

## THE VIRTUES OF WAR

Gabriel Moran

War, although stupid and destructive, has persisted throughout the centuries; it or its violent successor continues. Why? It must be appealing at some level to something in the human psyche or at least to some individuals. For some people, war is profitable; for other people, war is exciting. Hardly anyone would admit to liking war but for many people war provides a meaning to life.

For a nation-state, war unifies the population into having a single vision trained on victory. "Leaders often favor war because war favors leaders." The pacifist who recounts the horrors of war makes no inroads on the militarist mind. Yes, war involves horrors but that is the means to greatness for the nation and courage for its youth. Orson Welles in *The Third Man* says: "Thirty years of warfare, terror and bloodshed in medieval Italy produced the Renaissance. Five hundred years of peace in Switzerland brought forth the cuckoo clock."

War has been mainly an affair of old men sending young men out to battle to become real men. The old men may have been soldiers themselves who know the risks but whose own lives, they think, prove that the risk is worth taking. Other old men (starting at age forty) delight in imagining themselves as strategists, commanders and leaders. They can be more dangerous than the generals. Erasmus stated the case succinctly: *Dulce bellum inexpertis* (War is sweet to those who have not experienced it).

With the recent changes in the nature of war, the military man may no longer encourage an eighteen year old to pursue a military career in service to his country. One of his successors is a religious leader strapping a bomb on to a fifteen-year old to spread havoc on a city bus. The more overtly religious character of this new form of terror/war brings out the religious character of war. William James noted that "reflective apologists for war at the present day all take it religiously. It is a sort of sacrament." War is difficult to dislodge because people religiously believe in its power, grace and inevitability; it is good for the soul. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. said: "In this snug and over-safe corner of the world we need it [war] that we may realize that our comfortable routine is no eternal necessity of things, but merely a little space of calm in the midst of the tempestuous untamed streaming of the world."

Opponents of war need to examine the presumed virtues of war such as loyalty, courage, bravery, and heroism. The first thing to note is that the word virtue is derived from *vir* meaning man and *virtus* meaning strength. Despite the fact that by the nineteenth century virtue was assigned to women, at the deepest level "manly virtues" still take precedence. That is especially true in the United States where as Walt Whitman said "the best culture will always be that of the manly and courageous instincts, and loving perceptions, and of self-respect."

War undeniably develops certain virtues. The strong or virtuous man is loyal to his buddies, undaunted by physical threats and ready to defend his family and his country. Anyone who dares to question martial virtues is dismissed as feminine, if a woman, or ridiculed as effeminate, if a man. How women soldiers fit into the mystique of military virtues is not yet clear. Their choice

would seem to be either to outdo the guys at their own game or try to change what it means to serve one's country.

The promise of strength, loyalty and bravery is fulfilled by some people in war but at a terrible price. Unless individuals can draw upon independent judgment and other virtues, martial virtues end with a reversal of their promise, that is, the comradeship of the squad can lead to violation of the rights of others, the discipline of one's abilities can be directed at destruction, and bravery can lead to foolish flirting with death. Theodore Roosevelt, a champion of the manly virtues, said that the citizen's duty is "to serve through the high gallantry of entire indifference to life, if war comes on the land." Is there not something bizarre in defending the lives of citizens with the "high gallantry of entire indifference to life"?

The paradox of war's false promise is found in the two words, heroism and self-sacrifice. War is celebrated for demonstrating heroism and self-sacrifice in their ultimate realization. The two ideas are closely related. "Sacrifice" is often modified by the adjective heroic, and a "hero" is someone ready for self-sacrifice. Neither idea receives much criticism. Indeed, heroes are celebrated as great men and self-sacrifice is thought to be the ultimate form of morality. War is undeniably the setting for the praise of heroism and self-sacrifice. J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors* describes his experience in World War II and provides philosophical reflection on the nature of war. The book is a powerful indictment of war. Yet Gray can still write: "Are we not right in honoring the fighter's impulse to sacrifice himself for a comrade, even though it be done as it so frequently is, in an evil cause? I think so."

A country does have an obligation to respect and care for the young people it has sent to fight in its name. But the country's celebration of heroism and self-sacrifice is misdirected in both war and peace. "Pity the country that has no heroes," says a character in Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*. "No," is the reply, "pity the country that needs heroes." The idea of the hero comes down to us from history's oldest legends. The hero is a man of superhuman strength and courage who protects his people, usually with violent means. The fact that heroes have almost always been men is significant; "heroine" carries little weight.

To this day, "hero" connotes the military flavor of its origin. The soldier who performs feats of courage in the face of deadly danger – the war hero – remains the main model for heroism. Perhaps in primitive war when physical strength and individual daring were likely to carry off victory, the hero's place made sense. In modern wars, the hero is often dangerous. A military historian notes that "one consequence of mankind's exaggerated regard for courage is that some remarkably stupid men, their only virtue a willingness to expose their own person to risk, have been granted positions of responsibility on the battlefield."

Hero is a title imposed by others. Anyone claiming to be a hero would be suspected of self-delusion. There is a predictable sequence of events after some great achievement under extreme circumstances. Someone is hailed as a hero. The person says, "Aw shucks, I was only doing my job." The response to that comment is, "See how modest he is; that's the mark of a true hero." The appointed hero then becomes more embarrassed and has difficulty adjusting to what he feels is a status that he has not earned.

There is nothing wrong with honoring great work. We need more not less of such praise. In the movie, *Topsy Turvy*, Gilbert says to Sullivan “Wouldn’t it be great if quite ordinary people got a round of applause at the end of the day.” The idea of the hero is a distortion and a narrowing of qualities that deserve praise. When the person who is hailed as a hero says, “I was just doing my job,” society ought to listen. The good work is what deserves praise, not some idea of heroism.

A striking example of the distortion of fine work with the title of hero occurred after the World Trade Center bombing in 2001. Firemen in New York City, who do dangerous but necessary work, had been underappreciated workers. The firemen were sometimes criticized for being insular, a closed club of guys who stick together. On September 11, when the firemen reached the twin towers, they reacted as they usually do: they rushed up the stairs to save the lives of their fellow citizens. Three hundred forty-three of the firemen died in the effort. The dangerous daily work of these men was dramatized on a large screen for all of the world to see. Those who died were rightly honored by the city; those who survived were seen with new appreciation. For several months afterward, every fireman was met with the word hero. They found it embarrassing. Their usual response was: I am just doing my job as well as I can.

The appointment of heroes idolizes one set of values and blocks out important concerns. For example, it does no dishonor to the memory of the firemen who died to inquire why the fire department’s communication system was so poor; the city’s administration failed to provide these men with the tools needed to do their job and protect their own lives. Assigning the title of hero is an easy way out for those who have sent men to their deaths in dangerous, unnecessary and sometimes stupid ventures.

The firemen who died on September 11, like firemen who die on other days, were not engaged in self-sacrifice. They were focused on saving lives, their own lives included. The idea of self-sacrifice is one of the most pernicious ideas that confuses moral thinking and glorifies war. “Sacrifice,” like hero, comes down to us from ancient religious myths. Its literal meaning is to make holy. Ancient people apparently thought that the gods would be honored by humans giving up prized possessions. If the first fruits of the harvest or the prized calf were destroyed, the humans would thereby signify that god owns everything and that the humans are thankful for whatever gifts they have received.

Some people went so far as to offer their first-born child to the gods. The child was made holy by being killed. Looking back at these practices of sacrifice, we express horror but we may not be as different as we think we are. It is amazing that the word sacrifice is constantly used in today’s secular literature and is assumed to be the height of morality. “Sacrifice” is used in many contexts in which death is not the immediate issue but there is always implied a negation or destruction. The idea of “self-sacrifice” is inconsistent to the point of absurdity. The first-born child who was sacrificed to the gods did not choose self-sacrifice. The father or priest did the sacrificing; the child had no say. Anyone who would choose self-sacrifice would be deluded or suicidal.

The Christian movement did with “sacrifice” what it did with numerous other religious terms: the church tried baptizing it. That is, the term was adopted and placed into a new context. “Sacrifice” became more central to the Christian story than most other adopted terms. The life

and mission of Jesus were conceptualized as a sacrifice to his heavenly father. However, the whole history of Christianity has been a struggle against reverting to the most primitive idea of sacrifice. In one reading of Christianity, God demanded an infinite sacrifice for an original human sin. The crucifixion of the Son of God was the only acceptable sacrifice. Jesus laid down his life willingly, even enthusiastically. His suffering is what saves us from the fires of hell. The Protestant Reformation was in part an attempt to correct the idea of sacrifice. The reception of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* suggests the continuing embrace of the idea of sacrificial suffering. Despite the secularization of the West, the self-sacrifice of the Christ still hovers over the heroic morality held up as the ideal.

In an alternate reading of the Christian story, the triumph of Jesus over death is the sign that God is creator of life and that all creation is revealing of the divine. All life is "made sacred" by a nonviolent resistance both to destructive tendencies within the human being and to political violence that puts innocent people to death. The biological facts of suffering and dying have not disappeared but their meaning can be transformed by the example of Jesus and the hope for a fulfilled humanity. God was not a sadist exacting retribution; Jesus was not a masochist who gloried in suffering and "self-sacrifice."

The latter reading of the story was there from the beginning and still inspires many Christian lives. Unfortunately, the primitive idea of sacrifice, compounded by a Christian idea of the self as sacrificed, affects not only Christianity but our secular ideas of morality. Most of all, the confused idea of self-sacrifice is at the center of thinking about war. There are numerous accounts of men on the battlefield who acted to save the lives of their comrades and died as a result. Their intention was not self-sacrifice; it was to save lives. The politicians back home who praise self-sacrifice are not honoring the dead but justifying their own decisions. Praise of self-sacrifice is often the attempt to cover up the incompetence and arrogance of old men who send young men out to die. Rudyard Kipling helped his 17 year old son to get into the army and the boy was promptly killed. Kipling gives his son the last word on war: "If any question why we died, tell them because our fathers lied."

If secular politicians would cease to use the word sacrifice, we might be able to start demythologizing war. Aggressive assertion in communal contexts is the desirable ideal rather than the humanity-hating ideas of selflessness and self-sacrifice.