

War Begets War

Robert Jay Lifton

Interview by Neta C. Crawford and Matthew Evangelista

September 4, 2024, North Truro, Massachusetts

Editors' note: We interviewed Robert Jay Lifton at his home in North Truro, Massachusetts, on September 4, 2024. He passed away exactly one year later, shortly before publication of this volume, on September 4, 2025. Dr. Lifton had approved publication of this interview, and we are grateful to his daughter, Natasha Lifton, for giving us permission to publish it posthumously. We hope this interview will extend Dr. Lifton's perspective and wisdom forward in time and to new audiences.

Neta C. Crawford. First of all, thank you for doing this. It's really appreciated.

Robert Jay Lifton. I'm happy to, and I feel that my work connects with your concerns, so that's why we're all here.

Crawford. This conversation began with a concern about the ways that the post-9/11 wars had affected American democracy. We also want to hear what you say about defeat in a "lost war," the role of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which you helped conceptualize, and the diagnosis of it among Vietnam War veterans. Can you relate that to the concept of the lost war?

Lifton. Well, first of all, I would say the principle here is that war begets war. War creates more war, and it always has to do with something that happened or didn't happen in the previous war. Just as we speak of "nuclearism" as an embrace of nuclear weapons to solve human problems, so can we speak of war or "warism." Warism requires a high degree of militarism and an ever-present potential use of force. This is especially true of a superpower, which maintains a dubious claim to omnipotence.

I always choose Vietnam as an example because in factual terms we clearly lost the Vietnam War; that loss was intolerable to a superpower. We knew we had the hardware – the technology – to win any war, whether with powerful nonnuclear weapons (so-called conventional weapons) or even nuclear weapons. And the question always arose: Why didn't we?

When you lose that sense of omnipotence, there's an impulse to reverse the loss of the war. Either by creating a new war that can be won (the First Iraq War initiated to reverse the loss in Vietnam, though it had nothing to do with it), or by what we can call the "Rambo phenomenon." In the series of *Rambo* films, a super

masculine figure can by his own power bring about a reversal of the outcome of the Vietnam War.

Involved here very importantly is a preoccupation in my work with the idea that we humans are meaning-hungry creatures. For survivors, that's true ten times over, especially for survivors of extreme violence or trauma. Toward the end of the Vietnam conflict, I wrote an article called "The Post-War War," which described the struggle between adversarial groups to impose their meaning on that loss. One meaning was that it was an ill-advised war, a misguided enterprise that we should never have initiated. Another was that the war was necessary, fought for a noble cause, and that we should have won it by applying our superior technology of destruction.

The concept of posttraumatic stress disorder was brought about by a committee consulting with those responsible for the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). A close friend and colleague, Chaim Shatan, did most of the coordinating, but I was active in it too. I brought up not only my experience with Vietnam veterans during the early 1970s, but also my experience with Hiroshima survivors in the 1960s.

Of course, as some have pointed out, PTSD can be so medicalized as to lose its political significance, but that can happen with any concept.

There are certain advantages to the use of the concept of PTSD. One is it gives a recognition to adult trauma. So much of professional psychiatry has focused on either the organic – the German *Anlage* – source of various conditions, or on childhood influences, as in the work of Freud or Freudians. There's been a kind of lacuna for adult trauma. Erik Erikson helped overcome that in his work, especially in relation to the life cycle.

Another advantage of the concept of PTSD is that it can contain a body of symptoms that are valuable for us to recognize. These include an obsession with the trauma while being unable to talk about it, or to talk about anything else. What results is considerable anxiety, alternating with what I call *psychic numbing*, the inability or disinclination to feel. There can be "flashbacks," which take the veteran back into the Vietnam situation, and he or she can behave accordingly in ways that include rage and violence.

For treatment purposes, it is most effective to provide psychological help close to the combat area and as quickly as possible. But when you do that, you are seeking to sustain participation in whatever war is being fought.

In terms of meaning, we may say that antiwar veterans found it in the meaninglessness of their war. And in coming to that powerful factual truth, they were released to tell others about it and emerge as leaders of various peace movements, especially in this country. And their leadership continues to expand.

They had, of course, special credibility because they were there doing the killing and dying. They could recognize the extraordinary number of Vietnamese ci-

vilians killed, and the confusion Americans inevitably had in distinguishing civilians from combatants in that kind of counterinsurgency war. These were the conditions that John Paul Sartre called likely to bring about genocide; certainly they can bring about atrocities.

It's also important to understand that the resistance by the antiwar veterans came from below. They were mostly ordinary Americans who hadn't questioned American war-making, because it was their country and they considered themselves patriotic. The fact that they could undergo this dramatic change in opposing their war while it was going on had intense significance for the society as a whole in turning against the war.

Crawford. It seems to me that the way you think about this throughout all of your work is to see the individual as both an individual and as a metaphor for the society. Are you saying that the culture experiencing this trauma of the lost war also has a need to overcome it collectively?

Lifton. Yes, there is the question of the individual and the collective, and that question runs all through my work. I have mostly interviewed individuals, and looked for what I call *shared themes*, which can then identify the collective. Shared patterns of individuals – including trauma and pain – become sources of understanding of the collective. Collective behavior becomes crucial to bringing about any social change or to characterize what is happening in a society.

The *Rambo* phenomenon wouldn't have taken shape if there weren't a long-standing collective support of the war, which amounted to a collective falsification of the war. That pattern was interrupted by the antiwar activities of veterans I interviewed.

The other point you raised has to do with the idealization of the lost war. Here one does well to go back to the American Civil War, when leaders in Southern culture, notably Robert E. Lee, who became the commanding general of the Confederacy, can be ennobled as having admirably held to their cultural loyalty and to the "compelling charm" of their society. This idealization covers over the fact that that Southern culture was inseparable from slavery.

There's a partial parallel with Vietnam: the kind of empathy and sympathy I and others had for the veterans themselves could be extended by some to mean that they were fighting for a noble cause. Ronald Reagan could see them as patriots on a great mission to combat a Communist effort to suppress our country. There's a lot of falsehood in that, since it was a murderous war that we started under dubious conditions.

We're still struggling with the false ennobling of the Confederate cause and the Vietnam War.

Crawford. What do you think could transform the collective? Because we remain at least partially stuck in the Reagan-era reinterpretation of the war.

Lifton. With Vietnam, the collective became increasingly susceptible to questioning; that is, Americans came to have increasing doubts about the war. There were enormous demonstrations; there was the “Moratorium”; there were many efforts on the part of the general public to express outright opposition to the war.

Let me say something else about the individual and the collective process. Erik Erikson had a theory of the Great Man (or Great Woman) in history. He emphasized (as he did in his psychobiographies of Luther and Gandhi) the great person who must “solve for all what he could not solve for himself alone.”¹ That was what led to historical change. My focus on shared themes questioned that theory in favor of a focus on specific groups of people that have particular influence in being acted upon or themselves acting on others. Among those specific groups were Hiroshima survivors and antiwar Vietnam veterans.

I think the shared themes theory is more in keeping with our task in this interview. That is also perhaps true for most of the other essays in this *Daedalus* issue, which are collectively oriented. They would be more in the realm of shared themes than of the great person in history.

Matthew Evangelista. In terms of shared themes, would you credit something like a “Vietnam Syndrome,” in which many Americans became skeptical of the use of military force, for wars that resembled Vietnam?

Lifton. The Post-Vietnam Syndrome collectively for America, as you suggest, came to mean a reluctance to get into counterinsurgency wars like Vietnam that are so dubious. That’s been a very powerful influence. But the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that we entered were, unfortunately, also counterinsurgency wars, and could be said to have been fought to break out of the Vietnam Syndrome.

It was the first George Bush who said, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all!”² Well, in fact, we hadn’t, but we had broken out of it significantly in creating the First Iraq War. And even with the Afghan War, one could have advocated much more limited means. Some action had to be taken against Osama bin Laden, but we didn’t need to initiate a war on the entire nation of Afghanistan, where previous efforts, including a Russian one, had notoriously failed.

Let me also say something about another version of the Post-Vietnam Syndrome. It originally had a different meaning, at least for veterans. It signified that veterans of Vietnam seemed different from the veterans of other wars. Many of them were reluctant to go to the Veterans Administration, which refused to recognize that difference. For a long time, the Veterans Administration wanted to see Vietnam veterans as just like veterans of other wars, who should join local veterans’ groups that tended to be conservative or reactionary about military matters.

I fortunately had an influence in bringing about a change in that attitude. A young man named Arthur Blank, who was my student and colleague at Yale, and himself a psychiatrist and a Vietnam veteran, became head of an outreach pro-

gram of the Veterans Administration. He consulted with me about veterans in general and the work I had done in rap groups [discussion groups or group therapy] with them. He enabled the Veterans Administration to recognize the conflicts of the soldiers in that war. Where I and others working with me could reach just a few hundred people in our rap groups and interactions with veterans, his program could reach tens of thousands.

Evangelista. What about the “war on terror” following upon 9/11?

Lifton. Unfortunately that “war on terror” could have a totalism of its own. Anyone who did not completely support our position was against us. September 11 also still haunts us, all the more so because a superpower cannot allow itself to be defeated or humiliated by anyone.

Crawford. When you say we’re haunted by the wars, do you think of it as victory having its own sort of hangover – victory as part of the superpower syndrome?

Lifton. Winning wars is problematic too. I have in mind World War II, which killed enormous numbers of people. I was once giving a talk to a religious group and I mentioned atrocities in Vietnam and the atrocity-producing situation, and a man got up and said: “I was a Marine in World War II. We mutilated bodies too. We killed prisoners. It wasn’t just Vietnam.” That was Paul Moore, the great Episcopal leader. He was saying those atrocities could occur even in a so-called good war – necessary to defeat the Nazis. The victory parades that followed World War II could also help block out its ugliness. The soldiers came back as heroes. We became world dominant and had a lot of ethical claim. And our own atrocities were covered over.

Evangelista. Would you say that the outsized role that military power plays in U.S. foreign policy has an effect on the quality of our democracy?

Lifton. What you are raising is what has come to be called a “national security state.” What that means is that the organs of the state are subsumed to a form of militarism as an assertion of what’s called “national security.” But that can come to mean a domination of behavior in the world.

It’s significant that this concept of the national security state was one that we directly questioned in the physicians’ antinuclear and antiwar movement: PSR, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and then the international version, IPPNW, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. We put forward a position of shared security or human security. That was embodied in a quasiumorous but deeply significant toast that would be offered at each meeting of the international group, either by an American or a Soviet delegate to the meeting. The toast that he or she would make was: “Here’s to your good health and the health of your

leaders and the health of your people, because if you die we die, and if you survive we survive.” A little gallows humor there and a lot of truth.

It’s disappointing that, in the buildup to the American election of 2024, there was very little rational mention of the nuclear threat.

Evangelista. Why do you think there’s such neglect of the nuclear danger now? Many would credit the international physicians with contributing to the end of the Cold War and the end of the superpower nuclear arms race. They won a Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts. Yet here we are with countries still maintaining nuclear arsenals even though they were reduced quite a lot after the initiatives of Gorbachev and Reagan. Now we hear talk of a new nuclear arms race, one that includes China. There’s still concern about Iran’s nuclear program, North Korea’s nuclear program.

Lifton. I think that the human psyche has a certain kind of overall area in which apocalyptic dangers are confronted or experienced. Charles Strozier and I did a study that was termed “Nuclear Threat” and found that people spoke of climate and nuclear threat almost in the same paragraph or even in the same sentence.

Much of the conversation about nuclear weapons has been in relation to deterrence. Joseph Nye at the Kennedy School wrote a notorious book called *Nuclear Ethics*, in which he said we shouldn’t be hawks and build too many, we shouldn’t be doves and not build enough, we should be owls who build just the right number. And, under certain conditions, we may have to use them.³ “Nuclear ethics” is a contradiction in terms. There is no ethics and only criminality in using weapons that can bring about an end to humanity. One has to remember that so-called deterrence always includes the possibility of using the weapons, and sometimes can encourage first use. That kind of thinking is a form of nuclearism. So is the idea that there can be an “exchange”: I drop a bomb on Moscow, you drop a bomb on New York, and we’re finished.

The dropping of the first nuclear bomb in Hiroshima was an act of nuclearism. J. Robert Oppenheimer’s tragedy was his brilliant success in bringing about the making of the bomb at Los Alamos. He became a national hero. But he advocated the use of the weapon to solve the country’s problems.

In the physicians’ movement, we were attempting to break out of nuclearism. We would say in effect: “Look, we’re doctors, we’d like to patch you up after a nuclear war, as doctors do with any war. But the trouble is that there will be no medical facilities to do that, and, besides, you’ll be dead, and we’ll be dead.” That was our message. It was the direct antithesis of nuclearism, and it was a form of factual truth-telling about nuclear threat.

All of my work in relation to nuclear threat and threat of war in general is enormously affected by the fact that I encountered the bomb in its annihilative use in Hiroshima. Survivors, called *hibakusha*, that I interviewed described those human

effects in the most pained way. That led me to look into the state of mind of those at the other end of the weapon, those who created it and advocated its use.

In my latest book, I emphasize survivor power and survivor wisdom, because survivors can apply what they have experienced – whether the survivors of Hiroshima or survivors of Auschwitz – to tell the tale of what happened in a deeply believable way.⁴ And their influence can be sustained even after their generation begins to die out.

Most of the scientists who worked closely with Oppenheimer to make the bomb also became what I came to call “prophetic survivors.” They started *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, whose authors mainly included scientists active in creating the bomb, who knew all too well what it could do, and did do, to human beings in general.

Survivor power involves what Martin Buber called “imagining the real.” That is, taking in the factual truth of the kind of a catastrophe that threatens our species.

The fact that International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War won a Nobel Peace Prize suggests the hunger for factual truth: the truth of nuclearism is it’s endangering the planet. There is the phenomenon of “nuclear winter,” where the ashes of the nuclear attack will block out the light of the sun and make it impossible to survive. And there is newer work that explores how nuclear war would affect agriculture and create world starvation. It’s research-based, so these are nuclear truths that are factual and that we need to articulate and continue to articulate.

Crawford. There’s a National Academy of Sciences study of nuclear winter underway. Christopher Yeaw, as part of his testimony for that study, advocated that nuclear deterrence required us to avoid giving the impression to adversaries like Russia and China that we would hold back from using the weapons. He warned against being “self-deterred.”

Lifton. The mildest term for that is disinformation. It’s worse than that because it’s reminiscent of the nuclearism of Edward Teller or Herman Kahn. Teller thought that the significance of Hiroshima was that we should never cease making bigger and more deadly weapons. Kahn, describing how when someone might tell him that a nuclear policy could lead to the loss of a city, would reply: “Well we’ll build a new city.” These are false assumptions about the weapons and about human behavior. Nuclearism can all too readily lead to planetary destruction.

Still, I think it’s reasonable to ask: How is it or why is it that there have been no nuclear weapons used since Nagasaki? Given the prevalence of nuclearism, one might have well feared they could be used again. We don’t know the answer to that question exactly, but it could be that the various peace movements, the recognition of Hiroshima, which created what I came to call “imagery of extinction,” and other forms of disseminating nuclear truths have played a part that could be

of greater significance than any clear deterrence. And that commitment to factual truth-telling about nuclear weapons has to be sustained by responsible leaders. But, as I always emphasize, the struggle continues.

Crawford. If it were me, I would say that the truth about war is that it never discriminates; it always harms civilians. And you would say there's always atrocity.

Lifton. Yes, there's always atrocity, with widespread killing of civilians.

War is also likely to produce the seeds for dictatorial leaders. For instance, in Hitler's own story, he could take the German defeat in World War I and the conditions imposed by the Allies as humiliating, as many others did. He himself described a kind of transcendent experience under poison gas during which he could envision himself a great leader of the German people.

There's something about the mass killing in war, any war, that leads to extremity, and speaks to those who want to either reverse it or deny its harm. I think that so much is covered over by the joy in victory. Warism becomes transcendent.

The Nazis believed that one could only be tested by war – that war-making was an ultimate human achievement. William James recognized the danger of that idea when he wrote about the “moral equivalent of war,” asking that people be conscripted not to the military, but to communal forms of hard labor and survival in the wilderness.⁵ But war-making has always had an appeal that is difficult to resist.

Crawford. We seem to be in a cultural moment when violence is alluded to, threatened, and ubiquitous. Do Trump's appeals to violence offer some hope of something to his supporters? Why are people attracted to that? We haven't talked enough about violence.

Lifton. Violence is very, very important. James Gilligan, a psychiatrist who I've been friendly with, studied violent people extensively and found that at the center of it was humiliation. There was personal humiliation in their lives that readily lent itself to violence. There can be collective humiliation on the part of countries, as Hitler claimed for Germany. Trump can tap the grievances of large numbers of people who feel they have been humiliated by intellectuals and scholars like ourselves, left out and ignored.

So humiliation is an ever potential source of violence. But Trump has both threatened violence or initiated violence regularly to those who simply question his falsehoods. It's reminiscent to me of a strange comparison: I had a Japanese friend who was antimilitary and antiemperor. During the postwar years, he spoke out against the emperor system, and when he did, he would find a note in his mailbox saying, “I heard you talk yesterday, I trust you and your family are well.” It was a thinly veiled threat to treat his family violently, not just him. So, the threat of violence can be always hovering in the Trumpist movement as well.

Crawford. Do you think that more Americans are accepting of that violence after twenty years of war, or because of Vietnam?

Lifton. Not accepting that violence, but more susceptible to its threat because of our history. We have had an enormous amount of violence, including the assassinations of the sixties. And the recent January 2021 calling forth of insurrectionists by Trump to storm the Capitol and allow in those who are armed. People are always concerned about the threat of violence, but Americans have reason for greater belief in its possibility.

Crawford. This reminds me of Irving Janis's work on groupthink. But it's a little bit different in the sense that you're saying that it's not just the people who silence themselves, they actually come to believe.

Lifton. You know, Janis was part of the Wellfleet meetings that I started with Erik Erikson in 1966 as a yearly seminar on the intersections of psychology and history. Gilligan came to those meetings as well. Janis talked about groupthink to us at Wellfleet. It does become a kind of reality in which those who start out skeptically do come to the thinking of the dominant group. Colin Powell was susceptible to groupthink when he testified falsely about weapons of mass destruction and chemical weapons in Iraq. He was after all a military person and an advocate of military loyalty to civilian control. In that case, his response to groupthink was catastrophic.

Evangelista. We also have the example of Robert McNamara during the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, when he lied about the evidence and later admitted having done so, out of a misplaced notion that lying was the right thing to do for his country. We think of the invasion of Iraq and the run-up to the invasion of Iraq as a kind of inflection point at which truth became quite degraded, and maybe we're still suffering the consequences of that. But in some respect, it goes further back, to the Vietnam War.

Lifton. McNamara was very much compromised, both in relation to nuclear weapons and to the Vietnam War. Yet he turned around eventually and became critical of nuclear policy and war-making. I was in touch with someone who worked with him, UN-sponsored, and he described McNamara as quite reasonable in advocating peaceful directions. So Janis's groupthink can work in different ways.

Crawford. What do you think about Harold Lasswell's idea of the "garrison state"? In Lasswell's view, it is a "world in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society," and on the civilian side, where civil liberties like voting are essentially optional.⁶

Lifton. The garrison state does suggest militarism. And yes, it's a close equivalent of the national security state with a military emphasis. Lasswell is partly right, but also turned out to be partly wrong in the sense that the military has more recently loomed large in questioning Trumpist efforts at seizing power. The military has held to subsuming itself to civilian control and has made statements against being used to suppress American protest, as Trump has suggested he would like to use it.



Lifton. Let me conclude with a few simple thoughts. Wars seek to solve human problems but never do. Rather, each war contributes to subsequent wars and general violence. Winners can experience dangerous forms of triumphalism, among them the fantasy of controlling the events of history. Losers are likely to invoke *Rambo*-like attempts to reverse the outcome. What is unacceptable psychologically is the idea that a large number of one's nation's men and women have "died in vain."

There is always an early "war fever," a widespread experience of transcendence with a glorification of a deadly version of patriotism. But soon afterwards come the killing and dying. The chaos and violence of war lead to the emergence of dictators and of totalistic ideologies like communism and fascism.

Our task becomes that of breaking this collective vicious circle of violence by invoking diplomatic forms of interaction among nations, and institutions within our own country that remain committed to truth-telling. The process is ongoing, a continuous dynamic of resistance to the rule of force by means of the rule of law.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Jay Lifton, elected a Member of the American Academy in 1970, was Distinguished Professor Emeritus at John Jay College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Lecturer in Psychiatry at Columbia University. His books included *Surviving Our Catastrophes: Resilience and Renewal from Hiroshima to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (2023), *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (2014), and *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (1967). He died at his home in Truro, Massachusetts, on September 4, 2025.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (Norton, 1958), 67.
- ² E. J. Dionne Jr., “Kicking The ‘Vietnam Syndrome’: Victory Sweeps Away U.S. Doomed-to-Failure Feeling,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 1991.
- ³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Nuclear Ethics* (The Free Press, 1986). The hawks-doves-owls distinction first appeared in Albert Carnesale, Paul Doty, Stanley Hoffmann, Samuel P. Huntington, Joseph S. Nye Jr., and Scott D. Sagan, *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (Harvard University Press, 1983). For a more recent discussion of his views on ethical use of nuclear weapons, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Nuclear Ethics Revisited,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 37 (1) (2023): 5–17.
- ⁴ Robert Jay Lifton, *Surviving Our Catastrophes: Resilience and Renewal from Hiroshima to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (The New Press, 2023).
- ⁵ “As John Dewey would remark, ‘An immense debt is due William James for the title of his essay.’” Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 515.
- ⁶ Harold Lasswell, “The Garrison State,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 46 (4) (1941): 455.