War According to Dharma
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What a rare fascination we have with Hussein's and Bush's lethal feud. It borders on the obsessive. This month war is in every living room, on every mind, in virtually every conversation. The meager media morsels Machiavellian censors on each side are throwing to the press barely sate, so we hungrily prowl in anticipation of CNN's next half-hour feeding. You're probably asking. "What docs dharma say about war?"

Indians have long promoted nonviolence, but they have long engaged abundantly in wars, large and small. They knew that war has given peoples and nations freedom, and war sometimes is required to preserve that freedom. The Kuwaitis are history's newest students of this lesson.

War in ancient India was one of the six conditions of international relations. War was undertaken only after other attempts at resolution were thoroughly exhausted - including negotiation, bribery, internal dissension and threat (George and Saddham attempted all these). Only as a final course was the full force of the slate pitted against the enemy. The Dharmashastras say. "A righteous war in defense of one's liberty is allowed. But it should be an honorable enterprise. In case of victory, the vanquished should be assured of protection."

The Arthasastra speaks of war as the necessary dharma of the king, and notes its purpose is glory and building up the empire. (That's one for Hussein.) Only later, in the Dharmashastras, did Manu lay down rules for a more civilized warfare. Homage, and not annexation, was the rightful fruit of victory. Two kinds of war were distinguished. The dharma-yuddha or 'righteous conflict" was fought according to a chivalric code among kings and warriors. It was a struggle of good against evil. Blatant acts of aggression were frequently put into this category. The justification for this kind of war finds its most eloquent expression in the Mababharata.

The kuta-yuddha or "false war" was caused by greed for territory or spoils and asura-yuddha or "demoniac war" was conducted for lust, conquest and massacre. (Score one for George's side, since the Gulf War id begin with Iraq's invasion of a sovereign nation.) The Mahabharata declares: "A king should not attempt to gain the earth unrighteously, for who reveres (lie king who wins unrighteous victory? Unrighteous conquest is impermanent, and does not lead to heaven." In general. Hindu kings followed the ideal of righteous war. excepting perhaps the Guptas.

The pre-war tasks, the building of roads for the army, the use of spies, the shape of advancing soldiers and their camps at night and the choice of the battlefield in relation to sun, wind and water were all defined in detail. Women were part of the encampments up to the middle ages. Their duties included entertainment, food preparation and "standing behind their men with encouraging words." The retinue included pots of poisonous snakes, inflammable materials, suppliers of provisions, spare parts and weapons, physicians, astrologers and panegyrists to sing of (lie valor of the troops (sort of a low-tech CNN).

Hindu generals believed implicitly in the strength of numbers, and it is said they frequently put into the field large numbers of combatants without a functional plan. This vast army, sometimes numbering over hall a million including non-combatants, was slow and cumbersome, difficult to coordinate. A shrewd enemy could out maneuver the closely packed field. Many were the easy victories of a handful of Greek, Hun, Afghan and European troops against what a Muslim chronicler referred to as "infidel rabble."

Siege warfare was employed from early times, but not always effectively. Texts urged the king to attack that part of the citadel over which he saw a crow fly, and advised him to be cautious if lie saw a lizard.

There were conventions, such as only fighting during the day and fighting people of equal rank and strength. Crops could not be destroyed nor innocent citizens harmed. Historian A.L. Basham writes. "It is doubtful if any other ancient civilization set such humane ideals of warfare." But outright condemnation of war is rare in Indian literature. The brutal encounters of India with the ruthless and violent armies of the Afghans and Turks put an end to the ancient rules of Hindu warfare.

On page seven of this issue we conclude the three-part series of Mark Twain's travels in India. In those days Twain was witness to another US military undertaking, the Philip pines insurgency. Ruthlessly caustic about man's inhumanity to man, he composed the following war prayer, which was not used for Bush's February 3rd National Prayer Day.

"Oh Lord, our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle. Be Thou near them! With them - in spirit - we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord, our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells. Help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead. Help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing In pain. Help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire. Help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief. Help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sport of the sun-names of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of (lie grave and denied it. For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their hitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, slain the white snow with the blood (if their wounded feel! We ask it in the spirit of love, of him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen."

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