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If Hitler Didn't Exist

The Pentagon Would Have to Invent Him

By: DAVID SWANSON

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When video of the October 14th edition of Thom Hartmann's TV show appears online (here) it will include him asking me to justify not attacking Hitler. Thom has asked me this repeatedly during multiple appearances on his show, each time a little differently, and each time provocatively. He's right to ask it, and he's been right in some of the answers he's helped provide in the asking.

Without Hitler, the U.S. military would collapse.

For 68 years, wars on poor countries have been justified by the pretended discovery of Hitler's reincarnation. Each time it has turned out to be a false alarm. Every post-WWII war looks disastrous or at least dubious in retrospect to most people. And yet, the justification of the next war is always ready to hand, because the real, original Hitler remains alive in our memories, and he just might come back — who's to say?

Actually, I think anyone vaguely aware of basic facts about the current world ought to be able to say that Hitler is gone for good.

How *do* I justify not going to war with Hitler, beyond explaining that Assad isn't Hitler, Gadaffi isn't Hitler, Hussein isn't Hitler, and so on?

Increasingly, I believe we must start with the fact that we live in a different world. Colonization is gone. Empires of the old model are gone. No powerful nation is plotting that sort of global conquest. In fact, no powerful nation is seriously considering war with other powerful nations.

During these past 68 years of misidentifying new Hitler after new Hitler, there has in fact been no World War III. We haven't just made it 25 years. We'll hit the 75-year mark during the next U.S. presidency. Nuclear weapons, awareness of the costs, understanding of the lack of benefits, established norms against the seizure of territory, the utter unacceptability of colonialism, and the vast increase in understanding of the power of nonviolent action all work against the waging of wars among the wealthy, armed nations. Instead, we have proxy wars, wars of exploitation, and poor-on-poor warfare. And even those wars fail miserably on their own terms. Occupations collapse. Puppets grow legs and wander off.

When World War II happened, war had never been prosecuted as a crime. The prosecutions that followed the war were the first. The seizure of territory was only beginning to be delegitimized. Colonialism was still understood as the route to riches, power, and prestige. War was imagined as a contest between armies on a battlefield, rather than what World War II transformed it into: the slaughter of civilians in their homes.

When World War II happened, there were no nukes, no satellites, no drones. There was no (or little) television, no internet, no WikiLeaks. There was no understanding of the tools of nonviolence. History contained no nonviolent overthrows of dictatorships, few examples of creative nonviolent resistance to tyranny, no teams of human shields, no Arab Spring, no Civil Rights movement, no overcoming of Apartheid, no bloodless revolutions in Eastern Europe, no peace studies programs, no expertise in conflict resolution, and no viable alternatives to war — much less the thousands of tools since devised, tested, and refined.

When we look back at Thomas Jefferson's slavery, we like to excuse it because he lived in an age in which lots of other people engaged in slavery. He didn't know better, we like to say. He didn't have an easy way out that would be equally profitable with so many side benefits. I think we're a bit generous in this act of forgiving, but I think there's also a grain of truth there. Times do change, and actions are taken in contexts.

When we look back at Franklin Roosevelt's war-making, perhaps we should remember that it took place in an era when nothing else was imagined by many people. Punishing the entire nation of Germany following World War I was not recognized as the time bomb it was, not by most people. Funding fascism as preferable to the horror of communism was not recognized as the Frankenstein experiment it was, not by most people. Hyping the danger of a Nazi takeover of the world and jumping into a war, and then escalating that war into the very worst thing the world has ever seen, was not viewed as a barbaric choice, was not viewed as a choice at all — not by many people.

We live in a different era. When our President claims he simply must send missiles into Syria, we tell him to think harder. We can forgive FDR for war-making as we forgive those who engaged in slavery or dueling or blood feuds or witch hunts. They were products of their times. But we need not go on acting as if it is forever 1945 — no matter how much that pretense profits certain people.

If we were to recognize that Hitler isn't coming back, and that we could resist him without war if he did, we might suddenly begin demanding the things that other nations have and the U.S. could easily afford: healthcare, education, a secure and adequate income, parental leave, vacation leave, retirement, public transit, sustainable energy, etc. Lockheed and Raytheon and Northrop Grumman would start making solar panels or start departing this world for the pages of history. In other words, we might shut down the other half of the government from the half that's shut down right now.

The following is an excerpt from my book, *War No More: The Case for Abolition*:

“There Never Was a Good War or a Bad Peace” or How to Be Against Both Hitler and War

Benjamin Franklin, who said that bit inside the quotation marks, lived before Hitler and so may not be qualified—in the minds of many—to speak on the matter. But World War II happened in a very different world from today's, didn't need to happen, and could have been dealt with differently when it did happen. It also happened differently from how we are usually taught. For one thing, the U.S. government was eager to enter the war, and to a great extent did enter the war, in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, prior to Pearl Harbor.

Pre-WWII Germany might have looked very different without the harsh settlement that followed World War I which punished an entire people rather than the war makers, and without the significant monetary support provided for decades past and ongoing through World War II by U.S. corporations like GM, Ford, IBM, and ITT (see *Wall Street and the Rise of Hitler* by Anthony Sutton).

(Let me insert a parenthetical remark here that I hope many will find quite silly, but that I know others will need to hear. We are talking about World War II, and I've just criticized someone other than Hitler—namely U.S. corporations—so let me hasten to point out that Hitler still gets to be responsible for every hideous crime he committed. Blame is more like sunshine than like fossil fuels; we can give some to Henry Ford for his support of Hitler without taking the slightest bit away from Adolph Hitler himself and without comparing or equating the two.)

Nonviolent resistance to the Nazis in Denmark, Holland, and Norway, as well as the successful protests in Berlin by the non-Jewish wives of imprisoned Jewish husbands suggested a potential that was never fully realized—not even close. The notion that Germany could have maintained a lasting occupation of the rest of Europe and the Soviet Union, and proceeded to attack in the Americas, is extremely unlikely, even given the 1940s' relatively limited knowledge of nonviolent activism. Militarily, Germany was primarily defeated by the Soviet Union, its other enemies playing relatively minor parts.

The important point is not that massive, organized nonviolence should have been used against the Nazis in the 1940s. It wasn't, and many people would have had to see the world very differently in order for that to have happened. Rather the point is that tools of nonviolence are much more widely understood today and can be, and typically will be, used against rising tyrants. We should not imagine returning to an age in which that wasn't so, even if doing so helps to justify outrageous levels of military spending! We should, rather, strengthen our efforts to nonviolently resist the growth of tyrannical powers before they reach a crisis point, and to simultaneously resist efforts to lay the ground work for future wars against them.

Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, which was not then part of the United States, President Franklin Roosevelt had tried lying to the American people about U.S. ships including the Greer and the Kearny, which had been helping British planes track German submarines, but which Roosevelt pretended had been wrongly attacked. Roosevelt also tried to create support for entering the war by lying that he had in his possession a secret Nazi map planning the conquest of South America, as well as a secret Nazi plan for replacing all religions with Nazism. However, the people of the United States rejected the idea of going into another war until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, by which point Roosevelt had already instituted the draft, activated the National Guard, created and begun using a huge Navy in two oceans, traded old destroyers to England in exchange for the lease of its bases in the Caribbean and Bermuda, and secretly ordered the creation of a list of every Japanese and Japanese-American person in the United States.

When President Roosevelt visited Pearl Harbor seven years before the Japanese attack, the Japanese military (which, just like Hitler or anyone else in the world, gets full blame for all of its inexcusable crimes) expressed apprehension. In March 1935, Roosevelt bestowed Wake Island on the U.S. Navy and gave Pan Am Airways a permit to build runways on Wake Island, Midway Island, and Guam. Japanese military commanders announced that they were disturbed and viewed these runways as a threat. So did peace activists in the United States.

In November 1940, Roosevelt loaned China \$100m for war with Japan, and after consulting with the British, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau made plans to send the Chinese bombers with U.S. crews to use in bombing Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

For years prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Navy worked on plans for war with Japan, the March 8, 1939, version of which described "an offensive war of long duration" that would destroy the military and disrupt the economic life of Japan. In January 1941, the *Japan Advertiser* expressed its outrage over Pearl Harbor in an editorial, and the U.S. ambassador to Japan wrote in his diary: "There is a lot of talk around town to the effect that the Japanese, in case of a break with the United States, are planning to go all out in a surprise mass attack on Pearl Harbor. Of course I informed my government."

On May 24, 1941, the *New York Times* reported on U.S. training of the Chinese air force, and the provision of "numerous fighting and bombing planes" to China by the United States. "Bombing of Japanese Cities is Expected" read the subheadline.

On July 24, 1941, President Roosevelt remarked, "If we cut the oil off, [the Japanese] probably would have gone down to the Dutch East Indies a year ago, and you would have had a war. It was very essential from our own selfish point of view of defense to prevent a war from starting in the South Pacific. So our foreign policy was trying to stop a war from breaking out there." Reporters noticed that Roosevelt said "was" rather than "is." The next day, Roosevelt issued an executive order freezing Japanese assets. The United States and Britain cut off oil and scrap metal to Japan. Radhabinod Pal, an Indian jurist who served on the war crimes tribunal in Tokyo after the war, called the embargoes a "clear and potent threat to Japan's very existence," and concluded the United States had provoked Japan.

The U.S. government is imposing what it proudly calls "crippling sanctions" on Iran as I write.

On November 15, 1941, Army Chief of Staff George Marshall briefed the media on something we do not remember as "the Marshall Plan." In fact we don't remember it at all. "We are preparing an offensive war against Japan," Marshall said, asking the journalists to keep it a secret.

Ten days later Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote in his diary that he'd met in the Oval Office with Marshall, President Roosevelt, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Admiral Harold Stark, and Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Roosevelt had told them the Japanese were likely to attack soon, possibly next Monday. It has been well documented that the United States had broken the Japanese' codes and that Roosevelt had access to them.

What did not bring the United States into the war or keep it going was a desire to save Jews from persecution. For years Roosevelt blocked legislation that would have allowed Jewish refugees from Germany into the United States. The notion of a war to save the Jews is found on none of the war propaganda posters and essentially arose after the war was over, just as the idea of the "good war" took hold decades later as a comparison to the Vietnam War.

"Disturbed in 1942," wrote Lawrence S. Wittner, "by rumors of Nazi extermination plans, Jessie Wallace Hughan, an educator, a politician, and a founder of the War Resisters League, worried that such a policy, which appeared 'natural, from their pathological point of view,' might be carried out if World War II continued. 'It seems that the only way to save thousands and perhaps millions of European Jews from destruction,' she wrote, 'would be for our government to broadcast the promise' of an 'armistice on condition that the European minorities are not molested any further. ... It would be very terrible if six months from now we should find that this threat has literally come to pass without our making even a gesture to prevent it.' When her predictions were fulfilled only too well by 1943, she wrote to the State Department and the New York Times, decrying the fact that 'two million [Jews] have already died' and that 'two million more will be killed by the end of the war.' Once again she pleaded for the cessation of hostilities, arguing that German military defeats would in turn exact reprisals upon the Jewish scapegoat. 'Victory will not save them,' she insisted, 'for dead men cannot be liberated.'"

In the end some prisoners were rescued, but many more had been killed. Not only did the war not prevent the genocide, but the war itself was worse. The war established that civilians were fair game for mass slaughter and slaughtered them by the tens of millions. Attempts to shock and

awe through mass slaughter failed. Fire-bombing cities served no higher purpose. Dropping one, and then a second, nuclear bomb was in no way justified as a way to end a war that was already ending. German and Japanese imperialism were halted, but the U.S. global empire of bases and wars was born—bad news for the Middle East, Latin America, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and elsewhere. The Nazi ideology was not defeated by violence. Many Nazi scientists were brought over to work for the Pentagon, the results of their influence apparent.

But much of what we think of as particularly Nazi evils (eugenics, human experimentation, etc.) could be found in the United States as well, before, during, and after the war. A recent book called *Against Their Will: The Secret History of Medical Experimentation on Children in Cold War America* collects much of what is known. Eugenics was taught in hundreds of medical schools in the United States by the 1920s and by one estimate in three-quarters of U.S. colleges by the mid 1930s. Non-consensual experimentation on institutionalized children and adults was common in the United States before, during, and especially after the U.S. and its allies prosecuted Nazis for the practice in 1947, sentencing many to prison and seven to be hanged.

The tribunal created the Nuremberg Code, standards for medical practice that were immediately ignored back home. American doctors considered it “a good code for barbarians.” Thus, we had the Tuskegee syphilis study, and the experimentation at the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital in Brooklyn, the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, Holmesburg Prison in Philadelphia, and so many others, including U.S. experiments on Guatemalans during the Nuremberg proceedings. Also during the Nuremberg trial, children at the Pennhurst school in southeastern Pennsylvania were given hepatitis-laced feces to eat. Human experimentation increased in the decades that followed. As each story has leaked out we’ve seen it as an aberration. *Against Their Will* suggests otherwise. As I write, there are protests of recent forced sterilizations of women in California prisons.

The point is not to compare the relative levels of evilness of individuals or people. The Nazis’ concentration camps are very hard to match in that regard. The point is that no side in a war is good, and evil behavior is no justification for war. American Curtis LeMay, who oversaw the fire bombing of Japanese cities, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians, said that if the other side had won he’d have been prosecuted as a war criminal. That scenario wouldn’t have rendered the disgusting war crimes of the Japanese or the Germans acceptable or praiseworthy. But it would have led to the world giving them less thought, or at least less exclusive thought. Instead, the crimes of the allies would be the focus, or at least one focus, of outrage.

You need not think that U.S. entry into World War II was a bad idea in order to oppose all future wars. You can recognize the misguided policies of decades that led to World War II. And you can recognize the imperialism of both sides as a product of their time. There are those who, by this means, excuse Thomas Jefferson’s slavery. If we can do that, perhaps we can also excuse Franklin Roosevelt’s war. But that doesn’t mean we should be making plans to repeat either one of those things.