

Chapter 4

CARTOON MENTALITY

The Story of the Good Girl and the Witch

There is a point about violence that comes from the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. Kansas is in black and white. It's the real world, where things work like they are always expected to. The heroine of the story, Dorothy, travels to the fantasy land of Oz. In this full-color world, the rules are different than they are in Kansas.

She kills two women. Once people find out that the first woman is accidentally killed by a house falling on her, they sing and dance and throw a party: "Ding-dong, the witch is dead. Which old witch? The wicked witch! Let them know, the wicked witch is dead." The reaction is not only one of delight, but a lengthy outburst of joy. When the second woman is killed by melting after having water thrown on her, her guards immediately give Dorothy a cheer. Dorothy is still the heroine of the story, because both women are witches. They are Evil. They cannot be reasoned with. They are not real people.



Back in Kansas, Miss Gulch is ~~the~~ clearly the model for the Wicked Witch of the West. She's played by the same actress. She threatens the life of the dog Toto and gets Dorothy really upset. Those of us watching the movie feel sorry for Dorothy. We see Miss Gulch as a terrible person.

Yet the worst thing that happens to Miss Gulch is that she gets told off by Auntie Em: "For 40 years, I've been longing to tell you what I thought of you. And now, well, being a Christian woman, I can't say it!" Miss Gulch's plot to destroy Toto is foiled when Toto runs away. Both fates make perfect sense for what she did, so the audience cheers.

How would the audience feel if Dorothy had killed Miss Gulch?

Even accidentally, the whole story would suddenly become sinister. No matter how much the people watching

the movie don't like Miss Gulch, there's no way killing her could be all right. Kansas is the real world. People may be mean and nasty, but they are not Evil Incarnate. Dorothy would no longer be an innocent person. There would be no parties to celebrate. There would be a criminal trial instead. This is the difference between the rules people follow in a fairy-tale world instead of the real world.

The problem is, when wars come, people often shift their thinking over as if they were now in a fairy-tale world. That makes them able to do violent things, or support other people doing violent things, that it would never occur to them to do in ordinary times.

When War Thinking Leads to Violence

It's been called "war hysteria" and "war fever." People start thinking in a different way than they normally do. Instead of the ordinary way of looking at things, they look at what's going on as if they were in a cartoon, or a fairy tale. Things get very simple, with people divided into heroes and villains. Everyone is expected to know which is which. Even the villains are supposed to know they're the villains. When people are back in peace time, they often look back at the time when they were thinking that way as a form of being insane, of being out of touch with reality. That's why it's been called war hysteria.

What are the differences between regular thinking and war fever?

- Commonly, during peace time, people think that good and evil have shades of gray. Many groups can have different ideas and opinions that are worth being respected. The variety of views can be seen as a good thing, because it helps everyone think about things in different ways. But with war hysteria, Good and Evil are the same as Us and Them.

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- With war fever, there are no by-standers and no one can be neutral. Everyone is either with Us or with Them. And opinions on the important things are either completely right or completely wrong. Any person on our side who is not entirely with Us and supporting the war effort is therefore a traitor and should be punished accordingly. No disagreeing with the war is allowed.
- During normal times, people think of the time now as being just normal. There may be more of some things and less of others compared to other times, but not that much difference. And when the present period is over, things will be pretty much as they are now. In wartime, now is a special time, different from all other times. Everything is in the balance. Whoever wins now wins forever.
- We don't ordinarily think of grand cosmic forces taking part in our arguments. We don't think the forces of nature, or God, or human evolution are involved or care about what we bicker about with each other. But in war time, history is on our side. Whatever it is that is moving human history, it will help Us. The forces of the universe are for Us.
- Ordinarily, we think that there are many problems to be solved. How important each one is can change from day to day. Life is rather complicated. In wartime, there is only one major problem to be solved. Everything else takes second place. Life is simple. There is only one major thing to focus on.
- We usually think of people as acting for pretty much the same reasons. But in war, They act because they wish to have power, whereas We act from self-defense

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and because we wish to do good. The very same actions are good and heroic when We do them, and evil and sinister when They do them. The heroes are supposed to kill the villains, so we cheer when they do, but when the villains kill the heroes, this breaks the rules and makes us angry.

- In peace time, we think that we can talk out problems with those we disagree with. In wartime, the enemy is seen as evil and lying and impossible to deal with in any way other than force.
- In peace time, we know that people in another country have a lot of different views on things. A news report might say that the government of that country decided something, but that there was a group within that other country that disagreed with the decision and objected. But in war thinking, another nation is a whole thing and all people in it are the same. The news report will just say that the nation did something. It won't mention any people as disagreeing with their own government. The whole country and every member of it is seen as the enemy.
- We would ordinarily be interested in the causes of whatever problems there are to solve. After all, it helps in solving the problems to know what caused them. If we remove the cause, that could be enough to solve the problem. If not, at least it gives us important information on how to deal with the problem well. But in war thinking, we are not concerned about causes. The cause is that the enemy is evil. No more information on the cause is necessary. Only outcomes matter.

World War I is an especially good example of how all this

worked. People in Europe had gotten so they did a lot of traveling around to other European countries. So the hatred that arose because of the war wasn't because people just didn't know other people very well. There were a lot of different groups advocating for peace, but when the war broke out, members of those groups shifted back to their own countries and supported the war effort. All the work that had gone into explaining how terrible war is went down the tubes, and quickly. The problem was that explaining things like that only works with people who are thinking in the normal way, when people are in touch with reality and can see clearly. If people shift over to this kind of cartoon or fairy-tale way of looking at the world, then they forget all about what they can see in more normal times.

The story that Mark Twain told, "The War Prayer," was showing how this kind of war hysteria can come about. People got excited and started thinking that way. Twain says there were at first some people that questioned whether the war was a good idea, but they saw quickly that it was dangerous to say so. The people that were in the way of thinking of Us and Them would not tolerate anyone disagreeing. So in this story, people who disagreed just shut up. In real life, sometimes they find it easier to join in the war hysteria, and sometimes they just keep quiet. Either way, everyone else starts believing that everyone agrees with the war.

Not all wars are fought with people thinking this way. World War I and World War II were, but when the United States fought wars in Korea and Vietnam, the people in the U. S. as a whole never got into that mindset. There were no popular war songs, like there had been before. In fact, when the television sets started showing people in the U.S. what was happening in Vietnam, they were still thinking the way people normally do in the real world. So they got very upset.

There have been times when government officials have even used this way of thinking to get themselves out of trouble. Doing this was made fun of in a 1997 Hollywood

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movie called "Wag the Dog," and the strategy had been called wag-the-dog ever since. In the movie, the president was running for re-election and there was a scandal that was getting ready to break out. A group of his people completely made up a war in order to get people so excited about the war that they'd forget about the scandal. The idea was that instead of a normal dog wagging its tail, things were turned around so that the tail wagged the dog. Instead of getting people excited because there was a war that those in government thought was needed, those in government needed the war in order to get people excited.

In the real world, they don't need to make up wars. That was just done in the movie to make a good story. But there are always times when real problems with other countries can be exaggerated.

- reckless wastefulness
"When the profligacy of a [government official], or the unpopularity of his measures, has excited public discontent, he can perhaps find no other way of escaping the resentment of the people, than by thus making them forget it. He therefore discovers a pretext for denouncing war on some convenient country, in order to divert the indignation of the public from himself to their new-made enemies."

—Jonathan Dymond, 1824

How Do We Stop the Violence?

Even in cartoons and similar stories, villains can change. Ebenezer Scrooge in A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens is a classic example. The spoiled-brat emperor in Disney's cartoon movie The Emperor's New Groove finally figured out what was wrong and changed his ways. Another Disney cartoon movie, Pocahontas, showed a scene where people saw the enemy as evil, not even human, and only possible to

deal with by force. This view was held by both sides at the same time. Both sides later realized differently because one person from each side had befriended one from the other, and they took courageous action. So even cartoons can escape a hero-villain white-hat/black-hat mentality.

It may be that understanding how all this works can make people realize when it's happening. That awareness may help. Talking about whether a "wag-the-dog" strategy seems to be going on has become more common since the movie. It does seem to make people think at least a little about whether something is being done just to manipulate them. But sometimes, the leaders aren't doing it to manipulate the public, because the leaders themselves are in a war fever and just expect that other people will be too. Knowing in advance how dangerous war fever can be may help both leaders and the public.

It may be that we can make a point of trying to figure out what kind of things can be done well in advance to keep it from developing in the first place. It's not the kind of thing we could run lab experiments on, so we can't figure out how to deal with it that way. It's whole societies that do this, not individuals who come to a lab.

It's also important to understand how this works in order to figure out why other people are acting the way they are. Lots of times, people on one side think that if they just make a big enough threat, the other side will be scared and back down. They're surprised when the opposite happens. The other people get mad, and they support their own leader that they didn't like before. They stop arguing among themselves and unite. They think the people making the threats are the villains of the story. We can see this over and over in history. We can also sometimes see it happening in the news.