

Geoffrey Gibbs

War Issue

April 2022

Recrudescence (Pandemic Journal)



Based on Francisco Goya's "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters", an aquatint from 1797 which deeply disturbed me when I first saw it in childhood. I am still frightened by it now as the fabric of existence seems to bring nightmares to life.

Kinsman Press

geoffgibbs@uri.edu

401-783-1682

14 Helme Road

Kingston, RI 02881

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1. Total War

This issue is devoted to war, not only in foreign lands but war against our own citizens by depriving them of civil rights and particularly the vote, their most precious possession. Strange that war arrives just as winter is ending and spring is on the way. There is a terrible sadness to this because as the planet wakes up, there should be rejoicing. But that is not to be in 2022. One would have thought that a third year of a pandemic was enough for us to deal with. In most respects we can forgive Gaia for natural disasters, but there is no way to excuse human beings who turn away from what is good, in order to pursue evil aims. It is nothing new—but one might have hoped that by this time, with all our cultural and scientific advances, that we could exhibit more of what was best in us. In advance I apologize if in any way it appears that I am trivialize the current calamity which faces millions of people. I can only write about what I know or at least perceive. And if I appear to be too opinionated, it is just a rashness brought on by current events.

Like garbage filling my trash containers to overflowing, my mind has become too stimulated during these months of world turmoil. It is like having a fever of the brain. The only way I can douse the fire is to put all my thoughts down on paper—as I am doing here.

I have never visited Ukraine, but with my late wife who spoke fluent Russian I lived a year in the old Soviet Union (1977-78) and I feel a nostalgic fondness for the people and their ancient country of fabulous Kremlins (there are a number of them) with clusters of Russian Orthodox churches and monasteries filled with beautiful mosaics and icons. Just as the steppes are so expansive, Russians have stupendous personalities which can envelop you in their offer of warm friendship. They gesture a lot (like the Italians) when they talk and they really drink and smoke a

great deal as if life is short and must be lived to the fullest. When they hug you, you are sure your ribs will crack. Don't look with too much admiration at anything—they will give it to you. I don't blame them for what has happened—this sorry state of events which seems to have no rhyme or reason is the diabolical work of one man.

From my year in Russia, there is one mystery that I can solve: why Vladimir Putin is calling the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a Nazi. When I was in Moscow, Putin would have been in his mid-30s and I am quite sure that he enjoyed the propagandistic cartoons in “Krokodil” which I found revolting. Most of the cartoons were lampoons on the decadent West and particularly the Jews of Israel who were pictured as Nazis. So it is my belief that Putin's attitude toward the Jewish president of Ukraine is based mostly old antisemitism. And what does he mean by de-Nazification? I expect it requires the end of Zelenskyy's government, jail sentences, and executions. Of course, it cannot be allowed—but how to stem the tide is the unanswered question.

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There was once a time when armies faced each other and fought valiantly on battle fields (such as at Gettysburg in the Civil War). There was an accepted code of honor between hostiles. Generals revealed their genius or stupidity as they plotted out strategies such as the brilliant way in 1815 that the Duke of Wellington lured Napoleon's calvary to attack his infantry squares of riflemen head-on; a bravery by the French that was entirely wasted. Back then it was considered barbaric to fight on the streets of cities and to kill non-combatants. But somehow in the modern age war metastasized into something absolutely nightmarish—chivalry was dead. This is not to suggest that over history there had not been many times when armies attacked cities and destroyed them. One of the earliest accounts of complete destruction is in the Old Testament with the conquering by Joshua of Jericho (1400 B.C.E.). But yet this turns out to be mostly fiction. Jericho, the first walled city, had already been destroyed by the Sea Peoples (marauders from the western Mediterranean) in about 1550 B.C.E.—part of what is referred to as the great Bronze Age collapse. Surely the city was pretty much deserted when Joshua sounded his trumpet and the walls easily fell, having already been breached.

Ancient Rome, so capable of horrible cruelty, did totally destroy Carthage in 149 B.C.E. and even ruined the farmland by sowing it with salt. This genocide was so successful at eliminating a competitor, that the Greek City of Corinth that refused to embrace the Romans was totally obliterated in 146 B.C.E. After that, few cities were willing to stand up to the great war machine,

with the exception of Jerusalem, which, although God appeared to be on their side, was eradicated in 70 C.E. But eventually Rome got its comeuppance when the eternal city was sacked by the Goth Alaric in 410 C.E. By that time the empire had become so corrupt that the rich land owners were not even willing to finance Rome's armies any more. Once the burning and pillaging was over, the population of Rome which had been over a million was reduced to only a few thousand.

But we must shift our attention to W.W. II to find the most calculated great destruction of cities. The German bombing of London was of course terrible. Friends of relatives of mine woke up one night to find that they had been blown out of their bedroom and landed in a nearby tree—for some reason unhurt. Allied response to the Axis was the bombing of Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, and the eventual dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was also the March 1945 fire-bombing of Tokyo. A few months later in Kindergarten I was filling little boxes with canned goods, cigarettes, and a child's drawings to send to the American troops, still overseas.

I remember the photos in the *Herald Tribune* and *Life Magazine* of the unbelievable atomic devastation. I must say that as a little child, I felt tremendous pride in America's accomplishment. It was only two years later with the reading by my mother out-loud in 1947 of the John Hersey's account of the horror (written about so beautifully) that my conscience was aroused. There have been fewer complete obliterations of cities since. Russia destroyed Grozny, the capital of Chechnya in 2000, and carpet-bombed Aleppo and many other communities in Syria (2016). We joined in the carnage when we destroyed the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa (2019). And we must shoulder the responsibility for killing civilians with our drone strikes which were not as precise as we expected. So America should be hesitant about thinking that it can so easily take the higher ground. We share in the guilt of modern civilization having its willingness to engage in total war.

And thus we come to Russia's present attempted bombing into submission of Ukrainian cities. Except that this time the news coverage is complete and the absolute carnage is graphically displayed for us to see nightly (while the Russian people are not allowed to observe what is actually happening). But surely the truth will reach them eventually. With relief we can say that atomic weapons have not yet been deployed but there seems to be a worry that the unthinkable might happen as Putin becomes more and more frustrated. Even what are called tactical nuclear weapons are catastrophic because they not only destroy the enemy on an unthinkable scale but also spread fallout near and wide. There can be no controlled nuclear war—and therefore there are no winners.

All that will be left will be a deformed humanity where DNA has been compromised beyond recognition.

Interesting that for the Ukrainians, the entire adult male population up to age 60 is considered enlisted for the cause. In America, after the Vietnam War with its rather significant anti-war protests, the military was changed to a volunteer army. I was not at all happy with this because I don't think that war should ever be considered a job. I am all for conscription which places the risk on everyone's shoulders. But I am surely ruffling some feathers with such a remark. For most people, whatever the standard policy *is* must be the right one after all we have "In God we trust" on our dollars (adopted in 1956 under Eisenhower). I have always been an outlier—it can't be helped. I am not willing to saddle God with the guilt for human activities.

I must admit that my pacifist leanings have been greatly shaken by recent events. Certainly what is happening in Ukraine cannot be tolerated. If we had a real U.N., there would be a united voice of nations that could put an end to what is going on. But the U.N. was always a window-dressing organization—quite useful for various charitable activities, but unable to take on the really hard aspects of modern life. And even America is not willing to join the International Criminal Court of Justice, nor endorse the Treaty for Human Rights. The excuse is that the USA cannot allow our citizens to ever be tried for crimes outside of our jurisdiction. But we are perfectly happy to support the trying in courts of individuals from other lands. This is of course hypocrisy—but it is better than nothing. One is also reminded that we are not even willing to sign a treaty to outlaw landmines which are truly one of the worst weapons ever devised and continue to kill people years after conflicts have ended. So the human enticement toward evil (what we call original sin) is always lurking somewhere in our psyche. But that does not mean that we can't continue to combat our worst instincts.

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It was in March 2020 that I decided to create an issue of a pandemic journal for each month that the scourge on humanity lasted. And here we are in the beginning of the third year of the coronavirus and although strides have been made to control the disease, it is still very much with us and remains threatening. Hospitalizations appear to be about to rise again and our drug companies are enticing us to have another booster. To compound the world's misery, there is now war between Russia and Ukraine (a completely insane land grab that cannot be justified in any way). Diplomacy would have only been successful if it furthered the aims of the dictator. There

always must be hope because the alternative is too terrible to contemplate. Although at the time of this writing, the result of the battle is not known, one thing can be stated, that the world order is in jeopardy, if not in tatters. I was taught by my parents that we should believe that people are telling the truth as they perceive it—rather than to assume that they are just cynically lying to us. So the outrageous things that Putin is saying and doing must be considered evidence of his world view rather than just propaganda to justify unjustifiable actions. Once great violence is upon us there is no way to reason with the tyrant any longer. But yet in an age where atomic stockpiles still exist, what is there that can be used to put breaks on what is happening? There is only *time* itself—all that we have is playing the waiting game. Sanctions and isolation will be applied but one hesitates about this, because rather than injuring the dictator ensconced behind the great walls of the Moscow Kremlin, we are hurting the average Russian and Ukrainian people. And our actions might boomerang and come back to harm us. So this is where things *are*, poised above a precipice and we are the ones who are being shoved over the edge by fate.

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For some reason my thoughts are drawn to ancient Assyria, the cruelest empire of all time. The Assyrians, once victorious, would blind by the thousands those who had resisted them. Eventually five nations ganged up on the Assyrians in 612 B.C.E. and destroyed them. The great city of Nineveh was burned to the ground. Being of clay the cuneiform library (30,000 tablets) survived and bequeathed us “Gilgamesh.” The great winged bulls and the ruins of the city were recently (in 2015) pulverized into dust by ISIS. So the desire to conquer and rule eventually is thwarted by time itself.

My wife and I traveled frequently to Turkey (historical Armenia) and on one trip a fellow passenger was a woman of Assyrian descent. You could tell that there was something ancient and different about her features. Her eyes looked like those on famous sculptures. The last Assyrians had settled on the shores of Lake Urmia, a small salt lake in northern Iran, between the southern Caspian Sea and Lake Van. The remaining Assyrians eventually made the tactical mistake of allying themselves with the Russian Orthodox church for safety which enraged the Iranians who decided to obliterate them. Many of the remaining Assyrians migrated to Armenia, where each year they still mourn the loss of their great city Nineveh. The spectacularly beautiful reliefs from the palace decorate the halls of a number of Western museums. They are some of the greatest art ever conceived—proving that despots can have superb taste.

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I have heard the argument made that nationalism is not a good thing. We do remember the horrors of jingoism in W.W. I and II. I would counter this attitude with reference to our own country, that the preservation of identity often requires nationalism, just as it did during the American revolution when a beloved document (the Declaration of Independence) separated us from England. I think of my New York City great-great-great grandfather who melted the lead in his windows to make cannon balls for George Washington's army. I would go so far as to suggest that the preservation of identity requires nationalism. It is when nationalism combines with autocracy that what is a celebration of cultural roots may metastasize into something terrible. While Russia has continually opposed a strong federal government for Ukraine, we already can see the wicked underlying reasons for their stance. Super powers can easily squash cultural identity: in the Ukrainian cities that the Russians have already conquered, peacefully demonstrating citizens have been fired upon and others abducted to be taken to Russia for brainwashing.

2. Motivation for Recrudescence

We seem to have almost conquered the pandemic when along comes another variant of it to plague us and requires our most brilliant minds to invent new strategies to safeguard our future. And it appears that Covid-19 is attacking the animal world as well. Thousands of creatures have died, many of them (particularly minks) have been killed to hold back the spread. Most white-tailed deer have come down with it. They often greet me with a snort followed by their scampering back into the woods as I walk along Biscuit City Road. I never thought when I began this project that it would last so long—that I had made a commitment which I would find rather burdensome and quite beyond my writing talents. Most issues of my journal are newly created, so that my inspiration is based on what is contemporaneous and has sparked my imagination recently. I can't vouch for the uniformity of my thoughts. They came out spontaneously and I am not sure that now I would even agree with the opinions I expressed a few months ago or a year ago. Better to just think that the enterprise is like my music—a work of art which is only meant to entertain or console but not entirely to inform and certainly not motivated by a desire to change friend's views.

Also I have discovered that writing every month about a state of existence in which I live has an unavoidable short coming: since the future is unknown, it isn't possible to shape my thoughts

as an arc which encompasses the whole experience. This I believe is also reflected in the responses to events by individuals, governments, and societies which may seem helter-skelter but are the best that can be thought of within the compass of things. Only in retrospect can the experience be truly understood. Then may we look back and evaluate what our actions and reactions were and whether they reflected the best we could summon up to meet head on what confronted us. I may attempt to do just that eventually, although I think that it is probably a lost cause. Human events are not influenced by reasoned thinking. Instead it is heedless reaction that catapults us from one emergency to another. We leave it to news people, opinion makers, academics, and politicians to attempt to shape what is really just chaos into something meaningful, but it is all a fabrication. It would be too difficult if not impossible to make real sense of history.

Unfortunately there are all those citizens who place limited perspectives, individual notoriety, political parties, or allegiance to fringe groups over patriotism and truth. What can be thought or written about them, other than an infinite disappointment in almost everything they say or do? The more outrageous they are, the greater their following among the disenchanted. But in recent times, the desire to be trendy, to capture the interest of a jaded public which is constantly bombarded by this and that, has led these demagogues into new subversive territory. They are now enemies of democracy with goals that go against the very foundations of the republic. A majority of states have now past new laws to make it more difficult for minorities and the poor to vote. And yet these legislators will be easily reelected by citizens who want their way, no matter how unfairly it may have been achieved.

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This is not to suggest that democracy was in a healthier state when I was a boy. At that time, the 1940s and 50s, there were terrible barriers such as segregation created to keep minorities down—to take away not only their vote, but also equality under the law, in the workplace, and within society as a whole, I remember a time when Blacks couldn't even own or rent property in many Long Island towns where I grew up. During and after W.W. II, there were a number of derelict houses, old farms which lay fallow—perhaps their owners had died in battles overseas or from old age. These empty sagging wooden ruins were the shelters for our derelict population of minority men, women, and children. Just imagine what life must have been like for them—no heat, no water, no electricity, and leaking roofs. You would see these families congregating on the front lawns because the houses were inhospitable places. My father took a photo of one family and made

an oil painting from it—desperate people are always a good medium for art. It used to be called the “ashcan” school of painting. George Bellows and Robert Henri depicted these scenes—tenement apartment blocks in the city with forlorn people walking the streets, prize fights in smokey auditoriums, or places of ill-repute with voluptuous but sad-looking females. They were the most significant American painters of their time, who chose *not* to decorate as John Singer Sargent did, the walls of mansions with portraits of insensitive smug looking society people dressed to kill. Interestingly enough at the end of W.W. I Sargent changed his subject matter to a depiction of masses of military men with expressions of foreboding. These war paintings and murals by Sargent have been put aside. No one flocks to see them.

And in some of my previous writings I have described how in the 19th and early 20th centuries, that along the swampy shores and wetlands of Brooklyn, on common land, that “undesirables” would build shanties out of driftwood for their shelter, because NYC apartments or houses would never be rented to them. Eventually the old vacant houses in my town were bulldozed down and the land sprouted Levittown (also off limits to minorities). Little by little attitudes changed, but obviously much of America’s White population was still upset by any equality offered to people of color. And here we are in a new millennium and things have not changed all that much. And it appears that the Supreme Court will look the other way as our rights are whittled down further. And old foreign enemies sensing our disintegration, have horrible plans to deal with us (as present events indicate). Perhaps external dangers will be the only way to unite our country again. Could anything be more pathetic! But I must reign in anger, which is always a useless emotion that clouds rational or compassionate thinking.

3. Hot-button Issues

I have chosen to offer my readers some sweeping statements that I am ill-prepared to make. One wishes that our political scholars might explain these things to us, but they are so concerned with their particularly narrow expertise or interests, that the overall picture is neglected. The major question to be asked is the following: is our form of government actually to blame for the present upheavals and what appears to be backtracking on democratic advances of the last half century? My answer is a resounding “yes!” It is the system which is at fault. One can view it particularly when observing the Senate that is incapable of legislating, mainly because of the filibuster which makes a simple majority useless. This is quite interesting, because when I was learning about politics in H.S., I was told how important the filibuster was to safeguard rural issues—to keep

powerful states with big populations from lording it over states like Montana with large territory but small populations. Without a doubt, I am concerned that West Coast states have hogged the water of the Colorado River to the point where reservoirs are almost empty. But somehow the thought that representation might not be based on population I find quite troubling. And recent voter suppression makes the whole system even more unfair and unworkable.

If we go back to the founding fathers, we find that many of the most famous ones, like Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe were champions of rural life and wished to restrain urban influence. They associated the cities with corrupt politicians influenced by the rich and new industries stimulated by the industrial revolution. Yet right before the Civil War, it was the rural South that was the wealthiest area in America, because of cotton production depending on slave labor. But what the Confederacy didn't have was sufficient industry to support the war effort and enough lives to sacrifice for their separatist cause. Then as the years went by after the Civil War, more and more power was gained by large industrial states and in the 20th century industry was consolidated in the cities, leaving factories in rural areas empty as they still are to this day. This is particularly true in Rhode Island (where I live). It is sad to see all the mills repurposed or empty while the products they used to produce come to us from Asian totalitarian lands where workers have no rights. No wonder many of our citizens are enraged by the injustice. It is a shame that their restiveness goes hand and hand with a nostalgia for old times when White America was entirely dominant. Blaming the current state of things on minorities is foolishness, but simplistic reasoning is easier to swallow than the truth.

When I was a teenager I wrote some really horrible rock 'n roll songs. I would be ashamed to sing them to you. One of them was titled "Yang and Yin." My father, having read a biography of Confucius, was telling me about how opposites rather than creating misbalance, have a way of complimenting each other. An example would be our two-party system. When one party goes too far or gets corrupted, the other steps in for its opportunity to screw things up. The society benefits from going back and forth between them. But that system only works if both parties are patriotic and dedicated to the overall democratic system. It all falls apart when the ideals are forsaken. It is like a pendulum clock that is misbalanced. Time can't be measured properly any longer. That is what is happening to us. I would have never believed it when I was young and a naïve patriot—that my beloved country was ready to go over a cliff. I will not be willing to remain quiet when

the democratic process is subverted in 2022 or 24. I will stagger out into the street to join the protesters—something I have rarely done.

A few weeks ago a middle-aged fellow came to clean and tune-up my oil burner. My inquiring mind never allows me to leave any stone unturned—so I began questioning him about his profession. “Why is it that you don’t have with you a young apprentice as was true in past years? Why do you have to do all the work alone?” He said with a dejected voice filled with frustration, “The company has done away with on-the-job training anymore. The problem with this is that there no longer is a younger generation coming up to take over my role once I retire. All the oil burner crews are my age now. He didn’t say it but I believed he thought it: *“The bosses don’t care as long as they can find ways to charge more and provide less.”* My recent absurd heating bills are proof of this.

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I have surely written about the following incident before—it happened in 1949, at a time when my parents were researching local history by attempting to identify historical locations as indicated in original 18th-century deeds. In this case it was land abutting a pond fed by a spring on a Plainview, Long Island farm. We may have seen a warning of “no trespassing” and I vaguely remember a crooked little sign to that effect. We were walking along a path by a hedgerow of wild cherry trees and brambles to the right of a long field when the gun shot went off nearby. “We are being shot at!” said my father as calmly as he could. “Turn around and we will walk back to the road. Do not run.” There was not a follow-up shot. My parents had no idea who had shot at us, since the gunman could not be seen. I only dredge up this memory as an example of land owners using guns to protect their private property. I suppose that this was legal, although I would have rather had the farmer confront us in a more civil way and just ask us to leave. But of course he would have been exposing himself to danger from a suspicious middle-aged man with his wife and child. But I can understand that private property may legally be defended. And if we had held our ground or continued our exploration I suppose he might have actually shot us. The difference between this incident and “open carry” is that the use of the weapon was on one’s own property, not in a public space. That is the contrast I wish to bring to the reader’s attention—that the use of guns by civilians traditionally is to defend personal property, not necessarily self-defense which might be easily misinterpreted in the heat of the moment. After all, dueling in America was against the law in New York State when Aaron Burr shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in 1804. They

had to go to the New Jersey barrens to do it. And Vice President Aaron Burr's political career after he killed Hamilton was ended too.

How inviolate are we within the social fabric in which we live? Laws govern many of the activities we pursue. If we have a new septic tank or roofing on our house an inspector will have to approve it. If we have a communicable disease we may be quarantined. Limitations on our actions and privacy are created to preserve the public good. How far this goes is determined by laws as enacted by municipality, state, and country, hopefully through a democratic process. Where our own expertise is not sufficient to protect one's self, we put evaluations and recommendations for decision making in the hands of professionals such as the medical general practitioners we see every year. When does this become an invasion of free speech and what activities may actually be interpreted as being evidence of an individual exercising free speech? One would think that anything related to speech must concern the propagating of *ideas*. Physical desires and needs are not ideas and thus may be monitored and limited by the state to protect all the population and preserve equality.

In writing this reaction to events I thought about my own handicap—that I would *never* be able to shoot a pistol or rifle and hit the target. Gun enthusiasts who might draw their weapons on me for some slight transgression or infringement on their space, would be so superior in a country which prided itself on equality for all citizens. Imagine the following scenarios: at some future time global warming might have made food scarce, and when I go to a market I find that the gun owners have taken all the food for themselves. Who would be willing to risk objecting? Or let us say that there is a future natural disaster or atomic war and I find militia types at the entrance to a place of safety, and they say, "Not for you—only available for us. Cross this line and you will be shot!" What resource would I have to counter such behavior? So I might be told, that if I had a weapon I could stand my ground. But is this the kind of country I want in the future?—like a Lebanon where armed groups are shooting at each other every day and assassinations and vendettas are just taken as normal behavior. Heaven forbid!—and I am not saying it as just an exclamation.

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I thought of censoring all of this war entry as being a bit too political for my readers who I hope are of various persuasions. They are all needed because we can never be sure which path ahead is the right one. The attractive and enticing path may be deceptive and take us into a tangle of thorns. We need opposing views to preserve various options for us. So I try to remain receptive to different

opinions from my own and to always show people respect, especially if they have been willing to reveal to me how they feel about issues. This represents a bravery which a democracy needs to survive. Out of our interactions, opinions may be changed or reinforced—the competition for ideas is as healthy as the give and take of our capitalist system.

Recently in an email, a reader of my journals said that he liked that my writing was not generated by anger—that my view of the world was not based in dissatisfaction. And I had to agree with him that my goal was not to vent all the bottled-up rage and displeasure that I might feel. When you get as old as I am, the overall emotion is one of thankfulness for having been here. Whatever the situation may have been, it is so wonderful to have been alive in a century of tremendous change where the world I was born into was quite different from the one that I will soon vacate. I lived through one societal transformation after another, including the most recent computer revolution where communication between all the inhabitants of Earth became possible. It is a tool which in the long run will generate much good, even though its ramifications may appear a bit dangerous in present circumstances.

So I have gotten all the wind out of my sails. I now feel placid and calm while culture careens on the brink of the unknown and armies clash by night. But I am not going to allow it to bother me any longer. As soon as the outdoors warms up again, I will be taking my daily walks and all the turmoil of my inner thoughts will evaporate as it should. I will get back to writing modernist music and nostalgic poems. Life will return to a stateliness which is good for my health and psychological wellbeing. It is so consoling to reach an age where being an observer is enough.

I promise my readers that now that I have vented all my frustrations about the society in which I live so comfortably, that I will in future issues get back to subjects I have written about before. No one, including myself, wants to read a diatribe about how deficient everything is. That kind of thinking breeds hermits—individuals who close themselves off from life (oops, that sounds an awful lot like me). Meanwhile there are all sorts of practical things that I never seem to do adequately. I must put all excuses aside, and get on with living what life is still allotted to me. I wish for my friends and readers, that their time on earth be enjoyable and rewarding. How is it that we are even here, experiencing an age when telescopes can view the beginnings of existence? The whole thing is a miraculous adventure—around the world in 14 billion years. And what is it that we expect to find on the other side: the great singularity—smaller than the point of a pin—but with a potential to be everything—so preposterous but true?

4. Art and War

As you have probably noticed, I started writing about war and diverged from it into politics—I should be ashamed of myself for avoiding the actual crux of what I wished to discuss. And most of my friends are well aware of, and may agree or disagree with what I have so far written. This paragraph is created directly after the Ukrainian President Zelenskyy made a televised tour of various western legislatures and argued for greater support. Everywhere in the free world, his message was received with genuine approbation. But NATO feared to give him the no-fly-zone he repeatedly requested. It might open doors to W.W. III. And yet Zelenskyy suggested that we were already fighting W.W. III (freedom against autocracy) and that may be true. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's children are dying of malnutrition. Having disengaged from Afghanistan after 20 years of occupation, one might think that we had some obligation, no matter whether the Taliban had been victorious or not. What harm would it do to take down the financial barriers we have put in place? I would think that humanity was more important than foreign policy. Although my frustrations are probably going nowhere, I might as well write about something I really know quite a bit about—art and its relationship to war and peace.

Being a connoisseur of all the arts and having visited numerous museums and attended countless concerts with my wife, I think I can adequately relate how art approaches war over the centuries. I can remember walking by countless rows of impressive paintings that were of absolutely no interest to me; because they were of generals on horseback in the midst of some battle or other, brandishing their swords or pistols, while wearing quite ornate uniforms and ridiculous tricorne hats. On the other hand, in the Prado Museum I was drawn to and deeply moved by the paintings and sketches of Francisco Goya who was willing to face the horrors of war and occupation head on—and also search deeply into the souls of both the oppressed and the oppressors.

I thought that I had found an interesting avenue through which to approach what was going on, and then found that the *New Yorker* art critic, the brilliant Peter Shjeldahl had anticipated what I might say in a thoughtful essay “Facing War.” He also discusses how appropriate an examination of Goya's intaglio prints “The Disasters of War,” are during these frightening days. I particularly remember the effect Goya's pictures had on me as a child. I found them absolutely terrifying, while now my mind is somewhat jaundiced by so much exposure to lurid scenes in the media. Perhaps

we, and particularly the dictator have become too desensitized to realize what we are doing to ourselves and to the planet. Certainly something is off-kilter about us.

And in the 20th century we have Picasso's mural painting "Guernica" which is an iconic work inspired by the 1937 Spanish Civil War. I saw it first in the 1940s when it was displayed at the NYC Museum of Modern Art, and at that time I could not appreciate it at all. The symbolism was entirely lost on the young me. I would have to go to Spain to see it now. The artist would not allow it to be transferred to his homeland until democracy had been restored. But for all its sophistication, it can't grip me the way Goya's works do.

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There are countless novels written about war and I am only going to single out three: Tolstow's "War and Peace," Stephan Crane's "Red Badge of Courage" (1894) about a common soldier in the Civil War and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "August 1914" (1971) which reveals the stupidity of Russian generals at the beginning of W.W. I. There is nothing particularly heroic or glorious about war as depicted in these three marvelous books.

As to music, there are four works that immediately come to mind. The first is Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" (1962) which inserts W.W. I pacifist poems by Wilfred Owen into the Latin text. I heard the premiere on radio and was enthralled by the beauty and depth of the piece—its depiction of the futility of war. Also I refer you to Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No 7 "Leningrad" (1941) with its catastrophic battle scene (variations on a stupid tune) in the middle of the first movement; and Symphony No. 10 (1953)—his greatest symphony with what appears to be a portrait of Stalin for a scherzo with its demonic frenzy. It might as well be a depiction of Putin.

If my reader can tolerate opera, I would recommend Sergei Prokofiev's four-hour "War and Peace" (1946), particularly Prince Andrei's death scene which is excruciating in its sadness. There is lots of criticism about this masterpiece by critics who approach it as a bloated failure, while not appreciating all the moments of beauty and heartache. I first heard it in my youth, of all things on a live broadcast in English (I believe it was on CBS)—something that a major network would never attempt now. Isn't it fascinating that three of my four choices are by Russian composers—but this is understandable because America has fought most of its wars overseas and the terror is remote for us; while the great wars reached right into the heartland of Russia, and currently the plains of Ukraine. Tolstoy's novel which was also read out loud to me by my mother, should have

more appropriately been titled “Peace and War” because the beautiful benign section of the book depicting the good life of Russia’s upper-crust comes first, which makes the coming of battle all the more unnatural and inconceivably evil—chaos inflicted on the order of life.

My father, an experienced writer used to tell me that it was dangerous to over-plot a novel. Better to allow the characters to develop themselves—to have their actions shaped by situations rather than the reverse. In “War and Peace” there are three principal characters. The naïve Natasha is the innocent who finds herself in situations that are beyond her understanding—but emerges as the nucleus for the expressions of love that enfold. Prince Andrei for all of his sophistication and intelligence, sacrifices his life on the battlefield as the hero he wishes to be, not realizing that there is something amiss about his stereotyped views of life. Count Pierre Bezukhov is a sweet misfit, unable to assume the typical role expected of him, and thus manage to eventually see through the misconceptions of his age. He is the winner—the man who will continue the human race. In the novel he becomes the observer of the war that is culminated with the burning of Moscow (so similar to what is happening to cities in Ukraine including the capital Kiev). If one takes the element of intelligence out of it, there is a similarity to different strains of Covid taking over from each other. Are we actually witnessing a competition of different DNA’s? Is it just nature acting out the survival of the fittest—how horrible to make such a comparison? But when humanity seems to be slipping into madness, one must wonder about the underlying motivation. What insane magnetism has attracted us to the unthinkable?

You might criticize my having suggested to approach what is happening through art. All I can state is that our attempts to bridge divides through militarist power or clever thinking appear to be going nowhere, while perhaps reaching for the hearts of people might bring about some realization that we are better than events would suggest.

5. Apocalypse

A few months ago I was waiting for my haircut at a hair salon in Wakefield, RI. I picked up a magazine which was on a nearby counter and found that it was an evangelical publication. The subject was preparing Earth for the coming apocalypse. The hero of the age was Vladimir Putin, potentate of the East who would be a bastion for Christianity against the pagans. Since I found this subject rather unbelievable, I could not help but read through the issue as I waited for my locks to be clipped like a Samson about to lose his strength. In order to realize the events as described in “Revelations,” it was necessary for there to be four kings (at the four poles of the Earth) who would

devastate the planet with epic battles. Trump was entirely suitable to be the king of the West, and Bolsonaro was appropriate for the South. After all the destruction, the Savior would appear to usher in the Day of Judgement when everything would be put in order and the human story would be over. It was the Evangelical mission to bring this to pass—and had something to do with the embrace of Putin by conservatives—although they surely in 2022 must have to eat their words! This is a particular type of extreme belief that I find repulsive—mostly because “Revelations” is a poem about the coming end of Roman dominion. It is told in a mythical imaginative way where one needs to read behind the lines—and in doing so the beauty of the symbolic poetic imagery appears. If the writer had created it as a political manifesto he would have been another of the countless victims of Imperial will who were crucified (including Jesus).

My wife Sona Aronian specialized on an unusual writer Aleksey Remizov (1887-1957)—a novelist and essayist of the Russian Silver Age who focused particularly on “Revelations” as a source for Russian folk-legend. So over the years my wife and I had quite a few discussions about “Revelations” and the apocalypse—although neither of us believed that it would ever come to pass. For us it was the wiping of the slate clean, a purification of human thought, an accessing of the imagination where truths were disguised in improbable ways.

Having been critical of any human yearning for the end of days, I must admit to have come from a family with three generations of ministers. I love my bible and have set apocalyptic texts to music. And with the threat of atomic annihilation over our heads, it appears that apocalyptic thinking may not be so far off from reality. But what I want is a purification of the spirit which comes out of a union of thought and feeling. It need not be acted out in a physical confrontation that only results in catastrophe.

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In much of my writings I have thanked my parents over and over for having read the great classics to me, all through my childhood and even into adulthood. With my weak vision, I could never have done it on my own. I remember my mother’s recitation of the Hindu “Bhagavad Gita”, a conversation between a princely soldier and the God Krishna on the eve of battle. It is the hero’s dharma to do his duty. One of the things that I appreciated about my parents was that they never treated any of the great books as above criticism. My father would say, “Although the concept of self-sacrifice for a worthy cause may appear saint-like and certainly is associated with admired figures like St. Francis and Mahatma Gandhi, there is another way of looking at it. I am quite

suspicious about martyrdom for any cause. In free democratic societies, one has the right to question everything. And accepting one's duty as defined by the state or religion may not appeal to everyone, nor should individuals be chastised for taking paths of their own—as Gandhi and King did and paid for it with their lives. So reconciling one's self to following through on the potentate's orders or to mold one's behavior as defined by tradition may make sense in a despotic realm; but it is not what a free human, a Friedrich Nietzsche, would be willing to do. I, myself, would only act on the dictates of my own conscience, which I would presume to align with what was for the common good.” But after hearing my father say this, I would look at him and reframe from answering with, “But yet you have worked for your whole adult life in the defense industry which makes weapons of mass destruction. Isn't your conscience bothered by this.” Not wishing to hurt my father who I so admired, I would never say such a thing to him out loud. I realized that our choices are not always so easy to justify or understand. For him they had been made at a time of W.W. II followed by the Korean War. But what I ascertained and still do, is that no book actually has all the answers. The “Bhagavad Gita” thrilled me as my mother read it out-loud so beautifully. It is a great work of literature but not an object of perfection—nothing is—not even the universe itself which only exists because of endless fractals created by asymmetry.

Indecision

Troubled by the choices we must make,
Afraid that the course we take is a mistake,
Worried that our resolve will soon break,
And our basic principles forsake,

Let nothing shake us to desert this cause.
There are things in life we cannot compromise,
Even though bad options bring applause,
Or readymade solutions seem so wise.

We must hold our ground and die.
Life itself is not worth sacrificing right.
Even when the enemy has such might,
Hold tight to virtue, surrender nothing.

But yet I am the coward who gives in.
Life is more precious to me than ideas.
And so I succumb to all my fears.
Only in verse the hero appears.

6. The Solution

I have the temerity to now suggest what the policy toward Russia and Ukraine might be. Here I am only a musician who feels a bit frustrated because I don't think enough clarity has been brought to what America's stance is or should be. It has led to a rather indifferent attitude by the public toward President Biden who especially at this time needs our attention and support. Decisions he will have to make may be earth-shaking—literally.

My thoughts go back to Eisenhower, who although he could never fashion an acceptable peace treaty with North Korea, was able to at least bring hostilities to an end and managed to create a balance of power which has lasted to this day. We should remember that the same month (June, 1950) that war with North Korea began, that Chinese troops joined in the battle. So although we state that it was a war with North Korea, it was actually a war with Communist China too. And Russia which was instrumental in the creation of North Korea, was also involved behind the scenes. In most respects it was W.W. III, even though we never dared to refer to it as such. The genius of both Truman and Eisenhower was that at least on paper, they never seemed to widen the war. No American or UN troops ever went beyond the Yaloo River into China. Gen. MacArthur wanted to bomb the bridges over the Yaloo River, to use nuclear weapons to make it impossible for Chinese troops to cross into North Korea, to attack Chinese territory head on, and to invite Nationalist Chinese troops to participate in the war. It was too rash and its implications, being unknown, would have opened America to risks which should never be taken. Truman (sacrificing his political career) as American casualties became greater and greater. But once elected, Eisenhower did not expand the war, but instead put all his energies into negotiations.

And no matter what Putin does, we should follow a similar policy: never to bring the battle to mainland Russia; and never to attempt to expand our participation beyond the provisioning of weapons to Ukraine. All fighting must be exclusively in Ukraine with no NATO forces openly participating. It may mean stalemate and a war that may go on for years (as did the Korean War),

but it is the only workable policy that comes to mind. And eventually Russia will grow tired of it. Again, probably no treaty will be signed. All we can expect is that Putin's warlike posture cannot last forever and eventually Russia will retreat. It sounds horrible—and is! Life is filled with compromise and we are lucky to survive with some of our character intact.

If chemical, biological, or atomic weapons are used by Russia against Ukraine, we should *not* respond in kind. Instead we should state that until Russia pays suitable reparations to the government of Ukraine and helps with the rebuilding, that Russia will be ostracized by the free world. I would state that if an atomic weapon is used against NATO, that we should only respond with the same number of bombs used against us. And we should choose military sites rather than civilian ones. It is not necessary for us to exhibit the same craven behavior as Putin. I remember my parents counseling me that one should always take the high ground. Never stoop to the adversary's level—then you are no better than they are. These simple maxims are forgotten to our detriment.

Have you noticed that since W.W. II none of the wars for regime change we have fought against autocratic powers have ever resulted in victory for us? Even supposed triumphs such as in Iraq slipped back into the same cultural clashes as before. Recently the war in Afghanistan is particularly an example of this. While in Ukraine the government is attempting with great heroism to preserve itself, the Afghan advocates of democracy just faded away and allowed the Taliban (supported by religious zealots in Pakistan) to take over—there was no major internal resistance. We should be reminded of the United Nations goal for “self-determination” for nations. The only real way to topple despotism is from within. It requires a rising up of the people as happened in Russia in 1917 and 1991. In retrospect, even though our patience is tried, it is the only way to deal with totalitarianism. There must be a victory of ideas, not just on the battlefield. One would hope that with our modern connectiveness through the internet that concepts of individual freedom might spread and eventually be embraced by the whole world.

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A few hours after having typed the above proposed “solution,” my conscience began to bother me. Wasn't there something cold-blooded about my suggestions? I was writing that the slaughter of innocents might go on and we would just continue to be observers until Putin was worn down. This began to remind me of the treatment of Jews by the Allies in W.W. II. Why were we unwilling to welcome them to our shores with open arms? I suppose the excuse was that we were too busy

with our own problems to bother. I have read that it would have been difficult to target the train tracks to Auschwitz or to bomb the gas chambers—but might we have at least tried to do something? I have written before that my father until the end of the war didn't even believe that there were death camps. He thought it was just propaganda. Civilized people just couldn't do such things. If we decided to give Putin a few smacks on his rump, are we so sure that he would drop atomic bombs on Western cities? Is there a time when we must risk our own lives to be decent people? Certainly Zelenskyy would think so.

You have the right to scoff at anything I might suggest. What background do I have to indulge in speculations of this type? And now, even though Russia's actions seem illogical and deranged, it will be necessary to somehow make sense of it and react appropriately, so that decisions can be made which save both the Ukrainian and Russian people and guarantee them a future free from fear and tragedy. But I have great foreboding—that a horror hanging over my head since 1945 might at last descend to bring everything to an end—how preposterous that it is even a remote possibility. Sorry to end this essay with pessimism—but reality must be accepted, even in old age when so many memories continue to haunt me and it is so easy to slip into reverie and isolate one's self from a reality that can hardly be faced.



Based on “Lo mismo” (The Same), Goya’s “Disasters of War” (1810-20) which reflect on Napoleon’s conquest of Spain (so like Putin’s attack on Ukraine). It took a quarter century for these honest portrayals of humanity at its worst to be published.

Other Chapbooks by Geoffrey Gibbs

Surrection Time (March 2020), Walking Kingston Hill (April 2020)

Water, Water Everywhere (May 2020), My Constitutional (June 2020)

Summer Fixation (July 2020), A Fictionalized Family Remembrance (August 2020)

Lamentations Again and Again (September 2020), Autumn Journal (December 2020)

Beyond Modernism (January 2020), My Inner Sanctum (February 2021)

Optimism Prescribed (March 2021), Vaccinating God (April 2021)

Safari of the Imagination (May 2021), Pandemic Politics (July 2021)

Uprooted Ovid (August 2021), Fictionalized Fact and Factualized Fiction (September 2021)

Covid Clowning (October 2021), The Mirror House (November 2021),

Winter Solstice (December 2021), Land and Sea Escape (January 2022),

Ella Sarrow (February 2022), Go West, Christina (March 2022)