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CHAPTER 2

TRIBAL, "ETHNIC," AND GLOBAL WARS

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Anthropologists define war very broadly. With small but sometimes significant variations, the basic idea is that war is organized, purposeful, lethal combat between different communities (Ferguson, 1984a, p. 3). Why do people do this? Why do people get together, make a decision, and go out to kill members of a different group—and think that it is legitimate, even commendable to do so? This chapter presents one cultural anthropological answer to that question. After briefly considering a major alternative—the idea that our evolved mind biologically predisposes us to war—I will sketch out a general approach to why wars happen and apply that perspective to our contemporary world. I will start by going through a theoretical perspective with a focus on relatively egalitarian societies, such as the Yanomami. Then I will apply that perspective to the topic of large-scale political violence within contemporary states, what is often though inaccurately called "ethnic violence," and I call "identerest violence." Finally, I will make a tentative extension of these ideas to the issues that preoccupy us today: terrorism and the war in Iraq.

Anthropologists devoted little attention to war prior to the 1960s, but since then the anthropology of war has grown into a very large and diverse field. The number of findings and hypotheses on its causes, correlates, and consequences has become enormous (Ferguson 1984a, 1999; Otterbein 1973, 1977). Only a small part of that work directly addresses the broad question of why humans make war. Most research focuses on other issues: How are specific features of social organization related to specific patterns of warring? Does peace need a separate explanation from war? Does war promote political centralization and hierarchy? Is Western contact responsible for much of what we formerly assumed was purely "indigenous" warfare? How does war reflect the values and beliefs of particular cultures? Looking over all the posited connections between war and society makes it clear that war is an extremely complex

institution. Far more than mere combat, it is an institution that can dramatically affect every aspect of social life. And it hammers home the idea that to understand war in any specific sense, it has to be firmly situated in the total cultural and historical context in which it occurs. But beyond all these specifics, the general question remains: Why do people make war?

There have been three basic kinds of answers to that question: biological, symbolic or cultural, and materialist (Ferguson, 2001). Certainly the theoretical pie could be sliced in other ways. Institutional approaches of varying sorts are probably the most common explanations of war, but these rarely articulate questions about "human nature"—other than that it is social. Biological approaches, I will argue, are poorly substantiated and less than illuminating. The cultural anthropological approach I will present and apply here is based on materialist premises, but in recent work, I have been trying to build a rigorous connection with symbolic or cultural approaches. But first, I will take a look at the competition: biology.

Biological Approaches to War

Biological theories range from simple invocations of aggressive instincts to sophisticated theories of inborn computational modules. Earlier theories of aggressive drives or killer instincts have been so long and thoroughly discredited that there is no need to rehash them here (Ferguson, 1984a; Klama, 1988). The concept of "human aggression" itself has been challenged as a misleadingly vague label muddying critical distinctions between very different kinds of behaviors (Fried, 1973; H. Van der Dennen, 1986). Since the time of anthropological pioneer Bronislaw Malinowski (1941), anthropologists have recognized the fundamental point that individual aggression is quite distinct from the social process that is war, much as individual athletic ability is quite distinct from organized sports. Humans have always had the potential for lethal violence since, or even before, they became human. But individual homicide is no more war in tribal societies than it is in our own. In tribal societies, rather than an impulsive outburst of aggression, decisions that lead to wars are typically long-considered and debated collective decisions. Still, individual or collective propensities for violent action against others can indeed play a significant role in such discussions, so aggressiveness cannot be ruled out of consideration.

Is aggressiveness biological? In some sense, of course. Neural structures, neurotransmitters, hormones, and genes have all been shown to be somehow involved with different measures of aggression. But involved how, and how much? More to the point, do these vast areas of research indicate that (nonpathological) humans, or maybe just men, have some kind of inborn propensity to do violence to others? These are reasonable questions, but answers are almost always highly debatable. Comparison of aggressiveness in young boys and girls in Western societies (e.g., Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) inevitably incorporate critical, early periods of socialization, and these can encourage gender differences. In one experiment, adults that were told an unknown infant was a boy gave the child a toy football, but gave a "girl" a doll (Sidorowicz & Lunney, 1980). In another, adults who were shown the same film

of a baby crying at a jack-in-the-box, when told it was a boy concluded that he was angry, but when told it was a girl concluded she was frightened (Condry & Condry, 1976).

Cross-cultural comparison does show men to be more aggressive. For instance, Kelly's (2000, pp. 31–32) detailed examination of five egalitarian band peoples found male-on-female (usually spousal) violence to be the most common, although male-male violence only slightly exceeded female-female violence. But there are solid theories explaining such regular gender difference as culturally elaborated outgrowths of social task segregation, based on physical factors such as strength, pregnancy, and requirements of infant care (Divale & Harris, 1976; Eagly & Wood, 2003). Much has been written about testosterone and aggression, but results are often contradictory or noncomparable (Archer, Birring, & Wu, 1998; Baron & Richardson, 1994); the whole subject is immeasurably complicated by the fact that testosterone levels are socially mediated. They rise and fall with personal events and may be as much effect as cause of aggressive interactions (Kemper, 1990; Sapolsky, 1997). In Western societies, whether and how much males or females score higher on aggression depends greatly on the kind of measures that are used, although a meta-analysis of many studies with different measures concluded that male-female differences accounted for about 5 percent of the variance (Hyde, 1984). A notable illustration of this variability by measure is domestic violence. Very large data sets from developed English-speaking nations show that females are slightly *more* likely to use physical force against their partners, but men are far more likely to cause serious physical harm (Archer, 2000).

In sum, we are nowhere near being able to distinguish, much less quantify, how much human or male aggressiveness can be attributed to "nature" rather than "nurture." Of course, many would say that is a false dichotomy: All behavior is the result of both. But that dodges the critical question: Is an evolved male tendency toward aggression an important factor in explaining war? Yet even if we cannot separate out the biological contribution, we can understand the limits of its possible significance: Maleness is one part of biology, biology is one part of aggressiveness, aggressiveness is one part of combat, and combat is one part of war. A part of a part of a part of a part cannot explain a whole.

Leaving aggressiveness itself, what about male reproductive competition? Is war a way individuals maximize the genes they pass along, an expression of male reproductive striving? The critical case is Chagnon's (1988) study showing that *unokais*—males who have undergone a ritual purification loosely associated with a killing—have more children than non-*unokais*. This study is cited time and again (see Ferguson, 2001, p. 108) by advocates who rarely, if ever, acknowledge the well-known critiques of that study: that *unokai* status is not a valid marker of a "killer" (Albert, 1990; Lizot, 1989); that the standard claim that *unokais* have three times as many children as non-*unokais* of the same age is in fact the figure for all adult men uncontrolled for age, and that age accounts for well over three-quarters of that difference (older men are more likely to have more children and more likely to be *unokai*); that much of the remaining difference can be accounted for by the fact that all headmen

are *unokai*, and headmen tend to be more polygynous; and that Chagnon's data exclude consideration of men who have died in war, whose lifetime reproductive success was decidedly lowered by being dead (Ferguson, 1989; 2001, p. 108).

What about the flip side, war as a result of men fighting over women, or raiding to capture them? This is a commonly reported fact of war, even built into theories which make no invocation of reproductive concerns (Siskind, 1973; Harris, 1984). But closer study shows its importance to be highly variable. Kelly's (2000, p. 33) examination of five egalitarian band peoples found that "adultery, sexual rivalry, and jealousy" are relatively infrequent causes of male-male fighting and homicide. Cross-Amazonia comparison of the political significance of fighting over women, and the practice of capturing women, shows that both range from none to a lot, depending on a series of social institutions and practices (Ferguson, 1988). Among the Yanomami, once again the archetypal case (e.g., Chagnon, 1968), woman-capture is not a goal that starts wars—as Chagnon (1996, p. 222) himself makes clear. Fighting over women certainly does occur among Yanomami, but it is entirely unpredictable of war (Ferguson, 1995a, pp. 32, 357–358).

Another argument for war being "in our blood" comes from reported observations of African chimpanzees. It has been claimed in very prominent publications (Ghiglieri, 1999; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996) that human males share with chimpanzees the inclination to kill males of other groups when they can do so with impunity, because in our common evolutionary past this led to reproductive benefits. But this argument is open to major question and criticism. First, the incidence of intergroup killings has been significantly exaggerated beyond actual observation. For instance, it is commonly reported that at two sites (Gombe and Mahale), one group of chimpanzees was wiped out by another (Ghiglieri, 1999, p. 173; Wade, 2003). However, killings at Mahale are entirely inferential, reinterpretations of disappearances in light of Gombe findings (Nishida, 1980). In fact, only one small incident of intergroup violence was reported between the two groups (Nishida, 1979).

Second, the confirmed instances of intergroup killings are almost all in situations where there has been major disturbance of chimpanzee communities by humans, in ways that can plausibly account for the increased competition and violence. For instance, there were three adult killings at Kibale National Park in 2002 (Wilson & Wrangham, 2003). At that same time, Kibale chimpanzees were coming out of the park, raiding crops and even attacking, killing, and eating a few human infants. Why? Kibale is an island surrounded by farmers, with a very dense chimpanzee population. "Squeezed into this diminishing forest resource, chimps are finding it increasingly difficult to locate ample food" (Gavin, 2004, p. 2; Wakabi, 2004). This is hardly a "natural" situation.

Third, any evolutionary continuity of violent behavior from the last common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees is extremely doubtful, given huge divergences and uncertainties in the evolutionary lines. For instance, the hominid line shows a marked reduction in sexual dimorphism beginning about a million and a half years ago, which Wrangham and Pilbeam (2001) agree suggests a selective process *against* intermale physical contests. Many other objections to the "demonic males"

perspective could be raised (see Ferguson, n.d.), but instead, this brief discussion will turn to a parallel line of argument: that a human propensity to war is evidenced by archaeological findings showing war throughout our prehistoric past.

To argue that war is a result of some sort of innate predisposition to wage it requires that war be practiced throughout our prehistoric past. Those who make that argument, from various angles, cite Keeley's (1996) *War before Civilization* in support of that point (see Ferguson, in press). Now Keeley has been joined by LeBlanc (2003), who refers back to Wrangham and Peterson (1996) in support of the antiquity of war. Both Keeley and LeBlanc portray war as appearing throughout the archaeological record. Yet several others (including myself) who have searched through that record conclude that the advent of war is a later development, although still very ancient (Ferguson, 1997; Haas, 1999; O'Connell, 1995; Roper, 1969, 1975; J. M. G. Van der Dennen, 1995, pp. 197–214; Vencl, 1984). What is the basis of this difference?

It is not, for the most part, about differences in the interpretation of material evidence, though there is some of that—most significantly about Czech Republic sites that Keeley (1996) and LeBlanc (2003) claim decisively establish warfare in the Paleolithic period, and which I argue does no such thing (Ferguson, in press, footnote 1). Primarily, it is about the basis of generalization. Keeley (1996) and LeBlanc (2003) note those cases where war is indicated in recovered remains and generalize from those cases to all areas. Those who see war starting later and varying dramatically across time and space also take into account the very numerous early sites, where we have good recovery of relevant physical evidence which *should* show war, but where there are no signs whatever of collective violent conflict. Haas (2000) details this difference in approach in regard to LeBlanc's earlier work (1999). In some of the best studied regions of the world, including the ancient Middle East, China, and Europe, signs of war are slim to none in the early record. (Australia is a contrary case, with very early war among simple hunter-gatherers. North America is complicated, with some very early signs of war in some areas but not others) (Ferguson, 2003; in press). Then, in all areas, war becomes very apparent and never goes away. Keep in mind that this still means war is very ancient, beginning perhaps 10,000 years ago in what is now northern Iraq. By roughly 6,000 years ago, war seems omnipresent throughout most of central Europe (Ferguson, in press).

What led to the advent of war? In my (far from finished) research on global origins of war, I identify six preconditions, which in combination make the onset of war more likely. Somewhat oversimplified, they are as follows: a more sedentary existence, growing population, social segmentation (clans or lineages), increasing status hierarchy, increased trade (especially in elite goods), and climatic disturbance. Significance varies considerably by area. For instance, war seems to antedate hierarchy and elite trade in much of North America, though their development later intensified it.

Why then did war become so common over time, found widely even among simple, mobile hunter-gathers? Four trends are suggested: war originated in more places in the world, from those places war spread outward, the rise of ancient states contributed to and extended militarism on their peripheries and trade routes, and European

expansionism after 1500 added many new war-inducing transformations, often well in front of the expanding range of contact direct contacts (tribal zones) (Ferguson, 2003a, p. 33; in press). In sum, the archaeological record contradicts the proposition that war has been a timeless expression of reproductive competition and indicates that war was a response to identifiable material, demographic, social, and historical conditions.

The last biological explanation of war I will consider is an inborn tendency to and xenophobia (Ghiglieri, 1999, pp. 211–212; Shaw & Wong, 1989). The idea of a natural tendency of in-group amity/out-group enmity goes back to Social Darwinists, especially Sumner (1906), but the premise was accepted even by those never associated with that orientation, such as Boas (1912). Ethnocentrism is an especially vague term, ranging from a mild sense of superiority to genocidal violence. But valuing one's own ways more than others' is elemental to culture: the norms one learns are those one should live by. Regarding war, however, the relevant notion of ethnocentrism is more specific. It is the idea that humans naturally form bounded social groups, with intense hostility to those beyond.

Anthropological evidence contradicts the idea that this is a basic human pattern. Australian aborigines in some ways provide the best case for biological explanations of war (see Gat, 2000). They are divided into recognized tribes consisting of numerous local bands. Yet the boundaries between these tribes are highly variable. Between some, the difference is a gradual transition rather than a recognized border; between some there is a border, but amicable casual relations across it; between some there is chronic hostility (Meggitt, 1965, pp. 37–43, 324–326; Spencer & Gillen, 1904/1969, p. 31; Warner, 1958, pp. 17, 35, 144–145). A detailed survey of intergroup attitudes in East Africa by one of the leading scholars of ethnocentrism found that "ethnocentrism as conceived by Sumner represents an extreme variation in the pattern of intergroup relations," linked to specific distancing and conflict-generating conditions (Brewer & Campbell, 1976, p. 144). Anthropologists have long known that ethnic identification is an often fluid and shifting categorization (Barth, 1969). Of course, hard boundaries with lethal hatreds exist in many wars, but they are a symptom, not the cause of conflicts.

This is consistent with findings of social psychology (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Experiments—although almost all in Western societies, where competition is part of the ethos—show that in even the most arbitrarily defined groups, there is a clear bias in favor of members, and against members of some similarly defined out-group. However, these same authors stress such bias is *not* explanatory of intergroup conflict. Research on that specific topic affirms that such conflicts are "realistic"; they come into existence when there is real competition for some scarce, needed good. So "ethnocentrism" cannot explain "ethnic" strife. What can explain it will be suggested below.

This does not exhaust all current biological explanations of war, nor does it deny in principle that evolved predispositions may be relevant for understanding some aspects of war (see Ferguson, 2000). However, the marginal utility of such insights is likely to remain quite limited, while the sweeping claims often made for biology

have the effect of distracting the attention of the public and policy makers away from sociocultural explanations. Fukuyama's (1998, p. 33) observations in *Foreign Affairs* illustrate this danger.

Once one views international relations through the lens of sex and biology, it never again looks the same. It is very difficult to watch Muslims and Serbs in Bosnia, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, or militias from Liberia and Sierra Leone to Georgia and Afghanistan divide themselves up into what seem like indistinguishable male-bonded groups in order to systematically slaughter one another, and not think of the chimps at Gombe.

An Anthropological Alternative on Tribal War

The main anthropological alternatives to a biological explanation are symbolic or cultural, and materialist. Symbolic/cultural approaches attribute war to the system of norms, values, beliefs, and symbols particular to a given culture. They come in many forms. In terms of simple descriptions, this is the oldest and most widespread anthropological approach to war. Countless ethnographers have told us that the so-and-so go to war to avenge the ghosts of the dead, to gather supernatural power from killing, to capture women, etc. More recently, studies of the cultural psychology of war have grown much more sophisticated and complex. So war to take heads is seen as acting out a prescribed cultural drama in which shame is erased and parity with other men is achieved (Rosaldo, 1983), or war leading to cannibalism expresses cosmological ideas by internalizing that which is exterior (Viveiros de Castro, 1992), or a particularly gruesome sort of shamanic assassination emerges as both a military technique and a deeply meaningful assertion of cultural autonomy in the face of Western influences (Whitehead, 2002). Implicit in all these approaches is the belief that as our ancestral species evolved into culture as the key to adaptive success, behavioral repertoires were shaped, above all, by the shared, culturally constructed *meanings* within local groups (Robarchek, 1990; Sahlin, 1987).

The cultural/symbolic approach to war has been reinforced by a parallel stream of studies, "the anthropology of violence" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004; Schmidt & Schroeder, 2001; Stewart & Strathern, 2002). In this field, war is just one form of violence among many to be studied. These studies focus on meanings of violence, which is often seen as entirely legitimate, at least by one side (Riches, 1986). Researchers see violent acts as *performances* communicating deep messages involving actors, victims, and broader audiences. Many, but not all, of these approaches downplay material goals, seeing them as important only as perceived through particular cultural lenses.

Materialist approaches, in contrast, have tried to understand war as practical struggles over materially important goods or conditions. In simpler societies—that is, those without a pronounced political hierarchy—wars are seen as being over basic needs of the entire war-making group. This most definitely includes the need to protect oneself from the threats of others. In the 1960s and 1970s, materialism was

associated with cultural ecology, in which war was argued to be a method of adapting populations to scarce natural resources (Rappaport, 1985; Vayda, 1968). However, critiques developed both within and outside cultural ecology undercut this perspective. Instead of populations adapting in some unconscious manner, actions came to be seen as the outcomes of strategizing actors. Ecological conditions were only one set of factors possibly involved in war, and war was only one possible response to material scarcities (Ferguson, 1984b; Vayda, 1976). Even from the start, however, it was emphasized (e.g., Divale & Harris, 1976; Harris, 1977) that ecological adaptationist models did not apply to war by societies with a pronounced political hierarchy.

My own approach (1990, 1999) is based in a reformulation of cultural materialism (Ferguson, 1995b; Harris, 1979). In a sentence, I argue that wars occur when those who make the decision to fight believe it is in their practical self-interest to do so (although I will be qualifying this view in the next section). This immediately calls attention to the social and political structure of decision making—who calls the shots. And it calls attention to *internal* as well as external interests. In ancient chiefdoms and states, political rule is closely associated with a legitimating ideology of leadership to victory in war, which shows clearly even in archaeological remains (Arkush & Allen, in press). But even among tribal peoples with very limited development of leadership, the internal position of leaders is often a critical issue in those decisions (Maybury-Lewis, 1974; Sillitoe, 1978). I will illustrate this general approach with reference to the Yanomami, the subject of my book *Yanomami Warfare* (Ferguson, 1995a). Source citations for ethnographic claims can be found there.

The Yanomami are an ethnolinguistic group of Native Americans who live in the highlands on the Venezuela-Brazil border. Their remote location has made them, until recently, much less accessible to outsiders than the vast majority of Amazonian peoples, and for this reason they remain unusually populous, with recent estimates putting their total number at something around 29,000 people (Bruce Albert, personal communication). Yanomami warfare became famous within anthropology through the publications of Napoleon Chagnon (1968, 1974). More recently Chagnon has argued that Yanomami wars are struggles for reproductive success. He claims that they typically begin in disputes between men over women and then are carried on for revenge (1988). In this, he portrays the Yanomami as undisturbed by the outside world and as representative of the ancient condition of war for human beings. They are, "our contemporary ancestors" (Chagnon 1983, p. 214).

I have never lived among the Yanomami. My work was historical, combing through the many theses and publications of anthropologists who did do fieldwork among them, as well as historical documents which show, contrary to previous opinion, that Yanomami had been significantly impacted by the European expansion from the middle 1700s or even earlier. Doing this, I strove for a complete record of all wars reported for all Yanomami from all times. Information about these wars is, of course, highly variable, often just a mere mention. But available information clearly demonstrates that most fights over women do not lead to war, and few wars are preceded by any reported disputes over women. Vengeance, though a powerful

personal motivator, is politically malleable. It is directed toward those who are "enemies" for other reasons, as are suspicions of witchcraft.

My argument is that the Yanomami wars that we know about (their prehistory is entirely unknown) occur for reasons related to an expanding Western presence. Mapping known Yanomami wars against a reconstruction of their contacts with outsiders shows that the wars occur at moments of major change in the outside presence and activities. That destabilizing changes can foster outbreaks of war between Yanomami groups is an obvious fact, in otherwise hotly disputed accounts of the Mavaca and Siapa River areas from the middle 1980s onward (Chagnon, 1992, pp. 219–221; Tierney, 2000, pp. 181–194). My point is that the critically shaping social, economic, political, and military impacts of Western contact are clear—if one looks for them—in those times and places previously portrayed as pristine, largely unaffected by the outside world.

Not all changes lead to wars however. Those that do are situations where the instability is marked by sharp antagonisms over the Western goods that the outsiders bring, in particular steel cutting tools which almost instantly became necessities for Yanomami garden-makers. Guns and ammunition also add to the brew of war. These goods became available only at specific points of contact, and those Yanomami groups who could monopolize access to the foreigners reaped great benefits, not only in having tools themselves, but in the women and the labor (in labor-intensive local manufactures and bride service) they obtained from more remote Yanomami groups that did not have direct access. Differential access to these trade sources is what generated the antagonisms that led to war. People with good access fiercely protected their position as monopolists, when necessary, with violence. They became first in a line of trade middlemen radiating outward from contact points. Those without good access tried to drive away, or replace, those who came between. In some areas, where an intensifying Western presence was accompanied by new epidemics and other social disruptions, the threshold for violence was lowered, so it took relatively little to start the arrows flying. These are the basic structural patterns that predict periods of war and peace, who attacks, and who is attacked.

Since my book was published, others who have worked with the Yanomami, some of whom endorse aspects of my reconstruction of their history (see Ferguson, 2001, pp. 104–105), have argued that the structured incentives and antagonism I invoke are simply not the way Yanomami themselves conceptualize war. Yanomami think in terms of personal grudges, of violence as an integral part of a broader schema of reciprocity, or more basically of a need for revenge, of suspicions of witchcraft which themselves are part of a broad cognitive complex, and of bravery and cowardice. These ideational factors, my critics contend, are themselves powerful motivations for violence.

I agree that all these are motivating factors in many cases, but in most instances, they provide only individual motivations. Among the relatively egalitarian Yanomami, where no man can order another to go to war, where each warrior makes up his own mind to fight, these alone do not provide the incentive for a *group* to raid. That incentive is provided, however, by the structured inequalities between villages,

and even village factions, regarding access to Western goods. Yet these particular value systems truly are integral to the Yanomami war complex. Wars, in general, may be fought over things, but they are fought against other people. Underlying antagonisms will always be translated into interpersonal values, in terms meaningful for a particular culture. My model addresses that fact.

When a group of Yanomami have a common interest in obtaining or controlling Western goods, they all know about this. It is a daily fact of life. When they begin to discuss the possibility of war, there are differences of opinion. There are serious potential costs to be weighed against prospective gains. There are alternative courses of action. Headmen—noncoercive leaders of particular groups or factions—have their own distinct interests, relating to their position within the ever-changing political alignments of village life and alliances. In the public discussions leading up to war, its advocates will use the highest applicable moral standard to make their cases, claiming, "Those people over there are doing witchcraft against us, we have not avenged a death from several years ago, who among you is brave and who is a coward," etc.

I refer to this as the "moral conversion" of self-interests. In some particularly detailed situations, we can see that this is pure manipulation, as when one man exhorted warriors to go raid so he could sneak off to do something else. But in others instances, war advocates truly seem to believe in the moral reasons they invoke. It seems to be a regularity across war-making peoples, that those who start the shooting always say, and commonly believe, that the other side is somehow to blame—"they started it," or at least, "they deserve it." Further, when a situation already teeters on the brink of war, any trivial incident can stand for the whole conflicted relationship and trigger the fighting—thus seeming to be its cause. But it is the underlying structure of material interests and antagonisms that explain why wars happen when and where they do.

That is my position in *Yanomami Warfare*, argued in hard form because it went against established arguments from biological or cultural/symbolic perspectives that material interests *could not* explain their fighting. And these interests *do* explain the occurrence of the great majority of their wars, particularly so when there is more information available. But since then, I have wondered if this view of values as constructed rationalizations of underlying material interests gives sufficient attention to cultural/symbolic aspects. Responding to critiques by Yanomami scholars, I have acknowledged (Ferguson, 2001, p. 106) that the materialist model I develop would be strengthened if it gave more detailed attention to Yanomami beliefs and psychology. Other readings, as for instance about war in highland New Guinea (e.g., Trompf, 1994; Stewart & Strathern, 2002), make me suspect that I need to give more general attention to suspicions of witchcraft, imperatives for revenge, and other more particular cognitive orientations in their own right. The problem in anthropology for many years has been that advocates of cultural/symbolic or materialist approaches, including myself, give a ritual bow toward the other—"of course such factors are involved"—before going on their own way. Yet we know the practical and general, and the symbolic and particular are joined in practice. Cross-cultural

studies of reactions to Western contact (see Ferguson & Whitehead, 2000) exhibit great similarities across extremely diverse peoples, while ethnographies of violence unambiguously demonstrate particular local conceptions that clearly shape behavior. But there has been little effort at rigorous integration, something beyond "a little of this, and little of that," or "sometimes this, sometimes that."

And what about situations where tribal peoples make more long-distance warfare, against people of different cultures? Do those cultural differences play an important role? Most Yanomami war involves kin and neighbors, people who have shared food and intermarried. But Yanomami have made war against neighboring Yecuana people and others. In general, antagonisms in those wars follow the structure of conflicts found internally among Yanomami. But the ethnic difference does seem to be a clearly recognized divide shaping cooperation and hostility. The next section describes an effort to expand a materialist approach to more fully integrate symbolic/cultural factors, especially across cultural divides.

From Tribal Conflict to "Identerest" Violence

The issue of cultural values, and cultural differences, as important causal factors is addressed directly in my Introduction to a recent volume (Ferguson, 2003b) *The State, Identity, and Violence*. That book is concerned with the kind of intrastate, large scale political violence that came to the foreground after the end of the Cold War, although really it was nothing new. In all these crises, combatants included nonstate irregular forces, who often deliberately targeted civilians, often with extreme brutality. Specific cases ranged through religious riots, ethnic cleansing, guerilla war, civil war, and even genocide. An important commonality in all of these very diverse situations is that political violence is somehow linked to personal identities, to different kinds or categories of people. These identities mark off both perpetrators and targets of lethal violence.

In that Introduction, I (2003c) discuss the scope of factors that can be found across different cases, factors running from the most global to the most local. All of these must be brought in to adequately explain a given case of large-scale political violence. I will briefly summarize the most important considerations before zeroing in on some of the cultural-psychological aspects, the nexus where all vectors come together to produce the killing. As with discussions drawn from my book on the Yanomami, details and supporting citations can be found in that Introduction.

Globally, critical factors include an international system that has enshrined *states*, with clear capitals and borders, as the only acceptable form of political organization; legacies of colonialism that created artificial countries without workable systems of governance; the Cold War, which aggravated many local conflicts, spread powerful weapons, and then collapsed leaving clients with sharply reduced support; global economic processes such as the precipitous decline of many primary product markets, which devastated many countries; the growing importance of humanitarian aid, which can be diverted and controlled by local agents; new and often illegal forms of transnational trade, from blood diamonds to narcotics; and regulation of local

government policies by international agencies—all of which undermined the control of many governments. While political violence is indeed the creation of local actors, the larger global system plays many critical roles in structuring the field of play.

At the level of the state or government—not the same things but close enough for this discussion—there are patrimonial systems that have lost the ability to dispense sufficient patronage; armies that could not be adequately financed; a governmental class of educated, typically urban people dependent on the state for their livelihood; shadow networks of personal connections that make the key decisions that ostensibly are the domain of formal officials; nationalist ideologies which claim to be all-inclusive, but in practice serve some particular political divisions; and government policies that favor some social categories or identities and penalize or attack others. This mix is a recipe for increasing intergroup suspicion and antagonism, for fostering “ethnic violence.”

A big casualty of these developments was the long cherished trinity of economic development, socio-cultural modernization, and a mildly patriotic secular nationalism. For decades, even across the political chasms of the Cold War, global and national leaders had seen that combination as the wave of the future, eroding the more particular identifications and loyalties that led to trouble in the past. Where that trinity was actually delivered, the dream often seemed to be coming true. The problem was that in many countries, or for particular areas or groups within a country, all that was experienced was immiseration, political oppression, and a growing realization that they were simply superfluous in the grand schemes of power.

Locally, there are regional differences in the benefits or costs of government policies and differential recruitment or access to seats of state power; literally grounded agricultural and other production systems, and the social, economic, and political structures that rose on top of them; political elites with their own interests; ethnic, linguistic, religious, tribal, clan, and other divisions; and along with all that, local symbols, values, and a sense of history that affect how people perceive the world around them. Combinations of these local factors provide a basis of political and military mobilization that can be directed against the central government and against world forces and powers above them. That fact is key to understanding the violence which often ensues, and it brings us back to the issue of materialist vs. cultural explanations of war, previously discussed.

There is a debate in the international relations literature as to whether these conflicts should be understood as the result of “greed” or “grievance” (see Berdal & Malone, 2000). Do they happen because people in power are pursuing their own very selfish material interests, making hay out of chaos and war? Or are they the result of perceived injuries and threat to those who see violence as the only recourse? I see this as a mistaken, and misleading, opposition. Given the social and spatial character of the costs and benefits of state rule and its opposition—“political topographies” one recent book (Boone, 2003) calls them: *who* you are, what kind of person, your identity—typically is tightly linked to *how* you are doing, whether you have been a winner or a loser in recent developments.

There are many dimensions to identity. Some are given by birth, some accrue with experience, and some are deliberately chosen. Cultural difference or ethnicity is only one kind of identity. Others include geographic region within a country, position in the continuum from urban capitol to country village, political and/or economic position (or class), religion, language, caste, race, tribe, clan, gender, and age. Some of these, such as ethnicity, language, or religion provide a ready-made category, replete with its own potent symbols, for group mobilization. Others, such as clan, gender, and age, may heavily impact on how particular individuals experience the world and thus make them more or less receptive to pitches at higher levels of identification. This highly variable basis of identity makes the frequently used catchall—“ethnic conflict”—inappropriate. Ethnic identity—recognized cultural distinctiveness—is only one variation. And to focus on ethnicity makes it seem that cultural difference is itself the cause of conflicts.

My point is that ethnic or other identities are not separable from more tangible, material concerns. Identity and interest are commonly *fused* into one. So, with due reluctance, I have proposed a new, hopefully more precise term: *identerest*. To speak of intergroup and intergroup conflicts does not presuppose any one universal basis of antagonism or mobilization. Rather it calls for those bases to be specified. And it calls attention to how material situation and a variety of symbolic understandings come together in groups heading toward lethal struggle, thus joining materialist and cultural/symbolic approaches.

The need for a new term is shown by the evident difficulties involved in existing terms. For illustration, take Ted Robert Gurr (2000), whose long-term work in this area is state of the art. Gurr writes,

ethnic groups are people who share a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on a belief in common descent and on shared experiences and cultural traits. They are also referred to here as communal and identity groups. Ethnopolitical groups are identity groups whose ethnicity has political consequences, resulting either in differential treatment of group members or in political action on behalf of group interests. (p. 5)

The latter are what I call “intergroup groups,” because even the prefix “ethno” encourages misunderstandings. As Gurr elaborates,

Ethnopolitical groups are not necessarily “ethnic” in the narrow sense. Many shared attributes can contribute to the sentiments and interests that lead to joint action ... the salient bases of collective identity include a common language, religion, or national or racial origin, shared cultural practices, and attachment to a particular territory. Most ethnopolitical groups also have a common history or myths of shared experience. (p. 8)

But all these diagnostics can vary independently of each other, and from the critical markers associated with ethnicity—common culture and sense of common ancestry. People of one religion may share a believed history but have radically different cultures and no shared ancestry. People of two large clans at each others' throats may be of identical culture and, at a higher level, acknowledge common ancestors. Submerging all these differences under ethnic or ethno only muddies the water. Alternatives are not better. “Communal groups” suggests an integration which may not exist

prior to conflict, and "identity groups" puts too much stress on one side of the equation (as would going in the other direction with "interest groups"). And Gurr is among the best. Most people just handle this linguistic stumbling block with something along the lines of "ethnic or whatever-you-want-to-call-them conflicts." I submit that we would be better served by calling them identerest.

In discussions of identerest violence around the world, we hear a lot about weak states, or even failed states. At one level, this diagnosis is accurate. For reasons noted above, central governments often are debilitated, unable to maintain order or respond to violent challenge. But this focus also obscures another critical fact: that the fighting we see is almost always all about who controls the state and what the state controls. The contenders seek to hold on to state power, to replace those in power, to redirect state-controlled resources, or to escape from existing centers of state power and set up new ones. As Reyna (2003, p. 272) found regarding Chad, but applicable much more widely, political violence is led by officials, former officials, and would-be officials.

The wars of recent years are often more extreme than normal political struggles. Some involve a project to replace one regime with another of a radically different type. Some involve breaking up an existing state into new smaller states. Others involve pushing the central government back from peripheral areas and replacing it with local structures of rule. But in one way or another, they are about the government. So there is a real double bind. Strong states are seen as the solution, but simply increasing the economic, political, or military power of the state makes the struggle over rule all the more important. The difficult lesson for diplomacy is that some kind of balance is necessary, increasing central authority, but in a way that does not generate even more opposition (and see Sharani, 2002).

My general theory of war stresses the need to focus on the self-interest of the leaders who call the shots on war. The respective roles of leaders and followers in identerest conflicts have been a big topic of research. Right after the Cold War ended, as new violent conflicts exploded and suddenly moved to center stage in our attention, many people argued that the violence was the result of "ancient antagonisms" and "primordial loyalties." Increased scrutiny quickly disposed of that perspective. The issues and groups involved were, on examination, very contemporary, not continuations of ancient struggles. By and large, a consensus emerged: the problem was not "the people," but "bad leaders"—leaders who manipulated identities for their own purposes and created situations of violence. This consensus is accurate, as far as it goes. Yes, there are leaders who manipulate, exploit, and compel others to kill. Focus on them is essential. But this view does not go far enough. Clearly, the leaders' charted course is often accepted with enthusiasm by people on the ground.

A common process in these conflicts is called "outbidding." In a field of potential leaders, those who rise to the top may be those who offer the most extreme views, the red meat, to their audience. Leaders often encourage or command atrocities to be committed, but we also see some followers jump to the opportunity, going beyond what is commanded. Certainly individual personalities play a big role here—the long disturbed, who suddenly find themselves with powerful backers and automatic

weapons. But so do local cultural symbols and scripts—as Lan (1985) demonstrates for Zimbabwe, Richards (1996) for Sierra Leone, Taylor (1999) for Rwanda, and Hinton (2004) for Cambodia. Deep themes shape the killings. So it is not just bad leaders. We also need to understand what motivates those who follow, including the actual perpetrators. We need to have an idea of how these violent identerest groups form in the interaction of leaders and followers, and in the interaction of practical interests and particular cultural understandings.

Continuing to draw from the introduction to *The State, Identity, and Violence*, I argue that there are four abstractly identifiable general stages in identerest conflicts. Real situations are considerably more diverse, of course. There are major pattern variations, such as whether group formation is one-sided or two-sided (i.e., the targeted people may not be organized), or whether one side is controlled by an existing government. Phases can be collapsed. Beyond that, every situation is unique. But comparison of cases in that book suggests that a broadly similar progression can be discerned even in radically different situations.

Phase one is the development of an active core of identerest entrepreneurs. This is usually some combination of politicians, businessmen, scholars, and clerics, who have convergent interests in promoting a conflict. They forge and widely disseminate a charged political ideology, thoroughly immersed in local cultural understandings, which identifies "our common enemy." They usually seem to believe in this ideology themselves. Remember my point about tribal warfare: self-serving material interests are couched and discussed in terms of cultural values, but the leaders also seem convinced that their proposed course of war is *right*.

Still, the propaganda aspect, the deliberate manipulation of messages to rouse an audience, comes through loud and clear. Blame for a poor life is cast on "them," and better times are pledged if "they" are defeated. "Justice" is invoked, and past grudges are diligently revived and dwelled upon. Violence is used against those who somehow stand against the leaders' definition of "us," sending a warning to others. Potent symbols are manipulated to drum up enthusiastic support. Leaders make a direct pitch to their self-serving construction of a salient identity—be it ethnic, religious, or whatever—and shore that up with self-serving constructions of that identity's history. History is the most potent symbol of all—who "we" are, how we came to be, and above all, how others tried to destroy us in the past, even centuries ago.

But even though their message will be framed in terms of some broad category of people, it typically is received very differently by different kinds of people within that category. So a message that is said to apply to all "Bikar"—to make up a group of some type—will be immediately taken up especially by the "Lokar" subdivision of Bikar, by Bikar in the south, by Bikar working in the mining district, and by young Bikar men in the city. That same message will be doubted or resisted by most Bikar who are urban professionals, or educated women, or Bikar farmers in the northwestern region. Many of these resisters may have active, good, even familial relations with members of the designated enemy. Again and again we have heard that those who slaughter today had lived as peaceful neighbors quite recently. So, to go from message

to violent action, the identerest group has to be broadened, lines have to be drawn, and dissent or passivity sanctioned. That brings us to phase two, fostering fear, or as international relations scholars put it, the internal security dilemma.

Again and again we have seen that the perception of threat, of danger, is key to mobilization of followers. The constructed threat is physical, to life and well being—the most material interest of all. But at the same time it is against identity. “You are an ‘x,’ I am an ‘x,’ and all those ‘y’s want to get rid of us because they hate what we are.” Leaders actively cultivate these fears, but their success depends in part on how realistic those fears appear to potential targets. The fears draw strength by their plausible correspondence to local histories and current circumstances.

When a perceived threat is directed at a person’s sense of self, at the very conception of who he or she is, and at all those who are like him or her, the elicited response is felt not as calculated, rational self-interest, but as bubbling hot passion, beyond or even against rational self-interest. In such situations, the old “prisoner’s dilemma” may rule. Both sides would do better by not attacking, but if one is convinced the other will try to get them if they do not protect themselves, attacking first may seem like the only way to go. And usually the message is, “Do not count on the government to protect us—we are on our own.” So as larger guarantors of security are seen as impotent, people fall back on loyalties of kin and kind. Who else is there?

By now the conflict is into phase three—guided polarization and projection. The classical dynamics of that well-known process apply. Efforts are made to eliminate the middle ground and make people choose sides. Whatever we do is right; whatever they do is wrong. Trust is said to be impossible with those who come to embody the negative image of whatever we stand for. Alternative narratives of cooperation and coexistence are banished as deluded at best, traitorous at worst. Since we have to defend ourselves, hard-core fighters and enforcers are recruited and organized, and broader sorts of people join in. At this phase, a dense mix of symbols, understandings, values, fears, and staged performances come into play among the hard core, the masses who follow, and even those who sit on the fence. Within the hard core, organizational structures, social pressures, and controlled information create a new reality, channeling them toward new potentialities of violence.

But how widely and deeply these divisive perceptions actually penetrate is variable. A constructed ethnic or tribal polarization used in fighting may be so superficial that it fades almost immediately when fighting stops, as Brown (2003) found in Liberia. The hard core is always a small minority, and as Nordstrom (1998) witnessed on several battlegrounds, the great majority of people, including members of martial forces, are not active killers, but merely want to survive. Misperceiving enemies as of uniform militancy is a deadly trap which precludes negotiation and compromise. Unless those less than committed to violence are recognized and actively engaged against it, a growing minority of committed partisans can easily brush past widespread nonengagement. Unorganized nonpartisans do not count. As partisan bands mobilize, leaders may be pushed into more aggressive postures from below, fueling outbidding.

Phase four is calculated violence, initiated by leaders, which comes in different forms. It may be members of a militia who are sent in to rape and kill, or it may be political mobs of urban youth who attack “enemy” centers, homes, and just people on the street. It must be recognized that this highly visible violence is a performance. Perpetrators communicate deep messages to both supporting and targeted groups (see Riches, 1986; Schmidt & Schroder, 2001). To supporters, the message is, “Look how we stand up for you; this is what needs to be done.” To the enemy the message is, “Whatever else you may be as a person, your life and death depend solely on the identity label we attach to you.” That is how, as Ignatieff (1977, p. 38) describes for one Croatian village, a man exchanging shots with his former friends and neighbors, had become “only a Serb.”

When these identerest group divisions become drenched in blood and atrocity, it is very difficult to turn back. Large-scale fighting is almost inevitable. Unless it is suppressed by some overwhelming external military force, people may keep on killing until they finally get sick of it all. War-exhaustion can be a potent force for ultimately negotiating a peace—but at what a cost. The big lesson of identerest violence over recent decades is that it really must be stopped *before* it starts. It is necessary to work against polarization, by supporting narratives and values and people and reforms that work against further separation, to find ways of peeling off those who start out as being less attracted to militant ideologies, and to somehow engage the political will of outside powers and institutions toward providing the necessary support for local peacemakers.

It is easier said than done. It is anything but easy to mobilize a major international effort to prevent violence in some faraway place that few in politics or the public know or care about, to deal with seemingly intractable problems, where success means the situation remains calm, and CNN viewers never hear about it. Nevertheless, that is where the effort is needed, because an early change of course is the best way to prevent more humanitarian tragedies. And while many today would say, in the middle of a global “war on terrorism,” that we cannot afford to be distracted by such humanitarian concerns, situations of violent breakdown of government and civil society can provide an ideal place for global terrorists to operate and grow (Lyman & Morrison, 2004). The issues are strongly connected.

Terrorism and the War in Iraq

The next-to-last section of this chapter deals with terrorism and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some of my points concerning tribal warfare and identerest violence do seem applicable to the crisis we face today.

First, I discuss “terrorism.” Labeling someone as a terrorist is a process in political symbolism (see Atran, 2003; Byford, 2002). *Enemies* are terrorists. Few who are called terrorists think of themselves in that way. They see themselves as freedom fighters, or religious warriors—and the defenders of those who have been victimized. The label as it is commonly used is the modern equivalent of the ancient label “barbarian,” those outside of and endangering self-proclaimed civilization—and indeed

the term barbarian was invoked in the last U.S. presidential campaign. It is very difficult to do a sober analysis of a conflict when one defines a situation in such polarized, political terms. So here is how I define things. When nonconventional fighters attack military targets, by whatever means, they are guerrillas. When they deliberately target civilians, they are terrorists. Of course, this conceptual distinction may be very blurry in practice, and fighters may be both at once.

Unfortunately, targeting civilians is how identerest violence usually works. In internal wars during the 1980s, the best estimate is about three-quarters of all deaths were civilian (Ahlstrom, 1991, pp. 9, 17). Why? Because it is "that kind of person" who, somehow, endangers us. And it is common because terror works. U.S. forces were withdrawn from Lebanon after a suicide truck bomber killed 241 servicemen in 1983. It is a cheap and effective tactic against an enemy, who may possess clear superiority in regular military forces. It can disrupt the plans of the powerful and may undercut their bases of support. It shapes the actions of other civilians. That is the world in which we live.

If terrorists resemble identerest fighters in their targeting of civilians, so do they in their form. News reports from Afghanistan and Iraq regularly implicate particular local religious affiliations, regional differences, ethnic identities, tribes, and clans as bases of recruitment. These, and other localized identities around the world, are connected in a loose global network of cell phones and computers, of diasporas and money flows. Their particular cases are disparate, but they are unified by similar radical interpretations of Islam, and linked to that, the perception of a common enemy, who is portrayed as the cause of "our" miseries and dedicated to the destruction of our identity. Be the focus America or Israel, Christianity or the West, there is enough conceptual overlap to foster cooperation. But to focus exclusively on the unifying beliefs, and lose sight of the local structures and processes that generate the fighters, is dangerously myopic. Much of the power in this global struggle comes from very local social identities, interests, and enemies (regarding Afghanistan, see Canfield, 1986, 1988; Sharani, 2002). Thus, Western states at war in Iraq and Afghanistan have become militarily engaged in an array of local identerest struggles.

Among the forces arrayed against the United States and its military allies, there are clearly leaders, and there are followers. Leaders have their own practical interests. Some seek governmental power, some push to increase the reach and influence of the institutions they control; many are well funded. Anti-Americanism has been "a useful tool for radical rulers, revolutionary movements, and even moderate regimes to build domestic support and pursue regional goals with no significant costs ... [It] is equally useful to oppressive Arab regimes, since it allows them to deflect attention from their own many failings" (Rubin, 2002, p. 80). Yet there is no reason to doubt that most believe in their ideologies of division, threat, and struggle. Many are extremely effective at communicating their visions. Those whom they recruit respond not just because the messages are laden with the most potent symbols of self-identity, but also because they are consistent with how some people see the world around them, with their perceived interests and lived experience, especially when that

experience includes politically targeted violence. They hear an emotionally powerful message that makes sense. It becomes a cause.

Commonly in localized conflicts, the majority of willing killers are the disenfranchised, frequently young men from camps or slums, young men with no future. But we know that this is not universal. Many with privilege and prospects join up—that has made the news. As the struggle intensifies, the manipulations of symbols and situations, and the growing perception of threat, push more and more into the polarized extremes. In the second Palestinian Intifada, which has provided time and opportunity for research, young supporters of extreme actions seem somewhat more prosperous and educated than average (Atran, 2003, pp. 1536–1537). I believe this is where trends are heading in the global war on terrorism.

The current situation is well illustrated by one *New York Times* (Sachs, 2004) story, the account of a Turkish journalist, a relatively secular Muslim woman, who was taken hostage in northern Iraq, and then, inexplicably freed. She describes being handed off from one distinct group of captors to another, of clearly different ethnicity and language. Her tormentors worked together because of their common opposition to "infidels." "For them, there's no difference between a Christian and a Jew, and Canadian and an American," she said. "These are people who think they are living in the time of the Crusades. They say they are fighting for Islam first and Iraq second. They think their religion is being attacked" (p. A12). She saw how this message is spreading.

I saw that around Mosul, everybody is the resistance—not terrorists, but not civilians really either. They used the small kids to bring them water, and nobody treated them like children. They'd be talking about cutting heads, and kids would be standing guard, like little men, so you become afraid of the children too.

Child soldiers are another characteristic of modern identerest violence (UNICEF, 1996).

U.S. military and political strategists have been bewildered by this diversity of enemies. In May 2005, the *New York Times* (Bennet, 2005) published an analysis under the heading of "The Mystery of the Insurgency." The general point was that no one could make sense of our opponents, that there was no coherence, no clear ideology, no general plan. That is exactly what is to be expected when the fight involves a variety of identerest groups and subdivisions. There is no one group to lead, but a spectrum of identities and divisions that become more or less salient as political entrepreneurs size up situations and play their cards.

That our adversaries are acting as I have described for identerest leaders is clearly shown in the famous captured letter attributed to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from February 2004 (Coalition Provisional Authority, 2004). Complaining that their enemies were increasing control throughout Iraq, he worried about having to "pack our bags and search for another land" (p. 8). But he had a clear plan. And the plan shows how the United States and its allies have become ensnared in an exceedingly complex local struggle for power. For al-Zarqawi in early 2004, the allies are just a sideshow. The true adversary are the Shi'a.

[They are] the unsurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom. ... The American army has begun to disappear from some cities, and its presence is rare. An Iraqi army has begun to take its place, and this is the real problem that we face, since our combat against the American is something easy. The enemy is apparent, his back is exposed, and he does not know the land or the current situation of the mujahadin because his intelligence information is weak. We know for certain that these Crusader forces will disappear tomorrow or the day after. ... I believe, and God knows best, that the worst will not come to pass until most of the American army is in the rear lines and the secret Shi'a army and its military brigades are fighting as its proxy. They are infiltrating like snakes to reign over the army and police apparatus, which is the strike force and iron fist in our Third World, and to take complete control over the economy like their tutors the Jews ... (p. 3)

In classic identerest style, al-Zarqawi provides a long historical tirade on what he portrays as the evil greed of the Shi'a, how this has long been directed against Sunnis, and how their campaign of killing their religious enemies is already in high gear. Yet the Sunni remain docile. What is to be done?

The Shi'a. These in our opinion are the key to change. I mean that targeting and hitting them in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis their rabies. ... If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these Sabbeans. ... Someone may say that, in this matter, we are being hasty and rash and leading the [Islamic nation] into a battle for which it is not ready, [a battle] that will be revolting and in which blood will be spilled. This is exactly what we want, since right and wrong no longer have any place in our current situation. (pp. 7-8, all brackets in original)

This strategy of al-Zarqawi and other identerest entrepreneurs in Iraq is working. In December 2004, one *New York Times* article (Wong, 2004) was headlined "Mayhem in Iraq Is Starting to Look Like a Civil War." Fighting had already begun along ethnic and religious lines, and leaders were organizing an increasing number of young men into "Anger Brigades" to attack other Iraqis. In July 2005, the *Times* ran an evaluation of Iraq, with two headlines: "If It's Civil War, Do We Know It?" and "Maybe the Nightmare Has Arrived." It is the first time I have seen the idea attributed to U.S. officials that we might have to withdraw in the middle of a civil war and let the Iraqis fight or settle by themselves. One week after that, an Op-Ed piece by Steven Vincent (2005) described the operations of death squads within the Basra police, targeting Sunnis, even as the police were being trained by the British. Two days later Vincent was kidnaped and killed by two men in Iraqi police uniforms, driving an Iraqi police car (Wong, 2005). Perhaps this was just a coincidence.

What can people like al-Zarqawi gain by encouraging such attacks? As he states, violence will rouse the Sunnis, marginalize those among them who wish to cooperate, and put terrorists like himself in the leadership of a much broader political force. By actions and constructed history, he would create a new identerest conflict of broader scope than all the many factions now fighting. If enough Sunnis and Shiites

kill each other just because of that identity, the two will polarize along that divide. In recent discussions leading up to the drafting of an Iraqi constitution, the possibility of national partition was repeatedly raised. A few years of forced displacements and mass killing along these constructed divides, and partition may well become unstoppable. The Shiites and Kurds would go their own ways—with whatever that brings. The Allies would be left holding the Triangle of Death bag—which we surely cannot hold for long.

In Iraq, terror and identerest conflict have become one. Without intending to do so, the Allies have followed the playbook for creating civil war. These divisions have been encouraged by the U.S. policy of excluding Sunnis from government while favoring Shiites and Kurds and using the latter two in military and police operations against Sunnis. It seemed necessary for security—but such steps are always taken for the security of a regime. Policies that favor certain categories of people, penalize others, and encourage violence by the most loyal against the more suspect are the tried and true way to shatter a coexisting mosaic and transform it into warring groups.

How did we get into this situation? Our war in Afghanistan had global support. We were attacked, and—in my view—had to go to the seat of our attackers. The war in Iraq, obviously, is another story. Can the ideas I have presented from anthropology be applied to why the Iraq war happened? I think so. Iraq and the United States are certainly not identerest groups, but the broader theory of practical interests shaping perceptions and being reinforced by identities and values of those who start wars—at least arguably—fits. While there is no comparison of the tyrannical Iraqi regime, all but isolated in the world, with the U.S. governmental system, the "Coalition of the Willing," and its partial reliance on the U.N., nevertheless there are significant parallels on the two sides. (The following points about Iraq are drawn from Davis, 1992; Lewis & Johnston, 2004; Johnston, 2004; Special Advisor, 2004, pp. 21-34, 61-62).

In this case it is unusually clear who were the decision makers on both sides—one top man, and a very small circle of close advisers (though Hussein's advisers were indisputably subservient compared to the ideologically driven American conservatives). On both sides, the path toward war was a path of internal political advantage. For the decade after the first Gulf War, even into early 2003, Hussein was making calculated decisions to ward off what he saw as the greatest threats to his number one priority: regime (and personal) survival. The greatest perceived dangers were Iran, which is what led Hussein to promote the idea that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) long after the program had been scrapped, and threats from within his own regime, including restive army officers, whom he felt had to be kept busy. (That was a major reason for invading Kuwait.) External enemies were necessary for Hussein to consolidate a nationalist vision that enshrined and protected him at the pinnacle. The United States, in contrast, was not seen as a military threat, and even into late 2002 Hussein was convinced that the United Nations and other powers would prevent an actual invasion. In the United States, after Republican victories in the 2002 Congressional elections, it was an openly stated strategy to

campaign for Bush's re-election on his actions as commander-in-chief. A victorious cakewalk in Iraq followed by joyous democratization would have been a surefire winner. But even the tragic miscalculation and carnage in Iraq could be, and indeed was, turned to electoral advantage—in times of danger, what is needed is a strong leader, a point with which Hussein would undoubtedly concur.

Yet on both sides, the aggressive stance was fueled by deeply held convictions about the moral value of their actions. Hussein was utterly convinced that he was the restorer of Iraq's historical glory and a stalwart defender of Arab dignity against Western pressures. The inner circle of the Bush regime was divided between neoimperialists and assertive nationalists, but both saw aggressive, preemptive use of military power as righteous and necessary for the United States and the way to spread our values through the world (Hirsh, 2002; Ikenberry, 2004; Simes, 2003). Both sides acted on erroneous information: Hussein on the ability of his armies to inflict such casualties that a U.S. invasion would not reach Baghdad, Bush on WMD existing and posing a potential threat, in each case shaped by the willingness of subordinates to tailor information to suit already fixed conclusions. Both sides made enormous miscalculations about things that seemed self-evident to those outside the inner circles: Hussein on his ability to prevail, Bush on the ability to establish order after Hussein had been defeated. Both sides saw the other as morally corrupt by association, with Israel or with al Qaeda. Both sides saw the other as the aggressor.

What I am saying is that the Iraq war is like many wars: the result of a complex dialectic between two sides whose leaders make decisions based on an amalgam of political self-interest, self-identities, and self-serving values and perceptions. The dialectic continues. Iraq has become the recruiting poster for terrorist leaders around the world, the rallying cry of those who benefit from anti-Americanism. Here at home, in American political culture, terrorism has become the new communism. Antiterrorism has expanded into almost every political niche once occupied by anticommunism. For the foreseeable future, how external threats are conceptualized, and what actions will be taken, will respond to the incessant struggle for domestic political advantage. Nothing matters more in American politics than who wins. Terrorists and antiterrorists are feeding off each other.

It is extremely difficult to stop a war once it gets started, especially when identities and interests are as fully engaged as they are in this conflict. It is difficult to see a silver lining, and I have no plausible suggestions to make things better. The way to stop conflicts like these is to keep them from developing in the first place. It is too late for that now. But there certainly is time to avert large-scale identerest violence in many potential crisis areas around the world. What is needed is a better understanding of how wars happen and the political will to prevent them.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a lot of ground, from tribal war, through identerest conflicts, to terrorism and the war in Iraq. The first section on biological approaches to war concluded with a quote from Fukuyama (1998, pp. 36–37). We can return to

that in closing. Fukuyama's main point was that feminine leadership could be a threat to national security, because "the broader world scene will still be populated by states led by the occasional Mobutu, Milosevic, or Saddam," and "masculine policies" will be needed to deal with them. I would not deny that the tight circle of Washington decision makers exuded machismo. But there were men and women all over the world on both sides of the issue of whether to invade, and would anyone care to argue that the reason we went to war in Iraq is that the two governments were led by macho, macho men?

Cultural anthropology offers a way to approach war that is applicable to both research and preventative action. Understanding war means first identifying and focusing on the key decision makers who take the leading steps down the road to war. What are their practical interests in the dialectic between external and internal political oppositions? What are the identities, moral values, symbols, constructed histories, and perceptions that relate to these interests? How do those two realms come together either as psychologically fused beliefs and/or as deliberate manipulation of others? How are these views conveyed to and/or imposed upon those who follow into war? For followers, what are their interests and understandings, and how do they interact with the promulgations of the political elites?

Disrupting a march toward war involves countering all those connections. It involves exposing, first of all, the interests of leaders, and second, how identities, values, symbols, histories, and perceptions are selectively constructed and used. It involves helping to promote local counterinterpretations and constructions, by supporting people and organizations who work against polarization and violence. It involves working internationally to build together sources of influence and finance to support those efforts. Success will be extremely difficult, because local problems are typically complex and seemingly intractable, and because those who are pushing for war have power behind them. They will typically attempt to marginalize (or worse) their opponents by characterizing them as partisans pursuing their own agendas.

Fighting against war, like any other curse of humankind, will always be frustrating and be doomed to many more failures than successes. Social science is a feeble antidote to the interests of power. But exposing the interests, misconceptions, and manipulations of the masters of war can provide some guidance and encouragement to its opponents. It is a positive contribution. What alternative is there?

Note

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