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Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War; Ride of the Second Horseman: The Birth and Death of War

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Army for a time. After the war, his well kept journals helped him write a popular book about his experiences.

Spencer paints an excellent picture of the events leading up to secession, as seen by the South and the "sea lawyer" Semmes, who resigned his commission in the U.S. Navy to follow his adopted home state of Alabama when it seceded in early 1861. Spencer also manages to convey the naive and somewhat confused atmosphere (so incomprehensible in hindsight) that gripped both Union and Confederacy between the secessions and the attack on Fort Sumter. During this period Semmes traveled through the Union attempting to purchase arms-producing machinery and other war material for the Confederacy.

Once fighting broke out, Semmes was given command of the steamer *Sumter*, supervising its long and arduous outfitting for use as a commerce raider. The sea-weary *Sumter* eventually had to be abandoned in Gibraltar, after which Semmes continued his reign of terror among Union shipping in the British-built CSS *Alabama*.

At sea, Semmes used his knowledge of winds, currents, and trade routes to capture merchant vessels. His techniques for finding enemy shipping were so successful that Kaiser Wilhelm II was to require all his naval captains to read Semmes's *Memoirs of Service Afloat during the War between the States*. Semmes used his own background in international law to decide the status of ships he boarded and the cargoes they carried, releasing, burning, or bonding them as he deemed appropriate.

Almost two years after launching, the *Alabama* limped into Brest harbor needing an extended yard period. Denied

that by the French government, Semmes nonetheless accepted the challenge of the Union navy, which had finally caught up to him in the form of the USS *Kearsarge*. After a one-hour battle, Semmes, rescued from the water by a British yacht, managed to return to the Confederacy, where he commanded the James River Squadron until the fall of Richmond, after which he served as a commander of artillery with the army.

The life of Raphael Semmes, as related by Warren Spencer, is filled with episodes that would seem more in keeping with Horatio Hornblower, or Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin. The Civil War, as fought on the high seas, was as much the last gasp of the age of sail as it was a harbinger of twentieth-century warfare. Raphael Semmes was a man of similar complexity and contradiction.

And for those of you who may still be wondering, the captain of the *Kearsarge* was John A. Winslow.

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Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997. 292pp. \$25

O'Connell, Robert L. *Ride of the Second Horseman: The Birth and Death of War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995. 305pp. \$15.95

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the foundations of peace must be laid."

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This opening phrase from the constitution of UNESCO (the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) impels one to inquire whether man's propensity to go to war and indulge in aggressive behavior is inherent or a product of his environment. Anthropologists and psychologists have increasingly turned their thought to this issue, conscious of the fact that the pressures of public opinion in favor of peace and the activity of such bodies as the United Nations seem to be virtually ineffective in preventing war. These scholars have even made increasing use of the evidence turned up by archeologists in ancient monuments or ancient graves.

Among such works, two stand out. In *Blood Rites*, Barbara Ehrenreich contends that modern man is the inheritor of his ancestor, who was the victim of a variety of predatory animals. As time passed, the prey became the predator, with a tendency to make war a religious experience involving, to some extent, the worship of blood—hence the human sacrifices of the Aztecs. “Man-the-hunter no doubt invented war; at least he invented the weapons of war. But for the tendency to secularize violence—to ritualize the slaughter of animals and bring ‘religious’ feelings to war [after all, in time of war the clerics on each side emphasize that God is an ally supporting the cause], we must go back further, to a time when ‘man’ was an object of prey.” Robert O’Connell, on the other hand, in his *Ride of the Second Horseman*, argues that man is essentially an agriculturist, whose survival depends on food and land on which to grow it. Consequently, man will resort to war to defend his food and home, and

he will if necessary take over the land of another when his own ceases to support him. In O’Connell’s view, “humankind was not born to war but came to it late in our existence as the result of fundamental shifts in subsistence patterns.”

While the political scientist may be largely concerned with the causes of modern warfare, the military is concerned with its means and methods, and with restrictions on conducting combat, but neither is terribly concerned with why man is aggressive. Therefore from a purely academic and philosophical standpoint, theories of the kind propagated by these two authors remain fascinating.

Perhaps the easiest way to comment on these two works and draw attention to their differences is by way of quotation, to emphasize their basic approaches.

In Ehrenreich’s work we see a consistent argument in support of her basic contention that the warrior is a descendant of the “predatee,” now himself become a predator. “It seems likely that the primordial experience of predation at least *colors* our emotional response to situations other than predation itself—the sight of violence or bloodshed occasioned by our fellow humans, for example. . . . Even in our relatively predator-free modern environment, the sight of bloodshed can trigger the fight-or-flight response, or at least a mild version of it. . . . We pay attention. . . . There are two likely psychological legacies of predation which would appear to be relevant to the institution of war. One is the automatic response of alarm in the face of a threat

. . . which we inherit from a time when our ancestors faced the world largely as prey. 'Designed' to ready us psychologically to fight or flee a dangerous animal, the response is what makes war . . . so gripping to us. The other, apparently weaker, response readies us emotionally for collective action and possible self-sacrifice for the sake of the group. . . . Neither of these responses is the 'cause' of war. They are simply part of the repertoire of emotional responses we *bring* to war, no matter what happens to have 'caused' it. But it is these responses . . . that color war with the profound feelings . . . that make it 'sacred' to us. The alarm response infuses war . . . with urgency and excitement, while the solidarity response . . . mobilizes our most altruistic and exalted impulses. . . . In war we act as if the only enemies we have are human ones, but . . . the emotions we bring to war are derived, in an evolutionary sense, from a primal battle [against predators] that the entire human species might have lost. . . . The weapons [of war] have changed beyond recognition over millennia, but the basic emotional responses represent defensive mechanisms which evolved in combat with a deadly non-human other. . . . The rise of war corresponds roughly with a global decline in the number of large animals, both 'game' and predators, for humans to fight against. . . . It may have been only through the compulsive repetition of acts and spectacles of violence—the hunt, the sacrifice, the initiatory ordeal, and *eventually the war*—that our ancestors were able to reassure themselves that they were, in fact, no longer prey. . . . [War] arises, at least in part, as a new source of prestige for men who might otherwise have been

employed as hunters and as defenders against wild animals . . . [serving] not only to enrich the victorious community as a whole, but to enhance the status of a specific group within it. Perhaps the war-leader indicated here is best represented by the orders of knighthood and their acceptance of the various codes of chivalry."

There may be some doubt among military people about the realism of Ehrenreich's comment that "by arousing the passions of solidarity and transcendence, *war makes nations*, or at least refreshes them." Thus, during DESERT STORM the United States, "like the primordial band confronted with a predator, leaped into a frenzy of defensive action, brandishing the fetishes of our faith—our flags and yellow ribbons—against the primordial intruding beast." That view seems to find some reflection in the media reaction to Saddam Hussein's rejection of American members of the United Nations arms-inspection teams.

O'Connell's view as to the origin of war may be more acceptable. He believes that "the origins of war must be explained in terms of how we became first farmers, then pastoralists, and finally warriors." Even so, war was frequently accompanied not merely by the carrying away of captives as slaves or for absorption into the victorious populace (as was the case in both ancient Israel and Rome) but also by "the continuing tit-for-tat confiscation of small parcels of border land, the repeated imposition of huge grain indemnities . . . and the gratuitous slaughter or enslavement of combatants and noncombatants." Without suggesting that predation is a result of

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having previously been victimized, O'Connell does at times come close to agreeing with some of Ehrenreich's views. Thus by the beginning of the third millennium B.C. "aggression could be dealt with in one of three ways—flight, submission or resistance—with the choice depending to a considerable degree on population size and the value, or at least replaceability, of the territory occupied. In the case of foragers, the obvious course was retreat, since almost any alternative range could support their typically sparse inhabitation densities. Alternately, small agricultural centers farming at low levels of productivity, when confronted by similar but more determined groups, might either accept accommodation and amalgamation or fall back on the inconvenient but still possible option of going elsewhere. Yet large populations dependent on the very limited quantities of land suitable for intensive cultivation were faced with the stark choice between submission and the probable loss of at least some of this vital resource—or resistance using an equivalent level of violence."

During the next millennium, cavalry began to displace absolute reliance on foot soldiering, and by the middle of the first millennium "mounted troops would prove extremely useful; hanging on the edges, reconnoitering and harrying the survivors of broken formations to prevent them from rallying, and . . . running them down and conducting the after-battle slaughter. Isolating victims, leaving them no avenue of escape and then killing them as prey—this was the ruthlessness of the hunt applied in practically its purest form." Ultimately, therefore, it would seem that O'Connell, while making no suggestion that man

was ever a predatee, also comes round to the view that while man might originally have resorted to war to preserve his possessions, he still behaved, as Ehrenreich suggests, as nothing better than a predator.

It might not be out of place to mention here the view of another writer interested in the origins of warfare. Dudley Young's *Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War* (1991) has cautioned us against too easily accepting the view that war stems from hunting. While "common sense [might] say so, this has been questioned recently in the study of seemingly pacific paleolithic hunters, notably the Bushmen, the Eskimos, the Pygmies, and the Hadza of Tanzania. Each of these, however, are now living in reduced circumstances, and almost certainly practiced warfare in their heyday. . . . What is at stake here is ultimately Rousseau's noble savage, the peaceful paleolithic that knew no warfare until the neolithic and the domestication of animals. . . . To have a war you need not covet your neighbor's ass nor even his goods: his wife and above all his *territory* will suffice."

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King, Dean, and John B. Hattendorf,
eds. *Every Man Will Do His Duty*.
New York: Henry Holt, 1997.
406pp. \$27.50