



Home from the War

VIETNAM VETERANS
Neither Victims nor Executioners

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vocacy I have already mentioned would render a denial of subjectivity—a claim of being a “neutral screen”—both hypocritical and, in the broadest sense, unscientific. I cannot say that I underwent the same transformation as the Vietnam veterans I describe, but I did not emerge from this study unchanged.

Wellsfleet, Mass.
November, 1972

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CHAPTER 1

The Hero Versus the Socialized Warrior



It is a joyous thing, is war. . . . You love your comrade so in war. When you see that your quarrel is just and your blood is fighting well, tears rise to your eye. A great sweet feeling of loyalty and of pity fills your heart on seeing your friend so valiantly exposing his body to execute and accomplish the command of our Creator. And then you prepare to go and die or live with him, and for love not to abandon him. And out of that there arises such a delectation, that he who has not tasted it is not fit to say what a delight it is. Do you think that a man who does that fears death? Not at all; for he feels so strengthened, he is so elated, that he does not know where he is. Truly he is afraid of nothing.

—Jean De Bueil (in *Le Jouvencel*, fictionalized fifteenth-century reconstruction of service under Joan of Arc)

Humanity is mad! It must be mad to do what it is doing. What a massacre! What scenes of horror and carnage! I cannot find words to translate my impressions. Hell cannot be so terrible. Men are mad!

—Alfred Joubaire (second lieutenant in French Army at Verdun, May 23, 1916)

The hero-deed is a continuous shattering of the crystallizations of the moment. . . . Transformation, fluidity, not stubborn ponderosity, is the characteristic of the living God.

—Joseph Campbell

THE WARRIOR has always laid claim on our emotions. He has been celebrated by virtually all known cultures for his individual courage, and for the collective glory he makes possible. The quest for such glory is, in turn, part of man's general struggle, in the face of inevitable biological death, for a sense of immortality.

In an earlier work I described this principle of symbolic immortality as the need to maintain an inner sense of continuity with what has gone on before and what will go on after one's own individual existence. From this point of view, the *sense of immortality* is much more than a mere denial of death though man is certainly prone to that denial; it is part of compelling, life-enhancing imagery, through which each of us perceives his connection with all of human history. The sense of immortality may be expressed biologically, that is, by living on through or in one's sons and daughters and their sons and daughters (or, via an expanding *biosocial* radius, in one's community, nation, people, or species); theologically, in the idea of a life after death or, more importantly, of the spiritual conquest of death; creatively, through works and influences, large or small, that persist beyond biological death; through identification with 'eternal nature' and its infinite extension into time and space; or through a feeling-state of 'experiential transcendence'—so intense that time and death disappear.¹

The warrior's courage in killing becomes associated with one or more of these modes, so that his immortality, his glory, becomes Everyman's. If so, our present weapons technology renders that kind of immortalization a contradiction in terms: the warrior-linked quest for the eternal makes problematic the existence of the immediate future. But before we accept the inevitability

of either nuclear or conventional immolation, we do well to make some distinctions.

When we consider the significance of the ancient mythological theme of the Hero as Warrior we discover that something more than technology has gone wrong. For, as Joseph Campbell tells us, the mythic image of the warrior is that of merely one of the "thousand faces" of the hero. The Hero as Warrior—like the Hero as Saint, World Redeemer, Artist, Emperor, Tyrant, Lover, etcetera—follows the heroic life-trajectory of the call to adventure, the crossing of the threshold into another realm of action and experience, the road of trials, and eventually the return to his people to whom he can convey a new dimension of wisdom and of "freedom to live." Campbell goes further in describing this transformative function of the hero and tells us that "the sword edge of the hero-warrior flashes with the energy of the creative Source; before it fall the shells of the Outworn."

For the mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming; the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo. Holdfast, the keeper of the past . . . the enemy is great and conspicuous in the seat of power; he is enemy, dragon, tyrant, because he turns to his own advantage the authority of his position. . . . The mythological hero, reappearing from the darkness that is the source of the shapes of the day, brings a knowledge of the secret of the tyrant's doom. . . . The hero-deed is a continuous shattering of the crystallizations of the moment. The cycle rolls; mythology focuses on the growing point. Transformation, fluidity, not stubborn ponderosity, is the characteristic of the living God.²

The symbolism is that of killing in the service of regeneration: "the great figure of the moment exists only to be broken, cut into chunks, and scattered abroad." And the Hero as Warrior, like his religious or artistic counterparts, acts in the service of man's spiritual achievement: "the ogre-tyrant is the champion of the prodigious fact, the hero the champion of the creative life."³

The nature of the wisdom, redemption, or enlightenment the hero brings to his people has less to do with the Oedipus complex and the son's confrontation with the father, as the early psychoanalytic interpretation had it, than with man's perpetual confrontation with death. Death is not eliminated, or wished away, but rather transcended by a newly envisaged enduring principle, by an activated sense of being part of eternal forms. The deeds performed by the Hero as Warrior thus reawaken a people's sense of its "immortal cultural and racial substance,"⁴ or what we spoke of as the biological or biosocial mode; as well as that of lasting achievement (the creative mode); and, in many cases the most intense form of psychic exhilaration (the mode of experiential transcendence). The hero in any myth becomes the giver of immortality. And the Hero as Warrior incarnates this symbolic quest; he kills not to destroy life but to enlarge, perpetuate, and enhance life.

But warriors and their myths are readily absorbed by specific societies, to be recreated in their own hierarchical, power-centered image. We then encounter the phenomenon of the warrior class, or what I shall call the socialized warrior. Now the allegedly heroic act, the killing of the enemy with whatever accompanying ritual, is performed to consolidate and reaffirm the existing social order. The socialized warrior thus easily lends himself to the corruptions of patriotic chauvinism, or to the spirit of slavishness which Karl Liebknecht called "the obedience of the corpse."⁵ We may extend that term to include the common "deadness" of both the robotized soldier and his enemy-victim.

This has been the way militarized states have rendered their conquests scared, and invested their socialized warriors with the mantle of the hero. The process began, as Campbell points out, with "the warrior-kings of antiquity [who] regarded their work in the spirit of the monster-slayer," and has continued ever since so that "This formula . . . of the shining hero going against the

* "The obedience of the corpse" is the literal translation of the German, *kadavergehorsam*.

dragon has been the great device of self-justification for all crusades."⁶ Even the great Athenian statesman Pericles was prone to this "self-justification," no less than the Spartans he opposed: In 431 B.C., he urged that his countrymen go to war and "be determined that, whether the reason put forward is big or small, we are not in any case going to climb down or hold our possessions under a constant threat of interference"; and a year later, in his celebrated funeral oration for fallen Athenian warriors, he asked that the parents of the dead recognize the "good fortune" of their sons who were able to "end their lives with honor" in a way that "Life was set to a measure where death and happiness went hand in hand."⁷

But that expression of Athenian democratic imperialism was still a far cry from the kind of glorification of the socialized warrior that existed in other ancient societies, as described and condemned by Aristotle: the ancient law in Macedonia "that he who had not killed an enemy should wear a halter"; a custom among the Scythians that "no one who had not slain his man was allowed to drink out of the cup which was handed around at a certain feast"; and a practice of the Iberians of indicating the number of enemies a man has slain "by the number of obelisks . . . fixed in the earth round his tomb."⁸ Here the worth of the socialized warrior comes to be measured by concrete acts of killing, and by a still more concrete "body count." Through killing he achieves honor, fellowship, something close to a state of grace. Only through killing can he connect with, and reinforce, the immortalizing currents of his society and culture.

To reach the desired psychological state, the socialized warrior has always required some kind of initiation process, a symbolic form of death and rebirth that may coincide with his attainment of adulthood. In that rite (now called *basic training*), his civil identity, with its built-in restraints, is eradicated, or at least undermined and set aside in favor of the warrior identity and its central focus upon killing. Only through such a prescribed process can the warrior become psychically numbed toward killing and

dying, shielded from complexity, and totalized in his commitment to the warrior role.⁹

An energizing force in the socialized warrior, and in his "patriotic" citizen-followers, is what Josiah Royce called the "war-spirit." Royce spoke of this spirit as a "fascinating and blood-thirsty form of humane but furious ecstasy."¹⁰ It is the feeling of being "transported," or what we have referred to as "experiential transcendence." The word "humane" is paradoxical but not entirely inaccurate; it has to do with the "love of the group," the "blood bond" of those who kill, defend, or survive together. In other words the socialized warrior has an "as-if" relationship to the mythological hero. He too confronts, and at times seems to conquer, death. But in the end his specific acts of killing and dying are not transcended in a way that provides a new vision of existence; rather these acts are revered in themselves, and in the service of group aggrandizement.

The socialized warrior thus becomes a distorted, literalized, and manipulated version of the Hero as Warrior. The larger purpose of the heroic quest gives way to cultivation of skill in killing and surviving. That skill can combine courage, loyalty, and technical proficiency (as, for instance, in the case of the gunman or "gun" of the early American West), but its relationship to the immortalizing principle is dubious and strained, if not falsified.

There are, of course, many in-between experiences. Revolutionary guerrillas are a case in point. By subsuming their acts of war (and the courage and skill required for those achievements) in a political-ethical vision for their people, they enter directly into the hero myth. But once they achieve social power and sometimes even before that they, too, tend to become converted into, or replaced by, more narrowly gauged socialized warriors.* If

* Twentieth-century China is a good example of this process. The Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s can be understood as an attempt to sustain the heroic aura so magnificently achieved by the guerrillas (the early revolutionaries themselves), almost two decades after power had been achieved and these guerrillas had given way to "socialized warriors" or their equivalents in political and cultural realms. Hence my title, *Revolutionary Immortality*, for the study I made of these events.

there is such a thing here as a lesson of history it is that the forces of entrenched power much prefer manipulable socialized warriors to more unmanageable heroes who are dedicated to principles which go beyond either themselves or their country's rulers. The result has been the murderous missions of socialized warriors. I have elsewhere suggested that the victimizing impulse can be understood as an aberrant quest for immortalization, one in which the victimizers require a contrast between their own group which 'lives forever,' and that of their victims, which is death-tainted and must die.¹¹

Yet there have been dissenting voices—those who have freed themselves from the powerful cultural pseudom mythology to take a hard look at the killing and dying. Those critics of the cult of the warrior have insisted that we feel the pain of the warriors' victims. They reject the conventional image of noble killing and insist upon calling it collective murder; and the individual warrior's death becomes absurd rather than heroic.

High technology brings further strain upon the warrior ethos. Automated weaponry is not conducive to the idea of glory. People no longer look for an ultimate meaning in the specific feats of heroes of war. To be sure, the military proliferates everywhere; but the warrior ethos becomes increasingly weak as a fountain of immortalization. Where versions of it remain psychologically viable, as in the case of militant revolutionaries, war and killing are experienced as means to social revitalization—and the warrior ethos gives way to the myth of the hero.

But old pseudomyths do not die easily, especially when they make contact with basic human emotions. As in the case of reactions to so many symbols and images undermined by new historical forces, there is confusion and ambivalence rather than full rejection or genuine replacement. In the United States we can observe a particularly excruciating conflict between a still predominant effort to hang onto, and technicize, the cult of the socialized warrior, and a heretical, disorganized, but nonetheless enlarging effort to replace it with an immortalizing cult of peace

and peace-makers. Yet little is really understood about how such a shift can be achieved on a scale large enough to matter.

No wonder, then, that the country has been fascinated by the phenomenon of 'antiwar warriors' (or former warriors). I refer of course to those Vietnam veterans who, publicly and militantly, turned against their own war. For this to have occurred while a war was still in progress is unprecedented. They raised questions not only about America's but about everyone's version of the socialized warrior and the war system and exposed their country's counterfelt claim of a just war.

Antiwar veterans generate a special kind of force, no less spiritual than political, as they publicly proclaim the endless series of criminal acts they have witnessed or participated in, contemptuously toss away their hard-won medals, reenact the Vietnam War by means of "search-and-destroy missions" in various American towns and cities—or, with bitterly ironic symbolism, occupy the Statue of Liberty or the Lincoln Memorial. Charles Oman, in his classic study of war, spoke of the veterans of the battles of the Middle Ages as "the best of soldiers while the war lasted . . . [but] a most dangerous and unruly race in times of truce or peace."¹² Can we say that war veterans have not changed? Or is there a new and significant quality in their "unruliness"—a quality that has to do with a transformation of the human spirit?