

Today I'm privileged to have Robert Kohler as a guest. He's an award-winning Chicago-based journalist and nationally syndicated writer. His recent book is *Courage Grows Strong at the Wound*. His website is commonwonders.com. Robert Kohler is a peace journalist. Peace journalism is when editors make choices about what to report, how to report it - creating opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict. See, for example, Johan Galtung, the father of peace studies, has been interested in this for years. Peace journalism looks for negotiated peace, considers issues important to the "other side," and attempts to find a solution without murdering each other. Welcome, Robert Kohler.

Robert: Thank you Blase, good to be here.

Blase: Pleased to have you. You wrote about the great American awakening. People are saying that Trump is the problem and if we can get rid of him, we can go back to the way things were before. What's wrong with that statement?

Robert: (laughing) Well, what we had before was a world of endless war. It has produced the chaos in the Middle East and the terrorism that's evolved out of it. It's millions of deaths, etc etc. All that good stuff.

Blase: The point is that as an empire, we have had a long history of this. Basically since the end of WWII. Now someone's in government who wants to increase the military budget.

Robert: Yes, that's the latest we've heard from the Trumpster. He speaks populism, he speaks this and that, but he's really just another stooge of the military industrial complex, as far as I can tell. This time we're going to fight and we're going to win. That's the populist's rhetoric. They'll take another 50 billion dollars.

Blase: We haven't done much winning. Millions died in Indochina, and we won nothing. Now he talks about winning, and we don't know what he intends to win! And when he says we have such a small military budget - we have troops in about a hundred and twenty countries right now. So we have to deal with things that are not being heard on the news. We're getting constant reports of the murder of Yemeni children, and this is not something that's acceptable. We're working with our great ally, the great democracy of Saudi Arabia, and giving them everything they need to keep killing Yemeni children. We are in a major hunger situation now. What's to be done?

Robert: The remarkable thing, as you say, is that this is not news. It's all out there happening essentially behind the scenes, at least, behind the American scene, it's not behind the scene for those who are the victims of it. We have to reach a point where the war machine and militarism is actually accessible to the American public and the American democracy and politics so that it can be addressed. I'm in the process of writing a column right now as we speak about the campaign of George McGovern for president in 1972 which is that last time that American militarism was on the table of presidential politics. McGovern got creamed by Nixon, even though Watergate began during the midst of that campaign. The establishment or deep state or whatever you want to call it crushed - along with the media - McGovern, and the democrats decided that they would never again be faced with this kind of issue and take the risk of being part of a truly progressive party. You know, it's been 45 years that we've refused to address this problem. Even today, when we talk about all the problems with Trump, even the progressive discussion about this tends to be domestic and economic and fails to address the military and the waging of war and the entire imperial project.

Blase: McGovern was certainly correct, and he had a huge following of young people and this issue now - we call ourselves a two party system, but both parties are military industrial parties. When was the last time the democratic party tried to stop a war? We have some wonderful people there, a handful of people who are doing good work and are very interested in peace. But the party, even today, can't even mention the war. They talk about very important issues, and issues that are domestic, but here we are in the midst of 70 years of war in which 30 million people have died since 1945...

Robert: ...and a military budget that is more than half of discretionary spending, widespread poverty and the loss of decent jobs, you know, climate change and all of those horrors could be addressed with a serious focus. But we have to give up playing war in order to address the issues that really matter.

Blase: Even before the McGovern campaign we had citizens saying that taxation without representation is tyranny, and we have a great interest at this time in war tax resistance because of this spending our money - it's not Trump's money, I know he had a lot of it (supposedly) and that's very nice - but he's spending our money to kill children in Yemen. I don't like that. We have refugees who came here because of our death squads and bombing in Central America and they've never cost us a cent. And now

the chaos in the White House is going to cost us trillions of dollars with the loss of great people who have come here from afar and those we are killing overseas. This leads us to the need for tax resistance.

Robert: Tax resistance is certainly a significant and serious part of it. In a way, it's where the left meets the right, which has always been anti-taxation unless it goes to support the military. My whole take on the Trump phenomenon - you know, contained in the comment by Depak Chopra, "Chaos Precedes Great Change." Trump is the bringer of chaos. I don't know what will happen with him. Maybe the republican party will rebuild around him. Maybe Trump brings so much of the politics of stupid so much into the mix that it will shatter the republican party. I don't know.

Blase: We have talked about the various avenues we have, like the use of impeachment, or the 25th amendment, we talked about the beauty of resignation, which of course Nixon did, and there's also the indictment of the president because he is not exempt from being indicted by authorities if he commits a crime. There are many avenues, and we are in the midst of a clear and present danger to our people and indeed to this entire tiny little planet on which we live. So we have to take some very strong action. I think our people are up to it, they are coming out everywhere, we can't believe the turnout we see everywhere we go. People who haven't taken any action for years are out there, and that is very exciting.

Robert: Right.

Blase: You do on in your piece to mention how many duly elected leaders we've removed to make way for authoritarian, pro-corporate regimes. You go back to Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, Salvador Allende in Chile, John Bertrand Artiste, Mohommad Modadegh, Arbenz, etc - you know, it's endless. And also who our cherished allies are - Saudi Arabia, Egypt, my God, it's a tragic situation. But we harken back to Joe Hill. Don't mourn, organize.

Robert: Absolutely.

Blase: He was charged with a murder in Utah in 1911. He was part of the International Workers of the World, the IWW, a great union, and he was singing songs to the tune of many hymns, and that upset people, and so they charged him with murder and convicted him. And you get your choice in Utah of being shot or hung. And he chose to be shot. And people all over the world complained, but he was executed and his last words to people were "don't mourn, organize." Get out there and do something. So this is the situation.

And there's another problem. Nationalism. Our president speaks in 18 or 19th century nationalism. By 1900, the Hague was the center for saying, look, the nation state as the terminus of sovereignty is over by 1900. The Hague was the center for the concept of internationalism, and he's going back to pre-WWI nationalism.

Robert: That's why he is the bringer of chaos. The wonder of Donald Trump is that he speaks the language of Joe Sixpack. So he's not bringing anything erudite to the discussion, he's bringing the basic racism and nationalism the way it existed in 1900 or thereabouts. He has no idea how to govern. Who knows what kind of chaos he's going to create - the ferment that is building around has to be bigger to make Trump go away so that we get Pence or even Hillary.

We have to reach something beyond nationalism and enemies and war. We need to build a conscious and aware movement quite beyond anything the two parties have to offer.

Blase: I want to call to mind an article of yours giving us the example of how a nation ends its military successfully. You spoke about Costa Rica's peace journey, which goes back to 1948 and the actions of Pepe Higuera, who I had the pleasure of knowing. Can you explain that peace journey?

Robert: It's an example for the whole planet. A remarkable thing happened when he came to power in 1948, ironically through an armed revolution spurred what may have been a stolen election. Instead of trying to stay in power, he stayed a year and disbanded the military. Remarkably, there was a lot of public support for that, so there must have been something special in the culture of this country that was able to see beyond militarism. They disbanded the military and he voluntarily stepped down from power, and Costa Rica has been a country that stood for peace and an end to war ever since. Oscar Arias was president during the Reagan years, and resisted Reagan's war and support of the Contras against the Sandanistas in Nicaragua. He later won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Costa Rica has stood with the enormous part of our world that rejects war. It has become perhaps the centerpiece of the world that's possible. A world at peace.

Blase: Generally speaking, when military generals take over they do a terrible job. This is an exception, a unique exception. Some four thousand people died when Figueres led the revolution and took power. He stayed in power for 18 months. Ever since he eliminated the military, Costa Rica has had healthcare as a right and education as a right. Those are two elements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But we don't have them here in the United States. So Costa Rica has given us an example.

There's a funny thing you mention in there. I remember Anastasio Somoza, I was in Nicaragua during his reign, and he was such a militarist that said to Pepe Figueres, "you and I should have a duel at the border." Figueres just looked at him and said: "Why don't you grow up." You know, we would solve so many conflicts if people would just grow up! Learn how to speak. learn how to practice diplomacy instead of destroying the world. We're also sitting on a trillion dollar bill for *modernizing* the nuclear arsenal. How are we going to make them more "modern?" By making them so they can destroy the whole universe?

Robert: I think the term has been tactical use nuclear weapons - nukes we can use. That's the absolute height of insanity. We can use nuclear weapons without killing ourselves in the process - that's the lunatic and impossible goal. We need to hear Figueres and just grow up. We can't hear those words in this country. What we hear is deceptive rhetoric.

Trump is small potatoes. The deep state is untouchable by American democracy.

Blase: This is what worries us, Robert. The last time I recall a president standing up to the deep state was when John Kennedy said, "I'm going to break the CIA into a thousand pieces." A few months later, he was dead. No president since that time has stood up to the real power of military industrialism. Certainly not the democrats or republicans. One voice here or there is not enough. We've had some wonderful voices, and we appreciate each and every one of them, but they are not the party. They are not what's going on here. And we have to urge people to become independent and to vote as independent as George Washington wanted them to.

Robert: Yes, but also to be out there in the streets. This is why I value Trump. He is helping to trigger what's going on in the streets. It's much bigger than Trump, but Trump being who he is a great trigger - and this has to continue, and the awareness has to transcend parties. It cannot be contained by the political establishment.

Blase: We have a situation in which republican lawmakers are introducing bills to criminalize protest in 18 states. This of course would be a violation of the first amendment.

Robert: I'm sure that will intensify the protests, you know. This is where we're at. Every step they take to stop it will intensify it.

Blase: That's what we're seeing, people coming out on all sides - to see 750,000 people out in the streets of Los Angeles was literally unbelievable.

Robert: Yes, and I saw the same thing here in Chicago. It opened my heart with such joy, I can't tell you.

Blase: The one thing we have to deal with that's very serious is pathological lying. We've been lied to many times in the past, but today it seems worse than ever. We have to realize that. You can't just lie your way through governance.

Robert: I hope that that era has reached its terminus, and that it cannot happen -

Blase: I don't think thing worked out very well with his speech this week. There were many questions - we have to open up our past, open up Guantanamo, so much that is yet to be done. We have the ICE people. The question of signals: the leader gives signals, to the police, with a wink and a nod, and you can turn them loose in Chicago, your city. I'll never forget demonstrations there where the police rioted. I've seen police riots in LA too; they are not unusual. It's just the "okay" from on high - and that signal is being given to ICE, to the border patrol people, and now even the attorney general is saying we're not going to inspect the police as before, telling them in effect just do what you want and we'll back you up. This is not okay.

Robert: Once again, my only hope is that this will no longer work. That we are no longer going to stay a spectator democracy, complaint and gullible to the media, and not actually creating the country and the world that we need to survive. The deep state that orchestrates events is not immortal, it is not eternal, and its time has come. That is my hope and my belief, and what keeps me going as a writer.

Blase: If the movement which calls itself environmental does not make it clear that the military is the number one threat to the environment, they are not an environmental movement. This is extremely

important, because just as the democrats see to forget to talk about perpetual war, many in the environmental movement forget to talk about perpetual war and the destruction of the environment and the elimination of the planet through nuclear warfare. And, according to former Secretary of Defense Perry, the danger of nuclear war is greater than in the past. And we have a man in Washington who has the football! It's unbelievable! One individual can destroy the planet, and that's just not acceptable. It's time for us to understand about the military code of justice, which says that we do not obey illegal orders. And we've heard from high level academics that is was a Russian sub-commander who refused to fire a nuke. He was ordered to do it, but he refused to do it - and he saved us a nuclear disaster. It's time for troops who are given illegal orders to realize that they do not follow illegal orders. This happened in Vietnam in a massive way. It was a huge mutiny. So he may be commander in chief of the military, but he is not one who can give an illegal order to anyone.

Robert: Absolutely.

Blase: Now, Robert, tell about your book. What is your theme?

Robert: The book is a collection of essays and columns written over a period of about five years. One way to put it would be that it is a search for peace, both internal and external. The personal issues of the loss of my wife to cancer, and dealing with that and raising a teenaged daughter - and moves beyond the personal to consider a world at war. 9/11 occurred in the midst of all that was going on in my life. The book tries to open the door to seeing the bigger world that we've been discussing through the lens of my personal loss.

Blase: I think it's a very important theme. I know that you carry that theme from the personal to the political, where you say..."It seems to me that the psychological and spiritual foundation of militarism and the military industrial complex, which has bequeathed the planet with enough nuclear weapons to wipe out all existing life. And Donald Trump, whose vision of American greatness is all about military triumph. He commands four thousand of these weapons. This is terrifying. Not simply because he is unworthy, impulsive, untrustworthy - it's terrifying that we've created a world where anyone controls that kind of power.

Robert: Yes, even a rational person.

Blase: If Trump goes away, we still have these major problems of perpetual war, which are getting worse, and it seems that so many people want to have a war with Russia. And if that doesn't work, maybe China. Or maybe we can go back to Grenada again, that was such an important war.

Robert: Yes, we're so much safer now, aren't we?

Blase: I'm just so happy to have you on today. Do you have any final thoughts for us today?

Robert: The final thought is that we do not live in a spectator democracy. We live in a participatory democracy. We - the public - are the only ones who can create a future in which our grandchildren can survive. Our leaders simply aren't going to do it.

Friends, we have a great writer in Andrew Bacevich. He has written a book called *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, which is now out in paperback. Professor Bacevich is one of the leading speakers on the topic of military industrialism. We're grateful to him and we'd like to share some of his work with you. He's especially upset with David Brooks and the New York Times. He wrote an article called *The Angst in the Church of America the Redeemer*. Now this is really amazing and creative, and I must say we share this view that our relationship to our country is religious, that war is sacred, that killing others outside of our borders is the will of God, all this horrible heresy into one religion, which he calls the Church of America the Redeemer.

In terms of confessional fealty, his true allegiance is not to conservatism as such, but to the Church of America the Redeemer. This is a virtual congregation, albeit one possessing many of the attributes of a more traditional religion. The Church has its own Holy Scripture, authenticated on July 4, 1776, at a gathering of 56 prophets. And it has its own saints, prominent among them the Good Thomas Jefferson, chief author of the sacred text (not the Bad Thomas Jefferson who owned and impregnated slaves); Abraham Lincoln, who freed said slaves and thereby suffered martyrdom (on Good Friday no less); and, of course, the duly canonized figures most credited with saving the world itself from evil: Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, their status akin to that of saints Peter and Paul in Christianity. The Church of America the Redeemer even has its own Jerusalem, located on the banks of the Potomac, and its own hierarchy, its members situated nearby in High Temples of varying architectural distinction.

Friends, I think it is most unusual for a military man to see this religiosity in patriotism, which is really idol worship and extremely destructive. We go on to war after war after war as if it were the will of God.

This ecumenical enterprise does not prize theological rigor. When it comes to shalt and shalt nots, it tends to be flexible, if not altogether squishy. It demands of the faithful just one thing: a fervent belief in America's mission to remake the world in its own image. Although in times of crisis Brooks has occasionally gone a bit wobbly, he remains at heart a true believer.

In a March 1997 piece for *The Weekly Standard*, his then-employer, he summarized his credo. Entitled "[A Return to National Greatness](#)," the essay opened with a glowing tribute to the Library of Congress and, in particular, to the building completed precisely a century earlier to house its many books and artifacts. According to Brooks, the structure itself embodied the aspirations defining America's enduring purpose. He called particular attention to the dome above the main reading room decorated with a dozen "monumental figures" representing the advance of civilization and culminating in a figure representing America itself. Contemplating the imagery, Brooks rhapsodized:

Say what you will about the shortcomings of the American educational system and the country's intellectual culture, they had far less to do with creating Trump than did popular revulsion prompted by specific policies that Brooks, among others, enthusiastically promoted. Not that he is inclined to tally up the consequences. Only as a sort of postscript to his litany of contemporary American ailments does he refer even in passing to what he calls the "humiliations of Iraq."

A great phrase, that. Yet much like, say, the "tragedy of Vietnam" or the "crisis of Watergate," it conceals more than it reveals. Here, in short, is a succinct historical reference that cries out for further explanation. It bursts at the seams with implications demanding to be unpacked, weighed, and scrutinized. Brooks shrugs off Iraq as a minor embarrassment, the equivalent of having shown up at a dinner party wearing the wrong clothes.

Under the circumstances, it's easy to forget that, back in 2003, he and other members of the Church of America the Redeemer devoutly supported the invasion of Iraq. They welcomed war. They urged it. They did so not because Saddam Hussein was uniquely evil -- although he was evil enough -- but because they saw in such a war the means for the United States to accomplish its salvific mission. Toppling Saddam and transforming Iraq would provide the mechanism for affirming and renewing America's "national greatness."

Anyone daring to disagree with that proposition they denounced as craven or cowardly. Writing at the time, Brooks disparaged those opposing the war as mere "marchers." They were effete, pretentious, ineffective, and absurd. "These people are always in the streets with their banners and puppets. They march against the IMF and World Bank one day, and against whatever war happens to be going on the next... They just march against."

Perhaps space constraints did not permit Brooks in his recent column to spell out the "humiliations" that resulted and that even today continue to accumulate. Here in any event is a brief inventory of what that euphemism conceals: thousands of Americans needlessly killed; tens of thousands grievously wounded in body or spirit; trillions of dollars wasted; millions of Iraqis dead, injured, or displaced; this nation's moral standing compromised by its resort to torture, kidnapping, assassination, and other perversions; a region thrown into chaos and threatened by radical terrorist entities like the Islamic State that U.S. military actions helped foster. And now, if only as an oblique second-order bonus, we have Donald Trump's elevation to the presidency to boot.

In refusing to reckon with the results of the war he once so ardently endorsed, Brooks is hardly alone. Members of the Church of America the Redeemer, Democrats and Republicans alike, are demonstrably incapable of rendering an honest accounting of what their missionary efforts have yielded.

Brooks belongs, or once did, to the Church's neoconservative branch. But liberals such as Bill Clinton, along with his secretary of state Madeleine Albright, were congregants in good standing, as were Barack Obama and his secretary of state Hillary Clinton. So, too, are putative conservatives like Senators John McCain, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio, all of them subscribing to the belief in the singularity and indispensability of the United States as the chief engine of history, now and forever. Back in April 2003, confident that the fall of Baghdad had ended the Iraq War, Brooks predicted that "no day will come when the enemies of this endeavor turn around and say, 'We were wrong. Bush was

right.” Rather than admitting error, he continued, the war’s opponents “will just extend their forebodings into a more distant future.”

Yet it is the war’s proponents who, in the intervening years, have choked on admitting that they were wrong. Or when making such an admission, as did both John Kerry and Hillary Clinton while running for president, they write it off as an aberration, a momentary lapse in judgment of no particular significance, like having guessed wrong on a TV quiz show.

Rather than requiring acts of contrition, the Church of America the Redeemer has long promulgated a doctrine of self-forgiveness, freely available to all adherents all the time. “You think our country’s so innocent?” the nation’s 45th president recently barked at a TV host who had the temerity to ask how he could have kind words for the likes of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Observers professed shock that a sitting president would openly question American innocence.

In fact, Trump’s response and the kerfuffle that ensued both missed the point. No serious person believes that the United States is “innocent.” Worshipers in the Church of America the Redeemer do firmly believe, however, that America’s transgressions, unlike those of other countries, don’t count against it. Once committed, such sins are simply to be set aside and then expunged, a process that allows American politicians and pundits to condemn a “killer” like Putin with a perfectly clear conscience while demanding that Donald Trump do the same.

What the Russian president has done in Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria qualifies as criminal. What American presidents have done in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya qualifies as incidental and, above all, beside the point.

Rather than confronting the havoc and bloodshed to which the United States has contributed, those who worship in the Church of America the Redeemer keep their eyes fixed on the far horizon and the work still to be done in aligning the world with American expectations. At least they would, were it not for the arrival at center stage of a manifestly false prophet who, in promising to “make America great again,” inverts all that “national greatness” is meant to signify.

For Brooks and his fellow believers, the call to “greatness” emanates from faraway precincts -- in the Middle East, East Asia, and Eastern Europe. For Trump, the key to “greatness” lies in keeping faraway places and the people who live there as faraway as possible. Brooks et al. see a world that needs saving and believe that it’s America’s calling to do just that. In Trump’s view, saving others is not a peculiarly American responsibility. Events beyond our borders matter only to the extent that they affect America’s well-being. Trump worships in the Church of America First, or at least pretends to do so in order to impress his followers.

That Donald Trump inhabits a universe of his own devising, constructed of carefully arranged alt-facts, is no doubt the case. Yet, in truth, much the same can be said of David Brooks and others sharing his view of a country providentially charged to serve as the “successor to Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome.” In fact, this conception of America’s purpose expresses not the intent of providence, which is inherently ambiguous, but their own arrogance and conceit. Out of that conceit comes much mischief. And in the wake of mischief come charlatans like Donald Trump.

There is the extremely insightful Andrew Bacevich, really one of the best and most important commentators of our time. It’s most unusual for a military man to face with such unflinching clarity the self-congratulatory hypocrisy of our militarists and their scribbling sycophants.

The great escape.

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