

The Moral Equivalent Of War: American Ideas Of Sport, The State And National Vitality, 1880-1920

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In the early twentieth century the philosopher William James wrote an essay entitled “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in which he identified sport as producing a set of virtues which formed “the rock upon which states are built.” James’ sentiments were shared by much of the American intellectual class which described itself as “progressive.” The writings of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Richard Ely, Simon Patten, Jane Addams, E.A. Ross and many others reflect similar estimates of the power of sport in strengthening nationhood. Their assumptions were shared by a growing army of professional recreation scientists and play movement leaders who borrowed James’ conception of a “moral equivalent of war” to agitate for a national crusade to make the United States into an athletic “city on a hill.”

The concept of sport as a “moral equivalent of war” had important implications for political and social theorists and reformers. Champions of the strenuous life hypothesized that sport could control and order energies, in particular human energies. Such a perspective flowed from analogical reasoning. Athletics required the regulation and rational application of the body’s dynamic potential to the dictates of the contest. Simple observation confirmed that fact. Sport then, the analogy testified, controlled

energy. James' identification of sport as "the moral equivalent of war" read one way, revealed the mainspring of progressivism's fascination with sport. Aggression represented the most basic, and the most powerful human energy, responsible for the destructions of war. Athletics turned the aggressive impulse into a socially productive force. Sport rendered the source of war, the aggressiveness of human nature and the need to dominate, "moral," by regulating and tempering warlike energies.

The founding fathers and mothers of the sporting republic connected sport to war in another way. While sport lessened the chances for civil conflict and controlled the warlike impulses of the masses, it also, to a world which saw some wars as necessary, kept the martial flame kindled and prepared the nation for what the global interventionists and jingoists insisted would be inevitable outbreaks of hostilities.

Each translation of James' phrase aimed at using physical culture to guarantee national vitality. Each perspective pushed its adherents toward political campaigns aimed at enlisting the aid of the national government to foster the strenuous life - empowering the state to create institutions designed to further empower the state. My paper delineates the origins and consequences of conceiving of sport as the "moral equivalent of war" and explores the interconnections between American ideologies of the state and sport in *fin de siècle* culture.