

Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past— with GPS

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The confessions of a neoclassical realist

In 1972, Hedley Bull wrote that ‘the sources of facile optimism and narrow moralism never dry up, and the lessons of the “realists” have to be learnt afresh by every new generation.’¹ He proceeded to claim, with undue emphasis, that ‘in terms of the academic study of international relations, the stream of thinking and writing that began with Niebuhr and Carr has long run its course.’ The scholarly problems with classical realist theory are indeed severe.² However, it would be a most grievous error to consign such theory to the bin marked ‘yesterday’s solutions for yesterday’s problems.’ If the academic study of international relations can find little save period-piece interest in the ideas of the classical realists, that is more a comment upon the competence of scholarship today than upon any change in world conditions.

There is much well worth criticizing in the classically realist theory of international relations and what was once eponymously called statecraft.³ Any

¹ Hedley Bull, ‘The Theory of International Politics, 1919–1969,’ in Brian Porter (ed.), *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics, 1919–1969* (London, 1972), p. 39.

² The scholarly literature on ‘realism’, now generally termed ‘classical realism’—with its modern devotees, such as this author, called neoclassical realists—‘neorealism,’ ‘structural realism’ (and one day soon, perhaps, neoclassical poststructural realism), is as large as it is largely aridly academic in a pejorative sense. For those inclined to intellectual masochism, I can recommend Kenneth W. Thompson, *Masters of International Thought: Major Twentieth-Century Theorists and the World Crisis* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1980); Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York, 1986); Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York, 1993); Benjamin Frankel (ed.), ‘Roots of Realism’, *Security Studies*, 5, special issue (1995); idem (ed.), ‘Realism: Restatements and Renewal’, *Security Studies*, 5, special issue (1996); Scott Burchill, ‘Realism and Neo-Realism’, in Burchill and Andrew Linklater (eds.), *Theories of International Relations* (London, 1996), pp. 67–92; and Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy* (London, 1998). These few references are merely the tip of a mighty iceberg of professional activity. For an ‘approach’ to international relations long condemned by the cognoscenti as simplistic and theoretically severely challenged, ‘realism’ seems able to attract an endless succession of firing squads. Contemporary theorists of international relations are still looking for that stake to the heart that definitively would dispatch ‘realism’.

³ You know you are in trouble as a scholar when an issue as apparently mundane as the day-by-day working title of your field is widely contested. Each and every title to my field, and subfield, carries some unhelpful baggage. I propose to handle this fact by ignoring it. The text refers to international relations, international politics, international studies, and world politics, without fear, special favour, or subtextual meaning. With respect to my particular corner of the broad field just indicated, I am more particular. Reference in my text to ‘strategic’ studies, theory, or history, indicates matter connected quite directly to the threat or use of *force*. From time to time, to indicate my liberality of spirit and genuinely holistic perspective upon the subjects that concern me, I refer to ‘security’ studies. For the record, however, I would like to register a vote for the position that the concept of ‘security’ studies is unmanageably inclusive. To study ‘security’ would require the study of everything, a fact which would translate as a thoroughly unfocused study of nothing in particular.

scholar worthy of his or her BISA membership could organize and deliver a sparkling module on the theme of ‘Classical Realism: Sins of Omission, Errors of Commission, and Flagrant Ambiguities.’⁴ Many of us have bored first-year tutorials with our skilful skewering of balance-of-power theory, the concept of power, and—of course—the national interest. The problem is that with our intellectual rigour all too often we correct the grammar but lose the plot. I will argue that flawed though the principal texts of classical realism may be, when compared with more contemporary would-be master/mistress-works, they have an overriding virtue. To risk the vernacular, they got the big things right enough.

Students reared on the flawed classics written by Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, Carr, Niebuhr, Morgenthau, Aron, and Kissinger might well be misled on many secondary matters.⁵ Authors cannot help but be limited, as well as inspired, by their personal circumstances of time, place, and therefore culture. But, did these paladins of theory capture the core of their subject? Thucydides, for example, tells us in an invented (though probably fairly accurate)⁶ discourse that ‘fear, honour, and interest’ comprise three of the strongest motives for holding on to empire whilst under powerful pressure.⁷ It is not at all obvious that eighty years of careful scholarship in the twentieth century, from the immediate aftermath of the First World War to the present day, have produced guidance on the causes of war noticeably superior to that offered by Thucydides. Indeed, recent scholarship by Emanuel Adler in the august pages of the *Review of International Studies* informs us that the key to building the ‘conditions of peace’ is the construction of security communities.⁸ On closer inspection, though, this apparently powerful idea translates rapidly into an unhelpful academic tautology. What Adler has achieved is simply an elegant restatement of the problem. To be told that the conditions for peace can be built via the construction of security communities—because people within such

⁴ Such scholars might just notice that some of the more informative critiques of classical realist theory have been written by classical realists themselves. For example, it would be difficult to improve on Ernst Haas, ‘The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept or Propaganda?’, *World Politics*, 5 (1953), pp. 442–77, or Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore, 1962), ch. 10, ‘National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol’.

⁵ Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to ‘The Peloponnesian War’*, rev. edn. of Richard Crawley (trans.) (New York, 1996); Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder, CO, 1994); Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, trans. L. N. Rangarajan (New Delhi, 1992); Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, rev. edn. of Ellis Farnsworth (trans.) (Indianapolis, 1965); idem, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, 1997); idem, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (Oxford, 1998); Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976); E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1914–1939* (New York, 1964); idem, *International Relations Between the Two World Wars, 1919–1939* (New York, 1966); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York, 1932); idem, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York, 1944); Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York, 1951); idem, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th edn. revised by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York, 1985); Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, NY, 1966); Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1818–22* (Boston, 1957); idem, *Diplomacy* (New York, 1994).

⁶ See Peter R. Pouncey, *The Necessities of War: A Study of Thucydides’ Pessimism* (New York, 1980), ch. 4, and especially Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides* (Baltimore, 1987), ch. 3. Richard Ned Lebow and Barry S. Strauss (eds.), *Hegemonic Rivalry: From Thucydides to the Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: 1991), is bold and interesting.

⁷ Strassler, *Landmark Thucydides*, p. 43.

⁸ Emanuel Adler, ‘Condition(s) of Peace,’ *Review of International Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 165–91.

communities do not fight each other (though they might fight people in other such communities!)—is inferior in practical merit to historian Jeremy Black’s conclusion that more bellicose societies are more apt to go to war than are less bellicose societies.⁹

It is perhaps a cultural, or psychological, problem for some contemporary scholars that our forebears in theory did such a good job. The problem appears more acute in academic international relations than it does in strategic studies. For example, most modern theorists and practitioners of strategy have little difficulty both in proclaiming the general superiority of Clausewitz over all pretenders to the throne of Top Strategic Thinker and then in taking selectively what they find of most value to them from his often opaque writings.¹⁰ A few contemporary strategic commentators have proclaimed the death of Clausewitz as a theorist with authority relevant for today, but that remains very much a minority position.¹¹

The historical focus of this essay is the decade of the 1990s, but lurking not far behind discussion of those years is argument on the essentially contestable question of progress in human affairs. As a neoclassical realist I insist that the game of politics (or security communities) does not change from age to age, let alone from decade to decade. I will stop just short of claiming that the game cannot change, but only by way of a token nod in the direction of never saying never. Paradoxically, perhaps, this stance is not a conservative one. It is alert to the facts of cumulative, sometimes apparently non-linear, change in the character of international relations, including international strategic relations. It denies only the likelihood of change in the nature of those relations. I agree with Ken Booth’s helpful light adaptation of the familiar definition of politics by Harold Lasswell: world politics is about “who gets what, when, [and] how” across the globe.¹² It was always thus and there is no pressing reason to anticipate a transformation anytime soon.

Agreement with Lasswell-Booth, however, still leaves much terrain for scholarly combat. The formula lends itself to emancipationist, among other, ethically rooted theory, as some scholars endorse and seek to advance particular notions of progress. In addition, though, Lasswell-Booth is compatible with a thoroughly strategic view of history (past, present, and future); that is to say a view that recognizes the importance of the threat and use of force. Such a view, held by this author, agrees with the notably postmodern strategic commentator-theorist, Ralph Peters, when he argues that our humanity is more our problem than our likely salvation. Time and again we humans demonstrate our willingness to do quite literally *anything*. In Peters’ words:

⁹ Jeremy Black, *Why Wars Happen* (London, 1998).

¹⁰ I explain the reasons for the persisting clear superiority of Clausewitz in my *Modern Strategy* (Oxford, 1999), chs. 3–4.

¹¹ Clausewitz is roughly handled in John Keegan, ‘Peace by Other Means?’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 December 1992, pp. 3–4; idem, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1998); Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, 1991); idem, ‘What is Wrong with Clausewitz?’, in Gert de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague, 1997), pp. 7–23. Christopher Bassford has performed nobly as the most recent counsel for the defence. See his articles, ‘John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: a Polemic’, *War in History*, 1 (1996), pp. 319–36, and ‘Landmarks in Defense Literature: “On War”, by Carl von Clausewitz’, *Defense Analysis*, 12 (1996), pp. 267–71.

¹² Ken Booth, ‘Dare not to Know: International Relations Theory versus the Future’, in Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 329.

Technologies come and go, but the primitive endures. The last decade of this millennium has seen genocide, ethnic cleansing, the bloody rending of states, growing religious persecution, the ascendancy of international crime, an unprecedented distribution of weaponry, and the persistence of the warrior—the man of raw and selfish violence—as a human archetype.¹³

Even more chilling than Peters' writings is the conclusion drawn by Joanna Bourke in her recent study of 'face-to-face killing in twentieth-century warfare'. Although Peters argues that 'men like to kill,' he somewhat softens the message by speculating that the 'minority of human beings—mostly male—who enjoy killing ... may be small'.¹⁴ Bourke, however, concludes that 'as this book has attempted to emphasize, warfare was as much about the business of sacrificing others as it was about *being* sacrificed. For many men and women, this is what made it "a lovely war"'.¹⁵

It is my thesis that in order to understand the 1990s, or the 2000s, study the 1890s, 1790s, and so forth. The future is the past in the ways that matter most. 'Statecraft' and strategy are made of the same ingredients, and work (or fail to work well) for the same reasons, in all periods and among all participants.¹⁶ The most key among the reasons why this should be so is, of course, the common thread of the human factor.

The well of error never runs dry

The industry of academe, indeed the sheer industry of academics, is a potent source of error. Given that the canon (or cannon) lore of international relations already exists in a few 'sacred books,'¹⁷ that careers cannot be advanced simply by intoning that unholy liturgy, and that mere change ever tempts interpretation as transformation, it is not surprising that so much of the new writing in our field is either trivial, or wrong, or both.

Courting the risk, perhaps glorying in the prospect, of being charged for possession of one of Ken Booth's 'nineteenth-century minds at the end of the twentieth-century',¹⁸ I will argue that the idea of realism—in its sensible classical form, not the reductionist nonsense of neorealism¹⁹—could have equipped scholars to cope well with the 1990s. To read Thucydides, Clausewitz, Aron, and Kissinger, for a terse short-list, allows inoculation by the enduring lore of world politics against misperception of the ephemeral as the lasting.

One function of superior theory is to provide the protection of superior explanatory power against the pretensions and ravages of inferior theory. International

¹³ Ralph Peters, *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?* (Mechanicsburg, PA: 1999), p. 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London, 1999), p. 375. Original emphasis.

¹⁶ An argument that I develop at length and probably in unduly excruciating detail in my *Modern Strategy*, ch. 1.

¹⁷ Booth, 'Dare not to Know,' p. 350.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁹ The bible for which view remains, of course, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: 1979), a book which demonstrates that being elegantly parsimonious in theory building offers insufficient compensation for being wrong.

relations, security studies, and strategic studies, holistically regarded, inherently comprise a practical subject. The test for good theory in this subject could hardly be simpler: does the theory work to offer plausible explanation of, dare one say it, real-world events? Elegance in argument, altitude of moral purpose, weight of quantitative support—are all irrelevant if the ideas at issue are empirically challenged. In the wise words of Charles E. Callwell: ‘Theory cannot be accepted as conclusive when practice points the other way.’²⁰ Faddish concepts have a way of concealing the persistence of old realities, especially when they are perpetrated in new textbooks written by major figures in contemporary academe. For example, the trendy concept of ‘global governance’ should carry the public warning to students that ‘anyone who chooses to take this exciting new concept with more than a grain of salt risks permanent impairment of their understanding of international relations.’ In his quaintly titled *Understanding International Relations*, Chris Brown informs his student readers that ‘[w]e may not have world government, but we do have global governance.’²¹ I wonder how much comfort that optimistic claim could provide to Kosovars, Chechens, and Somalis, not to mention Hutus and Tutsis.

The difficulty is that our students are not to know, unless we tell them, that Carr, Morgenthau, and especially Aron, wrote better—yes, better—books than have the theorists of the 1990s. The texts of classical realism offer superior explanatory reach and grasp, because they are better grounded empirically. Similarly those students are not to know that (classical and neoclassical) realism is not simply one among a potentially infinite number of ‘approaches’ to international relations. It may be academically sound and ecumenical for teachers to treat all theories as if they were created equal, with each capable of delivering salvation. The fact is, however, that for a practical subject like international relations, poor—which is to say impractical—theories are at best an irrelevance, and at worst can help get people killed.

There is a voluntarism in recent writing about international relations that is as attractive as it is perilous. To quote Brown again, he advises that ‘we need to pay serious attention to the implications of the view that knowledge is constructed, not found, that it rests on social foundations and not upon some bedrock of certainty.’²² At one level, such advice is a sound invitation to exercise healthy scepticism.²³ At another level, though, Brown opens the floodgates to fallacy and mythmaking. There is an obvious and rather trivial sense in which knowledge has to be socially constructed. Knowledge is what we decide it is. However, unless one totally debases the meaning of ‘knowledge,’ it is not useful to propagate the silly idea that we can ‘construct’ knowledge at will. There is knowledge as ‘truth’, in the sense of valid most-case generalizations, which the practitioners of international relations ignore at their, and our, peril. For example, Clausewitz advises that in war political goals can only be achieved if they are effected instrumentally by the securing of suitably

²⁰ Charles E. Callwell, *Small Wars: A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers* (London, 1990), p. 270.

²¹ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (London, 1997), p. 121.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²³ Bruce G. Blair offers a persuasive reason why such scepticism is desirable. Writing about my field of strategic analysis, Blair argues plausibly that ‘[a]s in any field that straddles science, policy, and politics, the temptation to overreach is unusually strong. High demand for unwaffled answers creates a market for study products that package immature theories as final, easily digestible truth’. *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: 1993), p. 288.

matching military objectives.²⁴ When policymakers elect to disdain that nugget of strategic ‘knowledge’ about means and ends, as did NATO for ten weeks from March to June in 1999, policy will not succeed and people will suffer gratuitously as a consequence.

Understanding of the nature of world politics and strategy is not, in a meaningful sense, socially constructed knowledge. That nature is what it is, and it is what it has been for millennia. Bold theorists, brave optimists, moral crusaders, as well as simply the simple, which is to say the ignorant, may find my claim quite shocking: theoretically primitive, morally irresponsible, and blind to the evidence of benign change, and so on and so forth. To be more specific, I believe that much of the misunderstanding of the meaning of the course of recent history and much of the faulty prediction stems from the popularity among scholars of some powerful myths and probable myths. A less polite way of making this point would be to claim that those scholars do not understand their subject as well as they should—certainly as well as they would had they read and inwardly digested Aron’s *Peace and War* at an impressionable age.

For the same class of reason why today no murderous sociopath will sign-up for the label ‘terrorist’, so no scholar will choose to recognize himself or herself as a propagator of myths. Some reader resistance to what follows is therefore likely.

Old fallacies rarely die: myths, probable myths, and half-truths

This discussion explores and explains many of the errors and much of the imprudence in current scholarship on international relations with reference to popular myths, or probable myths, and half-truths. These fallacies cluster around the subject of whether history is essentially cyclical or is more arrow-like; around the reasons why the human condition might be improving; and around beliefs about military power.

The megamyth of benign historical transformation

It might be more accurate to refine this claim to apply to the megamyth of benign and irreversible historical transformation. Many scholars of international relations, in some cases probably subconsciously, underwrite the myth of inevitable and, taking a medium to long view (i.e. temporary setbacks are recognized), inexorable improvement in the human security condition. Truly this is the master myth that opens the door to a host of lesser myths which, in succession with fashion or ephemeral evidence, appear to support it.

It is as commonplace to mistake the plain evidence of change for progress in some normative sense, as it is to flatter oneself that history actually has turned at a ‘turning point’ in one’s own lifetime. In 1994 I delivered an inaugural lecture which downplayed the significance of the very recent conclusion of the Cold War and

²⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 81, 605–10.

advanced the unremarkable principle that bad times always return in world politics.²⁵ In point of fact, my lecture was grossly and unduly NATO-centric, because very bad times indeed occurred in the 1990s for many peoples in the Balkans, the former USSR, and Africa.

The core of this megamyth is the appealing notion that we can improve our collective and individual security condition on a global basis.²⁶ This belief is fed by what amounts to a disdain for historical experience, our understanding of which is *not* all socially constructed at will (e.g., Nazi Germany did lose the Second World War and the USSR did collapse). The problem is one of time-frame and, of course, particular individual and societal circumstance. For many of us today, the future looks even brighter and more prosperous than is our distinctly tolerable present. However, we neoclassical realists contest neither the fact of good times for some, nor of good times rolling for quite a while. The argument, rather, is that ‘bad times return’. The point has been made with exemplary clarity in a recent essay by Donald Kagan.

If one lived, say, in 450 or even in 440 BC, one might very well have made what would have been an intelligent prediction: that democracy was the road of the future. Then the Athenians lost the Peloponnesian War, and democracy stopped. That was the end of democracy until the American Revolution. It is worthwhile remembering, therefore, that *great historical reversals can happen*.²⁷

Not all scholars recognize that to observe the present is not necessarily to observe the future. The future is made from the past, that is to say our present, but it is unlikely to comprise simply ‘today, only more so’. Such a view is what my late colleague Herman Kahn used to deride as a ‘surprise-free projection’. To explain, the 1930s in Germany were, of course, ‘made’ in the 1920s, which in turn were ‘made’ by The Great War. With the benefits of hindsight-foresight we see the origins of Nazi Germany in the (German) myth of an undefeated army in 1918 and in the Weimar Republic, just as we see the several holocausts of 1945 rooted in the new Germany of the 1930s. At the time, indeed at all times, however, the future that will be made creatively from the ever-moving present is not quite so clear. Eliot A. Cohen has a plausible grip on the matter when he argues that ‘[t]here is simply much more contingency in international politics than we are willing to admit.’²⁸ Even if in principle the future is predictable at some level of specificity useful for policy detail today, we lack the tools—if you like, we lack the social science—to do the job. Moreover, even if there is a futurologist of genius among BISA members, we have no way of knowing who he or she may be. Also, one should not forget a caveat about self-negating prophecies. ‘Futures’ that are widely and authoritatively endorsed as probable, are massively at risk to negation by purposefully spoiling action.

Although we neoclassical realists are apt to endorse Edward Gibbon’s opinion that ‘history . . . is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and

²⁵ Colin S. Gray, *Villains, Victims and Sheriffs: Strategic Studies and Security for an Inter-War Period* (Hull, 1996), esp. pp. 16–17.

²⁶ For example, see Andrew Butfoy, *Common Security and Strategic Reform: A Critical Analysis* (London, 1997). This book is as well intentioned, as appealing, and as moderate and reasonable, as it is hopelessly ‘off piste’ for the rougher realities of strategic history.

²⁷ Donald Kagan, ‘History is Full of Surprises’, *Survival*, 41 (1999), p. 142. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Eliot A. Cohen, ‘The “Major” Consequences of War’, *Survival*, 41 (1999), p. 145.

misfortunes of mankind,²⁹ typically we are not pessimists, at least we are not near-term pessimists. Realists do not believe that Humankind in History is embarked on some grand voyage towards an ideal future condition of peace and harmony. We believe that the twentieth century demonstrates, yet again, the truth—yes, the truth, not socially constructed ‘knowledge’—in our reading of the security story of past, present, and future. Indeed, we witnessed actual—*not socially constructed*—holocaust/genocide; and as late as the 1980s we might have witnessed actual holocaust on a truly global scale. The danger of nuclear war was real, if incalculable. Following the demise of the evil, but happily sickly, empire of the Soviets, a necessarily temporary geopolitical condition of quasi-US hegemony has allowed the peril of global nuclear holocaust a rest (not definitive retirement—a topic to which this essay will return).³⁰ The holocausts of the 1990s have been less global and explosive than was the possible one which dominated our concerns in the 1980s, but they have been actual, rather than virtual. Also, the beastliness of this decade emphatically has been in-the-face personally primitive and postmodern. Chechnya, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia comprised a ghastly combination of Homer and Tom Clancy.³¹

Our security story is not all grim, however. The twentieth century has been appalling, with crimes against humanity committed, book-end like, by the British Empire in Southern Africa and by Serbia in Kosovo, with much worse way-stations in between. Nonetheless, the strategic and general security history of this century might well have recorded events so unhappy that the actual history would appear benign. Specifically, whether or not it was a happily and repeatedly deeply contingent accident, it was a thrice-fold fact that the right side won each of the three great wars of the century. I claim that the human security condition was much improved, albeit only for a while—which is all that can be achieved—by the repeated defeat of Germany, and then by the defeat of the Soviet Union (for defeat it was). Realists aspire neither to improve humankind, nor to establish *for all time* a peace with security based upon the essentially contestable concept of justice. Realists know that a secure peace can only be established and maintained for now, and that despite our best educated, and certainly ‘prudent’ endeavours, still historical contingency is likely to ambush us in the future.³² Such generic pessimism is fully consistent with optimism over our ability, as prudent players, to survive history’s accidents well enough. If we could see off Imperial and Nazi Germany, and then the abominable heirs of Lenin—in the last case without need for (nuclear) combat—then there have to be grounds for hope. That hope, however, cannot extend to irreversible establishment of a world free from fear. Wars to end wars are a nonsense. If scholars of international relations do not know this, then they are overdue for attendance at an academic ‘boot camp’ with the classics of realism.

The megamyth of the transformation of world politics has some obvious religious affiliations and overtones. Another way of expressing this myth is as an ‘endist’ vision. For various reasons and in various respects, so we are invited to believe, the

²⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London, 1909), I, p. 84.

³⁰ On the past and future of nuclear history, see Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: 1999).

³¹ Robert D. Kaplan, ‘The Coming Anarchy,’ *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, pp. 44–76, and Peters, *Fighting for the Future*.

³² Aron advises that ‘prudence is the statesman’s supreme virtue.’ *Peace and War*, p. 585. This is not to suggest that the content of prudent behaviour is self-evident.

old order passeth away (has passed/is passing/will pass/will probably pass—one needs to watch the declension carefully). ‘Endist’ visions on sale in the 1990s have included

- An end of *History* as we know it, as great ideological struggles are overtaken by the definitive triumph of liberal democracy fuelled by capitalism.³³
- An end of *major war*—usually defined as great wars between states—because the costs are too high, the prospective gains are too low, and states are of sharply diminishing relevance to international security affairs.³⁴
- An end to *the utility of the use of force* in international relations, if not in all human relations, because of sundry taboos, the maturing of the legal and moral ‘war convention,’ and the strengthening of popular controls over public policy.³⁵

These *fin de siècle* visions proclaiming the death of bad old habits can be interpreted to amount, synergistically, to the claim that the long and bloody reign of *strategic* history at last has ended/is ending/is probably ending. Readers of an ‘endist’ persuasion are advised that the institution of war is a chameleon—to borrow from Clausewitz³⁶—able to adapt with apparently effortless ease to altered circumstances. War’s nature as organized violence for ‘political’ (or what corresponds to what we understand by political today) goals survives untouched by radical shifts in political forms, motives for conflict, or technology.³⁷ Recognizable ‘war’ predated, and will postdate, the modern states’ system. Readers are warned that if they are seeking an ‘endist’ transformational theory capable of slaying strategic history—the history that is influenced by the threat or use of force—they will need a very grand and inclusive theory indeed.

Hamburger heaven: countries with ‘MacDonald’s’ do not fight each other

Reductionist syllogisms easily can exceed a culminating point in sensible judgment. For example, consider the elegant formula which holds that (1) capitalism fuels democracy, (2) democracies do not fight each other, therefore (3) capitalism is a vital condition for peace. In a world both rational and reasonable this syllogism would have much to recommend it, notwithstanding its vulnerability to neo-Marxist assault.

The theory of the ‘democratic peace’ has much in common with its close relatives in theories of capitalism sponsoring democracy, and of maritime polities or trading

³³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1993).

³⁴ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York, 1989); Michael Mandelbaum, ‘Is Major War Obsolete?’, *Survival*, 40 (1998–99), pp. 20–38.

³⁵ ‘I propose to call the set of articulated norms, customs, professional codes, legal precepts, religious and philosophical principles, and reciprocal arrangements that shape our judgments of military conduct, *the war convention*.’ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York, 1977), p. 44. Original emphasis.

³⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89.

³⁷ I prefer to thicken Hedley Bull’s workmanlike definition of war as ‘organised violence carried on by political units against each other’ with the addition of ‘for political motives’. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York, 1977), p. 184. For a very different, culturalist, view of war, see Keegan, *History of Warfare*.

states being especially likely to find democracy both practical and practicable.³⁸ What the ‘democratic peace’ most has in common with those cognate theories, alas, is a hefty measure of irrelevance. Democracy worthy of the name is not about to conquer the globe, any more than capitalism worthy of the name can command compliant political change, or countries can choose a maritime orientation. I exaggerate, but not by much. Popular democracy as practiced, albeit imperfectly, in North America and by the members of the European Union, unfortunately is not a vision that can be caught by many greedy, or liberty-loving, others. So, even if the proposition is true that democracies do not fight each other, world politics is not in the process of thoroughgoing capture by the ideology of democracy. It is not surprising that democratic institutions are absent, say, from China, and a sham or bad joke in Russia. What is surprising is that so many Western scholars and business people should have expected otherwise.

I am not advancing an absolutist argument. Of course, political culture and its institutional expression can change over time; they can even change, fairly reliably, abruptly on command (witness the course of modern Germany and Japan). In the truly long term, or as a result of catastrophic events, anything is possible.³⁹ But a transformational theory of world politics keyed to an early universal triumph of popular democracy, has to be an awfully bad bet. An advancing tide of success for democracy that leaves even a very few islands of recalcitrant authoritarian polities behind it, would be about as useful for peace with security as a deterrent effect that worked well nineteen times out of twenty. A good, even excellent, record would not be good enough. Just one old fashioned ‘greater power’ that was a non-democracy could spoil a decade or longer, much as just one failure of deterrence might promote a substantial blemish on a whole century or more.

The problems with the theory of the ‘democratic peace’ are all too familiar. First, as suggested above, there is the structural and cultural difficulty that not all polities are plausibly susceptible to capture by democratic ideas and practice—and a most-cases success rate would mean failure. Second, democracy is not an either-or political condition. There is no magical metric, no alchemical algorithm, that can tell scholars when a polity has breasted the tape to be counted as a democracy. In point of fact, every polity in the world would score somewhat differently on a democracy rating, were we even able to agree on how polities would be graded. The

³⁸ A recent variant on this intriguing theme is presented in Peter Padfield, *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the Modern World, 1588–1782* (London, 1999). If Padfield overreaches on the evidence available concerning possible links between liberal values at home and maritime success, so does Spencer R. Weart in his study, *Never at War: Why Democracies Will Not Fight One Another* (New Haven, CT: 1998). Especially useful on the theory of the democratic peace are Peter T. Manicas, *War and Democracy* (Oxford, 1989); Michael Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steve E. Miller (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace: An ‘International Security’ Reader* (Cambridge, MA: 1996); and Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York, 1997). This important debate cries out for empirical assistance. The literature on the causes of war probably would be improved if it contained fewer entries by philosophers of international relations (e.g., Doyle, just cited, or Hidemi Suganami, *On the Causes of War* [Oxford, 1996]), who tend to add elegantly to opacity, and more by first-rate historians (e.g., John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* [New York, 1989], and Charles E. Esdaile, *The Wars of Napoleon* [London, 1995]).

³⁹ Scholars differ on the feasibility of swift radical change in political (or strategic) culture, in part because they differ on what they mean by culture. My current view may be found in my article, ‘Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back,’ *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (1999), pp. 49–69.

third region of difficulty, perhaps grounds for scepticism, is the non-trivial matter of plausibility in theory. Specifically, what is the mechanism of cause and effect that is supposed to generate the democratic peace? At this juncture, empirical concerns raise their embarrassing heads. Empirically it may appear to be true that democracies (hopefully, defined carefully!) do not wage war on other democracies. But, why should that be so?

If scholars could produce a 'cast of thousands' by way of well-attested case studies to 'test' the 'democratic peace,' though admittedly it is extraordinarily difficult to explain a negative (why did war *not* occur?), that would be one thing. As things stand, however, the case-study evidence is historically wafer-thin. Given that accessible history is most barely populated with polities that might even qualify as candidates for a list of democracies, it is not surprising that the potential, let alone the actual, database for this theory is embarrassingly sparse. It is precisely because the plausible historical database is so thin, that the quality of theory, the plausibility of its explanatory reach and grasp, is so important. Rephrased, the fewer the likely looking facts, the better sounding the explanation needs to be.

If we know anything for certain it is that decisions for war never rest upon perceptions of the democracy rating of the candidate enemy. The ideology, or political culture, of the enemy often is important, but most typically as a conditioner of behaviour or, more often, as an *ex post facto* rationale for belligerency. For example, both the Second World War and the Cold War had a large and richly veined moral dimension. Neither conflict, however, was waged by any polity for moral reasons. Nazism may have been at stake from 1939 to 1945, but none of Germany's foes who had a choice in the matter chose to fight in order to eradicate the Nazi ideology.⁴⁰

While there may be some limited merit in the theory of the democratic peace, on balance it warrants labelling as a probable myth. There is no evidence to suggest either that democracies do not fight other democracies because they are democracies, or that democracies fight non-democracies because they are not democratic. More troubling still for the theorist is the weight of evidence which casts doubt on the proposition that bellicosity correlates with authoritarian forms of government.⁴¹

The theory of the democratic peace does not withstand close scrutiny when viewed from any angle. In fact the theory reminds this author of the old saying, 'Indians go in single file, the one I saw did.' Aside from the almost cheap shot to the effect that the evidential base for the theory is meagre and eminently contestable, one needs to worry at the core question of how does the theory attempt to explain the democratic 'causes' of peace. Two leading answers are prominent, albeit of an 'it

⁴⁰ Richard Overy has attempted a brave, and unusual, treatment of the moral dimension of the Second World War, as ch. 9 in his *Why the Allies Won* (London, 1995). He argues that '[w]hatever the rights and wrongs of the Allied cause, the belief that they fought on the side of righteousness equipped them with powerful moral argument (p. 312)'. In conclusion, Overy asks rhetorically, '[b]ut can there be any doubt that populations will fight with less effect in the service of an evil cause? (p. 313).' Overy is surely right to flag the importance of the connection between the will to fight and a confidence that justice is on our side. The problem is that in practice belief in the justness of one's cause has proven to be entirely unrelated to the character of that cause.

⁴¹ Edward N. Luttwak is probably right with his characteristically robust claims that '[t]here is simply no connection between the form of domestic politics and the propensity to wage war by choice. As the historical record shows, dictatorships can be impeccably peaceful and democracies can be fiercely aggressive.' *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: 1987), p. 188.

stands to reason' kind. Democracies might be expected to be peace loving, because when 'the people' who must bear the costs of war are able to shape, even control, high policy, they can be trusted to demonstrate and vote for the blessings of the prosperity and personal safety associated with peace. In addition, so some will argue, government truly answerable to properly empowered and duly emancipated common folk, should be governments swayed by the humane human values that lurk within most of us. In other words, democracies make policy with an eye on cost-effectiveness and humane values' audits largely absent from the domestic processes of authoritarian polities.

The problem with the twin focused argument just outlined is that it is not true, at least it is not plausibly true enough. Authoritarian polities are not indifferent to the costs of war or the prudent assessment of the national interest, far from it. For example, Adolf Hitler was as obsessed with public opinion, and as worried about the consequences of public disapproval, as is Bill Clinton.⁴² The strange idea that dictators can ignore domestic constituencies needs to be quashed once and for ever. Also, the idea that human beings are 'good,' but only governments are 'bad,' requires prompt burial. The Wars of Yugoslavian Succession in the 1990s may have been masterminded by evil (but popular) dictatorial leaders, but generally they were conducted ferociously on all sides by 'ordinary' Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Albanian Kosovars. I shall return to this theme.

Globalization: truth with two faces

Globalization is not a myth. However, it is a truth, at least a half-truth, that bears a message more of menace than of hope. When promoted by enthusiasts, Anthony Giddens, for example, in his vapid and undisciplined 1999 BBC Reith Lectures, the concept of globalization lends itself too easily to summary dismissal as a faddish and trivializing celebration of the obvious. Fashionable sociologists like Giddens, as well as some contemporary theorists of international relations, may flatter themselves with the conceit that they have discovered this rather amorphous bunch of processes that can be retailed to the credulous as globalization.⁴³ Long before these theorists 'discovered' globalization, British and French statesmen actually practiced it strategically in an episode known to us as The Seven Years' War (1756–63). Whether information travels electronically around the globe in nanoseconds, or is

⁴² See Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1987), and John Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York, 1998), ch. 7.

⁴³ The best, and most even-handed, terse review of the relevant theories known to this author is provided by the editors in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 1–11 (ch. 1 by Jan Aart Scholte also is useful). 'Globalization,' meaning many things to many people, has been a buzz-word of the 1990s. Nearly every contemporary textbook on international relations makes extensive use of the word, generally reverentially. Readers interested in illustration of my point could do worse than refer to Janne E. Nolan (ed.), *Global Engagement: Cooperation and Security in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: 1994), for a glimpse at the sources of what has passed for a vision of foreign policy in the Clinton years; James H. Mittelman (ed.), *Globalization: Critical Reflections* (Boulder, CO: 1996); Brown, *Understanding International Relations*; and Lynn H. Miller, *Global Order*, 4th edn. (Boulder, CO: 1998).

carried by frigate in weeks or even months, would not seem to affect the quality of 'globality'; if I dare a neologism. Anglo-French unpleasantness in the 1750s and the 1760s was expressed, by central design, literally on a global playing field.

If The Seven Years' War fails to impress, try the history of geopolitical theory. Speaking at the Royal Geographical Society on 25 January 1904, Sir Halford Mackinder expounded the first of his three variants of truly global geostrategic theory.⁴⁴ To consider ideas and action in parallel, today's gurus of globalization might recall that in 1943 Mackinder wrote a prescient article in *Foreign Affairs* on 'The Round World and the Winning of the Peace', in which he postulated a geostrategic standoff between an Atlantic world and much of a Eurasia dominated by the USSR.⁴⁵ The 'globality' of it all was underlined in June 1944 when, only nine days apart, the United States led the two greatest amphibious operations in history at locations half a world apart (D-Day on 6 June, and the invasion of Saipan in the Marianas on 15 June). None of this is intended to belittle or discredit contemporary ideas on globalization. But it is to say that strategic thinkers and doers long have 'been there/done that'.

Genuinely global thought and action is not exactly an innovation of the 1990s. The issue, of course, is not globalization itself, but rather its meaning and implications. Many of the factual claims advanced by globalization theory can be admitted readily enough. There is no doubt that economic autarky is less feasible for more states than was the case in the past. Similarly, it cannot be doubted that modern information technologies (IT) have rendered states more porous than in days of yore. There are senses in which states are less sovereign than much of international law assumes them to be, and that societies and individuals almost everywhere—unless they are seriously IT-challenged—are accessible to information, ideas and hence potential influence from geographically distinct places. In the view of some people, a global politics, economics, and perhaps even culture, is emerging which transcends the traditional constraints of time and place—which is, in practical effect, placeless, beyond geography.⁴⁶

Provided the brush-strokes are kept broad and fast moving, characterizations such as that just offered are fairly plausible. But, even if the vision is plausible, we have to ask the classic strategist's question, 'so what?'. With respect to cultural and hence political identity, what is the evidence for the death of nation-state loyalties? The 1990s provided ample evidence of the decline in authority of loyalty to, even just bare tolerance of, multinational and sometimes federal polities. But the beneficiary of transferred loyalties does not appear to be a 'global village' polity. An increasing political clout for more local loyalties is a trend not much improved in its implications for a benign 'globality', when set in the context of a more organized regionalism. For all the rhetoric and scholarly speculation about globalization, the contemporary reality is an unattractive mixture of classic Balkanization—not excluding the less-than-United Kingdom—and a drift towards regional superstates.

⁴⁴ Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York, 1962). See also Geoffrey Sloan, 'Sir Halford Mackinder: The Heartland Theory Then and Now', in Colin S. Gray and Sloan (eds.), *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy* (London, 1999), and Geoffrey Parker, *Geopolitics: Past, Present and Future* (London, 1998).

⁴⁵ Reprinted in Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, pp. 265–78.

⁴⁶ Martin Libicki, 'The Emerging Primacy of Information', *Orbis*, 40 (1996), pp. 261–74.

A regionalization of world politics, if that is what is underway, is a step more plausibly down the road to 1984 than it is to the global village as a true global security community.

Some of the current rather breathless literature on globalization reveals a classic misunderstanding of the inherently Janus-like quality of technological innovation. The railways and the electric telegraph shrank brute geography in the nineteenth century. By 1914 they had bound Eurasia from Lisbon to Vladivostok, and indeed much of the world was 'on line' via underseas cables. Sad to relate, however, those wonders of nineteenth-century science and technology also enabled mass armies to be transported, fed and kept in ammunition, and operationally commanded over great distances.⁴⁷ The same kind of point applies to wireless, to aircraft, and now to the computer.

The IT story that lies at the heart of most current globalization theory happens to refer to the same technologies that are triggering the latest Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).⁴⁸ IT can, in one sense, transcend the erstwhile geographical discipline of distance and therefore time, but fundamentally it is a blank page, an empty bottle in which to place messages of our all too human choice. The computer, indeed the Internet and general exploitation of the electromagnetic spectrum, will not miraculously rescue the human race from a *strategic* history that, on the evidence, is endemic to the human condition. The globalization facilitated by modern science and electronic engineering can no more lead to a technologically mandated peace than could the invention of the wheel, the railway, the telegraph, or any other class of machine. The only scenario for a (rapid) process of globalization that would create a global security community, is some variant of the story line in the 1996 movie, *Independence Day*. In the event of an absolutely unmistakable threat from outer space, then, but only then, would our humanity unite us politically rather than divide us.

⁴⁷ Edwin A. Pratt, *The Rise of Rail-Power in War and Conquest, 1833–1914* (London, 1916); Paul M. Kennedy, 'Imperial Cable Communications and Strategy, 1870–1914', in Kennedy (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London, 1979), pp. 75–98; and Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: 1985), ch. 4. Writing in 1905, a Lt. General on Germany's Great General Staff explained what the electric telegraph meant for operational command. 'The former and actually existing danger of failure in the preconcerted action of widely separated portions of the Army is now almost completely removed by the electric telegraph. However much the enemy may have succeeded in placing himself between our Armies, or portions of our Armies, in such a manner that no troops can get from one to the other, we can still amply communicate with each other on an arc of a hundred or two hundred or four hundred miles. The field telegraph can be laid as rapidly as the troops are marching and headquarters will hear every evening how matters stand with the various Armies, and issue its orders to them accordingly.' Rudolf von Caemmerer, *The Development of Strategic Science during the 19th Century*, trans. Karl von Donat (London, 1905), pp. 171–2. The events of the first week of September 1914 were to demonstrate the vanity in this confident expectation that modern technology would eliminate much of the friction that impedes efficient communication in time of war.

⁴⁸ On the thesis of an information-led RMA, see Stuart E. Johnson and Martin C. Libicki (eds.), *Dominant Battlespace Knowledge* (Washington, DC: 1996), and John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.), *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, CA: 1997). Williamson Murray, 'Thinking About Revolutions in Military Affairs,' *Joint Force Quarterly*, 16 (1997), pp. 69–76, and Colin S. Gray, 'RMAs and the Dimensions of Strategy', *Joint Force Quarterly*, 17 (1997–98), pp. 50–54, are much more sceptical.

I fight, therefore I am human

It should be as obvious to everyone today as it was to neoclassical realists in the early 1990s, that the departure of the deeply unlovely USSR has had as great a significance for global power relations, as it has had no implications whatsoever for the nature of those changed relations. The 1990s were yet another of modern history's shake-down cruise periods following a protracted passage of arms—thankfully, only a *virtual* passage in this latest case, though the arms were real enough. If one was to attempt to rate modern postwar 'ordering' endeavours on an ascending scale of merit from 1 to 5, it would be plausible to allow Vienna and Paris 1814–15 an all but perfect 5, Versailles 1919 warrants a clearly failing grade of 1 (or 2 at the most), Yalta and Potsdam 1945 rates a 4, while 1989–91, a reordering period bereft of a formal settlement, probably deserves a grade of 3. The leading difficulty in 'marking' the statecraft of the early 1990s is that really it is too soon to tell. President George Bush, the largely accidental beneficiary of the prudent grand strategy pursued during his years of impotence as Vice President, and earlier, was not much attracted to 'this vision thing.' No vision, or statecraft, *à la* Bush, is, of course, preferable to poor vision. Still, The New World Order to which Bush spoke very briefly *en passant*, was strictly notional. There were senior officials in the Bush Administration who had a clear vision of a lasting American hegemony comprising the desirable meaning, architecture, and implications of a New World Order. Such a robust vision, however, at least as explicit inspiration for US policy, was judged too embarrassingly hubristic for contemporary sensibilities abroad as well as too expensive.⁴⁹

History repeats itself in that great conflicts come and go, and they are succeeded, or concluded, by more or less grand 'ordering' designs that cope more or less well with the would-be disruptive traffic of their period. It is a vital matter, as Brian Bond argues in his study, *The Pursuit of Victory*, that statesmen—if I may be forgiven the twin sins of eponymy and sexism—should understand how to win the peace as well as win the war.⁵⁰ Nothing lasts for ever, especially in the architecture of relations of power that principally organize world politics, but some postwar 'orders' endure much longer than do others. The most important principle (with *caveat*) for peacemaking is to try to ensure either that every essential polity/interest-player is tolerably satisfied with the political settlement, or that polity/interest-players who are certain to find the settlement intolerable will be unable to make significant mischief on any time-scale of relevance. For example, a 'Carthaginian Peace' can do the job

⁴⁹ The Bush Administration was much embarrassed by the revelation in Patrick E. Tyler, 'US Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop', *New York Times*, 8 March 1992, pp. A1, 14. The authority of the Pentagon's hegemony plan was denied promptly. See Patrick E. Tyler, 'Senior US Officials Assail Lone-Superpower Policy', *New York Times*, 11 March 1992, p. A6. This was a truly brief bid for glory! Words, of course, are one thing, the reality of American hegemony is something else.

⁵⁰ Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford, 1996).

admirably, provided it truly is ‘Carthaginian’.⁵¹ If you know that you are not of Roman quality, it is unwise to attempt to impose a ‘Carthaginian Peace’.

Sad to say, a proclivity to combat helps define the human condition. The 1990s were just another post-war decade and—if we are prudent and fortunate—the twenty-first century will be just another 100-year period. To repeat the primary refrain of this essay, a benign transformation in the human security condition is not about to happen. No matter what your transformational agency-of-choice happens to be, on the evidence available you are wrong. Humans will not learn the ways of peace, following the simplistic proposition that peace is a matter of education, even of education by doing;⁵² peace will not be enforced by awesome technologies; and peace will not be ours by default because wars happily and conveniently proceed through obsolescence to become terminally obsolete. War and strategy are eternal, albeit eternally changing as they adapt to new circumstances.⁵³

To believe that war, understood broadly,⁵⁴ largely is yesterday’s problem and yesterday’s solution,⁵⁵ is not unlike believing in all but eternal life guaranteed strictly by non-divine skills. Both are possible, but they are so improbable as to merit no weight in our planning. It can be difficult to advance neoclassical realist nostrums without appearing cynical, patronizing, or both. However, we realists would wish special note to be taken of the fact that in the twentieth century the ‘civilized countries’ proceeded from a Great War to end wars;⁵⁶ into a second Great War twenty years later which included an effort at genocide worthy of the title; and then into a virtual, or Cold, War which, had it turned hot, through a ‘nuclear winter’ effect might have ended life on planet Earth.⁵⁷ We humans have demonstrated that we are capable of committing, and are contingently willing to commit, any and every abomination. Furthermore, we have demonstrated this fact recently. The neoclassical realist, at least this neoclassical realist, admits that in the long term anything is possible. But for the next several decades it would be prudent to invest in

⁵¹ The problem with the Versailles ‘order’ of 1919 was that in deadly fashion it combined the elements of humiliation of the vanquished—who were not convinced that they had been properly vanquished—with an unrealistic requirement for protractedly robust postwar ‘ordering’ on the part of the victors. It might be said that there was nothing much wrong with Versailles; the difficulty lay not with the treaty, but rather with the lack of will for enforcement by the international community. This excuse, though strictly true, is not persuasive. Prudent peacemakers do not design a post-war ‘order’ that leaves most political parties among the vanquished committed to its overthrow. Such an absence of political stake in the new order all but guarantees that ‘bad times’ will return sooner rather than later. James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: 1992), is instructive. Scholars of international relations have devoted too much attention to the causes of war, a subject that does not lend itself to useful assault, and far too little to the making of more lasting periods of (postwar) ‘order’. The latter is a vital topic on which a great deal of useful work could be done. For a praiseworthy venture into the realm of ‘orders’, see Torbjorn L. Knutsen, *The Rise and Fall of World Orders* (Manchester, 1999).

⁵² Adler believes that learning is key to the arrival of peace. ‘[L]ike all practices it [peace] can be arrived at through *learning* ... In other words, peace is socially constructed.’ ‘Condition(s) of Peace,’ p. 168. Original emphasis. Would that Adler were correct.

⁵³ This is the central theme in Gray, *Modern Strategy*.

⁵⁴ War is a legal, certainly a customary concept. *Warfare* might be the better term.

⁵⁵ It may no longer be fashionable to say this, but in the words of B. H. Liddell Hart, ‘[t]he function of war is to settle disputes’. *The Revolution in Warfare* (London, 1946), p. 42.

⁵⁶ G. W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society* (Oxford, 1984).

⁵⁷ US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Science and Technology, Subcommittee on Natural Resources, Agricultural Research and Environment, and Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment, *Nuclear Winter, Joint Hearing*, 99th Cong., 1st session (Washington, DC: 14 March 1985).

residual military force for ‘order’, all the while one hopes for changes in human hearts and culture.

The ‘death of strategy,’ which is to say the demise of the political demand for strategy, has been anticipated from the mid-nineteenth century until today. In the aftermath of great conflicts, many among the best and the brightest in the scribbling class discern no obvious need for rude soldiery, or strategic reasoning, in a world that appears to present no strategic problems. Daniel Johnson offers an explicit statement of this recurring fallacy when he identifies false alternatives thus:

The Cold War was fought by warriors who never went to war. Intellectuals, that is, who are faced with an uncomfortable choice: obsolescence in a world which values their ideological polemics and treatises on strategy as little as the campaign medals of the retired officer; or a new career, perhaps as historiographers or critics of the martial arts they once practised.⁵⁸

Or, perhaps we would prefer just to cultivate our gardens. There may be much to recommend a new career, but the reason advanced by Johnson does not figure in such an inclination. Strategic thinkers and doers alas are not obsolescent. They were missing from the action in the Balkans in the Spring of 1999, but that is another matter entirely.

In its strategic dimension the megamyth of transformation appears in several variants.

First, the past decade has witnessed yet another burst of speculation by scholars concerning the health of the social institution frequently called ‘major war’. As Eliot Cohen and others have noticed, point scoring in this particular debate is extraordinarily sensitive to language.⁵⁹ As so often is the case, the scholars who can win the definitional combat are likely to win the debate. If, by ‘major war’, one means what the first half of the twentieth century intended by ‘total war’—*grande guerre* for existence among the greater powers—then, yes, the nuclear discovery certainly rendered ‘major war’ obsolescent, at least. Of course, obsolescent, or even obsolete, does not mean impossible. Several defence communities expended huge effort over forty years of Cold War preparing as rationally—though arguably not reasonably—as they could to conduct just such a war as competently as they might prove able. Arguably, a tolerably good job was done by all. Nuclear-age defence preparation proved compatible with a protracted condition of non-(hot) war. Quite possibly, the peace was kept during the Cold War despite the extant strategic theories, plans, and capabilities. I am not claiming that deterrence ‘worked’. We do not and really cannot know.⁶⁰

If one sidelines fine points of definition and adopts the position that major war can refer not only to great, possibly protracted, and bloody conflicts, but also to brief passages of arms that have major consequences, then its demise appears distinctly improbable. Furthermore, one needs to venture into the mire of postmodernity and abandon a fixation upon regular state-to-state conflict, focusing instead on the (somewhat) organized violence for political motives that defines

⁵⁸ Daniel Johnson, ‘Liberalism’s Tragic Lack’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 April 1999, p. 30.

⁵⁹ Cohen, “‘Major’ Consequences of War”.

⁶⁰ In which respect see Fred Charles Iklé, ‘The Second Coming of the Nuclear Age,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (1996), pp. 119–28, and Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: 1997).

warfare.⁶¹ Such a commonsense expansion of theoretical domain exposes the prospective longevity of our all too human will to fight—at least for major stakes—if only irregularly and therefore typically in tactically small-scale engagements.

Journalists who feed on exciting copy and whose grasp of international politics frequently appears to have been shaped strictly by the most recent of events, may be excused believing that the world ever can be remade anew. But scholars should know better. It is true that interstate wars are rare occurrences in the current era. However, it would only take one or two such rare events to spoil a decade, or even a century. Major war, employing every class of weapon in the arsenal, remains possible in a world where states remain the final arbiters of their own security. The reason why the United Nations could be allowed to assume such apparent significance at the close of NATO's air campaign against Serbia in 1999, was precisely because the issues at stake for the leading members of the Alliance were less than truly serious. Serious matters of national security are not submitted for essay, let alone action, if they might be impacted by an unfriendly veto. Overall, the current burst of *Moralpolitik* as favoured by baby-boomer leaders in the United States and Britain, means nothing in particular for the future of world politics (or even of 'global governance'). Moral imperialism, provided it is cheap, can be indulged in a period that is permissive of such frivolity. We neoclassical realists are not at all opposed to doing good. Rather are we opposed to doing good if the price is high and there are more pressing purposes of security requiring military attention.

Again on the principle of never saying never, let us not bury totally the possibility that major war is obsolescent/obsolete *and therefore very unlikely to be employed as an instrument of policy*. The consequentialist qualification is vital. Many an obsolescent, even obsolete, social institution limps on with varying degrees of grace. Consider the British monarchy. Given the appalling human record in the twentieth century, and given the absence of powerful theory explaining why the future must, or even is likely, to be notably different, we realists will keep the jury out on the trial of 'major war' for at least a couple of centuries to come.

Second, and as a somewhat inchoate variant of the argument above, it may just be a *déformation professionnelle*, but repeatedly over the past century and a half scholars and other pundits have declared a declining utility to the threat and use of force.

This uneasy compound of fact, value, and prediction can take the form of generalizations about new security agendas and how the traditional military dimension of security has lost (or is losing) pride of place as principal concern to political, economic, cultural, environmental or some other dimensions.⁶² Leaders of

⁶¹ Hedley Bull advises that '[v]iolence is not war unless it is carried out in the name of a political unit. Also, he insists that 'violence carried out in the name of a political unit is not war unless it is directed against another political unit.' *Anarchical Society*, p. 184. Although such juridical concerns can have great practical significance for the applicability of the limitations in the 'war convention,' they can impair achievement of a more relevant understanding of warfare. Although he overreaches in his argument, Peters does provide a useful wake-up call to Western scholars in his *Fighting for the Future*.

⁶² For example, see Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edn. (Boulder, CO: 1991); Ole Weaver, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup, and Pierre Lemaitre, *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe* (London, 1993); Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: 1998); David A. Baldwin, 'Security Studies and the End of the Cold War', *World Politics*, 48 (1995), pp. 117–41; and idem, 'The Concept of Security', *Review of International Studies*, 23 (1997), pp. 5–26.

all political parties in the United States and Britain in the 1990s celebrated the end of the Cold War by proclaiming the arrival of political peace, promptly seizing a large peace dividend, and demonstrating no real interest in defence policy. Such belated recognition of the utility of force as there has been pertains to the official rediscovery that even moral crusaders need sharp swords. Because moral force alone fails the strategy test (i.e., it does not work), evil dictators need to be bludgeoned by heavy ordnance. If humanitarian intervention for the forcible doing of good becomes all the rage—which it will not, because it is far too costly in relation to its dubious effectiveness—then military security would recover some lost ground in legitimacy, albeit for an unsound reason.

The case of humanitarian intervention shares with all military subjects subservience to the eternal lore of strategy. Recall Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's infamous apology of 4 August 1914 when he told the Reichstag that 'necessity knows no law'.⁶³ With profit for understanding world politics one could rewrite the German Chancellor's honest, if impolitic dictum, to read, 'necessity knows only the lore of strategic effectiveness'. Whether or not an exercise in attempted coercion enjoys the blessing of the UN Security Council, strategy, or one might usefully say 'Clausewitz, rules!' Readers of this essay who are not strategic theorists or defence analysts may have noticed that the Great Man came under renewed assault in the 1990s.⁶⁴ Yet again, agents of the transformational myth have been working overtime. If war, organized violence, or the threat or use of force for 'political' purposes—select your favoured language—has been/is being shown the door by the vigorous working of sundry antistrategic factors, then it should follow that war's greatest theorist must be yesterday's man.

The urgency of public demand for military security can vary on the scale from apparently zero to immediate and overriding of most other considerations. The scholars who periodically discover accurately enough that military security appears not to matter very much today, are akin to people who decide that because the weather now is fine the days of bad weather obviously have passed. Competent strategic analysts, who I am tempted to assert have to be neoclassical realists, can fall into the trap of responding to scepticism expressed by agents of any of the many variants of the transformational myth by overpressing the evidence extant on future threats. Let us be clear: competent neoclassical realists today do not emphasize the need for military security because they *know* that 'China is coming,' or 'Russia is coming back', as the leading challenge to US global hegemony and the international order supported by that hegemony. What competent neoclassical realists truly *know* is that just as all political vacuums eventually are filled,⁶⁵ so every hegemonic international order eventually decays and is challenged. There is scope for argument on the timing and political identity of the challenge, but not as to its eventual appearance.

Although active and intensive demand for military security is irregular, even rare, for most societies, for some it always reappears. Happy accidents of geopolitical location certainly allow some relatively quiet neighbourhoods, but for the globe as a whole bad times invariably return. To help guide superior performance for those

⁶³ Quoted in Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 240.

⁶⁴ Bassford, 'Landmarks in Defense Literature', is an outstanding defence.

⁶⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 548.

'bad times', when the threat or actual use of force is a dominant concern, the writings of a Prussian Major General, first published 167 years ago, provide the outstanding source of inspiration. In *On War*, Clausewitz was right enough on the essentials of his subject. Indeed, he was so right that he has no plausible competitors among strategic theorists.⁶⁶ The analogy between Clausewitz for strategic studies and Aron and Morgenthau for international relations is no less valid for being hugely unattractive to many scholars today. In the same way that Clausewitz explains strategy and war for all times, so Aron and Morgenthau tell their readers most, possibly all, that they really need to know. Before the firing squad draws its ammunition, I must add the explanatory point that of course Clausewitz's *On War* has its limitations, as do Aron's *Peace and War* and Morgenthau's *Peace Among Nations*. However, we do not seek perfection, rather do we seek good enough explanations of human misbehaviour in the realm of world politics.

The third spoke in the wheel of military oriented mythology is the persisting idea that particular weapons are unusable. This variant of the megamyth of transformation appears frequently in the guise of the belief that there is a taboo prohibiting, certainly inhibiting, the threat or use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Most of the pertinent literature addresses alleged taboos against chemical and nuclear arms.⁶⁷ The peril in this myth lies in the implications of its very plausibility. There is a taboo that has emerged since the 1960s that stigmatizes nuclear weapons, while a taboo against chemical arms is nearly half a century older. Unfortunately, these taboos do not extend into the domain where we need it most, which is to say into a commanding role over the hearts, minds, and policies of those desperate for a general respect or a specific protection against the well armed world of G-8 countries. A taboo, or taboos, proscribing WMD most probably is extant among all those who are not motivated to break it. Readers may notice that this is broadly the most serious of difficulties with the approach to the control of arms that we know as (negotiated) 'arms control'. Most people, including most political leaders, are horrified at the prospect of the threat, let alone the use, of any kind of WMD. But, most people, including most political leaders, favoured peace over war in the late 1930s. Under the press of perceived necessity, be it idiosyncratically personal to a leader, or genuinely of wider moment, no taboo is worth the ink expanded in its praise by scholars.

The danger in tabooist reasoning among Western academics is that they risk convincing themselves of that which is not true. We are encouraged to repose confidence in a rather fuzzy culturalist belief that, for example, nuclear weapons have not been, and cannot be, used because of the operation of a nuclear taboo.⁶⁸ A plausible consequence of such a position is blindness to the attractions of WMD to

⁶⁶ 'One Clausewitz is still worth a busload of most other theorists'. Richard K. Betts, 'Should Strategic Studies Survive?', *World Politics*, 50 (1997), p. 29.

⁶⁷ T. V. Paul, 'Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflicts', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 39 (1965), pp. 696-717; Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, 'Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos', in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York, 1996), pp. 114-52; and Richard M. Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: 1997).

⁶⁸ In 'Norms and Deterrence,' p. 140, Price and Tannenwald assert confidently that '[t]he strength of the nuclear taboo and the odium attached to nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction render unusable all nuclear weapons ...' Certainty, probability, and value, are thus confused.

those for whom necessity knows no taboo.⁶⁹ Speculation that the marvels of military effectiveness allowed by information-led armed forces translate as a strategic obsolescence for WMD are exactly wrong⁷⁰—except, that is, for us information-rich G-8 folk, who are decreasingly interested in employing WMD.

It is all too human to organize to fight and even to enjoy combat (especially vicariously). Alas, the belligerent quality to humanity includes a rare, but genuine, willingness to wage major war, including major war with WMD. There is no point in shouting that ‘war does not pay’. For most people, most of the time, such a claim is a self-evident truth. The trouble is that we humans are so gripped by some of the less attractive features of our nature as to be obliged to function according to a notion of prudence that has to include a willingness to fight.

On the lethality of optimism

From different angles this essay has assaulted the multifaceted myth of the possibility, probability, let alone actuality, of benign transformation in human security affairs. This megamyth has spawned interconnected undercooked theories of, for example, complex interdependence, globalization, emancipation, and the rest, all of which tend to share the features of innate attractiveness, some existential merit, but overarching signal error on the essentials. The evidence for synergistic trends suggesting a peaceable future were quite strong on the eve of the Wars of the French Revolution and Empire, the First World War, and in the 1920s and 1930s.

If scholars of international relations wish to conjure up fantasies of security futures radically different from past experience, such is their privilege. However, as professional students of their subject they should be held to account when they confuse fact and value, and they should know better than to risk misinforming students with airy visions of non-existent alternatives. History is a realm of contingency that lends itself to intriguing counterfactual theorizing. For example, had Britain’s RAF not resisted successfully the pressures in the 1920’s against maintaining service independence, its Army-oriented counterfactual alternative might well have been fatally overcommitted to the protection of the BEF in 1940.⁷¹ The consequences truly might have warranted description as awesomely awful. This military operational and strategic example of counterfactual speculation offers the prospects of an alternative course of events, but not of an alternative nature to the course of events. Too much of the contemporary scholarship in our field betrays either indifference to, or even rank ignorance of, the way that world politics and strategic history ‘works’. Four points summarize my argument.

First, although change in international politics—in the distribution of power, in the political culture of key polities, in the technological and economic contexts, and so forth—matters, it does not matter to the degree that it can transform the nature

⁶⁹ Tabooist argument is taken to task in Gray, *Second Nuclear Age*, ch. 4.

⁷⁰ I tackle this issue directly in my ‘Nuclear Weapons and the Revolution in Military Affairs’, in T. V. Paul, Richard J. Harknett, and James J. Wirtz (eds.), *The Absolute Weapon Revisited: Nuclear Arms and the Emerging International Order* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998), pp. 99–134.

⁷¹ I thank Richard P. Hallion for this example. See his ‘Air Power Past, Present, and Future,’ in Hallion (ed.), *Air Power Confronts an Unstable World* (London, 1997), p. 7.

of the subject. Admittedly, warts and all, the classical texts of political realism provide a sound education. Of course, every text bears the stamp of its place, time, and particular culture, but—for example—Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Machiavelli, Morgenthau, and Aron, all offer much timeless wisdom because they all shared an accurate enough vision of an enduring reality.

Second, because a line of argument, a set of assumptions, even a batch of nostrums, is familiar to the point of tedium in repetition, that does not make it incorrect. Classical realism may well appear boring and distinctly old-fashioned. Much that is apparently boring and old-fashioned happens also to be true, or true enough. There is virtue, certainly there is professional advancement for scholars, in theoretical novelty. Unfortunately, with respect to theories of international relations such virtue is apt not to include merit in understanding of the subject.

Third, my case against transformational theory is unusually easy to make when it is illustrated by reference to the strategic domain. A book first published in 1832 speaks as vitally to our security problems today as it did at the time of its gestation. The reputation of Clausewitz's *On War* has survived the slings and arrows of all critics, as well the damage of guilt by association wrought by disciples of different kinds for more than a century. No single tome dominates scholarship in international relations as does *On War* for strategic topics, but the *corpus classicus* of the great realist historian-theorists has persisting value because, as with *On War*, it penetrates and speaks to the enduring nature of its subject. Whether humans navigate by the stars or via the satellites of the US Global Positioning System (GPS), and whether they communicate by smoke signals or via space vehicles, matters not at all for the permanent nature of strategy.⁷²

Fourth and finally, lest any reader successfully has resisted comprehending my argument thus far, I claim that all truly transformational theory about international relations is, and has to be, a snare and a delusion. Resistance to this position is widespread and understandable. After all, I am saying that humankind faces a bloody future, just as it has recorded a bloody past, and for the same reasons that conflate to the problem with our essential (in)humanity. Decent, optimistic, self-confident, and liberal-minded scholars do not want to believe this. This fundamentally emotional resistance can have only two sources of *pseudo*-empirical support. On the one hand, it can be claimed that our all too strategic history strictly did not have to be like that; people and institutions must have made poor choices. Surely we will do better in the future! On the other hand, and admittedly with strict accuracy, one can assert that since, by definition, the future has yet to happen, all things are possible—including a transformation of, and from, strategic history. I find little merit either in such counterfactuality or in such optimism in the face of historical experience.

Classical realism may be unattractively pessimistic. On the evidence, however, that realism is right.

⁷² On Navstar GPS, see Lynn Dutton, David de Garis, Richard Winterton, and Richard Harding, *Military Space* (London, 1990), pp. 75–81.