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# The Antiwar Tradition in American Letters

by Allen Mendenhall, July 13, 2016

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A review of *War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar and Peace Writing*.  
Lawrence Rosenwald, editor. New York: The Library of America, 2016. 838 pgs.

James Carroll, the novelist and Christian man of letters who has won numerous accolades over a long, distinguished career, sets the tone for this fine edition, *War No More*, in his short foreword. "Wars," he says, "have defined the nation's narrative, especially once the apocalyptic fratricide of the Civil War set the current running in blood – toward the Jim Crow reenslavement of African Americans, further genocidal assaults against native peoples, imperial adventures abroad, a two-phased World War that permanently militarized the American economy and spawned a bifurcated imagination that so requires an evil enemy that the Cold War morphed seamlessly into the War on Terror."

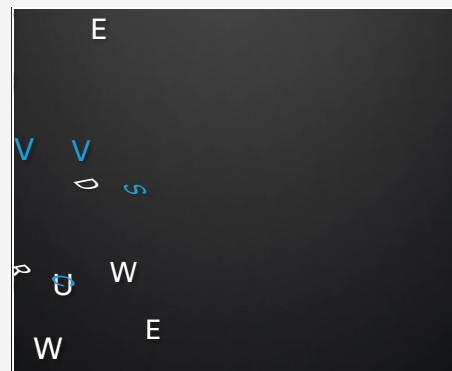
We've seen editions like this before – *We Who Dared to Say No to War*, edited by Murray Polner and Thomas E. Woods Jr. comes to mind – but the focus here is different and decidedly literary. Lawrence Rosenwald, the editor, believes the "antiwar impulse" requires a rich "vocabulary" that's "visionary, sensual, prophetic, outraged, introspective, self-doubting, fantastic, irreverent, witty, obscene, uncertain, heartbroken" – in short, that signals a range of human emotions and experiences. Rosenwald promises that "[a]ll of those traits are on display here," and follows through with essays and memoirs by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Kurt Vonnegut, Edmund Wilson, and, among others, Norman Mailer.

Rosenwald has also achieved a diversity of genre. He includes poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Stephen Crane, Adrienne Rich, Herman Melville, Robert Bly, Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, George Starbuck, and Walt Whitman; short stories by Ray Bradbury and Ambrose Bierce; a genre-defying piece by Mark Twain ("The War Prayer"); songs by Country Joe McDonald, Ed McCurdy, and Pete Seeger and Joe Hickerson; a statement before a federal grand jury; letters and an interview; a gospel song ("Down by the River-Side"); a leaflet on the Vietnam War (the conflict with the most permeating presence in the book); excerpts of the prefatory articles of the Constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy; and more.

Women as a class are underrepresented in Rosenwald's selections. I count 104 men and 35 women among the contributors. Are there fewer women involved in the antiwar movement throughout American history? Or did Rosenwald ignore females because of his preference for particular writers and writings? We may never know because he does not address the gender disparity. If antiwar writers are, in fact, disproportionately male, then further study of that curious fact – or at least some speculation about it – seems warranted.

Multiple traditions merge in these pages: John Woolman, Benjamin Rush, and Reinhold Niebuhr speak as Christians; Eugene V. Debs, Jane Addams, Arturo Giovannitti, and Howard Zinn as proxies for the Left; and Andrew Bacevich as a representative of the Right. Figures like Randolph Bourne cut across trite political labels. And writers associated with certain styles and forms demonstrate their versatility with other kinds of writing. For instance, Robert Lowell, known for his poetry, shows his mastery of the epistolary form in his letter to President Franklin D.

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Allen Mendenhall has lived, taught, and studied in Japan. He is an attorney, a LL.M. candidate in transnational law at Temple University, and a Ph.D. student in English at Auburn University.

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Roosevelt.

Rosenwald proves to be far more astute than Jonah Goldberg in his assessment of William James's "The Moral Equivalent of War." Whereas Rosenwald submits that this essay is "intended as oppositional" to war, Goldberg, a senior editor at *National Review*, treats it as fascist and accuses it of presenting "militarism as a social philosophy" that was not only "a pragmatic expedient" but also the basis for "a workable and sensible model for achieving desirable ends." Of course, **Goldberg has been wrong before.**

Given that Rosenwald purports to have featured the writing of "pacifists," the inclusion of John Kerry and Barack Obama is deplorable. True, Kerry's statement against the Vietnam War is notable as a work of peace activism, but Kerry also voted in 2002 to authorize President Bush's use of force to disarm Saddam Hussein, advocated U.S. military involvement in Syria, and appears at least partially responsible for **the US backing of Saudi-led bombings in Yemen.**

If opposition to the Vietnam War is now the measure of pacifism, then most Americans today are pacifists, there being, as of the year 2000, just 30% of Americans who believe that that war was not a mistake, according to a **Gallup poll**. Thus, Kerry is hardly unique in such opposition. Nicholson Baker, in his energetic essay for this volume, seems more attuned than Rosenwald to Kerry's foreign-policy prescriptions, castigating Kerry for inciting military involvement in Gaddafi's Libya.

President Obama, for his part, has overseen **regular bombings throughout the Middle East**, including in Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, and Somalia; ordered US military intervention in Libya; increased US troop levels in Afghanistan and escalated US military operations there; and urged Americans to support US military involvement in Syria. These positions are ironic in light of his warning, in his piece in this collection, against traveling "blindly" down "that hellish path" to war.

Rosenwald's brief, personal introductions (he recalls hearing James Baldwin speak in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, for instance, and mentions a tribute he wrote for Daniel Berrigan) to each chapter engender an autobiographical feel. One senses that this book represents a patchwork of accumulated memories, that Rosenwald has recounted and repurposed old reading experiences for present political needs. Inviting Carroll to pen the foreword, moreover, was entirely appropriate and wise. As this review opened with Carroll's eloquent words, so it closes with them.

"Because the human future, for the first time in history, is itself imperiled by the ancient impulse to respond to violence with violence," Carroll intones, "the cry 'war no more!' can be heard coming back at us from time ahead, from the as yet unborn men and women – the ultimate voices of peace – who simply will not come into existence if the essential American soul does not change." But all is not lost; Carroll remains optimistic. "The voices of this book, a replying chorus of hope," he says, "insist that such change is possible."

*Allen Mendenhall is a writer, author, and managing editor of Southern Literary Review. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com).*

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