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As we approach tenth anniversary of Sept. 11, a call to action

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

In less than two months, the US military and its media machine will tell us to mark the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks by celebrating their warmaking efforts --and continuing to live in fear.

We were attacked, so we bombed Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, killed hundreds of thousands of people, tortured thousands more, rebuilt our nuclear installations, threw out our basic liberties and spied on millions. In our so-called "war on terrorism," we became the biggest global terrorists, threatening the planet with drones, bombs, and a spanking-new nuclear weapons arsenal.

Brown University just released a study explaining how the true cost of our wars of revenge in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan will end up costing approximately \$4 trillion -- -- far more than the Bush or Obama administrations have said. Because the war has been financed almost entirely by borrowing, the report says, \$185 billion in interest has already been paid on war spending, and another \$1 trillion could accrue in interest alone through 2020.

President Obama's recent decision to pull out only 30,000 troops of Afghanistan, on top of his refusal to bring our troops home from Iraq, shows that we have committed ourselves to permanent warfare. We pursue global domination at our own expense, to the detriment of the economy, employment, education, healthcare and environmental cleanup. Dick Cheney once said that our empire will remain in Afghanistan and Iraq for decades. Obama is proving that his colleague was correct.

But the nonviolent Jesus, and the recent movements for nonviolent revolution in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere, insist that we have more power than we realize -- that if we organize, speak out and take action, we can reverse the tide of war, cut our military spending, and pursue a new culture of peace.

The Sept. 11 anniversary and the tenth anniversary of the U.S. war on Afghanistan Oct. 6 offer an opportunity. As we head into the heat of summer, I invite everyone to ponder and plan some public action for peace during those anniversary days.

One idea might be to see these three weeks -- 25 days -- between Sept. 11 and Oct. 6 as three weeks of prayer, fasting and nonviolent action for an end to our wars.

I invite everyone during those three weeks to intensive intercessory prayer for a miracle -- for an end to the US wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. I invite people to fast for a day or two, or more, for peace. And I invite every local peace community in the country to start planning now to hold some public event -- perhaps a teach-in, evening lecture, public vigil, march, or civil disobedience action to demand an end to these wars.

I urge friends far and wide to share this call, this invitation, with everyone they know.

Some people may want to plan now to come to Washington, D.C. Oct. 6 to join the massive mobilization that is being organized. See: www.october2011.org

As we look ahead to another election year and its pro-war media coverage, I hope we can also reflect on our Christian response -- that instead of placing all our energies in electoral politics, we might rebuild an active nonviolent movement that publicly demands an end to our wars at every opportunity, and announces the coming of God's reign of peace.

Last month, Jim Wallis and dozens of religious leaders sent an open letter to President Obama calling for aid, not bombs, for Afghanistan. As we ponder our response to these wars and the great peace work to be done, I share this important letter for your reflection in the hope that we might mark the upcoming anniversaries with prayer, repentance and action, and join the chorus of peace.

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An Open Letter from Religious Leaders to President Obama
June 22, 2011

Dear Mr. President,

As your target date to begin U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan approaches, we are compelled by the prophetic vision of just peace to speak. We represent a diversity of faith communities -- ranging from just war to pacifist traditions. As leaders of these communities, some of us initially supported the war in Afghanistan as a justified response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Others opposed the war, believing there were better ways than military force to address the al Qaeda threat. Today, however, we are united in the belief that it is time to bring the U.S. war in Afghanistan to an end.

After nine years, what began as a response to an attack has become an open-ended war against a Taliban centric insurgency -- which itself is largely motivated to drive out foreign troops and has no designs beyond its own borders. The military operation has so far resulted in the deaths of over 2,500 Coalition troops, including 1,600 from the U.S. Estimates are that over 20,000 Afghan civilians have died. And yet,

the security situation is deteriorating and Taliban influence is spreading. The military situation is at best a stalemate. Al Qaeda barely exists in Afghanistan, but it has metastasized into Pakistan and has established itself in Yemen, Somalia, and other places around the globe.

Relief and development aid, desperately needed after three decades of war, have been integrated into and are subservient to military operations. Civilian aid organizations that attempt to provide much-needed relief are often seen as part of the foreign military occupation and have faced increasing attacks. Additionally, this form of militarized aid has worked to undermine long-term sustainability while proving ineffective in addressing immediate poverty concerns. As the faith community, we have experience doing this kind of work, and maintain relationships with partners on the ground. We see and hear the need for relief and development aid to be provided through these civilian aid organizations, while untying it from a counterinsurgency strategy and involving and empowering local Afghan partners to the greatest extent possible.

Moreover, this type of aid is most effective -- both in terms of the development in Afghanistan, and the cost of the conflict. The past 10 years have shown that we cannot broker peace in Afghanistan by military force; it is time to transition toward a plan that builds up civil society and provides economic alternatives for Afghans. At a time of economic turmoil, as we are presented with difficult financial and budgetary decisions at home, we have an opportunity to invest in aid that both supports the people of Afghanistan, and saves our country much needed funds.

We recognize that legitimate ethical and moral issues are at stake in Afghanistan -- U.S. national security, protecting the lives of Coalition servicemen and women, protecting Afghan civilians, defending the rights of Afghan women, supporting democracy and, of course, saving innocent lives from the inevitable death and destruction that accompany war. We humbly believe there is a better way than war to address these important issues.

What is needed now is a comprehensive package of interlocking arrangements to enhance security and stability. This alternative path is not without some risk, but it is preferable to the known dangers of war. As you said in December 2009, the U.S. should begin a responsible but accelerated withdrawal of troops, beginning with a significant number in July 2011 and continuing along a set timetable. This must be linked to a comprehensive security agreement, a regional multilateral diplomatic initiative, and increased public and private assistance for locally based economic and social development programs. We must commit to proactively share the costs of war, which have been borne disproportionately by the veterans of these wars, their families, and thousands of Afghan civilians.

We reaffirm our religious hope for a world in which they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.?

(For a complete list of the co-signers, see: www.sojo.net)

[Editor's Note: John Dear's column is on a summer schedule and will be posted every other week through early August.]

Next year, John Dear will undertake a national book tour for his forthcoming book, *Lazarus Come Forth!*, which portrays Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To host John in your church or school for an evening talk and book-

signing, send an email through www.johndear.org. From August 8-15, he will offer a weeklong retreat on Jesus' teachings on peace, hope and love at the spectacular Ghost Ranch Center in New Mexico (www.ghost ranch.org). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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