

CITY LIGHTS REVIEW



WAR AFTER WAR

THE NEW CORPORATE/MILITARY ORDER

THE MIDDLE EAST

INSURGENCIES ON THE HOME FRONT

THEY MAKE A DESERT

Peter Lamborn Wilson

“War is Peace.”—The Ministry of Truth, 1984

“This is a war about peace.”—R. Nixon, 1991

“Neither your war nor your peace!”—Surrealist slogan

One of the CNN correspondents pinned down in the Baghdad Hilton on “opening night” of *Desert Storm* (the mini-series) spoke in hushed tones of the “eerie beauty” of the bombardment. Mussolini’s son made a similar remark about the flowers of fire he dropped on Ethiopia; he, however, was a fascist “hero,” while the reporter in Iraq was nothing but a few million pixels broadcast into a few billion brains.

To update Karl Kraus: Wars are started by politicians who lie to the media, then believe what they see on television. “We’re getting our news from CNN,” quipped Saddam Hussein, “just like everyone else.”

Prowar propaganda was paid for by Kuwait (i.e., the Sabah family) and engineered by a New York PR firm. The folk tradition of yellow ribbons that originated in the Civil War reappeared in a 1950’s John Wayne movie.

Excerpt from an interview with an American soldier on R-&-R in a bar in Tel Aviv. Reporter: “How do you like it here?” Soldier: “It’s great; they got all kinds of video games here.” Reporter: “Do you play much?” Soldier: “Nah, I’m into the real thing now.”

By these standards, what would a “real” peace consist of?

Various segments of the peace movement have covered themselves in glory. The Trots actually came out in favor of Saddam Hussein, the man who called George Bush a “criminal hypocrite.” It takes one to know one. A plague on both their houses, and a fifty percent discount on icepicks.

“Moderate” peaceniks actually marched together with prowar demonstrators to “Support Our Troops” and “bring them home soon.” This obviously pea-brained tactic needs to be explained psychohistorically.

According to legend, during the Vietnam “era” the antiwar movement traumatized our troops by calling them “babykillers,” thus causing “The Vietnam Syndrome” (another made-for-TV movie, starring “The Deranged Vietnam Vet”). In truth, of course, the antiwar activists tended

to sympathize with the troops, whom they viewed as fellow-victims. It was the government that made life truly miserable for soldiers, first by sending them into an absolutely meaningless abyss of hallucinatory violence, then treating them like shit because *they lost*.

As soon as the Nintendo war was over Bush rushed to the tube to proclaim the end of the Vietnam syndrome—i.e., *we won*, and now we needn't suffer any more psychological hang-ups about crushing the entire Third World into a gehenna of pauperized terror for the next thousand years. And in fact the war was over in about fifteen minutes. The troops came home almost before we noticed they were missing, and nearly the only ones who came back in bags were killed by friendly fire or bad liquor.

Where was the "peace movement" when Chinese troops fired on Tibetan monks or the students at Tienanmen? Where was the movement when the U.S.S.R. invaded Afghanistan in the last spasms of a doomed Stalinist dementia? Where was the *peace* movement when Reagan declared *war* on the poor, when Bush declared *war* on drug users, when the American legislature declared *war* on sexuality?

In New York during the Gatorade war, *one* demonstration was held to protest the suffocation of the American media. It was organized largely by poets and artists. Elsewhere: nothing but the eerie silence of a burning desert, mirroring the polluted emptiness of our public discourse. One demonstration! for the defense of *language!* What's the relation between the media and the war? The media *is* the war.

What does the peace movement have to say about American Kop Kultur, American militarization of the imagination? Does one need to be a poet to understand that the modern world has already achieved PURE WAR—that is, a permanent state of miserable terror occasionally relieved by a bit of old-fashioned genocide or carpet bombing? Pure speed—instantaneous delivery of information—has reduced actual combat to a gladiatorial spectacle, commodified and packaged as *control of consciousness*.

I actually heard peaceniks say, during the recent unpleasantness in the Gulf, that "we" stopped the war in Vietnam and "we" can stop this one, too. However, it was not "we" who stopped the war in Vietnam. The Vietcong did that. What "we" did (myself included) was to watch television and indulge in paroxysms of symbolic acting-out as self-appointed scapegoats for collective guilt. A few reactionary blow-hards actually took us seriously—Nixon, for example—but they were merely dupes of media hype. In those days everyone believed what they saw on the Evening News. Nowadays no one believes anything anymore, but they *pretend* to, because the only alternative is the black hole of utter meaninglessness.

Thus we pretend to believe that a war was waged in the Gulf. But "our leaders" have lied to us about *everything else*—why should we believe them now? How many dead Iraqis did you find in *your* back yard? All we know is what we saw on TV—which is worth *nothing*. With digital tape and computers Steven Spielberg could've "animated" the whole show in Hollywood. (And if he didn't, someone else *will*.) Paperback novelizations with embossed covers were appearing *during the war*. P. K. Dick, you definitely died too soon.

But you, reader, perhaps you wish to accuse me of making macabre jokes at the expense of thousands of slaughtered Iraqi children. Oh, no. I didn't joke about the Kurds in 1975 when the CIA ordered the late Shah of Iran to stab them in the back and deliver them up to Saddam for extermination, and I'm not joking about the Arab Iraqis now. All I mean to say is this: *If* the Gulf War had been a media hoax instead of a "real" war, it would have had exactly the same effect on the American public, both the jingoistic pinheads *and* the lovers of peace. This being the case, would "we" recognize "real" peace if it bit us on the ass?

"Neither your war nor your peace!"—because they're the *same thing*. And the "peace" of the peace movement—what is it? What will it be? We'll melt down all the weapons into educational toys. Children will be happy. Doves will fly.

And then what? Who'll pay the bill for this charming picnic? The Government perhaps. UNESCO? A grateful oil industry?

During Vietnam the leftists used to chant, "Bring the War home!" No thanks, pal! I've got enough problems. "War on Drugs? Hell, I can't even *drive* on drugs!"

The true explanation of Desert Storm is that George Bush, back in the late 1950s, set up a deal between one of his family companies, Lilly Pharmaceuticals, and his boss, Dick Helms, to supply LSD for the CIA's brainwashing MK-ULTRA project. As we know from Martin Lee's *Acid Dreams*, the spooks not only experimented on hapless victims but on *each other*. And just as you'd expect, they all had very bad trips, real paranoid bummers. Bush gulped down more sunshine than anyone else. He blew his mind. He started to believe he was the Masonic Messiah destined to realize the dream of the Founding Fathers (Freemasons, all of them): *novus ordo seclorum*. And we are now all living in Bush's evil hallucinations. Because his dream came true. P. K. Dick again. Ha. People who *do* know history are condemned to watch while other idiots repeat it—again and again and again. . . .

Compared with the totality of war, in which we swim like poisoned fish, and in which "peace" is simply another form of toxic waste—*pox*

americana—what semantic content can we ascribe to this word, “peace,” which still seems so precious to us? How can we rescue it from the Ministry of Truth?

Perhaps we could go to the enemy for a definition. The Arabic word for peace is *islam*. According to the sufis, one definition of *islam* is *ikhlas* or “sincerity.” To be sincere is the opposite of being a hypocrite: it means to be open with others as with oneself. This sort of peace follows after *jihad*, holy struggle, which must be carried out first against one’s own ignoble soul through the faculty of self-attention; the resolution of this conflict results in the “soul-at-peace.” The soul at peace, however, is not a soul in stasis but an active force—the zen martial artists call it the sword that gives life rather than death. This peaceful sword cleaves false from true; it does not forgive, though it may forget.

The peace movement, the labor movement, the causes of erotic freedom, of radical ecology, of gender justice, of economic justice—all these are like Rumi’s blind men groping the elephant. But the peace movement is the blindest of all. War is not peace; but the mere absence of war is not peace either. As usual we’ve been dealt a false dichotomy, and have been dropped again into the semantic mustard.

W. B. Yeats once shocked a dinner guest at Lady Gregory’s by banging on the table and shouting, “We must have more conflict!” Now, *conflict* need not be *war*. Bataille assures us (in *The Accursed Share*) that the basic fact of human economy is surplus, excess—a vast overproduction of creativity, energy, enthusiasm, divine madness. Some societies spend this excess in slaughter and mayhem, others in luxury, art, meditation, the attainment of exquisite states of *peace*. In any case the explosive power of this superabundance cannot be bottled—its very existence will boil up into *conflict*. The potlatch, for example, is a kind of agon or “war” carried out by gift-giving. Pindar describes a struggle of which the sole outcome is a brilliant glory. Charles Fourier predicts a form of social harmony based on the proliferation of mad passions and competitive cabals.

The image of peace called to mind by these poetic facts takes the form of life itself expending itself and expanding in joy, ever more turbulent, active, powerful, and creative. Therefore peace demands autonomy: it cannot bear Control. It must flow unchecked, like chaos, precisely so that it may resolve itself into spontaneous orders, into true beauty. (For *islam* is also *ihsan*, “virtu,” or the beauty of excellence.)

And what is the force that opposes all this? Who is *our* enemy?

On the first night of the war I took a taxi ride in New York; the driver, an unhealthy-looking black man about my age, turned out to be a Vietnam

vet. He said he’d nearly drunk himself to death after the war, done nothing but drink for years and years. Finally he’d managed to get it together, kick the juice and buy a medallion. “And now . . . *this!* I keep flashin’ on those missiles,” he said, actually gazing up into the winter night with an expression of dread. By the time we got to my destination we were both nearly in tears. “All’s I know is, man, I’m *against death*,” he said.