Enthusiastically endorsed by the likes of Stewart Udall, Michael Kammen, Robert Dykstra, and other well-known scholars, Michael Bellesiles’ *Arming America. The Origins of a National Gun Culture* was published by Alfred Knopf in September 2000. As Gary Wills put it in his review in *The New York Times*, Bellesiles’ book managed to disperse “the darkness that covered the gun’s early history in America” by providing overwhelming evidence that the American gun culture was created during the Civil War era and that in the eighteenth century guns were much less significant. “Guns are [so] central to the identity of Americans, to their self-perception as a rugged and violent people, as well as to their representation of others,” Bellesiles wrote in the introduction of his book, “that the nation’s history has been meticulously reconstructed to promote the necessity of a heavily armed American public. In the classic telling, arms ownership has always been nearly universal, and American liberty was won and maintained by the actions of privately armed citizens…. [W]hat if we discovered that early American men did not have that special bond with their guns?” Well, judging by the tempest that followed, and to some extent even preceded the book’s publication, if it could indeed be proven beyond any shadow of doubt that—as Bellesiles intended to show—“America’s gun culture is an invented tradition,” that would make no small difference to how many Americans perceive themselves. Bellesiles seems to have had a point when, in the last lines of his introduction, he noted that “there exists a fear of confronting the specifics of these cultural origins, for what has been made can be unmade”. In other words, Bellesiles realized that since *today* the gun is “the axial symbol of American culture, absolutely integral to the nation’s self-image and looming even larger in plans for its future development,” by showing that “it was not always that way” his research might stimulate an unmaking and remaking of American culture along less bellicose lines: an intellectual and political project that would obviously not go unchallenged.

I have been using the conditional because, as is well known, *Arming America* stands today in the eyes of most readers as an utterly disgraced book. Prestigious historians like Gary Wills and Edmund Morgan, after originally lavishing it with praise, have more or less explicitly retracted their earlier endorsements. In December of 2002 Columbia University voted to rescind the Bancroft prize awarded to *Arming America* a year before. Finally, also at the end of 2002 and following the
report of the review board appointed to investigate the soundness and honesty of his research, Michael Bellesiles resigned from Emory University. What happened was that a number of scholars discovered serious discrepancies between Bellesiles’ sources and their use or reproduction in the book. In particular, two lengthy reviews by James Lindgren appearing in *The William and Mary Law Review* and the *Yale Law Journal*, raised serious objections regarding the alleged scarcity of guns in the probate records Bellesiles claimed to have examined and which, at least in some cases, appeared to be non existent. Bellesiles admitted that he may have made mistakes in handling some of his data, yet one academic review after another called into question every single item on which Bellesiles’ thesis rested, that is, his readings of gun censuses, militia muster records, and homicide rates. Without going into the details of what has become known as “the Bellesiles scandal,” it will suffice to recall the conclusions reached by the review board appointed by Emory to investigate the case. Asked whether Bellesiles had engaged in “intentional fabrication or falsification of research data,” the board—while “seriously troubled by [his] scholarly conduct,” and believing that Bellesiles's research in probate records was “unprofessional and misleading” as well as “superficial and thesis-driven,” and furthermore that his explanations of errors “raise doubts about his veracity”—found it impossible to state conclusively that Bellesiles had fabricated or falsified his evidence. In other words, while firm in condemning his “sloppy” scholarship, the review board had to suspend its judgment regarding the question of Bellesiles’ good faith.

Some people believe that, no matter what his mistakes may have been, Bellesiles was subjected to an unusual amount of criticism because his book was a de facto attack against the pro-gun lobby. Being by nature skeptical about conspiracy theories, I cannot bring myself to believe that the N.R.A. may have enlisted a significant number of professional historians to find at all costs some flaws in *Arming America*. On the other hand, considering the overall tone of so many of the non-academic critiques of Bellesiles’ book, I have no difficulty believing that he may have indeed received insulting e-mails and threats of one sort or another. In fact, what I find most interesting in the Bellesiles story is less the academic scandal per se, than the heated debate surrounding it. In particular, I want to call attention to the angry reactions drawn by his thesis on the historical rather than mythical status of what is evidently perceived as a key component of the U.S. national character. Even before experts called into question his findings, *Arming America* was strongly criticized in newspapers, magazines and on the Web as a “foolish” attack on what Charlton Heston—at the time President of the N.R.A.—described as a “useful myth” of America’s past. Bellesiles was accused in several reviews of pursuing a “liberal-leftist” political agenda: of wanting, that is, to challenge from a historical perspective the notion that gun owning was understood as an individual right in the Second Amendment. Most of this early criticism did come, as Alexander
Cockburn has noted, from “NRA types … [and therefore] their often cogent demolitions were initially discounted as sore-loser barrages from the rednecks.” Once the academics came on the scene, they by and large decided to stick to the more or less objective flaws in Bellesiles’ scholarship, declining to take issue with the alleged politics of the book. Yet the relish with which many conservative commentators welcomed the scholarly demolition of Bellesiles’ thesis is worth a few considerations. I have obviously no trouble understanding why columnists for Guns and Ammo or the National Review should rejoice at seeing the fall from grace of a man who, in the original introduction of his book, had dared criticize the NRA’s interpretation of the Second Amendment. I can also understand why the Right should celebrate that a book written by a “liberal” academic ended up being exposed as fraudulent. Indeed, it was perhaps inevitable that Bellesiles would end up being characterized by some as the prototypical “postmodernist” historian, who has no respect for facts and tries to garner academic laurels by simply spinning a politically correct yarn.

However, to me there is still something somewhat puzzling about the Bellesiles affair. None of the conservative commentators I have had a chance to read seems to have even remotely wished that Bellesiles’ thesis were at least partly true. No one, in other words, had anything good to say on the fact that Arming America was correcting what is after all a rather negative image of the U.S. as one of the most violent and heavily armed countries in the world, by suggesting that originally Americans were not so much in love with firearms and were perhaps a more peaceful people than is usually thought. On the contrary, Bellesiles’ view that early America was relatively violence-free met with more than a sneer. A typical review appearing in the “BrothersJudd” website, for example, chides Bellesiles because in his book, “rather than rapacious conquerors and brutes, the early Americans seem downright pastoral”. I don’t know to what extent my views on this matter may be influenced by my position as someone who looks at American culture from the outside, but at first I thought that the picture of a gentler, kinder early America should have appealed not only to liberals in favor of tighter gun-control, but also to many conservative and patriotic U.S. citizens who may resent being often portrayed as the descendants of “rapacious conquerors and brutes.” In fact, in the same review where this phrase is used, the author—while all along attacking Bellesiles as an example of how “the modern academy has been thoroughly corrupted by Leftist ideology”—cannot fail to notice that, were Bellesiles’ thesis on a relatively violence-free early America true, it would deny “most of the crimes that the Left has laid at our collective doorstep over the years.”

Here I think that the reviewer raises, however contradictorily, an important point. Aren’t many contemporary scholars and critics accused of being “anti-American” when they focus on the unpleasant traits of U.S. history or society? Of indeed “hating” their object of study so much that our field should be renamed “Anti-American studies”? This is the case inside as well as outside
the U.S. In Italy, for example, especially since 9-11, critics of US foreign policy are systematically accused of being obsessed with the aggressive, warlike legacy of American history. The self-appointed guardians of what, along with my colleague Alessandro Portelli, I have elsewhere described as “Mythic Philoamericanism,” are always ready to denounce whoever calls too much attention to the United States as a violent or gun-loving country as being “anti-American”. Yet, rather than appreciating at least Bellesiles’ intentions, conservative reviewers seemed most of the time outright offended by the simple suggestion that early Americans may have not been armed to their teeth.

Along these lines I think it is surprising that only a reviewer like the one I just quoted would mention that, had it been widely accepted, Bellesiles’ thesis might have caused some problems not only for the gun-loving front, but for several left-leaning historians and cultural critics as well. It is worth remembering, for example, that in his introductory pages Bellesiles does not take issue only with the views of the N.R.A., but also refers to Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence* as an example of what the author of *Arming America* considers a common misrepresentation of early American history and culture. In fact, Bellesiles clearly implies that studies like Slotkin’s encourage the notion that “we have always been killers.” According to Bellesiles, by insisting that from a “Hobbesian heritage of each against all emerged the modern acceptance of widespread violence,” Slotkin’s approach ends up supporting the views of those who think that “little if anything, can be done to alter America’s gun culture”. Perhaps Bellesiles’ criticism of Slotkin is not altogether fair. However, considering that—as Myra Jehlen argued in a paper delivered at the Institute for the Futures of American Studies a few years ago—*Regeneration through Violence* is the book that rewrote the entire tradition of American Studies for a new post-Vietnam generation of scholars, it may be worth wondering whether on this particular point Bellesiles could not be at least partly right. Regardless of the serious and unquestionable pitfalls of *Arming America*, the resentful response with which the book met seems to suggest that the image of a gun-loving, and ultimately rugged, violent America is as important to the Right as it is to the Left. I know, of course, that such an image means something totally different depending on the ideological perspective from which one looks at it. This is why, perhaps, a quintessential American genre like the Western has been studied with equal passion by conservatives and liberals alike. To the former it is the precious record of the heroic and epic struggle of the American people to turn the wilderness into a New World garden; to the latter the Western offers a wonderful display of the workings of American ideology. In both cases, however, the mythology of the frontier, with its legacy of mythicized violence, is seen as standing at the center of U.S. culture.
As I hope it should be clear, the point I am trying to make is not that, if also early America was indeed as much in love with guns and as violent a world as the post-Civil War United States, we should simply choose to believe in Bellesiles’ fiction because at least it offers us the glimpse of an inspirational, peaceful golden age to which one day we may be able to return. We cannot, that is, make up a nonviolent America just because it may be politically convenient to do so. What we can and, as I will insist, we should do, however, is give much more visibility to the nonviolent and nonconformist side of American history and culture than many literary and cultural critics have done of late. Let me dwell just one more time on the Bellesiles story. In his damming review of the book, Clayton Cramer pokes fun at Bellesiles because “he would have us believe that by the 1830s, a pacifist movement, fiercely hostile not only to gun ownership, but also to a military and hunting of any form, was becoming a major influence on American society.”

To be fair to Bellesiles, this is not exactly what he argues. He does not say that in ante-bellum America pacifism was a dominant ideology, though he insists that there were both individuals and groups intent on criticizing the institution of war and calling for a politics of nonviolence. This is a point that few scholars would dispute. We usually think of nonviolence as a philosophy first conceived by Gandhi and Tolstoy, and later imported into the United States by Martin Luther King, Jr. However, according to the editors of Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History, there is “a distinctive [American] tradition of nonviolence [that] runs back to the British colonies in the seventeenth century. Thoreau’s influence on Gandhi is well-known. Tolstoy, too, was indebted to North American predecessors. In ‘A Message to the American People,’ written in 1901, Tolstoy stated that ‘Garrison, Parker, Emerson, Ballou, and Thoreau … specially influenced me.’

Obviously to argue that there is in the United States an important antiwar intellectual and political tradition grounded in Christian pacifism, and that this tradition reached a marked visibility in the 1830s and 1840s, is by no means to deny the reality of a “gunfighter nation,” with its legacy of slavery, racism, and imperialism. Yet, just like no one would dream of writing the history of the Vietnam years leaving the antiwar movement out of the picture, one should also not forget that the ideal of non-violence and a deep dislike for war have been a significant, albeit not a dominant feature of U.S. culture since at least the late eighteenth century. Some may think that when arguing that “the United States has more often been teacher than student in the history of the nonviolent idea”, the editors of Nonviolence in America may be overstating their case. However, in light of what I have been taught by the Bellesiles affair, I would submit that, especially in the post 9-11 climate—a climate that may indeed have had something to do with the irritation at the idea of a non-martial early America—the reclaiming of a non-violent, anti-war United States tradition would be a much more culturally and politically effective weapon than yet another “black book” on the
crimes of American domestic and foreign policies from the Pequot War onwards. Despite all the complaints against the practitioners of “anti-American studies” for focusing on U.S. imperialism, slavery, genocidal policies against the Indians, and so forth, it seems to me that many of those who stand behind George Bush’s war on terrorism prefer to think of their forefathers as “rapacious conquerors and brutes” rather than people who, amongst other things, wondered whether a key feature of a genuine New World should be the abolition of war.  

What I am trying to suggest is not that we should simply forget what Foucault and neo-Marxism have taught us concerning the ways in which power operates to preempt oppositional stances. Neither should we ignore the clever deconstruction of the “subversive hypothesis” performed by D. A. Miller and so many New Historicists, or the ways in which, as Sacvan Bercovitch has insisted, “the myth of America” is operative even in what strive to be counter-hegemonic practices. Yet it seems to me that a healthy skepticism regarding the limitations, the contradictions, and the blind spots of any intellectual or political movement wishing to challenge the status quo especially on a fundamental issue like the use of state violence, should never obscure the rich, and by no means naïve tradition of antiwar thinking visible in many strains of U.S. culture. So, while I am not implying even for a moment that we should stop reading Richard Slotkin’s trilogy on the Myth of the Frontier, I would welcome a greater familiarity with such works as Peter Brock’s *Pacifism in the United States, From the Colonial Era to the First World War*, a volume that, despite leaving out almost one hundred years of U.S. history, runs to nearly one thousand pages. At the same time I will be the first one to admit that Brock’s book is probably not even half exciting a read as *Regeneration through Violence* or *Gunfighter Nation*. All of us are more likely to find discussions of the role of violence in *The Last of the Mohicans*, or interpretations of *The Wild Bunch* as an allegory of US third-world interventionism, more captivating than the perusal of Quaker journals or of the writings of Elihu Burritt, one of the few abolitionists who opposed the Civil War on pacifist grounds.

The sad fact is that, as my Germanist colleague at the University of Rome, Vanda Perretta, has eloquently argued, notwithstanding the central place usually assigned to the idea of peace in both the individual and the collective consciousness, its “aesthetic appeal” is a very limited one. In comparison to the soldier or the fighter, the man or the woman of peace usually appear to be dull and as living in a sort of fantasy world. Like Arundhati Roy, we may be sincerely outraged to hear President Bush say that “We’re a peaceful nation” while announcing the air strikes against Afghanistan, but we should also be honest enough to acknowledge that, though we claim to love peace, we continue to be fascinated by its opposite. To paraphrase Mark Twain, we’d like to be in the Heaven of peace for its moral climate, but when it comes to reading and writing we prefer to
keep company in the Hell of war and violence. However, though there is certainly no easy way out of this conundrum, I do believe there are complex exit strategies that are worth pursuing and that may help us disclose an antiwar discourse that is neither dull nor disembodied but, on the contrary, both intellectually and aesthetically stimulating.

**Disarming America, “Arming” Peace**

The Arundhati Roy article I just referred to is entitled “War is Peace,” a healthy reminder that these two apparently irreconcilable signifiers can actually very often collapse into one deadly signified. This sort of doublespeak is of course nothing new. From the *si vis pacem para bellum* of my own rapacious conqueror forefathers to Michel Foucault’s clever inversion of Von Clausewitz’s view on the relation of politics to war, peace has been often understood as the continuation of war by other means.²⁴ The discourse of war and peace would therefore appear as an air-tight system, an ideological control mechanism even more powerful than Bercovitch’s jeremiad given that, as any military strategist would tell you, the end of war is peace. To the extent that they partake in the discourse of war, neither politics, nor literature, nor philosophy seem capable of escaping its grip. To repeat a key passage in Jacques Derrida’s “Violence and metaphysics”, “ Doesn’t war inhabit the philosophical logos, the only one in which peace may be declared? The distinction between discourse and violence would thus seem to be an inaccessible horizon. Nonviolence would thus be the telos, not the essence of discourse ???”.²⁵ What I would like to suggest in the remainder of this essay is that, moving from a premise nearly identical to Derrida’s, an important American tradition running from Ralph Waldo Emerson to William James, Jane Addams, Richard Gregg, Kenneth Burke and beyond, has precisely struggled to deconstruct the peace-war opposition knowing full well that the ideal of nonviolence can, and indeed must be spelt out in a rhetoric of war. By repeating the rhetorical and political gesture of Jean Paul’s 1809 *Declaration of war on war* and anticipating Ernst Friedrich’s 1924 cry, *Krieg dem Kriege!*, these thinkers wage an intellectual war against war, thereby paving the way for a non-violent, yet militant and uncompromising opposition to the cant of militarism and nationalism that has been an important feature of twentieth-century American political movements.²⁶

As most readers would have recognized, the title of my essay replicates the epigraph Kenneth Burke chose for his *Grammar of Motives*, published in 1945. Since I have already dealt elsewhere with his enlightening ruminations on the dialectic of war and peace, here I will only summarize the main features of Burke’s thesis.²⁷ The book’s motto registers its author’s desire to celebrate socio-political conflict by “purifying” it of its potentially destructive nature and “channeling” it along less warlike lines. From this point of view *A Grammar* is the logical
continuation of an idea Burke had already clearly expressed in *Attitudes Towards History*, where the entry “Control” in his “Dictionary of Pivotal Terms”, reads as follows:

To control a bad situation, you seek either to eradicate the evil or to channelize the evil. Elimination vs. the “lightning rod principle,” whereby one protects against lightning not by outlawing lightning but by drawing it into a channel where it does no damage…. When liberals began to think, not of eliminating war, but of finding “the moral equivalent for war,” liberalism was nearing the state of maturity.28

In developing this idea in his work of the 1940’s and ‘50s, Burke explored at some length the “war is peace” paradox. Burke believed that while we should always call attention to the rhetorical strategies deployed by war in order to masquerade itself as a form of peace, the deconstruction—or, as Burke called it, the “debunking”—of militaristic thought was not enough. What we should do, instead, is “treat ‘war’ as a ‘special case of peace’—not as a primary motive in itself, not as essentially real, but purely as a derivative condition, a perversion.”29 War, in Burke’s eyes, should be understood as “[the] ultimate disease of cooperation,” as “a disease or perversion of communion.”30 Thus, while on the one hand we need never deny what he calls “the tyrannous ubiquity in human relations” of strife and enmity, we must also resist the temptation to make of war our “representative anecdote.” “For—as Burke argues—if we took war as our anecdote, then in obeying the genius of this anecdote and shaping an idiom accordingly, we should be proclaiming war as the essence of human relations.”31

While, as we have just seen, Burke acknowledges his debt to William James’ essay on “the moral equivalent of war,” here I would like to suggest that the intellectual and moral fountainhead not only of both Burke’s and James’s thinking but, more generally, of a U.S. tradition of militant antiwar thinking is in fact Ralph Waldo Emerson. This claim will probably strike at least some of my readers as surprising. With few exceptions, Emerson has lately been portrayed either as Richard Poirier’s “philosopher of language” for whom “the revolution worth pursuing is the continuous act of turning and overturning the page,” or as an unwitting spokesman for westward expansionism, laissez-faire capitalism, corporate individualism, and so forth.32 Standing somewhat astride both the ahistorical, apolitical Emerson of the former tradition, and the politically incorrect Emerson of the latter one, one finds the Nietzschean, and perhaps even Foucaultian Emerson of George Stack, Michael Lopez and others.33 All of these different versions of Emerson have some merit, yet the Emerson that is of most interest to me here is the “philosopher of power” discussed at length in Lopez’s *Emerson and Power*. In particular, I would like to call attention to Lopez’s brilliant
discussion, in chapter 5 of his book, of Emerson’s rhetoric of war. Lopez does a wonderful job at pointing out the nearly ubiquitous presence of war as a master trope in Emerson’s language. Lopez does note that “Real war was for Emerson, in principle at least, a violation of the common soul of all men.” Yet, while he leaves open the question as to whether Emerson’s symbolic language may, or may not, “sanction militarism,” the bulk of Lopez’s investigation suggests that Emerson fully, if perhaps unwittingly, participated in the Romantic “poeticizing of war” that eventually led to the unspeakable disasters of two world wars.

Much as I admire Lopez’s clever exploration of Emerson’s rhetoric, it seems to me that—to resort for a moment to a Burkean terminology—he ends up treating war as Emerson’s “representative anecdote,” thereby never giving much credit to what I believe is his attempt to deploy war metaphors against the institution and the practice of war. Lopez, for example, does not mention that one of Emerson’s most important early statements on the subject—the 1838 essay “War”—was delivered as an address sponsored by the American Peace Society. Indeed, some insights of Emerson’s essay are as interesting and valuable today as they were nearly two hundred years ago. It is perhaps no accident that Howard Zinn has chosen to include an excerpt of Emerson’s address in his recent collection The Power of Nonviolence, and that a contemporary pacifist thinker like Michael Nagler continues to draw on it today, in his “search for a nonviolent future”. What makes this essay so important is, first of all, Emerson’s warning that along “the passive side of the friend of peace” there is “his activity.” Peace is not synonymous with inaction. To the contrary, peace can be achieved only through a non-military militancy. As Emerson put it in a passage with which William James was likely to have been familiar, “the peace principle … can never be defended, it can never be executed, by cowards. Everything great must be done in the spirit of greatness. The manhood that has been in war must be transferred to the cause of peace, before war can lose its charm, and peace be venerable to men.” By “manhood” here, as often elsewhere, Emerson means “self-dependence,” which he believes is what we really admire in the Greek and Roman heroes. Yet if “self-subsistence is the charm of war,” the highest form of self-subsistence is the one that can do without all military trappings—“without any flourish of trumpets, titles of lordships or train of guards.”

The hortatory conclusion of Emerson’s address deserves to be remembered as the forerunner of a modern tradition of militant pacifism culminating in Gandhi and King, and still alive in the contemporary global anti-war movement.

The cause of peace is not the cause of cowardice. If peace is to be defended or preserved for the safety of the luxurious and the timid, it is a sham, and the peace will be base. War is
better, and the peace will be broken. If peace is to be maintained, it must be by brave men, who have come up to the same height as the hero, namely, they will carry their life in their hand, and stake it at any instant for their principle, but who have gone one step beyond the hero, and will not seek another man’s life; men who have, by their intellectual insight or else by their moral elevation, attained such a perception of their own intrinsic worth that they do not think property or their own body a sufficient good to be saved by such dereliction of principle as treating a man like a sheep.\textsuperscript{40}

Here Emerson sketches a redefinition of heroism that will continue to preoccupy him in many of his writings. For example, there can be no question that, in his essay “Heroism,” “the charm of war” is operative in almost every sentence, beginning with the epigraph from Mohammed which, especially today, may sound particularly troubling: “Paradise is under the shadow of swords.” Read out of context, the quotation would seem to strengthen the perverse alliance between peace and war; the notion that the bliss of paradise and the hell of battle are but two sides of the same coin. Yet if Emerson appears fascinated by the concept of holy war, or, as I think is the case, by the virtual identity of religion and war, the essay as a whole shows that Emerson’s \textit{Jihad} is nothing but the “warlike attitude” of the soul opposing “external evil”.\textsuperscript{41} In fact I would argue that, in Jamesian fashion, Emerson calls attention to “the attractiveness of war” mainly to suggest how a vulgar and infantile military heroism must be superseded by true heroism, that is a “military attitude of the soul.” “Self-trust is the essence of heroism,” Emerson proceeds. “It is the state of the soul at war.”\textsuperscript{42} Also for Emerson peace is inextricably intertwined with war; yet the war he speaks of is essentially a metaphor for the ongoing spiritual and political struggle engaged by the non-conformist self against society, as we can also gather from “Self-reliance,” where he urges his readers to “enter into the state of war” if they hold dear their intellectual independence.\textsuperscript{43} Indeed, an appeal to this kind of intellectual and moral warfare will be at the core of Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government,” an essay that has been described as the greatest theoretical contribution the U.S. has made to the cause of world peace.\textsuperscript{44}

The resemblances between the position advocated by Emerson in these early essays and the Gandhian concept of non-violent civil resistance are striking. Emerson distinguishes between a “base” form of pacifism that borders on cowardice and a truly “heroic” non-violence that can be practiced only by those courageous enough “to carry their life in their hand.” Similarly, Gandhi draws a clear distinction between the “non-violence of the weak”—the non-violence of those who are afraid to be violent—and “the active non-violent resistance of the strong”: the behavior of those who have come to understand that “non-violence is the mightiest force in the world.”\textsuperscript{45} This
explains why, like Emerson, Gandhi was attracted to the symbolic dimension of military bravery (as displayed, for example, in the Mahabarata) and why, also like Emerson, he believed that “cowardice is impotence worse than violence.” As H.J.N. Horsburgh has noted, for Gandhi “the violence which springs from courage is morally superior to the non-violence that is an expression of cowardice.” Or, in Gandhi’s own words, “My nonviolence does not admit of running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. I can no more preach nonviolence to a coward than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scenes. Nonviolence is the summit of bravery.” For both Emerson and Gandhi the worst temptation is, finally, not violence, but cowardice. Hence the ambivalent attraction both felt for war not only as a “poetic” fact, but as a display of actual bravery.

Gandhi may have been more outspoken than Emerson in defining war as a form of “unmitigable” evil, yet it is quite striking to note how Emersonian he was in praising the “good,” admirable qualities of war: “War is unmitigated evil. But it certainly does one good thing, it drives away fear and brings bravery to the surface.” Emerson’s writings often call attention to the “charm of war.” The fact itself that when he published his address to the Peace Society he chose to change its original title (“Peace”), to its current one (“War”), seems to be an indication of how in his mind the struggle for peace had to come to terms with both the social functions and the psychological-aesthetic appeal of the martial spirit. Similarly, Gandhi noted that “if war had no redeeming feature, no courage and heroism behind it, it would be a despicable thing, and would not need speeches to destroy it.” Gandhi, in other words, fully shares Emerson’s desire to transfer to the cause of peace “the manhood that has been in war.” Like William James, Gandhi too is searching for a “moral equivalent of war,” but I would venture to say that Gandhi’s substitute for war is probably closer to Emerson’s formulation than it is to James’s. If, as Horsburgh and others have suggested, satyagraha—that is, a method of resistance practically and morally distinct from war—is Gandhi’s own “moral equivalent of war,” he is not so much thinking of what may take the place of national armies and help tame the martial spirit—arguably James’s major preoccupation—as he is striving to enroll Emerson’s “military attitude of the soul” on the side of social change and the fight for justice. Gandhi’s stress on a “warlike” form of self-reliance closely resembles Emerson’s, and it is no accident that the Mahatma not only insisted that satyagraha should be seen as an expression of soul-force, but he also repeatedly identified Ahimsā (literally, non-harming, non-killing) as a weapon, often employing in his writings the phrase, “the weapon of non-violence.” Finally, for both Gandhi and Emerson the value of “peace”—militantly defined not as the mere absence of war, but as a “higher”, purer, non-violent form of “war”—cannot be divorced from the notion of Truth as moral authenticity. As explained by William Borman, for Gandhi
“moral authenticity means the effort to bring inner states and outer conduct into congruence by speaking and acting one’s convictions”. This most Emersonian premise can help explain why Gandhi found cowardice far more despicable than violence and why at times some of his statements may be puzzling to those who think of him as an apostle of non-violence at all costs. When Gandhi notes, for example, that “where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence,” one is tempted to conclude that Gandhi’s paramount value is Truth rather than violence or non-violence, even though of course Gandhi’s simultaneous equation of Truth with non-violence suggests that the courage of those who cannot use non-violent means to their just ends is at most a second-best form of bravery, just as Emerson in his “War” essay maintains that any act of violence (treating a man like a sheep) will always be “a dereliction of principle.”

I am of course aware that the ad bellum purificandum perspective I have detected in the early Emerson is only one aspect of his rhetoric of war. There is no question that, especially during the Civil War and the crisis that led up to it, Emerson often poeticized real war. At times his praise of the martial spirit borders on jingoism, and yet we should always keep in mind that, even when Emerson speaks of war in general, what was on his mind was usually a specific armed conflict whose aim was the abolition of the daily violence of slavery. If there is no question that, for several years, Emerson’s preoccupation was no longer the purification of war, but rather war as an instrument of purification, I would in large part agree with the conclusion reached over sixty years ago by the earliest student of Emerson’s “philosophy of war and peace,” William Huggard. “Emerson desired to stand neither for war nor peace, but always for truth, which is a thing greater than any particular war or any peace, and which may afford sanctions or condemnation for either.” Yet, while this seems to me a reasonable, balanced summary of Emerson’s lifetime reflections on the question of war and peace, I would also insist that the most lasting and innovative contribution Emerson made in this area lies with his attempt to imagine peace as an active force in the service of individual and social transformation. Emerson’s invitation to inject a warrior spirit into the pacifists’ ranks lays the ground for the crucial shift from an essentially “passive” resistance to war grounded in religious belief to the “active,” more explicitly political antiwar ideology that has shaped the modern peace movements. His redefinition of peace as the cause of those “brave men” capable of going “one step beyond the hero” stands behind not only James’s celebrated search for a moral equivalent of war, but also deserves to be seen as the foundational act of an important American intellectual and political tradition grounded in the distinction between the non-violence of the weak and the non-violence of the strong.

For example, in the very first lines of her Newer Ideals of Peace, Jane Addams writes: “The following pages present the claims of the newer, more aggressive ideals of peace, as over against
the older dovelike ideal. These newer ideals are *active* and *dynamic.*”⁵⁸ In Emersonian fashion, Addams wishes to convince her audience that the struggle for peace is by no means a “dovelike” affair. Having little patience with “the old dogmatic peace,” she insists that

The word “non-resistance” is misleading, because it is much too feeble and inadequate. It suggests the goody-goody attitude of ineffectiveness. The words “overcoming,” “substituting,” “re-creating,” “readjusting moral values,” “forming new centers of spiritual energy” carry much more of the meaning implied. For it is not merely the desire for a conscience at rest, for a sense of justice no longer outraged, that would pull us into new paths were there would be no more war nor preparations for war. *There are still more strenuous forces at work reaching down to impulses and experiences as primitive and profound as are those of struggle itself.*⁵⁹

Addams’ wish to enlist the martial spirit in the service of peace replicates the intellectual and political move advocated by both Emerson’s “War” and William James’s “Moral Equivalent of War” (to which she refers in her introductory chapter). Rhetorically speaking, it is an excellent example of Burke’s “lightning rod principle.” By “channelizing” the evil of war in the fight for peace, Addams rejected “the heroism connected with warfare and destruction” suggesting that “the same heroic self-sacrifice, the same fine courage and readiness to meet death may be displayed without the accompaniment of killing our fellowmen.”⁶⁰

**Giving Peace a Chance**

The legacy left by Emerson’s, James’s, and Addams’s reflections on war and peace has had a lasting impact on the American, and indeed the international movements for peace and social justice. One need only think of the work done by figures like Charles Marsh Case, the University of Iowa sociologist who in 1923 published a book (*Non-violent coercion*) in which he tried to show how peace and practical force need not be thought of as opposites, and especially by Richard Bartlett Gregg, the author of *The Power of Non-Violence*, a work that would deeply influence Martin Luther King, who would himself never tire of distinguishing, in Gandhian fashion, between “negative” and “positive” peace, and who insisted that non-violent resistance could never be embraced by cowards.⁶¹ Gregg’s definition of non-violent direct action as a form of “moral jiu-jitsu” that could turn out to be an “effective substitute for war” was directly indebted to Gandhi’s example, yet it can also be seen as standing squarely in the tradition of Emerson and James,
especially where Gregg insists that the virtues required of the peace fighter are substantially similar to the ones one admires in the great military heroes. This lesson would not be lost on many great U.S. “peace heroes” of the last few decades such as Dorothy Day, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, A. J. Muste, Elizabeth Mcalister, Cesar Chavez, George Lakey, Cindy Sheean, and many, many others who have militantly, courageously, “strenuously” fought non-violently against war and injustice. When one thinks about such an important tradition, it is all the more surprising that, as Werner Sollors noticed with regret some years ago, peace has never managed to become a buzzword in American Studies. Perhaps, Sollors surmised, this is due to the fact that “American Studies may be first and foremost a child of war.” In fact, it could be hardly denied that both World Wars, and then in decisive ways the long Cold War, were key factors in the development of American Studies both at home and abroad. It was only during the interlude of the Sixties that, in response to the Vietnam war, “peace actually moved to the foreground of American Studies.” However, one could argue that a good deal of the literature stimulated by the Vietnam disaster was more concerned with locating the war within America’s imperialist legacy rather than focusing on ways to build peace. This kind of rhetoric is wonderfully epitomized by a famous passage of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*, where he writes that, “you couldn’t use standard methods to date the doom, might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along … might just as well lay it on the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace and filled them up with their own imported devils.” This is the kind of intellectual perspective informing Slotkin’s work, from *Regeneration through Violence* to *Gunfighter Nation*, as well as many other texts written since Vietnam—texts that passionately denounce the wrongdoings of the U.S. war machinery, but that too often seem bent on reinforcing D. H. Lawrence’s famous description of the essential American soul as “hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer” and thereby leave us defenseless when confronted with contemporary polemics such as Robert Kagan’s contention that while Europeans come from Venus, Americans are obviously from Mars. One must be careful, in other words, to avoid the “paradox” in which, according to Burke, run those doctrines too “zestful in building an admonitory image of our warlike past,” thus contributing their part “to usher in precisely the gloom they thought they were ushering out. For the only substance represented with any fullness in their statements [is] that of the warlike past—and so, what we [are] admonished against [is] just about the only tangible thing there for us to be” (331-2). It is hard to oppose war if one constantly projects an image of the U.S as a nation in which peace has virtually no place and whose deeds of gift, as Robert Frost famously wrote, always amount to many deeds of war.
Although, as Sollors argues, “There may be no American Lysistrata, and American literature may not be concerned with peace as was the book of Psalms … there is a tradition of American imaginings of ‘peace’ that could be profitably studied and taught.” I agree, and I would only add that “imaginings of peace” may be often found also in those texts that we would think more appropriate to teach in a “War and American literature” course. To me the most urgent task is not simply to replace the obsession for America’s obsession with war with the focus on an alternative gun-less and peace-loving national tradition, but rather to explore the dialectic of war and peace which quite often animates even those texts—like Emerson’s—that may at first strike us as only promoting “the charm of war.” In Burkean terms, I hope to see more studies of American history, literature, and culture in which war “would not be used primarily as a constitutive anecdote but rather as an admonitory anecdote.” As Burke writes towards the end of his Grammar, one must be aware that “the world as we know it, the world in history, cannot be described in its particularities by an idiom of peace … hence the representative anecdote must contain militaristic ingredients. It may not be an anecdote of peace—but it may be an anecdote giving us the purification of war.”

The kind of renewed interest in US antiwar discourse I am calling for should by no means be construed as being simply yet another call to condemn America for not living up to its own ideals. I agree with Amy Kaplan when she notes that “condemning the United States for failing to measure up to its own highest standards may have some strategic value in public debates, but this approach is both insular and exceptionalist, as it implicitly makes the United States the bearer of universal values” and I am all for holding “the US to standards beyond its ideal self-image … Standards of human rights, of international law, of ethics that stem from cosmopolitan, transnational, and local sources and are not prescribed by and limited to the ideals of a single nation.” My contention is that, by paying a closer attention to the dialectic of war and peace, American Studies may both rediscover an important homegrown tradition of militant pacifism and avoid the parochialism of the jeremiad. A genuine concern for peace is by definition meant to curb rather than promote nationalism. Unsurprisingly, all the great pacifist manifestos have always well been the product of cultural cross-fertilization. For example, as John Gruesser has argued in reference to Thoreau’s “Resistance to Civil Government,” “drawing on Greek mythology, Confucius, the New Testament, and Shakespeare and inspiring Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, suffragettes in England and the United States, anti-apartheid activists, Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as antiwar and antinuclear demonstrators around the world, Thoreau’s essay is international in both its pedigree and influence.”

I would therefore conclude by noticing that, given the recent push towards the internationalization of American Studies, it’s somewhat surprising that peace has not achieved the
buzzword status wished for by Sollors. Yet I believe it is high time that it should—especially today when, as Djelal Kadir has put it, “the global repercussiveness of America makes it imperative for us Americanists to be international Americanists.”

At a time when the “peace” promoted by the Bush administration is a shameless Pax Americana it is no wonder that some of us are tempted, to quote Kadir once again, to replace “the essentialist idealization of America as devotional object” with “the equally essentialist reification of a dark side of America as compensation for our chagrin at demystification and disenchantment.”

It is therefore all the more urgent for a truly international American Studies to rediscover a tradition of militant pacifism that has opposed various versions of Pax Americana, from the days of the proto-Gringos and the Trail of Tears to the Vietnam War and the attack on Iraq. As we do this, we should not—as Michael Bellesiles apparently did—manipulate the historical or textual record to suit our wishes; yet we should also never ignore those instances in which Americans have raised their voices against the gun-fighting spirit of the US. To invoke once again Emerson’s example, let’s consider his “Cherokee letter.”

Such a dereliction of all faith and virtue, such a denial of justice, and such deafness to screams for mercy were never heard of in times of peace and in the dealing of a nation with its own allies, since the earth was made…. [A] crime is projected that confounds our understanding by its magnitude,—a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country; for how could we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country, any more? You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world.

Judged by today’s standards, Emerson’s words are unmistakably those of an anti-American. By polemically contextualizing in world history the cruelty of the Indian Removal, Emerson imagines an international public opinion condemning the criminal behavior of the US government.
nationalist rhetoric of “my country right or wrong,” Emerson juxtaposes the notion that I can only call that country mine that behaves in a just and humane way.

Yet, important as they are, such critiques of nationalism and militarism are more significant when read against the background of the *ad bellum purificandum* tradition I have tried to sketch in the second half of my essay and which we are in dire need of rediscovering today, at a time when—as James Hillman has argued in his recent and important *A Terrible Love of War*—we are once again left to wonder why war (both as fact and symbol) remains to many a fascinating and attractive business.74 In Hillman’s view the only way to fight for peace under current conditions is by “going to war” with our minds. Even though he never mentions Emerson in his book, when in the very first paragraph he urges us to plunge our imagination into “the martial state of the soul,” he is unknowingly quoting from Emerson’s “Heroism.” Similarly, the epigraph of Hillman’s book—“The Lord is a great warrior; His name is The Lord”, from Exodus—is the Biblical counterpart to Emerson’s quotation from Mohammed in “Heroism”: a reminder that any religion of peace is always, perhaps inevitably, a religion of war. While I find some of the points Hillman makes in *A Terrible Love of War* rather perplexing, I do find his critique of all forms of naïve pacifism both convincing and timely.75 Some of the best pages of his book are indeed the ones where he shows that no neat boundaries can be drawn between Mars and Venus, peace and war, the field of love and the battleground. In sum, there is absolutely no need to think that peace should achieve buzzword status in American studies at the expense of war. The important lesson that American thinkers such as Emerson and Kenneth Burke have taught us is analogous to the conclusion Hillman arrives at in his book: *Similia similibus curantur*—“the like is cured by the like, not by the opposite”. Or, as Burke put it roughly seventy years ago, “Militaristic patterns are fundamental to our ‘virtue,’ even the word itself coming from a word which the Latins applied to their warriors.”76 To the peace that is under the shadow of Patriot missiles, we must oppose the warlike courage of the virtuous peacefighter, so as to avoid, years later, having to repeat Tim O’Brien’s bitter words on his Vietnam experience: “I survived, but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war”.77
Notes

5. Bellesiles, p. 15.
6. The relevant material on the “Bellesiles affair” can be easily consulted on the web. A good place to start, which includes links to the most important documents, is the Wikipedia article on Bellesiles: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bellesiles.
10. Charlton Heston attacked Bellesiles before the publication of *Arming America*, in a piece published in the November 1999 issue of *Guns and Ammo*.
13. The relevant material on the “Bellesiles affair” can be easily consulted on the web. A good place to start, which includes links to the most important documents, is the Wikipedia article on Bellesiles: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bellesiles.
15. Bellesiles, p. 5
26. Ernst Friedrich, *Krieg dem Kriege!* (Berlin: Freie jugend, 1924) is a shocking collection of World War I photographs, prefaced by a trilingual (German, English, and French) call to fight against war and those who make wars possible. It was republished in the U.S. as *War Against War*, with an introduction by Douglas Kellner (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1987).
Historical study of Emerson that stands outside these two "schools" of Emersonian criticism, see Eduardo Cadava, *Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Routledge), pp. 307-52; Christopher Newfield, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 22.


Horsburgh, p. 64n. It is no accident that Gandhi’s endorsement of real wars may have never reached the level of intensity characterizing Emerson’s support for the Union during the Civil War, it is worth noting that “his belief that courage is a major index of moral stature … led him to accept the role of recruiting sergeant during several imperial wars—a role for which he has been widely criticized” (Horsburgh, p. 64n).

As Fulvio Cesare Manara reports, in Gandhi’s complete writings we can find one hundred occurrences of the phrase “non-violent resistance,” eighteen occurrences of the phrases “non-violent fight” or “non-violent sanction,” fifty-seven occurrences of “non-violent struggle,” twenty-five occurrences of “non-violent war” and, finally, forty-one cases in which the expression “non-violent army is employed.” *Una forza che dà vita. Ricominciare con Gandhi in un’età di terrorismo* (Milan: Unicopli, 2006), p. 280n.


Emerson, “War,” p. 171.


As quoted in Borman, p. 189.

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Borman, p. 74. It is no accident that *Satyagraha* is translated by Gandhi as “Truth-force.”
The Gandhi quotation is taken from Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence. The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 28. As for Emerson, I would also argue that often—in his essay “Heroism,” for example, or when in “Fate” he argues that one can have no insight into truth unless he is ready to face martyrdom for truth’s sake—when Emerson sounds his praise for “war,” he usually imagines his ideal hero as one who is ready to endure the violence of others rather than as a warrior ready to bring destruction to his enemies.

As noted by Eduardo Cadava, “In characterizing the institution of slavery as a form of war . . . Emerson appropriates and exploits the abolitionist rhetoric of [Wendell] Phillips, who in February 1861 declared that ‘Slavery is a form of perpetual war.’” Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History*, p. 34.

William Allen Huggard, *Emerson and the Problem of War and Peace*, University of Iowa Studies (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1938), p. 72. For a shorter version of Huggard’s thesis, see his “Emerson’s Philosophy of War and Peace,” *Philological Quarterly*, XXII (October 1943), pp. 370-75. Though neither Lopez nor Stessel mention Huggard’s study, I think it remains to this day a very useful and instructive read.

It is no accident that Ira Cherns begins his survey of pacifism in America precisely by explaining the difference between these two forms of non-violence. See *American Nonviolence The History of an Idea* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).


Addams, pp. 7-8. Emphasis added.


Equivalent/substitute for war.

I wish to make clear that my scope here is not to sketch a history of the modern critique of violence in the United States or elsewhere. I am well aware, for example, that any history of the sort would have to include a voluminous chapter on the various strands of feminist thinking on war, power, force, etc. Nor do I want to enter the discussion of whether the non-violent strategies of Gandhi and King can be considered as always valid regardless of historical and political circumstances. I do wish to insist, however, that the political and intellectual tradition I have traced, is marked by a concept of “peace” that has nothing to do with the “negative” peace embraced not only by most military strategists but in several ways also by such thinkers as Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari.


Sollors, p. 28.


Sollors, p. 34.


Gruesser, p. 173.


Kadir, p. 151.


The main problem with Hillman’s approach is that, in his laudable attempt to explain the root causes of war’s appeal, he often arrives at a simplification similar to the one that plagues James’s essay, and which Richard Poirier has acutely detected: “Its [the essay’s] simplification consists in supposing that war results from militaristic sentiment, inbred pugnacity, or because war, as he puts, ‘is the strong life.’ By that logic, ordinary folk not only fight the wars, they plan and start them.” R. Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 117. I discuss at greater length the limitations of James’ approach in my “L’equivalente retorico della guerra,” pp. 226-34. As a corrective to strictly psychological/psychoanalytic theories of war it may be worth recalling Hanna Arendt’s thesis: “The chief reason warfare is still with us is neither a secret death wish of the human species, nor an irrepressible instinct of aggression, nor, finally and more plausibly, the serious economic and social dangers inherent in disarmament, but the
simple fact that no substitute for the final arbiter in international affairs has yet appeared on the political scene.” On Violence (??)