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The Obsolescence of Major War

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On May 15, 1984, the major countries of the developed world had managed to remain at peace with each other for the longest continuous stretch of time since the days of the Roman Empire. If a significant battle in a war had been fought on that day, the press would have bristled with it. As usual, however, a landmark crossing in the history of peace caused no stir: the most prominent story in the *New York Times* that day concerned the saga of a manicurist, a machinist, and a cleaning woman who had just won a big Lotto contest. . . .

For decades now, two massively armed countries, the United States and the Soviet Union, have dominated international politics, and during that time they have engaged in an intense, sometimes even desperate, rivalry over political, military, and ideological issues. Yet despite this enormous mutual hostility, they have never gone to war with each other. Furthermore, although they have occasionally engaged in confrontational crises, there have been only a few of these—and virtually none at all in the last two-thirds of the period. Rather than gradually drawing closer to armed conflict, as often happened after earlier wars, the two major countries seem to be drifting farther away from it.

Insofar as it is discussed at all, there appear to be two schools of thought to explain what John Lewis Gaddis has called the "long peace."¹

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¹Gaddis 1987b. The calculations about eras of peace are by Paul Schroeder (1985, p. 88). The previous record, he notes, was chalked up during the period from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to the effective beginning of the Crimean War in 1854. The period between the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914—marred by a major war in Asia between Russia and Japan in 1904—was an even longer era of peace among major European countries. That record was broken on November 8, 1988. On some of these issues, see also Nye 1987; Hinsley 1963, ch. 17; Luard 1986, pp. 395–99; Russett and Starr 1981, ch. 15.

One school concludes that we have simply been lucky. Since 1947, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* has decorated its cover with a "doomsday" clock set ominously at a few minutes before midnight. From time to time the editors push the clock's big hand forward or backward a bit to demonstrate their pleasure with an arms control measure or their disapproval of what they perceive to be rising tension; but they never nudge it very far away from the fatal hour, and the message they wish to convey is clear. They believe we live perpetually on the brink, teetering on a fragile balance; if our luck turns a bit sour, we are likely at any moment to topple helplessly in cataclysmic war.² As time goes by, however, this point of view begins to lose some of its persuasiveness. When a clock remains poised at a few minutes to midnight for decades, one may gradually come to suspect that it isn't telling us very much.

The other school stresses paradox: It is the very existence of unprecedentedly destructive weapons that has worked, so far, to our benefit—in Winston Churchill's memorable phrase, safety has been the "sturdy child of [nuclear] terror."³ This widely held (if minimally examined) view is, to say the least, less than fully comforting, because the very weapons that have been so necessary for peace according to this argument, also possess the capability of cataclysmic destruction, should they somehow be released. For many, this perpetual threat is simply too much to bear, and to them the weapons' continued existence seals our ultimate doom even as it perpetuates our current peace. In his influential best-seller, *The Fate of the Earth*, Jonathan Schell dramatically prophesies that if we do not "rise up and cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons," we will soon "sink into the final coma and end it all."⁴

This book develops a third explanation: The long peace since World War II is less a product of recent weaponry than the culmination of a substantial historical process. For the last two or three centuries major war—war among developed countries—has gradually moved toward terminal disrepute because of its perceived repulsiveness and futility.

²Said Herman Kahn in 1960: "I have a firm belief that unless we have more serious and sober thought on various aspects of the strategic problem ... we are not going to reach the year 2000—and maybe not even the year 1965—without a cataclysm" (1960, p. x). Hans J. Morgenthau stated in 1979, "In my opinion the world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is too unstable to survive for long" (quoted, Boyle 1985, p. 73). And astronomer Carl Sagan commented in 1983: "I do not think our luck can hold out forever" (quoted, Schroeder 1985, p. 87). On the history of the doomsday clock, see Feld 1978.

³Churchill: Bartlett 1977, p. 104. Edward Luttwak says, "We have lived since 1945 without another world war precisely because rational minds ... extracted a durable peace from the very terror of nuclear weapons" (1983b, p. 82). Kenneth Waltz: "Nuclear weapons have banished war from the center of international politics" (1988, p. 627). See also Knorr 1985, p. 79; Mearsheimer 1984/85, pp. 25–26; Art and Waltz 1983, p. 28; Gilpin 1981, pp. 213–19; Betts 1987, pp. 1–2; Joffe 1987, p. 37; F. Lewis 1987.

⁴Schell 1982, p. 231. For a discussion of expert opinion concluding that the chances of nuclear war by the year 2000 were at least fifty-fifty, see Russett 1983, pp. 3–4.

The book also concludes that nuclear weapons have not had an important impact on this remarkable trend—they have not crucially defined postwar stability, and they do not threaten to disturb it severely. They have affected rhetoric (we live, we are continually assured, in the atomic age, the nuclear epoch), and they certainly have influenced defense budgets and planning. However, they do not seem to have been necessary to deter major war, to cause the leaders of major countries to behave cautiously, or to determine the alliances that have been formed. Rather, it seems that things would have turned out much the same had nuclear weapons never been invented.

That something other than nuclear terror explains the long peace is suggested in part by the fact that there have been numerous nonwars since 1945 besides the nonwar that is currently being waged by the United States and the Soviet Union. With only one minor and fleeting exception (the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956), there have been no wars among the forty-four wealthiest (per capita) countries during that time.⁵ Although there have been many wars since World War II, some of them enormously costly by any standard, these have taken place almost entirely within the third—or really the fourth—world. The developed countries have sometimes participated in these wars on distant turf, but not directly against each other.

Several specific nonwars are in their own way even more extraordinary than the one that has taken place between the United States and the Soviet Union. France and Germany are important countries which had previously spent decades—centuries even—either fighting each other or planning to do so. For this ages-old antagonism World War II indeed served as the war to end war: like Greece and Turkey, they have retained the creative ability to discover a motivation for war even under an overarching nuclear umbrella if they really wanted to, yet they have now lived side by side for decades, perhaps with some bitterness and recrimination, but without even a glimmer of war fever. The case of Japan is also striking: this formerly aggressive major country seems now to have fully embraced the virtues (and profits) of peace.

In fact, within the first and second worlds warfare of *all* sorts seems generally to have lost its appeal. Not only have there been virtually no international wars among the major and not-so-major countries, but the developed world has experienced virtually no civil war either. The only exception is the

⁵Wealth is calculated using 1978 data when Iran and Iraq were at their financial peak (World Bank 1980). If later data are used, the figure of forty-four would be greater. Countries like Monaco that have no independent foreign policy are not included in the count. The Soviet invasion of Hungary was in some sense requested by ruling politicians in Hungary and for that reason is sometimes not classified as an international war. On classification issues, see Small and Singer 1982, pp. 55, 305; Luard 1986, pp. 5–7. Small and Singer consider Saudi Arabia to have been a participant in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 because it committed 1,000 troops to the anti-Israeli conflict (p. 306); if one accepts their procedure here, that war would form another example of war among the top forty-four. Some might also include the bloodless “war” between the USSR and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

1944–49 Greek civil war—more an unsettled residue of World War II than an autonomous event. The sporadic violence in Northern Ireland or the Basque region of Spain has not really been sustained enough to be considered civil war, nor have the spurts of terrorism carried out by tiny bands of self-styled revolutionaries elsewhere in Western Europe that have never coalesced into anything bigger. Except for the fleeting case of Hungary in 1956, Europeans under Soviet rule have so far accepted their fate, no matter how desperate their disaffection, rather than take arms to oppose it—though some sort of civil uprising there is certainly not out of the question.⁶

Because it is so quiet, peace often is allowed to carry on unremarked. We tend to delimit epochs by wars and denote periods of peace not for their own character, but for the wars they separate. As Geoffrey Blainey has observed, "For every thousand pages published on the causes of wars there is less than one page directly on the causes of peace."⁷ But now, surely, with so much peace at hand in so much of the world, some effort ought to be made to explain the unprecedented cornucopia. Never before in history have so many well-armed, important countries spent so much time not using their arms against each other. . . .

The Rising Costs of War

War is merely an idea. It is not a trick of fate, a thunderbolt from hell, a natural calamity, or a desperate plot contrivance dreamed up by some sadistic puppeteer on high. And if war begins in the minds of men, as the UNESCO charter insists, it can end there as well. Over the centuries war opponents have been trying to bring this about by discrediting war as an idea. In part, their message . . . stresses that war is unacceptably costly, and they have pointed to two kinds of costs: (1) psychic ones—war, they argue, is repulsive, immoral, and uncivilized; and (2) physical ones—war is bloody, destructive, and expensive.

It is often observed that war's physical costs have risen. World War II was the most destructive in history, and World War I was also terrible. World War III, even if nuclear weapons were not used, could easily be worse; and a thermonuclear war might, as Schell would have it, "end it all."

Rising physical costs do seem to have helped to discredit war. But there are good reasons to believe that this cannot be the whole story.

In 1889, Baroness Bertha von Suttner of Austria published a sentimental antiwar novel, *Die Waffen Nieder!*, that swiftly became an international best-seller—the *Uncle Tom's-Cabin* of the nineteenth-century peace movement. In

⁶Even as dedicated a foe of the Soviet regime as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has said, "I have never advocated physical general revolution. That would entail such destruction of our people's life as would not merit the victory obtained" (quoted, S. Cohen 1985, p. 214).

⁷Blainey, 1973, p. 3.

it she describes the travails of a young Austrian woman who turns against war when her husband is killed in the Franco-Austrian War of 1859. Now, in historical perspective, that brief war was one of the least memorable in modern history, and its physical costs were minor in comparison with many other wars of that, or any other, era. But Suttner's fictional young widow was repelled not by the war's size, but by its existence and by the devastating personal consequences to her. Opposition to war has been growing in the developed world because more and more people have come to find war repulsive for what it is, not simply for the extent of the devastation it causes.

Furthermore, it is simply not true that cataclysmic war is an invention of the 20th century.⁸ To annihilate ancient Carthage in 146 B.C., the Romans used weaponry that was primitive by today's standard, but even nuclear weapons could not have been more thorough. And, as Thucydides recounts with shattering calm, when the Athenians invaded Melos in 416 B.C., they "put to death all the grown men whom they took and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place for themselves."⁹

During the Thirty Years War of 1618–48 the wealthy city of Magdeburg, together with its 20,000 inhabitants, was annihilated. According to standard estimates accepted as late as the 1930s, Germany's population in that war declined from 21 million to under 13.5 million—absolute losses far larger than it suffered in either world war of the twentieth century. Moreover, and more importantly, most people apparently *thought* things were even worse: for centuries a legend prevailed that Germany had suffered a 75 percent decline in population, from 16 million to 4 million.¹⁰ Yet the belief that war could cause devastation of such enormous proportions did not lead to its abandonment. After the Thirty Years War, conflict remained endemic in Europe, and in 1756 Prussia fought the Seven Years War, which, in the estimate of its king and generalissimo, Frederick the Great, cost it 500,000 lives—one-

⁸To put things in somewhat broader perspective, it may be useful to note that war is not the century's greatest killer. Although there have been a large number of extremely destructive wars, totalitarian and extreme authoritarian governments have put more of their own people to death—three times more according to one calculation—than have died in all the century's international and civil wars combined (Rummel 1986). For example, the man-made famine in China between 1958 and 1962 apparently caused the deaths of 30 million people (see p. 165), far more than died during World War I. Governments at peace can also surpass war in their economic destruction as well; largely because of government mismanagement and corruption, the average Zairian's wages in 1988, after adjusting for inflation, were 10 percent of what they had been in 1960 (Greenhouse 1988).

⁹Thucydides 1934, p. 337.

¹⁰Wedgwood 1938, p. 516. German civilian and military deaths have been estimated at 3,160,000 in World War I and 6,221,000 in World War II (Sivard 1987, p. 29). For the latter-day argument that the losses in the Thirty Years War have been grossly overestimated, see Steinberg 1966, ch. 3. A recent estimate suggests a population decline from 20 million to 16 or 17 million (Parker 1984, p. 211).

ninth of its population, a proportion higher than almost any suffered by any combatant in the wars of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.¹¹

Wars in the past have often caused revolts and economic devastation as well. Historians have been debating for a century whether the Thirty Years War destroyed a vibrant economy in Germany or whether it merely administered the final blow to an economy that was already in decline—but destruction was the consequence in either case. The Seven Years War brought Austria to virtual bankruptcy, and it so weakened France that the conditions for revolution were established. When the economic costs of war are measured as a percentage of the gross national product of the combatants, observes Alan Milward, war “has not shown any discernible long-term trend towards greater costliness.”¹²

And in sheer pain and suffering wars used to be far worse than ones fought by developed countries today. In 1840 or 1640 or 1240 a wounded or diseased soldier often died slowly and in intense agony. Medical aid was inadequate, and since physicians had few remedies and were unaware of the germ theory, they often only made things worse. War, indeed, was hell. By contrast, an American soldier wounded in the Vietnam jungle could be in a sophisticated, sanitized hospital within a half hour.

Consequently, if the revulsion toward war has grown in the developed world, this development cannot be due entirely to a supposed rise in its physical costs. Also needed is an appreciation for war’s increased psychic costs. Over the last century or two, war in the developed world has come widely to be regarded as repulsive, immoral, and uncivilized. There may also be something of an interactive effect between psychic and physical costs here: If for moral reasons we come to place a higher value on human life—even to have a sort of reverence for it—the physical costs of war or any other life-taking enterprise will effectively rise as cost tolerance declines.

It may not be obvious that an accepted, time-honored institution that serves an urgent social purpose can become obsolescent and then die out because a lot of people come to find it obnoxious. But this book will argue that something like that has been happening to war in the developed world. To illustrate the dynamic and to set up a framework for future discussion, it will be helpful briefly to assess two analogies: the processes through which the once-perennial institutions of dueling and slavery have been virtually expunged from the earth.

¹¹Luard 1986, p. 51. Small and Singer 1982, pp. 82–99. About 180,000 of the half-million were soldiers (Kennedy 1987, p. 115), giving a battle death rate of about 4 percent.

¹²Thirty Years War: Robb 1962. Seven Years War: Kennedy 1987, p. 114; Brodie 1973, pp. 248–49; Milward 1977, p. 3.

Dueling Ceases to Be a "Peculiar Necessity"

In some important respects war in the developed world may be following the example of another violent method for settling disputes, dueling, which up until a century ago was common practice in Europe and America among a certain class of young and youngish men who liked to classify themselves as gentlemen. When one man concluded that he had been insulted by another and therefore that his honor had been besmirched, he might well engage the insulter in a short, private, and potentially deadly battle. The duel was taken somehow to settle the matter, even if someone was killed in the process—or even if someone wasn't.¹³

At base, dueling was a matter of attitude more than of cosmology or technology; it was something someone might want to do, and in some respects was even expected to do, from time to time. The night before his famous fatal duel with Aaron Burr in 1804, the methodical Alexander Hamilton wrote out his evaluation of the situation. He could find many reasons to reject Burr's challenge—he really felt no ill will toward his challenger, he wrote, and dueling was against his religious and moral principles, as well as against the laws of New York (where he lived) and New Jersey (where the duel was to be held); furthermore, his death would endanger the livelihood of his wife, children, and creditors. In sum, "I shall hazard much, and can possibly gain nothing." Nevertheless, he still concluded he must fight. All these concerns were overwhelmed because he felt that "what men of the world denominate honor" imposed upon him a "peculiar necessity": his refusal to duel would reduce his political effectiveness by subjecting him to contempt and derision in the circles he considered important. Therefore, he felt that he had to conform with "public prejudice in this particular."¹⁴ Although there were solid economic, legal, moral, and religious reasons to turn down the challenge of Vice President Burr, the prick of honor and the attendant fear of immobilizing ridicule—Hamilton's peculiar necessities—impelled him to venture out that summer morning to meet his fate, and his maker, at Weehawken, N.J.

Dueling died out as a general practice eighty years later in the United States after enjoying quite a vogue, especially in the South and in California. It finally faded, not so much because it was outlawed (like liquor—and war—in the 1920s), but because the "public prejudice" Hamilton was so fatally concerned about changed in this particular. Since dueling was an activity carried out by consenting adults in private, laws prohibiting it were difficult to enforce when the climate of opinion accepted the institution. But gradu-

¹³For other observations of the analogy between war and dueling, see Brodie 1973, p. 275; Angell 1914, pp. 202-3; Gooch 1911, p. 249; Cairnes 1865, p. 650n.

¹⁴Seitz 1929, pp. 98-101; Freeman 1884, pp. 345-48.

ally a consensus emerged that dueling was contemptible and stupid, and it came to be duelers, not nonduelers, who suffered ridicule. As one student of the subject has concluded, "It began to be clear that pistols at ten paces did not settle anything except who was the better shot. . . . Dueling had long been condemned by both statute book and church decree. But these could make no headway against public opinion." However, when it came to pass that "solemn gentlemen went to the field of honor only to be laughed at by the younger generation, that was more than any custom, no matter how sanctified by tradition, could endure. And so the code of honor in America finally died." One of the last duels was in 1877. After the battle (at which no blood was spilled), the combatants found themselves the butt of public hilarity, causing one of them to flee to Paris, where he remained in self-exile for several years.¹⁵

The American experience was reflected elsewhere. Although dueling's decline in country after country was due in part to enforced legislation against it, the "most effective weapon" against it, one study concludes, "has undoubtedly been ridicule."¹⁶ The ultimate physical cost of dueling—death—did not, and could not rise. But the psychic costs did.

Men of Hamilton's social set still exist, they still get insulted, and they still are concerned about their self respect and their standing among their peers. But they don't duel. However, they do not avoid dueling today because they evaluate the option and reject it on cost-benefit grounds—to use the jargon of a later chapter, they do not avoid it because it has become rationally unthinkable. Rather, the option never percolates into their consciousness as something that is available—that is, it has become subrationally unthinkable. Dueling under the right conditions—with boxing gloves, for example—would not violate current norms or laws. And, of course, in other social classes duel-like combat, such as the street fight or gang war, persists. But the romantic, ludicrous institution of formal dueling has faded from the scene. Insults of the sort that led to the Hamilton-Burr duel often are simply ignored or, if applicable, they are settled with peaceful methods like litigation.¹⁷

A dueling manual from 1847 states that "dueling, like war, is the necessary consequence of offense."¹⁸ By now, however, dueling, a form of violence famed and fabled for centuries, is avoided not merely because it has ceased to seem "necessary," but because it has sunk from thought as a viable, con-

¹⁵Stevens 1940, pp. 280–83. See also Cochran 1968, p. 287.

¹⁶Baldick 1965, p. 199.

¹⁷It is sometimes held that dueling died out because improved access to the legal system provided a nonviolent alternative. But most duels were fought over matters of "honor," not legality. Furthermore, lawyers, hardly a group alienated or disenfranchised from the legal system, were frequent duelists—in Tennessee 90 percent of all duels were fought between attorneys (Seitz 1929, p. 30).

¹⁸Stowe 1987, p. 15.

scious possibility. You can't fight a duel if the idea of doing so never occurs to you or your opponent.

The Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz opens his famous 1832 book, *On War*, by observing that "war is nothing but a duel on a larger scale."¹⁹ If war, like dueling, comes to be viewed as a thoroughly undesirable, even ridiculous, policy, and if it can no longer promise gains or if potential combatants no longer value the things it can gain for them, then war could fade away first as a "peculiar necessity" and then as a coherent possibility, even if a truly viable substitute or "moral equivalent" for it were never formulated. Like dueling, it could become unfashionable and then obsolete.

Slavery Abruptly Becomes a "Peculiar Institution"

From the dawn of prehistory until about 1788 it had occurred to almost no one that there was anything the least bit peculiar about the institution of slavery. Like war, it could be found just about everywhere in one form or another, and it flourished in every age.²⁰ Here and there, some people expressed concern about excessive cruelty, and a few found slavery an unfortunate necessity. But the abolitionist movement that broke out at the end of the eighteenth century in Britain and the United States was something new, not the culmination of a substantial historical process.

Like war opponents, the antislavery forces had come to believe that the institution that concerned them was unacceptable because of both its psychic and its physical costs. For some time a small but socially active religious sect in England and the United States, the Quakers, had been arguing that slavery, like war, was repulsive, immoral, and uncivilized, and this sentiment gradually picked up adherents.

Slavery's physical costs, opponents argued, stemmed from its inefficiency. In 1776, Adam Smith concluded that the "work done by slaves . . . is in the end the dearest of any" because "a person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much and to labor as little as possible." Smith's view garnered adherents, but not, as it happens, among slaveowners. That is, either Smith was wrong, or slaveholders were bad businessmen. Clearly, if the economic argument had been correct, slavery would have eventually died of its own inefficiency. Although some have argued that this process was indeed under way, Stanley Engerman observes that in "the history of slave emancipation in the Americas, it is difficult to find any cases of slavery declining economically prior to the imposition of emancipation." Rather, he says, "it took political and military action to bring it to a halt," and

¹⁹Clausewitz 1976, p. 75.

²⁰See Patterson 1982; Engerman 1986, pp. 318-19.

"political, cultural, and ideological factors" played crucial roles. In fact, at exactly the time that the antislavery movement was taking flight, the Atlantic slave economy, as Seymour Drescher notes, "was entering what was probably the most dynamic and profitable period in its existence."²¹

Thus, the abolitionists were up against an institution that was viable, profitable, and expanding, and one that had been uncritically accepted for thousands—perhaps millions—of years as a natural and inevitable part of human existence. To counter this time-honored institution, the abolitionists' principal weapon was a novel argument: it had recently occurred to them, they said, that slavery was *no longer* the way people ought to do things.

As it happened, it was an idea whose time had come. The abolition of slavery required legislative battles, international pressures, economic travail, and, in the United States, a cataclysmic war (but, notably, it did *not* require the fabrication of a functional equivalent or the formation of an effective supranational authority). Within a century slavery, and most similar institutions like serfdom, had been all but eradicated from the face of the globe. Slavery became controversial, then peculiar, and then obsolete.

War

Dueling and slavery no longer exist as effective institutions and have faded from human experience except as something one reads about in books. Although their reestablishment is not impossible, they show after a century of neglect no signs of revival. Other once-popular, even once admirable, institutions in the developed world have been, or are being, eliminated because at some point they began to seem repulsive, immoral, and uncivilized: bear-baiting, bareknuckle fighting, freak shows, casual torture, wanton cruelty to animals, the burning of heretics, Jim Crow laws, human sacrifice, family feuding, public and intentionally painful methods of execution, deforming corseting, infanticide, laughing at the insane, executions for minor crimes, eunuchism, flogging, public cigarette smoking. . . . War is not, of course, the same as dueling or slavery. Like war, dueling is an institution for settling disputes; but it usually involved only matters of "honor," not ones of physical gain. Like war, slavery was nearly universal and an apparently inevitable part of human existence, but it could be eliminated area by area: a country that abolished slavery did not have to worry about what other countries were doing. A country that would like to abolish war, however, must continue to be concerned about those that have kept it in their repertoire.

On the other hand, war has against it not only substantial psychic costs but also very obvious and widespread physical ones. Dueling brought death and

²¹Smith 1976, p. 387 (book 3, ch. 2). Engerman 1986, pp. 322—33, 339. Drescher 1987, p. 4; see also Eltis 1987.

injury, but only to a few people who, like Hamilton, had specifically volunteered to participate. And although slavery may have brought moral destruction, it generally was a considerable economic success in the view of those who ran the system, if not to every ivory-tower economist.

In some respects, then, the fact that war has outlived dueling and slavery is curious. But there are signs that, at least in the developed world, it has begun, like them, to succumb to obsolescence. Like dueling and slavery, war does not appear to be one of life's necessities—it is not an unpleasant fact of existence that is somehow required by human nature or by the grand scheme of things. One can live without it, quite well in fact. War may be a social affliction, but in important respects it is also a social affectation that can be shrugged off.