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The Totem Myth: Sacrifice and Transformation

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The Totem Myth: Sacrifice and Transformation

Abstract
The flag symbolizes the sacrificed body of the citizen. This label has meaning only in reference to the group that defines it, the nation. Blood sacrifice links the citizen to the nation. It is a ritual in the most profound sense, for it creates the nation from the flesh of its citizens. The flag is the sign and agent of the nation formed in blood sacrifice. Still, raising a piece of cloth and calling it a flag will not declare territory and form groups, at least not territory that will be respected, or groups that will endure and fight to produce borders. The power of a flag must be sacrificially established. The point was made by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, whose challenge to Boris Yeltsin in Russia's first parliamentary elections caught the attention of the West. Opposing the division of Russia into republics, Zhirinovsky complained that the countries created by these new flags were abstract symbols only. "They don't understand that you have to pay with blood for this process."
The totem myth: 
sacrifice and transformation

We owe God a death. 

Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

The flag symbolizes the sacrificed body of the citizen. This label has meaning only in reference to the group that defines it, the nation. Blood sacrifice links the citizen to the nation. It is a ritual in the most profound sense, for it creates the nation from the flesh of its citizens. The flag is the sign and agent of the nation formed in blood sacrifice. Still, raising a piece of cloth and calling it a flag will not declare territory and form groups, at least not territory that will be respected, or groups that will endure and fight to produce borders. The power of a flag must be sacrificially established. The point was made by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, whose challenge to Boris Yeltsin in Russia’s first parliamentary elections caught the attention of the West. Opposing the division of Russia into republics, Zhirinovsky complained that the countries created by these new flags were abstract symbols only. “They don’t understand that you have to pay with blood for this process.”

If myth without violence has no power, as Zhirinovsky proposes, violence without myth has no order. Myth and violence fuse in blood sacrifice. Through a system of group-forming rituals, a myth of blood sacrifice organizes the meaning of violent events after the fact. This retrospective creation—sacrifice story is the totem myth. Myth transforms disordered violence into ordered violence that engenders the group. Key elements include the transformative violence that creates a border, the flag that signifies this transformation, and the border so engendered. Group-forming episodes include the sacrificial crisis that sets in motion a quest for boundaries, the ritual journey to death’s border, the crossing where insiders and outsiders exchange identities, and the resolution of the crisis. The success of these episodes depends on a willing sacrifice who keeps the secret that the totem eats its own to live.
Endlessly re-enacted, the totem myth confers a quality of radiance on all the players in its drama, including the flag, which thus acquires a distinctive aura for celebrants. It becomes potent, "saturated with being," in Mircea Eliade's phrase. The transformed flag sets in motion further actings-out of the totem myth. These confer more radiance on the flag, which creates more occasions for mythic transformation. These may be commemorative or mission-oriented. From time to time they are messianic, for the memory of the nation exhausts itself and must be restored.

**What holds society together – blood sacrifice**

Our way of ruling is to kill each other, and what shall be the rule if we are not allowed to kill?

Representatives of the Swazi nation to Great Britain, 1889

History is what hurts. Fredric Jameson

Violence is the generative heart of the totem myth, its fuel. Group members yearn for it, though all suggestions of its appeal to morally motivated persons are vehemently denied. Robert Ardrey compares it to a layer of molten magma buried beneath all human topography, forever seeking expression. “To deny its incidence in all human groups – male, female, old, young, the immature – is the most flagrant of discriminatory attitudes.” Violence is discriminatory. It sorts group members by transforming them. It classifies Us and Them. Since it carries risks as well as rewards for those it defines, it must be monitored. This is one of the chief functions of patriotism. To group members violence signifies the primitive, the Other at the border. Healthy modern societies are thought to be cohesive without violence, and it is assumed to have no useful role in their maintenance. By contrast, primitive societies are said to practice violence shamelessly. In popular mythology blood sacrifice is a feature of primitive societies, but not our own. We argue that blood sacrifice is our defining feature.

When practitioners of violence surface in spite of everything, they are mythologized as loners and outliers, border-dwellers, primitives visibly different from normal citizens who are strangers to violence. “Civilized” societies overwhelmed by disordering violence (Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda, and the Balkans come to mind) are described as barbaric and savage. “A civilized country does not resolve conflicts in a manner that causes so much human suffering, death, and destruction,” a Swedish diplomat admonished Russians bombing the breakaway province of Chechnya. What we call primitive is that violence from which we seek to distance ourselves. Defined by violence, classified as primitive, the Other is not us.
Zhirinovsky and accomplices were described as “persistent spear carriers of xenophobia, anti-Semitism and, in some cases, outright Nazism” as if these were not thoroughly modern ideologies. While denouncing the borders erected by Nazis and anti-Semites, this speaker does not hesitate to label barbarians and raise the gates against them. Calling others primitive, the labelers purify themselves.

Efforts to portray ourselves as peacemakers break down. Media violence is only the most obvious example. A New York Times reader blamed the 1992 Los Angeles riots, an unprecedented episode of civil unrest, on media violence. “All this creates the belief that violence is normal,” he wrote. Nothing could be more normal, statistically speaking. In 1991 deaths from firearms in the United States rivaled deaths from motor vehicles. In that year there were 43,536 vehicle-related fatalities and 38,317 deaths from firearms. Since 1980 more than 1,500,000 abortions have been performed each year in the United States. Indeterminate levels of euthanasia take place in medical facilities. In 1991 the United States was also the most criminally violent of industrialized nations. More than two million people were beaten, knifed, shot or otherwise assaulted annually within its borders, about 23,000 of them fatally. Second-place Scotland boasted less than one-fourth the US rate of criminal violence. Even when gun murders are excluded from US figures but included for other countries, “Our stabbing, choking and strangling rate alone puts us in first place in the murder sweepstakes.”

Many analysts claim that media violence exaggerates societal violence. George Gerbner, for example, argues that media displays of violence are disproportional to the violence that individual citizens are likely to experience. In relation to violence, however, citizens live not as individuals but within territorial zones defended by legal violence explicitly forbidden to them. Since individuals are not expected to defend themselves against violence, the more relevant measure is the total incidence of violence within specific perimeters patrolled by local police, state police, and national armed forces rather than any particular individual’s chance of encountering it. In urban areas, where most Americans live, media under-represent violence that occurs within the territorial perimeters of law enforcement. Listening to a police scanner on any day in a big city will easily confirm this. Other incidents escape the attention of law enforcement altogether. This is not to say that media violence is not pervasive. “American television dotes on death, the violent kind,” writes a commentator reflecting a widely held view.

The point is that violence is present at every level in the community. It is a ritual preoccupation of popular media for a reason. Analysts argue that it sells, and this accounts for its popularity. But why does it sell? It sells
because it presents the central issue that engages enduring groups. Violence is both the greatest threat to their survival and essential to their existence. Violence, defined as the level of physicality necessary to control someone else’s behavior, is surely not essential for creating every group. But we are concerned with enduring groups whose members will shed blood in their defense. To join an enduring group is to commit to a system of organized violence. This lesson is difficult and repugnant. Our refusal to recognize the contribution of violence to the creation and maintenance of enduring groups is the totem taboo at work.

**The totem myth**

*Only the dead have seen the end of war.*

Plato

Social theorists are interested in borders. For Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, “cultural identity is inseparable from limits, it is always a boundary phenomenon and its order is always constructed around the figures of its territorial edge.” The image of society, says Mary Douglas, “has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas.” This energy is violence. Violence is contagious, devouring everything in its path. Only resistance, a border, restrains it. Borders without energy are impotent. Energy without borders is dangerous. Patriotism is a religion of the borders organized around a myth about the violence that begets them. This religion is as necessary to the American nation–state as its standing armies, its police and its administrative apparatus. Something like it is necessary to all groups that strive to be enduring. “The dream of a united Europe . . . is dead,” wrote Anthony Lewis about the failure of hopes for a politically United Europe as the Bosnian civil war dragged on. “It died when the European Community refused to act against Serbian aggression – when it would not lift a finger to stop mass racial murder on its own continent. The Community survives, but it is a soulless creature.”

The borders that a group will defend with blood ritually produce and reproduce the nation. The nation it produces is the shared memory of sacrifice, it is whatever is the last sacrifice that counts for group members. When the remembered boundaries of a nation are tested in new wars, new memories of sacrifice reconstitute it. The nation re-enacted by new blood sacrifice may be physically coterminous with the old one or present entirely different boundaries. The totem myth is a tale about the relationship of violence to borders. A schematic version goes like this:
Members of the totem group travel to the limits of what is familiar and known. They reach the border, an area of confusion where identities are exchanged between insiders and outsiders, and cross over. The crossing is violent and bloody – sacrificial in a word. This dramatic encounter with death marks the exact border of the community. The act of crossing establishes a clear contrast between who is inside and who is outside the community. Border crossers become outsiders dead to the community. The flag marks the point of their crossing. It is the sign of those who have crossed, of devotees transformed. The community celebrates and reveres its insiders turned outsiders, taking steps lest they come back and punish those who did not cross over. From within the boundaries, the community fears and worships these outsiders it consumes to preserve its life. Some wrestlers with death return, carrying tales of the transformed. These undead feel guilty for not crossing over. The community is joyful, whether at the death of sacrificial outsiders or the return of insiders, it is hard to say. The community welcomes these returning border-crossers back to the fertile center by removing the mark of death they carry. Thus the group reconsolidates itself.

As a narrative of group identity, totem myth is a staple of official and popular culture. It structures our understanding of war and peace and of ourselves as a group. It appears in all media. Its variations are endless. Though no single expression contains all its elements, a classic version appears in a 1943 *Life* news feature describing “Bill the Wisconsin boy,” fallen in the Battle of Buna in World War II. In this story the chaos of war becomes the cosmos of a transforming totem journey. Wisconsin, explains this version of the tale, “was where his folks belonged – and his girl.” Bill comes from the regenerative female center protected by the totem. “He never considered himself a warrior, exactly.” Bill and his buddies travel to New Guinea, a place beyond every familiar border. It takes them a while to recognize the liminality of their new existence. “Their job was to become hunters; to learn the ways of the emerald-green jungle, to become one with the giant trees and palms, the tangled undergrowth, the thick kunai grass higher than a man’s head, the bottomless marshes, the mud that oozed up from foxholes and trenches.” They have left the clear borders and distinctions of civilization and returned to a primitive state of “vicious Indian warfare.” There are, of course, no Indians in Buna, neither native American nor Asian subcontinental. The metaphor is mythic American primitive.

The totem quest for Bill and his buddies is to move outward to a border where they will become outsiders or dead men, who are identical in totem myth. Theirs is an ordeal of ambiguity, a liminal journey. “Bill and his buddies crept and crawled, listened and stalked through what seemed to
them a nightmare." The enemy was difficult to identify, "wily as a cat, quiet as a ghost, tenacious, not afraid to die," animal-like, inhuman, conversant with death, the ultimate outsider. All around Bill "were jungle sounds that he had to learn to recognize – animals maybe – or maybe a lurking Jap. And suddenly a twig would snap and Bill would fire – quicker than he could think whether it was friend or foe." Bill has entered a domain where borders and definitions are up for grabs. Animals are non-human; Japs are animals. Animal and human sacrifice are the same; friend and foe are indistinguishable. Both may be dead men. Bill begins to change, to age from his ordeal, to resemble death the outsider. Each morning, "his beard a little longer, his cheeks a little more sunken, he and his buddies would creep on, foot by foot, pushing the Japs toward the invisible sea."

In early December Bill and his buddies learn that others before them have pushed down to the sea, a border. Following these progenitors through hell, Bill approaches the banks of the symbolic river of death. Transformed by the mythic unimaginable "it," he will lie and be resurrected.

The shore down to which he fought his way was a charnel house where the stench of Jap bodies rotting in the tropical sun seemed like the breath of hell. He charged through, emerging onto the smooth white beach, chasing a bunch of Japs, hot and tired and blazing mad. And it was right there that he got it.

He felt a terrible blow on his heart that whirled him around. It knocked him flat on the beach, face down, with his helmet on.

Dying in his warrior's armor, the sign of his death-toucher's status, Bill is at this moment a fully transformed totem sacrifice.

Now comes the resurrection, the metamorphosis into a sleeping child ready to be reborn, to whom the lullaby of "Taps" will be sung at the totem center where Bill's sacrifice and others will be invested with restorative significance.

He lay there while the tide came in, creeping up with soft white waves to cover him - once - twice - maybe three times. He lay with his arms half buried in the clean Papuan sand, his legs drawn up a little, as if in sleep. It was the first rest he had had in a long time. But he would never go back to his girl in the farmlands of Wisconsin.

Sacrifice releases regenerative power. The dead warrior becomes the regenerated child identified by his fetal posture and womb-like covering of water. In fact, he has two roles. Especially if he lies unburied or unsung, he is the restless, dangerous ghost-father pulling future sacrifices, on whom the community's life depends, across the border. In the funeral ritual he will be reassimilated and transformed from a father owed for sacrifice who will need future blood tributes, into a child embodying the renewed life of the community, on whom its future also depends.

The border encloses and defines the generative center. Together they
The totem myth

make a nation that may be clearly manifest only in crisis. Croatian journalist and novelist Slavenka Drakulic spoke of her own awareness of patriotism, the ideology of membership in a sacrificial group, before and after armed attacks by Serbians.

I never asked myself if I was a patriot. I didn’t need to, because I was sure I was. I remember as a child sitting on the balcony of our apartment in Split and watching the busy street below, the roofs and distant sea. I felt that all that—the city, the landscape, even clouds—was mine, that it belonged to me and that I was an inseparable part of it. And there was the sweet taste of my language, of words as I said them aloud. . . . But, as it happened, I suddenly found myself in a war that defined patriotism for me as well as for everyone around me. And the measure was clear enough. It was readiness to sacrifice oneself in the name of patriotism: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*

The unaware patriot, the child, is initially undifferentiated from a regenerative maternal center. Challenge awakens a need for definition and borders. To establish a border that defines the center, this passage suggests, some citizens must separate and die. Death creates a border. This is why it is honorable and sweet to die for one’s country.

The semiotics of the physical flag elaborate a drama of male sacrifice and female regeneration. In its male aspects the flag on its pole sits at the outermost point of its staff. This is a border, the point of crossover from human to divine, from profane to sacred, from center to periphery. The flag soldiers carry into battle signifies their willingness to go to the border and die. This flag functions like the Christian cross that also stands at the border between life and death and also signifies sacrificial willingness, and recalls the origins of European nation-states within the sacrificial system of Christianity. The myth of the sacrificed Christ who dies for all men makes every sacrificed soldier a remodeled Christ dying to redeem his countrymen. Every soldier becomes a redemptive sacred figure to subsequent generations of celebrants.

The flag that marks the border is also rooted in the regenerative center of the cosmos. It is attached to an *axis mundi,* a flagstaff, a tree of life like the cross. The victorious flag raised on its male staff is joined to the female earth. Like the traditional quincunx, an ancient figure, the flag marks boundary and center, male and female elements of the cosmos. Just as every insider is a sacrificial outsider in the making, just as every outsider may be no different from us than insiders are, the flag is also doubly coded. It is center and border, now one, now the other. What keeps killing organized is a clear border. Borders allocate killing authority. Moments of greatest uncertainty about killing authority are marked by the greatest show of flags, when groups are in doubt about their identity. Flags massed at the border focus attention on competing claims for killing authority and
4.1 Totem flag marks border that transforms willing sacrifices. Korean War.
indicate that sacrifice to re-impose authority is imminent. When these claims are resolved, flags migrate to the center.

The totem secret

No beast [was] offered to the gods which was not too holy to be slain and eaten without a religious purpose, and without the consent and active participation of the whole clan. Robertson Smith

We depart from Durkheim’s theory of the totem at three points. First, we assert that archaicness and modernity have no bearing on whether social systems are totemic. Durkheim regards totemism as archaic, though he sees totem residues in modern life. Second, we argue that violence unifies enduring groups. For Durkheim groups are held together by sentiments of solidarity. He does not say how these sentiments are forged, but only that it is taboo to challenge the group’s agreement to be a group. We say killing agreements hold the group together. A strong group is one with a widely shared consensus about who may kill and be killed. Organizing, not eradicating violence is the task of group survival. This would have seemed odd to Durkheim, who denied any essential role to violence in traditional societies.

Durkheim reverses the usual equation of violence with the primitive, suggesting that only more advanced cults spill the blood of sacrificial victims and only occasionally. Though he asserts that sacrifice creates society, violent sacrifice is no more than a special case to which he devotes scant attention. We say the knowledge that only the totem may kill its own is what is taboo for group members. When the totem goes to war, its grievance is not that its members have been killed or are in danger, but that a power besides itself has killed or threatens to kill them. For the group to cohere, acts of totem violence against its own must be rendered unknowable. What is thus set apart is the essence of the sacred. The violent specificity of the totem secret is missing entirely from the Durkheimian scheme. It constitutes our third point of departure.

Violence surrounds us. Without boundaries to contain it, it is everywhere undifferentiated. There is no end to it, no place it cannot come. Slavenka Drakulic describes the horror of unorganized violence, “that wipes out all personal differences and feeds on hatred for the ‘other.’ That feeds on differences of all kinds. That asks for more sacrifice and more blood, that makes the war go on.” For killing to stop, some must submit to others. Whoever is able to seize and enforce sole killing authority is the totem. Organized killing power must be asymmetrical. Devotees must bow down
to it. It is set apart and has the power to set apart others for sacrifice. Organized violence is focused violence. The totem re-directs killing from the regenerative center of the group to its borders. Violence is no longer everywhere the same. The difference between where violence is and is not is a border. It is what police call “the thin blue line . . . between society and chaos” in describing themselves both as totem agents and border dwellers. Killing creates death, which has this quality: more than anything else, it demarcates insiders and outsiders. In the system of cultural distinctions that constitutes a group, life and death are ultimate distinctions visited on bodies, the raw material of groups. A dead man is not a member of the group. Violence removes members from the group by causing their death. Thus it is forbidden to them. Violence is the condition of border dwellers, both those who suffer killing authority and those who are ritually authorized to implement it. War offers the most dramatic chance for groups to exercise the asymmetrical killing power that brings violence to an end. Consider this Gulf War example of symmetrical claims to killing power:

“You know that singer, Sinead O’Connor, says they’re murderers and we’re murderers,” said [Reuben] Parmer, a 32-year-old electrician from nearby Jonesboro [Georgia], referring to the iconoclastic musician. “But I don’t think that’s so . . . I believe you’ve got to draw the line somewhere, and this is the place we should draw it.”

The totem stands ready to kill any group member who kills another. But naked retribution by the totem against its own would show that violence exists within the group. The totem therefore creates a sacrificial class to absorb the anger group members feel toward one another and sends it to the border. Sacrificial designates go willingly, becoming murderers so we can kill them more easily. The totem sends them to die but it is not their visible executioner. Violating the totem killing prerogative, the enemy executes the members of the sacrificial class. To re-establish its imperiled killing prerogative, the totem must send more group members to die. Death is pushed to the border. Life at the center is purged of murderousness. The totem kills its own to expel violence and create a state of difference, an asymmetrical killing power that projects violence outward.

The regenerative center is the true killer of its children. If this knowledge is exposed, the killing agreement will be in doubt. The totem will be unable to project violence outward, threatening chaos within. Those who have been to the border know the secret. “We knew that we were considered to be expendable,” recalled a participant in the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944. “That was the price of doing it . . . I didn’t tell my mother I wasn’t coming home, but I knew I wasn’t coming home.” Because they have
touched death, sacrificial designates cannot return to the center without special rituals of reinstatement. These insiders turned outsiders must cast off the knowledge of who sent them to die. They forswear revenge and refuse to tell what they know. If they agree, they are reincorporated. They do not disturb the joyous unity of the group that has killed its children.

Death is not the only difference that sorts groups. Body features, clothes, cuisines, kinship, and beliefs distinguish them. So do language, custom, territory, and morals. Differences that sustain groups are constructed as matters of life and death in a classificatory crisis. Detached from death, differences are negotiable. They are more or less great, more or less important, more or less clear. Death is the definitive boundary. It distinguishes who submits from who does not.

We recast René Girard’s account of how violence escalates as follows. Disputants reject a killing arrangement that has kept borders in place. If competing claims for territory, respect, or privilege begin a dispute, these will quickly be re-focused on killing power. Each side claims the right to use force against whomever stakes a claim to what it desires. The real object of struggle is the right to kill the challenger. Both sides desire it. Neither will submit. To use Jesse Jackson’s term for those who foment ethnic conflict, they are “matchmakers of hatred.”

Matchmakers exist in a state of lawlessness in which the possession of legitimate killing power is up for grabs. At such times group members may be unable to discriminate borders confidently. In the months before the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, placards featuring the Israeli leader wearing Arab headdress or an SS uniform began to appear at domestic political rallies. Draping Rabin in the garments of the historic enemies of the Jewish nation reflected uncertainty about borders. It posed the defining question of all groups: Are we Us, or are we Them? The group whose killing authority we do not question is the group to which we belong.

The willing sacrifice

What makes the flag on the mast to wave? Courage!

Cowardly Lion, Wizard of Oz

I regret that I have but one life to give for my country. Nathan Hale

A group-defining rule is that insiders under totem protection may not be killed. During a sacrificial crisis this rule is ritually inverted. This is how the group signals itself that it faces a crisis. The dynamics of sacrifice, or insider death, are as follows. Insiders consent to leave the group, which colludes in their execution. “Uncle Sam wants you!” goes the famous recruiting slogan in which Uncle Sam stands for the nation calling its sons to
Blood sacrifice and the nation
demption, ritually transforming them. The selection of the sacrificial hero, the insider who agrees to become an outsider, is a key episode in the totem myth, since a willing sacrifice keeps the totem secret. In American patriotic myth, individualism produces the sacrificial hero. The myth of individualism helps enforce the totem secret by denying the presence and interest of the group, but *individuals* receive this label only in relation to a group from which they have separated. Parables of individualism explain how the group is advantaged by its fearless nonconformists. To defy convention, as individualists do, is to step across the border. Separation is a sacrificial move. A sign of submission, it designates the holy. The lonely hero volunteers to bear sacrificial burdens for the group. The flag he carries signifies his willingness to be expelled from the group, to cross the border. Guilt is a condition of resistance to being pulled across the border, a recognition by insiders that they are called and do not wish to leave the group. Since the dead are all the same, violence makes all the living guilty. They are reluctant to cross the border. They are responsible for expelling those who do.

During the presidential contest between George Bush, a veteran of the most popular American war of the twentieth century, and Bill Clinton, a Vietnam draft dodger, campaign talk focused on whether the good sons were those who were willing to sacrifice in Vietnam or those who were not. The discussion did not address whether the fathers were good fathers to send the sons to a bad war. Only the willingness of the sons to die could be publicly examined. The taboo discussion was the fathers’ willingness to sacrifice them. Clinton’s claim that his behavior was ordinary among his contemporaries is the guilty logic of the fertile center. What death-touchers do is always extraordinary. As Eliade says of Abraham, who was commanded to sacrifice Isaac,

He does not understand why the sacrifice is demanded of him; nevertheless he performs it because it was the lord who demanded it. By this act, which is apparently absurd, Abraham initiates a new religious experience, faith. 32

In the words of a disgruntled veteran Vietnam was a “folly.” But ritual duty trumps even a bad cause.

Those who joined the service made the choice and sacrificed for our country. Draft resisters who went into jail or exile likewise made the choice and sacrificed for their convictions. But those privileged children who faked a “calling” to exempted professions, or got daddy’s doctor or lawyer to pull strings, or defrauded the draft board and ducked the choice, spurned all sacrifice and put Honor last on their list of priorities. 33

Boys become men by touching death. Those who refuse belong to the regenerative class of children. The willing sacrifice is unnatural, a social
exception. This makes him god as well as man. In a speech to Israelis within hours of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres described the normally dour Israeli leader in the language of willing sacrifice. He depicted the prime minister's final day as exceptional, even magical:

It was a happy day in his life, probably the happiest day in his life. We spent the whole evening together; never did I see him more happy, more excited, more complete with himself.\(^{34}\)

A willing sacrifice is happy in his fate. The messianic sacrifice of the insider-turned-outsider is a sacred mystery, unimaginable and unknowable because it involves leaving the group, which is death. Sergeant Edward Swanson of Houston, disappointed by the lack of opportunities for glory in the Gulf War, measured himself against the sacrifice symbolized by the flag: "I thought it would be a chance to find out my true colors. I am glad there were so few casualties, but I would have liked a little more resistance."\(^{35}\) Resistance is a border. The young men are willing. They want to know what it is to go to the border and touch death. Observing young soldiers leaving for the Gulf, an Army infantryman who had lost half a leg in Vietnam modeled those who modeled him: "You're seeing yourself in their faces, and you know the horrors of what's about to happen to them."\(^{36}\) They will be transformed by touching death.

The post-World War II Western film classic \textit{Shane} (1953) explores the fate of the willing sacrifice.\(^{37}\) A stranger rides in from nowhere. In a gun duel he dispatches a villain who has killed totem insiders, settlers who represent the fertile center and an end to the border-crossing drifter's life that Shane embodies. In a final speech he tells the young boy who idolizes him why he cannot stay. "There's no living with a killing, there's no going back," he says, a wandering spirit transformed by death-touching. Generally interpreted as a film about the end of frontier or border life, \textit{Shane} is an allegory about the end of World War II, about those who are lost and cannot return. Border life is the life of the sacrificial class. The boy notices Shane's wound, the mark of the insider turned outsider, the mark of death. "Right, wrong, it's a brand, a brand sticks with you." The dead are not right or wrong, but all the same. Shane reassures the boy that he is beyond any notion of death mattering. He is willing. The totem-father-to-be gives his ghostly charge to the young sacrifice-in-training who still lives at the regenerative center. "You go home to your mother and father and grow up strong and straight, and Joey, take care of them, both of them." Joey's body will model the flag held high, the sign of willing sacrifice.

\textit{They Were Expendable} (1945), directed by John Ford, disguises the totem
secret in its ritualized account of the American surrender of Bataan in World War II. As Bataan falls, MacArthur and his generals, totem sacrificers, are dispatched to safety. MacArthur’s men hold him in religious awe. In the closing scene enlisted men abandoned by their own army march along the surf of Bataan, a border. All hope of rescue is gone. They gaze devotedly after the plane that carries their departing officers. As the plane flies toward sunset, men’s voices sing the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, and MacArthur’s messianic pledge, “I will return,” flashes across the screen. It is not likely to be these officers who will meet God the soonest, as this Valhallian scene suggests. The true sacrificial offering is these enlisted men. The totem secret is kept. The ending is ritually proper.

What René Girard calls the peril to distinctions or classifying differences, precipitates the search for a sacrificial scapegoat that will be thrust outside in a violence-expelling, border-defining gesture. Totem violation stirs devotees to identify their substance with the totem and offer it to repair the breached taboo. Believers willingly exchange themselves for the totem. Drawing off totem peril, or death, with spells of imitative and contagious magic, they embody it. A story about how totem challenge may inspire perfect sacrifice explains how the peril to classifying differences originates and is resolved:

Craig Mills was in 12th grade at Washington High School in the northeast when the Iran hostage crisis began.

It seemed to this boy, who loved John Wayne, who was always pushing himself to excel at everything he did, that other countries were always trying to humiliate his country.

They burned the flag. They burned the president in effigy.

“We both just wanted to bomb the hell out of Iran,” said Mills’ longtime friend Saul Ravitch. “That was where it sort of crystallized, him going into the Marines.”

To desecrate the totem is to claim its killing power, to set in motion a contest of escalating menace. As each side mimics the other, the killing rules that separate them are imperiled. Sacrifice alone will show who possesses authentic killing power. If no sacrifice consents to cross the border and resolve the peril to distinctions, the totem may die. In this story the willing sacrifice is the boy who loved John Wayne, the mythic, heroic outsider. The boy who was always “pushing himself to excel at everything he did” is willing and perfect, a hero in the making. He has already practiced separating from the group in preparation for border crossing.

Ritual displays of willing sacrifice are standard in media accounts of totem deaths. Two Philadelphia firefighters killed on the job were portrayed as eagerly engaged in border missions:
John J. Redmond and Vencent Acey always wanted to be the first in, and they never wavered, fire officials said. When they strode onto the fire scene, they gave what was needed to put out the blaze, and their bravery helped keep losses down.40

Sacrifice preserves the group. Like flags that remain upright and rally soldiers, firefighters face death and do not flinch. A member of the Heavy Rescue unit, Acey was a death-touching outsider, “a Green Beret of firefighting.” His spiritual preparation was unceasing:

“He was dedicated to the training. He was always studying, reading. He was preparing himself for promotions. It was a way of life for Vence,” [Acey’s commander] said. “It wasn’t a job.”41

He added, “When something like this happens, it reminds us of our own mortality. All we can do is serve.” Only our deaths avenge those who have given everything. “You break down society into givers and takers,” explained a veteran firefighter, “and the Fire Department are all givers.”42 The Fire Marshal’s Office described the totem journey: “They love what they do and go the distance.” A willing sacrifice reflected:

“I know it sounds strange, but I look forward to each fire,” said Firefighter Bill Johnson, a 17-year-veteran. He added that the moment in training class when the instructor issued his warning was “also the moment when I knew this was the job for me,” adding, “and I never looked back.”43

Intimates of the victim are ritually bound to certify his willingness to die. Standing in for both victim and society, the family by blood or ordeal testifies that the victim bears no grudge in death. No blood vengeance will be sought on his behalf. No blame attaches to the group. When the deaths of eighteen Army Rangers in Somalia threatened to expose the totem secret, the New York Times interviewed their families. A victim’s brother was reassuring:

“Ever since childhood, he wanted to do it,” Mr. Pilla said. “He was always playing Army in the woods as a little kid. He was interested then in strategies and tactics. He liked to push himself as far as he could go.”44

The story foreshadows the journey of the willing sacrifice to the border of death, as far as he can go. Corporal Jamie Smith’s father said his son “wanted that special feeling inside him that he did something others didn’t do.”45 A retired soldier, the father knew that whole categories of human beings are systematically reserved for sacrifice. “Was it worth it?” he asked himself, inquiring whether the ritual had worked properly. His answer was totemic. “It’s not really a soldier’s position to decide whether or not it’s worth it.” Sacrificial willingness assuages the guilt of the community that sends soldiers to die by denying its killing agency. Jamie’s father felt
“sadness – absolutely,” he said. “But I am not bitter. It was my son’s decision. I could not have stopped him.” The son was willing. The father is blameless. The ritual is complete.

In a sacrificial crisis the totem compels reluctant insiders to become outsiders. Shoah survivor Elie Weisel describes the moment when his father was beaten at Auschwitz. That violent desecration created a sacrificial crisis for the son. This transcript is from a televised interview.

BILL MOYERS: And can you remember what you were thinking as you saw your father beaten?

ELIE WEISEL: It pains me to this day because of [my failure to] “honor thy father”. I remember I felt like running to that man, that couple who beat him up, and throw myself either at his feet for mercy, or beat him up. But I didn’t do it.

BM: Why?

EW: I was afraid . . . of being beaten or killed . . . I felt fear, and I felt guilt. To this day I feel guilt . . . My father all of a sudden felt he had to go to the toilet, and there was a couple and he went to the couple, and said, “Can I go to the toilet.” And all of us, hundreds and hundreds of people were there, lined up. And the couple measured him up with this look and gave him simply a slap in the face, only one, and my father fell to the ground. It lasted a second. My father got up and came back. And during that second, I staged my own trial. I accused myself, I defended myself, and I pronounced the verdict on myself.

BM: Guilty?

EW: Guilty.

BM: Of?

EW: Of not behaving as a son should have.

The father embodies the totem. Violence against him breaches the totem taboo. The command to re-establish boundary protection precipitates sacrificial crisis. It presents the morally equal alternatives of self-sacrifice and killing the outsider who desecrates the totem. Failing to obey the totem imperative, Wiesel refuses to die. He cannot kill the desecrator without sacrificing himself, which he is unwilling to do. Thus his totem fails, and he becomes an outsider in spite of himself. He is forever guilty.

Creating enemies

It was my will that the whole youth of Paris should arrive at the front covered with blood which would guarantee their fidelity. I wished to put a river of blood between them and the enemy.

Danton to the future Louis XVIII

Girard claims the hostility of every group member threatens to dissolve the group. The real source of aggrieved feelings is a brother. By focusing group
violence on the savior and the scapegoat, our translation of Girard's notions of surrogate and ritual victims, the group discharges these impulses. Though we set out to kill the scapegoat, the enemy beyond the border, only the savior's death makes the ritual work. "It's always the good people that this happens to," a firefighter lamented for a lost comrade. "It's true what they say – only the good die young." A minister eulogized a pilot killed by terrorists in Dhahran by comparing him to "another young man in his thirties who touched many lives and died young." The guilt we feel about the killing we cannot admit to reconsolidates the group. The surrogate victim, the savior, is the son we expel into death. The ritual victim, the scapegoat, makes our anger and killing acceptable and disguises its real target. Our rage at the scapegoat provides a pretext to kill the savior. With the death of enough sons, the group finds relief from internecine tensions. These will build again, for the savior son becomes in death the demanding totem father who calls for more blood and more sons. The group will need more willing sacrifices on whom to vent its anger. New victims will be expelled along with the burden of group violence they carry. If not, the group will perish, a casualty of internal disunity. "We can crane our necks and peer across the oceans for as long as we please in search of a threat to America," observes commentator Bob Herbert, "but the gravest threat, without a doubt is the epidemic of murderous violence here at home."

The manufacture of enemies takes place with or without a credible external threat. Ethnic combat in Rwanda and Yugoslavia occurred among people who had co-existed peaceably for years: "Until Yugoslavia broke apart, Croats and Muslims reportedly lived easily with Serbs here . . . They were work mates, husbands and wives, and students at the single high school." In a study of four wars and a near war, historian Donald Kagan asserts how small a role "considerations of practical utility and material gain, and even ambition for power itself, play in bringing on wars and how often some aspect of honor is decisive." Honor is totem code for ritually satisfying or group-ordering death. In the quest for a foe upon whom to lavish our hostility we may choose among all the dangers in the world. Some are more useful than others for disguising our motives. For example, the invasion of Pearl Harbor provided Americans with one of the most unifying enemies in their history since a large number of dramatic deaths unauthorized by the totem created an urgent need for ritually re-ordering disordered death. Does this mean group threats are never objective? Perceptions of the enemy are rarely objective in any condition, and more is always at stake for group identity than the simple existence of a threatening foe. Still, the more credible the threat, the more completely our motives are concealed, the more blood we can demand, the more unifying the ritual.
The totem secret demands that we must pose as unwilling killers. Our side must not shoot first. Whoever does is no sacrifice but an outlaw, a violator of totem rules. It is not we who want the blood of our sons. The enemy causes the sacrifice. Violence exists because of the Other at the border and not because of us. Even the claim that insider lives are sacrificed to repel the enemy is counterfactual. "Is this worth dying for?" the New York Times asked on the eve of the Gulf War. Dead men do not repel enemy outsiders. Only live ones do. What accounts for the patriotic misspeaking that some men die to make others free, the totem code word for group membership? The demand for insider death is the irrational terrifying heart of the sacrificial crisis, its dark secret. We offer our children to repel violence at the borders where outsiders and vengeful dead fathers are.

As dangerous and frightening as the enemy, the dead ancestors demand that the sons march to avenge their deaths. Exhorting the graduates of West Point to their border calling, General Douglas MacArthur declared, "The long grey line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and grey, would rise from their white crosses, thundering those magic words: Duty, honor, country." This ghostly spell is totem myth condensed, a mnemonic for soldier sacrifice. Duty is the ritual journey to the border. Honor is transformation in sacrificial death. Country is the border that death defines. Ancestors and enemies are outsiders. Because we kill them, both demand blood. Because of them, death comes to our group and so defines us.

Effective sacrifice requires that the scapegoat who offers the pretext for killing our own must resemble the real target of vengeance, the members of our own community. This resemblance must not be so close that we start to kill those from whom we seek to divert violence. In 1943 Life published an account of Japanese popular theater to explain the psychology of the enemy to American readers. The traits attributed to these ritual victims resemble American soldiers in every respect. The Japanese are depicted as loyal, brave, willing to fight to the death, regarding death in the service of their own totem as honorable, and possessed of a popular culture filled with heroic violence.

Their behavior is so different from our own that Americans are apt to dismiss them simply as being funny. But they are more than just funny. Their military behavior in this war has revealed a cold-blooded ruthlessness, not only toward their enemy but also toward themselves, that has shocked us. Their blind loyalty to their superiors seems to be matched only by their stubborn fanaticism in the face of death. The legend has grown that they will commit mass suicide rather than be taken prisoner.

Such unfunny conduct in battle is really part and parcel of the over-all character of the Japanese people and not just a sudden manifestation of inordinate courage.
by their soldiers. For centuries these people have been indoctrinated to regard death as an honorable estate – a final ceremony which achieves glorious results here and hereafter . . . Japanese culture is packed with this age-old concept of violent death, and nowhere is it exhibited in more gory detail than in the traditional Japanese theater. To an American who understands Japan's ideals and philosophy as revealed on its native stage, the action of Jap soldiers on Guadalcanal or Attu becomes considerably more comprehensible.\textsuperscript{55}

Beneath a rhetoric of disclaimer, the Japanese stand accused of being like Americans. This is what makes their deaths ritually useful. We have observed that violence is precipitated by attaching life and death to attributes that groups are seen to share equally. Equality claims also make it possible more easily to transfer our angry impulses from group members to a suitable scapegoat, a ritual victim.

The best guarantor of the totem secret is the enemy. It does no good for a soldier to go up to the border and not cross over. In the liminal fog of battle the outsider is an enemy brother who pulls the insider over. Because of him the group may deny the totem secret while acting according to its dictates. "We Americans will not forget that when we speak together, when we act together, when we pray together, the enemy trembles and the walls come tumbling down," a returning prisoner of war declared.\textsuperscript{56} Together we place our own in harm's way. It was said that green troops did well under General George S. Patton because they feared Patton behind them more than the Germans in front of them.\textsuperscript{57} What willing sacrifices love about their enemies and their fathers is that both make them men; their enemies by pulling them across the border, their fathers by pushing them.

Insiders and outsiders meet at the border, a liminal zone where identities are confused, and one side becomes the other in an instant. Scapegoats and saviors may discover they are all sacrificial outsiders, all dead men-to-be. "The problem is you can't tell the bad guys from the good guys," Corporal Jamie Smith wrote from Somalia just before his death in a firefight.\textsuperscript{58} An Iwo Jima veteran recalled fighting there. "It was like standing in the cauldron of hell, performing an act of total self-destruction, killing your brother."\textsuperscript{59} Soldiers know the totem secret. When they return they must be stripped of it and ritually reincorporated.

The secret is always at risk

\begin{quote}
If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.
\end{quote}

\textit{Rudyard Kipling}

When external threats recede, the sacrifice of excess males on the battlefield may become the slaughter of excess males in the streets of the city. New
strangers must be invented to create boundary-defining sacrifice. “It is when social space can no longer be defined and guarded that terror appears at the door,” Robert Ardrey writes.60 “I think they should stop worrying about Bosnia,” said a Chicago postal worker in the summer of 1994. “If they want to send the troops somewhere, they should send them to the South Side of Chicago.”61 All killing puts the totem secret at risk, but some conditions are more perilous than others. The secret is especially at risk in the absence of unanimous victimage. The cry raised against Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War, “Hey, Hey, LBJ! How many kids did you kill today?” was generally taken to refer to Vietnamese children but did not exclude the children of America. When protesters at a Gulf War Welcome Home parade carried signs reading, “Killing people doesn’t make me proud,” onlookers shouted, “Shoot them!”62 As Boris Yeltsin struggled to keep the Russian confederation together with an unpopular military action against the breakaway province of Chechnya, Moscow’s largest daily visually portrayed the totem secret:

Editors superimposed a photograph of a grinning Defense Minister Pavel S. Grachev over another of dead Russian soldiers laid out on the snow. The doctored photo makes it look as if the general’s right foot is treading on one corpse.63

During the vice-presidential campaign of 1976, candidate Bob Dole famously remarked, “I figured it up the other day. If we added up the killed and wounded in the Democrat wars in this century, it’d be about 1.6 million Americans, enough to fill the city of Detroit.”64 His opponent Walter Mondale replied, “I think Senator Dole has richly earned his reputation as a hatchet man tonight.” Instead of charging the murder of America’s children to its enemies, Dole charged it to American citizens. He did not articulate the greatest taboo, that the entire group wishes for the death of its own. But blaming one political party threatened the secret enough for Mondale to shift the category of executioner away from the collective responsibility Dole hinted at, and back to Dole the “hatchet man.”

The risk to the secret increases when the totem displays pleasure in killing. During the 1989 invasion of Panama the secret briefly threatened to show itself this way:

During a news conference following the invasion of Panama, President Bush was deeply embarrassed when pictures of coffins arriving at Dover Air Force Base were broadcast live, on a split screen, while Mr. Bush could be seen laughing with reporters.65

Finally, the secret is especially at risk when our side shoots first. In 1995 the State of Texas executed Jesse Dewayne Jacobs on a legal technicality for a murder both prosecution and defense agreed he did not commit. Such an
occurrence threatens our sense of ourselves as reluctant executioners. We must be able to differentiate our group from primitives, who are said to practice violence shamelessly. The New York Times editorialized:

A state that calls itself civilized yet elects to use the death penalty must do all it can to prevent the execution of the innocent. Otherwise its people cannot for long live with themselves.66 [italics added]

Those who die by the totem’s hand must be clearly marked off to preserve a clear boundary between insiders and outsiders. If there is no boundary members could become unrestrained killers, primitives, to one another and place the group at risk.

The most controversial election commercial in American history threatened the totem secret on all three counts. Seeking to stoke fears that 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater would wield nuclear weapons recklessly, the Democrats aired a commercial of a young girl in a blooming meadow picking daisy petals, a regenerative vision of the fertile center. She counts haphazardly and not always accurately from one to ten, that is, childishly, toward the future. The camera zooms in on her right eye as she looks up, alarmed, at the count of “nine.” An adult male voice begins counting backward with harsh precision in an easily recognized countdown to a missile firing. At zero there is an audible explosion and the image of a mushroom cloud. The buried sound of the explosion is the bed for President Johnson’s voice:

These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God’s children can live. Or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.67

The commercial addresses our greatest fear, the death of the group. The totem instructs us that hostility can only be repaired by sacrifice. This is the totem secret, thinly veiled. But exactly who needs to love each other? In the context of the nuclear threat, surely the reference is to the Soviets and Americans. But the countdown is in English! The conclusion that our side has launched death and destruction is inescapable; the victims, our own young. The Soviets are nowhere to be seen. If Barry Goldwater wants to kill our own, he must be thrust to the border and denied the presidency. The commercial outraged Republicans. President Johnson quickly ordered it withdrawn. How did it threaten the secret? It implied that President Barry Goldwater would relish killing, the victimage it proposed was not unanimous, and our side appeared to shoot first.
The totem leader

Upon the King! Let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our careful wives, our children and our sins lay on the King! Shakespeare, *Henry V*

Grandfather, you were the pillar of fire in front of the camp and now we are left in the camp alone in the dark; and we are so cold and so sad.

Noa Ben Artzi Philosof, at the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin

For Durkheim the totem is no illusion. Devotees, he felt, would not embrace with their lives empty symbols lacking transformative power. We agree that the devotee does not deceive himself. The power he feels is truthful and real. It is society. But how can devotees believe society is real unless they see it act? They must have proof of its existence, a visible body. When Jesus allowed his disciples to place their hands in his wounds, the Word of God was shown to be incarnate in the son beyond all doubt. The President is the national totem incarnate. His is the one office that can never be empty, even for a moment. Since he embodies the group, special fears accompany his death. An attack on him is an attack on us. What affects him affects us. He is flesh of our flesh, as metaphors of kinship and bodies attest. On hearing that Rabin had been assassinated, a citizen testified that his pain "was as searing as an ulcer." "When he was shot, we felt we lost a part of ourselves," said a student. "It’s like there’s a big hole in me," said an El Al airline steward. "Farewell, Daddy," read a placard held by a visitor to Rabin’s grave.

The group idea is vulnerable to exhaustion and collapse. When a leader’s expression of it no longer unifies the group, it must be detached from him and revivified. Following Rabin’s assassination, the acting prime minister reminded Israelis, "The nation also knows that the bullet that murdered you cannot and will not kill the ideas you advocated." The discarded savior becomes the scapegoat. The group unifies around his expulsion and projects the group idea on a new leader. "New Deal, New Society, New Contract, New Covenant," recalled a citizen about the succession of American presidents and group ideas. "Same dragon, different head." Though he may be killed or assassinated, in democratic countries the leader typically dies a political death, banished from the fertile center.

The test of the savior king is his ability to define the group by defending the blood border. If he fails, he loses everything. So may the group that is tied to him. During the grimmest days of World War II, Winston Churchill’s totem promise to England was, “I have nothing to offer but blood, sweat, toil and tears.” These are offerings of the body, fleshly proofs of willing sacrifice. By embodying the group idea, the leader proves it exists.
By offering his body, he proves it matters. Group members can only discover if their fantasy of group existence is real by enacting it together. When it falls short of expectations, we blame the leader for our failures, for the exhaustion of our will to live in common. Larger than life, he is publicly sacrificed to our reconstituted resolve to be a group. Society is the embodied power to dispose of group members. By deflecting antagonism and guilt onto him, we deny we sacrifice each other to keep the group alive. Since he offers himself willingly, we need not recognize we have killed him. In a 1979 essay journalist James Fallows describes that process:

Jimmy Carter tells us that he is a good man. Like Marshal Pétain after the fall of France, he has offered his person to the nation. This is not an inconsiderable gift; his performance in office shows us why it's not enough.

Such talk is prelude to sacrifice.

Like every member of the totem class, the president is a border dweller. He faces inside and outside. He is killer and killed, savior and scapegoat. Mediating between life and death, neither wholly one or the other, he dwells in liminality. He is removed from contact with ordinary persons. Harry Truman called the White House the big white jail. For William Howard Taft it was the loneliest place in the world. The president's own killing role is definitive but concealed. In the typically veiled context of a staff firing, Franklin Roosevelt once remarked that a president has to be something of a butcher. Ordering American bombers to kill Libyans, the protagonist of the romantic film comedy *An American President* (1995) insists, "You've just seen me do the least presidential thing I do," though issuing the killing command defines presidential power. "He has no enforcer," a dissatisfied Democrat explained about President Clinton following mid-term election losses. "If you cross him, absolutely nothing happens to you." A totem who cannot kill cannot define the group. Halfway through his presidential term, a voter faulted Clinton for being "wishy-washy. But if he is able to define himself again, if he makes some heads roll . . . I might vote for him again."

The president must be in a fit state to create sacrificial victims. The traditional proof is his own transformative journey to the border to look death in the face. Service in World War II provided this experience for eight presidents beginning with Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of Allied forces in World War II. As the body memory of World War II receded, Bill Clinton was the first postwar president to lack wartime service. He had not been "tempered," or magically transformed by war. Worse, he had refused the totem call. In his official role as steward of the nation's sacrifice at D-Day anniversary ceremonies, Clinton called his generational cohort "the
children of your sacrifice.” Positioning himself as a child who had been too young to sacrifice in the good war, he passed over his unwillingness to serve in the bad one. He was the uninitiated son. War had not made him a man, a death-toucher. His image as totem sacrificer remained insecure. Charged with accommodating every point of view, he seemed to have no borders. Media priests described him as without a foreign policy vision. They meant he seemed unable to kill.

What makes sacrifice ritually successful?

Substantial group attention, treasure and energy is directed to blood sacrifice in war. No other ritual so transforms the group. What makes any event good material for group-unifying sacrifice depends on the following factors.

Blood must touch every member of the group

Merely as an idea, sacrifice has no permanent value. Real stakes are measured in bodies. The value of a sacrificial episode depends on how many bodies touch blood directly and how many other bodies are linked by personal ties of blood and affection to them. Enough bodies must suffer and die so many families will feel the pain of sacrifice that constitutes the stuff of social kinship. When all bleed, everyone is kin. The two most ritually successful wars in American history were World War II and the Civil War, in which the largest number of Americans perished. In World War II virtually everyone was connected to the war through the body of a loved one, since 82 per cent of American males between 20 and 25 were drafted or enlisted. In the Civil War nearly one in every ten able-bodied male adults was killed or injured on the Union side. In the South the number was one in every four, blacks included. Consider these figures for American casualties from the Civil War forward:

Civil War (1861–65):³¹
- Union forces: 2,213,365
- Confederate forces: 1,082,119
- Total forces: 3,295,484
- Confederate lost: 258,000
- Union lost: 364,511
- Union wounded: 281,881
- Union casualties: 646,392
Confederate and Union dead: 623,026
Confederate and Union wounded: 471,427
Total casualties: 1,094,453

**World War I (1917–18):**
1915 US Population: 100,546,000
Served: 4,743,826
Wounded: 204,002
Lost: 116,708
Total casualties: 320,710

**World War II (1941–45):**
1941 US Population: 133,669,000
Served: 16,112,566
Wounded: 671,801
Lost: 407,318
Total casualties: 1,079,119
MIA/POW: 139,709

**Korean War (1950–53)**
1950 US Population: 152,271,000
Served: 5,720,000
Wounded: 103,284
Lost: 54,487
Total casualties: 157,771
MIA/POW: 10,218

**Vietnam War (1959–75)**
1965 US Population: 194,303,000
Served: 8,744,000
Wounded: 153,303
Lost: 58,151
Total casualties: 211,454
MIA/POW: 932

**Gulf War (1990–91):**
1990 US Population: 249,900,000
Served: 541,425
Lost: 148
Wounded: 467
Total casualties: 843
POW: 21
Sacrificing our own is the supreme ritual of war. If enemy deaths were the most ritually compelling, the Gulf War would have been an enduring unifier of Americans. After twenty-six days of fighting, Iraqi casualties were estimated at between 10,000 to 40,000, with perhaps 60,000 wounded. Though the deaths of only 147 Americans testified to impressive American military superiority, its weak sacrificial impact on the totem group caused the Gulf War to fade quickly as a unifying event. Wars whose unifying effects endure must be costly. Casualties in World War I constituted about 0.3 per cent of the total population. World War II casualties were 0.8 per cent of the total population. Korean and Vietnam casualties constituted about 0.001 per cent of the total population each. The number of Congressional Medals of Honor conferred for each war also follows the argument. Nearly half the roughly 3,400 Medals, the nation's highest recognition for sacrifice, were awarded for acts of Civil War valor. World War I produced 96 Medal winners; World War II, 439; Korea, 131, and Vietnam, 238. Not winning or losing, but serious bloodletting is the important factor in ritual success. This explains the power of Nazi and Confederate flags to attract committed followers long after the decisive defeat of their armies. These flags are attached to "nations" that have met other sacrificial requirements, especially significant bloodletting. For the majority of Americans these flags manifest a high degree of profane magic because they denote ritual enemies credited with instigating the greatest blood sacrifices in American history. They have a potency not even achieved by the Soviet flag during the Cold War, which exacted no significant sacrifice of American blood.

The large number of Civil War dead also accounts for the enduring historical memories of combatants, family members, and descendants of the identity-producing sacrifices of both the Confederacy and the Union. While Union victory determined once and for all that the United States was a single nation whose identity had been forged in the blood of its own, the memory of devastating Confederate losses long kept a sense of separate community alive in the South, a separateness gradually weakened by the loss of living memory of Confederate sacrifice and by twentieth-century war losses of Southerners on behalf of the whole country. Though competing histories of bloodletting continue to vie for Southern loyalty and identity, it is fair to say that blood sacrifice to the nation as a whole has become the primary sacrificial identity of Southerners.

The sacrificial victim must be willing

Having already dealt at length with willing sacrifice, we add only a few points here. Preserving the totem secret requires cooperation from both
sacrificed and sacrificers. Insiders must offer themselves willingly, or appear to. To protect the totem secret we say that soldiers “gave” their lives for their country. While unwilling sacrifices may be reconstructed in death as having been willing, the most useful sacrifices declare in advance of leaving that they face death willingly. Unpopular and divisive, without an enemy convincing to a large portion of the citizenry, the Vietnam War was a failed ritual sacrifice. With a body count comparable to the Korean War but drawn out over two long decades, victimage seemed neither massive nor unanimous. Formal declaration of war provides an important ritual opportunity for groups to communicate to themselves their willingness to sacrifice their own. The Vietnam War was never officially declared, and this was another element in its ritual failure.

The special case of group identity forged from unwilling sacrifice, as in the Jewish Shoah or the European enslavement of Africans, is worth considering. Within the United States neither Jews nor African-Americans are totem groups. They are affiliative groups whose members share a sacrificial history. Though we shall discuss affiliative groups in a later chapter, suffice it to say that unity through shared victimage alone is less powerful than belonging to a group that claims the totem power to kill its own. Modern Israel is the totemic Jewish nation, no longer the incomplete sacrifice of a totemic Other, but able to redeem the unwilling sacrifice of its members by killing its willing own in the face of totem challenge. Once a group is willing to kill its own to secure its identity (a process euphemistically called “resistance” to keep the totem secret), it can appropriate past instances of unwilling sacrifice in the search for sacrificial justifications to re-establish the killing authority of its own totem. African-Americans in the United States have debated whether to sacrifice their own in order to usurp totem power, the message of groups such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. A different approach was taken by Martin Luther King, Jr., whose non-violent civil rights movement offered sacrificial bodies on behalf of the totem group without trying to seize its power. His message was that instead of defeating the totem, African-Americans must pursue membership in the dominant society by making their sacrifices assimilable.

Victimage must be unanimous

The point is Girard’s. War must be popular. The entire group colludes in the secret. A credible enemy is the most reliable producer of unanimous victimage. “I don’t want them to be sacrificed needlessly,” a citizen told journalists inquiring about his support for American troops in Bosnia. His remark implied approval of other sacrifice. The more credible the
enemy, the more enthusiastically the group sends the surrogate victim to die amidst general lamentation for the loss of its young, the more group members believe they are not the cause. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has argued that German sacrifice of the Jews in World War II was "unanimous" in totem terms, though unwilling. Thus the war failed to produce German unity. Other responses than constructing surrogate and ritual victims are possible. A group may disavow its own killing rules and submit to those of the threatening group. Protesters are often regarded as bad group members who do exactly this. Since enduring groups are constituted by the agreement that only they are entitled to kill their own, "objective" threats are those in which outsiders seek to exercise totem killing power. When this prerogative is challenged, the group must re-establish it or defer to the killing rules of the challenger and thus join his group.

Still, why do mothers surrender their children to the murderous group will? Given the pretext of a convincing scapegoat they may be surprisingly willing. The mother of the assassin of Israel's prime minister found irresistible the demand that group members must distance themselves from the violator of the totem taboo. A good group member, she disowned her son. "He's put himself beyond the bounds of this house. Today he's not mine anymore. Gali's not mine," Geula Amir wept. The assassination of Rabin provided only short-lived unity since his victimage was not popularly willed, however much it may have expressed the wishes of some group members. Without unanimous victimage, the totem secret could not be disguised. A Jew had killed a Jew. "With all the anger that people had toward each other, I can't believe that we have come to this," worried an Israeli mother. "Some people are saying that we'll . . . be all right. But others are very worried about the future."102

At the launching of the undertaking there is genuine uncertainty about the fate of the group

In the best rituals, devotees feel group survival is at stake. The need for ritual is never in doubt. The more uncertain its outcome, however, the greater the ritual magic that will be deployed and the more transformative will be the result. Ritual uncertainty is greatest when both sides in a dispute make credible claims to enforce killing power. An American participant in the Normandy invasion recalled, "The moment of the invasion was a great and solemn moment; it was a prayerful time. Because one didn't know! And everything was at stake, everything."103 "When I think of the beaches of Normandy choked with the flower of American and British youth," Churchill told Eisenhower, "and when in my mind's eye I
see the tides running red with their blood, I have my doubts. I have my doubts.”

Wars and presidential elections are the most important national rituals. Both require uncertainty for maximum efficacy. In the best elections there is a choice, as the rhetoric goes. Ritual uncertainty drives the debate about whether television networks, sources of totem revelation for devotees, should broadcast voting results from the eastern and central United States before polls close in the west. Observers fear that reducing uncertainty about election outcomes dampens voter participation and diminishes ritual success. The issue is not that someone won’t win, but that congregants won’t perform their ritual duty and vote. A dramatic case of ritual uncertainty was the 1960 presidential election in which Mayor Richard Daley and Senator Lyndon Johnson engineered vote tallies in Illinois and Texas to manufacture the margin necessary to elect John Kennedy. The losing candidate, Richard Nixon, chose not to contest the election result. By submitting to the appearance of a genuinely uncertain election, the only ritually successful kind, he declined to create an opportunistic group crisis to disrupt the contrived group crisis of presidential election.

Outcomes must be definite. Borders must be re-consecrated. Time must begin again

The greater the ritual uncertainty, the more satisfying the resolution when it comes. Dramatic structures frame outcomes best. Elections, for example, proceed through well-marked stages. What these are and how long they last are well-known to the group. An exception is the ever-lengthening unofficial campaign before and after presidential primaries, a development that has been criticized as ritually flawed. The importance of clear-cut ritual structures was suggested by sportswriter Robert Lipsyte, lamenting “the unfinished decade, the 1960s,” that lasted thirty years. It began when boxer Muhammad Ali inconclusively beat Sonny Liston for the American heavyweight title in an emotionally charged fight.

That inconclusiveness became a signature of those times. We still don’t know the outcome of the Vietnam War (will Coke or Pepsi win?). And the War on Poverty, the Civil Rights movement, the drive for gender equity—all were highly promoted contests that we have slowly come to realize are continuing struggles without a final result.
Only another ritual can repair a failed one

Successful rituals require blood stakes, unanimous victimage, and willing sacrifice. The anticipated outcome must be thrillingly uncertain. The result, when it comes, must be clear. Most rituals satisfy these conditions only partially, if at all. Their success will be correspondingly qualified. But even incomplete and faulty rituals may bring the group to a new, if rarely enduring, sense of itself as a corporate body. When a talented New Jersey high school senior was killed in a car crash, her friends sacrificed their own work to complete the science contest entry she had nearly finished and won a posthumous prize. A school official recalled how her blood sacrifice unified the group:

Day after day the pain was so intense . . . Everybody was hugging, touching. We kept pulling together rather than separating apart. I really feel we have a connection through this that will keep us together for the rest of our lives.\(^{106}\)

But here is a description of an old photograph, a mediation of a ritual event, that gets closer to the process by which blood sacrifice unifies groups:

A large group of men and women were standing near a tree. Hanging from that tree was a bloodied corpse. Smiling men, women and children stood at the base of that tree, pointing up at the dead black man as if directing the camera’s eye toward the corpse.

These white people beamed. There were great smiles on their faces, as if they took great pride that this bloody black corpse hung from that tree. They had done it, you see. They had killed the man. And they were glad.\(^{107}\)

Failed rituals produce disunity. The greater the failure, the larger the division. Since all rituals eventually fail to elicit renewing sacrifice from devotees, what counts is the duration for which they succeed, and the intensity of the sacrificial commitment. Successful rituals engender new rituals, and only another ritual can address a failed ritual. This could be another war, a new presidential election, or some other event.

What the flag means to school children

What the flag means to its citizens may be glimpsed in a sample of school children’s essays for a Flag Day contest sponsored by the Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia in 1989. The sacrificial semiotics of the flag are fully displayed. Thirty-nine teenagers considered “What the Flag Means to Me.” Their principal themes are that the flag represents sacrifice and freedom, the totem word that signifies the human and makes it coterminous with
4.3 School children worship the totem on the eve of World War II.
one’s own group. For these budding citizens the American flag is intimately engaged with bodily gestures. Our choice to limit them is a matter of space.

What does the flag mean to me? . . . Wherever I go and see the American flag, I feel free, and proud to live in America.

Red stands for the blood that is shed during the wars. The blue is for the sky that looks down upon the people during the fighting and corruption that takes place. The white symbolizes all of the courage the people have.

The flag also stands for freedom and peace.

When you see the flag waving high in the breezy sky, hear the echoes of the soldiers’ voices, in the Star-Spangled Banner, and put your hand on your heart, think, and be proud that you are an American.

A nation’s flag is a stirring sight as it flies in the wind. The flag’s vibrant colors and striking designs stand for the country’s land, its people, its government, and its ideals. A nation’s flag can stir people to joy, to courage, and to sacrifice. Many people have died to save their countries from dishonor and disgrace.

The Flag means truth, honor, Justice, and most of all freedom. The Flag is a symbol of the good in all people. It means freedom of religion, freedom of choice, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression. The Flag is a remembrance of all the people who died for these freedoms.

It symbolizes the courage of the people who founded the nation and the people that made it what it is today. It symbolizes the pride that I have for my country, the hardships, and the joys of the country. Most of all it symbolizes our country’s freedom.

In the early days the flag symbolized the tight bond of the thirteen colonies . . . and how if they could peacefully pull together they could make the United States a better place for all.

The flag means liberty and freedom. It’s amazing how the old red, white and blue could withstand such a fierce battle as it did . . . To think of all the gruesome fighting that went on, and to see the glorious flag shining in all its beauty and splendor to remind us that anything is possible if we try.

In my eyes, red stands for the blood that was shed for the unselfish sake of our country, white stands for the clouds that each brave Soldier’s soul passed while fighting and dying for our country, blue stands for the oceans where many hard battles were fought, and where many men died trying to protect the pride and freedom of our country.

The red, white, and blue United States flag symbolizes freedom and courage. Freedom for the great liberties we have, and courage for the courage of our forefathers to fight for what they believed in.

The American Flag is important to me because to me it means freedom. When we went to war to fight for Independence we won. The flag is like a reward that will
always remind us of our Victory. I think the reason we salute the flag is to show respect for those who died fighting for our Independence.

The flag is a symbol of freedom, bravery, honor. Many men have died to keep our country a free nation and the flag is the symbol of that. The American Flag is the most ultimate symbol of democracy in the world today . . . I would proudly defend my country if it was needed. The flag has stood during wars against Great Britian [sic], Germany, Japan, etc. and was a light in our darkest hour.

It is a symbol of what our fore-fathers fought for and what they achieved, so that our generation will not have to fight . . . It is a wonderful feeling when you can stand and sing the “National Anthem” while watching it blow in the wind at a baseball game.

As I look at our national flag, I see . . . all those [who] worked so hard to make this country the land of the free and the home of the brave, these United States of America.

The flag is a symbol of liberty, but it is the people of the United States who keep liberty’s torch burning throughout eternity . . . Red was for the blood that was shed for freedom at Valley Forge. White was taken from the bandages which helped pave the way for freedom. Blue was from the sky which showed how free this country is.

Our American flag stands for freedom . . . The flag has been a standing point and support system for all men who have fought in the war. It represented their reason for fighting. It was a blessed reminder.

The thing that I love most about this country, and the flag, is that it represents FREEDOM.

When I was a small child, I was glad that my birthday fell on a holiday. Now that I’m older and I know what the holiday represents, I can relate to those who died for their country and the flag . . . I now know that our flag may have been the only thing that kept people going during early wars . . . In my opinion there wouldn’t be a United States if not for the flag. The flag is what pulled our country together in its time of need . . . I also feel gratitude towards our flag. To me, it’s the single most important part of the United States of America.

To me the flag means freedom and the courage to fight for what we believe in. Without these two things the United States would not be the great country it is today. The flag also stands for the blood that was shed by all those brave men and women who fought for our country’s freedom.

The United States flag stands for liberty. Liberty is what the whole world should have . . . Our flag stands for freedom, liberty, and the American way. The flag also stands for the ability to fight for the freedom.

As it waves in the air, even through the violence and disasters, through wars and death, and even through times when our country has failed, it proves “whose broad stripes and bright stars” will always be there.
The flag of the United States means to me a symbol of freedom, our loyalty to our country. When I see the US flag I see patriotism, veterans who put their lives on the line to save our flag. The flag reminds me of back in colonial times when the flag was being made, and the people then who fought for it.
44 Charles M. Wallington, affidavit, in Parry, 1–3. The Betsy myth was already under construction in "The Birth of the Flag," in the *Philadelphia Press* for September 11, 1887, quoted in Parry, 3.
46 Ibid., xiii.
48 Ibid., 17–18.
49 Ibid., 14.
54 Katharine W. Hill to "To Tell the Truth," CBS, February 16, 1965, Archives of the Flag Research Center. Winchester, Mass. The scholar was Whitney Smith, director of the Flag Research Center.

4 The totem myth: sacrifice and transformation


7 A similar argument has been put forward by Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard, 1993).


16 A number of theorists have suggested a central role for symbolic violence in group behavior. See Morris Nitsun, *Anti-Group* (New York: Routledge, 1996).


20 Implicit in those distinctions is a hierarchy of totem protection measured by distance from the boundary. The nearer one is to the totem, the more protection one has, for insiders are under totem protection. Women wrapped in the flag, for example, symbolize the protected life center, while the flag that wraps them signifies the perimeter that borders death.


29. Embodied in the president and Congress, the totem has the power to declare war and thus to obligate soldiers to expose themselves to death and to kill others. The police have legal authority to execute citizens when the situation demands it. In other situations, the totem must exercise due process (totem class members are also subject to due process for killings they commit), but due process is under the control of totem referees. The Official Secrets Act states explicitly that death is a possible penalty for passing totem secrets. Just as criminal suspects must receive due process but totem executions of citizens may also take place in the streets, spies may get their day in court. They also may be shot on sight in the field if the totem commander of the moment deems it necessary. Other totem at-will powers include the right to seize and hold citizens without charge for seventy-two hours, and the right to search citizens with no other warrant than the suspicion of the totem officer on the scene. Without accountability, totem officials have sponsored life-threatening experiments on its citizens when this was deemed necessary. Included in this category are “experiments” with 400 syphilitic prisoners in Tuskegee by the US Department of Health as a means of observing long-term effects, and secret drug experiments conducted by MK-Ultra from 1956 to 1972. An interesting example occurred in 1995 when a murderer scheduled for lethal injection in Oklahoma attempted suicide. “Authorities . . . had to arouse a condemned man from a self-induced drug stupor today so that they could execute him with state-approved drugs.” “It wasn’t his job to take his life,” [a state official] explained. See (n.a.), “Revived From Overdose, Inmate is Executed,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1995, 6.


31. “A cardinal principle of Russian military doctrine is that the country should never use its armed forces against its own people. How cynical this sounds as bombs explode in the houses of innocent people in Chechnya,” wrote a former Ukrainian Minister of Defense. See Kostantin Morozov, “The Grasp of Empire,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1995, A27. Compare to a related mythic
system, Christianity, in which the crucified son cries out during his ordeal, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"


38 Directed by John Ford, and starring John Wayne, Robert Montgomery, Donna Reed, MGM, 1945.


41 Ibid., A5.


45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.


67 For a history of the advertisement see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Packaging the Presidency (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 198–203.
71 Ibid.
77 Former Reagan chief of staff Kenneth Duberstein recalled that on the last day of his presidency, Reagan walked into the room for a final farewell and briefing, “and I remember him turning to [NSC adviser General] Colin [Powell] before a final word on a foreign policy/national security briefing, and Colin saying, “The world is quiet today, Mr. President,” and the President turned to
us, reached into his pocket and said, “Well, in that case, can I give back my nuclear code card? [Moderator Bryant Gumbel laughed heartily at this mention of the taboo power that defines the totem] and we both said, “No, you’re still President for two and a half more hours!” Today Show, January 20, 1992.


81 Civil War figures from Ibid. Based on Thomas L. Livermore, Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America 1861–65 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin: 1901).

82 “Lost” refers to death in the service from all causes. To a family, the loss of a member in association with a war, whether in action or off the field, is a war sacrifice.


84 All war figures, including “served,” from Clodfelter, Warfare, II, 785.


86 All war figures, including “served,” from Clodfelter, Warfare, II, 956. Not including POWs.


88 Ibid., 359.

89 All figures except “served,” from Clodfelter, Warfare, II, 1216. Not including MIA/POWs.


92 All war figures except “served,” from Clodfelter, Warfare, II, 1322–23. Not including MIA/POWs. Gulf War figures do not include figures for exposure to nerve gas, which was only acknowledged by the Pentagon in 1996.


94 Clodfelter, Warfare, II, 1078. This is not total served, but peak strength.

95 Ibid., 1085.

96 Not including MIA/POWs.


Notes to pages 90–104


5 Death-touchers and border crossers


12 Discussing deprivation and demoralization in the post-Cold war Russian military, a senior officer, General Vorovyov, observed: “I love the army very much,” he told *Izvestia* in an interview. “I gave it 38 years of my life. And I don’t want even the smallest stain on its uniform.” Steven Erlanger, “Russia’s Army Seen as Failing Chechnya Test,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1994, section 1, 10.


14 For an account of boot camp training in the old Corps, see William...