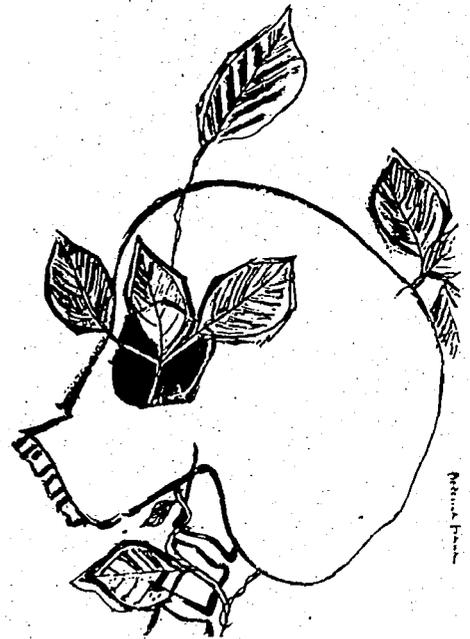# How Wars Have Ended

Gil Elliot

Historians may conclude that the Vietnam war ended some time during the week beginning March 25, 1973. Certainly in the news media—and no war has had its signposts so vividly marked out by press and television—it was ending throughout that week with increasingly complex last-minute drama, right up to the conclusive pictures of "one of the last U.S. soldiers out of South Vietnam" and "the last prisoner out of North Vietnam." The last prisoner, more than anything, was the definitive image. Other official aspects of impending peace—treaty negotiations, troop withdrawals, cease-fires, lulls, resumptions, "peace in our time" speeches—were worn thin by months of assertion and publicity. They were no longer quite powerful enough to symbolize finality. It was the last prisoner of war physically out of North Vietnam that allowed the *New York Times* to announce on March 30 that "the U.S. war role in Vietnam is ended."

March 30 was a Friday. A week of last-minute legalistic wrangling over the exchange of prisoners had been producing small batches of released men, daily photographed as they emerged from plane or helicopter in Saigon, like the last teeth pulled from decayed but stubbornly clinging gums. Stateside, these tightly dramatic appearances had blossomed into a hundred human-interest stories as the men interviewed in their local communities told of individual suffering and torture. The welcoming embrace of home was symbolized by groups of women, some having little connection with the prisoners, greeting them as returning heroes. Meanwhile, the last military rites were performed over the American flag in Vietnam, generals made speeches thanking the soldiers, soldiers smiled gratefully at the generals. The historian scanning these media images of a war ending will notice some odd juxtapositions in the head-

lines. But for the moment, with the weekend coming up, the whole show had moved Stateside, and the various cumulative reports and stories were gathering in to a climax.

Sunday, April 1, *New York Times:* "Lieut. Charles D. Rice tells how captors placed an iron bar in his mouth to keep him from screaming in pain" (picture of the lieutenant stretching corners of mouth with middle finger of each hand); "Pilot Recalls 'Bad Attitude' Made Him Suffer in Hanoi" (3,500-word indepth account enables readers to relive situations and sufferings of the POW camps and gets in a few digs at antiwar groups). The *Boston Sunday Globe* accompanied its 4,000-word background piece on the ending of the war with reports on two local homecomings: "Rowley going all out for POW" (community plans fund-raising, reception, parade to welcome local boy; "A Separation Ends" (picture of black couple embracing passionately).

The media climax of it all was the report that "Thousands Along Broadway Watch 4-Hour Parade for Vietnam Veterans," supported by pictures of a crippled soldier, Medal of Honor winner, being wheeled to reviewing stand by two policemen and of faces in the crowd lining the triumphal route. The grimly downset mouth and bittersweet eyes of a dire old patriot give weight and focus to the bland, jolly, vacuous expressions of the rest crowding in behind. His hat is held to his breast. The *New York Times* cameraman has exposed his lens with a sure instinct for the tribal gathering.

The fact that the emotional whip for these rituals was provided by returned prisoners of war may be unique, historically speaking, but the tribal response itself goes back at least several millennia. The ancient Assyrians, to take one of the most warlike of preclassical societies, showed off their *captured*

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prisoners to the cheering crowds. The new slaves, with the other spoils of war displayed at their parades, were an important addition to the home economy. Tribal reassurance in those days demanded more than symbolism. Assyrian victory celebrations went as far as decimating the population of the defeated enemy, thus stabilizing foreign policy for a time by reducing the threat of attack. The volatile significance of victory and defeat, in terms of political and economic stability as well as tribal psychology, gives the ending of wars a special importance. Maybe this factor has contributed as much as the range of aggressive/protective human instincts to the arrangements made by historical societies for their security.

Ancient times provide a classic model of three responses—the Athenian, the Spartan and the Roman—to the tribal dilemmas of security which are reflected in very different reactions to the ending of wars. Athens maintained a high level of competence in military matters. Yet although living, like the other Greek city-states, in an atmosphere of perpetual insecurity vis-à-vis their neighbors, the Athenian society never fully internalized the warlike virtues. Pursing the most subtle arts of peace as well as facing up to the problems of defending itself, it was vulnerable to the influence of different values. Military success could mean triumph, but defeat brought demoralization to the home society and penetrated the philosophy of the time with a spirit of gloom, pessimism and pragmatic cynicism.

The Spartans, living in much the same environment, stabilized this uneasy balance between war and peace by integrating the two sets of values, though not of course on an equal basis. Internalizing the warlike virtues meant that these dominated and became also the values of peace. In the Spartan society the weak were killed through exposure at birth, citizens were raised in barracks and toughened by various ordeals. Sparta was resilient to defeat, for their values could only be penetrated to the extent of making them more alert to the problems of the next war. In a significant sense, they could only be defeated once. Athens was significantly defeated a number of times. As we know, her civilization lived on, her values persist. The Spartans more or less dropped from sight on being finally defeated. All that remains of them is a diagram of their system.

No one could say that Roman values disappeared with the fall of Rome, although the ancient Romans internalized the warlike virtues to a greater extent than did the Athenians. The peaceful values of Rome were buffered from the immediate shocks of victory and defeat by the periphery of empire. The rulers had time and room to manipulate the end of a war by minimizing defeat or, if politically desired, by stage-managing a "triumph" at the center.

How to end a war" has thus always included the specific problem of how to handle the repercussions of the ending as well as how to bring fighting and destructiveness to a halt. In the millennium that followed the fall of Rome, crumbling empires fought with one another and with vigorous new tribes; new dynasties and systems of order struggled to emerge. In the apparently meaningless state of chaos that characterizes such periods of fluctuating order and disorder, the ending of a war is not only hard to handle but often chronically difficult to achieve. When the logic of victory and defeat lacks agreed premises, opposing sides often have to search over long periods for an excuse or a rationale for ending the war even when both sides desire it.

The conflict known as the Hundred Years War, when the emerging nations of England and France fought for supremacy into the middle of the fifteenth century, took many years to achieve the ending needed by both exhausted parties. The physical symbolism of a marriage alliance was brought in to cement the first uneasy truce, and even then the fighting dragged on, so that historians usually date the ending from about ten years later, when the English at last physically withdrew from France. In fact, sporadic warfare was continued by visiting English for another twenty years after that. But the historians, themselves exhausted perhaps by the frustrating disorder of the past, are not having anything to do with a "Hundred and Twenty Years War." Such wars are chronic not only to their participants, in the sense of dragging on in a meaningless way with no satisfactory ending in sight. Even history, set to abstract a title from the patterns of the conflict, has to fall back on the "chronic" in the neutral sense of pertaining to the time or duration of the war.

The Thirty Years War, begun in 1618, is the other most well-known of these chronic wars. It brings us not only to the modern period but to a particularly significant point for the ending of wars. The Peace of Westphalia, 1648, took five years to negotiate and engaged some of the most brilliant diplomatic and scholastic minds in Europe. It was a triumph of legalistic and rationalizing order imposed retrospectively on thirty years of chaos, and effectively marked the beginning of the modern system of international diplomacy. Since it is still largely with us, the Westphalian system deserves the closest scrutiny as a methodology for the ending of conflicts. It could be described as the classic model appropriate to the post-Renaissance nation-state. During the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, security systems had to take account of realities far beyond those of the nation-state. The structures of ancient, current and emerging empires continued to blur national boundaries. Divine right, the dynastic principle, the Holy Roman

Empire were as important as the Balance of Power and the Grand Alliance. Upon these complex and often contradictory patterns the Westphalian system imposed an order and a continuity typical of the learned professions.

However much the system fell into the confusion and chaos of war, the war itself was rationalized at its end into highly complex but meaningful patterns, such as succession legitimacy, national interest, mutual security agreements. However meaningless the actual conflict might have been, it was given retrospective "causes" and, in hindsight, a rational motive. Typical of the system is the nineteenth-century dictum that war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means. It is a kind of realism, not necessarily cynical but true to the conditions of its time. War was inevitable, control was essential. However beastly and futile the conflict, at the end of it someone had to step in and reimpose the concept and forms of order. The gap between war and peace was a narrow one, sometimes invisible. The same intimate relationship between war and peace is quintessentially displayed in the seventeenth-century War of the League of Augsburg (the very title combines violence and diplomacy), where it is equally difficult to discern whether the diplomatic episodes are interludes between the fighting, or vice versa.

The ingenious secret of the Westphalian system is that in the ending of one war, built into the treaty, lies the seeds of the next. The *plus* is the degree of control and predictability, the *minus* is the inevitability of the next war. The Westphalian system, whose success lay precisely in emphasizing the *ending* of wars as the optimum moment for the application of rational principles, has now been rendered suitable for limited conflicts only, and hopelessly out-of-date in the case of major wars. This can be traced progressively in the history of twentieth-century state violence up to and including the ending of the Vietnam war.

The Treaty of Versailles which ended World War I has often been said to contain the seeds of World War II, a typically Westphalian characteristic. The great departure from the old system, however, was that Versailles did not restore anything like the *status quo ante bellum*, nor indeed has it ever been restored in any major war since. In both these wars the status quo was blown apart by massively escalating war technology and by massively escalating popular involvement in war, far beyond the reach of end-of-war rationalizations. In every major war since 1914 we see that forms of order, territorial boundaries, the destinies of peoples are changed *during* the war by the explosive force of its content, and not by technical adjustments made at the end of it. The content of the war is more influential than the style of its ending.

This is a new reality which takes us several stages beyond the clever capabilities of the Westphalian system. It is not entirely new, for it has been true before, as it is in our century, that big violence is about new legitimacies emerging (and not about old legitimacies grabbing a bit extra here and there). But it is novel in scale and, in the existence of the ultimate weapon, unique. The legitimacy of content as against ending was recognized in World War II, which had no diplomatic ending and no peace treaty. It was ended by the most explosive element of its content (the atom bomb), and the vast transformations in the destiny of peoples wrought by its course were accepted as *de facto*. For the major participants the ending was not at all like the civilized denouements of the nineteenth century, and for some it was more like those of the classic models of ancient times. The French, both victors and vanquished, were more penetrated by the realities of defeat and responded with a valuable if pessimistic literature and philosophy. Nazi culture, like the Spartan, responded to total defeat by disappearing without trace. The English-speaking nations, like the Romans, were buffered by their extensive peripheries from the ultimate realities of massacre, torture and degradation. It is relevant to note that the only hostages they gave to the enemy were prisoners of war, who were in the main treated according to the Geneva Convention, a strange anomaly in that war, but hugely important to the present-day attitudes of the British and American peoples.

The continued escalation of destructive capacity after World War II, as well as the repeated emergence of new legitimacies through violence, sustained the view that wars were no longer neatly bound by beginnings, endings and diplomatic wrappings but were episodes in the same continuum of twentieth-century violence. On top of the Nuremberg war trials, with their revelations of Nazi bestialities half-hidden from the world when they were being committed, the tensions of the cold war forced into the open the monstrous truth about Stalin's labor camps —and this twenty years after the event!

The vision of a continuum of human self-destructiveness, where "wars" merge with "camps" and "ghettos" as arenas of massacre and attrition, had been latent in events since 1914, but Vietnam was the first time this view fully surfaced during a major war, and for very good and clear reasons. In wars of total involvement it has not generally been difficult for governments to keep the minds of the people on the task of defeating the enemy. Although the Vietnam war was in some ways very big and very total (for instance, the mechanized

battlefield, two million deaths), the involvement for most Americans was at several removes, and indeed mingled with the fantasy world coming at them from their television sets. More important, it lasted an inordinately long time, eight years, time for at least two generations of students to think and rethink, for books to be written and for the war to be analyzed out of its own blind involvement and into the perspective of world violence from Verdun to Bangladesh. In the line of that tradition Vietnam had become vastly important in its destructive content and meaningless in terms of the logic of its beginning and possible ending. Even for the government it was now a "chronic" war (often referred to as "a new thirty years' war"), with the looking-glass logic of such situations: that with no rationale for the fighting it is equally difficult to find the basis for an ending.

The instinct of the U.S. Government was to end this thirty years' war in the same way as the first. If it was impossible to recreate the diplomatic myth of the beginning ("the containment of communism"), a new, retrospective myth would be imposed upon the ending. The instinct of the government's domestic opponents was the opposite. For them the war had become a flagrant denial of these old diplomatic methods. Here was a contest of realities, between the old Westphalian system and a new vision of state violence. For some Americans the shame of the war might be redeemed by a full admission of the complex realities it had exposed. For insofar as the continuum of twentieth-century violence might be indicated by a line of key words such as Verdun, Kolyma, Stalingrad, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Biafra, the addition of "Vietnam" to that line has a very special significance. It means that for the full bestiality, monstrous scale and horror of the destructiveness of these wars we have to blame, as we always did, the "warmongers and profiteers," but not just them; also Stalin's Communists, but not just them; also the German army, but not just them; also the Nazis, but not just them; even also the advanced democracies under pressure, but not just them; even, God help us, the Third World in their poverty and wretchedness, but not just them; finally, also, our advanced democratic societies, and not under pressure, but from our own will, just like the others. It was left to the United States, the leading "open society," to admit the unquestionable truth, frightening though it be, that "our boys" are centrally involved in the great darkness of our times.

How was the U.S. Government going to face up to that reality? Since the rational situation was intractable, they were set to find, like those who ended the Hundred Years War, a physical symbolism for the ending of the war, extrarational maybe, but something that "everybody could understand." A marriage alliance with the Viet Cong being out of the question, the returning prisoners of war served as a good if ironic substitute. Good because in the climate of skepticism about the war ever ending these were the people for whom it was unquestionably over with their release from captivity, and as they stepped daily from the planes and helicopters, they physically embodied the whole course of American involvement, from the first airman captured in 1965 to the last released in 1973. Ironic because there was a note of cultural triumph about it all: our boys had been tortured and we don't do that sort of thing. This at the very moment of historical revelation that our boys are in it right up to their necks.

Finally, success was assured by the eager cooperation of the American public. Some odd statistics have come out of Vietnam. For example, since the war "ended" in March, 1973, there have been at least 15,000 fresh casualties from what is called "unofficial fighting." But this was no piddling number like 15,000 Vietnamese. This was all of 589 Americans! Other official statistics to set against the 589 prisoners of war are as follows: U.S. deaths, 50,000; Vietnamese killed—South Vietnam soldiers, 200,000, civilians, 500,000; Viet Cong soldiers, 1,000,000. Displaced from homes, South Vietnam, since 1965, 7,822,000; Laos, since 1962, 1,000,000; Cambodia, since 1970, 2,000,000. The government did not deceive the American people or the journalists or television networks about these figures; they were allowed to take their choice.

In fairness to the Americans it has to be said that no other people has faced up in a true sense to the violence they have wreaked on others during the last sixty years. That is one reason we can be sure that the war against humanity that began in 1914 is still going on—no one has yet fully admitted that it exists—and we can only sit back and wait for the next episode to break out, wherever it might be. Meanwhile the best the old diplomatic system can do is feed us bromides like "peace with honor" and nonsense like "a generation of peace."

The Arab-Israeli conflicts, however much diplomatic space they occupy, do not remotely approach Vietnam or Biafra or Verdun in scale. Their endings still have diplomatic significance in relation to their content. Thus the Westphalian system of handling the ending of wars can still operate in such cases. But even there the twentieth-century horrors have peeped through, both in the factor of the contestants, and also in the American nuclear alert. There is no conceivable connection between Metternich-type diplomacy and nuclear weapons.

So long as the Westphalian system accepts the perspective of the continuum of major violence it still has a role in handling the endings of limited conflicts. But to attempt to stuff the modern realities of that continuum into the old system of diplomacy is pure illusion.