



**Left and Right Against War**

**Guest: Murray Polner**

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***Murray Polner is the author of numerous books and edited Present Tense, published by the American Jewish Committee, for 18 years.***

**WOODS:** I've had so many people tell me how much they enjoyed the collection that you and I worked on: *We Who Dared to Say No to War*. And I remember when you and I met for lunch that day, I remember it was rainy. For some reason I remember that distinctly.

**POLNER:** It was one of Long Island's stormiest days.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's right, but doggone it, something bright—

**POLNER:** I said that kid better have something good for me.

**WOODS:** Yeah, this better be worth it. (laughs) And it was not easy because sometimes we had to navigate copyright restrictions, and what is in the public domain and what isn't. But by and large, we came up with a great collection of really great antiwar stuff from a diverse array of people. That's what made it exciting.

**POLNER:** Yes, and I saved every review. I am sure you did, too. There wasn't a single negative review, not even in some of the much more right-wing, hard line—only occasionally in a neocon publication they would have to put in a jab. But they are always bellicose, and they are always home-front warriors, so I never pay attention to them.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I take that as a medal on my chest if they don't like what I do. But we even got a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*, which is hard to get.

**POLNER:** That was super.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I was really thrilled about that. Now obviously I want to talk about the issue of war and so on and so forth, but I do want to start off talking a little bit about you. I gave people a little bit of your background and where you have written, but you've been involved in peace circles for, well, quite some time.

**POLNER:** Well, I did serve in the naval reserve, and I did serve in the active military—Army duty and so forth. So I didn't get any lessons from that, but what I did was—I was always involved. I was, from the beginning, a member of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, but I also was primarily interested in finding not pacifist, but alternatives to conflicts and war. Yeah, I read Gandhi, and I read Thoreau, and I read Tolstoy and all the rest, but I was trying to find an American kind of thing. Our book helped me because I found certain people I had never really thought about too much, but I was always interested, and primarily I was a writer. I did march in antiwar things and so forth, but I wrote several books that brought me deeply into it. One of the books that I am most proud of is *No Victory Parades*. I was teaching in a community college some 60 miles from New York City, and I never introduced the war into my history classes because I felt that was unfair to students, and actually, I wasn't going to push my opinion.

**WOODS:** Good. Good.

**POLNER:** But I also organized Concerned Faculty against the War, which was all teachers after that and faculty and professors. And then I did it at a Catholic college where I taught, and therefore, I gave a talk against the war, and while I was in my office for the visiting, you know, the students come in at your office hours. This kid came in and he said it had just been two or three weeks after, or six weeks, I think, as I remember after he was in the Central Highlands in Vietnam, and he said to me, professor, excuse me, but I think you're full of shit, and he defended the war. And then I talked to somebody else there who had been in the war, and the result was I wrote *No Victory Parades*. I interviewed over 200 guys who had been in combat, and I also tell at the end what a lie the whole thing had been. As George Kennan famously said, "What was our national interest in even going in there?" And George Kennan was right at that point.

And then I wrote many other things. I wrote, I wrote, I wrote, I wrote all sorts of things. Right now I am working on four or five different publications. One of them that I really love—the George Mason University has a website called History News Network, and its editor, Shenkman, is a terrific guy, and it's a terrific website, and I write for them all the time. I have a blog and so forth. What I do is I used to speak a lot to different groups. I don't speak anymore, but I like to write, and it's great fun aging and writing. The book that we did, Tom, did for me—it opened up even more things that I never knew. And I know America is in a trap of its own set by the Washington consensus, as the great Andrew Bacevich and former Senator James Webb have been talking about recently, and that is with endless wars—no entry, no exit—and moving more and more. The only wars that America should ever become involved in, that's what I've been writing about, are those that directly engage our national interest. Ukraine doesn't. Georgia didn't. Of course, Iraq and Afghanistan didn't, and so forth and so on. And one of the things I've been doing is reading a great deal, as I did in Vietnam and in World War II, about the combatants themselves. An extraordinary number of volunteers—volunteers, not draftees, because we wouldn't dare have a draft—have written about it.

Recently, not long ago, last year I had collected something like 10 or 15,000 books on Vietnam, and I donated them all free to Texas Tech University in Lubbock because they have the largest collection of Vietnam-era materials. And I want future generations to know what the hell we went through and they went through.

Another thing that triggered my interest tremendously was the murder of the Kent State kids. That's the one book that I regretted not writing about, although I am writing a piece again, I have written several pieces about. I never could find a smoking gun, and it was horrible, and so forth and so on. And then I wrote a book with my friend Jim O'Grady, a biography of the Berrigan brothers—the two priests that decided that—Dan was more religious—Phil was more political—they were going to upset the apple cart, and based upon much of what Thomas Merton wrote, based upon their religious background, political background, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, etc., etc. They were an extraordinary group that I found very, very interesting. And then, as I said, I worked in the anti-draft movement and so forth and so on.

**WOODS:** Murray, I want to go back to something you mentioned about yourself. I always wanted to ask you this, and somehow when we were working on the book, we were so busy I was never able to do it, but I know about your involvement with the Jewish Peace Fellowship, and there must be a weird relationship between that kind of group and the neocons who believe that if you're Jewish there's only—

**POLNER:** I don't want to go into it now, but I am a real critic of the current Israeli government, and I don't believe they are interested at all—Netanyahu has never been interested in allowing Palestinians to have their own sovereign, viable state. But, yes, we were never really—we were always outsiders, but look, in the recent election, 69% of American Jews—the only white Americans that voted Democratic and for moderate liberal candidates. Jews have always been traditional liberals. Of course, what American Jewish—the Jewish so-called Israel lobby does is they depend largely on the money of billionaires who are very conservative and so forth and so on. So the Jewish Peace Fellowship started in 1941, long before I was—I was a baby—by a group of rabbis who felt that numbers of Jews had been conscientious objectors in World War II, and this was before news came out about the Holocaust, and even after, it was very difficult. A lot of their families abandoned them, and there was no one to support them.

So what they did was did what Quakers did or the Mennonites did for their COs. They provided them with literature and business packages and food and so forth and so on. When I got in, I was in the beginning very active in the anti-draft movement in 1967 and '68 when I was teaching at various colleges, and I looked for also because I am very Jewish, and I am very knowledgeable about my Jewish past, and I have written a book about the whole thing, and I have written all about my father and mother, who lived through various pogroms and so forth and so on. So I decided that I wanted to find, as well as the secular group that I was with, find a Jewish group. So I found the Jewish Peace Fellowship. They were wonderful people. They were supportive—they didn't tell people to be a CO, but if they wanted to be, they told them the law,

and they supported them along the process. In fact, I have a lot of their documents I am going to be submitting to the American Jewish Historical Society for futures to read.

**WOODS:** Hang on, let me jump in for a second. I want to make sure that listeners know that CO stands for conscientious objector. Remember, we're dealing with a generation that doesn't know the draft. So they may not actually be familiar with this concept. Can you just take a minute to explain what the law was pertaining to conscientious objection?

**POLNER:** Yeah, the last person—that poor sucker—the poor guy was drafted June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1973, and a conscientious objector initially said—America has been pretty good—except in World War I they were terrible to conscientious objectors. Some 27 to 37 people were sentenced to death, though no one ever died, and they sentenced them to long prison terms and so forth. Americans go crazy periodically; alien/sedition laws, red scares, McCarthyism and all that horrible neo-fascist crap—pardon me. But conscientious objectors—America in World War II was better and generous and in Vietnam extremely generous, but the whole system was breaking down—Selective Service. Originally it said that you had to have a religious orientation. You had to be a Quaker—traditional, historical religious groups; Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, and so forth and so on. During the war a guy who was—it must have been the ACLU—people they applied for—they objected to it.

And therefore, they added you had to have not only—you could have a religious objection or a very powerful ethical and moral objection to war. It couldn't be a particular war, or it couldn't be a political instance: I don't like Bush. I don't like Obama, etc. It had to be that you came from a world or you moved into a world that you couldn't ethically, morally or religiously support a war. And large numbers of volunteers who joined after 9/11 have been discharged because they have since come to believe that war was not the answer for them, where they did not speak of justice or right of the unjust and crazy invasion of Iraq, but they spoke about their feelings, and in many cases, the Defense Department accepted it because they've learned that if they don't want to be in it, then let them go. They got honorable discharge and they go. Incidentally, a cause that I have been interested in: a number of those volunteers in the military got dishonorable discharges often for a very stupid, inane, trivial reasons. They are denied to this day all the rights that a guy like me, who had an honorable discharge, get. It's a lot.

**WOODS:** Well, that's interesting. I assumed there must have been a lot of people who were dishonorably discharged for reasons that were trivial. There's so many things I want to ask you, Murray, though while I have you on the phone here.

**POLNER:** Write another book. That's what I want to do.

**WOODS:** I know. Look, you and I have the same answer to everything: just write another book, see what happens, float it out there—see where it goes. Did you think in 1989, 1990, 1991 as the Cold War wound down, did you think that this meant the warfare state would be scaled back, or did you feel like even then I've been around the block too much; I know these people will find some pretext for it?

**POLNER:** I hoped that with the collapse of communism that there would be a new approach, not only to the ex-Soviet Union, but a new approach without the nonsense of our hegemony and global necessity of being involved and so forth. I think there were a few people that wanted to move in that direction—so-called national interest people. You find them in their publication, *National Interest*. They're all around. But I found that there were too many people invested, an interest invested in taking a continued hard line so that you're talking about not only the neocons who love war, although they'll never go, and their kids never go, but we're talking about our merchants of death producing a constant flow of advanced killing machines. We're talking about our think tanks, our lobbyists, producers of everything from uniforms to everything. You're thinking that by then there were still people still married to the Cold War mentality. I've written about, for example, in the Ukraine, Gorbachev was promised by Bush I that the United States would never support its puppet NATO moving close to their borders, which would be a direct threat just like if they moved close to Mexico or into Cuba, and when they started to do that, he complained, and they said, well, it's only a verbal statement, and of course, you see what almost happened in Georgia and certainly almost is happening in the Ukraine. Yes, there were definite vested interests. It's very hard to break that mentality. That we are one—USA, USA. And that's part of—whatever's left of me to write about and talk about is that we should only be involved when we're immediately and directly endangered, and that none of our current—and China, the future enemy, is not on my list.

**WOODS:** Well, nor on mine. Now, I want to know as somebody who has spent his life on the Left, but not as part of the liberal establishment certainly, which has not been good on war, contrary to popular belief, how do you respond when you see "Ready for Hillary" bumper stickers? This must enrage you.

**POLNER:** Well, I told my wife I get a little nauseous at times. You know, she's a hawk, or she'll be a moderate hawk like her husband who dodged—evaded the draft—and then when he was president, and of course, sent bombers over Belgrade and over Kosovo and so forth. There's nothing like people—take John Kerry, for example: the man who made his famous statement, "Who should be the last person to die in a war like Vietnam?" He said that in the Senate. He was a hero for the Vietnam Veterans against War. And yet he turned, to the extent that he—when you get into power, you take on the coloration of power frequently, and you have to make all sorts of compromises, which is a very good argument against it. So in answer to your question—what was the question?

**WOODS:** How do you assess this popularity of Hillary?

**POLNER:** I love to watch Bill Maher on television sometimes. Last night—Friday night, he said he hates the Republicans because they're all these home-front warriors, most of them, not Walter Jones or anything, but he also said that the Democrats by and large are so weak. My last two congressmen, somebody said to me let's form a picket line—this was during the Iraq war—out of their offices. I said they're so embedded. They're so involved. They are so pro-war, and even if they're not personally pro-war. My former congressman wrote me a letter. When I

protested he said, “My wife disagrees with me, and I have two sons who are of age,” and then when the war ended, at least more or less in Iraq, I wrote him a letter. He was out of office. He resigned and retired. And I said, “How long did your son serve in the military?” Never got an answer.

**WOODS:** (laughs) Of course you didn’t.

**POLNER:** So these Democrats—they are—I must tell you the Democrats have a progressive bloc in the Congress. A lot of them—but they’re not very powerful. Bernie, whatever his name was—

**WOODS:** Bernie Sanders.

**POLNER:** Sanders was on Bill Maher, very good, doesn’t stand a chance in hell. Bill Greider quotes, what’s his name, I forget—William Greider in the latest *Nation* quotes Alan Hunt—an old hand, a wise, old hand in the Washington press corps whose wife is one of the lead announcers on NPR Radio and TV. He said, “Jim Hunt could be Hillary Clinton’s worst nightmare.” I don’t know. Who knows what will happen. I do know that over the years, let me put it this way, as a left-winger more or less, I have become more and more libertarian in the sense that you and I agree on war and civil liberties and some of the heavy hand of people, not to say the federal government, but the way they operate.

I wrote for a wonderful publication. I had a column that just died—the newspaper—it was a watchdog on the *New York Times*—*New York Times Examiner*. And I wrote, for example, a series of articles on Obama, who I voted for twice. The second time I regretted. Obama—I voted twice—though he’s much better than the others. Obama’s violation of civil liberties and his attorney general, who’s now retiring, with their constant use of Woodrow Wilson’s outrageous 1917 Espionage Act. You know that, Tom, that he has used more indictments under the Espionage Act than every president combined throughout out history. Even John Adams when he had the Sedition Act didn’t do that. And he also has all of these crazy little rules they put in that federal workers have to tell on, spy on, their fellow workers if they hear something bad. I think of the old movies about the Nazis and the communists, people spying on their parents. So to that extent, we have to be very, very careful. The federal government is necessary, but not in that direction.

**WOODS:** Well, I don’t know if I’ll be able to persuade you otherwise on that, but I’m glad you’re going in that kind of direction, Murray. But, now look, I want to ask you this. It’s Veterans Day today, and it seems to me that things are getting weirdly more idolatrous every year in the incredible reverence shown to and compliments heaped upon the heads of veterans. I don’t know if there’s a phenomenon quite like this elsewhere in the world. Veterans get discounts, special privileges, every football game starts with some military celebration. It is everywhere. It suffuses the whole culture. Left and right have bought into it. You’re on an airplane. There are soldiers on the plane. You’re expected to clap. It is everywhere. Because without the soldier, you’d be speaking German or whatever it is. What is your response to that?

**POLNER:** Well, my response is twofold. One is that as a veteran, my wife still tells me to take out the garbage.

**WOODS:** (laughs) Good.

**POLNER:** And my grandchildren call me grandpa. However, I understand what they are doing. I agree with you—the over-militarization in the culture is impossible—it’s drowning. I know a lot of veterans, and not only Vietnam, but also some of the kids that went in and volunteered in Iraq, and they think it’s mad. They just live their lives, but this is one—it’s like remember those bumper stickers, “Support Our Troops”? Somebody made a lot of money on that.

**WOODS:** Oh, yeah.

**POLNER:** And what does that mean—support our troops? And secondly, there’s a culture of militarism here that’s come a-cropper. They haven’t won a war since 1945, unless you count the glorious conquest of Grenada and Panama. And it’s a guilt complex. I don’t know what it is. And liberals—they feel they have to join in, you know? The right wing—join in. What are they saluting? I wrote a letter—it never got published—they had—I’m a great baseball fan, and I love the Mets. And they always have Wounded Warrior Day, and I wrote a letter to the *Times* sports page. They didn’t publish it. And I said but they never mentioned why those guys were there and wounded, and what was the lie that brought them there. So I agree 1,000% with you. This is craziness that they have to go through.

And this used to be called Armistice Day, and Armistice Day celebrated the end of another horrible, horrible four years of war where some 50 million people were killed in the whole process and 100,000 American soldiers were killed. And this is all forgotten.

**WOODS:** Yeah, the change in emphasis is very clear and obvious.

**POLNER:** And there’s a very good article in today’s *New York Times* by a retired general, and he said, “How do you define insanity? You define insanity by doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” And that’s a perfect definition of insanity.

**WOODS:** Well, what did you think of that poll that found that most Americans supported the president’s move against ISIS, and most Americans didn’t think it would work? That’s insanity!

**POLNER:** I know. It won’t work. They do it just—Americans had the hysteria over Ebola and the hysteria over this thing and that thing, and ISIS. No one knows who ISIS is, and many of them came as a result of the failures in Iraq.

**WOODS:** Yeah, no doubt.

**POLNER:** So they’ll bomb, and they’ll bomb. Americans—these polls are reflective of only the immediate headline. They ask complex questions or they frame questions that are favorable to the responses. So I dismiss them. They are very confusing, but they are—the best poll was when Kerry and Obama and maybe McCain, I don’t know who else on the Republican side,

wanted to bomb Syria and support the rebels. No one knew who the rebels were, of course. And surprisingly, the British Parliament said no, and surprisingly the Americans said to their pollsters no. There's a certain point where Americans have a certain good sense—more of them—most of us, and that is endless wars threaten everything, including their own children. The volunteer army simply means that Americans don't want their kids drafted, and they sold a bill of goods to these kids who joined the National Guard or reserves, or came in because they had no other economic opportunities, or they were bored as teenagers, or whatever.

I remember enlisting in the naval reserves. I didn't know what else to do, and it was a nice \$10 a check a month or something. So I think the polls are not confusing. Tomorrow's polls may be different. To get back to your basic question, after 1945 and especially when the war ended and especially after the collapse of communism, it was a great opportunity. Gorbachev was the best Russian they would ever meet, and they failed. And because of all the interests—Washington—what's his name? I forget his name. He runs antiwar.com.

**WOODS:** Justin Raimondo?

**POLNER:** Yeah, he calls it the imperial city. It really is the imperial city—cloistered, cut off from the rest of the segregated black city, although many middle and upper class blacks have joined and are doing very well there.

**WOODS:** And separated economically, too. They are all prospering. Their salaries are very high—home values are high. They're doing great.

**POLNER:** In America?

**WOODS:** In D.C.—in the imperial city. They're all doing great.