When I was thirteen years old, my father took me to Gettysburg. It is my first recollection of my father’s growing passion for studying the history of the Civil War, which, I was only to realize long after his death, was his way of grappling with the unresolved horrors of his own experience as a battlefield medic. By escaping into the minutiae of a past and – at a distance – more heroic war, he had been probing his feelings about a war that he suspected (like Paul Fussell in *Wartime*, and Farley Mowat in *And No Birds Sang*) was dominated by “chickenshit” and pointless death. He was past sixty before he told me how terrified he had been, and how he had never stopped thinking and dreaming about what he had seen.

I began my own study of war by accident. Searching for material on American Indian social history in files that had not yet been moved to the National Archives from the old Interior Department office block on C Street, I discovered a scrapbook on Indians’ service in the First World War (Barsh, 1991). The trail continued to other Federal records, visits to Indian reservations and local historical collections, talks with friends who were Indian Vietnam veterans. Eventually I realized that I had begun a search for my father’s lost voice.

Indigenous methodology, in my experience, avoids generalizations. Generalization is arrogant. It presumes that the speaker has infinite knowledge extending far beyond personal observation. Knowledge is not shared in the form of general theories, but as case studies, which are the stories of the narrator’s own encounters with the subject. A wise observer tells good stories. They form a subtle pattern that helps an inexperienced listener appreciate and navigate the hard road of living that stretches ahead.

Russel L. Barsh is Adjunct Professor at New York University’s Institute for Law and Society, 161 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013–1205, USA.
It’s up to you as a young man listening to him speak to see that someplace, while he was talking, he has made his point, and it’s for you to listen and identify it when he makes that half-hour circle of talking about an issue. He’ll talk about everything in the world, but somewhere he has come to the point and realizing where he did is up to you. (Young Bear and Theisz, 1994: 17)

Very few contemporary American Indian scholars write “scientific” prose. Most of the white people who study Indians write academically. Most of the Indians who think a lot about being Indian write poems and novels. In part, this reflects a resistance to separating Action from Feeling, Science from Art. Non-Indians count stories (cases) and try to generalize about them “objectively”. Indians just go ahead and tell the stories.

Stories represent the endless, indeterminate and ever-growing totality of human experience: “this boundless symphony that is Man,” as British cosmologist and novelist Olaf Stapleton termed it just after the Great War. An oral literature has not precise beginning point, no fixed body of theories or rules, and no foreseeable end, yet is recognizably a reasonable representation of lived experience. It is a living entity that grows and changes, while Theory is essentially inert unless it can be proven to be false, and is rejected.

Western thought continues to grapple with the urge to be precise, to categorize every thing which exists, to discover a Unified Field Theory (or, Physicists have described it, The Theory of Everything). In his 1933 essay on Asian aesthetics, the novelist Tanazaki Jun’ichiro elegantly describes an alternative epistemology:

The Chinese also love jade. That strange lump of stone with its faintly muddy light, like the crystallized air of the centuries, melting dimly, dully back, deeper and deeper – are not we Orientals the only ones who know its charms? We cannot say ourselves what it is that we find in this stone. It quite lacks the brightness of a ruby or an emerald or the glitter of a diamond. But this much we can say: when we see that shadowy surface, we think how Chinese it is, we seem to find in its cloudiness the accumulation of the long Chinese past, we think how

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1 This may appear to be an uncritically romantic stereotype, but I believe it can be shown quantitatively to be true. Over the 27 years that I have taught Native American studies, I have tried to acquire as many books by American and Canadian Indian authors as possible; of the 171 such works on my bookshelves today, 86% are works of fiction. Of the 177 non-fiction works published during the same period of time about Indians that are on my bookshelves, 82% have non-Indian authors. This may reflect selection bias on the part of publishers, of course. My friends amongst Native poets, novelists, and university scholars believe that this pattern is also a matter of personal choice on the part of Native authors.
Contemporary social scientists struggle with the problem of being precise about that which defies precision: the cloudiness of our own lives.

Sitting in the Emalu clan’s bure at Narokorokoyawa in the Fijian highlands thirty years ago, I asked ratu Apenisa if he remembered the days of inter-tribal warfare before the British pacification program. “Yes,” he answered thoughtfully. “Your grandfather ratu Timoci was a great warrior; all the vunivalu of the Wainimala were in fear of him, because he thought nothing of buying a life if someone disobeyed him.” Could he tell me about one of the wars he had seen? Ratu Apenisa quietly straightened the edge of his sulu. This is the story he told.

“Those sneaky Vuniqumu people were up to no good. It has always been like that. One early morning the Emalu men were on their way to their gardens. They were climbing the path from the river, along the bulibuliqele [stone fence] that separates the Emalu and Vuniqumu land. All of sudden, one of them stopped and cried out. ‘Look!’ he cried, pointing to the bulibuliqele, ‘it has moved!’ They all looked at the bulibuliqele in astonishment. It had been moved into Vuniqumu land. ‘It must have been those sneaky Vuniqumu people,’ the men agreed, and they went back immediately to the village to speak with ratu Timoci and the elders.

“The people said, ‘this means war.’ They resolved to teach those sneaky Vuniqumu people a lesson. The warriors prepared themselves all night. They painted themselves and polished their big war clubs. All night there was singing. The next morning, before light, the warriors assembled and went quickly to the mountain. Very carefully, they took the bulibuliqele completely apart, then reassembled it where it should have been, on Emalu land. They all got down behind it and waited.”

“Bye and bye, those Vuniqumu men came up the mountain, with their digging sticks on their shoulders. They were very cheerful until they reached the bulibuliqele. Suddenly one of them stopped, and he cried out ‘Look! The bulibuliqele has moved!’ At that moment, all of the Emalu men jumped up from behind the bulibuliqele and shook their war clubs at the Vuniqumu. ‘If you ever mess with the bulibuliqele again,’ they shouted, ‘you’ll see.’”

“And that,” ratu Apenisa added triumphantly, “was a good war.”

It is difficult for us, with our knowledge of improved implements of war, to comprehend how bloodless these early wars of the Indians must have been. A shield would stop a stone-headed arrow, and at a slightly greater distance a robe would do the same. … In those old days, we may imagine that in many, if not
most, of the battles that took place, the combatants, however anxious they may
have been to kill, were forced to content themselves with beating and poking
each other, giving and receiving nothing more serious than a few bruises.
(Grinnell, 1895: 11)

“Such battles,” the American anthropologist George Bird Grinnell
explained in his popular book, *The Indian*, “might go on for half a day
without loss of life on either side.” A student of the Pawnees and
Cheyennes, two of the reputedly most bloodthirsty tribes of the prairies,
Grinnell concluded that, “The Indians set a high value on life, and did
not willingly risk it.”

Grinnell’s sober assessment was not consistent with the glory dime-

ovel conception of Indian temperament so popular with Gaslight Era
American youth. Nor did it square with the nostalgic stories of glorious
deeds young Indian men of that era were hearing from their own
grandfathers. As the new century began, all Americans, Indian and white,
were in love with an imaginary age of blood and chivalry. Film, popular
adolescent literature and Indians’ oral history produced an inflated
masculinity, collapsing the entirety of indigenous experience into a
cartoon image of the Warrior.

Essentializing the Indian as a brutal warrior underscored settlers’
supposed achievements in “taming the prairies” and “building a nation.”
The last pioneer generation of Americans had crossed the prairies to the
Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana in the 1870s, riding on the meteoric
growth of the range cattle industry. The range cattle business collapsed in
the terrible winter of 1886, and Indian resistance had largely disintegrated
before the “battle” of Wounded Knee took the lives of hundreds of
unarmed men, women, and children in the snows of 1890. The army had
successfully intercepted the last holdouts among the Nez Perces before
they could reach freedom in Alberta, and the last bands of Apache
guerrillas before they could reach freedom in Mexico. By 1900, the
railroads were already advertising package tours to Santa Fe and Denver,
on stylish posters promising wayside glimpses of the Vanishing Race
riding painted ponies.

The glory days were over. In less than a century, Americans had
exhausted the frontier that had given them identity and purpose as a new,
self-defining state. But with the pacification of the prairies the myth-
making intensified, no longer tethered to any visible reality. Theodore
Roosevelt was swept into the White House as much by the myths woven
by his popular historical series, *The Winning of the West*, as by his mythic
1898 cavalry charge up San Juan Hill. A vigorous proponent of Anglo-
Saxon superiority, Roosevelt helped introduce an idealization of the Indian as a worthy adversary: bloody and cruel, but intelligent enough to have posed a real challenge to the invaders. As Indians diminished as a threat, so they grew in nobility.

Ernest Thompson Seton introduced Americans to the boy-scout movement at this time, joining forces with the Dakota Sioux physician and author, Charles Eastman. Eastman had been the attending physician at Wounded Knee, a harrowing episode he describes in his autobiographical work, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, as his moral epiphany. His response was unconsciously subversive; he set out, with Seton, to turn white American youth into Indians. Besides helping Seton incorporate “Indian lore” and Indian woodcraft into the American scouting program, largely drawing on his own Minnesota upbringing, Eastman popularized the Indian-theme summer camps which eventually became a routine of East Coast childhood.

As Europe prepared for war, Joseph Dixon published his immensely popular photo-essay, *The Vanishing Race*, which is still in print. It purported to document “the last great Indian council” on the prairies, in reality an encampment of elderly veterans of the last Plains battles of the 1870s meticulously staged by Dixon and financed by the Wanamaker Company in Philadelphia. Dixon’s book presented the Indian as the defining ideal of the American nation: clever, pragmatic, and generous, but a formidable and relentless adversary if provoked. By the time Americans entered the European war in 1917, they had become intoxicated with the Indian Warrior ideal, both as a representation of the worthy adversary and as their own *alter ego*. In a recent dissertation, my student Diane Camurat traced the use of Indian imagery in American regimental insignia, while I have shown the extraordinarily high expectations that the American press and the Army placed on the thousands of young Indian men who enlisted.²

When I got my draft notice, I had no idea where Vietnam was. I had to look it up on a map. I had never seen or heard of a Vietnamese before and I had no idea what the war was all about. My mother had wanted me to stay out of it and I could have, because I was the sole surviving son in my family and my parents were old. But I didn’t want to stay out of it. I wanted to go. I wanted to get away from the reservation and I wanted to see what it was like to be in battle. I had heard

² In the basement of Dartmouth College’s Baker Library, where I write these lines, there is a memorial to Howard Lines, *mort pour la liberté de la France* in 1916 as a volunteer ambulance corpsman. The center of the display is a swatch of frayed canvas taken from the vehicle Lines was driving when killed by German fire. The regimental insignia is an Indian head with a flowing Sioux war bonnet.
stories all my life – from my father and my uncles and cousins. … When it was
time to go, I had talked myself into believing that I would go into the jungle as
a Sioux warrior. That is how I planned to survive, as my people had always done.
Not as an American GI, but as a Lakota. (Guy Dull Knife, quoted in Starita,
1995: 274–75)
For me, it started with John Wayne as Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. I
wanted to be a marine after seeing that movie. I knew from the old stories that
the Anishinaabe were warriors and my family expected me to join the service. As
long as I was going to be a warrior, I wanted to be the best. (Northrup, 1997: 156)

During the Vietnam War era, American Indians were more likely to enlist
voluntarily than either African Americans or whites, and, among those
who enlisted, more likely to justify their enlistment in terms of family and
cultural traditions, and gaining self-respect in their own communities
(Holm, 1994: 21). While African Americans were highly stressed by being
in white-led military units, struggling to cope with racism and, in many
cases, trying to earn whites’ respect, Indians were more stressed by the
expectations of their relatives at home (Egendorf et al., 1981: 52; Holm,

Young Indian men of the 1910s wanted to be “modern,” as social
historians Alexandra Harmon and Peter Iverson have shown (Harmon,
1999; Iverson, 1985). They *were* modern. Scores of family photos in my
collection, scrounged from friends or discovered at second-hand
bookshops over the years, attest to this truth. While white Americans
cherished the images of savage antiquity marketed by Edward Curtis and
other commercial photographers, most of whose images were studio shots
of young Indian men and women wearing their grandparents’ outfits, the
photographs treasured by Indians themselves tell a tale of Ford coupés
and raccoon coats, baseball tournaments and church socials. The Lakota
author Barbara Means, a neighbor and friend of many years when I still
taught at the University of Washington, had a favorite snapshot of her
great-uncle, dogged out like Hopalong Cassidy in a smart white Stetson
hat and cowboy boots with half a cigarette dangling from his lips, for all
the world another glamorous silent-film star. He made sure to get his
Model T in the frame. Scott Momaday included a remarkably similar
photo of *his* father in his superb autobiography, *The Names*.

Most Indian men who enlisted in 1917 spoke English, played baseball,
watched the silents, and were saving money for an automobile to impress
their “girls.” They had been to Federal Indian schools, or to the regular
public schools, and hundreds had been to college. Indeed, the great
majority enlisted directly out of their schools and colleges in a great public demonstration of Americanism and patriotism orchestrated, to no small degree, by Indian political leaders and white Indian-rights activists. Indians’ first modern war was a commitment to being modern and American.  

What could have prepared Indian men for the terrifying immobility of the sodden trenches, the total atomization of humans and horses in an endless rain of high explosives, insane infantry charges in which hundreds of thousands perished within minutes – and the survivors lay screaming for days hung up in the barbed wire? No one was prepared for such mad and useless destruction. But American Indians suffered a peculiar and unique burden of cultural nostalgia: their grandfathers’ stories.  

What refuge exists for peoples crushed by invaders, whose methods of total war and pervasive social engineering are unthinkably vast and cruel? A fragile refuge exists in a glorious imagined past, but it is a suicidal redoubt, a land of witchery. Those who sit by the fire may warm themselves with conjured memories of physical power and glory, in the dream of rising anew as a nation. But those who must fight bear a double burden of inflated expectations on their way to the slaughter – and a profound silence when they return home shattered by the reality. Having been told from childhood that they were once great warriors and that warriors are mighty, proud, and do not cry, what do real warriors do when they need to express their terror, sadness and anger? So much the worse for them if their grandfathers’ dreams are reinforced by the mass media, and by their oppressors.  

These thoughts came to me while re-reading the Gaelic tribal war stories known as the Ulster Cycle, recorded some time in the ninth or tenth centuries and probably composed several hundred years earlier than that. The daring exploits of Cu Chulainn and the Ulster warriors in raids upon their neighbors’ cattle pens and palisaded farms were no doubt rendered increasingly dramatic in generations of retelling. Who can literally believe that 1,400 warriors perished in a brawl over who should carve up MacDatho’s roasted pig, or that the ensuing battle was so terrible that “seven streams of blood and gore burst through the seven doors of MacDatho’s hostel”?  

It is easy to imagine how much of this embellishment was aimed at thrilling Gaelic audiences a millennium ago. But we must also consider

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3 Although American Indians had fought in every previous American war including the Civil War and Spanish–American War, Indian participation in the First World War was proportionally much greater (by a factor of at least ten) and involved all tribes.
strategic exaggeration on the part of the Gaelic bards who told these stories to the foreign monks who first recorded them, not to mention the great delight the Irish have taken in sustaining this national literature in more recent centuries as an act of collective identity and defiance of English rule. “You may have us in your power today,” the old stories say, “but we have been terrifying warriors, and someday we shall be so again. So tread carefully, or you’ll see!”

“Your father wasn’t wounded in the war, but he came back damaged. At first I didn’t notice it, I thought he was getting better all the time, but once he found out I was carrying, the holes in him opened up. I think he was afraid what he might pass on to you. I don’t know. All I know is, the memories of war chewed his mind away.” I wished I could tell her to stop. I could see it, all too clearly: my father’s skull empty and gleaming, licked clean from the inside. I heard the sound my mother made when she cracked bones and ate the marrow. (Power, 1994: 142)

At the University of South Dakota, I find a crumpled leatherette booklet published by the Indian Office to commemorate the Indian veterans of the Second World War. A drawing of a traditional Plains scaffold-burial is on the title page, with the caption “Burial of a Brave.” A painted warrior stands by the scaffold shooting an arrow into the sky.

Walking point, Guy Dull Knife “pretended he was a Sioux Warrior in another place and time” and concentrated on what Samuel Hynes describes as “killing well” (Starita, 1995: 283–84). In Philip Red Eagle’s novel Red Earth, Clifford Goes-First learns that he can only survive mentally by taking his nickname “Chief” seriously. He takes pride in walking point and assuming the unofficial leadership of his platoon, banishing the impersonality and randomness of modern war. By asserting his own personal power and exercising individual choices in the face of chaos, his life and suffering gains significance, and he persuades himself that he can save the lives of his comrades and defeat death.

Hynes (1998) argues that combat experience is powerfully mediated by the existence – or the illusion – of personal significance. As wars grew increasingly mechanized and pyrotechnic, soldiers no longer thought of themselves as independent actors whose conduct had any real bearing on the outcome of conflicts. Since 1914, the focus of war narratives has shifted from courageous killing to miserable dying, from fearlessness in combat to the heroism of somehow enduring and managing to survive. That this is not merely a Western phenomenon is suggested by Sakurai’s narrative of Japan’s first mechanized war, Human Bullets, which extols heroism while dwelling on the terrible deaths of Japanese soldiers from Russian artillery and enfilading machine-gun fire.
Modern war challenges romantic and comforting idealizations of an age when war was “a game of skill and all the players were skillful” (Hynes, 1998: 143). The popular heroes of modern wars are soldiers who succeeded in returning to daring, even chivalrous forms of single combat, such as airmen during the First World War, tankmen during the Second World War, or the Special Forces in Vietnam. These are the skilled few for whom individualism actually counts, and death is useful and honorable. For soldiers caught in the ponderous machinery of a ground war, heroism is an intoxicating antidote to abject terror and meaninglessness.

All Indians were nicknamed “chief” in modern wars (e.g. Adair, 1947: 7; U.S. Office of Indian Affairs, 1945: 3). Goaded by stereotypical expectations, it is not surprising that Indians sought validation in a traditional ideal of warriorhood. Indian soldiers assumed risky assignments, such as scouting and walking point, because they felt that their individual skills and courage actually mattered, the way it had mattered for their grandfathers. They sometimes took ears and scalps, not as war trophies in a triumphal sense, but because they felt that “After a battle, you are always supposed to bring back proof to your chief that you have been a good warrior” (Guy Dull Knife, quoted in Starita, 1995: 284).

Indian soldiers who found refuge in a warrior self-image helped reinforce racial stereotypes, and that probably led to more Indians being assigned to hazardous combat roles (Barsh, 1991): a vicious circle of defense to stress resulting in greater stress, as Red Earth’s Clifford Goes-First painfully learns. When soldiers went home, their idealization as warriors was recognized and celebrated by their families and communities. Plains Indian tribes organized scalp dances to welcome home their veterans, Pacific Northwest peoples held potlatches.

I was a hero to my people. They didn’t have much to give, but wherever I went, they would stop me on the street and slap me on the back and stuff dollar bills in my pockets. A lot of them were strangers. They really respect the uniform on the reservation and they were proud of me and all the Lakota who had served in Vietnam. (Guy Dull Knife, quoted in Starita, 1995: 292)

Traditional celebrations honor individual heroism, not the mere act of survival in a modern war. Indian veterans are expected to have glorious tales to tell – personal war honors to recite, or have recited by the elders. The silence and shame of modern veterans, particularly in the aftermath of Vietnam, is a contradiction. At the climax of the celebration, there is nothing much to say.

Indian veterans returned home to powerlessness and poverty on their reservations, and to border-town racism. Federal lawmakers were
Russel Lawrence Barsh

preoccupied with budget balancing after the World Wars. In the 1920s, and again in the 1950s, Indians were forced to fight for the right to maintain and develop their distinct communities while the Congress talked of dismantling the Indian Office and abolishing Indian reservations. The current national policy of “self-determination” was only adopted in 1975 following a wave of Vietnam-era Indian militancy. For most Indian veterans, then, coming home meant the loss of individual rights and freedom: being “bossed around” by federal bureaucrats, having to get approval to access their bank accounts, use their lands, or make up a will. One of the strongest impressions reported by Second World War veterans was that they could no longer legally buy or drink liquor (Adair, 1947).

The powerlessness and marginality of reservation life probably intensified men’s feelings that going to war would increase, rather than reduce their personal significance. For the Indian soldier, as opposed to most of his white comrades, war service offered the possibility of becoming more than an anonymous statistic. It was very important to come home a man who had broken the shackles of Indian Office colonialism and gained individual power and competence.

The liberating force of Indian war service was reinforced between 1919 and 1945 by the strong feelings, shared by Indian communities and the wider American public, that Indians made good soldiers, and helped win a “good war.” In one early fictionalized account of a veterans’ reunion pow-wow, a young Pueblo contemplates the regenerative power of modern warriorhood:

I think about my grandfather, an all old time Indians. Seem like they all comen back, dancen with us, all just Indians, and not no white men. Like all those old peoples comen on the Spirit Road going across the sky, touchen those Oklahoma hills, and be-en happy with us. (Austin, 1927: 369)

But how does the warrior become an ordinary farmer or tradesman again?

Warrior idealization was no longer an effective emotional defense in the 1960s, when veterans returned to a country torn by opposition to the war. Indian veterans were angry and confused at being treated like monsters by the foreign country for which they believed they had been fighting. Red Earth’s Clifford Goes-First returns from Nam a hero to his platoon, but the psychological armor of warriorhood does him no good back home in South Dakota. After ten years of brooding and alienation, he puts a .45 automatic to his head and ends his emotional pain.

“We don’t fight for them,” the dying Jimmy Johnny tells his North Vietnamese captors in Philip Red Eagle’s Red Earth, “We fight for us. My
Grandpa fought in World War One, my dad and uncles in World War Two and Korea, and I’m here. We fight for honor.”

How does a culture of defiance based on an oral literature of glory and courage cope with real contemporary violence? “Survived the war,” Jim Northrup wrote after his 1966 combat tour as a Marine in Vietnam, “but was having trouble surviving the peace” (Northrup, 1993: 8). “We all died in Nam” (Te Cube, 1999: 1).

And then there was the other thing. He would close his eyes and the ghosts of those women and children would be walking toward him, crying and moaning through the darkness that has taken over his mind. He was never going to forgive the white officers for making him kill those women and children. He was never going to find peace for letting them threaten him into it. No peace. ... His Grandfather had talked a lot about honor. Honor in serving. Honor in being an Indian man, an Indian warrior. ... There was no honor in killing women and children. (Red Eagle, 1997: 82)

Vietnam utterly shattered the ego-defensive myth of warriorhood and re-opened the wounds of being a colonized and marginalized people. A dead German on a European battlefield was a dead white man. He was an Other. A dead Vietnamese villager was simply too familiar. One of Jim Northrup's short stories is told by a former Marine who cannot shake the memory of a North Vietnamese sniper he had stalked and killed.

The asshole turned and fired at me. I remember the muzzle flash and the bullet going by together. I fired again as I moved closer. Through a little opening in the brush I could see what looked like a pile of rags, bloody rags. I fired another round into his head. We used to do that all the time – one in the head to make sure. The .762 bullet knocked his hat off. When the hat came off hair came spilling out. It was a woman. ... Her hair looked like grandma’s hair used to look. (Northrup, 1993: 28; similarly Starita, 1995: 282)

In a terrible alchemy, the defensive psychic armor of warriorhood was smashed by painful memories on Indians’ own oppression. “Northern Lights” is Muscogee Creek poet Joy Harjo’s Vietnam-era version of the Johnny Cash World War Two ballad, “Ira Hayes”:

He was killing himself he thought; each shot rigged his spine to hell. There was no way to get out, he was in it, and he knew the warrior code said nothing about the wailing of children in the dark. In Yuma, in the hangover of a dream of his

4 Obviously this could have been the reaction of many American Indian Soldiers in the Pacific Theatre of the 1940s or the Korean front. But I have only encountered it with Vietnam-era veterans. Perhaps the Indians who served in Vietnam were better prepared to see the contradictions than their fathers. Or perhaps it was because the Vietnamese were not only brown people, but (as Guy Dull Knife recalled) they were also plainly tribal people.
mother beading a blanket in his honor he tore the medals from his pack and pawned them for a quart. He snuffed his confusion between honor and honor with wine, became an acrobat of pain in the Indian bars of Kansas.

Ira Hayes, a Pima Marine, is immortalized in bronze at Arlington National Cemetery as one of the soldiers raising the American flag at Iwo Jima. After receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor, Hayes returned to his Arizona reservation, pawned his medal, drank steadily, and was found beaten and bloody, lying dead in a ditch by the side of the highway. The Johnny Cash ballad turned on the irony of Hayes surviving the carnage at Iwo Jima only to be beaten dead, just a drunk Indian, by some anonymous, never-to-be-punished white toughs. Harjo has tapped a deeper and more ominous subterranean river of self-hatred and depression among those Indian veterans who have won glory in white men’s eyes only by behaving inhumanly from an Indian perspective. The worst part of it was being unable to explain the contradiction and pain to the elders.

In *Fools Crow*, Blackfoot novelist James Welch has recreated the inner world of a nineteenth-century warrior who matures into a spiritual leader on the eve of the catastrophic destruction and confinement of his society. The eponymous protagonist has devoted his life to combat – but it is combat of a stylized, ritual nature that takes place largely on the outskirts of ordinary life. It is a test of individual wills and strength of principle, from which the surviving combatants learn to appreciate the fleeting joy of human existence. It is an aesthetic of combat that could easily have been appreciated by traditional Japanese novelists, such as Mishima, Soseki, and Tanazaki, whose ideals were deeply rooted in the Tokugawa era. It is combat, but it is not war. Fools Crow lives to see a real war. It drives him mad.

In 1919, twenty-eight Lakota Sioux men came home from the war to the relatively integrated Pass Creek district on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation – one-fifth of all Pass Creek Sioux men under the age of forty. While they were overseas, beef prices had soared. Some of their fathers and brothers briefly prospered, purchased additional land and equipment, and went deeply into debt (Barsh, 1987). Two years after the Armistice the inflated cattle market collapsed, and Lakota commercial producers went broke, sold their land and stock, or leased whatever remained of their cattle operations to white neighbors. Just as Lakota veterans began a new life, the reservations slid back into abject poverty.

Pass Creek’s veterans were considerably more educated than other Lakota men, a reflection of the crucial role of Federal Indian schools such as Haskell and Carlisle in promoting enlistments. Only one-fifth of Pass
Creek Sioux men over the age of 40 had remained in school past grade six, compared to 38 percent of non-veterans under the age of 40, and 62 percent of veterans. Veterans’ schooling and war service gave them higher expectations than hardscrabble farming and ranching in the economically depressed northern Plains. They also had difficulty finding good land. Nearly one-third of Pass Creek’s veterans were still living with their parents five years after the war, compared with one-tenth of Lakota non-veterans their age (U.S. Office of Indian Affairs, 1924). Some of the others had married older women, widows with land and livestock of their own. While two-fifths of Pass Creek veterans were engaged in at least some farming by 1924, comparable to all other Pass Creek men, one-third of them pursued trades or earned wages in town—much greater than other Lakota men their age (21 percent) or older (10 percent).

By farming as many acres as other men their age, and working more jobs, Pass Creek veterans managed to rival their peers’ modest wealth, whether measured by mainstream American standards such as ownership of frame houses (12 percent of veterans and 14 percent of non-veterans), or the traditional Lakota standard of horse ownership (veterans owned an average of 9 horses and non-veterans owned an average of 11). They were resentful and angry, however. One percent of the older Pass Creek men were identified by Indian Office field workers as “no good,” agitators, or jailbait. Four percent of the younger non-veterans fell into that category, but one-fourth of the veterans. None of the veterans could match the success stories of non-veterans such as Henry Standing Bear, Jr., who at thirty was already a lawyer, realtor, and landlord in the town of Martin, or Owen Peck, who by the age of twenty-seven was farming 300 acres and raising 180 hogs.

Guy Dull Knife Sr. and Hobart Keith were among the Pass Creek men who survived the war. Guy stayed home and helped his father farm until he married in 1925, briefly worked as a rodeo cowboy, and finally pitched a tent on his wife’s land to begin farming modestly on his own in 1927 (Starita, 1995: 243–46). After entering tribal electoral politics in the 1930s, Guy represented his reservation district for 20 years, and as a traditional yuwipi ceremonialist he emerged as one of the opponents of the violent Dick Wilson “dictatorship” in the 1970s. Hobart was the only Pass Creek veteran that Indian Office field staff predicted “should make good.” Hobart taught himself law and eventually gained notoriety as an irascible and incorruptible tribal judge, with a demeanor evocative of W. C. Fields. It was Hobart’s order to jail tribal president Wilson, for refusing to account in court for election tampering, that helped trigger the 1973 AIM occupation of Wounded Knee. I vividly remember meeting him at his
Pine Ridge home in the spring of that year, when I was still a law student. He was brilliant, funny, unforgettable, and never mentioned the Great War in the few years I knew him. I will always regret that I did not yet know how to ask.

I am sitting with Ray in the living room of his uncompleted house on the reserve, overlooking the lake. Amidst the cast-off children’s clothes and broken toys, a television screen is flashing brightly with interspersed images of the first night of American bombing of Baghdad. Clean-shaven young men in clean uniforms sit at computer monitors, lit red and green. Cut to grainy target images. Cut to grainy explosions of dust and debris. Cut to the deck of an aircraft carrier scampering fighter-bombers that disappear like fireflies in the sky.

Bill comes in the back door and crosses heavily behind us leaning on a thick walking-stick. His legs have been held together with metal pins since he took the wrong turn in a rice paddy twenty years ago. I do not look up, but I feel his anger. “Fuckin’ kids,” he growls after a scornful silence, “think it’s a fuckin’ video game.”

I hear his boots drag along the linoleum, then the slap of the kitchen door. We watch Baghdad blossom with explosive white flowers. The Persian Gulf was not a video game. It was a rock video. And hundreds of young American Indian men and women got to be in it.

We went into their country and killed them and took land that wasn’t ours. Just like the whites did to us. I helped load ville after ville and pack it off to the resettlement area. Just like they moved us to the rez’ [reservation]. We shouldn’t have done that. Browns against browns. That screwed me up, you know. (Holm, 1994: 24)

Guy Dull Knife had not been in Nam long before he realized “that many of the men in his unit were no longer in their right mind and he wasn’t too sure about himself, either” (Starita, 1995: 282). American Indians were not alone in developing feelings of guilt, intensified by feelings of having been betrayed by their own country. Such feelings distinguish the manifestation of stress disorder in Vietnam War veterans, compared to survivors of other conflicts (Hynes, 1998). More American soldiers died of suicide or recklessly self-inflicted violence within a few years of coming home than had died on Asian battlefields (Brende, 1983) and the toll on Indian communities was particularly severe. The incidence of chronic and disabling illness on reservations, already high (Barsh, 1990), was aggravated when veterans returned with stress disorders that slowly undermined their health. Clinical symptoms of combat stress such as intrusive thoughts and compromised immune systems have persisted for
50 years among veterans of the Second World War (Lee et al., 1995; Boscarino, 1997; Wang and Mason, 1999) so the reverberations of Vietnam in Indian country will not soon fade away.

It has been estimated that one out of ten American Indians living today is a veteran, three times the proportion of veterans in the rest of the United States population. This means that roughly one-third of all adult Indian men have seen military service. From the First World War to Vietnam, furthermore, Indians were more likely to be sent to the front and assigned combat duty (Barsh, 1991). A recent survey of Indians who served during the Vietnam War found that 42 percent had been in heavy combat, 27 percent had combat-related disabilities, and 25 percent had sought professional help for stress disorders (Holm, 1994). I have met very few men my age in Indian politics who have not experienced combat.

One time he awoke in a state of terror, sweating like crazy, and he actually heard himself screaming. Jennifer, the woman he lived with at the time, was pulling her shit out of the dresser drawers and closets. All she said as she left was, “Goddamn you. Goddamn you.” She cruised out the door and out of his life. His relationships were not taking the stress. He was not taking the stress. All in all, it sucked. (Red Eagle, 1997: 45)

The Fall of Saigon was already becoming a repressed public memory when Leslie Silko, a young Laguna Pueblo poet, published her first and most influential book. *Ceremony* did not attract the critical acclaim of *House Made of Dawn*, which had earned Scott Momaday a Pulitzer Prize a decade earlier and made him the country’s first American Indian “man of letters.” Rather, Silko’s prose-and-poem fable about the spiritual journey of a disillusioned and self-destructive young Second World War veteran was the *Catcher in the Rye* of a generation of young American Indians whose cousins, friends, and lovers had perished in the jungles of southeast Asia. It was one of the defining events of the 1970s for American Indians, as significant as Wounded Knee II and the occupation of Alcatraz.

Like so many of Silko’s relatives and readers, Tayo comes home from an incomprehensibly vicious war overseas, only to realize that the war continues silently, slowly and unacknowledged within his own community, in people’s souls. Feeling depressed and angry, confronted by his relatives’ silence, inaction, and self-blame, Tayo drifts towards alcohol, madness, and death until he meets the spiritual healer, Betonie, an elder who doubts his own powers. “And so I wonder,” Betonie muses as the novel reaches its ambiguous turning point, “I wonder what good Indian ceremonies can do against the sickness which comes from their wars, their bombs, their lies?”
The old man shook his head. “That is the trickery of the witchcraft,” he said. “They want us to believe all evil resides with the white people. Then we will look no further to see what is happening. They want us to separate ourselves from the white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place.” (Silko, 1977: 139)

What exactly was Betonie’s insight? That Indians are the authors of their own holocaust, and have always possessed the powers necessary to free themselves? That their oppression – the witchery – is really an idea (materialism, anti-humanism, sociopathy), rather than a race or a people? That Indians and Europeans can wage a common struggle against the ideas that oppress them both?

I read Ceremony when it first appeared in 1977. It seemed to cut directly to the heart of our confusion, and I shared it with my Indian students. Two years later Leslie visited my university campus to give a series of readings, and we exchanged ideas about war, oppression, and liberation. Ever since that time, I have been perplexed at the extent to which my students overlook the importance of war in Leslie’s book. “Oh yeah, that’s right, I forgot; the guy was in some war or something wasn’t he?”

Betonie’s insight was about war. Everything that oppresses us is interconnected. War is only an oozing sore, a painful boil with its pus and blood and sliced flesh. It is the most painful, terrifying aspect of oppression that continues in the everyday life of the oppressed and which (unlike depression, self-hatred, self-abuse, the neglect and terrorization of children, the mistrust and suspicion) we glorify, and celebrate, before we look the other way.

Ceremony was about a personal journey in the face of the silence. The silence continued.

In Red Earth, written 20 years later, my Dakota Sioux friend Philip Red Eagle outlines another kind of post-traumatic vision quest.

Home from the jungles of Vietnam, Raymond Crow-Belt and Clifford Goes-First have ghosts. Raymond’s ghost is the Vietnamese bar girl he loved, and lost horribly when she was shot as a suspected Viet Cong informer. Clifford’s ghost is the ville he rubbed out, the women and children he killed for no reason except that he was told to kill them. Raymond learns to use his grandfather’s yuwipi, the shaking tent ceremony in which the physical world and the spirit world briefly become one, and flings himself back in time to warn Phuong before she makes the fatal New Year visit to her home village. Returning to the present, Raymond has again lost Phuong, but regained his lost honor and his power.
Clifford is less fortunate. He has lost his sense of personal honor so completely that he cannot master his grandfather's power. His spirit survives in a fellow Indian Marine, Stoney, who inadvertently discovers his own power years after the war, jumps back in time, and saves their platoon from an air bombardment. All the circles of men's lives come together in an affirmation of the transcendent unity of being. There is power, there is wisdom, and there are real miracles, but there is no "order" to it all.

"Grandpa says miracles are happening all the time. Not like white miracles. Indian stuff. Every day, in every thing. If you look hard and listen, you begin to know things. To understand things. Ya' know! Like here. What does this mean?" Clifford raised his right arm to the sky and swept it around to include the wretched country they were standing in. The one that had done so much to ruin his life. (Red Eagle, 1997: 130)

Red Earth broods about men's struggle to find a kind of personal honor in pointless suffering. Jimmy Johnny dies bravely, and the NVA officer who respectfully offers him his final smoke also dies bravely just hours later, after receiving a final smoke from Raymond: a completed circle of honorable behavior in the midst of a cruel war. Men may die horribly, randomly, and uselessly, but at least they can say that they behaved well. War does not often give us choices about how we behave, however. Men in Red Earth act spontaneously to protect their buddies, and they pay for it with their limbs and lives. In the final analysis the war is not a field of personal honor, but rather a rite of passage into a greater spiritual mystery that non-combatants cannot fathom or comprehend. The grandfathers of Red Earth's protagonists were also combat veterans, and they achieved power and became holy men after their wars. Pain and sadness are a kind of deep knowledge that can be drawn upon to gain power.

He could almost hear Clifford say, "Don't look down, Stoney. It's not a man anymore. Move! Move! There's no time for tears out here, man. Save yer self. They're gone man! They're gone man." (Red Eagle, 1997: 117)

To my Western-trained side, the indigenous cosmologies I learned about in my travel and work appeared hopelessly paradoxical: endlessly circular and repetitious, while at the same time pervasively willful and capricious. The Judeo-Christian universe, in contrast, is finely tuned clockwork, marred to a small but manageable extent by the localized effect of human (and satanic) will. Whatever is not orderly and clock-like, in the European philosophical legacy, must be unreality, untruth, or insanity. There is something fundamentally wrong, in the clock-like cosmos, with what may be terrible and unpredictable. We see injustice in what is
unpredictable, and thus inexplicable and unpreventable. We cry out angrily at the heavens, demanding a return to order.

Living in direct dependence on chaotic ecological processes, most especially in the Prairies and the North where weather conditions can be particularly irregular, indigenous Americans could discern a degree of structure in the universe without conceiving of any predominance of order. The structure they perceived was social rather than mechanical in nature: the efforts of all beings to build relationships, and form families and communities, to cooperate and reciprocate, to compete for status and influence. Observation and experience with ecosystems made it plain to them that the underlying structure of the universe was not an Order but a Process, characterized by individual will and energized by social feelings such as love, generosity, and loyalty. Thus it was true that everything is circular and repetitious in the sense that all beings endlessly re-enact the same kinds of feelings and relationships. Over the long term, in the broadest view of time and existence, the outcomes are largely the same. Within the minute span of a human lifetime, however, anything could happen. And every improbable, inconceivable, and amazing thing does happen, whence the stories which form the legacy of all our catastrophes and pain.

In his excellent critical history of military psychiatry, Richard Gabriel concludes (as did First World War veteran William March in his novel Company K, and Second World War veteran and literary critic Paul Fussell in his autobiographical memoir Wartime) that the only psychic survivors of wars are those who were already insane before they left home. There is more truth to this apparently depressing conclusion than a reflection on the monstrous, chaotic absurdity of war. Indirectly, it acknowledges that a philosophy of cosmic chaos can be a powerful protective factor, and an effective post-war healer of traumatic stress.

Meskwaki poet Ray Young Bear (1996: 73) has recalled learning the healing power of a less-than-orderly cosmology from his grandmother:

I looked past the frosted glass and beyond the silhouetted trees on the hilly horizon, peering into the rose-spotted clouds. In the proper frame of mind, I saw the First Earth as a fireball and then a vast ocean previous to the Black Eagle Child Creation. “Anything that we do here,” she continued, “our successes and failures, have all been done before by the Supernaturals.” I came to understand that in emulating their previous lives, through the instructions given in the Principal Religion, the Black Eagle Child people were reenacting Remnants of the First Earth. In this reenactment was found a continuation, a strengthening in a largely unpredictable cosmos.

I was awarded six battle stars during my military career for being in major battles from Iwo Jima to the Korean War. I was never wounded or shot but was missed
by inches, and missed being captured by thirty minutes or less. I was very lucky to have gotten through that time. Maybe because I believe in the traditional Navajo ways and felt that the Great Spirit was protecting me. My parents, both very traditional Navajos, had ceremonies for me using clothes that I had worn before I left home to go in the service. These ceremonies protected my well-being, so I could survive. (Navajo Marine Thomas Begay, quoted in Kawano, 1990: 29)

Just before he died on Ie Island, popular war correspondent Ernie Pyle filed a story on a pow-wow organized by Navajos serving with the First Marine Division while they prepared for the invasion of Okinawa:

The Red Cross furnished some colored cloth and paint to stain their faces. They made up the rest of their Indian costumes from chicken feathers, sea shells, coconuts, empty ration cans and rifle cartridges. Then they did their own native ceremonial chants and dances out their under the palm trees with several thousand Marines as a grave audience. In their chant they asked the great gods in the sky to sap the Japanese of their strength for this blitz. They put the finger of weakness on the Japs. And then they ended their ceremonial chant by singing the Marine Corps song in Navajo. I asked [Navajo code-talker] Joe Gatewood if he really felt their dance had something to do with the ease of our landing and he said the boys did believe so and were very serious about it, himself included. “I knew nothing was going to happen to us,” Joe said, “for on the way up here there was a rainbow over the convoy and I knew then everything would be all right.” (U.S. Office of Indian Affairs, 1945: 12–13)

Some things did go wrong. Many Indian Marines died on the beachhead and in the bombed-out rice fields of Okinawa. As much as it served the purposes of national war propaganda to promote the image of Indian warriorhood – and a kind of nostalgic, half-serious idea that the gods were fighting in the American cause – it served the emotional needs of Indian riflemen to believe that they somehow had a power over their destiny on the battlefield. Some of them could not fully block out the reality, however. Here is the testimony of one of the young Marines that Ernie Pyle watched dancing before the Okinawa landing, recorded 30 years later:

What I remember is carrying messages from headquarters to the front line, night and day, for eighty-two days. I lost friends in Okinawa. When I came home from the war, my family had two-day and two-night healing ceremonies, as well as two squaw dances, to help me get well, but I am still sick. (Navajo Marine Deswood R. Johnson, Sr., in Kawano 1990: 53)

Two-thirds of the Indian Vietnam veterans surveyed by Holm (1994) found traditional healing ceremonies helpful in mitigating post-combat stress. For many of them, ceremonies probably reinforced the psychic defense they had already adopted to survive in combat. For others, like
Deswood Johnson a generation earlier, the veneer of confidence in the power of ceremonies to restore harmony had already been demolished.

Traumatic stress can produce a complete break with the past, like dying and being reborn as a different person (Brison, 1999). Eric Leed (1979) suggests that a war can become an initiation rite for an entire generation, reshaping its collective identity. Veterans of the trench warfare of 1914–18 agreed on the absurdity of the old aristocratic order of Europe, and returned home as revolutionaries of both the Left and the Right. They grew sentimental, bitter, a mass of undisciplined anger directed against the old order, the state, all churches, and all ideologies— in sum, anyone who had not shared in their suffering (Leed, 1979: 198). At the same time they were trapped in a descending spiral of continual, ever-deeper mourning as more became depressed, suicidal, or psychotic, or died prematurely. While opposed to state institutions, they were also habituated to obedience and collective action, which made them vulnerable to the appeal of charismatic authoritarian leaders such as Hitler. Dependency on external leadership has been identified as a clinical issue in studies of Vietnam veterans as well (Shalit, 1988: 146). Vietnam veterans also reportedly tend to be overprotective, indifferent, or violent fathers (Harkness, 1993).

Non-Indian observers argued that service in the First and Second World Wars had strengthened Indians’ respect for white Americans, and desire to become like them (Adair, 1947; Austin, 1927; Barsh, 1991). The flip side was the intense resentment of Indian veterans at conditions back home on “the rez.” There is some evidence that Vietnam veterans as a whole became more active politically than others of their generation (Jennings and Markus, 1976). Indian veterans such as Jim Northrup and Guy Dull Knife were drawn to the American Indian Movement (AIM), with its promise of radical change and liberation. Holm’s (1994) survey of Indian Vietnam War veterans found that a majority were suffering from a combination of depression, anger, intrusive thoughts and alcoholism. Half of them were unemployed, and the proportion of men living in urban areas had doubled. A pattern of anger, urbanization, and unemployment is consistent with the emergence of AIM militancy in cities such as Denver, Oakland, and Minneapolis in the 1960s. The most visible legacy of Vietnam, in Indian America, was the emergence of an activist generation. Not nearly so visible, but also transformative, was the growing alienation within families, the loss of sense of warmth and trust in the existence of love in the universe, all of which struck at the core of indigenous cosmologies and ideals.
I am sitting on the steps of Alan’s three-room ranch house in the tribal housing project. It is distinguished from its neighbors, lined up tightly but crookedly on either side of a dirt track, by a swath of flaking red paint. Perhaps there had been a change of heart. Perhaps the paint had been scavenged from a tribal construction project, and a few brushfuls were all that remained in the can. Perhaps it was trick played on Alan by his nephews.

I have asked Alan about his grandfather, who survived the carnage at Vimy Ridge. Many young Sioux men who enlisted in South Dakota were assigned to the 147th Field Artillery. Quiet, brown, speaking broken English, they were regarded as incapable of understanding and aiming the big guns, so they were placed in charge of the horses. And they went on to distinguish themselves throughout the Front by persuading horses to drag those big guns over blasted terrain and through opposing fire where no one else dared to make the attempt. In my office there is an Army Signal Corps photograph of a wild melee of horses, gun carriages, and Sioux drivers moving a massive field piece into position through a scorched pasture.

At the reservation elementary school, the names of the Sioux veterans of both world wars are memorialized on a crude cement cenotaph. At the top of the list is Alan’s grandfather. Children who were not born yet when he died have remembered his name, and know that he was a hero in the first big war fought for the white man.

I ask Alan what his grandfather told him about the war. “Nothing much that I can remember,” Alan says after a while. “Grandpa liked to go to Sturgis and hang out there with the white veterans at the Legion hall. He never spoke much about it at home.”

Alan takes a long, slow drag on his cigarette, watching his sons and nephews chase each other, screaming gleefully, around the yard.

“Nope,” he said at last, “grandpa never did say much at all about his war.” Alan reflected again, tapping out his cigarette. “Come to think of it,” he added, “dad never said much to me about his war, and I don’t say much about mine.”

High levels of anxiety and alienation among American Indian children were first reported by Gordon Macgregor (1946) in a pioneering psychometric study on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Macgregor’s team, which included Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Erik Erikson among its technical advisers, had been organized and financed by progressive New Deal-era Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, himself originally a New York social worker who began his career
working with recent immigrants in Jane Addams’ settlement-house movement. Macgregor attributed the children’s emotional distress to their families’ loss of economic independence in the 1920s, when federal mismanagement led to the collapse of Sioux ranching. Thus the Sioux were simply an extreme case of the distress suffered by most Americans during the Depression, and the solution, Macgregor argued, was more government job training and employment programs.

Macgregor acknowledged in passing that the Sioux had been engaged in continual defensive warfare from 1865 to 1890, within the memory of many reservation Sioux, and that the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee had remained “a symbol of injustice and abuse by the white man” (Macgregor, 1946: 33). He did not even mention the fact that most of the fathers, uncles, and grandfathers of the Sioux children in his sample had served in the American armed forces in two wars, although the lingering anger and emotional alienation of combat veterans was already established in American clinical psychology and counseling (Waller, 1944). Macgregor instead told Collier what Collier the progressive wanted to hear: that economic factors were the cause and cure of despair and violence among American Indians.

Studies of values and acculturation had become fashionable in post-Depression anthropology, a carryover from turn-of-the-century sociological theories about the cultural barriers to total assimilation of ethnic immigrants. Harvard and Yale each sponsored exhaustive longitudinal studies in multi-ethnic American communities. Yale’s project at Fall River, Massachusetts, followed the sociologists’ lead and concentrated on economic integration and cultural assimilation of Polish and Irish immigrants (Warner and Srole, 1945). Harvard sent its anthropology graduate students to the Navajo Reservation in northern New Mexico to study American Indian and Hispanic acculturation. Many early Harvard studies focused on American Indian veterans. Recently returned, Indian veterans were fluent in English and accustomed to answering questions posed by white authority figures, making them an excellent opportunity sample for studying culture change. On the whole, Harvard anthropologists were pleased to report, Indians’ war experience “had a positive effect upon acculturation” (Vogt, 1951: 98; also Adair and Vogt, 1949).

The Harvard studies presumed that the major “trauma” experienced by Indian veterans had not been the war, but learning how to cope with the alien values and beliefs of their non-Indian comrades (Vogt, 1951: 96–97). Only one paragraph was devoted to combat stress and post-traumatic psychology:
For those veterans who served in combat theaters, the strong Navaho fear of the dead and ghosts was a problem of some importance. There is little doubt that they were terrified upon first sight of dead bodies, but so far as could be discovered most of them became accustomed to such sights after a few weeks. ... To some extent the eventual adjustment made to this problem depended upon the fact that many of the Navaho veterans did not believe that the whites had ghosts or that they had witches. (Vogt, 1951: 97)

“The veterans themselves take pride in having been to war,” moreover, and “the older leaders are proud of them for having served.” This was not the case for Zuni veterans, however, who had gone to war involuntarily (Vogt, 1951: 98). Adair and Vogt did not delve further into their informants’ contrasting community roles as veterans.5

Adair and Vogt attributed the only combat stress they recognized – anxiety over corpses – to particular tribal superstitions rather than a more general human psychological response. They took no notice of the previous three decades of combat trauma studies. Was this because they assumed Navajos' intellectual and emotional inferiority? Or that stereotypically stoic Indians would ordinarily not have been disturbed by combat, in the absence of some specific cultural beliefs or taboos about death?

By this time I was used to seeing wounded and dead people. The first time I was shocked but I stayed cool because I knew the other marines were watching me. After it happened a few times, I was no longer horrified. I would look down at the dead person, Asian or American, and think – Jeez, I'm glad that's you lying there and not me. ... We recognized the look in one another’s eyes. The look that said this marine has seen the worst things imaginable. We didn’t know we were making lifelong memories. We were marines, young, strong, with a feeling of being bulletproof. It always happened to the other guy, we thought. That feeling went away with each wounded marine we loaded on a helicopter. (Northrup, 1997: 171)

At the same time that Harvard anthropologists were studying value conflicts and culture change by interviewing Navajo and Zuni veterans, George Devereux was laying the conceptual foundations of the field of cross-cultural psychiatry in psychotherapy sessions with the Indian patients at a Veterans Administration hospital. In Reality and Dream (1946) he suggested that at least some of the symptoms he observed in Indian and white veterans arose from the same underlying psychological processes.

5 I studied with Vogt when I was at Harvard in the 1960s, and he was preoccupied with a longitudinal study of Zinacantan, in Chiapas. He would not discuss his veterans' studies, and avoided meeting or speaking with American Indian students. I have often suspected that he realized how naïvely optimistic he had been in the 1940s about the positive, assimilative effects of war.
Symptoms might differ, however, because they were culturally mediated expressions of all veterans' underlying, shared distress. Thus, while the Harvard studies seem to have assumed that Indian veterans reacted in a fundamentally different way than their white comrades to combat experience, Devereux assumed that everyone was traumatized in much the same way but expressed their pain in culturally specific symptomological languages. Like Macgregor, Adair, and Vogt, however, Devereux nowhere recognized that Indians may have been predisposed to interpret combat in particular ways because of their ancestors' historical exposure to violence and oppression.

In an exhaustive ethnography of the Interior Salish (Flathead) discourse of loneliness, grief, and pity, psychiatrist Theresa O’Nell has recently challenged the cross-cultural validity of the standardized diagnostic criteria for depression derived from clinical experience with white Americans. When Salish express profound loneliness, she contends, they are participating in a traditional collective discourse of emotional investment in their group, rather than exhibiting the symptoms of a potentially immobilizing and self-destructive depression (O’Nell, 1996: 188). Salish who seem to be clinically depressed may be exhibiting culturally specific, functionally adaptive (that is, “healthy”) psychological processes. Hence, like Sow (1980), O’Nell accuses Western psychotherapy of a preoccupation with individual happiness, to the exclusion of the long-term importance of secure collective attachments.

While I believe that O’Nell’s criticism of diagnostic criteria is well taken, her study considers violence and oppression in Salish people’s past only to the extent of its role in shaping their collective perceptions of whites (O’Nell, 1996: 35). At the individual case-history level, moreover, O’Nell appears to have omitted war experience from her interviews with Salish subjects. Yet, judging from the military records and statistics I have compiled, it is likely that most of O’Nell’s informants were veterans, or the siblings or spouses of veterans.

Perhaps inadvertently, O’Nell perpetuates an invidious characterization of Indians as somehow immune to the stress and cumulative emotional effects of oppression and war. She attributes all of what appears to be depression and post-traumatic stress disorder to healthy responses to important aspects of maintaining social relations. Although she acknowledges that her Salish informants themselves feel that there is too much depression and violence in their community, she fails to reconcile their alarm with her interpretation of Salish psychology. If scholars declare that emotional distress in Indian communities is all a healthy
cultural process, it will contribute to the further silencing of veterans and their families.

I am replaying videotapes in a dark, claustrophobic back room at the Oklahoma Historical Society, surrounded by obsolete tape decks and the recorded fragments of hundreds of Indian lives. I have come here to sift those fragments for personal reflections of the Great War. A ponderous mass of archival material has accumulated in my cellar, two thousand miles away, but it is merely a dense fog obscuring the heart and pain of it all. I can tell you where American Indians fought, and where they died, what they did when they came home, what the white men who were their officers, teachers, and social workers thought of them. The men themselves have been silent.

I have heard that two Sioux veterans remain living, confined to Veterans Administration nursing homes, and I have been trying to contact their families. Meanwhile, I am struggling with eyestrain and frustration, reading the summaries of hundreds of interviews of Plains Indians recorded in the 1960s. Here and there I think I recognize a name, and hastily consult the service records I have entered on my laptop computer. He enlisted in 1917 and went directly to the trenches.

I read and re-read the written summary with growing anticipation, then anger. Tell me some Indian stories. Sing me some Indian songs. Tell me what it was like in the old days. Tell me about spirituality. Nothing about the war. Anxiously, I decide to listen to the tape. It winds along, creaking, for two hours. Nothing about the war.

At last I discover the tape of Tom Tinker, a much-decorated Osage infantryman whose brother was to die flying bombers over the Coral Sea on another continent a war away. The summary goes on for pages, but my attention is drawn at once to the phrase “war experience.” My fingers become awkward. I cannot make the videotape advance quickly enough to the time marker indicated on the typewritten page. There, finally, is Tom Tinker in his wheelchair, cheerfully speaking in a luxurious Osage drawl to the unseen interviewer.

“So, Tom, were you in the war, the big war?”
“Yep.”
“Did you go to France?”
“Yep.”
“Were you in the trenches? Did you see any action?”
“Yep.”
“How did you get up out of the trenches and charge the Germans?”
“Jes’ git up and went.”

Hastily, the interviewer changed the subject to Osage songs and dances.

During the final years of the Vietnam War, while I waited for the draft notice that never came, I spent summers with friends on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana. We hunted and worked at odd jobs, went to “sweats” with the old men, and did not let ourselves think too much about the boys who “went into the service” and did not come back. The old men did not talk much about their wars, the wars they once fought for the United States. They expected my generation to go when it was our time. It was ambiguous whether going to Vietnam was an honor or a punishment. A white punk from Hardin was acquitted for beating a Crow man to death in 1969, and afterwards the judge told him he’d better go join the service before we killed him. He went.

Grandfather believed strongly in his sons and his grandsons serving their country because he believed that Indians were loyal and courageous and honorable. Where he came from – and where so many friends and acquaintances come from – joining the armed services could also be a ticket out of poverty or trouble, a perfectly respectable action to take. (Penn, 1995: 213)

Frederick Hoxie’s (1995) recently published history of the Crows does not say much about the Crow men who fought overseas, or what they did once they returned home. Hoxie’s otherwise excellent and thorough history, like others that explore the forces shaping contemporary Indian social life, appears to view modern war as a side-show. The important events happen here on American soil. That standard makes Indian cavalry wars important, and it makes Federal Indian policy important, but overlooks what Indians learned about themselves, and became, on Western European and Asian battlefields.

Hoxie devotes a chapter to the participation of 72-year-old Crow leader Plenty Coups in the 1921 dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Advertised as representing all American Indians, the old man somberly laid his eagle-feather war bonnet and coup stick on the grave as tens of thousands of spectators watched. According to the New York Times, this gesture was “one of the outstanding features of the whole remarkable ceremony” (Hoxie, 1995: 345). For Hoxie, it remains a potent symbol of the Crows’ survival and assertion in face of American exploitation, and of their ability to manipulate stereotypes to their own advantage. He might have considered the effect of that symbol on the
young Crows who subsequently went to war – who grew up with the notion that Plenty Coups was the greatest Crow Indian that ever lived because he was a warrior, and honored by white men as a warrior.

The Grand Entry begins. Out of the gentle chaos of human voices, brass bells and tin jingles, the evening’s first drum slowly emerges, growing from soft, distant footsteps into an urgent, steady heartbeat. With the bird-pitched opening line of the lead singer, flags appear on the edge of the circle, held aloft by a uniformed honor guard. Older and younger, bent and straight, they are followed by a knot of solemn politicians, some grandfathers and grandmothers, a long line of gaudy dancers in ribbons and feathers. Their eyes remain hidden behind dark glasses as they lead the people around the arbor until the circle has been completely filled with twirling, swaying, glittering, and tinkling humanity. The flag song ends with a triumphant final thunderclap from the drum.

Instantly, there is silence, then prayer. Dignitaries speak, and honored guests are introduced. They acknowledge the veterans carrying the flags, who stand quietly, nodding, growing weary of their burdens. The squalling of infants and laughter of children punctuate the ritual of recognition and respect. The roll of introductions and handshakes continue to the occasional volley from the drummers, signaling their approval, and the jangle of dancers shifting position.

Gently, it is over. Dancers and dignitaries drift to the edge of the circle to join their families, admire babies, adjust their outfits and test their tape recorders. The old men and young men in uniforms disappear. They are not seen again while the dancing continues.

Most of the time he only came out at night. He learned how to elude the public. If he was caught out in the public, like riding the bus, or train, he would “trip” on them; little scenarios. He’d plot how he would kill them if they fucked with him. He avoided “them”: the “fuckers,” the “know nothings,” the innocent. He stayed drunk and stayed out of their way to avoid killing “them” in their stupidity. (Red Eagle, 1997: 45)

It was the inability of the honest citizen to share the point of view of the returned soldier that brought about that cynically amused silence on war subjects which confused, saddened, and sometimes frightened relatives and neighbors. The soldier was frequently called upon to exercise a wide charity toward people “on the outside,” even when they suspected him of a vague sort of disloyalty. (Three Other Soldiers, 1921: 481)

When he was curator of North American ethnology at the Museum für Völkerkunde at Vienna, my friend Christian Feest collected beaded belt
buckles. His philosophy (with which I heartily agreed) was to compile a record of the Indian material culture of today, a portrait of Indian reality that Indians themselves would recognize and enjoy. Along with rodeo gear, black felt Stetson hats, bingo cards, and election posters were Christian’s treasures, locked away securely in a metal file cabinet. Boldly painted in brightly colored clear, opaque, and iridescent Czech seed beads were the pickup trucks, bucking broncos, and pow-wow dancers of reservation life, the End of the Trail and Mickey Mouse, alongside familiar old geometric and floral images. And the flags, the flags!

American flags have been a prominent theme in American Indian pop art since the days when Plains warriors collected shot-torn regimental banners from Western battlefields as war trophies. Flag imagery grew in its significance and popularity when Philadelphia department-store magnate Rodman Wanamaker, a philanthropist and Indian-art enthusiast, organized an “expedition for American Indian citizenship” to distribute flags and a conciliatory message from President Wilson on Indian reservations from coast to coast (Barsh, 1993). A few years later America went to war and Arthur C. Parker, newly elected president of the Society of American Indians, a national lobby of Indian teachers, lawyers, and physicians, urged young Indian men to enlist at once and demonstrate their worthiness for American citizenship.

In 1913, the Indian Office hit upon organizing agricultural fairs to promote competitiveness and industriousness. Indian community leaders cooperated, and sought permission to organize purely social dances as an attraction; traditional religious dancing had been forbidden since the 1870s. The inter-tribal pow-wow was born out of this compromise, and has become the most important unifying experience for North American Indians. American flags were flown at pow-wows to demonstrate good faith, and when Indian veterans returned from Europe in 1919, they were honored with special flag songs and the task of opening and policing the celebrations. Increasingly, American flags and veterans became synonymous with treaty rights, distinctive Indianness, and the legitimacy of demanding the respect of whites.

Crow Fair is the grandmother of all Indian agricultural fairs cum pow-wows. I was at Crow Fair in 1967, when several young men had just returned from Vietnam. At daybreak one morning there was a sudden burst of shouting, drumming, and the staccato of horses’ hooves. I vaguely remember sleepily maneuvering myself through the encampment towards the commotion, which was on a small hill some distance from the dance arbor. Many older and younger men on horseback formed a ring
around a knot of dancing, singing women waving symbolic tufts of horsehair. It was an old-time scalp dance, proudly organized by the veterans’ families. The veterans stood in the circle, a bit dazed and sad and withdrawn. What could they have been thinking, surrounded by the pride of their grandparents with the terror and stink and gore of Nam still impressed on their minds? Could they have expressed their true feelings?

James had returned home to obscurity. Obscurity partly inflicted, partly self-imposed. When he came off the plane he immediately changed into his civilian clothes. One hour later he was in downtown Tacoma eating pizza and drinking beer with his sister and a distant cousin he had come to know in Nam. He spent his first night out all night. Then it became out all day. Then it was out all week. His folk said nothing. They just looked at him and politely asked how he was doing. After a few months it was: “When do you think you might go to work?” (Red Eagle, 1997: 121)

The scuffed red book I am holding is filled with young and earnest faces in black and white. Some are vaguely familiar; I once knew these people as distinguished elders, powerful political leaders. Most of them have already passed away. One is still teaching, an emeritus professor. I speak with her occasionally about her academic brawls and scholarly irritations.

An organization of Indians in public life and their promoters was formed in 1933, in connection with the exhibit on “Indian progress” at the New York World’s Fair. They called themselves the Indian Council Fire, and they published directories of successful Indians in 1936 and 1946. In 1960, the same year that a Convocation of American Indian Scholars at the University of Chicago condemned the policy of Indian assimilation, the Council Fire published their last directory, selecting 129 Indian men and 26 Indian women for recognition as success stories in science, religion, medicine, business, public service, and the arts. It is not an unbiased sample of influential Indians. The overwhelming themes, consistent with the public mood of Cold War America, are Christianization and Americanization. Traditional ceremonialists, who were on the rebound in the post-war years, are notably absent, as are the advocates of armed struggle, who were still in high school. I recognize nearly all the faces of established notoriety and power as I remember them from the political struggles of 1968–74, however.

One in four of the men lionized in the red book had seen combat in the First or Second World Wars. Nearly as many had served in other military capacities, ranging from boot camp trainers to naval convoy duty. Two were wounded; one had been gassed. One languished for a year in a
Japanese prison camp. Two received the Congressional Medal of Honor, and two had been “Navajo code talkers” in the Pacific theatre. All had become successful Indians, according to the American norms of their time, but had their war experiences influenced their choice of careers? None of the men extolled as successful businessmen had served in the military, and few veterans were found among the elected tribal leaders (8 percent) or Christian ministers (23 percent). A majority of the men who made their careers in the civil service were veterans, however (63 percent), and most of them worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Veterans were also four times more likely to become university teachers.

Preferential hiring of veterans may help explain why so many Indian veterans chose civil service careers, but does not explain why so few veterans sought elected office in their own tribes. What might have been the consequences of the concentration of Indian veterans in the B.I.A., and of non-veterans on tribal councils and in reservation churches? Had military service contributed to building an institutional force supporting paternalism and assimilation?

In actuality, Indian-veteran bureaucrats were instrumental in reversing the “termination” policy of the post-war Congress, and promoting the concept of “self-determination” (tribal self-government) eventually adopted by Richard Nixon and all subsequent presidents. In the pages of the red book I find Forrest Gerard, former combat fighter pilot and mid-level civil servant in 1960, who became the power behind the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in the 1970s, as well as former Marine and future B.I.A. chief Robert Bennett. Bennett’s 1966 nomination as Commissioner of Indian Affairs prompted a Senate debate over his unorthodox support for Indian self-government (Tyler, 1973: 198–99). I still remember my first meeting with Gerard in 1976, when he exercised virtual control of federal Indian legislation as the protegé of Washington State Senator “Scoop” Jackson, one of the most powerful men in the Capitol. He exuded utter confidence in his ability to manipulate the system and oversee the emergence of Indian tribes as capitalistic micro-states in middle America.

After they returned home from the front in 1945, Joe and Willy wanted a piece of the American pie, but they found only crumbs (Mauldin, 1947; Waller, 1944). A cocktail of lofty material aspirations, frustration, and bitterness characterized the post-war era, as veterans sought the good life the Depression and the war had thus far denied them. American Indian veterans were no different in their feelings that America owed them a prosperous and comfortable future. They were no longer willing to take
orders from the aging white men in the B.I.A. who had ruled their families’ lives before Pearl Harbor. They wanted to become American on their own.

Volumes upon scholarly volumes have been written about the Indian political movement, about its strategy and ideology, about lawyers and leaders, about laws and policies. They expound learnedly about tribal sovereignty and the theory of the state. They do not write about my friend Bill, raging in the cold green tile corridor outside another endless and stupid government meeting, as we try one more time to calm him. “Doesn’t that goddamn motherfucker realize I could blow him away like that?”

It is said that ribbon shirts were originally a prerogative of combat veterans. They appeared at the first intertribal pow-wows in the 1910s. The scalps and horsehair tufts on grandfathers’ ceremonial outfits were replaced by colorful ribbons, like the ribbons from which the white soldiers suspended their metal medals.

A man wearing a ribbon shirt was shown respect. He was not to be messed with. He had paid his dues, and deserved a little extra leeway if he spoke too loudly or grew frustrated and angry with the tribal politicians. At ceremonials, he might be given a place of honor, have his food brought to him by the young boys as if he were an elder.

Many of the leaders of the American Indian Movement were Vietnam veterans, and they brought their rage and their ribbon shirts into the iconography of contemporary Indian resistance. Before long it was inconceivable not to wear one. Ribbons became the symbol of rage and of resistance; of manhood, and of unapologetic Indian identity. (The masculinity of ribbon shirts has long since faded, a casualty of the resurgent maternalism within Indian communities; politically and culturally assertive young women now wear ribbon shirts.)

The pain of Indian combat veterans has disappeared behind a vast, undulating prairie of ribbon shirts. Veterans no longer have any symbols of their pride or their loss. Except rage.

Didja ever hear a sound
smell something
taste something
that brought you back
to Vietnam, instantly?
Didja ever wonder
when it would end?
It ended for my brother.
He died in the war
but didn’t fall down
for fifteen tortured years.

(Northrup, 1993: 14)

I am sitting eating with Ray and Bill in a Chinese restaurant in New York, where we have come for an international conference on Indian rights. It has been a long day of explaining the inexplicable and the unimaginable to blank eyes in smiling faces. We are aggravated, tired, and hungry. The Chinese restaurant is the only refuge we can find in the rundown neighborhood of our rundown west-side hotel. Outside, the night is dark, wet, and steamy, an impression of rain streaks and sudden flashing red and yellow lights. We order and wait. The restaurant is quickly filling with young customers, some of them speaking Cantonese.

Our food suddenly appears: several platters of vegetables, shrimp and chicken, and an enormous bowl of rice. Bill stares fixedly into the rice bowl. A veil of starchy vapor surrounds him as our spoons and chopsticks dig into the sticky mass.

Suddenly Bill is on his feet, pushing his way to the door through a crowd of terrified customers. “Motherfuckers!” he screams as he disappears, “Kill you sonofabitches,” a dark shadow already halfway down the street outside our rainspotted window.

“Rice,” Ray says quietly, as he leaves the table very slowly but deliberately, heading for the door.

The shooting is over in five seconds
the shakes are over in a half-hour
the memories are over never.

(Northrup, 1993: 21)

I did not go to Nam. My draft number was 178, and they only got to 176 in my New York City neighborhood. There were plenty of Latinos and Blacks to fill the quota before they reached me. But I didn’t realize that until Christmas. On the Friday night that I learned they reached 175, I started to pack. Classmates advised me to volunteer immediately so that I could choose my branch of service. Everyone I knew was volunteering for the Navy or leaving the country. I resolved to enlist if possible as a medical corpsman, and try to survive my war the way my father had survived his war, tying rags around shredded bodies, stitching bloody entrails back into stomachs, and carrying a .45 that never got used.

Before I went to the recruiting station, it became plain that the draft board was not going to reach my draft number before the New Year. The
lottery saved me from the moral responsibility of choosing between death and exile. When my father died of cancer just after I completed graduate school, I forgot about war.

Ten years later when I was working overseas, I fell into a wonderful, terrifying love affair with a young woman from a distant country. She had survived an ethnic riot that left most of her family and neighbors dead, hacked to bloody bits. Sometimes she would scream in her sleep. After waking her, I would hold her for hours. Then she would leave me, without explanation or destination, for days.

Once persons who have been visited by trauma begin to look around them, evidence that the world is a place of unremitting danger seems to appear everywhere. (Kai Erikson, 1995: 195)

My father was nearly 60 before he was able to talk about his war. When I could get a few days away from classes I would visit him at his mid-town flat, hoping ambivalently for another opening in the pensive silence which had removed him from me since the time of my earliest memories. Sometimes he would drink Scotch and talk. Sometimes he would say very little and ask me about unimportant things. Sometimes he would just drink Scotch. Once he told me a story about fear.

He had been in command of the medics attached to a rifle company in the European invasion. Their job was getting wounded men off the field as quickly as possible, conducting a triage, performing emergency surgery in the nearest basement or barn, and packing the survivors into jeeps or trucks. They shoved guts back into stomachs, pulled shards of steel from heads and chests, tried to find enough of a face and neck to open a breathing passage with a metal tube. My father looked forward to the times he spent alone on a rooftop or a hill away from the blood and screaming and smells of burnt and putrefied flesh, surveying the distant line of battle and deciding where to deploy his stretcher bearers.

There was a machine gunner in the company, a plump mechanic from Brooklyn. We'll call him Ziggy. Ziggy was perpetually cheerful. Every day he would get up early, clean his piece meticulously, hoist the clumsy water-jacketed gun over one shoulder and trundle off towards the front line as casually as if he were walking down to a garage on Prospect Avenue. On reaching position, he would set up and blast away calmly, whistling or singing show tunes, until the line was recalled or he used up his last belt of ammunition. When the rest of the squad fell into depression, homesickness and bitching, Ziggy just laughed and went back to work.
One morning my father was directing his team from a rise overlooking a broad expanse of French countryside. The battle was slowly moving and shifting in intensity around a far village, shrouded in a gray mixture of fog and cordite. Suddenly he spotted Ziggy, still at a considerable distance but walking towards him, gun slung over his shoulder, shaking his head and for all the world appearing to be arguing with himself. Eventually he came close enough for my father to hear his words.

“Goddam! Sonovabitch! Jesussonuvabitchchrist!”

My father called out to him. “Ziggy! What are you doing? The battle’s that way!” Ziggy stopped. Wildly, he looked around.

“Doc! Doc! The damnedest thing just happened! There I was at the front, doin’ my job, just shootin’ my piece and mindin’ my own business, when all of a sudden I noticed this German up in a tree with a gun lookin’ at me!” He looked around again fearfully as if he expected to be followed.

“And doc, I don’t know how to say this, but … I think the sonuvabitch was trying to kill me!”

Bad memories can stand out like formidable enemies. In adversity of this sort you see everything clearly. It is unsettling. You see tiny details around you, like the cold gray sky dotted with swirling snowflakes. Your eyes seem to remember and you conjure the colors, like the pale edges of frozen mud along the river’s edge, the tan barkless tree covered with frost, and the indented burrowing of insects. (Ray Young Bear, 1996: 59)

There are two ways I can conceive of coping with the incomprehensible arbitrariness of combat violence. One way is to deny it as long as possible, like my father’s friend Ziggy. The other way is to construct some kind of alternative theory of order.

For more than a hundred years, American Indian cultures were shaped by a colonial bureaucracy that treated all Indians alike, and collapsed Indian realities into the stereotypes embraced by non-Indian Americans: cruel warriors, lazy drunkards, desirable but doomed princesses, spacey mystical masters. The positive stereotypes permitted to Indians offer veterans escape routes into structures of order. One route leads to hypermasculinized warriorhood, in which the Hollywood mythos of the Plains Indian as a tough and efficient killer is associated with the honored traditional role of defender of the people. Tom Holm (1996: 174–79) has observed that Indian Vietnam veterans’ feelings of betrayal by the American government synergized with their need for a renewed sense of order and purpose, and that this synergy built the critical momentum for the armed Indian militancy of the 1970s. I believe that the same sense of
betrayal and militancy followed Indians’ participation in the First and Second World Wars, although it was largely invested in community organizing and local resistance, and garnered little attention from the national press. Each twentieth-century American war has been followed by a major national Indian-rights movement: for citizenship in the 1920s, for economic development in the 1950s, and for sovereignty in the 1970s.

Idealizing masculine warriorhood legitimizes male violence and patriarchy within Indian society, however, as Creek scholar Craig Womack (1997) explains. The patriarchal attitude of American Indian Movement leaders persuaded women to secede and form their own militant organization, Women of All Red Nations. Idealizing the positive defensive and protective aspects of warriorhood may also involve a denial of the destructive, senseless realities of modern warfare. Contemporary Vietnamese writers such as Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong, both combat veterans themselves, suggest that the glorification of the wars of liberation against the French and the Americans has silenced veterans. Without being able to tell the truth about all the terror, futility and ugliness they experienced, Vietnamese veterans continue to repress their fear and anger, and cannot move ahead.

In the climactic passage of the autobiographical Novel Without A Name, Duong’s alter ego Quan dreams of being visited by the ghost of his ancestor “from the seventieth generation,” a foot soldier with nothing but a bronze lance and a sack of rice. The wraith demands that Quan overcome his frustration and bitterness with the war. “We left you our triumphal arches,” the wraith complains. “Why don’t you build your own?”

I think to myself: He’s lost it, the old man. Doesn’t he see what we’re doing? Hasn’t he seen all the young people who’ve left for the front, who died with a song on their lips? And what about those who’re still advancing toward the wondrous half-circle of the horizon? But my tongue is frozen. I am incapable of pronouncing a single word. (Huong, 1995: 257)

The other escape route offered by modern culture is exactly the opposite of warriorhood: spirituality. Instead of idealizing violence, a growing number of Indian veterans are rediscovering order in a complete renunciation of violence (Holm, 1996: 185–93). The spiritual path in veterans’ search for redemptive order has contributed to a wider Indian movement embracing traditional religious values and ceremonies—notably in prisons, among disaffected urban Indian youth, and among reservation Indian women organizing against domestic violence, and alcohol and drug abuse.
It may sound funny, but sometimes my life makes the most sense to me when I think of it as a narrative, kind of like a creation story, where you start with chaos, confusion, as in the Creek story where everyone is stumbling about in a thick fog, bumping into each other and getting hurt. But then, by the end of the story, the fog lifts, individuals have banded together with the animals they ran into and discovered their clans and their place among the people. … I think the story is like a circle; periodically, you end up back in the fog and chaos, but as you get further along, the darkness becomes more manageable, and you know eventually you will emerge out into the light of the broader landscape. (Womack, 1997: 45–46)

Does suffering prepare us to suffer more? Were Indians immunized by their oppression, or did the war reverberate with the oppression to make it even more unbearable and unspoken?

A critical mass – a critical, indigestible and painful mass, if you will – was reached by the 1970s as the Vietnam War came to an end. It is likely that the twin emergences of armed militancy and a non-violent spiritual re-awakening were facilitated by the broader American social and political environment of that period. It is also reasonable to suppose that these contrasting movements could not have occurred but for the cumulative effect of oppression on American Indians, and Indian participation in four major “modern” wars within 50 years.

I have tried to show that American Indian combat veterans have been profoundly distressed by their experiences, as individuals, in much the same way as their non-Indian comrades. This source of individual alienation and stress on family and community relationships is at least as old as the Indians’ first “modern” war in 1917. American Indian societies have not been significantly better able to address and resolve the psychological reverberations of combat experience than their neighbors. On the contrary, Indian societies have been subjected to stereotyping and marginalization in ways that appear to have rendered them less able to accept and address the realities of warfare.

Indians’ oppression has essentialized Indian warriorhood and masculinized the role of resisting oppression in a way that silences veterans and amplifies the distress that they carry with them into their homes and families. Silencing is likely to exacerbate feelings of alienation, mistrust, and bitterness, and confirm veterans’ sense of futility of caring or acting. Political oppression itself is also a source of alienation, mistrust, and self-contempt that corrodes domestic relationships, estranges parents from their children, and undermines solidarity within communities. The combination of oppression and war, over several generations, can become a powerful explosive.
American Indian veterans’ search for redemptive order – a worldview that restores some sense of purpose and order to life – has fed both of the social movements that have energized and divided Indian communities since the 1960s. Militancy and spirituality may be philosophical opposites, but they are congenital twins. Each path promises a redemptive order that is millennial and transcendent. Warrior Indians smash Western capitalism and colonialism and restore the original power and prestige of Red Nations, while spiritual Indians smash Western consumerism and restore universal socio-ecological harmony. In a tragic way, oppression and war have helped continue the slow transformation of Indian societies into externally defined, two-dimensional images.

I have reached this pessimistic point in my story (stumbling around in the fog, as my friend Craig Womack says) still thinking in a Western analytical paradigm. The logical relationship between critical masses of psychological distress and the realization of externally imposed stereotypes is plausible, and it fits the historical data that I have at my disposal. Every time I am with Bill or Ray or any of the many, many other friends who form part of this story, however, I feel that something else is also going on. The contemporary Indian spiritual movement is a response to distress within the framework of externally imposed symbols, but I believe that Indian veterans (and their spouses, their children, their mothers) are beginning to invest spirituality with a new energy and meaning which is entirely their own. And that is the next cycle of the story.

I wave and smile, trying to convey what strength I have, the significance of my people, of my belief in him and in myself to him.

Laguna Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz (1992: 280) wrote these lines for a fellow Indian patient on his departure 25 years ago from the Veterans Administration hospital, “contain[ing] men broken from three American wars”:

Let this be your travelling prayer, Taos brother.
Good things come from below, from above,
from everything, from the rain.
Believe that.
Be strong now, be strong and good with yourself.

Literary scholar and Marine Corps veteran Samuel Hynes maintains that war is the only significant event in most men’s lifetimes, their one brush with History (Hynes, 1998). The power of war to obliterate and recreate
men’s individual identities is heightened by its terror, its strangeness, and its emotional intensity. For pure adrenalin, he argues, there is nothing quite like it. As Jim Northrup writes (1977: 178–79), “being in a war zone was either boring or exciting.”

When things were happening, it was very, very exciting. When things were quiet and we weren’t moving, we would sometimes play with fragmentation grenades. We’d experiment with the grenades, holding them for a while before throwing them, trying for an airburst. If a new marine joined us we would indoctrinate him with a frag. There is a way to put a piece of wire in the firing mechanism of a grenade to keep it from going off. Once fixed like that, the spoon would fly off the grenade but it wouldn’t explode because of the wire. Then someone would go up to the new marine and tell him he was having trouble getting the pin back in the grenade and ask for help. As he handed it to the new marine, he would drop it on the ground.

That, he recalled, “was always good for a laugh.” Courting death can become an addictive drug. Nothing else can quite reproduce the rush. Hynes suggests that the excitement of war explains why men forget the silences and sadness of their fathers, and go back for another round. Despite its risks and horrors, combat can be the most memorable event of an otherwise tedious life. Certainly this is why tribal societies, which fought such comparatively tiny battles, keep such great literary records of their military achievements. A tribal society confined by repression and colonial domination has all the more reason to seek and celebrate the excitement of dancing with death.

Veterans recall and celebrate the humor and excitement of battle, and struggle to repress the sadness and the loss. The strategy they adopt to survive emotionally therefore fosters a deceptive public memory of combat: laughter and glory. The selective silence of fathers condemns the sons to ignorance and death. The silence of war and its aftereffects are more profound in American Indian communities, where repression has deepened the seductiveness of momentary heroism and significance.

The collective memory of war within Indian America continues to be fundamentally positive. Indian communities do not know how to honor and heal their veterans without romanticizing combat experience. William Penn is one of the few Indian writers with the temerity to expose how idealizing warriorhood reinforces Indians’ oppression as agents of the state.

Romanticization is a way of not just burying the bodies but cementing the graveyard over, even building a shopping mall upon it, like people want to do in California. No, I don’t wish I’d gone, and when I see the Wall with the names
of brothers and friends and strangers etched into its black marble, I wish they hadn’t gone either. More Coke would have been sold by now if they hadn’t. (Penn, 1995: 214)

“It’s a good idea to honor veterans,” Anishinabe Vietnam veteran Jim Northrup observed in his latest rumination on war experience, “but a better idea is to quit making them” (Northrup, 1997: 207).

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