

The Alternative

Box 1405. Montauk, NY 11954

May, 2009
Vol. XXXVI No. 3

The subject of war is unfortunately always in season. The United States of America began in war with “the shot round the world.” Its history since then has been one of war with only short intervals of peace. Its citizens truly believe they are a peace-loving people but the historical record challenges that belief. At present the U. S. is engaged in two wars that have largely faded into the background of the country’s daily business, except for the devastation caused to the military people involved. The recent report that in the last three years 110,000 Iraqis have been killed was buried in the inside of the newspaper, if it was reported at all. It seems that these wars will continue indefinitely. War used to have a beginning (a declaration) and an end (surrender).

Despite the nearly constant presence of war there is less written on the topic than one might have expected. Those who have a direct experience of war usually are not able or not willing to speak of war. Those who are innocent of the experience may be all too willing to speak of war but they do not know what they are talking about. One of the best books on war is J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. Gray reflected on his experience as a soldier in World War II. It took him fifteen years before he could sort out the experience. His reflection was aided by the fact that his PhD in philosophy from Columbia University had arrived the same day as his draft notice. These days not many front line soldiers have a PhD in philosophy.

Some of the best writing on war is found in novels. It seems that the horror of the experience usually requires an artistic vision to convey the experience. That or the simplicity of a child’s experience is needed. Ishmael Beah’s, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) is an extraordinary document of life as a child soldier. One of the worst developments in recent warfare is the advent of child soldiers, at least 300,000 of them (one tenth of them girls). War has always been hard on children but until recently no one could imagine an army of children. The presence of forty million orphans in Africa plus the availability of the lightweight AK-47 made children ready for exploitation. Charles Taylor’s army in the Congo was estimated to be sixty percent children.

At the United Nations next month there will be an exhibit of 200 paintings done by former child soldiers. The new good will ambassador of the U.N., Ross Bleckner, helped the children to do the paintings in Uganda. When U.N. officials approached Bleckner, they asked if he thought art could perform a useful role in drawing attention to child trafficking (\$32 billion a year profit), he said: “If art can’t perform a role like that, it has no role at all.”

The following essay is by Chris Hedges, a former *New York Times* reporter. He quit reporting when he came to realize that war was killing him; he has since written against war with insights similar to Gray’s book. The essay by Gabriel Moran is reflection on what Hedges, Gray, Beah and others with first hand experience have written. The last essay is from Steven Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis* which traces how war has changed and where the power to oppose war now lies.

THE NARCOTIC OF WAR

By Chris Hedges

During the war in El Salvador I worked with a photographer who had a slew of close calls and then called it quits. He moved to Miami. He took pictures of tepid domestic stories for one of the newsweeklies. But life in Florida was flat, dull, uninteresting. He could not adjust and soon came back. From the moment he stepped off the plane it was clear he had returned to die. Just as there are some soldiers or war correspondents who seem to us immortal and whose loss comes as a sobering reminder that death has no favorites, there are also those in war who are locked in a grim embrace with death from which they cannot escape. He was shot a few months later through the back in a firefight. It took him less than a minute to die.

We believe in the nobility of war and self-sacrifice demanded by war, especially when we are blinded by the narcotic of war. We discover in the communal struggle, the shared sense of meaning and purpose, a cause. War fills our spiritual void. I do not miss war, but I miss what it brought. I can not say I was happy in the midst of the fighting in El Salvador, or Bosnia, or Kosovo, but I had a sense of purpose, of calling. This is a quality war shares with love.

Happiness is elusive and protean. And it is sterile when devoid of meaning. But meaning, when it is set in the vast arena of war with its high stakes, its adrenaline-driven rushes, its bold sweeps and drama, is heartless and self-destructive. The initial selflessness of war mirrors that of love, the chief emotion war destroys. We are tempted to reduce life to a simple search for happiness. Happiness, however, withers if there is no meaning. The other temptation is to disallow the search for happiness in order to be faithful to that which provides meaning. But to live only for meaning – indifferent to all happiness – makes us fanatic, self-righteous, and cold. It leaves us cut off from our own humanity and the humanity of others. We must hope for grace for our lives to be sustained by moments of meaning and happiness, both equally worthy of human communion.

During the first phase of the war in Kosovo I moved about the country in an armored jeep. I slept in wooden sheds and barns or on the floors of peasant homes. I heard from local rebels about a Serb attack on a nearby village. The victims would be buried in a few hours. As often happened, I had to leave my vehicle behind because of the extensive Serb roadblocks. I walked to the site on foot. It was, as usual, a perilous game of cat-and-mouse, one I had played for five years with the military in El Salvador. During the funeral Serb snipers opened fire on the crowd. We darted for cover. I filed my story, quickly typed out and sent over the satellite phone I carried in my backpack. Then I walked out. To record the atrocities, even as I knew that the killings would continue, was my task. But by then it was destroying me. I felt profoundly alone.

I did not sleep well in war. I could rarely recall my dreams, waking only to know they had been harsh and violent. When I left the war zones, the nightmares descended on me like furies. I had horrible visions of war. I would dream of being in combat with my father or young son and unable to protect them. There are few sanctuaries in war. But one is provided by couples in love. It was with them, seated around a wood stove, usually over a simple meal, that I found sanity and was reminded of what it means to be human. It was to such couples that I retreated during wars in Central America, the Middle East, and the Balkans. I could sleep in the homes of such

couples. Their love spread a protective blanket over us. It was able to blot out the war, although the lure of combat, the distant rattle of automatic weapons beckoned us back, and we always went.

Aristotle said that only two living entities are capable of complete solitude and complete separateness: God and beast. Because of this the most acute form of suffering for human beings is loneliness. The isolated individual can never be adequately human. And many of war's most fervent adherents are those atomized individuals who, before the war came, were profoundly alone and unloved. They found fulfillment in war, perhaps because it was the closest they came to love. If we do not acknowledge such an attraction, which is, in some ways, so akin to love, we can never combat it.

We are tempted to honor false covenants of race, nationalism, class and gender. They sometimes compete for our loyalty. War of course is often – maybe always – a false covenant. Sham covenants are based on exclusion rather than universality. All covenants that lack an adequate sense of humility and an acknowledgment of the sinfulness of our own cause are false covenants. The prophets warned us about them.

The cost of war is often measured in the physical destruction of a country's infrastructure, in the blasted buildings, factories and bridges, in the number of dead. But probably worse is the psychological and spiritual toll. This cost takes generations to heal. It cripples and perverts whole societies, as Europe saw with the shattered veterans from World War I. But even for those who know the cost of war, it still holds out the promise of eradicating the thorny problems of life.

In the beginning war looks and feels like love. But unlike love it gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self-destruction. It does not affirm but places upon us greater and greater demands. It destroys the outside world until it is hard to lie outside war's grip. It takes a higher and higher dose to achieve any thrill. Finally, one ingests war only to remain numb. The familiar becomes strangely unfamiliar – many who have been in war find this when they return home. The world we once understood and longed to return to stands before us as alien, strange, and beyond our grasp.

In the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, almost a third of all Israeli casualties were due to psychiatric causes, and the war lasted only a few weeks. A World War II study determined that after sixty days of continuous combat, 98 percent of all surviving soldiers will have become psychiatric casualties. They found that a common trait among the 2 percent who were able to endure sustained combat was a predisposition toward "aggressive psychopathic personalities."

War ascendant wipes out all delicacy and tenderness. This is why those in war swing from rank sentimentality to perversion, with little in between. Stray puppies, street kids, cats, anything that can be an object of affection for soldiers are adopted and pampered even in the midst of killing, the beating and torture of prisoners, and the razing of villages. If the pets die they are buried with elaborate rituals and little grave markers. But it is not only love, although the soldiers insist it feels like love. These animals, as well as the young waifs who collect around military units, are total dependents. They pay homage to the absolute power above them. Indeed, it may be that at times they please or they die.

THE VIRTUES OF WAR

By Gabriel Moran

War, although stupid and destructive, has persisted throughout the centuries; it or its violent successor continues. Why? It must be appealing at some level to something in the human psyche or at least to some individuals. For some people, war is profitable; for other people, war is exciting. Hardly anyone would admit to liking war but for many people war provides a meaning to life.

For a nation-state, war unifies the population into having a single vision trained on victory. "Leaders often favor war because war favors leaders." The pacifist who recounts the horrors of war makes no inroads on the militarist mind. Yes, war involves horrors but that is the means to greatness for the nation and courage for its youth. Orson Welles in *The Third Man* says: "Thirty years of warfare, terror and bloodshed in medieval Italy produced the Renaissance. Five hundred years of peace in Switzerland brought forth the cuckoo clock."

War has been mainly an affair of old men sending young men out to battle to become real men. The old men may have been soldiers themselves who know the risks but whose own lives, they think, prove that the risk is worth taking. Other old men (starting at age forty) delight in imagining themselves as strategists, commanders and leaders. They can be more dangerous than the generals. Erasmus stated the case succinctly: *Dulce bellum inexpertis* (War is sweet to those who have not experienced it).

With the change in the nature of war, the military man may no longer encourage an eighteen-year old to pursue a military career in service to his country. One of his successors is a religious leader strapping a bomb on to a fifteen-year old boy or girl to spread havoc on a city bus. The more overtly religious character of this new form of terror/war brings out the religious character of war. William James noted that "reflective apologists for war at the present day all take it religiously. It is a sort of sacrament." War is difficult to dislodge because people religiously believe in its power, grace and inevitability; it is good for the soul. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said: "In this snug and over-safe corner of the world we need it [war] that we may realize that our comfortable routine is no eternal necessity of things, but merely a little space of calm in the midst of the tempestuous untamed streaming of the world."

Opponents of war need to examine the presumed virtues of war such as loyalty, courage, bravery, and heroism. The first thing to note is that the word virtue is derived from *vir* meaning man and *virtus* meaning strength. Despite the fact that by the nineteenth century virtue was assigned to women, at the deepest level "manly virtues" still take precedence. That is especially true in the United States where as Walt Whitman said "the best culture will always be that of the manly and courageous instincts, and loving perceptions, and of self-respect."

War undeniably develops certain virtues. The strong or virtuous man is loyal to his buddies, undaunted by physical threats and ready to defend his family and his country. Anyone who dares to question martial virtues is dismissed as feminine, if a woman, or ridiculed as effeminate, if a man. How women soldiers fit into the mystique of military virtues is not yet clear. Their choice

would seem to be either to outdo the guys at their own game or try to change what it means to serve one's country.

The promise of strength, loyalty and bravery is fulfilled by some people in war but at a terrible price. Unless individuals can draw upon independent judgment and other virtues, martial virtues end with a reversal of their promise, that is, the comradeship of the squad can lead to violation of the rights of others, the discipline of one's abilities can be directed at destruction, and bravery can lead to foolish flirting with death. Theodore Roosevelt, a champion of the manly virtues, said that the citizen's duty is "to serve through the high gallantry of entire indifference to life, if war comes on the land." Is there not something bizarre in defending the lives of citizens with the "high gallantry of entire indifference to life"?

The paradox of war's false promise is found in the two words, heroism and self-sacrifice. War is celebrated for demonstrating heroism and self-sacrifice in their ultimate realization. The two ideas are closely related. "Sacrifice" is often modified by the adjective heroic, and a "hero" is someone ready for self-sacrifice. Neither idea receives much criticism. Indeed, heroes are celebrated as great men and self-sacrifice is thought to be the ultimate form of morality. War is undeniably the setting for the praise of heroism and self-sacrifice.

J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors* describes his experience in World War II and provides philosophical reflection on the nature of war. The book is a powerful indictment of war. Yet Gray can still write: "Are we not right in honoring the fighter's impulse to sacrifice himself for a comrade, even though it be done as it so frequently is, in an evil cause? I think so." A country does have an obligation to respect and care for the young people it has sent to fight in its name. But the country's celebration of heroism and self-sacrifice is misdirected in both war and peace.

"Pity the country that has no heroes," says a character in Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*. "No," is the reply, "pity the country that needs heroes." The idea of the hero comes down to us from history's oldest legends. The hero is a man of superhuman strength and courage who protects his people, usually with violent means. The fact that heroes have almost always been men is significant; "heroine" carries little weight.

To this day, "hero" connotes the military flavor of its origin. The soldier who performs feats of courage in the face of deadly danger – the war hero – remains the main model for heroism. Perhaps in primitive war when physical strength and individual daring were likely to carry off victory, the hero's place made sense. In modern wars, the hero is often dangerous. A military historian notes that "one consequence of mankind's exaggerated regard for courage is that some remarkably stupid men, their only virtue a willingness to expose their own person to risk, have been granted positions of responsibility on the battlefield."

Hero is a title imposed by others. Anyone claiming to be a hero would be suspected of self-delusion. There is a predictable sequence of events after some great achievement under extreme circumstances. Someone is hailed as a hero. The person says, "Aw shucks, I was only doing my job." The response to that comment is, "See how modest he is; that's the mark of a true hero." The appointed hero then becomes more embarrassed and has difficulty adjusting to what he feels is a status that he has not earned.

There is nothing wrong with honoring great work. We need more not less of such praise. In the movie *Topsy Turvy*, Gilbert says to Sullivan “Wouldn’t it be great if quite ordinary people got a round of applause at the end of the day.” The idea of the hero is a distortion and a narrowing of qualities that deserve praise. When the person who is hailed as a hero says, “I was just doing my job,” society ought to listen. The good work is what deserves praise, not some idea of heroism.

A striking example of the distortion of fine work with the title of hero occurred after the World Trade Center bombing in 2001. Firemen in New York City, who do dangerous but necessary work, had been underappreciated workers. The firemen were sometimes criticized for being insular, a closed club of guys who stick together. On September 11, when the firemen reached the twin towers, they reacted as they usually do: they rushed up the stairs to save the lives of their fellow citizens. Three hundred forty-three of the firemen died in the effort. The dangerous daily work of these men was dramatized on a large screen for all of the world to see. Those who died were rightly honored by the city; those who survived were seen with new appreciation.

For several months afterward, every fireman was met with the word hero. All of them found it embarrassing. Their usual response was: I am just doing my job as well as I can. The appointment of heroes idolizes one set of values and blocks out important concerns. For example, it does no dishonor to the memory of the firemen who died to inquire why the fire department’s communication system was so poor; the city’s administration failed to provide these men with the tools needed to do their job and protect their own lives. Assigning the title of hero is an easy way out for generals, mayors and administrators who have sent men to their deaths in dangerous, unnecessary and sometimes stupid ventures.

The firemen who died on September 11, like firemen who die on other days, were not engaged in self-sacrifice. They were focused on saving lives, their own lives included. The idea of self-sacrifice is one of the most pernicious ideas that confuses moral thinking and glorifies war. “Sacrifice,” like hero, comes down to us from ancient religious myths. Its literal meaning is to make holy. Ancient people apparently thought that the gods would be honored by humans giving up prized possessions. If the first fruits of the harvest or the prized calf were destroyed, the humans would thereby signify that god owns everything and that the humans are thankful for whatever gifts they have been given.

Some people went so far as to offer their first-born child to the gods. The child was made holy by being killed. Looking back at these practices of sacrifice, we express horror but we may not be as different as we think we are. It is amazing that the word sacrifice is constantly used in today’s secular literature and is assumed to be the height of morality.

“Sacrifice” is used in many contexts in which death is not the immediate issue but there is always implied a negation or destruction. The idea of “self-sacrifice” is inconsistent to the point of absurdity. The first-born child who was sacrificed to the gods did not choose self-sacrifice. The father or priest did the sacrificing; the child had no say. Anyone who would choose self-sacrifice would be deluded or suicidal.

The Christian movement did with “sacrifice” what it did with numerous other religious terms: the church tried baptizing it. That is, the term was adopted and placed into a new context. “Sacrifice” became more central to the Christian story than most other adopted terms. The life and mission of Jesus were conceptualized as a sacrifice to his heavenly father. However, the whole history of Christianity has been a struggle against reverting to the most primitive idea of sacrifice.

In one reading of Christianity, God demanded an infinite sacrifice for an original human sin. The crucifixion of the Son of God was the only acceptable sacrifice. Jesus laid down his life willingly, even enthusiastically. His suffering is what saves us from the fires of hell. The Protestant Reformation was in part an attempt to correct the idea of sacrifice. The reception of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* suggests the continuing embrace of the idea of sacrificial suffering. Despite the secularization of the West, the self-sacrifice of the Christ still hovers over the heroic morality held up as the ideal.

In an alternate reading of the Christian story, the triumph of Jesus over death is the sign that God is creator of life and that all creation is revealing of the divine. All life is “made sacred” by a nonviolent resistance both to destructive tendencies within the human being and to political violence that puts innocent people to death. The biological facts of suffering and dying have not disappeared but their meaning can be transformed by the example of Jesus and the hope for a fulfilled humanity. God was not a sadist exacting retribution; Jesus was not a masochist who gloried in suffering and “self-sacrifice.”

The latter reading of the story was there from the beginning and still inspires many Christian lives. Unfortunately, the primitive idea of sacrifice, compounded by a Christian idea of the self as sacrificed, affects not only Christianity but our secular ideas of morality. Most of all, the confused idea of self-sacrifice is at the center of thinking about war. There are numerous accounts of men on the battlefield who acted to save the lives of their comrades and died as a result. Their intention was not self-sacrifice; it was to save lives.

The politicians back home who praise self-sacrifice are not honoring the dead but justifying their own decisions. Praise of self-sacrifice is often the attempt to cover up the incompetence and arrogance of old men who send young men out to die. Rudyard Kipling helped his 17 year old son to get into the army and the boy was promptly killed. Kipling gives his son the last word on war: “If any question why we died, tell them because our fathers lied.” If secular politicians would cease to use the word sacrifice, we might be able to start demythologizing war. Aggressive assertion in communal contexts is the desirable ideal rather than the humanity-hating ideas of selflessness and self-sacrifice.

OPPOSING WAR

By Stephen Toulmin

After World War I, the allied powers sponsored the League of Nations, and from the start this multinational institution was meant to have a moral authority, on occasion, of overriding that of any single associated Power. This limitation on the moral authority of all national rulers is also, of course, a feature of the United Nations Charter; and the same limits are implicit in the

operations of the International Court of Justice at the Hague, and in the founding documents of the European Union.

Still, even these limits are interpreted as *self*-limitations. They are not external constraints, which bind such states willy-nilly, but internal glosses on the modern nation-state's exercise of its undoubted sovereignty: each state accepts them as a condition of entering into voluntary association with other co-equal states. As a result, the moral authority of the United Nations and similar institutions is less striking and less influential than the spiritual authority of the Medieval Popes.

In apparent paradox, external authority today belongs to other *non-governmental* institutions. No one takes wholly seriously the moral opinions voiced – whether in outrage, sorrow, or excuse – in the General Assembly or the Security Council of the United Nations, as they are always presented by official spokespersons of the member states, whose status marks them as “interested parties.” The only institutions whose moral opinions command general respect and are generally heard as stating “the decent opinion of humankind” are Amnesty International, Doctors without Borders, the World Psychiatric Association, and similar organizations, which are devoid of physical power or “armed force.”

At this point, the underlying confusion between *power* and *force* in Thomas Hobbes' account of the modern state is crucial. In a moment of cynical joviality Josef Stalin once asked, “How many divisions has the Pope?” The fact is that in the eyes of decent human opinion, moral challenges are *never* answered by displays of force. The day that Amnesty International takes possession of a machine gun, let alone an atomic bomb, its ability to gain a hearing and influence events will be at an end.

Institutions with bigger and bigger guns have, in practice, less and less claim to speak on moral issues with the small voice that carries conviction. Here lies the effectiveness of Jonathan Swift's image of *Lilliput*. Stalin failed to see that the military triviality of the Pope's Swiss Guard increases his claim to a hearing, rather than undermining it; while Amnesty International is that much the greater, just because it is a Lilliputian institution.

To this day, the patterns of our lives are shaped politically by the action of state authority; yet, morally, rulers of contemporary states are open to outside moral criticism of kinds that have not been widely available since before 1650. Even a forceful superpower can no longer ignore that fact. Mikhail Gorbachev saw, as Josef Stalin never did, the harm that a challenge from Amnesty International can do to an authoritarian government. Gorbachev said that Eastern Europe would not have broken away from the Soviet Union without the influence of the Pope.

Lilliputian organizations cannot compel immoral rulers to apologize on their knees, as Henry II had to do; but they do subject rulers who refuse to mend their ways to damaging embarrassment in the eyes of the world. If the political image of modernity was Leviathan, the moral standing of national powers will, for the future be captured in the picture of Lemuel Gulliver, waking from an unthinking sleep to find himself tethered by innumerable tiny bonds.