



# ‘Sops to Humanity’

*How a focus on war crimes has distracted us from the evil of war itself*

**Phil Klay**

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. In the years before World War I, the antiwar movement achieved considerable success in advancing an “arbitration” model of conflict resolution between states. Why do you think this approach failed to prevent a dramatic escalation of war in the twentieth century? Is there something in the arbitration model that we can recover for the twenty-first century?

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  2. Some of the antiwar activists Samuel Moyn discusses in his book *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War* insist that making war more “humane” actually increases the scope of war as it becomes more palatable and less viscerally abhorrent. But wouldn’t this stance lead antiwar activists not to accept harm-reduction measures? Is it intellectually and morally coherent to oppose them?

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  3. Klay’s article references Tolstoy’s famous quote: “Where violence is legalized, there slavery exists.” In Tolstoy’s anarchist thinking, this quote would apply not just to war but to the state, as the state is the institution that claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Does opposition to war also require opposition to the state?

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  4. Klay describes the Obama era as one in which American war was “expanded in scope while constrained in its conduct.” What do you make of Moyn’s characterization of the Obama administration’s approach to war? Was Obama’s emphasis on drone warfare a useful tactic for drawing down two costly wars—or was it a mechanism for concealing from the American public an expanded imperial presence?

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  5. What’s the role of public opinion in contemporary American warfare? U.S. foreign policy is often described as being insulated from public pressure, but Moyn’s story emphasizes the role of antiwar and humanitarian NGOs and civil-society groups in influencing policy. Has something changed in the past several decades? Or is President Joe Biden’s withdrawal from Afghanistan an indication that public opinion still influences matters of war and peace?

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  6. If we accept Moyn’s argument that harm reduction has increased the scope of war, where should the United States go from here? Dramatically reduce its military budget? Refrain from using force overseas? How could such outcomes ever come about? What would have to change, in public opinion, civil society, and government institutions, to make that happen?
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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Solmaz Daryani, “The Other Afghanistan,” October 2021 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/other-afghanistan>

Phil Klay, “Killing Machines,” October 2020 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/killing-machines>

Frank Pasquale, “All Too Humanitarian,” September 2018 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/all-too-humanitarian>

Andrew Bacevich, “The Forever War Continues,” October 2021 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/forever-war-continues>

The Editors, “An Unwinnable War,” September 2021 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/unwinnable-war>

Thomas Merton, “Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility,” February 1962  
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/nuclear-war-and-christian-responsibility>

Christopher Bram, “The Zen of Tolstoy,” March 2016 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/zen-tolstoy>