

REVIEW ESSAY: *The War and Environment Reader*, edited by Gar Smith. Charlottesville, Va.: Just World Books, 2017. \$25.

Gar Smith, the founding editor of *Earth Island Journal* now active with World Beyond War, has delivered an urgently timely book. From the outset, the integrated conception not only transcends the usual categories of “war” and “environment”; it encourages readers to see how militarism inflicts damage to our already beleaguered planet.

The list of contributors is hardly an assembly of lightweights:

- writer, visionary, and activist David Brower;
- pacifist Marine General Smedley Butler;
- activist pediatrician Dr. Helen Caldicott;
- author, scholar, and whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg;
- scientist, activist, and author Dr. Jane Goodall;
- historian and foreign-policy analyst Michael T. Klare;
- renowned anthropologist and writer Margaret Mead;
- author, activist, and radio host David Swanson, plus . . .
- physicist, writer and environmental activist Dr. Vandana Shiva.

A savvy editorial decision to trust that most readers have access to texts on peace by Thoreau, Gandhi, and Einstein made room for a greater range of mostly contemporary writers. Their insights into war and its ravages are most instructive.

War and Human Nature, Real and Imagined

The War and Environment Reader opens with an insightful discussion of prehistory and human nature. Editor Gar Smith points out that throughout most of human history—for well over a hundred thousand years—organized violence was not a significant factor among hunter-gatherers. This widely accepted fact challenges the common misconception, effectively critiqued by Jane Goodall and Margaret Mead, that all primates are “hard-wired for violence.” It might be more accurate to understand how humans display aptitudes for *both* aggression and compassion.

Later in the collection, Goodall contrasts chimps with bonobos, another close relative of humans. Unlike chimpanzees, who do kill their own kind, bonobos use expressions of affection to resolve conflicts. Extending the critique of conventional assumptions, Mead’s research showed that if a culture does not have a concept for an action, members of that culture are less likely to engage in it. Cultures lacking the idea of a vendetta are less apt to undertake vendettas (46). Degrees of aggression and violence are culturally determined, not universal.

Though human hunting had affected populations of prey species for thousands of years, impacts on megafauna increased in the late Pleistocene. At that time, new technology changed native cultures. Smith points out that about 14,000 years ago, native people in North America developed the

longer, heavier Clovis spear point; this innovation allowed hunters to kill large mammals from a safer distance. “Hominids suddenly vaulted to the top of the food chain—a major step on the path to dominating the natural world” (16). Using this new technology, these hunter-gatherers hastened the extinction of mastodons and likely contributed to the decline of saber-toothed tigers, which also hunted mastodons.

Despite the efficacy of this new hunting tool—one with obvious applications for killing humans—warfare did not appear until about 8,000 years later. War followed the rise of large-scale agriculture and vast, centrally organized empires dependent on subjugation of women and exploitation of slaves. When a ruler needed more slaves, war provided an easy way to commandeer them. Smith shows how warfare is a learned behavior in “dominator societies” that developed “warrior cultures” to conquer vast areas, deploy slave labor, and divert great rivers (16).

However, the extensive damage Mesopotamian agricultural civilizations were inflicting on the environment hardly went unnoticed. The Akkadian/Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest classic in world literature, showed how the gods got offended when humans arrogantly plundered nature. When Gilgamesh kills the divine protector of the cedar forest, he triggers the wrath of the gods (17).

Smith contrasts the warnings implicit in the *Gilgamesh* story with the endorsement of deliberate ecocide endorsed in the Hebrew *Bible*, such as its rendering of Samson's scorched-earth attack on the Philistines (*Judges* 15: 4-5). The remainder of Smith's instructive overview focuses on the environmental consequences of wars in recent centuries, focusing on the Civil War, World Wars I and II, the two Gulf Wars, and the equally toxic legacies of the Cold War.

Vandana Shiva's "Patriarchy and War: Treating Nature Like Dirt" also focuses on large-scale agriculture and male domination. Unfortunately, many scholars might find this discussion dated. Drawing on the much-disputed work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, Dr. Shiva opens with an exaltation of ancient goddess cultures (28-29). Like Gimbutas, Shiva tends to focus on the Earth Mother, the fertility goddess of vegetation, ignoring the many other ancient goddesses who were just as violent as their male counterparts.

The discussion becomes more apt when it includes the insights of French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who observed that "in a patriarchy, men dominate both women and nature. A patriarchal warrior culture treats Mother Nature the same way it treats any other female figure" (29).

Even more pertinently, Dr. Shiva cites Carolyn Merchant's classic *The Death of Nature*, which shows how a belief that nature is sacred can constrain acts

of violent desecration: “One does not readily slay a mother, dig her entrails, or mutilate her body” (29). Shiva also points out that if capitalist theorists had taken a loving mother rather than a striving man as their basic economic unit, “they would have been less able to formulate the axiom of the selfish nature of human beings” (31).

Michael Klare, author of *Resource Wars*, opens with a grabber: “Whether you know it or not, you’re on a new planet, a resource-shock world humanity has never before experienced” (36). Fears of dwindling resources, especially scarcities of food and water, have historically caused wars. Anxieties about food were factors in the aggression of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

However, although the decline of fish populations concerns many present cultures, including China, it’s the desire to control supplies of other resources that has undergirded much recent militarism. The Carter Doctrine (1979) threatened that the US would consider any interruption of access to Mid-East oil as an act of war. Presidents Bush I and II would invoke this Doctrine to justify their invasions of Iraq (39).

The Use of “False-Flag” Deceptions to Start Wars

One would not expect a book entitled *The War and Environment Reader* to skirt controversial issues, and the collection does not disappoint. Although historians often avoid “false-flag operations” because of their associations

with conspiracy theories, military history is full of *actual* conspiracies—and thus of “false flags” in which one country starts a war by making itself seem to be the victim of an attack.

James Corbett, host of *The Corbett Report*, delivers cogent examples of how “false-flag” schemes, most of them scarcely known, have set off many major conflicts, including World War II and the Vietnam War. Corbett shines light on how in 1939 Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, masterminded a plan to convince the German public that the Fatherland was the victim of aggression at a German radio station. His scheme involved dressing prisoners in Polish military uniforms, having them shot while “attacking” the station, and then broadcasting an anti-German message from the “captured” station (78–79). The very next day Hitler’s Wehrmacht rolled into Poland, starting World War II.

One has to wonder why, given the immense public interest in that conflict, this incident on the Polish border remains so little known. One reason might be that it is far from unusual, that to understand its relevance to Nazi aggression might encourage Americans to look more closely at how their own country has started its wars.

Such an examination would reveal that most, perhaps even all, of the foreign wars begun by the US did in fact involve “false-flag” operations. Best known are the sinkings of the Battleship *Maine* in 1898, which the US

used as a pretext to attack Spain and seize its empire, and the *Lusitania* in 1915, which Washington blamed on German aggression even though Berlin had warned against smuggling munitions. When she was sunk, the *Lusitania* was hauling large amounts of war materiel to England.

Focusing on wars since World War II, Corbett cites several other widely-ignored “false-flag” incidents. One was the attack by Israel in 1967 on the *USS Liberty*, a high-tech electronics ship. The Israelis hoped to trick the US into supporting its Six Day War against Egypt and other Islamic countries. Not even bothering to paint Egyptian insignias on their aircraft, the Israelis strafed and bombed the Navy spy ship repeatedly for 18 hours, killing or wounding most of its crew.

When the Israelis had to admit they were in fact the attackers, they claimed they had mistaken the *Liberty* for an Egyptian ship. Yet because some of their pilots had refused to fly missions against the ship, clearly the Israelis knew they were not bombing an enemy vessel. Although American leaders failed to rescue the beleaguered Navy ship, at least they did not fall for a ruse designed to draw the US into the Israel-initiated Six-Day War (80).

Readers may be reminded of another “false flag” deception, this time an alleged attack in 1964 on the *USS Maddox* off the coast of Vietnam. Even though the attack did not happen, the National Security Agency manipulated the reports. Washington was quick to claim it had occurred.

Armed with these false reports, Lyndon Johnson got Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution granting him the power to greatly widen the war against North Vietnam (80). The resulting “police action” raged for more than a decade and resulted in the deaths of over three million people, most of them Asians.

Vietnam and El Salvador: Ongoing Eco-Catastrophes

In terms of environmental damage, much of it intentional, the Vietnam War exceeded all previous conflicts in history. Truly massive damage was done by aerial spraying of Agent Orange, flagrant abuse of napalm and white phosphorous, and repeated carpet bombings by B-52s. Every bomb could release as much toxic pollution as a solid waste incinerator emits in a year (130).

The devastation to both humans and the natural world was inconceivable. After the war Xuan Hien, Secretary of the People’s Committee, described what he had seen: “. . . people’s bodies just shriveled up. . . . Farm animals died. Almost all wild animals in the forest disappeared. We found the carcasses of birds, tigers, and monkeys after the spraying. . . . We had nothing left, no forest, no fruit, no chickens, no buffalo, nothing to hunt. Our crops died, even the fish in the river died . . .” (134).

While the ecocide in Vietnam is widely documented, similar devastation of El Salvador by US weaponry is not widely understood. Addressing this

ignorance in a personal essay, editor Gar Smith describes “Scorched Earth in Latin America.” Less than a decade after the US withdrawal from Vietnam, the same weapons and strategies were once again causing massive destruction: Huey helicopters, napalm, white phosphorous, “free-fire zones,” and fragmentation bombs saw extensive use, again against leftist guerillas (101).

Over years of “secret” attacks on El Salvador, lasting damage was done to the environment: a spokesperson for Medical Aid to El Salvador observed that at one napalmed site “nothing had grown on the patch of ground, years after the event” (194).

“The War That Wounded the World”

Terrible as the environmental destruction done to Vietnam and El Salvador was—and is—at least most of it was regional, not global. The same was not true in Kuwait and Iraq, where the destruction was so extensive it affected air, water, and soil thousands of miles from the Middle East. William Thomas, a journalist who’d quit the Navy and spent five months documenting the devastation of first Gulf War, came to see it as “the War That Wounded the World.” The damage, both short- and long-term, was horrific: huge oil slicks plus wanton destruction of beaches, mangrove swamps and wetlands. Over 400 burning oil wells belched thick black smoke resulting in black rain (114).

Near Amadi, Kuwait, where Saddam Hussein's troops had set the oil wells afire, the lungs of sheep became hard and black; "flocks of birds began dropping dead in the streets." Yet the UN Environment Programme, apparently trying to support the war, insisted the choking midday blackout posed "no danger to human health." Testing the air 175 miles downwind, a research team from Boston's National Toxics Campaign found high levels benzene, arsenic, zinc, cadmium and lead (114).

But the unprecedented amounts of pollution blanketing Kuwait "could not match the savagery of the bombing unleashed against Iraq." This aerial onslaught was the heaviest, most sustained bombardment ever directed at a country. In just six weeks, "twice as many high explosives were dropped on Iraq as all the bombs dropped during World War II" (117). Weapons included "smart bombs" that often missed their targets—plus enormous "fuel-air bombs" designed to simulate blasts from tactical nuclear weapons.

Nor were these the only crimes against the environment. During the brief war, American gunners blew away outmoded Iraqi tanks with depleted uranium (DU) shells that, whether they struck their targets or not, exploded into highly radioactive fragments and dust. Whether inhaled by combatants at the time or by children decades later, residues are still contributing to an epidemic of cancers.

Because it remains lethal over very long periods, depleted uranium fallout became “the Agent Orange of the 1990’s” (119). David Swanson rightly observes that “Americans hear through their media that over 4,000 soldiers have died in Iraq, but rarely do they encounter any report on the deaths of Iraqis.” The British medical journal *Lancet* calculated that by 2011, eight years into the second Iraq War, the invasion and occupation had contributed to the deaths of 1.3 *million* Iraqis. Put another way, 97.7% of the people killed in Iraq have been Iraqis, overwhelmingly civilians (173).

Along with the toxic smoke and chemicals, an invisible shroud of radioactivity also became a cause of the “Gulf War Syndrome” afflicting thousands of American veterans. For most of the Americans, exposure to the toxic stew was relatively brief; the Iraqis had to live in it.

As if the massive bombing and use of radioactive weapons were not enough, the final outrage was a massacre of defeated Iraqis on the road to Basra, the “Highway to Hell.” A long line of vehicles, civilian as well as military, jammed the highway, offering easy targets for hundreds of American and Canadian fighters screaming in for the kill.

The next day, allied forces hurriedly buried 15,000 charred, often limbless corpses in mass graves before they could be photographed by Western media (118). Since these soldiers were routed and fleeing for home, the aerial slaughter was completely unnecessary.

The “Suits” That Planned for Thermonuclear War

Daniel Ellsberg, who recently published a stunning *The Doomsday Machine* (2017), contributes some of the most sobering insights to Smith’s very unsettling book. Drawing on personal experience in the Kennedy administration, Ellsberg reveals his shock at how casually planners in Washington (and probably Moscow) could discuss the incineration of tens of millions of human beings. Working in the White House, Ellsberg hobnobbed with “the best and the brightest,” the “suits” planning for nuclear war:

I knew personally many of the American planners, though apparently, from the fatality chart—not quite as well as I had thought. What was frightening was precisely that I knew they were not evil, in any extraordinary sense. They were ordinary Americans, capable, conscientious, and patriotic. I was sure they were not different, surely not worse, than the people in the Soviet Union who were doing the same work, or the people who would sit at the same desks in later US administrations (230).

This is a courageous statement because Ellsberg includes his own face in this portrait of the powerful and privileged. One wonders, though, if his analysis stops short of seeking a sociological and psychological profile: are these just typical government functionaries, or are they elite white males selected for their abstracted thinking, hyper-competitiveness, and hunger for power?

In recent decades, nuclear weapons have not only grown larger and more deadly; they are also more apt to be used. Since Smith went to press on this remarkable book, the specter of nuclear holocaust has drawn much closer. As he recently observed on TruthOut, it's important to understand that today the bomb obliterating Hiroshima would be called a "mini-nuke," one with an explosive force of "only" 15 kilotons. It's hardly reassuring to hear Pentagon planners tell the public that "mini-nukes" are needed because they could be used more "appropriately."

There's so much in this collection that no review, even a long one, can do it justice. The Pentagon is the biggest consumer of fossil fuels on the planet, and the residual toxics generated by hundreds of American bases is appalling. Readers must read this timely and instructive book as though our lives depended on it. Perhaps they do.

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