



*"Apparently the Americans have perfected this weapon that realizes people's worst fears while leaving their apathy intact."*

# Psychological Attitudes and War

by Paul Valent

**There are three aspects to bear in mind when considering war. Firstly, there is the real horror of its destructiveness, suffering, degradation and futility. Secondly, there are the psychological means invoked in dealing with these negative aspects. For example, in peacetime, in the main, war and its implications tend to be ignored emotionally, and war becomes a distasteful taboo subject. Otherwise it is liable to be trivialized. Its horrors are discounted because they are so vast. Thirdly, one may try to develop an awareness of its painful implications, and some knowledge about it that is scientific. This approach is the only hope for breaking the taboo on discussing war, and so gaining power over our fears and our horror, the source of the taboo. We shall examine each of these aspects of war in this article.**

If war were a purely rational human endeavour, philosophers and scientists would already have found the key to the ending of this ubiquitous phenomenon. All we need say about war and rationality is this: that the further a war is from us the sillier it seems, but the closer it is the more emotionally convincing appears to be its necessity. Thus we wonder at the wisdom of Iran and Iraq pounding at each other's oil installations, or Britain and Argentina going to war over the Falkland Islands, but it must be remembered that, like the current protagonists, we feel absolutely correct at times about entering wars with even distant enemies who are supposed to be threatening us.

We all seem to share a universal human propensity to feel threatened. The arousal to fight is one way to cope with threat; others are surrender, withdrawal into inconspicuousness, fantasies, illnesses, non-aggressive comfort groups, allying oneself with a powerful parent-figure nation, or even allying oneself with a powerful aggressor. The arousal to fight leads to euphoric preparedness to battle for the highest stakes, in the firm belief in one's power to win and destroy the source of danger. The reality of danger is ignored because of one's fantasies of omnipotence. Fighting is a common option individuals choose in the face of threat, as do nations when they go to war.

It might seem like a mere human aberration for people to display in a naked form emotions like fanaticism, certainty of the rightness of one's group or nation, idealization of a leader as if he were a god, the veneration of banal symbols and slogans and to bear hatred and prejudice for the opposing group which, it is felt, must be destroyed like vermin—unless we understand that those fighting believe fervently and very simplistically that they are threatened with what they take to be ultimate danger and Evil. They further believe that if they allow it to overcome them then every human fear will be realized. Thus wars are meaningful to the belligerents in that they promise to establish security and goodness (their goodness) forever. Those involved in war find it difficult to imagine that the enemy is composed of similar beings as themselves, with similar fears and goals.

It is essential to learn as much as possible about these phenomena of war so that we may gain some power over

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**Paul Valent** is a practicing psychiatrist at one of the major hospitals in Melbourne. He has specialized in the psychology of trauma and stress and is currently completing a book on the psychology of war. He has numerous publications in this field.

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them. All too often we are offered little more than a choice between despair or vain hope when thinking about war. In order to understand the underpinnings of war we must go beyond the rational intellectual theories usually offered us. They do not explain the basic irrationalities in war. It is only when we look at psychological factors which are often not easily accessible to conscious cognition that these irrationalities become comprehensible. We must therefore delve into the hidden areas of human emotions and misperceptions. It is true that each situation of implicit terror in the international arena has some rational intellectual aspects, but it also bears the emotional undercurrents present in most wars. We should try to be aware of them.

The rest of the article will be devoted to the further examination of the underlying 'fear' components of war, the actual effects of war stress, and the problems of the current nuclear threat.

### *Emotional underpinnings of war*

We should have more respect for man's propensity for the kind of fear which may arouse him to fight. Fear alerted man in his natural biological environment to the dangers of animals bigger than himself; the hyperacuteness of fear then provided a margin of safety. Each of us, even in modern times, relives the vulnerabilities of early man in our long impressionable and helpless childhood. The imprinting of a vulnerable and small self-image relative to the environment and in relation to other humans is a natural heritage. The high degree of fear that is unreasonable in the adult of today would, in the distant past, have promoted survival. It was also a spur to using the powers of the mind to develop weapons to overcome the sense of smallness and vulnerability.

An overacute sense of danger from a big outside entity, from another group, tribe or nation is almost endemic in our society, too. For instance, two years ago an *Age* poll<sup>1</sup> found that 63% of Australians felt that Australia was under threat to its security from another country, and this at a time when no country directed any particular attention to us, certainly not hostile attention. We certainly feel small in relation to our neighbours. Yet in turn they may be afraid of our size as represented by the size of our country. It may come as a surprise to us that some of our smallest Pacific neighbours have seen us as a real threat to them.

'Over-fear' is, of course, a spur to arms races. For instance even when the U.S. had undoubted nuclear superiority over

the Russians, it felt compelled to develop the hydrogen bomb after Russia exploded her first atom bomb. This was fuelled by 'over-fear' of Russia's bigness. The desire to be in a position, not to be annihilated, but rather to be able to annihilate through superior force is a factor in the current over-armament spurt. Past experience has shown that 'over-fear' may inspire both sides to 'sacrifice all' in an attempt to overtake what is seen as a too powerful and dangerous enemy. The domino theory is another example of 'over-fear': the belief that an encroachment on our outposts of security is the first step to our inevitable annihilation, that we, as the last domino, will automatically fall. Thus we have Vietnams. For Britain, failure to fight in the Falklands apparently meant that any future enemy could take what they wanted from any part of her.

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to kill because that seems the only way to eliminate what is perceived as a dangerous enemy. If this is not done, we feel we will be killed by the superior enemy. However, the desire to kill brings the complication of making us believe that our enemy, the source of our danger, wants to kill us, because he knows our own dangerous mind. Hence, fear breeds more fear. A first fatal strike at the superior enemy is the only way to achieve security, it seems. Such a mental set assisted survival in the natural environment.

So consider how little we have advanced from the prototype thinking of the Kaingang Indians from the Brazilian jungles who in everyday life are really threatened by beasts and men.

Everything outside threatens. This is my Lu (my threatening doom). My body is in constant danger of destruction, and I must take action against that threat. Contemplating action I feel the other person fears me

because he knows what is in my mind. He fears me and therefore wishes to destroy me. This is my Lu. I must take action to prevent it. I take action.<sup>2</sup>

Man understands death better than other animals. Therefore, the sight of dead enemies assures him that he has gained life for himself. However, man's fantasies range wider, too, and so he feels he must destroy more widely to have a sense of security. In fact, he can never kill enough to gain it. In order to be able to kill, the jungle men banded together in packs to overcome big animals. Groups still give a sense of power to their members and acts of aggression are committed in groups which a man would be afraid to perpetrate alone.

In summary, man is prone to feel insecure. One set of strategies often used by him to remedy his fear is to band together with others, acquire ever more powerful weapons and destroy the sources of anxiety. When directed to other animals these tendencies have served man well. The tragedy is that he is still using his jungle mentality against the only remaining source of danger—the mirror image of himself as a dangerous animal now reflected in other humans. His weaponry has grown, of course, to almost unlimited power. Thus man is still trying to grow ever bigger and stronger; he is still wary and ready to make a deadly thrust at a time when he thinks he can get away with it. This mentality leads to war. But war does not bring the longed-for security, for actually it creates more insecurity and suffering, more than we ever like to admit, as will become apparent below.

### *Effects of war on survivors*

There is now a wealth of evidence that stress from whatever source is followed by consequences affecting the person's equilibrium. This holds in all areas of his functioning—i.e. the body, the mind and the whole social fabric. Furthermore, the more severe the stress, the more severe and the more varied the illnesses which follow. Even ordinary civilian stresses like bereavement, retirement etc. lead to increased morbidity and mortality. Personal disasters like motor car accidents may be followed by quite severe disorganizations of the person. Disasters like floods lead to increased morbidity and mortality from various causes.

War time multiplies greatly the stresses humans must endure. Apart from death and injury, war brings on neuroses, psychosomatic illnesses and other illnesses. Juvenile delinquency, crime, motor car and industrial

accidents also increase. Bombing raids in the Second World War were noted to be associated with anginas and heart attacks, perforated ulcers, digestive diseases, thyroid disease, strokes, skin and menstrual disorders. The proportion of population suffering significant psychological disturbance rose with the intensity of the bombing. For instance, one third of those bombed whose houses were significantly damaged and who were caught in the rubble for up to an hour had severe psychiatric symptoms ten months after the event, one third had moderate symptoms, while one third coped reasonably well at follow-up.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Morale division of the Strategic Bombing Survey<sup>4</sup> found that one third of the people who underwent a big air raid suffered relatively permanent psychological effects. Prevalence studies of psychological disturbance among survivors of bombed Biafran<sup>5</sup> and defoliated and bombed Vietnamese<sup>6</sup> villages showed that months after the event around 80% of the population suffered from severe psychological disturbances.

War psychiatry has come to the conclusion that all people can break down under sufficient stress. Very few would not break down after an aggregate of 120 days of combat or attrition of two thirds of one's comrades. Millions suffered from combat neurosis in the U.S. Army in the Second World War and carried serious scars for many years thereafter. Many more suffered lesser neuroses, psychosomatic illness, etc. Further problems ensured for many veterans on their return home from the war, as can also be seen currently among Vietnam veterans.

There are no unscathed survivors of concentration camps and Japanese and Korean prisoner of war camps. Follow-ups on them 5, 15 and 30<sup>7</sup> years later show that these survivors' lives are permanently permeated by their gruesome experiences. The psychological and physical health of survivors was seen to suffer throughout each period of follow-up, over and above those of control groups, as did their mortality rates.

Survivors of Hiroshima and survivors of concentration camps and the severe prisoner of war camps have many features in common. Both groups experienced a saturated death experience, where every horrific fantasy of a malign end of the world seemed to be confirmed by reality. In Hiroshima<sup>8</sup> people died all around. Their bodies blackened, skin hanging from their bodies, people moved slowly like ghosts, dying. Among survivors utter shock lasted about thirty-six hours, followed by useless slow marching in columns, or people just stayed in one place. Within days came the frightening effects of

radiation—the second saturated death experience. Death-rumours of nothing ever growing again and of extreme punishment were rife. Fear of death never left the survivors. Their personalities, their physical self-concern and their actual illnesses, poverty and social isolation ensured the persistence of the experience for the rest of their lives.

Though this was the extreme of horror and destructiveness in the last war, it would seem mild in the next, for now we have bombs 1000 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb and these could cause far worse devastation and have even more drastic effects on any survivors.

### *Dealing with the danger of nuclear holocaust*

As we said at the outset, there is a natural tendency to blank out the dangers of war and this is often in-

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dulged when actual war does not impinge. The blanking out of thoughts about a prospective nuclear war does not stem from ignorance, but from feelings of helplessness. Apathy, despair and withdrawal from the problem occur when we perceive that we can do nothing against an overwhelming threat, this war itself. Such reactions of apathy, despair and withdrawal may be as maladaptive as the arousal to fight, and may also be a result of 'over-fear'. Excess apathy explains why three recent accidents involving nuclear missiles in the U.S. hardly merited comment. (how many of us can even remember them?) even though Russia pointed out that such mistakes could start a Third World War. Similarly, no public programme in the U.S. to promote building of fall-out shelters took off with any enthusiasm, and as a result of the Cuban missile crisis, when war had seemed likelier than ever, such programmes actually ceased. Remin-

ders of our death are too threatening to be allowed into consciousness in meaningful ways. We do not build shelters for the same reasons as we do not order our coffins and we even resist the law about seat belts in cars because it reminds us of our vulnerability. We glorify those who apparently escaped the face of death unscathed. We abhor those who were shattered by the experience. We avoid the dying and the bereaved. It took fifteen years for the suffering of atomic bomb and concentration camp survivors to come to light, and even then they, and the knowledge about them, were shunned.

To the average person atomic warfare signifies the final Armageddon, the quick elimination of humankind and all living things from earth. It conveys the ultimate of what we fear. On the emotional level it conveys all the fears of helplessness, loss of control, abandonment and separation from all sources of security. We have all experienced such feelings in childhood and repressed them. We do the same with all subsequent fears which reminds us of them. Nuclear warfare does not even offer hope as conventional warfare does. It does not matter if our cause is right for there will be no reward or enjoyment of the victory at the end. We will not have achieved eternal peace and security for our children (a common hope of wars). Therefore the repression or denial of this ultimate fear is particularly strong.

Total denial is rare. But emotional denial is the rule. This leads to a particular form of denial which allows intellectual acknowledgement of dangers without accompanying emotional reactions. This psychic defence allows people to talk of a holocaust with the same lack of feelings as if they contemplated the wiping out of millions of insects with insecticides. This intellectualization is used particularly by strategists and scientists. Here, talk of technical facts and figures hides their real meaning. Dogmatic ideological stances as defences are also used, e.g. 'Democracy must be preserved at all costs'. They give certainty to some in the face of disquieting facts. Quasi-religious beliefs and blind faith may also be of comfort. These may be expressed as:

The leaders surely know. They know more than we. They won't let disaster overtake us. It would not be logical. (There is a blind belief in logic.) Nuclear war is so destructive that it will never happen. God will look after us. The acme of human achievement and endeavour has gone into the bombs. Surely they will not destroy humankind. (Or even) Let the bombs

fall, let's get it over and done with, and then live in peace.

Our concern may be displaced to minor issues about which it is felt something *can* be done. Thus, much concern may be voiced about fluoridation of water, or the effects of medical use of X-rays and radioactive materials. Fear of poisonous, atmospheric nuclear saturation may be channelled into concern for industrial pollution. Or discussion may rage about defence expenditure rather than what defence is really about.

### Some pragmatic questions

The third aspect of war mentioned at the start revolves around breaking the taboo on understanding this horror. While paying due attention to contemporary economic and political factors, we must not shy away from the study of the emotional ones, including our own fears and potentials for group actions such as fighting war.

With such knowledge we can more logically assess our own responses and the wider political situation, and ask some relevant questions. For instance, to what degree do we encourage our leaders to deal with the substantive issues of the nuclear dangers we face, and to what degree *do* they address themselves to these dangers? Or do we work on presumptions that somehow things will be right, divert ourselves to talking about fact and figures, or ideologies, or other comparatively minor issues? In particular, do our leaders appreciate in a meaningful way the effects of war, and particularly nuclear war? Is everything done to keep nuclear holocaust out of Australia, away from the Pacific? Are we doing

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what we can to reverse the nuclear build-up among the superpowers and other powers?

To what degree can we acknowledge our fears and to what degree can we separate the rational and distorted emotional components of them? Can we remember and compensate for the tendency to exaggerate fear? Thus is it possible that 63% of us see our position too fearfully? Our seeing ourselves as small, isolated and vulnerable and ready to be attacked may be an irrational fear. For instance, being small and tucked away may also mean that no one sees us as threatening. On the other hand, what are our neighbours' fears, and how much do we empathize with them? Can we thus match our fears to reality, rather than needlessly exacerbate them?

Arming oneself as a result of fear, and accusing the opponent only fuels the other nation's fear and desire to arm itself, as is the case with Russia and the U.S. They are fearful of each other with good cause; but if each side were to examine its own and the other's fears this would be more worthwhile than super-arming themselves in the hope that they will gain security. Diffusion of this mutual fear seems to be the only

hope of reversing the dangerous spiral of the arms race. Is Australia doing what it can to reverse this spiral, or is it adding to it through its own fears?

The world, and we with it, face immense dangers. But surely knowledge, logic (including the special logic of emotions) and hope can contribute more than denial, apathy, dogmatism, or pugnaciousness. □

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