

**Imagine**  
**A Deeper Look at John Lennon's Most Endearing Song**  
**November 18, 2017**  
**By**  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**

Thanksgiving is this Thursday, which means it's time to start talking about Christmas. I know this is so because I was at Target the other day and the signs and sounds of the Yuletide were already everywhere. And if we're going to skip the turkey, why not go *Cold Turkey*, and talk about John Lennon. (You have to be a real fan to get that pun.) All bad kidding aside, when I think of the late Beatle's greatest song, *Imagine*, I think of the holidays. I recall *Imagine* being chosen as the best song of all time in 2001, according to 50,000 readers polled by *The Observer*, but I think, when considering what it's about, *Imagine* is also the greatest Christmas song ever.

Just think about all the popular Christmas songs that dream of world peace, like *I'll Be Home For Christmas*, written in 1943, during World War II, expressing a soldier's wish to come home for the holidays, "if only in my dreams." Although *Blue Christmas* didn't become a holiday classic until Elvis recorded it in 1957, it was written in 1948, at the end of the War, and was remembered as such when Vince Gill recorded it 50 years later in 1998, accompanied by a music video in which he played an American soldier trapped in Belgium on Christmas Eve 1944, having a "blue Christmas" without his loved ones. The concluding words of the Jon Jarvis song, *The Greatest Gift of All*, offer "a silent prayer for creatures great and small, peace on earth, good will to men is the greatest gift of all;" echoing more classic songs like, *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, "Peace on the earth, good will to [all]," and, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, "Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." And John Lennon himself also wrote another Holiday classic, *Happy Xmas*, subtitled, *War is Over*.

For some reason, maybe one year ending and the promise of another, the waning of the darkness and the coming of the light, of warmer, brighter days, the symbolism of Spring, birth, renewal, and the hope a new child brings, a new way of doing things, happy times ahead, we cannot help but express these most ancient of yearnings in our Holy Day songs.

So this is Christmas  
And what have you done  
Another year over  
And a new one just begun  
And so this is Christmas  
I hope you have fun  
The near and the dear one  
The old and the young

A very Merry Christmas  
And a happy new year  
Let's hope it's a good one  
Without any fear

## Imagine

And so this is Christmas  
For weak and for strong  
For rich and the poor ones  
The world is so wrong  
And so happy Christmas  
For black and for white  
For yellow and red one  
Let's stop all the fight

A very Merry Christmas  
And a happy new year  
Let's hope it's a good one  
Without any fear<sup>1</sup>

These are profoundly moving sentiments. Still, I think *Imagine* is the best Holiday song, because it asks us to envision a world without all that causes of war to begin with, “no countries... no possessions... no greed or hunger... no religion... nothing to kill or die for... all the people living life in peace...” That’s the world I want. That’s the world I want to work hard this year to help create. *You may say that I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.*

But is that all it is, a dream? A figment of Lennon’s own imagination? Was he high? Was he hallucinating? Was he transcendently meditating when he wrote *Imagine*? Might we just as well believe in Santa Claus as to really think war will end and world peace will ever come? Maybe, but Lennon’s dream of a better world was taken seriously enough to make him a lot of enemies. Mark Chapmen, the gunman who killed him shortly before Christmas 1980, may have been Lennon’s most lethal adversary, but he was far from his most powerful.

You see, Lennon did more than just imagine world peace, he used his tremendous popularity to make it a reality. During the Vietnam war, for instance he initiated a national billboard campaign calling for the war’s end. He participated in and financed peace rallies and concerts protesting the war. In 1969 he said, “What would [Christ] have done if he had advertisements, T.V., records, films and newspapers? The miracle today is communication. So let's use it.” Lennon, who once bragged that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, used his popularity, fame, and his ability to reach millions through the media, to help make real the peaceful world he imagined.

In so doing, however, he incurred the wrath of his most powerful adversary, the President of the United States, Richard Nixon. Prior to the presidential election in 1972, less than a year after releasing *Imagine*, Lennon planned a national concert tour to protest the war in Vietnam, which meant he would be protesting the reelection of Nixon as well. This first came to the attention of the White House through a memo from the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, addressed to Bill Timmons, Assistant to the President, and copied to Attorney General John Mitchell:

Dear Bill:

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<sup>1</sup> *Happy Xmas (War is Over)* Written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, 1972.

Imagine

Find attached a memorandum to me from the staff of the Internal Security Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee. I am a member of the subcommittee as well as the full Judiciary Committee.

This appears to me to be an important matter, and I think it would be well for it to be considered at the highest level.

As I can see, many headaches might be avoided if appropriate action be taken in time.

With kindest regards and best wishes,

Very truly,

Strom Thurmond<sup>2</sup>

The memo attached to Thurmond's letter claimed Lennon was connected with:

Radical New Left leaders Rennie Davis, Jerry Rubin, Leslie Bacon, Stud Albert, Jay Craven, and others [who] have recently gone to the New York City areas. This group has been strong advocates of the program to "dump Nixon." They have devised a plan to hold rock concerts in various primary election states for the following purposes: to obtain access to college campuses; to stimulate 18-year-old registration; to press for legislation legalizing marijuana; to finance their activities; and to recruit persons to come to San Diego during the Republican National Convention in August 1972. These individuals are the same persons who were instrumental in disrupting the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968.<sup>3</sup>

The memo then concludes with the following suggestion:

The source felt that if Lennon's visa terminated it would be a strategy counter-measure. The source also noted the caution which must be taken with regard to the possible alienation of the so-called 18-year-old vote if Lennon is expelled from the country.<sup>4</sup>

A short time later, on March 6, 1972, the following reply was sent to Strom Thurmond:

Dear Strom:

In connection with your previous inquiry concerning the former member of the Beatles, John Lennon, I thought you would be interested in learning that the Immigration and Naturalization Service has served notice on him that he is to leave this country no later than March 15. You may be assured the information you previously furnished has been appropriately noted.

With warm regards,

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<sup>2</sup> Wiener, Jon, Gimme Some Truth: The John Lennon FBI Files, University of California Press, Berkeley and L.A., CA, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Sincerely,

William E. Timmons  
Assistant to the President<sup>5</sup>

Lennon fought deportation, however, and won. But the Government did not end its battle against him. The Nixon administration went on to illegally use the CIA and FBI to deal with Lennon in a covert Nixon reelection effort. Of course, none of this disturbing information became public until more recently, during the Clinton Administration, after the ACLU won a battle on behalf of historian Jon Wiener, who requested a look at the Lennon file under the Freedom of Information Act as early as 1981, shortly after the singer/activist's death. His initial request was denied under the claim that releasing the material would threaten national security, an excuse we hear often from our government.

After a long court battle, Wiener finally won the right to view, and subsequently make public much of the Lennon file, except for ten documents and a file said to have been destroyed by the FBI's Miami office. One of the arguments in favor of Wiener was this use of the CIA to investigate an individual in the United States, which is illegal according to the National Security Act of 1947 that prohibits the agency from conducting "investigations inside the continental limits of the United States,"<sup>6</sup> The Supreme Court agreed the CIA had abused its powers and ordered the files released.

One of the documents in the Lennon file, half of which was blacked out, had the anachronistic heading CHAOS. This turned out to be part of the CIA's illegal covert operation to conduct surveillance of domestic political dissidents. Operation CHAOS was exposed in 1976 by the House Subcommittee on Government Information and Individual Rights. The CIA director at the time, George Bush Sr., testified before Congress that, "the operation in practice resulted in some improper accumulation of material on legitimate domestic activities."<sup>7</sup> When the Subcommittee asked to view the list of those investigated by CHAOS, Bush suggested that all the information "improperly collected" be destroyed instead, which would have been illegal under the Freedom of Information Act.

Operation CHAOS was secretly housed in the basement of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, to keep its illegal activity from other CIA employees. Its office was surrounded in specially shielded vaults to prevent electronic eavesdropping.<sup>8</sup> Under Nixon, CHAOS was expanded to sixty agents who became, according to professor Wiener, the President's "primary source of intelligence about antiwar leadership."<sup>9</sup>

Keep in mind, however, the worst crime against Lennon was not that Federal Agencies illegally gathered information about him, but that they were also used to conspire against

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

him. After the first attempt to have him deported failed, the Feds realized they would have to catch him in a crime before trying again. On July 27, 1972 the Acting Director of the FBI sent a memo to all law enforcement agencies in Miami, where Lennon was expected to travel during the Miami Republican National Convention, stating:

Miami should note that LENNON is reportedly a “heavy user of narcotics” known as “downers”. This information should be emphasized to local Law Enforcement Agencies... with regards to subject being arrested if at all possible on possession of narcotics charge... INS has stressed to Bureau that if LENNON were to be arrested in US for possession of narcotics he would become more likely to be immediately deportable.<sup>10</sup>

Even without the destroyed Miami files, the ACLU had enough evidence to prove the FBI's abuse of authority, and in 1976, Senator Frank Church, Chairman of the Senate Select Subcommittee on Intelligence, and father of renowned Unitarian Universalist minister, F. Forester Church, said the FBI demonstrated a “pattern of reckless disregard of activities that threatened our constitution.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, unable to make headway on removing agitator Lennon from the country, the Committee to Reelect the President decided to conspire against the young dissidents he was agitating. G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt suggested they spend a million dollars to mug demonstrators at the Republican National Convention and abduct their leaders to Mexico. Attorney General Mitchell balked at the illegal and costly solution, only to agree to Liddy's plan B, breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters to plant bugs and photograph documents, which, of course, led to the Watergate scandal and Nixon's downfall. During the Watergate Hearings, the Lennon files were often used as the only evidence necessary to prove the disgraced President's abuse of power.

And all of this occurred, this little known piece of modern U.S. history, because some of the most powerful people on Earth were terrified of a guy with a little imagination. John Lennon was assassinated on his door step just a few years later, less than a year into Ronald Reagan's Presidency, but *Imagine* is still considered one of the greatest songs ever, and still makes us pause to envision a world without countries, or possessions, or religions, or greed or anything else worth fighting over. Just how dangerous could this dreamer have really been?

To answer this, we must do more than consider *Imagine* just a great song. We must see it as a real possibility. Firstly, calling for a world without borders, “no countries,” means no walls, no immigrants, no foreigners, no dominant world powers, no “underdeveloped” nations to be exploited by the “developed” world, a world in which we recognize, not a dream, but the reality, as Chief Joseph said, that, “The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it...”<sup>12</sup> It would mean a global society, a global government, and global democracy. Some may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'd say those stuck in the old paradigm of nation-states are the ones not dealing with reality. The only people on Earth who still think

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 289.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

the United States is an isolated nation are the people within its imaginary borders. The U.S. wields influence all over the world. It has more foreign military bases than there are countries on the planet. Our businesses have gone global. The workforce is global. Almost half our national debt, close to 7 trillion dollars, is owed to foreign countries, and, according to the Commerce Department, they also own more U.S. assets than Americans do, by the trillions. Today, the idea of America has become little more than a brand marketed to gain voter loyalty and limit the voices and rights of those most impacted by our government's policies and practices elsewhere. The reality, as I see it, is that we already are one world and one people, we're just not acting like it or thinking like it yet.

As for no possessions, I'd settle for a world in which we spread the wealth a little better, in which there is a just distribution of resources, in which the top 1 percent don't own everything, and the top 10 percent don't own just about all that's left, in which nobody must go hungry, or homeless, or have their environments destroyed because some greedy little pigs don't know when they've have enough.

I don't know if we'll ever be without religion, because it seems our nature to treat all our favorite ideas like a religion, be it the church we go to, our favorite sports team, or our political ideologies. Traditional religion is declining round the world, and atheism is on the rise, but our human need to find meaning causes us to often treat any belief we have like a religion, just as secular religions like nationalism, capitalism, communism have been treated. I say, let people hold, even express, whatever beliefs they have, but, as we have endeavored to do with the U.S. Constitution, let's not allow governments to influence or be influenced by religion or any other extremist ideology. Let's make that an international law in our global democracy.

Eliminating these things, countries, possessions, and religion, is what Lennon imagined it's going to take for us to also end war and poverty, and to truly establish peace on Earth and good will toward all. Just a pipe dream? If that's all it is, if it weren't a genuine threat to the *status quo*, I doubt if Lennon would have had the FBI, the CIA, and the President of the United States after him. So, as another year comes to a close, and we consider all we've done, all we've left undone, and all that remains to be done, I hope those of us who share Lennon's vision of a better world can take him at least as seriously as Nixon did. This year, instead of worrying about a bogus war on Christmas, let's bring an end to all war by bringing all our girls and boy home for the holidays. Let's take seriously the possibility of ending poverty, and greed, and racism, and sexism, and all the other ills that keep us apart and prevent peace on Earth. These may be dangerous ideas to some, but they aren't impossible. Some may say, he's a dreamer, but I know he's not the only one. I hope today you'll join us, and the world will live as one.