

War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning



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For my children, Thomas and Noëlle, and yours

There is ful many a man that crieth “Werre! Werre!” that woot ful litel what werre amounteth.

—Geoffrey Chaucer, medieval English poet who was a soldier and prisoner of war in France, in “The Tale of Melibee,”
The Canterbury Tales, c. 1392

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INTRODUCTION

I have spent most of my adult life reporting war. By the time it was over, after nearly two decades, I had worked as a correspondent in about a dozen conflicts from Central America to Africa to the Middle East and the Balkans. I spent five years covering the insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. I was there for the first Palestinian uprising, or intifada, in the West Bank and Gaza, and returned to write about the second. I reported on the civil wars in the Sudan and Yemen, the uprisings in Algeria and the Punjab, and the collapse of the communist regimes in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. I went on to the Gulf War, the Kurdish rebellion in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, the war in Bosnia, and finally to the fighting in Kosovo.

I have been in ambushes on desolate dirt roads in Central America, in firefights in the marshes in southern Iraq between Shiite rebels and Iraqi soldiers, imprisoned in the Sudan, captured and held prisoner for a week by the Iraqi Republican Guard in Basra during the Shiite rebellion following the 1991 Gulf War, strafed by MiG-21s in Bosnia, fired upon by Serb snipers, and pounded with over 1,000 heavy shells a day in Sarajevo. I struggle with the demons all who have been to war must bear. There are days when these burdens seem more than I can handle.

There are few books that describe in raw detail the effects of war, what it does to bodies, to minds and souls. The trauma of war is often too hard for us to digest. We find it easier to believe the myths about war, the exciting call to duty, honor, courage, and glory, those abstract terms that are rendered hollow in combat. This is not to say these qualities do not exist—they do—but they rarely have much place on the battlefield. Modern industrial warfare is largely impersonal. The effects of these powerful weapons and explosives on human bodies are usually not disclosed to the public. The physical and psychological wounds are lifelong crucibles carried by veterans and civilian survivors. These wounds are often unseen. Those who suffer from war's touch are often left to struggle with the awful scars of war alone or with their families. War, when we understand it, forces us to confront our own capacity for violence, indeed for atrocity. And it is little wonder that most of us prefer to turn away.

“Few of us can hold on to our real selves long enough to discover the momentous truths about ourselves and this whirling earth to which we cling,” wrote J. Glenn Gray, a combat veteran of World War II, in *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. “This is especially true of men in war. The great god Mars tries to blind us when we enter his realm, and when we leave he gives us a generous cup of the waters of Lethe to drink.”

We ennoble war. We turn it into entertainment. And in all this we forget what war is about, what it does to those who wage it and those who suffer from it. We ask those in the military and their families to make sacrifices that color the rest of their lives. Those who hate war the most, I have often found, are veterans who know it.

War, I believe, is an inevitable part of the human condition. I doubt it will ever be eradicated. B

it should never be waged lightly or without good cause. The cost is high. Most of those killed, wounded, and left homeless in modern warfare are innocents, families, including children. There are millions of people on this planet who, because of war, have been thrust into a life of want and misery. And their dislocation, along with their loss of dignity and basic human rights, has created legions of the disenfranchised.

The truth about war is hard to confront, especially if we have come to believe the romantic image of war. But the truth will arm us to wage war. It will make us conscious of the sacrifices we demand from those we send to fight. Our young men and women do not deserve to be deceived about the difficulties they must undertake. In a democracy, the voting public must grasp the exacting toll of war. And when we know what it is we face, and the possible consequences, we will be better prepared to cope with the stress, pain, and loss. Those who come back from war will be better able to handle their own trauma. They will understand that they are not alone. Perhaps they will also come to realize that we all need help. We all need each other. War is a cross no one should have to bear alone.

“Give sorrow words,” William Shakespeare wrote, “The grief that does not speak whispers the o’erfraught heart and bids it break.”

The book is a manual on war. There is no rhetoric. There are very few adjectives. It is a book based on research. The core of the research was directed by Cabe Franklin, who worked with Sam Frank and Byrd Schas. Laurie Kelliher, along with some of my other graduate students at Columbia University’s School of Journalism, gave many hours to the effort. The book is also the product of a great deal of reflection by several veterans, especially John Wheeler who graduated from West Point, served in Vietnam, and went on to chair the drive to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. He significantly shaped and molded the book. Paul Woodruff, a philosopher who wrote *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* and was a military adviser in Vietnam, helped edit the manuscript. The novelist Christian Bauman, who joined the Army after high school and served in Somalia and Haiti, along with Jarrad Shiver, who was a sergeant in the Marine Corps, made sure the concerns and dilemmas of the enlisted men and women were included. Christian wrote *The Ice Beneath You*, one of the finest books on life in the American army. And we are indebted to three members of the Hughes family, all West Point graduates, who helped us look at the issues that concern women in the military and made sure we thoughtfully asked and answered questions about wounds and warfare. Carolyn Hughes Copenhaver, a former Army captain who served in military intelligence from 1992 to 1997, Captain John R. Hughes, an Army surgeon, and Dr. William F. Hughes, a retired colonel who served three tours in Vietnam, all generously lent their expertise to the work.

We drew up basic questions about war and searched medical, psychological, and military studies for information. We were meticulous about footnotes, fact checking, and sourcing. If anyone wants more on any subject, the footnotes and bibliography show where to find it. We kept the book direct and accessible. And we operated on the assumption that the simplest and most obvious questions in life, and certainly war, often never get asked. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus noted that “men are estranged from what is most familiar and they must seek out what is in itself evident.”

The idea for the book came from the work of Harold Roland Shapiro, a New York lawyer who stumbled on medical studies from World War I during a law case. The medical descriptions, he wrote, rendered “all that I had read and heard previously as being either fiction, isolated reminiscence, vague

generalization or deliberate propaganda.”

He began to do research in the New York Academy of Medicine and the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. He published a book called *What Every Young Man Should Know About War* (Knight Publishers, Inc., 1937) in question-and-answer format. The book was published a year later in London by George Allen and Unwin Ltd. It described war in “dispassionate words” that were “as irrevocable as bullets once they have been issued from the mouth of a machine gun.”

Mr. Shapiro, who hoped to avert another war, distributed his book on the eve of World War II. But when the war started, fearing that it would interfere with recruiting, he pulled the few copies in circulation. The book never appeared in print again.

Lawrence Walsh, who covered the war in Afghanistan, mentioned the book to me while I was on a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard. It was hard to find. Widener Library at Harvard, the second largest in the country, did not have a copy. I had to order it from the Library of Congress.

The book is dated. It deals with bayonet wounds, “trench fever,” and “going over the top.” And it pulls almost exclusively from medical studies. Its focus is on physical wounds, although one sees glimpses of the recognition of the deep psychological cost of war in vague medical references to “anxiety state.” However limited, the concept was brilliant. And Mr. Shapiro, who died in 1985, did his country a great service. I want to thank his son, Dr. Jonathan S. Shapiro, for sharing with me his father’s history and blessing our enterprise.

A lot of work has been done on the physical and psychological effects of war since World War I. Post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, was not officially recognized and named until after the Vietnam War. We now have a much better understanding of what the trauma of war does to us. But the military has also worked hard to make its soldiers more efficient killers. It has employed the tools of science, technology, and psychology to increase the lethal force of combat units. These studies strip away the gloss of military life. There is a method to the military’s madness. And recruits will be better able to cope with what seems like insanity when they understand what it is the military is trying to accomplish.

Finally, there may be some who dislike this book. It is hard to read. But war is hard. And closing our eyes to the reality of war will not make it go away, nor will it make it better. Knowledge does give us power. It allows us to understand what is being done to us. It allows us to prepare ourselves for the hard task of warfare. It makes us cautious and hopefully hesitant about unleashing the dogs of war. Most important, it gives us a greater compassion and insight toward those who return from war. The invisible wounds inflicted on survivors are potent. They can destroy lives, long after the conflict has ended, as effectively as artillery shells.

This book is meant to give a glimpse into war as it is, not as it is usually portrayed by the entertainment industry, the state, and the press. War, however inevitable and necessary, must always be a final resort. It is always tragic. War maims generations. War sends out deadly aftershocks that ripple outward in ways we do not understand. War, the blood-swollen god, asks us to sacrifice our young. Beware of that sacrifice. Fear it.

—Chris Hedges

WAR 101

What is a war?

War is defined as an active conflict that has claimed more than 1,000 lives.¹

Has the world ever been at peace?

Of the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them, or just 8 percent of recorded history.²

How many people have died in war?

At least 108 million people were killed in wars in the twentieth century. Estimates for the total number killed in wars throughout all of human history range from 150 million to 1 billion. War has several other effects on population, including decreasing the birthrate by taking men away from their wives. The reduced birthrate during World War II is estimated to have caused a population deficit of more than 20 million people.³

How many people around the world serve in the military?

The combined armed forces of the world have 21.3 million people. China has the world's largest with 2.4 million. America is second with 1.4 million. India has 1.3 million, North Korea 1 million, and Russia 900,000. Of the world's 20 largest militaries, 14 are in developing nations.⁴

How many wars are taking place right now?

At the beginning of 2003 there were 30 wars going on around the world. These included conflict in Afghanistan, Algeria, Burundi, China, Colombia, the Congo, India, Indonesia, Israel, Iraq, Liberia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda.⁵

Is there a genetic reason why we fight?

There is no single “war gene.” Combinations of genes can predispose a person to violence. However, aggression is a product of biology and environment. In America, sources of aggressive dispositions include domestic violence, the portrayal of violence in the media, threats from enemies, and combat training.⁶

Is war essentially male?

Worldwide, 97 percent of today’s military personnel are male. This is thought to be a reflection of culture and biology. Fifteen percent (204,000) of American military personnel are female.⁷

Can women fight as effectively as men do?

Yes. While fewer women are “natural killers,” and women are on average smaller than men, there are many women who have the psychological makeup and the physical ability to fight. There are many men without either. Women have shown valor in combat. Dr. Mary Walker won the Medal of Honor during the Civil War.⁸

Why are civilians so attracted to war?

War is often regarded by observers as honorable and noble. It can be viewed as a contest between nations, a chance to compete and be declared the victor.⁹

Does the American public support war?

Between 65 and 85 percent of the American public will support a military action when it begins. Vietnam had 64 percent support in 1965. As American casualties mount, support often decreases. The Korean and Vietnam Wars ended with support levels near 30 percent. World War II support levels never fell below 77 percent, despite the prolonged and damaging nature of the conflict. The Gulf War enjoyed similar levels of support.¹⁰

How large is the American military?

The active peacetime force of the U.S. armed services includes 1.4 million people, with the Army making up almost 500,000 of that number. The Navy has approximately 380,000 men and women on active duty. The Air Force has approximately 365,000, and the Marines have approximately 175,000. Approximately 1.3 million Americans serve in Reserve and National Guard branches that can be activated in time of war.¹¹

How many Americans have died in wars?

More than 650,000 Americans have been killed in combat. Another 243,000 have died while wars were being fought, due to training accidents, injury, and disease. In the twentieth century, approximately 53,000 Americans were killed in combat in World War I, 291,000 in World War II, 33,000 in the Korean War, 47,000 in Vietnam, and 148 in the Gulf War. Including deaths from disease, accidents, and other factors, each war's total was much higher: approximately 116,000 died in World War I, 400,000 in World War II, 53,000 in the Korean War, 90,000 in Vietnam, and almost 400,000 in the Gulf War.¹²

How deadly is the American military?

It is difficult to measure how many enemy deaths American armed forces have inflicted. Americans and their allies typically cause 10 to 20 times more combat casualties than American forces suffer. Estimates of Iraqi soldiers killed in the Gulf War range from 1,500 to 100,000. The lowest figure would still be 10 times the number of Americans killed in the war. Approximately 850,000 Vietcong died in the Vietnam War, 18 times the 47,000 U.S. dead. More than 600,000 North Korean and 1 million Chinese fighters died in the Korean War, almost 50 times the 33,000 American dead. In World War II, 3,250,000 German and 1,507,000 Japanese soldiers, sailors, and pilots were killed, 16 times the 291,000 American servicemen who were killed.¹³

How much does it cost the United States to maintain its armed forces?

Since 1975, America has spent between 3 and 6 percent of its gross domestic product on national defense, or approximately 15 to 30 percent of each year's federal budget. In the first years of the twenty-first century, this meant spending roughly \$350 billion per year. In comparison, annual spending for other programs included roughly \$15 billion on state and international assistance and \$60 billion on education. From 1940 to 1996 (a period that includes several cycles of war and peace, including the arms race of the cold war), America spent \$16.23 trillion on the military (\$5.82 trillion of that on nuclear weapons), versus \$1.70 trillion on health care and \$1.24 trillion on international affairs.¹⁴

How much does war cost?

The cost of the Gulf War was approximately \$76 billion.* Vietnam cost \$500 billion; the Korean War, \$336 billion; and World War II, almost \$3 trillion. Put another way, the Gulf War cost each person in the United States \$306; Vietnam, \$2,204 per person; Korea, \$2,266 per person; and World War II, \$20,388 per person. At its outset, estimates for the cost of the Iraqi War were \$50 to \$140 billion, and an additional \$75 to \$500 billion for occupation and peacekeeping, or from \$444 to \$2,277 per person.¹⁵

How big is the military industry in the United States?

Besides the 1.4 million active duty personnel, the military employs 627,000 civilians. The defense industry employs another 3 million. In total, the military and its supporting manufacturing base employs 3.5 percent of the U.S. labor force. In 2002, the Department of Defense spent \$170.8 billion with military contractors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin.^{[16](#)}

How has the size of the industry changed over time?

The 2003 level of 3.5 percent of the labor force is historically low. In 1987, toward the end of the cold war, defense (including the military) made up 5.7 percent of the U.S. labor market; in 1968, during Vietnam, 9.8 percent; in 1943, during World War II, 39 percent. After World War II, defense employment dropped to 4.5 percent, but jumped back to 11 percent in 1951 with the Korean War and the start of the cold war.^{[17](#)}

Does the military industry help make defense spending decisions?

Yes. In 2000, defense lobbying groups spent approximately \$60 million. Defense political action committees also contribute roughly \$14 million per congressional election cycle. Defense aerospace, defense electronics, and miscellaneous defense are the 31st-, 44th-, and 46th-ranking industries, respectively.^{[18](#)}

How many weapons does the U.S. military industry export each year?

In 2001, U.S. arms manufacturers exported \$9.7 billion in weapons worldwide. The United Kingdom was second in international exports with \$4 billion. In addition, the United States made new sales of \$12.1 billion. Russia was second with \$5.8 billion. The United States is the world's largest arms manufacturer, supplying almost half of all the arms sold on the world market.^{[19](#)}

What kinds of arms does the United States export?

In 2002, U.S. manufacturers planned to export arms including Cobra and Apache attack helicopters, Black Hawk helicopters, KC-135A Stratotanker air-to-air tanker/transport aircraft, Hellfire and Hellfire II air-to-surface antiarmor missiles, Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, TOW 2A and 2B missiles, M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns, grenade launchers, MK-82 (500 lb.) and MK-83 (1,000 lb.) bombs, Sentinel radar systems, GBU-12 Paveway series laser-guided bombs, standard assault amphibious personnel vehicles, assault amphibious command vehicles, and CBU-97 sensor fused weapon antitank cluster bombs.^{[20](#)}

How many of the weapons U.S. companies export go to developing countries?

Approximately half. From 1994 to 2001, the United States exported \$131 billion in arms, with \$59 billion going to developing nations. The United States is the leading exporter to developing countries, with Russia and France second and third.^{[21](#)}

How do American arms exports affect the American people?

Arms exports are an important source of American jobs and help maintain U.S. military manufacturing capacity. They also have some negative consequences. When American weapons are used in a conflict—for example, by Israel against the Palestinians—America is also blamed for the attacks. U.S. forces regularly find themselves up against sophisticated weaponry of American origin, which is harder to defend against.^{[22](#)}

How dangerous is war for civilians?

Very dangerous. Between 1900 and 1990, 43 million soldiers died in wars. During the same period, 62 million civilians were killed. More than 34 million civilians died in World War II. One million died in North Korea. Hundreds of thousands were killed in South Korea, and 200,000 to 400,000 in Vietnam. In the wars of the 1990s, civilian deaths constituted between 75 and 90 percent of all war deaths.^{[23](#)}

What is the civilian experience in war?

They are shot, bombed, raped, starved, and driven from their homes. During World War II, 135,000 civilians died in two days in the firebombing of Dresden. A week later, in Pforzheim, Germany, 17,800 people were killed in 22 minutes. In Russia, after the three-year battle of Leningrad, only 600,000 civilians remained in a city that had held a population of 2.5 million. One million were evacuated, 100,000 were conscripted into the Red Army, and 800,000 died. In April 2003, during the Iraqi War, half of the 1.3 million civilians in Basra, Iraq, were trapped for days without food and water in temperatures in excess of 100 degrees.^{[24](#)}

How many refugees are there?

In 2001, 40 million people were displaced from their homes because of armed conflict or human rights violations. Refugees have been a concern throughout the twentieth century. Five million Europeans were uprooted from 1919 to 1939. World War II displaced 40 million non-Germans in Europe, and 13 million Germans were expelled from countries in Eastern Europe. Approximately 2.5

million of the 4.4 million people in Bosnia and Herzegovina were driven from their homes during the region's war in the early 1990s. More than 2 million Rwandans left their country in 1994. In 2001, 200,000 people were driven from Afghanistan to Pakistan. In early 2003, 45,000 Liberians were displaced from their homes.²⁵

What are the consequences of becoming a refugee?

Refugees have very high mortality rates, due primarily to malnutrition and infectious disease. Rwandan refugees in Zaire in 1994 had a death rate 25 to 50 times higher than prewar Rwandans. Iraqi Kurdish refugees in Turkey in 1991 had a death rate 18 times higher than usual.²⁶

How does war affect children?

More than 2 million children were killed in wars during the 1990s. Three times that number were disabled or seriously injured. Twenty million children were displaced from their homes in 2001. Many were forced into prostitution. A large percentage of those will contract AIDS. Children born to mothers who are raped or forced into prostitution often become outcasts.²⁷

How many child soldiers are there?

More than 300,000 worldwide. Soldiers are sometimes recruited at age 10 and younger. The youngest carry heavy packs, or sweep roads with brooms and branches to test for landmines. When children are hostile, the opposing army is more likely to consider every civilian a potential enemy.²⁸

Why do children join armies?

They are often forced to. Some are given alcohol or drugs, or exposed to atrocities, to desensitize them to violence. Some join to help feed or protect their families. Some are offered up by their parents in exchange for protection. Children can be fearless because they lack a clear concept of death.²⁹

How can war affect women?

Women often take on larger economic roles in wartime. They must find ways to compensate for their husband's military deployment or unemployment. Those in war zones must search for food, water, medicine, and fuel despite shortages. Some women in war zones are forced into prostitution to provide for their family. Famine and stress cause increased still-birth and early infant death. AIDS risk increases for many women in war, from prostitution, husbands who return from military duty with HIV, or rape.³⁰

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