

Is War Ever Redemptive?

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Selections from Ancient And Modern Sources

Matthew 26:47

And while Jesus was still speaking to his disciples at the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

Now, the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “the one I shall kiss is the man; seize him. And Judas came up to Jesus at once and said, “Hail, Master!” And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, “Friend, why are you here?”

Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who was with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear.

Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

From James Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War*

“War is the father of all,” said Heraclitus at the beginnings of Western thought We think in war-like terms, feel ourselves at war with ourselves, and unknowingly believe predation, territorial defense, conquest, and the interminable battle of opposing forces are the ground rules of existence. . . .

War is normal. I base that statement on its constancy throughout history and its ubiquity over the globe. These two factors require another more basic: acceptability. Wars could not happen unless there were those willing to help them happen. Conscripts, slaves, indentured soldiers, unwilling draftees to the contrary, there are always masses ready to answer the call to arms, to join up, get in the fight. There are always leaders rushing to take the plunge. Every nation has its hawks. Moreover, resisters, pacifists, objectors, and deserters are rarely able to bring a war to a halt. The saying “Someday they’ll give a war and no one will come,” remains a fond wish. War drives everything else off the front page.

If war *is* normal, is this because it is lodged in human nature or because it is inherent to societies. . . ? Kant, like Hobbes before him, finds war to be an uncaused component of human nature for which no explanation need be sought. “War,” he writes, “requires no motivation, but appears to be

ingrained in human nature and is even valued as something noble.

War certainly does rely upon the individual’s repressions and/or aggressions, pleasure in demolition, appetite for the extraordinary and spectacular, mania of autonomy. War harnesses these individual urges and procures their compliance without which there could be no wars. But war is not individual psychology writ large. Individuals certainly fight ruthlessly and kill; families feud and harbor revenge, but this is not war. In fact, even well-trained and well-led infantrymen have a strong unrealized resistance toward killing which tactically impedes the strategy of every engagement. Only a political entity can war: “The only source of war is politics,” said Clausewitz. “Politics is the womb in which war develops.” For war to emerge from this womb, for the individual to muster aggressions and appetites, there must be an enemy. The enemy is the midwife of war.

Reflections

Although it might initially seem a bit incongruous to introduce the grim topic of war on the cusp of the cheerful winter holidays, I would argue that the season and the subject are connected. More than one Christmas carol extols the “Prince of Peace”—Jesus—in whose kingdom war will become obsolete. The last stanza of “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” a carol composed by the Unitarian minister Edmund Hamilton Sears, delivers this bold promise:

For lo! The days are hastening on by prophet
bards foretold,

When with the ever-circling years comes
round the age of gold:

When peace shall over all the earth its
ancient splendors fling,

And the whole world give back the song
which now the angels sing.

Sears penned those lines a decade before the nation was plunged into its deadliest war, the one that pitted North against South and caused repercussions that lasted for over a century. Others at that time also predicted an end to war. No less an intellect than Ralph Waldo Emerson declared war

to be “on its last legs.” Universal peace, he said, ... is as sure as is the prevalence of civilization over barbarism, of liberal governments over feudal forms. The question for us is only: how soon?

That is the question we keep asking: how soon? When? How long before this brilliant species finally and firmly abandons a practice that has wreaked so much havoc for so long. During the 5,600 years of recorded history nearly 15,000 wars have been fought. During this entire period, historian Will Durant estimates, humankind has experienced only 29 years of complete freedom from war.

Around the turn of the 20th century many observers again sensed a turning point, as high officials from all the great powers gathered in the Netherlands for the Hague Peace Conferences. Two such meetings were held, and a Permanent Court of Arbitration for the peaceful resolution of international disputes was created. Andrew White, the chief American delegate, reported that there was evidence of a “feeling more earnest and widespread” than anything he had ever dreamed of. But then the “War to end all wars” broke out in 1914—the most costly ever conducted both economically and in terms of human loss of life.

Stunned by the destructiveness of the Great War the nations of the world tried again in 1928. Sixty two sovereign states—including Japan, Germany, Britain, France and the United States—signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact, a treaty that outlawed war as a method of resolving political differences. “Those critics who scoff at our agreement,” American Secretary of State Henry Stimson wrote, “Have not accurately appraised the evolution of opinion since [1918].”

Nevertheless, within ten years Japan had invaded Manchuria, and Germany had annexed Czechoslovakia. Three years later, Pearl Harbor was bombed and the 20th century’s second global war commenced.

If we are evolving socially and ethically as a species, the 20th Century provided little positive evidence of it. The tally of war dead for the 20th century was 108 million, or nearly 70 *times* as many as during the second worst century, the sixteenth, when 1.6 million are estimated to have died. More disturbingly, of that huge number, almost two-thirds of last century’s casualties were civilians. In this modern, mechanized age, entire populations have become as vulnerable as the combatants themselves.

“Future wars may become even more savage,” military experts warn, since stateless terrorist groups like the one that recently attacked Mumbai are more than willing to target innocents if they think it will further their fanatical cause.

So why do we keep doing this to ourselves? What is the attraction? Have its 16,000 wars made our world a better place? John Keegan, perhaps the world’s foremost authority on the history of warfare has concluded that it is, for the most part, utterly pointless and counter-productive. “After a lifetime of reading about the subject,” he writes,

... mingling with soldiers, visiting the sights of war, and observing its effects, it seems to me that war has ceased to commend itself to human beings as a desirable or productive, let alone rational, means of reconciling their differences.

War serves only itself, Keegan argues. It has its passionate devotees, men like General George Patton who profess to love it, and it has its profiteers, those who callously use war to make a buck. For few others is it truly beneficial.

There are plenty of the latter—war profiteers—in our own country, and it could be convincingly argued that the business of America is war. Down-size the Pentagon, and the economy would take a major hit. In 2003 arms exports totaled over \$21 billion dollars, much of the material sold to disreputable regimes already engaged in hostilities. This year’s total defense-related budget will exceed \$700 billion dollars, and the military will spend our tax dollars at the rate of \$16,000 per second.

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How necessary are these outlays? Is it truly in our national interest to budget as much for defense as the rest of the world’s sovereign states combined? Russia spends a tenth of what we do. China a sixth.

Chalmers Johnson says that the United States has deliberately embraced an economic strategy known as “military Keynesianism,” which, for the past sixty years or so, “has placed its emphasis not on the demand for defense, but rather on the available supply of money.” Public financing of the private arms industry has served as a powerful engine for economic growth and, as Johnson notes:

The prosperity of the U.S. has come increasingly to depend on the construction and continual maintenance of a vast war machine. . . . Between 1940 and 1996, for instance, the U.S. spent nearly \$4.5 *trillion* on the development, testing and construction of nuclear weapons alone. . . . Nuclear bombs were not just America's secret weapon; they were also a secret *economic* weapon.

If Americans are prone to overlook or approve this peculiar method of stoking the U.S. economy it is probably because we tend to be more deferential toward the military than the citizens of other developed nations. As the British historian Tony Judt observes, "The U.S. is the only advanced democracy where . . . the military is exalted" and where many still believe that "war works."

Judt attributes this attitude to the fact that the United States escaped relatively unscathed from the two world wars. Indeed, those conflicts enriched rather than impoverished us and have caused us to "experience the 20th century in a far more positive light" than those who bore the brunt of the battle. Thus, we continue to throw good money after bad because as a culture—Vietnam and Iraq notwithstanding—we still "have faith" in war.

At some point, however, we will be forced to address the fact that a permanent "war economy" is not a sustainable or a redemptive economy because it siphons away resources that are desperately needed elsewhere—for bridges, schools, health care, renewable energy research. Moreover, the temptation to *use* military hardware rather than let it sit idle—to make war a first rather than last resort—is always present in such an economy.

More powerful and pervasive than monetary interests, however, is war's emotional and psychological appeal—the opportunity it affords for *personal* redemption. A statement made by a Frenchwoman after World War II is, in this sense, revealing. "You know that I do not love war or want it to return," she told an interviewer. "But at least it made me feel alive, as I have not felt alive before or since."

The intensity, the excitement, the way in which it concentrates the attention and sharpens the perceptions is what makes war both terrible and fascinating. It also produces moral clarity by creating "a black and white tableau," war correspondent Chris Hedges writes. War eliminates ambiguity and "makes the world understandable," he says.

It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought. . . . Tragically, war is sometimes the most powerful way in which human society achieves meaning.

If this were not enough, war also calls forth the "highest and finest passions humans can know," as the psychologist James Hillman points out. Courage, altruism, selfless sacrifice all blossom forth on the battlefields. Soldiers often report that combat fostered the strongest bonds of brother and sisterhood they had ever experienced and ironically helped them understand the meaning of *love*.

Something similar happens to spectators—people who experience war vicariously through the media. "in times of malaise and desperation, it is a potent distraction," Chris Hedges observes.

It instantly reduces the headaches and trivia of daily life. The communal march against an enemy generates a warm, unfamiliar bond with our neighbors, our community, our nation, wiping out unsettling undercurrents of alienation and dislocation.

For all these reasons, "war does what religion is supposed to do." It raises life from the mundane to the meaningful and provides a rare opportunity for self-transcendence. This is why William James insisted that for the world to be rid of war, a suitable substitute had to be found: "Something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible."

The task of finding viable psychological and spiritual substitutes for war would be easier if religion itself was less of a hindrance. The religions of the book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have always had warlike proclivities, and their collective record from the conquest of Canaan in 1200 B.C. to last month's attack on Mubai has been one of frequent resort to violence.

Even the Prince of Peace himself wasn't consistently peace-promoting. Before sending them out on their mission assignments, Jesus addresses his disciples: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword," he tells them. Successive generations of Christians have taken Jesus at his word and gone forth to conquer under the sign of the cross.

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The Western God is a “god of war.” When paganism was defeated by Christianity, James Hillman wryly observes, “Mars didn’t go into exile, he merely converted.”

But suppose we *could* develop psychologically appealing and economically viable substitutes for it, should war be totally eliminated? Is it always and inevitably undesirable? Some would say so. “War is, at first, the hope that one will be better off,” Karl Kraus writes.

... next, the expectation that the other fellow will be worse off; then, the satisfaction that he isn’t any better off; and, finally, the surprise at *everyone’s* being worse off.

That could certainly be an apt assessment of our own experience in Iraq—a war that devastated one country and has nearly bankrupted our own—both morally and financially.

But haven’t the results of other wars been better? The Maccabean War, for example, which drove the oppressive Seleucid colonizers out of Israel and restored Jewish self-rule? And what about World War II—the “good war”—and the defeat of fascism? What about all those small, “savage wars of peace” that the neoconservative commentator Max Boot describes in his book by the same name? For 150 years the United States has waged wars both to advance the national interest and promote stability and progress, he argues.

Boot offers Haiti, a country we invaded in the early 20th century, as a prime example. That nation had experienced 102 civil wars, revolts and other political disturbances in 70 years. But during our occupation, 1,000 miles of roads, 210 major bridges, 9 major airfields, 1,250 miles of telephone lines, 82 miles of irrigation canals, 11 modern hospitals, and 147 rural clinics were built, and civil order was established. According to Boot, we probably should have made the occupation permanent, because once the Marines left “the roads decayed, the telephones stopped functioning, and thugs once again took control of the machinery of government.” Did

war, in this instance, serve a redemptive purpose?

And what about humanitarian interventions? In her landmark study of 20th century genocide, Samantha Power faults the United States for not responding earlier to the emerging crises in Bosnia, Rwanda and Cambodia. “When they ignored genocide around the world, U.S. officials did not intend to give the perpetrators the go-ahead,” she writes,

But since at least some killers thought they were doing the world a favor by “cleansing” the “undesirables,” they likely interpreted our silence as consent or even support.

Reflecting on terrorist groups and “rogue regimes,” Robert Kagan makes much the same point. Such individuals and organizations don’t play by our rules and have no sense of restraint. They operate on the basis of unyielding “principles” rather than negotiable “interests” and thus cannot be reasoned with. Adolf Hitler and his henchmen fit this description—conscienceless warriors who cannot be reliably dealt with using the traditional tools of statecraft.

“The highest excellence,” the ancient Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of Warfare*, “is never having to fight.” Nevertheless, knowing how to fight artfully—in the least cruel and most effective way possible—is essential, for occasionally it may be the only option we have.

The authors of a new Unitarian Universalist document on peacemaking seem to recognize this. “There are no easy answers,” they say, and to be ethical and peace-promoting does not require a person to repudiate war entirely. But “if force *is* to be used,” the document states, “it must be in the service of ending violence of much greater magnitude.” The ultimate goal should be to move away from a culture of war toward a culture of peace.

It is probably not the perfect answer, but at the present time it may be the soundest one. Sadly, if there is ever to be “peace on earth, good will among all,” a willingness on rare occasion and with the greatest reluctance to take up arms may be required.