INTRODUCTION

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

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PLATO

SARAJEVO IN THE SUMMER OF 1995 CAME CLOSE TO Dante's inner circle of hell. The city, surrounded by Serb gunners on the heights above, was subjected to hundreds of shells a day, all crashing into an area twice the size of Central Park. Ninety-millimeter tank rounds and blasts fired from huge 155-millimeter howitzers set up a deadly rhythm of detonations. Multiple Katyusha rockets—whooshing overhead—burst in rapid succession; they could take down a four- or five-story apartment building in seconds, killing or wounding everyone inside. There was no running water or electricity and little to eat; most people were subsisting on a bowl of soup a day. It was possible to enter the besieged city only by driving down a dirt track on Mount Igman, one stretch directly in the line of Serb fire. The vehicles that had failed to make it lay twisted and upended in the ravine below, at times with the charred remains of their human cargo inside.

Families lived huddled in basements, and mothers, who had to make a mad dash to the common water taps set up by the United Nations, faced an excruciating choice—whether to run through the streets with their children or leave them in a building that might be rubble when they returned.

The hurling bits of iron fragmentation from exploding shells left bodies mangled, dismembered, decapitated. The other reporters and I slipped and slid in the blood and entrails thrown out by the shell blasts, heard the groans of anguish, and were, for our pains, in the sights of Serb snipers, often just a few hundred yards away. The latest victims lay with gaping wounds untended in the corridors of the hospitals that lacked antibiotics and painkillers.

When the cease-fires broke down, there would be four to five dead a day, and a dozen wounded. It was a roulette wheel of death, a wheel of fire that knew no distinctions of rank or nationality. By that summer, after nearly four years of fighting, forty-five foreign reporters had been killed, scores wounded. I lived—sheltered in a side room in the Holiday Inn, its front smashed and battered by shellfire—in a world bent on self-destruction, a world where lives were snuffed out at random.

War and conflict have marked most of my adult life. I began covering insurgencies in El Salvador, where I spent five years, then went on to Guatemala and Nicaragua and Colombia, through the first *intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza, the civil war in the Sudan and Yemen, the uprisings in Algeria and the Punjab, the fall of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu, the Gulf War, the Kurdish rebellion in southeast Turkey and northern Iraq, the war in Bosnia, and finally to Kosova. I have been in ambushes on desolate stretches of Central American roads, shot at in the marshes of southern Iraq, imprisoned in the Sudan, beaten by Saudi military police, deported from Libya and Iran, captured and held for a week by Iraqi Republican Guard during the Shiite rebellion following the Gulf War, strafed by Russian Mig–21s in Bosnia, fired upon by Serb snipers, and shelled for days in Sarajevo with deafening rounds

of heavy artillery that threw out thousands of deadly bits of iron fragments. I have seen too much of violent death. I have tasted too much of my own fear. I have painful memories that lie buried and untouched most of the time. It is never easy when they surface.

I learned early on that war forms its own culture. The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by mythmakers—historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state—all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us. And this is why for many war is so hard to discuss once it is over.

The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble. And those who have the least meaning in their lives, the impoverished refugees in Gaza, the disenfranchised North African immigrants in France, even the legions of young who live in the

splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world, are all susceptible to war's appeal.

Those who make war do so for many reasons, although many of these motives are never acknowledged publicly.

The Palestinian uprising was not just about throwing the Israelis out of Gaza and the West Bank, but also about crushing the urban elite, the shop owners and businessmen, in East Jerusalem and Gaza City. The "strikes" organized by the *shabab*, the young men who fueled the uprising from the refugee camps, hurt the Palestinian community far more than they hurt the Israelis. In Bosnia it was the same, the anger turned against a Communist hierarchy that kept for itself the privileges and perks of power even as power slipped from their hands in the decaying state. There is little that angers the disenfranchised more than those who fail to exercise power yet reap powerful rewards. Despots can be understood, even tolerated, but parasites rarely last long.

War is a crusade. President George W. Bush is not shy about warning other nations that they stand with the United States in the war on terrorism or will be counted with those that defy us. This too is a *jihad*. Yet we Americans find ourselves in the dangerous position of going to war not against a state but against a phantom. The *jihad* we have embarked upon is targeting an elusive and protean enemy. The battle we have begun is never-ending. But it may be too late to wind back the heady rhetoric. We have embarked on a campaign as quixotic as the one mounted to destroy us.

"We go forward," President Bush assures us, "to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world."

The patriotic bunting and American flags that proliferated in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were our support for the war mounted against the "axis of evil." Elected officials, celebrities and news anchors lined up to be counted. On Friday, September 14, three days after the attacks, Congress granted the President the right to "use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks." The resolution was passed unanimously by the Senate. There was in the House only one dissenting vote, from Barbara J. Lee, a Democrat from California, who warned that military action could not guarantee the safety of the country and that "as we act, let us not become the evil we deplore."

When we ingest the anodyne of war we feel what those we strive to destroy feel, including the Islamic fundamentalists who are painted as alien, barbaric, and uncivilized. It is the same narcotic. I partook of it for many years. And like every recovering addict there is a part of me that remains nostalgic for war's simplicity and high, even as I cope with the scars it has left behind, mourn the deaths of those I worked with, and struggle with the bestiality I would have been better off not witnessing. There is a part of me—maybe it is a part of many of us—that decided at certain moments that I would rather die like this than go back to the routine of life. The chance to exist for an intense and overpowering moment, even if it meant certain oblivion, seemed worth it in the midst of war—and very stupid once the war ended.

I covered the war in El Salvador from 1983 to 1988. By the end I had a nervous twitch in my face. I was evacuated three times by the U.S. embassy because of tips that the death squads planned to kill me. Yet each time I came back. I accepted with a grim fatalism that I would be killed in El Salvador. I could not

articulate why I should accept my own destruction and cannot now. When I finally did leave, my last act was, in a frenzy of rage and anguish, to leap over the KLM counter in the airport in Costa Rica because of a perceived slight by a hapless airline clerk. I beat him to the floor as his bewildered colleagues locked themselves in the room behind the counter. Blood streamed down his face and mine. I refused to wipe the dried stains off my cheeks on the flight to Madrid, and I carry a scar on my face from where he thrust his pen into my cheek. War's sickness had become mine.

In the fall of 1995, a few weeks after the war in Bosnia ended, I sat with friends who had suffered horribly. A young woman, Ljiljana, had lost her father, a Serb who refused to join the besieging Serb forces around the city. She had been forced a few days earlier to identify his corpse. The body was lifted, the water running out of the sides of a rotting coffin, from a small park for reburial in the central cemetery. She was emigrating to Australia soon—where, she told me, "I will marry a man who has never heard of this war and raise children who will be told nothing about it, nothing about the country I am from."

Ljiljana was beautiful and young, but the war had exacted a toll. Her cheeks were hollow, her hair dry and brittle. Her teeth were decayed and some had broken into jagged bits. She had no money for a dentist. She hoped to fix them in Australia.

Yet all she and her friends did that afternoon was lament the days when they lived in fear and hunger, emaciated, targeted by Serbian gunners on the heights above. They did not wish back the suffering, and yet, they admitted, those days may have been the fullest of their lives. They looked at me in despair. I knew them when they were being stonked by hundreds of shells a day, when they had no water to bathe in or to wash their clothes,

when they huddled in unheated, darkened apartments with plastic sheeting for windows. But what they expressed was real. It was the disillusionment with a sterile, futile, empty present. Peace had again exposed the void that the rush of war, of battle, had filled. Once again they were, as perhaps we all are, alone, no longer bound by that common sense of struggle, no longer given the opportunity to be noble, heroic, no longer sure what life was about or what it meant.

The old comradeship, however false, that allowed them to love men and women they hardly knew, indeed, whom they may not have liked before the war, had vanished. Moreover, they had seen that all the sacrifice had been for naught. They had been betrayed. The corrupt old Communist Party bosses, who became nationalists overnight and got my friends into the mess in the first place, those who had grown rich off their suffering, were still in power. There was a 70 percent unemployment rate. They depended on handouts from the international community. They knew the lie of war, the mockery of their idealism and struggled with their shattered illusions. They had seen the grinning skull of death that speaks in the end for war. They understood that their cause, once as fashionable in certain intellectual circles as they were themselves, lay forgotten. No longer did actors, politicians, and artists scramble to visit, acts that were almost always ones of gross self-promotion. And yet they wished it all back. I did too.

A year later I received a Christmas card. It was signed "Ljiljana from Australia." It had no return address. I never heard from her again.

Many of us, restless and unfulfilled, see no supreme worth in our lives. We want more out of life. And war, at least, gives a sense that we can rise above our smallness and divisiveness.

The weeks after the September 11 attacks saw New York City, with some reluctance, slip back to normal. One felt the same nostalgia.

The attacks on the World Trade Center illustrate that those who oppose us, rather than coming from another moral universe, have been schooled well in modern warfare. The dramatic explosions, the fireballs, the victims plummeting to their deaths, the collapse of the towers in Manhattan, were straight out of Hollywood. Where else, but from the industrialized world, did the suicide hijackers learn that huge explosions and death above a city skyline are a peculiar and effective form of communication? They have mastered the language. They understand that the use of disproportionate violence against innocents is a way to make a statement. We leave the same calling cards.

Corpses in wartime often deliver messages. The death squads in El Salvador dumped three bodies in the parking lot of the Camino Real Hotel in San Salvador, where the journalists were based, early one morning. Death threats against us were stuffed in the mouths of the bodies. And, on a larger scale, Washington uses murder and corpses to transmit its wrath. We delivered such incendiary messages in Vietnam, Iraq, Serbia, and Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden has learned to speak the language of modern industrial warfare. It was Robert McNamara, the American Secretary of Defense in the summer of 1965, who defined the bombing raids that would eventually leave hundreds of thousands of civilians north of Saigon dead as a means of communication to the Communist regime in Hanoi.

It is part of war's perversity that we lionize those who make great warriors and excuse their excesses in the name of self-defense. We have built or bolstered alliances with Israel and

Russia, forming a dubious global troika against terrorism, a troika that taints us in the eyes of much of the rest of the world, especially among Muslims. Suddenly all who oppose our allies and us—Palestinians, Chechens, and Afghans—are lumped into one indistinguishable mass. They are as faceless as we are for our enemies.

As the battle against terrorism continues, as terrorist attacks intrude on our lives, as we feel less and less secure, the acceptance of all methods to lash out at real and perceived enemies will distort and deform our democracy. For even as war gives meaning to sterile lives, it also promotes killers and racists.

Organized killing is done best by a disciplined, professional army. But war also empowers those with a predilection for murder. Petty gangsters, reviled in pre-war Sarajevo, were transformed overnight at the start of the conflict into war heroes. What they did was no different. They still pillaged, looted, tortured, raped, and killed; only then they did it to Serbs, and with an ideological veneer. Slobodan Milošević went one further. He opened up the country's prisons and armed his criminal class to fight in Bosnia. Once we sign on for war's crusade, once we see ourselves on the side of the angels, once we embrace a theological or ideological belief system that defines itself as the embodiment of goodness and light, it is only a matter of how we will carry out murder.

The eruption of conflict instantly reduces the headache and trivia of daily life. The communal march against an enemy generates a warm, unfamiliar bond with our neighbors, our community, our nation, wiping out unsettling undercurrents of alienation and dislocation. War, in times of malaise and desperation, is a potent distraction.

George Orwell in *1984* wrote of the necessity of constant

wars against the Other to forge a false unity among the proles: "War had been literally continuous, though strictly speaking it had not always been the same war. . . . The enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil."[1]

Patriotism, often a thinly veiled form of collective self-worship, celebrates our goodness, our ideals, our mercy and bemoans the perfidiousness of those who hate us. Never mind the murder and repression done in our name by bloody surrogates from the Shah of Iran to the Congolese dictator Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who received from Washington well over a billion dollars in civilian and military aid during the three decades of his rule. And European states—especially France—gave Mobutu even more as he bled dry one of the richest countries in Africa. We define ourselves. All other definitions do not count.

War makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought. All bow before the supreme effort. We are one. Most of us willingly accept war as long as we can fold it into a belief system that paints the ensuing suffering as necessary for a higher good, for human beings seek not only happiness but also meaning. And tragically war is sometimes the most powerful way in human society to achieve meaning.

But war is a god, as the ancient Greeks and Romans knew, and its worship demands human sacrifice. We urge young men to war, making the slaughter they are asked to carry out a rite of passage. And this rite has changed little over the centuries, centuries in which there has almost continuously been a war raging somewhere on the planet. The historian Will Durant calculated that there have only been twenty-nine years in all of human history during which a war was not underway somewhere. We call

on the warrior to exemplify the qualities necessary to prosecute war—courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. The soldier, neglected and even shunned during peacetime, is suddenly held up as the exemplar of our highest ideals, the savior of the state. The soldier is often whom we want to become, although secretly many of us, including most soldiers, know that we can never match the ideal held out before us. And we all become like Nestor in *The Iliad*, reciting the litany of fallen heroes that went before to spur on a new generation. That the myths are lies, that those who went before us were no more able to match the ideal than we are, is carefully hidden from public view. The tension between those who know combat, and thus know the public lie, and those who propagate the myth, usually ends with the mythmakers working to silence the witnesses of war.

John Wheeler, who graduated from West Point in 1966, went to Vietnam, where he watched his class take the highest number of dead and wounded of all the classes that fought there. "I was a witness in Vietnam," he told me. "I spent half my time in a helicopter traveling around the country. I was a witness to the decimation of my West Point class. And I knew we were decimated for a lie." He left the army as a captain in 1971, went to Yale Law School, and became an activist. He was the driving force behind the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington. "When I left law school the full impact of the lies hit me," he said. "I have been thinking about these lies, meditating on them and acting on them ever since. The honor system at West Point failed grotesquely within the chain of command. The most senior officers went along with McNamara and Johnson and were guilty. It was an abomination. If in order to do your duty as an Admiral or a General you have to lie, West Point should tell the new plebes."

The Iliad is about power and force. Those who inhabit its space abide by the warrior's code. Its heroes are vain, brave, and consumed by the heady elixir of violence and the bitterness of bereavement. The story is primarily that of one man, Achilles, who returns to the battlefield at Troy to attain *kleos*, the everlasting fame that will be denied to him without heroic death. *The Iliad* could have been written about Bosnia, with its competing warlords and its commanders willing to sacrifice men and villages to their egos and ambition.

The Odyssey is different. It is also built around one character, Odysseus. In *The Odyssey* the hubris and inflexibility of the warrior fail to ward off the capriciousness of fate, the indifference of nature. Odysseus has trouble coping with the conventions of civilized life. When he takes umbrage at more powerful forces and cannot resist revealing his name to the Cyclops, he condemns his men to death and himself to prolonged suffering. As the sailors beat the sea to white froth with their oars, Odysseus calls out to Cyclops: "With my men / hanging all over me and begging me not to," but they "didn't persuade my hero's heart."[2]

It is his hero's heart that Odysseus must learn to curb before he can return to the domestic life he left twenty years earlier. The very qualities that served him in battle defeat him in peace. These dual codes have existed, perhaps, since human societies were formed, and every recruit headed into war would be well-advised to read *The Iliad*, just as every soldier returning home would be served by reading *The Odyssey*. No two works have come closer to chronicling the rage and consumption of war and the struggle to recover. The name Odysseus is tied to the Greek verb *odussomai*, which means "to suffer pain."

War exposes a side of human nature that is usually masked by the unacknowledged coercion and social constraints that

glue us together. Our cultivated conventions and little lies of civility lull us into a refined and idealistic view of ourselves. But modern industrial warfare may well be leading us, with each technological advance, a step closer to our own annihilation. We too are strapping explosives around our waists. Do we also have a suicide pact?

Look just at the 1990s: 2 million dead in Afghanistan; 1.5 million dead in the Sudan; some 800,000 butchered in ninety days in Rwanda; a half-million dead in Angola; a quarter of a million dead in Bosnia; 200,000 dead in Guatemala; 150,000 dead in Liberia; a quarter of a million dead in Burundi; 75,000 dead in Algeria; and untold tens of thousands lost in the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the fighting in Colombia, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, southeastern Turkey, Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland, Kosova, and the Persian Gulf War (where perhaps as many as 35,000 Iraqi citizens were killed). In the wars of the twentieth century not less than 62 million civilians have perished, nearly 20 million more than the 43 million military personnel killed.

Civil war, brutality, ideological intolerance, conspiracy, and murderous repression are part of the human condition—indeed almost the daily fare for many but a privileged minority.

War is not a uniform experience or event. My time in the insurgencies in Central America, the Persian Gulf War—where two large armies clashed in the desert—and the Balkans, where warlords and gangsters tried to pass themselves off as professional soldiers, illustrated the wide differences that make up modern warfare. But war usually demands, by its very logic, the disabling of the enemy, often broadly defined to include civilians who may have little love for the Taliban or Saddam Hussein or Somali warlords. While we venerate and mourn our own

dead we are curiously indifferent about those we kill. Thus killing is done in our name, killing that concerns us little, while those who kill our own are seen as having crawled out of the deepest recesses of the earth, lacking our own humanity and goodness. Our dead. Their dead. They are not the same. Our dead matter, theirs do not. Many Israelis defend the killing of Palestinian children whose only crime was to throw rocks at armored patrols, while many Palestinians applaud the murder of Israeli children by suicide bombers.

Armed movements seek divine sanction and the messianic certitude of absolute truth. They do not need to get this from religions, as we usually think of religion, but a type of religion: Patriotism provides the blessing. Soldiers want at least the consolation of knowing that they risk being blown up by land mines for a greater glory, for a New World. Dissension, questioning of purpose, the exposure of war crimes carried out by those fighting on our behalf are dangerous to such beliefs. Dissidents who challenge the goodness of our cause, who question the gods of war, who pull back the curtains to expose the lie are usually silenced or ignored.

We speak of those we fight only in the abstract; we strip them of their human qualities. It is a familiar linguistic corruption. During the war in Bosnia, many Muslims called the Serbs "Chetniks," the Serbian irregulars in World War II, who slaughtered many Muslims. Muslims, for many Serbs in Bosnia, were painted as Islamic fundamentalists. The Croats, to the Serbs and Muslims, were branded "Ustashe," the fascist quislings who ruled Croatia during World War II. And there were times when, in interviews, it was hard to know if people were talking about what happened a few months ago or a few decades ago. It all merged into one huge mythic campaign. It was as if Josip Broz

Tito, who had held Yugoslavia together for most of the Cold War era, had put the conflicted country into a deep freeze in 1945.

The goal of such nationalist rhetoric is to invoke pity for one's own. The goal is to show the community that what they hold sacred is under threat. The enemy, we are told, seeks to destroy religious and cultural life, the very identity of the group or state. Nationalist songs, epic poems, twisted accounts of history take the place of scholarship and art.

America is not immune. We mourn the victims of the World Trade Center attack. Their pictures cover subway walls. We mourn the firefighters, as well we should. But we are blind to those whom we and our allies in the Middle East have crushed or whose rights have been ignored for decades. They seem not to count.

"The principle of the movement is whoever is not included is excluded, whoever is not with me is against me, so the world loses all the nuances and pluralistic aspects that have become too confusing for the masses," wrote Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*[3]

Before conflicts begin, the first people silenced—often with violence—are not the nationalist leaders of the opposing ethnic or religious group, who are useful in that they serve to dump gasoline on the evolving conflict. Those voices within the ethnic group or the nation that question the state's lust and need for war are targeted. These dissidents are the most dangerous. They give us an alternative language, one that refuses to define the other as "barbarian" or "evil," one that recognizes the humanity of the enemy, one that does not condone violence as a form of communication. Such voices are rarely heeded. And until we learn once again to speak in our own voice and reject that

handed to us by the state in times of war, we flirt with our own destruction.

And yet, despite all this, I am not a pacifist. I respect and admire the qualities of professional soldiers. Without the determination and leadership of soldiers like General Wesley K. Clark we might not have intervened in Kosova or Bosnia. It was, in the end, a general, Ulysses S. Grant who saved the union. Even as I detest the pestilence that is war and fear its deadly addiction, even as I see it lead states and groups towards self-immolation, even as I concede that it is war that has left millions of dead and maimed across the planet, I, like most reporters in Sarajevo and Kosova, desperately hoped for armed intervention. The poison that is war does not free us from the ethics of responsibility. There are times when we must take this poison—just as a person with cancer accepts chemotherapy to live. We can not succumb to despair. Force is and I suspect always will be part of the human condition. There are times when the force wielded by one immoral faction must be countered by a faction that, while never moral, is perhaps less immoral.

We in the industrialized world bear responsibility for the world's genocides because we had the power to intervene and did not. We stood by and watched the slaughter in Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Rwanda where a million people died. The blood of the victims of Srebrenica—a designated U.N. safe area in Bosnia—is on our hands. The generation before mine watched, with much the same passivity, the genocides of Germany, Poland, Hungary, Greece, and the Ukraine. These slaughters were, as in Gabriel García Márquez's book *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, often announced in advance.[4] Hutu radio broadcasts from Kigali called on the Interahamwe in Rwanda to carry out genocide. The U.N. Belgian detachment,

however, like the Dutch peacekeepers in Srebrenica, stood by and watched. The radio in Kigali was never shut down. The rampages began. There was never any secret about Milošević's plans for a greater Serbia or his intent to use force and ethnic cleansing to create it.

I wrote this book not to dissuade us from war but to understand it. It is especially important that we, who wield such massive force across the globe, see within ourselves the seeds of our own obliteration. We must guard against the myth of war and the drug of war that can, together, render us as blind and callous as some of those we battle.

We were humbled in Vietnam, purged, for a while, of a dangerous hubris, offered in our understanding and reflection about the war, a moment of grace. We became a better country. But once again the message is slipping away from us, even as we confront the possibility of devastating biological or nuclear terrorist attacks in Washington or New York. If the humility we gained from our defeat in Vietnam is not the engine that drives our response to future terrorist strikes, even those that are cataclysmic, we are lost.

The only antidote to ward off self-destruction and the indiscriminate use of force is humility and, ultimately, compassion. Reinhold Niebuhr aptly reminded us that we must all act and then ask for forgiveness. This book is not a call for inaction. It is a call for repentance.