Anti-War Social Work: Is It for You?

Social Welfare Action Alliance
Webinar, November 5, 2026
Presenter / Facilitator:
Sam Coleman, PhD, MSW

Starting Today—
We Can

- **Share insights** about our unique ability to combine micro with macro --clinical with community.
- **Acknowledge** that we have to oppose our country's rampant militarism if we are to secure well-being for our clients and ourselves.
- **Identify** new roles and alliances as specialist-activists in the broad struggle of "peace" as antimilitarism.

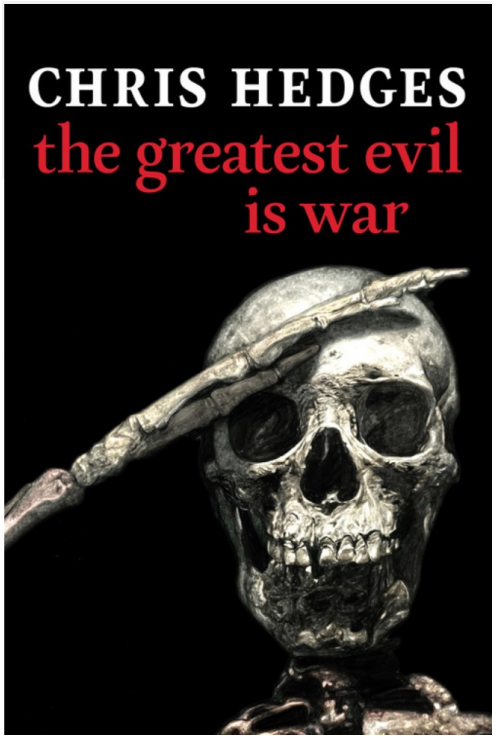
This is just a first step but we can make it work by putting our minds together!

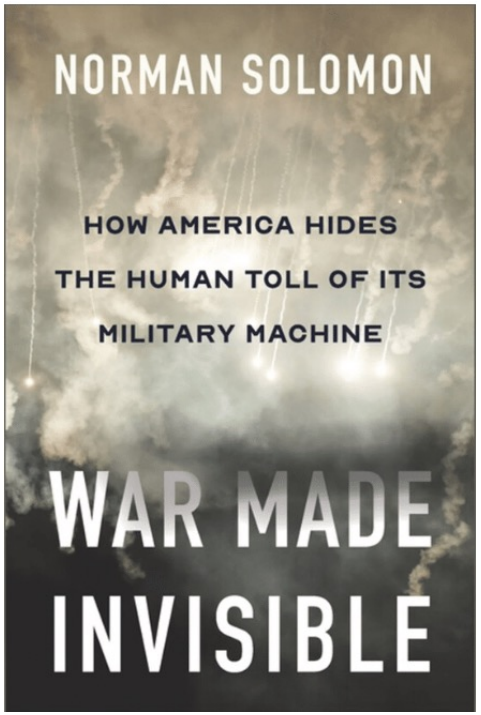
Why Oppose War?

- *Militarism* is an essential component of ***every*** authoritarian and fascist regime.
- America's endless wars are sucking the life out of our country and sapping our well-being.

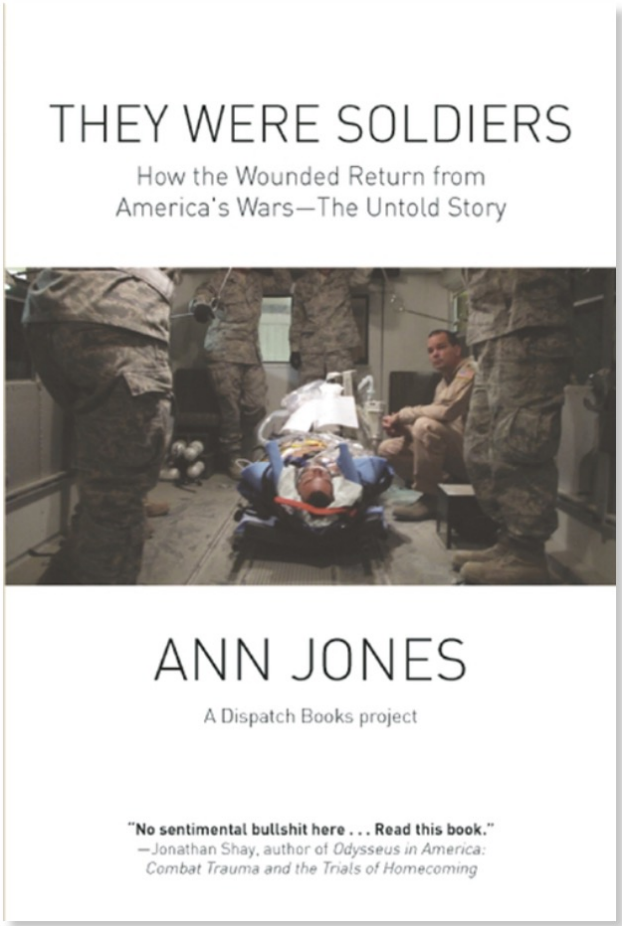
If time permits I'll explain more about the deadly effects at home of military spending.

About the Suggested Readings





And One More…


THEY WERE SOLDIERS
How the Wounded Return from America's Wars—The Untold Story
ANN JONES
A Dispatch Books project
"No sentimental bullshit here . . . Read this book."
—Jonathan Shay, author of Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming



And a Recent Documentary

Drs. Thaer Ahmad, Palestinian-American (IL), Mark Perlmutter, Jewish-American Orthopedic Surgeon (NC), and Feroze Sidwa, Zoroastrian trauma surgeon (CA).

We Have Many Options for Professional Development and Activism in Resisting War

- **Assisting** veterans—today's focus
- **Countering** military recruitment, especially in economically distressed areas
- **Treating** victims of torture
- **Supporting** assistance for war refugees, domestically and abroad
- **Wresting** resources from the military to support local communities instead

All of these efforts give us the moral authority to bear witness to the many costs of America's wars, too!

Potential for Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration and Alliances

- Public Health – APHA has a Peace Caucus!
- Nursing
- Clinical Psychology
- Social Epidemiology
- Public Policy
- --We can learn from debates that anticipate ours within other professional organizations

We Can Do This Together!

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Let's Establish Face-to-Face Connections Wherever We Can

- Colleges and universities are ideal for interprofessional, interdisciplinary antiwar networking.
- Social work students in the US took a prominent role opposing the Vietnam War.
- Let's explore creating or renewing efforts in existing organizations.
- Examples: the Veterans for Peace Military Trauma Working Group and the Center Conscience and War

➢ If you live in the Los Angeles area, please contact me via nsc@socialwelfareactionalliance.org.

Forgotten Resistance:
Jane Addams' Opposition to World War I

- Jane Addams ardently opposed American militarism and wars. She co-organized the Women's Peace Party in 2015 and later the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).
- Her role in organizing opposition to America's entry in World War I drew popular resentment and harsh criticism as "America's most dangerous woman."
- Addams' efforts and sacrifice were vindicated in 1931 when she received the Nobel Peace Prize.

An Anti-war Social Work Leader
Sarah Haley, MSW



1939 - 1989

The Crucial Incident

- As a new Boston VA intake team member in 1969, Sarah Haley interviewed a just-returned Vietnam War combat veteran presenting with body tremors, “startle response,” and jagged, incoherent memories of women and children’s dead bodies in a Vietnamese village his platoon had entered.
- He remembered vomiting and throwing down his gun.
- He told Haley that fellow soldiers who were killing villagers told him they’d kill him if he reported them.

Her VA Intake Teammates' Diagnosis And Her Opposition

- Teammates' intake log entry: "severe agitation and anxiety" for the presenting problem. Dx "paranoid schizophrenia," Rx: 5 mg. Stelazine (a powerful tranquilizer)
- Sarah knew from her father what actually happens on the ground in war.
- She later learned that the veteran had witnessed the My Lai Massacre of March 16, 1968, in which US troops murdered as many as 500 Vietnamese innocents.

Activism from the Ground Up

- Sarah got around the system, interviewing as many Vietnam combat veterans as she could in order to listen, observe, and learn from them in her efforts to devise new interventions.
- It took her two years to publish her experience as a therapist. When her article, "When the Patient Reports Atrocities" appeared in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* in 1974, she broke new ground for a whole generation of clinicians and social workers.
- By then she was teaming up with Drs. Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim Shatan to define post-traumatic stress reaction for the DSM III.

An Enduring Recognition

The Sarah Haley Memorial Award for Clinical Excellence

has been awarded annually since 1974 by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS)

- Recommended reading:

"Invisible Wounds," Chapter 4 in Gerald Nicosia's *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2001, pp158-209

Some Take-aways?

- Everyone said Sarah was warm, approachable, and engaging.
- Every veteran's elegy said, "She didn't give up on me."
- "She treated each person as a unique human being with a significant history. Her distinctive clinical skill was the the ability to enter the imagination of people who had been dehumanized, and help to restore their dignity."*
- She was an astute observer of disturbed behavior, grounded in her knowledge of what modern war really is.

*Chaim F. Shatan, 1990. "A True Child of Trauma--Sarah Haley: 1939-1989." *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3(1), 477-81.

There’s More Behind Sarah Haley’s Success

- She was a communicator. Her published articles brought her new professional contacts and connections.
- She was also adept at ‘networking’ with both veterans’ groups and antiwar clinical professionals.

Yesterday's Battle?
It's Not Over Yet!

- We have to expose Pentagon attempts to deny and under-report psychological disorders.
- Since the DOD's first concern is their workforce numbers, they strive to keep servicemembers in their current roles or returned to duty as soon as possible.
- Facts regarding actual frequency give America's wars a bad public image, and the numbers add to the true costs of war for all of us.

How Important Are Good Investigative Reporters?

- *The Intercept,* for example, covers the US military:
- "The Disappearing Victims: Pentagon Records Missed Almost Half of Troops' Domestic Abuse Killings" (10 / 26 / 2026)
- "Newly Released Data Reveals Air Force Suicide Crisis After Years of Concealment" (10 / 27 / 2025)
- "In U.S. Military, Sexual Assault Against Men Is Vastly Underreported" (11 / 29 / 2022)
- while you're at it? "Pete Hegseth's Crisis of Masculinity" (07 / 25 / 2026)

The Modern American Way of War Inevitably Creates Multiple Psychological Disorders

- The United States habitually installs or props up unpopular, corrupt regimes that spark insurgencies.
- The US then steps in militarily with expeditionary forces to suppress them.
- Our troops go there expecting a grateful populace but instead find resentful, fearful people willing to tolerate insurgents instead.
- Combat troops are thus subject to what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton identified as “conditions of atrocity.”

Summarizing the Experience in One Word

Betrayal

At This Point….

Are there questions or comments to share before we move on?

It’s hard to confront betrayal in its many forms

- Anger, self-doubt, guilt, a sense of failure—all balled up in one very messy emotional package.
- I suspect that “the therapeutic alliance” has never been more important.

One of Today's Urgent Issues for All Direct Practitioners

- A critical ingredient in the Haley Generation's accomplishments: the ability to engage in authentic, face-to-face human connection.
- Capitalists dislike it because this process is first-person and real-time, i.e. labor-intensive.
- Their substitutions: AI and other automation inroads.
  How could Haley have made those invaluable therapeutic connections on the other end of a display screen?

The Neoliberal Policy

- It's *privatization*, the ultimate job crematator.
- It's not science and it's not even ideology: it's a business model.
- We share a vital common cause with other human service providers here.



Resistance: SOVA, Save Our VA

- Veterans for Peace SOVA is fighting budget cuts and privatization inflicted in recent years on the Veterans Health Administration.
- The galvanizing event: the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP) in which expanded private-sector outsourcing of veteran healthcare since 2019.

More about
Sarah Haley's Professional Strengths

- She grasped the reality of war.
- That's harder to do today than 50 or 60 years ago.
- Norman Solomon's 2023 *War Made Invisible* reveals how government policy and media hide, sanitize, and normalize our warmaking.
- In addition: "militainment" weaponizes thousands of motion pictures and television programs.*

* Aboukhater, Hekmat. 2024. "That's Militainment! Big Hollywood Succumbs to the Pentagon Borg." *Responsible Statecraft*

Who ARE Today's Veterans?
… as a Percentage of US Society

- There are about 15.7 million veterans in the US today.
- They represent **about 6 percent** of the total United States adult population.
- We typically group veterans by the wartime era in which they served.

What Generation?

- Breaking out the numbers by cohort, as %:

Gulf War era II (Sept. 2001–present)	**32.5**
Vietnam War era and earlier	**28.3**
Interwar ('peace') periods	**20.3**
Gulf War era 1 (Aug 1990 – Aug 2001)	**18.9**
TOTAL	100.0

Why the quotation marks around ‘peace’ for “interwar periods”?

- When we add “small wars” involving uniform-wearing US expeditionary forces engaging in hostilities, we find that
- *America has been at war constantly since World War II*, ***except*** for the period of:

October 15, 1976 to November 4, 1979…

… and seven months in 1990.

Dudziak, Mary. 2012. *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 30-31.

The Psychological Suffering Among Our Veterans Today

- Suicide rates are a major indicator of suffering:
- Veterans represented 14% of all adult suicides in 2024 but occupied less than half that percentage of the whole adult population.
- These figures aren’t weighted by age group and sex, but recall also that the military is supposed to select candidates for recruitment who are emotionally healthy.

Let's Examine Two Particularly Vulnerable Sub-populations

- How does **social class** affect the military experience, including the liability of mental ill health?
- Epidemiological studies in the US don't use social class per se as an independent variable, so we need proxy measures.

Unequal Sacrifice

- *In every American war since World War II, the burden of military service resulting in death and injury has fallen most heavily on the least affluent.*
- Political scientist Douglas Kriner and legal scholar Francis Shen published the definitive study in 2010.
- Titled *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities*, it made extensive use of massive data sets.

Quoting the Authors…

“The empirical analyses we have presented … show that since the conclusion of World War II, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities have borne a disproportionate share of America’s war casualties” (Kriner & Shen 2010, p. 47).

UK Specialists Report the Same Process



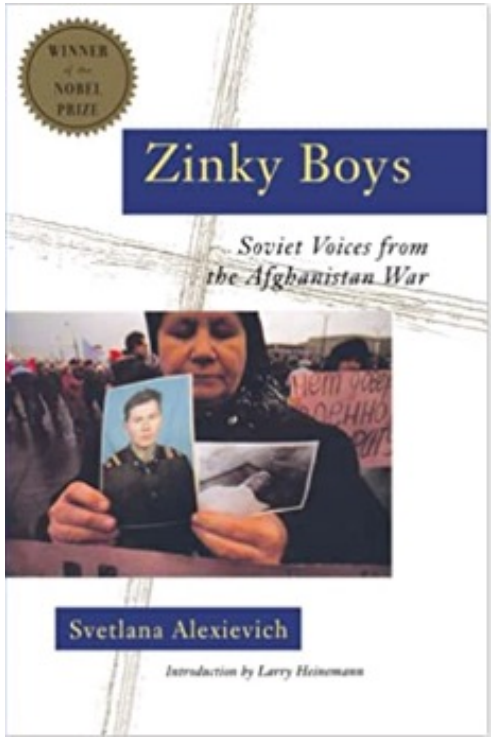
Veterans for Peace UK 2017

Economic Conscription in Japan Today



Yūjin Fuse, *The Economic Draft System*, 2015

From the Soviet Union, 1989



Who Is Most Susceptible to PTSD? Major Danny Sjursen Put It Well

"… enlisted, younger, browner, poorer, less educated and more rural than their civilian counterparts."

"Uncle Sam Sent Me to Rehab." Major Danny Sjursen, writing in *Truthdig* March 11, 2019

In the Case of Suicide …

- In general, the most at risk are youthful (in their twenties), white non-Hispanic males in the Army or Marine Corps (Suitt 2021).
- Among the 1.3 million veterans who had been on active duty in OIF and OEF (the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars), *enlisted service members were almost twice as likely as officers to die by suicide*, a hazard ratio of 1.92 (Kang et al. 2014/2015)

The Class Dimension: Stratification in the US Military

- *Commissioned Officers*: have post-secondary degrees, earn their commission via officer candidate schools (or service academies), perform executive roles, and serve in highly trained capacities (e.g. pilots) or professional career categories (e.g. medicine).
- *Noncommissioned Officers* (NCOs): drawn from the higher ranks of the enlisted via education and testing programs, they have certain command authorities.

The Great Majority: Enlisted

These are military personnel who sign up on a contractual basis to perform specific types of tasks.

Among present-day living veterans, % (2018)

- Enlisted personnel 81.6
- Officers 18.4

Total 100.0

https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Infographic/2023-demographics-active-duty-members.pdf

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What about Women?

- As of 2024 there are 1.7 million female veterans, 11.1% of the total number of veterans.
- Their age-adjusted suicide rate is almost twice (99.9%) higher than their civilian counterparts'.
- Their lifetime (ever-experienced) rate of PTSD is over twice that of male veterans.'
- The greatest factor in their distress experience is rape and other sexual assaults.
- Discuss: "military sexual trauma" (MST): a misleading euphemism?

The Actual Extent of the Problem



Brown University Watson Institute 2026

Two Women in the Armed Forces
--a Class Analysis



Sinlan Ripley Morrow in Iraq (center, foreground)

Morrow, a CSU Long Beach Graduate, Succeeded Thanks to Military Training

- Joined the Army Reserve, served in the Persian Gulf War of 1991.
- Transferred from a community college to CSULB as a civil engineering major.
- After graduating from ROTC in 1994, served in Iraq with the Army Corps of Engineers.
- Retired from the military in 2013 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Ambrose 2013

Another Woman Veteran



Lyn Acosta

Lyn Acosta, Woman Veteran Prevails, But It Was after 22 Years in Prison

- She had been abused in adolescence “in every way a child could be.”
- She joined the Navy at age 19, but
- left the military after being sexually assaulted.
- At age 25, she was arrested for not reporting a murder plot.
- Released from prison at age 47, today she is a licensed physical trainer and DVA counselor. Harshaw & Tauszik 2022

Different Lessons from Their Military Experience

- Morrow credited the ROTC program at CSULB with giving her “leadership and coping skills.”
- Acosta observed, “I think the military prepared me for acclimating to prison,” as in submitting to authority and keeping her quarters clean.
- Is that all there is to “Be all that you can be”?
- Take-away: break out stats on psychological disorders by class--or at least class proxies

A Documentary Tells Us a Lot

- Why do women enlist? Data are thin on this subject, but many are escaping from dysfunctional families and abusive marriages, seeking economic independence.
- Kirby Dick's 2012 documentary *The Invisible War* is a good start for understanding the problem.
- We should investigate the enduring "chain of command" obstacles to reporting abuse, including the chaplain's role. Prospects for reform under Pete Hegseth are grim, though.

On to Military Spending

Nothing of importance gets done without government money. We can't support our current generation of Sarah Haleys with car washes and yard sales.

An All-Too Brief Introduction to Military Spending as National Ruination

➢The federal budget is divided into three categories:

- *mandatory spending* (entitlements)
- *interest* on the national debt
- *discretionary spending*, for everything from public health, education and research to infrastructure and the environment.

--The competition between DOD (DOW) spending and human needs takes place primarily *here, in discretionary spending*.

In the FY 2026 budget, military spending consumes half of discretionary budget items. In the FY 2027 proposal, far more.

The ‘National Security State’ Budget a.k.a. “The Blob”

- When we include all other war and “national security” related expenses such as nuclear weapons production, veterans’ care, borrowing costs for war and our country’s nine intelligence agencies outside the DOD, the figure balloons.
- Brown University’s Costs of War Project provides reliable statistics.
- In their analysis, annual military / security state spending and borrowing total between **$1.1 trillion** and **$1.5+ trillion** annually.

Not only does ‘defense and security’ spending crowd out human needs in the federal budget

- Military budgets support “self-licking ice cream cones” for an aggressive foreign policy, meaningless bureaucratic measures of output, and flabby auditing.
- Every military-related job that’s generated cements the recipient’s loyalty to the military agenda:

“It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.” -- Upton Sinclair

Military Spending in Postwar America Has Reshaped Our Industrial Base

- Military production has warped America's manufacturing base. Examples: Singer used to make sewing machines but now specializes in military avionics and aerospace weapons. Raytheon used to make color television sets.
- Today, major weapons systems contracts are awarded to corporations that have placed their manufacturing operations in key Congressional districts.
- These expenditures create far fewer jobs than do human well-being expenditures like housing or human services. The Brown University Costs of War Project provides analyses.

Aggravating the Political Rot…

- Why do Americans hate taxes? Because we don't get anything for them.
- If we spent the money on health care, education and infrastructure instead of bombs we wouldn't see tax revolts manipulated by demagogues.
- Every social worker should realize our stake in this struggle.