

# War is the Health of the State

by Bill Herbst

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The phrase, "*War is the Health of the State*," was first penned by Randolph Bourne in an unfinished essay he wrote in 1918, in response to World War I. Bourne was a radical American social critic whose life was cut short in 1919 by the influenza pandemic. The phrase, now part of the standard lexicon of both the far left and far right (especially among Libertarians), has come to be interpreted in light of defense contractors who profit from military expenditures, and who thus lobby — either passively or actively — for war. That's a significant topic worthy of discussion and debate, but it's not the subject of this commentary.

Bourne's original meaning for the phrase, "*War is the Health of the State*," was focused on the moral disintegration of a culture caused by mass warfare. His interest was that individuals normally concerned with the regular, day-to-day, functions of institutions and governments during times of peace, descend into a kind of unconscious patriotism (or jingoism) when their countries go to war. Bourne was concerned with the loss of individual independence when people surrender to irrational fealty to the State.

In the 20th century — correctly dubbed "the American Century" — America participated in two global wars: World War I, which President Woodrow Wilson called "the war to make the world safe for democracy," and World War II, to defeat the scourge of Nazi fascism. We emerged from those global holocausts as the reigning superpower in the world. Those were the last wars America fought against other "white people." Since then, all the countries of northern Europe have been our friends. America's military excursions around the world — both overt and covert, in what amounts to perpetual war — have occurred in areas and nations inhabited by "people of color" (i.e., those with darker skins). America spends far more on its military than any other nation — \$600 billion (which doesn't include trillions that have gone missing inside the deep security state).

Since the very beginnings of European colonization of the western hemisphere, the culture that eventually became America has been profoundly bellicose. Juxtaposed strikingly against the ideals of peace and lawfulness, a deep thread of violence and domination has always run through our society's myths and memes. Whether in the concepts of "manifest destiny," the "Monroe Doctrine," or the more sweeping "American Exceptionalism," we've claimed the right to dominance, not only in our existing territory and spheres of influence, but also

far beyond them. Originally, that meant the North American continent, but quickly expanded to include the rest of the Western Hemisphere, and finally encompassed the entire world. Our "outreach" was achieved in part through diplomacy and the export of culture, but very often through military excursion (i.e., the violent application of force to fulfill our aims). Our national interest — otherwise thought of as national security — seems to recognize no boundaries.

We've entered an age where "war" has gone beyond its past meanings. Once limited to military conflicts pitting one group against another — nations, societies, and cultures — war now includes the State turning on its own people. That was true of Stalin's Soviet Union in "The Great Patriotic War" against Nazi Germany, and it is increasingly true in 21st century America. In a society that has disintegrated into tribalism, with its politics in shambles and public trust in institutions at an all-time low, the American state has begun to eat its own.

Witness the violence in Florida on February 14th. Ho-hum. Another day, another school shooting — this time killing 17 high school students and teachers. In the wake of that murderous spree, all the usual platitudes were dragged out: condolences and prayers for the families that lost loved ones (mostly children). But will any substantive legislation be considered or passed to prevent future tragedies? Not likely, despite the surviving students from that Florida high school and around the country having organized a powerful protest against senseless gun violence.

Why? Because the whole issue of gun control is off the table. First, guns have always been sacred in America. Estimates vary, but perhaps a third of American households owns guns. And yet, a mere 3% of Americans owns more than half of all the guns. Taken as a group, the tens of millions of gun owners live in rural more than urban areas and are frequently single-issue voters — focused on the fear that their rights to buy and own guns will be abridged or that their guns will be confiscated. They are active and vocal in their unqualified support of the 2nd Amendment and constitute a political force.

Next on the list of reasons that gun control is a verboten subject in Congress is the sad fact that, as a culture, America cares about profits more than people. The New Deal sense of the common good ("we're all in this together") that provided a balancing check on selfishness is mostly gone, almost completely replaced over the past 40 years by attitudes that favor utter self-aggrandizement ("I got mine, so screw you"). Owning guns may be sacred in America, but making a buck any way one can is now the ultimate sacrament. The weapons industry is simply too profitable to be even modestly reined in. In addition, the NRA (National Rifle Association) that shills for the industry is a powerful lobby that Congress hasn't the spine to challenge. More guns is their answer.

The AR-15 assault rifle and others like it, with their high-velocity bullets, are the weapons of choice for mass murderers. Unlike hand guns, assault rifles are

designed to kill rather than wound. And yet, the NRA refuses to support a ban on the sale of assault rifles to the public. Allowing anyone who can pass a background check to purchase these military weapons is sheer madness. But the powers-that-be in America are fine with it.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the Parkland massacre, President Trump floated the idea of arming teachers (those who are “proficient with guns”) inside schools, as a “deterrent.” Oh yeah, that’s a great idea (not). Trump has also proposed ending food stamps and substituting delivery of food packages to needy families. Not fresh, healthy food, but canned and processed food of the lowest agri-business quality. Think Spam.

The American government is waging war on its own population, and whether that’s children gunned down in schools or disadvantaged families offered unhealthy food doesn’t matter.

Are the Republicans to blame for all this? Of course, but the Democrats are too. Politics has always been a dirty business, but now it’s a virtual cesspool. No, the problem is not simply our elected representatives, but our entire system. Our hyper-complex society has become unmanageable and perverse. We don’t run it; it runs us. When I was born in 1949, the population of America was 150 million. Now it is more than twice that — 320 million. The entire landscape looks and feels different. Wealth disparity was moderate when I was young, held in check by many different factors in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Curiously enough, big corporations (such as GM and U.S. Steel) were back then a source of maintaining a more level playing field, since a decent corporate job represented a gateway to the middle class. Go figure.

Most of those leveling factors are now long gone. They’ve been rejected, supplanted, and replaced by a reactionary neoliberalism that has encouraged the most extreme wealth disparity ever seen in America. Around the world, dire poverty has been significantly reduced. Not here, though. America is now literally a society of relatively few Haves and many more Have-Nots, where the top 20% enjoys riches and privilege, while the bottom 80% struggles to get by. And it’s getting more extreme, not less.

As the situation worsens, more and more Americans feel betrayed, abandoned, and ignored, and that includes more than just those in the bottom half of the economic pyramid. American culture is now so depraved that even many of those among the “winners” who are technically well-off are being driven mad. The American Dream has devolved into the American Nightmare.

At one level, Trump’s victory in the 2016 election was the direct result of the rage millions of Americans feel. The fact that Trump is a despicable snake-oil salesman who lies his ass off and cannot fulfill anything he promised (except the destruction of the government) may be tragic, but it’s understandable that he

was able to seduce and enthrall enough voters in the right states to win. Half the country (including not just the white lower classes, but socioeconomically better off white Americans as well) was completely fed up with the erosion of their status, and the combination of anger and fear they felt was a toxic brew that the Democrats failed to account for and didn't come close to understanding.

Would a "blue wave" in the 2018 midterm elections remedy what ails us, if the Democrats win back a majority in the House and perhaps even the Senate? I doubt it. Both parties are completely in thrall to the financial clout of special-interest lobbyists and wealthy donors. Corporations and industries write the laws and dictate what they want, and elected representatives do their bidding.

The conflicted tribalism that now divides the population is a convenient sideshow to distract us from the real battle we need to wage, which is getting the influence of Big Money out of politics. And that, dear friends, is not on the agenda. The wealthy elites have not only the money and power to support their rule, but an entire neoliberal philosophy that rationalizes their privilege (namely, that the rich deserve to be rich). Believers in that perverse morality include millions who are not members of the royal club of wealth (but would like to think that they too have a shot at joining, which they don't, mostly).

I've written plainly over the past year about my increasing pessimism concerning our collective future. While the looming prospect of mass suffering is truly dreadful, I worry that humanity in general and Americans in particular have neither the will nor the sanity to correct what ails us, or, at least, to pull back from the disastrous course we're on. Individually, human beings are often well-intentioned, smart, and loving. Collectively, not so much.

Much of the burden of saving America and the world from our own worst impulses now falls squarely upon the shoulders of our young people, basically the two most recent generations: *Generation Y (also called Millennials)*, born 1977-1995, and *Generation Z (also called iGen or Centennials)*, born 1996 and later. Millennials are now in their 20s or early 30s, and iGens are moving into and through their adolescence. My generation (Baby Boomers 1) and the two that preceded mine, The Silents and the GIs, embodied some admirable qualities in their youth, but all three have displayed a conspicuous lack of long-term wisdom, and we've left these young people with one hell of a mess.

Many of the surviving students from the Florida high-school shooting will be able to vote in 2020, along with millions of others from their generational cohort. Perhaps they can make a difference.

I wish them luck.