

Evil is so complete that not only similar qualities but also similar actions on the contrary side are seen as fundamentally different. For example, the World War 2 bombings of Rotterdam by the Germans and Hamburg by the Allies were seen as two different kinds of behavior. We bomb civilian centers for the good of mankind. They do so because they are evil. In a mythic reality, the enemy can only be stopped by force. Our defenses are never adequate; we always need a larger military, more atomic bombs, and so on, without end. Because the enemy has no regard for truth, words can no longer be relied on and real discussion stops. In regard to our own leaders, a "Teflon factor" appears; we quickly forget their mistakes and believe anything they say.

Ever since the philosopher Friedrich Schelling first described the mythic orientation in the early 19th century, many have noted that the shift to mythic consciousness is natural and easy for humans. More recently, social scientists from Ernst Cassirer to Erik Erikson have noted that it takes energy *not* to shift to this perspective. In times of stress and uncertainty the pulls become particularly strong. If enough people begin thinking mythically, a society can "tip," making it extremely unpopular or even dangerous to express the sensory mode of perception.

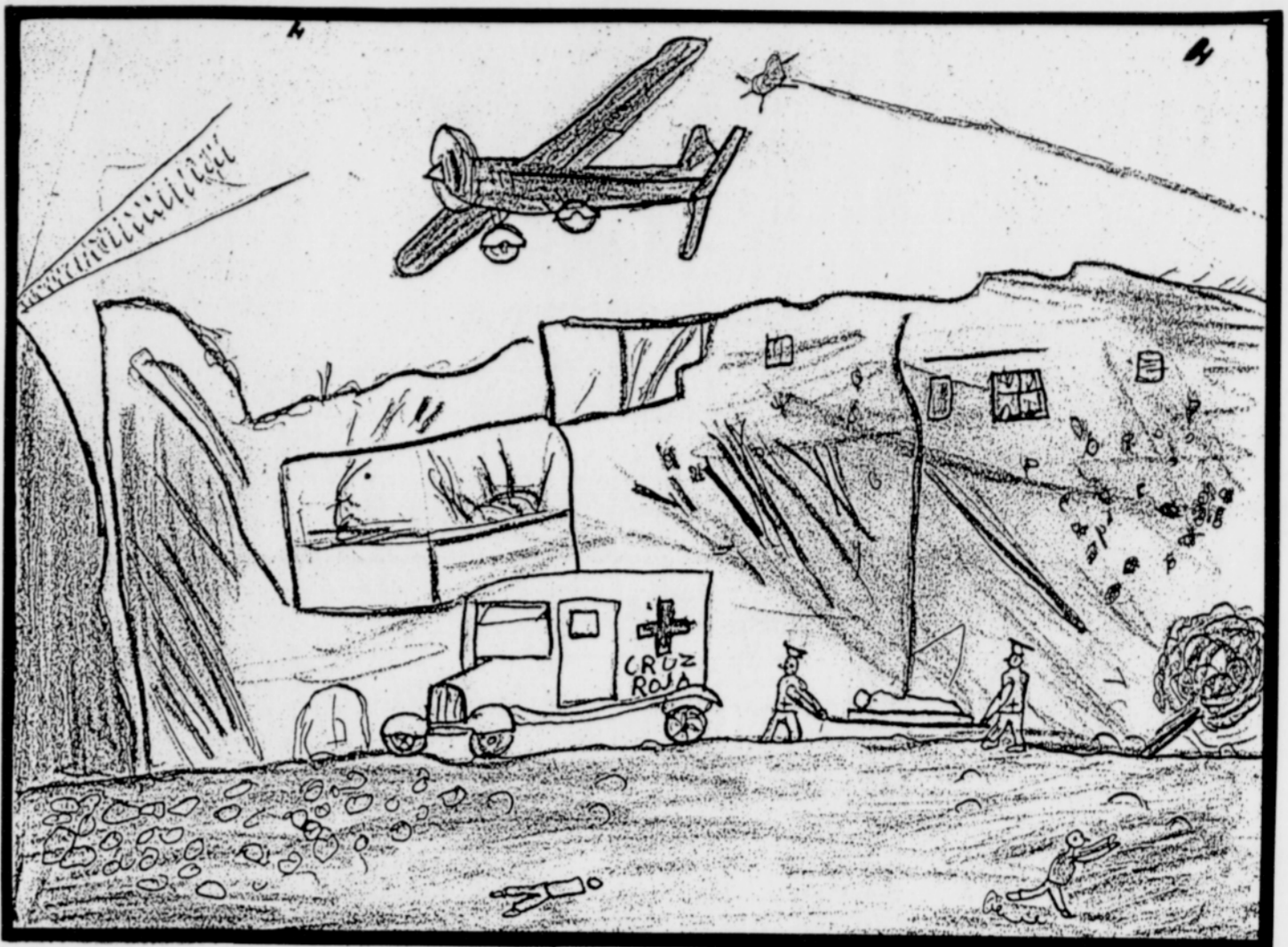
One fascinating dimension of mythic reality is that it usually applies to only two general areas: human behavior and interaction, and the great forces of the cosmos. It is not applied to the tools and routines of everyday life. We are perfectly clear about how these modes of reality relate, and about when and where to use each. We may be on a great crusade to make the world safe for democracy, but we drive on the correct side of the street to get there. "All my means are sane, my object and motives are mad," said Captain Ahab of his mythic quest for Moby Dick.

In order for a war to retain its mythic aspects, many of the facts of how war is really waged must be concealed. Any information that lessens war's psychological satisfaction is generally rejected. Since the birth of modern war correspondence and the telegraph in the mid 19th century, the public has shown a great desire for news about war — as long as it makes the conflict seem heroic. Mythic wars have proven to be the greatest way ever discovered to sell newspapers. Wars like Vietnam, which came to be viewed through the sensory mode of perception, are a different story. As the terrible jungle fighting went on and on in Vietnam, even those who had first seen it in mythic terms were disillusioned in the face of so much visual evidence to the contrary, via photos and television. After the conflict ended, war in general became unacceptable to many Americans.

There was one way in which the Persian Gulf War in 1991 was a complete success: It once again made war widely *acceptable* in this country. The media as a whole was magnificently managed by the military, showing how well they had learned the lessons of the Vietnam fiasco, at least in terms of the press. The war had a mythic goal — a "New World Order" in which the forces of aggression would be stopped by a civilized "coalition" led by the United States. Brave allies were on the scene and the media carefully avoided criticizing them. Murder, rape, and other domestic issues largely disappeared from the television news as all our problems became one problem. By the time the bombing got underway, the war was a fully mythic one.

The Persian Gulf War was, in fact, the cleanest, most bloodless, most idealized picture of war in a century and a half. The military had finally solved the dilemma of how to present war to a civilian population. The United States had clearly entered a new era. Whether this was a conscious goal of the government remains unknown, but its effect today is clear.

Indeed, before we can understand the psychology of war we have to explore the role government plays in perpetuating it. As history shows, governments are remarkably inept at preventing wars, even when it is clearly against their interests to fight them. This fact is especially striking in light of how efficient they can become once a war begins. War seems to be a "natural" way of behaving for governments; indeed, our governmental forms today are descended from earlier governments that saw war as their central function. In the ancient world, war was an accepted way to solve problems. (It wasn't until the 17th century



FROM 'THEY STILL DRAW PICTURES: CHILDREN'S ART IN WARTIME FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR TO KOSOVO'

that peace began to be discussed as a natural and permanent state.) In theory, a constant, deeply concealed pressure *toward* war may be exerted by the structure of our governments, a structure "designed" partly for this purpose.

As a holdover from the violent past, every government today has officials in charge of "war" or "defense" at its highest level. Nowhere, to my knowledge, is there an official at similar levels in charge of "peace." The U.S. Constitution is perfectly clear as to which organ of the government has "the power to declare war." Nowhere does it state which organ has the power to declare peace or strive to maintain it. That perhaps explains why our government has developed the idea of an active peace program to only a minuscule degree compared to war programs.

Any serious effort to protect ourselves against war must concentrate on two areas: why war is so attractive to humans, and why governments so often act against their interests in moving away from peace. Our first step is to increase our awareness of the fact that war is a tempting way to solve certain human problems. We then must begin to teach our young how to achieve these benefits without resorting to armed conflict.

This process can't begin until we acknowledge how easily we shift from sensory reality to mythic reality, especially

when international tensions escalate. The point is not to prevent such shifts; all the scientific evidence indicates that they are essential to psychological health. If we encourage the use of alternate realities — as often achieved during meditation, play, listening to or playing music, and so forth — we increase the ability of human beings to reach new potentials. We are also more likely to become familiar with alternate modes of perceiving reality and know what they portend.

The ultimate goal is to be able to consciously *choose* between war and peace, uncontaminated by mythic thinking. The ambitions of a Hitler, a Pol Pot, or a Saddam Hussein may be so bad for the rest of us that declaring war against them is a reasonable and logical decision. But no war will accomplish mythical goals. It will not make the world safe for democracy, nor establish a thousand-year Reich, nor organize a new world order, nor establish the perfect society, nor end war, nor do anything else except solve a particular problem, at a high cost and with unexpected results. And there *will* be unexpected results.

War has been so common in history that many have assumed it to be part of "human nature" or "inevitable to the socialization process." All such theories are comforting in that they lessen our guilt by assuming there is nothing we can do. But in fact other social patterns just as widespread as war, and deemed just as intractable, have been abandoned. We have only given up slavery in the last 150 years. Under the threat of extinction, and using our new knowledge of the social sciences, we must get rid of war.

The time is now. Every war since 1945 increases the chance that someone will again use the atomic bomb, destroying our civilization and perhaps the species. The day the first bomb was dropped was, in Buckminster Fuller's words, "The day that humanity started taking its final exam." We had better pass.

Lawrence LeShan is a research psychologist, educator and author of more than a dozen books, including *The Dilemma of Psychology* and *How To Meditate*. This article is adapted from his book, *The Psychology of War: Comprehending its Mystique & Its Madness* (Helios Press, 2002).

IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

There are startling differences in the ways we perceive reality during wartime compared to peacetime.

PEACETIME

1. Good and Evil have many shades of gray. Many groups with different ideas and opinions are legitimate.
2. Now is pretty much like other times.
3. The great forces of nature, such as God or human evolution, are not often evoked in our disputes.
4. When this present period is over, things will go on much as they have in the past.
5. There are many problems to be solved and their relative importance varies from day to day. Life is complex.
6. All people act from pretty much the same motives.
7. Problems start on different levels — economic, political or personal — and must be dealt with on those levels.
8. We are concerned with what causes the problems we are trying to solve.
9. We can talk to those who disagree with us.
10. All people are fundamentally the same.

WARTIME

1. Good and Evil are reduced to Us and Them. There are no innocent bystanders; there are only those for or those against us. Crucial issues are divided into black and white, and opinions about them are either right or wrong.
2. Now is different from all other times. Everything hangs in the balance; whoever wins now wins forever. It is the time of the final battle between good and evil.
3. "God is on Our Side," "History will absolve us," and other such slogans indicate our belief that the great cosmic forces are with us.
4. Everything will be vastly different after the war. Things will be better if we win and terribly worse if we lose. Winning or losing will change the meaning of the past and the shape of the future.
5. There is only one major problem to be solved. All others are secondary. Life has one major focus.
6. They act from a wish for power. We act from self-defense, benevolence, and reasons of common decency and morality.
7. The real problem started with an act of will by the enemy and can only be solved by breaking his will or by making him helpless to act on it.
8. We are not concerned with causes, only outcomes.
9. Since the enemy is evil, he naturally lies. Communication is not possible. Only force can settle the issue. We tell the truth (news, education). They lie (propaganda).
10. The same actions are "good" when we do them and "evil" when the enemy does them. There is doubt that "we" and "they" really belong to the same species.

~LAWRENCE LeSHAN



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