

War Is Just a Racket

for speaking pianist
text by General Smedley Butler

Kyle Gann
2008

War Is Just a Racket (2008)

When pianist Sarah Cahill asked me for an anti-war piece for an entire concert of such works, composer Brian McLaren had just alerted me to a wonderful 1933 speech by General Smedley Butler, called "War Is Just a Racket." Butler was a popular general who, in 1933, was approached by a bunch of plutocrats (including apparently Prescott Bush, father and grandfather of presidents) who wanted to stage a quiet coup, reducing FDR to a figurehead and setting up a government friendlier to Hitler and Mussolini. It was an attempt at a fascist takeover, and they thought with Butler on their side, the army would play along. Butler feigned interest for awhile, but after he'd gotten enough information, he marched straight to Congress and turned the bastards in. Apparently FDR agreed not to jail them all if they'd stand out of the way of the New Deal - and that's what it took to get the New Deal through.

The text is a speech Butler gave in retirement detailing his disillusionment with the purposes for which the U.S. Government uses its armed forces. I've come to think that political music is really only effective with text, and Sarah wanted a solo piece. So I borrowed the device that Christian Wolff used in his 1971 *Accompaniments for Frederic Rzewski*, whereby the pianist speaks the text at a normal pace, and chords associated with certain syllables are played along with the words, in a speech-determined rhythm. (My theater piece *Custer and Sitting Bull* was also indebted to *Accompaniments*, which seems to remain a pretty well-known work, even though Christian later disavowed its Maoist politics. As allergic as I am to all things military, this is the second time I've set to music words by a general.)

World premiere: March 12, 2009, Merkin Hall, New York City, by Sarah Cahill

Duration: 8 minutes

Text:

War is just a racket. A racket is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to the majority of people. Only a small inside group knows what it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses.

I believe in adequate defense at the coastline and nothing else. If a nation comes over here to fight, then we'll fight. The trouble with America is that when the dollar only earns 6 percent over here, then it gets restless and goes overseas to get 100 percent. Then the flag follows the dollar and the soldiers follow the flag. I wouldn't go to war again as I have done to protect some lousy investment of the bankers. There are only two things we should fight for. One is the defense of our homes and the other is the Bill of Rights. War for any other reason is simply a racket.

There isn't a trick in the racketeering bag that the military gang is blind to. It has its "finger men" to point out enemies, its "muscle men" to destroy enemies, its "brain men" to plan war preparations, and a "Big Boss" Super-Nationalistic-Capitalism. It may seem odd for me, a military man to adopt such a comparison. Truthfulness compels me to. I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service as a member of this country's most agile military force, the Marine Corps. I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major-General. And during that period, I spent most of my time being a high class muscle-man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.

I suspected I was just part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it. Like all the members of the military profession, I never had a thought of my own until I left the service. My mental faculties remained in suspended animation while I obeyed the orders of higher-ups. This is typical with everyone in the military service.

I helped make Mexico, especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank

boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested.

During those years, I had, as the boys in the back room would say, a swell racket. Looking back on it, I feel that I could have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.

To Sarah Cahill

War Is Just a Racket

Text by General Smedley Butler

for speaking pianist

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Impetuously

$\text{♩} = 100$

Piano

fff

fff

subito mf

War is just a racket. A racket is best described, I believe, as

p

something that is not what it seems to the majority of people.

Musical notation for the first system, featuring a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

Only a small γ inside γ group γ knows what it is about. It is con-

Musical notation for the second system, showing a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

ducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses

Musical notation for the third system, including a piano accompaniment with a complex chordal structure in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand.

I believe in adequate defense of the coastline and nothing else. If anation comes over here to fight,

Musical notation for the fourth system, featuring a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

$\text{♩} = 100$

then we'll fight!

The

Musical notation for the fifth system, including a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

trouble with America The trouble with A-merica The trouble with A-merica is that when the

Musical notation for the first system, piano accompaniment. It consists of a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The music features chords and single notes, with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) in the bass clef.

dollar only earns six per-cent over here, then it gets rest-less and goes over seas to get

Musical notation for the second system, piano accompaniment. It continues the grand staff from the first system. The melody in the treble clef has a long slur over several measures. The bass clef has a few notes and rests.

one hun-dred per-cent. Then the flag follows the dollar, and the soldiers follow the

Musical notation for the third system, piano accompaniment. It continues the grand staff. The treble clef has a series of chords. The bass clef has a few notes and rests. There is a time signature change to 4/4 at the end of the system.

ritard.....

flag

I wouldn't go to war again

as I have done, to pro-

Musical notation for the fourth system, piano accompaniment. It continues the grand staff. The treble clef has a few notes and rests. The bass clef has a few notes and rests. There is a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) in the bass clef.

tect some lousy investmen of the bankers There are only two things we should fight for.

Musical notation for the fifth system, piano accompaniment. It continues the grand staff. The treble clef has a few notes and rests. The bass clef has a few notes and rests. There is a dynamic marking of *obsequiously mf* (obsequiously mezzo-forte) in the bass clef and a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) in the bass clef.

One is the de- fense of our homes, and the other is the Bill of Rights. War for any other reason is simply a

Musical notation for the first system, featuring piano accompaniment with chords in the right and left hands.

♩ = 100
racket.

Musical notation for the second system, including a melodic line in the right hand and piano accompaniment in the left hand, with a *mf* dynamic marking.

Musical notation for the third system, continuing the piano accompaniment with various chordal textures.

There isn't a trick in the racketeering bag that the

Musical notation for the fourth system, featuring a melodic line in the right hand and piano accompaniment in the left hand, with a *f* dynamic marking.

military gang is blind to. It has its "finger men" to point out en- e- mies; its

Musical notation for the fifth system, showing piano accompaniment with chords in the right and left hands.

"muscle men" to destroy en - e - mies its "brain men" to plan war preparations

♩ = 100

and a Big Boss Super nationalistic Capitalism

It may seem odd for me, a military man γ to adopt such a comparison γ

♩ = 100

Truthfulness compels me to. I spent thirty-three years and four months γ in

active military service as a member of this country's most agile military force the Ma-

rine Corps. I served in all commissioned ranks from Second Lieutenant to Major General. And

subito p

Ped. *

during that period I spent most of my time being high-class muscle man for

Big Business, for Wall Street and the Bankers. In short, I was a racketeer,

f *f* *mp* *mf*

$\text{♩} = 100$
explosive

a gangster for capitalism

ff

I sus-pected I was just part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it.

p, delicate

Red. Red. Red. Red. *

Like all the members of the military pro-fession, I never had a thought of my own un-til I left the service.

Red. Red.

My mental faculties remained in sus-pended animation while I obeyed the or-ders of

pp

Red. *

♩ = 100

higher-ups. I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in nineteen fourteen

mp

p

I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the

mp

National City Bank guys to collect revenues in.

Musical score for the first system, featuring piano accompaniment with dynamic markings 'f' and 'p', and a triplet in the right hand.

I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the

Musical score for the second system, featuring piano accompaniment with dynamic marking 'mp'.

benefit of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. *with mounting intensity*

Musical score for the third system, featuring piano accompaniment with dynamic markings 'f' and 'subito p', and a change in time signature to 6/4.

I helped purify Nicaragua for the

international banking house of Brown Brothers in Nineteen 0-Nine to Nineteen Twelve

Musical score for the fourth system, featuring piano accompaniment with dynamic marking 'p' and a change in time signature to 7/4.

I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in Nineteen Sixteen

Musical score for the fifth system, featuring piano accompaniment with dynamic marking 'p'.

In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmo-

Musical notation for the first system, including treble and bass staves with chords and a melodic line.

lested.

During those years I had, as the

Musical notation for the second system, featuring a piano (p) section with a forte (ff) dynamic marking and various chordal textures.

boys in the back room would say, a swell racket. Looking back on it I feel

Musical notation for the third system, including treble and bass staves with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic marking.

that I could have given Al Capone a few hints The best he could do was to

Musical notation for the fourth system, including treble and bass staves with a piano (p) dynamic marking and a 'Ped.' instruction.

operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.

Musical notation for the fifth system, including treble and bass staves with a piano (p) dynamic marking and a triplet of eighth notes.

$\text{♩} = 84$

the two hands to be played with very different colors: the left legato, magisterial and distant, the right more sharply and mercurial, but still soft

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time, with a tempo of quarter note = 84. It consists of six systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first system includes a performance instruction. The score features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are several triplet markings (3) and a quintuplet (5) in the right hand. The left hand is characterized by sustained chords and moving lines, often with a legato feel. The right hand is more active and melodic, with some sharp accents and dynamic markings like *mf* and *sfz*.

The first system of musical notation consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef begins with a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4 and B4, then a half note C5. The bass clef accompaniment features a series of chords, including a triad of G2, B1, and D2, and a dyad of G2 and B1.

The second system continues the piece. The treble clef melody includes a quarter note C5, followed by quarter notes D5 and E5, then a half note F#5. The bass clef accompaniment continues with chords, including a triad of G2, B1, and D2, and a dyad of G2 and B1.

The third system concludes the piece. The treble clef melody features a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4 and B4, then a half note C5. The bass clef accompaniment includes a triad of G2, B1, and D2, and a dyad of G2 and B1. A dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) is placed above the final chord in the treble clef.

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