

COLUMNS

## War of our words

November 29, 2018



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*War stories have always had a special place in U.S. culture and define who Americans are as a society. But we are not talking about actual wars. We are talking about the metaphorical wars we immerse ourselves in every day the War on Cancer, War on Drugs, War on Poverty, the Battle of the Sexes, Fight Against Climate Change, the list goes on and on.*

*How has all of this war rhetoric shaped American thinking, where did these stories even come from and, most importantly, where will they take the country?*

*Jasmine Bina, CEO of **Concept Bureau**, shares her thoughts on why these stories have taken root in American culture and will likely never go away.*

We are immersed in war stories as Americans. Not actual wars, but the metaphorical ones that weigh on us every day.

The War on Cancer, the War on Drugs, the War on Crime, the War on Poverty, the Fight Against Climate Change, the Battle of the Sexes, identifying as a Weekend Warrior the list goes on and on, and it affects how people perceive their role in the world.

War rhetoric pervades our language, and although that is curious on its own, what is really surprising is the fact that war is not actually organic to any of these concepts.

The War on Cancer is, at best, a misnomer. Cancer, generally speaking, occurs when your own cells begin to mutate and cause your vital organs to shut down. There is nothing "outside" or "other" attacking you. It is a war on yourself.

While it is certainly useful as a concept to help align people toward a cause and help patients feel brave in the face of the "battle," we have to remember that it is a war that we have chosen to create as a society.

In fact, what is most telling is that the War on Cancer does not even exist outside of America.

Aside from some common language borrowed here and there from Western regions such as the United Kingdom, the idea of a "war on cancer" is solely American, as are all of our other metaphorical wars.

The War on Drugs, the War on Crime, the War on Poverty, the Fight Against Climate Change, the Battle of the Sexes, identifying as a Weekend Warrior these are all constructs. They are wars that we have chosen to create and frame of our understanding of the world within.

Americans fight wars even when there is no battle. They may create a shortcut to meaning or urgency, but there is a reason why they ever entered our lexicon in the first place.

More importantly, there is a powerful pattern to them that we cannot always control.

Heritage of battle

A lot of our modern war language started in the 1960s and 1970s with our presidents, namely Richard Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson.

It was Nixon who started the War on Cancer when he signed the National Cancer Act of 1971.

Interestingly, it was also Nixon who started the War on Drugs when he declared drug use to be "public enemy #1" in the same year.

Before him, Johnson declared the War on Poverty as well as the War on Crime.

The War on Crime, one of the most debatable modern "wars" to exist, was seared into the public consciousness when Johnson declared the urban policeman to be the "frontline soldier" of the mission. That phrase completely changed how policemen were perceived, funded and elevated in communities across America.

All of this happened in a span of 20 years, and that is a lot of militaristic language for a culture to absorb in a very short amount of time.

Some of these initiatives increased research and public benefits. Others increased punitive powers.

But all of these are wars against things that were actually part of the fabric of our society. These were and still are wars against ourselves.

The unity of a whole alongside the war of its parts is a strange juxtaposition to wholeheartedly accept, but we do it all the time.

Sports rivalries, Nike ads that would have you believe there is a war within every athlete, trade wars, culture wars, war of ideas war is happening all around us in the most mundane and unexpected of places.

There is always a battle in American storytelling. There is always a frontier.

We have a strong heritage of storytelling behind this.

Manifest Destiny, that incredibly alluring narrative of American success, is itself a story of war against the elements toward a God-given right. It entered our psyches and never really left. We are always warring against a Western frontier, in one form or another.

And that struggle is part of our identity.

As Americans, we are obsessed with these kinds of stories. They may be far removed from the truth, but they persist.

And that is because they all have one thing in common: war stories are survival stories.

These are the stories that tell us how to survive in the world, no matter how high the odds are stacked against us.

Value of survival stories

Survival stories do two things:

1. They tell us exactly who the enemy is, especially valuable when the enemy is abstract, as with cancer
2. They tell us why we are destined to win

These are the stories that keep us alive, literally and metaphorically. And we cling onto them, because without them, a part of us will die.

The War on Cancer, the War on Drugs, the War on Poverty, the War on Crime these are all survival stories.

There was an existential threat, real or not, and the war story told us who the enemy was, and why losing was not an option.

You know a survival story when you see one, because it defies reason. It is far removed from the truth of things, but we still choose to repeat it.

Survival stories persist because they defy reason and logic.

- Manifest destiny was pretty removed from the reality of disease, death, and a Western frontier that was not always what was promised but people believed it because it gave them a clear enemy to overcome, and a narrative that predestined their victory.
- You do not fight a climate. It is not climate change that is the real enemy, but with such an abstract concept, a survival story makes it much easier to connect emotionally and intellectually.
- The war on crime is problematic on many different levels. I will not elaborate here, but there is an entire body of work dedicated to this. So why, decades later, is it still here with us?

These survival stories work because, as philosophers and psychologists have pointed out many times before, "Survival is more important than truth."

When a part of you is threatened, or a part of your identity is in danger, the facts of the situation may not really help. But a survival story will give you the impetus to overcome. To not give up and to move forward.

In that way, a survival story gives you something that facts could never give you.

Change on the horizon

What is interesting about all of this is that our survival stories, for the first time in a long time, are changing. That is incredibly important because once a survival story is accepted, it almost never goes away.

After all, how do you challenge a story that is immune to facts?

America has gone through three different ages of survival stories, and each age is defined by what we were trying to survive against at that time.

First it was an age of surviving against the elements: Manifest Destiny, which lasted a long time until we hit the industrial revolution. Then we entered the second age of surviving against threats to the group: all of our modern "wars" relating to the perceived ills of society.

That brings us to today's new age of survival against an identity crisis.

As the authority of higher education, marriage, home ownership, career and government all begin to evaporate, we will struggle to define who we are in a changing world. This is where the survival stories of the near future will come from.

I go through these ages and discuss what it means for our culture in *One Interesting Thing*.

REMEMBER, THESE ARE the stories that shape our culture, and they are very powerful.

If you are in the business of storytelling either as a CEO, marketer or creator it is important to know what stories we will be telling ourselves in the future.

*One Interesting Thing: Episode 1*

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