

In Honor of Seymour Melman

A key figure amongst academics who have chosen to apply their approach to real world issues beyond the ivory tower in the United States is Seymour Melman, someone whose work should be discussed in every classroom in which current issues facing America are of concern.

Throughout his career Melman wrote some of the saddest texts imaginable, not only about what is happening in a world of “pentagon capitalism,” but what is happening elsewhere in society as a consequence of those actions. I always feel like crying when reading Melman’s writings, particularly his last book *After Capitalism*, a masterpiece that was virtually ignored (in part because it came out exactly when 9/11 occurred). When he died, he was working on new book, *War Inc.*, and I’m honored to have it as part of our growing *AmeriQuests* monograph series. For this, I’m grateful to Seymour himself, and to those who have worked so hard to bring this book to light, notably Ben Abrams and Patrick Deer, who edited the text. Jonathan Feldman has been an active promoter of Melman’s ideas, and both Marcus Raskin and Murray Eden have been crucial interlocutors and facilitators for this project.

There is so much to learn from all of Melman’s work, as is evident from even a small selection of his words: In a section entitled “the Human and Industrial Cost of Defense,” Melman offers a sense of the tasks that stand before those who wish to work beyond the ivory tower:

From 1990 to 2000, the United States government spent \$2,956 billion on the Department of Defense. This sum of staggering size (try to visualize even one billion of anything) does not express the cost of the military establishment to the nation as a whole. The true cost is measured by the “opportunity cost”, by what has been foregone, by the accumulated deterioration in many facets of life, by the inability to alleviate human wretchedness of long duration.

Here is part of the human inventory of depletion:

1. By 2001, huge numbers of US homes were decaying. 2 million homes have severe physical problems. 13 million have leaks from outside the structure. 1 million homes have holes in their floors. 1 million homes are infested with rats. 72,000 homes have no electricity.
2. In 2002, 9.3 million people in the US were classified as “hungry” by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Furthermore, almost 35 million people -- 12.5 percent of U.S. households -- had no secure supply of food, due to lack of resources.
3. In 2002, 34.8 million people in the US lived in poverty. This is 12.4 percent of the population, and an increase of 1.4 million from 2001.
4. 2.3-3.5 million people (including 1.3 million children) in the U.S. experience homelessness each year.
5. 41.2 million people in the U.S. lacked health insurance during the entire year 2001. In 2002, 18,000 uninsured Americans died due to lack of treatment.

6. 14 million children go to class in deteriorating public schools. Two thirds of all public schools have troublesome environmental conditions

The human cost of military priority is paralleled by the depletion of industrial technology caused by the concentration of manpower and capital on military technology and in military industry. For example:

1. In 1996, over 60% of the machine tools used in US industry were 11 + years old.
2. Congestion of roads causes 5.7 billion hours of delay in the U.S. each year. This is equivalent to 650,684 years of time wasted.
3. U.S. railways have become antiquated. Now the electrification of 60,000 miles of track is required before the US can use the modern, fast and efficient trains that exist in other countries.

As civilian industrial technology deteriorates or fails to advance, productive employment opportunity for Americans diminishes.

To carry out the role that Melman as an industrial engineer assigned to himself, he as an intellectual had to be “engaged,” in the Sartrian sense of *engagé*, in issues of the day, and to do so he had to be willing to extend the scope of his work by speaking out and taking risks in the real world. As an engineer, he had long experience from which to draw, and as a deeply humane person, he measured each policy and each approach against a human scale. His engagement shows us what can be done within and beyond the ivory tower, and his uncompromising insistence that each decision in both realms be judged by standards of decency and effect offer us a sense of what can come from careful and reasoned research.

The problem is that so many contemporary intellectuals come to be seduced, or “bewitched”, by ideologies or methodologies which in their implications can be murderous even if their ambitions seem lofty, and it’s amazing that people like Seymour Melman managed to remain engaged while keeping away from such sectarian quick fixes. In his controversial *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, Paul Aron berated those who mercilessly attack the failings of contemporary democracies while providing intellectual asylum for those who support the “proper” doctrines; we need to recall this kind of courage, and can do so with reference to books like *War Inc.*

Seymour Melman’s words offer us grounds for hope that we really can address contemporary problems through careful and often pragmatic examination of the world we occupy, in this case from the perspective of the United States, and this book points to the kinds of debates with which we ought to be involved, particularly in an election year, when so much is at stake in terms of what can be gained, and what forever lost. This is not to say that we can hope that candidates will really engage these issues, lobbying and personal power have always had the final say; but readers of this text can insist that these concerns be raised and raised again, so that each decision made and policy put forth can be measured against its real implications, not only in terms of what is likely to occur, but what could happen otherwise, if the legislation is effected in some other way. We are forever hearing from teachers, politicians and policy makers at all levels that “utopian thinking” is to be shunned. I disagree, because we really can do better, we can demand more, and we can dream of a better future for ourselves and for our children. This book is utopian thinking at its very best, it seems to me, and we ought to be fighting for it rather than giving in to the non-

choices of resource depletion and murder that have become the gold standards in our domestic and international legislation.

Robert F. Barsky, Editor

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