

Byron



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# Approaches to Peace

A READER IN PEACE STUDIES

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## WAR IS A FORCE THAT GIVES US MEANING

There is an irony in the public's attention to war. On the one hand, most people detest it, considering war among the greatest misfortunes to befall human beings. But on the other, people eagerly listen to war stories, songs, and marches; avidly read accounts of battles; flock to parades and movies that celebrate armed conflict; and revere war heroes. Because war is almost universally reviled—as opposed to soldiers, who are typically admired—only rarely are the *attractions* of war faced honestly and openly; yet those attractions are undeniable, as indicated not only by the public's almost insatiable appetite for war-related material but—even more troublesome—by the persistence of war itself. Even those peace activists who agree with Margaret Mead's claim that "warfare is only an invention—not a biological necessity," believe that there is a need to confront its appeal.

There are many reasons for war's perverse attractiveness, ranging from sheer thrill seeking, with its physical and sexual opportunities, to its potential for expressing genuine altruism and, indeed, heroism. High on the list is a connection to other combatants, including even, on occasion, the opponents. A U.S. combat veteran of World War II wrote that

we are liberated from our individual impotence and are drunk with the power that union with our fellows brings. In moments like these many have a vague awareness of how isolated and separate their lives have hitherto been. . . . With the boundaries of the self expanded, they sense a kinship never known before. Their "I" passes insensibly into a "we." . . . At its height, this sense of comradeship is an ecstasy.<sup>3</sup>

Reflections of this sort may be discomfiting to those of us seeking to eliminate war, or at least, to reduce its frequency and intensity. But an honest approach to peace requires nothing less than an honest recognition of war's appeal, including the extent to which it offers many a sense of "meaning." In this regard, former war correspondent Chris Hedges offers an honest and troubling account.

War and conflict have marked most of my adult life. I have been in ambushes on desolate stretches of Central American roads, locked in unnerving firefights in the marshes in southern Iraq, imprisoned in the Sudan, beaten by Saudi military

police, deported from Libya and Iran, captured and held for a week by Iraqi Republican Guards, strafed by Russian MiG-21s in central Bosnia, shot at by Serb snipers, and shelled with deafening rounds of artillery in Sarajevo that threw out thousands of deadly

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<sup>3</sup> J. Glen Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

bits of iron fragments. I have seen too much of violent death. I have tasted too much of my own fear. I have painful memories that lie buried most of the time. It is never easy when they surface.

And yet there is a part of me that remains nostalgic for war's simplicity and high. The enduring attraction of war is this: even with its destruction and carnage, it gives us what we all long for in life. It gives us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our news. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble. And those that have the least meaning in their lives—the impoverished refugees in Gaza, the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France, even the lost legions of youth that live in the splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world—are all susceptible to war's appeal.

### WAR AS CULTURE

I learned early on that war forms its own culture. The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by mythmakers—historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state—all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks just below the surface within all of us.

And so it takes little in wartime to turn ordinary men into killers. Most give themselves willingly to the seduction of unlimited power to destroy, and all feel the peer pressure. Few, once in bottle, can find the strength to resist.

The historian Christopher Browning noted the willingness to kill in *Ordinary Men*, his study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Poland during World

War II. On the morning of July 12, 1942, the battalion was ordered to shoot 1,800 Jews in the village of Jozefow in a daylong action. The men in the unit had to round up the Jews, march them into the forest, and one by one order them to lie down in a row. The victims, including women, infants, children, and the elderly, were shot dead at close range.

Battalion members were offered the option to refuse, an option only about a dozen men took, although more asked to be relieved once the killing began. Those who did not want to continue, Browning says, were disgusted rather than plagued by conscience. When the men returned to the barracks, they "were depressed, angered, embittered, and shaken." They drank heavily. They were told not to talk about the event, "but they needed no encouragement in that direction."

### WAR AS MYTH

The most recent U.S. conflicts have insulated the public and U.S. troops from both the disgust and pangs of conscience. The Gulf War—waged from bombers high above the fray and reported by carefully controlled journalists—made war fashionable again. It was a cause the nation willingly embraced. It exorcised the ghosts of Vietnam. It gave us heroes and the heady belief in our own military superiority and technology. It almost made war fun. And the chief culprit was, as in many conflicts, not the military but the press. Television reporters happily disseminated the spoon-fed images that served the propaganda effort of the military and the state.

These images did little to convey the reality of war. Pool reporters, those guided around in groups by the military, wrote once again about "our boys" eating packaged army food, practicing for chemical weapons attacks, and bathing out of buckets in the desert. It was war as spectacle—war, if we are honest, as entertainment. The images and stories were designed to make us feel good about our nation, about ourselves. The families and soldiers being blown to bits by iron fragmentation bombs just over the border in Iraq were faceless and nameless phantoms.

The moment I stepped off an Army C-130 military transport in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, to cover the

Persian Gulf War, I was escorted to a room with several dozen other reporters and photographers. I was told to sign a paper that said I would abide by the severe restrictions placed on the press. The restrictions authorized "pool reporters" to be escorted by the military on field trips. Most of the press sat in hotel rooms and rewrote the bland copy filed by the pool or used the pool video and photos. I violated this agreement the next morning when I went into the field without authorization. The rest of the war, most of which I spent dodging military police and trying to talk my way into units, was a forlorn and lonely struggle against the heavy press control.

The notion that the press was used in the war is incorrect. The press wanted to be used. It saw itself as part of the war effort. Most reporters sent to cover a war don't really want to go near the fighting. They do not tell this to their editors and indeed will moan and complain about restrictions. The handful who actually head out into the field have a bitter enmity with the hotel room warriors. But even those who do go out are guilty of distortion—maybe more so. For they not only believe the myth, feed off the drug, but also embrace the cause. They may do it with more skepticism. They certainly expose more lies and misconceptions. But they believe. We all believe. When you stop believing, you stop going to war.

I knew a Muslim soldier, a father, who fought on the front lines around Sarajevo. His unit, in one of the rare attempts to take back a few streets controlled by the Serbs, pushed across Serb lines. They did not get very far. The fighting was heavy. As he moved down the street, he heard a door swing open and fired a burst from his AK-47 assault rifle. A twelve-year-old girl dropped dead. He saw in the body of the unknown girl lying prostrate in front of him the image of his own twelve-year-old daughter. He broke down. He had to be helped back to the city. He was lost for the rest of the war, shuttered inside his apartment, nervous, morose, and broken. This experience is far more typical of warfare than the Rambo heroics we are fed by the state and the entertainment industry. The cost of killing is all the

more bitter because of the deep disillusionment that war usually brings.

### WAR AS CRUSADE

The disillusionment comes later. Each generation again responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionment—often at a terrible price.

"We believed we were there for a high moral purpose," wrote Philip Caputo in his book on Vietnam, *Rumor of War*. "But somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten."

Once again the United States stands poised on the threshold of war. "We go forward," President George W. Bush assures us, "to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world." He is not shy about warning other states that they either stand with us in the war on terrorism or will be counted as aligned with those that defy us. This too is a crusade.

But the war on terrorism is different in that we Americans find ourselves in the dangerous position of going to war not against a state but a phantom. The crusade we have embarked upon in the war on terrorism is targeting an elusive and protean enemy. The battle we have begun is never-ending. But it may be too late to wind back the heady rhetoric. We have embarked on a campaign as quixotic as the one mounted to destroy us. As it continues, as terrorist attacks intrude on our lives, as we feel less and less secure, the acceptance of all methods to lash out at real and perceived enemies will distort and deform our democracy.

And yet, the campaign's attraction seems irresistible. War makes the world understandable, a black-and-white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought. All bow before the supreme effort. We are one. Most of us willingly accept war as long as we can fold it into a belief system that paints the ensuing suffering as necessary for a higher good; for human beings seek not only happiness but also meaning. And tragically, war is sometimes the most powerful way in human society to achieve meaning.