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From Our September–October 1980 Issue . . .

Sadness and Hope

Some Thoughts on Modern Warfare

Herman Wouk

THIS IS MY SECOND SPRUANCE LECTURE. Should I be flattered? I hope I did such a hell of a job seven years ago that I've been called back for an encore—though a wicked whisper suggests that possibly I said so lamentably little last time that nobody remembers I've already spoken here.

I, at least, do have vivid memories of that evening. It was the first of these lectures, delivered the evening before the dedication of Spruance Hall. Mrs. Raymond Spruance sat radiant in the first row beside Secretary of the Navy—now Senator—John Warner; with them was Admiral Stansfield Turner, then the President of the Naval War College, now my much-embattled friend in Washington; beside him, Samuel Eliot Morison. That was my chance to pay Morison my debt, face to face; and I said, before starting my lecture, that nobody can ever write of the Pacific War without standing on his shoulders. The ovation

Herman Wouk was born in New York City in 1915, earning a bachelor's degree from Columbia University in 1934. He was a writer for radio comedians, including Fred Allen, and in 1941 he was commissioned into the U.S. Naval Reserve, eventually becoming executive officer of the destroyer-minesweeper USS *Southard* (DMS 10). His books include *Aurora Dawn* (1947), *The City Boy* (1948), *Slattery's Hurricane* (1949), *The Caine Mutiny* (1951, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1952), *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), *This Is My God* (1959, nonfiction), *Youngblood Hawke* (1962), *Don't Stop the Carnival* (1965), *The Winds of War* (1971), *War and Remembrance* (1978), *Inside, Outside* (1985), *The Hope* (1993), and *The Glory* (1994). Mr. Wouk has been on the faculty of Yeshiva University and has been scholar-in-residence at the Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies. He is the recipient of the U.S. Naval Memorial Foundation "Lone Sailor" Award (1987) and of several honorary degrees.

This article reproduced a Raymond A. Spruance lecture given on 16 April 1980 at the Naval War College. (Photograph courtesy Naval War College Museum.)

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which these truthful words brought the great historian perhaps touched me even more than it did him.

These lectures celebrate the memory of Raymond Spruance, but tonight I also speak in memory of two young men—a naval aviator of the United States, Walter Williams, and a paratrooper and tank commander of the Israel Defense Force, Jonathan Netanyahu. What I have to express of “sadness and hope” is summed up for me in the lives and in the deaths of those two men; and everything I say tonight will be by way of prologue to my tribute to them.

It both troubles and interests me that for a second time you have invited an artist, an entertainer—for that is what I am—to speak to a professional military audience on warfare, the ultimate extension of conflict politics. Statesmen, historians, military leaders abound who would feel honored to speak here, and from whom you could learn much. Maybe I am here just because we are at a stalemate, a critical point in this grave question, when every professional avenue seems to be explored, every idea expressed. Maybe you have envied the ability of the entertainer, the artist, to shake up the familiar elements of sadness in the kaleidoscope of his vision, and perhaps to chance upon a new pattern that will show some golden trace of hope; for otherwise I can surely say little on the subject of modern war that has not appeared somewhere in a hundred books, in a thousand articles; that you have not heard in your courses, that you have not thought yourselves. This sort of fresh look is, after all, my metier. The Second World War is a vast theme that fills many libraries. In *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance* I did my best to shake up the familiar elements in the kaleidoscope of art, to give them an organizing vision and a shape, so that “he who runs might read” and picture what happened in this worst world catastrophe—the worst, that is, so far.

If that is to be my purpose, you might well ask of me, “Skip describing the sadness; we know it all too well. Get to whatever hope you can give us.” But the sadness is the present reality. I can rush through the main heads, but only against that dark background can I trace whatever hope I may discern. I tell you now that I have no solutions. I will offer no facile optimism. I can unravel none of the problems that haunt today’s headlines. All I can do is to speak from a long view, and tell you what is in my heart after many years of dwelling on, and writing about, modern warfare.

What an age of innocence it was, my friends, on that day of August 1945 when the minesweeper in which I served was steaming to Kyushu, to sweep ahead of a preliminary invasion before the main assault on Honshu, and word came through that an awesome bomb had been dropped on a place we’d never heard of, called Hiroshima, releasing “the energy of the sun”—that was the journalists’ phrase at the time—and that the war was bound to end soon; and so we turned one-eight [180 degrees], went back to port in Okinawa, and never

swept off Kyushu. The Hiroshima bomb and the Nagasaki bomb that followed hard upon it seemed to us ultimate horrors, shocking beyond imagination, the grand curtain on warfare in human history. What an age of innocence! We now possess—and our great opponent, once our great ally, the Soviet Union, now possesses—thousands of weapons, each one of them thousands of times more powerful than the dread thing that eradicated Hiroshima.

There are no words for the destruction that men in this very room can wreak on our planet.

Beyond this bedrock fact of our sadness lies the sadness of contemplating the energy, the wit, the resources, and the expense of human spirit, that have gone into the creation of these horrible things, and of the engines to deliver them. One cannot bear to picture what the obverse of all this could be. What riches, what plenty, what achievements, the race would now have as its treasures, had all this energy, all this wisdom, all this ingenuity, all this exploring of the unknown, been poured into benign paths—instead of into this colossal machine of destruction which exists only to give us some sense of hope that we will not ourselves be destroyed!

In tragic irony, our mirror-image enemy, the Soviet Union, is in just the same fix. And the still greater sadness is that there seems no end to it, no way out. Today's papers are almost impossible to read. One has a sense that it's all running out of control; that the old politics, the only politics we have, are utterly inadequate to handle these things. We move in dense gloom, in a fog that all the wisdom, all the light of human experience cannot pierce. There is the ultimate sadness for all mankind; and the special final sadness for the men in this room is that they are submerging their lives in this dead-end, horrifying, unhonored military structure.

There is no comfort in looking ahead, and there is no comfort in looking back. In the pages of the first and greatest of historians, Thucydides, we find men and nations behaving just as they do now. There is nothing in today's newspapers, nothing in our world wars, nothing in all of politics from ancient days to the present, that we cannot read in Thucydides. The present relevance of his account of the Peloponnesian War is almost scary. You remember that Athens and Sparta were the two great adversaries, the "superpowers" of the Greek world; that they had allied themselves to fight off and defeat a common enemy, Persia; and that after the victory the alliance fell apart in a cold war, a truce which crumbled away, because their smaller allies got into fights which gradually dragged down Athens and Sparta into the great war that is Thucydides' theme. His was a miniature world, a world of armies of a few thousand, of allies smaller in population, it might be, than the town of Newport, in which we meet. And yet, in this miniature world everything happened that is happening now: breakdowns of alliances, disastrous rivalries among politicians and generals,

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treachery and counter-treachery, internal dissent wrecking a war effort—it's all there, in the writings of a clearheaded Greek genius who lived four hundred years before Christ. And more than two millennia later we seem still trapped in Thucydides' world. None of the ways in which those quarrelsome Greeks behaved is suited to these dread times of nuclear menace; yet we still behave in those ways, and can find no other.

How do we break out of this Thucydidean trap, which now threatens to strangle, if not to destroy, our world? The engines of war, the old last word of politics, have completely overbalanced politics as we know it. That is the darkness in which we find ourselves. And to find light, strangely, we must look back far beyond Thucydides, into lost times, two hundred and fifty years before he lived.

Two hundred and fifty years is a long time. Swing such an arc of time back in our own history, and you are in the years before the American Revolution, before George Washington; you are in a time when this whole continent was a wooded wilderness inhabited by Indians. Two hundred and fifty years ago: a long time. Two hundred fifty years before Thucydides, in a bad trouble spot of the world, the Middle East, in a small country surrounded by battling superpowers, the land of Israel, or Judea, Isaiah the prophet spoke words that you heard as children, that we hear frequently in our churches and synagogues: *And they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up its sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore.*

No more war colleges! Such was the promise made to us close to three thousand years ago by Isaiah, prophesying in the name of the Lord God. These same words which I quote tonight, here in the Naval War College, are inscribed on a structure in New York that seems a monstrous monument to futility, the United Nations building. These words of Isaiah, and no words of Thucydides, are at the entrance to that edifice, where—for whatever reason, and however futilely—the representatives of all mankind on this small globe now gather to squabble and disagree and cheat and argue in Thucydides' fashion under one roof.

The most widespread of world religions, Christianity, offers itself to mankind as an embodiment of this vision of Isaiah; and it offers its Founder as that very Prince of Peace who would realize the vision. Whatever the bloody and ironic paradoxes of Christian history down the ages, at least this has been the rhetoric, the vision and aspiration, of Christian men in a Christian world: the lion and the lamb, the predator and the once-preyed upon, living together in peace; the young lion and the calf walking together, and a little child leading them; the purity in the eyes of a child, the innocence and clear affection with which children look at their parents, promised to us as the way that all men will regard each other.

This vision of world peace is, as I dimly understand it, the core of Islam, too. "Islam" means wholeness, peace; the area that believes in the Muslim faith is the area of peace, of universal justice—outside is the barbaric chaos of the nonbelieving world. And notwithstanding the violence of Islam's history and its present-day turbulence, the rhetoric and the religious vision of Islam evoke an age of eventual everlasting universal peace.

Even the pseudo-Islam of Marxism, which for the moment has swept so much of the planet, offers itself as a program of turmoil, violence, and world overthrow solely to bring about the brotherhood of man in the classless society of world peace.

And this vision is not only religious, not only utopian-political. Let me read you words of the father of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant.

Nature has made use of conflict among men between large societies and states, to create a situation of rest and security. Out of this inevitable antagonism, by means of wars and the high tension of never relaxed armaments for these wars, by means of a distress which every nation must thus suffer, even during times of peace, she drives man to imperfect attempts, and finally after many devastations and disturbances, toward a situation which reason might have anticipated without so many sad experiences. Men leave the lawless state of savages and enter into a brotherhood of nations.

Thus Immanuel Kant, writing in 1784.

What shall we make of all this? On the one hand, we behave to this hour as Thucydides pictured us; and on the other hand, to this hour, in many visions and visions, we hold Isaiah's promise of universal peace in our hearts. Are we then trapped in this tension forever? Are we to go on behaving in the old way when we know it is fatal to do so, while dreaming to the last a baseless dream of living another way?

And now for what hope I have to offer you. I feel it is real hope, but it is not simple, and it is not immediately comforting.

My own grandfather lived at a time when this country, the United States, went through a giant military convulsion over one issue—whether men had the right to make slaves of other men. Now, this is something unthinkable today. Government enslavement of masses, as in the Soviet Union, exists; but the idea that one man may buy another and use him like a draft animal has disappeared from human consciousness.

One of the great founding fathers of this country, Alexander Hamilton, died a young man, because he was challenged to a duel. He thought it perfectly reasonable to go out, expose himself to the bullet of a man who didn't like him, and fall fatally shot. That was the way things were done in America, not two hundred years ago. Picture for yourself Mr. Reagan and [columnist] Mr. [Jack]

Anderson coming to sharp words, and Mr. Reagan inviting Mr. Anderson to meet him out in the redwoods north of San Francisco, in order to have it out by potting at each other with revolvers—a wild fantasy! And yet, great and honorable men so behaved, long after this country was founded; and they did own human beings, too, and did trade them back and forth.

Peer backwards a bit farther in time, on this continent, to a period just before Shakespeare, when Chaucer was writing in England, and Rabelais in France, and the great cathedrals were rising all over the European continent. At that time, on pyramids in Mexico and in South America, human beings were being cut open, and their bleeding throbbing hearts thrust up to the sun in worship. So late did the presently unthinkable horror of human sacrifice persist in world history. And it was commonplace in the ancient world of Thucydides and Isaiah.

I say to you, therefore, that what seems to be an eternal truth about human nature—that men have always fought wars and therefore always will fight wars—may not in fact be eternal; that just because men have always done it, they will not necessarily always do it. There is a slow tortuous rising line in human behavior and in human nature, away from the animal and the barbaric. If its rise is too slow, if it will not reach a new enlightened stage in time to save us, that is another thing. But our nature, and the ways of human society, have in fact very slowly and materially changed. This much hope we can draw from the past.

Now let us talk about—now.

There is something new about the world we live in; a radical difference from the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Our world has become like the planet of [Antoine de] Saint-Exupery's *Little Prince*. Some of you remember that beautiful fable of a prince who lived in a tiny world, perhaps ten times as big as he was, with a single flower for companionship. That was his earth. The little prince, had he had an enemy, could not have carried out a war if he had wanted to—because if he had shot off a gun, the bullet would have come right around his globe and hit him in the back of the head. That is the condition in which, essentially, the great powers now find themselves. On the Peloponnesus there was an infinite world around and beyond Athens and Sparta. When they struck at their foe, they struck to win, as hard as they could. It can't happen any more. If we strike at the foe as hard as we can, the bullet will come around and blast us in the back; and so it is with our great Soviet foe.

Moreover, the smaller wars, what we call the brushfire wars (the Israeli officers in my audience will consider that an ironic description) occur under the umbrella of the great powers' stalemated and very shaky nuclear truce. What is quite new is that Athens and Sparta themselves cannot shoot at each other without risking blowing their own heads off. That stark truth must give all sane men pause.

But there are things newer than that in the human condition. We have the pictures from the moon taken by men—*Americans*, let me emphasize with unashamed pride—who walked there and photographed this planet. We now know what our home in the universe looks like. Everybody does. It takes a long time for this radical new perception to sink into the common sense and the actions of mankind. But now we know. We know that we live on this beautiful small ball hanging in space—in dark cold space—and we know, too, that we are gutting this little ball, burning up what supplies the good Lord put here, or nature granted us, consuming our irreplaceable wealth for the sake of building up an insane confrontation of annihilatory machinery and mutual threats. We know that in this outmoded, grotesque process we are eating out our own bowels. It is sinking in, year by year. In our hearts we are coming to know that we cannot go on much longer in the old Thucydidean way.

Now you may say to me, “Reverend Wouk, you are preaching to the choir. We could not agree with you more. What about the men in the Kremlin who are creating all the problems, without whom all these clouds and this nightmare might pass away?”

Just tonight, in the guest lecturer’s room, I was chatting with the President of the War College, Admiral [Edward F.] Welch, about the SALT II negotiations, in which he spent many years. He spoke of the Russian officer who served as his counterpart, his opposite number, in the Soviet delegation at Geneva; allow me to say that he mentioned the man in order to commend my portrayal of such Russian officers in *War and Remembrance*. “I feel enormous sympathy for this officer and I think he does for me,” the admiral said. “We understand each other and we respect each other. But there is this line that we just come up against and we can’t cross.” Admiral [addressing Admiral Welch], you were talking about the old Thucydidean barrier of nationalist confrontation. Yet you and he did experience a fellow-feeling that transcended it, dealing as you both were with today’s new horrific realities.

Is it absolutely inevitable, then, that there are no such thoughtful younger men in the Soviet Union—men who will someday come to power, who see these things as clearly as we Americans believe we do? I sometimes think it a blessing that men only live seventy or eighty years and then die off. Without a doubt the policy of the Soviet Union now is the work of ossified minds hardened into the nineteenth-century Marxist perception of the world. Surely, in that great nation, there are many young men and young women who are waiting for their time to come to power and change what is going on. It will not happen tomorrow. It may be a long time happening, because to rise in the Soviet system one must play the game and speak the rhetoric, and so, to some extent, take on much of the coloration, and perhaps even of the conviction, of the older leaders. That too, then, is but a long-range prospect.

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Now I am ready to talk about Colonel Netanyahu and Commander Williams.

The hope that I have described is tentative and distant; it calls for hanging on while the world breaks out of the Thucydidean nightmare, and gropes toward the vision of Isaiah, which—so I believe in my heart and soul—is at this very time struggling to be born on this tortured planet. During this long, long night of hanging on, this vigil of the fearful birth pangs of a new age, men of good will must stand guard and protect not only human existence itself, but what is most precious in the human experience: freedom.

You may not recognize the name of Colonel Jonathan Netanyahu, but you all know of his great exploit. In June–July of 1976 a pro-Palestinian terrorist gang captured an Air France plane, flew it to Entebbe Airport in Uganda, and held hostage there a hundred and three Jewish passengers, threatening to murder them unless the Israeli government submitted to the terrorist demands. The Israeli defense forces, in a spectacular coup, flew a rescue commando team 2,500 miles, launched an attack on the terminal, and freed the hostages—a searing thing to talk of here today, when we agonize over the Americans still held hostage in Iran. Colonel Netanyahu devised and led the attack on the Entebbe Airport. He was the only Israeli soldier who was killed. The Entebbe rescue gave hope to all the world that there is a way to cope with this twentieth-century horror, this monstrous practice of kidnapping innocent people and using their lives for political leverage, this vile threat to all civilized life.

Jonathan Netanyahu's letters, collected by his bereaved family, have been published in Israel, and will be published here in America in the fall. I have had the honor of writing an introduction to this remarkable self-portrait of a philosopher-soldier—American-born, educated in America and in Israel, exceptionally able and vigorous, full of the joy of life, yet saddened at having to give his young years to this process of war and killing, taking little joy in the victories in which he played a heroic part in 1967 and 1973. Haunted by this sadness, his letters are; and yet for the reader they are shot through with a hope of which the writer himself could not have been wholly aware: quite simply the hope that comes of knowing that there was such a man as Jonathan Netanyahu, who wrote such letters and did such things.

Now I'm going to talk about Walter Williams. I encountered him here at the Naval War College, when I came seven years ago to give the first Spruance Lecture. A pleasant, bright-faced young man of medium height met Mrs. Wouk and me, showed us around, drove us to the flag quarters, helped us with our bags, and asked us if he could get us coffee or anything else. He introduced himself as Lieutenant Commander Williams, and added, "My name is Butch." That was all I knew about him. I had to find out from others—never from him—that this man had flown four hundred combat missions in Vietnam; that he had five Distinguished Flying Crosses and more decorations than I can begin

to tell you; that he was an absolutely peerless professional fighting man and a first-class mind, number one in his class here at the Naval War College. So modest, so plain in his manner was he, that only after learning at second hand of his distinction did I come to observe the subtle clues of outstanding character in Butch Williams. I saw him several times after that. We were friends. I sent him a copy of *War and Remembrance* when it came out, and he wrote me a wonderful letter about it. At that time, after a lot of shore duty as an aide to Admiral Turner, he had just been given the thing he had been wanting through all his naval aviation career, command of a squadron on a carrier.

Two months ago, in routine duty at sea, Butch was being catapulted. The catapult failed and his plane fell in the sea. He ejected, but something went very wrong with the rescue procedure he was so familiar with, and Butch drowned. He is gone.

Well, when a man like Colonel Netanyahu dies, in a flaming deed that lights the hearts of the world, the family can feel agony, and all of us can feel sadness; yet there's a sense of tragic catharsis in what the man achieved with his death. But what did Butch Williams do with his death—this wonderful fighter, this first-class man who I believe would have been an important American leader, military and possibly more than military? What did he achieve with this accidental death in routine operations?

I'll tell you what he did—he served. He was there. This man of the highest excellence submerged himself, his life, in this big destructive machine which is our solace and our protection, knowing full well that whether he flew combat missions or routine operations he was at risk. He gave up all the high-priced opportunities in this rich country—and the men in this room know what the advantageous offers and possibilities are outside the military life—and he served. While articles and books poured from the presses in New York and across the country about the doom of civilization, the collapse of Western society, the hopelessness and the death of the American dream, Butch Williams served, and stood in the breach. For he knew that in this terrible fight against odds to hold the world together, while it struggles out of the Thucydidean nightmare to the sunlight of Isaiah's vision, American men must stand in the breach and face those odds and conquer those odds—the best men among us.

When Raymond Spruance sailed to Midway he was taking two carriers against nine, no battleships against perhaps twelve. He was a surface officer. He had had no training in carrier fighting. The leadership of this great battle fell to him by accident, because his friend, William Halsey, sickened at the last minute. Another senior, Frank Jack Fletcher, was supposed to take over Halsey's tactical command; but he arrived at the scene in the partially damaged *Yorktown* and in mid-battle he had to turn over the conduct of the fight to Raymond Spruance. The victory that Spruance won against those rough odds, the stand of this one

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man in one dark hour on the Pacific Ocean near the island of Midway, turned the tide of history from the blackness of totalitarian barbarism into the troubled world we have today—a world, however troubled, in which we Americans can still talk as free men and work as free men toward the future.

Mrs. Spruance remarked to me after my lecture, “You know what Ray once said? He said, ‘There were a hundred Raymond Spruances in the Navy. They just happened to pick me to do the job.’” I believe Spruance spoke the truth. There are hundreds of Spruances in this country. And there are hundreds of young Netanyahus in Israel, and in America there are thousands of Butch Williamses. We know about Spruance only because he was thrust into that battle and won it. We know about Jonathan Netanyahu and Butch Williams, and speak of them tonight, only because they died.

In their deaths, I find embodied at once the sadness at the historic trap we are in, and the hope that mankind, which produced such courageous, noble, and clear-seeing spirits, will yet find its way to the light that was in them, and that burns for us. They are here among you, the Netanyahus and the Williamses, men who are such, or who aspire to be such. I tell you that you are right in what you are doing, that you are answering the noblest of calls. In all my sadness, you are my hope.



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