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America—Still in the Hero's Grip

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Although the United States is clearly still reeling from its current and recent exported wars, it has never gotten close enough to fully witness their actual horror. As a result, the nation's profound identification with the archetypes of the warrior and hero has never undergone a corrective experience. The country's one-sided myth of its own exceptionalism and goodness has created not only an unattainable image to live up to, but also its flip side—a very repressed and ignored shadow, which is liable to pop up in highly unregulated forms. The psychic split this creates is now being played out in a deeply divided nation and the seemingly sudden emergence of a president who carries all the shadow aspects of the hero archetype. The United States is certainly not the only nation with a narrative elevating itself above all others—or that has ended up enthroning its own shadow. But because of its size and power, the consequences are much more damaging. It would serve the United States well to relativize its view of itself, and for it to take a more appropriate place among the nations of this world. However, history shows that this kind of shift does not happen voluntarily; instead it is forced upon a country by its own failure. It remains to be seen if the United States will be able to make the necessary leap in consciousness to avoid following in history's footsteps.

The recent headline that President Donald Trump gave Defense Secretary Jim Mattis the authority to raise troop levels in Afghanistan brought back memories of those heady days, nearly 15 years ago, when the U.S. government believed that it could topple a dictator, win a war, and restore order to an entire country in a few months. The inflation and hubris of that moment were encapsulated in an image that has stayed with me ever since:

Tens of thousands of American tanks, jeeps, and trucks rolling across the Kuwaiti border toward Bagdad in 2003, accompanied by an angry flock of Apache helicopters and fighter jets streaking across the cloudless sky; the most powerful war machinery the world has ever seen on the move. One hundred thousand young men intoxicated by the sheer physical power of their numbers, their young faces glowing with a sense of aliveness and camaraderie only war seems to provide. An army of boys, often hastily recruited from the outskirts of American society, invading a country many of them barely knew existed a few months earlier. Invasions rely on the fact that the invaders have no connection to

Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/upyp.



Keiko Fukazawa, *Peacemaker 82620171*, 2017, 6 x 11.5 x 9 inches,
Porcelain, fabric box. Photographed by Susan Einstein.

the land, the shape of the terrain, the plants, the animals, and the people living there. Their tongues are unfamiliar with the native language or the local food. It is much easier to destroy a place of which one has not even begun to form an image.

As I am grappling with the realization that there will be no end to the longest war in U.S. history, a familiar sense of disconnect, hopelessness, and fatigue sets in. The issues at play are bigger than what can be grasped on a rational level. Approaching the horrors of war from an archetypal perspective, though, might provide an experiential understanding of its powerful hold on entire nations. War is an archetypal possession, and this one is no exception. Psychologist James Hillman (1976) noted that “one thing is absolutely essential to the notion of archetypes: their emotional possessive effect, their bedazzlement of consciousness so that it becomes blind to its own stance” (p. xix). He compared an archetype with a god that sets “up a universe which tends to hold everything we do, see, and say in the sway of its cosmos” (p. xix). War then becomes the only possible response, and even in places where the archetype of war seems to have lost its grip, the memory of its terror might just have put it to rest temporarily.

I grew up in Austria deep in the shadow of two world wars, the first one having paved the way for the second one by breaking down the political, cultural, and societal belief system of the time. Although I was nearly two generations removed from World War II—my parents were small children during “The War,” as WWII generally was referred to—it was omnipresent. Our daily life, beliefs, and the general outlook on life were deeply permeated by it. The War was a breathing, living entity at the dinner table, casually referred to in the most mundane conversations, but always sated with a deep, underlying horror. This notion of personifying the war into a monstrous, autonomous force was aided by our referring to it in the personal pronoun “he” or “*er*” in German. I remember vividly how stunned I was when I learned in school that there had been a Korean War in 1950, just five years after The War had ended! The imagery and presence of WWII were so vivid and tangible that the idea of a repeat seemed impossible and utterly absurd at the time. In the wake of catastrophes such as the genocide in Rwanda, the tsunami of 2004 in Indonesia, or a war, it is often said that it takes three generations for a people to fully recover. Is this also the amount of time it takes for people to lose the ability to imagine what to others seems unimaginable? Does this mean that Europe will be ready for a war again in one more generation, when the images have lost their power, and the experience of war as an archetypal, ravenous force—which once unleashed, cannot be stopped—is forgotten?

The United States, although clearly reeling from its recent wars, hasn't gotten close enough to be able to truly imagine them, and as result, it still deeply identifies with the archetypes of the warrior and hero, elevating them to mystical proportions. Since the fiasco of the U.S. invasion in Iraq in 2003, the response of the U.S. government has been predictably more tempered to global crisis situations, but the dualistic tone of the discussion has not changed. The debate is only about when and how much war there should be. This viewpoint shows not only a catastrophic lack of imagination, resulting in an unwillingness to entertain other solutions, but also enables the illusion that war can be controlled and dealt out in palatable portions. This response is supported by the United States' historical narrative and has been elevated to the only way of rational thinking.

Being so strongly aligned with one archetype presses a nation into a one dimensionality wherein dissenting voices are pathologized, and—particularly in times of crisis—penalized as being traitorous. Decisiveness, single-mindedness, a results orientation, and a sense of justice are qualities strongly associated with the archetype of the hero and

are arguably desirable traits for an individual or a nation—were it not for the accompanying refusal of the United States to acknowledge its shadow aspects and consequently projecting them onto other nations.

Psychiatrist and founder of analytic psychology C. G. Jung defined the shadow as “the thing a person has no wish to be” (1966, par. 470). It is the sum of all unpleasant qualities one wants to hide: the inferior, worthless, and primitive side of a person’s nature (Samuel, Shorter, & Plaut, 2013, p. 138). Jung emphasized that everybody has a shadow and that the less conscious one is of it, the darker and denser it gets. This same process also holds true for a nation. The United States, with its one-sided myth of its own exceptionalism and goodness, created not only an unattainable image to live up to but also its flipside: a very repressed and ignored shadow, which is liable to pop up in highly unregulated forms. The psychic split this one-sidedness creates is being played out in a deeply divided nation and the *seemingly* sudden emergence of a president who carries all the shadow aspects of the hero.

The characteristics of the shadow hero are selfishness, indifference, a lack of humility, and a lack of self-awareness. He likes to be admired, relishes stories of his great accomplishments, and does not acknowledge the contributions of others. The shadow hero doesn’t recognize his own limitations and claims the accomplishments of others for himself. For him the goal—reaching the top—*always* justifies the means.

The United States is certainly not the only nation that has a narrative that elevates itself above all others or that has ended up enthroning its own shadow, but because of its size and power, the consequences are that much more damaging. Hillman (1989) argued for the need of relativizing the hero, since “the hero myth tells the tale of conquest and destruction, the tale of psychology’s ‘strong ego,’ its fire and sword, as well as the career of its civilization, but it tells little of the culture of consciousness” (p. 32). In the same vein, it would serve the United States well to relativize its view of itself, and to take a more appropriate place among the nations of this world. Historically, this does not happen voluntarily; it is instead forced upon a country by its own failure. It remains to be seen if the United States will be able to make the necessary leap in consciousness to avoid following in history’s footsteps.

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FURTHER READING

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