expediency no longer calls for the acquisition of independently existing states—especially as the forcible interference in the constitution or government of other states can meet that expediency.

The last two of Kant’s preliminary articles of peace are very much relevant today; however, and due to political expediency, it is still very difficult to imagine how they could be executed at once, or even at some future date. Here Kant suggests that if the nations of the world really want peace then standing armies should be gradually abolished (article 3) along with the accumulation of national debt “in connection with the external affairs of the state” (article 4). Regarding the former, Kant foresees an arms race in which states seek “to outdo one another in arming unlimited numbers of soldiers, and since the resultant costs eventually make peace more oppressive than a short war, the armies are themselves the cause of wars of aggression.” Kant even warns that such an arms race might compel states “to mount preventative attacks.” Some hundred and fifty years before Eisenhower, Kant seems to have seen the danger of the Industrial Military complex: “for of the three powers within a state—the power of the army, the power of alliance and the power of money—the third is probably the most reliable instrument of war.”

Kant’s prohibition against the incurrence of national debt for foreign military adventures seems perhaps even more prescient. The neo-con adventure in Iraq would, of course, be completely inconceivable without the tremendous debt which has been accumulated. Kant’s explanation for this article of peace seems as if he had in mind precisely the case with the U.S. today:

There is no cause for suspicion if help for the national economy is sought inside or outside the state (e.g. for improvements to roads, new settlements, storage of foodstuffs for years of famine, etc.). But a credit system, if used by the powers as an instrument of aggression against one another, shows the power of money in its most dangerous form. For while the debts thereby incurred are always secure against present demands (because not all the creditors will demand payment at the same time), these debts go on growing indefinitely. This ingenious system, invented by a commercial people in the present century, provides a military fund which may exceed the resources of all the other states put together. It can only be exhausted by an eventual tax-deficit, which may be postponed for a considerable time by the commercial stimulus which industry and trade receive through the credit system. This ease in making war, coupled with the warlike inclination of those in power (which seems to be an integral feature of human nature), is thus a great obstacle in the way of perpetual peace. Foreign debts must therefore be prohibited by a preliminary article of such a peace, otherwise national bankruptcy, inevitable in the long run, would necessarily involve various other states in the resultant loss without their having deserved it, thus inflicting upon them public injury. Other states are therefore justified in allying themselves against such a state and its pretentions.
The Definitive Articles of a Perpetual Peace

While the preliminary articles in Kant’s treaty certainly provide much food for thought in considering whether it is possible to give peace a chance, it is with the definitive articles that we come, I think, to the real crux of the challenge of peace in our time. What Kant says here is, on the one hand, quite influential, while on the other hand, very problematic. The influential part is the second article in which Kant lays out his idea for a league or federation of nations.

Kant is clearly influenced here by the political theory of the early Modern philosopher Thomas Hobbes, to whom we owe the idea of government as a social contract. In order to provide a justification for the social contract, Hobbes conceived of a hypothetical “state of nature” which would be what human society would be like without government. As Hobbes had a basically pessimistic understanding of human nature, human beings being hard-wired, so to speak, to seek only their own self-interest, the state of nature, as he conceived it, is a state of war. Everyone would have an unlimited right to get away with anything, and thus everyone would live in constant fear and danger of violent death. The life of man in the state of nature, as Hobbes famously put it, is thus “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” It is thus to get out of this state of nature that human beings would rationally choose to surrender this unlimited right, and to form a government by social contract.

The early modern political theorists such as Hobbes and John Locke were concerned only with the formation of the nation-state and did not extend their reflection to the international arena. Kant’s essay extends social contract political theory to the relations between states. Kant begins the second section of his essay introducing the idea of an international social contract:

A state of peace among men living together is not the same as the state of nature, which is rather a state of war. For even if it does not involve active hostilities, it involves a constant threat of their breaking out. Thus the state of peace must be formally instituted, for a suspension of hostilities is not in itself a guarantee of peace.

Kant follows Hobbes here more than Locke in conceiving the state of nature as a state of war (Locke conceived the state of nature as bound by natural law, and thus it is not necessarily a state of war, though it is still inconvenient enough to require a social contract to get out of the state of nature). Kant argues that if the people of the world want to get out of the constant state of war among nations, then the nations of the world ought to form a federation of nations:

Each nation, for the sake of its own security, can and ought to demand of the others that they should enter along with it into a constitution, similar to the civil one, within which the rights of each could be secured. This would mean establishing a federation of peoples.

Kant is clear that he is not thinking of an “international state” or one world government. Each state retains its sovereignty in the same way that individuals retain their rights in entering the social contract (Kant follows Locke here more than Hobbes in arguing that states and individuals have rights that cannot be given up). Kant argues that the only way of giving a perpetual peace a chance is through such an agreement between nations:
But peace can neither be inaugurated nor secured without a general agreement between the nations; thus a particular kind of league, which we might call pacific federation, is required. It would differ from a peace treaty in that the latter terminates one war, whereas the former would seek to end all wars for good. This federation does not aim to acquire any power like that of a state, but merely to preserve and secure the freedom of each state in itself, along with that of the other confederated states, although this does not mean that they need to submit to public laws and to a coercive power which enforces them, as do men in a state of nature. It can be shown that this idea of federalism, extending gradually to encompass all states and thus leading to perpetual peace, is practicable and has objective reality.

Kant’s idea of a particular kind of league of nations which would seek to end all wars for good was, of course, first proposed as the League of Nations at the end of the first world war. The U.S., of course, didn’t participate in the League of Nations because the Senate, controlled by Republicans after the election of 1918, voted against the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. The League of Nations came to an end with the onset of the second world war, but was resurrected in its aftermath as the United Nations.

The problem with the League of Nations, as well as its successor, is that there is no coercive power to enforce international law. The success of the federation, as Kant makes clear, depends upon the mutual agreement of the member nations. The main weakness of the United Nations today is that the most powerful nation in the world, led by the neo-cons in the Bush Administration, has shown utter contempt for the United Nations and clearly operates as if the international arena were a Hobbesian state of nature.

Hobbes was quite explicit that in the state of nature the question of justice and injustice cannot even arise: “To this war of every man against every man, this is also consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where there is no law, no injustice.” Although the Bush Administration has tried to justify its wars of aggression to the American public, it’s clear from everything they did in the run-up to the war in Iraq—when instead of doing everything in their power to avoid war and find a peaceful solution, they, in fact, did everything in their power to avoid a peaceful solution and find a reason for war—as well as their disregard of the Geneva Conventions concerning the treatment of prisoners during the occupation of Iraq, that their real position is that they need not be concerned with the question of justice and injustice and the restrictions of international law. Kant had this to say about people like these architects of the Iraq war who have chosen to reject international law and the federation of nations and instead plunge the nations of the world into a state of nature in which the future of humankind seems likely to be nasty, brutish, and short:

We look with profound contempt upon the way in which savages cling to their lawless freedom. They would rather engage in incessant strife than submit to a legal constraint which they might impose upon themselves, for they prefer the freedom of folly to the freedom of reason. We regard this as barbarism, coarseness, and brutish debasement of humanity. We might thus expect that civilized peoples, each united within itself as a state, would hasten to abandon so degrading a condition as soon as possible. But instead
of doing so, each state sees its own majesty (for it would be absurd to speak of the majesty of a people) precisely in not having to submit to any external legal constraint, and the glory of its ruler consists in his power to order thousands of people to immolate themselves for a cause which does not truly concern them, while he need not himself incur any danger whatsoever.

There remains one further aspect of Kant’s essay which is necessary to discuss and that is the problematic first definitive article of a perpetual peace. Kant argues that for this federation of nations to be possible it is first necessary that the constitution of every state be a republic. Fortunately, it proved not to be necessary to wait for this to come to pass for the establishment of the United Nations. Unfortunately, this requirement can be construed as a reason not to take the United Nations seriously, and even more perniciously, as a justification for wars of aggression in the name of democracy. However, Kant’s argument is not based on the intrinsic superiority of a republic in itself (he argues for a republic over a pure democracy for the essentially the same reason Madison did, and the reason why the U.S. Constitution is a republic—and that is the danger of the tyranny of the majority, which could not be avoided if a simple majority vote of the people decided every issue and the executive and legislative powers were not separated). Kant’s argument is rather that war would be less likely if the government were accountable to the people as in a republic:

If, as is inevitably the case under this constitution, the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise. For this would mean calling down on themselves all the miseries of war, such as doing the fighting themselves, supplying the costs of the war from their own resources, painfully making good the ensuing devastation, and, as the crowning evil, having to take upon themselves a burden of debt which will embitter peace itself and which can never be paid off on account of the constant threat of new wars. But under a constitution where the subject is not a citizen, and which is therefore not republican, it is the simplest thing in the world to go to war. For the head of state is not a fellow citizen, but the owner of the state, and a war will not force him to make the slightest sacrifice so far as his banquets, hunts, pleasure palaces and court festivals are concerned. He can thus decide on war, without any significant reason, as a kind of amusement, and unconcernedly leave it to the diplomatic corps (who are always ready for such purposes) to justify the war for the sake of propriety.

Not surprisingly there has been much discussion of this point, and sometimes it has been argued that Kant’s whole scheme has been undermined by the unfolding of history since Kant’s day with numerous examples of republics making war upon one another. Two replies to this objection, however, have been offered. The first is that it is not so clear that there has been war between states that “really do satisfy Kant’s own highly stringent definition of a republic” and secondly, “it must always be remembered that Kant never argues that even a worldwide federation of republics makes permanent peace necessary; his view is rather that only such a federation makes permanent peace even possible. Kant’s final word, after all, is that human beings have free will, and no matter what remain free to choose to do what is right, but equally free, alas, to choose evil over good.”
The example set by the U.S., in the last half-century at least, does not necessarily refute this last point; however, it does raise the question of whether a republican form of government is enough to protect a democracy against the problem of the tyranny of the majority. I don’t imagine that Kant ever foresaw a republic such as ours, where the people could be so oblivious to the real costs and miseries of war. What Kant says above about the despotic owner of a state applies just as easily to our leaders in Washington today. What value is there in a republic today, as far as avoiding unnecessary wars, if the people can be so insulated from the devastating effects of war?

One of the principle reasons the U.S. is in Iraq today is that the American people never really learned the lesson from the Vietnam War. As soon as the troops came home and the protests ended, the corporate controlled media began a reactionary counter-movement which pretty much successfully obliterated the memory of what happened in Vietnam. This came home to me most powerfully in one of my Introduction to Western Philosophy courses last year. During our review of the issue of the ethics of war and peace, I had the students watch the film The Fog of War.

Before watching the film, I said that most Americans probably know about how many Americans died in the war, but probably don’t know how many Southeast Asians perished. So I asked them. There was a few minutes of silence, and then one young woman raised her hand and hesitatingly responded: “10,000?” That about sums up the problem for me. How many Americans really understand that millions died, and—as Robert McNamara seems to acknowledge in The Fog of War—for really no good reason. What was the reason? Oh, that’s right, all those millions died so that we could stop the dominoes from falling and halt the spread of communism. McNamara admits that the U.S. just simply never understood that the Vietnamese saw it as a war of independence. The U.S. has still never come to terms with the terrible moral failure that was the war in Vietnam.

Our corporate controlled “free press” tells us that the “surge” in Iraq is going great. They won’t tell us, however, what is really going on in Iraq. The majority of Americans may be tiring of the war, like they tire of yesterday’s news; yet they still don’t really understand what a moral failure it is once again that U.S. troops are engaged in a war for no good reason. The fear of communism was replaced by the fear of terrorism in leading the American people to support another unnecessary war. It certainly doesn’t help put out the fires of terrorism by participating in terrorism. When it is understood that over a million Iraqis have already perished, supposedly as a response to the threat of terrorism and in retaliation for the 3000 that died in New York on 9/11, when it turned out that Iraq was never really a threat and certainly had nothing to do with the atrocity of 9/11, then it must be recognized that the invasion and occupation of Iraq has been, itself, an act of terrorism that dwarfs what happened on 9/11. Americans are simply as oblivious to the real causes of the problem of terrorism as they are to the real costs and miseries of war.

The majority of Americans may want to bring the troops home, but what value is there in our republic if the only candidates who have a chance of being elected President next fall are not going to bring the troops home, and are committed to continuing the general direction of U.S. foreign policy? What value is there in our republic if a candidate like Dennis Kucinich, the only candidate who is committed to giving peace a chance, and understands what it would take to do so, is excluded from even participating in the debate?
How many Americans have the slightest inkling of what political expediency really drives the U.S. war machine? It certainly isn’t a defense of democracy, as our leaders have been more than willing to overthrow democratically elected leaders if it suits that political expediency—as the assassination of Allende in Chile ought to have made clear. It certainly isn’t a defense of our freedom—as the Vietnam War and now the war in Iraq should make abundantly clear. That political expediency which has made the U.S. the greatest obstacle to peace in the world today is simply the preservation and dissemination of an economic system which seeks, above all, to maximize wealth in the hands of the very few. The $400 million retirement package doled out to the former CEO of Exxon Corporation in 2005 perhaps stands as the best illustration of what our troops are really dying and killing for. In the century ahead, with unparalleled crises facing humanity, that expediency is beyond abominable. John Lennon hit the nail on the head when he said, as recorded in The U.S. vs John Lennon, “our society is run by insane people for insane objectives.”

What is really absurd is that this Christmas, like every Christmas, churches all across America will be filled with those who most believe that America is a just nation—those who most stridently think of themselves as followers of the “prince of peace”—and yet they will elect more insane people for these same insane objectives and thus peace will never have a chance.

The problem with the U.S. is that Americans have never really understood what the key to democracy is. If one were to take a poll across America and ask everyone what is more important, faith or the love of wisdom—the capacity to question and to critically think about the important issues of the day, there isn’t much doubt about what the result would be. Such a poll would reveal the contradiction within the heart of America. The first colonists were mostly religious fundamentalists who certainly had no idea of founding a democracy. That idea came more than a century later, during the height of the Enlightenment. Perhaps this was the Enlightenment and Kant’s greatest naivete. The Enlightenment hope in democracy, and Kant’s conviction that a republican form of government would be the best hope of giving peace a chance, both are founded on the assumption that the people are capable of the love of wisdom—and have thus, not just the freedom to choose good over evil, but the courage and strength to take up the burden of conscience in thinking through the problem of good and evil. All those Christians who think that faith is the key to democracy should read Dostoevsky’s short story “The Grand Inquisitor” from The Brothers Karamazov. Then maybe they would understand how, if faith is blind, one can have faith in the precisely the opposite of what one thinks one has faith in.

Given the state of affairs in the world today it certainly seems naive to think that a perpetual peace can ever be achieved. There is certainly no hope for Kant’s plan for a perpetual peace if the most powerful nation in the world cannot come to its senses and set a better example for the nations of the world to follow in living up to the requirements of international law. Maybe, just maybe, war could be over—if we just wanted it. Imagine that.

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1. The origin of the phrase “pie in the sky” comes from Joe Hill’s radical song *Preacher and the Slave* from 1911 (http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/282700.html).


4. See the costs of the Iraq war at the National Priorities Project: (http://nationalpriorities.org/cms/costofwar).


