

World Focus – November 26, 2017

Guest-Host Matthew Hoh Interviews Will Griffin

Good morning and welcome to World Focus. I'm Matthew Hoh, sitting in today for Blase Bonpane. Blase is enjoying some well-deserved time off with his family this holiday weekend.

I learned last week the origin of the phrase *Don't Mourn, Organize!* Of course, Blase, in his emails for Office of the Americas, uses that phrase, and has been using it for a long time. But only this last week that I learned about its origins, where the story came from. I want to share that with you. There are others out there who don't know where it came from, or the importance of a man named Joe Hill and the labor movement a hundred years ago. This comes from *This Day in Peace and Justice History*, which I subscribe to and really recommend to everyone. It's put out by Carl Bunin, and you can subscribe to it and get daily or weekly updates at peacebuttons.info. That's where I get this from.

On November 19, 1915, Joe Hill, a labor organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was assassinated by firing squad in the courtyard of the Utah State Penitentiary in Salt Lake City.

The IWW, or Wobblies as they were known, were advocates of organizing all workers into One Big Union. It is reported that Joe had been framed for murder by copper bosses, the press and government forces. Just prior to his execution, as Joe stood before the firing squad he propelled himself from organizer to labor martyrdom with these words: "Don't waste any time in mourning. Organize!"

And so that is where we get this phrase that we see so often nowadays. It's so important to remember. So important to know about Joe Hill and others like him who were framed and murdered for doing nothing more than advocating for workers and acting on it. Something that would better his fellow man. But the problem is that it would cut into the profits of big businesses, and it cuts into the wealth of the rich. And as Blase and I have spoken about many times, and as Blase explains so well - when you cut into the profits of the rich, you're not just blaspheming against the great God of Money in this country, but you're carrying out an heretical act. You're trying to make life better for others, and when you're willing

to sacrifice like Joe Hill did, there's no profit in that. And so for those who follow our religion of money, you have to put somebody like that to death.

And that's what happened to Joe Hill. But he still lives in his words, and many people listening right now are acting upon his words. The idea of don't mourn, organize, you see it often, and for many people I feel it's just something trendy to put on Facebook or to Tweet, and by doing that you're establishing your anti-Trump credentials. But I know a lot of folks listening here on this show, that you're not part of that group, you're someone who has been *acting* on your principles and values. Someone like Will Griffin, who lives his values and principles and puts them to work through social media. Let me read his bio here before I bring him on the air.

Will Griffin is a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He was a paratrooper. He is now an anti-war activist and organizer. Will is one of the directors of Veterans for Peace and the Global Network Against Nuclear Power. He also created the Peace Report, which just reached 100,000 followers on Facebook and has over 30 million video views. His Peace Report page has only been around about a year, and he's grown it to a hundred thousand followers, which makes his one of the largest peace and antiwar pages on Facebook. Welcome to World Focus, Will Griffith.

Will: Thanks, Matthew.

Matthew: How did you end up in the Army? Why did you choose to join the army, and how did you decide to become an antiwar activist? How did that transition occur for you?

Will: I was born into a military family. My dad was in the army for 22 years, and my mother is originally from South Korea. She also did five years in the army as well. So I was born on a military base overseas, in West Germany, and I lived in South Korea and various places around the US. 2004 came along, and having grown up with the notion that every man should serve his country for a few years and be patriotic and "give back," and all those "ideals," and I was nineteen and figured it was my time to do three or four years' service. So I signed a four-and-a-half-year contract in 2004, and ended up doing five and a half years because I was stop-lossed. I went to Iraq in 2006 and 2007.

Matthew: Were you stop-lossed in Iraq?

Will: No, Afghanistan.

Matthew: How does that happen? You're in Afghanistan. Does one of your sergeants tell you that you're not going home? How does that work (for people who have never had the experience of being in a war zone and being told that the army is extending your obligation and keeping you in the war)?

Will: I was told two months before my deployment. In January 2009, I was waiting. I had only four months to do before I got out, but deployed in two months. I was just waiting for orders to come down to see what was going on with me. I was going on this deployment, so I figured that I was being stop-lossed.

Matthew: I don't think too many people know how impersonal and how cold that is from the army, and I'm sure folks who are listening have stories of their own about that. I remember meeting, when I was in Iraq, in the marines, in 2006 and 2007, meeting some of the soldiers who had been sent home back to Alaska, and then, after seeing their families, they were told "you have to go back to Iraq for another four or five months." Just that kind of betrayal does away with the notions that the military is looking after the soldier's best interest.

Will: For sure. I joined a combat brigade that is supposed to have a three-year life cycle. One year of training; one year deployment; one year recovery, and then you start a new three year process again. That last year of recovery was taken away and folded into training; they kind of merged them together, so we were supposed to have 24 months in garrison away from the combat zone, but they shortened it down to just 14 months and then you redeployed to Afghanistan again.

Matthew: There's a great investigation published in the New York Times last week by Ahmed Kahn and Anan Gopal on the slaughter of civilians by American airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and how the number of civilians killed by the United States, at a minimum is 31 times higher than the US military admits. And we wonder how the military can get away with lying about stuff like that. But then we realize that the military lies all the time to everybody. They lie to the people they are depending upon to wage the war. So it shouldn't be a shock. So how do you become an antiwar activist? How did all that happen?

Will: I got out in 2010 and immediately wanted to use my GI Bill. I was stationed in Alaska, and I wanted to live in warm weather. I ended up in San Diego using my GI Bill. I studied - my major was global studies, with an emphasis on US foreign policy. So I was studying foreign policy when I got out, and originally my thinking was that I'd just done two years in a combat zone - one in Iraq, and one in Afghanistan - and I had to admit to myself that I didn't even really know what they meant, and had no perspective on international relations. I didn't have any perspective on why we really went to Iraq and Afghanistan. I was just being a good soldier, following orders, going through life, *being "patriotic,"* blah blah blah, and I think that was the most important thing I could have done for myself. Admit that I really hadn't investigated and didn't know. That opened a lot of pathways for me to explore, to ask questions. It's a mixture of college, asking questions, research, having the time to do it. And I met people virtually and watched veteran's interviews on video, talking about their issues and problems. There's a lot of stuff out there that you can learn from. And that had a big influence on me. Learning about veterans from past wars who are now antiwar activists. All the way back to Buckminster Fuller, Josh Fresco, veterans in organizations like Veterans for Peace and Iraq Veterans Against the War. Finding out that they existed in the first place, and that what they are saying actually means something really opens the door to try to find new paths. Trying to think about what we as veterans participated in. Veterans come back, and as you said, the military is kind of like this secret organization. They're not really putting out the details. No one really knows the vast scale of operations they are carrying out all the time. Veterans come out imagining they know everything because they were there and had belonged to that organization. But that's a illusion, given the breadth and sheer scope of what the military does. It was clear that I didn't know what the hell was really going on. And I asked questions.

So in my last year of college (2014) I found a local organization here in San Diego called Veterans for Peace, the local chapter, a really great group of people. They opened my world up, and finding VFP completely changed my life. It gave me a sense of purpose and duty and meaning. It led me to want to fix all the wrong I'd done in my past.

Matthew: For folks who haven't seen it yet, you talk about our government not being truthful about things. Gareth Porter points out - and it was ignored by every American media network besides Newsweek - that the United States has had 2,000 troops in Syria for the past however long. Not the 500 troops that were admitted to. So over and over again, we keep seeing this. And Gareth Porter, who's just a fantastic reporter, points out that you can't count on the American media to cover the fact that

the United States has been lying about its troop presence even though we now officially know it. If we don't have organizations and outlets who are informing us and helping get information out, we're at an incredible disadvantage. But before we get into that, I want to get into some of the things you've been doing with Veterans for Peace. I've been with you a few times. You've done a large number of delegations. Six or seven, probably at least, where you've gone with other veterans to stand in solidarity with resistance movements both outside and inside the US. You've been to Okinawa, you've been to the Jeju Islands in Korea, you've been in Palestine, Standing Rock, and were just down at the border for the SOA Watch at the border. Can you talk about that please, kind of let folks who are listening understand what the purpose of those delegations is and what you've gotten from it. When you go with veterans to stand in solidarity with these resistance groups, and you oppose the guys with the guns, the militarism, the occupations and militarism. How does that effect you as a former soldier?

Will: The first thing to realize is that the US, the United States of America, is a global empire. It's not just the victims of war from the bombs and bullets, but the whole world is essentially suffering impacts from this empire that we live in. This is an international, global strategy of fighting empire. Going to other countries and standing with them in solidarity while they fight empire themselves. I got lucky. For my first delegation, I was invited to go to Japan and Okinawa because they were in the midst of changing their peace constitution so they can send troops abroad and go to war. They really wanted post 9-11 veterans to come speak because they have so few veterans, and none since the Second World War.

Matthew: Yes, there's no one there who can say: you want war, this is what's going to happen if you get it.

Will: Exactly. And they wanted to hear that voice. I went to Okinawa, and also Korea. And after that, which changed my life again - these are small town villagers and indigenous people, women and young people, all fighting against the US military bases in their countries. Seeing their faces, learning their stories, interviewing them, protesting with them, crying with them - it was such an amazing experience that I've been going on all the delegations I can. I've been to Korea three times, Okinawa twice, and will be going again in about a week and a half. I've been to India and Nepal, Palestine, Standing Rock, and I think it's so important to stand in solidarity and learn their stories. And I also want to highlight those stories, and that's what I do at the Peace Report. I want the whole world to hear their stories because

clearly the corporate media is not covering these stories. These are the stories we need to hear. And they give me hope, that's for sure. And I'm sure that they'll give others hope, too.

Matthew: Yes. Okinawans and the people of Jeju Island in Korea - they don't want the United States to build or expand bases in their land. The indigenous people who live there are against it. And this runs counter to that narrative that we hear in the US, that people are happy for our bases because it brings jobs and money and keeps them safe from bad people like North Koreans and Chinese. Can you explain why 80 percent of Okinawans don't want the US military in Okinawa anymore?

Will: Well, like you said, we always hear stories about how our bases benefit the local people. But why don't we go to the source, to the people who are actually impacted by the bases and the military presence. From what I've gathered, the people there don't want the bases. And we have 800 military bases around the world. The people who are leading the fight against the bases and US presence are the indigenous people of Okinawa and the Jeju Islands. There are organizers all over South Korea. And, you know, these bases have huge environmental and economic and political impacts, as well as impacts on daily and social life. You have foreign soldiers walking around your streets all the time. They commit rapes and murders at bases around the world. It has a huge impact on their political life. It's obvious that they have a huge impact on all these things. And I relate to these people because I was born on a foreign military base myself, in West Germany in the 1980s. I can relate to them because I call myself a global citizen; I've lived on three different continents and I've traveled to these bases, and I feel that I can relate to these people for sure. There's a quote by a rapper, a great antiwar rapper named Low Key, and he says "I'm a product of a system I was born to destroy." So not only was I born on a foreign military base, and later so-called "served" on military bases, I'm now fighting against these bases and doing it with indigenous people around the world. Villagers around the world. And they are really leading the way in fighting empire. There's a documentary which has a title that says it all: *Village vs. Empire*. It's about the villagers of Jeju Island, who are fighting huge naval base out there. Places like Jeju and Okinawa islands have been doing daily protests for *over ten years, think of it, ten years*. Every single day there's been a protest against these bases. That should be in the news. What if Americans saw that? Maybe they'd start to question what policymakers are doing with our tax dollars overseas. There's so much we're not being told from the local host nation's perspective. I've built a lot of strong relationships overseas, and I just try to get their story out. We live in an empire, we're destroying the planet, affecting

political systems, and we need to focus on destroying this empire, so to speak, and the way to do that is to link arms with other people around the world who are suffering from the same things we are.

Matthew: Absolutely. You brought up the sexual violence of US forces overseas. Now sexual violence and harassment is very much in the news now with people in upper levels of Hollywood, media and the government. Sexual misconduct is very prevalent in the American military. A woman in the US has a one in three chance of being a victim of sexual assault, rape, violence, threats, in their *lifetime*. In the US military, women have a one in three chance of being victimized *during their enlistment*. The average enlistment is four years. And for people living around our bases - if you look at the US military's official statements about the incidence of rape, they say it's less than the "norm," if there can be a norm for such a thing - but if you talk to Okinawans, the average is 200 rapes or sexual assaults per year since the US occupied the island in 1945. And you're talking about 200 a year on a small island, seventy miles long in total, and 1.2 million people there right now. But over the last 60 - 70 years in that small population there have been 200 rapes or sexual assaults by American forces every year. And with impunity! The worst that can happen is that if an American soldier rapes an Okinawan boy or girl, they would be sent home early. It's that type of story that we don't hear in the US.

What else have you learned from your comrades on the front lines, both abroad and in the US? And I'm glad you brought up the rapper Low Key. We played the song *Joe Hill*, and I've heard people ask where's the resistance movement now, where are the resistance songs? Because it's not in rock music, it's not in pop music, but I think it's in hip hop and rap. If you could talk a bit about that group.

Will: Yes, everyone's always asking, where's this, where's that. The groups, the organizations, the movements, they're all here. I think it's a sign of the times because there are more distractions, more advertising, and we have to dig through this mess to find the things we're searching for. And I think hip hop is a huge influence that's always been a genre for the oppressed. I've always looked at it that way, and if we expand our horizons - you know if you look at most of the 20th Century, it's all a white history. Folk and rock come out of white traditions. But now there are more cultures and more genres of music to listen to, and I think people should expand their horizons a little bit when it comes to things like that. Music and any art form, music and films, can prove to move people in a certain direction, and that's what I try to do with my art. Make it into an educational platform that people can use to disseminate

the information that you never or rarely learn about in the news. And now we have a hundred thousand people following us, and there are people looking for this kind of information.

Matthew: Yes, and you built that audience, those followers, in about a year's time. I was in Okinawa with you when you started the Peace Report. So I was an earlier adopter of the Peace Report ethos. I want you to talk about this, because I think it is so important to talk about what we can do and what is possible, and the idea of taking each phase of this - I hate the term resistance because it's been so corporatized and coopted by the democratic party, you know, the McDonald's resistance - but could you talk about the first viral video you had, the one on the bridge in Okinawa. Could you talk about that and describe the setting to the listeners, what was happening in Okinawa at the time and what occurred that day, what the Okinawans were able to accomplish, how they reacted, and how you were able to capture it on a film that was seen by a million people or whatever?

Will: First, let me speak for a few moments about what drives me, some of my principles and values. I think a lot of people in the peace movement, and people on the boards of directors of peace organizations, I think that after being in the game long and doing the work for years or even decades, they tend to forget the masses, what Walter Lippman called the "bewildered herd." They don't know we have 800 bases around the world. They don't know we're spending a trillion dollars a year on the military industrial complex. They don't know some of these things that we would call ourselves basic facts because we've been doing this for a long time. So what I try to do is bring those basic facts into my social media news organization, Peace Report, to try to educate people so they have a foundation to build on. And in doing that, starting a year ago in September of last year when I was in Okinawa with you and shot the video.

So imagine there's a base, and they're trying to do construction on the base. There's only one road to get to the base, and we as protestors, the local people, come and block the road with as many of our bodies and personal vehicles as we could. We completely block the road to prevent construction trucks from getting to the base, and construction of any kind from occurring. And it was successful. I was on top of a car, a van, and we were all on the bridge dancing and singing together, and I just put in a description saying we had stopped the trucks from going in. And it was just a really good moment. Things are possible. We won this battle today. And everyone is happy, they got what they wanted. And for me, what I depicted on camera was people taking back their own land and using it for what they

want to use it for. And they don't want military bases on their land. This goes to the basic fact that people don't know there are 32 US military bases on Okinawa, or that we're building new bases in Okinawa and that the people don't want them. Just going and filming something that goes viral like that, people are learning about things they've never seen or heard about before.

Matthew: Yes, that day the US military and the Japanese government were bulldozing parts of the forest in northern Okinawa, and that forest is home to all kinds of endangered species. It's absolutely beautiful up there, but the Americans want it for more military helicopter landing zones. As you showed, the Japanese government had to bring in Japanese police from the Japanese mainland, because they couldn't count on the Okinawans, who are ethnically distinct (the Japanese had conquered Okinawa in the 1870s), so they had to deploy Japanese police from Tokyo and Kyoto and other places, to do the job. And that dance party that occurred, the joy that came from defeating it - there were around a thousand Japanese police there - and the Okinawan people stopped them. What you're able to put forth, in addition to the information, was the Okinawan music, the dance and the joy. I think Blase would say this is part of our heritage, too, and what we're fighting for is joy and love and life. Do you try to get that across in your video, too?

Will: Yes, and that's what the dance party on the bridge shows - fighting empire, but the end result is a huge party where everyone is getting along. Internationals, indigenous people, music and culture and art. There were people from China. From the US. Canada. We all came together to express solidarity with the Okinawans on that day. It goes against the narrative that the US military and government use, saying that our presence there is what makes peace happen. That of course is pure *bull*. So the video of us dancing on the bridge fighting empire shows what could happen if there wasn't such a huge militarized country anywhere in the world. We'd get along a lot more peacefully, and the world would be a safer place as a result.

Matthew: Yes, absolutely. And Okinawa is a great case study for a lot of this. You know, we were there, we met with the late governor Oda, who was one of the first Okinawan governors who really resisted the American presence. He passed away this past year. He had all kinds of academic studies about the benefits when land was turned over from the US military to the Okinawan people, the economic benefits were three or four fold. The argument that somehow if the American military people are going to lose their jobs and the economy is going to crash and the island of Okinawa is going to sink into the

ocean is just completely absurd. It's not based in fact. In the last few minutes we have, I wonder what kind of advice you have for other people. You have the second or third largest peace group facebook presence. What can you tell people who maybe are right now so capable with social media (in other words, people like me). What words do you have for us? How can we utilize this to fight back here at home and of course abroad?

Will: I think the first step is to remember - two interconnected things. Remember that people just *don't know*. They're ignorant, but not stupid. They just don't know. So post on social media from a perspective of being modest. Don't try to speak to others like you know it all. You may know more about foreign policy and what the US does overseas, but never speak like that. Remember that other people just don't know that we're bombing seven countries right now and running special ops all over the world every day. And from that perspective, it can take you a really really long way. Simple things. Like, when you post a video, include in the description where you are, what you're doing. I see a lot of people put up videos of protest or whatnot and don't label them, don't put the video in context. People need a title or something that orients them to what's happening. Secondly, there's a huge audience out there that does not read. I'll speak on behalf of my generation, the millennials, they do not read, but they do watch video. If you can turn a video into an article or essay but also entertaining people with artful video - every sound, every picture, it all matters when you're looking at this two dimensional screen that is showing a lot of colors and brightness and sound levels all at the same time, and how you put them together can fuel the message you're trying to push. Facebook has really blown up to be the platform to share videos, more so than Twitter or other places. Another thing is that many activists and organizers who use social media tend only to use Twitter or Facebook, an occasionally youtube. There are other social media platforms that are really great. One is [Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com). It's huge for sharing information, and I've yet to see many antiwar organizers use Reddit's real potential. Every major YouTuber has used reddit to build audience and subscriber followers. Veterans for Peace, Code Pink, World Beyond War, none of these organizations are using it. And it may be a generational thing, as more platforms come out all the time. It's hard to keep up with.

It's called social media for a reason. It can be a public media, with us sharing information among ourselves and with the general public. If you look where technology is taking our society, more and more people will be spending more time in virtual reality systems, whether it's listening to a podcast or watching a video. More and more people are going to try to escape reality and go into these virtual

worlds. I think reading articles and books is something we should all do and always maintain, but we should also recognize that more and more people are watching video and going into the whole virtual reality type of world. And we can use these technologies to our benefit. The problem is that many people we work with in our movement tend to be luddites or anti-technology somehow and refuse to learn. I understand; it's hard to learn new technologies, but if we're going to keep up with the times, we have to engage with these platforms in some form.

Matthew: And we have to, right, because so much traditional media, mainstream media, has been coopted. There's so much congruence between the media and the government and business interests. If you look this past week there is a section on the Vietnam War called Vietnam 67, and there's an article there about agent orange. He talks about thousands of people being affected by agent orange, but we know it's millions and that people continue to be affected. He talks about barrels of agent orange being dumped in Vietnam when we know that it was *sprayed from aircraft and that 23-24 million gallons of it were dispersed*. So even when they speak about subject in the mainstream media, it's often whitewashed or glossed over or reduced to euphemisms.

Well, Will, we're out of time. I want to thank you for being with me today on World Focus. And I'd like to thank Blase Bonpane for letting me be a guest host today. I hope I didn't screw it up too badly, that I did a decent job. Please be sure to tune in to World Focus next week.

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