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Deadly Myths of Aggression

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Research at the frontlines of wars shows that the realities of war are quite different from the public presentations of war. The experiences of those surviving in the midst of war are frequently worlds apart from the "images" of political violence (mis)portrayed in public media, formal military texts, the literature, and war museums. This has allowed for a number of myths about war and human aggression to hold sway in both academic and popular culture that, as the basis for policies, can actually further harm those subjected to war. For example, although the vast majority of cultural and military treatises on war focus on soldiers, more children than soldiers are killed in wars in the world today. If this core reality of war is omitted from analyses, solutions become impossible. On the other hand, people often look at statistics like these and decry the inevitability of aggression in human nature and society. Yet, data from combat soldiers have shown that through much of modern history, the majority of combat soldiers on the front lines do not fire their weapons, at least not at other humans. They do not flee war, but they cannot bring themselves to kill others. When these facts are excluded from public discourse on political violence, we sacrifice our potential for understanding the human capacity for peacebuilding. Without actual war zone research—research conducted at the front lines of wars—it is impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction in these formal presentations of war. In exploring some of the common myths about war and comparing them with data collected at the front lines, this article examines the question of why these myths emerge with such force and chronicles the cultural construction of aggression. In conclusion, the article suggests that a new kind of empiricism is necessary for studying such difficult, dangerous, and complex phenomena as political aggression and peacebuilding. It is an empiricism that necessitates both sophisticated methodological tools attuned to wartime realities and theoretical insights capable of explaining them. Examples take the reader through key dilemmas and solutions in the search for a more representative, and responsible, understanding of political violence and peace. Aggr. Behav. 24:147–159, 1998. **© 1998 Wiley-Liss, Inc.**

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Fifteen years of studying political violence from the epicenters of aggression in Sri Lanka, Mozambique, Somalia, and elsewhere have taught me to ask not just what a particular war is about, but what war and violence are in general. These terms are loosely and widely applied to thousands, even scores of thousands, of different events and

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phenomena. But what exactly is this cultural reality we call war? How do we disentangle the truths and the myths about political aggression that equally dominate public consciousness? How do we study it both empirically and responsibly? This article suggests that any explorations into questions of violence need to explore as critically the assumptions we hold about violence, both in academia and in society.

War is one of those curious phenomena that is inherently defined. People quite simply *know* what war is. This is not to say that this knowledge is correct, but to point out that people believe it is. Part of the cultural phenomenon of war is that both war and its definition are taken as ‘‘given’’ in human society. You can stop anyone on any street in the world, as I have, and ask them to describe war, and they can. The same cannot be said for other comparable phenomena, such as peace, capitalism, or democracy. Texts, classes, and debates on the latter begin with working toward a definition of the topic. But forays into the topic of war begin with its definitions assumed. In the past 15 years, I have heard endless discussions about what constitutes democracy, human rights, or security. I have never heard anyone ask for a definition of war.

This holds true for related phenomenon: Aggression and violence are taken to be inherently defined. Interestingly, it is difficult to tell if peace is inherently defined. Peace is taken to be a stasis—the resting pulse rate of humanity. Although we delve endlessly into the many kinds of wars, and differentiate them according to when and where they occurred (the American Civil War vs. the American War of Independence vs. the Communist Revolution in China), we do not do so for peace. In fact, while we speak of ‘‘wars,’’ implying more than one, we cannot even speak of ‘‘peaces’’ in English: We do not differentiate the peace after the American War of Independence from that after the American Civil War or Mao’s Revolution. Yet, although wars differ in Linnaean categorization, in popular conception they, like peace, form into a single phenomenon with an overarching definition. The definition that is assumed but seldom defined.

This is not to say that all definitions of war, violence, and peace are the same. The war described by a 14-year-old who has survived a violent attack on the front lines is not the same as that described by a middle-aged person who knows war only through book and media portrayals and whose experience of violence is domestic. But each is equally convinced their definitions are accurate.

Clearly, if different definitions of political aggression exist, no single inherent definition lies at the core of this phenomenon—no irrefutable primordial truths can be attached to this aspect of reality labeled in sweeping linguistic icons as war or peace. It only appears that way. It is culture that gives this appearance, culture that people create, craft, and employ in the course of their lives and politics. War and its attendant aggressions, like all human endeavors, are cultural acts.

Because war and aggression are so often presented as objective givens in human society, their definitions are likewise cast as objective. This assumption of objectivity lends an aura of scientific factuality, of rationality, of ‘‘military *science*.’’ There is little impetus to investigate exactly where our definitions of war and aggression come from and what they are composed of. But an exploration of the treatises on these topics, from popular to academic, shows that their definitions are composed of a powerful entanglement of cultural tradition, science interlaced with folklore, philosophy, religious ethics, and power politics. Definitions of war are not so much about what war is as about what we would like it to be. In the words of Bacon [1960, p 52], ‘‘whence proceed sciences which may be called ‘sciences as one would.’ For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes.’’

This has been nowhere more apparent to me than when I am standing in the midst of war. From Asia to Africa, from communal to conventional conflicts, the first thing I notice about the wars I have witnessed in the 15 years I have been studying them is that they look, behave, and progress nothing like what conventional wisdom says wars look, behave, and progress like. The ‘‘definitions’’ of war circulating most widely in general culture often seem to have little do with the ‘‘realities’’ of war. This includes any number of observations from who kills and gets killed to the fact that most people in a war zone, no matter how pitched and chaotic, elect *not* to be aggressive but to respond to violence with peacebuilding solutions. The inaccuracy of public definitions of war are not merely a matter of insufficient information. The war journalists, analysts, and theoreticians who have carried accurate depictions of war and political aggressions back into general society for centuries have not been able to lay rest to these general belief systems about war, however inaccurate they may be. Everyone *knows* what war is, whether they have experienced it from the front lines or from John Wayne movies, Joan Dideon novels, and the CNN news.

Thus, it seems that the most prudent way to approach an understanding of war and the aggressions it is grounded in is to begin by *undefining* war. This is not to suggest a mere semantic exercise, but a cultural analysis of war *and* of how we perceive political violence and human aggression. If war is a cultural reality, so to is the way in which we conceptualize it. What I am undefining is a set of assumptions that can be found from the bulwarks of realism to the byways of postconstructivism; from the tenets of academia to the passionate beliefs of popular culture. These assumptions are the grounding notions and images of war and peace that are common to much of western culture, however contested these may be. Because war and peace are the staging ground of human actions from dedicated altruism to absolute atrocity, these assumptions about war and peace contain a deeper set of cultural codes concerning fundamental views of humanity and the inhumane. Basically, the question *What is war?* translates on a profound level to *What does it mean to be human?* The way people choose to answer this question is seldom based on empirical research or ethnographic endeavor—it is based on what they think the world should, or could, be.

My point is simple to demonstrate. Conjure up an image of war. For most people, this includes men in uniforms, with weapons of some kind (from automatic assault weapons to stealth aircraft), in a battle zone; possibly with an additional view of organized politico-military professionals directing strategy from the offices and bunkers of the power elite. (People often supplement these images with such phrases as ‘‘natural aggression,’’ ‘‘animal nature,’’ ‘‘Darwin’s law of survival in a competition over resources,’’ and ‘‘the Hobbesian war of all against all.’’) Entire libraries, both textual and visual, have been devoted to the topic of war, and if researchers peruse both the literary and media selections they will find that the vast majority focus on soldiers doing battle and the political process launching war into practice or mediating it toward peace. Art carries the same message: From war museums to galleries, fighting men dominate the images.

These images persist despite the fact that today, as we sit at the cusp of the third millennium, 90% of all war casualties are noncombatant civilians. The majority are women and children. In fact, more children are killed in war today than soldiers [UNICEF, 1996]. Child casualties, military torture, and the indiscriminate maiming and killing of noncombatants do not figure prominently in military texts or museum displays. Why, if this represents the reality of war today?

Before I encountered war firsthand, my images of war were much like those offered in public culture, including the belief that I knew exactly what war was. These images have changed considerably after visiting countries at war and listening to people's experiences on the front lines. When I think of war now, I envision exceedingly complex sets of relations between soldiers and civilians, where war affects everyone in a society. From the fire bombing of London and Dresden in World War II to the massacres in Bosnia and Rwanda, noncombatants suffer the front lines as much, if not more so, than soldiers. These civilians are not the proverbial ‘‘generic mass''—adults all—as media portrayals would lead us to believe: they are statespeople and children, rogues and artists, academics and the infirm, arms vendors and quiet heroes. They are kidnapped as prisoners of war and sequestered for physical labor; they are tortured, sexually assaulted, maimed, and killed in greater numbers than soldiers; they suffer from starvation, landmines, and chemical-biological weapons in greater numbers than militaries do. Those least physically able—children, the aged, women, the disabled—are most likely to be killed in attacks: They are the least able to defend themselves or flee. Even deciding where war begins and ends is difficult: Domestic and social violence increase dramatically in wartime. In addition, statistics worldwide show that domestic and sexual violence is more prevalent among those in uniform than among the average society [Ashworth, 1985; Nordstrom, 1996]. Even the relationship between perpetrators and victims is slippery: Without dismissing people for the ethical responsibility of their actions, the soldiers I have seen who violated human rights had themselves generally been brutalized. Harsh and degrading training has often been successful in producing harsh and degrading strategies [Gibson and Haritos-Fatouros, 1986]. Culture reproduces itself. Why did I need to actually see war firsthand to understand these complexities of conflict? Perhaps, in part, because the ‘‘truths'' of war are often taken to be the truths of the human condition. Yet here too, ideals do not match what mere observation can tell us is factual.

To explain: When statistics such as those showing that 90% of all war casualties today are civilians are raised, a second set of conventions comes into play. A common thread through both scholarly and popular perspectives concerns the bloodlust of inherent aggression. From the epistemological traditions of Hobbes to those of Christianity, from military science to Bladerunner-esque science fiction, the notion is well entrenched that society and its institutions merely control, but do not tame, human's basic animal nature. This animal nature is seen as anarchic, self-serving, and capable of great aggression in its natural search for power and control. Civilization, in the form of governments, security forces, and legal institutions, harness this aggression and channel it toward the good of humankind. In these views, society and its formal institutions create civilization, not the other way around.

When confronted with the number of nonmilitary casualties in war, these themes of natural aggression coalesce into a view that decries human rights abuses as abhorrent, but inevitable. In the chaos of battle, in the breakdown of social institutions governing society during war, what else can be expected: People become animals in the heat of battle, and civilization's morals become a distant chimera. There is as little empirical data for this as there is for focusing on military casualties as representative of war deaths. Marshall [1978] and Grossman [1995], both combat soldiers, have shown that through the time of World War II, 80% to 85% of the soldiers in the heat of battle *did not fire their weapons*. Apparently, a large percentage of soldiers were willing to go to war for their country, they were willing to work on the front lines, but they were not willing to kill.[1] Grossman goes on to note that by the time of the Vietnam War, firing ratios in battle climbed to 90% to 95% as a result of military training specifically aimed at overcoming the resistance to firing weapons discovered in World War II. Grossman notes that this increase in willingness to fire weapons at ‘‘an enemy’’ has come at a heavy cost in traumatized soldiers and delegitimized political and military institutions censured over civilian casualties. I find another strong correlation emerging from this data. Training to increase firing ratios on the front lines links strongly with the drastic increase in Geneva Convention violations. For example, in World War I, only 10% to 20% of all casualties were civilians; the vast majority were trench soldiers. By World War II, 50% of all casualties were civilians. This correlates not only to increasingly sophisticated weapons but to politico-military philosophies that deemed civilian support for the war effort as being the war effort and thus a target for assault. This ranged from bombing runs on industries to city center fire bombings intended to break the political will of the population. Finally, by the Vietnam War, 80% to 90% of all casualties were civilians. Since that time, the 90% civilian casualties rate has remained constant in wars worldwide [SIPRI, 1996; Sivard, 1996; UNICEF, 1996].

Clearly, the vast majority of people do not want to kill and may not be able to unless careful training is given. Grossman concludes that there is a strong evolutionary inhibition against killing in humans. This inhibition is in fact so strong that it resides at the core of primal instincts. For humans, like all animals, survival is far better served if conflict does not end in maiming and death.[2] From a different vantage point than military analysis, anthropologists have come to similar conclusions, from work on small-scale societies that shows social interdependence, not aggression, is critical to smoothly functioning societies [Howell and Willis, 1989] to work in war zones in complex societies that shows *most* people elect not to use violence even when confronted with it [Nordstrom, 1997]. The question then becomes: Why has this belief in the intrinsic nature of aggression, the very necessity of it in a Darwinian sense, become so entrenched in modern thought? Why have we accepted so readily that war is a ‘‘fatal attraction’’ [Fox, 1992] ?

The answer rests in part on the strong relationship between power and the use of violence in state societies. States gain legitimacy through a number of civil institutions. But ultimately, behind them all, a single factor upholds the power of the state: the use of force. Police stand at the control points if citizens do not abide by legal systems; militaries protect the interests of the state against others. Murder is legitimate if the state’s protectorates are threatened. This use of violent force is strongly restricted: Citizens are denied the very use of force that controls them. As Turpin and Kurtz [1997, p 1] sum up, ‘‘There is a paradox about violence. Since most people believe they can be secure only by repelling violence with violence, they simultaneously deplore and condone it.’’ How can violence be both morally reprehensible and legally necessary? One answer is to define it as biological: possibly unpleasant, but inescapably real.

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[1] Grossman also investigates 18th and 19th century wars, from the American Civil War through the Napoleanic wars to World War I, and finds similar resistance to firing weapons among combat soldiers.

[2] Grossman points out that 2% of the human population do not have these natural inhibitions toward killing. It is this 2% that account for the preponderance of war kills. He cites Swank and Marchand’s [1946] World War II research and statistics such as Dyer’s [1985] that 1% of US Army Air Corps fighter pilots were responsible for 40% of all kills.

This biological definition of aggression has led to any number of clichés: ‘‘war is inevitable, ‘‘killing rage’’, ‘‘natural contest over limited resources’’, ‘‘survival of the fittest.’’ Possibly the most incisive is ‘‘war is hell, but it is human nature.’’ The casualties of war, from the 80% who were soldiers cut down in the trenches in World War I to the 90% civilians in the battle zones of the world today, are often lamented with these stock phrases. But again, simple logic defeats these ‘‘truisms.’’ The people who inaugurate wars do not fight them, giving lie to the social fact that ‘‘wars explode.’’ The politicians and military elites who plan and declare wars are worlds away from the grunt soldier who delivers the lethal shot. This is an important point: Popular culture confuses the architects of war with those who actually do the fighting. In truth, there is no war until some one aims and shoots a weapon at another. All the military strategies and political antagonisms remain abstract until someone far removed from the circles of power is convinced to kill another human being. Not any human being, but a specific human being, killed in a specific way, in a specific place, according to specific rules. If a grunt soldier kills his wife, his buddy, his commanding officer, or some guy in a bar, war does not exist. If he kills ‘‘the enemy’’ in a brawl in a side street in his civilian clothes, war does not exist. Actual killing is rule-bound behavior, giving lie again to the social fact that ‘‘people explode into war.’’ Rules are culturally imparted, they are not biological facts.

One of the rules of war is that those who do the actual killing do not make the decisions about who and when or if to kill. Neither do they necessarily partake of the booty of war. The phrase ‘‘the spoils of war go to the victors’’ usually refers to the decision makers. So a situation emerges where people are asked not only to be killed, but to kill—according to Grossman as distasteful as risking one’s life—with no control or power attached to that killing. Worse, contrary to popular myth, for the vast majority, war is not exciting or pleasant. War at the front lines is full of deprivation and sometimes horror. Killing, being maimed or killed, or watching bloodshed is a profoundly unpleasant experience for most. Watching a typical civilian family die at the hands of soldiers is neither morally or militarily gratifying. Despite all the movies and literature published away from the front lines that revolve around theme that ‘‘war is thrilling,’’ virtually all of the combat troops I have spoken with in war zones find it difficult at best, unbearable at worst. For the grunt soldiers, most find their experiences on the front lines, in their words, ‘‘pretty miserable.’’ The rates of emotional disturbances combat soldiers suffer, often for a lifetime, attest to the toll of killing [Stellman and Stellman, 1988]. What, then, is the myth of the ‘‘fatal attraction’’ of war so compelling in our society?

The myth of the necessity of aggression, the comradeship of soldiering, the glory of war, and the heroism of battle is the carrot dangled in front of society to justify a call to war. Power and militarization are strongly linked in this enticement: To be associated with the military is to be associated with power. The carrot is sufficiently dazzling that the illusory nature of this power remains undiscovered until grunt soldiers find themselves on front lines they had no hand in naming, fighting people they do not know over issues they did not forge, using strategies they may detest but cannot change. The horrors of killing are far away from the offices of the policymakers. The equation does not ask how natural aggression can be if those declaring war do so with words but not bullets, and those pulling the triggers can only aggress ‘‘upon command.’’

This hinges on another powerful myth defining battle. The myth is that soldiers can be controlled. This control is defined as another biological fact: that killing is sufficiently abhorrent that people can be brought to kill only when what they love is at stake and only against the enemy threatening what they hold dear. This belief is widely accepted despite the fact that it is in direct opposition to the cultural creed that humans are naturally aggressive and at certain heated moments ‘‘see red’’ and ‘‘explode into irrational and uncontrollable violence’’ (which, of course, contradicts the view that soldiers obey rules and follow orders). Even the bloodlust postulated as intrinsic to fighting is portrayed as always being directed toward the enemy. Movies and museums show soldiers battling soldiers in the ‘‘heat of battle,’’ not soldiers blowing up their own battalions, the neighborhood cafe, or their family and living quarters in a ‘‘red haze of aggression.’’ Yet, in fact, this public perception covers a deeper truth. When neighbors kill neighbors in ex-Yugoslavia or Rwanda, analysts sadly shake their heads and invoke related platitudes about the depth of ethnic hatreds and the killing frenzy of war. This myth hides one of the truths of violence many prefer to keep hidden: The relation between wartime and peacetime killing is closer than we would like to think. Considering violent deaths in general, regardless of circumstances, we find that most killing that occurs takes place between people known to each other and against a person with less power. I mentioned previously that domestic violence and social violence rise significantly during war time. For those on the front lines, no simple heuristic dichotomization of war assault and nonwar assault is possible. A physical or sexual assault is equally harmful if done by a soldier politically deemed an ‘‘enemy’’ as by a soldier from one’s own community. One might argue that at times the latter is more harmful: Troops and the concept of ‘‘national right’’ are there to protect the victims of harm against ‘‘the enemy,’’ while little is in place to protect people from attacks among their ‘‘own.’’

If the story of Cain and Able is as common as the story of war, then it should not be a surprise that in war, familiars constitute a battleground in themselves. Empirically, then, the slaughter of neighbors and the rape of community members should be an expected characteristic of war, not a shocking aberrancy. What is tolerated in peace is tolerated in combat.[3] If aggression were biologically coded for survival and dominance, would people so frequently harm those least powerful, least able to defend themselves, and least threatening? Would biology follow rules of social privilege so carefully in ‘‘seeing red?’’ If what I say here seems more true in peacetime than in war, consider the casualty figures for civilians cited previously. Even if we take this back to World War II, the ‘‘Good War,’’ these observation hold true. Any large theater of war provides grim support. In the USSR, for example, 20 million people were killed, 7 million of which were troops. Thirteen million were civilians, many from Belarus and Ukraine, where they lost 27% and 25% of their *entire* populations, respectively. Germany's war in Poland took 22 million lives, 20% of Poland's entire population at the time. Stalin is credited with killing 20 million more people in the USSR during his political reign [Mearscheimer, 1997]. The figures from the Asian theaters of World War II are equally steeped in noncombatant deaths.

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[3] As with war, there are ‘‘rules’ for aggression in peace, but these are far less articulated than for combat troops. For example, though violence is often portrayed as a violent, mindless eruption, this so-called ‘‘eruption’ generally takes place against familials, members of equal or lower standing in one’s community, or the powerless in hate crimes and seldom against the executive officers in one’s place of work, the power elites of the arts and industry, sports superstars, or licensing board members. Merely counting casualty demographics can tell us this. But even simple counting, available to anyone in war or peace, does not allay the staunch beliefs about the intrinsic nature of aggression and the ramifications of this outlined in the previous pages.

These dynamics of political aggression hold constant from world wars to regional conflicts, from historical battles long since ended to those unfolding as I write. Veena Das [1995] powerfully demonstrates that from the Partitioning of India to the communal riots after the assassination of Indira Ghandi, political violence is not generic and undifferentiated: Muslims against Hindus, Hindus rioting against Sikhs. Instead, dramatic differences in violence take place according to gender, class, social position, and geography—differences that reflect and exacerbate already existing power inequalities in society.

Whether in war or in peace, violence is not a biological eruption of genes encountering environment, but a culture-bound system of learned rules, ethics, and actions. Like all cultures, these rules are made, enforced, reinforced, and changed through human interaction. If all empirical logic demonstrates that war is not a biological necessity, and aggression is not a fixed quality of human nature, what, then, is war?

Even though war is taken as an inherently defined phenomenon in public culture, it is, paradoxically, underdefined, if not undefined, in real terms. A tour of assumptions about what constitutes war shows considerable divergence on the ways in which the topic is broached, with few tools for bridging these differences. Realist theory views war as formal engagements between hostile militaries producing damage or death. Political elites, military commanders, and their assigned troops constitute the arena of analysis, with a focus on politics, policy, and formal strategies. Contemporary liberal analyses expand on the scope of war to include the sociological traditions shaping the expression of hostilities and the behaviors of actors. Here the concern moves beyond the state to link in grass roots movements on the one hand and international power networks on the other. But here too, the focus is largely restricted to the arena of formal political action and related economic and social factors. Poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives opened up the realm of analysis even further, arguing that institutionalized violence creating power inequalities shares similar characteristics with war and cannot be easily separated in analysis. It is here that enduring human rights abuses, sexual violence (leading to the recognition of rape as a war crime), and the harsh realities of racism, marginalization, and poverty are carefully adjoined with more traditional approaches to military warfare. Finally, philosophical treatises on war retool the definition altogether, as in Doris Lessing's definition of the locus of aggression ''not as a place, a field of battle, but as a habit of mind, a structure of feeling, a cultural predisposition'' [Hanley, 1991]. Or as Simmel [1950, p 151] so elegantly states, aggression ''is not so much the exploitation of the other as much as the mere consciousness of the possibility.'' But how many of these perspectives were authored at the front lines of wars? How many are based in empirical research, and what, indeed, defines empirical research?

Even if researchers elect to conduct studies of war in its midst, where, exactly, is that? Is it the power brokers and the state posited by neorealist theory? The front line actors of all kinds, from troops to transnational actors, described in liberal analyses? The maimed bodies of the persecuted, whether in torture chambers or barren back streets of peacetime cultures, highlighted in postmodernist readings? The militarization of the mind introduced by philosophers and cultural theorists? The profound creativity average people employ in surviving war and forging peace? Do we consider the actions of the arms shippers who craft sanction-avoidance transit paths; the beliefs of skinhead mercenaries from Germany and Serbia found on the battlefields of the Sudan and Rwanda? Do we follow the plight of war orphans forced into illegal under-age labor by international war profiteers? Do we investigate the general's private life to see if he or she has profitable connections to arms manufacturers, has secretly authorized torture, or has engaged in racist or misogynist violence? Do we study the efforts at stopping bloodshed that civilians with no political voice have instituted on the front lines to help hapless victims? And, if so, how do we find these people, their stories? How do we give them human depth and empirical relevance at one and the same time? How do we ourselves stay safe in the process?

Studies of war and aggression point out the need for a new kind of empiricism. Empiricism has become something of a dirty word in the recent era. For cultural theorists and political philosophers, it is a narrow and largely uninteresting straitjacket of qualitative analyses and sterile surveys that have little relation to the complex dynamics that shape people's lives and institutions. For realists, it denotes parochial methodologies blind to the sweep of history and power politics. And for those labeled empiricists, the term has been as often derogatory as descriptive. In terms of the fundamental conceptions that ground human endeavor, the term empirical can be a study in smoke and mirrors: pretty, but largely insubstantial. Aggression, human nature, social order, peace, and war—as well as concepts like theory and methodology—do not easily lend themselves to a straightforward empirical analysis. As Bacon [1960, p 42], famed for his scientific realism, noted centuries before:

> There is no soundness in our notions, whether logical or physical. Substance, Quality, Action, Passion, Essence itself, are not sound notions; much less are Heavy, Light, Dense, Rare, Moist, Dry, Generation, Corruption, Attraction, Repulsion, Element, Matter, Form, and the like; but all are fantastical and ill defined.

As a cultural theoretician, I found it easy to scoff at the pedantic confines of what the Academy called empiricism. Like many, I did not think anti-empiricism was the answer but that the tools we had as cultural theoreticians were meta-empiricist, certainly better. That is, until I saw war up close several times. The first thing I realized was that no agreed on scholarly tools existed to research and theorize war up close and dirty. More dangerously, people are unlikely to find their lives ruined or ended if ill-defined notions of Bacon's *heavy* and *light* circulate widely in a society. But people do die from misrepresentations about political aggression. Policies are made on what ‘‘facts’’ are deemed true. If we make decisions based on cultural myths about violence, we inscribe that very violence more deeply into the institutions of society, ensuring continuing cycles of the very thing people say they are working to halt.

One of my first encounters with severe political violence helps explain this point. I was caught in the midst of fighting that lasted unabated for over a week. In the days and months that followed, I was astounded at how inaccurate the reports were on what had taken place. Worse, I noticed that decisions and policies as well as attitudes were formed based on this misinformation that tended to foment further aggressions in ongoing cycles of violence. I first thought that the erroneous views commonly held were a result of a lack of information: How many impartial researchers conduct viable research in the midst of a firefight? During the time I was in the midst of this communal violence that took thousands of lives, I noticed few people taking notes and most people taking sides or seeking to flee the country altogether. Most who wrote on the violence did so by flying in and conducting interviews after the aggressions had abated and relative order had been restored. It is a cliché to note that people clean up their stories of violence after the fact. Few admit that they firebombed a neighbor’s house or stabbed an unarmed person. The victims themselves often hide the truth for fear of retaliation. It was this difficulty of studying violence firsthand that I assumed underlay the misinformation that I saw published on the events I had witnessed up close. I further assumed that the policies based on this erroneous information—policies doomed to fail because they were based on fiction and not fact—would change to embrace more accurate information should it become available. But the first times I publicly presented my research on the political violence I had seen, another view began to form. People from the audience stood up, incensed, to challenge my data. ‘‘How could I say priests were involved in violence?’’ For others, I was being offensive by saying some youths participated in the violence or that trusted members of the community harmed children. ‘‘Women don’t join mobs, they are only assaulted by them!’’ And for others still I violated sensibilities by saying troops condoned, even assisted, massacres of civilians. The list of offenses went on. It did not matter that I had witnessed these events personally and talked to the people involved. The offense was speaking of these things. Most people spoke, not from a position of knowledge, but of privilege and passion: Militaries did not want to be tainted with the accusations of killing civilians, nor the religious with the thought of priests fomenting communal aggressions. Professionals far removed from the political conflicts did not want to believe that others like them, perhaps they themselves at some future time, could target the innocent and become pawns in ugly political power struggles. By the time everyone had their say, I began to understand the images of war conveyed in the media and literature: Variously devoid of priests and women, children and rogue troops, the low-class altruists and the high-class profiteers, political violence is harnessed as the province of rational militaries and mostly rational soldiers controlling the dangerous elements and explosive fissures inherent in human society. A clean picture, but an inaccurate one.

Studies of war have followed the images of war described above: They tend to focus on fighting men in uniform, conventional or paramilitary, and the political and military elites who author wars and broker peace. A paradox describes these studies: Few who study war study it from its midst, and those in its midst generally study it from one side only. A general’s experience of war is an important part of understanding war, but it is certainly not all of it. It in no way captures the experiences of the grunt soldier, the civilian women tortured for information, the troops of the hostile army, or the arms merchants who make an economic killing from war. The bomber pilot will ascribe a far different reality to war and killing than the hatchet man in a torture chamber housed in a military prison, and both will see it far differently than their victims. The journalist who travels to war zones is unlikely to witness either of these views on war but will collect others unavailable to the generals and torturers. And few people even ask the noncombatants—the 90% war casualty population—what their experience of the war is.

> A very large part of military history is written, if not for the express purpose of supporting an army's authority, at least with the intention of not hurting it, not revealing its secrets, avoiding the betrayal of weakness, vacillation, or distemper [Vagts, 1959].

What, then, is this new empiricism I'm suggesting? First, it is a call to apply field research to studies of violence and peacebuilding. If researchers do not include first-hand accounts of war, they are incapable of challenging the myths widely accepted as defining it. Any secondhand account, relying solely on narratives gathered from the sidelines of wars, from the offices of the power brokers, or from the advantage of pre-war or postwar peace, will contain more information on how the war ''is supposed to be'' than how it really is, or was. And far from the front lines in time or space, in comfort or commitment, there is virtually no way to check the facts one is given.[4]

> These narratives of exotic experience may have the most power over us of all, because we can't challenge their authenticity with our own senses. We can't say to H. G. Wells, ''No, it wasn't like that when Martians landed in my backyard.
>
> Most Americans living in this decade have not directly experienced war, have not fought at the front, or been invaded, occupied, or bombed at home, so our narratives of war are particularly potent in shaping our imagination, indeed our very memory, of war. And since how we imagine (or remember, or forget) war has a great deal to do with our propensity to make war, the question then occurs, What is it in our literature of war, in our modern cultural memory of war, that has led us in this century to make war again and again, and to export our organized violence to just about every corner of the world? [Hanley, 1991, p 4]

Second, research into political aggression should consider the phenomenon in its entirety. If someone stands at the front lines of a war, and sees soldiers, foreign advisors (both legitimate and illegitimate), weapons vendors, blackmarketeers, and mercenaries, these all need to be a part of the war story. But as well, the front lines are populated with teachers and traders, doctors and criminals, preachers and profiteers. They are home to the young and the aged, to the healthy and the infirm, to the violent and the peaceful. All of these people are embroiled in the war, by choice or by chance. If they kill or are killed, if they sell weapons or flee from them, they are an integral part of the processes of war. As Cynthia Enloe [1993] impressed on us: The wives and girlfriends, the prostitutes and war supply sweat shop laborers are all key components of the international military system—without these people, there would be no war, no militarization, no political institutions. If large-scale international business concerns take advantage of the social disjunctions and weak political controls common to war to reap tremendous, if questionably legal, profits—and possibly foment further aggressions to continue their advantage—this is an important variable in the equation of war. If some

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[4] I have personally seen entire towns leveled to the ground that were never reported, acts of heroism that changed the course of the war in a region that were never documented, and war casualty figures that gave new meaning to the word fiction. I have witnessed soldiers broker peace in the midst of a firefight, unarmed civilians take military bases, and children at the front lines forge conflict resolution programs—topics that seldom, if ever, make the evening news, the formal military texts, or the war museums. These and many other acts coalesce to define the realities of war that are often silenced by cultural propaganda.

United Nations peacekeepers work to rebuild shattered communities while others trade in heroin and used weapons, or engage in physical or sexual assaults against civilians, these realities form a part of the complex story of peacebuilding. If journalists, scholars, diplomats, or media stars promulgate erroneous information about any of this, silencing some stories or inflating others through choice or ignorance, this too falls within the realm of war. And, importantly, if the vast majority of war's cast of characters elects not to fight, documenting their beliefs and actions is critical to understanding the processes of (non)aggression. Studying war where and when it occurs is not simple, but it is necessary. Each of the people mentioned above can be interviewed, their actions charted, their beliefs recorded, and their impact on others chronicled. This is not an exercise in wishful thinking: A number of scholars have traveled to war zones and collected these data [see Fry and Björkqvist, 1997; Howell and Willis, 1989; Nordstrom and Martin, 1992; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Rupesinghe, 1995; Rupesinghe and Rubio, 1994; Warren, 1993].

Third, research into political violence, in my opinion, is better served if we do not apply the same win-lose perspectives to theory that we do to war. I find a tendency in academic and political discussions to declare a war of theory: postmodernism, poststructuralism, liberalism, humanism are posited as ‘‘winning out’’ over realism, positivism, and Enlightenment rationalism, which held ‘‘power’’ during the Cold War Era. I suspect hegemony of theory is as dangerous as political hegemony. Physics can teach us a valuable lesson here: We do not throw out Newton with Einstein, or Einstein with Chaos theory. The goal is to advance and refine understanding, taking the insights of various epistemologists while correcting the flaws. In terms of political aggressions, states do matter, policymakers do exist who see deadly threat and anarchy in the international (dis)order. Yet, equally nonstate actors forge complex social and political orders, and international networks, from nongovernmental organizations through transnational industries to mafias, reconfigure the shape of power as we know it in the world today. Both nonstate actors and international power configurations inform the politics of aggression and alliance, both have toppled entire governments. News, propaganda, art, and music are as instrumental in shaping political aspirations as formal theory. Across all of these groups, both legal and illegal, honorable and immoral actions define the flux of political cultures and everyday realities. All of these arenas provide invaluable sites of research, and all, taken together, begin to portray the grounding dynamics of political aggressions and peacebuilding.

Last, research into violence can confront Kipling's truism that the first casualty of war is truth. Whether we are humanists or realists, hawks or doves, it does no one any good to misrepresent the realities of violence. If more children are killed in war today than soldiers (intolerable to every formal military in the world as well as to every human rights convention), we do nothing to change this system by burying these truths. Confronting them is the only way change becomes possible. Once people subject their own notions of the inherent nature of aggression to real scrutiny and recognize the cultural dimensions of war and peacebuilding, we open up the possibilities of the degree to which change is possible.

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