

RECRUITING TOMORROW'S DEAD

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

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 ("friendly fire"). 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 war 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 our preoccupation with the rationales, strategies, weapons and machines of war.

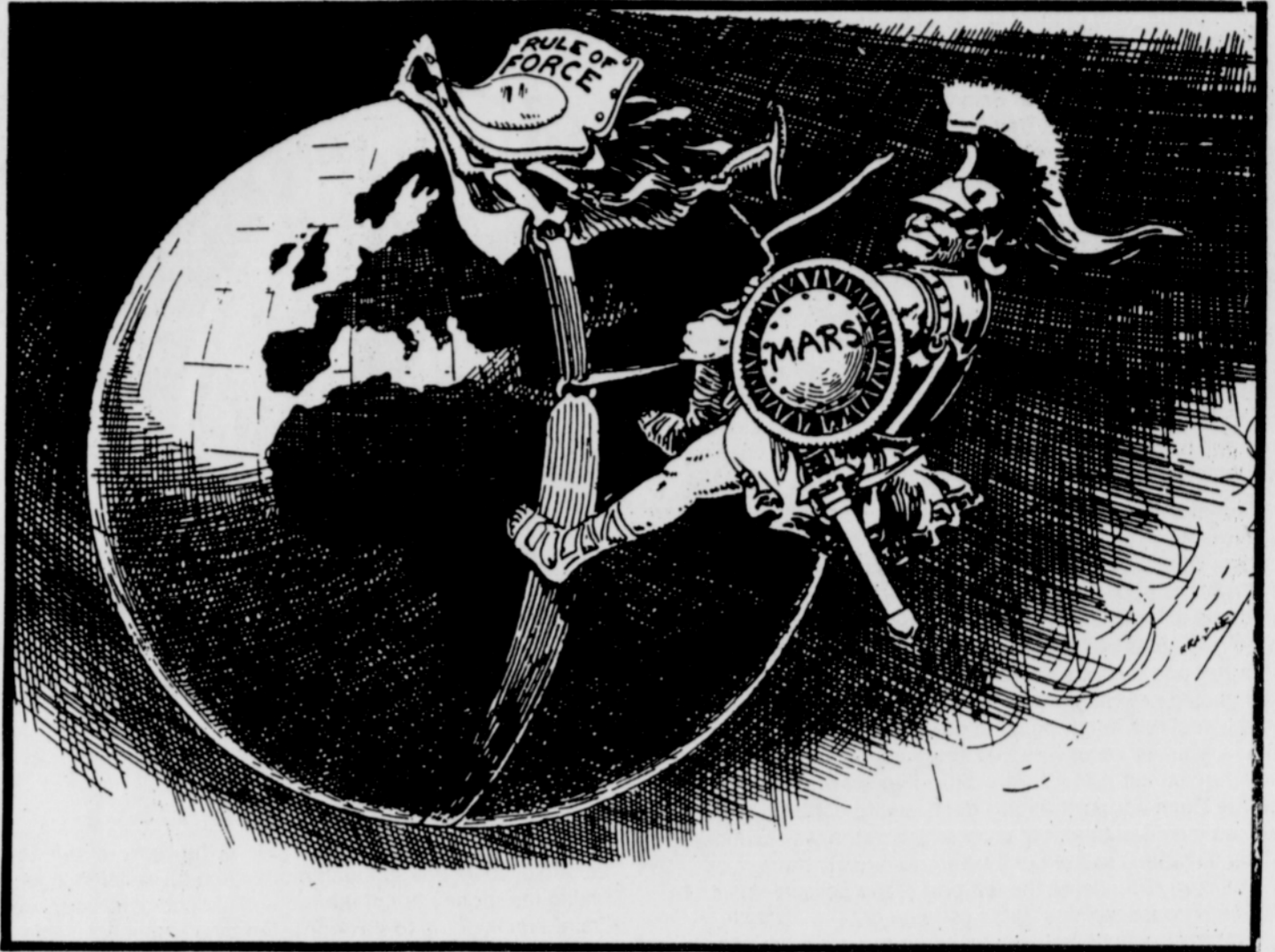
Each generation seems to think it should not be outdone by its predecessors. It must leave its bloody mark on history no matter how absurd or pointless. Every generation has been incapable or unwilling to arrest the pattern of terror and suffering each inflicts on itself, and our own risks world holocaust because of a compulsive insistence that our era, 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. Well's 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 '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 macro-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 rapacious 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. The industrial nations are arms bazaars, producing and marketing exotic 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 is verification of the popularity of reality as image devoid of involvement.

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 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 megadeath. 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 reckless ferocity 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 fornicating. 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 have become 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 militant ambitious 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 historical occurrence.

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 an exception of possibly dying in appalling numbers.

The invention of the harpoon gun and the exploding harpoon decimated the whales. 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 despoliation 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 might seem unnecessary they are useful for traditional fratricide short of provoking megadeath. Dead soldiers are Christlike in a sense; they die as surrogates for the rest of us. Unrestricted warfare in the last century significantly enlarged soldiers' always shadowy and disavowed parallel roll as surrogate executioners.

Looking at history through only the bloody prism of war is to miss much of the best of it, and distorts it — yet war shapes nations and individuals; much of what each claims as heritage and honor is bequeathed by war. Waging war is a nation's most serious business. Robert E. Lee said it was probably fortunate war is so terrible, otherwise we might grow to love it. He did not foresee its possibilities as video entertainment — 'smart' missiles and bombs breaking down doors and falling through industrial chimneys; high-tech stuff in which skywarriors anonymously and indiscriminately (always hotly denied) murder strangers from the stratosphere. Most significant to the human psyche is that nearly a century of airwarfare (powered aviation is 103 years old this year) has made the very sky that envelops the earth the most dangerous threat to existence.

A people will generally support a war once it is initiated, if for no other reason than they feel there is not much else they can do. That support is considered essential for conducting a war to its end in victory or defeat. In this era of the supposed common person the focus of support is upon the average soldier, sailor and airman/woman, who are not responsible for the wars they fight in but make possible. Bellicose war fever is whipped up to discourage questions of a war's purpose or cost, and to

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