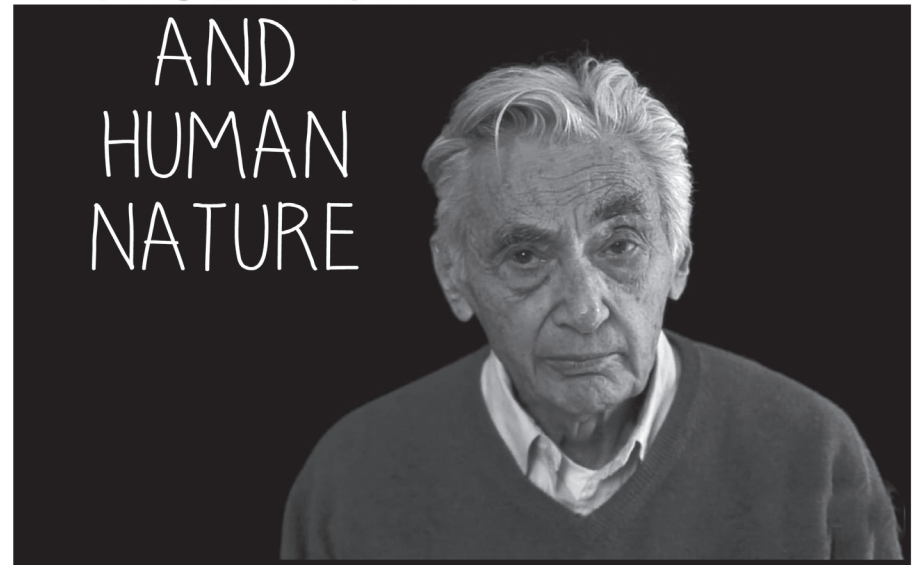


# VIOLENCE AND HUMAN NATURE



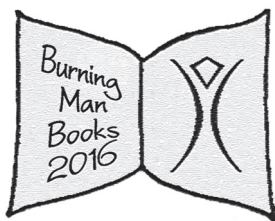
BY HOWARD ZINN

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EDITED BY RAYMOND SOULARD, JR.  
& KASSANDRA SOULARD

# *Violence and Human Nature by Howard Zinn*

edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.  
& Cassandra Soulard



Number Sixty-seven

**Violence and Human Nature**

by Howard Zinn

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*This volume is dedicated to Occupy Wall Street,  
its cousins, ancestors, & descendants.*

This volume was composed  
in the AGaramond font  
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I remember three different incidents of violence in three different parts of my life. In two of them I was an observer, in one a perpetrator.

In the fall of 1963 I was in Selma, Alabama, and saw two young black civil rights workers clubbed to the ground by state troopers, and then attacked with electric prods, because they tried to bring food and water to black people standing in line waiting to register to vote.

As a twenty-two-year-old Air Force bombardier, I flew a bombing mission in the last weeks of World War II, which can only be considered an atrocity. It was the napalm bombing of a small French village, for purposes that had nothing to do with winning the war, leaving a wasteland of death and destruction five miles below our planes.

Years before that, while a teenager on the streets of Brooklyn, I watched a black man in an argument with an old Jewish man, a pushcart peddler who seemed to be his employer. It was an argument over money the black man claimed he was owed, and he seemed desperate, by turns pleading and threatening, but the older man remained adamant. Suddenly the black man picked up a board and hit the other over the head. The older man, blood trickling down his face, just kept pushing his cart down the street.

I have never been persuaded that such violence, whether of an angry black man or a hate-filled trooper or of a dutiful Air Force officer, was the result of some natural instinct. All of those incidents, as I thought about them later, were explainable by social circumstances. I am in total agreement with the statement of the nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill: "Of all the vulgar modes of escaping from the consideration of the effect of social and moral influences upon the human mind, the most vulgar is that of attributing the diversities of conduct and character to inherent natural differences."

Yet, at an early point in any discussion of human violence,



especially a discussion of the causes of war, someone will say, “It’s human nature.” There is ancient, weighty intellectual support for that common argument. Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, expresses confidently his own view of human nature, that human beings tend to be bad. This gives him a good reason, being “realistic,” to urge laying aside moral scruples in dealing with people: “A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to maintain himself, to learn how not to be good.”

The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes said, “I put forth a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death.” This view of human nature led Hobbes to favor any kind of government, however authoritarian, that would keep the peace by blocking what he thought was the natural inclination of people to do violence to one another. He talked about “the dissolute condition of masterless men” that required “a coercive power to tie their hands from rapine and revenge.”

Beliefs about human nature thus become self-fulfilling prophecies. If you believe human beings are naturally violent and bad, you may be persuaded to think (although not required to think) that it is “realistic” to be that way yourself. But is it indeed realistic (meaning, “I regret this, but it’s a fact . . .”) to blame war on human nature?

ii.

In 1932, Albert Einstein, already world famous for his work in physics and mathematics, wrote a letter to another distinguished thinker, Sigmund Freud. Einstein was deeply troubled by the memory of World War I, which had ended only fourteen years before. Ten million men had died on the battlefields of Europe, for reasons that no one could logically explain. Like many others who had lived through that war, Einstein was horrified by the thought that human life could be

destroyed on such a massive scale and worried that there might be another war. He considered that Freud, the world’s leading psychologist, might throw light on the question: *Why do men make war?*

“Dear Professor Freud,” he wrote. “Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war?” Einstein spoke of “that small but determined group, active in every nation, composed of individuals who . . . regard warfare, the manufacture and sale of arms, simply as an occasion to advance their personal interests and enlarge their personal authority.” And then he asked: “How is it possible for this small clique to bend the will of the majority, who stand to lose and suffer by a state of war, to the service of their ambitions?”

Einstein volunteered an answer: “Because man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction.” And then he put his final question to Freud: “Is it possible to control man’s mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?”

Freud responded: “You surmise that man has in him an active instinct for hatred and destruction, amenable to such stimulations. I entirely agree with you . . . . The most casual glance at world-history will show an unending series of conflicts between one community and another.” Freud pointed to two fundamental instincts in human beings: the erotic, or love, instinct, and its opposite, the destructive instinct. But the only hope he could hold for the erotic triumphing over the destructive was in the cultural development of the human race, including “a strengthening of the intellect, which tends to master our instinctive life.”

Einstein had a different view of the value of intelligence in mastering the instincts. After pointing to “the psychoses of hate and destructiveness,” Einstein concluded: “Experience proves that it is rather the so-called ‘Intelligentsia’ that is most apt to yield to these disastrous collective suggestions.”

Here are two of the greatest minds of the century, helpless and frustrated before the persistence of war. Einstein,

venturing that aggressive instincts are at the root of war, asks Freud, the expert on instincts, for help in coming to a solution. Note, however, that Einstein has jumped from “man has within him a lust” to “disastrous collective suggestions.” Freud ignores this leap from instinct to culture and affirms that the “destructive instinct” is the crucial cause of war.

But what is Freud’s evidence for the existence of such an instinct? There is something curious in his argument. He offers no proof from the field of his expertise, psychology. His evidence is in “the most casual glance at world-history.”

Let’s move the discussion forward, fifty years later, to a school of thought that did not exist in Freud’s time, sociobiology. The leading spokesperson in this group is E.O. Wilson, a Harvard University professor and distinguished scientist. His book *Sociobiology* is an impressive treatise on the behavior of various species in the biological world that have social inclinations, like ants and bees.

In the last chapter of *Sociobiology*, Wilson turned to human beings, and this drew so much attention that he decided to write a whole book dealing with this subject: *On Human Nature*. In it there is a chapter on aggression. It starts off with the question: “Are human beings innately aggressive?” Two sentences later: “The answer to it is yes.” (No hesitation here.) And the next sentence explains why: “Throughout history, warfare, representing only the most organized technique of aggression, has been endemic to every form of society, from hunter-gatherer bands to industrial states.”

Here is a peculiar situation. The psychologist (Freud) finds his evidence for the aggressive instinct not in psychology but in history. The biologist (Wilson) finds his evidence not in biology but in history.

This suggests that the evidence from neither psychology nor biology is sufficient to back up the claim for an aggressive instinct, and so these important thinkers turn to history. In this respect, they are no different from the ordinary person, whose thinking follows the same logic: history is full of warfare; one

cannot find an era free of it; this must mean that it comes out of something deep in human nature, something biological, a drive, an instinct for violent aggression.

This logic is widespread in modern thought, in all classes of people, whether highly educated or uneducated. And yet, it is almost certainly wrong. And furthermore, it’s dangerous.

Wrong, because there is no real evidence for it. Not in genetics, not in zoology, not in psychology, not in anthropology, not in history, not even in the ordinary experience of soldiers in war. Dangerous because it deflects attention from the non-biological causes of violence and war.

It turns out, however, that Wilson’s firm assent to the idea that human beings are “innately aggressive” depends on his redefinitions of “innately” and “aggressive.” In *On Human Nature*, he says: “Innateness refers to the measurable probability that a trait will develop in a specified set of environments . . . . By this criterion human beings have a marked hereditary predisposition to aggressive behavior.” And the word “aggression” takes in a variety of human actions, only some of which are violent.

In other words, when Wilson speaks of people being “innately aggressive” he does not mean that we are all born with an irresistible drive to become violent—it depends on our environment. And even if we become aggressive, that need not take the form of violence. Indeed, Wilson says that “the more violent forms of human aggression are not the manifestations of inborn drives.” We now have, he says, “a more subtle explanation based on the interaction of genetic potential and learning.”

The phrase “genetic potential” gets us closer to a common ground between Wilson and his radical critics, who have attributed to him sometimes more extreme views about innate aggression that he really holds. That is, human beings certainly have, from the start (genetically) a potential for violence, but also a potential for peacefulness. That leaves us open to all sorts of possibilities, depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in, and the circumstances we create for ourselves.

There is no known gene for aggression. Indeed, there is



no known gene for any of the common forms of human behavior (I am allowing the possibility that a genetic defect of the brain might make a person violent, but the very fact that it is a defect means it is not a normal trait). The science of genetics, the study of that hereditary material carried in the forty-odd chromosomes in every human cell and transmitted from one generation to the next, knows a good deal about genes for physical characteristics, very little about genes for mental ability, and virtually nothing about genes for personality traits (violence, competitiveness, kindness, surliness, a sense of humor, etc.).

Wilson's colleague at Harvard, scientist Stephen Jay Gould, a specialist in evolution, says very flatly (in *Natural History Magazine*, 1976): "What is the direct evidence for genetic control of specific human social behavior? At the moment, the answer is none whatever."

The distinguished biologist P.W. Medawar puts it this way: "By far the most important characteristic of human beings is that we have and exercise moral judgment and are not at the mercy of our hormones and genes."

In the spring of 1986, an international conference of scientists in Seville, Spain, issued a statement on the question of human nature and violent aggression, concluding: "It is scientifically incorrect to say that war is caused by 'instinct' or any single motivation . . . . Modern war involves institutional use of personal characteristics such as obedience, suggestibility, and idealism . . . . We conclude that biology does not condemn humanity to war."

### iii.

What about the evidence of psychology? This is not as "hard" a science as genetics. Geneticists can examine genes, even "splice" them into new forms. What psychologists do is look at the way people behave and think, test them, psychoanalyze them, conduct experiments to see how people react to different experiences, and try to come to reasonable conclusions about

why people behave the way they do. There is nothing in the findings of psychologists to make any convincing argument for an instinct for the violent aggressiveness of war. That's why Freud, the founder of modern psychology, had to look for evidence of the destructive instinct in history.

There was a famous "Milgram experiment" at Yale in the 1960s, named after the psychologist who supervised it. A group of paid volunteers were told they were helping with an experiment dealing with the effects of punishment on learning. Each volunteer was seated in a position to observe someone taking a test, wearing electrodes connected to a control panel operated by the volunteer. The volunteer was told to monitor the test and, whenever a wrong answer was given, to pull a switch that would give a painful electrical jolt to the person taking the test, each wrong answer leading to a greater and greater electrical charge. There were thirty switches, with labels ranging from "Slight Shock" to "Danger—Severe Shock."

The volunteer was not told, however, that the person taking the test was an actor and that no real jolt was given. The actor would pretend to be in pain when the volunteer pulled the switch. When a volunteer became reluctant to continue causing pain, the experimenter in charge would say something like: "The experiment requires that you continue." Under these conditions, two-thirds of the volunteers continued to pull the electrical switches on wrong answers, even when the subjects showed agonizing pain. One-third refused.

The experiment was tried with the volunteers at different distances from the subjects. When they were not physically close to the subject, about 35 percent of the volunteers defied authority even when they could not see or talk with the subject. But when they were right next to the subject, 70 percent refused the order.

The behavior of the people who were willing to inflict maximum pain can certainly be explained without recourse to "human nature." Their behavior was learned, not inborn. What they learned is what most people learn in modern culture, to follow orders, to do the job you are hired to do, to obey the experts

in charge. In the experiment the supervisors, who had a certain standing and a certain legitimacy as directors of a “scientific” experiment, kept assuring the volunteers that they should go ahead, even if the subjects showed pain. When they were distant from the subjects, it was easier to obey the experimenters. But seeing or hearing the pain close up brought out some strong natural feeling of empathy, enough to disobey even the legitimate, confident, scientific supervisors of the experiment.

Some people interpreted the results of the experiment as showing an innate cruelty in human beings, but this was not the conclusion of Stanley Milgram, who directed the study. Milgram sums up his own views: “It is the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority that constitutes the chief finding of the study . . . This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process.”

So it is a learned response—“always obey,” “do your job”—and not a natural drive, that caused so many of the people to keep pulling the pain switches. What is remarkable in the Milgram experiment, given the power of “duty . . . obedience” taught to us from childhood, is not that so many obeyed, but that so many refused.

C.P. Snow, a British novelist and scientist, wrote in 1961:

*When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion. The German Officer Corps were brought up in the most rigorous code of obedience . . . in the name of obedience they were party to, and assisted in, the most wicked large-scale actions in the history of the world.*

*iv.*

What about the evidence from anthropology—that is, from the behavior of “primitive” people, who are supposed to be closest to the “natural” state and, therefore, give strong clues about “human nature”? There have been many studies of the personality traits of such people: African Bushmen, North American Indians, Malay tribes, the Stone Age Tasaday from the Philippines, etc.

The findings can be summed up easily: There is no single pattern of war-like or peaceable behavior; the variations are very great. In North America, the Plains Indians were war-like, the Cherokee of Georgia were peaceful.

Anthropologist Colin Turnbull conducted two different studies in which he lived for a while with native tribes. In *The Forest People*, he describes the Pygmies of the Ituri rain forest in central Africa, wonderfully gentle and peaceful people whose idea of punishing a wrongdoer was to send him out into the forest to sulk. When he observed the Mbuti tribe of Zaire, he found them cooperative and pacific. However, when Turnbull spent time with the Ik people of East Africa, whom he describes in *The Mountain People*, he found them ferocious and selfish.

The differences in behavior Turnbull found were explainable, not by genetics, not by the “nature” of these people, but by their environment, or their living conditions. The relatively easy life of the forest people fostered good will and generosity. The Ik, on the other hand, had been driven from their natural hunting grounds, by the creation of a national game reserve, into an isolated life of starvation in barren mountains. Their desperate attempt to survive brought out the aggressive destructiveness that Turnbull saw.

There have been many attempts to use the evidence of ethology (the study of the behavior of animals) to “prove” innate aggressiveness in human beings. We find Robert Ardrey using animal protection of their territory to argue for a “territorial imperative,” which drives human beings to war against one



another, or Desmond Morris, who uses the evidence of primates (*The Naked Ape*) to see human beings as deeply influenced by their evolutionary origins as tribal hunters.

But the study of animal behavior turns up all kinds of contradictory evidence. Baboons observed in a London zoo were found to be violent, but when studied on the plains of South Africa their behavior was peaceful. The difference was easily explainable by the fact that in the zoo baboons were strangers to one another, brought together by man. Even when baboons were aggressive, this consisted mostly of yelling and squabbling, not doing serious damage to one another.

We might note the work of Konrad Lorenz, an important zoologist and a specialist in the study of birds who could not resist the temptation to turn to human behavior in his book, *On Aggression*. Lorenz is often cited to support the idea that aggressive instincts in human beings derive from evolutionary origins in animal behavior. But Lorenz was not that certain. Indeed, he said at one point that none of our so-called instincts are as dangerous as our “emotional allegiance to cultural values.”

It is a big jump, in any case, from bees or ducks or even baboons to human beings. Such a jump does not take account of the critically different factor of the human brain, which enables learning and culture and which creates a whole range of possibilities—good and bad. Those wide possibilities are not available to creatures with limited intelligence whose behavior is held close to their genetic instincts (although even with them different environments bring different characteristics).

The psychologist Erik Erikson, moving away from Freud's emphasis on biological instinct and on impressions gained in infancy, has pointed to the fact that, unlike most animals, human beings have a long childhood, a period for learning and cultural influence. This creates the possibility for a much wider range of behaviors. Erikson says that our cultures have created “pseudospecies”—that is, false categories of race and nation that obliterate our sense of ourselves as one species and thus encourage the hostility that turns violent.

Animals other than human beings do not make war. They do not engage in organized violence on behalf of some abstraction. That is a special gift of creatures with advanced brains and cultures. The animal commits violence for a specific, visible reason, the need for food and for self-defense.

Genetics, psychology, anthropology, and zoology—in none of these fields is there evidence of a human instinct for the kind of aggressive violence that characterizes war. But what about history, which Freud pointed to?

u.

Who can deny the frequency of war in human history? But its persistence does not prove that its origin is in human nature. Are there not persistent facts about human society that can explain the constant eruption of war without recourse to those mysterious instincts that science, however hard it tries, cannot find in our genes? Is not one of those facts the existence of ruling elites in every culture, who become enamored of their own power and seek to extend it? Is not another of those facts the greed, not of the general population, but of powerful minorities in society who seek more raw materials or more markets or more land or more favorable places for investment? Is there not a persistent ideology of nationalism, especially in the modern world, a set of beliefs taught to each generation in which the Motherland or the Fatherland is an object of veneration and becomes a burning cause for which one becomes willing to kill the children of other Motherlands or Fatherlands?

Surely we do not need human nature to explain war; there are other explanations. But human nature is simple and easy. It requires very little thought. To analyze the social, economic, and cultural factors that throughout human history have led to so many wars—that is hard work. One can hardly blame people for avoiding it.

But we should take another look at the proposition that the persistence of war in history proves that war comes from

human nature. The claim requires that wars be not only frequent, but perpetual—that they not be limited to some nations but be true of all. Because if wars are only intermittent—if there are periods of war and periods of peace and if there are nations that go to war and other nations that don't—then it is unreasonable to attribute war to something as universal as human nature.

Whenever someone says, “history proves . . .” and then cites a list of historical facts, we should beware. We can always select facts from history (there are lots to choose from) to prove almost anything about human behavior. Just as one can select from a person's life just those instances of mean and aggressive behavior to prove the person naturally mean and aggressive, one can also select from that same person's life only those instances of kind and affectionate behavior to prove him or her naturally nice.

Perhaps we should turn from these scholarly studies of history, genetics, anthropology, psychology, and zoology to the plain reality of war itself. We surely have a lot of experience with that in our time.

*vi.*

I remember reading John Hersey's novel, *The War Lover*. It interested me greatly, partly because I am an admirer of Hersey's writing, but even more because his subject was the crew of a Flying Fortress, the B17 heavy bomber in World War II. I had been a bombardier on such a crew in just that war. The novel's main character is a pilot who loves war. He also loves women. He is a braggart and a bully in regard to both. It turns out that his boasted sex exploits are a fraud and, in fact, he is impotent; it appears that his urge to bomb and kill is connected to that impotence.

When I finished reading the novel, I thought: *Well, that may explain this piss-poor* (a phrase left over from that war) *fellow Hersey has picked as his subject and his lust for violence and death. But it doesn't explain war.*

The men I knew in the air force—the pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and gunners on the crews flying over Europe, dropping bombs, and killing lots of people—were not lusting to kill, were not enthusiasts for violence, and were not war lovers. They—we—were engaged in large-scale killing, mostly of non-combatants, the women, children, and elderly people who happened to inhabit the neighborhoods of the cities that we bombed (officially, these were all “military targets”). But this did not come out of our natures, which were no different than when we were peacefully playing, studying, and living the lives of American boys back in Brooklyn, New York, or Aurora, Missouri.

The bloody deeds we did came out of a set of experiences not hard to figure out. We had been brought up to believe that our political leaders had good motives and could be trusted to do right in the world. We had learned that the world had good guys and bad guys, good countries and bad countries, and ours was good. We had been trained to fly planes, fire guns, operate bombsights, and to take pride in doing the job well. And we had been trained to follow orders, which there was no reason to question, because everyone on our side was good, and on the other side, bad. Besides, we didn't have to watch a little girl's legs get blown off by our bombs—we were 30,000 feet high and no human being on the ground was visible, no scream could be heard. Surely that is enough to explain how men can participate in war. We don't have to grope in the darkness of human nature.

Indeed, when you look at modern war, do you find men rushing into it with a ferocious desire to kill? Hardly. You find men (and some women) joining the armed forces in search of training, careers, companionship, glamour, and psychological and economic security. You find others being conscripted by law, under penalty of prison if they refuse. And all of them suddenly transported into a war, where the habit of following orders and the dinning into their ears of the rightness of their cause can overcome the fear of death or the moral scruples of murdering another human being.

Many observers of war, and former soldiers too, have

spoken of the lures of war for men, its attractions and enticements, as if something in men's nature makes war desirable for them. J. Glenn Gray, who was in army intelligence and close to combat situations in the European theater during World War II, has a chapter in his book *The Warriors* called "The Enduring Appeals of Battle." He writes of the "powerful fascination" of war. He says, "The emotional environment of warfare has always been compelling . . . Many men both hate and love combat." What are these "appeals" of war, according to Gray? "The delight in seeing, the delight in comradeship, the delight in destruction."

He recalls the biblical phrase "the lust of the eye" to describe the sheer overpowering spectacle of war, the astounding scenes, the images, the vignettes—things never before experienced by young men who lived ordinary lives on ordinary farms or ordinary streets. That is certainly true. I had never seen the innards of a fifty-caliber machine gun; had never flown in an airplane miles high, in the night and close to the stars, overwhelmed by the beauty of that, and operated my bombsight and watched specks of fire flare like tiny torches on the ground below; and had never seen at close range the black puffs that were the explosions of antiaircraft shells, threatening my life. But that is not a love of war; it is an aesthetic need for visual and emotional excitement that comes, unrequested, with war and that can also be produced by other experiences.

Gray is also certainly right about the extraordinary comradeship of men in combat. But they don't seek combat because of that, any more than men in prison seek imprisonment because in prison they often forge human ties with fellow prisoners far stronger than any they have on the outside.

As for the "delight in destruction," I am skeptical about that. Granted, there is something visually exciting about explosions and something satisfying about hitting your target efficiently, as you were trained to do. But the delight that comes in a job well done would accompany any kind of job, not just destroying things.

All of the elements Gray and others have talked about

as "the enduring appeals" of war are appeals not of violence or murder but of the concomitants of the war situation. It is sad that life is so drab, so unsatisfying for so many that combat gives them their first ecstatic pleasures, whether in "seeing" or companionship or work done well. It challenges us to find what the philosopher William James called "the moral equivalent of war," ways to make life outside of war vivid, affectionate, even thrilling.

Gray himself, although he tries to understand and explain those "enduring appeals," is offended by war. *The Warriors* recalls an entry in his own wartime journal, made December 8, 1944, which reflects not only his own feelings, but that of so many other veterans of war, that war is an affront to our nature as human beings. He wrote:

*Last night I lay awake and thought of all the inhumanity of it, the beastliness of the war . . . I remembered all the brutal things I had seen since I came overseas, all the people rotting in jail, some of whom I had helped to put there . . . I thought of Plato's phrase about the wise man caught in an evil time who refuses to participate in the crimes of his fellow citizens, but hides behind a wall until the storm is past. And this morning, when I rose, tired and distraught from bed, I knew that in order to survive this time I must love more. There is no other way.*

When the U.S. government decided to enter World War I, it did not find an eager army of males, just waiting for an opportunity to vent their "natural" anger against the enemy, to indulge their "natural" inclination to kill. Indeed, there was a large protest movement against entrance into the war, leading Congress to pass punitive legislation for anti-war statements (2,000 people were prosecuted for criticizing the war). The government, besides conscripting men for service on threat of prison and jailing anti-war protesters, had to organize a propaganda campaign, sending

75,000 speakers to give 750,000 speeches in hundreds of towns and cities to persuade people of the rightness of the war.

Even with all that, there was resistance by young men to the draft. In New York City, ninety of the first hundred draftees claimed exemption. In Minnesota, the *Minneapolis Journal* reported: "Draft Opposition Fast Spreading in State." In Florida, two black farm workers went into the woods with a shotgun and mutilated themselves to avoid the draft; one blew off four fingers of his hand, the other shot off his arm below the elbow. A senator from Georgia reported "general and widespread opposition . . . to the enactment of the draft . . . . Mass meetings held in every part of the State protested against it." Ultimately, over 330,000 men were classified as draft evaders.

We have an enormous literature of war. Much of it was written by men who experienced combat: Erich Remarque and Ernest Hemingway on World War I; Norman Mailer, James Jones, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Paul Fussell on World War II; Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, John Del Vecchio, Bill Ehrhart, and Ron Kovic on Vietnam. The men they write about are not (with occasional exceptions) bloodthirsty killers, consumed by some ferocious instinct to maim and destroy other human beings. They connect across a whole century with the young scared kid in *Red Badge of Courage*; they experience fear more than hate, fatigue more than rage, and boredom more than vengefulness. If any of them turn into crazed killers for some moment or some hour, it is not hard to find the cause in the crazed circumstances of war, coming on top of the ordinary upbringing of a young man in a civilized country.

A GI named John Ketwig wrote a letter to his wife:

*After all those years of preparation in the schools, you walked out the door, and they told you it was your duty to kill the commies in South Vietnam. If you wouldn't volunteer, they would draft you, force you to do things against your will. Put you in jail. Cut your hair, take away your mod clothes, train*

*you to kill. How could they do that? It was directly opposite to everything your parents had been saying, the teachers had been saying, the clergymen had been saying. You questioned it, and your parents said they didn't want you to go, but better that than jail. The teacher said it was your duty. The clergy said you wouldn't want your mother to live in a communist country, so you'd best go fight them in Asia before they landed in California. You asked about 'Thou shalt not kill,' and they mumbled.*

It was no instinct to kill that led John Ketwig into military duty, but the pressure of people around him, the indoctrination of his growing up. So it is not remarkable that he joined the military. What is remarkable is that at a certain point he rebelled against it.

While two million men served in Vietnam at one time or another, another half million evaded the draft in some way. And of those who served, there were perhaps 100,000 deserters. About 34,000 GIs were court-martialed and imprisoned. If an instinct really was at work, it was not for war, but against it.

Once in the war, the tensions of combat on top of the training in obedience produced atrocities. In the My Lai Massacre we have an extreme example of the power of a culture in teaching obedience. In My Lai, a hamlet in South Vietnam, a company of U.S. soldiers landed by helicopter early one morning in March 1968, with orders to kill everybody there. In about one hour, although not a single shot was fired at them, they slaughtered about 400 Vietnamese, most of them old people, women, and children. Many of them were herded into ditches and then mowed down with automatic rifles.

One of the American soldiers, Charles Hutto, said later, "The impression I got was that we was to shoot everyone in the village . . . . An order came down to destroy all of the food, kill all the animals and kill all the people . . . then the village was burned . . . . I didn't agree with the killings but we were ordered to do it."

It is not at all surprising that men go to war, when they have been cajoled, bribed, propagandized, conscripted, threatened—and also not surprising that after rigorous training they obey orders, even to kill unarmed women and children. What is surprising is that some refuse.

At My Lai a number of soldiers would not kill when ordered to: Michael Bernhardt, Roy Wood, Robert Maples, a GI named Grzesik. Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson commanded a helicopter that flew over the scene and, when he saw what was happening, he landed the helicopter and rescued some of the women and children, ordering his crewmen to fire on GIs if they fired on the Vietnamese. Charles Hutto said afterward:

*I was 19 years old, and I'd always been told to do what the grown-ups told me to do . . . . But now I'll tell my sons, if the government calls, to go, to serve their country, but to use their own judgment at times . . . to forget about authority . . . to use their own conscience. I wish somebody had told me that before I went to Vietnam. I didn't know. Now I don't think there should be even a thing called war . . . 'cause it messes up a person's mind.*

vii.

In British novelist George Orwell's essay, "Shooting an Elephant," he recalls his experience in Burma, when he was a minor official of the British Empire. An elephant ran loose, and he finally shot it to death, but notes he did this not out of any internal drive, not of malice, but because people around him expected him to do that, as part of his job. It was not in his "nature."

The American feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, before so much of the scientific discussion of the relationship between violence and human nature, said:

*Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! Every fool, from king to policeman, from the flathead parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presume to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature. Yet how can any one speak of it today, with every soul a prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed?*

Her point about "the visionless dabbler in science" was affirmed half a century later by Nobel Prize-winning biologist Salvatore E. Luria, who points to the misuse of science in attributing violent behavior to our genes. Moving away from genetic determinism and its mood of inevitability (as too often interpreted, the inevitability of war and death), Luria says that biologists have a nobler role for the future: to explore "the most intriguing feature—the creativity of the human spirit."

That creativity is revealed in human history, but it is a history that Machiavelli and a succession of scholarly pessimists ignore as they concentrate on the worst aspects of human behavior. There is another history, of the rejection of violence, the refusal to kill, and the yearning for community. It has shown itself throughout the past in acts of courage and sacrifice that defied all the immediate pressures of the environment.

This was true even in the unspeakable conditions of the German death camps in World War II, as Terence des Pres pointed out in his book *The Survivor*. He wrote: "The depth and durability of man's social nature may be gauged by the fact that conditions in the concentration camps were designed to turn prisoners against each other, but that in a multitude of ways, men and women persisted in social acts."

It is true that there is an infinite human capacity for violence. There is also an infinite potential for kindness. The unique ability of humans to imagine gives enormous power to idealism, an imagining of a better state of things not yet in



existence. That power has been misused to send young men to war. But the power of idealism can also be used to attain justice, to end the massive violence of war.

Anyone who has participated in a social movement has seen the power of idealism to move people toward self-sacrifice and cooperation. I think of Sam Block, a young black Mississippian, very thin and with very bad eyes, taking black people to register to vote in the murderous atmosphere of Greenwood, Mississippi, in the early 1960s. Block was accosted by a sheriff (another civil rights worker, listening, recorded their conversation):

*SHERIFF: Nigger, where you from?*

*BLOCK: I'm a native of Mississippi.*

*SHERIFF: I know all the niggers here.*

*BLOCK: Do you know any colored people? (The sheriff spat at him.)*

*SHERIFF: I'll give you till tomorrow to get out of here.*

*BLOCK: If you don't want to see me here, you better pack up and leave, because I'll be here.*

History, so diligent at recording disasters, is largely silent on the enormous number of courageous acts by individuals challenging authority and defying death.

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