The Moral Equivalent of War?

Wilfred M. McClay

This past spring and summer found the Obama administration consumed with image management and damage control in response to the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Early attempts to direct attention away from the White House in the wake of the accident proved unavailing, and subsequent efforts to show that the president was fully in charge of the response did not seem to move the public. The stakes were high: No one in the administration needed to be reminded of the grievous political damage that had been inflicted on the presidency of George W. Bush in 2005 by the perceived inadequacy of his response to Hurricane Katrina.

Eager to avert the same fate, Obama sought in mid-June to link the gulf disaster not with Katrina but with the other great calamity of the Bush years—the one that had galvanized the public and caused Americans to rally around their president. The spill, Obama told Politico on June 11, “echoes 9/11.” The bizarre comparison—likening an intricately planned, murderous assault by a foreign enemy to an entirely unintentional industrial accident at sea— sparked immediate controversy. But Obama was not deterred. Four days later, on June 15, in front of a cheering audience at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, the president declared: “This is an assault on our shores, and we’re gonna fight back with everything that we’ve got!” That evening, he delivered a televised prime-time address to the nation from the Oval Office—a practice normally reserved for occasions of great moment, such as those involving matters of war and peace—and informed the American people of his “battle plan” to fight the spill.

Even before that speech was over, however, it became clear that Obama’s employment of the analogy of war was intended to advance

Wilfred M. McClay is the SunTrust Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.
an agenda far broader than simply addressing the crisis at hand. As the speech progressed, its emphasis moved from the assault on our shores by the gushing oil to the need for America to “transition away from fossil fuels” and “jumpstart the clean-energy industry” (by, among other things, enacting cap-and-trade legislation to limit carbon emissions). It seemed that the president had made a calculated decision to emphasize the crisis atmosphere surrounding events in the gulf, hoping that it might create an opportunity to advance his stalled legislative agenda.

The use of the analogy of war for such a purpose is hardly unique to Obama. It has been a remarkably common trope of presidents — especially presidents on the left — for the better part of a century, often called upon when liberal ambitions have run into resistance from the American constitutional system, or the American public.

**THE MODEL OF WAR**

Obama’s response to the oil spill illustrates just how deeply ingrained martial analogies in the service of non-military policy goals have become in the liberal imagination — since the language of war does not otherwise come easily to this president. Even when discussing the missions of soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan under his charge, Obama rarely speaks of fighting through to victory the way he did about the cleanup in the gulf.

That general aversion to war talk surely reflects the outlook of Obama’s generation of liberal intellectuals, whose anti-military worldview is a standard product of the elite-academic demimonde. But this aversion has not diminished their willingness to speak of other causes as analogous to war, in the sense that these enterprises are worthy of great sacrifice yet also free of the moral taint of actually fighting and killing for one’s country. This was a distinction perhaps best articulated by President Jimmy Carter in a 1977 Oval Office address — an address that was, as it happens, devoted to the need to find alternatives to oil. “Our decision about energy will test the character of the American people and the ability of the president and the Congress to govern,” Carter told the nation. “This difficult effort will be the ‘moral equivalent of war’ — except that we will be uniting our efforts to build and not to destroy.”

Other presidents have made similar appeals — calling for a war on poverty, or a war on drugs, or on cancer, or childhood obesity. Such appeals have occasionally been employed by the right (especially in the
case of the “war on drugs,” a term first used by Richard Nixon in 1971), but far more frequently and more extensively by the left. The search for what William James in an influential 1910 essay dubbed “the moral equivalent of war”—that is, a shared objective that can elicit the same willingness to sacrifice, and the same disciplined and purposeful ethos, as military conflict does, yet direct them toward entirely peaceful purposes—has informed most Progressive efforts to build a comprehensively organized and morally purposeful nation. From Edward Bellamy’s captivating vision of America as a marching industrial army (articulated in his 1888 novel, *Looking Backward*) to contemporary attempts to cast economic, social, public-health, or environmental problems as the moral equivalents of war, the linkage of war imagery with the cause of social reform has popped up too often in left-leaning thought to be dismissed as a fluke.

The war metaphor was most noticeably present in the rhetoric of Depression-era politics. Its use began when the Great Depression did, in the surprisingly Progressive-influenced speeches of President Herbert Hoover, who liked to compare the struggle against the economic downturn to specific battles of the First World War. But as historian William Leuchtenburg argued in a 1964 essay on the subject, the analogue of war was nowhere more prominent than in the language of the New Deal. It was common for New Dealers to point to, and draw upon, the unprecedented coordination of industry by the War Industries Board—the federal agency created in 1917 to organize the provision of war supplies—as a favorable precedent for the massive federal intervention into the economy that they wished to bring about. They also tended to invoke the admirable spirit of cooperation and solidarity that the wartime effort had inspired in the American people, citing it as evidence of what was possible even in peacetime with sufficiently enlightened leadership. Indeed, in creating the Civilian Conservation Corps—the public-works relief program established in 1933 to employ jobless young men—President Franklin Roosevelt predicted that “the moral and spiritual value” of the corpsmen’s work would far exceed its economic value. The sublimating force of a moral equivalent of war would bring not merely material improvement and greater social cohesion, but the spiritual renewal of the nation.

Examples of this rhetorical framework in action abounded during the New Deal years, but its most consequential use may have been in support of the ill-fated National Recovery Administration. Created in 1933 to bring government-business “co-ordination” to the weak and
dispirited economy through the promulgation of codes of competition, wage and price standards, and other forms of central direction, the NRA was the centerpiece of the “First” New Deal (even though it was ultimately struck down by the Supreme Court in 1935), and was explicitly modeled after the War Industries Board. The NRA’s leader, the colorful General Hugh Johnson, brought to the job direct experience with wartime mobilization through his service as a liaison between the Army and the War Industries Board.

Roosevelt’s statement upon signing the NRA’s enabling legislation (the National Industrial Recovery Act) on June 16, 1933, clearly invoked the holy grail of sacrificial solidarity: “The challenge of this law is whether we can sink selfish interest and present a solid front against a common peril,” the president explained. Roosevelt specifically called upon the memory of the First World War: “I had part in the great cooperation of 1917 and 1918,” he said, “and it is my faith that we can count on our industry once more to join in our general purpose to lift this new threat and to do it without taking any advantage of the public trust which has this day been reposed without stint in the good faith and high purpose of American business.” F.D.R. was hardly modest in his claims for the act: “It is the most important attempt of this kind in history. As in the great crisis of the World War, it puts a whole people to the simple but vital test: — ‘Must we go on in many groping, disorganized, separate units to defeat or shall we move as one great team to victory?’”

With this famous concluding question, Roosevelt revealed the core of his renewed Progressive vision. It was time to discard the past’s inefficient social and economic institutions — whose foundations rested upon outdated ideals of individualism and competition — and replace them with cooperative institutions undergirded by a great and all-embracing solidarity, which would enable a united nation to move forward toward an ever brighter future.

But it hardly seems incidental that the entire package came wrapped in the rhetoric of war. In the views of Leuchtenburg and other left-leaning New Deal historians, the need for this martial justification — regrettable though it might have been — reflected the particularities of America, where the sense of community was notoriously weak and the distrust of government strong and constitutionally encoded. Still, the New Dealers had to work with the country as they found it; this meant appealing to memories of a great national pulling-together in World War I, and
depicting America’s economic woes as the depredations of an enemy, in order to help the nation overcome its ingrained individualism and produce the solidarity needed to solve national-scale problems. “Only in war or in a crisis likened to war,” Leuchtenburg wrote, “was it possible to put aside inhibiting doctrines, create a sense of national homogeneity, and permit the government to act in the national interest.”

**The Challenge of Unity**

One hears in Leuchtenburg’s words a premonitory hint of the now familiar dictum of President Obama’s chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, that crises should be understood as opportunities “to do things that you could not do before” and “you never want a serious crisis to go to waste.”

But as the example of Obama’s Oval Office speech about the gulf oil spill shows, there are important limits, quickly reached, to the effectiveness of this approach. Solidarity formed around one object cannot always be readily transferred to other objects, and there are considerable risks in trying. Indeed, Obama’s steadily sinking political fortunes illustrate this very dilemma. In 2008, he ran a positive and uplifting campaign, heavy with the promise of restored national solidarity, racial harmony, bipartisanship, a prudent and pragmatic post-ideological politics, and a desired but unspecified “change.” His administration, however, quickly devolved into something entirely different: a highly partisan, aggressively top-down, expert-driven, bureaucracy-empowering, constituency-rewarding operation that has used congressional majorities to muscle through a pork-heavy “stimulus” and sweeping “reform” programs. These were codified in mammoth bills that were voted into law without being read, and that added massive new deficits and fresh entitlements to an exploding federal budget—all enacted in clear defiance of strongly adverse popular sentiments. The wistful promise of renewed solidarity that was such a hallmark of the Obama campaign has not merely been abandoned; it has been vaporized.

So there is more than one way to let a crisis go to waste. One can miss out on the ulterior and unexpected openings for large-scale change that the crisis creates; this was what Emanuel cautioned against. But one can also forget that the first imperative is addressing the crisis itself. Successfully managing a crisis is the best way for a leader to establish, and reinforce, his credibility. To focus on tantalizing opportunities created by a crisis while failing to resolve the crisis itself—as happened in
the case of the gulf oil spill, and as has happened more generally with
the administration’s approach to the American economy — is to waste a
 crisis in a more profound and consequential way.

Still, Emanuel’s dictum represents an attempt to address a deep prob-
lem, one that is central to the successful operation of any free society.
How can a liberal political culture, one grounded ultimately in the
free consent of rights-bearing individuals, nevertheless be capable of
purposeful public action when circumstances call for it? How can plu-
ralistic societies find ways of marshaling their resources for great public
exertions? How can they elicit from their citizens the acts of discipline
and self-denial that are necessary to achieve such public goals? If not
through the catalyzing effect of some crisis, preferably one that presents
itself as the moral equivalent of war, then how is a nation of “groping,
disorganized, separate units” going to learn to act in concert?

Answering these questions has been a problem not only for self-
described Progressives, or for those on the political left. Others across
the ideological spectrum have also worried about how to purposefully
incorporate citizens’ energies into the structure of national life. Such
concerns have often been behind the calls for some form of universal
national service, a proposition whose appeal cuts across conventional
partisan and ideological lines. These questions have also informed the
perennial search for unifying objectives for the American nation, often
expressed as a quest for national goals or a national agenda.

Modern American presidents of various political stripes — particularly
those whose outlooks were shaped by military service — have found
this idea irresistible. President Herbert Hoover, who had admin-
istered the Belgian relief effort and served as head of the U.S. Food
Administration during the First World War, created two ambitious
projects — the Committee on Recent Economic Changes and the
Committee on Social Trends — which issued voluminous reports de-
digned to help direct the future path of the nation. In 1959, President
Dwight D. Eisenhower — whose wartime exploits hardly need to be
mentioned — created the President’s Commission on National Goals, a
group of “selfless and devoted individuals” from all walks of life, whose
thoughtful deliberations and reports on the nation’s political, economic,
and social challenges would, he hoped, result in a badly needed set of
national goals. Nearly two decades later, President Jimmy Carter (a for-
mer Naval officer) sought to address similar questions with his own
Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties. In their specifics, these reports are of interest chiefly as documents of their times; it is difficult to find any evidence of real-world influence. But taken together, they indicate a recurring anxiety over how a liberal, individualistic, and pluralistic commercial society can find ways of unifying for the effective pursuit of larger public purposes — and over how our inability to do so might affect the characters of individual citizens.

Such anxieties and countercurrents are nearly as old as the American republic. As early as the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville was already expressing deep concern that the individualism of American democracy, if not effectively countered, would lead to a fatal evacuation of public life, which would in turn enervate the characters of individual men and lead irresistibly to “soft” despotism. Much of the influential social thought coming out of post-Civil War America similarly revolved around a suspicion of individualism, and was augmented by a fascination with the enhanced reform possibilities of purposeful large-scale combinations (the United States Sanitary Commission, established as a government agency in 1861 to coordinate volunteer efforts to support Union soldiers, was an admired wartime model). Even Theodore Roosevelt — whose concern that “overcivilization” would retard the development of robust individuals led him to tout “the strenuous life” as a school of character — turned out to be the quintessential proponent of large, nationalized institutions. In Roosevelt’s view, national life needed to be carried on in the same martial spirit of “valor and disinterestedness” as had once animated the Grand Army of the Republic.

**MORAL EQUIVALENCE**

Many of these currents came together in William James’s 1910 essay, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” which was adapted from a lecture he had delivered at Stanford University four years earlier. Modern war was, James thought, too barbaric in itself to be considered a worthy means to any conceivable end. But, he added, his fellow pacifists too often failed to consider that the regimen of war gives rise to human excellences that are genuine and precious, and that form an essential part of the human constitution — not to mention the foundation of civilized existence itself. “Martial virtues,” James ventured to say, “must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which
states are built.” The task at hand was finding some way of incorporating “the old elements of army-discipline” into “the more or less socialist future,” and of making “new energies and hardihoods continue the manliness to which the military mind so faithfully clings.”

James proposed to do this by instituting “a conscription of the whole youthful population” as part of an “army enlisted against Nature”—to work in coal mines, on freight trains, in road construction, and on a whole host of hard and menial tasks. Such a project would see to it that our “gilded youths” would “get the childishness knocked out of them,” helping them to enter society as sober and sensible citizens, fathers, and teachers. “So far, war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community,” James proclaimed. But he was absolutely certain that “the ordinary prides and shames of social man” would someday be “capable of organizing such a moral equivalent as I have sketched.” This miracle of sublimation was, James predicted, “but a question of time, of skillful propagandism, and of opinion-making men seizing historic opportunities.” He was surely thinking of the kind of clever men who know that you never let a serious crisis go to waste.

It has now been a century since James’s essay appeared, however, and we are still waiting for this long-expected moral equivalent of war to transform our nation of individualists. We have had successful small-scale experiments—some of them clearly inspired by James’s essay—such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and other government efforts to transmute military values into non-military virtues. But none of these has come anywhere near the goal of “disciplining a whole community” or of finding a national purpose.

One clue as to why James’s superficially appealing theory has failed to generate viable offspring in practice may be his way of understanding war—or, more specifically, what is missing from his understanding. His essay was notably subtle and sympathetic in portraying the admirable aspect of the military character. But James understood war only in the most abstract, generic, and external way, giving no attention to the things that wars are properly fought about and for. In other words, he spoke of war as if its purpose were that of organizing the community and promoting virtues of “hardihood,” when those things are best understood as adventitious byproducts of the pursuit of some other purpose, or as means to support some other end. It is as if one viewed the superb physical conditioning of highly trained Olympic athletes as an end to be admired.
in itself, rather than as the essential instrument by which these athletes would achieve success in their respective competitions—indeed, as if it were imaginable that they might ever have risen to such heights without victory as their goal.

Nor does it do either war or peace any justice to blur the distinctions between the two, or to recast one in the spirit of the other. President Obama should reserve talk of war for the actual conduct of war: for explaining the work of our armed forces and encouraging strong and well-informed public support for the missions in which they are engaged. It is not as if the opportunity to speak rightly about war were not close at hand. Indeed, the president could instantly render a great service to the successful prosecution of the war we are now fighting in Afghanistan—a real war with real bullets and real casualties, whose outcome is far from certain at this moment—if he would resolve to speak of it frequently and spiritedly as befits a commander-in-chief. Such animated leadership would not only elevate the morale of our forces, and rally the support of the public, but would also signal America’s determination to our enemies, and America’s reliability to our friends and allies—including those who are lingering on the fence, looking to see whether we will fight through to victory.

When it comes to playing fast and loose with the concept of war, Obama is hardly the only offender of course. Even though human aspirations, human virtues, human efforts, human loves, and human solidarities are not fungible entities—transferrable at will from one situation to another, or one object to another—many of us make the grave mistake of thinking they are. We imagine that all difficult projects are interchangeable and that we can, by alchemical magic, sublimate one into the other at will. The hackneyed cry that “we need a Manhattan Project” to solve this or that technological or scientific problem, for instance, ignores the specific circumstances attending that project: circumstances of immense national peril during wartime, in which the commandeering of scientific resources on a massive and concentrated scale, under conditions of extraordinary secrecy, was not only acceptable but mandatory. Those framing circumstances cannot be replicated at will, not even by the most gifted of stage managers; nor should we wish them to be.

Perhaps, though, the problem is not only with the pursuit of moral equivalents of war, but more generally with the search for dramatically
unifying ideas of national purpose, or national goals, or any other such images of national life that aspire to bring us all together in solidarity, marching as one toward some incomparably fine shared end. That there is a recurrent yearning for such national solidarity is undeniable; the success of Obama’s 2008 campaign attests to it. But not all that is yearned for in politics can be delivered, as the rapid deflation of the Obama phenomenon has also shown.

**INHIBITING DOCTRINES**

As the sociologist Robert Nisbet frequently insisted, the very idea of a “national community” — which, in various ways, is at the heart of the Progressive yearning for an obedient and disciplined pursuit of common purposes — is a contradiction in terms, since the scale of a nation-state is too large to accommodate the forms of local knowledge and personal interaction that constitute community in any genuine sense of the word. The totalitarian experiments of the 20th century testify to the dangerous folly of expecting the nation to absorb all the displacements and energies of private life, and of believing that the “solidarity” it provides in return is anything more than a hollow simulacrum of community.

Indeed, one could go so far as to say that such images of comprehensively organized national purpose deserve to be viewed with automatic suspicion, no matter where or whom they come from. For one thing, such images are dramatically at odds with the spirit of our Constitution — which, in pursuit of a “more perfect union,” sought not to extinguish factions but to contain them, and even multiply them, and which sought not to concentrate power but to diffuse and disperse it as much as possible. Far from seeking to create a harmonious and unified regime, the Constitution sought to institutionalize conflict, to make it both endemic and controlled, and thereby to exploit its potential for wringing good governance out of limited and imperfect people.

Small wonder, then, that Progressives have so often seen the Constitution as their enemy, and have either stood in open opposition to it or devised ways to work around it, viewing its “inhibiting doctrines” as mere obstacles to “national homogeneity” and more effective governance. Their antagonism is understandable: The Constitution is not a charter of solidarity, or an expression of national purposes or national goals (aside from the highly general ones put forward in the preamble); rather, it is better understood as a protective container, a charter of negative liberties.
designed to facilitate the flourishing of a wide variety of spontaneous human associations within which, and through which, free individuals and groups are able to enjoy the solidarities they choose, and are permitted to pursue matters of ultimate concern as they see fit. The Constitution, in other words, envisions the most important task of public life as the protection of private life. Few premises could be further removed from James’s moral equivalent of war.

This constitutional ideal is very nearly the reverse of the Progressive view of the matter, epitomized in Franklin Roosevelt’s contrast between an America of “groping, disorganized, separate units” and an America that is “one great team.” But after nearly 80 years of great teamwork, we should at least have the honesty to substitute the words “vast and uncontrollable bureaucracies” for Roosevelt’s “one great team,” and should have a renewed appreciation of the alternative those bureaucracies have all but displaced. As Tocqueville astutely recognized, the establishment of groping and competing units was one of the principal ways that the framers sought to combat the potentially lethal effects of individualism while still preserving liberty. By dividing and subdividing political authority in countless intricate and crisscrossing ways, they not only dispersed power, but multiplied citizens’ opportunities to be involved in governing themselves and to cooperate with one another, and thereby to be schooled in public life.

This is a vision of political society that, far from being obsolete, has fresh relevance to an increasingly pluralistic America—far fresher than the century-old ideas still being hawked as the epitome of “progress,” and the misguided analogy still being used to advance them.