

War and Ending It

I always knew I would join the military. It was simply a matter of choosing the Marines or the Army. Growing up in the shadow of Fort Bragg and Fort Lee, in North Carolina and Virginia, I was highly influenced by the presence of the soldiers. I saw them everyday. Not just your regular run-of-the mill soldiers, Bragg is home of the Green Berets—the real John Waynes. In my mother's house we were taught God, Family and Country. These beliefs guided me to crave and need to serve. I still have the need to serve, but now I see that there is no place for war and I serve to bring humanity to a peaceful coexistence.

As military service goes, mine was relatively uneventful. I spent time in the Army Reserve as an enlisted man and, after Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), as an active duty officer. I served in combat during what many know as the 1st Gulf War; Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the 3rd of the 41st Artillery Battalion of the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division. But I was blessed not

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• Veterans For Peace

**“There is no way to peace;
peace is the way.”**
➤ A.J. Muste



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to have experienced the true horrors of war. I did not kill first-hand. I did not see the aftermath of a firefight, or the consequences of my battalion's artillery shells. I contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis, some in a more direct manner than others. But it was from a distance and impersonal. For every US combat soldier on the ground, there is a system of troops providing a host of services working together to destroy and kill. That is war; stark and naked violence.

Why Do We Walk the Road to War?

Of course there are the practical reasons why wars happen, to gain access to resources and to protect one's homeland. There are the base motivations of power and greed that drive what many call “the ruling class” who lead us to war. There is the belief that the patriarchal system is the fundamental building block for the social and political forces driving us to war. But none of these explain in full what allows humans to gather in large groups and attempt to kill each other.

I believe humans have a natural aversion to killing each other that must be overcome to participate in war. There is a process that conditions us to accept war. This process plays on a number of our basic instincts and uses our complex social and political systems to help us agree to war. There are three components to this process: the warrior myth, the creation of an encompassing identity myth and dehumanization of “the other.” One can take this process and overlay it on most any conflict between groups and see it at work, but let us look at the US to see why we walk the road to war.

The Creation of the Warrior

The creation of the warrior begins when we are children. Boys are taught that combat is the ultimate test of manhood. The female inclusive version teaches us that war

tests our mettle; our mental toughness and our ability to succeed. “Be All You Can Be,” “An Army of One” and, today, “Army Strong” are self-esteem-building catch phrases that convey this message. With this in mind, we are given the toys to practice war; the slingshot, the plastic sword, the bow and arrow, the repeating cap guns and machine guns with authentic sound. We are taught to play the role of the warrior with miniature replicas of combatants; a hundred green men to a bag or the multi-colored cowboys and Indians. The GI Joes, Transformers and various video simulations make the act of war possibly fun, exciting and tempting.

Still this is not enough to build a warrior. It takes more than toys and the TV screen. I believe a basic instinct of the human mind is to have a sense of meaning. Our

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Since the American Revolutionary War, the US has been involved in nearly two dozen wars that have resulted in millions of casualties.

society reinforces the acts we learn at play by giving the function of a warrior meaning. The purpose of the warrior is to serve. It is the opportunity to commit the most altruistic act; to make the ultimate sacrifice. The soldier is prepared to give one's life for family, tribe or country. This is the base of the ideal warrior. Called to serve and prepared to give all for little or nothing in return.

War as Part of Our Identity

The warrior's purpose is to protect the larger group. However, warriors do not go to war alone. A nation goes to war. The warrior must see the larger group or the protection of it worth the service and possible ultimate sacrifice. The group must believe itself worth the possible death of the warrior so that it will send its sons and daughters to the horrors of war. This meaning is provided by the identity myth. Every nation develops a narrative that provides an identity to its people. This identity binds the group members together and, on whole, demands a subservience to the will of the group for the glory of the group. The United States was

born in a struggle for liberation thus creating a national character of a people who hold in the highest regard the ideal of freedom and the acceptance of war as a means to attain it. Because this is so engrained in our national fabric, those that question the road to war are branded unpatriotic.

Dehumanization and the Creation of "the Other"

War is the ultimate example of dehumanization. In the rhetoric espoused before wars, the enemy is juxtaposed with the image and values of this myth and is always found wanting, alien and evil. Evil places the enemy beyond salvation and allows for easier dismissal of the killing of both the enemy combatants and innocent civilians. The deaths of millions are worth the sacrifice of ensuring that our manifest destiny is fulfilled. In my estimation, the creation and dehumanization of "the other" is the heart of why people are able to participate in war: "I, the warrior, must defend my group, my myth against you, the evil other. You are not

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Photo courtesy World March for Peace and Nonviolence

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Photo courtesy Christian Briggs

like me. You never will be and if there is a possibility of change it must be through violent redemption."

The Path of Peace

I believe that to travel the path of peace our efforts must work to accomplish many things, but the first is to end the use of war as a means to solve conflicts. I believe this task, which is also the mission of Veterans For Peace, is most central to achieving peace. The absence of war does not constitute peace. However, while I am not sure what peace looks like, I know there cannot be peace in the presence of war.

There is a growing world consciousness via religion, science and philosophy recognizing the unity of humanity. Herein lays a portion of a strategic framework to build a world free of war. We must clear away the artificial walls that lead to hate, indifference and greed. We must do this work both in domestic and international settings. Most crucial, we must do this work in our personal lives and spheres of influence. We need to engage in activities that connect people in efforts to help us to accept differences and highlight our common

humanity. These actions also build a sense of a collective destiny, therefore undermining the human tendency to wage war. These challenge individual societal identity myths and replace them with the truth of our human identity. Peace requires fundamental transformations. In how we see ourselves and others and peace, as an ideal, needs to be elevated and integrated into every facet of society and strategically planned for and resourced.

While it is true that there are millions of armed soldiers ready to do battle across the planet, there are also hundreds of thousands of organizations around the world with millions of people diligently working to bring about a vision of human cooperation. Most soldiers, just like most people, at their core want this too. Our most basic task as peacemakers and justice seekers is to cut through the politics of the moment with the undeniable truth of our common humanity so that over time a majority can see that it is in our universal interest as humans to live in a world free of war. Then we will begin to see what peace really looks like.

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