

"A STIMULATING BOOK, AND A HOPEFUL ONE."

—MARVIN SEID, LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

RETREAT **FROM** DOOMSDAY

**THE OBSOLESCENCE
• OF MAJOR WAR •**



JOHN MUELLER

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Retreat from Doomsday

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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

To JAM and ESM,
to Karl, Michelle, Karen, and Susan,
and to the memory of Bernard Brodie

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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-