

A Just Foreign Policy is a Rights-Based Foreign Policy

A keynote address to Nebraskans For Peace by Kathleen McQuillen, AFSC Iowa Program Coordinator
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Good evening and thank you for giving me the opportunity to be with you tonight.

As many of you know the American Friends Service Committee was founded by Quakers in 1917 to provide an opportunity for young people to play a positive role during the carnage that was the world war. AFSC's beginning was in witnessing against the violence and establishing food programs for the refugees from the war.

In Iowa, AFSC's program work is still deeply rooted in the principles upon which AFSC founded. Our two program foci are peace building and immigrant rights. We have two full-time staff working in our Immigrants Voice Program: Jody Mashek provides immigration legal services and Sandra Sanchez organizes for immigrant rights in the Latino community. I'm delighted to say we recently hired an intern to organize young immigrants known as Dreamers to work for humane immigration reform.

Our peace building program has been focused on Iraq, starting with the anti-sanctions work in the 90s; and then of course the Iraq war, and now Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Palestine. We are fortunate to have recently hired an intern to support our work on Palestine and Israel.

I was asked to speak tonight about what would a just foreign policy look like. As I began to work on this topic, what kept coming to me was Mahatma Ghandi's response when asked what he thought of western civilization: "It would be a good idea," he said.

Similarly, a just US foreign policy would indeed be a good idea. A just foreign policy would have to start with human rights. Clearly this is not a strength in US policy making.

In 1948, Secretary of State George Kennan, noting the great wealth and resource disparity in the world and the particular position of privilege of the US, warned that the US would become the "object of envy and resentment."

To deal with this envy, Kennan's prescription was to "...cease to talk about vague and ... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts." (Policy Planning Study 23 (PPS23), *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1948)

If this envy talk sounds familiar, perhaps you remember George W. Bush telling us that the 9-11 attackers disliked us because they are jealous of the US. So it seems US policy has continued on Kennan's path.

But there is another way. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. looked at the same situation Kennan talked about – the poverty, disparity – and said one day people around the world will look at the US and say, "This is not just."

King went on to tell us:

“Charity is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. True charity comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” (“A Time to Break Silence,” at Riverside Church 1967)

King’s answer was to change the structures that create poverty and injustice. We can still choose King’s path. It is part of who we are to do so. It is in our national psyche. We have the declaration of human rights: *All men—and now women—are created equal*. And when that proved not to be enough, we demanded a Bill of Rights.

The tools are there for us to choose another way. As well as our own US documents, there are now the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Convention and the International Criminal Court. But we the people have to breathe life into these documents.

Our government won’t do it. What has recent US history shown?

In Iraq, according to the Lancet study, well over 100,000 people were killed in the U.S. war. During the sanctions years before the 2003 war, half a million children were killed by the economic sanctions regime. And in the style of her predecessor, Sec. of State Madelyn Albright, observed, “The price is worth it.”

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US has expanded the attacks – let’s not call it a war – under the Obama Administration. Current estimates are that 3,300 people have been killed by drones in Pakistan alone. This in a land where no war has been declared, and where, despite official U.S. claims, distinctions between “terrorist” and civilian are not clearly delineated and certainly not supported by any internationally recognized agreements.

We know, too, that US drones operate in some villages 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Whole villages now suffer depression and anxiety. Children fear going to school, families fear going to gatherings, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is rampant.

Regarding Palestine, the US holds to language about a “special relationship” with Israel that consequently denies the rights of Palestinians. Every time Israel engages in their attacks, incursions, and invasions into Palestine, the US Congress hurries to create a resolution affirming Israel’s right to defend itself.

Such a resolution was passed after the 2008 Cast Lead war in which 1400 Gazans were killed and 10-14 Israelis were killed. Again, a similar resolution was passed after the 2012 Israeli attacks on Gaza.

The US is now under pressure from Israel to attack Iran – or at least approve of an Israeli attack – which of course obligates the US to defend Israel if need be. There is currently a resolution in the US Congress stating this.

John Mearshmier and Walt Stephen argue in the *Israel Lobby* that the United States' unconditional and biased support for Israel has nothing to do with US strategic interests but is based simply on the power and undemocratic pressure of the Israel lobby on the US Congress.

Still, we could choose Dr. King's route. What keeps us from choosing a path such as his?

Clearly there is the whole issue of money in politics – the weapons industry, the military industrial complex, and now compounding these, the corporate personhood ruling in *Citizens United*.

But money is only one way of achieving power; the other is through people power. We need to grow our movement for justice – for a just foreign policy.

We need to know, too, that while justice fails at home we will not have justice in our foreign affairs. While we tolerate racism, sexism, and the exponentially growing economic divide in our domestic policies, our government will not be sensitive to human rights in our foreign policies.

If we tolerate factory explosions in Texas, we will not support safety programs to prevent factory collapses in Bangladesh. If we accept the environmental racism of the Keystone pipeline, efforts to move backwards on gender equality, and a US wealth and democracy gap providing exorbitant riches for some and poverty for many, many more, then we will not let what George Kennan called “unreal objectives like human rights” impact our policies beyond our borders.

So, finally what would a just foreign policy look like?

First, the words “regime change” would be eliminated from the American lexicon.

Food, water, and access to resources would be the guiding principles.

We would develop a culture of peace and respect in our relationships.

We would emphasize diplomacy over threat and intimidation.

The principles from our Declaration of Independence would guide our policies: *All men/women are created equal.*

In summary, a just foreign policy would give witness to this principle laid out by the Friends Committee on National Legislation: “We believe God dwells in each human soul and therefore it is the birthright of all persons to live a life of dignity...with access to life's basic necessities.”