

Chapter 2

War

Anti-war activism on a large scale started with Vietnam and the need for military conscription to fill out the requirements of fighting a foreign war. The idea of a democratic government made up of “old” men forcing “young” men to go and sacrifice - occasionally even their lives - to participate in a war many didn’t believe in, trampled the ideals of justice and equality taught to the “sixties” generation by parents who fought against the tyranny and brutality of the German and Japanese war machines. These children grew up immersed in the belief that their parents sacrificed to provide them freedom but, as young adults, they came face to face with the reality that their freedom was at the convenience of those in power. In effect, the anti-war movement was precipitated by the rhetoric drummed into the post war baby boomers by their parents and grand parents generation. However, like most concepts based on rhetoric, they don’t tell the whole story - and in the face of a war that was broadcast nightly on television, the lies were difficult to hide. Thanks to advances in technology, the complexities and the hypocrisies of war became too available, and powerful, for the governments of the day to overcome. The war may have ended in defeat but the controversy will never end. Like most governments, the learning curve is sharp when it endures humiliation and changes are thereafter instigated to see it doesn’t happen again. The anti-war movement, in fact, all activist movements, have become subject to much increased scrutiny, and governments have worked hard at developing the necessary skills and resources to counteract domestic criticism. Under the present rules of governing it will always be a constant battle to find the truth when determining the realities of war.

War is an event where interpretation is everything. Kings, prime ministers, and presidents might say, “I just sent those troops over there to protect our interests - purely a defensive action, we are not at war.” When, of course, it quickly becomes obvious to anyone watching the evening news a war has already started, and people might as well be laying bets on when their fearless leader will announce that, “Our citizens have suffered a cowardly and brutal attack and we were forced to retaliate.” This happens so often it has become cliché. In the First World War the Germans fabricated French bombing attacks on Nuremberg before declaring war. In the Second World War Germany claimed people of German heritage were suffering atrocities in the countries on its borders so they had to rush in and defend them. On the surface no one goes into a war willingly, they are all dragged in, kicking and screaming their desire for peace. It was the other guy’s fault.

This is not to say that it's all hypocrisy, wars can be truly necessary and justifiable. It simply means that regardless of whether they are, or not, the general population is often resistant - particularly in the early stages as they discover the full extent of their commitment - and, therefore, they have to be duped into getting involved. Even the very hawkish United States stayed out of the First and Second World Wars for a couple of years until they experienced direct attacks on their sovereignty. Taking a combat role in either War was a tough decision for the US and, in hindsight, the First Great War in particular didn't offer any long term solutions to problems, or create any net benefits for the nations who fought - especially when you take into consideration that the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the First World War, played a large part in precipitating the Second World War.

World War II, on the other hand, had to be fought and won by the allied powers because it was a race war. If the Germans had won the Jews would have been eradicated... most likely followed by the Negroes and anyone else who didn't look Aryan. That's the problem with wars over racial purity. The proponents never stop until they either lose or everyone left standing looks like they do.

War is a very ancient and common phenomenon. There have always been wars since the beginning of civilization and even though we now live in a highly sophisticated and technological society we continue to have wars - lots of them - in spite of the well detailed reality that nothing damages a nation more than war. It kills our young people; some might even say the best of our young people. It puts at risk a large portion of our civilian population from various forms of attack. It empties our treasury and may leave us virtually bankrupt, even if we win. It brings about laws which restrict our freedoms, it gives enhanced and corrupting powers to our leaders, and it spreads a cloak of fear and paranoia over the entire population... and still we support our governments when they enter into a war. Obviously we believe they are necessary.

I personally believe that war, or the threat of war, is an essential part of international politics. For much of my life I couldn't articulate exactly why until, in my early forties, I read a book by Andrew Bard Schmoekler entitled "The Parable of the Tribes". It managed to sort out the confusing muddle of ideas I had been packing around.

The parable itself is about a group of tribes living in an area large enough and rich enough to support each tribe if they all wish to live in peace - and they all do - except one. One tribe is ambitious for expansion, even if conquest is the only option, so they attack a neighbor, kill its people, and seize their lands. Then they attack the next tribe, enslave its people, and seize their lands. A third neighboring tribe flees and settles into an area where the land is rough and difficult in an effort to avoid enslavement or death. Meanwhile, the remaining tribes are gearing up for war to defend against the aggressor.

All of the tribes except one wanted peace and as a result they suffered "destruction, absorption, transformation, withdrawal and imitation." Not one tribe remained untouched. As Schmoekler states, "no one is free to choose peace, but anyone can impose upon all the necessity for power... Power can only be stopped by power." Simply put, as long as one group of people in human society are willing to use violence and brutality to get what they want, the rest of us have to be prepared to fight and defend our families and ourselves. Whether this is happening in your neighborhood, your nation, or on the world stage, it is a simple fact of life that only the silliest of dreamers would try to deny.

The problem then becomes that even if we understand the necessity for an occasional war how can we know that "this particular war" is righteous... and when our politicians start promoting war how can we be sure it is for the reasons they state and not part of some personal or lobby group agenda? I know that sounds paranoid but I'm not a conspiracy theorist and I don't believe that our nations are run by clandestine committees seeking more wealth and power for themselves. What they are run by is politicians - who need an incredible amount of resources to get elected, and reelected, and when they finally leave the halls of power, through losing or retiring, they want a soft

landing because they've gotten used to a pretty good life. It is just human nature but it makes them vulnerable. We don't elect saints. Anyone who has been part of any election process knows you must sacrifice little bits and pieces of your integrity to win the support you need to gain office. The saints leave very early in the game. What remains are people who like being at the center of power and need a great deal of help to stay there and, thus, are very sensitive to the needs of those who give them help. War is an incredibly large and diverse industry and it is sometimes used to support other large industries. The pressure on political bodies to see a need for war can, at times, be intense.

President Eisenhower may have been one of the most boring presidents, or politicians for that matter, in the history of American politics but as I've gotten older my respect for him has grown by leaps and bounds. His war experience as Supreme Allied Commander placed on his shoulders a withering level of responsibility. He managed the high stakes juggling act entailed in keeping the allies on the same path leading to D-day, and then the battle across Europe into Germany... and then he ran for President and won twice at a time when everyone expected a nuclear war could start at any moment. As President for eight years during the Cold War Eisenhower sat at the very center of political power and as Commander and Chief of the armed forces which, as a man who had achieved so much in his military life, he understood better than anyone, he was, arguably, at the pinnacle of knowledge about modern war. Yet, disturbingly, his final message on leaving office was to issue a warning to the American people to beware of the "military-industrial establishment". It was a surprising message and some thought it particularly odd given his history. Still, before the succeeding presidential term was over the United States was at war again, with North Vietnam. From the perspective of time it's hard to imagine this was purely a coincidence.

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution is what created the U. S. war with North Vietnam and it was overwhelmingly passed by Congress in response to "unprovoked" attacks on the American destroyer, U.S.S. Maddox, occurring in the evenings of August 2nd and 4th, 1964, and perpetrated by North Vietnamese torpedo boats.

When Congress was informed on August 4th, by President Johnson, of these "surprise" attacks, they soon passed this resolution retroactively approving his retaliatory air strikes and giving the President authority "to take all necessary measures", including the use of armed force, as a means of protecting American lives and interests in that region. In effect, he was given the power to fight an undeclared war.

At the time there was much fist pumping and rallying 'round the flag especially when detailed reports of the attack hit the newsstands. As Time magazine described the assault on the Maddox:

The night glowed eerily with the nightmarish glare of air-dropped flares and boats' searchlights. For 3 1/2 hours the small boats attacked in pass after pass. Ten enemy torpedoes sizzled through the water. Each time the skippers, tracking the fish by radar, maneuvered to evade them. Gunfire and gun smells and shouts stung the air. Two of the enemy boats went down. Then, at 1:30 A.M., the remaining PT's ending the fight, roared off through the night to the north.

Richard Goodwin, a Whitehouse insider on the Johnson administration team, gives a different accounting from records he produced twenty-five years later in his insightful book, "Remembering America". He described the testimony of his colleague, Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara who supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, as a "calculated, egregious deception of Congress and, indirectly, the American people". Goodwin further informs us that:

Contrary to McNamara's assertion, there was no clear evidence that in the shrouded evening hours of August 2, there had been any attack at all... a quarter century later, voluminous research has been unable to demonstrate that there was... McNamara knew this when he testified, and lied about what he knew... Before and during the

“attacks” on our destroyers, South Vietnamese PT boats-directed by McNamara and [national security advisor McGeorge] Bundy-had been conducting hit-and-run raids against the North Vietnamese coast...Indeed, it is likely that the [American destroyers] had been sent to the gulf in order to create an impression of U.S. aggression that would provoke a “counterattack.” (Less than two weeks before the Tonkin incident, Johnson had anticipated that a “provocation” from North Vietnam might require a “response.”)

No attack - according to Goodwin, and others, most recently it appears, McNamara himself - and still the President and members of his cabinet felt it necessary to seek “retroactive” permission to wage war... and Congress “overwhelmingly” and immediately gave them that permission. Why did the President want a war and why did Congress so readily accede to his wishes? Goodwin suggests that South Vietnam’s corrupt and despotic government was about to fall to Communist insurgents and this would have made the United States look bad given the amount of military aid contributed to the South. Johnson, a Democrat, felt vulnerable to attacks from the “hawks” on the Republican side of the House. At the time he was trying to enact some far-reaching and enlightening domestic legislation and he apparently believed that if he looked weak on foreign issues it would impact his ability to pursue his policy at home. Members of his cabinet, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk, were very supportive and instrumental in Johnson following this course, spurred on with positive projections from the Joint Chiefs of the military.

As for Congress, they were presented with not just an emergency but a “retroactive” emergency. And the “facts” they were supplied with turned out to be highly suspect. Even so, to give open ended permission for a President to wage something as destructive and depleting as war was wrong. And, of course, a war that was begun to “save face” must be won, whatever the cost, because the future humiliation of losing rises with the investment.

As it turned out, approximately 50,000 American young men dead and hundreds of thousands more crippled and brutalized. Between three million and four million Vietnamese died and untold others had their lives destroyed. They are still dying fifty years later from unexploded mines and other ordnance. Is it really possible that this was all about party politics?

Today the United States is at War with Iraq. The American people were told it was a necessary war - America had been attacked by terrorists and the brutal and unstable Saddam Hussein supported world wide terrorism and had weapons of mass destruction. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, one of the most respected and trusted political leaders in his nation, went before the United Nations Security Council in February 2003 and presented evidence to support these “truths”, and shortly afterward the war began. These facts turned out to be not true either but by then the war was underway so... too late. In his book Scott McClellan, former press secretary to President George W. Bush, called the Whitehouse’s attempt to sell the war in Iraq a “political propaganda campaign”, and went on to say that the war “was not necessary”. The facts George W. Bush was putting before the American people every night on the national news were not true but he wasn’t lying because he “convinces himself to believe what suits his needs at the moment,” and, incredibly, he needed to attack Iraq.

Perhaps Bush didn’t like that Saddam Hussein had once threatened his father’s life, more likely it was the oil man in Bush seeing one of the largest oil reserves in the world shut off from America, or maybe he just needed to look tough on terrorism at a time when his hunt for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan was a failure. Probably it was some combination of all three, plus hype from the war hawks seeking glory and pallet loads of cash.

It’s been a decade since the war began and thousands more young people, men and women this time, have been torn from their families and buried with full honors and the regrets of their nation. Many thousands more have returned home disabled and left to muddle through life as best they can. Financially, it has cost trillions, which is unfathomable to most of us except that much of it is borrowed and, as a result, has left the United States on an

economic precipice. Each and every citizen is worth less than they would have been if no war had happened and facing a much less bright future... and all because a “Whitehouse” wanted to go to war - for its own reasons. “That can’t be!” you exclaim, “Our system is the best in the world. It wouldn’t allow such destructive abuses of power.” That may be a comforting thought but it isn’t necessarily so.

War is a gigantic machine... often the largest single industry in many countries. When a government believes it has the power to achieve its goals through brute force, and they enlist the most brilliant and beloved people in the land to spin a tale of patriotism and necessity, what really is stopping it? Just the citizens - you and me - unorganized, uninformed, with few resources and less leadership and, if we do muster up the courage to demand detailed answers to tough questions, we most likely will be branded as traitors. Yet, if we don’t, the people in government might make the most dangerous decisions in our nations history based on little more than their own personal agendas.