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CONFRONTING HUMAN NATURE

Dilemmas and Delusions of Pacifism

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ABSTRACT

Despite the huge efforts and personal sacrifice of pacifists, it remains fairly easy to start wars, and seemingly impossible to create the necessary conditions for lasting peace. This is difficult to reconcile with the generally optimistic view of human nature that is stated or implied in much, if not most, pacifist thought. Evolutionary theory, on the other hand, offers a plausible explanation for the persistence of war and the equally persistent failure of efforts to eradicate it. Among other things, it offers valuable insights into the dynamics of power and authority in human societies, as well as the social-psychological preconditions for war. Although the lessons of evolution tend to clash with fundamental notions of traditional pacifism, ignoring or blindly rejecting those lessons is to deprive oneself of the best available conceptual framework for understanding war and the reasons why it has proven so difficult to eliminate.



Photo: Al Burke

Along with a great many other towns and cities around the world in February 2003, Stockholm was the scene of a major demonstration against the imminent U.S. war of aggression against Iraq. One year later, the war was still raging—with the inevitable devastating consequences for the land and people of Iraq—but the size of the anniversary demonstrations had dwindled to a tenth or less.

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ONE OF THE MOST frequently cited observations of recent years has been the reaction of the *New York Times* to the anti-war demonstrations that took place around the world in February of 2003. Those massive expressions of popular opposition to the impending onslaught by the United States against Iraq “. . . are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion”, wrote Patrick Tyler of the *Times* under the heading of “A New Power In the Streets”.¹

That is an encouraging thought which has since been oft repeated by anti-war activists and others concerned about the destructive power of the United States, including many who otherwise tend to regard the *New York Times* as a doubtful source of wisdom. Like it or not, the semi-official newspaper of the U.S. empire is a widely acknowledged “voice of authority”—a fact of life which partly illustrates the following analysis.

Another frequent observation related to the United States’ most recent war of aggression is that opposition to it was mobilized at a much earlier stage than was the case with the Vietnam War, for example. Of course, the experience of that and subsequent crimes against humanity have no doubt contributed to anti-war preparedness. But the relatively rapid response to the most recent assault on Iraq is undeniably an encouraging sign.

More super than others

So there we have it: An opposing superpower which has become quicker to demonstrate its opposition to war. It appears, however, that some powers are more super than others; for, among other things:

The assault on Iraq was launched as planned, and is still raging in ways that seem to be changing and intensifying daily.

The two principal war criminals, U.S. President George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, are still in place and are now threatening even greater disasters. This, despite the fact that their rationale for starting the war— invalid as it was to begin with— has long since been exposed as a fabric of lies and deceptions.

President Bush has even been re-elected in the midst of it all, an outcome whose disturbing significance had been anticipated by financier George Soros with these words: “I would dearly love to pin all the blame [for the administration’s disastrous errors] on President Bush and his team. But that would be too easy. It would ignore the fact that he was playing to a receptive audience; and even today, after all that has happened, a majority of the electorate continues to have confidence in President Bush on national security matters. If this continues and President Bush gets re-elected, we must ask ourselves the question: ‘What is wrong with us?’ “ Soros is a controversial figure in his own right, but the question he poses is clearly justified.

Bush’s popularity has declined rapidly since his re-election, but not necessarily because a majority of U.S. citizens now share Soros’ sense of outrage at the immorality of the Iraq War and other forms of aggression. Rather, Bush’s dwindling popularity appears to be due as much to internal matters — including gross incompetence and neglect in response to a hurricane that flooded New Orleans, disclosures of illegal domestic spying, etc.— as to growing disaffection with the war. The latter is doubtless a factor in Bush’s declining popularity, but it is evidently not based on any deep and widespread concern for the principal victims, the Iraqi people. The main problem, for Bush and his handlers, is that the war is dragging on much longer and disrupting or destroying more *U.S.* lives than suggested at the outset.

Even in the current, rapidly deteriorating circumstances, U.S. opinion surveys are still finding that nearly half of respondents claim to believe that their country will ultimately “achieve its goals” in Iraq, including that of “promoting the spread of democracy”. A recent poll of U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq found that 85 per cent believed that the main reason for the invasion was to avenge the attacks on the New York World Trade Center in 2003 — a belief rooted in a propaganda myth planted by their government.

In this connection, it is well to keep in mind that Richard Nixon was forced to resign as president, not for slaughtering millions of innocent people halfway around the world and laying waste to their countries, but for condoning and then trying to cover up a “third-rate burglary” a few blocks from the White House.

As for the “other superpower”, represented by millions of anti-war demonstrators, it has largely disappeared from view. Despite the best efforts of organizers, the demonstrations on the first anniversary of the war’s opening shots were only a tenth as large, or less, as the year before. On the third anniversary this year, anyone peering out from the headquarters of the *New York Times* might have been excused for failing to detect the presence of the new superpower in the streets of Manhattan. This time, there were only a few hundred protesters.

“I remember when we first started CodePink before the invasion of Iraq,” recalls Medea Benjamin, founder of that women’s peace organization. “We felt compelled to leave our families, our jobs, our warm homes, and camp out in front of the White House to try to stop the war. ‘We’ll put a call out to women across the country,’ we said, ‘and the streets of Washington, D.C., will be flooded with angry women saying no to an unjustified war.’ During the four cold, winter months we spent in front of the White House, hundreds of women came to join us, and more than 10,000 marched with us when we ended the vigil. But we kept wondering: Where were the millions of women who, according to the polls, were strongly opposed to the war? When a grieving Cindy Sheehan called on people all over the country to join in her vigil at Crawford, Texas, last summer, a few thousand people responded, most of them women. But why didn’t tens of thousands come? Or 100,000?”²

“Public opinion? How many divisions has it got.”

Today, as Iraq descends into ever deeper chaos and misery, we are confronted with the spectacle of yet another aggressive campaign by the United States and its allies, including some that opted out of the Iraq offensive — this time to demonize Iran in preparation of yet another “preventive” war. “They will attack within a year,” was the assessment last week of Middle East expert Loretta Napoleoni. “One must keep in mind that the U.S. administration is extremely dangerous. . . . We can only pray that they do not do what they want to do in Iran.” She did not say anything about a second superpower putting a stop to it all.

Meanwhile, vast sums continue to be lavished on every sort of war-related project, including new varieties of nuclear weapon and the militarization of space. And while meetings like this one, devoted to issues of pacifism and non-violence, continue to be held as they have been for decades and perhaps centuries, there has never been any apparent need for conferences devoted to the encouragement of war. As we have seen and are seeing, there are powerful forces in the world that do not require any such encouragement.

In short, Bush and his handlers— to the extent that they ever considered the matter— might well have borrowed a thought from Stalin and enquired sardonically: “Public opinion? How many divisions has it got.”

Not nearly enough

Clearly, despite the impressive and perhaps increasing mobilization of anti-war forces, they have not been nearly powerful enough to pose a significant obstacle to the perpetrators of war.

How to explain this sorry state of affairs? It is certainly difficult to reconcile with the generally optimistic view of human nature that is stated or implied in much, if not most, pacifist thought. Two examples may serve to illustrate the apparent discrepancy.

On a per capita basis, the Quakers (Religious Society of Friends) have probably done more good in the world than any other definable category of human beings. The Quaker view of existence — there is no formal creed or system of mandatory beliefs — is based on the notion that everyone possesses “that of God”. This is referred to as the “Inner Light”, a source of inspiration that induces a spirit of peace and harmony toward oneself and all others.

I have asked a good Quaker friend if the problem of evil is addressed in any way and, upon reflection, he could not recall it ever being discussed. The unspoken assumption of

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his Friendly upbringing was that those whose behaviour did not accord with the spirit of the Inner Light had simply not yet discovered it within themselves.

My second example is provided by Jan Öberg, founder and director of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research in Sweden, who has laboured indefatigably to promote peace and heal the wounds of war in the Balkans, Iraq, Burundi and elsewhere. According to Jan, “Many believe that the violence we see around us is caused by evil people. I think it is caused by people who do not know enough about how to handle conflicts—the conflict illiterate. If more people knew the secrets of conflicts and the tools of non-violent resolution, and if they knew how to engage in conflict in time, the world would be a much better place. Peace can be learnt.”³

Similar notions have been expressed before—by the Buddha, Kant and Gandhi, for example. But it is painfully evident that the necessary learning has yet to take place; and where is the evidence or faint reason to hope that the warmongers of today are eager to cure their “conflict illiteracy” or are even aware that they suffer from that disorder? There is none that I can see.

Of course, Quakers are well aware of the evil that is done in the world, and have long striven to abolish inhuman policies and/or ameliorate the consequences—with the anti-slavery movements in England and the United States, programmes of support to all victims of the U.S. war against Indochina, humanitarian aid to refugees and much, much more. Likewise, Jan Öberg is not blind to the forces of darkness, and not at all reluctant to denounce them.

But their conceptions of human nature are primarily useful for understanding *their* behaviour. They do little to explain—not to me, at least—the behaviour of those who persist in starting, conducting, and actively or passively supporting wars. In order to understand the Bushes and the Blairs of the world, as well as the millions who support or tolerate them, it is necessary to look elsewhere for guidance—to the teachings of Reichsmarschal Hermann Goering, for example.

Recipe for war

During his incarceration for the Nuremberg Tribunal, Goering offered some valuable insights into the art and politics of warmongering:

Naturally, the common people don’t want war: Neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship.

Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.⁴

This basic procedure is familiar from recent events such as the orchestration of the Iraq War and the so-called war on terror, which are much easier to understand from Goering's point of view than with the optimistic notions or doctrines of pacifist thought.

Goering's recipe for herding a nation to war provides some useful clues about the nature of the process. He explains that there are two opposing forces, the leaders and the peacemakers. Then there is a malleable and implicitly decisive third party— "the common people"— who invariably align themselves with the bellicose leaders. "It works the same in any country," asserts Goering, and there is a great deal of evidence to support that view.

This raises a number of vital questions, including:

Who gets to be leader?

Why does it seldom or never seem to be a peacemaker?

Why is it so easy to manipulate, "the common people"?

It was largely in search of answers to such questions that I chose to study sociology in my callow youth. But either I was a poor student of sociology, or the particular variety to which I was exposed was not very useful for that purpose.

In any event, the questions remained, and eventually I found what appeared to be some plausible answers in evolutionary theory. That is a rather large subject which I will not attempt to explain here— partly because there is not nearly enough time, but mainly because I am not qualified to do so. What I *will* try to do is to outline a few basic concepts that I have found to be helpful for understanding— and to some extent predicting— the behaviour of human beings as it relates to the problem of war.

Before I do that, however, it is probably necessary to explain what that conceptual framework does *not* include or imply. This is because efforts to apply evolutionary theory to human behaviour have often been met with dismay, misunderstanding and even outrage.

Pernicious doctrine

That was certainly the case in 1975 when a mild-mannered professor named Edward O. Wilson published a book entitled *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. His stated ambition was to establish a new discipline devoted to "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behaviour". Most of the book was concerned with social insects, Wilson's main field of study; but it also included a chapter which placed the behaviour of human beings within that same general framework. That was enough to trigger an intense and often heated debate which reached a sort of boiling point some years ago, and is still simmering today.

Wilson and other adherents of sociobiology have been accused of practising or advocating all sorts of dreadful things, including racism, eugenics, war, and the oppression of women. Among other forms of abuse, the perpetrator of the book has been doused with a bucket of ice water at a scientific conference, and hounded by politically correct mobs shouting chants like, "Racist Wilson, you can't hide! We charge you with genocide!"

A high-powered *ad hoc* committee, called the Sociobiology Study Group and led by colleagues of Wilson at Harvard University, was hastily mobilized to combat the pernicious doctrine. According to the Study Group, sociobiology was similar to discredited theories which, among other things, had "... provided an important basis for the enactment of sterilization laws and restrictive immigration laws by the United States between 1910 and 1930, and also for the eugenics policies which led to the establishment of gas chambers in Nazi Germany."⁵

Efforts to smear sociobiology with the brush of fascism and other right-wing ideologies are perversely ironic, as pointed out by sociologist Pierre van den Berghe: “Actually, a review of the politics of leading sociobiologists would lend more credence to the contention that *sociobiology is a communist conspiracy*. J.B.S. Haldane...was a leading member of the British Communist Party; so was John Maynard Smith. E.O. Wilson and most other leading sociobiologists are left-of-center liberals or social democrats. ‘Racist’ Trivers is even married to a Jamaican and is heavily involved in radical black politics.”⁶

All of this is described by Ullica Segerstråle in her lucid and well-documented account, *Defenders of the Truth: The Sociobiology Debate*,⁷ which I warmly recommend to anyone interested

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in the subject. A sociologist who is also trained in natural science, Segerstråle was an eye-witness to the drama as it unfolded at Harvard following publication of Wilson’s book. She was initially ill-disposed toward

sociobiological thought, but changed her mind with the acquisition of knowledge about it. Segerstråle admits to having allowed herself to be at first misled, and provides an interesting description of the process by which gross misconceptions of sociobiology became rooted in academia:

“Most academics are not in the habit of checking sources, unless they have a *specific* reason for it (such as refereeing an article or writing a book review), and as long as the conclusion fits with their taken-for-granted assumptions. So, also in the case of *Sociobiology*, people rather let the critics read the book ‘for’ them. Why read the original when the critics’ conclusion was eminently plausible?”

“Controversies involving sensitive political issues exhibit something of the social psychology of witch hunts. Once they have started, it does not help much that the targets themselves protest and try to demonstrate their innocence. The original interpretation tends to stick, and those who criticise it as incorrect or unfair— or worse, try to defend the target— run the risk of being identified themselves as supporters of the same unpopular cause that got the target in trouble in the first place. (Defend someone as not being a racist, and you automatically come under suspicion for racism yourself.) This is exactly what happened in the sociobiology controversy.”⁸

In this and other ways, the antics of sociobiology’s most impassioned critics have, in fact, served to illustrate some of its basic concepts.

Genetic indeterminism

From a scientific point of view, the most serious accusation against sociobiology is that it postulates or implies “genetic determinism”— i.e. the notion that human behaviour is governed largely or entirely by genes and/or related biological structures, and that environmental or cultural factors are of relatively slight importance.

That sort of complaint may apply to some theorists, but certainly not to Wilson. This is how he has addressed the issue:

To those who wish to reject sociobiology out of hand, [genetic determinism] means that development is insect-like, confined to a single channel, running from a given set of genes to the corresponding single predestined pattern of

behavior. The life of a mosquito does fit this conception perfectly. . . . The mosquito is an automaton. There are only about one hundred thousand nerve cells in its tiny head, and each one has to pull its own weight. . . .

The channels of human mental development, in contrast, are circuitous and variable. Rather than specify a single trait, human genes prescribe the *capacity* to develop a certain array of traits. In some categories of behaviour, the array is limited and the outcome can be altered only by strenuous training— if ever. In others, the array is vast and the outcome easily influenced. . . .

Conrad H. Waddington, the great geneticist [said] that development is something like a landscape that descends from the highlands to the shore. Development of a trait— eye color, handedness, schizophrenia or whatever— resembles the rolling of a ball down the slopes. Each trait traverses a different part of the landscape, each is guided by a different pattern of ridges and valleys. . . . The developmental landscape of the mosquito can be similarly envisioned as a parallel series of deep, unbranching valleys, one leading to the sexual attraction of a wingbeat's sound, another to automatic bloodsucking, and so on through a repertory of ten or so discrete responses. . . .

The developmental topography of human behavior is enormously broader and more complicated. . . . In the case of language, dress and the other culturally sensitive categories of behavior, the landscape dissolves into a vast delta of low ridges and winding oxbows.⁹

As an example of a restricted capacity, Wilson cites handedness, i.e. the predisposition to be either right- or left-handed. Examples of less restrictive capacities include those relating to some aspects of language, the details of courtship rituals and other behaviours that vary widely between cultures.

It may also be noted that variation, change and adaptation are among the most fundamental principles of evolution. Those processes have given rise to the human brain with its great complexity and capacity for symbolic thought.

The results need not harmonize with biological imperatives, as evidenced by the apparent determination of human beings to destroy the natural environment on which their existence depends. Cultural beliefs and practices may even nullify basic evolutionary processes— as in the case of the Shaker religion, which strictly prohibits procreation. The last surviving member of the original Shaker community died some twenty years ago (although a handful of new believers have since chosen to carry on the self-extinguishing tradition).

War— an evolutionary perspective

None of this contradicts or invalidates the evolutionary perspective on human behaviour. Evolution is a messy business, with all sorts of experiments in living going on all the time, some of them more successful and enduring than others. There are always exceptions. At this stage of evolution, there is even plenty of room for peace activists— a circumstance which may be regarded as a sign of progress.

In any event, it is a basic premise of sociobiology that much of human thought, behaviour and cultural development is linked to our evolutionary history. The *institution of war*— an evocative phrase— exemplifies that linkage.

For the purposes of this limited discussion, the following aspects of human evolution appear to have some relevance to the phenomenon of war.

Homo sapiens sapiens is a social animal with an extraordinarily long dependency period. Research indicates that the process of bonding with other individuals begins while the developing infant is still in the womb. Bonding with other members of the primary group is normally so strong and systematic that individuals tend to identify their own existences with that of the group. Hence the power of group pressure, and the tendency to experience an attack against the group as an attack upon one's self.

In short, we are dependent on each other—physically, intellectually and emotionally. The question is: Who are “we”? Until the invention of agriculture some 10,000 years ago, virtually all humans lived in small groups of hunter-gatherers which seldom grew beyond the size of a hundred or so individuals. The past ten millennia comprise a brief moment of evolutionary time, whether one traces our history back to the first modern humans nearly 200,000 years ago, to the origins of *Homo erectus* nearly two million years ago, or to the first hominids around six million years ago. Even if we assume a fairly late starting point of one million years ago, it means that 99 per cent of human evolution was experienced by hunter-gatherers.

Classifying “outsiders” as subhuman is a useful and, for most people, probably a necessary mental preparation for plaguing and slaughtering other human beings. It is a state of mind which, demonstrably, is not very difficult to induce.

Like all social animals, humans require some organizing principle or mechanism to enable concerted action and promote cohesion. That is the function of leadership which, in small groups, may be somewhat informal and egalitarian. But as groups increase in size and complexity, there is a tendency for leadership to become more formalized and hierarchical. This is probably an inevitable adaptation to the problems of co-ordination and cohesion that arise as numbers increase.

Another important consequence of large population size is that it becomes impossible for individuals to be familiar with everyone else in the group. This leads to multi-level memberships, with the primary group at the centre of the individual's existence, and various secondary groups branching out from there. Individuals are able to identify with secondary groups by extension of their primary allegiances, and much effort is devoted to inducing that frame of mind. That is why nations invent flags and national songs, for example, and why politicians display their families and kiss other people's babies at election time.

A corollary of group membership is that those who do not belong are regarded as somehow different. In the absence of conflict or oppression, the difference may be perceived as trivial and of little consequence. But in times of war or under a system of oppression such as *apartheid*, “outsiders” may be assigned distinctly lower value— even to the point of being classified as subhuman. This is a useful and, for most people, probably a necessary mental preparation for plaguing and slaughtering other human beings. And it is a state of mind which, demonstrably, is not very difficult to induce.

Predisposition to aggression

Although, by definition, there are no annals of history from prehistoric times, the available evidence— from observations of other primates and of surviving stone-age cultures— suggests that hunter-gatherers may have lived relatively peaceful lives as long as they managed to avoid competition for desirable resources. But that was probably not very often, especially as the human population expanded.

Whatever the conditions of prehistory, it is clear that war has been commonplace since records of human behaviour have been kept. “Throughout history,” notes Wilson, “warfare. . . has been endemic to every form of society, from hunter-gather bands to industrial states. . . . Theoreticians who wish to exonerate the genes and blame human aggressiveness on perversities of the environment point to the tiny minority of societies that appear to be nearly or entirely pacific. [But] innateness refers to the measurable probability that a trait will develop in a specified set of environments, not to the certainty that the trait will develop in all environments. By this criterion, human beings have a marked hereditary predisposition to aggressive behavior. . . . We are strongly disposed to slide into deep, irrational hostility under certain definable conditions “¹⁰

Two related conditions are particularly important in this regard: competition for desirable resources; and ethnocentrism, i.e. allegiance to one’s own group and aversion to others. “Our brains do appear to be programmed to the following extent,” contends Wilson. “We are inclined to partition other people into friends and aliens. . . . We tend to fear deeply the actions of strangers and to solve conflict by aggression. These learning rules are likely to have evolved during the past hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution and thus, to have conferred a biological advantage. . . .”¹¹

The rise of modern civilization is closely linked with the increasing scale, technical sophistication *and institutionalization* of war, a process that has tended to eliminate any peaceful societies that may remain, according to Quincy Wright, often referred to as the founder of research into the nature and causes of war: “Out of the warlike peoples arose civilization, while the peaceful collectors and hunters were driven to the ends of the earth, where they are gradually being exterminated or absorbed.”¹²

Repressive tendency

A fundamental behavioural pattern of groups and societies is that they invariably respond to attack with reflexive hostility and internal repression. They do *not* seek to embrace their attackers and strive to understand their point of view, nor do they tend to become more open and democratic. This can be seen clearly in the response of the United States to the terror attacks in Washington and New York on 11 September 2001— a brief, rare taste of the death and destruction that the U.S. has been inflicting on other nations for over a century on a much vaster scale.

The defensive reflex of human societies is so predictable that the U.S. government has often deliberately attacked or threatened targeted countries in order to provoke repression, knowing that it can rely on mainstream media to report the “tyrannical” repression and ignore the aggression that provoked it. This is almost standard U.S. policy toward disobedient Latin American governments, and has been applied to great propaganda effect against Cuba and Nicaragua, for example.

Another routine consequence of external attack or its threat is that the level of solidarity increases throughout society; this invariably includes stronger and less critical support of the leadership. It is worth emphasizing that a mere threat can suffice, as both the Cold War and the so-called war on terror clearly illustrate.

As for the internal dynamics of human groups, they follow patterns which reflect our evolutionary history. In the famous social psychological experiments of Asch, Milgram and Zimbardo, for example, large majorities of experimental subjects— university students

unknown to each other— readily abandoned fundamental intellectual and ethical norms under the influence of group pressure or an authoritative leader.¹³

In the present context, however, the most interesting finding is that the subjects of such experiments could in most cases be sorted into three general categories which roughly correspond to Reichsmarschal Goering’s tripartite conception of society. One category unhesitatingly violates the intellectual or ethical norm; another wavers, often with evident anxiety, but eventually follows the lead of the first category; and the third steadfastly upholds the norm.

Contours of pacifism

In the third category— comprised, for example, of those who refuse to torture fellow humans on the instructions of an authority figure— one can discern the contours of pacifism and anti-war movements. But those individuals are heavily outnumbered.

Again, there is no contradiction between such experimental results and evolution. Variation is an integral part of the evolutionary process, and the behaviour of the ethically inclined is well within the range of normal social behaviour. The key question that remains to be answered is: How to explain the different types of response, e.g. the willingness to torture vs. the refusal to do so?

The more or less standard distribution of behaviours in this regard is so consistent and widespread as to suggest the possibility that it may have an evolutionary function of some sort. It is not inconceivable, for example, that it is advantageous for groups to include a certain proportion of members with comparatively low levels of aggression and a capacity to identify with all human beings, including “outsiders”.

In any event, such experimental results serve to underline the fact that there is more than one way to respond to authority and group pressure. The significance of this for peacemakers is that it is futile, and most likely counterproductive, to assume that they share a common mental ground with warmakers and their followers. There is a fundamental conflict in perspective and behavioural inclination which cannot be made to disappear by uttering peaceful platitudes.

As regards the question of how and why leaders get to be leaders, that is a very large and complex issue in itself. Suffice it for the present to note that the leaders of nation-states are typically selected on the basis of a demonstrated or effectively advertised capacity to defend the society and promote its commonly perceived interests. They are not chosen because they are devoted pacifists. As former U.S. President Bill Clinton has exhorted his colleagues in the Democratic Party “We have got to be strong.... When people feel uncertain, they would rather have somebody who is strong and wrong than somebody who is weak and right.”¹⁴

He certainly showed them how wrong and strong he could be in Iraq and in the Balkans, for example. As for the qualification that this wisdom applies only “when people feel uncertain”: When do they not; and if not, when can they not be made to feel that way?

There is a fundamental conflict in perspective and behavioural inclination which cannot be made to disappear by uttering peaceful platitudes.

Understandable irrationality

These are just a few aspects of human behaviour that appear to be intertwined with our evolutionary past, and they are probably familiar to everyone at this conference. What I wish to underline is that they all fit neatly and coherently within an evolutionary framework. Most, if not all, the destructive and seemingly irrational behaviours that are difficult or impossible to understand from the standpoint of pacifism and related perspectives are quite understandable from the standpoint of human evolution.

The implications for war and peace are obviously profound. Among other things, the foregoing, extremely oversimplified analysis suggests that the members of a society may be sorted into three general categories: the aggressive, the peaceable, and the somewhat pliant “undecideds” in between. In most cases and especially in warrior societies like the United States, the aggressive will predominate—because they are aggressive. The peacemakers will disqualify themselves for leadership by virtue of their non-aggression, and the undecideds will follow the predominant forces. The latter tendency may be something of what Michael Parenti had in mind when he postulated: “Scratch a liberal [in the U.S. sense of the term], find a fascist.”

The syndrome can also be discerned in Frances Moore Lappé’s account of the methods used by the right-wing forces that currently dominate U.S. politics:

The radical Right plays by different rules.... In a pamphlet [distributed to Republican leaders] author David Horowitz writes, “Politics is war conducted by other means. In political warfare you do not fight just to prevail in an argument, but to destroy the enemy’s fighting ability.... In political wars, the aggressor usually prevails.”

... Richard Viguerie, a founding father of the modern conservative movement and author of *America’s Right Turn: How Conservatives Used New and Alternative Media to Take Power*. Viguerie couldn’t have described the Right’s Machiavellian outlook more succinctly, speaking about the vicious pre-election attacks on [presidential candidate John] Kerry:

“I just wish he [Bush] could have done a little bit more [against Kerry]. I thought it was just great. And we’re not gonna play by the liberal establishment’s rules. They say, ‘This is acceptable and this is not acceptable.’ Those days are gone and gone forever.”

I got my own taste of Viguerie’s anything-goes world, where the facts are irrelevant..... Campaigning in late October for Lois Murphy, who challenged incumbent Republican Congressman Jim Gerlach in Pennsylvania’s 6th district, I experienced the power of a lie. Gerlach campaign telephone message ads linked Murphy to the Taliban (MoveOn supports her, MoveOn “supports” the Taliban, ergo Murphy = Taliban-lover). Who would swallow that, I thought, especially since Murphy is a feminist? But...it worked. “Are you with the Taliban lady?” said a potential voter when I approached his door. He threatened to set his dog on me.

I had a nearly identical experience in 1972 while gathering voter information for the presidential campaign of George McGovern, among the Republican troglodytes who were prevalent in Vermont at that time. “George!” cried the lady of the house to an unseen presence in the dark interior. “There’s a Democrat at the door. Shall I sic the dog on him?”¹⁵

For those unfamiliar with *The Great American People*, I should perhaps note that such episodes and the attitudes they reflect are not at all uncommon in the United States. As Jacqueline Kennedy once observed, “There is so much hate in this country.”

What is to be done?

I realize that the view of human nature outlined here must be rather dismaying for those who wish to eradicate the scourge of war— and that includes most people, as Reichsmarschal Goering observed. It is possible that this sort of talk might even have the effect of discouraging some individuals from continuing or becoming engaged in anti-war efforts. That is an important consideration which no doubt helps to explain the tendency to interpret relatively small or modest signs of progress— a few encouraging words in the *New York Times*, perhaps— as evidence of major strides toward world peace.

In the short run, that sort of hopeful message can be effective in motivating people who might not otherwise become involved. But in a longer perspective— which, as we have seen, need not be more than a year or so— the net result may

instead be disillusionment and apathy, when it turns out that the business of war continues unabated despite impressive efforts to obstruct it, that the criminal leaders who perpetrate it remain in power, etc.

For that reason, I believe it is essential to be honest with ourselves and with potential allies about the immediate prospects of establishing world peace. We are not even close, despite all the dedication and sacrifice of war resisters through the ages. The warlike are also dedicated, prepared to sacrifice life and limb (i.e. unless they can arrange military exemptions, like the current U.S. president and vice-president), and have at least a million years of evolution working in their favour.

What, then, is to be done? I am certainly not qualified to lay out a plan of action; and even if I were, it would require a lot more time than is available in this setting. But for the purpose of initiating discussion, here are a few suggestions that seem to emerge from the foregoing analysis.

Presumably among the highest priorities must be to win over “the common people” to the idea that the peace they long for is a genuine possibility, and that the wars they are being frightened into tolerating will only make things worse. This will require that the peace movement— a deceptively unitary term for a highly diverse and nebulous phenomenon— acquire power and authority in society as a whole, not just within its own limited confines.

Major dilemma

Therein lies a major dilemma; for, “peace” and “power” are generally perceived as incompatible terms, and they probably are. But assuming that dilemma can be resolved, the next logical step would be to organize and co-ordinate the many disparate elements of the peace movement into an effective agency for change.

Something like this does occur from time to time, as with the global demonstrations preceding the Iraq War. But such fleeting events— which take enormous quantities of

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mainly volunteered energy, time and other resources to mobilize and carry out— soon dissolve into the normal condition of little or no co-ordination. Furthermore, they typically occur far too late to have any chance of producing the desired effect. The time to start preventing the Iraq War was directly after the Vietnam War, when the horrors and the lessons were fresh in memories not yet replaced by those of younger generations indoctrinated with the customary historical falsifications. The same thing is nearly certain to happen again after the uranium-blended dust of the Iraq War has settled, if it ever does— unless a systematic, large-scale effort is made to prevent such a repetition.

Avoiding confrontation and “painful reminders” virtually guarantees failure. It is the warmakers who are the principal beneficiaries of historical amnesia.

Experience indicates that no such effort will be made, due in large measure to lack of agreement on such issues among the various components of the anti-war “movement”. One fairly widespread and persistent theme is that, following a war, one should not “dwell on the past” with painful reminders that “open old wounds”. It is especially important

to have a care for the sensitivities of those who fought and/or lost loved ones in the war. Instead, one should “forget and move on”, so as to avoid ugly confrontations that “impede the process of healing”.

This non-confrontational ethos is very strong within the U.S. “peace movement”, and the effect has been to sharply reduce or eliminate any potential for conveying the lessons of history.¹⁶

That leads the field wide open for the warmakers and their adherents, who can be relied upon to falsify history and aggressively promote a mythology that justifies their attitudes and behaviour. That is what happened in the United States following the Vietnam War, and the mythology has become so firmly rooted that it played an important part in the reelection of George W. Bush to the presidency in 2004.¹⁷

For me, the lesson of this and similar myth-making processes is clear: It is absolutely essential to challenge the historical falsification of war— immediately, forcefully, systematically and relentlessly. The warmakers never cease in their labours, and the peacemakers can do no less.

It follows that the pious belief in the benefits of avoiding confrontation and “painful reminders” is a delusion that virtually guarantees failure. It is the warmakers who are the principal beneficiaries of historical amnesia.

Organization and subjugation

The foremost implication of this analysis is that, for the peace movement to have any significant and lasting effect on the development of society, it must gain access to leading positions in the major institutional centres of power— in government, education, business and the mass media. This is essential for two reasons: to exercise the authority necessary to win the allegiance of “the common people”; and to channel the resources of society into constructive uses instead of war.

All of this would require heroic efforts of organization and the subjugation of myriad diverse interests to the overriding task of building peace. How is that to be done? I have no idea. But it is something that should be possible to discuss. The alternative is to continue

with the present arrangement, with numerous worthwhile efforts being carried out in relative isolation from, and at times even in conflict with, each other.¹⁸

As if the problem of organizing the disparate elements of the peace movement were not daunting enough, there is yet another major challenge that would inevitably arise—brutal opposition from the war-inclined. To the extent that an effective peace movement actually threatened to acquire power, a serious confrontation would be unavoidable, and there is no guarantee that it would be conducted in accordance with democratic principles. Long traditions of democratic governance have been violated in places like Chile, and even in Sweden.¹⁹ And as several analysts have documented, the United States is already sliding toward a state of fascism.²⁰

In this connection, it should be noted that the suggestions offered here are based on an assumption of more or less democratic order. I will not even attempt to answer the question of how to build peace under conditions of tyranny. But at some point it is a question that must be addressed, since it will be impossible to institutionalize peace in any society unless a majority of its citizens can be assured that there is no risk of attack from others less enlightened.

As things now stand, the peace movement helps to legitimate the war-making system by providing a (sometimes irritating) democratic fig leaf of protest and dissent. And since it does not exercise decisive power, it does not have to assume responsibility to society as a whole for the policies it advocates.

That raises the obvious question: Is the peace movement, such as it is, prepared to govern? The answer is equally obvious. Clearly, a great deal of disciplined thinking and hard work remain to be done.

That is about as far as I have come in my efforts to understand the problem of war within the perspective of human evolution, and there is no point in trying to sugar-coat the bitter pill of this analysis. It is true that there are many encouraging signs and well-intentioned efforts, including events such as this conference. But there is no discernible decline in the predisposition to war, and there are ominous new sources of conflict looming on the horizon. They include what appears to be an inevitable collision between the interests of the United States and China, the militarization of space, the ongoing proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the massive dislocations expected to be caused by global warming, resource depletion, etc. The Pentagon is already busy planning for the wars that are likely to result.

Needless to say, none of this is in any way intended to induce peacemakers to give up. There is no acceptable alternative to continuing the struggle for world peace. But that struggle is likely to be more effective if we confront the difficulties involved and try to understand their origins.

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NOTES

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3. E-mail message from Jan Öberg, circulated 2 March 2006
4. Quoted in Gilbert, G.M. *Nuremberg Diary*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Company, 1947
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6. Quoted in Segerstråle, *op.cit.*
7. Segerstråle, *op.cit*
8. Segerstråle, *op.cit*
9. Wilson, Edward O. *On Human Nature*. Harvard University Press, 1978
10. Wilson, *op.cit*
11. Wilson, *op.cit*
12. Quincy Wright quoted in Wilson, *op.cit*
13. Accounts of the cited experiments are available at the following web addresses:
 - Solomon Asch: www.age-of-the-sage.org/psychology/social/asch_conformity.html
 - Stanley Milgram: www.stanleymilgram.com/milgram.php
 - Philip Zimbardo: www.prisonexp.org
14. Bill Clinton quoted by Jonathan Schell in "The Kerry Mandate: Strong and Wrong", *TomDispatch.com*, 30 July 2004
15. Lappé, Frances Moore. "Time for Progressives to Grow Up", *Guerrilla News Network*, 26 May 2005
16. For an example of the non-confrontational ethos as it has been applied to the Vietnam War, see "Delayed declaration" (p. 21) and "The shadow of the U.S.A." (p. 34) in the document, *Project Review*, at: www.nnn.se/environ/review.pdf
17. The falsification of the Vietnam War's history is discussed in the report, *Ethics • Law • Policy*, at: www.nnn.se/environ/ethics.pdf
See especially "The propaganda war" (pp. 11-16) and Appendix B (p. 70 ff.). The mythology of the Vietnam War played a key role in the U.S. presidential election in 2004, when supporters of President Bush attacked challenger John Kerry for, among other things, his condemnation of the massive war crimes committed by U.S. forces against the people of Vietnam. Those crimes are well-documented, but the attack on war and anti-war hero Kerry caused him significant damage in the election campaign due to the success of the ongoing falsification process.
18. See for example "NGO politics" on p. 26 of *Project Review* at: www.nnn.se/environ/review.pdf
19. Violations of democracy in Sweden are reviewed in pages 50-54 of the document, *All Quieted on the Word Front* at: www.nnn.se/disinfo/ordfront.pdf
20. See for example, "When Democracy Failed: The Warnings of History", by Thom Hartmann, *CommonDreams.org*, 16 March 2003