

# Dissent from War

ROBERT L. IVIE



Kumarian  
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## *Dissent from War*

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# **DISSENT FROM WAR**

For Natalie Jane

May the children of our children  
inherit from their parents  
a more generous and forgiving world.

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# 1

## War Is Easy

**W**ar is easy. Peace is difficult. That's the hard reality of human history. War occurs with such frequency that it seems inevitable, even natural. By one count, approximately a hundred international or civil wars occurred in the decade of the 1990s alone.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, to say war is inevitable and that it is inherent to the human condition is to profess a dictum so abstract and general that it tells us nothing about when or where or why any particular war will occur, who will fight whom, how intensely they will struggle, or anything else specific to the case at hand. Such a universal pronouncement of war's inevitability also says nothing about wars that never occur, wars that are averted, wars that are attenuated, or wars that end sooner rather than later. It simply means war happens, often—indeed, too often—so often, in fact, that resisting war seems unrealistic, even risky. Aspiring to peace except by means of military victory appears quixotic—a fantasy at best, a diversion at least, a threat to national security at worst.

We know war is inevitable when it happens, because it happened. It is the reality delivered at our doorstep with the morning paper, the necessity proclaimed by the political establishment and reiterated by the mainstream press. Supporting each war that comes our way is the realistic and right thing to do as citizens in good standing. It is a matter merely of submitting to war's gravitational pull. One cannot swim upstream against a raging current for long before being pulled under. It's better just to conform, to float downstream in the reassuring flow of public opinion and conventional wisdom.

The rhetorical presumption of war's necessity makes the violence regrettable but sane, rational, right, proper, and easier than bearing the heavy burden of dissenting from war. Curiously, placing one's self or loved ones in harm's way seems less difficult and more reassuring than questioning the necessity, legitimacy, or sanity of war in any given case. Indeed, many—perhaps most—Americans believe that dissent in times of war and crisis is improper and unpatriotic, that fighting wars in the name of democracy is more virtuous than, and actually incompatible with, exercising freedom of speech. Thus, when the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense



all come to town to rally the people behind a stalled war effort in Iraq, one is not surprised to read on the front page of the local newspaper that 45 percent of those polled believe war protesters are aiding the country's enemies, while 28 percent are not sure whether protest is good or bad, and only 27 percent affirm dissent's role in debating national policy.<sup>2</sup> The "moral and intellectual confusion" of war's critics appeases the nation's enemies, threatens national security, and weakens a free society's ability to persevere, asserts a combative Secretary of Defense.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, war is terrible, too. That goes without saying, usually. Surely we wouldn't resort to deadly, destructive warfare without good cause, and there are so many causes of war. Nations fight for land, vital resources, markets, independence, security, a way of life, a political system, an alliance, human rights, prestige, and power. People make the blood sacrifice for "God, country, nation, race, class, justice, honor, freedom, equality, fraternity," and more.<sup>4</sup> Truth be told, war is less a matter of strict rationality and cold calculation of strategic interests than it is an exercise in ritual, a sacrament of symbolism, and an enactment of tragic theater. Indeed, Chris Hedges contends that "war is a force that gives us meaning"—a god that "makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us" that suspends "self-critical thought."<sup>5</sup> Issues of good and evil are the ethical core of war's motivation. The "supposed rationality" of political objectives is a "thin veneer" covering deeper symbolic motives of a just cause.<sup>6</sup> Death is war's awful sacrifice to life's relentless struggle for meaning, identity, purpose, and exoneration.<sup>7</sup> Such is the human project that makes language and rhetoric crucial to understanding and coping with the ready desire to wage war and the gnawing guilt of a nation's arrogance.

This terrible attraction to the flame of war is America's red badge of courage, a time of testing the people's mettle and true virtue. Like Stephen Crane, America's exceptional war novelist and the volatile son of a Methodist missionary, the nation found a lifelong companion in war. Crane never experienced battle but lived life violently, imagining brilliantly the soldier's fearful quest for glory and redemption on the battlefield.<sup>8</sup> The guilty pleasure of war—and deep yearning to prove one's nobility under fire—is a powerful narcotic for recurring fits of a better conscience.

The nagging conscience of the nation, though, is never fully assuaged by the narcotic of war's false calling to redemptive violence. Succumbing to war's seduction is easier than dissenting from war and less complicated than making peace with one's adversaries, but the guilt of killing even a sacrificial scapegoat to atone for the nation's transgressions is a chronic aggravation to the soul of a self-proclaimed Christian people. Choosing peaceful reconciliation over redemptive violence is the Savior's command in the Sermon on the Mount addressed to all who would be his disciples. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for

they will be called children of God”.... “Love your enemies”.... “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”.... “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”<sup>9</sup> The Teacher’s “new commandment” delivered to his followers in anticipation of his crucifixion and their salvation was to “love one another” just as He loved them.<sup>10</sup> His blood sacrifice, not the blood of an enemy, was to be the way of reconciliation and the way to salvation. Redemptive violence, thus, is an inconvenient violation of the Christian conscience no less than it is a politically convenient salvation device of vicarious sacrifice.

The residual dissonance of engaging in redemptive violence goads Americans to make new enemies each time they vanquish or otherwise finish with the last enemy. Enemy-making is the seemingly perpetual vocation of an “exceptional” people and their guilty conscience. The perception of threat—a chronic sense of national insecurity—is hopelessly conflated with the ritual of enemy-making as an addictive but not-so-satisfactory salvation device. At a minimum, conjuring images of an enemy’s diabolical savagery raises the calculation of danger.

When enemies are represented as evil, something more happens to compound the incentive to fight. The very rhetoric that demonizes enemies also dehumanizes those who would vanquish evil, which is the work of gods, not humans. Just as enemies are reduced to villainous devils, our side is elevated to divine warriors. Heroic nations are thus prone to hubris, to overreaching the limits of humanity. America is inclined to think of itself in messianic terms as if it has inherited the election of biblical Israel and is itself a chosen nation. “In Christian theology,” though—as Jim Wallis underscores—“it is not nations that rid the world of evil—they are too often caught up in complicated webs of political power, economic interests, cultural clashes, and nationalist dreams. The confrontation with evil is a role reserved for God.” To think otherwise “is a serious theological error that some might say borders on idolatry and blasphemy.”<sup>11</sup> When a president uses “coded Christian language,” which Stephen Chapman warns happened “unmistakably” to justify an imperial war on Iraq, it is done “to use the authority of Christ as a talisman.”<sup>12</sup> In the process, messianic America becomes less human and more godlike in its own rhetorical image, quite contrary to the Christian ethic of humility. War rhetoric caricatures everyone, dehumanizing us no less than our enemies.

In this way, the rite of dehumanizing rhetoric that deifies the US by demonizing its enemies contributes to war’s self-sustaining momentum. War is no exception to the dominant motif of American political rhetoric. Indeed, the proliferation of demonizing rhetoric in the US is indicative of a basic and dangerously divisive moral paradox. This moral paradox, according to Tom De Luca and John Buell, is deeply rooted in the dilemma of Puritanical hedonism—a

tension of two fundamentalisms, one social and the other material, that produces hidden fears and forbidden desires so easily projected onto “despised others” to undermine the democratic values of respectful inclusion and egalitarian participation.<sup>13</sup>

The polarizing rhetoric of political demonization, which reduces difference to deviance and evil, is as common to culture wars at home as fighting terrorism abroad. An undifferentiated war on evildoers criminalizes dissent, threatens civil liberties, and undermines healthy debate and dialogue among citizens, between citizens and their government, and between the US and foreign nations. Manichaeon logic dominates political culture at the expense of democratic practice and effective problem solving. Americans fall prey to caricaturing and scapegoating at the very moment they need most to understand an adversary’s perspective and motivation in order to respond appropriately to the current challenge of terrorism and the recurring condition of war.

If the dehumanizing rhetoric of enemy-making—both the demonizing of others and the corresponding deification of self—makes war easier to condone, even at the expense of a nagging conscience and dreadfully polarized political relations at home and abroad, it also designates a key task of peacebuilding dissent. The hard work of reconciliation between enemies—of building bridges of constructive communication across the abyss of sheer antagonism—is never-ending and always cuts against the grain of politics as usual. Peacebuilding is necessarily therefore an exercise in dissent from war, and a difficult one at that. There is no easy way to resist the call to arms, but there is nothing more vital to democratic citizenship than to try.

Constructive dissent from war is difficult but not infeasible for ordinary citizens doing what they can to promote peace as a consideration of conscience. Accordingly, this book speaks to the matter of feasibility, of what can be done with effort by conscientious citizens, that is, what common people can do in common to inhibit war by adopting a humanizing strategy of political communication. The give and take of politics—the vibrant clash of opinion and the contestation of perspectives—is agonistic but not necessarily antagonistic. Indeed, political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe consider the basic challenge of pluralistic politics to be one of converting antagonistic into agonistic relations. In her words, “The aim of democratic politics should be to provide the framework through which conflicts can take the form of an agonistic confrontation among adversaries instead of manifesting themselves as an antagonistic struggle between enemies.”<sup>14</sup> Even as conflict and division define the human condition, Kenneth Burke stresses, we can develop strategies of identification along various dimensions of communication to bridge differences and increase tolerance. “Identification is compensatory to division,” he maintains, in a world where communication is never absolute or perfect. Sustained effort

backed by “richly humane” imagery can help us to understand better and value more highly “people in circumstances greatly different from our own.”<sup>15</sup>

The importance of cultivating a humanizing discourse of dissent would be difficult to overstate, especially since enemy-making war propaganda is designed to desensitize the public to the human attributes of adversaries by demonizing one side and deifying the other. Yet, anti-war dissent tends toward an idiom of negative criticism chiefly, if not exclusively, and a dehumanizing exercise in reverse recrimination that demonizes the nation at war and its leadership. This, too, is a polarizing discourse, which readily reverts to the alienating language of good and evil.

To transcend the dilemma of recrimination is perhaps the greatest challenge of peacebuilding dissent. A public forced to choose between an absolute claim to national virtue and a bleak charge of collective malevolence is disinclined to the latter and thus disposed by default, if for no other reason, to stay the course of belligerence. The sharp criticism of an impending or present war, and of a warring regime, is an indispensable demonstration of nonconformity to the call to arms, but it is not the only gesture in a peacebuilding idiom of counter-persuasion. A second gesture, an expression of humanizing solidarity, is required to escape the downward pull of reciprocal recrimination. The double gesture of peacebuilding dissent from war—of nonconforming solidarity—transcends competing attributions of evil by redirecting our attention to the human realm of error, imperfection, limited perspective, and the greater need for tolerance and reconciliation. Thus, at its best, dissent is a nonconforming expression of humanizing solidarity. That, at least, is the argument of the book.

My aim is to focus attention on dissent from war as a viable and healthy practice of democratic citizenship. We are “democracy’s children,” in John McGowan’s words, “called into existence in plural societies in which freedom of speech and the press combines with wide-open debate among competing visions of the good life [and] the good polity.”<sup>16</sup> To champion democracy is to remain vigilant against the suppression of dissent but also to promote the best practices of dissent. Thus, it is especially important during periods of crisis and an ongoing global war on terrorism to examine—even interrogate—the cultural status, political role, and rhetorical characteristics of dissent as a vital democratic practice in the US.

Dissent is critical to holding ambitious governments and misguided policies accountable to public scrutiny and democratic standards. Without open debate, government defaults to secrecy, repression, and extremism in the name of national security. As Cass Sunstein argues, freedom of speech is a safeguard against senseless conformity; a culture of free speech is the foundation of democratic self-government; and dissent within the polity is a protection against

ideological extremism, political polarization, and unchecked power. Thus, "well-functioning societies take steps to . . . promote dissent."<sup>17</sup>

A healthy democracy encourages wide criticism and robust debate. It fosters a culture of constructive contestation that respects diversity of opinion and variations in perspective on matters of political judgment. It values dissent for questioning and contesting the views that most people hold at any given point in time. Consistent with the nation's commitment to the democratic principle of collective self-government, dissent is opposed to political orthodoxy. As Steven Shiffrin observes, "The commitment to sponsor dissent assumes that societal pressures to conform are strong and that incentives to keep quiet are often great."<sup>18</sup> The democratic value of dissent, then, consists largely of honoring, protecting, and practicing "speech that criticizes customs, habits, traditions, institutions, or authorities."<sup>19</sup> This is especially the case, Nancy Chang insists, when the nation's security is threatened and the temptation is greatest to curtail freedom of speech.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is particularly important for a democratic people to understand what is at stake when dissent from war is curbed, to recognize such dissent as an everyday practice of responsible citizenship and productive deliberation—not as something to be despised and marked as strange, disloyal, or threatening—and to explore how dissent can help to address a crisis of terror in today's volatile world.

Toward this end, and for the purpose of making war appropriately difficult rather than nearly automatic, we should seek to orient dissent to a robust conception of democracy so that it might resist war propaganda's reduction of the image of a rival to the figure of pure enmity, so that it might convert hostilities into relations of constructive rivalry where possible, so that it might articulate more complex characterizations of adversaries that consist of shades of difference intermixed with degrees of similarity between the parties in conflict, so that it might bridge divisive distinctions well enough to sustain nonviolent political relations short of effacing separate and even opposed identities. Dissent, in this sense, is a mainstay of democratic citizenship, not a luxury, a nuisance, or a malfunction. Without such a mode of healthy contestation, there would be no play of differences or means of accommodating to a pluralism of opinions, interests, identities, and diverging orientations, or of exercising judgment and acting on decisions while remaining responsive to changing circumstances, unresolved disagreements, and continuing uncertainties. Without dissent there can be no truly democratic polity, only submissive quiescence, or violent resistance. Indeed, dissent should be understood as a practical, if underappreciated, necessity in a complex and volatile world, a medium of collective self-rule and a resource for managing the human divide. It is a lively affair and a sign of political health.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, an exigency of war and terror presses hard against polemics of any kind when patriotism is measured by a standard of political conformity instead of

democratic contestation. Dissent is more difficult to carry out at the point of greatest tension in human affairs and when it could especially benefit the political process. Periods of war and crisis reveal, usually in retrospect and by way of negative examples, how deeply democracy is invested in dissent to maintain its own vitality and viability. By challenging reified discourses of good and evil and the violence such rigidity engenders, dissent from war returns human struggle to the realm of political contestation, renders politics less heroic, and opens democracy to greater participation by ordinary citizens. Dissent, that is, can be an impetus to peacebuilding consistent with a people's conscience and commonsense notions of democratic citizenship, a vehicle of communication for everyday citizens to speak up and speak out against a chronic state of warfare.

How do ordinary citizens find their voice to express humanizing themes? In part, I argue, the motive to speak stems from listening to conscience, confronting the question of war's hypocrisy, contemplating the consequences of dehumanizing people, and coming to the realization that we should always resist dehumanizing others. To make that general point more tangible and personal, I tell an ancestral story of a Civil War footsoldier who fought to end slavery but never resolved the tensions of conscience or the ambiguities of friendship and enmity. Victory in war, with all its devastation, did little to change the plight of emancipated but still dehumanized Blacks living under the thumb of Jim Crow. Frank Strain's war story, it turns out, is a record of the nation's troubled Christian conscience—a haunting disenchantment with the Manichaean divide between righteous comrades and evil enemies. What lurks in the shadow of Frank's unsettled account of lethal estrangement is a citizen-soldier's profoundly human sentiment, a residual impulse to reconnect the broken circle of humanity. Thus, a locus of peacebuilding is found in the realization that war is fundamentally and wrongfully dehumanizing.

Yet, the dehumanizing trope of evil savagery is indigenous to US war culture and forms the baseline image of war propaganda's recurring ritual of national redemption. The problem is largely a matter of public memory. Even fallen warriors are depersonalized by cold stone monuments to war's past, official remembrances that stifle the voice of dissent. Telling a familial story of Private Jack Haley, killed in action during World War II (which is now remembered as the good war, the model war to vanquish pure evil) recovers a young soldier's down-to-earth humanity to make his sacrifice more real and regrettable, less easily forgotten and rationalized. The stories we tell about the protagonists of war can either suppress or inspire the voice of peacebuilding dissent and reconciliation, and when we see that it is our nation's own dark shadow cast onto the image of an enemy whom we have made into a sacrificial vessel for the hubris of a chosen people, we begin to understand the role of enemy-making

narratives—the projection of self-doubt and self-loathing, the desire for an unburdening of the collective guilt of national arrogance, for redemption by vicarious sacrifice—in the production of fear and the perception of national insecurity. We begin to appreciate the importance of dissent that rehumanizes the parties in conflict if we hope to address the problems at hand more realistically and less violently.

Communicating a bond of humanity, which is the personal and collective responsibility of everyday citizens, is more than a matter of conveying information or transmitting knowledge. It is instead a strategic persistence and tactical exercise in democratic persuasion that involves outmaneuvering the reigning discourse of ruling authorities to dispose public opinion gradually toward a peacebuilding attitude. Resisting the dehumanizing strategy of war propaganda is no simple or straightforward matter of direct rebuttal and immediate rejection. It requires a certain rhetorical sensibility to break free of—to avoid reversing and thus being recaptured by—the governing framework of disdain and damnation. It involves an artful circumvention from a position of political weakness rather than a command or proclamation of authority from a position of power. It is an oblique critique, not a head-on confrontation, which aims to produce a new order of meaning, or revised perspective, by weaving a web of reconciliation that would supplant the ruling paradigm of victimization and redemptive violence. Positive and negative lessons of such rhetorical maneuvering can be drawn from considering both more and less artful examples of a dissenting documentary about the declaration of war on Iraq, of a public intellectual exercising academic freedom to resist the war on terror by reversing the blame for 9/11, and of innovative media usage by citizens engaged in creative web-watching on the internet to locate incipient metaphors with humanizing potential.

These are important lessons to learn because the peacebuilding rhetorical work of dissenting citizens is to produce persuasive redescriptions and symbolic transformations of enemy images, to engage in a constructive critique of reified metaphors and denigrating myths that resists the demonizing language of war. Differentiating the undifferentiated, totalizing language of anti-terrorism and tyrannizing image of Islamists is a case in point. Terrorism, especially holy terror, under close scrutiny turns out to be a dangerously misleading term to guide policymaking and a problematic metaphor for justifying wars of empire. Developing a language of political friendship is a necessary corollary to resisting demonizing war propaganda if we are to talk ourselves down from fear and anger to establish a modicum of goodwill between adversaries. Thus, it is useful to consider options for cultivating a sense of common humanity with adversaries on what has been called the axis of evil. Moreover, peacebuilding citizens must be mindful of transcending the very viewpoint of war



by articulating a positive image of peace. They must be able to see above and beyond conventional wisdom, much as an artist transcends orthodoxy, to articulate a positive, for-peace perspective. Ultimately, they must apprehend the adversary's perspective, the worldview of an adversary understood as a complex protagonist rather than simplistically as an evil enemy.

None of this kind of constructive language critique can be done well in strict isolation from the rites and initiatives of a larger peacebuilding community. Making war difficult is never easy. Resisting the prevailing habit of war propaganda is a collective effort, not just an individual lament, which must be undertaken in common to achieve its full potential. By democratizing a peacebuilding practice of dissent from war, we might hope to develop over time a collective attitude of reconciliation more conducive to the nation's conscience and less accommodating to wars of empire. We might hope to progress cautiously but resolutely toward a culture of peace, coming together along the way even though each of us begins earnestly alone—breaking the quiet solitude by telling one another stories of human strife, stories on which we may reflect charitably, stories that stir us to act ever more generously toward prospective foes.

## NOTES

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