

[Note: the following essay was written in July, 2001, just two months before the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon catapulted the world into the new era of Post-Modern War.]



Modern War

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Intro

Human beings are among the more aggressive and violent animals on this planet. We are internally competitive and often brutal with our own kind, killing each other for territory, for property or economic advantage, for revenge, and even for sport. In its most organized form, when social groups set out to kill or at least subdue other groups, we call such hostilities "war."

Throughout the long and vainglorious history of homo sapiens, we have sought better and more efficient means of murdering each other (although in the convoluted morality of war such violence is not legally considered murder *per se*). In part, this is because we are a clever and ingenious species of tool-makers. Human beings love to make gadgets, especially those that destroy something. Another reason is that killing is a difficult, messy, and altogether unpleasant

business, especially up close and by hand. Murder is also potentially dangerous to our own health; those we wish to kill are unlikely to shuffle off this mortal coil without a struggle and may end up killing us instead. So, to avoid distasteful intimacy and to lessen danger to ourselves, we developed weapons — rocks, clubs, spears, then knives, swords, arrows, and finally, guns, rockets, and missiles — all of which allow us to murder each other at a respectable distance.

We've also worked tirelessly to increase the sheer volume of our killing power, since the more of our enemies we can dispose of quickly and in one fell swoop, the more likely we are to survive to be crowned the winners. The fly in the ointment here is that our enemies are engaged in precisely the same effort, working just as hard to develop the means to kill us, even to the point of copying or stealing our weapons and turning the tables. And so the history of warfare is an endless search for better weapons, better strategies, and better tactics, all working in violent harmony to maximize our killing power and keep us one step ahead of those we might wish to eliminate.

War in History

The curve of our increasingly efficient means to do away with one another is parabolic. It meanders along for tens of thousands of years in human history with only fitful and sporadic upward movements. The developments of arms, armor, and armies all contribute their respective spikes, such as the bow and arrow or the forged sword, and, much later, the phalanx shield tactics of Roman Legions or the stunning horsemanship of the Mongol Hordes. Only very recently, however, has the curve of killing power spiked upwards dramatically. Now it's almost vertical.

For much of the 50,000-or-so years of our species' anthropological history, the relatively low human population and sparse distribution around the world limited war to a significant degree. Competition for territory and resources was less intense in the early days of homo sapiens, and, after the occasional bumping up of one band of hunter-gatherers against another, the extent of the hostilities were usually limited by the disadvantaged or vanquished group simply retreating, moving away to a new location at a safer distance.

The evolution of agriculture upped the ante. About 30,000 years ago, humans were planting their first seeds (motivated initially not as a food source, but as a convenient means to harvest more grain for distilling alcohol). As organized farming took hold about 10,000 BCE, our previous wandering gradually gave way to more permanent rooting in one place. With crops came commerce and competition, and we grew from villages into city-states. War took a great leap forward here. Consolidation led to expansion, and expansion to conquest. Agriculture yoked us not only to the plow, but also to the dubious art of war. In many ways, civilization itself is synonymous with war, as the two are fundamentally inseparable, with one hand washing the blood off the other.

Whatever inherent potentials for violence to our own kind may lurk in our genes have been amplified thousandfold by culture. Human beings feel a natural suspicion of strangers, but human cultures are downright xenophobic in their exclusivity and paranoia. Pit two lone individuals with conflicting interests or beliefs against each other in an open field, and they are more likely to run away than fight. Replace those two individuals with two groups from conflicting cultures, and the likelihood of bloodshed rises dramatically. Men will gladly

commit violence in groups that most would never consider or be capable of alone. Give both groups weapons and training in their use, imbue them with "fighting spirit," rename them armies, and you have a virtual recipe for carnage.

Whereas the early evolution of humanity was marred by only occasional and sporadic hostilities, the landscape of the last five or six millennia have been pockmarked by a metaphorical meteor shower of wars. The resulting craters have composed an ever-larger part of the human story. Whatever else the gods of conscience may accuse us of, they cannot regard human beings as lazy students of warfare. We have been not merely diligent, but downright obsessive in our sustained efforts to create ever better ways to dispose of one another.

In just the last millennium, we seemed to really get the hang of it. The curve of killing power began to spike upward more frequently. The devastating use of the English longbow against French knights in the Battle of Agincourt, the refinement of the Samurai sword for the warrior caste in Japan, and the advantages of bayonets attached to muskets in Wellington's quadrangles against Napoleon's cavalry at Waterloo — these and myriad other developments had profound effects on the art and practice of warfare.

The Gun

Only recently, however, has the killing curve reached critical mass with breathtaking acceleration and taken off like a rocket (pun intended). The most profound changes in the technology of warfare occurred in the mid-19th-century, when the gun began to mature as a primary weapon in battle.

We've been throwing stuff at each other since we lived in caves. Something about hurling projectiles is inherently powerful and exciting to human beings, more so than other weapons. Pummeling with fists, strangling, suffocating, burning with acid or fire, bashing with clubs or hammers, stabbing with knives or running through with pikes, slashing with swords — all these have their place, of course, in the pantheon of premature death. But, as stated earlier, such methods are risky because of the close proximity required to one's enemy, as well as being messy and altogether too intimate for comfort. Killing in these ways is fine in the abstract, but tough to do in reality. Poison is good, but it's usually stealthy and slow, and often without the ego satisfaction of the victim knowing who or what did him in. Spears can be thrown, but they're awkward, unwieldy, and inaccurate (plus, you get only one chance). Slings and catapults are better, but still primitive. Arrows loosed from bows are elegant and quite deadly, but they're silent.

No, of all the weapons our species has invented, guns are the most beloved. There's just something perversely thrilling to human beings about standing off at a distance, taking aim, and blasting away, especially with a big bang to announce the event, only to see one's opponent crumble. It's like target practice, but with a better payoff.

Whether in their large form as cannon or their small-arms forms as shoulder-fired rifles and hand-held pistols, guns are essentially devices for focusing the power of an explosive charge through a tube to propel projectiles at flesh-piercing speeds. This basic principle remains relatively unchanged after 700 years. What has improved, though, is every aspect of technology, design, and production.

Gunpowder was invented in China around 1300 A.D., and cannon were quickly developed to put the new propellant to a deadlier use than mere firecrackers. Crude handguns began appearing in European warfare late in that same century. In their earliest forms, however, these small arms were awkward, unreliable, inaccurate, and almost more dangerous for those who used them than those at whom they were aimed.

Each succeeding century brought significant refinements to the gun. In musketry, for instance, firing mechanisms improved, from simple fuses (14th century) to more ingenious mechanical methods — matchlocks (15th century) gave way to the wheel lock (16th century), which was supplanted by the flintlock (17th century). Although smooth-bore muskets became the standard for armies, which fought at close range, a new development appeared in a musket whose longer barrel had spiral grooves cut inside — called "rifling," thus the gun's name: rifle. The grooves imparted a spin to the ball, increasing both distance and accuracy. By the 18th century, the Kentucky rifle was embraced by the American colonies for use in hunting, and American gunsmiths earned world-renown for the meticulous hand-crafting and aesthetic beauty of their weapons.

The early part of the 19th century saw the rise of a professional military, with standing armies and military colleges, such as West Point. Post-Napoleonic tactics manuals continued to preach the gospel of frontal attack by massed infantry. In addition, strategists such as the German Carl von Clausewitz and the Swiss Andre Jomini wrote complex tomes on the nature and conduct of war. This codifying of methodologies had an immediate and lasting impact.

"Modern" war — which is to say, war involving progressively larger armies outfitted with weapons of previously unimagined killing power — first reared its ugly head here, in the 19th century. We would be allowed to wait until the mid-20th-century to see this evolve into "Total" war — war conducted not only against soldiers in the field, but against whole nations, combatants and civilians alike, and directed against the very means of production that supplied the armies. The groundwork, however, was laid earlier.

The Industrial Revolution

The French philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment — Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, etc. — had no more impact on civilization than their less glamorous contemporaries who tinkered in the workshops and factories of England. Intellectual treatises on reason, equality, religion, and science would have remained mere abstractions were it not for such working men as John Kay and James Hargreaves, whose flying shuttle and spinning jenny advanced the manufacture of textiles, or James Watt, whose steam engine supplanted water wheels in powering the factories of Josiah Wedgwood and other Staffordshire potters. Who could have guessed in the mid-1700s that these ingenious but modest devices would soon transform pastoral agrarian societies into urban industrial juggernauts?

Similarly, who could have foreseen that such inventions represented the first tumbler clicks in our picking the lock that would eventually open the Pandora's Box of modern war? Pottery and textiles were certainly significant in the early stages of the manufacturing revolution, but as the Industrial Age sank in its

metal-sprocket teeth and really got rolling, our desire for more and better guns was what brought that revolution to critical mass.

American Eli Whitney is perhaps best known as the inventor of the cotton gin, which he patented in 1794. He is also considered the father of mass production. In 1798, Whitney designed and built a factory around what he called the "Uniformity System" of manufacturing. What did he produce in that original archetype of the modern factory? Nothing so benign as cotton gins, reapers, or sewing machines. No, Whitney created his factory to manufacture muskets for the army — 10,000 of them. Guns were literally the first product ever to be mass-produced.

Until then, firearms could be made only by skilled machinists, and such talented craftsmen were exceedingly rare. Each weapon was carefully crafted by hand, making guns prized possessions and quite expensive. Beyond that, parts from one gun would not fit another, which was, needless to say, a serious shortcoming in battle. Eli Whitney changed all that. He designed a single musket with a template for each of its parts. Then Whitney devised automatic milling machines, drills, and lathes that allowed relatively unskilled workers to cut and fashion each part uniformly, while other workers assembled the finished parts. Voila! Muskets by the truckload, inexpensive to produce and purchase, and all with interchangeable parts. In terms of its profound implications for civilization in general and weaponry in particular, the significance of this event cannot be overstated. Our entire world changed overnight. To rank that moment in history on an equal footing with the meteor that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago may seem an absurd exaggeration, but the jury is still out on our continued survival as a species.

Subsequent and interwoven advances in industrial manufacturing were immediately applied to arms development. The wonder of power-driven machines that made other machines (first by waterwheels, then by steam engines, and finally by electricity) allowed production of weapons with formerly unimagined precision, and on a scale that dwarfed previous output. Refinements in chemistry improved the effectiveness of gunpowder. Advances in metallurgy and milling increased the strength and durability of cast or turned metal parts. Firepower made incredible leaps in numbers, accuracy, distance, and lethality. The seeds of modern war had been fertilized, and they took root with a vengeance.

By 1870, the steady stream of arms refinements suddenly overflowed into a raging torrent of new and deadlier arms. The frenzy of improved weapons design and production throughout the Gilded Age escalated the arms trade to such dizzying economic heights that the phrase "merchants of death" was coined, more as a necessity than an irony. For nearly a century thereafter, the small arms industry was fueled by a seemingly insatiable world-wide demand. Hundreds of millions of handguns and rifles were produced and sold until the market was finally glutted late in the 20th century, which did not stop headlong commercial proliferation, but served only to cut into what had been obscene profit margins. In certain third world countries today, an AK-47 (arguably the most effective assault rifle ever produced) can be purchased on the black market for as little as \$100.

Some of the brightest minds and most ambitious entrepreneurs of the last 150 years devoted their lives to deadly inventions. At least a few of these bright

minds also had serious pangs of conscience. Hiram Maxim, inventor of the first truly effective machine gun, expressed the forlorn hope that his invention would end war by making it too terrible to contemplate. Fat chance. Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, was so guilt-ridden over the fortune he made from the arms trade that he funded the Nobel Peace Prize. Too little too late, unfortunately. Many of the American nuclear scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project during World War II later protested in vain the subsequent Cold War arms race and government stockpiling of the very atomic weapons they had helped create. In the complex ironies of the modern world, we know how to release the destructive genie from the bottle, but we haven't learned how to put him back.

Strategy and Tactics

Historically, strategy and tactics had evolved hand-in-hand with the appearance of improved technologies. New weapons or significant refinements to existing weapons developed sporadically and at sufficiently long intervals that changes in how wars were approached (strategy) and battles waged (tactics) could stumble forward in the typically half-assed manner that characterizes most bureaucratic human endeavors. From the 16th through the 18th centuries, these developments were not so radical in killing power as to demand wholesale changes in land warfare.

Pikemen were gradually replaced by musketeers. Eventually all infantry carried muskets, usually with attachable bayonets. Shields were discarded, since these offered no protection against musket fire. Horse-mounted cavalry added pistols to accompany their sabers or lances. Artillery cannon increased in both size and range of fire, and saw some improvements in mobility with limbered, wheeled caissons drawn by horses. Still, these changes were piecemeal, and the basic chess pieces of land war remained intact — infantry, cavalry, and artillery.

Through the 17th and 18th centuries, tactics were adapted to match the new and improved weapons. Smooth-bore, ball-firing muskets (such as the famous Brown Bess used by the British army for almost a century) had an accurate range of only about 60 yards, so combat adjusted to that range. Essentially, infantry marched up to each other in wide, shoulder-to-shoulder columns, usually three or four soldiers deep. The narrow depth minimized losses from cannon balls or mortars lobbed from behind the enemy's lines.

When both sides were close enough and face-to-face, they blasted away with musket volleys. The admonition to not fire until you could see "the whites of their eyes" was literally true. Since muzzle-loaded, single-shot long arms took about 20 seconds to reload, volleys were often staggered by rows, with one line firing while another reloaded. Otherwise, the attackers could rush the defenders and be on them between rounds. Basically, this was a polite but bloody game of chicken, which continued until one side broke, retired, or was overrun by a bayonet charge.

Then came the Industrial Revolution, and with it, an end to the alternating leap-frog of weapons refinement and evolving tactics. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, weaponry slowly pulled ahead of tactics. By the middle of that century, the former equilibrium was knocked into a cocked hat. When technology exploded in exponential leaps, tactics remained mired in tradition, habit, and a curious sentimentality.

Progressive and decisive improvements to guns during the 1840s and 1850s are too numerous to list. A few that are relevant to this essay include the French minie ball (a soft-lead bullet-shaped projectile), manufactured paper cartridges that contained both bullet and powder, the Mercury fulminate percussion cap (which allowed the later development of brass cartridge ammunition), plus mass-produced British Enfield and American Springfield rifles that used the new bullets and firing caps.

These nearly simultaneous improvements in weapons design and production suddenly reversed the age-old advantage from attacker to defender and turned upside down the existing wisdom of military tactics. With an effective range of over 500 yards (10 times that of the old smooth-bore Brown Bess) and stunning accuracy, the new mass-produced rifles rendered obsolete the brute force of assaults by concentrated infantry formations. Riflemen protected behind breastworks could now bring withering fire to bear on an attacking column at long distance, and without as much risk to themselves. Depending on the relative numbers, the attackers might never even reach the defenders.

In the face of such accurate firepower, new tactics were clearly in order. Marching shoulder-to-shoulder in frontal assaults became downright suicidal. And yet, in obvious defiance of common sense, such revolutionary advances in the technology of firepower were not accompanied by corresponding changes in the existing tactics of warfare, which too often remained hypnotized by the parade-ground allure of infantry maintaining fixed and rigid formations, marching stoically into the teeth of these new and deadlier guns. This stubborn refusal to acknowledge reality had its first large-scale, tragic results in the American Civil War, but the tragedies (and the slaughter) continued to mount through World War I, nearly 60 years later.

The Uses of Ingenuity

Given the importance of the gun in history, one might reasonably ask just how much of our industrial energy went into the development and refinement of guns? Curiously, not nearly as much as one might think. The arms industry eventually grew into a massive and hugely profitable force in commerce, especially in the late-19th and 20th centuries, but earlier, during the 18th and early-19th centuries, the emphasis was not so much on the sheer quantity of manufacturing resources as it was on the intangibles of human creativity and ingenuity. We were then and still are obsessed with improving the effectiveness of weaponry through improved design.

If the amount of human ingenuity devoted to refinement of the gun had gone instead into, say, plumbing and waste-management, the world would probably be a much better place. Given our priorities, unfortunately, the world is as it is, which is to say, still full of shit.

Scatological double-entendres are obvious cheap shots in an essay such as this, but consider a more serious alternative: What if the same amount of creativity that went into guns could have been applied to humanity's spiritual wisdom and psychological maturation? Might we now live in a world less dominated by the specter of violent death on a mass scale? Sadly, I think the answer is no. As improbable as it may seem, I would suggest that we have indeed expended great

energy in the quest for human maturity, perhaps more than we have on guns, but with considerably less success.

One can argue that we are still driven (and controlled) more by the primitive aggression of our reptilian brain-stems than we are by the more complex "civilized" functions of our neo-cortexes. This is the biological equivalent of the psychological assertion that love and trust are more fragile and delicate than the baser emotions of hate and fear. But that argument, however true, misses the point.

The fact is that human beings are infinitely further along on the curve of technological development than we are along the curve of psychological maturation. Guns can be mass-produced by machines; maturity is still lovingly hand-crafted by one person at a time. It's not so much that we love guns more than we admire wisdom, but guns are simple, easy, and straightforward. Wisdom is complicated, difficult, and obscure. Guns have an instantaneous and direct payoff — lots of bang for the buck. The positive results of maturity are gradual, delayed, and usually indirect — not much immediate gratification for the effort involved.

[All this has a decidedly "male" ring to it. One might argue from a feminist perspective that we would be better off with women in charge, or, at least, with a more balanced proportion of classically masculine to feminine values in the collective. I would counter that the world would certainly be different if women ran the show, but not necessarily better. My personal conclusion after a career as a full-time counselor for 30 years was that women are every bit as nuts as men, just with a different slant to their characteristic insanity. And, for whatever reasons, women have not yet succeeded in transcending their inferior status in the collective — that of being coveted but not respected — to change the fundamental power dynamics of culture and war. In the basic status quo of society, women have made inroads mostly by becoming more like men rather than by successfully promoting an alternative set of values. Whether true feminism can significantly alter the future of civilization before time runs out is an unanswered question.]

More Disturbing Questions

I have been striving for decades to understand why so many of those in power in the military — the very people responsible for developing and teaching strategy and tactics — ignored the implications of advances in weaponry that occurred around the American Civil War, as well as later developments (such as the Maxim machine gun and the French 75mm howitzer). The new weapons were not greeted with universal enthusiasm by military staffs, but one by one they overcame the stodgy resistance of old-school generals and procurements officers and found their way into all the major armies of the world. But another, more insidious form of resistance was not overcome, namely, the necessary rethinking of how soldiers should be used in battle. From the 1850s until the late 1930s — when mechanized, coordinated operations of mobile infantry, artillery, tanks, and air support first came together in the Blitzkrieg tactics of the German Wermacht — millions of soldiers marched to their deaths under the command orders of general staff officers who clung like dinosaurs to the antiquated notion of massed infantry frontal assaults, often over open ground.

Why was this so? Were the generals insane? And what of the soldiers who marched dutifully to their demise? Were they mere robots? Fools? Did they all have a death-wish?

Beyond the limited issue of anachronistic tactics is the horror of the sheer numbers killed in modern wars. The statistics are appalling. [More on that later; for now, I need say only that the numbers are sufficiently staggering as to be mind-numbing.] If the wages of sin are death, then over the last 150 years, we have surely toiled in the muck of sin like pigs in slop.

Was there something in the nature of the sudden transition to modern war that rendered these recent generations stupid in ways that transcended all previous human stupidity? Were millions of human lives so worthless that they could be wasted without a moment's hesitation? Or, more likely, were the Hitlers and Stalins of our times no more murderous, no more callous and bloodthirsty than the infamous Genghis Khans and Attila the Huns of yore, but merely the benefactors of easier access to larger numbers of victims and improved means to dispose of them?

By contrast, I have no real questions about the smaller-scale wars in human affairs. Domestic strife, family conflicts, hatred between intimates, betrayal by friends, and sporadic episodes of violence between strangers may be tragic, but their causes, as well as their inevitability, make perfect sense to me. Warfare between nations, however, in its modern form, involving as it has the organized and calculated slaughter of millions, is a form of human madness that shocks and disturbs me beyond any understanding. Despite the sardonic tone of my writing, I am heartsick over it.

My anguish has motivated continuing research into the historical record. I'm not convinced that intellectual understanding will ever relieve the pain, but I try nonetheless. So far, my ongoing study has amassed a patchwork of reasons to explain the vile realities of modern war. These reasons are not military, *per se*; they are cultural, psychological, social, political, and institutional. Taken as a whole, they offer me some comprehension as to why the horrors of organized warfare increased thousandfold during that seminal period of 80 years. Still, nothing I have found provides the satisfaction of an epiphany. The "Ah Ha!" for which I yearn still eludes me in explaining the depth of human folly and suffering on such a grand scale.

Collective Aggression

In considering human nature, the case can be made that nothing ever changes, that our brains are essentially the same as those of our first Cro-Magnon ancestors. Biologically, we are pretty much as we have always been and likely always will be. Biology, however, long ago gave up the ghost as the driving force in human evolution. What fuels evolution now is civilization. The physical structure of our brains may be no different than those of human beings who walked the earth a million years ago, but the content of those brains, as well as the uses to which we put them, are now a function of collective culture. Compared to even the recent past, society is now evolving at breakneck speed. In history at least, time matters.

Among the foremost challenges of history is the difficult task of interpreting events from the standpoint of generations past, whose assumptions and beliefs

were often radically different from those of contemporary times. We cannot merely turn and look backward, since our lenses distort the view, often leaving the smug (and false) impression of our own superiority. No, at the very least we must try to understand the tenor of times gone by.

To say that the 19th century was a simpler time smacks of the very exaggeration and distortion against which I just cautioned, but, in terms of American culture, the conclusion is unavoidable. Collectively, American society was younger, more rough and tumble, closer to the roots of its own mythology, and less likely to question the currency of freshly minted beliefs. Mustangs and Cougars were still real animals, not merely evocative names for automobiles. Horsepower was exactly that. Americans of the time did not need to go to the gym to work out, because they used their muscles in everyday life. As a culture, we were just beginning to flex our collective muscles for the world to see.

Religion, always a dominant force in the mythology of society, was much stronger and more binding than today. Americans' abiding faith had not yet been eroded by modern cynicism over God and Government. The United States at that point was the great experiment in liberty and freedom, considered by many around the world, and especially by her own people, as the hope of humankind. The dream of America was just beginning to blossom then and would steadily unfold through the bulk of the next century.

Vitality was synonymous with aggression. This had been true throughout recorded history, of course, and the 19th century was no exception. In fact, the past two centuries have represented a pinnacle of sorts for mass aggression. The significant fact to be remembered is that conquest — of territory, of nature, and of other human beings — was an accepted morality of that time. The writings soon to emerge by Darwin and Nietzsche affirmed that the strong would always dominate the weak. Social Darwinism was a reality before it became a philosophy and justified the attempt by the dragon of civilization to eat its own tail.

America emerged into a world of empire-building. Colonization (a polite term for conquest) was in full bloom. Powerful nations threw their weight around like proverbial school-yard bullies. The big fish ate the little fish. In fact, any nation's survival required gobbling up smaller countries as fast as its armies and navies could, so as to become large and strong enough in territory, economics, and manpower to avoid being eaten itself.

Throughout our 230-year history, Americans have always been ambivalent about the idea of empire. Conquest may be the reality of the geopolitical world, but America set the bar so high with our lofty notions of freedom and individual rights that outright dominance is troublesome. It makes us look bad, especially in our own mirrors. Preferring to see ourselves as more principled and righteous than those loutish empires that tromped around the world in seven league boots, our public policy has always been to scorn aggression and disavow any wish to control people in faraway lands. All we wanted, or so we paradoxically asserted, was every square inch of land we could get our hands on in our half of the world, which, by the way, we considered OURS alone. Various of America's historical policy doctrines, associated with Presidents in office at the time — Monroe, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy — have reiterated this peaceful intention. More covertly, of course, we never let such propaganda get in the way of our

meddling in the affairs of other nations, no matter how close or far away they were, "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli."

On our continent, America's high-sounding ideals did literally nothing to prevent us from stomping on anyone who happened to stand in the path of our national expansion. By the middle of the 19th century, we had insured our national future by securing all the land from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. Either we bought it, we stole it, or we *de facto* inhabited it. Mexico had been bullied into submission, Canada had been contained, the indigenous AmerIndian cultures were in forced decline, the buffalo had been decimated, gold was discovered in California to kickstart the western migration, and immigrants flooded our shores. Americans loved their country and believed fervently in its Manifest Destiny. We felt "ordained by God" to rule the continent from sea to shining sea.

Even so, America had struggled for decades with the peculiar institution of slavery. Though racist beliefs in the inherent superiority of white Europeans were nearly universal (among Europeans, that is), this assumption did nothing to resolve the power conflicts, economic questions, and bothersome philosophical contradictions. Sectional politics wrenched the government and the nation. Northern abolitionists argued that enslavement of Negroes was a stain on our principles, and that we had fallen behind the other great nations of the world in outlawing the ownership of people. Southern property owners countered with the contention that the Industrial Revolution undercut the graceful heritage of our agrarian roots, and that their slaves were more humanely treated than the immigrant wage earners who were essentially imprisoned in the factories and urban slums of northern cities. Decades of political compromise — Dred Scott, Mason-Dixon, et al — had done nothing but stretch patience, fray tempers, and please almost no one. This stewpot simmered for forty years, and though armed conflict was forestalled, a boilover was approaching.

The crucible of war was seen by many Americans as an inevitable and necessary moral test. Some considered it a welcome cleansing for the nation, a tonic to counter malaise and renew our vitality as a people. When the bubbling cauldron of regional conflicts finally did boil over with the election of Abraham Lincoln as President in 1860, followed shortly by the secession of South Carolina, the onset of hostilities was enthusiastically welcomed by a sizable percentage of Americans. Very few foresaw the bloodbath that was to follow.

And so, in part because we politically postponed the southern rebellion until the perfectly inauspicious moment when the Industrial Revolution had just cranked out its first wave of more efficient weapons, and in part because the ensuing conflict itself provoked an economic bonanza for arms inventors and entrepreneurs, the American Civil War took its dubious place in history as the first large-scale demonstration of the sudden rift between the old tactics and the awesome new killing power of modern war, a rift that would progressively widen and deepen into a yawning chasm.

Individual Valor

The myths of chivalry are deeply rooted in cultural memory, gender identification, and disturbed assessments of self-esteem, with a staying power that is linked by testosterone to adolescent dreams (no matter what age the adolescent may be, whether 13 or 93). Little boys can only play at make-believe

war; older boys can and do routinely send their sons and grandsons to die in wars that are all too real.

American boys coming of age in 1861 had been raised to believe that battle was the ultimate test of manhood, as had the boys of almost every culture. Weaned on the books of Sir Walter Scott and other romantic authors who emphasized the honor of combat and the glory of war, they looked forward to the chance to prove their mettle.

Not only were men eager for a fight, but women as well. Though not permitted in the military, American wives and mothers were by proxy just as hypnotized as their husbands, lovers, brothers, and sons over the rituals of courage in battle. Time after time in letters from the Civil War, we see women supporting and often chiding their men to do their duty and honor their families on the battlefield, even if it meant that they would never return home. Death was preferred to cowardice.

Americans also believed fervently in the sanctity of the individual, so much so that it was enshrined in our political charter and was a key component in the mythology of our national character. In those days, people still wholeheartedly embraced the idea that personal fortitude and individual bravery could have profound significance in war, that one man's steadfast courage and heroism could turn the tide of battle and win (or save) the day. The astonishing victory of a small band of Founding Fathers in fomenting revolution on a reluctant populace and snatching our independence from the British was seen by Americans as proof that individuals could perform miracles to change the course of history, and that has remained the foundation for our national ethos.

These complementary beliefs — in war as an honorable enterprise and a grand adventure, and in individual courage as a necessary test and a decisive moral factor — were so interwoven and ingrained in the collective American imagination of those times that they packed the one-two wallop of a knockout punch. Though we compromised for decades to avoid war, by 1861 our pent-up frustrations and the longing for aggressive release were undeniable and overwhelming. When the war finally came — with Lincoln's election, the subsequent secession of South Carolina, and finally the culminating attack on Fort Sumter — any reasonable voices of caution were drowned out in a tidal wave of war fever.

In that spring of 1861, while armies were hastily recruited but before any large engagements, both sides were spoiling for a fight. Southerners swore that one Rebel could whip 20 Yankees ("whip" was the operative term, for no one yet spoke in terms of actual killing), and northerners boasted that they would put down these upstart Rebels with a single crushing blow. The rhetoric in newspapers and at dinner parties resembled the shouted taunts of rival teenage street corner toughs before a rumble. Patriotism swelled in every beating heart, northern and southern alike. Glorious ancestry was invoked on both sides, and God was claimed by each as an ally and benefactor.

The fact that neither north nor south had trained armies was brushed aside as irrelevant, little more than a minor inconvenience that would shortly be remedied. Americans believed passionately in their innate fighting abilities.

Cultural Arrogance

Pride in one's personal and cultural heritage, as well as in one's innate abilities and actual achievements, can be a wonderful, life-affirming attitude. But the journey from pride to arrogance is all too short a trip. Start with the necessary ingredient of narcissism, mix in a little vanity, season with a dash of hubris, then sprinkle on the holy water of fanatical religious belief in a Chosen destiny, and the result is a toxic stew just as likely to poison oneself as others.

Considered from a collective point of view, the assumption of superiority is a hallmark of every aggressive culture, a psychosocial phenomenon so widespread among human societies that it is nearly pandemic, and just as fatal in its repercussions as any medical plague. Love for one's country is an understandable sentiment given human territoriality, but, taken to extremes that are fueled often by racism and xenophobia, skips right past patriotism and devolves into belligerent jingoism, an infectious and deadly disorder. This particular form of cultural arrogance has killed more people in the past two centuries than all the great historical scourges — bubonic plague, smallpox, influenza, and AIDS — put together.

The particular qualities that for so long defined American presumptions of superiority are no mystery in their origins. They emerged out of our astonishing (and lucky) success, both politically and economically, during the first hundred years of our existence as a nation. Generally speaking, America's timing in history and position in the world could hardly have been more fortunate. Relative isolation from danger, vast potential wealth in natural resources, and a penchant for business organization and commercial trade built an impressive superstructure on the idealistic principles of our founding.

By the mid-19th-century, we had already crystallized an American mythology — individual resourcefulness, hard work, an inventive and "can-do" spirit, and very shortly thereafter the ability to out-manufacture any other country on earth. These myths would persist and grow in stature for another full century before falling into question.

One particular myth that grew out of the early period of American expansion — and of specific relevance to this essay — is the peculiar belief in the presumed superiority of American guns and marksmanship.

Having won the nation's independence with most ragtag of armies in an improbable revolution only 80 years earlier, the lore of the vaunted capabilities of American frontiersmen had been subsequently cast in stone by sentimental memory and popular fiction. The fact that we lost most of the battles in the Revolutionary War and came within a hair's breadth of losing the entire contest, to be saved only at the last minute by French aid and British blundering, was easily forgotten, or, at least, minimized. What was remembered and enshrined in our national beliefs was a revered image of the citizen-soldier with his Kentucky long rifle, whose self-reliance, resourcefulness, pluck, and dead-eye marksmanship had undone the disciplined armies of the British Empire. [These qualities would later be transferred and updated in the mythology of the Cowboy.]

Americans loved guns. As already stated, early American gunsmiths were among the best in the world, and prowess with a rifle was a prized skill and a source of great pride. Though the movement of the northern population into

industrialized cities had already begun (and was, in contrast to the mostly agrarian and rural south, a more subtle conflict behind the Civil War), still, the bulk of the American population of 31 million in 1860 lived on farms or in small towns. We were then a country for which the concept of an ever-expanding frontier had profound meaning. The virtues of rugged frontier life were embraced even by city dwellers, and, while many Americans used rifles only rarely, if ever, the fanciful idea of our innate national skill with firearms was shared by all.

This belief held great currency at the beginning of the Civil War. Many southerners especially felt that the dead-eye marksmanship of Confederate soldiers would be sufficient to overcome the daunting advantages of the north in population and economic power. The north had three times the people and ten times the manufacturing resources, and yet, early in the war, southerners were convinced that the skill and courage of their soldiers would prevail. They were wrong.

Along with the more encompassing myths of individuality, resourcefulness, and ingenuity, the assumption of our superior marksmanship persisted in the American military long past the Civil War. Even after the slaughter in the trenches of millions of European soldiers during the first three years of World War I, America entered that war in 1917 with a naïve faith that the skill and valor of individual soldiers could turn the tide. Viewed from the clarity of hindsight, this popularly-held opinion of the time appears laughable. Did Americans actually believe that millions of French, English, and German boys had gone to their deaths simply because they were lousy marksmen?

It's one thing for some yahoo in a bar to spout off about how American marksmanship will kick the Germans' ass, but it's quite another for that same stupidity to be held by the general staff of the nation's army. American military doctrine of the time was built around the incredulous presumption that well-trained riflemen armed only with bolt-action, single-shot Springfields could be so accurate in their aimed firing as to be not only equal but superior to the ghastly killing power of machine guns and massed heavy artillery. This was a ludicrous assumption, yet it was embraced by the American general staff, from Black Jack Pershing down. And American boys paid the price.

Other cultures, especially those in Asia, may not have held individuality in such high regard as Americans, but their beliefs were similarly outlandish, and every bit as deluded. Prussian militarism was well-established long before Germany's unification as a nation. The superiority of German soldiers' discipline and resourcefulness in land wars were borne out in the two apocalyptic world conflicts of the 20th century, where their "kill ratio" was significantly higher than any other nation's armies. In each, however, Germany was undone by limited resources, bungled industrial management, geographical liabilities (fighting wars on two fronts), and the overreaching ambitions of their political leadership.

The Germans did not invent the unified tactics of modern war, but their coordinated use of tanks, mechanized artillery, mobile infantry, and aircraft in the Blitzkrieg of early World War II was the first synthesis of such tactics and served as a model for other nations' armies to hastily emulate. Less well-known, however, is the telling fact that only the Wermacht's elite front-line divisions were so configured; most of the German army still moved on foot with equipment in horse-drawn carts, just like Napoleonic armies of 130 years earlier.

Pitted against the unexpected will of the Allies — the grit of the British, the unbelievable tenacity of the Soviets, and the industrial might of America, German militarism was crushed. Yes, it was a close call, and no sure thing early on. But German arrogance eventually backfired, as they consistently underestimated the abilities of those allied against them.

The Japanese were even more grandiose than the Germans in their overconfidence. As late as the 1930s, the Japanese people and their military continued to hold an unshakeable faith in the ancient samurai warrior code of Bushido as a sufficiently magical force, even among the largely peasant stock that filled the ranks of 20th-century Japanese armies, to overcome any technological disadvantages her soldiers might face. Had Japan not suffered from this deep-seated delusion, she might not have been so hellbent on attacking America in 1941, a tragic decision that sealed her fate.

A telling example of Japan's anachronistic approach to modern war lies in the ratio of soldiers fighting on the front lines to military support personnel devoted exclusively to maintaining the lines of supply. In World War II, Japan could maintain only a 1:1 ratio — for every Japanese soldier dug into a stinking cave on some coral island in the Pacific, there was but a single additional non-fighting soldier involved in supply and support.

By contrast, America's ratio in the same war was an astonishing 1:28 — for every fighting GI who saw actual combat, 28 others worked full time around the clock to insure the funneling of war materiel from the farms and factories of America's industrial might. They shipped clothing, food, arms, and ammunition by the ton, plus a seemingly endless stream of jeeps, trucks, tanks, artillery, and aircraft, as well as the parts and skill needed to maintain and repair them. No soldiers in prior history had ever been as well-supplied as our GI's during World War II. The lucky American victory over the Japanese fleet at Midway certainly accelerated Japan's defeat, but it would have come eventually anyway, with or without atomic bombs. In the unsentimental, stark realities of modern war, where industrial might matters so much, Japan never had a chance against America.

Arrogance and presumed superiority eventually defeat everyone who falls prey to their seductions, from individuals to nations.

Discriminating Weapons

Among the variables for assessing the effectiveness of weapons are skill required versus ease of use and discriminating versus indiscriminate effects. The theoretically "perfect" weapon is completely discriminate in its effect, which is to say, it kills precisely who you want it to (and no one else), and is utterly easy to use, which is to say, push a button, pull a trigger, whatever, with a minimum of training and skill required to whack an enemy. Many other variables exist, of course — cost, availability, size, reliability, ammunition, etc. — but those first two criteria are always critical.

Bolt-action rifles are relatively discriminating. A bullet from a rifle will generally kill only one person, and, unless fired into a crowd, the rifle must be aimed precisely to have the desired effect. Land mines, on the other hand, are mostly indiscriminate. Once planted in the ground and the trip charge set, land mines

are left to do their dirty work. They'll blow the hell out of anyone who steps on them — foe, friend, or innocent farmer twenty years after the war has ended.

The problem with weapons of discrimination is that, historically at least, they've required more highly skilled soldiers to use them. Training soldiers costs time and money; when you lose one in battle, it's back to square one with a new recruit. Early guns replaced bows and arrows despite the former being less accurate, less dependable, heavier to lug around, and more expensive to operate. So why not stay with the bow? Because guns could be used by soldiers with less training and skill.

Historically, the American military emphasized discriminate weaponry and skilled soldiers. One man, one rifle, and one bullet aimed at an enemy by a well-trained soldier skilled in the use of his weapon. Part of this tendency had to do with our vision of ourselves as fair-minded good guys. Because we cherish individuality and believe that each life is sacred, we downplay the imagery of indiscriminate killing, even when we do it.

For instance, in the aerial bombing campaigns during World War II, the American military's official propaganda line was that our highly secret Norden bombsight allowed B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberator bombers to achieve "pinpoint" precision bombing in their raids on German factories or Rumanian oil refineries. This was, in part, an attempt to hold the moral high ground of respect for human life. In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. From five miles up, with clouds often obscuring the targets, German fighters buzzing around, and anti-aircraft flak exploding everywhere, American bombardiers often just dumped their bomb loads on anything within a couple miles of the target.

By late in the war, the inaccuracy of the bombing raids was such a scandal that the Allies began using incendiary bombs to set whole Axis cities ablaze, the most famous examples being the fire-bombings in early 1945 of Dresden and Tokyo, which killed respectively 40,000 and 80,000 people, the vast majority of whom were civilians.

The 1991 Gulf War was made famous as the "video game war" by Pentagon-approved television footage on CNN of American laser-guided missiles — so-called "smart bombs" — that honed in precisely on their targets. Extremely discriminating. Less-publicized, however, was the fact that only a small percentage of the total tonnage of bombs dropped in that brief war were "smart." The bulk were dropped from B-52s miles overhead, in what is called "carpet bombing," and those bombs were dumber than sin. Effective, but hardly discriminating.

For all the considerable and endless lip service paid to honor and courage, effective training, individual initiative, discriminating weaponry, ethical conduct, and concern for the welfare of soldiers and civilians, the modern wars bookmarked by the Civil War at one end and World War II at the other were, finally, nightmares of brutality and bloodbaths of indiscriminate mass slaughter.

Photography

In an age before photography could show us the true nature of war's ugliness and utter waste, the illusions of honor and glory still held sway. As the Civil War progressed, photographers took the new technology to the battlefields. The bulky

camera equipment of the time prevented taking any pictures during the actual fighting. Even if the equipment could have been set up in the face of danger, the long exposures required for glass plates would have made such photographs nothing but a blur. Smoke obscured the battlefields, and movement was still impossible to capture. After hostilities had ended and the armies limped away, however, a few intrepid photographers roamed over those blood-soaked meadows and lanes to document the aftermath of the carnage. The unburied dead that littered the fields were perfect subjects for the still-lives required by the primitive technology.

In 1862, following the Battle of Antietam — the bloodiest single day in the history of American wars before or since — Alexander Gardner's first public exhibition of photographs of soldiers killed in that battle shocked the nation. Obviously, soldiers learned very quickly that war was a brutal and bloody business, but those experiences were kept hidden from the folks at home, both during the war and afterward. Even the best, most vividly-written accounts of battle fail to convey any true sense of the chaos and trauma. Photography, however, pulled back the curtain from that nasty secret, one corpse at a time. [Of all the photographs of Civil War dead that have survived to this day, the single most poignant and haunting of them all is not of a dead soldier, nor even a human being, but that of a single horse at Gettysburg, a white mare killed in its tracks but still resting upright on its haunches, the long, sad muzzle lowered to touch the ground, a true innocent victim...]

What is more revelatory, however, and infinitely more perverse, is how little difference photography actually made toward changing collective attitudes in the history of warfare over that 80-year period. Admittedly, photographic images were enlisted more often to maintain the status quo of pro-war sentiment than to unmask the horrible realities. War is first, foremost, and always about making a buck; like all other technologies, the visual media were used for that purpose — heroic, inspirational images sold better than the gruesome truth. Newspaper and magazine editors did not want to be accused of harming morale or profiting at the suffering of grieving mothers. Horror movies and fictional violence may be big box-office in the modern era, but "real" violent death is always repellant, so many of the more gruesome war photographs were censored (either officially or by default) and not widely seen until recently.

Photos, newsreels, and Hollywood movies were used as propaganda by every nation to sustain and reinforce all the traditional sentiments of patriotism, loyalty, and the glorious, antiseptic adventure of war as a noble and grand undertaking. This was true whether in Germany or England, Japan or America, both as government policy and popular myth.

Even so, much evidence exists to suggest that popular illusions of "war as great fun" were considerably dampened along the way of those 80 years. When the lights went out in Europe in August, 1914, at the beginning of World War I, respective national populations were still dutiful in their loyalty and support of the state, but more somber feelings of war fear lay underneath the apparent war fervor. And those fears were realized. By the end of The Great War, misnamed shortly after as The War to End All Wars, a whole generation of Europeans had been slaughtered, 28 million casualties in all.

America, however, was largely insulated from that experience of suffering and disillusionment — by distance, by our late entry into that war and the minimal

human losses we suffered by comparison, and also by a curious naivete. Even in World War II, American men and boys were still enlisting with the same giddy enthusiasm and foolish optimism as their Civil War counterparts.

Civil War Combat

Though men on both sides of the conflict in the Civil War entered the military with idealized notions of the adventure of combat, they did not remain immune long to the realities of this first modern war. The experience of battle was sobering, if not always immediately, then gradually. Some illusions were more easily stripped away than others. For instance, the emphasis on courage as proof of manliness flagged surprisingly little throughout the entire four years of bloodshed. Reluctance for battle increased, along with the numbers of shirkers, stragglers, and outright deserters, but, on the whole, the psychological touchstone of valor remained intact in both armies. On the other hand, the average soldier learned early on that courage was not a magical incantation that could shield him from volleyed rifle fire, and that valor, for all its virtues, provided no protection against artillery cannon loaded with double-shot canister.

As the war progressed, experienced soldiers realized the value of cover. When left to their own devices in battle, those on the defensive always fought behind breastworks. When time permitted, elaborate constructions of earth and logs were built under the supervision of engineers; under more urgent circumstances, hastily erected barriers were thrown up. Those on the attack had fewer options, especially in assaults over open ground, but, when permitted, the attackers learned to advance in brief rushes and take temporary shelter behind trees, boulders, ditches, fences, or whatever features of the topography would provide even momentary protection.

Given the weapons they faced and the appalling likelihood of injury or death in battle, such adaptations by ordinary soldiers are eminently reasonable. What is astonishing, however, is the lack of that same common sense among the commissioned officers up the chain of command, from regiment, to division, to corps commanders. One can understand how the early battles of the Civil War were marked by ineptitude in command. Many generals were political appointees or wealthy patrons who had assembled and funded units from their particular town, county, or state, and as such had no military backgrounds at all. Some were merely inexperienced and needed time to learn the realities of war. Others sought glory at the expense of competence. Still others were complete fools, idiots, or drunkards.

Alcohol has been a necessary stimulant in armies throughout history. The Civil War was no different, even though a major temperance movement during the 1850s had lobbied hard for the immorality of distilled spirits and convinced many Americans to swear off drinking. Nevertheless, soldiers on both sides bolstered their flagging courage with a nip from the bottle, and much of the time the amount imbibed was considerably more than a nip. As the war progressed, some soldiers of every rank stayed drunk all the time. A wild-card factor in many battles was whether brigade and regimental officers would be sober enough to carry out or coordinate the orders of their superiors on the division and corps levels, certain of whom were equally likely to be under the influence.

Another factor, and one that should never be underestimated, is the maelstrom of battle. In an age where reconnaissance was still primitive, armies fumbled

around blindly and often collided by accident. Even in those few instances where each had sufficient time to prepare, the utter confusion of battle was often overwhelming. Smokeless gunpowder had not yet been invented, and battlefields in the Civil War were routinely obscured, shrouded in clouds of drifting smoke from the repeated firing of thousands of muskets and cannon. Generals often had no vantage point from which to assess the entire scope of the fighting, and tactics were devised and revised based on delayed reports and misinformation. Orders were hastily written, relayed by courier, and frequently misunderstood. Some men lost all reason in the emotional chaos of combat, reverting to the panicked instincts of frightened animals. Many others were kept in line only by loyalty to comrades (who were usually from their home towns) and fear of censure if they showed cowardice. Of the outmoded tactics employed, most were attempts to maintain some semblance of order and discipline in a world suddenly gone mad. Unfortunately, these attempts were fatal for too many of those involved.

Whatever the reasons, both sides continued to conduct set-piece battles according to Napoleonic tactics long after it became apparent that such tactics were hopelessly ineffective. This blundering can be excused in the war's first year, and perhaps even the second, but to go on into the third and fourth years of the conflict, especially when the bloody results in grievous injury and death were so painfully obvious, is hard to swallow.

Lists and Numbers

History has a tendency to compress and simplify events as they recede in time, and the Civil War is no exception, despite its critical importance as the seminal event of American experience over our nearly two and a half centuries. As more time passes, the War of the Rebellion (as it was called in official records) is reduced to a set of lists:

The famous generals — Lee, Grant, McClellan, Jackson, Hooker, Hood, Hill (2), Johnston (2), Longstreet, Sherman, Beauregard, Burnside, Bragg, Meade, Pickett, Sheridan, Stuart, Forrest, Thomas, etc.

The famous battles — First Bull Run, the Seven Days, Shiloh, Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, Antietam, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Chancellorsville, Vicksburg, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Cold Harbor, Lookout Mountain, Petersburg, Nashville and Franklin.

The killing grounds — Bloody Lane, Bloody Angle, Devil's Den, Dunker's Church, the Cornfield, the Wheatfield, the Hornet's Nest, the Peach Orchard, Little Round Top, Cemetery Hill, Marye's Heights, Lookout Mountain, and Cemetery Ridge.

Such lists are inevitable, but represent an injustice nonetheless. They give no clue as to the immensity of the Civil War in its awful reality, and they diminish the cost in human suffering. Consider the actual numbers: More than 600,000 dead and wounded, which was roughly one out of every 25 men in the entire country. 26,000 in one day at Antietam, 51,000 in three days at Gettysburg, 7,000 in 45 minutes at Cold Harbor.

Almost no one anticipated such casualties at the beginning of the war. They were inconceivable. The overwhelming majority of Americans on both sides believed

that the conflict would be brief and relatively bloodless. One notable exception was Union general William T. Sherman.

Sherman was one of very few Americans, including most of his colleagues in the pre-war army, who foresaw accurately that the conflict would be a long, drawn-out, and extremely bloody affair. In the first year of the war, a comment Sherman made about the number of Union soldiers he felt would be required to end resistance in the western theatre — namely, an army of 200,000 men — found its way into public newspapers. His opinion so scandalized popular beliefs of a quick and easy victory over the south that Sherman was considered to have lost his faculties and was temporarily removed from command. It did not take long, however, for his superiors to invite him back.

Sherman believed that exhausting the resources and breaking the will of the enemy populace was as necessary as defeating their armies. In 1864 his marauding western army cut a 50-mile swath of destruction through Georgia and both Carolinas, sacking the countryside by consuming or burning everything in its path—farms, cities, railroads, bridges. Sherman's "bummers" were like a plague of locusts devouring the heartland of the south. That campaign earned his name enduring hatred from generations of southerners for a full century after. The March to the Sea is often cited as the first example of the modern concept of "total war," although Sherman's version was mild compared to what would come later.

Four Unforgivable Blunders

Of the thousands of combat engagements in the Civil War, each with its own true stories of extraordinary heroism and heart-rending tragedy, four stand out as stunning examples of exercises in futility: Fredericksburg in December, 1862; the third day at Gettysburg in July, 1863; Cold Harbor in June, 1864; and Franklin in November, 1864. All four of these major battles unfolded in set-piece fashion, with thousands of attacking troops marching in parade-ground pomp and circumstance across open ground toward well-entrenched defenders.

In the mountain of literature published about the Civil War since its end — official records, personal memoirs, angry accusations, fanatical polemics, apologist rationalizations, sentimental recollections, mythologized half-truths, objective statistics, standard histories, and revisionist revelations — an attitude that surfaces repeatedly is that of the presumed superiority of southern generals, and, to a lesser but still marked extent, of Rebel soldiers over their Union counterparts. Something about the "Lost Cause" has inspired many authors to praise, if not the outright genius, at least the supposedly greater competence of the Confederate armies on the battlefield.

And yet, two of these four doomed assaults were by Confederate armies. Descriptions in some history books of the two Union attacks are harshly critical, with references to inept commanders (Fredericksburg) or brutal insensitivity (Cold Harbor), while the similar Confederate attacks at Gettysburg and Franklin are painted with more sentimental brushstrokes in the bright colors of exemplary valor and steadfast courage. The fact is, however, that all four assaults were foolhardy and suicidal, ordered by commanders on both sides who had clearly lost their grasp of reality. And, however valorous soldiers in both blue and butternut may have been, those killed were no less dead for their dutiful courage.

Fredericksburg

By December of 1862, George McClellan had been relieved of command (again) of the Army of the Potomac after having failed to follow up his dubious success at Antietam the previous September. He had been replaced by Ambrose Burnside, arguably the least competent choice for the job. Burnside himself felt unqualified to lead the army, and his misgivings drifted down into the ranks. Even so, Burnside's plan for getting at Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was sound, all things considered, and might have been successful, if not for bungling in the quartermaster's office.

The pontoon boats Burnside had ordered to bridge the Rappahannock River had turned out to be too long to fit on the wagons procured to take them to their train transports. The subsequent delay in their arrival forced the reluctant commander to spend valuable time searching for other means to get his 116,000 Union soldiers across the river and into Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he intended to occupy the hillside behind the town and force Lee into a fight. The delay proved fatal. Lee occupied the town during the interim, and the bulk of his 78,000 Confederates were entrenched on the crest of that sloping plain, called Marye's Heights, by the time Burnside's Union army finally managed the river crossing. Confederate Chief of Artillery, Colonel Porter Alexander, was so confident in the placement of his cannon that he said, "*Not a chicken could live on that field when we open on it.*"

Had Burnside been more self-assured, he might have admitted that his plan had gone sour and not attacked at all, since he had entirely lost the advantage, but winter was setting in, and Burnside felt he could not go into winter encampment without first proving himself in a major engagement. There is a fatal inevitability to the mass movements of troops and materiel in preparation for a battle. Plans have a life of their own, however much they may fly in the face of common sense. Once set in motion, the wheels of the military machine grind toward an inexorable climax, and even worried generals who see their advantage slipping away are often helpless to stop the inevitable momentum. Canceling an attack after the momentum of weeks or months of preparation is psychologically more difficult than the fear of imminent defeat. Maintaining the morale of the army is sometimes offered as an excuse, but the fighting spirit of living soldiers can be rejuvenated, whereas that of dead ones cannot. The history of war is littered with generals who should have withdrawn but didn't, as well as the bodies of soldiers sacrificed by their refusal to face facts.

The attack Burnside ordered on December 13th was a study in futility. Union columns advanced up the wide slope in parade ground precision, bayonets gleaming, and marched right into the teeth of the guns arrayed against them. Artillery and musket volleys decimated the Union ranks. The attack went on all day, as regiment after regiment stepped over and around the ever-increasing dead and wounded, many of whom clutched at the trousers of passing soldiers in a vain attempt to keep their comrades from entering the meatgrinder. Few Union soldiers ever reached the Confederate rifle pits. Miraculously, the southern line was breached at one point, but only for a short time. Watching this spectacle of destruction, Robert E. Lee was moved to utter the famous quote: "*It is well that war is so terrible, lest we grow too fond of it.*"

Burnside's reaction is less famous. Throughout the night of the 14th, with Union soldiers — both alive and dead — pinned down on the blood-soaked blue carpet of the hillside, the cries of the wounded among the 12,600 Federal casualties (compared to only 5,400 for the Confederates) were so plaintive that Burnside was heard to sob repeatedly: "*Those men upon the ground! Those men, those men, those men!*" His grief, however heartfelt, did not deter his intention of resuming the attack the next day. Thankfully, his staff officers convinced him otherwise, and Lord knows how many thousands more Union troops were spared.

In his official report, and with classic military spin doctoring, Burnside later wrote, "*The courage and heroism displayed by the army at the Battle of Fredericksburg has not been excelled during the war, and the memories of the brave officers and men who fell on that field will ever be cherished and honored by a grateful country.*" Grateful? Why? Because they perished needlessly, and to no gain whatsoever? So much for heroism.

Gettysburg

On July 3rd, 1863, the third and climactic day at Gettysburg, Lee ordered Longstreet's Corps on what has become the most well-known assault in the Civil War, misnamed Pickett's Charge. In the first day of the battle, Lee's Confederates had been stalled by a small brigade of stalwart Union cavalry long enough to allow the arrival in the nick of time of a corps of commander George Meade's Federal infantry, which were then nearly routed, pushed back through the town of Gettysburg and into a defensive position on the crest of a long, fishhook-shaped rise called Cemetery Ridge. On the second day, Lee attacked both Union flanks and came within a hair's breadth of breaching the defenses and getting into the Union rear, which would have spelled disaster for Meade. Though the fighting was desperate all along the line, only sacrificial heroism on the part of certain critically-placed Yankee regiments (the 1st Minnesota at the ridge and Joshua Chamberlain's 20th Maine on Little Round Top) saved the day.

After nearly winning the battle on two successive days and testing both flanks of the Union defensive line, Lee chose to assault the Federal center on that fateful third day. This was Fredericksburg all over again — the roles were reversed, but the result was the same. 12,000 fresh Confederate troops attacked by marching for a mile across an open, undulating plain, in full view of their foes. Union soldiers dug in on the ridge later described the southern advance in almost religious terms. Their recollections praised the Confederates for the discipline of their formations, noting that the advance was glorious and awe-inspiring, with thousands of Rebels marching silently in wide columns, muskets at the shoulders, bayonets gleaming in the sun.

Once in range, however, the respect and awe of the Union soldiers did not prevent them from decimating the Confederate ranks. By the time they finally approached the Union rifle pits, the Confederates had already lost one-third of their number to withering cannon fire and virtual hailstorms of musket volleys. As at Fredericksburg, the defensive lines were momentarily breached at one point, but the attack was decisively repulsed, leaving half the Rebels to retreat that same long mile back, while the other half lay pitifully strewn across the field. The north had finally won its great victory, and the south would never recover.

Some historians have speculated that Lee suffered a mild heart attack during the first or second day of the battle, and that this physical crisis diminished his

faculties. While Lee's health was certainly failing from the agonizing responsibilities of command (he would die only four years after the war's end), we need not attribute his decision to a medical emergency. Lee's blood was up, and he wanted to get at "those people" in blue on the ridge. Longstreet had argued, even pleaded, with Lee to not fight the battle at all, but to move around the Union flank into a defensible position that would force the Federals into the disadvantage of attack. Unfortunately, Lee was unmoved by this conspicuously wise counsel. Though justifiably famous for his brilliant defensive maneuvers, Lee had failed to grasp the fundamental lesson of his own successes, namely, that massed attacks were a Napoleonic anachronism. Temperament and training won out over reason and common sense.

My best guess is that the real culprit at Gettysburg was Lee's faith in the invincibility of the Army of Northern Virginia. Having achieved one improbable victory after another, usually against superior numbers and often in dire circumstances, Lee had come to believe that his troops could perform miracles. Feeling so close to a victory that would turn the tide of the war, open the way to capture Washington, D.C., and win the crucial support of the British, Lee hoped for one more culminating miracle. His dream was shattered, not by any lack of inspiration or failure of courage on the part of Rebel soldiers, but by the deadly, massed firepower of Federal guns.

Cold Harbor

Cold Harbor, the abortive battle that earned Union commander Ulysses S. Grant the nickname "The Butcher," was one of the most egregious examples of outmoded, suicidal tactics defeated by overwhelming firepower. While chasing Lee's army in the summer campaign of 1864 following bloodbaths in The Wilderness and at Spotsylvania Courthouse, Grant had tried once again to outflank Lee, but he got to Cold Harbor a single day late. Lee's men had again arrived first and spent that one critical day digging into an impregnable defensive position of earthworks, so that Grant could do nothing but hurl his army at the well-entrenched southerners.

But why? Why attack at all?

Yes, Grant was committed to attacking Lee wherever he could. And yes, he was resigned to a war of attrition. Grant had concluded, perhaps rightly, that the only way to end the war was to destroy Lee's army, and, since Lee had fewer men and virtually no replacements, Grant was willing to sacrifice two of his own replaceable soldiers for one of Lee's.

But this was 1864, more than three years into the war. Hard experience on both sides had shown the utter futility of attacking strongly fortified defensive entrenchments. Attrition cannot be achieved by suicide. On the night before the assault at Cold Harbor, thousands of Grant's soldiers pinned nametags on their uniforms. They were certain that they would be killed the next morning and wanted their bodies to be identifiable. If common soldiers recognized the hopelessness of their situation, why didn't Grant and his general staff realize it? Were they idiots or madmen?

The next morning, Grant ordered the attack. Wave after wave of Union columns marched toward the Rebel earthworks and were mowed down by scathing volleys of fire like wheat before the scythe. One Confederate soldier later wrote

that he and his comrades fired until their musket barrels were red hot. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

4,000 Union soldiers were casualties in the first 8 minutes. After 45 minutes, 7,000 had been killed, wounded, or captured (compared to only 1,200 southern casualties). Even so, Grant pressed the attack for four more hours before calling off the debacle. All told, Grant lost 12,000 men, Lee 5,000. Decades later, Grant admitted in his memoirs that Cold Harbor was a mistake, the one assault of the war that he regretted ordering.

Franklin

For senseless carnage, no major battle in the Civil War eclipses what occurred at Franklin, Tennessee, in December, 1864. Here the roles were reversed.

Confederate commander John Bell Hood, in a fit of pique designed to discipline certain of his subordinate officers and (as he said) "improve the morale" of his army, ordered a full assault by his 27,000 men across two miles of open ground toward 28,000 well-entrenched Union soldiers whose defenses were basically impregnable. Hood was, by all accounts, a gallant soldier — he had lost an arm at Gettysburg — but he was a miserable general. Obsessively devoted to the offensive and disdainful of caution, Hood was ill-tempered, stubborn, and none too bright. Horrified pleas by subordinate staff officers imploring Hood not to make the doomed charge at Franklin fell on deaf ears. Union commander John Schofield was frankly astonished that Hood would even consider an assault.

Until recently, the Battle of Franklin was almost forgotten, obscured by the fame of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg, and remembered if at all only as a mere footnote in the western theatre as the Civil War ground to its end. The battlefield at Gettysburg is now a revered National Park; the battlefield at Franklin is now a parking lot and shopping mall. But Franklin was worse than Gettysburg, infinitely more shocking in its brutality and terror. Pickett's Charge was a single assault, and the fighting was over in less than an hour. At Franklin, there were 17 separate attacks, one after another after another, in a frenzied maelstrom that lasted five solid hours. The Rebels kept coming, shattering themselves against the Union lines like ocean waves crashing against a solid stone cliff.

Observers reported that the carnage in front of the Federal breastworks was simply indescribable, with corpses piled up like cord wood. In his poignant and poetic memoir — *Company Aytch* — southern private Sam Watkins wrote of the tragic encounter: "*The death-angel was there to gather its last harvest. It was the grand coronation of death.*" When the Battle of Franklin was over at last, more than 6,000 Confederates lay dead or wounded, including 12 generals, versus 2,000 Yankee casualties.

What began as haphazard incompetence in strategy and tactics at First Bull Run culminated almost four years later with the crowning incompetence of Franklin, which was all the more tragic because of the unforgivable failure and outright refusal of Civil War commanders to learn from experience.

Attrition

As the first modern war, the American Civil War attracted world attention, in large part because of the many new and revolutionary weapons technologies that were introduced in that conflict. It was, however, but a sneak preview of what

was to come. Despite the unexpectedly high cost in bloodshed, our rebellion paled in both weaponry and brutality compared to the two World Wars of the next century that would devastate Europe and Asia.

The industrial development of increased killing power in new weapons that made such significant strides in the mid-19th century had, by that century's end, accelerated to a truly dizzying pace. In the Gilded Age of capitalism, arms design and manufacturing had become a dominant force in world commerce. Nationalism and militarism were moving hand in hand toward an apocalyptic crescendo.

And yet, despite all the clear warning signals, civilization entered the 20th century with an ebullient optimism. Most of those among privileged classes in industrially developed nations felt that the "gifts" of modern technology would dramatically improve the quality of life, and that we were surely on the verge of a golden age of enlightened societies. Within a brief two decades, however, that optimism turned to horror and despair as civilization collapsed into barbarism on a scale never before witnessed in the whole of known human history.

Modern war — which is, in truth, total war — eroded cherished myths of individuality and valor. It also brought an end to clear victory in specific battles as a decisive factor. Battles lost their meaning, as did the very notion of victory, in favor of endless, ongoing campaigns of sheer endurance, consuming millions of lives and all that industry could produce. As Grant and Sherman foresaw in the American Civil War, modern warfare was about attrition, but neither of those generals could have imagined the extremes to which the policy of attrition would extend in the two World Wars of the 20th century.

To simply defeat an enemy was no longer sufficient. Instead, the foe had to be used up, exhausted, drained of the very means and will to wage war. That decimation applied not only to soldiers on the battlefield, but necessarily to civilians on the home front as well. This expanded definition of combatants emerged as a direct result of the exponentially increased killing power of modern weapons coupled with the philosophical, political, and economic realities of the 20th century, all of which set a torch to old hatreds that stretched back into antiquity.

Attrition as the main goal of modern war began with the destruction of massive armies in World War I, and it mushroomed into the near-total destruction of whole populations in World War II. First we slew an entire generation of European boys, then, unsatisfied with our limited handiwork, we moved on to massacre literally anyone our weapons could reach.

The Somme

In 1916, during the third year of World War I, France and Germany were already in shock over the apocalyptic slaughter on the Western Front: Luxembourg, Belgium, The Marne, First Ypres, Soissons, Second Ypres, Artois, Champagne, and Verdun. British armies had participated in numerous of these campaigns, but their losses had been slightly less appalling (relatively speaking) than those of the French and Germans, who had borne the brunt of the butchery after the Schlieffen Plan had stalled mere miles from Paris. Despite pouring millions of men into the grisly maw of trench warfare, neither side had been able to break the stalemate.

Now it was Britain's turn at The Somme. Determined to force a breakthrough, British heavy artillery pounded the German front lines with a constant bombardment that lasted ten solid days, expending in the final hour alone a staggering 250,000 shells. This unprecedented artillery barrage was intended to pulverize the German trenches and pave the way for a massive infantry attack to follow. What the British failed to anticipate in their dimwitted overconfidence, however, was how well the Germans were adapting to the harsh conditions of modern war.

The German military had already begun to learn the lessons about the futility of mass assaults against modern weaponry. Even as early as 1916, they were restructuring their infantry into small rifle units of 10-15 men, each with a machine gun crew as its centerpiece. These "stormtroops" were led by lower-level officers specially retrained to exercise independent decisions on the fly and given considerably more latitude of judgment in their movements. No longer would German soldiers attack in static or massed formations. Each squad of soldiers would have serious firepower, a novel idea now enshrined in all 21st-century armies for infantry deployment.

In addition, the Germans had invested much more thought and energy than either the British or French in defense-in-depth through multiple trench line fortifications that were both horizontal and vertical. Not only did the Germans have three successive lines of trenches, but they tunneled deep under each line like ant colonies. (The Viet Cong would later use an even more elaborate system of defensive tunnels to great effect in Vietnam.)

As the British artillery barrage began, the Germans simply retreated down into underground dug-outs and concrete-lined bombproof shelters constructed 50 feet beneath their front trench lines. From there, German soldiers waited out the shelling, in extreme discomfort admittedly, but at least in relative safety.

When the artillery shelling ended and 120,000 British infantry prepared to climb out of their trenches and advance in the first waves across No Man's Land toward the German barbed wire, British officers reiterated field commander Sir Douglas Haig's order to their troops that the soldiers should walk, not run, toward the German lines. Weighed down with 60-pound packs, British infantry companies were instructed to advance in formation, with an interval of five yards between each man along the 15-mile front — not quite the shoulder-to-shoulder formations of the American Civil War, but even more suicidal, considering the firepower they faced. In the meantime, German defenders had taken up positions again in their forward trenches and were waiting with machine guns ready.

The result was catastrophic. Whole battalions of British Tommies were mowed down by German machine gunners. Entire regiments were virtually annihilated, some actually to the last man. On that first morning of the campaign, the British suffered 58,000 casualties, with 20,000 killed outright.

The extent to which the dreadful illusions of glory and valor still infected the minds of the commanders (as well as the dutiful obedience of regular soldiers) is illustrated in the following passage written by General Rees of the British 94th Infantry Brigade. From the safety of the English trenches, he described the attack by his men on that fateful day:

They advanced in line after line, dressed as if on parade, and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine-gun and rifle fire that finally wiped them out. I saw the lines which advanced in such admirable order melting away under the fire. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks, or attempted to come back. I have never seen, I would never have imagined, such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination. The reports I have had from the very few survivors of this marvelous advance bear out what I saw with my own eyes, viz, that hardly a man of ours got to the German front line.

The Somme Offensive lasted for five months, after which the total casualties on both sides numbered more than one million men. All told, the British gained less than six miles of territory.

The Madness

I am aware that my brief summary discounts numerous reasons for the Somme tragedy that have been researched and detailed in many volumes of war history — the need for a major British offensive to relieve pressure from the French armies at Verdun, the ill-fated decision to spread the artillery barrage evenly across the entire 15-mile front rather than concentrate British cannons on specific areas of German weakness, as well as the psychological need for optimism (not merely unstated, but officially ordered) that prevented better-informed junior officers from expressing to more stodgy senior staff their shock and horror at a plan that was clearly suicidal and destined to fail.

Tactical blunders also loomed large at the Somme. The British general staff felt that their infantry, composed not of professional soldiers but raw recruits and conscripts, was neither sufficiently well-trained nor experienced enough to handle anything more than a simple parade march toward the German lines. And a last-minute compromise demanded by the French delayed the push-off of British troops from their trenches by two full hours, until 7:30 a.m. — long after the sunrise had burned off the morning fog and haze that would have obscured the battlefield and given those doomed troops a better chance of making it across No Man's Land in some force.

These and other factors leave the impression that reasonable men did the best they could in circumstances that did not favor humane decisions and went badly awry to boot. But however true such arguments may be, they leave me emotionally unsatisfied. From my admittedly distant and removed vantage point, the whole campaign was not merely ill-conceived, but downright deranged.

To support my contention, I need only point out that the basic strategy of the Somme offensive was for the artillery bombardment to clear the way for British infantry to capture and secure wide breeches along the German lines, which would then be exploited by sending divisions of cavalry through those openings to charge unimpeded into the German rear.

CAVALRY, for God's sake! This was Sir Douglas Haig's grand scheme. 70 years after the last great (and failed) British cavalry charge — the 13th Hussars at Balaklava, which Tennyson's poem made famous as "The Charge of the Light Brigade" — and in a modern age of devastating automatic weapons and hellish artillery whose killing power was nearly unlimited, this imbecile Haig actually

believed that he could win a glorious victory with his "ace in the hole" — men on horseback armed with sabers!

I exaggerate, of course. In fact, these divisions of mounted infantry would have carried slung rifles and been accompanied by horse-drawn small artillery pieces and wagons with machine guns. But the essential point remains. Haig's three-phase plan lurched further back in time by about 50 years with each successive phase. First modern artillery (the present state of the art), then a massed infantry assault (Civil War era), and then the *coup de grace* — horse-mounted cavalry (Waterloo era). The overwhelming, anachronistic stupidity of this idea is so monstrous as to be inconceivable. To consider this strategy anything more than the insane ravings of a lunatic is to confer upon it a totally false and undeserved dignity.

Even if Haig's plan had worked perfectly (an absurd thought in itself, given the inevitable chaos and confusion of battle, which Clausewitz called the "fog of war"), those cavalry divisions set to charge through the breach would have encountered multiple lines of German barbed wire and trenches that stretched for ten miles into the rear, all the way to the fail-safe point, the Hindenburg Line. Had the British infantry that were to open up the breach not been slaughtered first, the waiting cavalry surely would have suffered the same fate.

It is no mere irony that Sir Douglas Haig was trained at Sandhurst as a cavalryman. He lived in a dream, part fixated experience, part mythic sentiment, and part pure delusion. Haig remains a standout among the worst examples of the "upper-class British twit," one of those insufferable buffoons weaned on the cricket fields of Eaton. For his folly at the Somme and again the following year at Passchendaele, more than a million British boys were killed or maimed, along with another million of their German foes. That someone like Haig was given the authority to order such mass murder, and willfully exercised it against the advice of saner counsel, is inexcusable.

But such nightmares can't be blamed solely on any particular individual. No one's shoulders are broad enough to bear such a burden. The entire institutional apparatus of the commercial, military, and political machineries of the time were responsible for creating this vortex of death, and whole nations of people went along for the awful ride, like sheep in the slaughter-pen.

For king and country in Britain. For the honor of France. For the fatherland in Germany. For the flag and apple pie in America. For the emperor in Japan. For mother Russia. The bloodlust of patriotism is a dark stain on the pages of modern history.

Implications

The 600,000 casualties of the American Civil War were a mere prelude to what was to come in the 20th century, when technological advances in weaponry and burgeoning populations allowed us to kill each other with an abandon that passes all reason.

If we total the number of soldiers and civilians killed in wars of the 20th century (world wars, regional wars, local wars, civil wars, undeclared wars, etc.) and then, for good measure, add the willful murders by governments (which represent a kind of ersatz war) in purges, pogroms, ethnic cleansings, elimination

of political dissidents, etc., the very conservative figure we end up with is somewhere in excess of 100,000,000 dead — well above, in fact, by some counts half again more than that.

And this figure omits unintended atrocities, such as the 10 million who perished in the Soviet Union during the Five-Year Plans of the 1930s, or the estimated 30 million who died of starvation in China during Chairman Mao's ill-fated Great Leap Forward during the 1960s. The total of 100+ million represents only organized, intentional killing. For a sobering perspective, this means that roughly one out of every 35 people who lived and died in the 20th century were killed by other human beings.

We are all products of the times in which we live. Human attitudes and beliefs adapt themselves almost instantly and with stunning if ersatz pragmatism to the milieu in which we find ourselves. What was unthinkable and abhorrent in one century can become accepted as commonplace in the next. Sanity is disturbingly relative. And so we have adjusted to the insanity of modern war. We don't register the horror because we are numbed to it. Modern war has become the water around the fish, the invisible ether through which we all travel.

A great deal can be said, I believe, for the idea that human beings were caught up in the mass insanity of the past two centuries, and that most went through it without open protest or civil disobedience because they saw no realistic alternative. Such bargains with the devil are entered into unknowingly, one step at a time. When the full horror is finally revealed, it's too late to go back. In the same way that Thomas Jefferson privately disapproved of the practice of slave-owning but bent to the economic and racial winds of his times, so many men throughout history have dutifully gone to war as soldiers and carried out their orders, no matter how gruesome to others or themselves, not with any great gusto, but rather, with resignation, finding no viable options for any other course.

Another factor not to be overlooked is the everpresent contradiction between human genius and human incompetence. We are incredibly smart, but, in the very next breath, unbelievably stupid. For all our brilliance as a species, our uncanny ability to manipulate reality in the most amazing ways, we have proven ourselves unable to reliably distinguish fact from fiction. By and large, humans prefer illusion to reality. Our genius lies in our ability to learn; our incompetence, however, lies in the complexities of selective unlearning. Memory is a two-edged sword. Those who forget the past may indeed be doomed to repeat it, but those who fixate on the past and mistake it for the present are equally out of touch. Dreams supplant realities. Finally, it's all Hollywood, and in war, a Disneyland of Death.

In individuals, this contradiction is easy to see. The most intelligent, wise, and loving people I've ever known are not immune from incompetence or fantasy. Just about the time I've convinced myself that these wonderful people are gods who can do no wrong, they make an utterly obvious mistake — they do something patently idiotic, or they fall prey to a lurking illusion or self-deception, or they simply crumble from mastery into helplessness. We seem inherently to carry these falls from grace within us as an endless supply of banana peels on which we can be counted to slip in both comic and tragic pratfalls. I laugh at some of my own tumbles. Others are not so goddamned funny.

If I am all too aware of the indignity of my own incompetence and can see the same amply demonstrated in individuals all around me, why should I expect nations and cultures to be any different? I suppose I must believe that the averaging effect of the collective will somehow neutralizes the contradictions between individual brilliance and stupidity, that in the balance we should emerge with a modest overall competence, somewhat like Goldilocks settling on Baby Bear's porridge — not too hot, not too cold, but just right.

The ironic truth, of course, is that nothing cancels out. The whole of society selectively amplifies both the talents and the idiocy distributed among its individual human parts. Our collective genius and our collective madness highlight rather than neutralize each other. This is the Peter Principle in action on a massive scale — we rise by our genius until we reach the level of our own incompetence. In war, this always leads to tragic consequences.

I am a realist more than a pacifist. I acknowledge that the conflict of war is inevitable at this stage of human and cultural evolution, if for no other reason than to prevent despots and their minions from ruining life for everyone else on the planet. I understand that duty and discipline are necessary in soldiering, that suffering and death are fundamental outcomes of battle, and that human errors are unavoidable in the planning and execution of all endeavors, most of all in warfare.

So, knowing all this and more, why then do I continue to be obsessed and horrified by the realities of war? The blunders and stupidities of modern war are deeply unsettling to me, not so much because I don't understand their causes, but rather because the scale of their repercussions in human pain, suffering, and death have become so massive in our time that my heart is overwhelmed with grief.

Our penchant for destruction seems unlimited. Not content to murder each other, we have set out on a path that now threatens every other living species on this planet (which are vanishing at astonishing rates of extinction). We may yet destroy even the ability of the earth to support life. For me, the agonies of modern war represent a terrible window into the collective hourglass, showing us how quickly time is running out for humanity. We survived our long infancy, but our graduation out of deranged adolescence now appears dicey at best.

Even without war, human life is full of suffering — overflowing with it, actually, and often overwhelmed by it. Any aspect of real life can become an imprisoning nightmare: cruel families, unrequited or broken romances, loveless or hateful marriages, betrayals in friendships, mistreatment by strangers, lack of money, the drudgery of meaningless work, ill health, lies, deceptions, all manner of inward mental and emotional torment, etc., etc. Yes, pleasures do abound, both in dreams and in reality, but these are often only fleeting distractions from life's difficulties. For many, but especially for those who survive past the bloom of youth, disappointment, disillusionment, and loss are increasing themes. Followed by death. No matter how much we may pose or propagandize for life as a beautiful journey, the hard truth is that beneath the superficial flow of day-to-day normalcy run darker, more disturbing currents.

Modern war is salt in the wound of life. It takes the whimpers of commonplace suffering and amplifies them into a collective scream. The cruelty of human

beings to each other is banal in ordinary life, but in modern war that cruelty is driven to unimaginable depths, not only for those who are killed, obviously, but for the survivors as well. The humiliation and degradation live on to twist in the wind and threaten the very future of our species.

I hate coming off here as one of those old farts walking around with a sign that says, "The End is Near." I would prefer that the obvious pessimism of this essay were merely the result of my having lost the protective filters that normally shield us from life's unavoidable tragedies, and I sincerely hope that my fears for our collective future prove to be unfounded.

For the most part, the inmates have always run the asylum in human affairs. I worry not so much that we are any more insane now than we were earlier in history (although that case can be argued), but, instead, that the bureaucracy of madness has grown so far-reaching, so banal, and so insidious that civilization itself can no longer withstand the tides of violence begetting more violence in increasingly devastating waves, to the point of obliterating what precious little sanctuary our sweet asylum once provided.

