

Are Wars Metaformic?

by Judy Grahn

Mass warfare is not sustainable, is not noble, and is not between warriors. Civilian deaths far outnumber those of soldiers; terrified and furious soldiers go mad in war and murder civilians, and many ex-soldiers never recover from the traumas—physical, psychological, and social—of modern warfare. War is addictive and attractive because it appears to be about meaning,¹ but it is actually about sensation and loyalty, grotesquely out of balance emotions of the people who endure it, and grotesquely out of balance power urges of the men who decree it to happen. Yet, the bloodshed of war is glorified above all other bloodshed.

A poster with the slogan “War is Menstrual Envy” surfaced during the Vietnam War. Even as open as the Sixties were, it was a bit of a stretch to imagine why anyone would envy menstruation, a virtually unspeakable subject at the time. The shock value of the poster was designed to put war in its place, as neither more nor less glorious than women’s bleeding rites. Another point of the poster: that women can bear babies while men are expected to go to war and shed blood, including their own, remains a pretty clear description of the difference between rituals developed by each of the two genders—taken at their extremes.

And of course there is much crossover, men who cook, shop, become farmers or gardeners, are nurturing and would rather die than go to war; women who become surgeons, sharpshooting hunters, ax-murderers, and GI Janes. I’m not essentializing individuals here, but I am essentializing rituals. Women developed elaborate menstrual, birth, defloration and related blood rites, including gathering, gardening and agricultural rites, and all the toolmaking that goes with them. Men developed particular hunting, warrior, headhunting and warfare rites, with all the toolmaking that goes with them. Both sexes, and a broader range of genders, collaborated in developing sciences, crafts, religions, languages, and arts.

Metaformic Theory states the poster’s sentiment a bit differently: not that men developed bloodshed rites out of simple envy of menstruation per se, but rather that men developed bloodshed rites because they needed to keep up with the cultural developments women were creating. Women, by synchronizing their periods with external cycles and forces of nature, identified with and interacted with these forces as beings. Women after all, once they had sisterly and mother/daughter solidarity within their own blood rites of menstruation and childbirth, made the crucial discovery that they could regulate sexual behavior with the rites, using a blood-based signal system. Mothers in need of support were not going to waste time with an unformed unconscious unritualized male who could not spear a fast red fish in deep water, or hold his own in wrestling a big hunk of horned meat to the ground—or who could not go into an altered state of healing while making his own nose bleed in synchrony with her bleeding—or who fainted dead away holding

¹ Chris Hedges. *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: Public Affairs, 2002.

the blade for her scarification ceremony. So for the men, developing blood rites was a necessity, the primary way to belong to the ever-evolving human family.

In the process of cultural evolution, regulated bloodshed became the prime vehicle of transformation, healing, forward seeing, adulthood, acquisition of abundance, solidarity, and communication with nature; as well as providing methods for gaining love, sex, and family, acquiring status and community attention.

While a boy's sister became an adult through women's initiation rites involving the support of the entire community, and involving various ordeals that would make her a courageous adult, the brother became an adult by undergoing a similar rite in which his blood or the blood of a creature, such as a deer he hunted, was shed. These rites extended into highly ritualized and regulated battles between groups of young men showing and gaining their courage by counting coups or engaging in headhunting or other warrior rites. The warriors dressed in red, adored the goddess, the earth and other creation principles, received the blessings of the women, smeared blood on each other and in a hundred ways showed that they recalled the connection between their rites and the sacred rites of women.

But, increasingly in many parts of the world, including mainstream U.S. culture, people have entirely forgotten that menstruation ever had anything to do with warfare or any other—let alone all other—rites.

This forgetting, a national amnesia, has happened and continues to happen because, when a patriarchy arises, or when people, for various reasons, convert to a patriarchal system, menstrual celebrations and other rituals are suppressed. Here the term menstrual envy is quite appropriate. With women's blood rites out of the big picture, men's blood rites take precedence and become completely out of balance, allowing men to rise to the top of a hierarchy and identify themselves, and all deities of their gender, as the sole creators of culture, creation, and moral authority. War then becomes a different kind of rite, one increasingly directed at shedding the blood of civilians, seizing power, punishing, acting out emotion without enhancing civil life. War shatters, body and soul, many of the men who participate in it. War maintains racism. Still, war is glorified and treated as the single most important axis of a nation's history. War is credited with creating nations, progress, wealth, security, advances in surgery....everything, in different forms, that women's blood rites once produced, and that the rites of both genders kept in balance, and as an elaborate dialogue with nature.

The metaformic question I wanted to ask is whether, though as a mass culture we have forgotten the connections of menstruation to the creation of culture, in what ways are we still quite metaformic? Do we live in a metaformic cosmos even when we have buried the roots of menstrual contribution under centuries of denial and suppression?

Do wars follow a metaformic pattern?

What makes menstruation so connected to calendars and other cultural markers is its worldwide cultural connection to the moon, Robert Briffault reported in 1927 in *The Mothers*, and is evident in the generalized Native American term for menstruation, "moontime". So when I attempt to determine if something stems from menstrual roots,

and is therefore metaformic, I look for lunar connections to bloodshed. Since the bloodshedding of war is so important to national story, I wondered if the major wars fit any kind of regular repetition.

I decided to see if U.S. wars fit any pattern related to numbers associated with the lunar cycle. That is to say, if the lunar cycle is culturally understood as 30 days, or 29 or 28 or 27—all of which numbers have been associated at various times with the lunar cycle, is there a larger, “cosmic” cycle of such numbers that war fits into?

To begin, I chose the number 28, since it is so often associated ritually with lunar patterns, being the number of days (nights actually) of light, when the moon is visible. I changed 28 days into 28 years—the lunar pattern, but writ larger. Then, attempting to see if I could find a correlation to a war pattern, I began with a war that had a distinctive beginning—the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

What follows is my study, which poses the question: Are Wars Metaformic?

METAFORMIC WARS IN U.S. HISTORY

This preliminary study sets forth a more or less regular pattern of twenty eight year intervals between national major bloodletting events, i.e., wars, of the U.S., especially a majority of those prominent in the public imagination and in history.

The Theoretical Basis for the Study

I have investigated possible roots of culture stemming from looking at rites of women in indigenous cultures, specifically concentrating on menstrual rituals. The theory² I use for this research is my own—Metaformic Theory—which postulates that the initial recognition of primate ancestral females that their periodic bleeding could be and was timed with the lunar cycle, led to timed seclusions, a signal language unique among primates, calendar time and a multitude of cultural forms including extending and applying aspects of menstruation to comprehending the world of nature. Another way to describe this is that primate females recognized an entrainment between their cycles and lunar cycles and awoke to a consciousness of timed discernment, including discernment of their relationship to a being outside themselves—light—developing a uniquely human signal language from this.

Metaformic theory understands that male rituals of intentional ritualized bleeding synchronized with those of mothers, sisters and aunts. Through this humans became passionately connected to cycles of all kinds in nature, marking themselves, trees, stones and so on with their own blood and with red paint understood as the “blood” they saw in substances in nature, such as ochre, plant sap, red berries and flowers and so on. An anthropological theory has been put forward by British author Chris Knight³. Knight’s theory focuses on sexuality and development of reciprocal relations between the sexes, stemming from women gaining female solidarity through their rites, excluding sex in

² Judy Grahn. *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

³ Chris Knight. *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

their seclusions and then trading sex for meat and other gifts from males on their re-emergence.

Male bleeding is associated with menstruation in many cultures within historic memory, and many accounts are recorded of men's hunting rites being regulated by menstruation and the moon, and of warrior rites also synchronized in one way or another to women's rites, and to lunar cycles. Male centered (Abrahamic) religions have broken historic consciousness of the overt character of these interrelations by suppressing menstrual celebration in favor of the elevation of male blood rites, including circumcision, martyrdom through crucifixion and torture, martyrdom through assassination, and glorification of rites of warriors and warfare.

The initial success of lines of research of these theories led me to speculate farther afield. In a heady moment I wondered whether, if humans are as I believe, literally *constructed* of elemental menstrual cycle patterns (which I call metaforms and "menstrual logic") might we even today live in a metaformic world? Might we, even in mainstream secular Christian society after centuries of the suppression of menstrual rites, still be subject to and guided by, our relationship to the "menstruations" of great natural forces? This is not so far-fetched as it might seem given that even into current times some peoples appear to have understood cycles, such as hot dry season followed by rainy season, as "periods" of an earth deity conceived as female, and as menstrual. In agricultural Kerala, South India, the deity is and was Bhumi Devi, (literally "earth goddess") and only two generations ago major festivals attended by hundreds of thousands if not millions of agricultural people, marked the onset of Her yearly menses period; a similar theme remains present in the state of Orissa, in northeast India, and there are indications of similar beliefs regarding creation figures, seasonal changes and menstruation from South America and Australia.

With this as background, I wondered whether our hundreds of thousands, or millions of years of metaformic patterning would persist even in the absence of overt rituals celebrating and identifying menstruation as a great formulating and enduring pattern governing of human affairs. As I said in the introduction, I decided to apply a lunar number to a pattern of bloodshed. I chose the number 28 because it is associated in various folk cultures all over the globe with menstrual cycles, and also with lunar cycles, evidently because 28 days of light plus 2 days of dark moon = one 30 day period. I decided to apply the number to contemporary patterns of war involving the U.S.

Subtracting 28 from the Marking Year of 2001

As a marker I decided to take September 11, 2001, the date of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, with the relatively large number of deaths—3000—as the opening moment of a metaformic period, the equivalent, in a larger sweep of time, of a "dark moon blood cycle".

If, as both Chris Knight and I think, in human rites and myths, the "dark of the moon" is the same as female cyclical bleeding time, and if, as I have postulated, human culture is metaformic—even those cultures that do not, or do not any longer, acknowledge the cultural contributions of menstruation—then some kind of pattern related to lunar numbering might be expected to be associated with "major blood events" of U.S. history. In other words, as I have postulated, if war is a periodic human blood rite

and therefore an outgrowth of synchrony with both menstruation and lunar timings, application of a “lunar number” should allow a pattern to emerge.

My subtractions of 28 years beginning with the date 2001 initially yielded the following list of national blood “periods”:

2001: World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and U.S. engagement with “War on Terrorism”

- 28 =

1973: Vietnam War (ended in 1975)

- 28 =

1945: End of WW II

- 28 =

1917: Beginning of U.S. engagement with WW I

- 28 =

1889:

- 28 =

1861: Beginning of Civil War

- 28 =

1833:

- 28 =

1805:

- 28 =

1777: Revolutionary War (1775-1883)

Encouraged by the fact that five major wars in U.S. history are included in the pattern, I explored further. While 5 out of 8 may be an unexpected and significant initial finding, what about the 28 year pattern-fitting years of 1889, 1833, 1805? Had “blood events” of national import occurred during these years? Close to these years?

I decided to explore wars within U.S. borders, especially those that have remained important to the U.S. mythos. Slave rebellions, Indian wars, forced marches and massacres were not only blood events, they also would have triggered or been triggered by, vengeful murders and bloody punishments in the years surrounding the triggering event. I also looked at wars in particular states. Giving the designation “strong correlation” to the five already identified, and “weak correlation” to any I found on or close to the remaining three dates fitting the 28 year pattern, I decided to take four years as an acceptable spread for a “weak correlation” with the target date in the center. I was looking for bloodshed events that have remained important in the U.S. mythos, such as the Massacre (of Dakota people and others) at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and the Texas Battle of the Alamo.

I chose four years as the spread because in most of the menstrual seclusions reported by indigenous peoples, women stayed in their state of menstrual power most frequently for four days; for some, such as the Jews and many groups in India, seven is the number, and in others it was longer. But in my research four was the most frequent number given.

Using my spread, the 1889 date immediately jumps into place as very close to a blood event significant to the national mythos, as Wounded Knee occurred in 1890.

There were many slave rebellions in the South throughout the centuries from 1619 to the Civil War, and especially following the Revolutionary War, which put forward so powerfully the necessity of fighting for one's individual freedom and of freeing the colonial state from tyranny. The most well-known slave up-rising was led by Nat Turner, in 1831, when 57 whites were killed, and slave-owners reacted with punishing reprisals against slaves.

Forced removal of native peoples went on from Maine to California. The particular marches that have remained well known are those of the Cherokee, the Navajo and the Choctaw. The Choctaw removal and forced march "Trail of Tears" began in 1830 and ended in 1833.

Conflict between Mexico and the U.S. accelerated in 1833 and culminated in the Texas Battle of the Alamo in 1835-6, an event that has become a benchmark of Texas history and tourism, and of Texas nationalism. All of these events play a significant part in the national myth among certain populations, rising to mass national consciousness when documentaries or Hollywood films highlight them.

So the year 1833 is hedged all about with "blood events" within two or three years, events impacting both history and the national psyche.

My last possible "weak correlation date", 1805, marks the end of U.S. naval combat in what was called the Barbary War, of North Africa. Also, in the U.S, a slave conspiracy to revolt, "Gabriel's Conspiracy" was uncovered in 1800, which triggered five years of bloody repressions on the plantations.

So all three of the "weak correlation dates, 1805, 1833 and 1889, sit on or very near events storied as important by some U.S. populations; the 1833 date sits in the middle of three such conflicts.

To summarize this pattern:

1889: Wounded Knee massacre occurred in 1890.

1833: Nat Turner Rebellion 1831; Choctaw forced march 1830-33; Battle of the Alamo 1835-6.

1805: U.S. ended involvement of its navy in the Barbary War; U.S. soil saw reprisals against slaves stemming from Gabriel's Rebellion of 1800. This seems very weak, although I will continue to investigate for other slave rebellions, massacres, etc.

Viewing the Overall Pattern

Viewed overall my 28 year pattern for U.S. history has (counting the Iraqi War, which is ongoing as of this writing): 6 strong correlations, 2 weak correlations and 1 very weak correlation, and includes all the wars considered major by the people of the United States. I am assuming that the invasion of Iraq by U.S. troops will be at least as important as the Korean War, or, say, the Battle of San Juan Hill in 1898.

I notice that a number of U.S. wars do not fit the 28 year pattern, for example neither the Korean conflict nor the Battle of San Juan Hill, though they line up with each other on a line of 28 years, 1898 to 1954. Like the first Gulf War of 1991, which also doesn't fit the major war pattern, the Korean War is not strongly remembered by Americans; it remains unresolved, like the first Gulf War. The Korean War is called "the

forgotten war” and were it not for the television series MASH, about a wartime medical unit stationed in Korea, very few Americans would be aware this war ever happened. My list has the major wars vital to U.S. national mythos and three weak correlations vitally important to U.S. minorities, both the African and Native American peoples, and their supporters, and Texans and Tejanos. Wounded Knee was brought to national attention during the (1970’s), when Lakota people again confronted U.S. Marshalls. As the nation matures and takes responsibility for the bloodshed saturating the history of U.S. relations with both native peoples and African enslaved peoples, the “weak correlations” may take a more prominent part in national memory. The Battle of the Alamo continues to be riveting for Texans especially.

I should note that massacres and forced marches of Native peoples occurred also during the Civil War, as war “periods” evidently may bring about other violent bloodshed besides that of the main conflict. Studies of battery against women confirm that this type of bloodshed increases during wartime and the Vietnam era was marked by bloodshed from assassinations of populist political leaders, FBI attacks on Black Panthers, Black nationalist attacks on each other, police clashes with antiwar demonstrators, and such incidents as four students shot to death by soldiers on campus, at Kent State, May 4, 1970.

So far I have only one year, 1805, unaccounted for in the national mythic memory (though one online source—unidentified—referred to 1805 as “the year of African American War of Independence”). In the completed list, strong correlations are in bold type, and I have included the marking date of 2001, opening of the ongoing war on terrorism:

2001: World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and U.S. engagement with “War on Terrorism,” U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

1973: Vietnam War (ended in 1975)

1945: End of WW II

1917: Beginning of U.S. engagement with WW I

1889: Wounded Knee (1890)

1861: Beginning of Civil War

1833: Nat Turner Slave Rebellion 1831; Choctaw relocation 1830-33; Battle of Alamo 1835-1836, U.S. vs. Mexico 1830-36

1805: End of U.S. naval involvement in Barbary Wars; reprisals against an 1800 slave rebellion.

1777: Revolutionary War (1775-1783)

About the Patterns

The pattern of periodic bloodshed that I have described does not hold except with the number 28. Subtracting either the numbers 29 or 27 from 2001 do not hold the pattern for major wars even through the twentieth century.

The 28-year dates don’t fall at a particular part of the war period. Some fall on a date recognized as a clear beginning of engagement, such as 1917 or 1861; but one, 1945, is at the end of the war period, two are in the middle, within two years of the beginning or end. The Vietnam War has no clear cut “opening salvo” as U.S. engagement was

gradual, from advisors at first in 1959 to year-by-year increase in troops. The year 1973 was one of the most memorable for Americans with the fall of Saigon.

The pattern does not predict how long a national blood period will last. The Civil War and WW II were each four years long. The Revolutionary War was eight years long, and Vietnam, as I said began slowly in 1959, gradually heating up through the Johnson Administration. The year 1968 was a tumultuous year of antiwar and other conflict in the U.S. and saw an acceleration of bloodshed in Vietnam, so the war is considered to be most intense (from a U.S. standpoint) from 1968-1973, the year Americans fled Saigon. Peace was declared in 1975.

The pattern may indicate that each four year “period” of the most intense national bloodshed of the U.S. falls within 28 years of another four year “period” of intense national bloodshed, stretching back to the Revolutionary War.

This pattern needs to be applied to other countries, but lists of wars should be compiled by natives, in order to get to the major conflicts that pre-occupy the historic “mythos” of the people, in addition to the more obvious “world wars”.

About War and Metaforms

To return to metaformic theory, the pattern implies that we may indeed be held in a pattern much larger than ourselves, and that wars may have much different “motives” than nations have imagined for themselves. If this pattern can be applied to other wars and other countries, the implications, enormous and profound, are that the feeling states and energetic drives that explode into bloodshed emanate from a longtime pattern that is both outside and inside ourselves, and we are unaware of it. The justifications for committing the national will to mass violence are ways we explain what is largely inexplicable in contemporary mass culture. The emotions that lead to actions of warfare are not different than those waves of emotions periodically affecting dogs or wolves to suddenly attack each other, ripping throats open to the death and then subsiding. The difference is the animals do not attempt to justify and explain.

Peaceful societies deal with periodic waves of hostile and fearful emotions by cooling and assuaging the feelings, not by inflaming them with nationalist ambition and racist ragings of demonization and defamation. War began as an outgrowth of initiation rites of pubescent males into adulthood, rites designed to give the boys courage, stability, community responsibility. The original intentions of initiations of boys to become men, to become good husbands and good fathers has degenerated into contemporary scenes from around the world of adolescent soldiers turned loose on hapless villagers, armed with rapid fire machines that splatter internal organs and explode heads; and ten year olds strapped with bombs so soldiers have no choice but to learn to kill children.

Contemporary soldiers shatter, return not “home” but to varying and deteriorating states of psychosis, many wandering the streets addicted to denial drugs, fighting their horrible memories, beating the women who love them, crippled in a dozen ways, and misunderstood by everyone except each other. War is not a suitable initiation rite. Is it protective of nations? War is permission to commit genocide, to kill, maim, rape, torture, starve, terrorize, enslave, degrade, sexually and in other ways desecrate, rob and leave barren, polluted by uranium, chemicals and land mines. War is an unsustainable ritual. War is a ritual that evolved from peaceful blood rites initially developed by women,

celebrative of life, beauty, intelligence, craft, community, sensuality, nurturing and above all, love—love of the community, of the earth and sky, love of fecundity and growing beings, love of human connection to spirit, love of public ceremony and of daring acrobatic feats by brave young people skilled and dedicated, and love of women for family and of men for women.

We can return to those rites of peace. We can awaken to a consciousness that though we are subject to periodic waves of hostile and fearful emotions, we have alternative rituals to address these periods. We do not need to be puppets helpless to nature's waves nor to human machinations and addictions to violent behaviors.