

WAR & PEACE AT

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

If the dead mean nothing to us (except on Memorial Day weekend when the national freeway is clogged with surfers, swimmers, skiers, picnickers, campers, hunters, fishers, footballers, beer-busters), what of our wounded? Does anyone know where they are. How they feel? How many arms, legs, ears, noses, mouths, faces, penises they've lost? How many are deaf and dumb or blind or all three? How many are single or double or triple or quadruple amputees? How many will remain immobile for the rest of their days? How many will hang on as decerebrated vegetables quietly breathing their lives away in small, dark, secret rooms?

~DALTON TRUMBO

The most shamelessly exploited minority in American society is its war dead. They died horribly and most of them unwillingly, but they are not left to rot in peace. Their molding, mutilated corpses are eloquently exhumed as spearheads for the next war, their deaths extolled to recruit new armies.

A language of lies develops. The dead always died for their country, heroically and nobly, and all of them willingly made the publicly acclaimed final sacrifice. None raped, pillaged or burned or committed other than sanctioned murder or terrorism. None died because of simple bad luck or from their own stupidity or that of their commanders or from callous or asinine battle strategies. None died from accidental shelling or bombing by their own side. All of them were killed facing the enemy, not running away. Their deaths are glorified as justifications for the wars that killed them.

Nations are haunted by their war dead. Monuments and Memorials are built in every city and somewhere near the center of every town. The war dead assume a purity in death most would have found difficult to attain in life. The official piety is that the cultural lifeblood is sustained by their deaths rather than drained, and only by sacrificing themselves in the same manner will the living gain a similar historical legitimacy. Service to the state is always a possibility to the young, and death in its service is presented as either an ideal or an unavoidable necessity. Families of the dead who should protest the slaughter of their young are instead willing accomplices in the demand that warfare is the only acceptable response to an unruly world. Those who resist that specious reasoning are compared to the heroic dead as unworthy cowards and traitors implicitly responsible for their deaths. "War would end if the dead could return," Stanley Baldwin said. But the irony of war deaths exploited as coercion for others to murder and die is lost in the thunder of voices calling for vengeance and righteous war.

War survivors are used as shabbily as the dead. They are contained within government sponsored veterans' organizations that rubberstamp their approval on everything military. They are given parades and empty honors. The horror of their experiences is shielded from public view, goldplated in boilerplate and pageantry, yet they are undeniably representatives of humanity's darkside that civilization attempts to disregard or abstract even while perpetuating it through them. War is blood, carnage and death, which is so obvious a fact we often ignore it in our preoccupation with the rationales, strategies, weapons and the machines of war.

Each generation seems to think it should not be outdone by its predecessors. It must leave its bloody mark on history no matter how absurd or pointless. Every generation has been incapable or unwilling to arrest the pattern of terror and suffering each inflicts on itself, and our own risks world holocaust because of a compulsive insistence that our time, which is noteworthy only because we live in it, be no less dramatic than the histories we imitate.

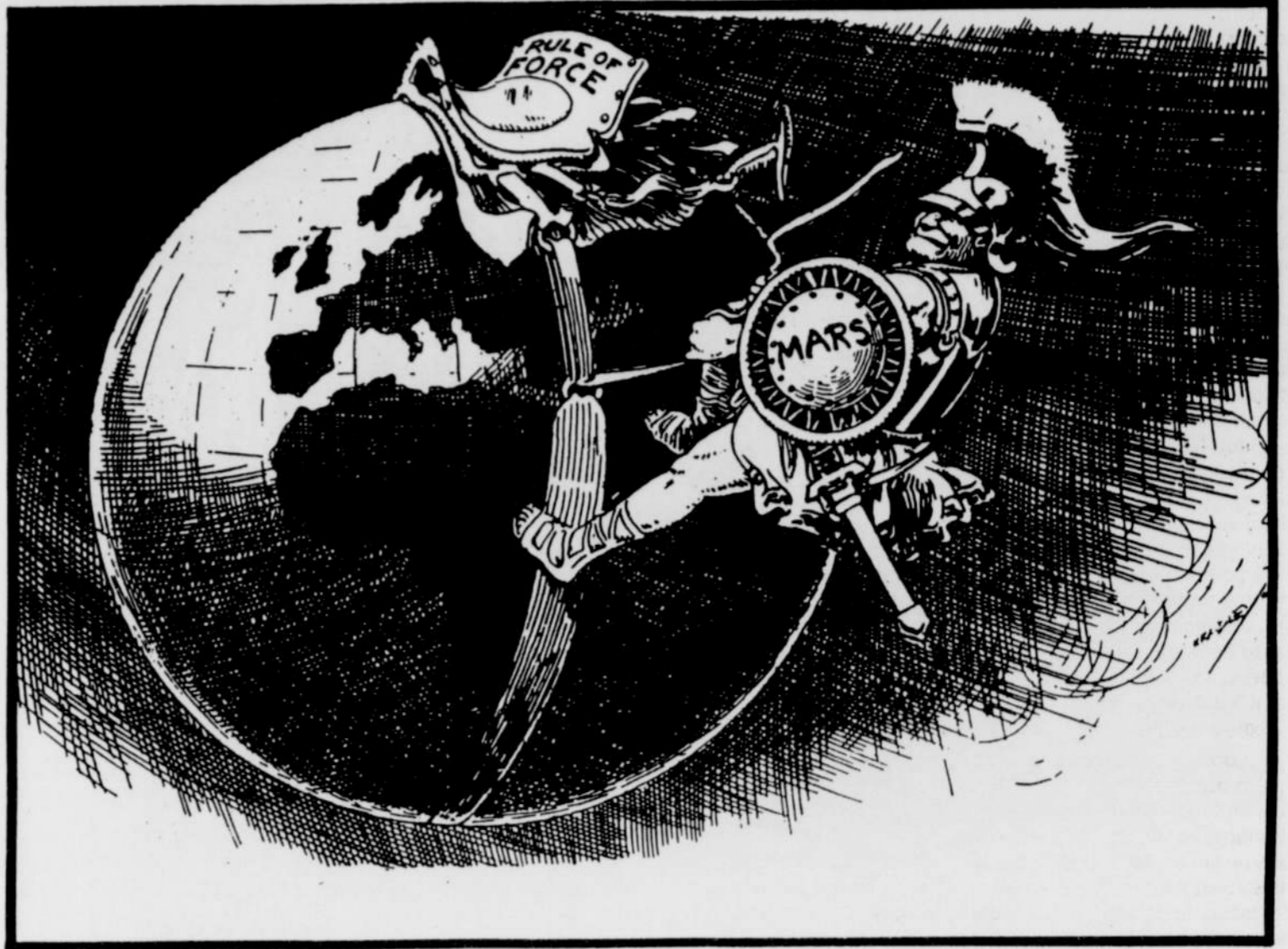
Albert Schweitzer warned in 1924 that the *suicide of civilization* was in progress because humanity has lost "the consciousness that every man is an object of concern because he is MAN," and predicted that "the advance of fully developed inhumanity" was only a matter of time. "We have talked for decades with ever increasing lightmindedness about war and conquest as if these were merely operations on a chessboard," he wrote, asking how else that might be possible than "as a result of a tone of mind which no longer pictured to itself the fate of individuals, but thought of them only as figures or objects belonging to the material world."

Half a century later philosopher Donald Wells offered another explanation. The problem of war and conquest and the diminished value of human life was not due to a vague tone of mind but the demand of government authority over the masses. Wells wrote: "If it is presumed at the outset that the life of the state transcends that of the individual in value, indeed, that the state is more important than all the citizens, then the fact of human death, on even a cosmic scale, will prove irrelevant as an argument against war."

Inhumanity is exclusively human. History seldom mentions compassion or 'the consciousness of every (human being) as an object of concern' as vital ingredients to the structure of civilization. Humanity's history is of wars. The most fierce and acquisitive sweep away the gentle and least avaricious. It was that way when our hairy ancestors thrust pointed sticks into each other; it is that way now when the weapons of our industry are able to reduce continents to radioactive ash in minutes. The only real significance of the eternal conflicts of our species is the epic flow of blood, the slaughter of millions at each turn of history's gory pages for reasons as brief as their lives. The names of the multitudes are lost, only their numbers are marked, aggregates of killers and killed.

Our mental evolution of the past ten thousand years has not eradicated the savagery or the terror of our most primitive ancestors. We continue to regard every other human, and by extension other cultures, nations, religions and races, as our blood enemies. We continue to war or think of war as our right to dominate or destroy whoever is weaker, different or in the way. We refuse to think of ourselves as parts of the same family or to understand the rarity or privilege of life.

Instead we make war more ardently than love. War gives our lives a transcendent vitality that daily living and its squalid defeats squeeze out of us. We feel that we are a vital part of great events, that our normally diminished lives serve an



important purpose at a watershed moment, and we are never so unified, so able to collectively surmount tremendous obstacles as when we make war against each other.

We make excuses for warfare and accept it as a consequence of living. We seldom think of war as our invention. We treat it instead as a natural phenomenon; an earthquake, a flood or volcano. We feed its insatiable thirst for blood with the best bloodstock we produce. Until recently the highest honors a nation or people could bestow were upon the men who draped themselves in the blood of others. Life's heroes have always been the men of death.

As with most other effects of insatiable technology warfare has advanced far beyond 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 anywhere. 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 and vengeful boys 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 made possible by outlandish weapons designed in the manner of video games (and ardently viewed on TV screens) is verification of the popularity of reality through image without participation.

This defacto decadence might be related to the hallucinatory dread of nuclear obliteration, which has been almost too large a horror to bear for more than half a century. It seems inconceivable that humanity has made itself capable of its own extinction, and that by our own will we can disappear from history as absolutely as dinosaurs and dodo birds. Most folks refuse to think we could be so foolish; yet they suspect our leaders have few qualms or sufficient fears, urged instead to the possibility of the unthinkable by the prospects of opportunity. In such a world reality hurts. We turn away as we would from a glare of sunlight. We submerge into banality to mute our angst.

Genesis might be a warning: Instead of a myth of instant birth it is a prophecy of mega-death. Perhaps we are still in the Garden of Eden, which is 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.

War has advanced civilization as brutally as it has destroyed civilizations. Humanity is as accustomed to warfare as breathing and copulating. We are a killing species; we rule earth because our ancestors were clever, ruthless and well-organized predators, and we have always butchered our own as readily as any other creature. We kill individually, which is murder, or we organize murder and name it war. We have throughout history honored the killers among us, and as we

became more settled and civilized the laurels inevitably transferred from the stealthy hunters of animals to the slayers of human beings. All of our great civilizations and empires have been structured on the expenditure of human blood, the conquest and often decimation of tribes, cities or nations unlucky to be along the march of more ambitiously militant societies.

War has affected civilization tremendously but its effect upon those who suffer firsthand is given little consideration. Wars determine the reaction and consequent effect upon a society and recovery is often a long slow process. Those with personal involvement in a war are not accorded the same respect for their own process of recovery. Their private horrors and nightmares of war are dealt with impatiently and with scorn at possible psychological or physical disabilities, although collectively these sorts of disruptions and discontinuities are accepted as part of the historical process.

The ambiguity of history might be encompassed in a phrase used often by Oliver Cromwell and others: *Pray for Peace, Prepare for War*. Earth bristles with preparation. Yet a grim irony of this Brobdingnagian era is that we have reduced human participation in warfare — with the exception of possibly dying in appalling numbers.

The invention of the harpoon gun and the exploding harpoon decimated the whale. The chainsaw has cut down the world's forests. By also inventing such weapons as the machine gun and hydrogen bomb we nearly match our reckless despoilation of the home planet by abetting our own extinction.

We have perfected war, refined it to an instrument of digital logic that no longer depends upon human rationale or justification; no philosophy or psychology, only strategy and provocation. Although armies are unnecessary now, they are kept around to engage in traditional fratricide without provoking megadeath. Dead soldiers are like the Christ in a sense. They die as surrogates for the rest of us. Unrestricted warfare in the 20th century also enlarged the soldiers' always shadowy and disavowed parallel roll as surrogate executioners.

Although Americans like to think of themselves as a peaceable society, we are among history's most successfully warlike. Our nation was created by war, maintained its union by war, became a continental power by invading our southern neighbor and stripping it of its northern half; and became a world power by terminating the decrepit colonial empire of another.

The two World Wars made the USA a superpower during which we built a war machine unsurpassed in history while demonstrating a productive capacity that overwhelmed allies and enemies alike. This nation now dominates global politics with its immense and highly sophisticated potential for total war as the only reigning superpower after emerging successfully from a half century 'Cold War' against Soviet Russia, which was characterized by inconclusive brushfire wars and a horrendous nuclear arms race that economically and politically broke our competitor but seriously injured our own economies and ideologies (and possibly unhinged our sanities).

In all the USA has fought in eleven major wars, but one must also not forget the incessant three century war against Native Americans which is comparably among the most savage and genocidal ever fought. Our expansion across the continent — our 'Manifest Destiny' — necessitated in the minds of the expansionists the continued extermination of the primeval tribes



Bach'n Rock

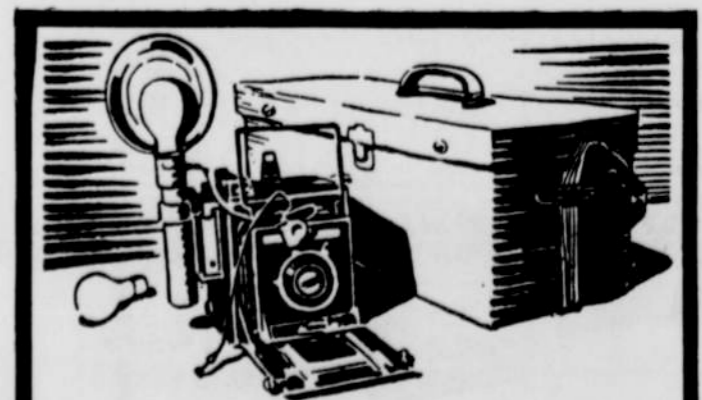
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