

## **Perpetual War / Provisional Thoughts**

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Thank you to the organizer of this panel Becky Luening, who has posed the provocative question: “What is it about American culture that allows our country to engage in perpetual war with little questioning or resistance?” Becky calls this a “culture of acquiescence,” which is an inspired word choice -- “a reluctant acceptance of something without protest.” While I do not believe that civilizations through the ages condoned or even tolerated protest against – usually – the king or warlord – our own moment in time has a unique configuration of features that may help to explain this passivity in the face of aggression.

With a tip of the hat to David Letterman, I have organized these features into a Top Ten list – in this case, the top ten reasons we find ourselves in today’s culture of acquiescence. Some of these factors are more influential than others, and in conclusion I’ll propose a simple recipe for acquiescence.

**10. The Jurassic Park Hypothesis.** At the outset it is probably worth remembering that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, and mankind is a mere hundred thousand years out of the trees and the swamp. We might be close to midnight on the climate crisis clock, but are still infants in the history of the planet or the universe and the fruits of our labors for peace may not be evident until long after we are gone, if at all.

**9. Life Isn't A Syllogism.** We all search for meaning, as Victor Frankl, put it, and are always looking for the “why” of things. Thanks to Aristotle and others, Western thinking is always looking for a “reason” that makes sense – a simple, satisfying truth, preferably in a syllogistic mode. But the truth of truth is that it is messy and the results of reason often contradictory or paradoxical. Living the paradox is not comfortable, but the acceptance of multiple reasons and realities makes life's fundamental ambiguities less paralyzing.

**8. The Freedom in Slavery.** In John Fowles debut novel *The Collector* (also a 1965 film by William Wyler) the oddball butterfly collecting protagonist kidnaps a woman (Samantha Eggar) in his rural basement and while at the end the story she is able to escape, she doesn't and dies in her cell. This film has always haunted me, because I want to scream “Run, Samantha! Run.” But beyond that, it just one of many examples where people succumb to bondage even when they have the means to escape. Why? Is there a certain comfort level in being freed from all decision making? Conformity creates less friction than dissent; acquiescence requires less thought and courage.

**7. No Draft, No Way, Not Me.** There is nothing quite like the prospect of being conscripted into the armed forces to focus the attention and energy of young people. Anti-Vietnam War protests were substantially fueled by resistance to the draft. Transitioning to an all-volunteer military was a stroke of genius, because not only do young men (and presumably women) lose the fear of being drafted, but most Americans have little more than a distant connection to the 1.5 million active duty soldiers (and nearly million reservists) and their families, further desensitizing the general public against the personal cost of war. Reduced job opportunities in the economy combined with an increase of military benefits has thus far provided a steady stream of volunteers

**6. Combat is Alluring.** Let's face it, there is something captivating about sweaty, dirty, adrenaline drenched intimacy whether it be in the throes of pain or pleasure. The yearning for intense experience seems to be universal, especially among the young. In this view, combat is just another extreme sport like “bullfighting, motor racing or mountaineering” (attributed to Hemingway) that is inherently attractive to especially young men, making them highly suggestible to the enticements of military life. This is where screen heroes from Rambo to American Sniper help seal the deal by making the wounded warrior attractive despite – and perhaps because of – the salvation in suffering. Wars are fought by the young with weapons, but the architects are old men with fountain pens and buttons to push who write the orders and live vicariously through their cannon fodder.

**5. Media Narcosis.** Really? Is this obvious phenomenon even worth mentioning? A trickle of information (oral) became a stream (print) that in the past one hundred years has become a torrent and in the past ten a tsunami of data. We are completely unprepared and unschooled to deal with this in any useful way, let alone control it. A few people knew that Marshall McLuhan was right – but no one suspected that he would be so right. Until everyone truly understands that “the medium is the message,” and how to act on that understanding, the media distraction will prevail will trump action almost every time.

**4. It's the Economy, Stupid.** People are vulnerable to acquiesce to war when they are constrained by finances. Middle class incomes have not increased in 30 years, and it now takes two wage earners to support a family. Student loan debt is a scandal. In the 1960s – before the manufacturing segment disappeared - a worker on the line in a GM plant could support a family. Today, labor force participation by mothers with children under 18 has increased 30% - to 70% - since 1962. Rising inequality and persistent income stagnation for all but the top 5% have led to both our polarized political system and the paralysis of individual citizens. Americans work more hours than any other developed country. Given a consumption-based standard of living that many of us are both grateful and guilty for, who has the time or energy to dissent?

**3. People Are Even More Gullible Than You Think.** With all of those hours working and the time it takes to check your email, Facebook, etc, who has time to learn American history? Americans know a lot of things – about Kardashians and sports scandals, and the price of gasoline – but our lack of political knowledge is staggering. The recent controversy about the Confederate flag revealed how little people know about what it symbolized in the first place, let alone that it was widely reintroduced in 1950s in a protest against integration. The U.S. is big and isolated from most of the world – fewer than one-half of Americans (46%) have passports. How lucky the U.S. is situated between Mexico and Canada and not, say, China and Russia. But while geographical isolationism does not prevent meddling in the affairs of other countries, the ethnocentrism that is such a striking feature of the American ethos has led to more combat misadventures than all other forces combined.

**2. Government Is Smarter Than You Think.** When the Pentagon determined that “the media lost the war in Vietnam,” despite the fact that the idea was at best a partial twisted truth, it became true in its consequences. That

is how you go from free-range reporters in Vietnam like Morley Safer and Peter Arnett and David Halberstam to Gulf War “embeds,” safely sequestered with the troops to keep their curiosity at bay. Censorship is not new – WWII coverage was tightly controlled – but it fell apart in Vietnam. The vast mechanism of government information management is well told in books like Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*, Daniel Hallin’s *The Uncensored War* (Vietnam) and Richard McArthur’s *The Second Front* (Iraq), and even earlier brilliantly reported by Peter Davis in his classic documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971). The misinformation campaign leading up to the Second Gulf War will be hard to top, but American media consumers have not indicated that they have gotten any more media literate despite being media saturated. The vast quantities of information available today do not necessarily lead to increased audience discernment. With the right doses of fear and mixed messages, any war can be sold to a public who have few or no critical defenses, no clear and present danger, and little immediate personal stake.

**1. Welcome To Medication Nation.** During the 2002 run-up to the second Gulf War, Harper’s publisher Rick McArthur opined about the lack of dissent by stating flatly it was a pharmaceutical issue – a critical core of people who would dissent were by then flattening their affect – and hence their outrage – with psychotropic drugs, losing that spark it takes to ignite action. I thought it was kind of a crazy hypothesis at the time, but ten years later I am convinced he was onto something. Psychotropic drug use has increased 22% from 2000 to 2010 – now taken by 1 in 5 – 49 million – Americans. Whatever else all those drugs do, they “take the edge off,” and that edge is the site of the burn that creates agents of change.

### A Recipe For Acquiescence

Where does this leave us? What results when government propaganda targets a mildly stoned uninformed public who yearn for both clarity and excitement within tight economic conditions? Exploited fear and armed conflict of the post-9/11 world seem to be where it has gotten us thus far. In other words, we haven’t moved much beyond “praise the lord and pass the ammunition and we’ll all stay free.”

*uninformed populace + government propaganda + sensory dulling + freedom in slavery + media narcosis + economic constraints + search for meaning = culture of acquiescence*