

[Script of remarks prepared for the keynote roundtable, “Waller’s The Veteran Comes Back at 77,” in *Conversations in Veterans Studies* online symposium, May 18, 2021.
<https://www.veteranology.org/virtual-schedule>]

Veteran Comes Back as a point of departure for interpreting veterans *in society*

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Like Nancy Dallett, I’m a full-time civilian; the “in society” part of the Veterans in Society projects. I used to be a political science professor. *Mea culpa*.

Willard Waller’s *Veteran Comes Back*¹, as my colleagues have already suggested, is very much a piece for its time and place. Yet we should read this book on veterans – as we should Waller’s chapter about “War and Social institutions” in the *War in the Twentieth Century* symposium he compiled in 1940² – for *how* Waller suggests we approach veteran-civilian interplay in other times and places.

As you’ve already heard, the Willard Waller of *Veteran Comes Back* is a scholar-activist. The book doesn’t represent itself as an academic monograph. His audience is ordinary civilians, not soldiers. Waller marshals historical, literary, as well as sociological sources and anecdotes – not all of them American – to show American society that the reintegration of veterans is *the* major problem facing the post-World War Two United States. We know his mission. We understand that he sometimes he may fire rhetorically for political effect.

Waller’s book seems to have been pretty good politicking: we see a lot of his proposals in US postwar policies for veterans’ education, health care, and (with their families) housing. Even if the book didn’t *set* a cultural tone, it certainly

¹ Waller, Willard. (1944). *The veteran comes back*. Dryden Press. (Free digital scan available: https://archive.org/details/WordsAtWar_995/1944-09-05NbcWordsAtWar63TheVeteranComesBack.mp3)

² Waller, Willard. (1940). "War and social institutions," in Willard Waller, ed. *War in the twentieth century*. New York: Random House. (Free digital scan available: <https://ia601609.us.archive.org/8/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.179692/2015.179692.War-In-The-Twentieth-Century.pdf>)

hummed it: everybody's definitive movie about veterans' reintegration after World War Two, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, could have been ghost-written by him.

Two aspects of *Veteran Comes Back* trouble me, not so much for what Waller says but for how it constricts ways societies and civilian scholars may think about veterans in their midsts – and how they think about *themselves* vis-à-vis their veterans.

First, as Nancy Dallett has noted, the effectiveness of the book's advocacy rests in part on demonizing veterans: when reading *Veteran Comes Back* it's easy to slide from reading that *veteran reintegration* is the greatest social problem to thinking that *veterans* are the greatest social problem.

In concluding the book, Waller does scholars like us no favors by likening “veteranology” to criminology – the study of how social forces made some people bad, how well-designed institutions can make them better in the dominant culture, and, over the period that these dangerous victims of society are being rebuilt and reprogrammed, how they can be contained and controlled by benevolent but firm technocrats.

In some sense, of course, pathologies among veterans *are* the fault of their societies, and more generally the result of the perversities sewn into all societies. (Here you should read Waller's editor's introduction to *War in the Twentieth Century*³ as well as his chapter on “War and Social Institutions,” which treat societies as elaborate recapitulations of lunacies.) But to the reader⁴ the most vivid case for implementing public policies to direct veterans back into the habits of fulltime civilians is extortion: as in the crime films of the 1930s to fifties,

³ Waller begins the volume (p. vii): “In our moments of despair we sometimes liken the world we live in to a lunatic asylum. The comparison breaks down because it is unfair to the madhouse.... A modern mental hospital is a sane, decent, well-ordered place. The only lunacy there is in the minds of human beings. A mental hospital is a sane society populated by madmen. Modern society, however, is thoroughly deranged, but the people in it are mostly sane....” Then: “Each one of us plays reasonably his part in the great human drama. We are all sane, more or less, but the play we enact is utterly mad. In the years 1914-1918 the civilized nations of the world staged the most gigantic holocaust of man-made destruction the world had ever seen...[W]hile it was going on we somehow deluded ourselves with the notion that a better world would come of it.”

⁴ Or, especially, to the listener to the 1944 NBC radio dramatization of *Veteran Comes Back* in its *Words at War series*: Kagan, Ben, Willard Waller, and Writers' War Board. *The Veteran Comes Back*. [War Script, No. 39]. New York: Writers' War Board, 1944. https://archive.org/details/WordsAtWar_995/1944-09-05NbcWordsAtWar63TheVeteranComesBack.mp3

Waller's veterans seem to be saying "Nice country you got here. It would be shame if anyt'ing was ta happen ta it. Youse might t'ink 'bout investin' in some protection."

Representing veterans as damaged, dangerous, yet deserving the largesse of the public simultaneously calls for public action and raises questions of veterans' own agency that we should take seriously.

My second concern: Waller's precedent is so *American* and so concerned with practical application over the immediate and short term. We might say his war writings assumed – or at least recapitulated – a colonial position vis-à-vis the veterans and civilians of other countries and other periods. *We're* important, they're not (except insofar as we can selectively appropriate their experiences for our current purposes). I don't deny that Waller's presentism and American focus can be useful then or now. But they are exclusionary, and that means blinders in both scholarship and practical application.

Waller's accounts of war and social institutions – that is, of how soldiers, hence veterans, are made, and what they are made into – can suggest that social evolution necessarily led to "the veteran" as Waller represents "him."⁵ The all-transforming war in Waller's accounts is total war, an all-consuming mobilization by dozens of countries of millions of civilians into formal military service, millions more into war production, and the cooptation – one might say, *conscription* – of tens of thousands of differentiated social institutions (schools, faiths, all manner of voluntary associations, and more) to the cause of victory.

It seems to me that Waller presupposes that wars, by definition, are fought among nation-states or nations that aspire to be states. Scholars of international relations sometimes set those conflicts within the "Westphalian state system" that arose after the Thirty Years War. In that system, sovereign states exercise the monopoly on the legitimate use of force in their territories, and their civil and military organizations are hierarchical and rule-bound – that is, impersonal and bureaucratic. There are the Law of Nations and the Laws and Articles of War to regulate the fighters. By the rules of this state system, there are people who deserve more than the thanks of the grateful nation – and there are bums with

⁵ Waller in "War and Social Institutions" sometimes implies that cultures, mores, and institutions evolve through natural selection, had he explicitly speaks of eugenic and dysgenic consequences of war.

bad paper. Achilles has no place; Odysseus can take his oar and keep on walking *away* from Ithaca.

Waller doesn't mention the Westphalian system, but I think he'd say that in some sense the institutions of the Westphalian system construct noncombatants, soldiers, and veterans – in their lived experiences and identities as much as in their laws duties and entitlements.

With some version of the Westphalian system as his stage, Waller provides answers to the research questions have underlain the Veterans in Society project for nearly a decade:

- What does it mean to be a *veteran*?
- Who counts as a *veteran*?

But how have peoples and institutions outside the Westphalian trope answered those questions? How adequate is our notion of *veteran* to account for the motley, feudal band of brothers who fought and cried “God for Harry, England, and St George”? In what respects does *veteran* apply to Geronimo or Sitting Bull – or to a former child soldier in Darfur?

Rather than read people out of our inquiries the way that the US Congress once excluded merchant mariners or Women Airforce Service Pilots, veterans studies should explore new ways of representing a veteran-society spectrum.

Given Waller's explicit focus on the total wars that defined the first half of the twentieth century, we can speculate about how he would address veteran-social interaction after the “small wars” that have punctuated American history, often fought by small forces of professionals (ie, veterans in the older sense of experienced soldiers and sailors) alongside odd lots of militia and volunteers. It is outside his brief to address veterans of asymmetric or unconventional conflict, such as the various “Indian Wars” of westward expansion. We can speculate about how he would account for veterans and their societies of on both – more – sides of the Cold War.

(I expect his assessment of the civilians during and after those non-total wars would resemble what he says about civilians in big wars: they are fickle, complacent, and self-interested; for a while they may claim to support the troops,

but they also out-compete the troops in the civilian game of life and turn the troops into Others.)

But still ... Waller is a point of departure for serious, systematic interpretations of the veterans (and their families) within larger communities of full-time civilians.

First, we might encourage scholarly work that starts within Waller's own frame of reference: twentieth century American veterans and the civilian communities they are *in* but not wholly *of*.

- In what respects was he right about the people he expressly described and analyzed at the time he wrote? What would research show about those former GIs 20 or 25 years later, when America's TVs were filled with shows like *Combat* and *Twelve O'Clock High*, *Hogan's Heroes* and *McHale's Navy* – and shows created by veterans, such as *The Twilight Zone* and *Star Trek*, that would eventually become cultural touchstones. What kind of evidence and theorizing should inform a production of *The Best Years of Our Lives: the Next Generation*?
- In the same context, as Nancy suggested, what about Americans at the margins of Waller's frame? He does nod toward women and black people on the civilian side, but his own methodology rests on empathic understanding of his subjects to give heft to his case studies, and lots of communities and subcultures are outside his ken.
- As I suggest before, how could Waller's questions and approaches reveal in other frames? What could they conceal?

Second, let's step back from the texts and look at Waller as an exemplar of the scholar and teacher about veterans and society. In this sense, he is his own corrective to my criticisms of what he wrote in one book and one chapter.

- Waller draws on plural ways of understanding the world and oneself and communicating them to others. That is, he tells stories that at least partially illuminate complex and bewildering realities. Note how much he juxtaposes literature, conspicuously Erich Maria Remarque's *The Road Back*, with memoir. His prologue to *Veteran Comes Back* deploys the Old Testament story of Uriah to drive home the thesis that civilians routinely betray veterans and that it was ever thus.

- Like a good teacher, he tells stories that people can understand. He doesn't write solely for cloistered professional communities. Waller's kind of veterans studies thus serves both knowledge and practical action that can embrace veterans as citizens rather than problems. Today's academic culture rarely rewards that kind of interdisciplinary scholar, especially at elite research universities, but collectively we can and should bring plural approaches in research and exposition together in fora like this and the *Journal of Veterans Studies*

We've talked at you far too long. Let's see how much conversation we can start in this section, then continue in the Zoom chat during the breaks.

We'll start our breakout sessions at 3:30. Slides during the intermissions and during the breakout sessions will include instructions for accessing each Zoom room.