

World Focus – July 9, 2017  
Blase Interviews Rebecca Gordon

Friends, we're very proud of the thousands who marched this week calling for Trump's impeachment. Thousands gathered for the march downtown here in Los Angeles, and it was one of the biggest turnouts of the nearly 50 impeachment marches all across the country. We're proud of the great awakening that is taking place and emerging in all sectors.

I'm privileged to have Dr. Rebecca Gordon here today. She's on the faculty of the University of San Francisco's philosophy department and also on the university's Leo McCarthy Center for Public Service and Common Good. She's give us her latest book, *American Nuremberg*, in which she writes that officials should stand trial for post-9/11 war crimes - a very timely discussion. Rebecca, your field is philosophy, and your doctorate is in ethics and social theory. I can't think of anything more important than the need of ethics at this time. Would you care to comment on that?

**Rebecca:** Absolutely, I couldn't agree with you more. It's a discipline in philosophy; my degree is actually from the graduate theological union, so I also have some awareness and expertise in theological ethics. What it's about is what kind of people do we want to be and what kind of lives do we want to live. What does it mean to live a good human life? This is the question that Aristotle started with, the question that St. Augustine started with, the question that John Stuart Mill started with - and it's the question that we as people living in the United States still need to be asking ourselves. I tell my friends that I have the best job in the world. I get to talk with young people about their deepest values at the very moment in their lives when they're trying to figure out what those values are. I try to give them some tools to help them think about that, and ways of thinking of themselves not only as individuals and members of families and their relationships with other individuals - but my secret goal is that every student will come out of the class thinking of themselves as a citizen of the world. Not in the sense of immigration or national status, but in the sense of being a participant in the life of the human and non-human world in a real way. And so that's my goal in the classes that I teach, and it's an incredible privilege.

**Blase:** The beauty of ethics is the non-sectarian nature of it. People can deal with it from wherever they are, whether that be theism, non-theism, atheism - or any other approach. It's a matter of including logic, and it has been picked up by theologians. Aquinas used Aristotle, etc. He also had his sectarianism,

but the ethical societies are often free of all religious sectarianism. And I believe religious sectarianism is the catalyst for so many of our wars, not only Sunni and Shia, but Protestant and Catholic, Hindu and Muslim, and so on.

You wrote "All war all the time, or war American style." People under 27 years of age have not known a day of peace, and we're deteriorating rapidly and fighting all over the world with troops in 137 nations today. Would you care to comment on your piece, which was so meaningful, published by Information Clearing House?

**Rebecca:** I'd be happy to. I write about issues of war and peace, and my particular focus before the book you mention is about the use of torture and the ethics of torture and specifically the US use of torture in the post 9/11 period. I started teaching in 2005, so the topic of 9/11 was four years old and was deemed important then in the lives of my students. And two months ago I realized that I'm now teaching students who were two and three years old on 9/11, so what they have known their whole lives are references to this event that they did not experience. It's constantly brought into public consciousness as an excuse for the wars that have been going on their entire lives. They've never known a time when their country wasn't, as you say, at war, and yet, at the same time, those wars have had so very little effect on the lives of many people in this country even as they are destroying the bodies and the spirits and the cultures and the infrastructure of peoples all across the world. Unless you live in one of those poor rural places from which our military draws its so-called volunteers, you can live a perfectly normal life and never have to be aware of what the realities of the wars being fought in our name are. So that's what the article's about.

**Blase:** What happens then is that people get more and more angry because they don't relate the fact that instead of education, they're paying for cluster bombs. Instead of healthcare, they're paying for missiles and the deaths of so many innocent people throughout the world. It's somehow possible that they don't connect the two issues, and I think that anger contributed to the election of our current president by people who think the war is just what we do, who we are, but they don't realize that their lives are deteriorating, the base is deteriorating, as has happened in every empire throughout history.

**Rebecca:** You're absolutely right about that. And I'm old enough that I came up in the civil rights movement as a young teenager and the struggle against the US war in Vietnam, as you were, and I

remember back then, too, we had a slogan about bringing the war home and make exactly the same connections. You can't have guns and butter. You can't have both human needs met at home and war making in other countries. And it was never a very successful argument; it was almost always impossible to get people to make that connection. Honestly, I think that one of the things that we have lived through, especially during the Bush years, but also under the Obama Administration, is an intentional creation of exactly what you say - a climate of fear, the sense that we're encouraged to believe that at any moment, every single citizen of this country is under mortal threat of attack by a dangerous terrorist. The reality is that I am way more likely to die on the highway going from my house to the airport than I am to be killed in a terror attack. But the Bush administration went out of its way to create what is called *security theater*, you know - you go to the airport and take off your belt and take off your shoes and have your liquids in a little bag and all of this seems designed to remind you you are in terrible danger and only the government and the government's military can protect you.

**Blase:** My theme song was written by my son: Fear fearing fearing fearing fear. It explains how fear is the glue that holds a corrupt society together, and makes people obedient and servile, makes them accept anything, even 137 countries where we have troops. The fear factor is extremely great, together with the reality of the fear of nuclear war and the danger that that presents to people. They are somewhat paralyzed, and we want to get through this paralysis so they can continue to be active citizens and give us a peaceful society on behalf of the common good. And people are more fearful than I think they've ever been; we have the reality of nuclear threat, which of course is very fear-inducing, and I know you've written on Nuremberg. I tried to remind our young people in the service that they are bound not to obey illegal orders, and there is not an ethical way, in my view, for anyone to obey an order coming from the president to launch a nuclear weapons. What ethical source would there be to approve of killing 50 or 60 million people? If our young people understood that, they would do what they did in Indochina, which was to quit. That will end it. Would you care to comment on that reality?

**Rebecca:** Absolutely. Thinking about what it takes for a war to end - because we have a picture in our minds that wars end with the unconditional surrender of the losing side, and you sign a treaty, etc. And that is what happened at the end of WWII. But it hasn't happened in any of the wars the United States has fought since then. In fact, in Vietnam we were defeated, in part because the young conscripts who had been drafted into the military finally said we're just not going to do this anymore. In fact, I have a friend who is almost 70, a young working class guy who was drafted into the army. He used to go around

before the briefings for the people who were going to fly the bombers and he would literally go and erase villages off the blackboard so that they wouldn't be bombed. And this was the kind of sabotage that people started doing - along with fragging, of course - killing their senior officers.

**Blase:** I've had students who were vets over the years and they've given me testimony after testimony of the mutiny, the fragging of officers, of refusing any kind of order. It was very clearly one of the largest mutinies in our history, and it is what people do when they understand they're in the wrong. Why is it that suicide is the number one cause of death of our young people deployed to Afghanistan? They feel they don't belong there. And the generals can't get over the cry for more troops. General Westmoreland, in Vietnam - all he wanted was 750,000 more troops, that's all he needed to *win*. We're hearing the same thing from our generals today!

**Rebecca:** Exactly the same thing, and we're even seeing the press, the "liberal" press like the New York Times and the Washington Post, which have for the most part done a pretty good job of noticing the fact that we have an insane toddler running the country - but even they are completely on bended knee when it comes to the military men in the government because they think they are the only grownups in the room. But the problem is exactly what you say. General Mattis now wants to send an extra four thousand troops to Afghanistan. *To do what?* No one asks what the actual purpose of doing it is, what it would look like to have a successful conclusion to this war. What are we trying to do by tearing apart people's bodies? Nobody is talking about what the actual goal would be, because there is no meaningful military victory for the US in Afghanistan. Yet their answer is: more troops, more bombs, bigger bombs, test more weapons. You know, there's a philosopher you may be familiar with named Elaine Scarry. She wrote an extraordinary book called *The Body in Pain*. It's about torture and how it works on a phenomenological level, how it works in the interaction between the torturer and the human being who is being tortured. But there's a later chapter about war. And what she says about war is that it's a very strange thing - a contest in which disagreements between a few human beings are settled by destroying other human beings' bodies. And when you think about it that way, it really makes very little sense. But in fact, that's exactly what war is. It comes down to causing physical injury to other human beings, soldiers and civilians; it's direct or slower, as in Iraq and Mosul, where people die because they don't have water, they don't have food, because the infrastructure has been completely destroyed. It is when you try to think logically about what we could possibly be trying to achieve in Afghanistan, it doesn't make any sense.

You hear former Bush Administration and even Obama's Administration officials say, "oh, what we need to do is completely eliminate Al Qaeda", but that's not something you can achieve by killing other people.

**Blase:** This goes back to the just war theory of St. Augustine, and the corruption of this - here you are, an empire, and you're supposed to say that every war is just, and that goes back to the Crusades, which were considered just, and a thousand years ago the Crusaders destroyed Mosul, the same Mosul we are destroying today. A short time after that, Saladin threw the Christians out of Aleppo - the same Aleppo we speak of today. War is the greatest evil, as far as I'm concerned, and here we've played around with it ethically for the benefit of those with power. Those who don't have the power, well St. Augustine and goons of today say "that's just war." Well it isn't.

**Rebecca:** No, it isn't. There are clear theories in just war and international law about what is a legitimate cause for war. Basically, what it comes down to is defending your own territory against an unprovoked attack. That is it.

**Blase:** It's always wrong.

**Rebecca:** And at Nuremberg, as you know, the great powers got together and decided there would be essentially three areas of criminality, or three kinds of crimes. One was crimes against humanity, which was a new invention, a term they used to try to describe the horrors of the mass murders of the holocaust. One was ordinary war crimes, the kinds of crimes that soldiers commit in war all the time and were covered by existing Geneva convention and other conventions and rules and laws of war. But the third one was actually - the US, ironically, and Great Britain that the third category was actually the most important, because all the other crimes grew out of it. And that was what they called crimes against peace. The crime of making an aggressive war. And their argument was that all the rest of it grew out of the crime of making an aggressive war. And I argue in *American Nuremberg* is that we can say exactly the same thing about the torture, the imprisonment indefinitely in Guantanamo, all come out of the desire of Dick Cheney and his sidekick George W Bush to invade Iraq. And so if you look at the stories of the very earliest use of torture, both in Guantanamo and by the CIA, what you find is that what they were trying to get people to say was that there was a link between Saddam Hussein and the people who

attacked the United States on September 11. That's what the first water boarding was about - to provide a pretext for an invasion of Iraq, a pretext based on false testimony extracted using torture.

**Blase:** Dr. Gordon's latest book is *American Nuremberg: The Officials Who Should Stand Trial for Post 9/11 War Crimes*. Now, many of our people might say, well, it's unrealistic to think that we can bring these people to trial. *Germany repented*. And it's time for us to repent for what we have done. We've been fighting wars since 1945, we've won none of them, we've killed 30 million or more people...

**Rebecca:** Yes.

**Blase:** ...and there's no apology, there's no repentance, there's no acknowledgement that this was evil. In fact, we still see the war producers saying "*this is a great business opportunity*." They're publicly saying that tension with Russia is *wonderful* for business! The very statement of such a thing - to plan, to plot, to conspire to commit mass murder to make profits is certainly not an ethical thing to do. Sometimes a conflict between law and ethics - we try to put the two together, as they can be and have been in some cases. Frequently the violation of law, especially international law - after all, the United Nations was created to "end the scourge of war" - we have ignored it constantly unless it was to our benefit. You can't operate that way; that's not how you operate ethically.

**Rebecca:** I completely agree with you and at the same time I believe that in a world where one country so dominates, at least militarily and to an extent economically, the rest of the world - the hope of the human race - in some part has got to rely on international law. There's nothing else that's going to constrain the United States, because our interests have been constructed for us and defined for us, the people of this country, in such untruthful ways that it's really going to take the program of the rest of the world to reign us in. You know, you were saying before that people in this country are not prepared for repentance. And I think there are reasons for that that to some extent have to do with the deep, besetting sins of our own country, which I would say are racism and the legacy of slavery and the deep inequality that derives from an out-of-control capitalism. But I think most people in this country honestly, truly would be shocked to know that there is anything that they might seek to repent of. There isn't anything that their beloved country had actually done wrong. It's a very complete world view of the US as the most humane, most devoted to human rights, the benefactor of the world - it's a very difficult

picture to crack, because once you crack it, you've taken people who have very little and taken away the little that they have.

**Blase:** It's a civic religion, and it is the religiosity of patriotism. When people say things like, "Do you love America," they're talking about it as an idol to be worshipped, rather than a people who live together for the common good. This exceptionalism that we can accept the fact that we have troops in 137 countries today - that acceptance indicates that we're dealing with something of a cult situation here. I think of Einstein who made it clear that we all have to give up some of our sovereignty in order to have international law and order. We can't have four percent of the world's population telling the other 96 percent what to do. It's not working. It's 18th century nationalism, totally out of date, from the city-states of old, and I think it's a religious problem, a problem of the religiosity of the state. And it worries me.

**Rebecca:** I think you're right about that. One part of the antidote for that, oddly enough, might be to go back and look at some of our founding documents. One of the things I do with both my undergrads and my grad students is that we read a book by Daniella Alan, who is an African American feminist writer. She's written a book called *Our Declaration*. It's an extremely close, word by word, reading of the Declaration of Independence. That document is literally revolutionary. And in spite of all the contradictions that were lived out by the people who wrote the document, including Thomas Jefferson, and the fact that the document itself indicates what I call the original sin, the expropriation of the native people already here, and the enslavement of people from Africa. There is in that document some extraordinary ideas about what the responsibility of people is who live under a particular government and what our responsibility is when our government becomes a tyranny.

**Blase:** Speaking of ethical documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is one of my favorites. It's a goal that we should go for. It makes the obvious clear: medical care in a developed society is a right.

**Rebecca:** Like housing.

**Blase:** And education and so on. It's a great document, and Eleanor Roosevelt had so much to do with it, an amazing woman who sort of told her husband what to do. She was really awesome. I wanted to ask

you - in the Declaration of Independence, we have a really strange accusation of the King for unleashing these vicious savages, and maybe we're referring to the French and Indian war.

**Rebecca:** And the general idea that - at the time the declaration was written, the war had really already started. And the people who were writing it in Philadelphia could literally hear the cannon down the river from where they were. They could hear the cannon firing, and the war was getting closer to them. The British made tactical alliances with some of the native peoples who were not too thrilled to have colonists on their soil. But yes, it is one of the astonishing ones in the list of accusations against King George. Thomas Jefferson also wanted to include an accusation against King George that essentially he had sullied the moral life of Americans by bringing the slave trade to the Americas and the British colonies. That one never made it into the list of grievances against the king. Many point out that there was something ironic to say that Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, argued so strongly that the declaration should place the blame for slavery not on the colonists, who were in fact importing slaves, but on the King, who permitted the trade. But there were some other things in there that I think, you know, eventually came to be enshrined in the constitution. For example, quartering soldiers in people's homes, which was the common practice in Europe. The dreaded army, in your town, if the British army showed up, you were forced to put them up in your home. They would take your food and whatever you had that they needed, and this was considered one of the great wrongs that was being done to the colonists. There were others as well, but some of these we see now enshrined in the constitution, including the idea that no appropriating for the military should last for longer than 2 years, because it was very much intended by the people who wrote the US constitution that war should be limited to a short duration and only declared by congress, and that the power to pay for that would be something that congress would have to re-up every two years. This is why, for those of us old enough to remember the Vietnam War, every two years the question of whether the draft would continue was reconsidered in congress, and that's because of that two-year limitation in the constitution.

Well, of course, in my lifetime, I've seen congress completely abdicate its power to declare war and say, oh no no no, we're happy to let the executive branch, the presidency, decide when we're going to declare war. Maybe we'll give you an appropriation for the use of US forces however you want, which, by the way, the one that we're currently operating under in Iraq and Afghanistan and Syria had nothing to do with ISIS, who is supposed to be the enemy of the day, because ISIS didn't even exist when that authorization for the use of military force was passed back in 2002. So congress has routinely stepped

away from its right and responsibility to be the voice of the people in deciding whether the country goes to war.

Now, with this new president, we have somebody who is so disinterested in the work of the presidency that he's not even interested in exercising that power that's been wrongly given over to the executive branch. He's decided to delegate all of that directly to the military. So one of the big fights in the declaration of independence was about King George taking away civilian control over the military, and this is exactly what we see happening right now today. Under Donald Trump, the military, the pentagon and the secretary of defense have been given the power to decide not only how many troops to deploy but where and when we're going to have wars. So we have seen the loss of ordinary people in this country having the power to decide whether the US goes to war.

**Blase:** They put us into a bifurcation situation: to kill or not to kill, we have two choices. One choice is to bomb; the other choice is not to bomb. What we need to learn is what diplomacy is all about. You don't have it necessarily with your *friends*. It's for dealing with your enemies, it's for dealing with people you disagree with, it's for using one of the highest things we're capable of doing- talking. For example, if we had a functional state department, rather than having it run by the military, we would say why don't we send about 500 diplomats to spend three or four months to party and enjoy themselves - and then maybe on the last day decide that war is just stupid. We could do the same thing in Korea. We just had a marvelous statement from the North Korean Peace Committee reminding us that we destroyed every city in that country and bombed it into dust. We dropped more bombs in one province than there were *people*. More bombs were dropped in Korea than in Japan. The country was absolutely destroyed, totally and completely. Here we are today saying well maybe we ought to blow it up again.

**Rebecca:** Yes, we beat our chests and do what we call *military exercises*, basically a means of saying *we are dangerous, be afraid of us.*" And the thing that's really sad about this is that under Bill Clinton, the United States and North Korea had actually worked out an agreement in which North Korea was in the process - the beginning stages - of nuclear disarmament, or at the very least, not proceeding with a nuclear program. It was under George W Bush and Dick Cheney that those agreements were basically ignored and dismantled. The US didn't meet its obligations, and the North Koreans said, well, if they're not going to keep their promises, and they're going to continue to threaten us every year with these military exercises, then what alternative do we have? They probably had other alternatives, but from

their point of view, it certainly looked like one of them was to try to present as much of a danger to the United States as they could. And this was when diplomacy was *already starting to work!*

**Blase:** Of course, it works....

**Rebecca:** Now, I don't know - I honestly think we are in the most dangerous moment of my lifetime since probably the Cuban Missile Crisis when I was eleven.

**Blase:** I recall when people were saying there's no way Germany would ever reunite, it can't be done, etc. It's the same thing they've been saying about Korea. Here we have one language, one culture, one people, relatives from both sides who haven't seen each other in decades. It's entirely possible. The people down deep would love to do this.

**Rebecca:** There's a reunification movement.

**Blase:** Of course there is. It's critical that we see this, but it's hard for the average citizen to believe that we have an enemy, and we have those in power who actually want war. It's hard to believe that - there are people who have been making money on war. Certainly it was noticed in the Civil War. We get annoyed by the press when all they do is discuss what Trump said to somebody else and what Comey said and so on. But things do get through. I have a CBS report here that is quite striking to me. *Yemen Suffering from the World's Largest Cholera Outbreak*. It states that the two-year-old war has devastated much of the nation, leaving millions on the brink of starvation. Now the conflict has spawned a health emergency - the second cholera outbreak in six months. 250,000 people, half of them children, have been sickened, making it the world's largest cholera outbreak. What do you feel about paying taxes so we can starve Yemen and kill its children?

**Rebecca:** I know. And the UN has been talking about this outbreak at least since September of last year. This is not news, and if you get your information from outside the United States, for example from even the BBC, which I sometimes call the imperial news, you could know this. But in this country we don't know - and most people in this country don't know that the reason why this civil war as they call it is going on is in large part because Saudi Arabia had decided to throw down on one side because they argue that Iran is supporting the other side, the Houthis. Now the reality is that actually, while Iran has a

lot of influence in the Middle East, Yemen is one of the countries where they're not very deeply involved. The Houthis really are a homegrown political and to some extent ethnically based movement. But they started as a political movement, and they are not an Iranian invention. But the United States is providing logistical support, mid-air refueling for Saudi bombers, participating in the blockade of one of Yemen's only two ports. So not only are people dying of cholera, but as you know, there's also a famine that's affecting 17 million people in the very poorest country in the middle east to begin with. These people are not our enemies.

**Blase:** Now CBS says that 1500 people have died since April alone. The disease is spreading through water contaminated with human waste. Hunger is also widespread and skeletal images of people from the region are painful to see. The United Nations states that the country is on the brink of famine, and more than 17 million people are desperately in need of food. Yemen has been crippled by a two-year civil war with the Houthi rebels against the military alliance of Arab states led by US-backed Saudi Arabia. Civilians are trapped in the middle.

Now I really don't want to pay for that. We're being forced to pay for mass murder and genocide. I think that it's time to end the charade and to get on with the business of peacemaking. But we rarely hear about it. We rarely hear these problems discussed on mainstream media, and I'm proud at least that some of it is getting through. We are directly the cause of this horror in Yemen. We should be very upset. We hear about an attack in Paris, and of course we publicize those attacks even if a small number are killed or injured. But we ignore the elephant in the room.

**Rebecca:** It's almost as if the human mind can't encompass what 17 million people are, or even 10 to 20,000 cases of cholera. What makes the outbreak so crazy is that cholera is a disease that most people will survive if they have access to clean water. It's actually not usually a life threatening disease. But the infrastructure that would have delivered clean water has been destroyed by Saudi bombs. Which they buy from the United States. So yes, you're absolutely right. We are complicit. I know tax resisters; I was a tax resistor a number of years after I came home from Nicaragua. I just couldn't imagine paying taxes to kill people in Nicaragua. And at the same time, I think, a big part of the problem we have in this country is that we've also allowed ourselves to believe Donald Trump's assertion that we are the most heavily taxed country in the world, and the truth is that we actually pay relatively low taxes in this country. And if over 50 percent of that money was not going to kill other people, we could live

extraordinarily well as human beings in this country. But we have not been able to defy the illogic of war, and I think there's something else about war. And I think there's something attractive about war to people who haven't experienced it. The idea for them is that it is a locus, a place where people can experience "heroism," where they can be great and heroic and take life-threatening risks in ways that make life worth living. Chris Hedges has a wonderful book called *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* in which he talks about how both for the civilians and the people who fight in war and for himself as a war correspondent, it's like a drug and it's a drug of meaning, a drug that takes all the ordinary daily mishigosh of life and dispenses with it and says you have just one job which is to resist, to fight this war, to be a brave warrior.

**Blase:** I think that Chris' insight there in that book was really outstanding. Once you get into the cult situation, it's simply something very very exciting. It's like - think of WWII in the United States. There were absolutely no complaints, no visible resistance; I can remember the cheering that went on when we heard that Hiroshima had been bombed, and then Nagasaki - hooray was order of the day, hooray, the war is over, maybe they didn't realize hundreds of thousands of people had been killed. There was a spirit of excitement, and bombing people seemed to be exciting and routine. This is a force that gives them meaning - and it's a very diabolical force, and it continues today.

You spent time in Central American, and of course I did too. We can see democracies forming all over the Americas, and here we are interfering with every single one of them.

**Rebecca:** Absolutely.

**Blase:** We have spent billions to destroy the Sandinistas, to kill 40,000 people. The Sandinistas are in charge today in Nicaragua. In El Salvador, the FMLN is in power. They're trying to develop a new situation in Venezuela. Now we know how to destroy an economy. When Nixon wanted to destroy Chile, what did he say? His order was: *Make that economy scream*. And we can do that to most of the countries of the world. And then you say: *oh, you can't get your act together*. We even did it certainly while I was in Nicaragua. We try to destroy the economy to make the people suffer. Here we are fighting against upcoming democracies while we latch onto the great democracy of Saudi Arabia as our dear friend. It's really more than we can handle.

But in the midst of this we have a great awakening.

**Rebecca:** Yes.

**Blase:** We have people all over this country and all over this world who have had enough of this. We had wonderful demonstrations in Los Angeles, not only for peace but some 25 other issues that must be addressed, all inter-related. Our country is out of control, and we're running out of time.

**Rebecca:** Yes, I'm afraid you're right.

**Blase:** Thank you so much for being with us today on World Focus.

**Rebecca:** Thank you, Blase.

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