

RETREAT
FROM
DOOMSDAY

THE OBSOLESCENCE
OF MAJOR WAR

JOHN MUELLER



BasicBooks

A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

Publication history:

- 1989 Basic Books (hardbound).
1990 Basic Books (paperbound).
1996 University of Rochester Press reprint (paperbound)
2009 Reprinted by Zip Publishing/The Educational Publisher
Columbus, Ohio www.EduPublisher.com

ISBN: 1-934849-17-0 ISBN13:978-1-934849-17-0

The appendix, "War, Death, and the Automobile," was substantially
rewritten from an article which appeared in the
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To JAM and ESM,
to Karl, Michelle, Karen, and Susan,
and to the memory of Bernard Brodie

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mueller, John E.
Retreat from doomsday.

Bibliographical notes: p. 271
Includes index.

1. War. 2. World politics—20th century. 3. Military
history, Modern—20th century. I. Title.
UA21.2.M84 1989 355'.02'0904 88-47899

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Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Vincent Torre
92 93 FG 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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TWENTY YEARS ON: SOME REFLECTIONS

One rather good thing about publishing a book contending that major war--war among developed states--may be obsolescent is that even those who disagree with you hope you're right. That certainly happened to me in early 1989 when *Retreat from Doomsday* came out--reviews were peppered with words like "hopeful" and "encouraging."

In an important respect, that very phenomenon underscored a central message of the book. Had it been published a century earlier, it would have been met, as chapter 2 seeks to demonstrate, by a rash of derisive reviews reacting with horror that anyone would have the temerity to suggest that war could in any sense be on the way out--that a beautiful, honorable, holy, sublime, heroic, ennobling, natural, virtuous, glorious, cleansing, manly, necessary, and progressive institution might be in the process of being replaced by something as debasing, trivial, and rotten as perpetual peace characterized by crass materialism, artistic decline, repellant effeminacy, rampant selfishness, base immorality, petrifying stagnation, sordid frivolity, degrading cowardice, corrupting boredom, and utter emptiness.

Beyond the hope, there was quite a bit of strong agreement, most notably and gratifyingly in a front page review in the *Sunday Washington Post Book World* by McGeorge Bundy.

However, the book certainly attracted some distinguished detractors as well. Harvard's Samuel Huntington assessed it along with then-current discussions about the apparent end of the Cold War and with Francis Fukuyama's famous essay, "The End of History?" which came out a few months after *Retreat from Doomsday*. Labeling the collective phenomenon "endism," he pronounced it the "intellectual fad of 1989." Although willing to concede that "the probability of hot war between the two superpowers is as low as it has ever been" and that war between any of the advanced industrialized democracies was "even more unlikely," Huntington warned that endism tended to ignore the "weakness and irrationality of human nature" and stressed that human beings were "often stupid, selfish, cruel, and sinful." Endism, he concluded, provided "an illusion of well-being," invited "relaxed complacency," and was accordingly "dangerous and subversive."

Meanwhile in the *New York Times*, the prominent military and diplomatic historian Michael Howard reviewed the book with considerable skepticism (although with less alarm) about its central thesis. "One would like to believe Mr. Mueller," he wrote, but the "prudent reader will check that his air raid shelter is in good repair."

The plausibility of the book's central theses was probably boosted when the Cold War came to an abrupt and hasty end shortly after it was published--the

"endists" of the time seemed to have that one right. Indeed, by 1991 Howard was musing that it had become "quite possible that war in the sense of major, organised armed conflict between highly developed societies may not recur, and that a stable framework for international order will become firmly established." Two years later, the prominent military historian and analyst, John Keegan, concluded in his *A History of Warfare* that the kind of war he was principally considering could well be in terminal demise: "War, it seems to me, after a lifetime of reading about the subject, mingling with men of war, visiting the sites of war and observing its effects, may well be ceasing to commend itself to human beings as a desirable or productive, let alone rational, means of reconciling their discontents."

By the beginning of the new century, the ranks of the "dangerous and subversive" had expanded. Mary Kaldor suggested that "the barbarity of war between states may have become a thing of the past," and Robert Jervis, in his Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association and in a subsequent book, concluded that war among the leading states "will not occur in the future," or, in the words of Andrew Mack "has effectively become obsolete" or, in those of Jeffrey Record, may have "disappeared altogether."

The world seems, then, to have continued, even accelerated, its retreat from doomsday--a word that has picked up a slight aura of quaintness over the ensuing two decades. And, however imprudently, air raid shelters do seem to have been allowed to lapse into disrepair.

In the interval, two collections have appeared that relate to the arguments in *Retreat from Doomsday*. One, edited by historians John Lewis Gaddis, Philip Gordon, Ernest May, and Jonathan Rosenberg, critiques a central proposition in the book, that nuclear weapons have been essentially irrelevant to Cold War history and to the deterrence of major war--a perspective much expanded and developed in my latest book, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda*. The other, edited by political scientist Raimo Väyryen, is entitled *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, a topic political scientists Michael Mandelbaum and Christopher Fettweis have also separately explored.

Retreat from Doomsday deals quite extensively with the Cold War because at the time it was generally considered likely that, should a major war take place, it would emerge somehow out of that global contest. The book argues that the central reason for the Cold War was Communist ideology which, as developed over the decades, was based on the concept of a threatening worldwide class struggle, but not on anything resembling "aggressive, conquering, Hitlerian war" which "would foolishly risk everything" (pp. 99-102). By 1985, as I was beginning the book, it appeared to me that, after decades of failure, the new Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev was in the process of abandoning the class struggle ideology. If ideology (as opposed

for example to arms balances or Communist control of East Europe) was its essential driver, the Cold War could be in terminal demise, and it was logical to conclude that we might be coming to the end of the world as we knew it. I presented that argument at the International Studies Association meetings in March 1986, and, in 1985 and 1986 tried to get it published in various versions in *Foreign Policy*, *National Interest*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New Republic* to no avail. I then gave up and blended the argument into *Retreat from Doomsday* (especially in pp. 211-14), pleasantly uncomfortable throughout by the fact that Gorbachev was dismantling the Cold War faster than I could write about it.

In later years, I have revisited this ideological argument, focusing especially on the rhetoric and actions of the Cold War contestants in the months after the publication of the book. It seems to me these support the argument. These later observations, published as "What Was the Cold War About? Evidence from Its Ending" in *Political Science Quarterly* are included in the appendix to this reprint.

Reprinted there as well is another updating article, "War Has Almost Ceased to Exist: An Assessment," published in the summer of 2009, also in *Political Science Quarterly*. In this I have sought to extend the perspective presented twenty years earlier in *Retreat from Doomsday*. As the book's subtitle pointedly declares, it focuses on major war--war among developed states--not with other kinds of war. It does speculate a bit about the potential that war aversion might prove contagious and suggests that the decline of the Cold War might have something of a dampening effect (pp. 251-54). It also observes that there may already have been a "decline in the attractiveness of conventional, old-fashioned set-piece wars where countries send organized armies to battle it out with each other" (p. 256)--and indeed, since 1989 there has been only one war in which two countries directly battle over a contentious issue, in this case territory: the costly, but little-noticed conflict waged by Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998 to 2000.

However, *Retreat from Doomsday* has little to say about civil war, the kind of war that was far the most common then and has continued to be so since. Indeed, its hopeful observation that there had been remarkably little civil war in Europe especially over the previous four decades (pp. 5, 91-92), was shattered in the early 1990s by several wars in formerly-Communist areas, especially Yugoslavia.

In 2004, I published *The Remnants of War* which sought to assess not only major war, but warfare of all sorts including especially those of the civil variety. (It also more fully develops two issues advanced in *Retreat from Doomsday*: the process by which a change in attitude took place at the time of the First World War and the argument that Hitler was a necessary cause of the Second World War in Europe.) When that book was published, a notable

dwindling in the frequency of all forms of war, especially civil war, was evident, and the 2009 article updates the data and the argument to the end of the decade. It finds that, despite headline-grabbing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the decline of war in all its varieties continues. It is far too early to be certain about this trend--particularly with regard to civil war. Nonetheless, it is likely, again, that those who disagree with me will hope I am right.

John Mueller
Columbus, Ohio
August 19, 2009

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FOREWORD TO THE 1996 REPRINT

An outline of the argument

Major war--war among developed countries--seems to be becoming obsolete.

War is merely an idea. It is not a trick of fate, a thunderbolt from hell, a natural necessity, or a desperate plot device dreamed up by some sadistic puppeteer on high.

Therefore it can be supplanted--rendered obsolete--if people come to embrace another idea: one holding that, as an institution, war is abhorrent and, on balance, methodologically unwise.

Two notable ideas that have undergone such a transformation are the ancient institution of slavery and the popular and romantic problem-solving device of formal dueling. Both died out because people came to regard them as undesirable, not because they had ceased to be objectively viable or economically effective.

At least in the developed world, war seems to have followed a similar trajectory. Europe, once the most warlike of continents, has now been substantially free of international war for the longest period of time since the Roman empire.

This does not seem to have come about because war became physically more destructive. There have been many instances in the past of wars or patterns of warfare that were essentially annihilative, but this did not cause an effective revulsion against the institution itself.

In fact, despite such experiences, until 1914 war was commonly viewed in the developed world as ennobling, virtuous, glorious, beautiful, holy, manly, redemptive, beneficial, progressive, necessary, natural, and inevitable.

In the late 19th century--only about 100 years ago--this notion was actively challenged on a wide basis for the first time in history by various peace organizations which effectively propagated the view that war was repulsive, immoral, uncivilized, and futile, particularly economically.

World War I--the Great War--played perfectly into the hands of this gadfly peace movement. At its end, its notion that war--or at least wars of that type--should be abolished came to be commonly accepted in the developed world.

World War II in Europe came about not naturally or inevitably, but largely because of the atavistic--if lucky, fanatically dedicated, and remarkably skilled--machinations of one man, Adolf Hitler. He was allowed considerable leeway in part because other European leaders desperately wanted to believe that no one could possibly desire another major war and because he continually assured them, and the German people, that he abhorred war.

Whether one accepts that argument or treats World War II as simply an additional learning experience for Europe (and as a terminal one for the distant Japanese who had largely missed the lessons of World War I), the developed world came overwhelming to reject the notion of major war at its conclusion.

The international Communist movement--the chief source of international instability since 1945--has embraced the idea that violence is necessary to overthrow the capitalist enemy. It has, however, rejected major war as a sensible device for carrying out this mission even while fearing--and preparing for--the possibility that the capitalist world might launch such a war against it.

Since neither side in the Cold War ever saw major war as a remotely sensible device for pursuing its agenda, nuclear weapons have not importantly affected history: things would have turned out much the same if they had never been invented. They furnish dramatic reminders of how destructive a major war could become, and they could conceivably be useful in the future, for example if another Hitler should arise. But they have not been necessary to inspire caution among the war-sobered people who have actually led the major countries since World War II. Even at times of crisis, major war has never really been in the cards.

While eschewing major war, the international Communist movement was willing to experiment, somewhat cautiously, with a direct military probe in a neglected corner of the world, Korea, as a method for advancing the revolution in 1950. The West's forceful opposition seems permanently to have discredited this device and may have been an important stabilizing event in the Cold War.

The Communists have also at times been enamored of crisis as a desirable method for advancing the cause and for enhancing disagreement and conflict among the capitalist enemy. After the traumas of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, however, they substantially abandoned the device as too dangerous.

Revolution and revolutionary civil wars continued to be romantically embraced by the movement--particularly by the Chinese--as natural, desirable, and inevitable devices. The United States entered the "test case" war in Vietnam principally to demonstrate to the Communists that this method was unproductive and unwise. The war was lost not because the United States had no effective military plan, but because the Vietnamese Communists were willing and able to accept casualties at a rate that is all but unprecedented in modern warfare.

In the meantime, however, and in the midst of a dangerous ideological clash with the Soviet Union, China turned inward and, by the 1970s, substantially abandoned its support of the movement. As it dropped out of the Cold War, it was quickly, if somewhat cautiously, embraced by its former capitalist enemies.

The Soviet Union continued to support violent revolutionary movements around the world, and at the end of the 1970s it gleefully welcomed several new countries into the camp--only to see each become mired in economic and military chaos while looking to the Soviets for maternal warmth and sustenance.

Burdened by such questionable adventures (including one in Afghanistan that became militarily as well as economically costly), by foolish overexpenditures on defense, and by a severely mismanaged economy and empire, the Soviet devotion to international revolution faded, often replaced by a distinctly unideological cynicism. As Mikhail Gorbachev recognized this change and began to abandon the international revolution, the essential ideological cause of the Cold War faded. As the book went to press at the end of 1988, the Cold War seemed to be on the verge of terminal demise. As it turned out, it was.

Major war, like slavery and formal dueling, remains physically possible, and it could come about if some aggressive Hitler-like world leader came to believe (quite possibly correctly) that large crises and military ventures need not necessarily escalate to massive war.

However, major war has been substantially discredited over the last century. Moreover, two important ideas have substantially taken hold: prestige and status principally derive from economic prowess (a quality often disparaged as debased and disgustingly materialistic by warlovers in the past); and war is a singularly ineffective and undesirable method for attaining wealth.

As a result, major war may be becoming truly obsolete--subrationally unthinkable. Countries like the once perennially hostile France and Germany reject war as a method for resolving their difficulties not so much because they determine it to be unwise after mulling over their options. Rather it is because--like dueling for quarreling aristocrats--war no longer occurs to them as a option to be considered.

War remains rather common outside the developed world--indeed the book was written while a war between Iran and Iraq was raging there, not to mention some 30 civil wars. In the last few hundred years, however, most major ideas have tended to flow from the countries we now call "developed" to the rest. It seems possible--particularly with the Cold War out of the way--that war aversion will follow a similar path.

Even if peace--the absence of war--comes to infuse the world, conflict, disharmony, turmoil, trouble, and contentiousness will likely continue in fulsome measure. Unlike war, these qualities do seem truly to be natural and inevitable.

Rochester, NY
July 16, 1996

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For helpful comments and suggestions I would like to thank Verna and Michael Cavey, Richard Dolan, Seymour Drescher, Stanley Engerman, MacGregor Knox, Karl Mueller, George Quester, Peggy Rosenthal, Kenneth Shepsle, Harvey Starr, and especially Robert Jervis. Dana Loud, virtuoso typist, weaver, and puzzle-solver, cheerfully fashioned a recognizable tapestry of my scrawls and endless emendations. At Basic Books, Martin Kessler helped greatly in shaping and improving the argument, and Sharon A. Sharp in shaping and improving the prose, while Charles Cavaliere ably guided the result through the production process. Research and writing were supported by the University of Rochester and by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Peace, now, to all.

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

IT IS THE central burden of this book that war is merely an idea—an institution, like dueling or slavery, that has been grafted onto human existence. Unlike breathing, eating, or sex, war is not something that is somehow required by the human condition or by the forces of history. Accordingly, war can shrivel up and disappear, and this can come about without changing human nature; without creating an effective world government or system of international law; without modifying the nature of the state or the nation-state; without expanding international trade, interdependence, or communication; without fabricating an effective moral or practical equivalent; without enveloping the earth in democracy or prosperity; without devising ingenious agreements to restrict arms or the arms industry; without formally outlawing or renouncing war; without reducing the world's considerable store of hate, selfishness, nationalism, and racism; without increasing the amount of love, justice, harmony, cooperation, good will, or inner peace in the world; without altering the international system; without establishing security communities; without improving the competence of political leaders; and without doing anything whatever about nuclear weapons.

Not only does the book argue that such a development *can* take place, but it contends that it has been taking place for a century or more, at least within the developed world, an area that was once a cauldron of international and civil war. Conflicts of interest are inevitable and continue to persist within the developed world. But the notion that war should be used to resolve them has increasingly been discredited and abandoned.

Readers and reviewers have found these contentions to be somewhat unorthodox, and they have raised a number of queries and objections (even while hoping that the book's theme is correct). Accordingly, a few comments may be in order.

- It is important to point out that the book nowhere contends that war has become fully obsolete. While major war—war among developed countries—seems to be going out of style, war obviously continues to flourish elsewhere. There are reasons, arrayed in the final chapter, to believe that the developed

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world's aversion to war may eventually infect the rest of the world as well. But this development is not certain nor is its pace predictable. As slavery continued to persist in Brazil even after it had been abolished elsewhere, the existence of war in some parts of the world does not refute the observation that it is vanishing, or has vanished, in other parts.

- Nor does the book contend that war, even war within the developed world, has become, or could ever become, impossible. When it seems necessary, even countries like the United States and Britain, which were among the first to become thoroughly disillusioned with war, have been able to fight wars and to use military force—often with high morale and substantial public support, at least at first. The ability to make war and the knowledge about how to do so can never be fully expunged—nor, for that matter, can the ability or knowledge to institute slavery, eunuchism, crucifixion, or human sacrifice. War is declining as an institution not because it has ceased to be possible or fascinating, but because peoples and leaders in the developed world—where war was once endemic—have increasingly found war to be disgusting, ridiculous, and unwise.

- In many important respects, the book argues, war in Europe had been thoroughly discredited by 1918; yet, obviously, Adolf Hitler was able to start another one. (Put another way: after World War I, a war in Europe could only be brought about through the maniacally dedicated manipulations of an exceptionally lucky and spectacularly skilled entrepreneur; before World War I, any dimwit—for example, Kaiser Wilhelm—could get into one.) As acknowledged in chapter 10, while Hitlers are rare, another one could conceivably arise. But this doesn't mean that the remarkable and unprecedented peace the developed world has enjoyed for decades is necessarily fragile. The lessons of the 1930s have been well learned—indeed, they have vitally informed the policies of containment and deterrence that have been designed precisely to counter another Hitler. Furthermore, a new Hitler would have to contend with enemies who have nuclear weapons. While the book contends that nuclear weapons have been essentially irrelevant to the history of the postwar world, it does point out (on pp. 218–19) that circumstances are at least imaginable under which they might prove useful.

- If countries in the developed world—particularly in the West—are so averse to war, why have developed nations still gotten into any war at all since 1945? The book, of course, focuses on *major* war—war *among* developed countries—and argues that this kind of war is becoming obsolete. But it also traces the historical rise in war aversion, and it seems clear that most developed countries have generally come to abhor war of all varieties, not only the kind that might happen to take place in their immediate neighborhood.

In general the wars that have involved developed countries since World War II have been of two kinds, both declining in frequency and relevance. One of

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these concerns lingering colonial responsibilities and readjustments. Thus the Dutch got involved in (but did not start) a war in Indonesia, the French in Indochina and Algeria, the British in Malaya and the Falklands.

The other kind relates to the Cold War contest between East and West. The Communists have generally sought to avoid major war, not so much because they necessarily find such wars to be immoral, repulsive, or uncivilized, but because they find them futile—dangerous, potentially counterproductive, wildly and absurdly adventurous. However, for decades after 1945 they retained a dutiful affection for what they came to call wars of national liberation—smaller wars around the world designed to further the progressive cause of world revolution.

As discussed in considerable detail in Part II, the West has seen this threat as visceral and as one that must be countered even at the cost of war if necessary. Wars fought in this context, such as those in Korea and Vietnam, have essentially been seen to be preventive—if Communism is countered there, it won't have to be countered later on more vital, closer turf. The lesson learned (perhaps over-learned) from the Hitler experience is that aggressive threats must be dealt with by those who abhor war when the threats are still comparatively small and distant; to allow the aggressive force to succeed only brings nearer the day when a larger war must be fought. Thus countries that abhor war have felt it necessary to wage them in order to prevent wider wars.

With the ideological evisceration of the Communist threat (a process which has accelerated since the book went to press at the end of 1988), this elemental contest has largely dissipated. Unless it is replaced by something new, war participation by developed countries is likely to continue its decline.

- The apparent collapse of Communism, particularly of its ideology-impelled expansionary threat, may also have brought about a correlated collapse in the notion, propounded by some international relations theorists, that the postwar world's "bipolarity" has been determined by military and economic capabilities rather than by ideological differences. In fact, as Communist ideology and, therefore, the Cold War become abandoned, the United States and the USSR seem not only to be significantly moderating their bipolar opposition, but also to be embarked on a negative arms race and perhaps even the process of alliance confederation discussed and recommended on pp. 258–63. (I have developed these policy issues more fully in the Winter 1989–90 issue of *Foreign Policy*.)

- There are those who find the book's central message to be optimistic. Since just about everybody has now come to regard major war as a horror and a scourge, it is to be expected that a book tracing its obsolescence would be so regarded. While I happen to share that particular perspective, the book tries to be objective about the historical process, and it should not be taken to suggest that the human race is continually getting better and better in every way: the book is not an

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uncritical paean to the “advance of civilization.” It is quite possible that, as war declines, the human condition will in other ways become worse. Indeed, the last pages suggest that a world without war might in some respects betray more contentiousness and less civility than one with it.

- Finally, some people have been concerned that the line of thought presented in this book could be dangerous because it invites a relaxed complacency about the possible reemergence of war in the developed world. The concern is a fair one—and, indeed, chapter 10 spends quite a bit of time warning about ways that a major war could still come about.

However, as has often been pointed out, there are dangers in being overly anxious about war as well. Policies based on blind belligerence, a desperate reliance on destructive arms, and a principled unwillingness to be open to the possibility that old hostilities and methods of resolving conflicts might genuinely be mellowing, could pointlessly generate the very dangers they are designed to deter or confront.

Clearly it makes sense to remain alert to the fact that major war will never be impossible and could make an anachronistic comeback under special, and perhaps bizarre, circumstances. But it seems unlikely that people—particularly after the traumatic experience of the 1930s—will become so neglectful of one of history’s most famous and grisly institutions that they will remain oblivious if it begins to reappear. A policy of mindless, Panglossian complacency about major war would be a mistake, but the conditions of our remarkable times do suggest that a degree of wary optimism is justified.

Rochester, New York
November 27, 1989

Retreat from Doomsday

Introduction

History's Greatest Nonevent

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.

This book seeks to develop an explanation for what is probably the greatest nonevent in human history. 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

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

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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 into 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.

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 devel-

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oped 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 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.

To deal with this task, the book begins, in part 1, by tracing changing attitudes toward war in the developed world. As early as 1800 a few countries, like Holland, Switzerland, and Sweden, had begun to drop out of the war system, but war was still generally accepted as a natural and inevitable phenomenon. Beginning in 1815 the institution of war for the first time in history came under organized and concentrated attack. Opponents argued that war was repulsive, immoral, and

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uncivilized, and that it was futile, particularly economically. They remained a noisy minority for the next century and were often derided by those who still held war to be noble, thrilling, progressive, manly, and beneficial.

The holocaust of World War I turned peace advocates into a pronounced majority in the developed world and virtually destroyed war romanticism. Were it not for the astoundingly successful machinations of Adolf Hitler, just about the last European who was willing to risk major war, and for the anachronistic forays of distant Japan, World War I might have been the last major war.

Part 2 examines the long peace—the great nonevent—itself. Major war has been most likely to develop from the Cold War that has dominated postwar international history. The hostility of the era mostly derives from the Soviet Union's ideological—even romantic—affection for revolution and for revolutionary war. Although this ideology is expansionistic in some respects, it has never visualized major war as a remotely sensible tactic. The book traces the history of the Cold War, dealing particularly with the wars in Korea and Vietnam and with Cold War crises. It concludes that East and West have never been close to major war and that nuclear weapons have not been important determinants of this fact—insofar as a military deterrent has been necessary, the fear of escalation to a war like World War I or II has been sufficient. A large war, nuclear or otherwise, has never been remotely in the interest of the essentially contented, risk-averse, escalation-anticipating countries that have dominated world affairs since 1945 and, even allowing considerably for stupidity, ineptness, miscalculation, and self-deception, it is difficult to see how they could have gotten into one.

Because of economic crisis and persistent ideological failure, it appears in the late 1980s that the Cold War may be on the verge of substantial improvement as the Soviet Union, following the lead of its former ideological soulmate, China, abandons its quest for ideological expansion and quests after prosperity and a quiet, normal international situation.

Part 3 considers whether peace in the developed world is likely to linger or break down (the prospects for lingering look good as long as the quest for prosperity remains a popular goal). It also explores the possibility that major war has become, or is becoming, obsolete: without being formally renounced or institutionally superceded and without being undercut by notable changes in human nature or in the structure of international politics, major war may have gradually moved toward final discredit. In areas where war was once often casually seen as beneficial, noble, and glorious, or at least as necessary or inevitable, the conviction has now become widespread that war would be intolerably costly, unwise, futile, and debasing.

The book concludes by suggesting how the military strategists' concepts of deterrence and stability can usefully be broadened to include often crucial non-

military considerations. It also assesses the possibility that the apparent obsolescence of war in the developed world will eventually infect those portions of the globe where war remains endemic. And it examines the prospects that, in a world without war or warlike tension, the arms race will gradually atrophy and a general political settlement will be reached.

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, which will be more fully assessed in the next chapters, 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 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

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20th century.* 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."⁸

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.⁹ 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-ninth of its population, a proportion higher than almost any suffered by any combatant in the wars of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.¹⁰

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."¹¹

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

*To 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).

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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.

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.¹²

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

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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."¹³ 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 gradually 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.¹⁴

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."¹⁵ 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.*

A dueling manual from 1847 states that “dueling, like war, is the necessary consequence of offense.”¹⁶ 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, conscious 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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Here and there, some people expressed concern about

*It 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).

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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 "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."¹⁹

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: bearbaiting, 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.*

In the remainder of this book the possibility will be explored that war is in the process of joining this list of recently discovered sins and vices. 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 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.

*Where death and injury have only been by-products of an institution rather than consequences of its central intent, however, abolitionists have often failed to materialize. For a discussion about the potential value of abolishing the private passenger automobile, the cause of far more death and injury than most wars, see the Appendix.

