

descended frequently on the country. They were nicknamed “the sandalistas” by critics because of their penchant for dressing in ratty attire and sandals. I spent a day with one group that, the first day they arrived, headed straight to the U.S. Embassy for a protest rally.

“For me,” said one of the participants, “a demonstration at the embassy will be my liturgy for the morning.”

“Amen,” said one of her fifteen companions.

The group was part of a religious organization from Dayton, Ohio, known as Pledge of Resistance. They would return to Ohio to speak in church basements and at small gatherings about their experiences in Nicaragua. The trip, organized by a group known as Witness for Peace, took the members to a model prison farm, arranged interviews with Sandinista supporters, and threw in several moderate critics.

Alvaro José Baldizón, the former chief investigator of the Special Investigations Commission of the Ministry of Interior, told me after he had fled to the United States that before one of the solidarity groups arrived in a town, critics were warned by police to stay away from the foreigners. He said that government employees often posed as local residents or relatives of local residents and spoke about atrocities carried out by the Contras as well as the benefits of the Sandinista revolution. The two-week visits saw most groups live for a few days in a village. They held prayer vigils, did work projects, and collected testimony from alleged victims of the war.

I went with the group to a model prison farm. It had pleasant gardens and spotless sleeping quarters. The farm housed forty-two inmates. The group was told that there were only two unarmed guards on the farm, prisoners were given a one-week vacation, and no one had ever tried to escape.

A prisoner, Hernán Lozano, who said he was once a bodyguard for the former dictator Anastasio Somoza, spoke to the delegation. I would hear a version of this talk from dozens of other prisoners. The stocky Lozano grinned lavishly and heaped praise on the Sandinistas.

“You appear happy to be here,” said one of the Americans. “Are you truly happy or is this an appearance?”

Lozano assured the delegation he was happy on the prison farm. He told them he was telling the truth because “the revolution has brought the loss of fear, especially the fear of telling the truth.”

The Potemkin quality of the farm seemed hard to miss even for the delegates.

“Even if this is a showpiece, the cream of the crop, it is here,” another participant told me. “It does seem to be more than good intentions. In reality it is a lot better than in our own country.”

The group, often praised by Sandinista officials for their courage and dedication, became openly moved at the end of the day. There was an electric current of self-satisfaction and moral outrage that ran concurrently through the conversation.

“To me, the process of the revolution is a religious experience. It’s not a political movement,” said another American in the group. “It comes from a deep-faith commitment by the Nicaraguan people.”

The social critic Christopher Lasch has argued that such radical politics fills empty lives and provides a potent sense of meaning and purpose. It is “a refuge from the terrors of inner life,” he observed in *The Culture of Narcissism*.<sup>14</sup>

But it is a refuge for all, for lower classes as well as privileged elite. None of us is immune. All find emotional sustenance in

war's myth. That myth can take many forms. It can lead people to celebrate power among those who are America's enemies, those who lead "revolutionary" regimes in Cuba or Vietnam, or it can lead us to celebrate our own power, but the process is the same. It is still myth. It still blinds those who swallow it.

The myth of war rarely endures for those who experience combat. War is messy, confusing, sullied by raw brutality and an elephantine fear that grabs us like a massive bouncer who comes up from behind. Soldiers in the moments before real battles weep, vomit, and write last letters home, although these are done more as a precaution than from belief. All are nearly paralyzed with fright. There is a morbid silence that grips a battlefield in the final moments before the shooting starts, one that sets the back of my own head pounding in pain, wipes away all appetite, and makes my fingers tremble as I ready myself to go forward against logic. You do not think of home or family, for to do so is to be overcome by a wave of nostalgia and emotion that can impair your ability to survive. One thinks, so far as it is possible, of cleaning weapons, of readying for the business of killing. No one ever charges into battle for God and country.

"Just remember," a Marine Corps lieutenant colonel told me as he strapped his pistol belt under his arm before we crossed into Kuwait, "that none of these boys is fighting for home, for the flag, for all that crap the politicians feed the public. They are fighting for each other, just for each other."

It may be that Falstaff, rather than Henry V, is a much more accurate picture of the common soldier, who finds little in the rhetoric of officers who urge him into danger. The average soldier probably sympathizes more than we might suspect with Falstaff's stratagems to save his own hide. Falstaff embodies the carnal yearnings we all have for food, drink, companionship,

a few sexual adventures, and safety. He may lack the essential comradeship of soldiering, but he clings to life in a way a soldier under fire can sympathize with. It is to the pubs and taverns, not to the grand palaces, that these soldiers return when the war is done. And Falstaff's selfish lust for pleasure hurts few. Henry's selfish lust for power leaves corpses strewn across muddy battlefields.<sup>15</sup>

The imagined heroism, the vision of a dash to rescue a wounded comrade, the clear lines we thought were drawn in battle, the images we have of our own reaction under gunfire, usually wilt in combat. This is a sober and unsettling realization. We may not be who we thought we would be. One of the most difficult realizations of war is how deeply we betray ourselves, how far we are from the image of gallantry and courage we desire, how instinctual and primordial fear is. We do not meditate on action. Our movements are usually motivated by a numbing and overpowering desire for safety. And yet there are heroes, those who somehow rise above it all, maybe only once, to expose themselves to risk to save their comrades. I have seen such soldiers. I nearly always found them afterward to be embarrassed about what they did, unable to explain it, reticent to talk. Many are not sure they could do it again.

I was in Khartoum in 1989 during one of the attempts to overthrow Sadek Mahdi, who was then the prime minister. The city had fallen into decay, with lines of destitute Sudanese curled up in blankets and with holes in the pitted roads so huge that men fell into them. Electricity and water service were sporadic. The phones did not work. The only thing that seemed to function was the rampant corruption. The coup attempt had been fought off, but the army was still nervous. At dusk another reporter and I took a walk through the streets. Inadvertently, we

turned down the road past the Presidential Palace. In the half-light the palace guards, who had ordered the road closed to all traffic and pedestrians, noisily unlocked the safeties on their assault rifles and pointed their weapons toward us. We yelled out in Arabic, "Foreigners! Foreigners!" I deftly, without hesitation or forethought, sidestepped behind my friend. Better to let any bullets pass through him first. It was a disconcerting decision, one made swiftly and instinctually. To this day I have not had the heart to tell him.

We are humiliated in combat. The lofty words that inspire people to war—duty, honor, glory—swiftly become repugnant and hollow. They are replaced by the hard, specific images of war, by the prosaic names of villages and roads. The abstract rhetoric of patriotism is obliterated, exposed as the empty handmaiden of myth. Fear brings us all back down to earth.

Once in a conflict, we are moved from the abstract to the real, from the mythic to the sensory. When this move takes place we have nothing to do with a world not at war. When we return home we view the society around us from the end of a very long tunnel. There they still believe. In combat such belief is shattered, replaced not with a better understanding, but with a disconcerting confusion and a taste of war's potent and addictive narcotic. Combatants live only for their herd, those hapless soldiers who are bound into their unit to ward off death. There is no world outside the unit. It alone endows worth and meaning. Soldiers will rather die than betray this bond. And there is—as many combat veterans will tell you—a kind of love in this.

The Salvadoran town of Suchitoto was a dreary peasant outpost made up of stucco and mud and wattle huts. It was off the main road. The town was surrounded by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) rebels, who, when I first

arrived in El Salvador in 1982, were winning the war. The government forces kept a small garrison in the town, although its relief columns were regularly ambushed as they ambled down the small strip of asphalt, surrounded by high grass. It was one of the most dangerous spots in El Salvador and had taken the lives of a few reporters.

The rebels launched an attack to take the town. A convoy of reporters in cars marked with "TV" in masking tape on the windshields hightailed it to the small bridge that led to the lonely stretch of road into Suchitoto. We stopped for the familiar ritual of getting high, something as a print reporter who could scramble to safety I did not do, but something many photographers, who would stand and take pictures in the midst of combat, found a necessary salve to their nerves.

Then we moved slowly down the road, the odd round fired ahead or behind us. We made it to the edge of town. We ran into rebel units, now accustomed to the follies of the press. On foot we moved through the deserted streets, the firing from the garrison becoming louder as we weaved our way with rebel fighters to the front line. And then, as we rounded a corner, several full bursts of automatic fire rent the air. We dove head-first onto the dirt. The rebels began to fire noisy bursts from their M-16 assault rifles. The acrid scent of cordite filled the air. Dust was in my eyes. I did not move. I began to pray.

"God," I thought, "if you get me out of here I will never do this again."

I felt powerless, humiliated, weak. I dared not move. I could see the little sprays of dust the bullets threw up from the road. Rebels around me were wounded and crying out in pain. One died yelling out in a sad cadence for his mother. His desperate and final plea seemed to cut through the absurd posturing of

soldiering. At first it haunted me. Soon I wished he would be quiet.

“Mama!” . . . “Mama!” . . . “Mama!”

The firefight seemed to go on for an eternity. I cannot say how long I lay there. It could have been a few minutes. It could have been an hour. Here was war, real war, sensory war, not the war of the movies and books I had consumed in my youth. It was disconcerting, frightening, and disorganized, and nothing like the myth I had been peddled. There was nothing gallant or heroic, nothing redeeming. It controlled me. I would never control it.

During a lull I dashed across an empty square and found shelter behind a house. My heart was racing. Adrenaline coursed through my bloodstream. I was safe. I made it back to the capital. And, like most war correspondents, I soon considered the experience a great cosmic joke. I drank away the fear and excitement in a seedy bar in downtown San Salvador. Most people after such an experience would learn to stay away. I was hooked.

# 2

## THE PLAGUE OF NATIONALISM

War is the health of the state.

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RANDOLPH BOURNE

THE MILITARY JUNTA THAT RULED ARGENTINA, AND WAS responsible for killing 20,000 of its own citizens during the “Dirty War,” in 1982 invaded the Falkland Islands, which the Argentines called the Malvinas. The junta, which had been on the verge of collapse and beset by violent street demonstrations and nationwide strikes in the weeks before the war, instantly became the saviors of the country. Labor union and opposition leaders, some of whom were still visibly bruised from beatings, were hauled out of jail cells before cameras to repeat what was a collective mantra: “Las Malvinas son Argentinas.”

The invasion transformed the country. Reality was replaced with a wild and self-serving fiction, a legitimization of the worst prejudices of the masses and paranoia of the outside world. The secret interior world arrayed against Argentina became one