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Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat
ON WAR

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In the year 1830, a French customs official named Jacques Boucher de Crèvecœur de Perthes unearthed in the valley of the Somme some strange implements of flint now interpreted by the learned as the weapons with which the men of the Old Stone Age made war. These stones are called coups de poing, or “blows of the fist,” for one end was rounded for grasping while the other was pointed for persuasion. With these modest tools of death, it seems, Neanderthal men, from what is now Germany, and Cro-Magnon men, from what is now France, fought fifty thousand years ago for the mastery of the continent, and, after a day of lusty battle, left perhaps a score of dead on the field. In the First and Second World Wars, modern Germans and modern Frenchmen fought again in that same valley, for that same prize, with magnificent tools of death that killed ten thousand men in a day. The art that has made the most indisputable progress is the art of war.

For five hundred centuries, two thousand generations have struggled for that terrain in a calendar of wars whose beginning is as obscure as its end. Even the sophisticated mind, made blasé by habituation to magnitude and marvels, is appalled by the panorama of historic war, from the occasional brawls and raids of normally peaceful “savages,” through the sanguinary annals of Egypt, Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria, the untiring fratricide of the Greek city-states, the conquests of Alexander and Caesar, the triumphs of Imperial Rome, the wars of expanding Islam, the slaughters of Mongol hordes, Tamerlane’s pyramid of skulls, the Hundred Years’ War, the Wars of the Roses, the Thirty Years’ War, the War of the Spanish Succession, the Seven Years’ War, the English, American, French, and Russian Revolutions, the Napoleonic Wars, the Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Spanish-American War, the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, the Second World War . . . This, to our pessimistic moments, seems to be the main and bloody current of history, beside which all the achievements of civilization, all the illumination of literature and art, all the tenderness of women and the chivalry of men, are but graceful incidents on the bank, helpless to change the course or character of the stream.

Such a chronicle of conflict exaggerates, without doubt, the role of war in the record of our race. Strife is dramatic, and (to most of our historians) peaceful generations appear to have no history. So our chroniclers leap from battle to battle, and unwittingly deform the past into a shambles. In our saner moments we know that it is not so; that lucid intervals of peace far outweigh, in any nation’s story, the mad seizures of war; that the history of civilization—of law and morals, science and invention, religion and philosophy, letters and the arts—runs like hidden gold in the river of time.

Nevertheless, war has always been. Will it always be? What are its causes in the nature of men and in the structure of societies? Can it be prevented, or diminished in frequency, or in any measure controlled?

The causes of war are psychological, biological, economic, and political—that is, they lie in the natural impulses of men, in the competitions of groups, in the material needs of societies, and in the fluctuations of national ambition and power.

The basic causes are in ourselves, for the state is the soul of man enlarged under the microscope of history. The major instincts of mankind—acquisition, mating, fighting, action, and association—are the ultimate sources of war. For thousands, perhaps millions, of year’s men were uncertain of their food supply; not knowing yet the bounty of husbanded soil, they

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depended upon the fortunes of the hunt. Having captured prey they tore or cut it to pieces, often on the spot, and gorged themselves to their cubic capacity with the raw flesh and the warm gore; how could they tell when they might eat again? Greed is eating, or hoarding, for the future; wealth is originally a hedge against starvation; war is at first a raid for food. Perhaps all vices were once virtues, indispensable in the struggle for existence; they became vices only in the degree to which social order and increasing security rendered them unnecessary for survival. Once men had to chase, to kill, to grasp, to overeat, to hoard; a hundred millenniums of insecurity bred into the race those acquisitive and possessive impulses which no laws or morals or ideals, but only centuries of security, can mitigate or destroy.

The desire for mates, and parental and filial love, write half of the private history of mankind, but they have not often been the causes of war. Probably the “rape of the Sabine women” was the amorous result of a conflict for land and food.

The fighting instinct enters more obviously into the analysis. Nature develops it vigorously as an aid in getting food or mates; it arms every animal with organs of offense and defense, and lends to the physically weaker species the advantages of cunning and association. Since, by and large, those groups survived that excelled in food-getting, mate-getting, and fighting, these instincts have been selected and intensified through the generations, and have budded into a hundred secondary forms of acquisition, vengence, and strife.

As the quest for food has expanded into the amassing of great fortunes, so the fighting instinct has swelled into the lust for power and the waging of war. The lust for power is in most men a useful stimulus to ambition and creation, but in exceptional men it can become a dangerous disease, a cancer of the soul, which goads them on to fight a thousand battles, usually by proxy. Nietzsche, nervous and sickly, disqualified for military service, thrilled at the sight and sound of cavalry galloping along a Frankfurt street, and at once composed a paean in honor of war and the “will to power.”

The instinct of action enters into the picture as a love of adventure, or escape from relatives or routine. A wider source is the instinct of association. Men fear solitude, and naturally seek the protection of numbers. Slowly a society develops within whose guarded frontiers men are free to live peaceably, to accumulate knowledge and goods, and to worship their gods. Since our self-love overflows, by an extension of the ego, into love of our parents and children, our homes and possessions, our habits and institutions, our wonted environment and transmitted faith, we form in time an emotional attachment for the nation and the civilization of which these are constituent parts; and when any of them is threatened, our instinct of pugnacity is aroused to the limit demanded by the natural cowardice of mankind. In a divided and lawless world such patriotism is reasonable and necessary, for without it the group could not survive, and the individual could not survive without the group. Prejudice is fatal to philosophy, but indispensable to a nation.

Put all these passions together—gather into one force the acquisitiveness, pugnacity, egoism, Egotism, affection, and lust for power of a hundred million souls, and you have the psychological sources of war. Take them in their mass, and they become biological sources. The group, too, as well as the individual, can be hungry or angry, ambitious or proud; the group, too, must struggle for existence, and be eliminated or survive. The protective fertility of organisms soon multiplies mouths beyond the local food supply; the hunger of the parts, as in the body, becomes the hunger of the whole, and species war against species, group against



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group, for lands or waters that may give more support to abounding life. Euripides, twenty-three hundred years ago, attributed the Trojan War to the rapid multiplication of the Greeks.

Group hunger begets group pugnacity, and pugnacity develops in the group, as in the individual, organs of protection and attack. In the group these are called armament; and when they are powerful, they may themselves, like the boy's consciousness of his biceps, become a secondary source of war. On either scale some armament is necessary, for struggle is inevitable, and competition is the trade of life.

The basic economic cause is rivalry for land: land to receive a designedly expanding population, land to provide material resources, land to open up new subjects to conscription and taxation. So the ancient Greeks spread through the Aegean, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean to Byzantium, Ephesus, Alexandria, Syracuse, Naples, Marseilles, and Spain; so the English spread through the world in the last two centuries; and so the Americans are spreading now.

Greece fought for control of the Aegean, the Hellespont, and the Black Sea, because it was dependent upon Russian grain. Rome had to conquer Egypt because it needed corn and Asia Minor because it needed markets for its handicrafts and fortunes for its politicians. Egyptian wheat, Near Eastern oil, and Indian cotton explain many a battle in British history; Spanish silver explains the wars of Rome with Carthage; Spanish copper has something to do with German aid to Fascist Spain. Our sinless selves had a taste for sugar in 1898; and far back in 1853 we pointed our gifts and cannon at a Japanese government and persuaded Japan to transform itself into an industrial nation eager for foreign markets and spoils. These Japanese chickens came home to roost at Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The business cycle adds its own contribution to the causes of modern war. Since men are by nature unequal it follows that in any society a majority of abilities will be possessed by a minority of men; from which it follows that sooner or later, in any society, a majority of goods will be possessed by a minority of men. But this natural concentration of wealth impedes, by the repeated reinvestment of profits in promoting production, widespread purchasing power among the people; production leaps ahead of consumption; surpluses rise and generate either depression or war. For either production must stop to let consumption catch up, or foreign markets must be found to take the surplus that was unpurchased at home.

Add a few political causes of war. The first law of governments is self-preservation; their second law is self-extension; their appetite grows by what it feeds on, and they believe that when a state ceases to expand it begins to die. Furthermore, the distribution of power among nations is always changing through the discovery or development of new processes or resources, through the rise or decline of population, through the weakening of religion, morals, and character, or through some other material, biological, or psychological circumstance; and the nation that has become strong soon asserts itself over the nation that has become weak. Hence the difficulty of writing a peace pact that will perpetuate a present arrangement. Wonderful indeed is the treaty that does not generate a war. Peace is war by other means.

If the foregoing analysis is substantially correct, we must not expect too much from those who seek to end or mitigate war. William James, in his kindly way, hoped that the enrollment of the nation's youth, for a year or two, in a far-flung "War against Nature" would give creative expression to the impulses of action, adventure, and association, and so provide a "moral equivalent for war"; America is trying this in its excellent Peace Corps; but obviously such

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measures do not reach to the major sources of international strife. The League of Nations (except under Briand and Stresemann) was a conspiracy of the victors to preserve their gains; it had to fail as soon as the fertility and industry of the defeated had altered the balance of national power prescribed by the Treaty of Versailles. The life of nations cannot be straightjacketed into immutability. Pacifism would be a cure for war if it could survive the call to arms and national defense; the same English youth that had, in the Oxford Union, vowed never to take up arms for England, took them up manfully against Hitler.

Vague appeals to the conscience of mankind to put an end to war have had little effect, throughout history for there is no conscience of mankind. Morality is a habit of order generated by centuries of compulsion; international morality awaits international order; international order awaits international force; conscience follows the policeman. A wise people will love peace and keep its powder dry.

An effective approach to the problem of war will proceed, not by large and generous emotions, but by the specific study and patient adjustment of specific causes and disputes. Peace must be planned and organized as realistically as war—with provision for every factor, and prevision for every detail. This cannot be done in an occasional moment stolen by statesmen from internal affairs; it requires the fulltime attention of first-rate minds. The incentives to war are so numerous and powerful that each of them should be the major concern of an international commission specifically appointed for its consideration and adjustments. There are so many specialists, economists, and diplomats lying around (to use this verb in a purely physical sense) that we might well distribute them into commissions severally assigned to examine the economic causes of war, to hear the disputing groups patiently, to investigate possibilities of conciliation, to make specific and practicable recommendations to their governments, and to do their work without the explosive excitement of publicity. We must isolate the germs of war at their source, and sterilize them with understanding and negotiation.

One such commission would study the problems generated by reckless human fertility. It could promote policies and methods of family limitation wherever the birthrate (minus the death rate) is outrunning mitigating local shortages of food; it would seek territorial outlets for the expansion of congested populations. A permanent commission might study the access of industrial nations to material, fuels, and markets. It should be a major function of the Department of State to wage peace vigorously and continuously on every front running the visible or prospective means of subsistence; it would prepare international procedures for mitigating local shortages of food; it would seek territorial outlets for the expansion of congested populations. A permanent commission might study the access of industrial nations to material, fuels, and markets. It should be a major function of the Department of State to wage peace vigorously and continuously on every front.

In the end we must steel ourselves against utopias and be content, as Aristotle recommended, with a slightly better state. We must not expect the world to improve much faster than ourselves. Perhaps, if we can broaden our borders with intelligent study, impartial histories, modest travel, and honest thought—if we can become conscious of the needs and views and hopes of other peoples, and sensitive to the diverse values and beauties of diverse cultures and lands, we shall not so readily plunge into competitive homicide, but shall find room in our hearts for a wider understanding and an almost universal sympathy. We shall find in all nations qualities and accomplishments from which we may learn and refresh ourselves, and by which we may enrich



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our inheritance and our posterity. Someday, let us hope, it will be permitted us to love our country without betraying mankind.

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