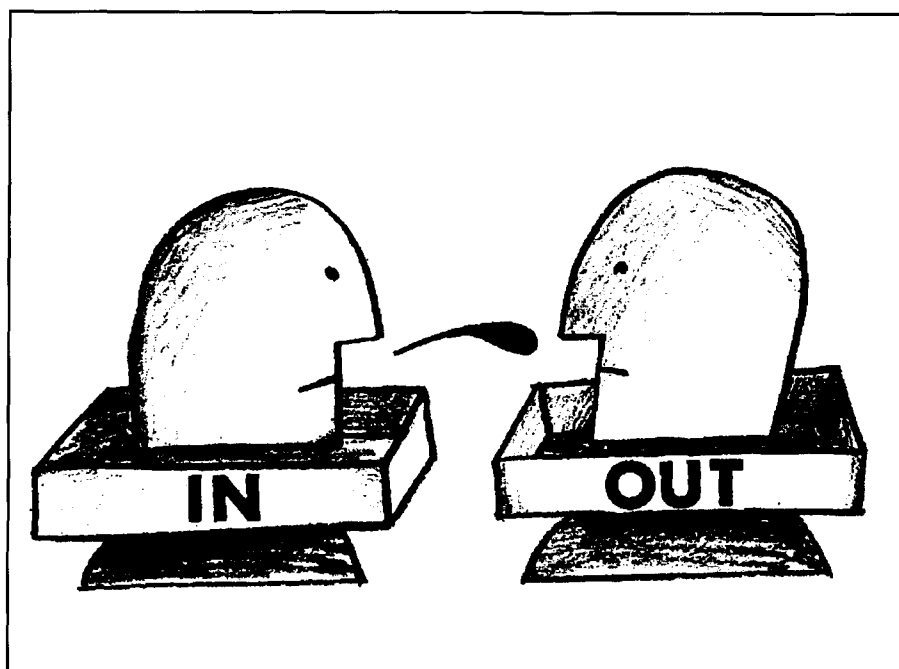


Don't Feed the War Machine

by Bill Kauffman



Igor Kopechinsky

“His sympathies were for race—too lofty to descend to persons,” a wit once said of the abolitionist Senator Sumner. For how else could a man countenance the slaughter of his countrymen, not only rebel Southerners but noble Robert Gould Shaw and Berkshires boys, too?

The most dangerous people—the ones who will kill you for your own good—are those who subordinate the individual to abstractions: the class, the master race, the efficient economy. They gain power because they are willing to perform the sleazy and degrading acts necessary to its achievement. You see them on television, their flickering lair: the Senator once arrested outside the South African embassy, oozing righteousness, who daily browbeat his staff with his crazed Richie Rich rantings; the slovenly obese comedienne, self-styled champion of the working class, who mistreats elevator operators and hotel clerks; the striding purposeful men—from Bill Clinton to William Simon—who make a great show of their religious faith yet are known as squalling martinets who abuse underlings.

Influential men, their days a blur of movement, retainers at beck and call, unable even to dial a car phone by themselves, come to see others as toadies or supplicants (with the toothsome few laid aside as bed partners). In their eyes we are all expendable. Why was anyone surprised when Ted Kennedy swam away, leaving Mary Jo Kopechne to scream in her air

pocket till the water rushed in? Kopechnes serve, and Kennedys are served; Vietnam was just Chappaquiddick with rice paddies. Shut up and die.

Who are these creatures, capable of decreeing—with no more compunction than an acned scamp in a Metallica T-shirt displays whilst zapping foes in *Mortal Kombat*—the mass execution of, say, Iraqi children or uppity Salvadoran peasants? Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, wrote of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

Mr. Truman was jubilant . . . True man. What a strange name, come to think of it. . . . Truman is a true man of his time in that he was jubilant. He was not a son of God, brother of Christ, brother of the Japanese, jubilating as he did . . . *jubilare deo*. We have killed 318,000 Japanese . . . they are vaporized, our Japanese brothers, scattered, men, women and babies, to the four winds, over the seven seas. Perhaps we will breathe their dust into our nostrils, feel them in the fog of New York on our faces, feel them in the rain on the hills of Easton.

But then Dorothy was what they called a sob sister. Of course she wasn't: her acts of charity, her very life, were face to face, local, and intensely “personalist,” as she sometimes described her philosophy. (Other times it was “anarchist” or “distributist.”) But she saw Christ in the face of a Bowery bum, and like an impractical idealist she offered him bread instead of a

Bill Kauffman is the author of Every Man A King, Country Towns of New York, and America First!

knee to the groin and an application for Food Stamps.

Harry, meanwhile, gave them Hell, all right. Unless Hell gave them Harry. (There are two names for men who order flunkies to kill strangers: Charles Manson and Mr. President.)

The *New York Tribune* observed of General Ulysses S. Grant's "immobile, heavy, and expressionless" visage that it was "the face of the only man in America, perhaps, who could make the calculation of the multitude of lives necessary to blot out a multitude of other lives." This calculus requires a certain moral density; an inability to credit persons unknown to you with lives, families, feelings, and histories of their own. Politicians, who perforce see people merely as an agglomeration of lever-pullers called the "electorate," are capable of making this dead reckoning; curiously, many military men cannot, perhaps because the men they drill are all too real to them. Among the most memorable of American antiwar voices was that of General Smedley Butler, the maverick marine, who told a radio audience in 1939:

Now—you mothers, particularly! The only way you can resist all this war hysteria and beating of tom-toms is by asserting the love you bear your boys. When you listen to some well-worded, some well-delivered war speech, just remember it's nothing but *sound*. No amount of sound can make up to you for the loss of your boy. . . . Look at him. Put your hand on that spot on the back of his neck. The place you used to love to kiss when he was a baby. Just rub it a little. You won't wake him up, he knows it's you. . . . Look at this splendid young creature who's part of yourself, then close your eyes for a moment and I'll tell you what can happen.

Somewhere—5,000 miles from home. Night. Darkness. Cold. A drizzling rain. The noise is terrific. All Hell has broken loose. A star shell bursts in the air. Its unearthly flare lights up the muddy field. There's a lot of tangled rusty barbed wires out there and a boy hanging over them—his stomach ripped out, and he's feebly calling for help and water. His lips are white and drawn. He's in agony. There's your boy.

Today, Butler's speech would be derogated as mawkish—that is, if the two or three corporations that have gobbled up all our radio stations would permit its broadcast. (Sure they would. It could air right after the "Noam Chomsky Hour.") You see, mother is not supposed to care if her son dies on a foreign battlefield, fighting because a few degenerate old men have ordered him thither; he's only one boy, after all—there are plenty more where he came from. The thoroughly modern mother must cut the apron strings—or power-suit tails—when Troy or Trey or Treg is but an infant. After all, we've got to prepare him to *compete in the global economy*. No sooner has he been graduated from daycare than off he goes to Stanford, where if he's a sentimental slob he can e-mail mom a loving message on Mother's Day. If he's of the working class, he can learn the skills that will enable him to *compete in the global economy* by joining the world's largest and richest and deadliest socialist organization, the U.S. Armed Forces.

The best reason to oppose the military-industrial complex is the most intimate: because it can kill your son or brother or cousin, and its social and economic fallout can destroy your town. But arguments from personal experience are consistent-

ly belittled. For instance, the only legitimate defense against a charge of prejudice is the oft-lampooned "some of my best friends are . . ." Yet this is inadmissible; the prescribed defense is to make a windy speech about brotherhood, get misty-eyed when Tiger Woods wins the Masters, and then go home and underpay your Guatemalan housekeeper.

During the Cold War our Presidents became masters of spangled orotundity, of ghosted magniloquence, as the rotting carcasses piled up offstage. How could we possibly have endured three consecutive rulers such as JFK, LBJ, and RMN—deranged monograms who, their publicists assured us, dreamed Great Dreams. (The only compliment more glowing is that a President "made America believe in itself again," as Ronald of Bel Air was said to have done. Indeed, who among us will ever forget where he was at the moment he learned that Grenada had been liberated?)

Yes, these men thought big. Kennedy, after declaring that he and his Harvard touch-football-playing suckups were willing to make Middle American boys pay any price and bear any burden to perform the constitutionally mandated task of preserving the libertarian democracies of Quemoy and Matsu, next set his sights on colonizing the moon, which had never done us any harm. (Presumably our Pulitzer Prize-winning historian had heard colorable tales of sluttish seleno-starlets just dying for one of those fabled 45-second Kennedy love marathons.) The pathological liar Johnson declared war on poverty, which he apparently intended to win by killing as many poor boys as possible in Vietnam. Then came Nixon, geostrategic thinker for the ages. In one of those sententious post-Watergate books that were intended to burnish his reputation and make us forget about his fascistic misuse of the FBI and IRS (or is any use of the internal security system by definition a misuse?), Nixon quoted De Gaulle that "France was never true to herself unless she was engaged in a great enterprise." To which the Trickster added: "I have always believed that this was true of the United States as well. Defending and promoting peace and freedom around the world is a great enterprise. Only by rededicating ourselves to that goal will we remain true to ourselves."

True to ourselves. You might think you can be true to yourself by raising a family, participating in the life of a small and vital community, writing books about your people's history, building houses or farming land or simply studying with the birds, flowers, trees, God, and yourself, as Dvořák had it—but you would be wrong. Worse, you would be small, meager, mean, niggardly, pinched. The measure of a man's greatness is his willingness to abandon his family and go abroad to murder strangers on behalf of . . . your guess is as good as mine. "What are you fighting for?" screamed a pretty blonde from a Catholic girl's school. "It's not my security." Even if we discount the possibility that our men have died and killed for corporate interests, financiers, the munitions industry, or the foreigners who embroiled us in the republic-razing Cold War, we are still left with Mr. Nixon's "great enterprises."

The kids' lemonade stand on the street corner is a great enterprise; the cabinetmaker's shop is a great enterprise; the town historical society's new museum is a great enterprise; the undertakings of the warped and scrofulous men who rule us call to mind Thoreau's remarks on the pyramids: "There is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile."

I'll say this for them, though: JFK, LBJ, and RMN were born in these United States of America and at some point in their lives, each of them met actual Americans. Reagan and Clinton, too. (Bush may have seen a few Connecticut laborers through the tinted glass of his limousine's window, but that doesn't count.) The brain trusts that advise our Presidents whom to bomb and where to ship our myrmidons became, over the postrepublic years, less and less American, infiltrated by émigrés both unintelligible (Brzezinski, Kissinger) and polished (Albright, Shalikhvili). Indeed, authentic Americans within the Clinton foreign policy apparatus are as rare as white kids on a PBS children's show. These newcomers, by and large Russophobic (for good—but *non-American*—reasons), brought with them exotic habits: Edward Teller pestered us to adopt the metric system lest we be "overtaken by Russia"; of Nobel Laureate Kissinger, Pat Moynihan liked to say, "Henry does not lie because it is in his interest; he lies because it is in his nature."

These aliens have no real connection to Americans: the war-death of a boy from Youngstown means no more to them than the war-death of a boy from Prague. They see it as an even (if not lopsided) trade. Like General Grant, they can do crimson calculus; it's easier for them, lacking, as they do, ties of kinship or neighborliness within our country. (Roscoe Conkling poetized Grant's rootlessness—sorry, Galena—at the 1880 Republican convention: "When asked what state he hails from / Our sole reply shall be— / 'He hails from Appomattox / With its famous apple tree.'")

Do you really think Henry Kissinger gave a damn how many Joe Doakes and LeRoy Washingtons he inscribed on the Vietnam Wall? He didn't know these men; he couldn't *imagine* them. They hadn't even the reality of a planchet on a Risk board. The same with Madeleine Albright: indeed, Prague

means more to her than Youngstown ever could. If your son's corpse and those of his ten best friends can pry open a foreign market or break a turbaned renegade to the U.N./U.S. will, then unzip the body bags and grab that shovel, sexton.

I will give you my solution, though it is no more "practical" than a Dorothy Day prayer or a Henry Thoreau spade. No statesman's coercive power should ever extend over people he does not know. If Madeleine and the Democracy Geeks of M Street want to pull their Brads and Joshuas out of Choate and ship them overseas to kill ragheads and bohunks and niggers and chinks—the inscrutables are our new enemy; the yellow peril rides again!—to make the world safe for Nike, then so be it, but she has no claim upon my kin or my neighbors (or yours).

We are useful to them only insofar as we follow orders, do not make trouble, and die on cue. The literary critic Paul Fussell, whose back and right thigh were ripped by shrapnel from a German shell in March 1945, explained, "It wasn't long before I could articulate for myself the message that war was sending the infantry soldier: 'You are expendable. Don't imagine that your family's good opinion of you will cut any ice here. You are just another body to be used. Since *all* can't be damaged or destroyed as they are fed into the machinery, some may survive, but that's not my fault. Most must be chewed up, and you'll probably be one of them. This is regrettable, but nothing can be done about it.'"

Well, one thing can be done about it. Don't go. Stay with your family. Confirm their good opinion of you. Don't feed the war machine. You are not expendable, in your family's eyes or in God's. The 30-piece whores of Washington who write their little pamphlets proving that whatever slaughter our government is currently engaged in is a "just war" should be laughed back to the seminaries they quit. Thou shalt not kill means us, too. ©

The Pallbearers

by Tim Murphy

At the prairie cemetery
where the river meets a road
and Murphys come to bury
love in the loam we've sowed
my brother lets me carry
the light end of the load.