



DALE FLOWERS (2003)

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

'Barrels of blood were offered in exchange for barrels of oil. The world has a glut of human blood but oil is finite and will likely dry up sometime in this new century.'

~(MPMc, NCTE Jan/Feb 2001)

Nearly everyone professes hatred for warfare, but the truth is humanity is a savagely warlike species whose penchant for cleverly organized violence has made it supreme on earth. Throughout its history the killers have been the most honored, and as people became more settled and civilized the laurels transferred from the stealthy hunters of animals to the slayers of other human beings. All the great civilizations and empires have been structured on the expenditure of human blood, the conquest and often decimation of tribes, cities and nations unlucky to be along the march of more ambitiously militant societies.

War has been defined as "the incompetent forcing the unwilling to do the inexcusable." War is never necessary, and there has never been a "good" war despite partisan assertions, only bad wars that compel a tribe, a city, a nation to defend itself against the ruthless aspirations of an eager enemy.

Although Americans like to think of themselves as a peaceable society, we are among history's more aggressively warlike, inspired by a "Manifest Destiny" to create a worldwide empire based theoretically on its ideals of liberty and equality, but more truthfully on its general practices of militant theocracy and seemingly overbearing appetite for wealth and power.

The American nation was conceived by war, preserved its union by war, became a continental power by invading Mexico and cutting off its head, and acquired world power by seizing the feeble remnants of Spain's decrepit colonial empire. The USA became a superpower by fighting two world wars in which it built a war machine unsurpassed in history while demonstrating a productive capacity that overwhelmed allies and enemies alike. And now at the beginning of the 21st century and 3rd millennium of Christianity, the United States dominates world politics with its immense and highly sophisticated potential for total global war as the only reigning superpower after its successful emergence from a half-century cold war against the communist empire of Soviet Russia, which was characterized by inconclusive brush-fire wars and a horrendous nuclear arms race that economically and politically broke its competitor but which also seriously crippled its own economy.

The United States has fought a dozen major wars — which does not include the incessant three century war against Native Americans that is comparably among the most savage and genocidal ever fought. This expansion across the North American continent inflamed the concept of Manifest Destiny, which necessitated in the minds of the expansionists the continued extermination of the primeval tribes whose brave but pitiful resistance against extinction was no match for the weapons of the Industrial Revolution and the determination to possess their homelands. To this purpose, in addition to indiscriminate obliteration of any tribe within reach, was the use of disease, the deliberate spread of smallpox among tribes who might more adequately defend their territory than others.

At the beginning of the 20th century the U.S. fought for control of its new Pacific empire by slaughtering Filipinos who had mistakenly hoped their liberation from Spain would result in independence — they resisted their new masters with a bitter insurgency that in length and furious response of attrition was a precursor of the Vietnam War sixty years later. In the 1920s similar tactics were used in a series of 'Banana Wars' in Latin America and the Caribbean in which the U.S. set up brutal puppet regimes that managed U.S. economic interests with death squads and iron political control for nearly a century.

Of all the wars which have embroiled America, none have been so psychologically harmful as the nearly half-century

Cold War against communist Russia. Persistent subliminal fear of mass destruction was the *sine quo non* of the early years of the Nuclear Age that began with the obliteration of two Japanese cities sixty years ago.

It seemed as if the world might have been given a reprieve from fear of annihilation with collapse of the Soviet communist empire and end of the nuclear arms race between the USA and USSR, but a Middle Eastern dictator who had previously been a valued "free world" ally in the bipolar sphere of the Cold War suddenly (and preemptively) attacked a neighbor nation in summer 1990. The response by Western nations was to defend the heartlines of oil the usurper threatened while declaiming their rush to war with pieties of preserving peace and thwarting aggression.

By seizing Kuwait, Saddam Hussein was reminiscent of local emirates or bandits who occasionally and ruthlessly choked off the ancient Silk Road and extorted tariffs and tolls until either Rome or China or some other displeased power (perhaps armed by one or the other Imperial) sent an army to chase the spoilers or usurpers off. Once the 'enemy of our enemy' (post-Shah Iran), Hussein was portrayed as a despoiler of Western civilization by the nations arrayed against him who had previously armed him in the erroneous belief he would bolster an iron status quo in the Middle East that would maintain their interests in the region.

The war in Iraq is as much about democracy as it is about oil and empire simply because the soldiers who are fighting the war believe it is, however manipulated and deceived they are into that belief.

The same can be said about any war. The U.S. Civil War was about slavery because that was the essential reason the soldiers on both sides fought it, for and against. World War 1 was to put an end to war because the soldiers who endured the worst hell on earth — which they also created for themselves — slaughtered each other by the millions for that fervent hope (which might have been a not so subjective basis for the fierce obliteration). World War 2 is eulogized as history's most titanic struggle between freedom ("democracy") and totalitarianism ("fascism"); each claimed history on its side — the Germans, however conscripted, believed in the rightness of a thousand year Reich despite their detestation of Nazidom; and the Japanese despised colonial white rule in Asia although theirs was as arrogantly cruel.

The wars in Korea and Vietnam were more subjective than their predecessors, so-called "brushfire wars" to promote or prevent the spread of Cold War ideologies and to skirt nuclear obliteration while simultaneously risking it. As a result, both wars were inconclusive; yet at the heart of each, the combatants fought for beliefs latently instilled in them or fiercely demanded of them.

So Iraq. The grunts on the ground most likely cling to a tenacious faith that they have liberated the Iraqi people from a monstrous dictator and now defend against a resurrection of his regime. At the very least they hope their great personal risks are for the exalted principles that are claimed, that their leaders are literally keeping the faith with them. Yet every day the Americans and their allies face an equal tenacity by a hardcore resistance determined to oust the invaders whom they regard as infidel imperialists as pernicious as the earlier medieval Crusaders.

Soldiers have been lied to throughout history. They have always been coerced in one manner or another to commit and suffer humanity's most hideous acts, generally in the names of its most sanctified beliefs. That has not changed: the Americans who are fighting and dying in Iraq are as deceived as to the underlying purposes of the war as were their predecessors of wars immemorial, and the rewards for such guileless intrepidity are as always unequal and usually disproportionate to the fervid sacrifice for them.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
(NCTE, APRIL 2004)

THE OIL

Every war can be traced back centuries — a vengeful antipathy beneath a contemporary surface of conflict, religious at its root. The most devastating and never forgiven wars are religiously based: holy wars, crusades, jihads, whatever they may be called; and it seems that every century has an explosive recurrence among the same theolitical combatants — and now the world is at a millennium of a religiously-inspired calendar that bifurcates history. The cusps of millenniums seem to stir apocalyptic prophecies to greater carnage to obliterate opposing theologies. The last millennium in 1000 AD sparked holy wars that lasted three centuries and have never really ceased.

This millennium started ominously: a surprise assault on the foremost temples of Christian capitalism by radical Islamists. Although the United States has treated 9/11 as an unprovoked attack upon an innocent nation, it was retribution for earlier provocations and has itself been ruthlessly revenged, so far in Afghanistan and in Iraq — which probably had very little to do with it (Saddam Hussein was a tyrant, but he was a non-Muslim, a viper in the Muslim temple) — and more recently Iran and Syria are in jeopardy of being engulfed in the new Western crusade.

September 11 transcended the secularly political and moved into the demagogic metaphysical, an archaic and mythological abstraction of people certain they are the instruments of God, whether Judeo/Christian or Islamic — bloody minded retribution against innocents to revenge atrocities committed against innocents.

A major rhetorical elevation of vengeance against the terrorists into the theolitical was the President's appellation of them as evil and their accused leader Osama bin Laden as "The Evil One." Osama bin Laden, for his part, seemed to desire a return to 7th century Mecca; to early Islam which nurtured the world's most literate and scholastic civilization — a return to basics, so to speak, in a manner similar to ecumenical Christians who wish a revival of a piety that never existed except in imagination and myth.

The devastating and unprecedented attack against the United States on 9/11 was not directed at the World Trade Center and Pentagon (and perhaps the White House) as mere symbols of American power but instead as the true center of the USA's political, economic and militarily global supremacy. That was clearly the perspective of those who elaborately planned and executed the attacks. They regarded those employed in those two centers (and surely the White House) as directly responsible for American actions around the world as are U.S. soldiers, diplomats and multinational corporations based in the USA.

Total war is not only the prerogative of military regimes but also of those who struggle against them by any means at hand however horrible and catastrophic the results. In an unconditional war everybody is a soldier, which was the rationale of the mass bombings of cities in World War 2, and certainly the use of two atomic bombs on Japan which ushered in the nuclear age and its iconic mushroom cloud that billows over everything since.

Those who committed the atrocity of 9/11 did not do it because they were 'evil' but because they perceived evil had been done to them and they reciprocated as they were capable. A major reaction of the USA to 9/11 has been that it is irrelevant what we have done to others, all that matters is what has been done to us, which is dealt with as if it occurred in a vacuum.

A grievous crime was committed against the United States on 9/11, but not one that was undeserved or should have been so unexpected. Americans have lived a long time in a false bubble that assumed that what the U.S. did elsewhere would not in similar measure reach back to it. Rather than seek international justice for a criminal act the American response has been to make war and murder many more innocents without trial and certainly without justice as died on 9/11. The government claims these deaths are by accident and not intent, which apologists insist is much different than the planned murders of 9/11 — but war is murder on a mass scale and Americans have allowed themselves to be herded into war with little resistance.

9/11 unleashed a frenzy of bellicose patriotism in the USA. Prejudice, always waiting with its intolerant leer, leaped into the dialogue much earlier. Whatever people in the Middle East called the massive influx of Westerners into their deserts during Gulf War 1, some words that quickly became prevalent in the USA to describe the diverse types of humanity in the Arab lands were "ragheads" and "desert niggers, which continue in usage." Post 9/11 pundits assure readers and listeners that rabid religious beliefs and hotheaded passions are typical Mideast traits. Propaganda machines erase the ambiguities of everyday life to present immediate contrasts devoid of shades; extremes overpower dialogue: *Us* against *Them*, good versus evil, black and white the only acceptable tones of public conversation.

9/11 is a pivot point that unsettles world societies and will echo through international relations for decades. The USA's real unity was the shock and revulsion at 9/11, but since then a growing split has intensified as to the real motives of the attack and the nature of reaction to it.

Two years ago, on March 19, 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. President George W. Bush the previous June declared to graduating West Pointers what is known as the "Bush Doctrine," his concept of 'preemptive war' which means, without frills, the divine right of the U.S. to invade any nation in the world for any reason, the old fashioned way of warfare such as practiced by Saddam Hussein in Iran and Kuwait, the Caesars throughout the Mediterranean world, Hitler to most of Europe.

The first Gulf War was to protect the world's oil supply, which Saddam Hussein put a chokehold on by invading Kuwait similar to ancient emirates or bandits who occasionally seized portions of the old Silk Road between Rome and China and had to be chased away by the armies of each or both. The purpose of the second Gulf War was to depose Hussein and take control of Iraq's vast oil reserves, second largest in the world, and to frame to U.S. occupation around creating a "democratic" state in the Middle East.

The second Iraq War was started ostensibly to deter Saddam Hussein's use of weapons of mass destruction, but they have never been found and the search for them has essentially stopped. Since WMDs didn't materialize the purpose of the war has subsequently been proclaimed the democratization of Iraq, with so-called coalition troops occupying the country until it is stabilized and Iraq's immense reserves of oil flow unvexed into American barrels.