

Why do Wars Happen? Genesee County and the Problem of Human Conflict, 1775
to the Present

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Introduction

Regardless of whether one looks at war in national terms or through the lens of local history, the understanding of war reveals four common themes between the Revolutionary War and the war on terrorism in our own day. Genesee County has proven to be no exception to what one sees nationally or on the local level – there are consistent beliefs about human conflict that are discernible time and again, and these ideas – indeed, one might say hopes – have implications for how people see the future – and whether or not that future continues to offer war as a human phenomenon that simply will not go away.

An examination of the voluminous documentation pertaining to the many wars that have touched our County enables one to see how these motifs have played themselves out in Genesee County. In the interest of time I have restricted myself to an exploration, to one degree or another, of eight wars. Here I was guided as much as anything else by the availability of sources. Therefore, we will make our way from the Revolutionary War, to the War of 1812, and on to the Civil War. World Wars One and Two will then be considered. Finally, the Korean War, Vietnam, and the War on Terror will complete our journey. And as we will see, certain ideas about war – its causes, its conduct, and its implications – will reveal themselves with a surprising degree of regularity.

The first belief about war that we will examine is the idea that this war – whichever one that is – is indeed the last war. A commonly held view was that the modernization of the economy would preclude future wars – because ultimately war does not enrich the societies involved. At the height of the revolutionary upheaval in the colonies, leaders such as Thomas Paine wrote that “if commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable; it would extirpate the system of war.” Setting the tone for generations of Americans to come, Paine

argued that the replacement of monarchies with republics would also contribute to world peace. As we shall see shortly, such a belief in the capacity of modern economic systems – along with representative government – to cultivate peace was also seen locally, in what became Genesee County.

The second recurrent theme evident in a thinking about war stretching back to the eighteenth century is the idea that modern technology precludes future wars. In 1900 one commentator, Ivan Bloch, looking at rifles, confidently asserted that “with the weapons now adopted, the effectiveness of fire presents the possibility of total mutual annihilation.” Hence, modern rifles preclude the possibility of a war that no one can win. But such thinking was hardly confined to Europe, as in the case of Bloch. The idea that war, as he puts it, “has already become impossible,” is one that was also evident in the United States. As the passage of the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928 attests, this law – still with us – that rendered war illegal – was one with enormous support in the United States, and was based, in part, on the belief that modern weaponry made war obsolete.

A belief that technology itself made wars archaic and therefore unwinnable dovetailed with the assumption that on a deeper level nothing is ultimately gained from war. While for many such moral qualms are most commonly associated with the Vietnam War, one should not forget that even after World War Two, which was undoubtedly the most supported of all America’s wars, there were decorated veterans who challenged the idea that this was a consistently “good war.” For example, there is the case of Professor Howard Zinn, a prolific American historian from New York City who was a decorated Army Air Corps bombardier during World War Two. Looking back at his experiences during the war, he questioned the necessity not of fighting fascism – but instead, of how the war was conducted. In his essay entitled “The Bombing of Royan,” he recounts his experience as a bombardier in the 490th Bomb Group that participated in the bombing of that French site. Subsequent to his research in the Royan Town Library in 1966, he wondered why the mission took place at all – this attack of a French seaside resort ten months after D-Day and with the Soviet Army already in Berlin. While the official explanation continued to be the destruction of “stubborn German garrisons still holding out around Bordeaux,” the underlying reasons for

him turned out to be far more complicated – and for Lieutenant Zinn – sinister. Along with the desire to learn more about the effects of new technologies – incendiaries, two thousand pound demolition bombs, and napalm bombs, there was, as he saw it, a configuration of such factors as “pride, military ambition, glory, (and) honor (that) were powerful motives in producing an unnecessary military operation.” For him, the only result from the bombing of Royan was the unnecessary loss of forty-five American airmen only weeks before the war in Europe came to a close. As we shall see, such sentiments about the philosophical worth of war were also evident in some of the observations of war expressed in Genesee County.

If there is proof of veterans and civilians questioning the worth of war – or at least the ways in which a conflict is being conducted – then is there evidence that people believed that individuals can be fashioned to desire peace and a progress and prosperity not dependent upon armed conflict? On a national level, the answer is a resounding yes. And more importantly, for our purposes, the answer closer to home – in Genesee County – is also a resounding yes. As seen in a full-page advertisement subscribed to by thirty-seven businesses in the County on August 18th, 1945, in Batavia’s *Daily News*, the reader was asked “Victory for What?” The answer, in part, read:

Victory to re-establish the old hates between peoples, religions, classes?

Victory to go back to the internal prejudices and dissensions that mock and divide us?

No! O’Donovan and Cohen have lived together in foxholes on New Guinea. Calhoun from the South and Prentice from New England are buddies on a battlewagon. They have learned the hard way – they know from actual experience that their fellow Americans of all extractions and persuasions are pretty swell guys.

With all of this in mind, let us turn initially to the recurring notion that every war reveals people believing that this war – whatever the war may be – is the last war being fought.

The Belief that this is the Last War

Maybe the most ironic theme at work in the history of American warfare is the assumption that the war being fought is most likely the last war to be fought. This motif is evident as early as the American Revolution. For many of the colonists, the Revolutionary War was founded upon a seventeenth century conception of America as an agent of divine will. In effect, the war effort was understood as an opportunity to engage in a fulfillment of the Puritan conception of a society ordained by God. In other words, the struggle would mean the end of war, for it would translate into a separation from a corrupt Great Britain that had introduced unchristian values such as cynicism about the needs of the community and the importance of self-sacrifice. This is not to say that there were numerous other factors at work by 1775 – but it is to say that the Revolution captured for many the theological idea of an impending millennium which, when introduced, would make war obsolete. For example, look at the reference to a “Public Fast” noted by a surgeon in his military journal which is housed at the Genesee County History Department Library. James Thacher, writing of his experiences between 1775 and 1783, speaks of a “Public Fast throughout the United Colonies,” designed to help usher in “Divine benediction” part and parcel of the impending millennium. As he observed, this fast, on July 20th, 1775, “is the first General or Continental Fast ever observed since the settlement of the colonies.” The introduction of this paradise on earth means by definition the end of war.

The sentiments espoused by Thacher were echoed time and again by ministers throughout the war who served as military chaplains, colonial legislators, and penmen for the committees of correspondence, and as members of units actively engaged in combat. A perspective denying the possibility of war in the future with the advent of the millennium was one in evidence on the local level in Genesee County. Maybe the most compelling evidence of this is what numerous historians have referred to as the “burned-over” region of western New York by the early to

mid-nineteenth century. The term itself is a reference to the *Autobiography of Charles G. Finney*, a Presbyterian minister who spoke of a “burnt district” – which included Genesee County – that had been so fervently religious that there was no longer “fuel,” or an unconverted population, to “burn” – in other words, to convert. Such an area had long proven to be an area in which millennialism had consistently flourished, and it also made its presence felt during the War of 1812.

Here too the sense that this is the last war being fought had its roots, in part, in feelings of religious intensity. Leaving aside the much discussed causes of the war, e.g. impressment, boundary disputes, fishing rights, etc., there remains the reality that for those Americans who supported the effort, a strong strain of millennialism was at work in the very location of Finney’s “burnt district.” If anything, the often horrific experiences of the struggle against a mighty superpower – Great Britain – gave credence to a central idea of millennialism – that for the perfect world to be ushered in the world as it now stood will have to be destroyed. In a letter to the *Progressive Batavian* published on October 15th, 1869, Peter Tufts recounts what was termed “pioneer incidents and experiences” in LeRoy on January 21st, 1814:

They have burned to ashes the once flourishing village of Buffalo. Immediately on hearing the news, fearing the fate of some of my friends and neighbors, I immediately hastened out to learn their fate, and to relieve some of them, if possible. I found the British in strong force on the battleground. From the best information I could obtain, I should say they had three thousand men in all.

Tufts then went on:

I could not ascertain the number killed, wounded and prisoners; many of my neighbors are missing. Their fate is not yet known; the extent of their barbarities is not yet known. One woman, the wife of a Mr. Lovejoy, a merchant of Buffalo, has been found near her own house, stabbed with a bayonet and otherwise mangled in a shocking

manner. Two of our people, in attempting to bury her, were fired upon; one of them was killed, the other was wounded and made his escape.

All of this culminated in

a scene of dismay and confusion (that) I (have) never witnessed as there is in this country at present; (with) most of the inhabitants fleeing in all possible haste, with what few things they could snatch up in their hurry; some are with wagons, some with carts, some with sleighs, others on foot, some women on horseback with children in their arms, sometimes two women on one horse, each with a child in her arms, some without money and (having) to depend upon the charity of others. Every house in this place is filled with the fugitives; every floor in my house is at this moment covered with men, women and children, striving to obtain a little repose for the night.

What greater illustration of what many believed to be the necessary time of social chaos before the utopian period of peace could there be then the scene described by Tufts? And yet, even in the burnt-over area of western New York it could not be denied that the time of troubles failed to produce the period of peace and justice so yearned for. But by 1861 a new moment of chaos had erupted – and with it the idea that this war, to be certain, would be the last.

The Civil War was both the embodiment of the requisite chaos in millennialism *and* the culmination of religious inspired outrage over slavery. The disorder is easy to see, and was not lost upon the average American, both in and out of Genesee County. How could it be? For four long and bitter years the war dominated the lives of millions of Americans. More than six hundred twenty thousand died, with an additional five hundred thousand wounded – a rate of casualties *four* times the casualty rate for the U.S. armed forces during the Second World War. The economy of the South lay in ruins, along with such major cities as Atlanta by 1865. The psychological trauma was deep enough to produce a

concern to this day over the question of which side of the conflict one's ancestors were on.

For those with a bent toward millennialism, this war was a convincing example of the time of troubles certain to appear prior to the thousand year reign of peace and justice. Even for those who did not have such views in 1861, the years of horrific casualties and destruction produced millennial thought, itself an expression of the hopes, fears, and passions induced by the war. How could this not be the last war? President Lincoln's second inaugural address implied as much, alluding to an "Almighty" having "his own purposes," one of which was the giving of such chaos as the Civil War "as the woe due to those by whom the offence came." What was that offense? The offense, of course, was the barbarism of slavery. The Civil War was the price demanded for justice and lasting peace, Lincoln maintained. Indeed, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," authored by Julia Ward Howe, was an open expression of a millennial perspective. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord," and divine judgment was brought forth by disorder – a "terrible swift sword."

The perspectives of Lincoln and Howe on the national level are visible in Genesee County as well, as found in the records of the Twenty-Eighth Regiment, New York State Volunteers. This unit, which included soldiers from Genesee County, compiled a volume published in Buffalo after the war which included testimonies of those who survived the carnage. Here, at the close of the nineteenth century, we find a piece entitled "The Peace We Fought For." "Contributed," we are told, "By a Comrade," the reader was told that the outcome of the war was the elimination of

the war spirit in the nation, (which) (makes) us in thirty-five years the champion among the nations of the world for the settlement of all variances by appeal, not to battle, but to fair adjudication after testimony in (the) high courts of arbitration. . . The peace for which we fought has become a doctrine of peace for all the world.

So out of the misery and chaos of the Civil War there emerged a vision of peace and justice, at least for those who saw the world through such a lens.

The understanding of a future age of serenity and good will paid for with the horrors of the War Between the States was one that could not be separated from the religious fervor of abolitionism. While much has been written about the religious component of early nineteenth century abolitionism on the national level, our concern here is primarily how, in Genesee County, this movement fanned the religious flames of millennial thought to produce the idea that the Civil War would be the last war. An example of the intensity of the abolitionist perspective revealed itself in an article appearing in *The Republican Advocate* in Batavia on August 21st, 1855. In a front page article entitled “How the Slaves Live” the reader is given a long and passionate description of the daily realities faced by slaves:

It is the boast of slaveholders that their slaves enjoy more of the physical comforts of life than the peasantry of any country in the world. My experience contradicts this.

How? The reader is told that the slave is typically not given enough food, they are only fed enough to sustain them in the rigors of hard, unrelenting labor, a labor in which men and women are “working constantly in the field, from morning until night, every day in the week except Sunday. . .”

As if malnourishment was not bad enough, slaves typically were not afforded proper rest:

As to beds to sleep on, they were known to none of the field hands; nothing but a coarse blanket – not so good as those used in the north to cover horses – was given them, and this only to men and women.

Hence for the children, they

Stuck themselves in holes and corners, about the quarters; often in the corners of the huge chimneys, with their feet in the ashes to keep them warm.

The inadequate food supply and lack of proper rest was part of a system of punishment described in vivid detail in *The Republican Advocate*:

More slaves are whipped for oversleeping than for any other fault. Neither age nor sex finds any favor. The overseer stands at the quarter door, armed with stick and cowskin, ready to whip anyone who may be a few minutes behind time.

The “cowskin”

is a kind of whip seldom seen in the Northern States. It is made entirely of untanned, but dried ox hide, and is about as hard as a piece of well-seasoned live oak. . . A blow with it, on the hardest back, will gash the flesh and make the blood start.

The indignation regarding the obvious inhumanity of slavery therefore combined with the perspective of millennial thought to produce a sense of the Civil War’s function as a war that would be the last. It also linked these views to a perception of America as a redeemer nation – a vision of the United States that was brought into the First World War – a war to end all wars.

Clearly this was a notion that reaches far back into American history – the seventeenth century depiction of America as a shining city upon the hill – the world’s “redeemer nation” – was one suggestive of an America assigned a special historical role. That exceptionalism merged with a clear strain of millennial thought to once again create a war – World War One – seen as America’s “last war.”

By the time of U.S. entry into World War One the disorder demanded by the millennial outlook had become all too obvious. The unprecedented loss of life in a mechanized, industrial war that had dragged on for three long years before the entry of the United States is of course well known. For numerous Americans, then, the observation of disorder at places like the Western Front was seen as a prelude to the coming period of peace and justice – which then combined with the long-standing theme of America as a redeemer nation - to produce once again the view that this would be America’s last war. As has been seen, Genesee County fit the national pattern – the same thrust of millennial thought and American exceptionalism reared its head in Genesee County between 1917 and 1918.

I again turn to a newspaper illustration that quickly captures the idea of this being America’s last war – with America leading the way into a just and lasting peace. In this instance, the *Batavia Daily* featured an article on May 28th, 1917, entitled “Patriotic Bodies Attended Church.” Reverend George M. Reid of the First Baptist Church in Batavia delivered a sermon in which he addressed the theme of “America at the Cross Roads.” “Our motives,” he argued, “are worthy and we battle as Christians.” His sermon was summarized as follows:

. . . this country was in the war to end war.
He (Reverend Reid) believed that the results
would be such that it would be the last great war.

Sentiments such as this abounded locally and on the national scene as well. Looking ahead, this of course made the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 all the more unsettling. That event drove home the reality that the “war to end all wars” had hardly done that. Was it possible for some in the United States - and in Genesee County – to see entry into an even more deadly conflict through the same lens of redemption and millennial thought?

The answer here is yes – and maybe even more so than in 1917. Eschewing – as in the case of the other wars – the multitude of factors producing war, what remains striking is the recurrent notion that the war being waged is the last war to be fought. As I have repeatedly stressed, the common thread tying all of this together is the idea that chaos is a prerequisite for justice and peace. In the

interest of time I will once again present just one example of this perspective from Genesee County while first linking it to a national perspective. Chaos once again precedes the time of peace and justice, as a soldier, Clayton Dahl, a member of the 31st Infantry Regiment, describes on Bataan in December of 1941:

They'd come in waves, with their rifles high above their heads, screaming. God! What mass murder. They'd jump and stumble over their own dead. The smell of the dead was sickening. God, such a nightmare, like a bad dream.

About dusk they'd come, like lambs to slaughter. Several times 500 were burned in cave fields, or cut down in water waist deep, with oil burning on the water. Just like Dante's Inferno. . .

Three years later a Private in the Army from Genesee County, stationed at the Army Service Forces Training Center, Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, Vincent M. Spatola, wrote a newspaper article on the 5th of August in 1944. This Batavian, whose family hailed from 20 Wood Street, offered his views on "Why We Fight." Among other things, Private Spatola envisioned a future America exuding tranquility and fairness:

Why Do We Fight? Yes, Why? Why in the name of God this insane desire to feel cold steel slide between flesh and bone into twisted guts, and to die in agony with a bullet through your head. Why? Listen, brother, and I'll tell you why. . .

There's a promise in America. . . The promise of America! That's why we suffer and die in agony with bullets through our skulls. Because there's a million churches and we pray for what we believe. There's a God we believe in . . . There are schools for all. Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Negroes! All of them go to school, and they

vote, brother, for the guy they think is best.

The sense that the turmoil of war was a price to be paid for a world featuring peace did not of course end with World War Two. The Korean and Vietnam Wars were components of a Cold War moment that also featured a millennial vision complicated by the factor of atomic weapons and once again stressing the idea of America as a redeemer nation. Suffice it to say that two wars costing 351,381 dead and wounded American service people, along with a combined Cold War expenditure of about \$4.65 trillion between 1947 and 1991, produced a chaos unprecedented in duration that by 1991 resulted in an absolute confidence that the golden age of harmony and justice had now really arrived. This is, in part, what the historian Francis Fukuyama meant when he wrote about “the end of history” in 1992 subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. This perspective was also seen in Genesee County. In an editorial in the *Daily News* on August 30th, 1991, we find reflections regarding the end of Soviet-style communism, and comments regarding a “golden age” ushered in subsequent to the violence of the Cold War and the creation of a world in which freedom and self-determination means the end of global conflict:

. . . There is a spirit of self-determination in the air throughout the world, not just among the Soviet republics. If encouraged, this might lead all of us to the golden age we seek.

But once again the “end of history” and the introduction of the war on terrorism subsequent to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, meant yet another age of disorder producing hopes of a time of international harmony and justice sometime in the future. The pain of that day still resonates both locally and nationally, as does the anguish of years of protracted warfare that followed. And yet, there is still a discernible sense of a golden age that will follow, as suggested by columnists such as Helen Thomas. Writing in October of 2002, she commented on our

. . . new patriotism, accompanied by more examination of ourselves and our culture, can help us find the truth.

We can learn the reasons for the abominable acts of terrorism and how they can be avoided in the future. And we can realize the greatness of our country.

And if this millennial strain in American life is not a guarantee against perpetual war, then maybe technology is.

The Belief that Technology Precludes Future Wars

Not long after the second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in August of 1945, the *Daily News* ran an article entitled “More Atomic Thoughts.” Quoting George Bernard Shaw, the readers were told that “now that we, the human race, have begun monkeying with the atom,” it is obvious atomic energy offers “limitless possibilities” for peaceful pursuits while limiting the possibility of war, as a war fought with atomic weapons would only lead to unacceptable destruction. Therefore, the editorial stressed that “scientific progress (will remain) harnessed to reason and devoted to progress, rather than destruction.”

This editorial was both an echo – and a prelude – to another theme evident in the history of American warfare that played out locally as well in Genesee County. Simply put, the idea here was that the technology of modern war had advanced so far that it was no longer plausible to fight. Why? The reasoning here was simple – the destruction of life and property would be so extensive that no one in the end would win. Three wars in particular offered this perspective, the Civil War, World War One, and, as I have already suggested, the dawn of the atomic age at the close of the Second World War.

As the great Civil War historian James M. McPherson wrote in the *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988):

More than 620,000 soldiers lost their lives in four years of conflict – 360,000 Yankees and at least 260,000 rebels. The number of southern civilians who died as a direct or indirect result of the war cannot be known;

what can be said is that the Civil War's cost in American lives was as great as in all of the nation's other wars combined through Vietnam.

As in the case of World War One, the effectiveness of modern weapons of war – combined with a lagging state of battlefield medicine – merged to make it appear that future war would be impossible. In Bloch's *Is War Now Impossible?* The answer was clearly yes – technology itself was the ironic solution to the perpetual problem of human conflict. As one historian, Donald Kagan, once summarized:

. . . modern war would be not only futile but also suicidal. . . The range, speed of fire, and accuracy of modern weapons would prevent decisive battles. The deadlock on the battlefield would produce (quoting Bloch) “increased slaughter on so terrible a scale as to render it impossible to push the battle to a decisive issue.”

Kagan then goes on, agreeing with other historians that there was a growing belief in the impossibility of war in the modern age when, in once again quoting Bloch:

. . . there would be a “long period of continually increasing strain on the resources of the combatants, (an) entire dislocation of all industry and severing of all the sources of supply. . . that is the future of war – not fighting, but famine, not the slaying of men but the bankruptcy of nations and the break-up of the whole social organization.”

Closer to home this was the perspective of a Civil War surgeon in the 121st New York Volunteers, a regiment eventually commanded by none other than Major General Emory Upton of Batavia. In a letter to his wife from Fredericksburg, Virginia on the 2nd of January, 1863, Doctor Daniel M. Holt agonizes over the continuous firefights of the modern battlefield and the consequent endless stream of casualties:

Death is upon our track, and almost every day sees its victim taken to the grave. Yesterday *two*, and to-day two more were consigned to their last resting place, and still the avenger presses harder and harder claiming as his victim the best and fairest of the men. . . As I rode out upon the picket line to-day to see if more of our boys had been shot (for a constant fire is going on between the reb and loyal lines) or had been taken sick, I for the first time *fully* felt the dreadful effects of this cruel, wicked war.

The seeming futility of modern war reached its crescendo with the advent of the atomic age in 1945. And if so much destruction and loss of life results from modern war – as President Dwight D. Eisenhower reminded Americans in the mid-1950s – then an obvious question to be asked is what in the end is gained from war – even wars which are seemingly justifiable?

The Belief that Nothing is Gained from War

In a somewhat distressed editorial in the *Daily News* on January 31st, 1919, the reader was told that the Peace Conference at Versailles following the end of World War One bore an uncanny similarity to the Peace Conference held in Paris in July of 1849. Like the 1919 Conference, hundreds of delegates in 1849 met from various countries subsequent to the revolutionary upheavals and attendant wars of the preceding years. Delegates from Great Britain, Holland, Prussia, Belgium, Russia, Italy, and the United States met and decided upon four resolutions, which were passed:

1. Condemnation of War.
2. Establishment of International Arbitration.
3. International Code of Laws.
4. General Disarmament.

Nonetheless, as the editorial implies, the world – including the United States – faced numerous wars subsequent to these resolutions; despite the effort to

render war impossible via legal restrictions, international cooperation, and a strong moral position against war. The question, then, was obvious – what can be gained through such devastation of life and property? A similar note of despair – or at least bewilderment over the larger meaning of war – is found in comments made by Congressman Barber B. Conable, Jr. In a newsletter to his western New York constituents at the close of the Vietnam War, this courageous World War Two Marine articulated perceptions not easily reducible to words:

. . . We have lost, if you can lose what you are not trying to win, and history will decide what that means in our view of ourselves. The length of the war and the unfairness of its burdens affected a whole generation. . .

I frequently retreat into poetry to find the right word for the moment of truth, but in this case I don't know whether it would be more appropriate to say, "What I aspired to be and and was not comforts me," or "All looks yellow to the jaundic'd eye." I guess the right word is "period." The Vietnam War has ended, period.

In both of the aforementioned quotations there is a questioning of war, which means a questioning of its purpose. It is one thing to speak of war simply in terms of how best to undertake one successfully. It is quite another to ask if it is right or wrong. It is possible to see war as morally questionable, and yet as something that can achieve good – such as the fight against fascism in World War Two, or the struggle against empire during the American Revolution. But there may be a third way to understand war – as an endeavor so bad that no defense of it can ever stand. While this perspective does not reveal itself in the evidence we have concerning the perception of conflict in Genesee County, one thing remains certain – that much can be lost from fighting the wrong war, for the wrong reasons. Which then raises the final theme evident in the County's perception of war stretching back to the eighteenth century – is it possible to create people

who desire the very things that can serve as an impediment to war: a desire for peace, progress, and prosperity for as many as possible?

*The belief that the individual can be shaped to desire Peace,
Progress, and Prosperity*

In April of 1906 a trial was held in Batavia. This was a unique trial, for it did not involve either criminal or civil issues. Instead, it was a heresy trial before the Ecclesiastical Court of the Episcopal Church for the Diocese of Western New York. The defendant was the Reverend Algernon Sidney Crapsey, the Rector of Rochester's St. Andrew's Church. On trial were some of the sermons and statements found in Reverend Crapsey's book, *Religion and Politics*. In this work he stressed his belief in the perfectibility of human nature, with Jesus as the model:

. . . Jesus was the man created for the purpose of inaugurating the movement that was to change the base of human life, making love instead of fear the motive of human action, resting all government upon persuasion and consent, rather than upon force, and so creating a new ideal for human endeavor.

The Reverend goes on, pointing to the injustices of the Roman Empire and the possibility of a world devoid of violence – which could only be possible in a world in which the villainy propelling society to war would no longer exist, “a society in which rulers should not lord it over the people.” The Reverend then concluded that it is possible to raise and nurture human beings to desire peace, social improvement, and prosperity for as many as possible. War has for him no place, nor do religious beliefs supportive of governmental violence:

Jesus was wise enough to see that physical force can only decide physical questions. He knew as well as Bonaparte that God is always on the side of the strongest battalions and the more skillful commander.

Reverend Crapsey was found guilty of heresy and lost his ministry. The question of war was also a personal one for the Reverend, as his son, Philip, died from malaria contracted during the Spanish-American War. This representative of what has been called the Social Gospel Movement stressed an understanding of human nature at odds with one supportive of war. The trial in Batavia captures a perspective that rejects the assumption that the mere frequency of war points to a human tendency towards violence. When the Reverend used Jesus as the example of questioning political leaders he was asking people to consider the motives of that leadership – were they good motives? Can those leaders be trusted? Is the world so neatly divided between good people and bad people? He was asking the obvious – if wars are an expression of our allegedly aggressive natures then why do governments spend so much time trying to convince people to kill and to obey orders unquestionably? If war is rooted in a natural expression of who we are, then why is it that about 330,000 men were classified as draft evaders during the First World War? If war is natural, and the pursuit of peace, progress, and prosperity for as many as possible is not, then what propels people into war? For the Reverend and other Americans in the Social Gospel Movement of the early twentieth century, the answer, more than anything else, is governmental and societal pressure – along with an ongoing indoctrination of the young. But this also produces confusion, as one Vietnam veteran reminds us of. In a letter to his wife, John Ketwig wrote that

After all those years of preparation in the schools, you walked out the door, and they told you it was your duty to kill . . . If you wouldn't volunteer, they would draft you, force you to do things against your will. Put you in jail. . . How could they do that? It was directly opposite to everything your parents had been saying, the teachers had been saying, the clergymen had been saying. . . You asked about 'Thou shalt not kill,' and they mumbled.

Stressing the necessity of questioning those in power enabled human beings to express their true nature of brotherhood, at least as the Reverend understood that. Moving away from our true nature, he reasoned, allowed for the stockpiling of weapons which only served to deepen fear and distrust. Disarming ourselves would remove the basis for fear – and in the process, allow for a more realistic expression of a peaceful nature which, for many in the Social Gospel Movement, was embodied in Jesus himself.

Conclusion

As I stressed at the beginning of this talk, the patterns seen nationally regarding our thinking about war are those seen in Genesee County as well. An integral part of these perspectives is also an issue I raised early on – is our future one that is possible without war? Historical evidence is certainly not on the side of those desiring peace – in 1968 Will and Ariel Durant estimated that in the previous 3,421 years only 268 of them had been free of war. Many scholars have emphasized the role played by economic interests; thirsts for glory and status, and the competition for power – and these are only some of the causes historians of war have cited in response to the question “Why War?” While I had started to explore such issues as they revealed themselves in Genesee County, I quickly came to see instead that war has to be understood with what it means for everyday life – such as life in Genesee County. Ironically, the four themes at work in daily life in our County were also themes played out nationally – in the day to day realities of national life.

Will that life – national and local – continue to include war? If history is a guide in this sense, then the answer is a *qualified* yes. Those yearning for progress and peace tend to dismiss the simple fact that warfare is a consistent feature of human history. Those believing that fearsome technology means the end of war tend to dismiss the historical fact that new weapons produce even newer weapons which then in turn have to be overcome – technology gives birth to new technology. In addition, even Plato and Aristotle both spoke of acquisitive human beings long before theories of imperialism were linked with the development of modern economies.

It seems, then, that the best one can do is to accept uncertainty about the possibility of protracted peace while remaining anchored in a consistent optimism. And where could this hope come from? As those in Genesee County stretching back to the abolitionists, and up through Reverend Crapsey and beyond have heroically demonstrated, it means that an acceptance of uncertainty really just means that people shed illusions about the sources and exercise of power – recognizing that the violence of war is one typically generated from the top down. Optimism about the future lies in a sober acknowledgement of how the world works – and how important it is to recognize human rights. Maybe the best that ordinary people – the ones who most often fight the wars – can do – is call attention to unnecessary sacrifices, be they induced by government or by those opposed to the status quo. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, we must remain vigilant in monitoring those who remain absolutely certain that they know how their policies will turn out, despite a refusal to accept the limits of what they can really know.

