

Wisdom and War: From Homer's Trojan Horse to Spielberg's *War Horse*

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In Steven Spielberg's film *War Horse* (2011) there is a scene in which Joey, the star horse of the film, is entangled in barbed wire in the no-man's-land between WWI German and English trenches. A British soldier hoists a white flag and goes out to disentangle Joey. He is eventually joined by a German soldier who brings wire cutters, and the two men free Joey, exchange first names and friendly words, and then decide who will take Joey back with them by a flip of a German coin.

The scene moves us because amidst all the horrific and senseless killing of WWI, we see a glimmer of human cooperation and decency that transcends national boundaries.

This episode reminded me of two others, which I have [examined in more detail elsewhere](#). The first occurred in Leo Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Stories*, which he wrote based on his experiences in the Crimean War (1853-56). In one of these sketches there is an earlier white-flag scene in which the Russians and French declare a short truce in order to gather their dead. While collecting the bodies, soldiers from both sides exchange pleasant words and even mementos. Tolstoy then concludes the episode:

Yes, white flags have been raised on the bastion and all along the trench, the flowering valley is filled with stinking corpses, the resplendent sun is descending towards the dark blue sea, and the sea's blue swell is gleaming in the sun's golden rays. Thousands of men are crowding together, studying one another, speaking to one another, smiling at one another. It might be supposed that when these men--Christians, recognizing the same great law of love--see what they have done, they will instantly fall to their knees in order to repent before Him who, when He gave them life, placed in the soul of each, together with the fear of death, a love of the good and beautiful, and that they will embrace one another with tears of joy and happiness, like brothers. Not a bit of it! The scraps of white cloth will be put away--and once again the engines of death and suffering will start their whistling; once again the blood of the innocent will flow and the air will be filled with their groans and cursing.

The second similar occurrence was in the Oscar-nominated French antiwar movie *Joyeux Noël* (2005). It depicts a spontaneous WWI Christmas truce that occurred between French, Scottish, and German troops. Here once again we have a contrast between killing one moment and exchanging friendly words and mementos the next.

Spielberg has been [quoted](#) as saying horse "Joey represents common sense. If more people had the common horse sense of Joey, we wouldn't be having wars." When we see such films as *War Horse* and *Joyeux Noël* or read words like those quoted above of Tolstoy, who later became a pacifist and greatly influenced Gandhi, we shake our heads at the folly of war.

Many additional works have a similar impact on us. One thinks, for example, of the novel and film (in several versions) *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), which film critic Leonard Maltin calls "a shattering study of the insanity of war." There are also many poems like Thomas Hardy "The Man He Killed,"

occasioned by the Boer War, which ends: "Yes, quaint and curious war is! You shoot a fellow down/ You'd treat, if met where any bar is,/ Or help to half a crown." Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" also comes to mind. After describing the horrors of a gas attack and saying to his reader that if he could only witness it, then he would not tell with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory, /The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori.* [It is sweet and honorable to die for one's country]

At the end of *War Horse* when we see Albert return after the war to his mother and father we can sense the joy they must have experienced in seeing their son alive and whole and not among the millions whose lives were snuffed out by that foolish war. Owen, the real life poet and captain, was not so fortunate. He was machine-gunned to death a week before the war ended at 11AM on Nov. 11, 1918. One hour later, with bells still ringing in celebration, his parents received the telegram informing them of their son's death.

Historian Barbara Tuchman in her book *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984) traces the folly of several other wars (and other government actions) beginning with the Trojan War. She writes, "Mankind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any human activity. In this sphere, wisdom, which may be defended as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information, is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggest? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?"

Regarding the Trojan War, she stresses the literary depiction by Homer, Vergil, and others of the Trojans' accepting the Greek gift of the Wooden Horse. Despite numerous warnings, the Trojans committed the great folly of allowing the horse, containing Odysseus (Ulysses) and a small band of fellow Greeks, inside Troy's walls. Once inside, they take advantage of the sleeping Trojans to open the various gates of the city to other Greek warriors who join them, as Tuchman writes, in "slaughtering right and left, burning houses, looting treasure, raping the women. . . . Everywhere the dark blood flows, hacked corpses cover the ground, the crackle of flames rises over the shrieks and groans of the wounded and the wailing of women. Thus from the earliest stages of Western literature the tragedy and folly of war are clearly evident.

And yet, despite thousands of years of history and an uncountable number of wars, humans in the last hundred years have continued to act unwisely when it comes to war. Before writing *The March of Folly*, Tuchman had become famous with *The Guns of August*, her study of the folly of nations blundering into WWI.

Surely, there has to be a better way of settling disputes than the useless slaughter of millions of people, often civilians as well as military. In *War Horse*, the minor dispute over whether the Englishman or German is going to take horse Joey is settled by a coin toss. In his *Sevastopol Stories*, Tolstoy suggested that Russia and its enemies ought to reduce their forces so that each side eventually has only one soldier left who could then

fight it out to decide whether Sevastopol would stay in Russian hands or be ceded to the enemy forces. And he concluded one of his chapters by writing: "One of two things appears to be true: either war is madness, or, if men perpetrate this madness, they thereby demonstrate that they are far from being the rational creatures we for some reason commonly suppose them to be." Russian censors cut this material from his work and inserted into Tolstoy's prose the following justification for the war: "We must at least take consolation in the thought that we did not begin the war, that we are only defending our country, our native land."

Such a defense is a common justification for war, and is sometimes true, sometimes not, and sometimes partly true and partly false. The reasons people go to war are many, and I have spelled out many of them [elsewhere](#), but war often flows from unwise values and foolish decisions. Take for example, the thinking of German General Bernhardt, who wrote soon before the outbreak of WWI: "War is a biological necessity of the first importance, a regulative element in the life of mankind which cannot be dispensed with, since without it an unhealthy development will follow, which excludes every advancement of the race, and therefore all real civilization."

As we attempt to find a wiser approach to war, we find there are no easy answers. Some like Tolstoy (in his latter years) and Gandhi become complete pacifists. Following in their footsteps, others like the American Dorothy Day continued in their tradition even when it came to dealing with the menace of Hitler during WWII. But others, though valuing peace, rejected such an absolutist position. Abraham Lincoln was certainly one of our wisest presidents and yet he went to war—and a terribly bloody Civil War it was—to maintain our political union (see Harold Holzer's 2011 collection, *Lincoln on War*). Perhaps the most influential 20th century U.S. theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (listed by President Obama as one of his favorite philosophers). He strongly supported the U.S. entry into WWII. One reason for the difference among people who are wise in many ways is because of different ethical approaches.

The great German sociologist Max Weber once wrote: "We must be clear about the fact that all ethically oriented conduct may be guided by one of two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims: conduct can be oriented to an 'ethic of ultimate ends' or to an 'ethic of responsibility.'" In the first, "the Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord." In the second, "one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one's action." Because the second ethic takes into consideration the consequences of one's actions it has often been called consequentialist ethics. Weber maintained that while a pacifist may choose to follow the dictum "Resist not him that is evil with force," follow "the gospel . . . [and] refuse to bear arms"; for the politician the reverse proposition holds, 'thou *shalt* resist evil by force,' or else you are responsible for the evil winning out."

One of the rarest qualities in modern politics is political wisdom, a subject I have addressed in other essays on the web. Most historians think that John Kennedy acted wisely in avoiding war during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. According to his brother Bobby, "A short time before, he [the president] had read Barbara Tuchman's

book *The Guns of August*, and he talked about the miscalculations of the Germans, the Russians, the Austrians, the French and the British. They somehow seemed to tumble into war, he said, through stupidity, individual idiosyncrasies, misunderstandings, and personal complexes of inferiority and grandeur." President Kennedy was determined to learn from history and not again foolishly "tumble into war" with the USSR. A [more recent account](#), taking into consideration all the tapes and transcripts of the crisis meetings of Kennedy advisors, officials, and generals, with the president usually present, concludes that "Jack Kennedy emerges as the lone fount of wisdom."

But the lessons of history are not always applied so wisely—and Tuchman makes it very clear in *The March of Folly* that she believes Kennedy, despite his interest in history, did not apply adequate historical insight to Vietnam (e.g. regarding lessons to be learned by the French defeat there in 1954) . Moreover, one could argue that books and film like *All Quiet on the Western Front* (book, 1929; film, 1930), depicting the horrors of WWI, contributed to the appeasing attitudes toward Hitler in the 1930s, and that the lesson that appeasement was unwise contributed to the U.S. desire not to "appease" the Communists in Vietnam in the 1960s . But Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam was not Hitler in Nazi Germany. During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the Air Force chief of staff, General Curtis LeMay, told President Kennedy that the naval blockade he planned rather than a military strike would be interpreted as weakness. "It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich." LeMay's desire to avoid appeasement blinded him to the reality that no two historical situations are exactly alike, and one must be careful about applying lessons from the past to different events in the present.

When it comes to the folly of war, perhaps the best any of us private citizens can do is never support war or steps toward it unless we are convinced that much greater evil will result from pacifistic acts. In the early 1960s, when I was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army for two years, I probably would have been unwise enough to have gone to Vietnam if sent there—fortunately I was not. By the late 1960s, by which time I was no longer on active duty, I would not have gone there because I was not convinced it would be morally acceptable to kill Vietnamese "enemies."

A president or other political leader has a much more difficult job weighing the wisdom and morality of war. It is probably safe to say that too many leaders in too many countries during modern times have unwisely chosen war over peace. But unless one is a complete pacifist, it is often very difficult to judge what course of action will cause the least evil and suffering. Would French and English leaders in 1936 been better to oppose Hitler militarily when he sent German troops into the Rhineland? Would such a show of military force then had been better than waiting until Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939? Would it have caused less ultimate suffering and death if France and England had risked war (and been better prepared for it) in 1936?

One of the most important decisions a U.S. president makes is when and how to use the armed forces under his command. As we vote for president in 2012, I hope all of us ask ourselves which candidate is likely to be wisest in deciding on questions of war and

peace. We all know, or should, that it is folly to kill other people (whatever their nation) unless we are convinced great evils will flow from failing to do so.