

THE WAR *at* HOME

On VIOLENCE and VIGILANCE

by Nathan Schneider

The night of March 19th, 2003, I was alone in the lounge of my college dorm, watching the TV and waiting for bombs to begin falling on Baghdad. I was tired. I caught myself wishing it would get started already. I caught myself welcoming the idea that it would. That week I had been lending my voice to the last gasps of protest, such as they were: a rally on campus, a march to the federal building downtown, enough shouting to make my throat hurt, and carrying signs someone else made. Onlookers stared in bewilderment and drivers honked their horns in what could have been support or complaint. A month earlier, on February 15th, the largest mass protest in human history had taken place in cities all around the world. Millions of people had piled together in the half-human frenzy of crowds, yet the handful empowered to decide were unperturbed.

Slavoj Zizek summed up the Bush administration's cheerful confidence in the face of such dissent: "You see, this is what we are fighting for, so that what people are doing here—protesting against their government policy—will be possible also in Iraq!" We couldn't possibly shout loud enough. The logic of our protest collapsed on itself; the war against war only paved the road to war. Ever since, as each suicide bombing in Baghdad points back to the invasion of that night, those of us who hoped to prevent it have been left wondering why our outburst failed so fundamentally.

Not long after ten o'clock, the president appeared on the screen. He announced that an "attack of opportunity" had been made, a "decapitation strike" against Saddam Hussein. It failed, but ground forces soon crossed the border, and our bombs burst open over Baghdad.

That night, glued to the news, I became six again, enough to forget my grown-up, principled objections. The flashes began over a familiar alien city, with familiar precision weapons. Relief overcame me: surrender to a future unfolding, apparently, and also to an old habit. I knew the script like a movie I'd been watching all my life. The lines of George W. Bush's reasoning made perfect, necessary sense, though I wouldn't say so to anyone. I found myself wondering which planes were flying sorties that night, which bombs were falling and which divisions had crossed the border. What resistance did they encounter and what, this time, would count as victory? I can't remember for sure, but probably that night, as on many nights since, I fell asleep plotting my own campaign of "shock and awe" on the sheets and pillows: which planes to use, in which order, and where.

This is my earliest memory: I'm standing by the closet in my bedroom, putting on a white naval sailor suit. It has a blue collar and flared bottoms, innocent and pajama-like but signifying firepower. Light shines in from the window facing west, and there I am, as if on the deck of a mighty battleship. Vague enough to be unfalsifiable, it is the inaugural recollection of a boy gravitationally attracted to the shapes and forms of violence.

My parents did what they could to prevent my fascination. If not pacifists outright, they wanted no child of theirs, least of all the only one, involved with weaponry. They never played at battles with me. Once, while I was dressed in some military uniform or other and storming through the house making explosion sounds, my mother stopped me and sat me down with pictures of Civil War soldiers missing body parts in various horrific ways. For how long I'm not sure, the pictures stayed in a drawer next to the kitchen.

Though they haunted me and continue to haunt me, those images seemed only tangential to my interests. Hand-to-hand combat, splattering blood, big muscles, and other things that some kids dream of held no appeal. I never got into actual, physical fights. When one seemed imminent, I turned to what my mother had taught me. In the face of playground warfare, I'd start telling parables of the Buddha to my baffled friends. Or else I'd simply hide. When an epic battle broke out in my neighborhood against the brothers across the creek, I was satisfied to stay back and keep track of events by walkie-talkie. The more abstract the combat, the more I relished it.

It wasn't until a public ceremony on my father's fortieth birthday, after begging every way I could, that they gave me my first toy gun. Having bought a tuxedo for the occasion, my father started the party by gathering his closest friends and family, before the rest of the guests came. To each he gave an inscribed trophy, topped with a golden angel holding a wreath of victory over her head. The inscriptions, and the speeches with which he presented each prize, were full of the supercilious vocabulary that came out with his sense of humor. His speech for me invoked coming-of-age incantations and promises I had made to work harder at cleaning up my toys. With my trophy, I received the true prize of the evening: a beautiful lever-action, wood-and-metal sniper rifle, just my size. By the time the party began in earnest, I had changed from my red sweater and clip-on tie to a much more comfortable camouflage shirt and infantry helmet. The new weapon clung to my shoulder by its adjustable green strap.

The first was always the best. Every other toy gun I subsequently had was made of plastic. Though many took the form of more modern weapons—a 9mm semi-automatic pistol, an M16 assault rifle, a snub-nosed revolver with caps, a handful of grenades, plus various Star Trek phasers—nothing could compete with the realness of that rifle. And all the others, one way or another, eventually broke.

I memorized every airplane in the American arsenal from the piles of books by my bed. Many weekends I insisted my mother take me to the National Air and Space Museum across the Potomac in Washington, D.C., where I could commune with the ordnance dangling overhead. As an employee of the Smithsonian, she pulled strings to



get us special access behind the scenes of the museum. I got to sit in the bomb bay of the Enola Gay, from which Little Boy fell on Hiroshima in 1945.

On the way to the museum, we would pass the Pentagon and Washington's marble monuments to war. The Capitol stood in the backdrop. If I looked hard enough, could power be seen? Perhaps in the city's wide avenues or in the blind eye they cast on the horrific neighborhoods. Unlike Rome, a fortress on hills, we built D.C. in a swamp, as if all its wars would be distant ones.

There was only one time when I actually got to use a deadly weapon. It was the summer I went to a sleepaway camp where there was a rifle range. I signed up for shooting a couple of times. We used .22 caliber rifles with a satisfying bolt-action breech, like in a World War I movie. We fired at paper targets resting on haystacks until they were full of holes.

The monotony broke when, one day, one of the other kids found a wasp and put her in an empty cartridge box. A whole group of us became the firing squad for the creature's execution. After shooting nothing but paper and hay, we were finally taking advantage of the lethal powers in our possession. I aimed my hardest at that little box. At the end of the frenzy, we went to open it and see if our aim had found its mark.

It hadn't.

The wasp still squirmed, and though several limbs were gone, her soul very much remained in her body. One of the other boys finished her off the old-fashioned way, with the sole of his shoe. I returned to my tent feeling mixed up and didn't go shooting again.

I had trouble sleeping in those years and hated lying awake at night. Hours would pass, and in would creep the silence of the early morning. Eventually, I discovered a surefire strategy for lulling myself to sleep: imagining great battles playing out on my bed. These fantasies struck the perfect balance, familiar enough to let my mind relax but

engrossing enough that I wouldn't get distracted by something else. The basic scenario was always the same: a fortified base under assault. Sometimes the weapons were those the Greeks and Persians used at Marathon and sometimes ones that haven't been invented yet. I always tried for an inventive stratagem, like high-flying Dauntless dive bombers that sneaked around the Japanese Zero fighters at Midway. It was usually in the process of thinking of one that, at no single, certain time, I drifted from my murderous symphony into peaceful sleep.

These glimpses of violence in my childhood remained dreams, dreams that gobbled up reality. Thinking of a weapon's wonderful power would transport me out of body and memory, out of responsibility and place. It became a divine scepter, remaking the rules of logic in its own image and calling attention to itself above any of its effects. Inflicting brutality does not require brutal thoughts; it comes more naturally to us than that. This is true more than ever in our age of war at a distance, when a technician in the Nevada desert can maneuver a drone over Afghanistan and point its payload onto a suspect village she will never visit. But this magic is also an ancient one, making battle thinkable as the work of cultivated gentlemen, of Christians, or of anyone supposedly devoted to a life of benevolence. A weapon ushers in an alternate universe which from birth we are prepared, when called, to inhabit.

Not long before he died, my grandfather took me to a back room of his house in Colorado Springs to show me his gun collection. Only, he whispered, on the condition I didn't tell Grandma. Of course I agreed. But upon the sight of that rack full of firepower, all worldly bets were off. When we returned to the light of the main rooms of the house, I burst into where my parents and grandmother were, announcing, "Grandpa showed me his guns!" Only when I looked back and saw how deep the wrinkles in his face had grown did I see what I had done.

Of all the adults—and as an only child I lived in a world of adults—it was only an uncle, that grandfather's only son, who could speak sense to my condition. Once, we sat at our kitchen table and he explained to me the physics of a gun barrel, drawing a diagram and everything. Trained as a scientist and a carpenter, he knew how things worked down to their tiniest parts. Over the phone, another time, I listened as he detailed Alexander the Great's triumph over Darius III of Persia. He understood the wonder in such things.

Even so, my uncle wasn't like me. He had a pilot's license and, as a kid, played in BB gun fights with his friends. He'd even been shot in the eye. He seemed, and still seems, fearless. Spending summers on the family farms out West, and the son of a veteran rather than a pair of peaceniks, he had grown up with all the real firepower he could want. For him, the ecstasy was neither inexplicable nor abstract. He went to college at the height of the Vietnam War and, like my mother, turned into something close to a pacifist. But once, during one of our long bike rides, he told me that under other circumstances he could just as easily have become a terrorist, and a good one too.

We read the news together now, about the latest bewildering violence somewhere near or far, and he talks again about how close he came and how close he may always be.

He feels the proximity intimately. What kept him from enlisting to fight in Vietnam, he says, were the women at school who preferred protesters to soldiers. They made it worth his while to question the war's magnetic pull, to oppose it and study biology instead. It was a simple opportunity to devote himself to something else. When he and I talk about these things now, we remind each other of the fragility of our convictions against our contrary predilections. Only the most tenuous happenstance kept us away from battlefields.

Hannah Arendt, in her account of the trial of a Nazi war criminal, wrote of "the banality of evil." Adolf Eichmann was not some scheming, horned devil bent on executing mass murder. He was a startlingly ordinary, self-satisfied bureaucrat engrossed by the logistics of moving human cargo around with trains. On the stand, he spouted ethical maxims and spoke of his hope to set a good example for German youth. He inhabited a world of language and order where his horrific accomplishments made sense in respectable company. Abstract banality consumed and hid from view the brutality at work beneath it. Brutality, as Eichmann experienced it, hardly required a departure from the ordinary, the normal and the laudable. Opposing it, hearing out the most minimal gasp of compassion, would have been a heroic exception.

My childhood fantasies should sound neither particularly unusual nor outstandingly grotesque, for they aren't. I call attention to them because of their ordinariness. Those of us who come out to march when conflagration is already on the horizon, or when it has already begun, forget how comfortable mass destruction is to the human imagination. We act as if war were the concoction of a nefarious few, rather than a product of the vast inertia of history and instinct, lurking as much inside ourselves as anywhere. What leads us to it can be as frighteningly accidental as what keeps us from it. Remembering these visions that went through my head, what amazes me is how easily, how joyfully, they came, despite my parents' efforts to discourage them. "Banality" is a word difficult to apply to childhood. When we're young, violence comes to us "innocently." This excuse is no less terrifying.

By the end of 1990, I was in first grade. Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait, a country nobody had ever talked about before. Each night I'd watch the news on my family's twelve-inch, rabbit-eared TV set. American soldiers, dressed in sand-colored camouflage, were setting up camp in a parched wasteland. On August 7th, Operation Desert Shield began. Nothing happened at first, and though I knew enough not to say so, I hoped something would. The holidays passed and the new year came. On January 17th, American planes crossed into Iraq from their bases in Saudi Arabia, and Desert Shield became Desert Storm.

The night it began my mother was distraught, and through my secret excitement I consoled her. President George H.W. Bush came on TV and announced that the attack had begun. Then came the images I will never forget: blinding flashes above a city of strange shapes and Martian towers. The tracer rounds of anti-aircraft guns swirled around like a carnival. All was bathed in the green light of night-vision lenses. It didn't



look like any human city I'd ever been to or seen in pictures. It seemed no more real than a video game. So, I thought, on the couch with my mother, on the other side of the world, this is war.

I followed the mechanics of battle as closely as I could. The anti-aircraft fire, I learned, had been useless. The F-117 stealth fighters that led the blitz of Baghdad suffered no losses from enemy guns, which were shooting blind at the top-secret, invisible jets overhead. Soon the hundred-hour ground war began. M1 Abrams tanks firing depleted uranium shells, backed by the lighter Bradley vehicles, stole the show from fighter planes and bombers. Together with close air support from A-10 Warthogs and Apache helicopters, they crushed the elite Republican Guard. Soviet-made Scud missiles fired from the Iraqi desert into Tel Aviv as part of an effort to draw Israel into the war and rally the Arab states to Saddam Hussein's cause. The political subtleties were lost on me, but all the same I cheered on the American Patriot missile batteries charged with intercepting the Scuds.

The war was over too quickly for my taste. There was no sack of Baghdad, and Saddam stayed in power. My friends and I couldn't reenact any of the battles because they were so unfair. Nobody would want to be the Iraqis. How are a group of six year olds supposed to play out A-10s pummeling a column of unprotected Republican Guards from overhead with 30mm Gatling guns?

"No war has ever been won," my mother once said. I forget when; I forget why. Of course the idea should be preposterous. What about World War I? World War II? The Civil War? Or the Second Punic War, which halted Hannibal and his elephants in

their march on Rome? Then again, I grew up in Virginia, where Route 1 is still Jefferson Davis Highway, colored with Confederate flags. And the Second World War rose out of the resentment made by the First, just as its victors started a Cold War of their own. So also, as that finally wound down, came the green flashes in Baghdad and an apparently decisive victory. But it too, we soon learned, was only the beginning.

I got older. By the time Clinton ordered air strikes in the former Yugoslavia, I paid no special attention to the weapons being used. I watched TV less and read more; the sophisticated weapons began to lose their hold on me. The force once bound up in them carried over to other fantasies. Saddam continued to defy sanctions and the no-fly zone. Mogadishu happened to us; Rwanda happened to them. Our cruise missiles missed Osama bin Laden but hit a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. And then, on a clear September morning at the start of my last year of high school, a plane flew into the Pentagon, six miles from my house.

It was, in so many ways, a moment of decision. During those first days after the attack, it was easy to well up with patriotism and vengefulness. But when the president declared his vacuous war on terrorism, I knew I wouldn't make this war, or any other, mine.

I had an internship with a radio station and helped with their coverage of demonstrations against the attack on Afghanistan that followed soon after 9/11. Between interviews, I joined in the marching and the slogans. "You'll grow out of it," a woman at the Defense Department told me of my politics then. She had it backwards; I had grown into this.

The change was less a conversion than a coup. All my life, my mother taught me the horror and uselessness of violence, and a part of me always believed her. Yet I continued to practice making explosion sounds and drawing landscapes of carnage in my school notebooks. As I grew older, the balance of my schizophrenia shifted. It isn't so uncommon. We all, someday, put down childish things, even if we can never put them away. For some, coming-of-age means graduating to real guns. For me, it happened to be something else.

Undoubtedly I would think of all this differently if I had been raised around weapons, if they weren't such exotic fruits for me, always dangling just beyond my grasp. I've been told I would have a healthier way of thinking about it all if that were so, just as French kids who grow up with wine have no need for the alcohol binges of American college freshmen. But to have guns or not isn't the crucial question. The fact remains that, despite my parents' hopes, I gravitated to the engines of destruction as do so many others, generation after generation. The habit was in me and in the world around me more deeply than my parents' influence could reach, forever threatening to reassert itself in human history.

For the moment, my parents' lessons and example had caught up with the martial fantasies. The kid who loved his toy rifle gave way to the one who'd channeled Buddha on the playground. I began turning back to the spiritual traditions they had exposed me to as a kid, in the course of their own explorations, and I wandered into some new ones of my own. I read the books of mystics and philosophers. I found friends who would sit

around forever and talk about ideas, and in those good, late nights, the prospect of peace could overwhelm the allure of war. I became enchanted with the notion of truth I found in Gandhi's writings, a substance of absolute sacredness borne by friend and enemy alike. Reading them offered me a new way of seeing the world, as a living firmament of people, each with righteous claims to truth and justice. Destroying anyone is, or should be, tantamount to defeat.

There is no sense pretending, though, that this turning point will last me for life. Such moments of decision repeat themselves perpetually. The transformative logic of weapons and the banality of violence always offer to reinvent the game, to insist that, this time, to kill and be killed is not murder. No: it is defense, it is honor, it is duty, it is right. Gandhi, for one, lived a life of obsessive vigilance against these creeping temptations. In diet, family life, community and politics, his writings reveal a constant anxiety that violence might weasel its way through. Reading Gandhi's *Experiments with Truth*, one can grow exhausted with the endless efforts at self-purgation. His ascetic impulses sometimes do little more than replace harming others with harming himself. But if the answer to violence were simply a feat of deprivation, it would be as much a denial of life as killing. I cannot simply cut off these militant organs, for I'd probably die in the process.

In May 1939, the *Partisan Review* asked its writers about "the next world war." "What do you think the responsibilities of writers in general are when and if war comes?" James Agee's reply, reprinted in his masterpiece *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is as meandering as it is earnest. He says he has thought much about the matter—"first glibly ... later with more and more perplexity, distress, and immediate interest, fascination, and fear"—and at first it doesn't seem to have brought him to much of a conclusion.

He could enlist as an ordinary soldier, in defiance of his education and privilege. Or join the Stalinists. Or refuse orders and endure the consequences. Or ignore it all and write (which is largely what he did). For those hoping to plant Agee in a particular position or camp, either for or against this war, or war in the abstract, he is evasive. A footnote appended later seems to offer some encouragement for pacifism: "I would now (fall of 1940) have to add to this belief in non-resistance to evil as the only possible means of conquering evil." But in the very next sentence he equivocates: "I am in serious uncertainty about this belief; still more so, of my ability to stand by it."

One may be tempted to dismiss Agee as a political weakling, a dilettante making games out of serious business, but the last sentences of this passage clarify his purpose. They spell out a cosmic reversal, an insistence that The War everyone talks about is in fact a game, an absurdity when viewed from the truly serious business of making art and meaning for himself and the human race.

Or, in other words, I consider myself to have been continuously at war for some years, and can imagine no form of armistice. In that war I feel "responsible." I doubt any other form of war could make me more so.

Agee insists that he cannot be the partisan that the *Review* wants to drum out concerning the coming war. He refuses to accept the war being declared by politicians and generals—and all those who consider themselves informed—as the real war most worthy of his attention. Especially when no one else does, he hopes, the artist can look past society's present means of mass suicide and murder, into the deathless questions that may finally be our rescue.

We are warlike creatures. Yet Agee's answer to what would be the most deadly war in human history, an answer that sounds like an evasion, proposes that there are other wars to be fought than the violent ones. We can choose which wars we commit our minds and hopes to. The war against war is not simply a negative discipline, but a positive effort, one that subsumes our warlike proclivities into creative tasks.

There is, nevertheless, a troubling quietism in Agee's position; its evasiveness is real. Just like the fascination of weapons, his private war grants him freedom from the demands of compassion. Though his war may not be so heinous as Hitler's, its arbitrariness can also appear cruel. There has to be a compass. If not the grand matches among militaries, which wars do we choose to fight?

I keep coming back over the years to William James' 1906 speech, "The Moral Equivalent of War." James begins by reflecting on the memory of the Civil War and the more recent Spanish-American War. He concedes that war has a unique capacity to unite nations around a pressing cause and, most importantly, forge the character of people. But he is also a pacifist who hopes that violent conflict is a feature of human history we will someday learn to do without. What, in its place, can be done to foster the virtues that war has served to teach—the grit, the discipline, the sacrifice for a higher cause?



What can unite us as strongly as war has, bringing people together “by self-forgetfulness and not by self-seeking”?

For James, the answer is to conscript our young people in an “army enlisted against *Nature*.” It’s an awkward turn of phrase today, as civilization stands on the verge of destroying the natural balance that sustains it. What he had in mind was along the lines of the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, our experiments in organized civilian service, so sparsely supported in comparison with all the people and resources the last century has committed to militarism. I’ve begun to feel, though, that there is sense to his wording. Nature includes the world around us as well as the raw material within. James thought that to cultivate one we have to cultivate the other. Staving off the conditions, both material and spiritual, that drive us to violence demands a struggle at least equivalent to war. Like Agee, he didn’t imagine the alternative to violent warfare to be simply its tranquil absence; we need to fill it with something, with a different and better kind of undertaking, one that creates rather than destroys.

In this age of wars of choice, being “antiwar” has become uncommonly easy. Military and terrorist threats, while real, are statistically unlikely to affect many Americans directly. At home the government takes care to insulate us from the carnage, censoring images of mangled bodies and encouraging us to support the war effort by shopping. Before 9/11, we fancied that the end of history was at hand, ushering in an age of perpetual peace. It should be little surprise, then, that in those first months of 2003, even the largest protest the world had ever seen was not enough. It was far too little, far too late. Rather than mounting a constant struggle, a constant war against the war-making in our natures, we mistook a break in hostilities for progress. We failed to create a culture of genuine alternatives to the appalling capacity for horror that can always well up in us, hibernating closer to the surface than the semblance of peace might permit us to imagine. Agee and James offer hints that a better kind of war is possible. But it is a challenge we—even we who call ourselves antiwar—have yet to take seriously enough. We fail to notice how deeply the danger is a part of us.

I recently paid a visit to the Long Island Shooting Center, an unmarked building hiding in a quiet neighborhood, around the corner from a front yard shrine to the bravery of firemen. I hadn’t fired a gun since that summer at camp, and I decided it was time to try it again, to touch those ancient cravings within me and see what had become of them.

My choice of weapon was unavoidable. The AK-47 was among the most expensive options, but the twentieth century’s most horrifically lethal gun suited my mission. It still amazes me that the AK’s ugly Russian body can be handled so easily and legally under pretense of recreation, even if only in semi-automatic form. It still retains all the stink of geopolitics.

With the help of the Center’s staff, I loaded one cartridge at a time into the unmistakable curved magazine and, relishing the sound of deadly hardware, clicked it onto the gun. Even more titillating was, after switching off the safety, pulling back the charging handle to load the first round into the chamber. Raising its butt to my shoulder

and the barrel forward, I took aim as best I could at the humanoid target's midsection. My imagination lit up with all the wonders that might be done with this weapon.

The first shot jarred me. My expectations had yet to coincide with the gun's reality. I kept on firing, one shot then the next, and they made a rhythm. Happenstance turned into capability. It was no longer a foreign guest; body and mind accepted it as a limb. It turned that weird, dark shooting gallery into a temple, a liminal zone of death, life and power, mediated by the holy jangle of equipment and the bang of fire.

Back in the shop, I got to talking with the clerks about the different guns. We looked at wooden-stocked AKs, Glocks, AR-15s, six-shooters and .22 rifles. The store took on a mood of banter and comradeship. We looked at more guns. I asked every question I could think of about each.

"You know," the man behind the counter surprised me by saying, "I'm nonviolent. I believe in nonviolence."

"Me too!" I blurted. I was thrilled to discover that someone else, perhaps even more fully than I, could share in this cognitive dissonance of ammo and *ahimsa* that has followed me all my life. Then he continued.

"But if someone messes with me, that's different. I'll defend myself. If I go down, I go down kicking and screaming and taking as many of them down with me as I can." For that reason he keeps a loaded 9mm Glock at the ready in his home and, most days, on his belt.

My enthusiasm faltered. His kind of nonviolence suddenly stood in contrast to the kind I aspire to: one in which no real victory comes through harming others, in which the solution to fear is not to inspire it. For one so constantly prepared to lash out with deadly force, it becomes easy to mistake the mere absence of violence here and now with something worthy of being called nonviolence. It's a spell our society periodically falls prey to, as we frenetically pour incredible resources into weapons and comparatively so little into their diplomatic and humanitarian alternatives—much less artistic, cultural and scientific ones.

The Roman writer Vegetius famously advised, during his empire's relentlessly violent final years, "If you want peace, prepare for war." But the peace he offered has repeatedly shown to be an illusory one. The kind of wars that we prepare for—and that meanwhile fill our children's imaginations—are the wars we end up fighting again and again.