

War and Nationalism, Aldous Huxley

War and Nationalism

I propose to talk in this lecture about one of the more disturbing features of our present human situation: war and nationalism.

It is probably worthwhile to begin with a few words about war and nationalism in the abstract and more general context of biology and semantics. We often hear it said that war is inevitable because man is a fighting animal, but biologically speaking war—a conflict between organized groups of members of the same species—is a very rare phenomenon. There is, of course, continual preying of one species upon another, but in fact there are only two species of creatures which make war: one is the harvester ant and the other is the human being. These two creatures have in common the institution of property. The harvester ants from one nest collect large quantities of foodstuffs; the members of a neighbouring nest come in genuine armies and fight for the possession of these foodstuffs. In spite of the fact that harvester ants do not possess a language and therefore have no conceptual system of principles or ethical notions, these wars can last for a considerable time. Some have been observed to last for as much as five or six weeks, which is a very long time for an animal without a language system to keep a war going.

The human being, when he makes war, can go on far longer than the ant precisely because he possesses a language and a conceptual system. We are able, even when the passion of the moment has subsided, to keep on fighting and killing because we can goad ourselves with our concepts, our principles, our categorical imperatives, to do whatever we feel we have to do. One thinks of the phrase of Matthew Arnold, 'tasks in hours of insight will'd, Can be through hours of gloom fulfill'd'. This is true not only of positive tasks, tasks that we would regard as constructive, tasks willed in hours of insight, but it is also true, unfortunately, of tasks willed in hours of passion and prejudice and often of a profoundly destructive nature.

It is because we possess a symbol system and can formulate ideals and categorical imperatives that it is possible for human beings to achieve both sanctity and pure diabolism—to persist at the highest level of charity and understanding and also at the lowest level of wickedness and folly. The animal can never be an angel or a saint, a lunatic or a devil, for it lives so to speak in a condition of intermittence. You can see this when two dogs fight; they will begin with tremendous frenzy and then suddenly one will sit down and start scratching fleas and they will forget all about it. But this is impossible for human beings because they have motives for fighting; they have words that say that it is right for them to fight; they have categorical imperatives by which it is their duty to fight and not to run away.

Conflict—not war—is frequent among members of the same species. But natural selection has taken great care that conflict between animals of the same species shall rarely be pushed to the fatal conclusion. We always think of the wolf, for example, as a peculiarly ferocious and sinister animal. Actually, as naturalists have observed—you will find a full account of this in Konrad Lorenz's book, *King Solomon's Ring*—wolves never fight to the death. The wolf that feels it is going to be beaten exposes its throat to its adversary in such a way that if the adversary chose to do so, it could immediately sever the jugular vein and kill its enemy; but, owing to the benevolent action of natural selection, the

vanquishing wolf finds it psychologically impossible to bite. Instead he starts growling and then turns away. One can see that there are very good evolutionary reasons for this; if male wolves habitually fought to the death over females, the species would very soon come to an end. And it is interesting to find that the injunction to turn the other cheek, which is very rarely practised by men, is constantly and instinctively practised by wolves.

War, which may be described as a culturally conditioned state of affairs based upon the natural condition of conflict, is precisely the opposite of this because it consists in pushing organized conflict to the limit of destruction and is not instinctive. It is very important to remember that both war and the motivating power which drives men to war are socially conditioned because it makes us realize that there is nothing biologically inevitable about the terrible thing that menaces us. Because it is a socially conditioned phenomenon, we can, if we want to, de-condition and get rid of it.

War is conditioned by human symbol systems, and in our modern life the symbol system is that of nationalism. One can say that nationalism is a kind of theology—a system of concepts and ideals and ethical commandments—based upon a natural and instinctive attachment to our place of origin and to familiar people, but extended, by means of our capacity for abstraction and generalization, far from the natural piety of the native place and the familiar folk. Nationalism uses all the devices of education to create an artificial loyalty to areas with which the individual is quite unacquainted and to people that he has never seen.

We have now to briefly consider the question, How is a nation to be defined? Many attempts have been made to do this, and it is very curious that none of the most obvious methods covers all the cases. We cannot say that a nation is a population occupying a single geographical area, because there are cases of nations which occupy areas widely separated, such as Pakistan at the present time. We cannot say that a nation is necessarily connected with the speaking of a single language, because there are many nations in which the people speak many languages—even in so small a nation as Switzerland there are three main languages, and in India there are hundreds, with twenty or thirty being quite important. (There is a very considerable linguistic patriotism within the national frame of India which does tend to produce strong centrifugal forces.)

There is the definition of a nation as something composed of a single racial stock, but this is quite obviously inadequate; even if one ignores the fact that nobody knows exactly what a race is, in this country alone 10 per cent of the inhabitants belong to non-Caucasian stocks and yet are quite clearly Americans in the fullest sense of the word. Finally, the only definition which the old League of Nations was ever able to find for a nation (and I presume the same definition is now adopted by the United Nations) was that a nation is a society possessing the means of making war. Thus the feeblest and smallest nation which has some kind of a war-making machine—Libya, for example—is a nation, but an immense geographical unit with a huge population, such as California, is not a nation because it does not have a war-making machine.

It is most curious to see how profoundly this oddly arbitrary definition of the nation as a society which is capable of making war has affected history. I remember being greatly struck twenty years ago, when I was travelling in Central America and reading the history of the region, by the extraordinary story of nationalism in that part of the world. It is worth looking at this history in some detail because in a certain sense

it is like a small-scale laboratory experiment which can be studied more easily than large-scale events which take place in Europe and other parts of the world.

Nationalism came to Central America after 1821, when the Spanish colonies revolted against the crown of Spain because the idea of the divine right of kings had been smashed by Napoleon when he imposed his brother Joseph on the throne of Spain. (Napoleon's brutal extraction of this keystone of the great arch of Spanish loyalty led to the collapse of the whole arch.) In Central America the result was that each province of what had been the Spanish empire declared itself a nation, and even some of the departments within the provinces declared themselves nations and had to be reconquered by the provinces as a whole. It is only by chance that there is not a small state between Guatemala and Mexico called Quezaltenango; such a state did declare its independence, but then was re-conquered by the rest of Guatemala.

What happened when nationalism was suddenly born into this area? We have there a population fundamentally the same overall: a minority of Spaniards and, underneath them, the Mestizos, the Ladinos, and the Indians, who were politically quite untouched and had no relationship with the general march of affairs. Their religion—a mixture of Catholicism and the ancient Indian religions—and their economic interests were also much the same. The people had lived at perfect peace with one another for three hundred years because they took for granted that they were all subjects of the king. Then, overnight, the provinces became nations—which are by definition war-making machines—and they spent a considerable part of the following century in savage struggles one with another. These struggles were not economic in character; they were almost always ideological struggles between federalists and non-federalists, liberals and conservatives.

This, then, presents an extraordinarily interesting small-scale and simplified picture of the arbitrary nature of the whole national set-up. At one moment you are not a nation and the next moment you are. In Germany, before 1870, Germans were not Germans; they were subjects of the kingdom of Saxony or of Bavaria, etc., and Germany was not Germany, it was the Germanies. Abruptly, overnight, the Germanies were welded into a single country and German nationalism was systematically encouraged. (The beginnings of German nationalism may have been earlier, under Napoleon, but it was not until the country was politically united that the theology of nationalism was officially taught.)

The history of modern nationalism begins with the French revolution and the rise of the self-conscious nation-state. The curious and ironical feature about this is that the tremendous fervour which was aroused among the revolutionaries for the new nationalist theology was the thing which helped Napoleon to extend his conquests far and wide over Europe. By 1811 he had the intention of setting up a new Holy Roman Empire, with its capital in Paris and its second city in Rome, and of consolidating it through a most elaborate system of legitimacy and nobility. But he completely left out of account the fact of nationalism. In the process of winning the empire he had aroused the nationalistic feelings of the people against whom he had committed aggression, and suddenly his whole internationalist dream was smashed by the rise of nationalism in Germany, in Austria, in Russia. The very thing which had helped him to win his victories turned against him and finally destroyed him.

Nationalism played an incredibly important part in the history of the nineteenth century. It is interesting to see that Karl Marx, who was

after all a man of extraordinary intelligence and ability, seems to have greatly under-estimated its power. In this respect, this extremely astute and penetrating mind was much less realistic than the otherwise rather woolly-minded Giuseppe Mazzini, who built up a kind of idealistic theology of nationalism but at any rate saw the enormous power latent in it. Marx seems really to have supposed that national patriotism would very soon be replaced by class patriotism. History has shown that he was entirely wrong, and he would be profoundly surprised to find that today the ideology of Communism is the principal instrument of Russian nationalism.

Nationalistic fervour still persists and has recently overtaken a number of new converts. All the ex-colonial nations exhibit an ardour of nationalism which is certainly equal to the ardour which was displayed one hundred and fifty years ago in Europe. It is an ardour which is proportionate to their hatred of the ex-colonial powers but wholly out of proportion to their capacity to be efficient, modern nation-states. This is one of the tragedies of the situation today; we find an immense desire for national independence and a tremendous, almost quasi-religious fervour with regard to it which are quite unrelated to economic and cultural facts. This is certainly going to lead in many cases to a sense of frustration, to social chaos, and probably to various forms of dictatorship.

With nationalist feeling still as strong as it ever was, we would even be justified in saying that nationalism is the prevailing religion of the twentieth century, as it was during most of the nineteenth. It looks as though it is going to remain the prevailing religion for a long time. It is as though we had reverted from the monotheism which arose in Judea and was developed under Christendom to a religion of a particularly disastrous kind—a divisive religion that places absolute value in fragmentary parts of humanity and positively condemns those who accept it to chronic strife with their neighbours. In 1862 Lord Acton said about nationalism that it does not aim at liberty or prosperity; it aims solely at making the nation, which is a kind of abstract idea, the norm and mould of the political state. He added that the results of this would be not merely material but also moral ruin, and I think this was a remarkably astute prophecy.

We must bear continuously in mind that everything that is happening now, such as the explosive increase in population and the advancing technicalization of every aspect of human life, is happening in the context of nationalism. Consequently, it all takes on a very dangerous quality, precisely because it is taking place in the context of what appears to be the strongest quasi-religious fervour of our period, and in a world order which by definition commits those who believe in its theology to war with one another and to continual preparation for war.

This war ethos has been reduced to a kind of absurdity, as innumerable people, including those who are now preparing for war, are never tired of pointing out. War has reached a point where there can be no victors and where the only purpose which can be achieved by entering upon it is the complete destruction of the combatants and probably the destruction of large areas of not only civilization but life itself. Everybody knows this, and yet all the people in decision-making positions in the world today—and there are not very many of them—are so completely the prisoners of the theological-nationalistic system that they find themselves under a compulsion to go on willy-nilly preparing for something which they know must be disastrous. One has this extraordinary and paradoxical spectacle of unprecedented skill and knowledge and devotion and work and money

being poured out on projects which can lead not to life, liberty, and happiness, but only to misery, to servitude, and to death.

The rationalization of this is in all cases the old Roman adage, 'si vis pacem para bellum' (if you want peace prepare for war). Unfortunately, everybody has been acting on this adage for the last two thousand years or so, with the result that, as Pitirim Sorokin of Harvard has pointed out in his most elaborately documented book, most of the great nations of the world have spent from forty to sixty years of each century in war. Preparations for war have always led to war, and there seems to be no particular reason to suppose that the present armaments race can lead anywhere else.

One of the most alarming things that has happened under the present dispensation is that this piling-up of armaments has come to play a vital part in Western economies, particularly in the American economy, which depends completely on the expenditure by the government of approximately forty billion dollars a year on the manufacture of armaments. It seems to me one of the most tragic things which has happened, that this preparation for something which can only be a preparation for death has become the basis of Western prosperity. This is not a new phenomenon; the recovery from the Great Depression of the thirties was not complete until rearmament had begun in a systematic way. In England an enormous housing programme was put into effect in the late thirties but this did not completely eliminate unemployment; nor did the very elaborate pump-priming of the New Deal eliminate it in the United States.

It was only in response to Hitler's menace, when armaments began to be manufactured on a very large scale, that the unemployment bogey was finally banished. It is a dreadful, grotesque paradox that the prosperity of the West was due to the phenomenon of Hitler. And today we see the same thing: the fear of Russian competition, which entails the putting out of vast sums of money for armament, is the cornerstone and foundation of the prosperity which we are enjoying at present. There is a kind of vested interest in the preservation of this system and it will take a great deal of thought and courage to break away and to find some alternative means for keeping the economy going.

How easy is it going to be to get this change on the way? There is one school of thought which says that war is inevitable, that this is our fate. But what is the definition of fate? I don't think we can speak in such old-fashioned terms of some sort of external influence which foresees what is going to happen to us and creates a kind of plan to which we have to conform. The sociological idea of fate is very close to that which was elaborated by Tolstoy in War and Peace, the idea that historical events are determined not by the choices of individuals or small groups, but by the summation of innumerable small decisions taken by countless anonymous human beings, which add up to a general tendency in one direction.

At present, however, owing to the remarkable concentration of power in the modern world, this is not true; on both sides of the iron curtain there are relatively few decision-making persons. We see now that something like two-thirds of the entire assets of the American manufacturing economy is in the hands of five hundred corporations and that, among these five hundred, a smaller number actually possess the decision-making power. Members of this corporate élite are to be found in decision-making positions at the head of the pyramid of rule in this country, where we see a sort of triumvirate of power: the highest political powers plus the highest military powers plus the highest

economic powers represent an extraordinary concentration of force and economic power which makes it possible for us to imagine a way out of our difficulty.

It is quite clearly very dangerous when power gets into the hands of very few people. As Lord Acton said, 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' But in another way the concentration of power is encouraging because it means that the problem of war is not out of our hands; it has not become a problem of completely inhuman forces, and human will can still play a very large part in it. If the people with the enormous powers are men of reasonably good will, and if it is possible to influence their decisions, then we are in a better position than we would be if we were wholly at the mercy of non-human forces pushing us inexorably in one direction.

Now we have to inquire, What can we do in the present situation? How are we to get out of this push towards catastrophe? We walk and walk, we know the precipice is going to be there. Are we going to fall over the edge? I don't know; but I don't think it is necessary. The most obvious means which presents itself whereby we can get out of this dreadful situation is moral exhortation, begging people to behave, to be good, and to be sensible. Unfortunately, moral exhortation doesn't go very far in changing a political trend—although it would be quite wrong to disregard its value. It is terribly important that we should try to combat the strange kind of moral insensibility and indifference to the fact of large-scale violence which seems to have fallen upon so much of the world. We accept as natural and inevitable an immense wholesale destruction to be wreaked on entire populations. We accept as inevitable the existence of absolute weapons and of genocide, as though there were no alternative.

There seems to be in this matter of moral sensibility a kind of dual standard. I remember that just after the Korean War a number of articles appeared pointing to the fact that during the war a majority of American infantrymen never fired their rifles, and that the actual killing was done at long range by artillery and by aeroplane bombardment. This seems to show that there is an intense moral sensibility in face-to-face relationships which disappears when the relationship is distant and, so to speak, abstract and generalized. The age of saturation bombing and H-bombs is also the age of the welfare state; the age of massive preparation for biological warfare and the most dreadful kind of indifference to mass extermination is also the age in which violent protests occur when dogs are sent up in sputniks, and people are particularly alive to the dangers of cruelty to children.

It is very curious to see the difference between today's attitude towards mass atrocities and what used to happen in the past. I remember during the Second World War, after the saturation bombing of the city of Magdeburg, which had been largely reduced to flaming ruins, being struck by the remark of a knowledgeable commentator that the last time this had happened to Magdeburg was during the Thirty Years' War, when the armies of Tilly had sacked the town. I happened to have been reading something about it at the time, and I remember the account of the shudder of horror which went through Europe when the news of the sack of Magdeburg was published and became known in various countries of the West. How different that reaction was from the reaction during the Second World War, when similar destruction was regarded as something which had to be done—a standard procedure—and there was no particular object in being very much upset by it.

I feel that there has been a profound change even in my own lifetime. When I was a boy we still believed, with a kind of extreme Victorian optimism, that anybody who wore a top hat and took a bath every day and went to church on Sundays would be perfectly incapable of the sort of atrocities that the Turks had committed against the Armenians. But in the First World War we discovered that even people who took baths every day and wore top hats were capable of that kind of thing. The goodness of civilized man, which had been taken for granted while I was still a boy, was changed into a taken-for-granted native badness of man, for whom anything was possible. Since then we have been taking the destructive side of human beings for granted more and more, and talking in the most light-hearted way about large-scale destruction. Even children, with the kinds of toys they play with now, take it for granted. I was greatly struck the other day, meeting a group of children in the street—the smallest of them was crying bitterly, and I heard him say to the others, 'Give me the machine gun.' It gave me rather a turn.

It is extremely important for anybody connected with education and with writing and with religion to attempt to close this schizophrenic breach in our moral sensibility. We cannot go on separating the welfare state from the genocidal absolute weapon; we have somehow to bring the sensibility which works in the former into the area of the latter, where it doesn't work. Although I don't think its immediate effects are going to be very striking, this is a most important task to be done. We have to create the right kind of atmosphere in which suitable political action can be taken.

Now let us pass from morals to politics. Here we are confronted immediately by the fact that most of the people involved in the armaments race regard any alternative to it as utopian. But, after all, aren't they being a little utopian? Isn't a policy which everybody admits is a policy of complete destruction a utopian policy? They call themselves realists, but I would say that they are utopian realists. They are realistic about the means they employ—nothing could be more realistic than the way they approach the problem of the absolute weapon and the methods of delivering it—but nothing could be less realistic than the ends proposed, because there are no ends except the end of the human race. On the other hand, the utopian idealist lives in the stratosphere and implores everybody to be good and kind and sensible, but offers no practical method of implementing his good intentions. What we need is a kind of realistic idealism or idealistic realism which can offer some sensible alternative, to make it possible to transfer the conflict on to another level which does not involve these horrors.

Let me quote something which I wrote in 1946 in a small book called *Science, Liberty and Peace*, where I discussed these issues and pointed out that it was absolutely necessary to try to shift the whole attention of politics from the unsolvable problems of power to the solvable and even more urgent problems of human needs. This is what I wrote apropos the San Francisco conference:

At the San Francisco conference the only problems discussed were problems of power. The basic problem of mankind—the problem of getting enough to eat—was relegated to an obscure international committee on agriculture. And yet it is surely obvious that if genuine international agreement is ever to be reached, it must be an agreement with regard to problems which, first, are of vital interest to the great masses of humanity and which, second, are capable of solution without resort to war or the threat of war.

I still think this is true and I am glad to see that more and more people are taking the same line—that the only acceptable mode of conflict with the other great power bloc, which will be to the immense advantage of both power blocs and the great masses of humanity, will be precisely a conflict as to who can provide the two-thirds of the human race who now live in misery and undernourishment with the means of assuring some kind of decent life for themselves and their children.

Unfortunately, the decision-making people are always extremely well-fed and are not particularly concerned with the problem of subsistence. They subsist a great deal too well, probably, in many cases, and their first question is a question of power: Who shall bully whom? But the masses of the people are concerned with the problem of subsistence, and their first question is: Where is my next meal coming from? Two-thirds of the human race belong to this undernourished mass of people who are in general completely disregarded. The decision-making people never really consult these masses on what they would like.

If they were consulted, if a referendum of the whole world population, a Gallup poll, were instituted, we could ask them the question: Do you prefer the present system of power politics and armaments races, or do you prefer to have enough to eat? You cannot have both, because it is quite clear that countries which are spending 40 or 50 per cent of their revenue on non-productive armaments are not in a position to improve the agricultural situation of the backward nations or to help to industrialize them. As long as the current system of power politics and of preparation for war within the context of nationalism goes on, so long will persist the misery of these two-thirds of the world, who are increasing at an enormously rapid rate, and who will soon be more than two-thirds.

In this context I would like to read a few passages from a letter which was sent by President Sukarno of Indonesia to the English periodical the New Statesman last summer. The New Statesman had carried a series of very interesting letters, the first from Bertrand Russell, then one from Nikita Khrushchev, and one from Secretary John Foster Dulles. Finally President Sukarno wrote:

We of Asia are but pawns in the game of nuclear powers ... However, it would be most unwise to disregard Asian opinion. In all sincerity, I tell you that we are growing increasingly resentful of the present situation. Asians are the chief victims of the West's failures and moral bankruptcy.

We in Asia do not see you as saviours of civilization or as forerunners of the future; we see you as agents of death—our death ...

We utterly deny the right of the West to continue imperilling us and our future ... It is past time for the West, Communist and anti-Communist alike, to draw back from the edge of complete moral bankruptcy. It is explicitly your task to utilize the skill and technique of your science for peaceful purposes. One tenth of the treasure and skill used in making your hydrogen weapons could transform my country ...

There can be no question now of the West giving moral leadership to Asia. Your moral leadership has, for us, meant first colonialism and now the philosophical, moral, political and social bankruptcy of a nuclear arms-race ...

You in the West are causing more gaps between humanity; you are also losing the battle for the hearts and minds of men.

I think it is very valuable for us to see ourselves as others see us, and to realize that this is what the leaders of the unfortunate two-thirds of the world think of us and what they expect of us.

I cannot go into the details of the kind of policy which should be pursued. Such a policy has been set out, lucidly and extremely well, in a very valuable book by Professor Wright Mills of Columbia University, *The Causes of World War Three*, which I heartily recommend to everybody. He sets out what he thinks an idealistically realistic policy for the West would be, and also guidelines for changes in American policy and modes of thought, which would permit pressure to be put upon what he calls the 'power élite', the decision-makers at the top of the social pyramid. Meanwhile, he calls upon his fellow intellectuals and educators and writers to do all they can to help prepare the moral atmosphere in which such a change could take place.

I will close these remarks by pointing out that perhaps now is a fairly propitious time to come to some kind of agreement, not because I think anybody has had a change of heart, but because the advances of technology are making the present situation exceedingly precarious, and they are making it precarious in a new way. As a recent article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* pointed out, it is now possible for at least twelve nations, some of them quite small, to produce the hydrogen bomb within five years or, if they carry out a crash programme, even sooner; and the last thing that any of the three great nuclear powers wants is for the hydrogen bomb to get into the hands of anybody else. Obviously the world situation would become fantastically precarious, and the power of the great powers would be very seriously compromised.

If Lichtenstein and Monaco had the bomb, they would be in a certain sense on a level with the United States and with the Soviet Union, which is obviously a situation which neither of these countries could possibly tolerate. For this reason I do think that there is a better chance for making a beginning in disarmament; this would consist in the banning of nuclear tests, which would make it very difficult or impossible for any other nation to produce a bomb. I think that such a test ban is now more likely to be negotiated than it has been recently, and it will become increasingly likely as the capacities of the small nations to reproduce the bomb at a cheap rate become greater.

I also think that if we attack this problem on all fronts at once—on the moral front, the political front, the persuasion front, the technological front—there is some considerable hope that we may get ourselves out of this dreadful situation into which we have, by our folly and also by our good intentions, alas, succeeded in putting ourselves. We can see some prospect of making the decision not to go to the edge of the precipice, but to draw back in time.

The End