J. Glenn Gray and Reflections on the Age of Total War

Michael S. Neiberg
September 9, 2013

Michael S. Neiberg is Professor of History in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the United States Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for this wonderful opportunity to be here tonight and to talk about this terrific and insightful book. When I first read J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors* for TA Dave Hsiung's recitation section, I was, I am guessing, much like you. I was, I think, nineteen years old and had no direct personal connection with the military or war. I had only one relative who had served in the military, my godfather, a veteran of the Guadalcanal and Solomon Islands campaigns of the Pacific theater of World War II, and he did not like to talk about those days. Whatever he had seen or done there, he preferred to keep it to himself.

So, perhaps like you, I came to this book with no real connection to its subject. Moreover, I did not play war games as a kid, I did not (and still do not) particularly like war movies, and I suppose I thought of myself as a pacifist. Perhaps unlike you, I had at that time never been to any of the places J. Glenn Gray mentioned, such as Alsace, Rome, and Germany. I have since come to know many of them well, although it is usually difficult, if not impossible, to think of them as the scenes of the terrible carnage that they once were. I had also not yet read the authors he cites, such as Ernst Jünger, Norman Angell, or the brilliant philosopher who provided the introduction to *The Warriors*, Hannah Arendt. Nor can I now recover my own initial reactions to the book, as the copy I read in college either got lost in a move or, more horrifyingly to my mind now, got sold to an Ann Arbor bookstore in a desperate attempt to raise a few quick dollars at the end of a semester.

Since college, however, my life and my career have taken me if not into the world Gray described, then at least closer to it than I could ever have imagined at age nineteen. I have spent fourteen years of my professional life working alongside military professionals. I have not, I must stress up front, shared their danger or been anywhere close to a combat zone, but my career has given me an insight into the mind of the soldier that I never would have had attained otherwise. These experiences have not, I am very happy to say, made me into the type of irresponsible bloodthirsty civilian that Gray laments in chapter five.

With that introduction to my own background, I would like to share with you tonight some of my thoughts on this book after reading it again. Then I would very much like to hear your thoughts on what Gray had to say because in many ways you have more in common with him than I do. You are closer to his age when he experienced his war, and, by a very happy coincidence, you have Juniata in common.

Most striking to me as I reread this book in preparation for my talk today is Gray's difficulty in assigning causality to war. Historians like Dave and myself search constantly for causes — long-term causes, short-term causes, structural causes, anything that will help us to answer the central question of why large events and processes in history happen. We debate these causes endlessly at conferences and in publications. Was the Second World War caused by the unsatisfying peace treaty that ended the First? How important was a single individual like Adolf Hitler or Winston Churchill? Why do some nations win wars while others lose them? What causes large historical events like wars to begin and end?

Questions like these frame the way that we historians teach the world wars. We look for their causes in ideologies that have long since vanished from the developed world, such as monarchy, fascism, and imperialism. Because these phenomena have largely disappeared from our world, we find it hard to relate them to students like you or to make people understand why they once led people to kill and be killed. We also talk about individuals long since dead and buried like Otto von Bismarck, Georges Clemenceau, and Bernard Montgomery. This way of thinking about war allows historians like myself to talk about causes and contingency. The latter is just a fancy academic word for talking about those moments when history may have changed on a single decisive point like the sudden death in a plane crash of the general whom Churchill wanted to name in Montgomery's place, or the supposed story of Churchill himself being named prime minister because the first choice, Lord Halifax, had forgotten to tell his secretary that he was going to the dentist that day. As a result, he supposedly missed an important meeting where Churchill instead carried the day and marked himself as the man of the hour.

Whether any of the tales are true (and I suspect the latter is not) or whether contingency really shapes history matters less, I think, than the comfort that it provides to us today. We can delude ourselves, if we are willing to be deluded, into believing that a world where wars are caused by arcane ideologies, people in black and white photographs wearing funny clothes, and odd moments of contingency has little bearing on our world. Surely, we might conclude, we are too smart and too sophisticated today to let such things lead us once again into a period of war and destruction. Besides, in an age of cell phones, who misses a last-minute meeting because of a trip to the dentist's office?

Herein lies the true importance of *The Warriors.* In it, Gray gives us another, far more disturbing, lens into the problem of warfare. Reading the book put me in mind of a problem I had when asked to write a textbook on the history of war since 1756. Even after writing 40,000 words, I found that I could not adequately explain war to readers without sounding like I was merely writing the History of One Bad

Thing after Another. My authorial voice in the book started to sound more and more like the public school teacher Mrs. Lintott in Alan Bennett's brilliant play *The History Boys*. "Can you for a moment," she asks, "imagine how depressing it is to teach five centuries of male ineptitude?" Without some larger explanatory mechanism for all these wars, I could not find a way to write the book. I thus cancelled the contract and told the editor that quite possibly neither a historian nor a political scientist could write such a book.

Perhaps if I had remembered what Dave tried to teach me about *The Warriors* all those years ago, I would have had the sense to suggest that a philosopher might write it. For Gray does provide an explanatory scheme, uncomfortable though it is to consider. As William Broyles did in his fantastic essay about Vietnam, "Why Men Love War," Gray looks into the psyche of man to argue that the real reasons for war lie within us, although Mrs. Lintott would surely have taken some satisfaction from the strongly gendered language that both Gray and Broyles used. They thought of the problem of war as a male problem, just as Sigmund Freud had before them.

Never having been a soldier myself, I cannot speak from first-hand experience. I can, however speak to some of what Gray called "the enduring appeals of battle" as they have appeared in the novels, memoirs, and published recollections from soldiers in the bloody twentieth century. Of these, comradeship reigns supreme. The notion of comradeship as an enduring appeal surely predates the twentieth century, but it is such a dominant theme of soldier recollections since 1914 that it is worth our prolonged attention. As so many authors have done, Gray points to that special bond that connects men (and increasingly women) to one another under special circumstances. This bond, far more than ideology, drives men to fight. Gray could not explain the political reasons for World War II to the old Italian hermit he encountered, but he did understand in a visceral and instinctive sense why the soldiers he knew fought as they did. Comradeship explains why even men who hated the war, like the British trench poet Siegfried Sassoon, nevertheless wanted to get back to the front as quickly as possible. It also explains why institutions like the Veterans of Foreign Wars exist: they create social spaces where people instinctively understand the separate world soldiers once inhabited.

As Gray recognized, it is in combat that comradeship has a special role. It helps to increase one's own chances of survival because it reminds a soldier that he is not alone; someone is there to share food, supplies, and news from home. In other words, comradeship allows men at war to connect to other people in a positive, constructive way. Seeing that connection amidst such destruction and devastation provides a kind of redemption and regeneration of spirit that creates a light in a very dark tunnel. That comradeship comes at a price, of course. Just as comrades must risk their lives for you, so, too, must you risk your life for them.

Comradeship helps to explain one of the dominant forms of war fiction, the focus on the small unit. In recent years, the classic example has been the blockbuster television series *Band of Brothers*. Other notable examples from American cinema include *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Dirty Dozen*, and even the brilliant Bill Murray comedy *Stripes*. The dystopia of the tellingly-titled Oliver Stone movie *Platoon* comes directly from the discord in the unit that prevents comradeship from redeeming the war and the men who fight it. None of these movies attempts to explain the larger political issues of the day, nor do they focus on generals and senior leaders. Instead, they try to explain the military and war through the bonds that men of diverse backgrounds form in the highly unusual atmosphere in which they find themselves.

You may already have thought of other examples, like Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. You may not know of a book that heavily influenced Remarque, one written by a Frenchman named Henri Barbusse. That book, *Under Fire*, remains the best-selling French novel of World War I, published in 1916 in the middle of a war whose outcome remained very much in doubt. Himself a veteran, Barbusse wanted to give the French people an exposure to the war unaffected by either censorship or propaganda.

He gave them that and much more. He creates for his readers a fictional squad of men from a range of professions and a variety of places in France. They come from Normandy, Paris, the Belgian border region, and Brittany. They are small farmers, bartenders, and factory workers. They represent France and the efforts of all Frenchmen to defend their families and their homes. Comradeship redeems them, but they still live in a world that turns them into "slaves" who sometimes wish for death as a release from the horrors of the war that they must daily endure. Only "those that are dead are happy," Barbusse writes in one of the book's most famous lines. In the end, he concludes sadly that "there is no cure from the world's disease," war. One might as well, he laments, try to stop the rain. Gray would surely have understood the sentiment. The First World War for Barbusse had nothing at all to do with the assassination of an Austro-Hungarian archduke, however often we professors describe it that way.

While it might overstate the case to say that Barbusse created the small-unit genre, he nevertheless did much to popularize the approach of focusing on ordinary soldiers, moving far away from works like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which told the story of the Napoleonic wars through the eyes of aristocrats and leaders. Other works that told the story of World War I through the eyes of common soldiers followed Barbusse, like Frederic Manning's *Middle Parts of Fortune*, written partly in cockney slang, Liam O'Flaherty's *Return of the Brute*, and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, influencing an entire generation of high literature, memoir, and pulp fiction alike. Together these works stressed the role of the small unit dynamic in war and its ability to forge bonds that at times seemed to make the suffering of war almost worthwhile. Take, for example, a scene in Manning's largely

autobiographical book wherein a member of his platoon has been arrested for desertion during the Battle of the Somme in 1916:

> They were bitter and summary in their judgment on him. The fact that he had deserted his commanding officer, which would be the phrase used to describe his offense on the charge-sheet, was as nothing compared to the fact that he had deserted them. They were to go through it while he saved his skin. It was about as bad as it could be, and if one were to ask any man who had been through that spell of fighting what ought to be done in the case of Miller, there could only have been one answer. Shoot the bugger.[1]

Miller's crime, in the eyes of his comrades, had little to do with the politics of the war. He had not abandoned the British Army. He had abandoned his comrades, a crime that they believed should be punishable by death. He had broken the one unbreakable rule: he had accepted the benefits of comradeship without being willing to pay its price.

The Vietnam War veteran William Broyles spoke of comradeship as a fleeting phenomenon. Some of you may have already experienced a bit of this with friends from your home towns. When you are together, your shared experiences bring you closer together. Once apart and away from the thing that gave you something in common, however, the feeling of being together fades. In Broyles's case, he was puzzled by how distant one of his closest comrades in Vietnam felt to him when the two went on a Vermont ski trip together. Only then did Broyles realize that he had nothing in common with the man except their shared danger in a combat zone years before. After the war, and with all that danger safely in the past, they realized that they were the same strangers to one another that they would have been had the war not thrown them together more or less randomly.

Gray speaks of other appeals, including the disturbing delight in destruction and the appeal of just seeing and being. Although soldiers may hate the war they fight, they are aware of being part of something much larger and much more important than themselves. "It doesn't take much," Humphrey Bogart told Ingrid Bergman in the 1942 classic *Casablanca,* "to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." For that same reason, so many veterans find the transition to peacetime more difficult than they expect. Suddenly having to focus on the mundane elements of life like choosing car insurance, going grocery shopping, and commuting to a regular nine-to-five job protects men from the dangers of war, but at the same time they are part of a mind-numbingly dull routine that requires some mental adjustment. It is certainly a far cry from the world in which they quite literally held the power of life and death in their hands.

The enduring appeals of combat, of course, do not in and of themselves cause war. No one starts a war to feel the magnetism of these elemental forces. Moreover, the politicians and statesmen who ultimately decide on war remain well insulated from them. But they may help to explain why people do not oppose or resist wars as much as we might expect them to. Some scholars have gone as far as to argue that war is only possible because men often seek it out as an alternative to routines and drudgery that they

despise. They seek to escape from what World War I poet Rupert Brooke in 1914 called "a world grown old and cold and weary." That Brooke died not in heroic combat but in agony from an insect bite might have helped a future generation avoid this siren call.

Gray himself posited hopefully that perhaps we have now learned enough about war to turn away from its elemental appeals. He hoped that modern man, fully awake to the dangers of atomic weapons and fully aware of the damage that war can cause, would build ways to resist those appeals. Thus does his introduction to the 1970 edition of the book, written in the middle of what he called "the peculiar horrors of the Vietnam War," strike us as so tragic. That war seemed only to confirm in his mind that the root causes of war were not at all political. What was America fighting for that could justify the losses and the divisions at home? Why had America entered into what he termed a "monstrous present" instead of an enlightenment that could have produced an extended era of peace?

Thus the war in Vietnam might seem to confirm Gray's central thesis about the irrationality of war. Like so many wars before it, the causes (at least for the United States) faded into insignificance as the costs far outweighed any benefits. All the while, as Gray knew, the logic of war took on a force of its own, making it more and more difficult to disengage or seek other options. And as Gray could also have predicted, the war exposed Americans not only to the evil that the enemy could do, but to the far more disturbing evil that existed within Americans as well. The massacre at My Lai may stand out in the minds of most Americans, but a reading of books by Vietnam veterans like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* or Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* will demonstrate how fine the line can be between civilization and barbarity. Thus did so many Americans recoil in horror at the scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. We knew what the enemy was capable of doing. Discovering what we ourselves are capable of doing is infinitely more disturbing.

So it is as well with another key concept of the book, one popularized by Hannah Arendt. She famously described a phenomenon Gray observed as the "banality of evil." Easily recognizable monsters like Hitler or Stalin are few and far between, she argued. Most of the crimes human beings commit against one another are far more subtle. The man who drives the train of Jews to Auschwitz may be able to persuade himself that he is not himself committing any crime. The worker making weapons for an immoral war may only see himself or herself as earning money to feed their family, the most noble and basic duty of all. He or she need not worry about where those bombs will go.

Neither Gray nor Arendt meant to draw any similarities between the German worker forcing slave laborers to make bombs to support a monstrous system and the steel worker in Pittsburgh doing the same thing to stop it. They did not argue that all actions in wartime sat on the same moral level. They did understand, however, that even in a "good war" (as Americans like to call World War II), horrible, astonishing levels of destruction will occur. To liberate France, for example, the American and British air

forces killed 67,000 unarmed French civilians as part of an effort to deny the German army access to the French railway network. "What a terrible thing it is," one Parisian said to an American who had snuck into the city prior to its liberation, "to be slaughtered by the very people coming to liberate us." Necessary though the bombings might have been, they still sit uneasily alongside the narrative of World War II that Hollywood and American culture more generally have presented.

For Arendt and Gray, the question centered less on the morality of individual actions than the way that the altered state of war could force people into places they would not otherwise go. They would have recognized the central question in a study by Christopher Browning of a Nazi police detachment on the eastern front.[2] These men committed unspeakable crimes against Jews and other supposed enemies, but Browning's analysis of them showed them to be, in the words of his revealing title, ordinary men. They were family men, pillars of their community, and in some cases aware that what they were doing was terribly wrong. Had it not been for the war they would have led unremarkable and entirely ordinary lives. Browning's basic conclusion, like Gray's, is that one never knows what individuals or societies are capable of doing if pressed. Ordinary the men may have been, but given a lethal combination of the dehumanization of the supposed "enemy," an extra-legal environment where murder was encouraged, and the general chaos of a world war, they turned into small parts of a wider genocidal machine. We might well apply these conclusions to "ordinary men" like William Calley, the American lieutenant most responsible for the killings at My Lai.

In following this conclusion, Browning and Gray reject the safe and comfortable conclusion that we can place the terrors of World War II safely into a box. Far more than the Treaty of Versailles, the Great Depression, and the rise of a failed Austrian painter set loose war and the Holocaust. Those factors may have done nothing more than unleash the elemental violence that always sits close to the surface. For that reason, Gray posits, men often have a difficult psychological journey from collusion with a system to acceptance of its evils. In effect, they do not fully understand the depths of the evil they served.

Thus does Gray, in one of my favorite passages of the book, say "if I ever find one who will say 'I am, I was, and will remain a National Socialist and you can like it or not,' I will clasp his hand and cry, 'At last I have found a brave and honest, if an evil, man. We don't want to arrest such a one as you.'"[3] Gray meant, of course, that the modern, impersonal systems for war separated men too much from the actual circumstances of killing, a phenomenon introduced to war by the long-range artillery, submarines, and airplanes of the First World War. But more than technology is responsible, as Gray recognized. War in the modern world involves mass systems, with each person's place in those systems so minute that it becomes easy to rationalize away one's own significance.

Persuasive though Gray is on these and so many other scores, I feel that I must at least try to challenge some of his assumptions. There are, of course, periods of peace that become hard to explain if

we interpret Gray as I have done here. That's good news for me and my fellow historians, because it means that we still have a critical role to play. We still need explanations for why some periods can be peaceful for decades while others can concentrate intense violence into a short period of time.

It is also, I think, good news for us all as it proves that some force or set of forces is capable of controlling any atavistic yearnings that exist inside us toward mass violence. War need not be the normative state for men or for nations. This is not to argue that we will ever reach a state of perfect peace where armed forces are no longer necessary. I am not as naïve or optimistic as that. But it is to hope that we might reach a state where the impulses leading to war can be better understood, better managed, and better controlled. Then armies can truly exist, in the words of the motto of the place where I work, not to promote war but to preserve peace.

Herein lies the true value of *The Warriors* and why it is worth your time. As Trotsky is alleged to have once said, "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." As you continue your education here at Juniata and well beyond, you should not look upon war as I did it at your age: something that is ultimately someone else's responsibility. Whatever your relationship to the military, as a citizen of a democracy you bear what Gray called a social responsibility. In my mind, that means informing yourself of the key issues and learning as much as you can about this most critical of all subjects. It also means reading a lot of history and, if Gray is right, a lot of other disciplines as well. In short, it means engaging with this critical subject in all its many complexities.

Finally, let me end with a word of advice: don't sell your copy of this marvelous book to a book dealer at the end of the semester. You might one day regret it. Thank you.

NOTES

1.	Frederic Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (New York: Plume, 1977), p. 81.
2.	Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
3.	J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 9.