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The Cultural Approach to the History of War*



John Shy

TO speak of the cultural approach to any aspect of history is to enter an intellectual minefield. What follows may seem to lack theoretical rigor; but we can speak of a cultural approach because a number of recent, ambitious, and very stimulating works in military history share certain characteristics that expose the cultural dimension of war. Whether these shared characteristics meet a strict test of what constitutes a “cultural approach” may be a question, but that question should not divert attention from the quality and originality of the works themselves. None of them parades its methodology, or claims to be pioneering a breakthrough in our general treatment of the history of war. Some of the authors might even be surprised to learn that they were being singled out for this kind of discussion.

To be truly comprehensive, this essay could lengthen considerably its short list of works selected for discussion. As long ago as 1937 Alfred Vagts was exploring the cultural roots of militarism, and twenty years ago my panel colleague, Russell Weigley, developed at length the idea that there has been a distinctive American way of war, that there are indeed cultural determinants of American strategy and military operations.¹ No doubt others will think of works that have been omitted. But, pioneering work aside, there is something fairly new afoot within our

*The discussion of an earlier version of this essay by the Military Studies Group at the University of Michigan, and the interest of Dr. Theresa Wirtz and of my colleagues, Professors Marvin Becker and Susan Juster, has been especially valuable in revising it for publication.

1. Alfred Vagts, *A History of Militarism* (New York, 1937; rev. ed., 1959); Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York, 1973).

field of study, with traditional questions about how wars are waged being approached in a way that can fairly be called cultural.

This new scholarship tends to cluster, as might be expected, around a few salient and troubling questions in the military history of the modern Western world. One of these questions centers on the extreme brutality of much of the Second World War, on the breakdown between 1937 and 1945 of many previously accepted limits on the targets and methods of waging war. A second question, of special concern to American historians, deals with the surprising ferocity of the Civil War, with how and why Americans, against all prediction and prior experience, sustained four years of murderous combat against one another, killing almost 2 percent of their total population. A third and final question returns to the twentieth century, asking how European nations at high levels of economic and cultural development in 1914, could have behaved so idiotically, not only in going to war with so little intention or motive, but in then waging that war in a fashion that was so ineffectual and potentially suicidal. This is not an exhaustive list of salient questions, but it is long enough to include most of the recent work that identifies certain aspects of modern military experience as peculiar, and that seeks to explain those peculiarities in cultural terms.

* * * * *

No need to rehearse the statistics, or the stories; we can simply stipulate that, terrible as modern war had become by 1914, something far worse happened in the Second World War. At the center of our consciousness of the special horror of this war of course lies the Holocaust. But much of the most unrestrained killing went on in places and in ways that had no apparent connection to the Final Solution in central Europe; and it is these other corners of the war, where armed forces fighting battles, not bureaucracies bent on the extermination of defenseless civilians, committed more than incidental or accidental crimes, that have recently drawn the attention of historians. Their aim has been to explain the extraordinary breakdown of restraint in the conduct of military operations.

Omer Bartov has published since 1985 two books on the Eastern front and a series of articles, but the title of a paper he delivered at the 1991 American Historical Association convention captures best the main thrust of his argument: "National Socialist Ideology and the Barbarization of German Soldiers."² The question for Bartov arises

2. *The Eastern Front 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London, 1985), and *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991).

from the behavior of the German Army in the East, where we now know that it was deeply involved in the worst atrocities against civilians as well as against Russian prisoners of war. The question is pointed by the quite different behavior of that army, most of the time, in the West and in North Africa. The relevant culture for Bartov is not German, but National Socialism with its derivation of ethical norms from racial hierarchy.

Using demographic and sociological analysis, in addition to a more conventional reading of soldiers' letters, Bartov argues from a sample of well-documented army divisions on the Eastern front that both officers and soldiers were deeply imbued with what may be called Nazi culture. As the expected decisive campaign of 1941 turned into a protracted, costly struggle for which the Germans were not prepared, the Eastern war underwent "demodernization" when vast amounts of equipment were lost and logistical arrangements broke down. Forced more and more to live off the Russian economy, and directed to spare none of its precious resources for civilians or prisoners, the army was *culturally prepared* to behave toward its Slavic foe with unexampled ruthlessness.

John Dower has taken a somewhat similar line in a book on the Pacific theater, *War Without Mercy*, published in 1986.³ Starting from the contemporary perception that Japanese-American combat was "more savage" than in Europe, Dower explores racist ideology and its determinative effects on both sides of the fighting fronts. In addition to well-known American depictions of "Japs" as sub-human, Dower finds surprising evidence in Japanese archives of a governmental campaign to exploit cultural proclivities in portraying the American enemy as an inhuman devil. In Dower's formulation, "Race hate fed atrocities, and atrocities in turn fed the fires of race hate. The dehumanization of the Other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitates killing, not only on the battlefield, but also in the plans adopted by strategists far removed from the actual scene of combat" (p. 11).

Although Dower asserts the connection between wartime racist culture and military behavior, the actual links between thought and action are more often assumed in his book than explored.⁴ It needs also to be said that, while this paper is not intended to be a critical evaluation of this new work in military history, the thrust of Dower's argument sharply contrasts with that of Akira Iriye, who has put the Pacific war in the larger cultural context of Japanese pan-Asianism and American

3. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986).

4. A forthcoming book that deals with this connection, through a study of the U.S. First Marine Division, is by Craig Cameron, who presented a paper, "Imagining Battle: The Marine Corps and the Barbarization of the Pacific War," at the same 1991 American Historical Association session where Bartov presented a paper based on the work cited above.

support of China, both of which complicate the presumed role of racism in the planning and conduct of military operations.⁵

For Dower, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 are the conclusive instances of warfare barbarized by racist cultures, but Michael Sherry in *The Rise of American Air Power* (1987) takes a rather different cultural approach to the same events.⁶ Let me restate his query in my own words:

How the United States, officially dedicated to the purposes of peace, politically committed after 1918 to avoiding anything like another general war, economically prostrate after 1929, vocally hostile to all things military, became, among the six great powers that would fight a second world war, the leading air power—that is, the exemplar of a very costly and untested military strategy that would end in nearly indiscriminate slaughter of noncombatant people in order to achieve wartime results whose contribution to Allied victory were dubious, but whose baneful effects have lingered ever since.

My summary is misleading if it makes the book sound like a moralistic tract. Employing a narrative mode, Sherry draws us into the world of interwar aviation, with its rich commercial and military possibilities, and then into the emergence of the doctrine of strategic bombing, American-style; but he is careful (and persuasive) in passing judgment on people and events along the way—no posturing, no false detachment, no easy moralistic bashing, no lack of empathy, but also no conflation of empathy with sympathy. During the war itself, we can actually feel, through his artful narrative, the constricting grip of organizational commitment and technological momentum on planning, targeting, and air operations. One unhappy reviewer called the book “ponderous,” and I guess it is, though less than four hundred pages of text; but in Sherry’s capacity to reflect and analyze as he narrates lies the work’s greatest value. To offer a single example, from 1943, when precision bombing had clearly failed, and less discriminate air attacks seemed the obvious next step, Sherry takes us back for two sentences to the air-power enthusiasm of the prewar period: “The moral and imaginative effort required to bridge the gap between promise and reality had always been immense. If people in the relative luxury of peace could not reconcile their benign and horrific images of air war, they were hardly more likely to do so in the maw of war” (142–43). Without

5. Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). For Dower’s critical evaluation of Iriye’s thesis, see his “Rethinking World War II in Asia,” *Reviews in American History* 12 (1984): 155–69.

6. *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, Conn., 1987).

pushing the point, Sherry leaves little reason to accept Dower's view that racism ensured that an atomic bomb would be dropped only on the Japanese, not on the Germans.

There is much more, but no space here to say more than to urge those who have not done so to read Downer's book.

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The American Civil War, especially its latter phase, when General Sherman cut his sixty-mile-wide swath through Georgia and the Carolinas, has been called the first modern war, with Sherman's march explicitly compared to the aerial bombing of cities in the Second World War. But long before Sherman ordered the bombardment of Atlanta, defending his decision with a rationale for total war that would also justify his destructive march to Savannah, the conduct of the American Civil War had become a riddle for historians. How could citizens of a peaceable republic, whose previous military performances fell somewhat short of the heroic, especially when facing an enemy of anything like equal strength, have found it within themselves to fight so tenaciously, so ferociously in a struggle to preserve a decentralized federal union, and—increasingly as the war went on—to liberate from legalized slavery a mutually despised people of African origins? Before 1861, the military reputation of Americans at war might fairly be summed up in the private observations of the British General James Wolfe who, during the Seven Years War, described his colonial allies as “the dirtiest most contemptible cowardly dogs that you can conceive. There is no depending on them in action. They fall down dead in their own dirt and desert by battalions, officers and all.”⁷ Although never in quite such intemperate language, the letters of George Washington confirm the picture drawn by Wolfe, of ordinary Americans so little cognizant of authority or discipline in any form, and so persuaded of their own individual worth, that they made very bad soldiers. However ferocious they might have been in destroying Indian villages, or attacking the disorganized and demoralized troops of the Mexican Republic, young American males had never indicated before the Civil War that they were ready to fight, win or lose, to the literal death against a strong opponent. And yet for four years, they did exactly that. This, then, is the riddle of the Civil War, the riddle that conventional military historians have had difficulty solving.

Michael Adams, in his 1978 book, *Our Masters the Rebels*, has not directly addressed this riddle, but he has earned a place on this short list

7. Wolfe to Lord George Sackville, 7 August 1758, *The Life and Letters of James Wolfe*, ed. Beckles Wilson (London, 1909), 392.

of innovative work by arguing that a key to the military performance of the Union Army in the Civil War was a cultural myth, as strongly held in the North as the South, and shared by all social levels as well as all military ranks, that Southern Americans were superior warriors.⁸ Drawing on a variety of personal and literary sources, Adams asserts that, as courageous as Union soldiers may have been, their performance in combat was undermined by a profound sense of individual and collective inferiority.

Adams frankly subtitled his book “a speculation,” and confined his research and discussion to the Eastern theater where the Army of the Potomac had ample reason to feel inferior to its enemies, but my colleague Gerald Linderman does not so qualify his own solution to the riddle of the American Civil War.⁹ Developing his argument from a close reading of soldiers’ letters and diaries, Linderman insists that nothing but a deeply imbedded ideal of personal courage, recognizable as a prominent feature of a Victorian culture that pervaded most sectors of antebellum American society and clearly a key attribute of maleness, kept American soldiers on both sides, East and West, so relentlessly at the gruesome, dispiriting business of battle, no matter the human cost.

Charles Royster has just published a long, discursive book addressed to a single aspect of the Civil War, an aspect not unlike those that have drawn the attention of Adams and Linderman; for Royster the key question is “the scale of destruction to which the participants committed themselves,” in some cases from the very outset of the war. “Americans,” he says, “surprised themselves with the extent of the violence they could attain.” In one chapter, he calls it “The Anomalous War,” in effect emphasizing the peculiarity of an armed struggle that defied all prewar predictions, most of which had said that no war would ever take place. In trying to explain the war that actually did take place, a war of such extraordinary ferocity and destructiveness (despite being waged for the most part within accepted norms providing for humane treatment of prisoners and the sparing of civilians from the worst kinds of violence), Royster uses biography to probe the cultural roots of wartime attitudes and behavior. In a remarkable concluding paragraph to his “Anomalous War” chapter, he links the form taken by the war itself to the structure of American democracy:

the Civil War came as a plausible climax to and fulfillment of American political life since the Revolution, especially of the

8. Michael C. C. Adams, *Our Masters the Rebels: A Speculation on Union Military Failure in the East, 1861-1865* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

9. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York, 1987).

three decades before the war. Antebellum America was pervaded by an uncompromising insistence on personal autonomy, an expectation that opportunity and wealth must steadily expand, a demand that government directly serve citizens' wishes, a growing impatience with restraints on the ambitions of individuals or of groups. These tendencies to reject limitations and to defy unwelcome authority knew no certain means to resolve competing demands other than violence. Parties and the mechanics of government thrived on confrontation and winner-take-all outcomes, but were far less suited to restrain than to agitate. People so determined to have their own way and so certain of possessing right and power could not readily stop short of war or stop war, once convinced that they were threatened on matters they deemed crucial. All professing to be Americans, they found that America did not keep them together but told them to kill Americans who sought to control them. By doing so they could make history accede to their ethos.

Considering the tendency of Americans, then and later, to describe the Civil War as "tragic," Royster concludes that "they could not accept the war as intrinsic to Americans' nation."¹⁰

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In their efforts to account for the still greater ferocity of the First World War, a war whose destructiveness lacks even the Civil War's justification of having ended a great evil, historians have struggled to find explanations adequate to the event itself. Explaining the outbreak of European war in 1914 is fairly simple compared to answering questions about its uncontrollable escalation and its murderous, seemingly pointless duration. The waging of war, 1914-18, has struck many as almost idiotic, a ghastly exercise in collective irrationality. And it is just here, on the apparently irrational nature of European behavior in this war, that some of the most recent work is not only especially interesting in its readiness to explore the role of cultural factors, but also helps clarify why the study of modern military history has been until recently so resistant to a cultural approach.

10. Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York, 1991), 191-92. I trust Professor Royster will forgive me for excising the first words of the long paragraph: "Some historians have argued that," but he does not dissociate himself from the long list of authorities ("some historians") cited in a note for these pages (on 461), and I am tempted to conclude that he shares this view, which is consistent with most of the rest of the argument in his book. To his list of historians who see the war as an expression of American democratic culture I would add Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (New York, 1962).

Without doubt, the revived interest in the history of the First World War has arisen largely from our years of concern with the confrontation of two Superpowers, armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons and hair-trigger delivery systems. Nineteen fourteen and its aftermath has seemed to offer valuable lessons for the Cold Warriors who would avoid both defeat and unintended global holocaust.

Nine years ago, Jack Snyder, a political scientist, published *The Ideology of the Offensive*, dealing with the military decision making behind the disasters of 1914.¹¹ Snyder found much about decisions on prewar strategy, doctrine, and tactics that was difficult to understand and explain without resort to some broader modeling of the thinking and behavior behind the decisions. By the end of the book, Snyder is speaking of a “cult of the offensive,” a term used by his colleague, Stephen Van Evera, in his own work. More recently, Snyder and Van Evera collaborated in a volume of essays on *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War*.¹² Now, if I understand their work correctly, they come close to offering a cultural explanation for military action at the beginning of that war, but not quite. Faced with explaining military behavior that failed disastrously and, in retrospect, seems virtually doomed to fail, they begin with the model used, either explicitly or implicitly, by almost every military historian—the model of rational action. Their own contribution is in introducing two other qualifying elements: *bias* and *interest*. The military profession as it developed in the later nineteenth century was strongly *biased* against defensive warfare and in favor of offensive military action. At the same time, in Snyder’s view, relations between political and military leaders in each of the Great Powers before 1914 became “pathological,” with military leaders driven by their own *interest* to find a self-protective ideology. The military *interest* in self-protection from civilian interference, and the professional military *bias* toward offensive action, skewed rational behavior by military leaders strongly toward what became a “Cult of the Offensive.”

A few years after the appearance of Snyder’s book, Michael Howard responded to this line of thinking in a brief but elegant essay on 1914 in the new edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy*.¹³ Howard takes us through the prewar attempts of professional officers to evaluate both a

11. *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984).

12. *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War*, eds. S. E. Miller, S. M. Lynn-Jones, and S. Van Evera (Princeton, N.J., rev. and expanded ed., 1991).

13. “Men against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914,” *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 510–26.

radically changing technology of warfare and the ambiguous lessons of the most recent military experience in their effort to develop effective war-fighting systems. Clearly, their effort failed, with awful consequences. But, argues Howard, despite the Darwinian, Nietzschean, and Bergsonian cultural forces that may have pushed prewar general staffs to err in favor of dangerously aggressive tactical doctrines and risky offensive war plans, military failure is best understood as a result of circumstances; for no process, however rational, could have solved the impossible problem in warfare that existed in 1914. In other words, there is nothing sufficiently “peculiar” about the First World War to require the invocation of a “cult”—or of culture—because a rational model of behavior will tell us all we need, or can hope, to know.

Perhaps none of the authors would welcome their exchange being raised to the level of a debate, but considering what each has said in this exchange is helpful in thinking through the general problem of a cultural approach to the history of war. Howard’s 1986 response is persuasive, arguing as he does for an economy of explanation. In implying that if we can explain behavior without resort to cultural factors, then historians of war may safely ignore culture in doing their work, Howard demonstrates why military historians have not been quick to adopt a cultural approach. Historians of war tend to begin, as Snyder began, with a rational, instrumental picture, or ideal, of the military thinking that leads to action. When the results of action do not confirm the rationality of the process, we then begin to consider how and why presumed rationality proved deficient; it is failure, as measured by our initial presumption, that demands explanation. Were leaders too stupid or ignorant, troops too cowardly or ill-trained, for success to be achieved? And it is a habit of our own professional culture to pass judgment on the basis of that rational model, which Snyder and Van Evera have modified only slightly. When Howard responds that even this slight modification is superfluous, because all can be understood satisfactorily without departing from our working presumption of rationality, then we reach a moment of truth for military history. If nothing in a particular war appears truly “peculiar” or hard to understand in terms of rational behavior, then why resort to a vague something called “culture” for an explanation? Why indeed?

The best answer for the First World War I have found to this question is by a historian who directs our gaze away from Schlieffen, Colonel Grandmaison, the Marne, and all that, and toward the thinking of those whose thoughts proved far more relevant to the long war that was actually waged after all the plans of 1914 had failed. Avner Offer might insist that his strange and brilliant book on how ideas and the actual war, 1914–18, were related to one another is not a cultural

approach; his field after all is economic history.¹⁴ But I include it as the last item in this short list of innovative work, because his quirky exploration of obscure aspects of the war, like Sherry in this respect, illuminates our general understanding of how the war as a whole was waged, and he does this by taking us inside the cultures of two Great Powers.

Offer subtitles his book *An Agrarian Interpretation*, and it is on the agricultural economies of Britain and Germany, and especially the increasing dependence of both on imported food, that he focuses attention. As the war developed after 1914, blockade became a key weapon, aimed less at armies in the field than at the workers and voters at home whose support for the war was crucial. Offer traces the growing prewar vulnerability of the two Great Powers to such an attack, and a growing awareness, especially among a few key people in Britain—Admiral Fisher, Lord Esher, Maurice Hankey, and later Winston Churchill—of this vulnerability. The severe dependence of Britain on food from overseas, and more generally on its maritime empire, stimulated their obsessive concern with seapower, and with a parallel awakening to the vulnerability of their greatest competitor—Germany. British planning and naval building from the late nineteenth century were animated by two ideas: the need to secure British food supply in wartime, and the possibility of starving Germany if war came.

Their acute sense of Britain's vulnerability, which Offer argues was in considerable part a cultural artifact of the structure of British agriculture itself, may have led these influential men to exaggerate the degree to which Germany might be hurt in the same way. But their aggressive support of naval building surely stimulated support in Germany for Admiral Tirpitz's own program, which Offer contends was more rationally defensible than usually thought. British strategy, in this sense, would prove highly effective, keeping wartime Britain fed—an irrelevance of course to those blinded before 1914 to any chance for a long war—and hurting Germany badly, in large part because of nutritional culture, a pattern of dietary consumption that Germans found could not be altered even under wartime pressures.

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This brings our brief tour of recent, innovative work in military history to a close: these books, taken together, strongly suggest that there is something new and valuable going on in writing the history of war. All of these works broaden a field of inquiry that has long been trapped by preconceptions about the nature and boundaries of its

14. Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, 1989).

proper subject, and by the kinds of evidence that it normally considers. All of them stretch the definition of military history as that term is conventionally understood, but the best of them enrich our sense of the subject itself; they also provoke us to think about how things connect, especially along the links between perception and decision, decision and action, as we try to make sense of this bizarre sector of human experience. All of them reflect, to some degree, the influence on historiography of cultural anthropology, whose osmotic effect is finally reaching the study of military history.

Of course the cultural approach in history is hardly new. Well before Clifford Geertz had captured the imagination of many in our profession, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead had influenced some historians. And, among cultural anthropologists, the study of warfare is a well-established tradition.¹⁵ But even as the cultural approach was attracting more historians and reshaping the work of those who specialize in other fields, including diplomatic history,¹⁶ military historians until recently have resisted the appeals of a cultural approach.

What anthropologists have long been doing, as they looked at war, is to see and try to explain wartime behavior that seemed strange enough to need explanation: the extreme concern of the seventeenth-century Iroquois to minimize casualties among their own warriors, for example, or the way that the Dani people of Irian Jaya (western New Guinea) would contrive to end the fighting after a certain number of fatalities on each side.¹⁷ The definition of "strange" or "peculiar" is of course relative to the cultural position of the observer, but it has generally been accepted that there are aspects of wartime behavior in so-called "primitive" societies that demand some special effort to understand. So what we have been seeing in some recent scholarship on Western military history is a comparable recognition of wartime peculiarity, and a comparable search for understanding in terms of cultural imperatives.

15. Keith Otterbein, *The Evolution of War: A Cross-Cultural Study* (New Haven, Conn., 1970).

16. Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations* (New York, 1967); Robert Dallek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs* (New York, 1983); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), especially 12-17.

17. Daniel Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (1983): 528-59. Gordon Larson, "The Structure and Demography of the Cycle of Warfare among the Ilaga Dani of Irian Jaya" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1987). Dr. Larson, a missionary for many years among the Ilaga Dani, has retrieved oral evidence for several dozen Dani wars, of which he personally witnessed several. See also, for the more eastern Dani, Robert Gardner and Karl G. Heider, *Gardens of War: Life and Death in the New Guinea Stone Age* (London, 1969).

An obvious point is that all war, including modern Western war, is an expression of culture; but this does not get us very far. Culturally conditioned, we accept the normality of war, but find some aspects of some wars hard to understand. These hard-to-understand aspects of particular wars do not fit our culturally conditioned expectations that war should conform to the rational model that centuries of thinking and writing, from Machiavelli through Clausewitz to Henry Kissinger, have implanted in our minds.¹⁸ Without getting bogged down in definitions, by “rational” we mean that war is supposed to be consciously purposeful, employing a rough cost-benefit calculation about what is being defended, or what threatens something valued, or what valued object may be achieved through armed force. So why do we find aspects of the Civil War and the two World Wars hard to understand? I am really not sure; but I have asked you to stipulate that, contemplating each of these wars, we are indeed puzzled, and when we are puzzled we either deny our puzzlement or seek another mode of understanding and explanation. Each of these books has been engaged in just this kind of search. Whether the search in every case may be correctly labeled a cultural approach the reader can decide, but whatever we may call it, it is new and valuable.

The anthropologist, striving for detachment, is inevitably drawn to the exotic, the strange, the hard to explain: Why does marriage require the exchange of livestock? Why do some wars end in mutual feasting, while others become murderous bouts of expulsion and extermination? Looking at war in the Western world, at least since the Middle Ages, the military historian has habitually applied the test of rationality, of warring entities trying to achieve through violence some discernible result. It is when we stumble upon what appear to be lapses from this rational model of war, of behavior that seems to contradict the avowed aim, or that defies the expectations of contemporaries as well as historians, or that for whatever reason strikes us as crazy or awful, too extreme to be treated as simply a normal human lapse from rational action, in a

18. Of course the notion of rational behavior may itself be seen as an expression of culture, but it is a notion that has powerfully influenced behavior in war and thinking about war. The influence of the rational model among social scientists may be seen in the treatment of cooperation amidst trench warfare in World War I by Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York, 1984), Ch. 4. From Machiavelli through Clausewitz to contemporary studies of international relations like that by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven, Conn., 1981), the conception that war is, or ought to be, an instrumentally purposive expression of “policy” is very strong; Bueno de Mesquita builds his own theory of war on the economist’s concept of expected utility. The point, to repeat it, is that the rational-model approach does not treat “culture” as a significant independent variable. Those who modify the rational model (e.g., Snyder, *Ideology*, Ch. 1, and Offer, *First World War*, Introduction) in effect sneak up on cultural factors.

word, when we see something that is hard to explain, that we may turn for help to other approaches that take us beyond our predisposition to see war as an instrumental activity.

There is a risk in doing that. Howard's effective rejoinder to the "cult of the offensive" suggests the nature of the risk. The risk is in discarding too quickly the rational model, a powerful instrument not only for analysis but for communicating with one another about what we have discovered, and a risk in deciding too quickly that some aspect of war, or any particular war, is so strange that it requires a supra-rational, or cultural, level of explanation.

Here, near the end of this essay, we should address what is meant by "cultural." It is not simply distinctive patterns of belief and behavior that deserve study for their own sake, or particular expressions of sensibility like rap music or Beethoven quartets. This inquiry is confined to a consideration of the explanatory power of culture, for war, in answering the old question, "Why do people do what they do?"¹⁹ Among anthropologists, the definition of the noun "culture" is contested, but the adjective "cultural" causes far less debate.²⁰ So it seems reasonable to include under the loose rubric "cultural approach" motivating belief-systems as disparate as American and Japanese racism, National Socialist ideology, the professional culture of the U.S. Army Air Forces as it developed before and after Pearl Harbor, the aggressive personality type that Tocqueville and other observers described as characteristic of Jacksonian America, along with the eating habits of Wilhelmine Germany and the life-styles of the Edwardian English countryside.

The "cultural approach," used in this broad, inclusive way seems attractive—new, fresh, in tune for once with our colleagues working in other areas of history as well as beyond the disciplinary boundary.²¹ But the danger—and some of these works flirt with that danger—lies in posing questions about wartime peculiarity prematurely and too sharply, and then attacking those questions in ways that lead the inquiry to answers that reduce explanation to some aspect of culture. All of these

19. Claudia Strauss, "Models and Motives," *Human Motives and Cultural Models*, eds. R. D'Andrade and C. Strauss (New York, 1992), 1.

20. Roy D'Andrade, "Afterword," *ibid.*, 229–30.

21. A selected few of valuable recent works, each distinctly different in its exploration of links between armed conflict and "culture," are Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990); John M. Mackenzie, ed., *Popular Imperialism and the Military: 1850–1950* (Manchester, U.K., 1992); and James Aulich, ed., *Framing the Falklands War: Nationhood, Culture and Identity* (Buckingham, U.K., 1990). Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, 1972), who tried to explain Vietnamese war making in terms of Vietnamese culture, should also be considered.

new works have genuine value, but some more than others succumb to the reductionism lurking in the cultural approach, and a few others not discussed here contain stronger warning examples of how the cultural approach may go wrong.²²

This is not intended to be a conservative manifesto, so let it conclude on a positive note, with what among these works is most impressive and encouraging, exemplifying the enlightened possibilities while avoiding the inherent dangers.²³ Sherry on air power, and Offer on Britain and Germany in the First World War, are large, ambitious, and discursive books; their arguments may be summarized, as I have tried to do, but some of the best parts are in the discursions that defy summary. And we are surprised by these books, by the empathy that Sherry elicits for Curtis LeMay, and by Offer's sympathetic portrait of Tirpitz, for example. Of course both Offer and Sherry began by seeing peculiarities that demanded some new approach: the suicidal peculiarity of the First World War, and the murderous, almost mindless peculiarity of strategic bombing. But neither was too quick to tighten the focus of inquiry; both seem to let research take them where it leads; in seeking the specific connections, they give full weight to rationality, and often let culture emerge through narrative without fanfare: Germans who have come to prefer meat and fat, and whose government misses the chance to reshape dietary culture before it is too late; U.S. Air Force officers who know their strategy isn't working, but whose professional culture forecloses any alternative except more of the same. Using the term "cultural approach" flexibly, I see these as the best of the new wave, providing some better answers to nagging questions while serving, in their starkly different ways, as models for future inquiry.

22. While singling out Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford, 1989), as guilty of succumbing to the danger of reductionism in his cultural account of why and how military theorizing after Napoleon developed as it did, I will confess some guilt of my own in "The American Military Experience: History and Learning," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1 (1971): 205–28.

23. An earlier, somewhat skeptical essay on the uses of this approach is Joseph Rothschild, "Culture and War," *The Lessons of Recent Wars in the Third World*, vol. 2, eds. S. G. Neuman and R. E. Harkavy (Lexington, Mass., 1987), 52–72. Others, by leading exemplars of the approach, are Akira Iriye, "Culture and Power: International Relations as Intercultural Relations," *Diplomatic History* 3 (1979): 115–28, and Michael Sherry, "War and Weapons: The New Cultural History," *Diplomatic History* 14 (1990): 433–46.