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ETCETERAS . . .

On “Winning the War”

◆

ROBERT HIGGS

With fire and sword the country round
Was wasted far and wide,
And many a childing mother then,
And new-born baby died;
But things like that, you know, must be
At every famous victory.

—Robert Southey (1774–1843), “The Battle of Blenheim”

General Thomas Power, commander in chief of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) from 1957 to 1964 and director of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff from 1960 to 1964, ranked near the top of the U.S. armed forces waging the Cold War. An ardent warrior, he did not subscribe to the Aristotelian maxim of moderation in all things. In 1960, while being briefed on counterforce strategy, he reacted petulantly to the idea of exercising restraint in the conduct of nuclear war: “Restraint!” he retorted. “Why are you so concerned with saving *their* lives? The whole idea is to *kill* the bastards. . . . Look. At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win!” (qtd. in Kaplan [1983] 1991, 246). Everyone who knew Power seems to have thought he was crazy.

Even the man he replaced as SAC commander, General Curtis LeMay, regarded him as unstable—and everybody knew that LeMay himself was, as *Dr. Strangelove’s* Group Captain Lionel Mandrake would have put it, “as mad as a bloody March hare.” After LeMay left his command at SAC, he became vice chief of staff of the air force in 1957 and chief of staff in 1961. He is most often remembered as a tireless advocate of an all-out, nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union and its allies, and as the most likely

inspiration for General Buck Turgidson in *Strangelove*. Either Power or LeMay might have served as a model for the *Strangelove* character General Jack D. Ripper, whose own nuclear first strike on the Ruskies came straight out of the LeMay-Power playbook.

It is chilling to recall that such men once held—and may still hold—the fate of the world in their hot hands. In Power’s day, heaven be thanked, the civilian leadership had slightly more sense than the military leadership, but in more recent times that relationship seems to have been reversed, and now men such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and their zealous, bloodthirsty subordinates vividly attest to F.A. Hayek’s observation that “the worst get on top.”

Winning

Whatever else one might say about our glorious leaders throughout our history, it must be admitted that they have had, just as the current gang claims to have, a dedication to “winning” the wars they set out to fight. In his 2006 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush spoke repeatedly of “victory,” especially in the ongoing “long war” that “we did nothing to invite” against terrorists who espouse “radical Islam.” Undismayed by the fresh carnage and further devastation that each new day brings to the people of Iraq, the president assured his listeners that “[w]e’re on the offensive in Iraq, with a clear plan for victory . . . [W]e are in this fight to win, and we are winning.”¹ Indeed, winning a war strikes most people as a splendid idea until they stop to think about it.

Given an option to fight and win a war à la Thomas Power, however, with just two Americans and one Russian (Iraqi, Iranian, Chinese, or other foreign devil du jour) left alive at the end, sane people recoil. Such “winning” seems all too clearly absurd. As we back away from this *reductio ad absurdum* to consider less extreme conceptions of “winning the war,” a great deal of the senselessness continues to cling to the notion as long as we insist on an honest account of what actual war and actual winning involve.

The major reason for people’s confusion on this account probably pertains to their reification or anthropomorphization of the collectives—the clans, tribes, nation-states, or coalitions of such groups—whose violent conflict defines the war. Lost in the fog of war-related thought is the concrete, unique, individual person. Hardly anyone seems capable of talking about war except by linguistically marshaling such collectivistic globs as *we*, *us*, and *our* in opposition to *they*, *them*, and *their*. These flights of fight-fancy always pit our glob against their glob, with ours invariably prettied up as the good against the bad, the free men against the enslavers, the believers against the infidels, and so forth—on one side God’s chosen, on the other side the demons of hell.²

1. Speech available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/01/20060131-10.html>.

2. Vice President Henry A. Wallace, characterizing World War II as “a fight between a free world and a slave world,” declared: “We shall cleanse the plague spot of Europe, which is Hitler’s Germany, and with it the hellhole of Asia—Japan. No compromise with Satan is possible.” One ought to bear in mind, however, that Wallace also said, “The object of this war is to make sure that everybody in the world has the privilege of drinking a quart of milk a day” (qtd. in Chamberlin 1953, 498–99).

Of course, which is which depends entirely on the side that people happen to find themselves on, usually as a result of some morally irrelevant contingency such as birthplace, family migration, or a line that distant diplomats once drew on a map (de Jasay 1998; Calhoun 2000). More than fifty years ago, sociologist George A. Lundberg observed that despite "the cavalier fashion in which 'statesmen' revise boundaries, abolish existing nations, and establish new ones, . . . the demarcations thus arrived at thereupon become sacred boundaries, the violation of which constitutes 'aggression,' an infringement on people's 'freedom'" (1953, 581). It's almost as if human beings clamored to slay one another on behalf of little more than historical accidents and persistent myths. French philosopher Ernest Renan aptly characterized a nation as "a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbors" (qtd. in Bronner 1999).

A widespread inclination to think in terms of the group rather than in terms of the distinct individuals who compose it plays directly into the hands of violent, power-hungry leaders. Without that popular inclination, the leaders' capacity to wreak destruction would be reduced nearly to the vanishing point, but with it the sky's the limit—or maybe it's not the limit, now that space-based weapons are all the rage in the military-industrial-congressional complex. Nothing promotes the sacrifice of the individual to the alleged "greater good of the whole" as much as war does. On this ground, government leaders successfully levy confiscatory taxes, impose harsh regulations, seize private property, and even enslave their own country's citizens to serve as soldiers, to kill or be killed in hideous ways.

Sometimes, as in the aftermath of World War I, people have the wit to recognize, with the benefit of hindsight, that the alleged "greater good" for which so many individuals' lives have been sacrificed and so many individuals' wealth and well-being have been squandered actually consists of little more than their leaders' foolishness and vanity. On other occasions, however, people never come to that realization, preferring to live with a mythical justification of their losses. Even now, after sixty years have passed in which people have had ample opportunity to see through the official lies and cover-ups, the myth of World War II as "the good war" (in this country) or "the Great Patriotic War" (in Russia) remains robust.

Once memories of the War Between the States had faded, the mythologization of war came more easily to Americans because all our wars from the Spanish-American War on down to the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been fought on other people's soil. As the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) expressed it in "Fears in Solitude,"

Secure from actual warfare, we have loved
 To swell the war-whoop, passionate for war!
 Alas! for ages ignorant of all
 Its ghastlier workings, (famine or blue plague,
 Battle, or siege, or flight through wintry snows),
 We, this whole people, have been clamorous

For war and bloodshed; animating sports,
The which we pay for as a thing to talk of,
Spectators and not combatants!

No American can recall in sorrow and bitterness the wartime devastation of Philadelphia or Chicago because it never happened—devastation is what Americans dispense to the residents of Tokyo or Dresden or Fallujah. In an immensely important sense, our wars have long seemed to be, in their worst aspect, somebody else’s problem, something that happens “over there.”

If Ambrose Bierce could observe a century ago that “war is God’s way of teaching Americans geography,” one shudders to imagine what he might say today.³ Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan, Peleliu, Iwo Jima, Okinawa—in 1940, probably not one American in a hundred had ever heard of these remote places where tens of thousands of young American men and many more Japanese would soon lose their lives. Our good fortune in this regard has been real and important, but it ought not to blind us to the great variety of genuine losses that we have sustained notwithstanding our capacity to make all our wars since 1865—apart from the sporadic clashes between whites and Indians—take the form of “foreign wars.”⁴

For one thing, many Americans have gone “over there” and done some definite dirty work. Let’s be honest: war is always dirty work, no matter how hyped up we might get about its seeming necessity. In this regard, World War II, the so-called good war, might have been the dirtiest work of all. American forces abroad slaughtered not only multitudes of enemy soldiers, but also hundreds of thousands (maybe more) of noncombatants—men, women, and children, most notably in the terror bombing of German and Japanese cities.

Curtis LeMay had an important hand in this evil work as commander of the B-29 forces that laid waste to scores of Japanese cities. Speaking of his flyers’ devastation of Tokyo with incendiary bombs, he declared: “We knew we were going to kill a lot of women and kids when we burned that town. Had to be done” (qtd. in Lindqvist 2000, 109). Oh, did it really? Brigadier General Bonner Fellers, an aide to General Douglas MacArthur, called the March 10, 1945, raid on Tokyo “one of the most ruthless and barbaric killings of noncombatants in all history” (qtd. in Sato 2002). As a result of the U.S. air attacks on Japanese cities, by the end of July 1945 “civilian casualties exceeded 800,000, including 300,000 dead,” and more than 8 million people had been left homeless (Falk 1995, 1078). Unsated by this orgy of savagery, the Americans went on, completely unnecessarily, to annihilate scores of thousands of the hapless residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs.⁵

3. Bierce quotation available at: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Ambrose_Bierce.

4. U.S. wars during the twentieth century as well as the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have brought tremendous losses of life, liberties, and property to Americans in general. Having written elsewhere at great length about these losses (see, for example, Higgs 1987, 2004, 2005, 2006), I say nothing further about them here.

5. For a thorough debunking of claims for the military necessity of dropping the atomic bombs, see Raico 2001, 577-86.

These events were not losses for the Germans and the Japanese only. The men who carried out these barbarous acts also sacrificed their decency and a vital part of their humanity. War brings many of its participants to that tragic end. Only a deranged man can live complacently with the knowledge that he has committed such heinous acts. In greater or lesser degree, however, every war encompasses an enormous mass of such indecencies. Soldiers may excuse themselves on the ground that they are "just following orders" or, if they are especially naive, that they are acting heroically in defense of all that is good and great about their own country. Kept in combat long enough, however, nearly everyone who is not a natural-born killer becomes either psychologically disabled or absolutely cynical in a single-minded quest to survive (Grossman 1996, 43–50).

Government leaders and their blindly nationalistic followers invariably tolerate and even glorify many of the bestialities perpetrated during warfare and elevate the perpetrators to the status of heroes, but these ignoble rituals of apotheosis ring hollow when placed alongside the raw realities not only of the conduct of warfare, but of its typical outcome. A half-century ago, looking back on fifteen years of warfare and its aftermath, William Henry Chamberlin wrote, "It was absurd to believe that barbarous means would lead to civilized ends" (1953, 519).⁶ It is no less absurd today.

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6. Strange to say, Chamberlin later became a fanatical Cold Warrior. See Raimondo 2000, 75–76.

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Acknowledgments: Thanks to Michael Moore (no, not *that* Michael Moore, but the former editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*) for helping me track down the original source of the quotation from Thomas Power, and to Stephen Cox for permission to reuse material that appeared first, as part of a much longer article, in the April 2006 issue of *Liberty*.