

Is Warmaking Irrational?

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The following has been excerpted from David Swanson's new book, "War Is A Lie" <http://warisalie.org>.

"Those who constitute the real driving force behind wars know exactly what they are lying about and why."

Most of what we're told about wars is not true, and many of the real reasons for wars are easily discovered: economic reasons, control of domestic populations, control of resources like oil, extension of empire, profiteering by the weapons industry, electoral calculations, etc. But these explanations do not explain wars that are pursued despite being understood as doomed to failure on their own terms. In trying to understand the mad pursuit of ever more war by those who call the shots, rationality and cynicism take us only so far.

MACHISMO

Men and women cannot live by bread alone. Wars fought against a global menace (communism, terrorism, or another) are also wars fought to display one's prowess to bystanders, thus preventing the toppling of dominoes — a danger that can always be precipitated by a loss of "credibility." Remarkably, in warmongerspeak "credibility" is a synonym for "bellicosity," not "honesty." Thus, nonviolent approaches to the world lack not only violence but also "credibility." There is something indecent about them. According to Richard Barnet,

"Military officers in the [Lyndon] Johnson Administration consistently argued the risks of defeat and humiliation were greater than the risks of mining Haiphong, obliterating Hanoi, or bombing 'selected targets' in China."

They knew the world would be outraged by such actions, but somehow there is nothing humiliating about the prospect of being ostracized as murderous madmen. Only softness can be humiliating.

One of the most dramatic news stories that came out of Daniel Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers was the news that 70 percent of the motivation of the people behind the War on Vietnam was "to save face." It wasn't to keep the communists out of Peoria or to teach the Vietnamese democracy or anything so grand. It was to protect the image, or perhaps the self-image, of the war makers themselves. Assistant Secretary of "Defense" John McNaughton's March 24, 1965, memo said U.S. goals in horrifically bombing the people of Vietnam were 70 percent "to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as guarantor)," 20 percent to keep territory out of Chinese hands, and 10 percent to permit people a "better, freer way of life."

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McNaughton was concerned that other nations, wondering whether or not the United States would have the toughness to bomb the hell out of them too, might ask questions like: "Is the U.S. hobbled by restraints which might be relevant in future cases (fear of illegality, of U.N., of neutral reaction, of domestic pressures, of U.S. losses, of deploying U.S. ground forces in Asia, of war with China or Russia, of use of nuclear weapons, etc.)?"

That's a lot to prove you're not afraid of. But then we did drop a lot of bombs on Vietnam trying to prove it, over 7 million tons, as compared to the 2 million dropped in World War II. Ralph Stavins argues in *Washington Plans an Aggressive War* that John McNaughton and William Bundy understood that only withdrawal from Vietnam made sense, but backed escalation out of fear of seeming personally weak.

In 1975, after defeat in Vietnam, the masters of war were even touchier about their machismo than usual. When the Khmer Rouge seized a U.S.-registered merchant vessel, President Gerald Ford demanded the release of the ship and its crew. The Khmer Rouge complied. But U.S. jet fighters went ahead and bombed Cambodia as a means of showing that, as the White House put it, the United States "still stood ready to meet force with force to protect its interests."

Such displays of toughness are understood in Washington, D.C., to not only advance careers but also to enhance reputations in perpetuity. Presidents have long believed they could not be remembered as great presidents without wars. Theodore Roosevelt wrote to a friend in 1897, "In strict confidence...I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one."

According to novelist and author Gore Vidal, President John Kennedy told him that a president needed a war for greatness and that without the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln would have been just another railroad lawyer. According to Mickey Herskowitz, who had worked with George W. Bush in 1999 on the latter's "autobiography," Bush wanted a war before becoming president. One disturbing thing about all this longing for war is that, while many of the motivations seem base, greedy, foolish, and despicable, some of them seem very personal and psychological. Perhaps it's "rational" to want world markets to buy U.S. products and to produce them more cheaply, but why must we have "supremacy in world markets?" Why do we collectively need "self-confidence?" Isn't that something each individual person finds on their own? Why the emphasis on "preeminence"? Why is there so little talk in the back rooms about being protected from foreign threats and so much about dominating foreigners with our superiority and fearsome "credibility"? Is war about being respected?

When you combine the illogic of these motivations for war with the fact that wars so often fail on their own terms and yet are repeated time and time again, it becomes possible to doubt that the masters of war are always masters of their own consciousness. The United States did not conquer Korea or Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan. Historically, empires have not lasted. In a rational world we would skip the wars and go straight to the peace negotiations that follow them. Yet, so often, we do not.

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During the War on Vietnam, the United States apparently began the air war, began the ground war, and proceeded with each step of escalation because the war planners couldn't think of anything else to do other than ending the war, and despite their high confidence that what they were doing would not work. After a lengthy period during which these expectations were fulfilled, they did what they could have done from the start and ended the war.

ARE THESE PEOPLE CRAZY?

As is familiar from the current Iraq War, warmakers debate what purpose the public should be told a war is serving. But they also debate what purpose to tell themselves a war is serving. According to Pentagon historians, by June 26, 1966, "the strategy was finished," for Vietnam, "and the debate from then on centered on how much force and to what end." To what end? An excellent question. This was an internal debate that assumed the war would go forward and that sought to settle on a reason why. Picking a reason to tell the public was a separate step beyond that one.

President George W. Bush at times suggested that the War on Iraq was revenge for Saddam Hussein's alleged (and likely fictitious) role in an assassination attempt against Bush's father, and at other times Bush the Lesser revealed that God had told him what to do. After bombing Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson supposedly gloated "I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh, I cut his pecker off." Bill Clinton in 1993, according to George Stephanopoulos, remarked about Somalia: "We're not inflicting pain on these fuckers. When people kill us, they should be killed in greater numbers. I believe in killing people who try to hurt you. And I can't believe we're being pushed around by these two-bit pricks." In May 2003, *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman said on the Charlie Rose Show on PBS that the purpose of the Iraq war was to send U.S. troops door-to-door in Iraq to say "Suck on this."

Are these people serious, crazy, obsessed with their penises, or drugged? The answers seem to be: yes, yes, of course, and they've all drunk alcohol as needed. During the 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon told his aide Bob Haldeman that he would force the Vietnamese to surrender by acting crazy (this while successfully running for president, whatever that may say of our electorate):

"[The North Vietnamese will] believe any threat of force that Nixon makes, because it's Nixon.... I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war."

"Are these people serious, crazy, obsessed with their penises, or drugged?"

One of Nixon's madman ideas was to drop nukes, but another was saturation bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. Whether he'd been pretending to be crazy or not, Nixon actually did this, dropping 36 thousand tons on two cities in 12 days before agreeing to the same terms that had been offered prior to that fit of mass murder. If there was a point to this, it may have been the same one that later motivated "surge" escalations in Iraq and Afghanistan — the desire to look tough before leaving, thus transforming defeat into a vague claim of having "finished the job." But maybe there was no point.

In chapter five we looked at the irrationality of violence outside of wars. Can the making of wars perhaps be equally irrational? Just as someone may rob a store because they need food but also be driven by an insane need to murder the clerk, can the masters of war fight

for bases and oil wells but also be driven by what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called the madness of militarism?

If Barbara Ehrenreich is right to trace the pre-history of war-lust to humans as the prey of larger animals, to hunting bands turning the tables on those predators, and to early religions of animal worship, animal sacrifice, and human sacrifice, war may lose some of its glory and pride but become more easily understandable. Even those who defend current practices of torture, even torture for the sake of extracting false grounds for war, cannot explain why we torture people to death. Is this part of the spectacle of war that is older than our history? Are the warmongers proving to themselves the ultimate importance of their cause by mutilating their enemy? Are they reveling in fear and horror of the great forces of evil that were once leopards and are now Muslims, and glorying in the courage and sacrifice needed for the good to triumph? Is war, in fact, the current form of human "sacrifice," a word we still use without recalling its long history or pre-history? Were the first sacrifices simply humans lost to predators? Did their survivors comfort themselves by describing their family members as voluntary offerings? Have we been lying about life and death that long? And are war stories the current version of that same lie?

Konrad Lorenz noted a half century ago the psychological similarity between religious awe and the arousal experienced by an animal facing mortal danger. "What is known in German as the heiliger Schauer, or 'holy shiver' of awe, may be a 'vestige,' he suggested, of the widespread and entirely unconscious defensive response which causes an animal's fur to stand on end, thus increasing its apparent size."

Lorenz believed that "to the humble seeker of biological truth there cannot be the slightest doubt that human militant enthusiasm evolved out of a communal defense response of our prehuman ancestors." It was thrilling to band together and fight off a vicious lion or bear. The lions and bears are mostly gone, but the longing for that thrill is not. As seen in chapter four of "War Is A Lie," many human cultures do not tap into that longing and do not engage in war. Ours, thus far, is one that still does.

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When faced with danger or even the sight of bloodshed, a person's heart and breathing increase, blood is drawn away from the skin and viscera, the pupils dilate, the bronchi distend, the liver releases glucose to the muscles, and blood clotting speeds up. This may be terrifying or exhilarating, and no doubt the culture of each person has an impact on how it is perceived. In some cultures such sensations are avoided at all cost. In ours, this phenomenon contributes to the motto of nightly news shows: "If it bleeds, it leads." And even more exciting than witnessing or facing danger is joining together as a group to confront and conquer it.

I don't doubt that crazed longings drive the masters of war, but once they have adopted the attitude of sociopaths, their statements sound cool and calculating. Harry Truman spoke in the Senate on June 23, 1941: "If we see that Germany is winning we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible, although I don't want to see Hitler victorious under any circumstances."

Because that Hitler had no morals.

SPREADING DEMOCRACY AND MANURE

The masters of war tell their lies to win public support, but keep their wars going for many years in the face of strong public opposition. In 1963 and 1964 as the war makers were trying to figure out how to escalate the war in Vietnam, the Sullivan Task Force analyzed the matter; war games conducted by the joint chiefs of staff and known as the Sigma Games put the war makers through possible scenarios; and the United States Information Agency measured world and congressional opinion only to learn that the world would oppose an escalation but Congress would go along with anything. Yet, “. . . conspicuously absent from these surveys was any study of American public opinion; the war makers were not interested in the views of the nation.”

It turned out, however, that the nation was interested in the views of the war makers. The result was President Lyndon Johnson's decision, similar to Polk and Truman's earlier decisions, not to run for reelection. And yet the war rolled on and escalated at the command of President Nixon. Truman had a 54 percent approval rating until he went to war on Korea and then it dropped into the 20s. Lyndon Johnson's went from 74 to 42 percent. George W. Bush's approval rating fell from 90 percent to lower than Truman's.

In the 2006 congressional elections, the voters gave a huge victory to the Democrats over the Republicans, and every media outlet in the country said that exit polls were finding that the number one motivation of voters was opposition to the war in Iraq. The Democrats took over the Congress and proceeded to immediately escalate that war. Similar elections in 2008 also failed to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Opinion polls in between elections likewise seem not to immediately influence the conduct of those making wars. By 2010 the War on Iraq had been scaled back, but the War on Afghanistan and the drone bombing of Pakistan escalated.

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For decades, the U.S. public has largely gone along with wars if they are short. If they drag on, they may stay popular, like World War II, or become unpopular, like Korea and Vietnam, depending on whether the public believes the government's arguments for why the war is necessary. Most wars, including the 1990 Persian Gulf War, have been kept short enough that the public didn't mind the ludicrous rationales.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that began in 2001 and 2003, in contrast, dragged on for several years without any plausible justification. The public turned against these wars, but elected officials appeared not to care. Both President George W. Bush and Congress hit all-time record lows in presidential and congressional approval ratings. Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign used the theme of “Change,” as did most congressional campaigns in 2008 and 2010. Any actual change, however, was fairly superficial.

When they think it will work, even temporarily, war makers will simply lie to the public that a war isn't happening at all. The United States arms other nations and assists in their wars. Our funding, weapons, and/or troops have taken part in wars in places like Indonesia, Angola, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, while our presidents claimed otherwise or just said nothing. Records released in 2000 revealed that unbeknownst to the American public, the United States had begun massive bombing of Cambodia in 1965, not 1970, dropping 2.76 million tons between 1965 and 1973, and contributing to the rise of the Khmer Rouge.¹⁹⁰ When President Reagan fueled war in Nicaragua, despite Congress having

forbidden it, a scandal played out in 1986 that acquired the name “Iran-Contra,” because Reagan was illegally selling weapons to Iran in order to fund the Nicaraguan war. The public was fairly forgiving, and the Congress and the media were overwhelmingly forgiving, of the crimes uncovered.

SO MANY SECRETS

The masters of war fear, above all, two things: transparency and peace. They do not want the public to find out what they are doing or why. And they do not want peace to get in the way of their doing it. Richard Nixon believed the “most dangerous man in America” was Daniel Ellsberg, the man who had leaked the Pentagon Papers and exposed decades of war lies by Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. When Ambassador Joseph Wilson, in 2003, published a column in the New York Times debunking some of the Iraq war lies, the Bush White House retaliated by exposing the identity of his wife as an undercover agent, placing her life at risk. In 2010, President Obama’s Justice Department charged Private First Class Bradley Manning with crimes carrying a maximum penalty of 52 years in prison. Manning was charged with leaking to the public a video of an apparent murder of civilians by a U.S. helicopter crew in Iraq and information on the planning of the War on Afghanistan.

Peace offers have been rejected and hushed up prior to or during World War II, Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other wars. In Vietnam, peace settlements were proposed by the Vietnamese, the Soviets, and the French, but rejected and sabotaged by the United States. The last thing you want when trying to start or continue a war — and when trying to sell it as a reluctant action of last resort — is for word to leak out that the other side is proposing peace talks.

MAKE SURE AMERICANS DIE

If you can start a war and claim aggression from the other side, nobody will hear their cries for peace. But you will have to make sure that some Americans die. Then a war can be not only begun but also continued indefinitely so that those already killed shall not have died in vain. President Polk knew this in the case of Mexico. So did those war propagandists who “remembered the Maine.” As Richard Barnet explains, in the context of Vietnam:

“The sacrifice of American lives is a crucial step in the ritual of commitment. Thus William P. Bundy stressed in working papers the importance of ‘spilling American blood’ not only to whip up the public to support a war that could touch their emotions in no other way, but also to trap the President.”

Who was William P. Bundy? He was in the CIA and became an advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He was exactly the kind of bureaucrat who succeeds in Washington, D.C. In fact he was considered a “dove” by the standards of those in power, people like his brother McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Kennedy and Johnson, or William Bundy’s father-in-law Dean Acheson, Secretary of State for Truman. The warmakers do what they do, because only aggressive war makers advance through the ranks and keep their jobs as high-level advisors in our government. While resisting militarism is a good way to derail your career, no one seems to have ever heard of a D.C. bureaucrat’s being sidelined for excessive warmongering. Pro-war counsel may be rejected, but is always considered respectable and important.

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ranks and keep their jobs as high-level advisors in our government.”

One can become known as soft without recommending any course of action whatsoever. All that is required is that one question information that is being used to justify hard policies. We saw this in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as bureaucrats learned that information disproving claims about weapons in Iraq was not welcome and would not advance their careers. Similarly, State Department employees in the late 1940s who knew anything about China and dared to point out Mao’s popularity (not to approve it, just to recognize it) were branded as disloyal and their careers were derailed.¹⁹² War makers find it easier to lie if they arrange to be lied to themselves.

CATAPULTING THE PROPAGANDA

The dishonesty of war makers can be found in the contrast between what they say publicly and what they actually do, including what they say in private. But it is also evident in the very nature of their public statements, which are designed to manipulate emotions.

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which existed from 1937 to 1942 identified seven useful techniques for tricking people into doing what you want them to do:

1. Name-calling (an example would be “terrorist”)
2. Glittering generalities (if you say you’re spreading democracy and then explain that you’re using bombs, people will have already agreed with you before they hear about the bombs)
3. Transfer (if you tell people that God or their nation or science approves, they may want to as well)
4. Testimonial (putting a statement in the mouth of a respected authority)
5. Plain folks (think millionaire politicians chopping wood or calling their gargantuan house a “ranch”)
6. Card stacking (slanting the evidence)
7. Bandwagon (everyone else is doing it, don’t be left out)

There are many more. Prominent among them is simply the use of fear. We can go to war or die horrible deaths at the hands of fiendish beasts, but it’s your choice, entirely up to you, no pressure, except that our executioners will be here by next week if you don’t hurry it up!

The technique of testimonial is used in combination with fear. Great authorities should be deferred to, not just because it’s easier, but also because they will save you from danger if you obey them, and you can start obeying them by believing them. Think of the people in the Milgram experiment willing to administer electric shocks to what they believed was the point of murder if an authority figure told them to do so. Think of George W. Bush’s popularity shooting from 55 percent to 90 percent approval purely because he was the nation’s president when airplanes flew into buildings in 2001 and he let out a war whoop or two. The mayor of New York City at the time, Rudy Giuliani, went through a similar transformation. Bush (and Obama) didn’t include 9-11 in their war speeches for no reason.

Those who constitute the real driving force behind a war know exactly what they are lying about and why. Members of a committee like the White House Iraq Group, whose task was to market a war on Iraq to the public, carefully choose the most effective lies and set them on their course through the welcoming ears and mouths of politicians and pundits. Machiavelli told tyrants that they must lie to be great, and would-be great ones have been heeding his advice for centuries.

Arthur Bullard, a liberal reporter who urged Woodrow Wilson, to employ dishonesty rather than censorship, argued that “Truth and falsehood are arbitrary terms....There is nothing in experience to tell us that one is always preferable to the other.... There are lifeless truths and vital lies....The force of an idea lies in its inspirational value. It matters very little whether it is true or false.”

A Senate committee report in 1954 advised, “We are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply.”

Philosophy professor Leo Strauss, an influence on Neoconservatives associated with PNAC, backed the idea of the “noble lie,” of the need for a wise elite to lie to the general public for its own good. The trouble with such theories is that, in practice, when we find out we’ve been lied to we’re not just irrationally more angry about the lies than grateful for all the good they’ve done us, we’re justifiably outraged because they’ve never done us any good.

For more information on *David Swanson’s new book, “War Is A Lie,”* go to <http://warisalie.org>.

David Swanson is the author of “War Is A Lie”

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