



## OF ANTS AND MEN

The Lust for War

NOW AND THEN I'M ASHAMED TO BE A MEMBER OF THE HUMAN RACE. I'M NOT talking politics, just statistics. How many people do you think died in armed conflicts during the 20th century? Twenty million? Thirty million? It's crazy even to contemplate such large numbers, but, in fact, when you include soldiers and civilians killed in war, as well as large populations like the Jews and the Armenians, who were simply obliterated en masse, the total is more like 175 million. That's 175 million people killed, not because of individual conflicts or momentary passions (which took about 8 million lives during the last century) but because of organized efforts by large groups seeking to eradicate other large groups. No other species on this planet—except the proverbial ant—behaves so horribly.

About 30 wars are in progress at any time, and military spending worldwide is a trillion dollars a year. Thanks to mankind's technological prowess, we've also earned the odd distinction of being able to obliterate ourselves many times over within a few hours. War, it seems, is who we are, and someday it may be the sad mark of who we once were.

Behavioral scientists have identified many powerful factors that drive us to war—factors so numerous and so compelling that it's hard to imagine how we'll ever overcome them. Evolution seems to have equipped us—men, especially—with strong tendencies to organize and kill. As General John J. Pershing stated, "Men go to war because they enjoy it." Like many mammals, we also possess the natural tendency to protect our territory. Society is capable of suppressing genetically based tendencies, but when it comes to war, most cultures actually fuel the flames. We deliberately instill nationalistic pride in our children, and we teach them to assume roles and follow orders—all characteristics of the good soldier. In addition, we "deindividuate" people by giving them uniforms; we diffuse responsibility by having them use weapons in teams; we dehumanize enemies by labeling them heathens, animals and so on. Throw in financial incentives, some propaganda and a charismatic leader or two, and we become more antlike than ever. Lawrence LesShan's recent book, *The Psychology of War*, introduces another disturbing idea—that in war, our very perception of reality is altered. We accept a "mythic" mode of thinking that makes it difficult to see the obvious truths we accept during peacetime: that all people are basically the same, that "good" and "evil" are simplistic ideas, that the cost of war usually vastly exceeds the benefit.

I fear that it's going to take large-scale, science-fiction-like interventions to get us to make nice—nanobots that alter brain pathways, genetic manipulation or sedatives in the drinking water. Such methods may rob us of our very humanity. Alas, if the behavioral scientists are right, that might be just what we need to do.

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