

# TEN POINTS ON WAR

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**Abstract:** This article is a highly distilled summary of conclusions from three decades of research on war, involving examination of tribal societies, ancient states, recent civil wars, archaeology, biology and culture, and primatology. The key points are the following: (1) our species is not biologically destined for war; (2) war is not an inescapable part of social existence; (3) understanding war involves a nested hierarchy of constraints; (4) war expresses both pan-human practicalities and culturally specific values; (5) war shapes society to its own ends; (6) war exists in multiple contexts; (7) opponents are constructed in conflict; (8) war is a continuation of domestic politics by other means; (9) leaders favor war because war favors leaders; (10) peace is more than the absence of war. Each point is applied to the contemporary wars of the United States.

**Keywords:** identerest, Iraq, peace, politics, violence, war

Over the past 40 years, the anthropology of war has grown from a few scattered works to an enormous field with many areas of investigation and contention. While it used to be possible to read practically everything that came out on the subject, this is no longer the case, and the field is in danger of falling apart into several self-contained realms. I began studying war as a graduate student in 1974, and this article is a synthesis of my own subsequent work, boiled down to 10 major, interrelated points.<sup>1</sup> I will not discuss case examples from around the world, elaborate arguments, or provide citations here. To do that over so many topics would require a very lengthy article. My goal in this essay is to synthesize one coherent perspective out of many previous publications, in which details and documentation are provided.<sup>2</sup> The first two points are primarily refutations of currently popular ideas about the antiquity of war, but most points involve some contradiction of implicit assumptions on the subject. Going beyond refutations to new perspectives, the 10 points taken together argue for a different conceptualization of what war is about, pointing to a new



understanding that has direct implications for how we explain the occurrence of wars. To highlight that relevance, each of the points will be applied to the current war in Iraq and related conflicts.

### **Point #1: Our Species Is Not Biologically Destined for War**

For a very long time, there have been theories that war is the outgrowth of some predetermined aspect of the human brain/mind, that we make war because we are born to seek it out. Pre-eminent psychologist William McDougal said that fights arose out of an instinct for pugnacity. Sigmund Freud attributed collective destruction to an outward redirection of the inner death wish. Playwright Robert Ardrey argued that our inborn propensity to kill was what separated us from other apes, while primatologist Richard Wrangham claims that it is not our difference from but rather our similarity to chimpanzees that makes men incline toward war (Ferguson 1984a, 2000). Proponents of innatist theories of war often complain that their science is being opposed out of political correctness. But when specific assertions are compared to available evidence, they do very poorly.

The Yanomami of Brazil and Venezuela are the favorite example of those favoring inborn predispositions to violence. Made famous as fierce warriors by American anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, they have been used to bolster a wide range of hypotheses attributing human warfare to some inherent aspect of human nature, designed by evolution to maximize reproductive success. But all these claims are made with scant regard for empirical evidence. To demonstrate this, a range of innatist claims were considered against the Yanomami, using exclusively reports by Chagnon himself.

Comparing published claims to Chagnon's data, we find that the Yanomami do not begin wars to capture women. Only some wars are preceded by a conflict over women, and those conflicts are just one of many issues, with other factors being much more predictive of actual fighting. (In my own explanation [Ferguson 1995a], Yanomami wars are seen as the outgrowth of antagonisms related to unequal and exploitative access to Western trade goods, combined with several other destabilizing factors.) An examination of Chagnon's data invalidates his claim that becoming a killer is associated with higher lifetime reproductive success. Wars do not represent a reproductive strategy of young males, as they are initiated and fought primarily by middle-aged married men. A claim that Yanomami men who take wives kill their offspring from other men is without foundation. A claim that Yanomami wars parallel the pattern found between Gombe chimpanzees is contradicted by the fact that, contrary to chimpanzees, most Yanomami are village endogamous (marrying within the village) and that Yanomami raids regularly pose great dangers to raiders (rather than occurring only when they can act with impunity). Contrary to an assertion that Yanomami wars exemplify a human pattern of territorial conquest, Chagnon himself emphasizes they are not fought with territorial gain as an objective or consequence. A 'Darwinian algorithm', said to make war evolutionarily logical,

is contradicted at each of its four points by Yanomami data. Some Yanomami conflicts are between groups that are more genetically related within than to their enemies, but in many others, blood kin opportunistically side against other blood kin. 'Cultural pseudospeciation' plays no role in any reports of Yanomami wars (Ferguson 2001).

In the past decade, biological explanations have turned away from specific, predictive theories to broad life science findings on aggression. Different neural structures, neurotransmitters, hormones, and genes have been implicated in different measures of aggression. Some studies stress biological factors associated with maleness. But no work has demonstrated that non-pathological humans have an inborn propensity to violence, and comparisons of males and females are uniformly complicated, qualified, and debatable. The growing appreciation that genetic expression occurs within a system of biological systems, all with environmental inputs, greatly complicates key issues. We are far from being able to clarify how and the extent to which inborn biological variables affect human or male aggressive behavior. But even if we could, it is not clear that doing so would tell us much about the essentially social process that is war. Maleness is one part of biology, biology is one part of aggressiveness, aggressiveness is one part of combat, and combat is one part of war. The explanatory potential of biology thus seems fundamentally limited (Ferguson 2006a).

Reflection on the war in Iraq highlights this limitation. In all the complicated political processes leading up to and opposing the invasion, just how does a supposed biological propensity for war contribute to our understanding? What would such a propensity explain better than its long-standing anthropological alternative—that people have the *capacity* to learn, even to enjoy, war and build it into their social lives and institutions, without any inborn inclination in that direction? It must be kept in mind that any innate tendencies would have to apply equally to everyone involved in the process, both those in favor and those against.

## **Point #2: War Is Not an Inescapable Part of Social Existence**

If humans had an inborn predisposition for violent conflict, then they should have been war makers since, or even before, they became human. Proponents of biological theories regularly invoke a few archaeological studies, claiming that war appears throughout the archaeological record. But those studies are marked by three methodological flaws. First, they list cases where evidence of war is found and extrapolate conclusions to situations where war is not in evidence. Second, they confound the later archaeological record, where war often is ubiquitous, with the earlier archaeological record, where war seems rare or non-existent. Third, they make assumptions from historical situations or recent ethnography, where war is indisputably very common, and unjustifiably project those suppositions onto peoples of the distant past.

Empirical findings from earlier archaeological sequences reveal something quite different. War regularly leaves traces in recoverable remains. Skeletal and

settlement materials can clearly show war, as can specialized weapons such as maces, although people can kill with ordinary tools. Artistic renditions of battle also disclose evidence of war, even though most extinct peoples did not leave recoverable art. True, evidence for war, even if it was practiced, could be absent in any particular case, for any number of reasons. But globally, with few exceptions, a clear pattern emerges: signs of war are absent in the earliest remains and then appear later and rarely go away. The standard objection, 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence', would be valid if the earlier skeletal and settlement remains were so limited that they would not reliably reveal war. That is not the case. In many regions around the world—the Middle East, parts of Europe, the Yellow River Valley—there is good data for centuries, even millennia, with no indications of war. Then evidence of war appears without any qualitative jump in the archaeological data recovered. The situation is not unlike other recognized beginnings—such as plant or animal domestication—that are pinned on the earliest recovered evidence. As a global pattern, the evidence suggests a transition from societies that did not make war to ones that did.

Why did war develop, at different times, in many parts of the world? There appear to be six preconditions, themselves interrelated in various ways, which in combination made the inception and/or intensification of war more likely: (1) sedentary existence, often following agriculture (although war existed in some places before plant domestication); (2) increasing population density; (3) social hierarchy; (4) trade, especially of prestige goods; (5) bounded social groups; and (6) serious ecological reversals. The reason why war went from rare to commonplace around the world involves four long-term processes: (1) as those preconditions became more common, war began in more places; (2) war spread, often quite gradually, into surrounding areas; (3) the rise of ancient states projected militarism deep into their peripheries and along trade routes; and (4) Western expansion since the late fifteenth century often generated or intensified war in contact zones (Ferguson 2003a, 2006b).

One might say that the entire issue of biology makes little difference in conceptualizing war. Whether by culture or by genes, war has been programmed into us. Once initiated and built into cultural systems, war has rarely gone away in the past, so there is no reason to expect its demise in the future. This is a limited, and limiting, perspective. We tend to think in terms of the *foreseeable* future, the next few decades. But in all probability, humankind's future stretches on for countless millennia. Since Boas, and later Malinowski and Carneiro, anthropologists have called attention to the long-term consolidation of political units, where peace reigns within. There is good reason to believe that this trend can continue. Sixty years ago, who could have foreseen the current integration of Europe? In 1988, who foresaw the impending demilitarization of the communist-capitalist divide? On the other hand, who in 1988 foresaw the proliferation of new flags in front of the UN (Ferguson 1988a, 2003b)?

The foreseeable future of war looks pretty robust. The current war between elements of radical Islam and Western nations is not likely to end soon. Nor are the brutal civil wars that still rage through much of the underdeveloped world, although they clearly have been declining in number and casualties. New divisions

may arise. Future military confrontations between China or Russia and the US seem like reasonable possibilities. But it is misguided to think of these as permanent conditions. Without doubt, new, unforeseen global communities will emerge over time. People pushing for peace can shape what is to become. The future is beyond our mortal ken, but it is not impervious to hope. Anthropology can effect a positive contribution by making it clear that there is no scientific basis for believing that a future without war is impossible.

### **Point #3: Understanding War Involves a Nested Hierarchy of Constraints**

My approach to war is based on a modified version of cultural materialism. This involves two distinct but complementary research strategies, both founded on the principle that social life is essentially practical (Ferguson 1995b).

The first strategy divides socio-cultural phenomena into infrastructure, structure, and superstructure. Infrastructure includes basic population profiles, technology, labor techniques, and interaction with the natural environment. Structure comprises all patterned behavioral interactions and institutions, including kinship, economics, and politics. Superstructure encompasses the belief systems of a society, its norms and values in general and specific areas such as religion, aesthetics, and ideology. These three dimensions of cultural life are internally complex, interacting systems of subsystems, layered in a nested hierarchy of progressively more limiting constraints. Infrastructure sets possibilities for structure, and structure constrains superstructure, but each level and subsystem also has substantial autonomy (Ferguson 1990a, 1999).

Regarding war, this scheme is intended to explain the general characteristics of war in a given society. To give just a few illustrations, infrastructure defines how war is fought and what it is fought over: the scale of war-making units and parties, the kind of weaponry used, the scheduling of war parties in relation to subsistence activities, and the availability and costs of essential resources. Structure specifies the social patterning of war: the familial ties for mobilizing men within and between war groups, the circulation and distribution of necessities and valuables, decision structures, and patterns of alliance and enmity. Superstructure provides the moral framework for waging war and motivating warriors: the value systems pertaining to violence, religious and/or magical ideas employed in conflicts, and political ideologies invoked to justify war or peace.

Looking at war in this way is useful for unifying diverse theoretical positions that focus on different aspects of war and that might otherwise seem contradictory. It is relatively easy, for instance, to see social structural features such as patrilineal post-marital residence interlocked with competition over local resources and an ideology of male military prowess. But many more aspects of war than that can be fit together using this paradigm (Ferguson 1999). Or it can be applied to one particular case. That has been done for the Yanomami of the Orinoco-Mavaca area of Venezuela. Going from infrastructure through structure to superstructure, and considering how all of them have been shaped by

the changing circumstances of Western contact, explains why these particular Yanomami seemed so 'fierce'—not only why they made a lot of war, but also why allies fought bloody, pounding matches and men commonly assaulted women (*ibid.*: 1992).

Structural and superstructural aspects of the Iraq war, including political arrangements and processes, constructions of social identities, and value systems, will be discussed in later points. Here the topic will be limited to infrastructure. The population scale of the US allows it to put over 150,000 troops in the field, with US casualties directly affecting only a tiny fraction of the populace. Iraqi fighters are drawn from local neighborhoods or tribal groups but also include outsiders from a global Islamic population. Technology shapes military interactions, with drones, laser-guided air strikes, and night vision on our side, and on theirs, plentiful munitions, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and the Internet. The distribution of oil certainly affected US interests in Iraq and continues to play a critical role in shaping Iraqi politics today. Change any one of those variables, and it would be a very different conflict.

#### **Point #4: War Expresses Both Pan-human Practicalities and Culturally Specific Values**

My second strategy regarding war is intended to explain not a general cultural pattern of war, but rather the occurrence of real wars. The basic premise is that variations in actual fighting—periods of war and periods of peace, who attacks and who is attacked—are understandable as the result of those who make decisions on war pursuing their own practical self-interests, within historically changing material circumstances. It is an etic behavioral approach, based on an analysis of what people do in war, rather than what they say about it.

I used this method in studies of all reported wars among Native peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast and among the Yanomami. Analysis of archaeological records and early explorers' accounts of the Northwest Coast indicate a pre-contact pattern, in which people in areas of limited resources raided those with better supplies of fish and other food. These subsistence conflicts largely ended when diseases, introduced by outsiders, lowered populations and marginal areas were abandoned. In the post-contact period, war was structured by competition in the Western trade. In various ways, groups in different positions tried to control or improve their access to Western outposts or trade ports. In both pre- and post-contact periods, war was waged to capture slaves, although this greatly increased in post-contact circumstances (Ferguson 1984b).

The effects of Western contact preceded even the earliest reports about the Yanomami, so their pre-contact warfare, if any, is unknown. Early-contact warfare was related to defensive measures directed at indigenous slave raiders who traded to the Europeans. In Yanomami wars described by later explorers and ethnographers, which group attacks which, and when, is explained by antagonism based on unequal and exploitative relations regarding access to sources of Western trade goods, beginning with steel tools. This fundamental

antagonism is then channeled by structural and superstructural patterns. In contrast, two other hypotheses about Yanomami warfare—that it is explained by scarcity of game or conflicts over women—are not at all predictive of the actual occurrence of war (Ferguson 1995a).

War makers do not talk, and may not think, about war in this materialistic way. In the long discussions that usually precede war, people advocating any course of action convert practical self-interests into the highest applicable moral values—ideas of personhood, accusations of witchcraft, notions of religious duty, invocations of bravery or cowardice, demands of revenge. Such deeply held common values are used to justify plans and persuade others. In an already strained situation, even a seemingly trivial slight, exemplifying a total relation, may provide the trigger for violence, superficially seeming to be its cause. This is manipulation, but not *just* manipulation. The values are true to local culture. Cognitive dissonance theory long ago taught us that contradictory evaluations within individuals are brought into alignment, and this is true in war. Wants and needs are converted into moral rights and duties. This is a fundamental and necessary process of war, as struggles over things must be transformed into imperatives to kill other human beings. In many cases, perhaps the great majority, advocates of war come to believe their rationale themselves. What is good for them becomes the ‘right’ thing to do. Each side sees the other as responsible for bringing on war (Ferguson 1995a, 2006a).

But systems of thought have their own logic and power, not reducible to practicalities. As the anthropology of violence has taught us, acts of war are expressive as well as instrumental. Slaughters, tortures, exemplary killings—all are performances, laden with deep meaning for the actors, victims, and audiences. They become critical social facts, defining relationships and playing a major role in shaping future actions. The seamless integration of pan-human considerations of practicality and culturally particular values is highlighted by reactions to Western contact. Among very different peoples, political and military responses to powerful intruders—for example, when and why alliances with them are made or broken—display remarkable similarity. Take away identifying characteristics, and the response to a given situation could be transferred anywhere across the world. Yet ethnographic detail on each case makes clear that culturally specific understandings and norms are motivating indigenous actors. Reconciling the two areas of material practicality and symbolic logic remains a great challenge in the anthropology of war and violence, and the devil is in the analytic details (Ferguson 2001, 2003b; Ferguson and Whitehead 1999).

How we got into Iraq illustrates the need for a combination of practical and symbolic considerations. The Republican electoral strategy for victory in 2002 and 2004 was openly and explicitly built on war. A victorious cakewalk through the Middle East could have cemented Republican political power for a decade. Of course, that backfired in 2006, because this war, like most, did not go as planned. In retrospect, too, Saddam Hussein’s posture before the war seems self-destructive. But the CIA tells us that Hussein was actually pursuing his own survival against what he saw as the two main threats—his own officers and Iran. Because of Iran, he wanted the world to think he might really

have weapons of mass destruction. He believed, until it was too late, that a US invasion would be blocked by the UN. So the stance of both the US and Iraqi regimes was based on self-interest. But the leaders on both sides saw themselves as moral paragons. Hussein was the restorer of Mesopotamian glory and Arab dignity. Bush and Company were the protectors of American values and democracy. Both acted on erroneous information that was tailored by subordinates to suit their bosses' preconceptions: Bush on the presence of weapons of mass destruction, Hussein on the ability of his army to inflict enormous casualties on invaders. Both made miscalculations about things that seemed self-evident to many on the outside: Hussein about the UN's ability to block an invasion, Bush about the stable multi-ethnic society that was supposed to bloom after conquest. Both sides saw the other as morally corrupt. Both sides saw the other as the aggressor. On both sides, self-interests, understandings, and values all fit neatly together. They usually do in war (Ferguson 2006a).

#### **Point #5: War Shapes Society to Its Own Ends**

The standard anthropological approach to war is to relate some aspect of war to some other aspect of social life—to ecological stresses, to features of social structure, to belief systems, and so on. This is consistent with twentieth-century social science, which generally sees war as a thing to be explained, not an explanation in itself. What is less obvious is that war is a major causal force strongly affecting all areas of social life. War is a threat to physical and social existence. As such, people must cope with it, sometimes on pain of death.

War leads to the creation and destruction of institutions in many ways. In the archaeological record, war, or more intense war, often led to larger, nucleated settlements, which presumably required new forms of political organization and conflict resolution. War made necessary the redistribution of food and property that became elaborated into the Northwest Coast potlatch. In Amazonia and elsewhere, war generally affects gender relations, usually negatively for women. In non-state societies, the influence of war can be pervasive, accounting for the difference between 'warlike' and 'peaceable' peoples (Ferguson 1983, 1988b, 1994).

War's social causality is strikingly apparent in a comparative examination of ancient and medieval states. War can bring land into cultivation, while at other times it destroys a subsistence base. War increases the emphasis on boundaries and territory. It brings new people into regulated production, including draft labor for major projects. War can reduce population numbers and encourage higher birth rates. It structures the education and training of boys to be warriors. It can transform a landscape with defensive structures and foster the transfer of technologies across regions. It leads to the mixture of peoples and cultures. It can break down kinship relations. Participation in war can be a central aspect of stratification systems. Success in war is often a prerequisite for higher social status and provides avenues for elite competition. War leads to armies and other formal institutions that become weighty actors within

societies, including scribes and systems of taxation. It molds religion to provide justification for conquest. It can restructure societal systems of production and intensify internal political control. War can convert balanced into unbalanced trade and tribute, alliances into confederacies and empires, and otherwise extend systems of domination (Ferguson 1999).

There may be militaristic and non-militaristic trajectories of social development. Once a given society is internally adapted for war, making war becomes much easier—a necessity, even, for the reproduction of existing social relations. Commentators have often compared war to a disease, but a more apt analogy is an addiction (Ferguson 1994). We should ask how far the United States has gone in this direction. As Catherine Lutz (2002) and others have documented, over the past several decades, US economics, politics, and popular culture have been restructured to serve war. For anthropologists, the impact of war hits uncomfortably close to home. Ongoing research by David Price (2004) on World War II and the Cold War is revealing extensive connections between the demands of our national security apparatus and the development of US anthropology.

#### **Point #6: War Exists in Multiple Contexts**

We are accustomed to conceptualizing war as a contest between two or more groups. But war is also a property of a larger system of groups. The space between polities is highly structured, from the physical distribution of populations and resources, the terrain and its cover, and factors affecting travel; through all the social, economic, and political ties unifying or dividing groups; to the shared understandings, conventions, and expectations of war among adversaries. All of these intergroup circumstances exert strong determinative effects on the decisions and actions of any single group (Ferguson 1999).

Contexts come in layers, starting with local neighborhoods and moving on to regional and inter-regional interactions. Among comparatively egalitarian peoples, such as in highland New Guinea or Amazonia, the effective social universe is made up of neighboring communities of similar scale. But with the development of social hierarchy, more extensive and often unequal intergroup relations prevail. With broadening interactions, there can be systems within systems. For example, the many local war-making chiefdoms of Bronze Age Europe were part of a vast network linked by technology, trade, marriage, and ideology, and this system was itself part of a larger interaction sphere centering on the Middle East and stretching from Egypt to South Asia and beyond (Ferguson 2006b).

Ancient states were surrounded by tribal zones, defined as areas not under a state's control but manifestly affected by its proximity. One consequence of states seeking clear polities to deal with is the creation or reinforcement of more cohesive tribal units and a state-oriented system of militarism. The older war patterns of tribal zones are transformed by new technologies and military organization, and by resistance to or cooperation with state policies and interests. Militarized ethnies (recognized cultural groupings) are commonly used

by states and empires to project military force farther than the reach of their own armies, and to protect state interests along trade routes. They are subordinates, and their actions in turn modify the interactions of peoples deeper in the peripheries. These local groups still have their own interests, politics, and understandings, but these are played out in an overarching tribal zone context and would be unintelligible without bringing that context into focus (Ferguson 1993, 1999; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992a).

From the sixteenth century on, tribal zones have been more disruptive than those of ancient states. Previously separated from indigenous populations by vast distances, Europeans brought new diseases, plants, animals, technologies, and trade goods that radically transformed local societies. At the same time, they continued older state policies that encouraged war, such as dividing to conquer and recruiting ethnic soldiers. But European powers also encouraged local wars in a way not typical of ancient states, a fact that merits emphasis because it has so often been neglected in anthropological theorizing on war. The sudden introduction of new trade items, from cloth to steel to guns, provided a whole new set of incentives to fight, and Europe's insatiable demand for captive labor and for land emptied of indigenous populations generated a bow wave of local warfare, as displaced peoples sought a place to live and as slave raiders penetrated deeper and deeper. All these native wars in turn shaped the great games of colonial rivals and empires (Ferguson 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992a). As Keith Otterbein (1964) pointed out long ago, if the Huron had defeated the Iroquois in 1649, we might be speaking French today.

Skipping several millennia, the 1980s were a time of so-called proxy wars, localized struggles backed by one or more sides in the Cold War. As Eric Wolf (1973) noted, these conflicts were always much more local than realpolitik strategists imagined. The protracted struggle in Guatemala, for instance, had far deeper roots than the ongoing East-West confrontation. In the 1990s, it was the opposite problem, as fierce civil wars erupted in sub-Saharan Africa, the former Yugoslavia and USSR, and elsewhere, which were caricatured as explosions of ancient, local hatreds. It is true that these wars were launched and prosecuted by local actors, but they were heavily conditioned by supra-local changes, which show up repeatedly in comparisons across cases. The end of the Cold War destabilized many situations when formerly well-funded militaries were suddenly cut off as irrelevant to the great powers. Global economic processes led to crashing commodity prices and widespread immiseration in many areas. The illegal trade of drugs, 'blood diamonds', guns, and even oil encouraged criminals, warlords, and corrupt officials, who were often indistinguishable, as Nordstrom (2007) shows. Well-meant humanitarian aid was subject to military control and diversion. The regulation of local governments by international agencies curtailed patrimonial beneficence and the governments' ability to respond to both humanitarian and military challenges. The needs, aspirations, and fears of local players were tied to strings pulled from above (Ferguson 2003b).

In the current 'global war against terror', the levels of context are almost too obvious to mention. Ambitious leaders from one neighborhood make moves to vanquish local rivals, within the larger playing field of a city or region, relating

to parallel and connected struggles across international borders, all intertwined with a Cold War-esque global military confrontation. Policies on all sides reflect not just current realities on the ground, but the larger political arenas from which support can be drawn.

### **Point #7: Opponents Are Constructed in Conflict**

In war, a line must be clear between 'us' and 'them', otherwise one would not know whom to kill. Many biologically oriented theories postulate that war is, in some way, an expression of an innate tendency to in-group amity and out-group enmity. In these views, the existence of the group generates the conflict. But it is unusual, if not rare, for war to involve two pre-existing groups, and only them. In actual practice, it is the conflict that firms up the opposed groups.

War groupings vary in duration. Among the Yanomami, they are very ad hoc. Allies can quickly turn into enemies, and vice versa, depending on the situation. Members of one village community may take different sides in group violence (Ferguson 1995a). Elsewhere, where enmities stretch over years or even generations, alignments may be more fixed, although still subject to change. Segmentary systems provide structured fault lines guiding groups in alliance and opposition ("I fight my brother, but with my brother against my cousin, and with my cousin against a stranger"), although these oppositions are less mechanical and more opportunistic than once thought (*ibid.*: 1984a; 1990a). In ancient states and empires, military solidarity among component parts waxes and wanes over more or less long periods (*ibid.*: 1999). Since the seventeenth-century Treaty of Westphalia, the basic unit of war has been fixed on the state. But states rarely go to war without allies, and those depend on the conflict. This is so in the two current US wars: 'us' in Iraq is different from 'us' in Afghanistan.

Considering the identity-linked wars that have torn apart many countries over the past several decades, scholars are long past the idea of timeless entities acting out timeless grudges. We understand that oppositions in war are very contemporary constructions, fixed in recently spilt blood, however much ancient history is invoked by its leaders (or interested outsiders). These struggles are often called 'ethnic', even though most are not about cultural differences at all. The actual basis of the organization of groups going to war differs greatly by situation. Common variables include the groups' position in the hierarchical chain from urban metropole to country village, occupation and other indices of social class, religion, language, caste, race, tribe, clan, lineage, and the corresponding access of all categories to seats of power. These variables mix and morph into endless combinations. Within any grouping, so defined, attitudes toward war are also structured by individual factors of age, generation, and gender.

We have no general term for such conflicts. Understanding their violence is impeded without first understanding their specific social character, or, worse, by misleadingly tagging them as 'ethnic' or 'religious'. Sometimes science needs to invent a new term, and I do so in coining the label 'identerest' (from 'identity' and 'interest'). Although I recognize the natural reluctance to adopt

neologisms, I believe this term is justified because of the work it does. First, against some current explanatory divides that stress either self-interest or identity issues (sometimes framed as 'greed vs. grievance'), 'identerism' highlights the point that practical interests and self-identities are very commonly fused into one. Who you are—what kind of person you are—largely determines how you are doing and whether you have gained or lost in recent history. Second, it makes a necessity of clearly specifying the social bases of contending groups, rather than avoiding this critical issue by slapping on an inappropriate label. Calling a conflict 'identerest' creates a question of identities and interests that must be answered (Ferguson 2003b).

This is what we now face in Iraq. There is no insurrection but rather a kaleidoscope of intergroup struggles. There are not just two, as in many other violent situations, but countless intergroup groups fighting us and each other. News reports of violence regularly show groupings, both large and small, that are defined by geographic region, urban neighborhood, income, ethnicity, language, tribe, lineage, and religious differences. Anti-Americanism is the banner, because it conforms to recent life experiences, just as Islam invokes broad and powerful values. These beliefs bring in recruits and facilitate alliances, but the steam that powers these groupings is generated by local interests and struggles for wealth, power, and prestige (Ferguson 2006a).

### **Point #8: War Is a Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means**

War involves people of one side trying to kill those of the other. That is how people typically think of war—as a relation between groups. This is most clear in international relations theory, where war-making states are seen as interacting like billiard balls colliding on the green felt of anarchy, each with clear, unified interests. The domestic politics behind decisions on war are relegated to history, if old, or journalism, if recent. War is seen as essentially international. In one sense this is obviously true. In another, it is profoundly misleading. It is in the nature of war that its politics are internal as well as external (Ferguson 1995a, 1999; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992a).

Some wars are characterized by overwhelming unity within one or both sides. Responses to external attacks tend to be so, at least at first. But these are unusual. In most wars, within the basic political units there are differences of interests, disagreements over actions, and unequal abilities to influence the course of events. Even in the simplest of societies, war is not the result of someone beating on a drum, with everyone rushing off, but of long discussions and debates, frequently combined with internal alliances and log-rolling. Often there are identifiable factions that favor war or not, or one course over another. This is a result not just of different perceptions and interests relating to external affairs, but of those in relation to internal struggles as well. War itself, being a causal factor in social life, commonly has a major impact on the future position of individuals and sub-groups and their rise or fall.

Moving from single polities to larger alliances and beyond, these internal politics are even more critical. Variations in ties of descent or marriage, residential proximity, or prior alliances all play important roles in decisions. War affects future alliances, requiring compensation for losses and pledges of future support. Where intergroup connections involve hierarchies of power, these too shape decisions and are reshaped by war. The realpolitik view of war is fundamentally flawed. Understanding why wars happen requires bringing into theory the internal politics of each side in a conflict.

Internal politics are clearly on display in the current war in Iraq (Ferguson 2006a). That US policy regarding Iraq is closely tied to domestic politics has been up front and clear since 9/11. As I write this, in the pre-primaries period of the 2008 national election, the key issues in all debates are Iraq and terrorism. The candidates of both parties are trying to formulate positions that generate support and help them defeat rivals. It could be no other way. An Iraq plan that did not pay heed to US domestic politics would be a fantasy. Eventually, one candidate, one position, will win, and that victory will be a very important factor (along with many others) in determining the future of the war.

Internal politics are equally well-documented within Iraq. In 2004, al-Zarqawi wrote to bin Laden with his plan for Iraq, premised on the reality of complex and divided political allegiances, clearly stating a strategy of compelling the fractious Sunni to unite behind al Qaeda by provoking indiscriminate retaliation by Shiites (Coalition Provisional Authority 2004). His strategy was remarkably successful, not only in polarizing Iraq, but in convincing many US politicians that this is fundamentally a civil war between those two faiths. Yet Shiite militias fight other Shiites, Sunni militants cooperate with the Mahdi army, and tribal groups pursue tribal interests. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani may be the most important political player in Iraq, and if he dies any time soon, we can expect a whole new configuration of struggle. In the meantime, the United States demands that Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki develop a representative government and prosecute the war in a manner that is practically precluded by internal political alignments (Ferguson 2006a).

We criticize the Iraqi government as if it could be and do otherwise, without acknowledging that our Congress has been equally unable to reach basic agreements. These situations are not aberrations. The real politics of war is an ongoing dialectic of the internal and the external. Failure to appreciate that—to treat domestic politics as any less fundamental than the military violence between adversaries—will lead to severe misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations. It is not a good thing when one's adversaries make plans based on political realities, while one's own strategy is an exercise in wishful thinking.

### **Point #9: Leaders Favor War Because War Favors Leaders**

This is true most of the time, at least at the beginning. This is a subpoint of war as an expression of domestic politics, but it merits special attention. One of the greatest differences between wars by states and wars by tribal peoples is that in

states, war decisions are made at the top, with those below being compelled to follow. In comparatively egalitarian societies, that command power is generally absent. But even in politically egalitarian groups, there are leaders who have their own interests and exert substantial influence over decisions. Their actions can shape military behavior. Among the Yanomami, one leader (Fusiwe) fomented an attack on visitors who were favoring another leader in his village. Later, when he seemed bent on starting another war, those closest to him speculated on his motives, concluding that he wanted to force his scattered group to coalesce so that he could be “chieftain of them all” (Ferguson 1995a: 238). In New Guinea, big men assess military possibilities in terms of likely effects on their own political position. Farther up the societal scale, ‘chiefly ambitions’ has often seemed a necessary, even sufficient explanation for war. The distinctive interests of kings and emperors are obvious. Not only do these leaders experience vastly different costs, benefits, and powers in war, they may also require successful wars in order to establish and maintain rule (*ibid.*: 1990a, 1994, 1995a, 1999, 2006b).

Certainly, leaders do not always advocate war. It is often in their interests to avoid it. But war has several general consequences that can be used to enhance a leader’s position. War often forces a coalescence of groups in a way that makes the management of people more possible. It leads to the acceptance of certain situations—heightened aggression in war leaders and acquiescence to their directives—that would not be tolerated if there were no lethal enemy. Leading and prevailing in wartime can decidedly raise a person’s status. Referring back to point #4, leaders’ pursuit of self-interest in war may be accompanied by a deep sense of moral correctness. However, wars commonly do not work out as planned, and those who start wars may suffer defeat or death (as Fusiwe did). But such an outcome is not anticipated when the decision to fight is made.

To understand war, it is essential to understand the structure of decision making and to identify the total interests—internal and external—of those involved in it. This is clear in interest violence and war. Leaders seek wealth, power, and prestige. To build a following, they construct narratives and histories to define ‘us’ and demonize ‘them’. They speak to local cultural understandings and fears, invoke potent symbols, and offer plausible—even if false—explanations of recent miseries (al-Zarqawi’s letter to bin Laden is a textbook illustration of such a militarized construction of history, invocation of sacred values, and demonization of the other). Many leap to the cause, providing a hard core of followers to command. Thus empowered, the leaders foster polarization and fear, and start the killing. With the die cast, it becomes a situation of ‘follow the leader’. That is what happened in Rwanda (Ferguson 1999, 2003b).

In modern societies, decisions for war involve a complex array of class, corporate, institutional, media, and political positions. It is often difficult to understand even the surface maneuverings, much less get below them. For the war in Iraq, the distinctive interests and values of Bush and Hussein have already been noted. Bookshelves are filling up with investigative journalism on the immediate decisions leading up to the US invasion. But social science should move beyond that to illuminate all of the institutional imperatives and connections that were used to bamboozle the public and get their acceptance of an invasion.

What about terrorist leaders? I define them as non-state actors who deliberately target civilians, although states can wage terror, too. Everything we are told about these organizations indicates clear hierarchical structures with centralized decision making. The leaders are not blowing themselves up, but many *are* gaining power and the benefits that power brings. Late in 2006, news reports described Muqtada al-Sadr as having been partially ‘tamed’ by his new power, wealth, and prestige—which he does not want to give up. But he was losing control over elements of his loosely constructed militia. One breakaway faction, responsible for many of the torture deaths in Baghdad, was led by a former fishmonger, who some hailed as the Zaqawi of the Sunni (Tavernise 2006). You can be sure he was doing better than a fishmonger.

### **Point #10: Peace Is More Than the Absence of War**

As war needs to be reconceptualized, so does peace. People often think of peace as the absence of war, and given the human costs of war, perhaps that is good enough. But research by Leslie Sponsel (1994), William Ury (1999), Douglas Fry (2006), and others has made it very clear that factors leading to peaceful conflict resolution are quite distinct from those that lead to war. Peace has its own dynamic, including behavior patterns, social and political institutions, and value systems that foster equitable treatment and the rejection of violence as acceptable means to an end. This is a necessary insight for the world today.

We have seen some terrible examples of peacekeeping. Oftentimes, peacekeeping is no more than putting a neutral line of guns between two hostile lines of guns without addressing the more difficult issue of the underlying culture of violence. So war awaits its comeback. Anthropologists who wish to work against war directly face daunting problems. Few are equipped to participate actively in efforts to avoid or resolve civil wars. The effort itself is protracted and extremely difficult. Readers should consult de Waal’s (2006) account of Darfur negotiations for an example of the nitty-gritty issues, obstacles, personalities, and frustrations that get in the way of settlement. No effort will work that does not have sustained political and financial support, which is often lacking until the situation has gone well beyond critical. If one approach fails, another must be tried. In making peace, it is truly necessary to ‘stay the course’.

In Iraq, with its multiple identerest conflicts already going at full blast, peacemaking seems a fantasy. Anthropological knowledge clearly is being sought by the military, but for the purpose of waging war (Packer 2006).<sup>3</sup> These developments are part of a larger debate about whether or how anthropology should articulate with national security institutions—a discussion that has profound implications for our discipline. Based on past experience, most anthropologists would probably reject such direct cooperation. But what if, under a different regime in Washington, we were asked to use our knowledge to help reduce the incidence of wars and reinforce peaceful cooperation? Our discipline needs to discuss this issue fully and openly.

There is another way that anthropologists can help promote peace outside the halls of power. In the Reagan years I called this the protest route rather than the policy route (Ferguson 1988a, 1989). It involves calling attention to the interests of the powerful, dissecting militaristic propaganda, and dispelling the pervasive myth that war is to be assumed because humans are inherently warlike and thus war will always be with us. This brings us back to point #1 and a good place to stop.

## Conclusion

As Carolyn Nordstrom (1998: 148) observes: “War is one of those curious phenomena that is inherently defined. People quite simply *know* what war is. This is not to say that this knowledge is correct, but to point out that people believe it is. Part of the cultural phenomenon of war is that both war and its definition are taken as ‘given’ in human society.” Her point, and mine, is that many aspects of this implicit definition are not only wrong but positively misleading. They prevent us from grappling with the reality of war. Anthropology can offer a different vision, one with real implications for a critical response to the next call to arms.

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## Notes

1. This article is an expansion of a presentation at the 2006 meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Organizer Alisse Waterston asked me to prepare an overview of my conclusions, and I condensed them down to eight interrelated points (Ferguson 2007). With more room, these have been expanded, and previous points #1 and #2 are each divided into two separate points, making 10 points altogether.
2. My previous publications are at <http://www.newark.rutgers.edu/socant/brian.htm>.
3. The Army's new counterinsurgency manual includes detailed discussion of social structure and culture as necessary elements in designing military campaigns (DOA 2006: chap. 3).

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