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## A BRIEF RESPITE FROM WAR

"At length we are in peace. God be praised and long, very long may it continue. All wars are follies, very expensive and mischeivous ones. When will mankind be convinced of this, and agree to settle there differences by arbitration?"

— Benjamin Franklin (1783)

The world for a rare moment is precariously close to peace, an unusual suspension of slaughter which is the result of a few wars that ran out of gas at the same time. Iran and Iraq have stopped fighting (from sheer exhaustion, one would assume, after more than a million deaths), the Soviet Union has marched out of Afghanistan, the Cubans and South Africans agreed to simultaneously evacuate Angola, a ceasefire has been arranged for Cambodia (the terms of which might however return the horror of the Khmer Rouge to power), Nicaragua has accepted terms of a five-nation Central American peace treaty (which gives U.S. supported Contras little pretext for terror raids on peasant villages), and a few smaller or less noticed combats are taking a recess.

Waiting for the next shot can affect the nerves. Human antipathy does not go away easily or for very long. Old hatreds scab over only briefly and soon reerupt. Beirut is shelled heavily almost every day, South African and Swapo guerrillas hunt each other in Namibia in violation of a just-signed truce, Israeli soldiers and Palestine youth fight bitter battles over ancestral claims, soldiers and police continue to club and shoot into crowds all over the world, drug killings in the United States resemble war statistics (more Americans have been killed by guns in the past two years than during sixteen years of war in Viet Nam). Someone somewhere covets something possessed by a neighbor (land, wealth, power); an insurgency plans an assault or an ambush.

Late spring or early summer when the ground is dry and hard is traditionally the season when winter-restless armies clash. It is almost a contradiction: when life is renewed armies sharpen their spears, load their cannon — but perhaps men make war

because they are unable to give birth; the continuing winter of their discontent. Winter's soldiers. "There is no good war and no bad peace," Ben Franklin said. But peace has also been defined as a period between wars, a time to bury the dead, lick wounds, produce new weapons and recruit more human fodder.

As with most other effects of insatiable technology warfare has advanced far beyond

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nature's strictures of weather or geography. The world's militaries, even the poorest from the most obscure nation, are able to make war anytime anyplace. State of the art weapons float around the world, sold by arms merchants to anyone with money, credit or good prospects. Even drug gangs in American ghettos are armed with high status automatic weapons, as are sociopaths who spray school playgrounds with bullets. The industrial nations are arms bazaars, producing and marketing exotic weapons and high-tech weapons systems, vicariously enraptured by the increased carnage rockets and jet fighter-bombers make of tribal-level squabbles. Perhaps abstract engagement in wars fought by others, made possible by outlandish weapons designed somewhat in the manner of video games is evidence of a post-modern sensibility of image over participation.

This defacto decadence might be related to the hallucinatory dread of nuclear obliteration, which is almost too large a horror to bear. It seems inconceivable that humanity has made itself capable of its own extinction, that by our own will we can disappear from history as absolutely as dinosaurs and dodo birds. Most people refuse to think we could be so foolish, yet they suspect our leaders have few qualms or sufficient fear. In such a world reality hurts. We turn away as we would from a glare of sunlight. We submerge into banality to mute our anxieties.

Genesis might be a warning: Instead of a myth of instant birth it is a prophecy of sudden megadeath. Perhaps we are still in the Garden, it being a metaphor for life. Evil might not be sex after all (or knowledge) but humanity's careless brutality that leads irresistibly toward plucking the ripe fruit of specicide.

This past Memorial Day — a three-day holiday purchased by blood, or more aptly an image of sacrifice — instead of the usual honors as heroes we should have pitied the hallowed dead as fools or cursed them for being soldiers. It is almost too simple, but without soldiers there would be no wars. Without soldiers Casar would be a scheming minor politician,

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