

# Collective Mobilization

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*Mobilization* has two dictionary definitions. The first applies to the military:

*the action of a country or its government in preparing and organizing troops for active service, usually the readiness for war.*

This is the kind of mobilization that has occurred periodically throughout American history. The second definition is more general:

*the action of making something movable or capable of movement, or to have people and resources ready to move or act.*

That definition applies to the urgent need for a mass movement to address disruptive climate change.

Military mobilizations conform to the most basic level in human programming of Us-versus-Them, that of threats to our safety from literal or potential attacks by other human beings. Our safety and security is at risk, and we mobilize our forces to combat an enemy. Mobilization unifies Us by galvanizing our collective sense of purpose, usually through territoriality (defense of home) or patriotism (love of country) to do whatever is necessary to end the threat by defeating Them.

Even beyond the obvious event of war, that's the most common way to energize, unite, and impassion any group we consider Us — by identifying Them as an enemy. Conflicts, differences of opinion, or divergent goals that previously may have divided Us tend to dissolve when the whole group is threatened. Merely identifying the enemy (Them) is not enough. The in-group (Us) must actively want to go to war. We must respond to the threat with forceful aggression (hatred helps achieve this). It takes two to tango — an enemy (Them) and the passionate resolve in Us to defeat or even obliterate Them.

Those in power — whether rulers, policy-makers, or other elites — do not choose to go to war on a mere whim. They understand very well that public support is an absolute necessity, both before and after mobilization. 100% unity of support among the population isn't required, but majority support is, and it can't be lukewarm. The emotional state of the public in affirming the war needs to be red-hot, even if a minority continue to demur. Obviously, closer to 100% public

support is better for those planning the war, since it gives them the appearance of doing the public's bidding, thus confirming their belligerent authority.

America's armed military conflicts during the Cold War in Korea and especially in Vietnam didn't maintain a critical mass of unified public support. The Korean War, undertaken so soon after World War Two, ended in stalemate. The Vietnam War had moderate public support during the initial years, but, as American military casualties mounted and the war became more and more a quagmire with no clear victory in sight, that approval faded by the late 1960s. However steadfast the war's supporters remained, they were in the minority, and the American government faced a rising tide of increasingly tumultuous public opposition. The final result became inevitable — an ignominious defeat for America, not because we had insufficient military power, but because the American public had no stomach for what it would have taken to win.

In both World Wars of the 20th century, America was initially divided about whether or not to participate. Many Americans were extremely reluctant to see our country pulled into what they considered "European" wars. Three years went by both times before America entered those global conflicts.

Much of the changing sentiment among the public had to do with triggering events that galvanized our passionate resolve to fight. In World War One, the Zimmerman telegram and the attacks on America's fleet of merchant ships due to Germany's aggressive policy of unrestricted U-Boat sinkings were the catalyzing events that finally caused President Wilson to abandon the pretense of American neutrality. In World War Two, the surprise Japanese attack on the American fleet at the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii was more than enough to enrage the American public.

Conspiracy buffs believe that triggering event on December 7th, 1941, to have been a "reverse-false-flag," maintaining that President Roosevelt, the military, and the government either knew or should have known that the Japanese attack was coming, but they allowed it anyway, anticipating in advance the public response. I doubt that's true, but the end result was that the American population responded overwhelmingly with a unquenchable passion for vengeance and retribution. Yes, anti-war factions existed within America throughout the war, but as a decided minority. Overall, the American public was never more unified in its resolve to achieve victory.

What that support allowed was something the Nazis and Japanese had not believed possible. Both Axis nations regarded America and Americans as decadent, unsuited to, and no match for the ferocity of their own warrior cultures. What they failed to anticipate, however, was the scale and speed of America's total mobilization. Seemingly overnight, America reconstituted its wealth of natural resources and vast industrial capability from peacetime pursuits to the production of war materiel. Factories that had produced automobiles,

refrigerators, and other consumer goods were converted to cranking out massive numbers of guns, munitions, tanks, and aircraft. Our shipyards built battleships, aircraft carriers, merchant vessels, and landing craft seemingly non-stop, and with staggering efficiency. Americans willingly rationed everything, from gasoline to rubber to butter. The Home Front overwhelmingly supported the troops. This was a national commitment like nothing else in our history. And yes, that mobilization was finally the event that pulled America by its bootstraps out of the 12-year malaise of the Great Depression, showing what common cause could achieve. Along with the extraordinary human sacrifice of the Soviet Union, this unprecedented American mobilization won the war for the Allies, in both Europe and the Pacific.

To have even a chance of forestalling or ameliorating the worst effects of catastrophic climate disruption, we need a similar mobilization in America and around the world. Nothing short of a total human commitment will suffice. Most of the reports published by environmental organizations thus far have been watered down in their analyses and predictions. To some extent, that has been because the hard science of climate change was gearing up, still uncertain of its own modeling, and is only now advancing rapidly toward the unavoidable conclusion that our situation is much, much worse than previously assumed. To a larger extent, however, scientists and organizations feared that dire predictions would frighten the public, and that urgent warnings might be too much for an American populace already suffering bad news fatigue. They wanted to avoid the Chicken Little and Boy Who Cried Wolf scenarios. So, rather sounding the alarm, they've erred on the side of caution — way too far on that side, I fear.

That time is passing very quickly, but not quickly enough. Business-as-usual, Politics-as-usual, and Life-as-usual still continue, with all their standard narratives. Heaven forbid that anything should get in the way of our hyper complex society's commercial, profit-focused engines. The increasing number of extreme weather events — tornadoes, floods, fires, storms, droughts, heat waves, etc. — are reported as if they were disconnected, simply random anomalies. The subtext of disruptive climate change is mentioned only in passing, if at all.

Part of what stands in the way of collective mobilization is the galvanizing effect of a single, shocking event, such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Climate change is an incremental emergency, a long, slow build-up of changes. Worsening climate was so subtle in the 20th century that we hardly noticed it, except for air pollution, Superfund toxic sites, and the hole in the ozone. These first two decades of the 21st century have sped up that process in ways that are both measurable and visible (melting oceanic ice caps, retreating glaciers, and bare mountain tops that were once snow-covered year round). Once critical mass is reached and the methane feedback loops kick in, however, that slow change is likely to accelerate dramatically, but that hasn't happened yet. As long

as the virtual reality of screens — TV, computers, notepads, and smart phones — keep us distracted and entertained, we still cling to the illusion of normalcy.

Another factor blocking collective mobilization to address climate, and the one I think about most often, is the Us-versus-Them dynamic. Ordinary, social mobilization occurs because “Us” is threatened by “Them” in a clear and obvious way. Once They are identified, meaning that the enemy becomes apparent, then We can and do unify to protect ourselves. The most obvious example of that process is in war.

Addressing climate change is not, however, a war. There is no clear and obvious “Them” against which we can rally “Us” into unified togetherness and resolute commitment. To put it bluntly, in the case of climate disruption, Them IS Us. How do we unify Us when We are also Them? Over my lifetime as an American, the war metaphor has been applied to various efforts at social engineering — the War on Poverty, War on Drugs, War on Crime, War on Terror. Results from those efforts have been less than successful, and often abject failures.

Are we going to wage a War on Climate? That doesn’t make any sense, except that’s essentially what we’ve been doing for the past two centuries. Few people thought of it that way, of course. What we believed we were doing was improving on Nature, making life better for Us. We assumed that Nature would be able to suck up whatever we did, and that may have been true for awhile, but not ultimately, and sure as hell not on the scale of our current human activity. We just weren’t wise enough to see what was happening and where it would lead. So now we’ll be forced to wise up. That may be a challenge beyond the abilities of our species, or any species. Do cancer cells realize that their success in proliferating will cause the death of their host, thus insuring their own demise? I doubt it. Do humans realize that by messing with Nature the way we have we’re destroying the life-support system that underpins our survival? Not so far.

To mobilize effectively we’ll have to come up with a different metaphor than war. Or, better yet, perhaps we should dispense with metaphor entirely and just face the hard facts, without any pithy slogans or cute catchphrases. What we have to do is change the way we live by sacrificing the known, accustomed, and expected. Economics, industry, agriculture, travel, consumption — all these have to be overhauled and recreated in ways that are less damaging to ourselves and our world. We wouldn’t do that by choice, so we’ll do it because we have to.

Future human generations (if, indeed, there are future generations) will differ from us in that they probably won’t prattle on about “freedom.” No longer will people be “free” to do whatever the hell they want, regardless of the impact on others. Freedom will have been replaced by necessity. Democracy may also be gone, but that doesn’t have to be a bleak, dystopian future.

It just means that we’ll have to pull together to survive.