

The Unique Human Capacity for War

One characteristic that sets humans apart from other animals is the capability to organize sustained warfare against members of their own species, a troubling fact that connects to the problem of PTSD, says Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

The question “why war?” has long inspired scholars to seek answers in human nature. Their findings invariably have been ambiguous and judgments inconclusive. While it is easy to make the case that humans do engage in violent behavior as part of their nature, there is no basis for arguing that they are “killers.” There is no propensity to kill fellow humans that prevails over other forms of social inter-action.

Moreover, the development of organized societies as their standard habitat introduces cultural and structural elements that produce a wide range of behavioral patterns. Simply put, humans in groups are capable of conducting their collective affairs just about any manner imaginable – as illustrated abundantly by the historical record.

The effort to make sense of the connections between human nature and the phenomenon of war is getting renewed attention thanks to the rising interest in understanding Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome or PTSS (also called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD). That interest, in turn, reflects growing awareness that there is nothing new about PTSS or PTSD except that now we are chary about accepting cavalier explanations ascribing it to character flaws or the contradictions of socio-cultural conditioning.

One place to begin an exercise intended to unravel the puzzle is recognition that individual violence and war are not the same thing. All of God’s creatures engage in violence; only homo sapiens war with each other. Our ability to do so derives from the enlarged capacity of our brains that enables us to abstract, to conceptualize, to use language and – thereby – to organize joint enterprises sustained over time. Those activities engage the frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex.

That is why homo sapiens are the only species that fights wars. Other mammals, even primates, don’t have the mental ability to give meaning to others and events or to set objectives – two preconditions for war. Their violent encounters have two distinguishing characteristics: a) all are brief, b) and all are keyed to matters of survival. They fight for food, for mates, and for territory, which is tied to the first two.

Reptilian Brain

Essentially, it is only the Reptilian brain (or R-complex brain) that is involved in those fights with a small contribution from the next evolutionary level of mental function that allows for a measure of memory, cunning and coordinated hunting. Hence, the susceptibility to mental impairment doesn't exist, and the limited duration of the violence doesn't even generate the stress necessary to create such an impairment.

By contrast, there is a discrepancy between the evolved brain capabilities that make war possible, on the one hand, and our core physiology that is little different from that of other mammals, on the other. In other words, our greatly enhanced capacity for organized violence has far surpassed the rest of our psychosomatic apparatus. No wonder we are vulnerable to stress.

Military technology that permits fighting at a distance far from the battlefield, and from **the enemy**, partially avoids this contradiction generated by sustained physical combat. People who push buttons, though, encounter another contradiction. Their Reptilian brain is not engaged in combat even as their brain's higher functions are activated in killing people.

That means that the conceptual awareness, which is uniquely human (and the basis of mental stress) must be handled without benefit of the hormones and other physiological responses sparked by the Reptilian brain. They are dormant because the person involved is not at grips with the tangible enemy. This helps to explain the cause of the PTSD that some of the drone operators experience when snug in a Nevada cubicle.

At the other extreme, for soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand combat, the psychosomatic condition is comparable to that of other mammals – it is the Reptilian brain that engaged in the fighting. That probably was the experience on Saipan and Iwo Jima in World War II.

This analysis suggests that the prime question we should ask is not “why PTSD?” but rather “how is it that most humans are able to fight in wars without cracking up?”

One answer is that the human propensity to abstract reality produces the ideologies, the religious beliefs, their symbolic representations, and thereby the objectification of the “other.” That permits communal mobilization, regimentation, and protracted war-fighting. They generate feelings able to override survival impulses – for most soldiers, for a certain period of time.

Organized Warfare

A complementary answer is that there is indeed always the lurking possibility that individual soldiers put in lethal situations will bolt. Bolt out of fear. Once under fire, the adrenaline et al kicks in, and that impulse may subside. It may also rise once again after experiencing a long string of such episodes.

Or, individuals cannot handle the accumulated stress – aggravated by the strain between the survival instinct to get the Hell out of there and the combination of conditioned loyalties/duties and bonding with one's fellow "tribesmen." Emotional dissonance ensues. That adds to the stresses that eventually can produce PTSD.

Which emotions prevail can be affected by the type of leadership provided by officers in the thick of things. Whether through example, inspiration or imposition an effective leader can get soldiers to take high-risk actions. The methods at their disposal vary from army to army. In the citizen armies of the United States or Great Britain during World War II, for example, there were limits on the coercive means available to officers.

It has been pointed out that up to a third of American infantry soldiers never, or rarely fired, their weapons at the enemy. That was due either to their impulse to hide in a ditch or behind a tree with their head down and/or to an aversion to killing at relatively close range a visible fellow human. That percentage probably went down around Bastogne or on Pacific Isles where the survival instinct took hold.

It often is remarked that for most of history, in most places, warriors moved in fixed step within serried ranks. That is explained, in military terms, as creating mass for both offense and defense. It also makes discipline much easier to maintain. The instrument for doing so was the threat of being killed by one's officers (immediately or afterwards) for breaking ranks.

That practice continued right into the Twentieth Century, e.g. the Bolshevik commissars who patrolling behind the front lines shooting deserters or shirkers without inhibition. Surely, the ideal formation on strictly tactical military grounds was not to march across fields in brightly colored uniforms to be picked off by the enemy or shattered by cannon – as was the standard practice in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries.

The Victory of Horsemen

The drawback of that approach was demonstrated repeatedly over the centuries when the highly structured armies of great states were routed by horsemen from Central Asia. This occurred time after time: the Huns, the Seljuk Turks, the Mongols (mainly Turkish troops), Tamerlane, etc., etc. In fact, invading hordes

of horsemen who operated with a fluidity and adaptability that gave them an enormous advantage, chalking up a streak of almost uninterrupted victories across the millennia.

The exceptions were some of their wars with Chinese dynasties, which were able to prevail by drawing on vast resources to marshal formidable armies – and also to build defensive fortifications exemplified by the Great Wall. Still, even Imperial China was overrun on four separate occasions.

Some might note other candidate “exceptions.” The most commonly referred to is the battle of Ain Jalut where the Crusaders entered into a tacit alliance with the Mamluks to defeat the Mongols in Syria. However, that was a case in which the invaders had been greatly diminished when their main force, led by Helegu, hastily left the Middle East to deal with a succession crisis back in Karakorum.

The other cited instance is the battle of the Catalaunian Plains near Chateaudun in modern-day France where the Huns were defeated by a coalition of Romans, Franks and Goths. That Hun army, though, was composed mainly of infantry drawn from what had become a sedentary population settled on the Hungarian plain.

But did these fierce horsemen of the Asian steppe suffer from PTSS. Any speculation should bear in mind that they were bred in a culture where killing and risking death in battle were taken to be what life was all about. That said, there probably were a few who did experience PTSS at some point in their wild perambulations across the continent.

What might their symptoms have been? How were they interpreted? Was the condition concealed? Perhaps the sufferers figured among those Mongols who settled in Afghanistan with their families in the Thirteenth Century rather than trek all the way back to Mongolia. They are the ancestors of today’s Hazara minority. Most settlers, though, probably just wearied of the tribulations they had endured year after year.

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In the Grip of Warfare

Amid a deepening scientific consensus that human activity is inviting environmental catastrophe, humanity’s continued reliance on warfare to settle disputes is the other incendiary element in the mix for global annihilation, as Lawrence S. Wittner observes.

By Lawrence S. Wittner

Is the human race determined to snuff itself out through mass violence? There are many signs that it is.

The most glaring indication lies in the continued popularity of war. Despite well over a hundred million deaths in World Wars I and II, plus the brutal military conflicts in Korea, Indochina, Hungary, Algeria, Lebanon, Angola, Mozambique, the Philippines, the Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, wars continue to rage across the globe, consuming vast numbers of lives and resources.

In 2012, worldwide military spending reached \$1.75 trillion. Moreover, the most lavish spenders for weaponry, war, and destruction were the supposedly "civilized" nations of NATO, with \$1 trillion in military expenditures. By far the biggest military spender in 2012 was the United States, which accounted for 39 percent of the world total.

Nor has this pattern shifted since that time. Currently, the U.S. government is pouring \$7 billion a month into its 12 ½-year-long war in Afghanistan. Elsewhere, drones are rapidly becoming the U.S. weapons of choice in the worldwide "War on Terror," with America's largest spy drone, the Global Hawk, costing \$220 million each.

In recent months, as the U.S. House of Representatives dropped food stamps for the poor from the agriculture bill, continued the sequestration that slashed meals for sick and homebound seniors, and moved toward ending Saturday mail delivery, it rejected a 1 percent cut in military spending and, then, voted for a national defense authorization that provided for billions of dollars more than the Pentagon requested.

Furthermore, a nation's armed forces often engage in violent behavior quite unrelated to their national security. Commanded by military officers viewing themselves as the saviors of their countries, they have staged bloody coups against their own governments, terrorizing and massacring civilians in large numbers, as they did in Indonesia, Burma, Nigeria, Brazil, Greece, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and many other countries. At the moment, in fact, the Egyptian armed forces, having deposed a democratically-elected, civilian government, are busy gunning down thousands of Egyptians.

In fairness to the official armed forces, it should be noted that the mass violence in many societies goes far beyond them. Terrorism, gang wars and religious massacres continue to plague nations around the globe. In the United States, lynching has declined dramatically, but gun-related killings are quite

common.

More than 30,000 Americans die in gun violence each year and in a society with over 300 million firearms in the hands of civilians it seems unlikely that such violence will decline. Indeed, massacres by gunmen for example, the murder of 20 children and 6 teachers at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut have become almost routine.

Admittedly, the Sandy Hook massacre was the work of a mentally-deranged individual. But the NRA's response to a series of mass killings opposition to all gun control legislation and a stubborn insistence that wider availability of guns will reduce violence makes the Newtown maniac look relatively sane.

And what is one to say about the mental state of the pro-gun zealots who, this August, made plans to turn up, fully-armed, at a Starbucks in Newtown – and were foiled only when the horrified management shut down the coffee house?

The acceptability of mass violence is demonstrated on a much larger scale by national governments' ongoing preparations for nuclear war. Sixty-eight years after the U.S. government employed atomic bombs to exterminate the populations of two Japanese cities and it became clear to all but the mentally feeble that nuclear war meant global annihilation, over 17,000 nuclear weapons remain in existence, with 94 percent of them in the arsenals of the U.S. and Russian governments.

Despite numerous claims by national leaders that they are committed to building a nuclear weapons-free world, the United States, Russia, China, India and Pakistan are currently modernizing their nuclear weapons, with the United States and Russia spending about \$75 billion a year between them on this project.

Meanwhile, the North Korean government threatens to attack the United States with its small nuclear arsenal, while the Iranian government continues a uranium enrichment process that might enable it to enter the nuclear club. Appropriately enough, the famous "Doomsday Clock" of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists stands at five minutes to midnight.

There are, of course, important countervailing trends. Responding to the development of modern, mechanized warfare, mass-based peace movements began to appear in the Nineteenth Century. During the Twentieth Century, these movements grew even larger, particularly after the advent of nuclear weapons. In place of war, they championed international arbitration, global cooperation, arms control and disarmament, and the development of global governance.

The World Court, the United Nations and other international institutions owe much to this public pressure. Within individual nations, as well, critics of

mass violence fostered new, more cooperative modes of education, non-violent resistance, conflict resolution, innovative therapies, peace studies programs and gun control campaigns.

But resorting to violence is a long-term, deeply-ingrained habit in human history, and is not easily discarded. To shake it probably requires less attention to a royal childbirth or the latest sex scandal and more attention to the dangers of mass violence in an age of modern weaponry and war.

This was certainly what the French writer, Albert Camus, meant when, in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the first use of nuclear weapons, he offered a simple but powerful challenge: "All I ask is that, in the midst of a murderous world, we agree to reflect on murder and to make a choice."

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