

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the highest military commander of the Netherlands, with troops stationed around the world,

I am honoured to be here today.

When I look around at this TEDxAmsterdam venue, I see a very special audience.

You are the reason why I said Yes to the invitation to come here today.

When I look around, I see people who want to make a contribution.

I see people who want to make a better world.

By doing groundbreaking scientific work.

By creating impressive works of art.

By writing critical articles or inspiring books.

By starting up sustainable businesses.

You all have chosen your own instruments to fulfil this mission of creating a better world.

Some chose the microscope as their instrument.

Others chose dancing or painting or making music.

Some chose the pen.

Others work through the instrument of money.

*(--- Soldaat komt opmarcheren met het wapen. CDS neemt het wapen aan ---)*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I share your goals. I too want to make a better world.

I did not choose to take up the pen, the brush, the camera.

I chose this instrument.

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I chose... the gun.

For you, being so close to this gun, may make you feel uneasy.

It may even feel scary.

A real gun.

At a few feet's distance.

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Let us stop for a moment and feel this uneasiness.

Let us cherish this feeling.

Let us cherish the fact that probably most of you have never been close to a gun.

It means the Netherlands is a peaceful country.

The Netherlands is not at war.

It means soldiers are not needed to patrol our streets.

Guns are not a part of our lives.

In many countries, it is a different story.

In many countries, people are confronted with guns.

They are oppressed, they are intimidated.

By war-lords.

By terrorists.

By criminals.

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Weapons can do a lot of harm.

They are the cause of much distress.

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Why then, am I standing before you, with this weapon?

Why did I choose the gun as my instrument?

Today I want to tell you why.

Today I want to tell you why I chose the gun to create a better world.

And I want to tell you how this gun can help.

*(--- Wapen neerleggen op de tafel in de spotlight---)*

My story starts in Nijmegen, in the east of the Netherlands, the city where I was born.

My father was a hardworking baker.

But when he had finished work in the bakery, he told me and my brother stories.

And most of the time, he told us this story:...

...The story of what happened when he was a conscript soldier in the Dutch armed forces at the beginning of the Second World War.

The Nazis invaded the Netherlands.

Their grim plans were evident.

They meant to rule by means of repression.

Diplomacy had failed to stop the Germans.

Only brute force remained.

It was our last resort.

My father was there to provide it.

As the son of a farmer, who knew how to hunt, he was an excellent marksman.

When he aimed, he never missed.

At this decisive moment in Dutch history, my father was positioned on the bank of the river Waal, near the city of Nijmegen.

He had a clear shot at the German soldiers who came to occupy a free country.

He fired.

Nothing happened.

He fired again.

No German soldier fell to the ground.

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My father had been given an old gun that could not reach the opposite river bank.

Hitler's troops marched on and there was nothing my father could do about it.

Until the day my father died, he was frustrated about missing these shots.

He could have done something.

But with an old gun, not even the best marksman in the army could have hit the mark.

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This story stayed with me.

Then, in high school, I was gripped by the stories of the Allied soldiers.

Soldiers who left the safety of their own homes and risked their lives to liberate a country and a people they did not know.

It was then, that I decided I would take up the gun.

Out of respect and gratitude for those men who came to liberate us.

From the awareness that, sometimes, only the gun stands between good and evil.

That is why I took up the gun.

Not to shoot.

Not to kill.

Not to destroy.

But to stop those who would do evil.

To protect the vulnerable.

To defend democratic values.

To stand up for the freedom we have, to talk here today in Amsterdam, about how we can make the world a better place.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I do not stand here today to tell you about the glory of weapons.

I do not like guns.

And once you have been under fire yourself, it brings home even more clearly, the notion that a gun is not some macho instrument to brag about.

I stand here today to tell you about the use of the gun as an instrument of peace and stability.

The gun may be one of the most important instruments of peace and stability that we have in this world.

Now this may sound contradictory to you.

But not only have I seen this with my own eyes, during my deployments in the Lebanon and Sarajevo, and as the Netherlands Chief of Defence.

This is also supported by cold, hard statistics.

Violence has declined dramatically over the last 500 years.

Despite the pictures we are shown daily in the news.

Wars between developed countries are no longer commonplace, the murder rate in Europe has dropped by a factor of thirty since the Middle Ages...

...and occurrences of civil war and repression have declined since the end of the Cold War.

Statistics show that we are living in a relatively peaceful era.

Why?

Why has violence decreased?

Has the human mind changed?

Did we simply lose our beastly impulses for revenge, for violent rituals, for pure rage?

Or is there something else?

In his latest book, Harvard professor Steven Pinker, and many other thinkers before him, concludes that one of the main drivers behind less violent societies is the spread of the constitutional state.

And the introduction on a large scale of the state monopoly on the legitimised use of violence.

Legitimised by a democratically elected government.

Legitimised by checks and balances and an independent judicial system.

In other words, a state monopoly that has the use of violence well under control.

Such a state monopoly on violence first of all serves as a reassurance.

It removes the incentive for an arms race between potentially hostile groups in our societies.

Secondly, the presence of penalties that outweigh the benefits of using violence, tips the balance even further.

*Abstaining* from violence becomes more profitable than starting a war.

Now, non-violence starts to work like a fly wheel.

It enhances peace even further.

Where there is no conflict, trade will flourish.

And trade is another important incentive against violence.

With trade, there is mutual interdependency and mutual gain between parties.

And where there is mutual gain, both sides stand to lose more than they would gain if they started a war.

War is simply no longer the best option.

That is why violence has decreased.

*(--- Opkomst kapitein ---)*

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the rationale behind the existence of my armed forces.

The armed forces implement the state monopoly on violence.

We do this in a legitimised way, only after our democracy has asked us to do so.

It is this legitimate, controlled use of the gun that has contributed greatly to reducing the statistics of war, conflict and violence around the globe.

It is this participation in peacekeeping missions that has led to the resolution of many civil wars.

My soldiers use the gun as an instrument of peace.

And this is exactly why failed states are so dangerous.

Failed states have no legitimised, democratically controlled use of force.

Failed states do not know of the gun as an instrument of peace and stability.

That is why failed states can drag down a whole region into chaos and conflict.

That is why spreading the concept of the constitutional state is such an important aspect of our foreign missions.

That is why we are trying to build a judicial system right now in Afghanistan.

That is why we train police officers, judges and public prosecutors around the world.

And that is why the Dutch Constitution states that one of the main tasks of the armed forces is to uphold and promote the international rule of law.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Looking at this gun, we are confronted with the ugly side of the human mind.

We are confronted with the horrible things humans do to other humans.

Every day, I hope that politicians, diplomats and development workers can turn conflict into peace and threat into hope.

I hope that one day, armies can be disbanded and humans will find a way of living together without violence and oppression.

But until that day comes, we will have to make ideals and human failure meet somewhere in the middle.

Until that day comes, I stand for my father, who tried to shoot the Nazis with that old gun.

I stand for my men and women, who are prepared to risk their lives for a less violent world for all of us.

I stand for this soldier who suffered partial hearing-loss and sustained permanent injuries to her leg when she was hit by a rocket on her mission in Afghanistan.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Until the day comes when we can do away with the gun, I hope we all agree that peace and stability do not come free of charge.

It takes hard work, often behind the scenes.

It takes good equipment and well-trained, dedicated soldiers.

I hope you will support the efforts of our armed forces to train soldiers like this young captain and provide her with a good gun instead of the bad gun my father was given.

I hope you will support our soldiers when they are out there.

When they come home.

When they are injured and need our care.

They put their lives on the line for us and we cannot let them down.

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I hope you will respect this soldier with this gun.

Because she wants a better world.

Because she makes an active contribution to that better world.

Just like all of us here today.

Thank you.

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