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# WAR AND CULTURAL LIFE

KENNETH BURKE

## ABSTRACT

America today is confronted with the need to change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives. Democracy as a motive is different from the motives of war and business in that it is an ideal, a purpose. The intellectual climate has shifted from the three major pre-war emphases—"pure art," "semantics," and "debunking"—to an enlistment of art and rhetoric in the service of the war. Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down* exemplifies this enlistment, as do also *This Is War* and *Road to Victory*. What is now needed, in the cultural sphere, is a whole intellectual movement designed to give placement to the conception of our exigencies, resources, weaknesses, and intentions. Surrealism, as an international movement, is a cultural counterpart of the "global" attitude required by the conditions of global war. But a more positive expression is needed. As a feature of psychological warfare, it would have aspects designed both to demoralize and to remoralize the enemy.

### I

It is already quite apparent that there are to be several kinds of war, all going on simultaneously. I refer not only to the differences of situation that prevail among the various occupational classes and will show up as differences of motive in times of war quite as they did in times of peace; I refer also to broad distinctions among the nations at war—distinctions that can be seen most clearly, for instance, when we contrast our situation with that of an invaded but sparsely industrialized China or an invaded, socialized Russia.

In America we are apparently confronting the need to change from a commercial-liberal-monetary nexus of motives to a collective-sacrificial-military nexus of motives as the principle shaping the logic of the nation's efforts. Our high development of technology will probably continue to demand the kinds of accountancy that have their point of departure and their logical fulfilment in the symbolism of money, which in the rationale of capitalism is both the means and the end of exchange; but the nature of war necessarily requires a different emphasis. The change is both grammatical and rhetorical.

That is, we must now evaluate policies primarily in terms of national defense rather than in terms of business prosperity. In thus commending or denouncing policies in the name of national defense, we shall be using

this motive as a rationalizing basis of conduct. And such reference may exemplify "rationalization" in both senses of the term. The usage will be grammatical when we speak in the name of national defense because we are actually considering things primarily from the perspective of national defense. It will be rhetorical when we speak in the name of national defense purely because the grammar of the situation gives this term maximum suasive value (so that it is now "proper" to recommend things in terms of national defense even when they have nothing to do with national defense, or are positively detrimental to national defense).

A change from the monetary to the military, as the over-all public motive mediating among the great variety of private motives in our society, cannot be an absolute one. It is a matter of "priorities." It means simply that the military motive rises to a higher rank than the monetary motive as a public rationale. And though the two change places in the hierarchy of motives, one does not abolish the other.

However, war does compel a people to conceive the reality of forces in much more realistic terms than need prevail under conditions of peace, when the monetary symbols of wealth can actually assume a greater appearance of reality than the material things that are their backing and when, in a kind of "economic schizophrenia," these symbols can develop requirements quite out

of line with the facts of production and distribution which they symbolize. The "idealism" of financial speculation, the "futurism" of investment, while they still figure in wartime, diverge from the brute reality of "logistics," involving the immediate concern with the relation between material obstacles and material resources.

After the New England hurricane of a few years ago I recall seeing on the financial pages of a New York newspaper some figures to prove that the losses were much less than those of a slump in Wall Street securities. The writer thus spontaneously treated the two cases as identical in kind. Yet the hurricane had destroyed real physical properties, houses, roads, bridges, barns, timber, etc., whereas the market losses had been purely symbolic, with all the underlying properties in quite as good material condition the day after the market loss as the day before. Similarly, Prime Minister Chamberlain apparently considered reality largely in such an idealistic perspective, with a vision germane to "the City." And in the conversion of our industrial plants from peace production to war production, spokesmen for the unions could embarrass management without embarrassment to themselves, since the more purely materialistic relation of workers to their output made it much easier for these spokesmen to approach the problem of plant conversion purely as a technical one involving only the kind of operations directly related to the changes required in factory equipment and method. Thus the rhetoric of the attacks upon "business as usual" that accompanied the drive for plant conversion reflected, behind the corresponding conversion from the monetary motive to the military motive, this change from an idealistic to a realistic grammar.

## II

"Democracy," as a key term in the present structure of symbolic action, would seem to be a different sort of motive from the motives of war or business. Business and war are "scenic"; they are situations. But democracy, as a motive against fascism, is

an ideal, a purpose. Pragmatically, it can seem to be the same kind of motive, because all three—war, business, and democratic government—can be thought of purely as agencies, or means. But the present need to defend democracy rather than simply to use it (as we used it and abused it in times of peace) restores it as a motive to the role of purpose by placing it in jeopardy.

This transformation of the democratic motive from connotations of problematical actuality to connotations of futurity also fits well with the logic of the military motive, which requires great modifications of democracy as an actuality but can retain democracy "substantially" by making these modifications in the name of democracy as a purpose. And the disfranchised, such as the natives of India or the Negroes of the South, can logically be asked to defend democracy as a purpose even when they could not be asked to defend it as an actuality.

Thus, whereas democracy owes its heightened prestige in part to a better understanding of its place as an institutionalizing of dialectical method, in still greater part it owes its prestige to the sheer operation of dialectical laws. For the fascist enemy, by his opposition to democracy as an ideal, called upon us to prize it out of sheer dialectical necessity. Surely this roundabout assistance to the cause of democracy has, to date, been Hitler's major contribution to culture. Thus, whereas democracy in practice was fast coming to be synonymous with "the expression and reflection of *conflicts*," the logic of opposition to Hitler has made it, rather, synonymous with "the *expression* and *reflection* of differences." The stress has shifted from "*diversity* in unity" to "*diversity* in *unity*," a unifying attitude assisted also by the fact that democracy as a motive can legitimately connote conditions as distinct as the *preservation* of special privilege and the *curtailment* of special privilege.

Democracy as an actuality, in contrast with democracy as a purpose, must be affected by its dialectical relation to fascism in another way, since a further fascist contribution in reverse, I should say, has been the

hastening of our recognition of the fact that technology, as a world-situation, does very definitely require a new order, the establishment of some formal institutional structure alien to the nineteenth-century ideal of automatic international adjustment by free trade. I believe that the awareness of this condition will tend increasingly to foster an attitude of acceptance in matters of governmental regulation—and that this attitude is already beginning to manifest itself in our aesthetic expression.

### III

Perhaps the best way to characterize the present intellectual climate is to consider its relation to the immediately preceding movements. During the early years of the New Deal, when the most aggressive trend in the arts was under the domination of the political Left, those who opposed the Leftist propaganda art usually did so not merely by attacking this particular kind of propaganda art but rather by attacking the criteria of propaganda art in general. That is, to gain maximum forcefulness for their claims, they opposed this particular rhetoric with a categorical opposition to all rhetoric. Imaginative literature, they held, should deal with the universal or timeless. As against "time-serving" art, it should serve no cause other than itself (or the expression of the human sensibility, conceived in the broadest terms).

This attitude was paralleled in the conceptual field by the doctrines (under the general label of "semantics") of those who, with varying degrees of thoroughness or triviality, voted for a "scientific" vocabulary, a vocabulary of description, information, exposition, discussion wholly devoid of partisan weightings.

The pure-art position and the semantics position had notable differences. Especially, the advocates of pure art as against propaganda art upheld the ideal of an emotional vocabulary. Though its emotionality should not be employed to sharpen the consciousness of party or class, art should nonetheless be emotionally evocative to a high degree. On the other hand, the scientific vocabulary to be used for conceptual and expositional purposes and for the discussion of ethical,

social, political issues should shun the emotionally evocative, the rhetorically hortatory or admonitory. But whatever the contrasts between these two ideals of vocabulary, the two positions had this dialectical trait in common: Each, in its way, offered a categorical objection to the criteria of art and oratory then dominant. And, since one might dualistically uphold both positions, as compensatory to each other, the same critic might even employ them both, at different times, in his objections to the Leftist norms.

There was also the extreme negativism of the debunking movement (often in practice hard to distinguish from the semantics movement). Its function as excessive materialistic deflation to counteract excessive idealistic inflation is now generally recognized. It also could be put to use in the controversies with the Left. By rejecting the cult of heroes in general, for instance, the debunker had a categorical position from which to reject the Leftist heroics in particular.

A basic cultural change that the war conditions have brought about has unquestionably been the necessary dropping of these three positions—the pure art, the semanticist, and the debunking. War, when fought under conditions of totality, obviously requires the enlistment of art, of hortatory or admonitory rhetoric, of information presented in ways that cushion the discouragements of defeats or intensify the encouragement of victories, and of such identification between the leaders and the led as attains its natural fulfilment in a swing back from debunking to heroism (that is, from an attitude of individualist rejection to one of group identification).

A telltale distinction between the advance-guard attitude toward the first World War (which the artistic advance guard generally opposed as "imperialist") and their attitude toward the second World War which they now generally back as a war "against fascism") will consistently manifest itself, I think, in a changed attitude toward authority and leadership. Thus, whereas a characteristic advance-guard way

of expressing army experience in the last war was in terms of an antagonism between lower rank and higher rank, with the higher rank categorically suspect by sheer reason of its rank, a more characteristic expression now would portray the "diamond in the rough" type of officer who is outwardly severe but inwardly sympathetic and motivated by the duties of his office. Rank would be considered, in the imaginative sphere, rather as an obligation than as a privilege.

Judging from stories recently submitted by servicemen in a story contest organized by one advance-guard magazine, I might state the matter thus: Whereas in the imaginative expression of the last war it would have been characteristic for the writer to feature and to treat with resentment the contrast between an individual sensibility and the unwieldy demands made upon it by a vast impersonal military machine, it would be characteristic now to treat of any such discrepancy with resignation and to give it but incidental expression while the attention is focused elsewhere. Antagonism to an officer, as it might figure in the symbolic action of art, would now be more likely to manifest itself not against his categorical position as an officer but against any personal failure on his part to equal the stature of his office. Thus any overt or covert antagonism between private and officer felt strongly enough to call for imaginative expression would attain this expression in a rationalization that accepted the officer function in principle, quite as the earlier attitude had rejected it in principle. Where once the man in the higher rank would have to "live down" his rank, he might now rather be called upon to "live up to" it. The same experiences of actual antagonism could, of course, attain imaginative expression by either device, but the social implications of the two devices are obviously quite different.

#### IV

One can discern something of this change in the critical temper by considering the controversy over John Steinbeck's recent novel, *The Moon Is Down*, which has been gener-

ally attacked and defended not simply on its merits as a story but, from the standpoint of military exigencies, as a book that may help us to win or to lose the war. (In brief, the propagandist point of view is tacitly accepted by both opponents and defenders of the book.)

Steinbeck's propagandistic manner, as used in *The Grapes of Wrath*, had relied greatly on "reportage." Situating the motivation of its characters primarily in the economic scene (which moved them quite literally, in causing them to make the trek that gives direction to the plot), *The Grapes of Wrath* had depended upon a literary manner that required a reportorial, even a sociological, inspection of the ground. The novelist had to have been there, witnessing in person the scenic details that do much to give the book its reality.

In the case of *The Moon is Down*, however, though Steinbeck relies similarly upon a scene, or situation, as the central motivating factor, he is now writing of an enemy invasion which he had not, as a writer, thus reportorially and sociologically witnessed. And, though the story is as timely as the earlier novel was (the imagery of invasion being now relevant to the war as the imagery of the trek was then relevant to the depression), there is this important difference: In this book the scene is imagined rather than reported. As a result, despite the great importance of the scene as motive, Steinbeck must leave it somewhat ambiguously placed as he draws upon a more "dreamlike" level to impart the quality of motivation. This is so much the case that the book derives its tone from imagery of sleep, sleepiness, near-sleep, fatigue ("seemed to start out of sleep"; "settled tiredly into a chair"; "still half dreaming"; "all merge in one great gray dream"; "as though he had been asleep"; "they're almost dreaming"; "Yes, we could fight his rest, then. We could fight his sleep. We could fight his nerves and his certainties").

The result is that a pronounced trait of passiveness seems to distinguish the character of the invaders. It is a trait generally true of Steinbeck's characters. For his "en-

vironmentalist" method, in locating motives primarily in the scene, makes most naturally for characters who are "pushed about" by the scene and thus reveal passive attributes rather than the attributes of "agents." Lennie's murder of the girl in *Of Mice and Men*, for instance, is done without the active emotions or intentions of murder; he is pushed into it by a kind of trancelike response to the situation as stimulus, quite as the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* are pushed into their movement and their occasional moments of action. And so in *The Moon Is Down* the invaders (ambiguously suggestive of the Nazis in Norway) commit not so much "crimes of passion" as "crimes of passiveness."

And that is why, I think, many critics resented Steinbeck's version of the fascist enemy. They did not want to conceive of the enemy as passively motivated. They wanted a portrait of the enemy as vessels of great activity, an enemy moving not as in sleep but as in the most vigorous and malign wakefulness.

It is perhaps too early to gauge the significance of the sleep imagery as it applies to Steinbeck's development in particular. In the book itself, whatever its effect upon the portrait of the invaders, it helps build up a sense of foreboding, as the reader feels the natives coming nearer to such an explosion as would, within the conditions of the plot, equal complete wakefulness. And perhaps, ironically, as is so often the case with the attributing of motives to the enemy as scapegoat, the real relevance in Steinbeck's book is in the fact that it does rather thus obliquely depict not so much our enemy's motives as our own (as were the book to be taken, not as the portrait of two opposing sides, but as the portrait of the many attitudes we have experienced all on our side, with its state of mind ambiguously fluctuant between preparation and delay).

## V

We should note also the brilliant series of radio plays, *This Is War!*—a series thoroughly propagandistic in aim. These plays

served resourcefully and convincingly to translate the war into human terms, giving a sense of its poignancy, intensity, and necessity in a dramatic idiom that appealed to both the aesthetically naïve and the aesthetically sophisticate.

But the most "natural" aesthetic adjustment to war conditions I have seen so far is in the impressive exhibit of photographic murals, *Road to Victory: A Procession of Photography of the Nation at War*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City during the summer. The late-Whitmanesque legends contributed by Carl Sandburg are, at best, serviceable; but the scenic review of our country, assembled under the direction of Edward Steichen and in photographs almost mightily enlarged, can even, I think, call forth a certain philosophic or "meditative" attitude toward the war, quite as it also gives nourishment to a strong sense of our national power. And I think it would be a very good service both to the strength of our patriotism and to its quality if this exhibit could be shown throughout the United States.

We might say that in this "procession" of photographs the war is not so much "featured" as it is "placed." Indeed, as one enters, the first vista one encounters is a vast canyon in Zion National Park, Utah, a canyon nonpolitical, nontechnological, prehistoric, looking quite as it may have looked before the continuities of invention that have terminated in our civilization first began. From this we turn to panoramic records of our farm areas under modern cultivation, with intimate scenes of the human types and the ways of life intrinsic to the farm.

This is no place in which to give a detailed account of the many titles. Suffice it for our present purposes to note that, for the first two-thirds of this exhibit, we observe the nation in its customary peacetime pursuits, vocational and vacational. After the agrarian section the theme of industrial power comes to the fore—views of the great power-dams in operation and under construction, of mills, mines, shipyards, fac-

tories. And then, out of all this, we come upon the final third, telling of the men and scenes indigenous to war.

As a result we see the national power in war growing out of the national power in peace. It is what I mean by saying that the theme of war is not "featured" but "placed" (though, of course, its placing at the end of the sequence gives it as much emphasis as would be obtained had it been the single theme of the whole exhibit). And even at the very close the most extended mural of all, designed to give the impression of manpower unlimited, was flanked with portraits of homey couples, individualized, good-natured, in free posture, as though to state the other aspect of these men we see massed and regularized as sheer forces, power in the abstract.

By this "placing," I have said, we see the third section—the war section—growing out of the two foregoing sections that depicted the pursuits of agriculture and industry quite as they are in times of peace. I should add one important qualification, however: The sequence, as installed, allowed also for a crisis en route. For it was so designed that, at one turn in the way, we come upon three pictures so arranged as to be isolated from all the others: two photographic comments flanking a scene of the bombing at Pearl Harbor. It is beyond this point that we turn into the military section of the exhibit. Thus, as there is a continuity of motivation depicted here, there is also a change of motivation. Though we see our war power developing out of our peace power, we also see the critical point at which the quality of motivation changes from that of profit to that of defense.

## VI

The element of placement in the *Road to Victory* photographs could hardly be called complete from a purely administrative point of view. One could say only that the placement has a certain completeness as judged from the standpoint of its attitude. In contemplating these scenes and portraits, one gets a very strong feeling that the war, vast

as it is, is part of a still vaster configuration. The war may be considered as a scene motivating our acts—but this exhibit causes us to remember that the war may also be considered as an act placed in a more inclusive motivational scene and being enacted by agents with whom, likewise, motives originate.

What one might now most avidly look for, in the cultural sphere, is some evidence of a whole intellectual movement designed thus to "frame" the conception of our exigencies, resources, weaknesses, and intentions. The need to think of global war and of its counterpart, global peace, invites us to seek also a truly global attitude toward all mankind, with its expressions ranging from the austere down to the foibles of the human barnyard. The study of war aims should thus be grounded in the most searching consideration of human motives. So far, however, it seems that war aims are being treated as something of a cross between anticipatory or retrospective ideals and cameralistic proposals designed to enlist or appease various economic interests. And more basic inquiries into human motives seem to have been postponed, as a luxury that the moment cannot afford, precisely at a time when the need for such a search is all the more urgent. The temper of the times is revealed, perhaps, in the fact that our psychiatric experts, imbued with the spirit of total war, periodically do their mite for the cause by issuing news releases in which they prophesy the mental collapse of fascist leaders (thus automatically revealing a wish, not to remoralize the enemy, but to demoralize the enemy); and this has its somewhat more wholesome counterpart among the people in an increased willingness to be persuaded by the prohibitionists (fear of the powers unleashed by war probably taking the form of a desire to impose some such ritual of restraint as a counterweight).

One kind of global expression is more prominently with us, so far as advance-guard developments are concerned. I refer to the international surrealist movement, here fugitive from the dislocations in Eu-

rope. This movement, which is the extreme reflex of liberalism and is subsidized by wealthy amateurs (some of them formerly American expatriates), presents a particularly clear instance of correlations between the economic and the psychological. Its relation to private subsidy as against public subsidy is obvious in the fact that it is not the kind of art any governmental officialdom is likely to take for its own, since it has intrinsic affiliations with anarchism and "permanent revolution" (though mainly in a nonpolitical, purely symbolic way); and its expression is the very opposite in temper to the equestrian statue in a public park. Its relations to war are not as a rhetoric leading to organized action en masse but rather as a body of supple aesthetic resources apt at bringing to the fore the fantasies and anxieties of war, of such peace as was deeply troubled by the adumbrations of war, and perhaps of such peace as may be troubled by bewilderments of motivation after the war. It recruits an odd band of artists who, by their very oddity, may often clearly reflect neurotic promptings that secretly possess our more "normal" citizens. I take its "playfulness" quite seriously.

A more positive kind of global attitude could well, I think, in keeping with the nature of democracy as the institutionalizing of the dialectic method, be manifest in the kind of psychological warfare which we beam upon our enemies and by which we enforce and stabilize ourselves. The "demoralizing" theme we should direct against the enemy, it seems to me, is the thesis that the Hitlerite plans for a *Blitz* war also required a *Blitz* peace. That is, if Hitler could have "unified" Europe with a maximum of speed and a minimum of destruction and established his "new order" without such need of organized plunder as the intensified war conditions forced upon him, he might have got a sufficiently large percentage of the

people in each of the occupied countries whose interests could be identified with those of Nazi Germany. But, as it is, this failure to win both a *Blitz* war and a *Blitz* peace has led to the building-up of an undying popular resentment, particularly in view of the fact that Hitler has had to use terroristic methods with their ever widening circle of reprisals and counterreprisals. Hence, Hitler's plans for a new order have already failed, even if he could win the war.

This, it seems to me, should be the "demoralizing" emphasis in our cultural attack upon the enemy. And it should be matched, and more than matched, by a "remoralizing" aspect, a purely educational program, a "liberal university of the air," discussing in a purely pedagogic manner the problems of motivation and adjustment in which all mankind is involved, the findings of liberal anthropology, the causal theories of various biologists, psychologists, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, etc.

In brief, the attempt should be made to corrode the rigidities of the Nazi doctrines, not by a head-on attack, but by a patient review of the human scene in all its fulness and complexity. Such a program, if carried out with proper concern for the needs of popularization and with all the resources of learning and expression at the government's command, would demoralize in a way that is, in the profoundest sense of the word, a "remoralization." And we might even go a step further: we might have the same programs broadcast over our domestic circuits, for home consumption, if the time could be spared from our fabulously high percentage of rattletrap programs—both commercial and sustaining. They are now usually put forward in the name of Victory; but if there were many less of them we might have here a sign that the victory of our culture is better deserved.

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