

**WE NEED A GOOD WAR**

**BY**

**JAMES MORSE**

**THE CHIT CHAT CLUB**

**OCTOBER 8, 1990**

## WE NEED A GOOD WAR

Presented to the Chit Chat Club

October 8, 1990

We need a good war!! Shocking Idea, isn't it. However, the United States has grown and prospered due to good wars which have been the true melting pot of our country's diverse population. Nations are held together over time by a religion, cultural background, or a shared experience. Good wars have provided this renewed cohesion to the United States, beginning with the Revolutionary War in 1776. Bad wars, of which we really have had only one, Vietnam, have had the exact opposite effect on the cohesiveness of the country. We are talking now about what is in the best long-term interest of the United States of America as a nation. It is only in times of a war or crisis that a democratic society thinks in terms of what's best long-term for the nation with less regard for the political complications of a democracy trying to meet all the self interest needs of its constituents--for better or worse. We normally think of the terrible cost of war in lives and material and believe that they should be avoided at all costs. For those who watched the Civil War series on television you have had a review of the destructive nature of war over even one hundred year ago. However, in considering war the whole emphasis is usually on the battles, killing and ruin left by wars. However, most wars are fought for a reason and it is important to examine if the benefits from the war were greater than the costs.

The first good war, of course, was the revolution in 1776 against British rule which created our nation as the United States of America. No other event could have bound the 13 colonies together as did the shared experience of wartime with military duty, danger and death. Prior to 1776, the colonies were made up of a diverse population comprised of immigrants, some whose families had arrived over a hundred years before, together with recent arrivals, many convicts and indentured servants. Each colony was only worried about its own survival and future prosperity. The southern colonies lived in a relative lavish style relating more to the royalty of Europe including a slave population to serve them; the northern colonies were a mixture of many cultures, but mostly English speaking people without assets who were escaping persecution in their native land. Although there was a small body of people, mostly southerners, who had a long-term vision of a nation on the American continent, it was not shared by most people of

the colonies, many of whom were still loyal to the British crown. In addition, the colonies were not self-supporting and relied on England particularly and others for many of the necessities of life. Each of the colonies was pursuing their own self-interest but not without problems. In fact, in the period prior to 1776 in many colonies there were economic grievances of the working people some of which had exploded in mob violence (one example of this unrest being the Regulators who numbering in the thousands and organized to prevent the collection of taxes were defeated in a pitch battle in 1771 with a number killed). For many years there had been land riots by tenants often times ending in violence and emphasizing the conflict between the rich and the poor. In other words, many of the colonies had internal problems that were preventing a look beyond their own borders.

Then the King of England pushed too hard in 1776 and a revolution erupted near Concord, Massachusetts that developed into an organized war with battles and a conclusion that we all know about. Obviously, the creation of the United States was the greatest benefit of this War. However, other benefits included a forced regimentation for the first time for many people into a more disciplined life with shaving and bathing regularly a new experience. The mixing of people of the different colonies in the military as officers and men from the north and south began the process of eliminating class distinctions and what would in time be called the melting pot of democracy. Army veterans became entrepreneurs after the revolution, being awarded land tracts west of the Alleghenies which began the western movement. A new business class arose as the colonies developed the skills and facilities to be self-sustaining, including starting a ship building industry. The industrial revolution and mass production had its beginnings from Eli Whitney's creation of machine tools to make rifles for the army. All these developments may have eventually come to be without the pressure of a war, however, it might have taken decades and it is very unlikely an independent nation as we know it today would have happened.

The human cost of the revolution was only about 10,000 total casualties from the fighting which represented about one-quarter of one percent of the total population of four million at that time.

The War of 1812 was another good war. As the nineteenth century began, President Jefferson completed the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The Embargo Act of 1807, aimed at getting even with the British for their seizure of American sailors, caused economic hardship for the working people and worrying about politics, President Madison's impatience resulted in the War of 1812. While this War itself was not a triumph of arms, it did have several beneficial results. Once again men from the north, the south, and now the west fought and died together in another shared experience or melting pot that was one more step in unifying the people of the nation. The War created a new confidence and enthusiasm in the destiny of the nation which had waned since the Revolutionary days. In addition, with a greatly improved transportation

system of roads and canals to the west built to facilitate the War it encouraged the increasing flow of immigrants to settle the country. This increase in the number of landowners was important in creating a more stable society offsetting for a time the growing conflict between the slave-holding interests of the south and the moneyed interests in the north.

The nation's cost in total casualties was about 5,000 men, or seven-tenths of one percent of the total population of seven million at that time.

The next good war was the Mexican War of 1846-47. An era of prosperity followed the War of 1812 as the nation developed world trade and grew as immigration to the United States continued. However, there was an economic crisis in 1837 that slowed economic growth and produced great hardship for the poorer people. Many were leaving the farms for the cities where the extremes of the rich and poor clashed. There were anti-rent riots, strikes for higher wages, a flour riot of 1837, and Protestant-Catholic riots as more immigrants came from Ireland. There was no broad middle class and the government did not respond to the crisis. The Mexican War was basically started by the United States as an expansionary move for more territory and it did enlarge the nation by one-third, including Texas, the southwest and California and finally settled the question of the nation's security by then controlling the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It also created a focus on the future of the nation away from the problems of the rich and poor. Once again it brought together men from various parts of the country to fight and die together and encouraged the westward movement of the population to seek their fame and fortune as entrepreneurs. The cost to the nation was much less than one percent of the population in war casualties.

The Mexican War opened up the far west for settlement and, soon, the discovery of gold in California in 1849. The War also resulted in a major expansion in economic activity within the United States. Capital flowed in from Europe for a number of years and speculation became rampant. The British and French wars and their increased colonization efforts began a drain of capital back to Europe and interest rates in the United States rose substantially ending in a financial panic in 1857 with a large increase in unemployment and hard times for the working population. Both political parties, Democrats and Republicans tried to blame the other for the financial disaster and hard times and tariffs became a big issue in protecting special interests from foreign competition. At the same time the politics of the southern slave-holding states and the northern abolitionists prevented Congress from acting effectively including the inability to pass legislation important for the development of the nation such as the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railroad Act and land grants to colleges universities. Also the growth of the west as slave states or free states became the major issue, not what was best for the nation. Due to the ineffectiveness of

Congress and the radical differences between the north and south the United States was facing the prospect of being split into two nations.

The Civil War ensued, a costly war in human terms by any standard known before or since. Nevertheless, the roughly one million casualties represented slightly less than 3% of the nation's total population. For that price the United States was preserved as a nation and slavery was ended. In addition, a major beneficiary, the Federal Government was greatly strengthened by the eventual passage of the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, the Morrill Act for funding colleges and universities, and legislation for a National Bank System. Before the War the south with its constructionist view of the Constitution and deep suspicion of federal power had blocked a wide range of liberal measures. Also, for better or worse, the progressive tax system was adopted. The War created a major leap forward in the industrialization of the United States. Sanitation and medical technology received a great step forward in the care and treatment for all kinds of diseases. The leveling effect on society of the bloody fighting experienced by people from all walks of life and station, including different national origins fighting together and against each other was important in achieving one more step to a classless society or the melting pot effect. Once again it can be said that all these major material developments could have taken place in time, maybe, and without such a cost; however, preservation of the nation could only have been accomplished in a civil war.

The Spanish American War of 1898 was not totally a good war inasmuch as its motive was imperialism. Although it did help the nation by adding territory and gave the United States world power status, a large part of the populist thought it was wrong to build a colonial empire. However, it did not create a major strain on the cohesion of the country but did follow the pattern of putting a stop to deteriorating domestic environment that had began following a financial panic in 1893 that increased unemployment leading to labor unrest. In 1894 over 750,000 people were on strike with major violence that was leading to political instability. The War made heroes and focused attention on the nation away from its problems. The cost to the nation was very small in terms of human casualties.

The twentieth century opened with the United States riding the crest of the industrial revolution. Economic power was being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and politics was dominated by party bosses and machines that corrupted all levels of government. These early years of century saw the beginnings of a reaction to the vast power held by business interests. In 1904, 300 trusts controlled over 40% of the nation's industry. The capitalists had become too powerful and the vast gulf between the rich and poor was increasingly stratifying society with a continuing flow of immigrants only exaggerating the disparities because the melting pot was not working. Jack London's book, "The Iron Heel," was only the beginning of a

movement advocating socialism as the only answer to redistributing the nation's wealth. The year 1907 witnessed a financial panic that only increased the hardships of the working man. Labor strikes became more prevalent and violent, bordering on a class rebellion. There were major strikes in 1912 in the textile mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1913 the garment workers in New York, and the Ludlow massacre by the National Guard in 1914 which was a true revolution with 69 men, women and children killed. The nation was almost paralyzed by labor violence, threats of class rebellion and a sense of malaise everywhere was growing. The free land and the frontier was gone, replaced by unemployment and hard times. Socialism increased with the IWW identified as the primary instigator. In 1910 the first member of the socialist party was elected to Congress. By 1913 there were 73 socialist mayors and the press spoke of "the rising tide of socialism." In 1912 Eugene Debs became a serious socialist presidential candidate. Legislation to improve working conditions and provide some form of workers' compensation although much discussed never became law due to the self-interest of politics with no thought of what was best for the nation on a longer-term basis.

Then came World War I, the war to end all wars. After an initial reluctance to get involved in European affairs, the United States joined the fray with great enthusiasm. As a good war should, it created a revival of patriotism and focused attention on the state of the nation. Close to five million men were under arms with a patriotic enthusiasm which became the real melting pot of unifying the people from every aspect of society -- rich, poor, immigrant and native born in a common cause that required a shared experience of death and danger. The vast increase in industrial production to fight the War contributed to building a larger middle class which was helpful for political stability. The pressure of war once again resulted in rapid increases in medical technology, aviation and industrial capacity for developing new products. The discipline and education learned in the armed forces were important in providing people with skills for future growth and advancement. In the best interests of the nation during the War, most all aspects of a workers' rebellion and socialism was suppressed, one way or another but not always in a democratic fashion. The previous intolerance of the rights of the poor and disadvantaged and now of the courts to dissenting opinions during the War led to an eventual improved federal court system. Concern for the veterans after the War resulted in the first aspects of the modern state with responsibility for managing the economy and for taking care of the veterans with welfare and disability payments. During the War legislation was passed that did finally provide for workmen's compensation and finally recognizing some of the rights of the working man. The human cost for revitalizing the country and the attention of the people on the nation in addition to the material benefits was less than one-half of one percent of the total population at that time.

After the War, as we know, the twenties were a period of great prosperity. However, this ended with the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression in 1932. One cause of this disaster was the special interest groups getting favorable tariff protection that limited international trade which was certainly not in the best interests of the nation. As before with financial crashes, a slowdown in business activity increased the problems of the working people and widened the gap between the rich and poor. Violent strikes, veteran marches and political corruption began dominating the country's politics. In addition to socialism, communism also became popular as an answer to solving the problems and redistributing the nation's wealth. In 1936 Earl Browder ran for president on a communistic ticket with Norman Thomas on the socialist ticket. Despite the economic reforms that President Roosevelt had introduced including the minimum wage and social security, as late as 1938 there was a hopelessness about the future of America as a nation that would not go away and class tensions and anger were rising. In 1936 there were 48 sitdown strikes and, in 1937, 477, with the National Guard having to be called out to deal with a General Motors strike. In the 1936-37 period over half a million people at one time or another were on strike, many uncontrolled, with violence in some cases including 10 killed alone in Chicago at Republic Steel. In 1938 two million people were on relief with the Federal Government facing for then a major budget deficit. The problems of dependency and deprivation were so overwhelming in the 30's and the future so bleak that the nation's population growth came to a halt. Even in 1940 the socialist and communist parties were still attracting an increasing number of followers in the presidential elections.

December 7, 1941 and World War II galvanized the country into action and developed a patriotism and feeling of national unity that was a social cement that brought all the various factions together for the sake of the nation in a way we now remember with great nostalgia. Not only did the general population benefit from the industrial growth to fight the War, but the cause of women was much advanced by the sharing of equal jobs on production lines. In addition, the traditionally excluded groups such as blacks and the handicapped finally broke into the industrial revolution. The scientific fallout of the War is well known with atomic energy, electronics, major advances in medicine and medical technology plus high-technology industries and new production methods that would never have been possible in a peace-time economy. The armed forces in which over 18 million Americans served, representing the greatest proportion of the population ever, again was the real melting pot to bring the people of the nation together to reduce class tensions and consciousness. Over half of the veterans received the GI bill of rights which had a major impact on accelerating the growth of a prosperous middle class in the post-War period. Certainly everyone not in the armed forces did benefit from this good War with high wages and forced savings for future needs. Since the beginning of the century, the gap of well being between the top one-fifth and the bottom one-fifth had been widening. For the first time in this period the gap

narrowed due to the War as well-paid jobs became available to all willing to work. From the nation's standpoint the human cost in United States War casualties of over one million, while a staggering number, was still less than one percent of the total population. As important as the material benefits was the healing effects of the War on the nation's psyche, making a nation of individuals feel as one for a time, a profound and priceless experience.

The Korean War was not a good war, but its effects were not very harmful to the nation although its cost in human terms was very close to the war that followed. The Vietnam War was a very bad war for the nation. While the military life brought together people from all aspects of society again there is no question that there was an over representation of poor blacks and so there was nowhere near the same melting pot effect as previously. The lack of a military victory together with a general preception of ineptness on the part of military leadership negated most of the shared experience benefit. The impact on the nation was a devastating polarization of society to extreme radical positions that was derisive for the nation and bordered on real political instability.

Now let's look at the situation today. Congressional politics appear locked in a conflict of the Federal budget over how much to spend on the poor and how much to tax the rich that has stopped, as of today, the Government from functioning. No one seems to worry about what would be best for the nation as a whole, because continued major Federal deficits will lead to financial disaster and destroy the country as we know it. We are entering a period of financial difficulties and an economic slowdown which will increase the problems and needs of the working people and create tensions that will certainly lead to unrest and political instability. There is an increasing feeling of discouragement that the country cannot solve its problems of drugs, violence, racial discrimination, homeless people and the environmental challenges. If this drift continues there will be thoughts that a different form of government may be necessary to deal with the situation because the present one is not. Will it take a major crisis or a good war to make everyone focus their attention on the best interests of the nation. Is the cost in human terms worth the benefits of strengthening the nation? Is the concept of a nation important? Are its interests different than that of its people?

The current Middle East crisis began just as I was finishing the outline of this paper. I am not prepared to say that a war with Iraq would be a good war, but it is amazing how earlier this year we were beginning to believe that wars were obsolete. Now does a war come along just as we need it?.



## MEMBERS' COMMENTS

- David Kennedy: USA has had a unique war experience, unlike other countries.
- Will Hamilton: No morality in saying there is a good war.
- John McCosker: Environmental concerns overlooked, also opportunity loss from killing at early age best and brightest.
- Richard Prescott: Oxymoron - good war.
- Elmer Wheaton: Something must unify the nation.
- Kevin Starr: Frightened by how easy we are talking about war, hears war drums beating.
- A. Lyon: Hitler called his wars good wars.
- Tom Jukes: Overlooked effect on families, many of the benefits would have come about without a war.
- Jack Steppin: Strikes were beneficial, socialism has come anyways, the Cold war was a good war.
- Bob Gordon: Wars fought because of the efforts to protect trade advantages.
- Henry Evers: "Gross," wars are unthinkable, lost a brother in WW II.
- Rolly Warner: '54 in Vietnam, women would have a different view.
- Hilgard Sternberg: Negative reaction, value judgment of wars better.
- Bruce Bolt: Good and bad wars too simple, just wars better phrase.