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Primitive Violence, Culture, and the Path to Peace

by Phillip S. Meilinger

There is an old saw among political scientists that democracies seldom fight other democracies. Although the accuracy of that statement often hinges on definitions—was 1914 Germany an autocracy because of the Kaiser, or a budding democracy because of an elected *Reichstag*—it is nonetheless largely valid.¹ It has thus been a tenet of US diplomacy to urge the spread of democracy worldwide. Richard L. Armitage, the former Deputy Secretary of State, said recently in an interview: “every President except John Quincy Adams has been involved in the belief that the world is made better by a U.S that is involved in the protection of human freedoms and human rights across the board.” He went on to assert that “every postwar President has believed we have a duty to spread democracy.”²

At times, as with Presidents Ronald Reagan and both Bushes, that quest has been a major factor in foreign policy. Ironically, when President Barack Obama accepted his Nobel Peace Prize, he stated that negotiations would *not* force terrorists to lay down their arms; rather, “force is sometimes necessary [and that] is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history.” He went on to argue that “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace” and that “force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That is why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace.”³ These are interesting words coming from a man not viewed as a hawk; yet, implementing such a vision is problematic.

Wishing for peace and the growth of democracy will not produce them. Although the fall of the Soviet empire has spawned nascent democracies in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Russia itself seems to be backsliding into its traditional form of Oriental despotism. The democratic experiment in tribal Afghanistan is certainly an advance over the dismal situation that had existed under the Taliban, but the future of freedom in that unhappy nation is not assured. As for Iraq, time will tell if elections are truly inclusive and credible enough to bring all parties to the negotiating table of democratic government, much less whether the government can defend itself against hostile neighbors and internal rebels.

¹ It should be noted that democracies still fight a great deal—they generally do not fight each other, however. The literature on the subject is rich. Probably the first scholar to look seriously at the issue was Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*. 2 vols. (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1942). See also, Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Bruce M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press, 1993); and R.J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994).

² “An Interview with Richard L. Armitage,” *Prism*, 1 (December 2009): 107.

³ The text of Obama’s speech given in Oslo on December 10, 2009, can be found on line at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34360743/>.

When looking ahead to the prospects of democracy spreading in dark corners of the globe, it may be useful to look backwards first. The tribal, fractional, culturally driven, and in some ways primitive nations we are trying to influence today are not unlike those we have confronted in the past.



Historians tend to write in cycles—rediscovering and reinterpreting past events on a seemingly endless basis, often reversing the conclusions of the previous generation. One of the topics undergoing such a pendulum swing of opinion concerns the American Indians. Were they Noble Savages, or were they simply savages? The truth, as usual, lies between the extremes, but in times past, Indians have been portrayed in history books and fiction as godless, inhumane barbarians who could not be trusted and who routinely massacred white women and children. During much of our lifetime, the pendulum has swung the other direction, and Indians have been depicted in books, movies and Disney cartoons as peace-loving hunters and fishermen who were at peace with themselves, each other, and the environment.⁴ The white man then came along and ruined everything by destroying the Indians' ancient way of life and turning them into reluctant warriors who were forced to defend themselves from those stealing their ancestral lands and killing off the game.

This latter view of history is commonly held by many Indians themselves—in the words of Russell Means of the American Indian Movement: “Before the whites came, our conflicts were brief and almost bloodless, resembling far more a professional football game than the lethal annihilations of European conquest.”⁵ Many whites also feel guilt over the way they believe their ancestors treated the Indians.

Recent books capitalize on a new cycle of research that began a decade or so ago when archeologists and osteologists looked into Indian prehistory—the two thousand or so years before contact with Europeans. The results have been startling. Researchers discovered that prehistoric hunters/gatherers and indigenous peoples were violent and warlike. Most Indian villages, all over the continent, were surrounded by timber stockades, earthen palisades and berms, and other defensive fortifications.⁶ Indeed, the supposedly most peaceful of all Native Americans, the Anasazi of the southwest, did after all, often live in barely accessible cliff dwellings carved out of mountain sides. Why would they go to the trouble of hiding their homes and making them so indestructible if they had nothing to fear from each other?

Osteologists then began studying the bones. They found that an unusually high number of skeletons bore unmistakable signs of violence: embedded arrowheads, smashed skulls, evidence of scalping, decapitations, defensive wounds to hands and forearms indicating that individuals had tried to ward off blows, and even cannibalism. In some locations, the percentage of

⁴ See, for example, *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee, Dances with Wolves, and Pocahontas*.

⁵ Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza (eds.) *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 6.

⁶ Elizabeth N. Arkush and Mark W. Allen (eds.) *The Archeology of Warfare: Prehistories of Raiding and Conquest* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 7; Steven A. Le Blanc and Katherine E. Register, *Constant Battles: The Myth of the Peaceful, Noble Savage* (NY: St. Martin's, 2003), 1-3, 161-62; and Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), passim, but especially 34, 67-69, 83-91.

skeletons exhibiting such wounds exceeded 40 percent of all remains found.⁷ The archaeological site at Crow Creek, South Dakota, was compelling. It documents a massacre that occurred around 1300 AD, revealing that nearly 500 villagers were killed—men, women and children: “their noses, hands, and feet were sometimes cut off, teeth smashed, and heads and limbs cut from the body. The victims, from babies to elders, were universally scalped and mutilated.”⁸ This hardly sounds like a football game.

Anthropologists and ethno-historians have interviewed present-day Indian elders regarding their oral traditions—traditions that stretch back many centuries. These stories also tend to confirm the physical evidence, speaking often of massacres and revenge-taking on neighboring tribes.⁹

Many times these wars were waged with the intent of annihilation: it was often the goal of attackers to wipe out the tribe and remove an old enemy once and for all.¹⁰ It is also important to note that the warrior culture is central to Indian lore—in virtually all tribes across the nation. These traditions continuously stressed the nobility and importance of warriors. Kachina dolls, painted buffalo skins and other artifacts were made and preserved as a way of perpetuating the memories of these ancient warriors.¹¹

In sum, life was indeed nasty, brutish and short for most Indians between the years 1000 and 1500 AD, before Europeans arrived. In the words of one expert: “Warfare was ubiquitous; every major cultural area of native North America reviewed herein has produced archaeological, ethno-historical, osteological, or ethnographic evidence of armed conflict and ritual violence.”¹²

What does all of this have to do with a modern defense analyst or decision maker? There are several issues that are of interest. One of these is *war causation*. Why did these tribes make war against their neighbors for endless generations? Common motivations include revenge, religion, prestige, the desire for slaves and concubines, “trophy-taking” (scalping), and resource accumulation/deprivation.¹³ Only this last sounds like the type of political/economic policy justification that Carl von Clausewitz would have found acceptable. Yes, there were wars fought over hunting and fishing grounds, seeds, maize fields, and precious objects made from metal, gems or shells. In most cases, however, war causation was of a far more cultural nature. Motives of revenge dominated: feuding was endemic, and a tribe simply hated another and wished its destruction.

⁷ Patricia M. Lambert, “The Osteological Evidence for Indigenous Warfare in North America,” in Chacon and Mendoza, *passim*; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (NY: Knopf, 1998), 179; LeBlanc and Register, 59, 125; Keeley, 99-103.

⁸ Douglas B. Bamforth, “Climate, Chronology, and the Course of War in the Middle Missouri Region of the North American Great Plains,” in Arkush and Allen, 74-76.

⁹ John R. Johnson, “Ethnohistoric Descriptions of Chumash Warfare,” in Chacon and Mendoza, *passim*.

¹⁰ Ernest S. Burch, Jr., “Traditional Native Warfare in Western Alaska,” 21-22; Charles A. Bishop and Victor P. Lytwyn, “Barbarism and Ardour of War from the Tenderest Years,” 37, 40; and George P. Milner, “Warfare, Population, and Food Production in Prehistoric Eastern North America,” 185, all in Chacon and Mendoza; LeBlanc and Register, 68-71; Keeley, 67-69, 83-88.

¹¹ Polly Schaafsma, “Documenting Conflict in the Prehistoric Pueblo Southwest,” in Chacon and Mendoza, 119.

¹² Chacon and Mendoza, 4.

¹³ For excellent insights into primitive war and war causation, see Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapters 3-5.

The term “religion” as a cause of conflict is used here loosely. Most prehistoric tribes believed in mystical forces, shamans, and sorcery. Several tribes believed that the only “natural” death was due to drowning; all others were the result of outside actions or a curse. Thus, if a man died of a heart attack in his sleep, it was because someone—almost certainly a member of a neighboring tribe—had put a curse on him. Retaliation for this “murder” was not only acceptable but demanded in a warrior culture.¹⁴

In other words, the reasons for war in many if not most primitive cultures were not those modern people today would consider valid. Yet, those motives still exist and still drive cultures all over the world. One could certainly argue that the causes underlying the continuous strife in the Middle East between Muslims and Jews transcend traditional notions of justice, land, wealth or logic. Religion remains an enormously influential factor in conflict. Understanding that this is the case is crucial for anyone attempting to devise a peaceful solution to the problem. How else can one explain the visceral hatred shown by Iran for Israel—the countries do not border; Israel has done nothing directly to Iran to earn such deep enmity; and they are not in competition for resources or land.

It is also remarkable that warfare between Indian tribes in North America had virtually ceased by the middle of the nineteenth century—similar trends were also noted among native cultures overrun by Europeans elsewhere around the same time.¹⁵ Why? This is a touchy subject because most historians are loath to discuss it, fearing that calling attention to the great peace that descended on native peoples in the nineteenth century would be misconstrued as a justification and rationale for European/American colonialism and empire-building. They have a point: it would be too easy to dismiss the depredations, aggression, and even genocide that were too often the nature of white-native relations. The awful things done to indigenous peoples must not be forgotten or ignored. Even so, the fact that the level of warfare decreased so dramatically in such a short period of time—relative to the millennia that it had been on-going—needs to be addressed. There are several things at play here:

- The severity and likelihood of war initially increased as Europeans/Americans came into contact with native peoples. The whites came to conquer, and their superior weapons, technology, and political solidarity were compelling advantages.¹⁶ In some areas, this caused tribes to unite in opposition to the newcomers. This seldom worked, but the *alliance model*—especially as practiced by the Iroquois confederation of the northeast—did reduce the warfare between tribes that had been on-going for centuries. This began a process of tribes forgetting the ancient enmity that existed between them. They grew accustomed to living at peace with their neighbors.
- **Religion** also played a role. The Europeans brought with them Christian missionaries who preached a message of pacifism. This agenda was self-serving: the missionaries, who worked and lived along side the colonial governments, had a vested interest in lowering native resistance to white colonization. If the steady encroachment of native

¹⁴ Dean R. Snow, “Iroquois-Huron Warfare,” 151-52; and Bishop and Lytwyn, 49-50, both in Chacon and Mendoza.

¹⁵ LeBlanc, 201-02; Burch, 29; Bishop and Lytwyn, 54; Gat, 15.

¹⁶ It should also be noted that the vast majority of deaths among native cultures occurred as the result of disease, inadvertently introduced by the conquerors. One source states that 90 percent of all Native American deaths were from this cause. Gat, 482. See also Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

territory could be aided with a message that stressed peace and acceptance, the results would benefit the whites certainly, but the decreased level of warfare would also benefit the Indians.¹⁷

- **Economics** were also important in lowering the level of violence in North America. An important part was played by international trading companies in keeping the peace and quelling native warfare. The Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, both fur traders, had their own armies for policing what is today Canada and the northern United States.¹⁸ It was bad for business if the gathering of beaver pelts was disrupted by raiding parties, or the transport of furs, fish, nuts or maize was stopped by tribal warfare. Although some businessmen may have been "merchants of death" and profited from strife, war is actually a lousy time for most profitable commerce. Trade is disrupted, the labor force often goes off to war, insurance rates rise, and governments often impose onerous price controls and resource allocation procedures. Economic interests pushed for tranquility and order.
- Governments throughout history have sought a *monopoly of violence* within their territory. Rulers form police forces, militias, and armies to keep the peace within their realm. Weapons are often forbidden and violent crime—murder, assault or rioting—is illegal and violators are caught and punished. This policing role was played by the US Army in the American west throughout the nineteenth century. Initially, of course, the intent was to prevent the Indians from attacking white settlers, but over time, peace was extended between the Indian tribes as well. All violence, regardless of who were the victims, was condemned and punished. In the words of Steven LeBlanc, an expert on the Indians of the American Southwest: "From the mid-1800s on, the United States Army enforced peace in the Southwest. From that time, the Hopi were not allowed to, nor did they need to, engage in intense warfare to survive. By the late 1800s, this was the case over all of North America."¹⁹
- Imposing peace on colonial territories also meant that crops were no longer burned or looted, fields no longer stood untended because the population was at war or had been killed/captured, and trading was not brought to a standstill. There were more resources available, or at least those existing were more equitably distributed, thus removing one of the causes of going to war in the first place—fighting over scarce resources.²⁰

We must remain cautious when discussing such matters. The argument that colonial powers benefit humanity because they bring peace, prosperity and education to the natives can easily be twisted and misused. It was seldom the purpose of the colonizing power to bring love and plenty to indigenous peoples: if that came as a side effect of conquest and exploitation, than that was a bonus. Too often, the dominant strain of European/American policy was, to paraphrase the

¹⁷ Gat, 55; Steele, 31.

¹⁸ This story is told in Peter C. Newman, *Company of Adventurers: The Hudson's Bay Company*, 3 vols. (Toronto: Viking, 1985), I, parts 2-4.

¹⁹ LeBlanc and Register, 201. The authors point out that the Hopi, often considered a "peaceful" tribe, were actually engaged in continual warfare during most of their past—until the white man imposed peace on the region.

²⁰ This is one of the main themes of LeBlanc and Register, who argue that primitive peoples and their warfare was extremely harmful to the environment; this problem was alleviated by "civilization."

infamous comment from the Vietnam War, “to kill the Indians and their way of life in order to save them.” And yet, the statistics regarding this phenomenon are astounding. In his groundbreaking work on primitive warfare, Lawrence Keeley demonstrates that the male mortality rate due to war often exceeds 20 percent in primitive tribes in New Guinea, the Amazon Basin, the Arctic, and even during the past century in North America—the Blackfoot tribe was 50 percent deficient in adult males during the nineteenth century due to intertribal warfare.²¹ These horrendous figures dropped precipitously when peace was enforced on these areas by outside powers. Certainly, “civilized” warfare has also been deadly, but the highest rates of male mortality in modern times were those suffered by Germany and Russia in the two World Wars. Even then, their mortality rates were one-eighth that of the tribes and areas noted above. On a worldwide average, counting all deaths in war during the twentieth century, the mortality rate was “*twenty times smaller* than the losses that might have resulted if the world’s population were still organized into bands, tribes, and chiefdoms.”²²

The fact is, strong central governments have imposed peace on their empires since ancient times. When those empires crumbled, ethnic hatreds previously held in check often re-surfaced. The collapse of the Roman Empire during the fifth century led to fragmentation and warfare—the descent into the “Dark Ages.” More recently, the death of Tito and his strong-armed rule for the previous four decades plunged Yugoslavia into a decade of ethnic cleansing and bloodshed as the provinces of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia rediscovered their distaste for each other. Peace was only restored by the military intervention of NATO.

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There might be lessons for the West today in the still-unsettled regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Peace *can* be imposed on peoples who have a long history of endemic strife with their neighbors. Warlike tendencies can be curbed. Populations can be coerced into living in harmony with their neighbors. Obviously, the iron-fisted and excessive policies often used in the past by imperial/colonial powers are unacceptable, but the end result of peace—whose beneficial results are too obvious to ignore—is such an important goal that perhaps it is acceptable to *impose* such a modern-day *Pax Romana*. In a remarkable report published in July 2003, Refugees International argued that the military capability of the West now allowed it to intervene in civil wars or to counter aggressive attacks by other states with extremely low risk to all involved. It saw this as an important and positive development. In fact, the authors argued that the West now has a “responsibility” to intervene, worldwide, in internal conflicts in order to save lives. As they phrased it:²³

Our hypothesis is that a new military technology and tactics can be used to increase the effectiveness and reduce the costs and risks of forcible humanitarian interventions. If such operations can be made more effective and less costly, the political barriers to undertaking them should be lower, making

²¹ Keeley, 91-95.

²² Keeley, 93, 195. Emphasis in original. Azar Gat confirms these statistics, also noting that during the US Civil War, by far the mostly deadly in American history, the male mortality rate was “only” 1.3 percent. Gat, 131-32.

²³ Clifford H. Bernath and David C. Gompert, “The Power to Protect: Using New Military Capabilities to Stop Mass Killings,” Refugees International report, July 2003, 3. Note the oxymoron: “forcible humanitarian intervention.”

it easier for individual countries and the UN to fulfill their responsibility to protect.

In truth, this was one of President W. Bush's goals when invading Afghanistan and Iraq—to establish democratic governments in the heart of the Middle East that would serve as beacons—as the first dominos—to encourage the spread of democracy throughout the region. The theory was that nascent democracies would bring peace to a habitually troubled area of the world—as noted, democracies seldom fight each other. That was a useful and indeed noble vision, even if it was so badly implemented. Is there another way to encourage such change—to achieve the peace without the excesses incurred in past such movements? Richard Armitage, the former Deputy Secretary of State quoted earlier, notes the necessary preconditions for allowing democracy to grow: the rule of law, transparency, party-building and a free press.²⁴ Also needed of course is security.

It appears that President Obama also believes that peace and democracy can and sometimes should be imposed on lawless areas, but we need to rethink such a strategy and its implementation. Is democracy a realistic goal in Iraq, Afghanistan or other Islamic countries, and if so, how can it be achieved? Will 34,000 more American ground troops in Afghanistan provide the security and institutions needed to nurture democracy? It would appear that the goal should be to change the mindset and culture of ethnic groups—to accept the notions of diversity, tolerance, freedom and peaceful coexistence. These are not unworthy aims, and their achievement could go a long way to removing the hatred and violence than now reigns in too many areas of the world. The challenge is to determine a methodology for achieving these positive goals.

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²⁴ Armitage interview, 107.