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Don Herzog

University of Michigan Law School, dherzog@umich.edu

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Interest, Principle, and Beyond: American Understandings of Conflict

Don Herzog

To understand U.S. foreign policy, we need to understand the concepts and categories that Americans bring to bear. After all, we see the world through our concepts and categories. They identify what's possible, what's desirable, indeed what's visible in the first place. There is simply no possibility of junking all our concepts, stepping outside them, and gaining an unmediated grasp of the world. Here, I offer a sketch of American understandings of conflict. Understandings, not understanding: even in the realm of foreign policy, Americans have long brought intriguingly different categories to bear, categories whose richness isn't captured by some standard academic models.

I want to begin by suggesting that it's mistaken to assume that each culture must have some unified account of "conflict." U.S. culture clearly doesn't. It's not just that we have a number of competing accounts of conflict, though we do. Nor is it just a matter of cultural pluralism, of WASPs and Cuban-Americans and so on seeing the world differently, though they do. "Conflict" itself is an abstract category, that is supposed to bring together and illuminate different activities in very different social settings. I conjecture that the term itself comes more easily to social scientists (and those who have been through certain kinds of psychotherapy) than it does to the ordinary speaker. Those tempted to think that "conflict" is the name of some deep essence that all kinds of conflict have in common, that we use the category to strip away merely contingent and accidental details and illuminate what's central, are tempted in precisely the wrong direction, one inviting a Wittgensteinian rejoinder: concepts need have no deep core or essence at all, no property or properties found in each and every instantiation of the concept; they tie things together by loose relations of family resemblance, no more.

Think about the following familiar scripts, which I present in a deliber-

Hearty thanks to Charles Stein, who tolerated endlessly disjoint conversations and contributed some of the ideas and formulations of this chapter.

ately stylized way. It's an open question whether they actually capture what goes on in the world. Nonetheless, they provide some of our most familiar accounts of various sorts of conflict.

The playground fistfight. The schoolyard bully swaggers up to a bespectacled nerd and demands his lunch money. To the bully's astonishment, the nerd doesn't deliver. Anxious but defiant, he says, "no way." The bully pushes him around a bit; the nerd pushes back. Fists are swinging blindly, and the nerd's glasses get crunched, an untimely demise. Suddenly the nerd's friends appear and tell the bully to get lost. After some uncertain blustering, he does.

The marital spat. Jim gets home late from work, and to his disgust the meat loaf is burnt. He glares at Kathy. In a moment he'll regret later, he impulsively lobs a characteristically barbed sarcasm: "You've made this 3000 times before, so you really should have it down by now." Fed up with what she's recently learned to think of as sexist crap, Kathy responds with some contempt, "Why don't you go out and grab some beer?" Jim decides to do just that. Before he's out the door, though, the two have exchanged increasingly cutting remarks on in-laws, the household budget, and their sex life.

Market competition. Wizzabee's Widgets, long thought to have a lock on northeastern sales outlets, have been slipping in quality, and some of the dealers are disgruntled. The chairman of the board of Spacely Sprockets pores over a report by an ambitious junior executive suggesting that Spacely enter this new market. "Risky," he murmurs, shaking his head, "risky." Then he looks at the depressingly flat graph of company growth in the last three quarters and decides to enter the widget business. Wizzabee's is caught asleep at the switch, and within a year most dealers are happily buying Spacely Widgets, still priced a bit under cost to secure the new market.

Scholarly dispute. At the national meetings of the Society of Medieval French Historians, two professors continue their long-standing debate on criminal behavior in rural communities. One, a *marxisante* historian, wants to cast such behavior as a desperate response to the ongoing exploitation of the peasants by their bastard feudal lords. Another, more influenced by Durkheim than Marx, wants to think of the criminals as deviants testing and demonstrating the boundaries of communal identity. The evidence is tantalizingly sketchy, the argument on each side increasingly intricate, the audience alternately amused and stupefied.

Racial tension. "The old neighborhood just isn't what it used to be," sighs Glen, trying to explain to his daughter why they're selling their home. Away at college, she explodes with indignation. "You just mean that finally blacks are buying some homes. Dad, I never thought I'd hear *you* talking this way." Glen dodges. "Well, not quite that. But property values are falling. And there's something different about the tone of the neighborhood that your

mother and I just don't like." The local newspaper runs a story on white flight; rumors of a cross-burning abound. The neighborhood may be integrated, but people's social networks are completely segregated.

Sibling rivalry. Timmy, four years old, greets the new baby with a measured equanimity that leaves his parents surprised but deeply pleased. Once he'd found out what Mom's big tummy meant, he'd been increasingly sullen, and sometimes had lashed out with fearsome anger, even threatening to flush his new brother down the toilet. Still, they're home from the hospital, with the baby, and, after a lot of anguished thought and consultation, no gift for Timmy, lest he think they're bribing him. And Timmy seems quite happy. He even gives the baby a perfunctory peck on the cheek. Now it's time for him to go to daycare, and he wheels around. "Mom?" "Yes, dear?" "Just one more thing. When I come back today, I don't expect to see this baby here any more."

I could, of course, go on. Since the United States is a highly differentiated society, with crisply demarcated roles and institutions built on different internal logics, I could, in fact, go on for some time. Don't these familiar facts militate against thinking that "conflict" names some deep common essence worth capturing? If there is something in common, isn't it going to be completely banal and uninteresting? (Compare this all-too-familiar riddle from social science: "What do courts have in common?" "Courts are instruments of dispute resolution." This would be worth telling a six-year-old, or a visiting Martian anthropologist, but it doesn't tell us anything we didn't already know.) There may in fact be *nothing* that all these sorts of conflict have in common. Again, what unites various sorts of conflict may be nothing more than a loose family resemblance.

There's an important point here about the logic of comparative studies in political science. Often people respond to case studies or stories about some other country by demanding, "What generalization emerges from this? What does this have in common with other cases, other times, other places?" Typically, though, what's interesting about comparative studies is what's different, not what's the same. Anthropologists don't go to Bali or study potlatch to show that lo! they're just like us. The differences they discover aren't just inherently interesting, a way of providing the pleasures of tourism in an armchair. Rather they throw what's distinctive about our own way of doing things, what we had taken for granted, into high relief. We learn not just about them, but also about us. Similarly here: I take it we're interested in sorting out the American and Japanese and Russian and Chinese views of conflict not because we think that they must ultimately be the same, but because we want to know more about the differences, and how the differences make a difference. But then one can repeat the same point within each country. Again, there may be some distinctively national style informing or even governing

conflict in what seemed like different social settings: whether there is such a style is just another empirical question. Given what I know, my best bet is that we won't gain anything interesting by trying to isolate The American View of conflict. Instead I want to focus specifically on American views of war.

One other prefatory point (the penalty for inviting a political theorist to contribute to such a project), on what we tend too grandly to call methodology. Investigating Americans' view of conflict is not best viewed as a question about their behavior, even their "verbal behavior." It's more an interpretive enterprise, trying to reconstruct the concepts and criteria they use to sort out the world, to understand what does and should go on. If, to invoke Wittgenstein yet again, we are pursuing a language-game or a set of language-games, then we want to try to figure out the rules and principles of the game.

Political scientists are wont to think of concepts and especially ideology as constraints. But that is, by and large, a mistake. (It's not a mistake unique to political scientists. Durkheim makes a similar mistake about social facts in *The Rules of Sociological Method*; Bentham casts law simply as a matter of prohibiting certain courses of action; and so on.) True, concepts rule out some courses of action. Any vocabulary will downplay certain possibilities, will make them elusive or invisible or presumptively unacceptable. More important, though, concepts, even ideological concepts, open up new possibilities we wouldn't notice without them. Think of a social actor with no concepts at all. Such a curious fellow wouldn't be the most flexible actor of us all, the one uniquely well positioned to grasp far-flung possibilities in nuanced detail. Like someone trying to study the natural world without any concepts, he'd be mute, blind, paralyzed.

Concepts of war can, I suppose, serve as causes of war. Some views of war make it inevitable in any actual or even imaginable circumstances; others serve as self-fulfilling prophecies. (Consider: war is the rightful response to not always getting our way. Or, war is our destiny, our divine assignment, the only road to historical progress. Or, war is an ordinary and uninteresting social practice, in need of no special justification or excuse. Or, in a different way, war is what you must do whenever circumstances *xyz* arise, and, undeniably, we now find ourselves in such circumstances.) Ordinarily, though, the concepts we use to understand and appraise war neither preclude nor necessitate any war. A road map doesn't tell you what your destination must be. The rules of grammar don't tell you what you ought to say. Engineering doesn't tell you whether or where to build a bridge. Similarly, views of war don't make you fight particular wars. They set up a complicated and partly indeterminate game, allowing the players to make different interpretive moves in coming to terms with political events. Launching or continuing or withdrawing from war turns out, sometimes surprisingly, to be at the end of some path

in the game we launched on. So it doesn't all hang on the concepts. Much of it hangs on the way lots of little contingencies happen to come together in the world.

It's not just a question of what war in fact is (not that that's an easy question itself). We want also to know how war arises. Most important, we want to know what counts as a justification of war, or what Americans take to count as a justification. (Those who believe that social science depends on a fact/value distinction have no reason to avoid this agenda, for it's just a matter of fact that some consideration is taken in some community to count as a justification, and scholars can report the fact without endorsing or condemning it.) Studying the criteria that can be brought to bear in justifying war ought to be a central concern of the most bombs-and-rockets-oriented scholars among us. For those bombs don't go off, those rockets don't get fired, unless someone can tell a convincing story about why they ought to be. "Because I felt like it" isn't a good reason; indeed it isn't any kind of reason at all. Not, anyway, in America.

There's an obvious political reason for treating the justification of war as central in the United States. Since this is a democracy, framing a justification that (most of) the public will accept is a precondition of pursuing any military expedition effectively. (One way to write the story of Vietnam is to cast it as a war in search of a justification—not a fanciful suggestion in light of those internal memos later published in the *Pentagon Papers*.) The point remains central even if one is generally of the bent we weirdly call realist, even, that is, if one is inclined to think of state policymakers as unswervingly devoted to the pursuit of the national interest. Even if that's the only story they care about, it's not, in fact, a story that can always be told in public. (Nor, in fact, are our policymakers such unswerving realists. To give just one example, Richard Nixon frequently invoked the concept of honor in discussing Vietnam. It's implausible that he had no regard for honor, but was opportunistically trying to manipulate public opinion. The best bet is that Nixon himself was captivated by the concept.) So one could profitably reconstruct the tacit rules governing the permissibility of invoking interest.

Sometimes invoking national interest does work amazingly well. Consider for instance the U.S. decision to send ships into the Persian Gulf, ostensibly to protect Kuwait's oil tankers. Presenting that decision to the American public, President Reagan invoked the national interest—but he never explained quite what interest was at stake, or how the presence of U.S. ships would protect it. Still, despite the carping of some critics, the appeal seemed largely successful. There's an ironic twist here: Americans sound and behave most like realists when they're asleep at the switch, when they're paying no attention whatever to any actual calculation of costs and benefits.

Sometimes an appeal to the national interest appears, but isn't the central

point. In 1893, President Harrison urged that a decision to annex Hawaii "will be highly promotive of the best interests of the Hawaiian people, and is the only one that will adequately secure the interests of the United States. These interests are not wholly selfish."¹ More recently, we could say that we liberated the people of Grenada from an oppressive regime; we could lamely add that we protected American medical students. But we had to appeal to the interests of the people of Grenada, not our own. Similarly we couldn't publicly say what many believed must be true, that U.S. policy in Nicaragua was motivated by our own interests. We had to say that the Sandinistas had broken the revolutionary promises that they had made to their own people (just as Adlai Stevenson told the U.N. after the Bay of Pigs that "The Castro regime has betrayed the Cuban revolution"²); though again we could lamely add that they were only hundreds of miles from Texas, one of the more whimsical uses of worries about dominos. More recently yet, President Bush found himself fumbling for other and putatively better reasons after suggesting that we saved Kuwait because the price of oil and American jobs were on the line. Here, perhaps, we centrally appeal to the interests of others, and tack on some story about national interest to explain why we're bothering to get involved.

Sometimes, though, an appeal to the national interest is a nonstarter. Think about all the policy options that never get seriously considered. At the height of OPEC's power, William F. Buckley, Jr., suggested that we conquer Libya, thus gaining some oil and getting rid of Qaddafi. That might have been in our interests. So might grabbing Quebec and the Yucatan as vacation spots, or for that matter turning sharply against Israel and South Africa, so escaping international opprobrium and saving lots of money besides. One can always generate a story about why doing any of those things wouldn't *really* be in our interests, by emphasizing indirect consequences and the like. But those stories don't show that indeed U.S. policy is diligently devoted to the national interest. Instead they remind us how marvelously pliable talk of interest is, how soft this allegedly hardheaded guide to the world is.

Realists have sometimes acknowledged, but sometimes forgotten, that it's often very hard to figure out what our interests are and how to attain them, that lurking behind the apparently hardheaded category of "interest" are knotty disagreements about empirical and moral matters. The permanent availability of disputes about our interests means that realism could never furnish the brisk sort of foreign policy its patrons want it to. Walter Lippmann, for instance, criticized Woodrow Wilson for giving "legalistic and

1. James D. Richardson, comp., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York: Bureau of National Literatures, 1917), 9: 348ff.

2. Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History*, 8th ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), 2: 681.

moralistic and idealistic reasons” instead of appealing to “durable and compelling reasons,” namely “the substantial and vital reason that the security of the United States demanded that no aggressively expanding imperial power, like Germany, should be allowed to gain the mastery of the Atlantic Ocean.”³ And Henry Kissinger has suggested that American foreign policy lacks “staying power” because of our “denial that our interests are involved.”⁴ But even if the United States became a far more thoroughgoing realist actor than it is and has been, its foreign policy could still swerve and stagger, thanks again to unending disputes about what our interests are and how to attain them.

Again, though, even if American policymakers were hard-boiled realists, even if they were to wake up and go to sleep citing chapter and verse from Morgenthau, the rest of us aren't like that. So even realist policymakers hell-bent on pursuing the national interest would have to figure out how to justify their military adventures to ordinary citizens, to the rest of us. In fact, I suspect, our policymakers are no more single-minded realists than the rest of us are. I don't doubt that their subculture is different, that people buried in the bowels of the State Department employ some peculiar concepts and categories. And it may be that their subculture is closer to realism than American culture at large is. Still, no matter what their own beliefs, they have to find some way of talking not just to Congress but ultimately to the rest of us. It will be useful, then, to spend some time considering formal political documents: Presidential addresses, Congressional debates, declarations of war, and the like. Not that such documents provide transparent access into the deepest mental states of their authors: far from it. For these purposes, what matters isn't what the policymakers really think, but what they think the rest of us think.

To underline how systematically American views of war depart from realism, I want briefly to recall Robert W. Tucker's somewhat hysterical contribution to the debate on North-South relations, *The Inequality of Nations*. Tucker's disdain for the thought that poor countries in the global economy have any claims of justice to press against rich countries hangs partly on a crude variant of moral skepticism common among social scientists. But that's not what makes his book interesting. Tucker senses that the kinds of arguments often advanced on these subjects aren't readily captured by the structures brought to bear by realists, game theorists, and the like. I mean, broadly speaking, what we call rational-choice analysis. If we understand

3. Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950), 37.

4. Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy*, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), 91-92.

what's distinctive about that approach, we'll be able to grasp what's different about American views on war. Perhaps I should emphasize that it would beg the question, it would lean too heavily on mere words, to suppose that American departures from "rational-choice analysis" show that Americans are irrational or unreasonable.

In a rational-choice view, war is indeed the continuation of politics by other means, where politics in turn is the pursuit of advantage by actors with well-defined goals. They may find themselves in coordination dilemmas, in prisoners' dilemmas, in zero-sum games, in games with no determinate solution: regardless, they are in the business of weighing costs and benefits. Ordinarily one assumes those costs and benefits are commensurable and (idealizing for the sake of the mathematics) infinitely divisible, that one can think of giving up or putting in a bit more or less. That view, familiar in the academy, doesn't resonate in American culture. In fact, a casual survey suggests that Americans pride themselves on reviling any such account of war.

A first point: many of the famous battle cries of Americans stake out all-or-nothing positions that don't permit calculations of marginal payoffs or trade-offs or anything of the sort. 54' 40" or fight, unconditional surrender, give me liberty or give me death: such categories aren't shrewd second-order bargaining strategies, an attempt to precommit to an unbudgeable position to force the opponent to back down. They might end up working that way (though given a conventional story about the failures of the Versailles Treaty and the rise of Hitler, that wouldn't make them a triumph of rationality). But the actors don't understand them that way. They take themselves simply to be insisting on the right outcome.

A second point: appeals to morality have long played an important role in American foreign policy. President Carter wasn't eccentric in making human rights a central justificatory resource in foreign policy. The Four Freedoms, making the world safe for democracy, trying to compel the Soviet Union to let Jews emigrate: Americans have embraced such familiar causes not because they have a roundabout story about why they're in our interests, but because they're morally attractive or even required. Tucker's worry about moralism in foreign policy isn't just a skeptical worry that there's nothing really there, that it's all arrant nonsense. It's a worry that moral principles don't lend themselves to quasi-economic calculation. One doesn't compromise, we often think, when an issue of principle is at stake. Compromise would be evidence not of rationality, not of realism, but of reprehensible lack of integrity. Only scoundrels pursue interests when principles are at stake. That is why John Kennedy sounded such deliberately anti-economic tones in his frequently quoted dictum that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."

It's too quick, though, to think that self-interest and principle are simple opposites, that those not committed to some version of realism about foreign policy are Wilsonian idealists. The juxtaposition between self-interest and principle, realism and moralism, isn't only stale; more important, it doesn't come close to exhausting the alternatives. Notice here Secretary of State Stimson's 1931 address to the Council on Foreign Relations. Wilson, urged Stimson, had departed from long-standing U.S. policy in deciding not to recognize Mexico because it wasn't a "just government based upon law," wasn't based on "the consent of the governed." Americans had never previously paid—and, if Stimson had his way, would never again, pay—attention to "the *de jure* element of legitimacy"; instead, they would regard only a new government's "*de facto* . . . control of the administrative machinery of the state" and the like. Stimson sympathetically echoed Jefferson's view "that every nation has a right to govern itself internally under what form it pleases."⁵ But that too, of course, is a principle. Stimson no more than Wilson wanted to decide whether to recognize a new government by asking if doing so would serve U.S. interests. He was pursuing neither the national interest nor Wilsonian moralism. And he was restating long-standing U.S. policy. That policy at least sometimes really did have clout. President Cleveland reversed Harrison's stand on Hawaii, urging in part that the toppling of Hawaii's government had been accomplished "by a process every step of which . . . is directly traceable to and dependent for its success upon the agency of the United States acting through its diplomatic and naval representatives."⁶ That meant there was no autonomous support of the Hawaiian people, and so Cleveland decided not to annex Hawaii.

It's not just that there are different kinds of principle. The juxtaposition between interest and principle isn't only stale; more important, it doesn't come close to exhausting the alternatives. My third point concerns a curious mixture of views surrounding the categories of purity, cleanliness, filth, and redemption, views that have nothing to do with interest *or* principle. Consider a category familiar to U.S. historians, that of American exceptionalism. From the founding, there was supposed to be something different about America, something making this nation pure and shining and even divinely favored as against those corrupt Europeans. Tom Paine deliberately manipulated Americans' religiosity by arguing in *Common Sense* that America, the new world, was also America the promised land, a fresh beginning. Like Israel after Egypt, like life after the flood, America was God's starting from scratch. American society would be purged or cleansed of the characteristic sins of the ancien régime, among them the style of diplomacy that realists would en-

5. Commager, *Documents*, 2: 225–26.

6. Richardson, *Compilation*, 9: 461ff.

shrine as the very model of judicious behavior. The same sentiments animate Washington's famous Proclamation of Neutrality, holding out to Americans the promise of using the once vast Atlantic Ocean to distance themselves from the filthy maneuvering for interest that ensnared Europeans in endless war: "Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course." Celebrating the accomplishments of the Pan-American group in 1939, FDR would contrast the Americas' "serenity and calm" with "the tragic involvements which are today making the Old World a new cockpit of old struggles."⁷

Here peace is what makes America pure. (There are other dimensions to purity, like the racial purity that has tantalized many Americans since the founding, when Jefferson mused about sending the slaves back to Africa, and Benjamin Rush found scientific evidence that blacks were just whites suffering a curious kind of leprosy. This sort of purity itself has implications for foreign policy—recall, for instance, disputes about Asian immigration during this century, or how the thought of admitting eight million Mexicans to the Union led John Calhoun to temper his imperialism by noting, "Ours, sir, is the government of a white race"—but I can't pursue it here.) Isolationists and Christian pacifists follow this tradition. Critics of U.S. policy have sometimes found it useful to invoke the same tradition as part of their critique. So, I take it, arises the subversively critical force of Walter LaFeber's referring to the history of American policy in terms of empire and second empire, political and economic domination: those categories were supposed to apply only to those bellicose European dynasties, not America, so it should come as an alarming revelation that American policy can be cast just the same way.

If peace is purity, war is filth. Like everyone else, I suppose, Americans have always romanticized war: our boys abroad make us proud; they are involved in the great adventure hailed by Teddy Roosevelt, fighting one splendid little war or another. But some Americans have always tried to puncture the romantic illusions, to hammer home the familiar lesson that war is hell. So the dubious hero of *The Red Badge of Courage* learns the lesson that Thomas Hobbes long ago stated drily: "When Armies fight, there is on one side, or both, a running away."⁸ William James, appalled by Roosevelt's rhetoric, tried to make room for what he called the moral equivalent of war, other settings in which men could strive heroically. Literature is one thing, though; television is another. There is nothing for stripping war of its romanticism like beaming it live into millions of American households on the evening news, as happened during the Vietnam War. (The day after announcing he wouldn't run for re-election, Lyndon Johnson mused, "As I sat in my office last evening,

7. Richardson, *Compilation*, 1: 214; Commager, *Documents*, 2: 414.

8. *Leviathan*, chap. 21.

waiting to speak, I thought of the many times each week when television brings the war into the American home. No one can say exactly what effect those vivid scenes have on American opinion." No one could say exactly, but Johnson had some inklings. He went on to wonder what would have happened after the Battle of the Bulge or during defeats in Korea had Americans been able to watch television coverage.⁹) After years of that exercise, Frank Capra films could never be viewed quite the same way. One source of the appeal of the lightning surgical strike, what we might call the Grenada effect, must lie here: we're victors before we have to witness the carnage as we eat dinner.

That peace is pure, war filthy, isn't distinctively American: it's a banal truism, a syrupy slogan one might hear in Sunday school. But there's also an intriguing inversion. War itself can be purifying, cleansing, restorative: an ocean of blood can wash away the sins of a failed America. The best-known case is the reaction of many Northern intellectuals to the civil war. Charles Eliot Norton, for one, had no patience with any "feeble sentimentalities" about overestimating the value of human life: "I can hardly help wishing that the war might go on and on till it has brought suffering and sorrow enough to quicken our consciences and cleanse our hearts." Emerson, for another, had the characteristically questionable taste to console the bereaved parents of a colonel "that one whole generation might well consent to perish, if by their fall, political liberty & clean & just life could be made sure to the generations that follow."¹⁰

Nearby is another twist on the ideas of cleanliness and purity: war is the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil. One doesn't have a conflict of interest with Nazi Germany: that's the sort of thought that leads to Chamberlain's appeasement, which here looms not just as bad calculation but as a deal with the devil. Instead the Third Reich is evil incarnate, what we must be justified in sweeping off the face of the earth. (The deep appeal of this moral view, instructively, is almost completely absent from Bruce Russett's account of why America shouldn't have entered World War II.) Or think of Kennan's famous Mr. X article: it argues that the Soviet regime has an inherently expansionist dynamic, so that if it is successfully contained it will inevitably collapse; but the article can be taken, and has been taken, as urging something very like a quarantine. Or recall the celebration as well as the brouhaha surrounding Reagan's reference to the Soviet Union as the evil empire, before he warmed up so dramatically to Gorbachev. Many Americans were happy to have a leader finally willing to say what was simply true,

9. James MacGregor Burns, ed., *To Heal and to Build: the Programs of Lyndon B. Johnson* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 468.

10. George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 74, 80, 81.

instead of uttering mealy-mouthed pieties in the name of diplomacy. The bleakly comic possibilities in thinking of war as sanitation didn't escape the erratic geniuses of Monty Python, who offered a history of the Vietnam War as a cartoon commercial for a laundry detergent named Uncle Sam's—I think these are the details—which promises to get the red out, as the viewer watches a red, white, and blue gauntlet pouring detergent over a teeming map of Southeast Asia.

A fourth point: there's an entirely different American approach, a chillingly confident one, to thinking about conflict. It qualifies, I suppose, as a political version of bad faith. War isn't anything like a conflict of interest because it isn't in any interesting way elective or voluntary and because *they*, whoever they are at the moment, just have no standing. War here is necessary, inevitable, divinely appointed. Manifest destiny wasn't in any strong sense a justification of conflict. It's better viewed as a denial that there was any conflict that needed justifying, any land grabbing or Indian killing that might be morally objectionable in the first place. (Indian killing—I use the contemporary name—is another occasion for celebrating the cleansing power of murder. Robert Bird's best-selling novel of the 1830s, *Nick of the Woods*, can be read as a celebration or a critique. It features a Quaker, Nathan Slaughter, who, it turns out, secretly and gruesomely kills Indians because they once killed the members of his own family. His public protestations of pacifism ring hollow once we learn that he is Nick of the Woods; and—this may be literary clumsiness more than practiced ambiguity—it's not clear whether the reader is supposed to identify with Quaker Nathan or genocidal Nick.) Champions of manifest destiny not only appealed to Scripture, what even one so sagacious as John Quincy Adams once had read into the *Congressional Record* to explain what right Americans had to push the Indians ever westward. They also likened the expansion of America to the laws of gravity, arguing that America must surge west (and north and south, for that matter; a minor instance I've always found amusing is Walt Whitman's Brooklyn editorials urging that the United States seize the Yucatan) just as an apple must fall from a tree. Or again, while inviting Congress to declare war against Britain in 1812, Madison said the United States “shall commit a just cause into the hands of the Almighty Disposer of Events, avoiding all connections which might entangle it in the contest or views of other powers.” War here is nothing but a judicial appeal.

I want to quote one example of the rhetoric of manifest destiny at length. This is from William Gilpin's 1873 book, *The Mission of the North American People*:

The calm, wise man sets himself to study aright and understand clearly the deep designs of Providence—to scan the great volume of nature—to

fathom, if possible, the will of the Creator, and to receive with respect what may be revealed to him.

Two centuries have rolled over our race upon this continent. From nothing we have become 20,000,000. From nothing we are grown to be in agriculture, in commerce, in civilization, and in natural strength, the first among nations existing or in history. So much is our *destiny*—so far, up to this time—*transacted*, accomplished, certain, and not to be disputed. From this threshold we read the future.

The *untransacted* destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean—to animate the many hundred millions of its people, and to cheer them upward—to set the principle of self-government at work—to agitate these herculean masses—to establish a new order in human affairs—to set free the enslaved—to regenerate superannuated nations—to change darkness into light—to stir up the sleep of a hundred centuries—to teach old nations a new civilization—to confirm the destiny of the human race—to carry the career of mankind to its culminating point—to cause stagnant people to be re-born—to perfect science—to emblazon history with the conquest of peace—to shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind—to unite the world in one social family—to dissolve the spell of tyranny and exalt charity—to absolve the curse that weighs down humanity, and to shed blessings round the world!

Divine task! immortal mission! Let us tread fast and joyfully the open trail before us! Let every American heart open wide for patriotism to glow undimmed, and confide with religious faith in the sublime and prodigious destiny of his well-loved country.

Gilpin's rhetoric is incoherent in much the same way vulgar Marxism often is. He invites us to cooperate with our destiny, to choose to do what we must inevitably do. Its incoherence, though, doesn't mean it's politically unattractive. Nor, I think, should we be cavalier in dismissing such rhetoric as mere fluff, or for that matter as something we've outgrown.

Similarly, the Monroe Doctrine has sometimes been treated not as a contingent policy we've staked out, a choice we've made, but as a natural fact, not subject to our control or revaluation. Their missiles in Cuba aren't the least bit like our missiles in Turkey, because theirs just don't belong here. Communist influence in South America flouts long-standing U.S. policy, which drifts readily into U.S. tradition, which drifts readily into, flatly, the way things are. It's unnatural; when we move against it, we are simply restoring things to their pre-appointed harmony, the normal or natural state. I doubt American policymakers are taken in by this enough to be as virtuously astonished as they often sound in condemning foreign interference in Latin

America, in refusing to see any parallels with American policy; I don't doubt that they find it politically useful to pretend they're astonished. That particular message is for domestic consumption.

A closely connected point: if conflict is hard to justify, just deny there's any conflict at all. James Polk was a master of this move. In a single message to Congress, he described the impending annexation of Texas as a "union . . . consummated by . . . voluntary consent," adding,

This accession to our territory has been a bloodless achievement. No arm of force has been raised to produce the result. The sword has had no part in the victory. We have not sought to extend our territorial possessions by conquest, or our republican institutions over a reluctant people. It was the deliberate homage of each people to the great principle of our federative union.

Talk of victory, though, was a revealing slip. Though war had not yet broken out, Mexico's ambassador to the United States had already demanded his passport and returned home, after informing Polk that Mexico viewed these moves as a wholly aggressive violation of its sovereignty. That's why Polk moved blithely on, as though it was a separate subject, to say, "I regret to inform you that our relations with Mexico since your last session have not been of the amicable character which it is our desire to cultivate with all foreign nations."

At the same time, what looked very like conflict was brewing with Britain over the Oregon territory. Calm as ever, in the very same message, Polk reported that Britain had made "extraordinary and wholly inadmissible demands," that "our title to the whole Oregon Territory [is] asserted, and, as is believed, maintained by irrefragable facts and arguments." Note here the salutary political advantages of the passive voice, which enables Polk to avoid posing the embarrassing question, *who* believes it? (At the very least, one suspects, not the British.) Polk again disguised a contestable political judgment as an unquestionable fact when he added, "The civilized world will see in these proceedings a spirit of liberal concession on the part of the United States, and this Government will be relieved from all responsibility which may follow the failure to settle the controversy." To disagree with the U.S. position here is presumptively to declare that one isn't civilized: and then, of course, one's judgment doesn't count anyway.

Something finally might be said about Americans' views of soldiers. Again, they are our young men, even our boys, bravely shouldering their rifles and heading off to do us proud. They are also warriors out to win honor and glory, categories that may smack of Homer or the royal court but survive full-blown

in the military. They're also grunts, cannon fodder, surly interchangeable parts as wont to frag their commanders or smoke marijuana as to fight the enemy.

In part, there are real chronological changes here brought about by social change. The rise of increasingly awesome technology, for instance, makes it harder to tell a story about a certain kind of bravery in battle: for every talented fighter pilot, we think, there must be thousands of soldiers nowhere near the front lines, soldiers who wait for someone else to push some button or other. And the turn to a volunteer army enables us to think of soldiering as just another job.

But, in fact, all these views are always available, and they're invoked for different purposes. Soldiers are our boys when we want to rally 'round the flag and brand domestic dissent as a profound act of betrayal, not just something lending aid and comfort to the enemy or sapping the unified national will we need to grind out victory, but a moral failure to resonate to the heroic sacrifice our loved ones are making for us. (Recall how hard it was to rebut the plea, "Support our troops in the Gulf!" by urging that the best support would be bringing them home at once.) Soldiers are grunts when we want to despise war or mock the mindless robots who would go along with such inexcusable policies. (Savaging U.S. war in Mexico and support of slavery, Henry David Thoreau derisively referred to "the soldier, of whom the best you can say in this connection is, that he is a fool made conspicuous by a painted coat."¹¹) Then again, soldiers are our boys when we want to puncture abstract stories about glory and justification by underlining the savage human toll of war. Instructively, though, there's not complete symmetry here. I know of no case where someone has described American soldiers in demeaning or derisive ways in order to assure us that it's okay to be fighting because the price is so low. Though some have come close: take John W. De Forest, who knew full well the hardship of war. He insisted that "We waste unnecessary sympathy on poor people. A man is not necessarily wretched because he is cold & hungry & unsheltered; provided those circumstances usually attend him, he gets along very well with them; they are annoyances, but not torments. . . ."¹²

And, of course, soldiers are heroes when one wants to underline what a grand and glorious cause this war (or war generally) is. Take Arthur Bird's *Looking Forward* of 1899, a late but all-too-typical specimen of manifest destiny prose. In looking forward to the happy days of 1999, those of the United States of the Americas that cover both continents, Bird celebrates the soldier who gets God's work done:

11. Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," in his *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 95.

12. Fredrickson, *Inner Civil War*, 87.

“The man behind the gun,” anxious to lay down his life by the side of the powerful breech-loading destroyer he loved so well to train and groom; “the man behind the gun” who loved and cared for his mighty weapon as a father would his child; watching it by night and day, praying for the hour when he might belch from its throat missiles of destruction into the enemy’s ranks,—“the man behind the gun,” God bless him, is America’s own true born.

A closing caution: if Americans have so many views of war, so many views of soldiers, then it might seem that ruthless opportunism reigns, that one can always tell a story designed to come out the way one antecedently wants it to. (This is the opposite of the worry that our concepts compel us willy-nilly to certain wars.) That’s false. Rich as they are in some domains, these concepts fail us in others. It’s a commonplace among some academics that familiar views about bipolar conflict and state sovereignty fail us in coming to terms with the emerging international order. We can generalize the point: Americans find some (actual and potential) wars wholly baffling. We can’t always describe the situation the way we already want to. Sometimes we can’t figure out any way to describe it at all that makes sense to us. The poverty of our vocabulary in such cases must be one of the reasons, along with changing administrations and the rest, that American policy so often vacillates indecisively. So a richer vocabulary, a more intelligent conversation between rulers and ruled, would help us sort out what we’re up to and why.