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BLOOD RITES: Origins and History of the Passions of War

By Barbara Ehrenreich

Henry Holt/Metropolitan. 280 pp.

Humanity has a love/hate relationship with war, but we deny the love. We echo Sherman: "War is hell." We nod approval at Eisenhower: "I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity."

Yet from Alexander to Colin Powell, from Achilles to Rambo, the warrior is our hero. Those who vilify Bill Clinton for avoiding a war he condemned stay silent about Dan Quayle, who thought Vietnam a fitting place for other men to die.

In her sweeping glance across the history of our passion for war, Barbara Ehrenreich shows how humans have been killers even longer than they have been humans. She's far from exhaustive but never less than interesting and seldom less than fascinating.

She begins in frustration. "Our understanding of war," she notes, "is about as confused and unformed as theories of disease were roughly 200 years ago." She dismisses some theories of war: war is a way "men seek to advance their collective interests" or it springs from "subrational drives" or the male "aggressive instinct." These theories don't answer why soldier and civilian are honored and awed by the prospect of making what both call "the supreme sacrifice."

At the root of Ehrenreich's own theory lie two premises: that long before man was a hunter he was hunted and that war affords us the chance to merge gloriously into something far vaster than ourselves. This last, of course, gives war an appeal as powerful as religion's. Ehrenreich argues they have very much the same appeal and have always been tightly intertwined.

Despite combat's horrors, Ehrenreich observes that the feelings of a nation at war are "among the 'noblest' feelings humans are fortunate enough to experience: feelings of generosity, community, and submergence in a great and worthy cause." In war, we are no longer an isolate poor bare forked animal but part of "something indomitable and strong."

We learned this when our ancestors left the safety of trees to forage on deadly savannas. There lurked the primal terror upon which man's capacity to fight in groups emerged. "We were not given dominion over the earth; our forebears earned it in their long nightmarish struggle against creatures far stronger, swifter, and better armed than themselves, when the terror of being ripped apart and devoured was never farther away

than the darkness beyond the campfire's warmth." Here man learned "the powerful emotions, associated with courage and altruism, that were required for group defense."

Human evolution, intelligence and language (as well as paranoia, chronic anxiety and fear of abandonment), Ehrenreich suggests, may derive from man's need for cooperative defense against predators. As a species as well as an individual, we begin in vulnerability. No man is born a hero, not when he needs six months just to get a tooth. Our initial weakness made violence sacred.

The most basic and universal religious ritual is blood sacrifice to a being of whom man lives in awe and fear ("Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom"). Sacrificial killing, "the basic experience of the sacred," began with human sacrifice--if the lion takes him, it won't take me; if I sacrifice my son, the Lord will be satisfied. Gods like meat. The first murder sprung from Cain's envy that God preferred Abel's sheep to his fruit.

The common hero, then, was he who gave his life so others might live. As man evolved from prey to predator, his mythic hero became he who slew the beast: Hercules, Samson, Marduk, Perseus, Beowulf.

As war changed, man changed. Ehrenreich sketches those changes from the time man first raised a sharp stone to his firing computerized missiles, catching between a rock and a hard disk man's entire bloody history.

As few things are more dangerous to have hanging about than an underemployed hero, societies sought external enemies and their hunter-protectors became a warrior elite. What begins as a protection racket becomes necessity: if the neighbors have armed fighters, we must have them too, the knights, the samurai, who evolve their own heroic codes of behavior.

They were doomed by technology. Real heroes look their savage enemy in the eye. Hector wields a sword; the cowardly Paris shoots arrows from behind a shield. The longbow, then the gun, let men dispense death at great distance, no longer requiring might and ferocity but cool detachment. It's a bigger leap from sword to arrow than from arrow to stealth bomber.

With the evolution of lethal technology arose the "democratization of glory" the gun affords. No longer were honors only for the nobility, so the mass army and "bureaucratic state" were born, and those without blue in their blood won glory, a phenomenon poignantly lamented by the W.W.I officers in Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*.

In so polemical a work, readers will of course find much to quarrel with. Though a scholar (Ph.D. in biology), Ehrenreich can fall into questionable logic and too-easy dismissal of alternate theories. But even there, especially there, her speculations hone the reader's own opinions. She drifts into tributaries that prove particularly absorbing, such as her thoughts on the historical role of women as prey, hunter and warrior, which will surprise and disconcert many.

Particularly cogent is her portrait of patriotism as America's religion. In this land separating church and state, Ehrenreich says we've made a "proud fusion of 'flag and faith'," the only civilized country ever to contemplate making a crime of flag burning. Like the Old Testament Hebrews, we believe ourselves God's chosen people. When we step over a border at Buffalo or Laredo, Ehrenreich implies, Americans believe they've entered a place in which God takes less interest.

Is there hope for a world which since W.W.II has seen over 160 wars kill over 22 million people? Some. We have, she notes in hip-deep irony, begun to make war on War. And we must, because we've become the predator beast threatening to destroy humanity.