



TWO AUTHORS UNDER THE SAME ROOF (ON WRITING)

By Kara Dixon-Vuic, Jason Vuic and Michael Neiberg September 22, 2020
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Michael Neiberg: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. I'm **Michael Neiberg**, Chair of War Studies at the U.S. Army War College here in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and I'm delighted to be talking remotely today to two good friends and award-winning historians, **Kara Dixon Vuic** and **Jason Vuic**. Kara is the Lance Corporal Benjamin W. Schmidt Professor of War, Conflict and Society in 20th century America at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas and the author of *History of the Army Nurse Corps: Girls Next Door*, which won an AHA prize, the John's Prize and the Rutledge History of Gender, War and the U.S. military. Jason is the author of some of my favorite books. So just the titles alone, *The Yugo*, *The Rise and Fall of the Worst Car in History*, and *The Yucks* which is a history of the 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the only NFL football team to go through a season and not win anything. So, Kara and Jason, it's great to have you here even through remote. I know we've had a few technical challenges, but it's wonderful to have you here.

Kara Dixon Vuic: Thank you.

Jason Vuic: Thank you, Mike.

MN: Kara, I want to start with you. You and I met first through your undergraduate advisor, and I want to throw a shout out here to Monserrat Miller at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Montserrat reached out to me. She was a good friend of mine from graduate school and said, I have this really, really special really, really bright, talented student here. Would you talk to her because her interest seemed to be kind of like yours? And I remember when you and I first had that conversation, I think you were already in graduate school at that point and we talked to a wide range of things that you were interested in: military history, cultural history, gender history. So, I guess I want to start by asking how you went through that very natural, very normal process of narrowing down to research questions that you've been working on really ever since.

KDV: Actually, it all started in Montserrat's class. It was a history senior seminar and we all had to write a paper. We got to choose our topic and I was interested in the Vietnam War and I was interested in women's history. And I realized fairly early on that I could combine those two interests if I looked at army nurses who went to Vietnam and so that was my senior seminar paper as an undergraduate, and then I went to graduate school and wrote about these things, and my dissertation, and that became a first book, and it kind of grew into this broader interest in not just women and women's experiences in the military, but also sort of military perspectives about how to deal with women, how to manage women's problems, how to manage women's bodies, how the military uses women as entertainment which was the next book. And now I'm thinking about broader meanings of women's military service. What it means for women to serve, what it means in this next project in particular, to exclude women from registration for selective service. And so, it's kind of broadened in all sorts of directions, but it all goes back to that class with Montserrat as an undergraduate thinking about these amazing army nurses who went to Vietnam.

MN: So, did you know when you left Marshall to go to graduate school that you wanted to continue on that exact topic or was that something that sort of evolved as you went to graduate school and got exposed to different ideas.

KDV: Oh no, I was on a mission. I was totally on a mission and my adviser, Michael McGerr, Indiana. He kept saying maybe you want to broaden out? Maybe you want to think more broadly about some things? And I'm like, no, I am writing this story about these women, these nurses. And Dr. McGerr was right. He's right about all kinds of things, but he was right in that reading more broadly and thinking more broadly about social history, cultural history, military history, help me to place those women and that interest in a broader picture.

MN: Sure.

KDV: But I definitely arrived in Bloomington on a mission.

MN: Yeah, but you have to be able to provide that context, right? That's what our professional education in graduate school allows you to do. I want to come back to that, but I want to bring in Jason into this discussion because Jason, I think this is actually something that you do incredibly well and incredibly beautifully in your books. So, I want to start first by asking you, if I'm right in thinking that you have managed to find topics of some unbelievably spectacular failures to write about, and if so, what is it about spectacular failure? I remember you and I talking about the 1984 Olympic project that you were working on. What attracts you to these subjects and how do you find them? Who thinks to write a book on the Yugo?

JV: Well, I mean, I guess I've always been somewhat of a contrarian regarding history, not looking for arguments in history, but I'm tired of hagiographies. I was really disappointed, I think

it was William Manchester did a book on the greatness of the New England Patriots football coach. Do we need another one of those books with your enormous talent? David Halberstam, maybe, I'm not sure who it was. But I'm sure it was very good and well written but that doesn't excite me. I want books about oddballs and odd things that you could still draw a larger lesson from. The Buccaneers of 1976 or the Yugo were just phenomenal failures, but within those, there are great stories about the post-Tito Yugoslavia, of Yugoslavs desperately trying to earn money in any way possible to keep the country afloat, knowing that if it doesn't stay afloat, it's going to break apart violently, or the NFL coming together and trying to expand to new places like Tampa Bay which wasn't a place. Tampa Bay was a body of water and the Buccaneers really created a sense of place which is lacking in Florida. I grew up there. And so, anything that creates a sense of place. And so, these larger issues can be found in failure and as someone who wants to write popular books, if you can draw someone with the hook, with the title or the subtitle even better. Once I started with the Yugo, the Yucks was a natural. The Sarajevo Olympics was the same thing. How could something so wonderful and at the time really beautiful—the coming together of all these athletes in a poor country, not a typical Olympic country. And then how could, four years later, five years later, these people begin to kill themselves so violently? To me, those are no brainers. So, that's really what draws me to those topics.

MN: And like we were talking about with Kara, the other thing that I love about the way that you tackle these projects, you have a background in the Balkans. Your family is from there. You've been there many times. So, you're writing a story as you said, that is trying to contextualize these issues that as you said, it's not really a book so much about the Yugo as a question about, how does a post-Cold War state begin to make this transition.

JV: Sure, and part of it, my writing popular books and somewhat silly books from the title, but not silly books from the subject, it comes from my own experience as a historian and in graduate school and studying in the Balkans. I'm 47 years old. I came a little bit late to writing a popular book on the Balkans. Had I been 10 years older, I would have been in a situation where I could have written one of the first books that came out and was very popular like Misha Glenny's *Fall of Yugoslavia* that sold in the hundreds of thousands. By the time I was in grad school and fighting through a dissertation, people were tired of the Balkans. The wars were over, Kosovo war was over. I had lived through all that and traveled there and I wanted to write something that in a way, I could be heard, that people would read and I knew that even if I wrote the best book on the Balkans and interethnic relations and hatred and family issues and mixed marriages whatever, no one was going to read it. But I wrote *The Yugo* and I get invited to Harvard Business School to give a talk on the Yugo car. I could have written 50 books on the Balkans and not been invited to Harvard to give a talk is the way I look at it.

MN: Well, I want to shift a little bit. I want to ask you guys a question. Whichever one of you wants to tackle this one or both of you. When I give people writing advice, I have a sheet that I

give to all my students on my advice on writing, and one of the pieces of advice that I give is never rely for editorial advice from people that you really, really care about. That is to say, your significant other, because you're unlikely to get really good criticism, either because you've really made them mad and they want to criticize you or they don't want to hurt your feelings, so they'll say, well, this is kind of nice. So, I guess I want to ask you guys what it's like for the two of you. Do you read each other's work in draft? And I hear from the laughter already that I'm going to get a great answer, do you read each other's work in draft, and if so, how does that go?

KDV: Well, we also have very different writing styles. I can write 100,000 drafts. My first draft, nobody in their right mind wants to see because it's a hot mess. By the time you get to the end, there might be something presentable there. When Jason sits down to write, the period does not go at the end of the sentence until it is done. Done like take to the printers done. And so, our styles are so different that it's actually really hard for us to provide that criticism just because it's so different. If I say to Jason, this paragraph is great, but this middle sentence, think about doing this or this or this. That sentence interrupts the whole flow, like it's integral to that paragraph. You just can't mess with that sentence.

MN: So, do you tend not to read each other's stuff in draft? You tend to wait until it's published to read it? Or do you end up reading it in draft eventually?

JV: I think we read each other's things, it's just that we're kind of standoffish. I'm not going to read Kara's drafts nine times like her. Her peers and colleagues do and provide this great advice because she's such a consummate, professional historian. Even when I was an undergrad, when I'd have a professor say, alright, on the syllabus, it would say first draft due October 1. Second draft due November 1. I couldn't do that. I would hold back passages so I could then add them later and then the professor would go, wow, you've done so much. I just write in this weird, maybe OCD like fashion, but it creates a finished product. And Kara does so many drafts. I wait for hers towards the end when she's closer to being done, and then I say flush this out, I want more of this story.

MN: So, you let her kind of work through her drafts herself.

JV: Yes.

MN: Kara, I don't think I write 100 drafts, but I certainly know that the first draft of whatever I write, I'm writing to myself to figure out what's in my head. I don't want to show that to anybody. But Jason, you're different. Are you more stream of conscious writing? Is that what I'm hearing from Kara?

JV: I don't know. I research topics, let's say with the Sarajevo Olympics, I built spreadsheets of every single source, every single thing I could find from academic monographs to popular magazines to newspaper articles. I have various database subscriptions, many actually, through either TCU, through Kara or on my own. And I just put everything together in sheets. Who should I interview? Where do they live? Anything else I should know? And then I make kind of a chapter outline in my head and then I write maybe the seven or eight things I need to get through for this broken-down chapter. So, I go by feel. I'm a little odd that way, but it's worked. My first time I wrote and sold my first manuscript on the Yugo to Helen Wang, which is FSG Macmillan, they offered me a contract and everything and I hadn't done this. I didn't know people who had written popular books like this. And when I got the edits back and they were incredibly light and I was a little bit terrified because I thought, I can't blame an editor when someone reads this and says it's awfully written, but it's worked for me. I don't know. It's strange. It's a strange way of writing, but it's worked. And so, Kara and I have been able to not step on each other's toes, but we also help each other immensely. She points out larger themes. She's always, look at the forest for the trees, and I get bogged down in funny storytelling that might not be good for the book as a whole. I've learned to remove whole things and focus on the larger picture because of Kara.

KDV: It's just a different kind of book. So, mine are making academic points and I'm trying to tell a story and the more I've written, the more I think I've gotten away from the traditional kind of academic style of writing and try to tell stories as I'm making a point. But Jason's books are telling you the story and along the way you get the point. Does that make sense, sort of the difference? He tells a story in the book.

MN: But you both come to a point where you're speaking to both. When I talk to academics about Jason's work, you're certainly highly respected for what you do and Kara, your work is attracting a bigger and bigger audience all the time. So, in a way, you're kind of moving to the same point from different starting points, and I could see where it would be interesting, the synergy that you could build as the two of you are taking your different styles and adapting it to the other's writing. I could also see where that would be potentially contentious.

JV: We've learned. We've learned how to avoid that type of editing. And she is a phenomenal academic historian. She's just phenomenal. I've learned that over the years. When we married we were both in graduate school and I knew we were both smart, could write and read books, but I didn't realize I was marrying such a first-rate academic. An academic's academic. I've always been amazed by that. I'm not very good at academic history. I don't have the patience for it. I have a hard time discerning the field, especially in Eastern Europe which was less defined than American history.

MN: And needs the languages. We've had some fun times over your being able to eavesdrop on people, but it's still more than one language that you need in that part of the world.

JV: Yeah, and I never really had a feel of what I needed to know and what I was engaging. And so, once I was free of that as a writer, the story is key. So, Kara has to engage in academic field, add her argument to this pile, you know the traditional historians. There's the field. There's a hole in the field and I'm going to fill it, and this is how I'm going to do it. That intro to the dissertation or the master's thesis, and to me, I've learned how to research. I know how to research, I know how to exhaust everything that's available in what I'm doing, and so I do that, but then I'm looking to tell the story. I'm not engaging in any type of... if someone has made an argument in the field, I'll put them in the book as part of the narrative. And I've done that recently in a book I'm writing with UNC on swamp pedaling in Florida in the 50s and 60s. When someone has made an academic argument, I'll bring that person or that work into the narrative itself.

MN: It is part of the way, I have friendships with both of you. I get a crazy text from Jason where he's uncovered some crazy fact about swampland development in South Florida, just something completely off the wall that I just can't wait to see what you're going to do with it in a book. And Kara, you and I have these deep, kind of historiographical discussions. They're similar, but in another way they're very, very different in the way that they go. So, it's actually a lot of fun to know both of you and to watch the way that both of you work with evidence and go forward. So, as I'm seeing the sand starting to run out of the technical hourglass here, the virtual hourglass, I definitely want to switch to talk to you about the projects that you're working on right now. Kara, I know you're working on a project on gender and conscription. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how you came to that and where you are in the process?

KDV: I'm at the beginning. I'm at the very beginning.

MN: So, you're on draft number 97?

KDV: Right. I've got maybe a couple of paragraphs that are presentable.

MN: How many times have you written those paragraphs?

KDV: Several, took several times. No, I'm more broadly, recently interested in questions about women and selective service and conscription and what it means to have excluded women from registration for selective service for so long. And I think all of that is about to change with recent court decisions declaring that excluding women from registration is unconstitutional. I think that is going to play itself out, and we're going to see women have to start registering. And so, what I want to write is a short, and I'll say short because I keep trying to hold myself to it, but a short book that anybody could pick up and see that this is not the first time the United States has had

these discussions or these debates, that it's been a conscientious thing in American history, that we've had moments when we talked about and moments when we've actually come fairly close to drafting women. And I just want to provide that background and that context for thinking about what it means to register women and what it has meant to exclude women from compulsory service.

MN: Yeah, I had read an early draft or something I guess you put together for a grant proposal that I wrote on, and at about the same time, my daughter was asking me that. Something had come up in school and they were talking about conscription and I said, well you know my friend Kara is writing something very interesting about this. So, obviously there's a need for it. Jason, have you got the swampland in Florida project wrapped up?

JV: Yes. It's with UNC press. Two days from now I'm turning in everything. It's ready for proofreading.

MN: Congratulations.

JV: Thank you, it's been a fairly long road for this one. This is on where I grew up in Southwest Florida. It's on how these companies came in in the 1950s and bought up hundreds of thousands of acres of swampland and denuded forestland, cattle land and divided them into millions and millions of residential lots, which they then sold to northerners for \$10 down and \$10 a month. This is how working-class northerners retired to Florida, one installment at a time. And so, it's really about kind of the wackiness in the interesting era when Levittowns were being built in New York and in New Jersey and in Pennsylvania. The same type of Levittowns were being built, not for working people, but for retirees. And this is how Florida in many ways, the great excerpts of Florida, not the urban Florida, not the country Florida. This is how Florida was built and so this is what I'm working on with a focus on some of the wily land scammers and some of the people that built cities and what these cities have meant. The urban planning was somewhat poor, the environmental devastation was great. And so really, what these communities have meant for modern Florida.

MN: Every time I talk to you about this project, all I can get in my head is the "Married... with Children" episode where the Bundys go down to Dumpwater, Florida for vacation. It's all I can envision is something that would look like that.

JV: Yes.

MN: And then you already do have an idea for a book beyond that. Am I right?

JV: Well, I bat around ideas periodically.

MN: Some of which you and I have texted back and forth about, and that has been a lot of fun. I hope that continues.

JV: Yes. Periodically I wonder if I want to return to Yugoslav history and do something related even to World War II, maybe even early communism, but I'm also thinking of broader things. I'm thinking a book on invasive species all over the United States, chapter by chapter, various interesting invasive species. I'm thinking a book on the crazy phenomenon of Hooters restaurants and those type of restaurants and how they still exist today, unbelievably so, and things like that. Just something that might draw a readership that I can tell the broader story with the hook—something you might want to grab on your way onto an airplane or a flight somewhere or going on vacation to the beach.

MN: Speaking of, I know no one's going on vacation to the beach or not many people, but I do like to end these things, near the end, by asking people what their reading right now. So, Kara, what's on your bed stand? What are you reading?

KDV: I'm a nerd. I read all this history stuff.

MN: That's okay.

KDV: I've got books on the draft and really boring stuff. Yeah. I'm in trouble. Jason always makes fun of me for this, like you need to read fiction. I'm like no, I don't need to read fiction. I need to read more monographs.

MN: I'm with you. I think my academic training has broken my brain for fiction. I just I can't do it anymore. I'm doing what you're doing. I'm ripping it apart for argument and source and historiography and most of the fiction I read, I just can't do it. Jason, what are you reading?

JV: Well, Kara is always doing homework, even when she's relaxing. She's still doing homework. I'm walking every night after the kids go down, after the coronavirus thing, I walk every night for long, long stretches and so I've been listening to a lot of books on tape and I've just rediscovered after years and years of not reading him at all, John Grisham, just simple pulp thrillers. I've listened to his most recent ones and last time I think I read, maybe *The Firm*, I don't know, just out of college, sometime in the 90s is 20 years. I'm really enjoying it and the more I listen to pulp, the more I read pulp. But also, I read occasionally a monograph, but the more I read, and I think this is important for anyone listening who wants to write and wants their writing to flow, read more and read pulp, read sci-fi, read anything. Read, read, read. And I think reading helps you write. And certainly, I find that I write better when I'm reading more.

MN: So, you're not reading the same stuff. You're not reading each other's stuff. You're not writing in the same way, yet you've both got onto a remarkably successful careers at young ages, and I look forward to seeing what else you're both going to produce, and even though they're going to be very different books, I look forward to reading all of it. So, Jason and Kara, I want to thank you for taking some time out of your busy schedules during quarantine and all of this to sit down and talk to us. And I want to thank all of you, our audience, for joining us. Please consider subscribing to A Better Peace wherever you get your podcasts for more great content. Talk to you next time. Thanks very much.