

Summary of Joel Best's "Declaring War on Social Problems"

"How we talk about policy shapes what we do, what we think we are doing, why we think we are doing it, and so on." One popular form of policy talk is "declaring war" on social problems.

Throughout the 20th Century government officials have been "declaring war" on a variety of social problems, including drugs, poverty and crime.

The key meanings policymakers mean to evoke with the war metaphor are: "the problem is an enemy of society at large; society is justified in fighting this enemy; society's members should rally to this cause; and they should be willing to make sacrifices to the war effort."

However, social problems wars differ from literal wars in key ways.

1. *The problem of complexity.* Although the war metaphor suggests a single enemy, social problems are multifaceted and have multiple causes.
2. *The problem of victory.* The war metaphor carries the implication that the enemy can be defeated, but social policies are unlikely to result in clear-cut victories. Because of unrealistic expectations, even seemingly successful policies may be viewed as failures.
3. *The problem of duration.* Because most U.S. wars have been brief, the war metaphor suggests that the problem will be solved quickly. However, "most successful social policies produce modest improvements over time." Thus, policies that don't result in quick results may be viewed as failures.
4. *The problem of unity.* Because of the reasons noted above, social policy wars don't produce the lasting unity that literal wars may.

The war metaphor also makes it difficult to adopt alternative imagery and change strategies.

The war metaphor is an exemplar of the melodramatic imagery that defines social problems as battles between good and evil. This simplicity is ill-suited to describe effective social policy, which tends to be complex and boring.