War as Game

Throughout military history, and especially in the classical period of 1648-1914, war was seen through the prism of a game. A game is an organized human activity that is played according to written and unwritten rules. It is an alternate reality within ordinary reality in which participants strive to attain some goal. There are endless examples of the games people play in school, work, religion, sports, therapy, courts, weddings, funerals and so forth. Ludwig Wittgenstein made famous the idea that language itself is best viewed as a game, that is, various games are played with language according to different “forms of life.” From the time of our earliest histories, war had most of the elements of a game.

Perhaps the earliest rule of the game of war was a principle of fair play, a rule that underlies other rules. In war, injury requires restitution of some kind. The conviction runs deep even among people today that justice requires a balancing of debts. A criminal has to be punished to re-establish harmony in the universe. The retaliation of a tribe for bloodshed may appear to the outsider as vengeance but the responding party sees it as keeping faith with one’s people both past and present. The lex talionis (an eye for an eye) was a rule to keep violence within bounds. Avoid escalation by taking no more than an eye for an eye.

The first great treatise on the game of war is *The Art of War* attributed to Sun Zi (or Sun Zu) in the fourth century B.C.E. Writing within a Taoist context, the author views war paradoxically; it is a game that is best if not played at all. The difference between *The Art of War* and the other great classic, Clausewitz’s *On War*, can be dramatically illustrated by the fact that the term force (li) is used only nine times in the thirteen chapters of *The Art of War*. Clausewitz’s *On War* uses force (gewalt) eight times in its first two paragraphs that define war.

The *Art of War* is closely related to a more famous work of the same era, *Tao Te Ching*, which describes how to rule a state by non-action (wu wei). Sun Zu’s *Art of War* applies those principles to war. A superior general would subdue an enemy without fighting. The book does not glorify winning battles or killing the enemy.

If actual battles cannot be avoided, cleverness is what should rule so that there would be the least loss of life. “War is not a matter of the more troops the better. So long as one does not advance rashly, concentrates his strength, and understands his enemy, that will suffice to take the foe.” War should be quick. “There has never been a case of prolonged war from which a kingdom benefited.” Much of the *Art of War* may be out of date but a world in which the rules were still being formed may speak to a world where the rules of the game have broken down.

At about the time when the *Art of War* was composed, Plato described his ideal state in which a military class would rule. In Book Five of the *Republic*, Plato lays down some rules of war. The section is attached to his discussion of women and children. That location of the text may seem strange but Plato says that “men and women will serve together, and take the children to war with them when they are old enough, to let them
see, as they do in other trades, the jobs they will have to do when they grow up." Plato says to put children on horseback as young as possible and have them ride out to watch the fighting.

The Greeks by the time of Plato’s *Republic* had suffered through some very bloody conflicts; new techniques of war threatened to increase the bloodshed. The long struggle between Athens and Sparta was documented by Thucydides in the *Peloponnesian Wars*. Thucydides’ history has one of the most quoted passages in the history of politics and war. An Athenian diplomat is trying to convince a representative of the people of Melos to side with Athens. When the Melian resists, the Athenian says: “You know that right belongs only to equals. As for the rest, the strong do what they wish, the weak suffer what they must.” The Melians are not persuaded by this rule of war and as a result they are overcome; the men, women and children are slaughtered.

Plato was most concerned with what he calls “civil strife” between two Greek city states. Plato lays down rules for these domestic conflicts. “They will not, as Greeks, devastate Greek lands or burn Greek dwellings; nor will they admit that the whole people of a state – men, women and children – are their enemies but only the hostile minority who are responsible for the quarrel.” It is reasonable to take the opponents’ crops but the war is not going to last forever so that ravaging the land is forbidden.

The Greeks were mainly concerned with “civil strife” not wars against other nations. The Romans provided the first systematic thinking on war as an inevitable and justifiable human activity. The historian Livy wrote that “the war that is necessary is just, and hallowed are the arms where no hope exists but in them.” Augustine of Hippo was an heir to Greek and Roman thinking on war. Writing as the Roman Empire was collapsing, Augustine tried to work out a compromise between the Christian conscience and an increasingly violent world. He thought that a Christian should die rather than kill in his own defense. But if a vulnerable individual or group was attacked, the Christian had a duty to defend the defenseless. That logic allowed for many mischievous reasons for fighting wars.

Augustine’s rules for just reasons to begin wars and just ways to fight wars have echoed down through the centuries. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century took over Augustine’s rules of war and they are still cited by national leaders when they attempt to justify war. George H. W. Bush during the Gulf War of 1991 was fond of invoking Thomas Aquinas in support of the way the war was being fought. But it was somewhat disconcerting that Bush did not know how to pronounce the name Aquinas.

The crusading spirit of the Middle Ages led to chaotic violence that culminated in the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In reaction to horrendous violence, the rules of war became much more detailed and explicit. A war had a formal declaration of its beginning, stating that two nations were at war. At the end, a few months or years hence, the conclusion to the war was staged with greater formality. The provisions of surrender were put in writing, the generals shook hands, and the game was over. One side won, the other lost; the loser lived to play again.
At the Nuremberg trials, Hermann Goering gave an autographed photo to the U.S. General, Carl Spaatz. On it was the inscription: “War is like a football game; whoever loses gives his opponent the hand, and everything is forgotten.” In light of the Nazi atrocities and tens of millions dead, the statement seems bizarre. Goering did not grasp that by 1945 war according to clear rules of the game had collapsed. As a pilot in World War I, Goering would dip his wings to a disabled opponent and fly on rather than administer the coup de grace. In that war many of the rules of war were being broken but the generals could still imagine war as a game in which players knew the rules.

“An appropriate metaphor for interstate wars of the late 17th and 18th centuries was a duel or lethal minuet.” The game was played by actors in proper uniform and an audience of appreciative onlookers. It was a contest of wiles, tactics and maneuvering. A breakthrough would symbolize victory. The soldier was professionally trained to act without letting loose any passions; hatred of the enemy could get in the way of efficient warfare. Some actions were out of bounds. You did not fire at generals, messengers or flag bearers. Sometimes the game halted while each side was allowed to recover its dead and wounded from the field of play.

A main motive for Clausewitz’s On War was that the Napoleonic wars had violated many of the rules of war as a legitimate extension of state policy. Clausewitz feared that “since the time of Bonaparte, war…has assumed quite a new nature, or rather it has approached much nearer to its real nature, to its absolute perfection.” Napoleon’s army had suffered horrendous losses in its Russian expedition. In the nineteenth century, by means of a series of conference treaties at Geneva, the Hague and St. Petersburg, Europe pulled back from war in its “absolute perfection.”

On War stands out as the most insightful, detailed and consistent study of war as a game, “of all branches of human activity the most like a gambling game.” For Clausewitz, “combat is the real warlike activity, everything else is only its auxiliary.” This combat can be understood as a duel on an extensive scale. The point is “to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.” The military leader has to find the opponent’s center of gravity and attack it. The center could be the enemy’s army, the enemy’s capital or the army of a stronger ally. The soldiers in an army must be committed to the “honor of its arms” if it is to be a formidable fighting force.

In contrast to Sun Zu’s Art of War, Clausewitz distrusts generals who win victories without bloodshed. He thinks that “benevolence” is the worst error in war. Although there are rules for restricting killing, Clausewitz wants a recognition that war is a game of bloodshed. “The fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle must make us take war more seriously, but not provide an excuse for gradually blunting our swords in the name of humanity. Sooner or later someone will come along with a sharp sword and hack off our arms.”

Clausewitz’s cold-blooded description of the game of war may be horrifying but it has the virtue of being candid about the bloody nature of war rather than allowing national leaders to talk in abstractions and euphemisms. Clausewitz believed that wars
are inevitable and must be taken seriously. He thought that if the professionally played game between nations were to break down, the violence and bloodshed would spill from the battlefield to every city and village, every man, woman and child. Looking at today’s battlefields, one might conclude he was right.

For the most part, wars in the nineteenth century kept within the rules of the game. But there were harbingers of the future. The U.S. Civil War (1861-65) killed 600,000 young men, a number comparable to the Rwandan butchery of 1994. In the Boer War (1899-1902), ten British troops died of disease for each one in battle; there was widespread murder on both sides. xxiv

At the beginning of the World War, war still connoted two nations sending their teams on to the field to determine which would be victorious. As more nations were dragged into the contest and the position of each army became frozen, the whole economy of each nation was mobilized for a war of attrition. The technology of war had drastically changed in the decades leading up to the war. Human bodies were still needed to fill the trenches but they were more vulnerable to sophisticated weaponry.

Before the War disintegrated into irrational slaughter, rules of war were observed by the troops in unofficial pacts. War was still a game to be played fairly; the other team was not to be attacked during time outs. xxv An especially poignant moment was when British and German troops agreed to a cease fire on Christmas Day in 1914. The soldiers threw snowballs instead of shooting their weapons. The high commanders of both sides must have been horrified at the soldiers playing another game in which the enemy was just ordinary guys playing for the other team. xxvi

Endgame

Paul Fussell, in his history of war, locates the beginning of the modern era’s warfare on July 1, 1916. xxvii The British leader, Lord Kitchener was frustrated at the stalemate on the Western front and determined to break through the German line with one massive assault. Kitchener had gathered fresh recruits from Liverpool and other depressed areas of Britain to go on an exciting expedition to the war front. Some of them brought soccer balls with them. The British assembled 110,000 men at the Somme. Aerial bombing was supposed to have weakened the German position but in fact it had little effect.

At 7:30 on the morning of July 1, the whistle blew and waves of young men came up out of the trenches (it was assumed they were too simple for any other kind of fighting). The machine guns cut them down as fast as they rose; the few that survived no-man’s land ended on barbed wire. By the afternoon, 60,000 men lay dead and wounded on the few hundred yards between the two trenches. The machine gunners stopped from the sheer exhaustion of killing and to allow the British to recover the wounded. xxviii The twentieth century would provide technological slaughters on a larger scale, but for human tragedy in which war had lost all sense of a controlled game with clever tactics and decisive breakthroughs, the battle of the Somme can still evoke amazement.
The eventual entrance of the United States helped to stop the fighting. Its troops were badly trained but they were fresh bodies backed by money and war material. President Woodrow Wilson became a supporter of the war and a prominent spokesperson for how to design the peace. Similar to 1648 and 1815, the horror of a war which had spun out of control brought calls for a new international system. A League of Nations would henceforth regulate “legitimate” wars based on self-defense or enforcement of League-sponsored sanctions. The emerging great powers would run the world with their acquired wisdom. Germany was severely punished and it was isolated until it could seek to redress its grievances in Part II of the great war.

The lull between Parts I and II of the World War ended in the indiscriminate bombing of cities and the assault of armies on a scale that could not previously have been imagined. For supplying planes, ships, bombs, artillery and support services the militarization of each country was necessary. The United States, with an underperforming economy, discovered that it was an efficient producer of weapons. Its bombers were a main part of the allied effort. It drafted 16 million men into the conflicts with Japan and Germany but the Soviet Union supplied the bulk of the man power and suffered more than 20 million casualties. Of the five million Soviet prisoners in Nazi war camps, three million died. The rules of war protecting the rights of prisoners were clearly not working.

The six million Jews killed by the Nazis is one of the best known statistics of the War. Although tens of millions of other people died, the slaughter of the Jews in a culture where they had been main contributors to the philosophical, artistic, political, and economical life stands out as a shocking revelation of the irrationality of war. It would be two decades before Jews could even find a name to describe the near annihilation of their people; the biblical word Holocaust would be reserved for this horrendous event.

Although World War II seems to be remembered with affection by some people as a “good war,” the reaction at its conclusion was stupefaction and a resolve – once again – not to repeat the fiasco. The Nuremberg trials meted out punishment to Nazi leaders on a legal basis that was questionable but at least with a judicial process better than the usual “victor’s justice.” Justice Robert Jackson in his brilliant opening statement said that “the wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated. That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to Reason.”

In the United States the dropping of two atomic bombs on defenseless populations was greeted more by cheers than moral qualms. At the time, atomic bombs did not seem to be a big jump from the firebombing of sixty-seven Japanese cities earlier that year. From the start of the battle in Europe and the indiscriminate killing of whole populations by the Nazis, allied bombing was thought to be justified as retaliatory. The bombing of
Dresden in February of 1945 prepared the mentality for the bombing of Hiroshima in August of that year.

The use of nuclear weapons did bring a halt to the slaughter. Except for the United States, which suffered no bombing of its homeland, much of the world was in ruins. There were at least some world leaders who recognized that the world could not sustain a war with nuclear weapons. Albert Einstein stated the case in dramatic language: “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought but I do know that World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.” Clausewitz’s war to perfection had become an imminent reality.

For forty years the world managed to avoid ultimate catastrophe as two empires checked each other with the threat of annihilation. Other nations saw joining the exclusive atomic club as a mark of prestige, and rightly concluded that the possession of atomic weapons was an incomparable tool for threatening other nations. The unstable nature of nuclear weapons follows from the fact that to be effective the threat of their use has to be credible while the actual use would be unimaginably destructive for everyone. This balance of terror somehow survived until one of the empires disintegrated. The problem of nuclear weapons shifted from a conflict between two empires to the possibility of a small group, which believes it has nothing to lose, unleashing a bomb in one of the cities of its hated enemy.

War that has spread to the whole population of a nation-state contradicted a key provision of the classic model of restricting the killing to professional armies and excluding non-combatants. An even more confusing change is the fact that war no longer has to be between nation-states. The state system had been established in the seventeenth century as an attempt to avoid wars. In practice, the fear engendered in one state by a neighbor’s arming itself led to numerous wars. An end to the nation-state as the ultimate organization of human life might be desirable. But the human race has no agreement or even workable design for replacing the nation-state.

The United Nations is an organization of states not nations. It should logically have been called the United States but that name was too closely identified with the United States of America. Much of UN business over the years has been with nations or national groups within states. Minority groups within states do not usually have a way to get their voices heard in international dealings.

These minorities often use armed conflict either to reform the state or establish their own states. The problem is most severe in Africa and parts of Asia where colonial powers drew state borders while ignorant or dismissive of ethnic, tribal and religious arrangements. A diplomat at the Versailles conference after World War I wrote in a letter to his wife: “It is appalling that those three (Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George, George Clemenceau) ignorant and irresponsible men are cutting Asia Minor to bits as if they were dividing a cake.”xxxiii
There is often sympathy for groups desiring “national liberation.” The principle that a nation deserves to have statehood has been regularly voiced since 1918. However, any serious move in that direction by a minority within an existing state causes shockwaves within that state and its neighbors. The result has been that the great majority of wars have been within rather than between states although often the term war is not used for liberations, insurgencies, rebellions and so forth.

In the change of war from a well-defined clash of professional armies to irrational and seemingly endless violence between contending parties along ethnic, religious and tribal lines, nothing better captures the change than the emergence of something truly novel: the child soldier. War has never been kind to children but until recent decades no one could have imagined a real children’s crusade.

P.W. Singer lists three causes for the estimated three hundred thousands boy and girl soldiers today: 1) an available pool of more than forty million orphans in Africa 2) child-friendly weapons; the AK-47 is light, its use can be easily learned, and the weapon is almost indestructible 3) a context of broken states and entrepreneurial wars. Millions of vulnerable children awaited ruthless dictators to press them into action. Charles Taylor’s army was thought to be made up of sixty percent children.xxxiv

Aggressive and Deceptive Beyond Bounds

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.xxxv

For a nation-state, war unifies the population into having a single vision trained on victory. “Leaders often favor war because war favors leaders.” xxxvi 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. “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.”xxxvii

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).xxxviii

With the change in war, the military man might no longer encourage his eighteen-year old son to pursue a military career in service to the 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.”xxxix 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.”xxx

In the previous chapter I described a nonviolent life as aggressive and deceptive, two
qualities that are necessary for the full emergence of human personality. Both qualities
can obviously go astray if there is no communal context to maintain a healthy tension
between the self and the other. A violent life is a parody of human development. The
aggressive assertiveness of the person is replaced by destruction. Likewise, deceptive
playfulness is subsumed by lies, and as a result community is falsely attributed to the
religious fervor of pseudo-patriotism.

Aggressiveness and War

Opponents of war need to examine the 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.”xli

War undeniably develops certain virtues. The strong and virtuous man is loyal to his
buddies; undaunted by physical threats he is 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 achieved 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 a 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.”xlii 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 virtuous because it is undeniably the setting for the praise of heroism and self-sacrifice.

J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors* is one of the best books ever written on war. It describes the author’s 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 say: “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.

Heroes

“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 of the hero. Perhaps in primitive war when physical strength and individual daring were likely to carry off victory, the hero’s place made some 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 a great achievement in extreme circumstances. Someone is hailed as a hero. That 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 of 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 every day, had been underappreciated workers. The firemen were sometimes criticized for being insular, that they were 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 the entire 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. They 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.

Self-Sacrifice

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. “Just as the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, so the blood of the soldiers is the seed of the state.”

We use “sacrifice” 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 did 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. Still, such things as the reception of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* suggest 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 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. “Sacrifice itself creates a sense of legitimacy, simply because if we have made great sacrifices for something we cannot admit to ourselves that they have been in vain, for this would be a deep threat to our identity.”

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. If secular politicians would cease to use the word sacrifice, we might be able to start demythologizing war. Aggressive assertion of the self in communal contexts is the desirable moral ideal rather than a confused idea of selflessness and self-sacrifice.

Deception and Lies in War

I developed in the previous chapter the idea that a deceptive attitude and deceptive practices are intrinsic and worthy elements of human life. Especially in the arts, etiquette, and negotiations, deception is built into the game of life. In the classical form of war between opposing armies, deception was a valued tactic, a way of avoiding bloodshed. The *Art of War* says quite simply that war is a way of deception. By a series of tactical movements the opponent might be so deceived that surrender would follow. Deceptiveness could be a way of reducing violence within an intrinsically violent context.
Legitimate deceptiveness, with language as its ally, is opposed to violence. But the destruction of genuine linguistic communication is intrinsic to violence. Speech in support of war is inevitably filled with lies. The saying is accurate that the first casualty of war is truth. Once war begins, nothing that is said by government officials can be trusted. The government officials may not intend to lie but war creates such a haze over language that simple statements of truth are almost impossible. In his press conference of October 19, 2001, Secretary of Defense William Rumsfeld said: “I’m 69 years old and I have never lied to the press.” One could almost believe him, that is, believe that he believed he was telling the truth. But as eventually became evident, everything he was saying was premised on a lack of openness and truth in the government’s preparation for war.

Winston Churchill put the matter cynically: “In wartime truth is so precious she must be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies.” How else could one possibly deal with an enemy in war time? But the information or disinformation put out for the enemy’s benefit is not lying. That material is deception which both sides know is part of the game of war. Any intelligent government official knows not to take at face value anything that is said by the enemy.

The lying that Churchill refers to is unfortunately closer to home. The reason why truth is so corrupted in war is that lies are directed at one’s own people. Governments that claim to be democratic cannot trust their own citizens to be a hundred percent behind the war effort. Government information is burdened with propaganda, half-truths and outright lies. News reports are censored so that what does get through may distort the truth because of a lack of context.

The government does not have to rely only on overt censorship of news media. Reporting the news is economically tied to the political and economic interests of the people who do the reporting as well as the people reported upon. Even for good and brave reporters, it is nearly impossible to find and state the truth. If a reporter can only get access to a war zone by being “embedded” with the troops, an “objective” reporting on war is unlikely.

Twentieth-century assaults on the very meaning of truth unwittingly made war’s job easier. A journalist on the eve of World War I wrote: “Truth and falsehood are arbitrary terms. There is nothing in experience to tell us that one is preferable to the other….There are lifeless truths and vital lies….The force of an idea lies in its inspirational value.”

This sentiment, common among youthful rebels, is a lazy way out of a search for truth. Any respectable historian knows that there is more than one version of an event. Nonetheless, it is the job of journalists and historians to identify and resist lies. One journalist, Arthur Bullard, said of his work on World War I “they will not be able to say that Belgium invaded Germany.”

The U.S. entry into World War I is a case study in government officials and intellectual leaders deluding themselves into believing that the war was “progressive.” President Woodrow Wilson had run on a platform of staying out of war, but in a brief
period of time he became the chief enthusiast for the war. He informed Congress on April 2, 1917 that “we must accept war” because the German government “has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right and is running amuck.” Unlike previous wars, this one was to be fought under the quixotic motto of a war to end war. Wilson justified the war with the false ideal of selflessness. “There is not a single selfish element, so far as I can see, in the cause we are fighting for....We look for no profit. We look for no advantage.” Presumably Wilson was not lying but the statements have little connection to the realities of politics and war.

Wilson was abetted in his unreal expectations by intellectual leaders such as John Dewey who found support for the war in his pragmatic and progressive philosophy. The war would lead to an expansion of government services that could later be harnessed to progressive causes. The war itself was a sign of social triumph. A social gospel organization on the eve of the war proclaimed: “We believe that the age of sheer individualism is past and the age of social responsibility has arrived.”

What should have been worrisome to writers who hailed the war as a democratic step toward social responsibility was the blackout of criticism. Two professors at Columbia University, James Cattell and Henry Dana, were fired for writing a letter to Congress critical of the war. The president of the university, Nicholas Butler, said that Columbia had no place for those “who are not with whole heart and mind and strength committed to fight with us to make the world safe for democracy.”

The government came down hard on anyone, such as the socialist leader Eugene Debs, who spoke openly against the war. The Espionage Act in 1917 forbade criticism of war politics. The Sedition Act in the following year extended the penalties to anyone who spoke, wrote or printed anything “disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive about the government and armed services.” One hundred forty-two people were sentenced to life imprisonment; seventeen were sentenced to death (none was executed) for opposition to the war.

After the war, the suppression of open debate continued. A series of Supreme Court decisions eventually provided redress for Debs and others who had refused to be silent. The decisions rendered by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. did not amount to a ringing endorsement of free speech. The government was supported in censoring words that “create a clear and present danger.” The well-known example, used to embody that principle, is found in the same court decision: “The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing panic.” The example is clear but its relevance to protesting war is doubtful. Instead of irresponsibly causing panic in a burning theater, the opponents of the war were more like firemen putting water on the fire.

One of the severe critics of Dewey and the progressivists was Randolph Bourne. His biting criticism lost him his job but he saw clearly that the war would be the end of the progressive movement. The heart of the movement was improved education but there was nothing remotely educational about the war. The assumption that progressives could
direct the post-war government was proved hollow by the level of discussion within the
war. Bourne recognized that progressivism was on the road to ruin. “The support of the
war by realists, radicals, pragmatists is due – or so they say – to the fact that the war is
not only saving the cause of democracy, but is immensely accelerating its progress.”
Directly addressing John Dewey, Bourne went to the heart of the issue: “If the war is too
strong for you to prevent, how is it going to be weak enough for you to control and mold
to your liberal purposes.”

For most war activity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, presidents have
easily manipulated public support. Even the Vietnam War, while opposed by many young
people who were directly affected, was supported during three presidencies. Congress,
which constitutionally has the power to start and to fund war, gave President Lyndon
Johnson a blank check after an incident in the Tonkin Gulf. Later presidents found this
strategy to be an effective way to be “commander in chief.” In 2002 Congress abandoned
its role in war by granting George W. Bush the power to do anything he deemed
necessary in dealing with Iraq.

One recent war that did involve Senate debate was the Gulf War of 1991. The Senate
passed a war resolution by a four vote majority. The vote was affected by what proved to
be a calculated lie. On October 10, 1990, a tearful fifteen year-old girl named Nayirah
tested before the Human Rights Caucus of Congress. She described how, as a volunteer
in a Kuwaiti maternity ward she had seen Iraqi troops storm the hospital, steal the
incubators, and “leave 312 babies on the cold floor to die.” Seven senators referred to this
story as supporting evidence for going to war.

In January, 1991, just before U.S. bombing began, press reports questioned the truth
of the story. It was learned that Nayirah was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to
Washington and had no connection to the Kuwaiti hospital. She had been coached by
senior executives of Hill and Knowlton, the biggest public relations firm at the time,
which had a contract with Kuwait to make the case for war. Brent Scowcroft, the
National Security Adviser, said in a 1995 interview with the London Guardian: “We
didn’t know it wasn’t true at the time.” He acknowledged that “it was useful in
mobilizing public opinion.”

If one believes Scowcroft that the government was not lying, one can only conclude
that their willingness to be taken in by a shaggy dog story is breath taking. Why would
they not check out who this fifteen-year old girl was and whether there was any basis for
her story? The story itself stands in a long line of tall tales repeatedly told of an enemy’s
inhumanity. What would be the point of killing 312 babies (by her count?) except to
prove that you are evil incarnate? The government in this case may not have been lying;
it outsourced the job to a PR firm.

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Human Evolution of Cooperative Interest,” in *The Natural History of Peace*, ed. Thomas Gregor
iv Sun Zu, *The Art of War*, ch. 9, 111.
v Sun Zu, *The Art of War*, ch. 2.

vii Plato, *Republic* 466e.
viii Ibid., 467e.
x Plato, *Republic*, 471b.
xvi Clausewitz, *On War*, VIII: 3, 349.
xx Clausewitz, *On War*, I:1, 2.
xxi In the documentary, “The Fog of War,” Robert McNamara, who was an assistant to General Curtis LeMay, the mastermind of the bombings, recalls that LeMay said to him: You know if we lose the war we will be tried as war criminals. McNamara wondered if winning the war would prove that they were not war criminals.
xxxvi Francis, *Rethinking War and Peace*, 29.
xxxvii The lines are spoken by Orson Welles in the movie *The Third Man*.