Speaking of War

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The way people talk about war shapes the way they think about war. Frank public discourse about the nature of war, and about the devastation it brings, diminishes public enthusiasm for militarism, rendering war a little less likely, and in the struggle to prevent wars, every little bit counts. In the United States today, however, with the possible exception of military families, war is easily discussed with a measure of indifference or ambivalence, without serious reflection on what war actually is. As currently used, the term "war" is an aspect of cultural violence, meaning the beliefs, ideas, and language that legitimize and encourage structural and direct violence.

The word "war" itself is feeble, short and flat; so close to "wan," so unlike "massacre." Compared to "child molestation," "human trafficking," and "rape" (which register as vile acts and violations of taboo), "war" sounds benign; it does not hit the mind with the same moral weight. Most U.S. citizens have not experienced firsthand the physical devastation of warfare, and without such personal context, the negative emotional resonance of "war" is minimal. Certainly among television pundits, comedians, and politicians, "war" can be the subject of light, unreflective banter. In the vernacular, "war" is often used to indicate an intense competition (such as "trade wars" and "ratings wars"), or any large-scale effort to decrease or eliminate some unwanted phenomenon ("war on drugs" and "war on poverty"). Thus, when referring to armed combat, "war" is easily understood as the large-scale effort necessary for intense competition between nations, rather than the resultant human suffering—the strategizing, organizing, and mobilizing, not the killing and maiming.

Discussion of war typically mirrors discussion of a sporting event. U.S. politicians understand that their constituents will quietly tolerate reports of significant U.S. casualties so long as they believe their side is "winning." Promised a victorious end, the sacrifice is honorable. "Make no mistake," a congressman will bluster, "this is a war we will win"—although he will never clarify what winning looks like. For that, one must fall back on sports: winning means your opponents lose. Reports of enemy combat casualties and conquered cities are received, then, as markers of success. And because the

perception of eventual victory is critical for maintaining domestic cooperation with wartime measures, evidence of battlefield failures must be obscured.

This is nothing new. During World War II, Polish Jews in the Lodz ghetto secretly listened to German radio reports boasting of victories over Soviet forces. But if you knew your geography, one ghetto resident later recalled, you realized the Soviets were actually advancing and the Germans "were winning in the wrong direction." In "unconventional" wars, where capturing and holding territory may be less critical, score is kept in body counts. The falsification of Vietnamese casualty statistics by the U.S. Defense Department is well documented. When reports of the Tet offensive, in 1968, undermined the official body-count narrative, beloved news anchorman Walter Cronkite publicly expressed dismay, but his famous line also betrayed a sportscaster's mentality: "What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning this war."

The sports analogy prevails today. In fact, the general population's role in "supporting our troops"—beyond federal taxation—has been largely reduced to applauding "our men and women in uniform" at professional sporting events. The home crowd is the perfect audience for these carefully staged ceremonies, as the desire to belong—with minimal sacrifice—to a victorious institution is what draws many to the stadium in the first place. Just as the prospect of collective victory gives meaning to fan loyalty, it also contributes to the legitimization of war. After all, if a war, like a football game, can be won or lost, there must be great glory and reward in the winning, and losing can be viewed as noble failure.

Furthermore, the win/lose dichotomy posits national unity on both "sides"—two opposing teams—thus obscuring internal conflicts on "our side," and demonizing "their side" as a monolithic enemy. To declare victory, or to suggest victory is even possible, is to frame war as a high-stakes game of capture-the-flag or Risk, where one side is all triumphant, the losers look forward to a rematch, and casualties are beside the point. "This is a war we cannot win" is always a reasonable critique, except that it implies there are wars we can.

The first U.S. congresswoman, Jeanette Rankin, the only member of Congress to vote against U.S. entry into both World War I and World War II, rejected such sporting language, saying, "You can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake." Her point was that in war everybody loses. Soldiers and civilians are wounded, traumatized, and killed. Infrastructure is destroyed, resources wasted, forests, and farmland polluted. Our shared humanity is tortured. War, Rankin was suggesting, is better understood as a natural disaster rather than as a team sport.

Does anyone declare victory over a city-leveling earthquake? Some people, such as the owners of construction companies, might see increased opportunity for profits. Those lucky few are unlikely, however, to celebrate

loudly or wax triumphant. Such behavior in the face of human suffering and loss would generally be considered inappropriate, vulgar, and grotesque. Similarly, there are people who profit from wars: bellicose politicians, career military officers, weapons manufacturers. The difference, at least in the United States, is that claiming victory in war and celebrating loudly is socially acceptable and politically rewarded, even if almost all people touched by war experience loss.

Such exultant posturing is condoned, in part, because in U.S. discourse, war is generally understood as something that happens in strange, foreign lands. The victims of U.S. invasions are subhuman enemies who do not value life or suffer the way we do. They are threats to our safety, not innocent and deserving concern like earthquakes victims. Overt invasions by U.S. forces are remembered under the name of the invaded country—the Mexican War, Korean War, Vietnam War, and so forth. This emphasizes the foreignness of the event, both as location and experience, and reinforces the assumption that the conflict began elsewhere and, ultimately, is someone else's problem. As Robinson Jeffers observed in a poem equating war-makers to skunks, "[d]istance makes clean."

In sum, war is easily thought of as an intense international competition, something briefly mentioned on the evening news but occurring overseas, like the Olympics, with flags unfurled and medals to the winners. In the years between 1945 and 1990, misleading phrases like "police action" and "military advisers" were needed to mollify war-weary voters and to temper Cold War panic, but no longer. The word "war" has lost its bite, has become a euphemism for itself, obscuring the ugly realities it should be indicating. To see how well the euphemism works, try the opposite: replace "war" in common phrases with a word that indicates the terrible human cost, such as "slaughter." "Do you support the slaughter?" "The Vietnam Slaughter." "Just Slaughter Theory." "Bloodbath" and "mass killing" work equally well.

When we emphasize the worst aspects of armed combat, when we call modern warfare precisely what it amounts to, the words do not glide so gently off the tongue or slip through the imagination; they bring pause. George W. Bush explained, "I'm a [slaughter] president. I make decisions here in the Oval Office in foreign policy matters with [slaughter] on my mind." Barack Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize by insisting, "So yes, the instruments of [slaughter] do have a role to play in preserving the peace." With war clarified, these presidential proclamations are more revealing, and human butchery is less easily mistaken for a sporting event.

When Martin Luther King Jr. asserted that "the enemy is violence," he encountered resistance from a close aide, who did not want to dismiss the "good" that came out of U.S. wars. If the aide's understanding of U.S. history was simplistic, it was not unusual: the War of Independence brought

freedom from British monarchy, the Civil War ended slavery. Of course, public conception of the War of Independence has been reduced to a few quaint events around Boston, redemptive interpretations of the Civil War first require confession of the nation's original sin, and appeals to old battles between white-skinned English-speakers have mostly lost the power to persuade or provoke. But while those eras fade, the perception of victory in World War II remains critical to the legitimacy of warfare in U.S. political rhetoric.

Pro-war pundits are quick to equate antiwar sentiment with European appeasement of German territorial demands in 1938: antiwar equals pro-Hitler equals evil. This simple device has rhetorical power because, in popular memory, the 1945 military conquest of Germany was the salvation of Europe: pro-war equals anti-Hitler equals good. U.S. forces and their British allies liberated concentration camps, Hitler committed suicide, and the fascist German government surrendered. (The greater Soviet military contribution is conveniently forgotten.) Japan, too, surrendered after U.S. bombers had destroyed most major cities there. "They" started it, and "we" finished it. Team USA suffered no destroyed cities, occupied Western Europe and Japan, and emerged an unrivaled economic "superpower." The "good war" was an unambiguous triumph over evil, still beloved by U.S. filmmakers and popular historians.

If we leave aside the team sports analogy, and define winning as personal or material gain and losing as human suffering, a different conclusion arises. Who won in the years 1940 to 1945? Communist Party elites secured a privileged existence for themselves as they solidified repressive rule in the Soviet Union and its European satellites. In the United States, the military–industrial complex—the weapons profiteers—became the federally subsidized, indispensible foundation for national economic stability. A very good war, indeed. Who lost? Millions of people in Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, China, northern Africa, and on Pacific islands suffered death, injury, hunger, disease, emotional devastation, imprisonment, displacement, and loss of political self-determination—the numbers are staggering, the agony incalculable. American soldiers and their families also paid a high price, as did people of Japanese descent in the Americas.

Admitting that war brings enormous suffering, the righteousness of U.S. participation in World War II is, for many, still "proven" by a simple fact: Allied forces liberated the concentration camps. That alone sounds like a win—even if ending the Holocaust was not an Allied war objective, even if the people who stumbled out of the camps were traumatized survivors; victims not victors. But by this thinking, we should celebrate as righteous the Japanese attack on U.S. forces in Pearl Harbor, which led to formal U.S. entry into the war, which led to German defeat. The Pearl Harbor attack also arguably saved

millions in India, as the ensuing war in the Pacific hurried British departure from the subcontinent, thus removing the extractive and obstructive colonial dynamic that had allowed for frequent, devastating famines.

War typically brings political upheaval, with all sorts of outcomes, a few predictable, many more unforeseen, some for the better, most for the worst. Framing a war as "won" means emphasizing what was gained, leaving aside or minimizing what was lost, and this includes privileging some lives over others. The Allied destruction of Germany ended the Holocaust, sparing the lives of many European Jews and others targeted for elimination by Hitler. This sounds like a net positive for the speculative body-count ledger in the "postwar" era, until weighed against other outcomes that followed from the expansion of U.S. and Soviet militarism. The surrender of Nazi Germany saved many otherwise doomed lives, but U.S. and Soviet ascendancy doomed many more.

A vision of victory is untenable when one evaluates the U.S. war effort as an attempt at violence reduction. If the goal of the Allies (mainly Soviet, U.S., and British policymakers) was to extinguish the nascent German and Japanese empires and destroy their military and industrial capabilities, all-out warfare did the trick. If the goal was to reduce all forms of violence, make future wars unlikely, and promote all forms of peace, the armed response to German and Japanese militarism was counterproductive. If the goal was to transform conflict into opportunity for moral advancement, the military solution was a total failure.

The Allied conquest of Germany and Japan did not defeat violence. The U.S. and British leaders who condemned as immoral the bombing of civilian cities by the German and Japanese militaries were, a few years later, approving the systematic targeting of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Germany and Japan. Cultural violence received a boost among the Allies: military achievements were venerated, warfare was legitimized as the way to defeat bad regimes, and the ideological battle between the communist East and capitalist West led both sides to see bad regimes aligned against them.

Structural violence increased as U.S. and Soviet military power were institutionalized, the Soviet Union established repressive control over Eastern Europe and central Asia, and the extractive forces of U.S.-dominated capitalism expanded across the rest of the globe, with a special focus on the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. Wartime suffering eased in Western Europe after 1945, but soon intensified in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. Eastern Europe remained a place of misery. Stalin's reign of terror, in the Soviet Union, matched Hitler's for brutality and destruction—the mass killing just moved farther east. U.S. military spending impoverished domestic social programs, and U.S.

soldiers and their families continued to bear the cost of combat in distant lands. Nuclear weapons programs poisoned the planet. One might express relief at the temporary cessation of widespread slaughter, in 1945, but, in the face of such global loss, it requires great narcissism to declare victory.

Rankin was right: war is about losing, not winning, but her earthquake analogy can be interpreted to mean war is best understood as a natural disaster, an "act of God," a tragic event that comes with little warning and cannot be prevented or avoided. If war cannot be avoided, preparation for war is of utmost importance, for self-defense if nothing else. But traditional preparation for war—national military buildup—presents two obvious perils. First, given a commitment to militarism, national policymakers are quick to propose military solutions. In a most revealing example, in the aftermath of the catastrophic 2010 earthquake in Haiti, with tens of thousands killed, communications and medical infrastructure destroyed, and survivors in desperate need of food, water, medicine, and shelter, the official U.S. relief response was to send troops. The focus of that particular invasion may have been humanitarian relief, but the point is that U.S. officials turned to the military because that is where U.S. resources, training, and manpower are concentrated; in a crisis—any crisis—send in the warriors.

Second, foreign policymakers are likely to view the military buildup as a threat—even if labeled "defense," even if mobilized for "humanitarian" reasons—and will respond in kind, necessitating additional "defensive" buildup. The first leads to the second, and the second leads to more of the first. Call it escalation, a feedback loop, an arms race, the militarization of the planet. "If you wish for peace, prepare for war"—that tired, old dictum has it perfectly wrong. If you prepare for war, one way or the other war is what you will get. In short, belief in the inevitability of war—war as natural disaster—is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Disease, then, is a better analogy. War is a disease, and a highly contagious one at that, spreading its own germs the same way a common cold causes its human host to sneeze. Thinking of war as disease affirms the wisdom of A.J. Muste's remark, "The problem after a war is with the victor. He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay. Who will now teach him a lesson?" You don't win a war, you catch the war germ, and the "victors," unaware of how sick they are, keep spreading it. A brief survey of the twentieth century shows World Slaughter I leading directly to World Slaughter II, which metastasized into the Cold Slaughter, which included the Korean Slaughter, the U.S. Slaughter in Vietnam, and the Soviet Slaughter in Afghanistan.

The Cold Slaughter eased around 1989, but the remission was short-lived. The Gulf Slaughter broke out in 1990, and continued into the next century. War is neither a biological necessity—as anthropological study shows us—nor a natural disaster. A war is not a discrete episode that concludes with

a full stop. No war will ever "end all wars." War is a disease, and humanity has it. War itself is the foreign threat. It emerged ten or twelve thousand years ago, and, with ever-greater human proficiency in destruction, may be getting worse.

If the natural disaster analogy encourages fatalism, the disease analogy clarifies the urgent task before us: find a cure. It may be more accurate to call war a syndrome, meaning a collection of associated symptoms with multiple causes. Either way, by changing our perception of war, use of medical terminology may itself be part of the cure. One way to confront a disease is to create an environment where the germ cannot thrive. As the UNESCO preamble tells us, "Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." War ends in minds that are toxic to the war germ, that identify war as both slaughter and avoidable, not as sport and inevitable. But will the antiwar mindset overwhelm pro-war assumptions?

Fifty years ago, King observed that "nonviolence can be as contagious as violence." In recent decades, with advances in telecommunications, the likelihood of a peace contagion—of a peace breakout—has increased. The planet is "shrinking," and interconnection brings greater awareness of antiwar sentiment and actions in distant lands. Such globalization undermines fear of foreign threats. People in the West no longer need to "hope the Russians love their children too;" they can simply turn on their smartphones and verify that they do.

Also, popular rejection of war appears to be spreading, as does confidence in the power of nonviolence. Massive antiwar rallies—in Madrid, Rome, New York, London, Sydney, and many other cities—did not block the U.S. assault on Baghdad, in 2003, but the extent of protest before the killing began was unprecedented. That may be progress. Much more must be done. Not everyone can be an organizer or leader, not everyone is prepared for street activism, but greater awareness of language, use of words to reveal rather than obscure, speaking with honesty and transparency—these can be aspects of cultural peace, and are universally available. The more the people of the world communicate across borders and discover their shared aversion to mass killing, the less likely human slaughter becomes. It is important that we speak clearly.

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