

War, Words and Self-Perpetuating Force: Timely Reflections in the Light of Simone Weil

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'Mankind, under the appearance of controlling the forces that infinitely surpass him has delivered himself to them.'

Simone Weil¹

'The Iliad or a Poem of Force'

In November of 1945, three months after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, a remarkable essay: '*The Iliad* or a Poem of Force', appeared in a small New York review called *Politics*. The author, French philosopher Simone Weil, had written the piece in 1937–8 as the black clouds were gathering over Europe and the fascist powers were to 'let slip the dogs' of World War Two. Seeking to discover sources inherent to the human condition that lead mankind inevitably and persistently to war, Weil gave a close reading to Homer's description of the mutual annihilation of Trojan and Greek warriors in his epic poem, *The Iliad*. In that 10-year futile struggle over an illusory figure called Helen, both sides suffered immeasurable losses, but neither would call a halt. On the verge of defeat, the thought of surrender was humiliating; on the cusp of victory, the idea of power was intoxicating. Weil proposed:

The real hero, the real subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. . . . Those who had imagined that force, thanks to progress, now belongs to the past have been able to classify this poem as an historical document. Those who know how to recognize force, today as long ago, in the center of all human history, find in it the most beautiful the purest of mirrors.²

Simone Weil, a French philosopher, militant activist and mystic, was born in Paris in 1909. The toll of World War One, visible throughout her young years, made an

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indelible impression on her. She spent all her prodigious intellectual energies delving into the causes of social oppression and evaluating those aspects of society that nurture freedom of thought and action for the individual. She had an abiding conviction that the inherent dignity of the person must always be fostered. Abusive force used against the individual is the highest crime. Weil died in 1943 in London in the midst of the full-blown devastation wrought by World War Two. Her approach to contemporary problems by seeing them through a lens of eternal themes can be a useful model to us in the attempt to understand the realities of today.

Weil's original interpretation of this literary masterpiece focuses on the idea that force generates and regenerates its own existence. Humankind, spurred on by delusions of grandeur, prestige and unlimited power, risks all that is near and dear to it in the attempt to assault and dominate those considered as the threatening 'Other'. Weil wrote: 'Prestige, which is the major component of force, is characterized above all by the superb indifference of the strong for the weak, an indifference so contagious that the weak accept it as their due'.³ Language, carefully manipulated, furthers the goals of the powerful. Weil contends that certain words, having taken on mythical powers, enhance the rationale for such cavalier brutalizing of the vulnerable. Consequently, the force employed typically mushrooms out of all proportion to the desired ends; in the ascending violence, both victors and vanquished lose what they cherish most in life.

Weil considered the seeds of this self-destructive behavior to be inherent in the human condition. To her mind, only individuals who were willing to confront the truth of this malediction could mitigate the effects. Moreover, she foresaw with clarity that mechanized warfare would erase the line between military and civilian casualties, massive numbers of innocent people would fall victim to the ever-more-powerful weapons that threaten their lives and vital environments. After all the evidence to the contrary, how have thinking individuals been deluded into believing that the imposition of force could ever bring harmony between people?

Simone Weil on war

In 'Reflections on War', an earlier piece, Weil maintained that war waged by a nation was arguably more a matter of internal than external politics. Dwight Macdonald, the editor of *Politics*, had recently published her essay in his limited circulation journal. Macdonald, a feisty intellectual, believed that a healthy democracy requires tenacious self-scrutiny, particularly against incursions on the people's right to think for themselves. In his one-man monthly periodical, he pursued a wide range of contentious assessments criticizing modern society and government policies.⁴ Publishing four of Weil's articles just as World War Two was coming to a close, Macdonald was among the first to bring Weil's political and social thought to American readers. Serious talk of preparation for a third world war had already begun circulating among US administrative, military and economic leaders. The long-awaited return to peace was already being treated as a stepping-stone to yet further conflict while the deployment of the atomic bomb had rendered mute any pretense of concern for civilian protection in wartime. Furthermore, talk of national

defense in view of another world war had begun laying the groundwork for the imposition of government-sponsored restrictions on civil liberties.

Weil's concept that war engenders war had impressed Nicola Chiaromonte, a radical exile and close associate of Macdonald's, when he read Weil's essay on the *Iliad* for the first time in the *Cahiers du sud* in 1940. Arriving from Italy in 1941, Chiaromonte brought the piece to the attention of Macdonald, who immediately saw its pertinence for the contemporary debate in America over the US post-war economy. Should the economy focus on peace or national security, i.e. war? Chiaromonte recounts that this essay incited an unusually animated commentary among its readers, who had already sensed the direction toward a permanent war economy in the United States.

In the following springtime, Macdonald published a third piece by Simone Weil, 'Words and War',⁵ composed before 'The Poem of Force' and probably a study in preparation for it. 'Words and War' reveals Weil's conviction that the escalation of war preparations on grounds of National Security inexorably undermines belief in the supreme value of the individual. The perniciously misleading rhetoric that hypes war allows national leaders to assume arbitrary powers:

We live in a time in which the relative security that a certain technical domination over nature has brought humankind is largely compensated by the danger of ruins and massacres that occur between human groups. If the peril is so serious, it is surely due to the powerful instruments of destruction that technology has put in our hands.⁶

Increased power, in Weil's mind, would intoxicate its wielders, make them ignore the reality of limitations imposed on them by their human condition and encourage them to exaggerate their potential for control over the reality of human violence that can only be mitigated by human empathy and cooperation.

All the absurdities that make history seem one long delirious nightmare have their roots in one essential absurdity, the nature of power. There is a tangible, palpable necessity that power exist because order is indispensable to existence. But power is distributed arbitrarily because all men are the same or almost so. Any appearance, however, of being arbitrary destroys the illusion of power. Prestige, that is Illusion, is consequently at the very heart of power.⁷

An exaggerated reliance on the prestige of power allows ethically inviolable limitations to be scorned resulting in the inevitable ruin of all concerned. Two decades later, a US military officer justified carpet bombing the Vietnamese village of Danang, in which most of the inhabitants were killed, with the insane statement: 'We had to destroy the village in order to save it'. This terrible incident with its inane self-justification exemplifies the lethal absurdity that Weil was trying to pinpoint.

War today

Just as Weil used the lens of Homer's *Iliad* to understand conditions of war in her time, her reflections offer insights into the contemporary nightmare of ever-more-powerful weapons of mass destruction and the pall they lay over international

affairs. The most recent seeds of today's situation can be seen in the immediate post-World War Two period. The American people were heady with a sense of having conquered evil enemy forces in what is still referred to in America as 'The Good War'. They were convinced that power was safe in their hands. For the chauvinistically patriotic, 'God Bless America' meant that the deity was irrevocably on their side, as they stood for justice and liberty. There was little or no reflection on the occasional barbarous behavior on the part of the victors: the 1945 carpet-bombing of Dresden by allied forces, which killed close to half a million innocent civilians; the refusal to accept at the New York port in 1939 the ship *The Saint Louis* carrying 930 Jewish refugees, many of whom were children, seeking a safe harbor from persecution; and the rigorously enforced segregation in the US military during the major part of the war, a treatment that demeaned African-Americans' lives and sacrifices for their country.⁸ The woefully inadequate aphorism to shrug off disagreeable realities – 'Stuff happens' – sums up the prevalent attitude then, and now.

By shrugging off others' profound suffering, the strong reveal an exploitative and arrogant sense of privilege over the weak. To paraphrase the present US Secretary of Defense after the chaotic looting of the unprotected Baghdad National Museum and the burning of the Iraqi National Library and Archives: 'Democracy is messy. Crimes happen.' That is so, democracy is messy; but if it is to be true to its claim of respecting all persons and of being superior to fascistic and totalitarian forms of government, it must unrelentingly strive to protect the cultural milieus of those at risk.

The dire plight of the Afghan people, two million of whom have returned to demolished homes, mine-strewn fields, ruined infrastructures, rampant looting and the resurgent violence of warlords after a decade of savage war, all compounded by a severe drought, makes a mockery of any vapid claims of bringing them 'Enduring Freedom'. A May 2002 UN study revealed that a scant 15 percent of the Afghan people had secure water and a mere 9 percent knew where their next meal was coming from.⁹ Only huge influxes of promised aid from a dozen or so nations, the European Union and the World Bank might stave off famine, help rebuild their once ingenious irrigation canals, and stop the devastation of their forests, home to many endangered species. The actual pledges of grants and loans, however, promised over periods of one to five years, amount to about 60 percent of the low-end five-year projections made by analysts from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations Development Program.¹⁰ That the rest of the world increasingly neglects their fate has not been lost on the Afghans. Moreover, the Iraqi people are in danger of suffering the same fate.

The power of words

Weil understood the hazards of self-aggrandizing arrogance and the risks it imposed for international peace. In 'Words and War' she wrote:

The cloud of empty absolutes. . . not only dulls the mind, leads followers to their death, but far worse, consigns to the dust heap the very value of life. . . . The fine talkers who declare themselves for international peace, understand by it the indefinite maintenance of the

status quo for the exclusive profit of those who hold power. Those who speak publicly for civil peace but have every intention of maintaining their own privileges, or at least of subordinating any modification to the interests of the privileged, are the greatest danger to social and international peace.¹¹

Understanding the power of words like Democracy, Liberation, Victory – to cite a few flung about with abandon today – along with Axis of Evil and Terrorist, with little regard for defining them or the anticipative consequences of their usage in regard to the reality of the situations, Weil wrote:

But men will pour out their blood, pile ruin upon ruin repeating these capitalized words empty of meaning without ever truly obtaining anything that corresponds to them. . . . Clarifying ideas, discrediting these congenitally empty words, defining others by precise analyses is a task, strange as that may seem, that could preserve human lives.¹² . . . But we act, we struggle, we sacrifice ourselves and others by virtue of crystallized and isolated abstractions that have no possible connection to one another or to concrete things. We, in our so-called technological era, only know how to fight against windmills.¹³

Weil perceived democracy as the regime most likely to foster the dignity of the individual. Yet, she was deeply concerned that too often its criteria of morality made it resemble Plato's Great Beast: avid for prestige and devoid of humility. She observed that democratic societies, ruled by powerful majorities and/or manipulative elites, are deeply susceptible to ignoring what the Greeks had most admired: proportion, harmony, measure and balance in all aspects of life. She reminded her readers of a chronic weakness in the human condition: the strong conclude that destiny has accorded full license to them and none to their inferiors. At that point, they inevitably exceed the actual force they possess for they brush aside its limitations. But abuse of force is punished with a geometric rigor. This was the prime meditation of the Greeks; they called it Nemesis.¹⁴

She reflects that it is impossible to know what consequences will come from acts of violence. This should give pause for thought to the contemporary nations that wield the enormous destructive power of modern technological weaponry. This formerly unimaginable potential for destroying lives and the environment gives new intensity to Weil's contention that abuse of force elicits its own retribution. Given that National Security will always be a major concern but that prestige has its own requirements, she wrote:

Is it not natural for each State to define its national interest by its capacity to make war, since the surrounding armed States would subjugate it if they saw it as vulnerable? The only alternative to holding one's place in an armament race is being ready to fall victim to other armed states. General disarmament would eliminate that difficulty only if all States complied, which is scarcely conceivable.¹⁵

The Greek concept of Nemesis

Should greater heed be given to the Greek concept of Nemesis? The noxious fallout of today's arms fouls the atmosphere, pollutes the soil and water and leaves a virulent legacy for generations to come. The ensuing trail of death and diminishment of life cannot be contained within a restricted geographical area. Those who drop the bombs also reap the ills. Statistics have shown that the US veterans of the war in Vietnam register significantly higher than average incidences of suicide, alcoholism, abuse of family members and divorce, along with severe physical and mental problems. The gulf war syndrome, generally accepted as an aftermath of the Persian Gulf War of 1991, has impaired the normal functioning of huge numbers of veterans. Could enough courageous individuals, willing to confront the reality of war and say 'No more!', be given a wider hearing? The foreign military personnel facing the present hostile environment in Iraq, after believing their leaders' words that they were participating in a noble cause, will not return home unscathed.

Weil claimed that a nation's desire for prestige and glory will not only lead it to perpetual war against presumed enemies, but, worse, will also put a nation of people at risk of being manipulated by its own leaders' internal political agendas. In 'Reflections on War' she stated:

The greatest error of almost every study of war is to consider war as an element of foreign politics, when in truth, it is above all a fact of domestic politics and the most atrocious of them all.¹⁶

The hyping of war, as an act of interior politics in post 9/11 America, is as evident now as it was in the post-World War Two period. At both times, the rhetoric of Democracy, Freedom, and Liberty, under the guise of National Security, stifled dissent, permitted an intensification of military might, aggressive police actions and led to a concentration of power in the Executive Branch of government. Worse, in post 9/11, a nation with a proud past of trying to exemplify the democratic ideals of respect for the equality and dignity of all persons has arrogantly taken on the exclusive right of making pre-emptive strikes against weaker nations.

On the basis of flimsy and uncertified evidence that the United States was facing a dire threat from a dictatorial regime, courageous and loyal young men and women were asked to put at risk their most precious possession, their lives. War was not imminent, so one had to be created. The call for popular acceptance of the specious arguments validating a pre-emptive attack was reinforced by the rationale that if those we love most, our young people, were willing to sacrifice themselves, surely the rest of the country must consent to all that the present leaders demand. Support for the troops was inextricably melded into support for the war. Conversely, those who believed that the best support for the troops was to not go to war were ridiculed and scorned as shamefully unpatriotic. The war talk, bombastic as it was, resulted from a hidden agenda to manipulate public opinion. Few thinking people were fooled.

Senator Byrd, the elder statesman from West Virginia, spoke for the many unheeded and heavy-hearted dissenters in America when he declared in the US

Congress on 12 February 2003, the eve of the invasion of Iraq (available also on the Internet under the title: 'We Stand Passively Mute'):

This coming battle, if it materializes, represents a turning point in US foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world. . . . The doctrine of preemption – the idea that the United States or any other nation can legitimately attack a nation that is not imminently threatening but may be threatening in the future – is a radical new twist on the traditional idea of self-defense. . . . The kind of extremely destabilizing and dangerous foreign policy debacle that the world is currently witnessing is inexcusable from any Administration charged with the awesome power and responsibility of guiding the destiny of the greatest superpower on the planet.

I truly must question the judgment of any President who can say that a massive unprovoked military attack on a nation that is over 50% children is 'in the highest moral traditions of our country'.

A permanent war economy

In 1945, after 4 years of war, the American people were desperate to regain their peacetime lives. That, however, was not to be. Although the enemy's power to strike back had been irrevocably smashed, new competitors had emerged. The Soviet leadership's vice-like grip on its own people and its threat of spreading far-reaching tentacles of communist domination to other countries had to be vigorously opposed. The war against the Axis alliance had scarcely abated before the armed forces had to be re-equipped and expanded. In the US, a permanent state of military preparedness calling for civilian sacrifices in the name of security was installed. In addition, we now know that the military strength of the USSR was deliberately exaggerated by the US security establishment. The economy was adjusted to this encompassing focus and a public psychosis of war was cultivated by evoking the 'Red Menace'. All the insinuations of imminent danger allowed the research on atomic and nuclear weaponry to speed on apace.

The emerging threat of a communist take-over muffled dissent and gave credibility to the government's mobilization in view of the 'Cold War'. Military spending had decreased radically just after peace was declared. But with hardly a breathing space in between, defense spending started its upward climb once again until the height of the 'Cold War' in the early 1980s. At that point, under President Reagan and his Star Wars proposals, it surpassed the 1944 level. The Korean War had occurred in the interim. America was in a quasi-permanent war economy, with the implicit and explicit controls that implies. In his farewell speech to the nation as he left the presidency in 1962, the erstwhile World War Two general, now president, Dwight D. Eisenhower warned:

We must not fail to comprehend [the] grave implications of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved, so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-

industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

Eisenhower apprehended the danger, which has become a reality: that public policy could itself become the captive of a military, scientific, technological elite.

Fear as a means of social control

The anti-Communist hysteria that reigned in the late 1940s and 1950s seriously undermined the people's confidence that they could freely exploit their democratic right to speak out; some of that uneasiness has resurfaced. Past witch-hunts perpetrated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Alien Registration Act, and the opportunistic cluster attacks led by Senator Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Investigating Subcommittee, well supported by the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, gradually silenced opposition to US government policies. The pervasive fear that spread across the nation in those earlier decades, due to the orchestrated campaign claiming that the State Department, the entertainment industry, the universities and other institutions were riddled with Communists planning to undermine American democracy, wreaked havoc with civil liberties. Historians of the period estimate that over 10,000 people lost their economic livelihood, often through subtle insinuations spread by the pernicious self-serving anti-Communist network. The heralded icon of National Security allowed perception to rule over reality. The Investigating Subcommittee profited from the voluntary cooperation of employers who dismissed, often without a shred of evidence, any employees who fell under the cloud of suspicion. The creeping fear further narrowed the space for either public comment on domestic restrictions or challenges to American Foreign Policy. The primacy that National Security gained over ordinary law eroded the people's democratic defenses against official ideologies.

The fear that infiltrated the American people was also manipulated to undermine any efforts to pursue Roosevelt's unfinished agenda of New Deal social reforms, such as national health insurance. The political conservatives jumped on the opportunity to discredit any persons who called for radical changes to the status quo. They pushed their mean-spirited snooping quite deliberately into the professional arenas of public life occupied by lawyers, educators, social workers, union organizers: spheres where viable alternatives to social problems most often germinate and develop. Although the US Senate in 1954 firmly censured Senator McCarthy, the FBI throughout the 1960s and 1970s continued using political sabotage, unauthorized surveillance and disinformation in its secret program COINTEL against the Communist Party and groups perceived as radical.¹⁷ The effect of so many people losing any viable means of support due to shadowy accusations of having criticized America's woefully inadequate social programs, or associating with others who did

not endorse the orthodox view, imposed a cloak of social conformism on public opinion.

Even attacks by highly placed persons against this malignant disease metastasizing throughout American democracy were to no avail. Congress massively overrode President Truman's 1950 veto of McCarran's Internal Security Act. Truman was making the point that the act of forcing the Communist Party and its front groups to register publicly was repressive, unnecessary and made a mockery of the Bill of Rights. In 1952, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas deplored the dangerous implications in the pattern of orthodoxy that was shaping public opinion.

Fear has driven more and more men and women in all walks of life either to silence or to the folds of the orthodox. Fear has mounted – fear of losing one's job, fear of being investigated, fear of being pilloried. This fear has stereotyped our thinking, narrowed the range of free public discussion, and driven many thoughtful people to despair. This fear has even entered universities, great citadels of our spiritual strength, and corrupted them. We have the spectacle of university officials lending themselves to one of the worst witch-hunts we have seen since early days.¹⁸

Dorothy Day and violence

One radical thinker who refused to be driven by fear and who reacted strenuously to the orchestrated war mentality was Dorothy Day, a convert to Roman Catholicism and founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Ms Day was a reader of *Politics* and an admirer of the thought of Simone Weil. As a consistent activist against measures that spread a psychosis of war, she strove to arouse people's consciousness concerning ways to promote peace and social justice. Fully comprehending the threat that the atomic bomb posed to existence itself, she intensified her opposition to war and to preparations for war.

In the 1950s, all over the United States, on Saturdays, exactly at noon, Civil Defense sirens wailed reminding people that they might have to take cover were an enemy to approach. Although people continued their daily activities, their minds inevitably repeatedly registered the possibility of an enemy attack. Dorothy Day abhorred this exercise and the variety of insidious ways that government could promote a psychological aura of tension out of all proportion to reality. In 1955, when New York City mandated compulsory participation in the weekly air-raid drills, Dorothy Day refused to comply. For the next 5 years, she and her co-workers were regularly hauled into court, reprimanded and occasionally sent to prison. Like a common criminal, she had to endure the humiliation of being stripped, showered and deprived of clothing and belongings and being incarcerated with dangerous criminals.¹⁹ Eventually the officials, accepting that she was not to be cowed, stopped arresting her or any other violators. Shortly thereafter, the compulsory air-raid siren drills were quietly discontinued.

Day believed as did Simone Weil that true freedom means that individuals must have the ability to do their own thinking and then to follow their thought with

appropriate actions. Free thought and commensurate action were inextricably enmeshed with a person's dignity as a human being. Day believed that God spoke to humankind through the beauty of the universe and that no one should be deprived of the material means to sustain life with dignity. She also deplored the increasing contempt for life inherent in atomic weapons. In her last public speech in 1975 on the anniversary of the destruction of Hiroshima, she said: 'God gave us life, and the Eucharist to sustain our life. But we have given the world instruments of death of inconceivable magnitude.'²⁰

Dissent is never easy. Ms Day lived in such a manner that her few possessions were dispensable. McCarthy and his henchmen didn't pursue those whom they could not intimidate. They preferred to browbeat the vulnerable. Today, far more sophisticated means are taken to curtail dissent. The US media, a powerful tool in a democracy for disseminating information and instigating debate, has become innocuously bland. The concentration of media ownership in a handful of powerful companies with vested financial interests has homogenized a programming that increasingly appeals to the lowest common denominator. A few big corporation owners have for a long time been deciding what the public will or will not read, hear and see. While there appear to be more choices, there are in reality fewer voices. Overshadowing the former clear recognition of public ownership of the airwaves and of public service accountability is the present primacy of the financial bottom line. America's new media elite has no obligation or incentive to sponsor what might best serve the public interest. In the pursuit of cutting costs, they have abandoned US news outlets for foreign sources; fewer and fewer foreign correspondents are commissioned to be physically present in the country about which they are writing. Consequently, foreign news too often reaches the US public second hand. For the one super-power brandishing unequalled military might, this opens a perilous lacuna in accurate reporting for the country's citizens.

Media and democracy

The major media players' ability to direct public opinion was never more evident than during the Iraq invasion and the entire build-up of public sentiment for the use of force to launch the Regime Change *du jour*. Indeed, an increasing number of concerned American listeners turned to the BBC for less biased coverage. As John Nichols of *The Nation* wrote:

[The] American networks dismissed dissent, openly questioned the intellect and patriotism of those who questioned 'evidence' regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and degenerated into rah-rah coverage of presidential pronouncements once the war began.²¹

There was little effort to educate the American public on the unique Iraqi cultural, religious and historical context of their once extraordinary civilization. But a good deal of time was spent on the Administration's fatuous pronouncements, catchy slogans and clear fabrications.

'Operation Iraqi Freedom' was repeated verbally and visually with no attempt to

explore what that implied or whether the military means chosen might in truth be counter-productive to achieving such a complex and nebulous goal. Throughout the war, reporting on the thousands of Iraqi civilian casualties got short shrift, as did actual footage of the bombed areas. Americans had to look hard to find statistics on the results of military actions.

Nor were efforts made to have Americans understand the impact of cluster bombs that effectively turn into multiple land-mines ready to detonate on contact, causing death or injury to civilians and ground forces. As Weil had clearly foreseen, the impossibility of protecting civilian lives when such Weapons of Mass Destruction are deployed becomes manifest. Although International Human Rights campaigners made unheeded, bitter accusations against the use of cluster bombs, there was literally no discussion of this reality in the US media. If there had been full information, no one could have ignored the irony of using massively destructive means in a campaign to 'Win the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People'. The ludicrous idea of destroying in order to save still circulates.

As the attack on the people of Iraq became imminent, swaths of ordinary Americans registered their opposition by massing in public places. Every city and town had great numbers of people in the streets protesting the plan to use full military might against the Iraqi regime. Nevertheless, the protestors received scant media coverage. Full discussion of the range of options available to contain the universally discredited dictator Saddam Hussein was never encouraged by media moguls, who had already sided with the powerful leaders of the country. Once again, as in the Gulf War, the public had to accept an invasion as a *fait accompli* when they saw their beloved young people in the military already on their way to fight the 'enemy'. Subsequently, any challenging of the Administration's policies was regularly touted as a traitorous lack of support for US troops. Citizens exercising their democratic right to object found themselves powerless not only to act but even to be heard.

Disturbing and painful memories of the McCarthy era tactics surged up in Academe. Citizens profoundly felt their helplessness and disaffection from the leaders, who were supposed to be their representatives. In New York City on 22 March, the police roughed-up spectators and arrested as many of the anti-war protestors as they could despite the courts having sanctioned the event. This was not the only incident in which the police joined the military and the Administration in the assault on the people's right to dissent. As Weil insisted in her 'Reflections on War': the great potential adversary to human values remains a State apparatus, which includes the bureaucracy, the military and the police, intent on its own agenda.²² She points out that history consistently shows that war 'perfects the State apparatus'.²³

Freedom of thought

Pulitzer prize-winning historian and social critic Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr spoke out on 22 May 2003 in the *Seattle Times*, declaring that going to war does not abrogate freedom of conscience. Before sending young Americans to kill and die in foreign

lands, he argued, a democracy had a sacred obligation to permit full and searching discussion of the issues. He decried the United States Attorney General's statement that those who dare question the acts of the US Administration were giving aid and comfort to the terrorists. He insisted that there was nothing sacrosanct about presidents in wartime, particularly when the strategy of National Security promised a vista of presidential wars stretching far into the future. He cited President John F. Kennedy:

We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. . . . We cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity. . . . There cannot be an American solution to every world problem.

That it is in the interest of those in power to diminish the vital role of information outlets in a nation is evident. The 2 June 2003 bold attempt of the US Federal Communications Commission, in a vote of 3 to 2, to expand the ability of broadcast and newspaper conglomerates to extend their ownership where they already have a dominant presence follows Weil's concept of human nature. 'Whoever holds authority thinks it his mission to preserve order, which is essential to society, and he cannot believe in any order but the one there is.' She insists that: 'As long as there is a stable social hierarchy, whatever its form, those on the lower rung of society will have to fight in order not to lose all rights as human beings'.²⁴

And fight they did: the two dissenting members of the Federal Communications Commission made strong written opposition statements, protesting the final decision. One wrote: '[The Order] threatens to degrade civil discourse and the quality of our society's intellectual, cultural and political life. . . . Our very democracy is at stake.' They both castigated the lack of attention to the nearly unanimous public opposition. Of the three-quarters of a million comments they received, representing hugely diverse public interest groups, 99.9 percent were opposed to the proposed rule changes. The other commissioner cited Judge Learned Hand's truism of a half century ago: 'The hand that rules the press, the radio, the screen and the far-spread magazine, rules the country'. The vociferous dissent of an outraged public has slowed, but not stopped, the corporate media's determination to maximize profits. They show little concern for Dwight D. Eisenhower's call for an alert and knowledgeable citizenry who will seek ways to allow security and liberty to prosper together. One can raise the valid question of whether the American people would have supported this war had the media more responsibly reported the truth.

Weil understood the situation:

In every domain, we seem to have lost essential notions of intelligence, notions of limit, of measure, of degree, of proportion, of relation, of condition, of necessary communications, of connections between means and results. In order to understand human affairs, we have peopled our political universe exclusively with myths and with monsters; we know only abstractions and absolutes.²⁵

In an address to Yale faculty and students, JFK said: 'The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie. . . . but the myth'. The present myth being exploited is National Security, left without any clear definition.

Technology and national security

Simone Weil was deeply troubled by the powerful new tools technology put in the hands of those who wish to keep control over others: tools that dehumanize as well as destroy. By perpetuating an atmosphere of fear, those in power convince their followers to relinquish essential civil liberties, which otherwise they would not give up. In the war psychosis of post 9/11, Americans have given the regime sweeping new powers to place wire-taps, secretly search homes and offices and compile personal data from educational and financial institutions and libraries. A *Big Brother* proposition is in the wings to catalogue genetic information about innocent civilians. Once again, the rationale for these incursions into individuals' private lives is National Security. This massive amount of information collected and readily available through technology puts a terrible potential for exploitation in the hands of the unscrupulous. It corresponds to what Weil imagined as 'blind necessities implied in the operation of the monstrous social machine'.²⁶ As William Pitt, the Younger, contended in 1783: 'Necessity is the plea for every infringement of human freedom'.

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In her 'Poem of Force' Weil observed that while the strong feel themselves invincible, they march ahead oblivious of any obstacles blocking their path. They never feel the need for that brief interval where thought must occur and prudence be reassessed. They do not take seriously the idea that the consequence of their acts may cause them to suffer in turn. Consequently, they inevitably exceed their limits, for 'Where thought has no place, neither do justice or prudence'.²⁷

Resolution of the present debacle in the precarious global situation has to originate with the people themselves. An acknowledgement of the perilous course that is being pursued must come first, followed by a clear determination to say 'No' to further incursions against Human Rights on the domestic and global scene. American policy-makers claimed that they had expected the Iraqi people to stand up and throw off a sadistic dictator. The overthrow did not happen for many complex and compelling reasons, but the expectation shows that the policy-makers recognize the power of the people. Weil reminds us that 'these weapons [of destruction] do not go off by themselves, and it is dishonest to blame inert matter for a situation where we bear full responsibility'.²⁸ She insists on the need to face up to the reality of our human condition.

In the minds of Homer's contemporaries, in truth, the role that we attribute to mysterious economic cliques was played by the gods of Greek mythology. But to push humankind into the most absurd catastrophes, neither gods nor secret cabals are needed. Human nature suffices.²⁹

Force, as Weil asserted, follows its own inscrutable laws, but it is not invincible, nor is the struggle to counterbalance inequalities in power ever decisive. We can take heart in the guidelines of her conclusion in the study of 'Words and War'. She admits that the power ratio between two entities will be forever changing. According to

Weil, we have the responsibility to learn how not to admire force and, yet 'to discriminate between the unreal and the real in order to diminish the risks of war without abandoning the struggle, which Heraclites said was the condition of life'.³⁰ Differentiating the real from the imaginary is a major task for citizens of all nations, including the most powerful country on the planet. We must reclaim proprietorship over the public policies declared in our name, grounding them firmly on the conviction that the material power of military might is not stronger than the moral power of ideas.

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Notes

1. Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes*, VI 1. Paris, Gallimard, 1994: 106. All translations are the author's.
2. Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes*, II 3. Paris, Gallimard, 1988: 227.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
4. The third issue of *Diogenes* (summer 1953) featured Macdonald's critical analysis of popular culture: 'A Theory of Mass Culture'.
5. The French title is 'Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie' under the rubric of 'Le Pouvoir des mots'. I have kept the title as it first appeared to the readers of *Politics*. All translations from the article, however, are mine.
6. Weil, *OC II 3*: 49, *op. cit.* Note 2.
7. *Ibid.*, 63–4.
8. Stephan Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The US Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge, to the Surrender of Germany*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1998, Ch. 14.
9. Rob Schultheis, 'Perilous Gardens, Persistent Dreams', *Sierra*, May/June, 2003: 30.
10. Barry Bearak, 'Unreconstructed', *The New York Times Magazine*, June 1, 2003: 43.
11. Weil, *OC II 3*: 66, *op. cit.* Note 2.
12. *Ibid.*, 51.
13. *Ibid.*, 52.
14. *Ibid.*, 236.
15. *Ibid.*, 64.
16. Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes*, II 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1988: 293.
17. Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1994: 24.
18. *Ibid.*, 245.
19. Dorothy Day, *Writings from 'Commonweal'*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2002: 133.
20. William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography*, San Francisco, CA, Harper & Row, 1982: 513.
21. John Nichols, 'I Want My BBC', *The Nation*, May 12, 2003.
22. Weil, *OC II 1*: 299, *op. cit.* Note 16.
23. *Ibid.*, 296.
24. Weil, *OC II 3*: 58, *op. cit.* Note 2.
25. *Ibid.*, 52.
26. Weil, *OC II 1*: 298, *op. cit.* Note 16.
27. Weil, *OC II 3*: 236, *op. cit.* Note 2.
28. *Ibid.*, 49.
29. *Ibid.*, 50–1.
30. *Ibid.*, 66.

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