

# The Dehumanizing Effects of War

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## I

As historians study the fragmentary record of man's experience on this petty planet, one of man's most characteristic activities appears to be warfare — actual fighting, preparations for future fighting, the study of previous fighting to improve on performance, and writing about fighting as a literary form, for "War makes rattling good history," according to Thomas Hardy, "but Peace is poor reading."<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to discover any significant span of time when mankind has been totally at peace; and if such a period were designated, one would suspect that the historical record was faulty, or that it was but a lull between battles. Thus the Commonwealth of Venice used to have this inscription in its armory: "Happy is that city which in time of peace thinks of war."

History is commonly marked off by wars and battles: 331, 168, 1066, 1755, 1812, 1941, etc. And the heroes of the past who are remembered after the masses of humanity are totally forgotten are preponderantly military: Alexander, Julius Caesar, Hannibal, Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Napoleon, Wellington, Nelson, Washington, Jackson, and Eisenhower, to name but a few.

One might therefore reasonably conclude that war is a natural condition of mankind rather than an abnormality, and that peace is little more than a hiatus between wars for recuperative purposes. "To everything there is a season," Solomon informs us: "a time of war and a time of peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8).

Where did war originate? It is clearly not of human origin. We read in

Revelation 12:7 that "there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels."

Thus the first recorded historical event for the universe cryptically indicates the initiation of warfare. We are not informed about strategy and tactics, the forces deployed, specific engagements, the duration of the war, its precise locale, the weaponry and logistics systems, the names of any but the supreme commanders, or any dates connected with the war.

Genesis fourteen apparently contains the first formal comments on war in human history. Herein are contained elements that have become extremely familiar to mankind during the thousands of years since that event: nations, rulers, alliances, rebellions, battles, looting, physical destruction, slaughter, prisoners of war, and hostages. We could then leave this bit of history without further consideration if one additional element were not present in the account: Melchizedek, king of Salem and "priest of the most high God" blessed Abram for his military activities and assured him that God had given him the victory.

And the most remote specific event in the future about which we have significant detail is the culmination of this war in a stupendous campaign by the military geniuses of all history against the City of God. Apparently Satan will conduct his campaign as an ancient siege operation against the New Jerusalem without benefit of any modern weapons such as rockets or even aircraft, whereas God will utilize a nuclear device — "fire . . . out of heaven" (Revelation 20:7-9). The defeat of the attackers will not be followed by peace negotiations, war crimes trials, or attempts at rehabilitation, but by their complete annihilation.

Thus history as we can conceive it is a continuum extending from war initiated in heaven to the final war on this earth. Between these two points there stretches finite time of which a small segment is allotted for individual use. Our conduct during this personal time span, then, determines on which side we will be in the climactic battle of the universe. And one of the critical factors that will determine our eternal destiny is our relationship to that most typical of universal phenomena, war.

Men's minds have long been troubled by the institution of war. Moralists have often denounced it as an unqualified evil; statesmen have deplored it when they have not been forced to pronounce it salutary or essential to preserve independence, honor, freedom, and peace.

Contrary to Benjamin Franklin's aphorism that "there never was a good war, or a bad peace," the home-front American patriot has usually found war good. It furnishes patriotic excitement and instant virtue, the vicarious

joy of battle without risk, together with profitable jobs and generous contracts, all under the cover of national "defense." For a people to whom violence is an essential ingredient in popular entertainment, war fills a deep-felt national need in which conduct usually unacceptable in civilized society is blessed with the benediction of patriotic virtue.

To the participant, war's allure is compounded of romance, glamour, a break with monotonous routine, a relaxation of personal conduct codes, and the omnipresent possibility of instant promotion to folk-hero status. The average citizen possesses a primitive folk wisdom which intuitively informs him that John Hampden spoke correctly, as reported by Macaulay, in declaring "that the essence of war is violence, and that moderation in war is imbecility."<sup>2</sup> Thus he seldom troubles himself with questions of morality in war or of making warfare more humane.

## II

From a study of history, statesmen commonly assume that the capacity of a state to protect its interests and defend its existence is contingent on its ability to employ military force effectively. Thus no state incapable of waging effective war can expect other states to heed its wishes or even acknowledge its right to survive. In the bargaining process of diplomacy, prestige is all-important and is usually synonymous with a reputation for power, so that diplomacy is thus essentially potential war. Or conversely it could be said that war is a business of seeking political objectives by military coercion rather than by negotiation. Either way, the ability to employ arms effectively is typically a decisive element in international affairs.

Thus the pursuit of power can readily become an end in itself for a state, rather than a means to other, perhaps higher, ends, because other ends are meaningless if a nation lacks the power of self-preservation. Military preparedness can easily develop into an obsession when a state concludes that it can best preserve its independence by expanding its military power and that it can most readily guarantee its own security by depriving others of theirs. In this manner any war can be justified as one of defense.

This convincing semantic exercise thus performs the admirable function of automatically and almost effortlessly absolving the individual citizen with an activated conscience from the necessity of evaluating any of his country's wars according to ethical criteria, since any war can readily be interpreted as a war of defense. Couple this phenomenon with the paranoiac secrecy of governments relative to the background for and conduct of any

military action, and it would require a morbidly sensitive conscience for a citizen to insist on the necessity for personal evaluation of his country's wars.

National security depends fundamentally on power, and power is impotent unless it is capable of being translated into terms of armed might. From this truism springs the obsession of all states with armaments, which may in turn generate a conviction that armaments ensure peace. Chairman Mao Tse-tung has provided us with a succinct observation on this point with a memory verse from his little red book: "Every Communist must grasp the truth, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.'"

But "peace through strength" is as delusive as "peace through weakness." Weakness invites attack, whereas strength tempts its misuse and commonly generates counterstrength which an enemy may employ. "Force and fraud," Thomas Hobbes has explained, "are in war the two cardinal virtues."<sup>3</sup> The tragedy of mankind is that nations often begin with weapons in arsenals to preserve peace and end with weapons on battlefields to win wars. From this tragic dilemma man has as yet found no escape.

When international tensions become intolerable because of an accelerating arms race, someone usually proposes a timely "preventive" war against the enemy, together with elaborate and logical justification for such action. Goading the enemy into an attack so that public opinion can be rallied to the defense of the fatherland may also be urged. Thus Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson made this entry in his diary on November 25, 1941: "The question is how we should manoeuvre them [Japan] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves." This stratagem of Roosevelt and Stimson certainly ranks as one of the most monumental miscalculations in all history, comparable only, perhaps, to that of Belshazzar. But obviously they understood clearly the highly moralistic nature of the American people.

In contrast to the limited actions of the past, the twentieth century has seen wars of annihilation and demands for unconditional surrender become routine. In its extreme form this may involve the virtual extermination of a people; however, genocide is difficult to practice on a sufficiently large scale to alter the demographic bases of national power. Thus the humorless, deadly serious, efficient, methodical, disciplined Germans succeeded in eliminating only some eight million Jews and Slavs. The technological improvements created by American genius offer great promise for sharply heightened efficiency in the future.

Any seasoned battlefield commander recognizes the occasional value of skillfully executed atrocities in terrorizing enemy soldiers and civilians.

Thus we read in Joshua that after Israel had utterly destroyed Jericho — including men, women, children, and even animals — Joshua's "fame was noised throughout all the country" (Joshua 6:27). Today such tactics must be carefully regulated to prevent their escaping from control and also to prevent their dissemination to the general public through the news media (which thrives on sensationalism and thus eagerly seeks out such dramatic news), since the average citizen is too far removed from the actualities of warfare to evaluate such incidents properly.

Atrocities committed by the enemy are so essential in any war effort that they must be manufactured when the enemy is uncooperative. Their chief value is to imbue both soldiers and civilians with a firm belief in the consummate wickedness of the enemy and hence the moral necessity of annihilating him.

But diplomatic alignments are apt to shift so rapidly that experts in psychological warfare must be prepared to convert international saints into sinners, and vice versa, on short notice by having in storage an adequate supply of unused atrocity stories or by being able to transfer guilt for previously publicized atrocities from one side to the other. In this important facet of modern war the United States is currently cooperating beautifully with actual and potential enemies by generously supplying detailed atrocity stories against its own military personnel so that intelligence agents are no longer necessary in this area.

### III

In the Christian, war often creates acute anguish of spirit stemming from an inner conflict. His religion teaches love and brotherhood among all men, but in war he finds a stimulant to action, an escape from tedium and guilt, an easy opportunity for publicly honored self-sacrifice, and a means by which he may exercise repressed tendencies toward violence through what Nietzsche has called "murder with a good conscience." Through participation in war, man discovers for his frustrations, tensions, and aggressions modes of release or expression which are not only socially sanctioned but equated with the highest levels of morality and selflessness in all civilizations.

Moreover, the Christian is understandably perplexed when he attempts to evaluate his nation's role in international affairs by applying his personal ethical standards to its conduct. Although he may be conversant with *The Prince*,<sup>4</sup> a perceptive Christian citizen might well become confused

about the functional moral standards of his nation as contrasted with its proclaimed Christian ideals. If he has been convinced of national righteousness from reading historical accounts of crusades for justice or instances of international messianism or from having heard his country's history correctly interpreted by teachers, from kindergarten through college, it may well be a traumatic experience for him to be forced ultimately to accept the fact that Christian nations do not always deal with each other according to that system of ethical values to which he subscribes. But it would not be surprising if he could not accept as valid for his nation the maxim that often for safety and survival governments must employ "immoral" or "Machiavellian" policies inconsistent with the personal Christian ethic.

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Recognizing the dilemma into which a conscientious citizen is thus placed, the wise statesman will often recall the advice of the perspicacious Florentine that a Prince (i.e., a government) must always appear to be virtuous regardless of his actions, and this not for any reasons of conscience but for pragmatic reasons of politics. Such an objective is made more readily attainable by the invoking of national security to justify closing military and diplomatic record groups to historians. Likewise the current fashion of not declaring wars makes it possible largely to ignore certain unpleasant international developments by labeling them "police actions," a phrase that strikes a sympathetic law-and-order chord in the soul of the Christian patriot.

Even an observer only casually acquainted with Seventh-day Adventists would almost certainly conclude that a people possessing such finely tuned moral sensibilities would be acutely sensitive to the tremendous moral implications in the domain of war and its varied ramifications. Such an observer would surely assume that a person who makes countless moral decisions daily — concerning his clothes, food and drink, reading, recreation, and thinking — would be deeply moved by the moral problems of war in modern society; and also that when he had discovered moral lapses in the conduct of his government, he and his church would be among the very first to cry out in public protest.

But such a neutral observer would doubtless be shocked to find that a church which has freighted the minutiae of life with moral significance is timid and virtually dumb before one of the greatest moral dilemmas of all history. The rationale behind such a posture is indeed difficult to delineate even for those who may have an intimate acquaintance with the Adventist church. But at least a tentative attempt must be made.

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One reflex institutional response to any questioning would surely be that the silence of the church is justified because it has been warned to stay out of politics (a term that would be defined, if a definition were attempted at all, within the context of partisan American political action of the last century). The only justification for violating this rule of political non-involvement would be the appearance of a national or local issue containing a significant moral element relevant to the church, traditionally limited to either Sunday legislation or alcohol, which would set in motion elaborate machinery to influence the political processes of this nation on all levels. But once having defined those areas with significant moral content for a previous generation, the church has been unable to modify its definition despite cataclysmic changes in national and international affairs.

Doubtless there is also present the very real fear of being charged with institutional hypocrisy or of falling victim to the embarrassing Jonah predicament. Having preached for more than a century that war would steadily increase in frequency and horror before the end of the world, as one of the sure signs of the imminence of this event, the church can hardly adopt a position of attempting to counter this development while feeling convicted that any such activity is futile, unless this were to be construed as constituting assistance to the "peace and safety" cry. If the nations of the world were to heed our warning of its imminent end, forsake their evil ways, and turn to God as Nineveh did, how would we react to being made false prophets, as was Jonah, by God's granting the planet a reprieve? We pray for peace to finish the work that our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents failed to do. But how sincere in the sight of God is this prayer of an increasingly affluent subculture acutely conscious of status and social mobility upward from low class origins, and obviously luxuriating in what it terms, with what almost seems pride, the "Laodicean" condition?

With our eyes focused backward and our sensibilities strangely dulled, we talk as though wars were being fought as in the War Between the States, or at most World War I. Our concept of fundamental issues created by modern war is still limited to that of the soldier with a rifle and a bayonet (facing, it might be added, a similar soldier from the other side on quite even terms and according to fairly rigid codes of conduct). Hence we commonly talk as if modern war had created no moral problems not faced by Sergeant York, or even David: that is, one man facing another on a field of battle with weapons designed to kill, or at least intimidate, his individual enemy.

We give little indication of sensing the staggering range of moral involvement in modern, total, scientific warfare: the guilt and moral responsibility of the citizen who unprotestingly pays taxes and buys bonds to support the war machine; the citizen who profitably labors, without personal risk, in "defense" industries; the industrialist who amasses personal wealth and provides well-paid jobs for other church members in industries dependent for survival, directly or indirectly, on the demands of war; or the scientist who works for the government in developing the machinery of warfare while becoming wealthy and a respected member of the community and the church, even holding church office. (How brainwashed has one to be to tolerate any longer the scientist's cliché that he is freed from guilt as a searcher for pure truth, when in actuality he is a technologist serving the military machine as directly as any man with a gun, and with immensely more devastating effect and moral guilt?)

Another complicating factor in the church is the acceptance of an ill-defined concept, commonly denominated "the hand of God in history." Believing that God controls the affairs of nations, the Adventist is reluctant to speak or to act relative to national and international affairs for fear that he may inadvertently place himself in opposition to God's program; and he refuses to participate in the political process actively and reveal his insight concerning God's plan for his nation, because this would constitute forbidden political action.

He has had the specifics of this concept revealed but fleetingly in modern history— such as a single battle in the Civil War which was affected because the United States had failed to take a firm moral position on a social evil of national and even international import. (There seems to be no record that the church ever revealed this insight to President Lincoln or any other member of the government so that corrective action might have been taken to avoid similar divine punishment in the future.) Apparently no Adventist feels so certain that he possesses the formula by which he can readily and infallibly determine the side of right in war that he is willing to speak out publicly; at least he fails to aid his government with such intelligence, although he may speak dogmatically on these matters to small groups such as classes.

Although nationalism would doubtless impel the American Adventist to conclude that God's side has always been that of the United States, an even moderately observant person might be troubled in seeking answers to certain hard specific questions (such as those related to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the atom bombing of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the fire bombing



of major Japanese cities, the saturation bombing of such German civilian and cultural centers as Dresden, the development of chemical and biological warfare, etc.) even if ready answers were discoverable for the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, and the gamut of genocidal Indian wars, and if Vietnam were to be ignored simply as nonwar.

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Is the Seventh-day Adventist dilemma relative to war compounded unbearably by his acceptance of both the Old and the New Testaments as binding on him today? Thus he is forced to reconcile the warfare of Israel as directed by God (with its genocide, reprisals, extermination of prisoners, etc.) into his total concept of God, along with the Sermon on the Mount, since both originated with the same person of the Godhead. To be specific, he must be able to read that long tale of slaughter in Joshua ten which concludes with these words: "So Joshua smote all the country; . . . he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded," together with these words from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7), and "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) — and be able to integrate all of it into his personal philosophy with relevance to his life and that of his nation today. Is the task so formidable that he finds it impossible to face realistically?

## V

With this limited background, what can be said specifically concerning the dehumanizing effects of war on Seventh-day Adventists?

First, we must constantly keep in mind that we are dealing with men, fallen men, not with saints or angels, and with such men living in the world as it is today. We must meet man where he is. Thus we must not talk as if we were utopians or millenarians. This is still Adam's world. Adventists have consistently rejected the theory of progress; so the world is not getting better in any significant sector, but worse, any condition or development otherwise being an illusion or strictly temporary.

One of the most serious consequences of any war would not be killing, even in atrocities, or supporting in various ways the act of killing by others, but the genesis and growth of a doubt that we are acting according to God's will for us as a nation and the failure to communicate this conviction to a level where it might stimulate a significant response. Since the Christian accepts the existence of but two masters whom he may serve, the obvious traumatic impact of this dilemma is clear: if he is not serving God, then he must be serving the Devil. If the latter is correct, then his duty and his

church's duty are obvious and impelling: immediately to speak out loud, clear, and with persistence in order to inform the nation of the path of justice and righteousness that should be pursued. Any attempt to keep his insights private — or to share them in a limited way with his congregation or students — would be not only a grave sin but also a gross betrayal of the essence of the democratic process and a serious abuse of the basic freedoms of speech and the press.

Equally serious in its effect on the individual would be any gnawing suspicion that he had shirked his responsibility and obligations as a man and a citizen in relation to war. That is, the devastating impact on the integrity of his personality could hardly be overestimated if he began to wonder if the boy up the street had died for his sins and in his place — or had even been seriously wounded — while the citizen enriched himself, advanced his professional position, or lived in comfort in avoiding military service.

Also profoundly disturbing to a healthy personality would be the harbored suspicion that Machiavelli was indeed right — that there is no applicability of the Decalogue to actions of states and their leaders, that they are in fact above this law which pertains only to individuals, whereas states are subject to an entirely different code. Although the average draftee may not be equipped mentally to handle the complexities of why he should be a noncombatant and thus should be instructed simply to repeat the sixth commandment, even a cursory reading of the Old Testament makes it evident that killing by state action — either in warfare or in the execution of criminals — was not intended to fall under the prohibitions of the Decalogue. If this were not true, then we have been fearfully remiss as a church for more than one hundred years in not crying out constantly against the United States for committing mass murder and desecrating the Decalogue while claiming to be a Christian nation.

Equally serious to the institutional integrity of the church and its members would be the haunting doubt as to whether we had been consistent or not in our stand on war. Could we, for example, have both enlarged our witness and made a significantly better world by a firm, uncompromising position such as Quakers would take?

Might we profitably modify Briand's famous statement to Lloyd George during World War I: "War is much too serious a thing to be left to military men; it should be the concern of the church"? Has war been the concern of this church as it should have been? Or have we shamefully avoided a duty and thereby missed immeasurable opportunities?

The bell that tolls for the victims of war still tolls for each of us, whether

we stop our ears or rationalize it all away as of no concern to us or our church. And Donne might have added—the tolling will reverberate throughout all eternity.<sup>5</sup>

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts* (volume 2, 1906).
- 2 Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Essay on Lord Nugent's Memorials of Hampden* (1831).
- 3 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651).
- 4 Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1532).
- 5 This paper was presented at a faculty seminar sponsored by the Graduate School of Loma Linda University on April 26, 1970.