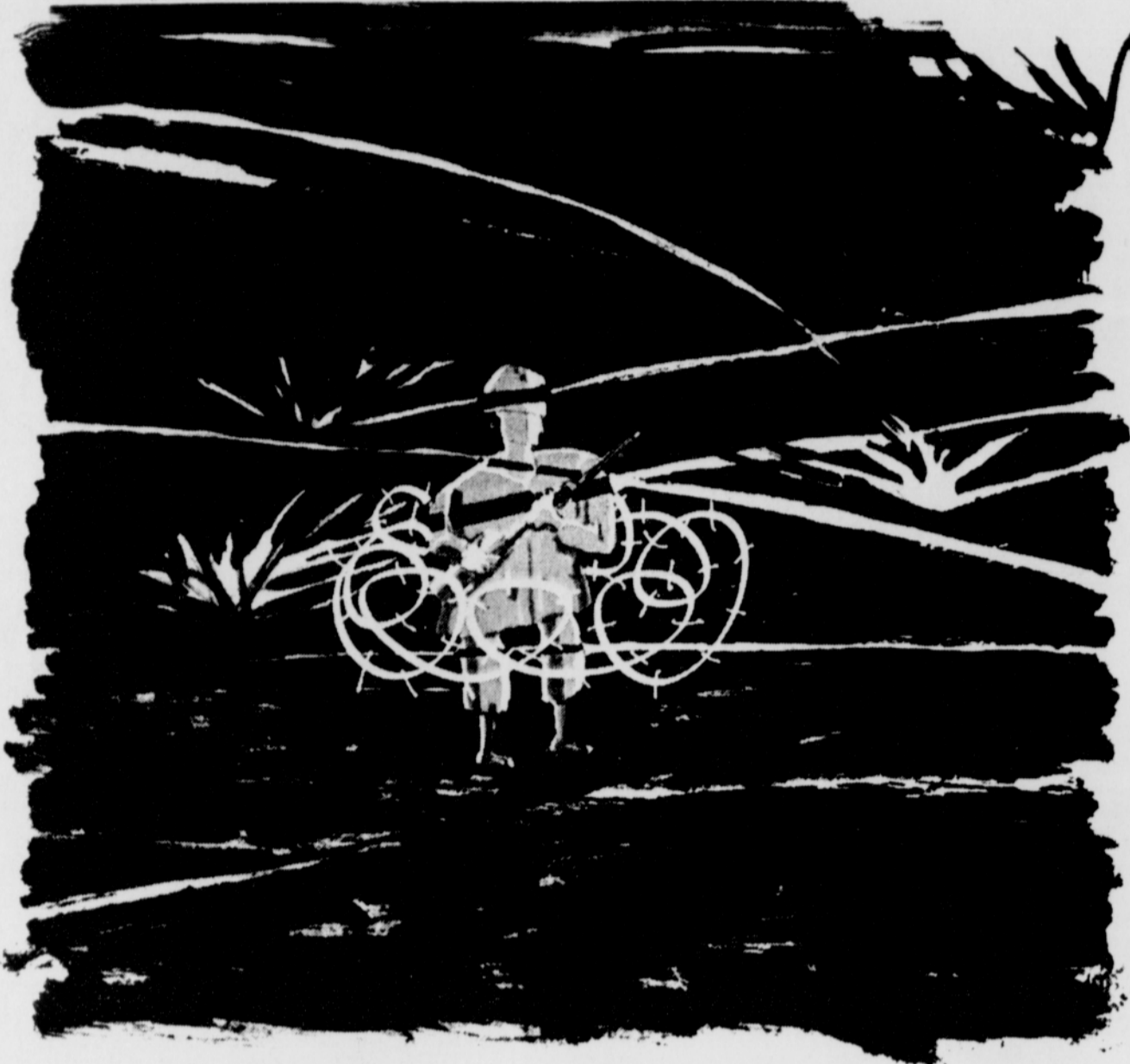


WHY WE LOVE WAR

& WHAT WE CAN DO TO PREVENT IT ANYWAY



ROB HATEM

BY LAWRENCE LESHAN

"My first wish is to see this plague of mankind, war, banished from the earth."

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

To understand why humans go to war, and have done so throughout history, we have to acknowledge certain psychological facts. One of these is a relatively recent scientific insight: that humans organize perceptions of reality in a variety of different ways, and that we often shift between these modes without being aware of it. No single mode reveals the absolute "truth" of the world around us, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. We also know that during war our view of reality is quite different than it is in peacetime. Once this shift occurs, war becomes more difficult to prevent or stop. Learning to recognize this shift allows us to see the signs that a society is moving toward war — and to understand what must be done if war is to be avoided.

War is not an entirely universal activity — there have been a few cultures in which it is unknown. But under almost every form of economic and political organization, regardless of different family structures, child-rearing practices, and other social norms, people fight wars on a fairly regular basis. The problem of why we go to war has been with us for a long time. *The Histories*, written by Herodotus in the 5th century B.C., was one of the first attempts to pinpoint causes of a particular war (in this case, between the Greeks and Persians). Since then, countless investigators have studied the causes of other conflicts, but attempts to generalize from their conclusions have failed. Though many theories have been developed on why war is so widespread, none has helped to stop it, and none fits the actual data on how war happened.

As suggested in *The Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*, a classic numerical study of conflict by the British mathematical psychologist Lewis Fry Richardson, our accepted beliefs about when and why wars occur have little validity. For example, people of my generation were taught the harsh peace treaties concluding World War 1 brought the next world war into being much more quickly. Richardson's analysis shows the opposite

— that statistically speaking, the harsher the peace treaty, the longer the peace that follows it. During the Crimean War in the early 1850s, A.W. Kingslake theorized that war is a foreign circus put on by rulers or ruling classes to distract citizens from troubles at home. As Richardson points out, this theory, though attractively simple, does not fit the data. In World War 1, for example, Germany's rulers were far more occupied with trying to unify the country in order to fight the war than with fighting the war in order to unify the country.

Today, no single theory on the cause of war is generally accepted. There has been a lot of discussion about using our knowledge of psychology, sociology, and other social sciences to prevent war. Much has been done on *techniques* — such as intercultural student exchange, international organizations, international mediation efforts and armament reduction — for reducing war's likelihood. But there appears to be a great reluctance to deal with general theories about the cause of war — or even to admit such theories are necessary.

Before we can find new ways to prevent war, we have to understand why it is so popular. War at least *promises* to fulfill some fundamental human need or tension. One central human tension is the problem of how to be both an individual and a part of the larger group. Many of the great literary works explore this theme, dealing over and over with how we try to reconcile these conflicting drives. The same issue runs through modern textbooks on psychology, sociology and anthropology. On the one hand is the drive to be more and more unique and individual, to heighten one's experience and being. On the other hand is the drive to be a part of something larger, a full-fledged member of the tribe.

There are two different means to satisfy these drives simultaneously and without contradiction. Both appear in every age and nearly every culture. The first involves turning to one of the schools of esoteric or spiritual development, including Zen, Sufism, and the Christian, Hindu, and Jewish forms of mysticism. These schools agree that there are two ways of "being-in-the-world." In what is generally called "The Way of

the Many," we view of ourselves as separate and individual. In "The Way of the One," we are seen as part of the total cosmos; nothing within it, including ourselves, is separate from anything else.

According to these traditions, humans have what the Roman mystic Plotinus called an "amphibious nature" and must integrate both views if we are to survive, let alone reach our full potential. All such schools espouse various meditative techniques as a means for achieving this integration. Meditation can sharpen our perception, heighten a sense of self, and increase a sense of *individual* being. It can also lead to a more profound sense of *oneness* with all existence. The schools insist there is no contradiction here. The problem is that the meditative path is too lengthy and difficult for most people. Though it promises — and apparently often delivers — a solution to this basic human tension, its historical influence has been small.

Historically, there is a second means of resolving this tension between our conflicting needs for singularity and group identification: war. Tolstoy described its effect in *War & Peace*: "Every general and every soldier was conscious of his own insignificance, aware of being but a drop in an ocean of men, and yet at the same time conscious of his strength as a part of that enormous whole." Again and again, descriptions of war by experienced participants and by great artists (and Tolstoy was both) demonstrates that it fulfills these fundamental needs. War sharpens experience, heightens perception, and makes one more aware of one's own existence. At the same time, war allows us to become part of something larger and more intense. The Way of the One and The Way of the Many intensify each other.

The writer Jo Coudert recounts:

And in England, shortly after the war, I commented to a Londoner what a relief it must have been to have the bombings ended. "Oh," she said, "it was a marvelous time. You forgot about yourself and you did what you could and we were all in it together. It was frightening, of course, and you worried about getting killed, but in some ways it was better than now. Now we're all just ourselves again."

It is important to note that wartime consciousness is not limited to the front lines. Nor is it only known to men. It was once argued that allowing women to vote would lead to more peace, but in fact the female vote has had no effect on war's frequency or ferocity. The attraction to war is a human characteristic, apparently not limited by gender. Though war clearly does not deliver exactly what it promises, it does offer temporary solutions to psychological problems for a very large percentage of the population. And once a war begins, the social pressures to continue it are very strong. Anyone who questions an ongoing war is considered a traitor or a lapsed heretic, and such people are traditionally imprisoned or killed. One cannot question the accepted wisdom that the war being waged is a wonderful crusade to rid the world of evil.

And after a war, with the general disillusionment and social confusion that accompanies the failure of the postwar dream, no one cares to examine the contradictions. When Johnny comes marching home with a chronic disability from his wounds, we all try to forget our recent bout of psychological illusion as soon as possible.

There are three ideas that, when they appear in society, should be regarded as signals that we are moving toward war, and that strong action must be taken against this drift:

~The idea that there is a particular enemy nation that embodies evils, and if it were defeated, the world would become paradise. (The latter part of this statement is the crucial danger signal. The first part may well be true—as with Hitler's Germany.)

~The idea that taking action against this enemy (now the enemy) is the path to glory and legendary heights of existence.

~The idea that anyone who does not agree with this accepted wisdom is a traitor.

These danger signals often appear at the same time in two enemy nations, which probably speeds the slide into armed conflict. If they appear in only one, and that nation then attacks its enemy, then the attacked nation is likely to believe that it has been victimized (the great majority of wars start with an armed attack preceding a declaration of war). This in turn increases that nation's sense that its attacker is evil.

The way that people begin to perceive reality in the period typically preceding the outbreak of war is very seductive. I call it the "mythic" mode of perception, as opposed to the "sensory" mode we ordinarily use. Once mythic perception takes over, we cease to structure the world in our customary way and turn to the ways of a fairy tale or a myth. In the mythic reality we never question why evil exists: it simply is. Since the enemy is evil, we're quite ready to starve, torture or kill them; after all, they cannot really be considered part of our own species.

During a mythic war, God, history, and destiny are clearly on one's side. The division of the world into Good and



Bach'n Rock

RECORD & TAPE SHOP

POPULAR MUSIC FROM THE 17TH TO 21ST CENTURY

& ALLEY CAT ESPRESSO

389 12TH ST. ASTORIA 3338-6376

MUSIC NON-PROFIT TO THE

SPAY & NEUTER HUMANE ASSOCIATION

AFTER WAR

Here, over bloodstained
craggy barren soil
the tattered banner waves,
high above the final
battlegrounds,
where hundreds slaughtered lie
in eternal sleep,
their blood tinting the dirt.

The banner flies
held up by the wind
witness to desolation
until time itself
tears the fabric remnants
from the pole
and everything crumbles
to dust

~MARGIT LIA BOWLER

Margit Bowler was 11 when she wrote this poem in 2001, which appeared in that year's July issue of the NCTE. She will be 15 on August 9.

