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## Atrocity and War

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Most learn about war by watching a Hollywood production or by reading a memoir, novel or historical account. In many if not most cases, the goal of the filmmaker or the author is to encourage people to see their movie, to buy their book, or more diabolically, to excite patriotic fervor and support for a particular conflict or to encourage enlistment into the military.

The historian may be more diligent in attending to details when reporting events and campaigns during the course of a war, but is oftentimes careful to respect the sacrifices and celebrate the courage of those who served. Consequently, the filmmaker's, the author's, and the historian's portrayal of war is often glamorized, fictionalized and glorified to make war attractive, or at least palatable, and the behavior of the warriors noble and heroic.

In truth, war cannot be understood, rationally or intellectually, by watching a film or by reading a book. To "know" war, you have to experience it, live it, feel it in your gut - the anxiety, fear, frustration, boredom, hopelessness, despair, anger, rage, etc. In truth, warriors exist in a world totally incomprehensible to those who have never had the misfortune of experiencing the horrors of the battlefield.

For the apathetic and for those who trumpet and champion war's necessity from a safe distance, war is a distraction, bleak, dire and unpleasant, better left for others and for other peoples' children to fight. For those who oppose war, it is murder declared by incompetent and/or deceitful politicians, to be prosecuted by soldiers who, it is hoped (and expected), would recognize its

criminality and courageously suffer the sanctions consequent to refusing to become its instruments of slaughter.

With the recent release of the video at Wikileaks that graphically documents, with less than Xbox clarity and sophistication, an alleged incident of atrocity prosecuted by American troops, all morally sensitive human beings, regardless of their political ideology or position on the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the wars in Pakistan, Yemen, etc., are understandably outraged and righteously appalled by such barbarism.



Consequently, in response to this clear violation of human decency and the laws of war, all other concerns and priorities they may have had lessen in importance. The apathetic and the supporters of the war set aside their "patriotic duty" to go shopping and address their concerns regarding Tiger Woods' infidelity. War's opponents, on the other hand, while bolstered in their admirable determination to end all war and make the world a better place in which to live, recognize the importance, the moral and legal imperative, of holding soldiers accountable for their actions in combat.

Confronting the incivility of war and recognizing the behavior of our troops as criminal provides a welcome, though perhaps unpleasant

and regrettable, opportunity for all to publicly reiterate their commitment to the rule of law and to the dictates of their individual and/or collective consciences. With an appropriate air of moral ascendancy, the apathetic, the supporters, and the opponents of war find common ground in dutifully judging and appropriately condemning, however reluctantly, those "depraved" individuals who dare tarnish the reputation of this great nation by violating the laws of God and of man.

To those struggling to survive the next improvised explosive device or suicide bomber, war's negative effects are pervasive and cumulative. Everyday living in a war zone is a netherworld of horror and insanity in which respect for life loses all meaning and "atrocity" becomes a matter of perspective. As an inevitable consequence, participants are dehumanized and desensitized to death and destruction. Judgments of right and wrong - morality - quickly become irrelevant and brutality and atrocity a primal response to an overwhelming threat of annihilation.

Life amid the violence, death, horror, trauma, anxiety and fatigue of war erodes our moral being, undoes character, and reduces decent men and women to savages capable of incredible cruelty that would never have been possible before being victimized and sacrificed to war. Consequently, atrocities in such an environment are not isolated aberrant occurrences prosecuted by a few deviant individuals. Rather, they are commonplace, intrinsic to the nature and the reality of war, the inevitable consequence of enduring prolonged life-threatening and morally untenable conditions, what Robert Jay Lifton describes as "atrocity-producing situations."

Having been indoctrinated by the propaganda of those whose militarism and warist agenda requires acceptance of the mythology of the "good war" and the "noble warrior," the uninitiated and unaffected - most civilians and many non-warrior members of the military - fail to realize this truth: that all war is barbarism in which cruelty and brutality - atrocity - is the norm rather than the exception.

During World War II, for example, often cited and celebrated as the "good war," over 50 million civilians were murdered by both Axis and

Allied nations. The American servicemen in the Wikileaks video who so nonchalantly "engaged the target" - slaughtering some 12 human beings - are no different from the pilots and bombardiers from the "greatest generation" who, with equal nonchalance, incinerated millions of civilians during the terror bombings of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, etc.

Despite the moral depravity of their actions, these individuals were not born killers. Rather they were created to do our bidding, first conscripted or lured into the military with promises of employment, a college education, or US citizenship, then subjected to sophisticated indoctrination techniques of value manipulation, moral desensitization, and psychological conditioning, aimed at destroying/overriding their humanity, their moral aversion to killing, reinforced by the violence and horrors of the battlefield environment. Is it any wonder, then, that warriors become capable of such heinous acts of slaughter as those documented in the Wikileaks video, or during the massacre at My Lai, or the terror bombing of European and Japanese cities?

While supporters and non-supporters of the war discuss and debate the complexities and applicability of "just war theory," the Geneva Convention, and military rules of engagement from the safe and sane environment of their judicial chambers, offices, classrooms, and cocktail parties, warriors desperately struggle to survive and to ensure that their comrades do, too, in a brutal and insane environment bent upon their destruction.

So, should they fail to display the nobility of the mythological warrior, meet your expectations of morally appropriate behavior on the battlefield, or participate, rationally and coherently to your satisfaction, in the philosophical debate regarding morality and war, please be tolerant and understanding, as they have more fundamental and basic concerns driving their actions and occupying their minds.

For the warriors, the mythology has long since crumbled, quickly replaced by the reality of death and destruction; and the esoteric and abstract discussion of the issues of moral philosophy are as distant and as irrelevant as Tiger Woods' infidelity or whether the world

becomes a utopian paradise.

So, whether you support or oppose the war, or couldn't care less, know that war itself is atrocity. Moreover, if you are truly concerned with justice, America's moral integrity, and the well-being of the troops, know as well that they chose not to be murderers, but patriots, and that they kill, not for profit or empowerment, but for survival.

Finally, while I do not justify or excuse the actions of these individuals, neither do I seek scapegoats in order to absolve myself of culpability and responsibility as a citizen of a democracy in whose name these atrocities are committed. Consequently, if there is to be condemnation and punishment, let it begin with those whose incompetence and desire for wealth and power unnecessarily make war inevitable, whose apathy allows the slaughter to continue, and whose blind allegiance, misguided patriotism, or utopian idealism hamper their ability to understand and appreciate the true reality and nature of war and its tragic and profound effects upon the warrior.

We must see through the mythology, the lies and the deceptions, and understand that all who become tainted by war are victims. Consequently, we must recognize as well, that their culpability must be mitigated and that we all share responsibility and blame for the inevitable atrocities of war.



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