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Mankind needs to end the wars that have ended so many lives

By Lionel Traubman

When I was a Boy Scout in the early '50s, I would volunteer on Memorial Day to guide bereaved families to the graves of their dead sons in the Veterans' Cemetery in West Los Angeles. The visitors were at the same time proud and mournful, and somehow my being there meant a lot to them. Maybe it was my uniform or just a timely helping hand. I seemed to be an important support for the moment, perhaps a substitute for a lost son.

It was a powerful and important experience of my youth, helping people and seeing the incredible grief felt by every family that lost a son or daughter, spouse or parent, by premature death in the violence of war.

I vividly remember the thousands of headstones going in all directions into the distance as far as my young eyes could see. It was my first profound experience of the collective grief and terrible price of war.

Until then, I had somehow thought that most soldiers survived and returned home to resume normal lives. My mother's five brothers had all come back from World War II safely. I had their trophies of war – German swastika armbands, uniform decorations, and medals – in a special drawer in my bedroom. My uncles were my heroes, and I had imagined that all victors came home able to begin again, to resume the lives they had left. Only later did I learn how many survivors, both winners and losers, are physically crippled and emotionally scarred.

As a teenager, I still concluded that war was useful, necessary, acceptable, and inevitable – the ultimate arbiter of people's differences. Most people thought so. I would watch "Victory in Europe" and "Victory at Sea" whenever they reappeared on television. I was proud of the American persistence and grit. I still am.

Entering dental school in the early '60s, and preoccupied with my own personal goals and education, I was hardly aware of the war and social concerns of the time. I even remember agreeing with Barry Goldwater that perhaps massive bombing and more napalm should be dropped on Vietnam, to end the misery and win the war.



Today, twenty-five years later, as a father and children's dentist, my view has changed. I have developed a strong desire to do something about bringing an end to war. The time is right – the obsolescence of war has become obvious. In today's military approach, death comes to more civilians than soldiers. The method has nothing to do with bravery or principles. In the long run, nothing is settled.

Caring for my young patients, I often wonder if it makes sense to work so hard to improve a child's health while most of our fragile economy and scientific genius is so devoted to building the weapons of destruction. As a health professional, I am keenly aware that any nuclear war, by accident or design, means the possible extinction of all life. Non-nuclear wars, at best, mean continued human suffering and depletion of precious resources – \$2 million a minute to arm the earth – money that could be used to cure human disease and suffering. At worst, some say inevitably, even small wars will eventually involve the superpowers in an atomic catastrophe of mutual suicide.

Today, more than ever before, I believe it is time to reject violence and demand negotiation. It is time to see that no amount of money for war, no ultimate weapon or technological "shield" against missiles can save "us" or "them". The many wars being waged in the world right now are not solving anything. They only lead to more poverty, ignorance, disease, resentment, and, sooner or later, other wars.

This Memorial Day, I have added new images to my early memories from the Veterans' Cemetery. As I have travelled, I have seen that all nations have their fields of dead soldiers. The collective grief of past wars is overwhelming, as is the misery caused by today's widespread violence, and the daily fear and anxiety that adults and especially our children carry about a future that is in grave doubt. We owe our children a stronger, saner sense of tomorrow. We owe them their future.

When I was a Boy Scout, there were very few atomic weapons. Since then, everything has changed – everything. I cannot put out of my mind a line from Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance*: "Either war is finished or we are."

The greatest memorial to war is to end it.

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