The State of Our Democracy: We're Gonna Study War No More
Harry C. Boyte, Augsburg University, Prospect Park UMC
St. Luke's Presbyterian Church, August 20, 2020

Today I want to talk about a hidden source of democracy's troubles: War fever. It pervades public life, polarizes, stirs up hate toward the "enemy" and diminishes ourselves, and fuels a search for great leaders to save us. The war mentality also affects activities like sports, games and movies, while it drains energy from democratic practices like voting and shrinks democracy. The spiritual, "Ain't gonna study war no more," sung by Louis Armstrong¸ is for our times. We need to study democracy, not war, building a culture of collaborative work. Voting gains power if we see democracy in larger ways, as We the People democracy where government is "with" the people. I conclude with stories of this emerging movement.

War Fever

Last March, Freedom House, a think-tank that studies democracies around the world, described trends in the US attributed to fragile ones: "pressure on electoral integrity, judicial independence, health care and safeguards against corruption, rhetorical attacks on the press, the rule of law, and other pillars of democracy coming from American leaders, including the President himself." The institutions of democracy are in trouble in this election. We also need to remember that expansion of voting rights in the 1960s depended on widespread practice of nonviolence, refusal to hate even segregationists, an approach which John Lewis embodied.

Triple crises followed the Freedom House report -- Covid-19, economic decline, and surfacing of racial injustice in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. Climate change looms over all of these. In *After Virtue,* Alaisdair MacIntyre observes, "I can only answer the question, 'what am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'of what story or stories do I find myself a part.'"[1] Societies are shaped by the stories they tell about themselves. For a long time, our

society has been telling war stories. These undermine our ability to act on the crises facing us and weaken our democracy. As Ali Oosterhuis, a brilliant young organizer and former student of mine, puts it, her generation has never known an alternative to war language.

On March 18, President Donald J. Trump proclaimed himself a "wartime president" battling the coronavirus.[2] The Surgeon General declared that Covid-19 is a modern Pearl Harbor or a new 9/11. Democrats, too, rallied around the metaphor of war. Susan E. Rice, Barack Obama's national security adviser from 2013 to 2017, wrote in an April 8 editorial for the *New York Times*, that "Mr. Trump is correct: This is war, the most consequential since World War II." Rice expressed no confidence in Trump's fitness to be commander of what she called "the viral version of World War III." But she was certain that the crisis demanded the aggressive leadership and command and control approach associated with war.

On every side, there is war fever about the coming election. Trump claims that Joe Biden is the puppet of the left wing. His election would bring rioting in the streets and destroy the suburbs. Many on the left charge that Republicans are fascists.

The killing of George Floyd surfaced the military mindset which afflicts many police departments. After a second killing of a black man, Rayshard Brooks, in Atlanta by police on June 13, 2020, Representative Hank Johnson, a Black congressman from Georgia, named the problem: "There's a need for a cultural change in the police departments across the country. We need to stem the warrior mentality." Black activists had long been making the point.

The war mentality has roots in the last century's wars. These reinforced technocratic reformers who imagine society is best transformed by science and technology and run by disinterested experts. For instance, contributors to the leading journal, *The New Republic,*

argued World War I demonstrated that "scientific method, the careful application of administrative technique" should be used to solve all sorts of public problems. As one put it, "The business of politics has become too complex to be left to the pretentious misunderstandings of the benevolent amateur." Pope Francis' climate encyclical *Laudato Si'* makes the case that technocracy has become dominant in governance across the world.

The Depression years surfaced a "We the People" view of democracy as an alternative to war. The public work of people in the New Deal built communities as they built public goods. But World War II, Vietnam, Iraq, and other conflicts returned a war mindset with a vengeance. Attacks on activists in the 1950s McCarthy period was paralleled by war against integrationists in the South. When I was 12 in 1958, I came into our room in Atlanta and saw a cross burning on our yard. My dad, manager of the Atlanta Red Cross, had started a group to keep public schools open, opposing segregationists' efforts to close them. His name was in the paper. In the next week we had 150 threatening phone calls.

A war mindset pervades movies, video games, and sports. It is also pervasive on both left and right. We've had wars on drugs and crime, targeting poor and minority communities. We've also had wars on climate change and racial injustice targeting conservatives.

As Trygve Throntveit and I show, the Green New Deal is framed as a war-like mobilization. A vivid example of this was *Disruption*, the promotional film for the New York People's Climate March of 2014. The film claimed the legacy of the civil rights March on Washington in 1963, but *Disruption* bore little resemblance to the message of the March, developed by the movement's master strategist Bayard Rustin. Rustin's deep nonviolent commitments included the principle that one must understand where opponents are coming from, not demonize or humiliate them. Rustin framed the March *not* as a polarizing protest but

rather as an effort to "win over the middle." A third of the nation was behind the goals of the

movement. A third was opposed. Most Americans were focused on their own concerns. Martin

Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which I heard him practice in the room next door to my

father's hotel room (my father had just gone on staff as an executive assistant to King)

embodied the strategy. The marchers did as well, embodying nonviolence as they walked with

dignity, calmness and determination. Many had learned nonviolence in hundreds of grassroots

citizenship schools across the South, where people developed literacy, agency, nonviolent

discipline, and confidence. I worked in this program of King's organization.

If the narrative of *Disruption* had followed the message of the March, it would have

included business owners, Pentagon officials, Evangelical Christians, Midwestern civic leaders

piling sandbags along river banks, and others from outside progressive ranks. Instead, the film

presented the movement as a battle of good guys against evil doers.

There are parallels in today's efforts to address racial injustice. A google search for the

phrase "war against racism," in quotes, turned up 905,000 hits last Thursday, August 13. The

demonstrations in the wake of George Floyd's death helped to clarify for millions of Americans

of European descent how much they live in bubbles that hide realities of African Americans'

experience, a crucial awakening. But the *war* mentality in addressing racial injustice creates

"us" (the woke) versus "them" (the bigots). Terms used by anti-racists to label other whites and

often themselves such as "white supremacy" are well-intentioned, but ineffective"[3] Moreover,

the focus on what's wrong with Whites creates a narrative in which European Americans see

Blacks as victims, learning little about their intelligence, creativity, and contributions. In a report

to be published this fall, *Beyond the War Metaphor,* I tell stories all Americans should know

about like the amazing revitalization of Cochran Gardens, an inner African American city public housing project originally controlled by drug dealers, led by Bertha Gilkey as a single mom.[4]

New technologies spread the mindset of war. War-like language is employed in robo-calls, internet mobilizations, talk radio, social media, and campaigns. An *NBC News* report in 2016, "How Big Data Broke American Politics," details the increasingly polarized campaigns and politics over two decades. "Polarization isn't new, but it's definitely worse than it was 20 years ago," they write. "And thanks to technology and the manipulation of demographic data, those charged with the setting…of American politics . . . have conditioned the country for a more permanent polarized atmosphere." My students describe how "cancel culture" – seeking to erase the memory of those who say the wrong things – is pervasive in social media. The war mindset divides the world into good versus bad. It ignores the profound complexity of the person. It fuels a search for saviors. It shrinks democracy. What can we do?

Verses one and two from Louis Armstrong, "Ain't Gonna Study War No More"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ih3kVkk5_Q

Democracy is more than elections

First, we need to emphasize that democracy is a way of life, not simply elections, though I want to that stress voting and fair elections are crucial. The Freedom House list of "pillars of democracy" all relate to government. This is the pervasive view of democracy. For all their differences, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump defined democracy as elections. This is conventional wisdom. The United States Agency of International Development spreads his definition: "Democracy refers to a civilian political system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular competitive elections with universal suffrage."

By way of contrast, the idea of democracy as an empowering way of life was at the heart of the civil rights movement, a hope animated by nonviolence and belief in the immense, unseen capacities of everyday people. Vincent Harding, a close friend and speechwriter for Martin Luther King, expressed this view. "The civil rights movement was in fact a powerful outcropping of the continuing struggle for the expansion of democracy in the United States," he wrote. "It demonstrates . . . the deep yearning for a democratic experience that is far more than periodic voting." Septima Clark, architect of the citizenship schools, described the aim as "broaden[ing] the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepen[ing] the concept to include every relationship." Here are two hopeful "civic silver linings" of the crises:

Government 'With' the People

A public-oriented work ethos in which government is the partner of the people – what David Mathews calls "democracy *with* the people"[5] -- was suggested by Lincoln's famous phrase, government "of the people, by the people, for the people." It survived into the next century through efforts of civic leaders like Jane Addams, whose Hull House settlement house for new immigrants inspired settlements across the country, who believed immigrants bring immense talents and energies to American democracy. Settlements included 14 in the Twin Cities, the first organized by Mt. Zion Temple for Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe.

Belief in the talents and intelligence of people without degrees or credentials also found expression in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the Great Depression. When President Roosevelt called for a Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, the aim was to address "forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control and similar projects" of stewardship. He also proposed such work would "pay dividends to the present and future generations" of the nation.

"More important than its material products," he said, "would be the moral and spiritual value of such work" to those who performed it—for themselves, their families, and the common good."

The CCC embodied public work, cooperative effort that created things of public value. Over a decade, more than three million CCC participants planted two billion trees, created thousands of fire towers, public campsites and recreational facilities, and built hundreds of thousands of miles of roads still in use today. When Nan Kari and I interviewed CCC veterans in the 1990s they described vividly the sense of civic contribution they developed, which infused their subsequent work. CCC alumni groups in every state brought families and friends back to see the sites of their public creation.[6] They were sources of life-long pride.

The concept of government support of community-driven change and public work is reappearing this year. In the early 2000s, program evaluators at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that, in solving discrete problems *for* rather than *with* communities, expert health professionals could leave communities more vulnerable in the long run if they displaced community efforts. When the coronavirus struck in 2020, the CDC commissioned a report in this vein, *Thriving Together: A Springboard for Equitable Recovery and Resilience in Communities Across America.* A project with more than 100 contributors, Springboard has the goal of "all people and places thriving." It aims "to leverage the immense resilience in America's communities" in order to fulfill the founding commitments for work undertaken in the name of We the People." The report argues that "our tendency to over-rely on expert-led, technocratic responses often disempowers people, squanders resources, and is itself part of the problem." It proposes policies supportive of public work, including a new CCC:

> A nationwide Community Commonwealth Corps would build on America's long history of public work, repairing the lives, businesses, community organizations, churches,

infrastructures, and other common goods decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the decades of neglect, civic erosion, and racial injustice the pandemic has revealed.

Free spaces

Sara Evans and I developed the concept of free spaces from our experiences in the civil rights movement, where interracial relationships developed in settings like religious youth groups and beauty parlors beyond control of the white power structure. Searching for other examples, we found free spaces as wellsprings of democracy throughout American history. Free spaces are settings where people develop respect through relatively egalitarian and sustained interactions, learn the talents of people far different than themselves, and develop capacities for nonviolent purposeful work across differences.[7]

From 1996 to 2015, a partnership called the Jane Addams School for Democracy illustrated the power of free spaces in the Twin Cities. Organized by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, the College of St. Catherine, Neighborhood House, descending from Hull House, the Jane Addams settlement, and immigrant leaders, it brought together immigrants from Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Central and Latin America, with students from Twin Cities colleges and European American adults.[8] Jane Addams School's principle was that "everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner." Its orientation session taught high achieving, individualist, upwardly mobile college students coming to participate that they were not doing service projects to "help the needy." Many had experience with our youth civic empowerment initiative called "Public Achievement," which develops young people's civic agency as they work in teams on public work projects of their choosing. These experiences had strong effect, as I saw among my students at the University of Minnesota. They prompted sometimes profound reflections about the meaning of

success, the importance of family and community, and the nature of democracy, with immigrants often serving as the teachers. Meanwhile immigrant young people, caught between the culture of elders and pressures of American education, found they could integrate contending messages. "I don't have to choose between being Hmong and being American," said one. "I am Hmong-American." Learning pairs, story circles, cultural exchanges, and projects like a national campaign for passage of the Hmong Veterans' Recognition Bill created a vibrant culture of discussion and public work.

Since the 2016 election, a depolarization movement called Braver Angels has been spreading free spaces across America where people push back against the war mentality. In June, 2019, it held its second annual convention in St. Louis, Missouri. Equal numbers of Republican and Democratic delegates participated, 130 from each side and from every state. Participants included Hawk Newsome, president of New York's Black Lives Matter, and Ray Warrick, a leader of the Tea Party in Cincinnati.

David Blankenhorn, founder of the Institute for American Values, had long worried about deepening polarization in the country. After the election in 2016, he enlisted David Lapp, a colleague in Ohio, to organize a meeting between Trump and Clinton supporters to see if any common ground could be found. They called William Doherty, director of the Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota, who had translated public work approaches in which regular citizens are at the center of problem solving into family therapy. Doherty crafted a workshop to allow participants to "bring their best selves forward, listen to the other person, not get into arguments, and reflect on their contribution to the problem."

All participants – 10 Trump supporters and 11 Clinton backers — at the end agreed to a statement that read, "A number of us on both sides began our meetings convinced that the

other side could not be dealt with … We say unanimously that our experiences of talking with rather than at or about each other caused us to abandon our belief." After a broadcast on National Public Radio with Doherty and two participants, one "Red" and one "Blue," communities across the country asked for similar meetings.

Out of these efforts came Braver Angels. The organization has grown rapidly, with more than 11,000 members, active programs of song writing, debates, communications media, and sixty local alliances. It has generated a remarkable series of discussions and public forums on "race in America," among Blacks of different views. These include Black Lives Matter leaders like Newsome. They also include conservative-oriented leaders like Bob Woodson, a former civil rights veteran claiming "1776 values" of equality, who works with Cochran Gardens and other inner city communities to build community strength and overcome social atomization. BA shows the potential for engagement across divides on racial justice through a nonviolent approach. Its methods for one and one meetings between blacks and whites and now developing, a conversation among whites of different partisan views, are proving extremely effective. Here's the link https://braverangels.allsidesconnect.com/conversation_guides/

Braver Angels is active in 50 states and has sixty local affiliates. Efforts teach deep listening skills, break down stereotypes, develop respect, and find common ground where it exists. The ideas is taking hold that "We the People" need to be at the center of democracy. As John Wood, an African American and eloquent champion of nonviolence, describes the aim: "To weave and re-weave the social fabric of this nation, even as our politics threaten to tear it apart." The platform declared BA's intention "to renew our trust in one another and build our civic muscle," striving "for the 'beloved community' of Dr. Martin Luther King." This year, Braver Angels has undertaken a nation-wide initiative called "With Malice Toward None" to create a

"we the people" counterforce to threats of greater division and even violence around the
election on November 3, 2020, which I'm involved with. The site reads, "We the People will
have both the opportunity and the responsibility to seize the post-election moment by bringing
many Americans together in our faith communities, civic groups, and colleges." I invite you to
join. Here's the link https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/with-malice-toward-none/

Democracy workers, not justice warriors, will free our energies and spirits for the work
ahead. Springboard and Braver Angels can help us get there, creating free spaces where we
form working relationships across even sharp differences. The BA song by Donna Jon-Baker,
"United States of Humanity" suggests the path forward https://vimeo.com/434527617.

---

[1] Alasdaire MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 279.

[2] The history of the war metaphor is from Harry C. Boyte and Trygve Throntveit, "Rethinking the Green New Deal: From War to Work," in Craig Calhoun and Benjamin Fong, Eds., *The Green New Deal and the Future of Work*.

[3] Daniel Bergner, "White Fragility Is Everywhere. But Does Anti-Racist Training Make a Difference?," *New York Times* magazine, July 15, 2020.

[4] Boyte, *Beyond the War Metaphor: The Work of Democracy* (Dayton: Forthcoming, Kettering Press, 2020). The story of Gilkey and Cochran is told in "60 Minutes" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwKBlrVy39E

[5] David Mathews, *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea* (Dayton: Kettering Press, 2020).

[6] See Harry C. Boyte and Nan Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), esp. 29, 109; also Melissa Bass, *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2013).

[7] See Sara Evans and Harry Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

[8] Nan Kari and Nan Skelton, Eds., *Voices of Hope: The Story of the Jane Addams School for Democracy* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).