Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas

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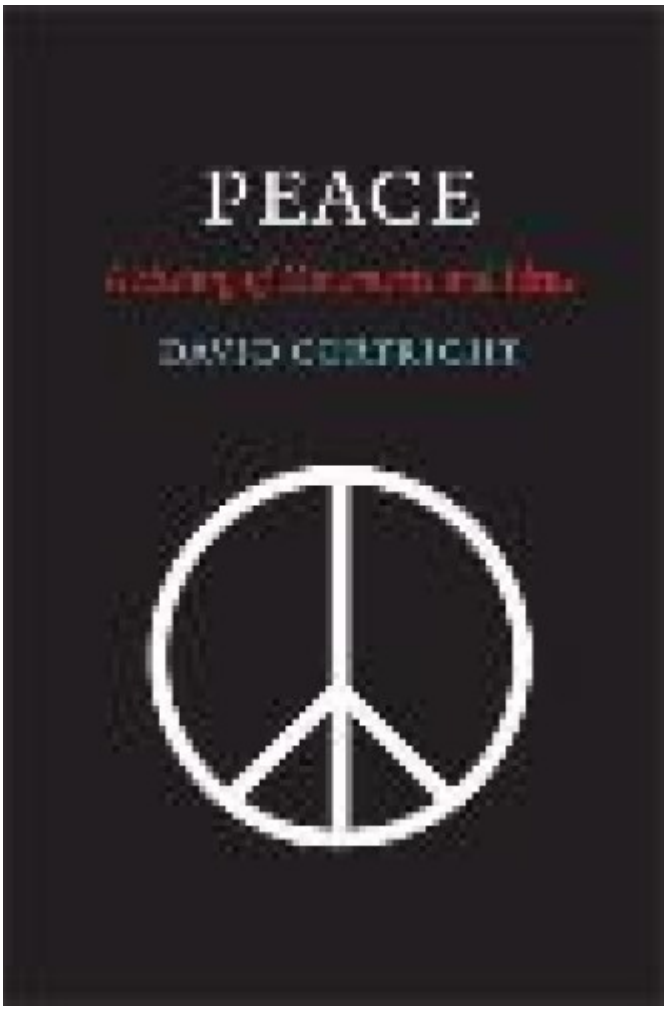
In Review



Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas

David Cortright
Cambridge University Press

In his history of peace movements and traditions in the U.S. and Europe, from the formation of the first peace societies in the 19th century to present resistance to the Iraq war, David Cortright aims to “forge a synthesis among peacemaking traditions” and to show the practical ef fectiveness of peacemaking responses to violent conflict. He argues persuasively that strategies advocated by peacemakers have historically proven more effective than militaristic strategies.

Cortright has won recognition for his work on nuclear disarmament and for his contributions to the development of the UN’s “smart sanctions” on Iraq, which prevented a military buildup there. At one time the director of SANE/Freeze (now called Peace Action), he is currently the policy director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Contrary to claims that pacifists were responsible for the political vacillations that led to World War II, Cortright shows that “the majority of those associated with interwar peace campaigns were opposed to appeasement” and, unlike the isolationists, “favored a forceful response to fascist aggression.” Prior to the war, they opposed the punitive Versailles Treaty, which caused deep German resentment and drove political power toward Hitler, and they supported collective security and international peacemaking aimed at creating conditions that could have prevented the war.

As World War II was ending, atomic scientists opposed the explosion of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We now see the wisdom in their demand for international control of atomic energy and reductions in nuclear weapons, as we face the threat of terrorists getting control of ingredients for bombs. After the war, peace activists worked toward the creation of the United Nations, the strengthening of international law, and the establishment of regional alliances for trade and collective security. The antinuclear movement “slowed the nuclear arms race and provided the basis for the unprecedented nuclear arms control agreements.” The cold war itself, Cortright contends, “was ended not by military build-ups but by Mikhail Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking,’ which broke decisively with the logic of militarism, and by the pressures of disarmament activism, which created a political climate conducive to arms reduction and East-West understanding.”

Himself a Vietnam veteran, Cortright credits Vietnam Veterans Against the War with performing “a historic service to their nation in bringing the USA’s longest and most

divisive war to a close.” The movement against the Iraq war, he notes, was supported by nearly every U.S. church leader who spoke out, and most people now agree that they were right. U.S. peace movements “have become increasingly effective in emphasizing the patriotic dimension of their opposition to war.”

Cortright shows the historical effectiveness of nonviolent direct action as practiced by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and others, and as demonstrated historically by the political scientist Gene Sharp. Spreading democracy by pushing for human rights has also proven effective in preventing conflict: democracies that respect human rights almost never fight wars against each other. Likewise, spreading economic development is effective in preventing terrorism. Cortright points to Ted Gurr’s award-winning research, which has shown that “anger and resentment over a lack of economic opportunity were principal sources of mass mobilization in virtually every case of armed rebellion.”

Cortright wrestles with the term *pacifism*, rejecting what he calls absolute or purist pacifism and arguing for pragmatic or realistic pacifism. But in the end he concludes that it may be best to set the term *pacifism* aside altogether and to describe the practice and theory of peace in the context of more contemporary terms, such as peace-building and peacemaking.

He argues for nine of the ten effective practices of peacemaking advocated by proponents of the new paradigm of just peacemaking: international cooperation, including the responsibility to protect citizens against massacres; sustainable economic development that decreases relative economic deprivation; support for human rights, gender equality and democracy; arms reduction; conflict transformation; nonviolent direct action; independent tension-reduction initiatives advocated by psychologist Charles Osgood and support for nongovernmental organizations and citizen groups. The adoption of these peacemaking practices, Cortright asserts, “has led to a 40 percent reduction in the number of armed conflicts in the world” since the 1990s.

Unlike the debate between pacifism and just war theory over whether war is ever justified, Cortright is asking which practices are effective in preventing wars. To answer the effectiveness question, we need the peacemaking practices that Cortright convincingly demonstrates are effective—the practices of just peacemaking.