

Are We Americans a Warlike People?

Educator Says the Fact That We Have Entered All Wars Unprepared Shows That We Are Fundamentally Unmilitaristic

By Brander Matthews

IN the unending discussion as to whether or not it is the duty of the United States to set its house in order and to put itself into a proper state of defense against foreign aggression, some of the advocates of unpreparedness insist that the training of our young men to bear arms would inevitably make us a militaristic nation, enamored of war for its own sake and unable to resist the temptation to engage in battle. This assertion raises three questions, each of which deserves consideration. First of all—What is militarism? Second—Which of the nations is or has been militaristic? And third—Have we Americans ever been militaristic in our attitude or even warlike in our temper?

First, then, what is militarism? The word is young, even if the spirit it seeks to define may be very old. Being a new word, its meaning is still a little vague; and probably no two of those who employ it as a term of reproach would agree as to its precise content. When we make an honest effort to discover the essential quality of militarism, we cannot help seeing that it describes both a dogma and a state of facts; that is to say, we are confronted by a theory and by a condition.

The belief, which is the core of militarism, holds that war is not an evil thing itself, but a good thing, to be anticipated gladly and to be welcomed warmly. It insists that war is inevitable and that it is necessary, that war is beneficial, and that the nation too long deprived of war will assuredly fall into corruption and decay; therefore peace is looked upon as not specially desirable in itself, as always temporary, as only an entracte, so to speak, during which the stage is to be set and the properties put in place for service when the curtain rises again after the briefest possible intermission—the orchestra having played martial tunes while the shining armor and the rattling scabbards were being made ready for the actor with the mailed fist.

The dogma declares that war is profitable as well as ennobling—in that it will broaden the boundaries of the State, fill the national coffers by plunder or by indemnities exacted from the defeated foe, and stimulate to the utmost all the faculties of all the individuals who must sacrifice themselves absolutely to the State; and thus it is that the theory leads to the condition, which is that the nation must always hold itself perfectly prepared for war and must always keep thinking about war as certain to come and as equally certain to be invigorating to the body politic.

As a result the army becomes the centre of national life; it takes on a supreme importance; it stands forth not only as the protector of the nation's rights if these should be infringed, but also and even more emphatically as the instrument of the nation's righteous self-assertion. So it comes about that the civil authority is likely to be subordinated to the military and that the citizen is treated as inferior to the soldier, as valuable chiefly as a soldier.

In a country dominated by militarism, the capital is certain to be filled with parading regiments; the drums will be rattling incessantly, the bugles blaring and the fifes shrilling out; and the higher officials of the State, even when their functions are civil and diplomatic, will be likely to exhibit themselves in military uniforms.

Militarism is at once a consequence and a cause of aristocracy and of autocracy. It is in all its manifestations fundamentally undemocratic. A nation in which the average citizen has little voice in the affairs of State and in which the final decision rests solely with the hereditary caste is always prone to militarism.

A nation governed by the people for the people is almost certain to abhor militarism. France, for example, was frankly militaristic under Louis XIV. and again under Napoleon and even

(although less wholeheartedly) under Louis Napoleon. France under the Third Republic has for more than two score years longed for peace, even if it felt itself forced always to be prepared against war.

There is not a little significance in one of the utterances of Professor Hans Delbrück (who succeeded Treitschke at the University of Berlin) in his "Regierung und Volkswille," published in 1914, just before the outbreak of the war. This German scholar denied that any Parliament or Congress really expressed the will of the people, and he failed to find honesty or wisdom in any of these representative assemblies.

Furthermore, he was moved logically to insist that the ultimate source of power is not in the voter, but in the soldier, and that the question determining the nature of the State is this—"From whom does the army take orders?" In a militaristic nation the army obeys the monarch or the closely knit aristocracy, and in a non-military nation the soldiers are under the command of the Chief of the State, chosen by the people to conduct the Government.

Perhaps the abiding difference between the militaristic nations and the non-militaristic nations may be put clearly in a single sentence—the militaristic nations, even while they are going about their peaceful occupations, are forever thinking about war as certain sooner or later; and the non-militaristic nations do not like to think about war, do not expect it, and even when it looms so near that they are impelled to take up arms, they try to believe that it may be avoided.

A people is not to be described as militaristic because it can fight, if need be, and because it is on occasion willing to fight. Militaristic countries are certain to be more amply prepared for war when it is declared than non-militaristic countries, but their soldiers will not be braver, more patriotic, or more self-sacrificing; they will not be sturdier in body or stronger in will than the less adequately trained soldiers of the non-militaristic countries. A non-militaristic people is likely to be lacking in aggressiveness and in the ambition to conquer; but this does not indicate that it is any the less able to defend itself when the necessity arrives.

Mere physical courage, upon which every people is prone to pride itself, is the common possession of every race which has been able to achieve its independence. If a people is not made up of men willing to stand up to be killed at the call of duty, then that people loses its independence and cannot call its soul its own. It sinks into servitude to the invader who is made of sterner stuff; it ceases to be a nation with a name of its own.

The race which resides and has resided for five thousand years in the narrow valley of the Nile seems to have been lacking in the stamina which might nerve it to assert itself and to defend its rights. Apparently it has never had iron enough in its blood to edge resolve with. As a result of this deficiency in the courage common to the majority of mankind the native Egyptian has been ruled, despoiled, and exploited for now twenty-five centuries by alien adventurers, stronger of purpose and readier with the sword—by the Assyrian and by the Persian, by the Greek and by the Roman, by the Arab and by the Turk, by the French and by the British.

Contrast the sad fate which has befallen these pitiable dwellers in the valley of the Nile with the nobler fortune achieved by the inhabitants of the uplands of Switzerland, exposed on all sides to invasion and shut in by neighbors, sometimes discourteous and sometimes covetous.

The Swissers are as peace-loving as the Egyptians—and perhaps even more

so, since they are willing to fight for peace if there is no other way of attaining it. They are as little militaristic as any people in Europe; they have the least to gain by war and the most to lose. But Switzerland, the smallest of nations, long ago served notice on all its neighbors that it was prepared to guard its borders, and as a result no foreign soldier has dared to set foot on its stony soil.

If the people of Belgium had shown the same stern determination and if they had made a similar preparation they might not now find themselves the helpless victims of ruthless invaders.

The Prussians are wont to maintain that if Great Britain is not a militaristic empire it is navalistic, which amounts to the same thing, so they assert. But even if the British have seen fit to keep up a fleet relatively as powerful and as ready for action as the German Army, they lack the inner essence of militarism as this is visible in Prussia. They have never allowed themselves to be obsessed by the idea of war as inevitable and as beneficial. They have always refused to think of war as immediately impending; and in fact they have thought about war as little as possible, declining to believe that it could not be avoided.

Moreover, the King of England is not always photographed in the uniform of an Admiral; the Prime Minister has never appeared in public in the costume of a sailor; the streets of London are not filled with swaggering naval officers in all the insignia of their rank; and the naval courts have never arrogated to themselves authority over the liberties of the individual civilian.

The British Empire, wideflung as it is and stupendous in its area, has not been gained by conquest so much as by exploration, colonization, and peaceful penetration. Although India and Egypt were taken by the sword and are held by the sword, the British Empire as a whole owes its expansion more to peace than to war; and here is its most evident unlikeness to the Roman Empire, which it resembles closely in many other ways.

Most of the wars in which Great Britain has been engaged have been little wars, happening more or less unexpectedly and catching the War Office more or less unprepared. Even in their greatest effort, in the long series of campaigns against Napoleon, the British relied at least as much upon their money bags as upon their soldiers.

There was an unconscious revelation of the constant attitude of the Island Kingdom toward war in a music hall song, popular in the late seventies of the last century, a martial lyric which began with the frank admission that "we don't want to fight," corrected immediately by "but, by jingo, if we do, we've got the men, we've got the ships, we've got the money, too!"

It was boldly by force of arms that the Roman Republic kept on broadening its boundaries and building itself bigger and bigger, until it embraced the civilized world. Century after century the doors of the Temple of Janus were wide open, and the vigorously disciplined legions went forth to occupy frontier outposts further and further from the seven-hilled city.

By their just and liberal government the Romans held the outlying territories they had taken by their valor, and they promptly made the roads which all led to Rome, and which endure here and there to this day. It was not until the realm of Rome had been consolidated under Augustus that the peace of Rome became possible. By a strange irony the aristocratic republic, which had been militaristic, was followed by an autocratic Empire which cultivated peaceful ideals—although without relaxing the maintenance of a multitude of soldiers, ready for the field at a moment's notice.

The Athenians were often at war; they could give a good account of themselves both on land and sea; and yet they never

succumbed to the insidious doctrines of militarism. On the other hand, the Spartans, who were often at peace, were trained and organized for war. The Athenians were intelligent and open minded, and the Spartans were unintellectual and narrow, and it is difficult to decide whether this narrowness was the cause or the consequence of their militaristic outlook on life. As the French appear today to be the direct inheritors of the kindly culture and alert intelligence of the Athenians, so the Prussians seem to have modeled themselves upon the stern and hard Lacedaemonians.

Of all the Greeks, Alexander was the greatest military genius, and he was also the archetype of embodied militarism. To sigh for more worlds to conquer is to express concisely the final essence of the militaristic spirit; and while Alexander was perhaps a nobler character than Frederick and Napoleon, he was as self-centred and as self-seeking. The militaristic State is never so domineering as when its monarch is himself a soldier—or when he thinks as a soldier.

When Spain was reaching out for the control of Europe and America, it was not as militaristic as Prussia under Frederick, simply because Philip was not himself a commander of energetic genius, enjoying the exercise of his mastery of the art of war. For the same reason France under Louis XIV. was less militaristic than it was under Napoleon. Louis XIV. was as avid of glory as Frederick, and as unscrupulous in his determination to aggrandize his own domain by despoiling his neighbors, but he was no warrior, and he did not view the world exclusively from a militaristic point of view.

This brings us in sight of an answer to our third question: Have we Americans ever been militaristic in our attitude, or even warlike in our temper? No one familiar with the history of the United States could maintain that we had ever been taken captive by the militaristic lust of conquest. We have always been enamored of peace and we have never liked to think of war.

We have been a good neighbor to Canada, and for more than a century our northern borders have been left undefended. If our relations with Mexico have been less satisfactory, that has not been altogether our fault; and for at least three score years we have displayed no desire to despoil our neighbors on the south.

Militaristic we never have been, but have we never been warlike in our temper? Warlike we might have been on occasion and under temptation, even if we were normally devoid of militarism.

It may be admitted at once that we resemble other peoples in admiring and in desiring to reward the successful soldiers with civilian offices. In the brief list of our Presidents we find General Washington, General Jackson, General William H. Harrison, General Taylor, General Grant, Colonel Hayes, General Garfield, General Benjamin Harrison, Major McKinley, and Colonel Roosevelt. We are inclined to suppose that the men who have proved themselves fit for command in war will reveal themselves as competent to govern in peace.

Yet a closer scrutiny of this list discloses the encouraging fact that most of these military titles were more or less accidental, if this is not an unfair phrase, and that their wearers were not promoted to the Presidency primarily because of their prowess on the tented field. The election of these ex-soldiers, not professional warriors, cannot be called evidence that we delight in battle.

When we consider the way in which the United States was populated we may still wonder why our temper has not been more frequently warlike. Almost every native American born before 1860 was descended from a selected stock—from men more adventurous than their fellows, readier to risk themselves in strange places, sturdier of soul to brave the un-

(Continued on Following Page.)

Are We Americans a Warlike People?

(Continued from Preceding Page.)

known perils of a new country attainable only after a long and uncertain voyage.

They were hardy folk, the men and women who were bold enough to cross the broad Atlantic, not knowing how they were to make good in their adopted home. And it would be natural enough if they and their children and their children's children should show themselves more or less venturesome and not always disinclined to the dangerous delights of war. They might not keep their minds constantly fixed on war, but they were not likely to love peace so completely as to refuse to consider the alluring possibility of war. They might carelessly disregard the duty of preparing themselves for self-defense; but none the less would they gladly spring to arms when the hour arrived for the dangerous adventure.

My colleague, Professor Munroe Smith, kindly permits me to utilize here a pertinent observation of his. Since the United States declared its independence, nearly a century and a half ago, the nation has been involved in five wars. Two of these were important and may properly be called necessary and un-

avoidable—the Revolutionary War and the civil war, the first giving us our independence and the second preserving our unity.

The other three wars—that of 1812, that with Mexico in 1846, and that with Spain in 1898—were far less important; no one of them was absolutely necessary, and perhaps all three of them might have been avoided—if we had been totally devoid of the warlike temper and if we had been as peace loving as we like to think ourselves. The war of 1812 broke out twenty-nine years after the treaty of peace signed in 1783—that is to say, a little less than a generation later. The Mexican war started in 1846, thirty-one years after the battle of New Orleans, (which was fought in 1815 after the treaty of peace had been signed with Great Britain); again the peaceful intermission is a scant generation. And the Spanish war began and ended in 1898, thirty-three years after the surrender at Appomattox; and here the period of peace has lengthened itself to a full generation.

These facts have their obvious significance, even if they do not suggest that our temper is more warlike than we are in the habit of admitting. They may not

prove that the people of the United States are so adventurous, so forthright, so eager for military excitement, that they have to let blood three times in a century, but they do testify to our willingness to enter on a quarrel and to see it through.

And there is a certain significance also in Professor Munroe Smith's later observation that when there loomed up a likelihood of war with Mexico in the Summer of 1916, only eighteen years after the Spanish war, there was absolutely no martial ardor, no uprising of volunteers, no belligerent hysteria—although there was no shrinking and no shirking. Plainly, the people of the United States did not want war again less than a score of years after they had found themselves forced to fight to free Cuba from intolerable oppression.

Even after the President of the United States had at last broken with Germany and withdrawn our Ambassador, when a declaration of war became an impending probability, there was no martial fervor such as had followed on the sinking of the Maine. It is true that a little group, as insignificant as it was vociferous, demanded war at any cost, but it was true also that another group, quite as insignificant and even more vociferous, persisted in pleading for peace at any price. The immense majority hoped that war might be avoided, but it did not shrink from it if it should be forced on us.

Whenever we have gone to war we have been found pitifully unprepared for it—which is satisfactory evidence that we are fundamentally unmilitaristic in spirit. As we have hitherto foolishly refused to adopt universal military service and to require every young man to take the training which will fit him to do his duty, we have always had to fight as best we could while we were making ready to fight and learning how to fight. We have had to rely on the valor and on the devotion of volunteers, and neither has ever failed us in the hour of need. And we have a right to believe that whenever this hour strikes we shall find the spirit of our men of fighting age not inferior to that of the standard bearer of the first colored regiment to be raised in Louisiana in the second year of the civil war. When the flag was placed in the hands of this black man he clasped it closely and, holding up his head, he said, "I will bring these colors back—or report to God the reason why!"