

Friends, a great journalist has passed away. I wrote a note to his son. Robert Parry died last week, and just as Thomas Aquinas referred to Aristotle simple as "the philosopher," your father should be referred to as "the journalist. We will never forget him or his example of what a journalist should be. We were there in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala while he was reporting, and we at the Office of the Americas want to affirm his work leading to the Boland Amendment and the exposure of the Iran Contra scandal, the treachery of the Reagan Administration, and pressuring Iran to hold 52 Americans in a dangerous hostage situation until after the election. We were fortunate to have a personal conversation with Bob to thank him for his courage in ignoring Beltway constraints knowing that *no good deed will go unpunished*.

I had a sinking feeling when his friend Gary Webb left Los Angeles for the last time. I gave him a ride to where he was going. He was destroyed by the commercial media. Sitting with a group of national anchors, one of them gave away a secret: "We know how to play the game." And playing the game today means that much of the media has censored out reference to perpetual wars, including sustaining famine and cholera in Yemen.

I think of Bob Parry and am reminded of sitting in a DC bar with IF Stone. He said, "I just can't stand the suffering of the innocent." And it was this compassion and sense of fairness that led him to establish the beloved I.F. Stone Weekly using his journalistic expertise. And it was Bob's humanity, together with professional expertise, that led him to create Consortium News.

Robert Parry, Presente!

I'm very privileged to have Medea Benjamin on World Focus today. She's the cofounder of the women-led peace group Code Pink, and the cofounder of the human rights group Global Exchange. She's been an advocate for social justice for 40 years, and I would say is one of the leading international people in the movement for peace and justice. Welcome, Medea.

Medea: Thank you, Blase.

Blase: You just got back from a trip to Palestine. What can you tell us about it?

Medea: Well, first of all that it was a surprise that we got in, since my organization Code Pink is one of the six groups in the US that had recently been put on an Israeli government list as one of the organizations whose leaders would be banned from coming in because we support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, and really Jody Evan, myself, and my partner Tye Barry went in to test the ban. Some say the ban hasn't been put in effect yet but will be in March. In the meantime we were able to go in, which was great because we were able to meet with a number of our partners on the ground and be in solidarity. We spent a day with the Tamimi family. The daughter has become famous after slapping an Israeli soldier, which also landed her in prison. The other family members, many are already in prison as well, including her mother, and then we spent time in Hebron, a town that is full of right wing, nasty reactionary settlers who on a daily basis are attacking and humiliating the Palestinians who live there. And then we did lots of other things like meeting with groups like Bethselem that documents many of these abuses, and a group in Jerusalem which is documenting what is happening with the taking over of more and more land in East Jerusalem. We were left with a sense of renewed horror at the kind of racist, apartheid society that has been constructed by the Israeli government, and awe and inspiration from the Palestinians who have been resisting non-violently in such a determined and ongoing way.

Blase: All the comments I've seen from South Africa indicates that the situation in Gaza and Palestine is worse than South Africa was. I've heard that from people like Desmond Tutu and others who are in office today in South Africa. Have you heard that?

Medea: Yes, I've heard it from many people, including a former minister in the government of South Africa, Ronnie Capril. And when you go to the West Bank and the occupied territories, you realize that in some of these places it's not just separate and unequal, which is bad enough in and of itself, but it's also the intermingling of now the settlers in the much-eaten-away Palestinian territories. They have their own guards protecting them. Many of them walk around with guns. The soldiers are there to protect them. If a settler beats up a Palestinian civilian, the soldiers are not going to do anything to protect the Palestinian. There are daily confrontations happening in which the Palestinians feel so violated in their own land. You might have heard of the very well known activist Esa Urah

from Hebron who runs a group called Youth Against Settlements. We just happened to be walking down the street with him and the soldiers came and were determined to detain him for absolutely nothing. It happens to him on a regular basis. As we walked down a street he was not allowed to walk - we were only doing it because the soldiers were detaining us and forcing us to go to the police station - he pointed down the street where he was born, but where he is not allowed to go walk down the street. *The street on which he was raised!* So this is the kind of daily provocations by the settlers and the government roadblocks, checkpoints, gates, expansive walls. All the repressive apparatus that has been put in place is quite astonishing. And it's even more distressing when you think of all the US money that's going to keep this system in place.

Blase: Well, Medea, there's been a lot of focus on Russia as influencing our elections in the United States. Do you believe that Russia has had as big an influence as Israel has had on our elections?

Medea: (*laughter*) No where near, Blase, that's a good point! Israel has incredible influence. I was reading an article yesterday about a young black professional who decided to run for congress in Pennsylvania, and the focus of the article was really about the influence of money in politics. But it had one section in which he was speaking to the former governor, Ed Rendell, and Rendell says to him: "Well, have you been to Israel." And the young man answered, "No, I haven't." Rendell said "Well, we'd better get you there, because it's important when you're seeking donations to say that you've been to Israel." And that was during a *primary campaign*, not the general. So from the moment you announce to run, you're supposed to have a connection to this tiny state of Israel and of course a connection to the right wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu, not to the Palestinians, who would be a much more natural connection for a person of color in this country.

Blase: Now they're trying to influence our laws. A federal judge just ruled that a Kansas law designed to punish people who boycott Israel is an unconstitutional denial of free speech. The plaintiff, Ester Cohn, recently wrote "I'm a member of the Mennonite Church, and I've also been a math teacher for almost a decade. Because of my political views, the state of Kansas has decided that I can't train other math teachers. Would you have any comment on what happened there.

Medea: It was a great victory that the courts ruled in her favor. But there are states throughout the country that have passed similar kinds of legislation that penalizes people for their political beliefs. This is something that the people in the democratic party, like Chuck Schumer, is very much in favor of. In New York State, liberal democrats like Ben Cardin from Maryland, a senator, introduced on the federal level a piece of legislation that the ACLU has come out strongly against as a violation of free speech. So it is quite remarkable how the democrat and republican parties have been in the grip of this right wing government of BiBi Netanyahu. When you visit and see the horrific, most incredibly racist system that has been built up in Israel and then come back to recognize the strength of the Israeli lobby in our own government here - *It's frightening.*

Blase: In 2017, when Benjamin Cardin, a democratic senator from Maryland and an APAC loyalist, joined 43 other senators purporting to impose prison sentences and large fines for anyone working with international organizations to boycott Israel. Now we never had anything like that with the United Farm Workers.

Medea: It's just remarkable, and right now that piece of legislation has been on hold because in the case of certain senators like Kirstin Gillibrand, who's taken her name off. I wouldn't be surprised if all of sudden it was rushed through and passed. Despite the fact that the ACLU considers it a violation of free speech, the fact that there's already 43 senators who showed their approval of such a horrific piece of legislation speaks volumes to the distorted political priorities that exist in the United States and this very dangerous relationship we have with the Israeli government.

Blase: Well, we saw the Center for Constitutional Rights picked it up. They wrote that this preliminary injunction affirmed what we've been saying for years, that boycotts of Israel are political protests protected by the first amendment. Twenty four states have enacted similar laws in the past three years, and congress is currently consider the draconian anti-boycott act. This injunction would be a wake-up call for elected representatives to stop trampling on our constitutional rights to shield Israel from criticism. Now more than ever we need representatives who protect and defend the constitution. Now have any senators made much of an issue of protecting the constitution in this case?

Medea: Bernie Sanders is one who has come out against that a spoken up about the need to support the rights of Palestinians, but most members of congress refuse to even sign on to a simple piece of legislation to support the rights of Palestinian children who are being held in military courts. As of now we only have less than 30 members of congress who have signed onto that piece of legislation introduced by Congresswoman Betty McCollum. So we're making some headway, but it is a long slog as you well know, Blase, and very disturbing when you can't even get congresspeople to come out against imprisoning children under military courts.

Blase: We have the J Street group here urging as many people as possible to tell their elected officials to stand up to the Trump administration. This is on another matter; this is about punishing Palestinians with deadly cuts to the UN relief operation which provides schooling, housing and healthcare to Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East. Trump's funding freeze would worsen an already critical humanitarian situation in Syrian and Gaza and could dangerously destabilize the region. Now this is a Jewish group, right? The J Street Group, saying that UN money should not be cut.

Medea: Yes, there are many groups that have come out to say that UNRAH is really the life blood for so many Palestinians who are refugees. The real solution is not to keep them in need of support of the UN and other government agencies, but to give them back the right to return to Palestine and to lift all of these restrictions on people creating their own ways of earning a living. Having been many times to Gaza, for example, most of the people there depend on UNRWA. They don't want to depend on it; they'd like to have their own businesses, and are very entrepreneurial. But when they're not allowed to have their goods come in or out of the country; when young people are not allowed to study abroad because they can't get exit visas; when people in need of medical care are not allowed to leave the country - all of this means that they are dependent on these UN agencies. So in the long run, the solution is giving the Palestinians their full rights.

Blase: This has been a long history. It has been made an issue by the people like the general's son, Miko Peled, who was in Palestine when you were. He authored a book, *An General's Son: The Journey of an Israeli in Palestine*. He is quoting what he heard as he visited Palestine. "Israeli forces killed more than 20 of my

family members, arrested and tortured me, shot my son. Now they're holding my wife and daughter." What do you say to that? Well, he had no reply.

Medea: I am amazed by the patience of the Palestinians that we met. Traveling around with them, seeing what they go through. For example, one young girl who lived in Ramallah, to get to the university to study every day, it takes her two hours to go seven miles because she has to go through a horrendous checkpoint that is often closed. To get to the checkpoint, you're on one bus, then you have to get on another bus to go through the checkpoint, then you have to get on a third bus - and this is all to go a tiny distance. She does that every day on her way there and on her way back. Four hours to travel less than ten miles. It's just so frustrating. On top of that, you have to be subjected to the humiliation of people searching you, of having the gate be closed arbitrarily, of the nastiness of the Israeli soldiers who are heavily armed and in your face all the time.

Everywhere we went, Blase, we saw Palestinians being pulled aside just like young black people in the US are pulled aside by the soldiers, asked for their identification, frisked, and basically just humiliated. This is their daily fare. The other thing is the restrictions that people have to move in the little bit of land that they have left. If you live in a place like Ramallah, you're not allowed inside Jerusalem. I have an interview with a very accomplished journalist who lives in Ramallah and I was in Jerusalem maybe ten miles away. She could not come to interview me because she doesn't have the right kind of permit to be able to get into Jerusalem. We wanted to meet with a man who runs a community center in an area called Solon which is just really part of East Jerusalem. We were inside the old city gates staying in a hotel. And he said, "I can't come to meet you at the hotel because I'm not allowed into the old city." So everywhere we turned, we met Palestinians who had just incredible restrictions on their movement. You just wonder, even those who have the kind of situations you mentioned in Miko Pela's book, people whose loved ones have been killed, still have to face on a daily basis so many obstacles to just daily life and it is remarkable that so many remain patient and non-violent in their resistance.

Blase: Your organization, Code Pink, has set aside the coming week to take daily action on social media to divest from the war machine. And then you have a website there, Divest from War, and that's under Code Pink?

Medea: Yes, it is Blase. After sixteen plus years of seeing the US remain in Iraq, Afghanistan and spreading its militarism throughout the Middle East, and the threats to North Korea and the building up of more military installations in South Korea, pushing Japan to become more militarized, the expansion of NATO and on and on, you have to ask who is profiting from all of this? And indeed, the violence and war and build up of everything from nuclear weapons to conventional arms, is big big business. Every time the Trump administration or Obama increase threats or bombing campaigns, the stocks in companies like Lockheed Martin, Northrup Drummond, Raytheon, Boeing, would go soaring. So we've decided that we have to have a campaign that really looks at these weapons industries and starts pulling money from our universities, our cities, our pension funds, our congresspeople out of the business of war.

Blase: It's so important. The State of the Union speech was just so full of war, violence, and weapons - let's realize now that we have two trillion dollars of our tax money set aside for nuclear suicide. Can you imagine taking your money to a store and saying I'd like to buy five nuclear bombs please? This is what we're doing, in effect, and we've become paralysed thinking that it's going to help somebody somewhere, well it could easily end all life on this tiny little planet, one little grain of sand in the universe. Here we are ready to damage it in the name of the war machine and the profits of war corporations. I think it's so appropriate for you to set up a week of actions as part of a campaign to induce financial institutions, cities, universities and faith communities to divest from war.

Medea: Yes, Blase, and you know, we are launching a long term effort because these are such entrenched industries. They are not easy to get at. They don't have retail branches in front of which you can stand. It's hard to boycott the F-35. So this is a marathon, and we think it's important that it has a strong educational component to it so that people start associating wars with merchants of death and really breaking it down so everyone recognizes who benefits from the carnage. We have groups around the country who are taking resolutions to their city councils to day that we want to take our money out of the war machine. We have investment companies who are not going to have a screen showing which countries are profiting from wars. We're identifying pension funds and other vehicles and empowering people to object to having their money invested in war. This is following the example of the very successful movement around fossil fuels, which

has recently have a lot of success in getting congresspeople to pledge that they won't take money from the fossil fuel industry. And we are doing the same thing now around not taking money from the weapons industry. So here in DC, for example, we're going to spend the week going to some of the more friendly congresspeople - the progressive congress, for example - and asking them to take the pledge. And the ones who are really wedded to the weapons industry - mostly republicans, but not exclusively - and many who are on the Armed Services Committee or the appropriations committee going and doing more of a kind of skit pretending that we are CEOs from these companies going in to demand more war, more violence, because it increases our profits. We'll have lots of creative actions throughout the week, and we hope that congresspeople will sign the pledge. We know that Congresswoman Barbara Lee suggested the idea to us, so she is certainly onboard. There are a couple of other congresspeople we have talked to who indicated that they would do this.

I think it's important to begin creating a wedge, and in the case of the congresspeople, the explanation we are using is that they are constantly being called on to vote for more money for the Pentagon, to rubber stamp sales of weapons to countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia, and that if they are taking money from these weapons companies, they have a conflict of interest that is critical to stop.

Blase: We are so interesting in what you're doing. You know, what began as divesting from Israel is now turning into divest from the war machine. Hosting this week of actions is so important. It highlights how deeply embedded the war machine is in every aspect of our society. Fun and creative action are so important. We saw so much of it in Latin American as people were fighting for their lives. They never forgot to dance, to have fun, to use creativity and humor to keep the spirit alive.

Medea: Oh, yes, I totally agree. That's why in this week of action we're including both serious, sit down with congresspeople, city councils, pension fund managers, etc. But we also have the fun part where we'll dress up in suits that are made of dollar signs and have corporate logos on them and come in waving our piles of cash. We'll wave them around in congressional offices, and we'll show up with big over-sized checks saying that if they will agree to keep this war in Afghanistan going for another ten or twenty years, we'll give them more money. It's a different

way to get the message across. In some ways, Blase, what we are living with in this military industrial complex, which is so embedded in our electoral system and has such sway over elected officials, is *absurd*. And we have to find all the different ways we can to tease out the absurdity of all of this, and while these are serious life and death issues, sometimes using sarcasm and wit and street theater that gets the message across.

Blase: Yes, stopping weapons companies *and their investors* from making a killing on killing - getting people to make a pledge to divest. One of the things that people like Bernie Sanders would bring up as he ran for mayor of Burlington, and the the congress, senate, and president, is the phrase *democratic socialism*. Just suppose that all weapons manufacture of any kind, from sling shots to ICBMs, had to be *non-profit*. Like the fire department. Do you think that would slow it down a little bit?

Medea: I think it would totally slow it down. The fact that we're talking about billions and billions of dollars in profits; that these weapons manufacturers have so cleverly produced their weapons in every congressional district and then called it a *jobs program*; and then used a tiny portion of the billions they've made off the taxpayer into lobbying people to continue this arms race - it's all just bundles and bundles of money. If you recognize as well, Blase, that in these weapons industries, you can't lose because many of them are no bit contracts in which you were guaranteed a profit, or what's called *cost plus contracts*, which guarantee a profit; the cost overruns on weapons like the F-35 are just unbelievable - and yet the US government keeps shelling out more and more of our tax money, even if it's way beyond the money originally pledged. If these were non-profits, I don't think we'd be involved in most of the wars that we're.

Blase: There was a birthday party for Ahd Tamimi. Her 17 birthday, which she's spending in jail because she slapped an IDF soldier. I think anyone that intrudes into a family and terrorizes the family deserves a good slap, even in honor of Gandhi. I don't think you would object to that.

Medea: Yes, Blase, when you say in her house - we were standing at her house, on the driveway where she slapped the soldier. You can't really tell where it's happening from the video. It is literally on their driveway inside their property. These soldiers with impunity go into these homes, raid homes, steal things from

people's homes, and of course, in the case of the Tamimi family, recently *shot her cousin in the head*. There is so much reason to hate these soldiers. Having them come in on their property after they had just shot a family member - and she slapped him to say, get out of here - and suddenly she is the aggressor. This has really backfired for the Israelis, though, because Ahed Tamimi has become a heroine in so much of the Arab world. It is quite remarkable. Millions and millions of people now have her picture and see her as an icon, and the Israeli government really doesn't know what to do with her. Government figures and the right wing media have stirred up so much hatred of this young girl who dared to slap a soldier and want to give her an extreme prison sentence, and yet the global community looks upon her as a modern day Joan of Arc. So this is going to be a very tough time; her trial is coming up quite soon, and it is important that we continue to give her lots of solidarity because it will really make a difference in what her sentence will be. It is also important to recognize that she is one of over 300 people under 18, juveniles, who are being held in military prisons and being subjected to military courts.

Blase: We look at the hypocrisy here, going after this child for slapping a soldier who invaded their private property. We look at their head of state and prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who says "beat the Palestinians up, not once but continually. Beat them til it hurts so badly it's unbearable." What do you call that? It's outrageous that they're holding 17 year old Ahed Tamimi in a military prison, under an imminent threat of rape, sexual torture by the State of Israel in a vile crime against humanity. And that's why we're demanding an immediate release of Ahed and her family. You can find out more about that by going to Code Pink dot org. This is critically important, because hypocrisy is the name of the game. We can put two trillion dollars into destroying the planet, and one young woman rightfully slaps someone who is terrorizing her family and her people - and they're going to make a criminal out of her? This tells us where groups like ISIS come from after enough families have their homes broken into, whether it be in Iraq, Afghanistan. You break into homes, terrorize people's children, takes their sons away in hoods to be tortured, you wonder why they're is a response? You would have to be blind, deaf and dumb, unable to reason or think, not to see the relationship. So we call these people terrorists, and here they are responding in a way that is for them the human way to respond, and this is a non-violent response if there ever was one. I think she has earned the title of Hero. This type of thing

can't go on. So everybody wished her may you be safe this year and every year on her birthday.

She's 17 now, and may there be ten million more of her. So these are the things you're dealing with this at this time. We're also stuck with the State of the Union address. There's a wall in China that maybe could be read about, it's one of the wonders of the world. Absolutely amazing piece of work, the Wall of China. The only problem is it didn't keep the Mongols out - it didn't keep anyone out. It'll be the same as Trump's inanity with his wall. It won't keep people out.

We we have this terrible thing of more money for the military to "modernize" nuclea weapons; a racist wall that won't work; and *more ICE agents*, who appear to me to be breaking the law every day in their abuse of immigrants. Do you have a thought on that?

Medea: Well, I'm not sure what you mean because the law has given them so much leeway to tear families apart and raid businesses. So I'm not sure what you're referring to.

Blase: Well, going into homes and taking people out without proper documentation, without warrants. And the act itself of breaking up families is absolutely unacceptable, and I know your work has gone on on behalf of the dreamers, 800,000 young people who came to this country as children and are now forced to struggle with their legal status facing deperation. People are constantly being thrown out of the country. What are your thoughts on that.

Medea: I feel that we shouldn't forget that Barak Obama was the deporter in chief, and that millions of people were deported during the eight years he was in the White House. But under Trump, it seems that no only are the deportations continuing and the threat to dreams, there is also just the racism that has so increased with the rhetoric of the Trump adminsitration and the way that immigrants are demonized - and Muslims are demonized. This all comes together in ways that have tremendous effects on people's lives, whether it's the breaking up of families and sending people to countries like Mexico that they don't even know. Or whether it's now the keeping out of people from Syria and elsewhere who are seeking refuge and who have family living in the United States. There is just so

much of the breaking up of families and just plain meanness that Trump is empowering in the US. Certainly it's not the kind of country that I want to live in.

Blase: I think there's a problem here relating to the two parties that we have. You rightfully brought up the terror of Obama administration, including assassinations, drone terror, deportations. Many people in the democratic party would be in favor of all the things perhaps that Bernie talks about, but we have a problem that the party structure is part and parcel of military industrialism. We have two military industrial parties, and that seems to hold regardless who's president. How do we break this stranglehold that military industrialism has as the key to our entire economy. The largest employer in the world is the US so-called defense department.

Medea: Yeah, we've talked about our campaign to divest from the war machine. It's very much related to other campaigns - for example, to stop US weapons sales to Saudi Arabia. It's the number one purchaser of US weapons, and you see how it is that the military industrial complex pushes our elected officials to send weapons to a regime like Saudi Arabia that has used it to create the largest human catastrophe in the world right now, and that's in Yemen. A bill will be coming up in the senate very soon - the next couple of weeks - that we really need to get all of our senators to be aware of, and that is to cutoff weapon sales to Saudi Arabia because of the war in Yemen. So while we do our work to divest from the war machine, we also have to look at the current realities of where those weapons are being used and intervene to try to stop all the violence.

You brought up the wall on the Mexico border - that's really part and parcel of a military industrial security complex that makes so much money from these wars. We see the militarization of police forces in the United States, the dumping of "surplus" Pentagon goods on our police departments. This shows that it is hard to separate our foreign policy from our domestic policy and immigration policy. They're so tied together.

I think, as we move forward with the efforts to direct attention and try to decrease the power of these weapon's companies, we have to show people the connections to the issues they really care about, whether it's immigration, police brutality, issues of climate change. Certainly war and the Pentagon are the biggest devastators of the planet. Women's right issues, women being the greatest victims

of these wars. All kinds of things. One of the campaigns happening right now that I'm sure you've talked about, the Poor People's Campaign, is bringing all these issues together. Tomorrow in Washington DC they're having a gathering that we're looking forward to being a part of - kicking off the Poor People's Campaign and moving from a war economy to a peace economy.

Blase: I'm very excited about that and feel it's a matter of putting in the very heart of it that we believe in dismantling unjust criminalization systems that exploit poor communities and communities of color and transform the war economy into a peace economy that values all humanity. Now, the reason we have so many people on the streets in our country, freezing to death - and you can freeze to death in Los Angeles on a cold night if you're not well - and all of the money wasted in having a military presence in 120 countries has to stop. Other countries don't do this. The extent of US militarism and force projection can't be compared with any other country's.

The new Poor People's Campaign is so critical. I remember the first one. Washington DC, fifty years ago, and Resurrection City, from which we were removed by some pretty nasty gas - worse than tear gas; that's the welcome we got in Washington at that time. It's so important to unite this campaign with the idea of a peace economy. Like all empires, we are deteriorating very fast, and in a very ugly and mean-spirited way.

You know, we're out of time, Medea, and I'd like to thank you so much for joining me today on World Focus.

