

## DECONSECRATING WAR

by Robert Fahrer, PhD



Cover image, *The Psychoanalysis of War*

“If it were not for war, society would be apt to leave men defenseless before the emergence of the Terrifier as a purely internal foe.”

The Psychoanalysis of War, 1975  
Dr. Franco Fornari, MD

“I...believe that psychoanalysis is crucial for a truly democratic culture to thrive.”

Jonathan Lear, PhD  
New Republic, December 25, 1995

Nearly fifteen years have passed since this author wrote the essay that follows. Novelist Cormac McCarthy therein pressed his reality concerning the bleak, dark shadow of war for all time. A bright light was shone on the constant, frenetic need, almost a blinding hunger, to find or create scapegoats upon whom the depressed and psychotic can cleanse themselves.

This update, attached to the original 2004 writing, *The Banality of Tribal Warfare in the Postmodern Era (CORRelations, 2004, pp. 20-22)* below, is a chance to pause, reflect, and reassess the meaning and presence of war in our time.

Today we can clearly grasp what was impossible to see even five years ago: solid evidence of more severely stressed social, economic and political systems around the world. Those conditions, says Bion, potentially lead to the increase of basic assumption groups, which can behave in comprehensively destructive ways that, if observed in individuals, would be classified as psychotic. (Segal, 1997, p 149)

The psychotic, chaotic and warring trends across the globe will continue their highly destructive levels in the years ahead.

Hanna Segal observed that the 1990-91 Gulf War was intended to erase the US's constantly running stream of subliminal depression and guilt about its dominant role in the thirteen-year Vietnam War that ended in 1973 and produced carnage among the Vietnamese while stretching already gaping holes in the US's own humiliation and failure. She contributed this observation: "The Gulf War...is forgotten as though it is ancient history. There is a universal denial of what we have done and what the consequences are. The countless victims, the devastation of the whole area, and the continuing human and ecological disaster are ignored. The guilt remains unacknowledged and the dangers of such a stance remain with us." (*Ibid*, pp. 166-67)

Segal's assessment has proved prophetic well beyond the Gulf War and extends fully to this present day.

The world's only superpower plunged into wild, blind lashing out after damage was done to it on September 11, 2001. This event at the century's beginning has been followed by a continuance of further wars, genocides, and other atrocities which have produced backlashes in the form of the Islamic State and scorched-earth actions resulting in an estimated 60 million people uprooted globally today. It is perhaps the largest refugee and scapegoated human mass ever, and future warriors may well be drawn from this outsized body. Segal's great concern about growth of nuclear arms would only increase were she alive today because of the hydra-like rogue states possessing or working toward deliverable nuclear devices that could bring about annihilation. These are powerful, dark presences in our minds producing a constant stream of fear, anxiety, and extreme denial.

The Gothenburg, Sweden-based death metal band 'At The Gates' released the album "At War With Reality" in 2014. The thinking of its musicians place them in the same psychological space as Shakespeare's Hamlet, Napoleon I, Hitler, Stalin, the Taliban, and ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Leader Tomas Lindberg described the constant struggle to find new realities, saying: "(This) concept deals more for the war with reality. The war is against one model for explaining reality...that you need to always reconquer reality." (Perkel, 2015)

Lindberg was one of the composers of the album's song "The Head of the Hydra," the title of which is pertinent here:

"Deceptive – the images burn  
Fragments of silent lives  
Hunger of the dreaming dead  
Imagination, the death of man...

In blasphemy  
The words from our bodies torn  
Temptation  
Death in all its bewildering forms

The tomb is the passage  
As the light flickers before me  
The head of the hydra

The charlatan denounced

We disappear  
The words from our bodies torn  
Irresistible  
In all its bewildering forms”

“Reconquering reality” and living in a world of several realities simultaneously may well refer to the title of the song above. In Greek mythology the many-headed serpent-monster and multifarious evil, Hydra, was slain by Hercules. Instead of eradicating the monster, however, each head was replaced by two other heads. End-of-times-oriented and ideologically extreme born-again Christians are now walking the same path with Boko Haram and the Islamic State. Cormac McCarthy could have incorporated the lyrics and harshest of sounds produced by this cultural band into the darkest of his novels, *Blood Meridian*. (McCarthy, 1985)

How are we to live in a world of constantly shifting, multiple realities in this early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while considering our own disappearance and possible annihilation?

In the essay below, the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was framed as the ‘festival of peace.’ However, a review of more recent events now requires a revision of that frame. *The last twenty-five years of that century*, marking the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the Middle East wars might instead be thought of as the Great Pause. We appear to have begun the 21<sup>st</sup> century digging deeper, larger graves to accept the dead and wounded of our present wars.

Dr Franco Fornari, an Italian psychoanalyst influenced by Klein and Bion, maintained that war is the very apex of a paranoid process and asserted that “...societies, with respect to war, are conditioned from a psychological standpoint to situate themselves at the level of anxiety of an eight-month-old child...” (Semelin, 2013, p. 20) He concurred with French sociologist Gaston Bouthoul, a war authority, who founded a special sociology of war called polemology and declared that war was a form of “deferred infanticide.” (Bouthoul, 1970)

Is it any wonder, then, that the globe’s one remaining superpower has a near-perfect record of *failure* in its thrashing about? As long as the psychotic beast is masked and unrecognized, the grand illusion will persist.

Fornari (1974) further postulated that “...what is victorious is true, whereby the victory is what is true and right, and the vanquished...is false and wrong.” (p. 24) So we must now observe, with very few exceptions, the horrendous flip side of the coin: is it that the results of this postulate would be that our *enemies* across fifty-five years of warring potentially *have been true and right*? This is a subtle but rather profoundly different way of thinking about warring and its perpetrators. If perpetrators are *not* victorious, how can they claim the only healing balm available: the truth? In Vietnam, the US was *not* the victor; hence the justification of truth and rightness for that war claimed by its leaders was *false and wrong* – plunging the 58,000 Americans who died to an even greater death.

Wars today have simply shifted their chameleon-like strategies, tactics, and delivery systems, which, despite the lyrics in “The Head of the Hydra,” shield the charlatans from being denounced. Instead, warring has not so subtly morphed since the fall of the other goliath, the USSR, in 1989. Drones, robots, and Predators abound, along with satellites that can surveil one

quarter of a room in a 12' x 12' house in the Algerian Sahara Desert. In May 2016, the US Navy announced development of three new weapons, the activation of which could be a "revolution" in sea warfare. (O'Rourke, 2016) These tools have allowed a numb population to further distance, sanitize, and intellectualize war. We are creators of self-deceit.

*How can we walk back from this edge?*

Perhaps it is again time to consciously kill the father in the broadest sense, which could have the effect of allowing new kinds of leaders to come to national and global leadership positions. Because of what Freud says is such a thirst to obey a master, perhaps then the group could be motivated to reduce its own self-destructive actions. Bouthoul went beyond Freud by providing the powerful insight that it is essential to *deconsecrate* the war phenomenon through scientific processes, rather than to merely dream about eliminating it. (Molina, 2015) Hanna Segal (1997) also offered crucial observations: the psychoanalytic profession is "...ethically bound to make known our views . . . about the dangers we foresee..." And that "...psychoanalytical neutrality must not be confused with ethical neutrality, which would allow us to be neutered." (p. 167)

As a community member of NPSI, as well as a citizen, husband, father, and member of the human race, I can do no more good than to become a change agent to clearly face the Terrifier within, to follow the lead of Bouthoul, and to work to unmask the illusions that lie in our midst. If not wrestled away from the psychotic, "...life on earth is in danger of perishing in man's attempt to destroy phantasms to save phantasms." (Fornari, 1974, p. 262) Our current century is already one of profound shifts that will require our best efforts to retain the best of our civilization's values and actions. Jonathan Lear's (1995) belief is that the work of the psychoanalytic community is a requirement for a healthy world to survive the darkness ahead. I concur.

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### **The Banality of Tribal Warfare in the Postmodern Era**

by Robert Fahrer, PhD

*War endures..... War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way. – Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian*

Nine of us came together in late spring 2004 in a COR Northwest Family Development Center-sponsored study group to undertake an arduous journey into war, that perennial world of violence instigated by cultures and political systems. Sue Neell Carlson and I were faculty for the seminar, which we titled "Mindsets of War: A Study of Violence and Its Vicissitudes." I remarked then that ours was not unlike that mythic journey taken by Captain Willard up the Mekong River in the film *Apocalypse Now* to find Kurtz, the embodiment of all violence and darkness.

Our literature about systems and warring focused less on the individual and individual motivations, but instead primarily on violent gangs (read nations) and cultural tribes, institutional shaming, humiliation and greed, and, finally, the application of raw power to settle disputes. There is ample evidence that both the combatants' collective amnesia and sanctified glorification of their always righteous causes are major contributors to instigating and prolonging a war. We

were taken onto the battlefield by our readings where its carnage was opened for us and where we were able to observe the protective shielding soldiers build for themselves. We were exposed to the precise process used to create the enemy as nonhuman, and to the way, over the centuries, two of the three Western religions, as well as Buddhism, developed formal arguments for “just” wars.

As we struggled to get to the postwar exhaustion phase known as peace, we held the excruciatingly heavy weight of our efforts while we attempted to arrive at *any* understanding of the tyrannous twentieth century, that epochal Age of Totalitarianism, which has produced over 180 million deaths by one count and over 160 wars of varying degrees during *just* the second half of that century.

Our journey was often accompanied by the absence of clarity and coherence. *The Fog of War* (2003), the pungent film in which Robert McNamara described the dysfunctions of the United States government during the Vietnam War, was in *our* midst as well. Sigmund Freud and cultural theorist Terry Eagleton provided parallel paths through the fog to some understanding at a far deeper place. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud posits the inevitable struggle of the transcending and uplifting with the destructive. Eagleton, in the piercing, pertinent insight of his *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2002), states this succinctly: “The more civilized we become, then, the more we tear ourselves apart with guilt and self-aggression. Culture and death are not rivals after all. There is a tragic self-mutilation at the very root of civilization. It is just that civilization needs this savage parody of itself in order to function.” (p. 208)

One primary conclusion I drew from our time together was that humankind is suspended between the affirmation and negation of life and lurches creatively and destructively between the two.

We appeared to concur that “market state” transnational consumerism and the machinery of mercantilism are the visible markers of an increasingly depthless, decentered, and derivative postmodern world. It should come as no surprise that systemic warring is one of this engine’s pistons. But now we are just beginning to understand that this global mercantilism is also an increasingly potent way to wage war and that it could evolve into a piston of power equal to that of battlefield carnage.

One of the current generation’s most powerful authors, Cormac McCarthy, has been placed by some in the same literary echelon as Faulkner, Joyce, Melville, and Dostoevsky. His exceedingly dark *Blood Meridian* (1992) uses the warring motif of the imperialistic United States across the American West in the mid-nineteenth century to grind out in mythic narrative the commodification of who we are in today’s world: body parts, dreams, ideals, histories, knowledge, and our daily lives. And Eagleton’s astonishing revelation is that it is not just the downtrodden minority that is dispossessed and wounded by each nation’s elite, but the *majority* as well. Images at once shattering and banal? I believe so.

The Greek *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, is the giant elephant in the closet in the warring world described above, and we observed it briefly. Eagleton states that the word *tragedy* is derived from “goat,” but conjectures that it may be better translated as “scapegoat song” (2002, pp. 277-78) and that Greek tragedy could well have had its true origins in animal sacrifice. In our present time, the retooled scapegoat has evolved into a bloated version of its original classic self to match the enlarged scale of carnage. A required ingredient in the composition of our increasingly

illusory world is now the attempt to rid ourselves of our “unclean things” by offering them as sacrifices. Our present political and economic systems will thus sacrifice through their wars and pogroms the desolate and primitive of our own cultures and those of the enemy in order to cleanse and to bring a new social order to a grateful world: justice, order, liberty, democracy, and increased economic opportunity. Real but still too horrendous to truly contemplate are the consequences of this cleansing: whole sweated populations in social chaos, ethnic and religious massacres, pillage, and deeper poverty. We spoke of the deep sacrificial wounding of innocent civilians and of discarded and disowned veterans present in all societies following their wars.

The Great War, also known as World War I, was only the first of three parts of a greater war that spanned the second, third, and fourth decades, ending in 1945, and presented the world with the greatest massacre of human life of any war across the span of human history. Although Woodrow Wilson is thought of as the author of the phrase “The war to end war,” H G Wells laid final claim to its authorship. An officer who commented on the decisions affecting ethnic groups and warring states following World War I rephrased it, “Peace to end peace.” But I propose a further revision, “War to end all peace,” to enable us to see the reality that warring is unfortunately an essential component of our human psyche and its constructed systems. Perhaps the very best we can do is to provide the correct structures to increase the interludes, which have been called festivals of peace, between the warring. The last decade of the twentieth century was just such a festival, and occurred after what is now commonly referred to as the Long War, which encompassed the period from World War I through the conclusion of the Cold War in 1990. An astounding one thousand five hundred years were required for Europe to resolve its chaotic social and political identity following the collapse of the Roman Empire. (Fromkin, 1989, p. 565) Must we, too, be that patient as we attempt to reduce and contain the beast of violence and war?

One essential aspect of our group’s journey into systemic violence that was unfortunately left by the wayside is the question of knowing when we have arrived at our darkest hour, the only point at which, as Hannah Arendt opined, an opportunity for great illumination presents itself. (Arendt, 1968, p. ix) Treading where Freud perhaps could not go, Eagleton suggests the next requisite step: that the dominant world structure must be destroyed for it to be repaired. Arendt’s illumination may be some distance in the future and we may yet be forced to await our Armageddon as did those of the fourteenth century when the plague that ravaged the world from South Asia through Europe brought this comment from a Siena chronicler at the scene: “And no bells tolled and nobody wept no matter what his loss because almost everyone expected death... And people said and believed, ‘This is the end of the world.’” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 95)

Author and historian Barbara Tuchman (1978) observed that an event of great agony is bearable only if one believes that at its end there will be a better world. (p. 124). Self-disgust is the result if it does not. But Eagleton maintains that the worst imaginable desolation contains within it the very generative spring from which, as was the case following the plague and each of humankind’s wars, illumination, transformation, and repair take place.

Upon reflection, was our time together in the seminar of value? In our nine hours we mastered nothing but understood more and did not want the end to be there waiting. One of our group commented forcefully that he had found both ways of coping and a figurative place to hold the terrors of the warring around him. We *all* deeply contemplated our own violent selves and the conditions under which we would injure or destroy others. Another observed that each closing also presents an opening. Thus expressed, she could have been walking alongside Freud, Arendt,

and Eagleton. All appreciated the COR Northwest Family Development Center's commitment to this new voyage into the heart of darkness.

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