

# War Without End: Dix Revisited

2007. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72"

*"Corpses are impersonal."*

Otto Dix, from his daybook on the Somme, 1916<sup>1</sup>

*"What of their oath to the colors, to me as Warlord?" asked Wilhelm.*

*"Oath to the colors? Warlord?"*

*replied General Groener with disgust. "These are just words today."*

November 9, 1918, German Quartermaster-General, Wilhelm Groener and General Hindenburg meet with Kaiser Wilhelm to convince the Kaiser that the war was over. The next day, Wilhelm boarded a train to cross the frontier to neutral Holland.<sup>2</sup>

The war was over, though not for the thousands who were permanently dismembered and disfigured in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century's First World War. Just as it was then, today's brutality of an insane war, orchestrated by cowards who had never served in combat, has permanently dismembered and disfigured thousands of soldiers and civilians all in the name of patriotism, loyalties to oaths, and lies.

In 1920, German painter and World War I veteran Otto Dix painted the *Skat Players* - 3 war cripples playing cards. The Skat players are "a mass of spare parts thrown together, left-over pieces of bodies."<sup>3</sup> The painting was an example of the grotesque - "[subverting] the expectations of both machine and man, merge horror with humor, and challenge the boundaries of propriety in order to attack the nationalism that created the result."<sup>4</sup> The players "resemble derisive dedications to man the beast, whose malicious social games provide further confirmation of the theory of *homo homini lupus*." (Man is a wolf to man.)<sup>5</sup> The war is portrayed "as buffoonery, as a sarcastic farce."<sup>6</sup>

The *Skat Players* was part of Dix's Dada period, after having served in the trench warfare of World War I, which itself was a stalemate of blunder and killing. His attitude during those post-war "years was one of self-ironic, somewhat disgusted and highly bored nihilism."<sup>7</sup>

Dix's painting features three disfigured former soldiers sitting at a table playing cards. Their wounds represent the brutality of the trench warfare of World War I – disfigurement from artillery, bayonet wounds, and rifle butt wounds to the head and face.

In the Iraq War soldiers experience a guerilla war of hit and run, snipers, and more importantly the devastating explosions of roadside bombs and vehicle bombs, which when they don't kill, they leave soldiers permanently scarred, disfigured, and disabled for life.

As one doctor, who returned from a deployment in Germany, said, "an extremely high number of wounded soldiers are coming home with their arms or legs amputated." Furthermore, he noted that he had "amputated the genitals of one or two men every day." He described it this way: "I walk into the operating room and the general surgeons are doing their work and there is the body of this Navy SEAL, which is a physical specimen to behold, and his abdomen is open, they're exploring both intestines. He's missing both legs below the knee, one arm

is blown off, he's got incisions on his thighs to relieve the pressure on the parts of the legs that are hopefully gonna survive and there's genital injuries, and you just want to cry."<sup>8</sup>

These are the living, breathing realities of aggression.

Otto Dix, in a 1964 interview with a German newspaper, recalled his motivations for another of his paintings, *Der Krieg* (the War), which he began ten years after the war, around 1928. He said: "At that time, by the way, many books...once more blatantly propagated a form of heroism and a concept of the hero that had long been taken to the point of absurdity in the trenches of the First World War. The people were already beginning to forget what unspeakable suffering the war had brought with it."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps much in the same way as a younger generation today was sold on books of a "greatest generation," somehow bypassing entirely the more instructive, more recent military blunder known as Vietnam. For today's generation, who were fed images of flower-tossing Parisians and victory marches through the streets of a "good war," have begun to understand that more applicable images would have been places known as Saigon, Bien Hoa, Hue, Danang, Quang Tri, and the Mekong Delta, where the people, culture, customs, and language were foreign, unfamiliar. A place where the enemy was invisible, walking among the population. The result of which was, the population became the enemy.

American historian Sidney Fay, who wrote, *The Origins of the World War*, a two volume study of the First World War published in 1928, "concluded that the causes of the war were the secret alliance system, militarism, nationalism, economic imperialism, and the newspaper press, which aggravated every little question until it became a crisis."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, as professor James L. Stokesbury noted in his epilogue to *A Short History of World War I*, all of Sidney Fay's causes are active today: "we have our alliance systems, our military and industrial establishment, our rabid nationalism, our revived colonialism in one guise or another, and we certainly have our yellow press, though it does not exactly see itself in that light."<sup>11</sup>

Like the three "autocratic monarchies that went to war in 1914" expecting to preserve or enhance their positions, only to destroy it all,<sup>12</sup> America and its allies, especially Britain and Israel, are on the same path to self-destruction. There will be no happy, no good ending to this war. That fantasy disappeared with the first wave of "shock and awe."

However, it is not only George W. Bush who is responsible, though he is the president who initiated the aggression upon Iraq, and continues to lead the war, but it is also the members of Congress, the leaders of the think tanks, especially the *American Enterprise Institute*, *The Heritage Foundation*, *The Brookings Institute*, *the Center for Strategic and International Studies*, as well as the American press, specifically, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NBC News*, *CBS News*, *ABC News*, *CNN*, and *Fox News*, who embedded themselves with the American military machine to wave the flag of patriotism and cheer on the nationalistic brutality of aggression. They too are responsible and should be held accountable for the disinformation they created, sanctioned, and

spread. The truth is not one of these institutions or participants could have created this war without the willing and accepting role of each other.

Therein will be the final accounting for those whose war is without end, that as professor Stokesbury wrote: "In the years after the war, an incredibly fertile war literature grew up, the product of some of Europe's best minds reacting to the horror through which they had lived. Implicit in their revelations of mud, stink, and brutal death was the rejection of the society and the leaders that had allowed, even encouraged, such things to happen."<sup>13</sup>

And finally, the big question for American society, especially the American government and corporate America is: will these men and women who were dismembered and disfigured be financially compensated for the sacrifice? And even more so, for so many who are so young, will American business provide these people with jobs and healthcare benefits, or will corporate America, like they have in the past after other wars, look the other way, and instead create excuses, explanations for why they too abandon the dismembered and disfigured, those whose war is without end.

### Notes

1. Linda F. McGreevy, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War* (Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2001) p. 67
2. James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War I* (William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1981) p. 306
3. Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix* (Taschen, 2002) p. 53
4. *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, edited by Frances S. Connelly, (University of Missouri, Kansas City, Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 4
5. Karcher, *Otto Dix*, p.53
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. *Iraq Vets Left in Physical and Mental Agony*, by Aaron Glantz, Inter Press Service News Agency, January 3, 2007
9. McGreevy, *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War*, p. 356
10. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War I*, p. 318

11. Ibid., 319

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 321