

On the Causes and Remediation of War and its Human Suffering

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War is an ancient human activity, at least as old as civilization and the founding of cities. It has always been a scourge, but has become much more so in the modern era, and especially in the last one-hundred years. Three related developments are chiefly responsible for this increase toll in suffering and human lives, blood and treasure exacted by war. First is innovations in weapons technology, which turned the battlefield into a scene of massive carnage during World War I and cities into flaming infernos in World War II (culminating in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs). Second, beginning in earnest with World War II, is the slaughter of civilians, often deliberate, as in the Holocaust and the bombing of cities, or sometimes merely foreseen, as in the high levels of “collateral damage.” Third is a shift in recent decades from interstate wars to intrastate wars; civil wars have now become a greater source of human suffering and death than wars of state against state. For example, in the past few years, a reported three to four million people have been killed as a result of the on-going civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. How many people even know about this? (The name of this state is a misnomer, an important foreshadowing of the argument to follow.)

It is one of humanity’s highest moral imperatives to lessen the scourge of war (in addition to the not unrelated task of reducing the extreme poverty of a large portion of humans on the planet, a source of even more suffering and death). In alleviating the suffering of war (as well as of poverty), the chief moral burden falls on those of us in the developed nations because we are much better placed than others to do something about it. Alleviating the suffering of war must be our goal, but what we need to understand is the means we should to adopt to achieve the goal. To choose the proper and effective means, we need to understand the causes of war; for knowledge of the causes will show us where the levers are that we can work to achieve the goal.

The question of the causes of war is, of course, a long-standing topic of human investigation and considerable intellectual controversy. I cannot hope to say much that is new or original on the subject in these short pages. What I will do is to borrow some ideas that have been developed with much greater insight and sophistication over the centuries by others who have addressed this topic, and seek using them to make a brief plausible case for action we can take as a society to reduce the suffering from war.

The first point to note is that great care must be taken with a popular style of argument about the causes of war, namely, an argument from analogy. In discussing the causes of war, writers often make an analogy between war and conflicts among individual persons. This is often referred to as a domestic analogy, the idea being that the causes of individual human conflict at the domestic level can provide insight into the causes of conflict at the international level (or among substate groups in the case of civil war). For example, there are human passions and emotions that frequently are cited as the motivation for or cause of individual conflict, such as greed, insecurity, vainglory, jealousy, and so forth, and it is argued on analogy that these same emotions are the causes of war. There is certainly some truth to this conclusion, but it is at best a misleading half-truth. Here is how it is misleading. It is easy, when in thrall of the domestic analogy, to reason in the following way: violent conflicts among individuals are inevitable; the causes of individual violent conflict (the aforementioned emotions) are the same as the causes of war; therefore, war is inevitable. This is not a good argument.

This is a poor argument because war always has multiple causes. Even if these human emotions are a causal factor of some war, they are not the only causal factor. These emotions may be necessary conditions for some wars, but, because the causes of war are multiple, the emotions are not a sufficient condition for any war. We could say that all wars have a set of necessary conditions. Some of these conditions serve to mediate between the passions of individuals and outbreak of war. To avoid any particular war, all that is required is to block one of the necessary conditions. We cannot, of course, eliminate those human emotions (nor would we want to if we could), but if we can block one of the other necessary conditions, the war will not occur despite the emotions. Various proposals have been made to channel the offending human emotions away from war, for example, in the proposed “tenth victim” game and William James’s “moral equivalent of war,” but it would be much easier and more effective to work on blocking some other necessary condition.

Crucial in thinking about the causes of war is the role of institutions. Return for a moment to the case of individual violence. Humans have adopted social institutions to seek to reduce the incidence of individual violence. Foremost among these institutions is, of course, the law. A good part of the purpose of the law is to insure that private quarrels and the passions they involve do not become violent altercations. The criminal law punishes individual violations of rights, so the victim need not go after the perpetrator; tort law provides an avenue through which an individual who is harmed by another can be compensated. In addition, there are other social institutions besides the law that seek to reduce the incidence of individual violence.

In any case, in terms of institutions, war differs in a significant way from domestic fights or violence. There are not only institutions that seek to avoid war, but there are institutions that are necessary for war to occur. Military forces are themselves composed of and dependent on a variety of institutions. In other words, war is institutionally mediated. In contrast, individual violence need have no such institutions and need not be institutionally mediated. If A and B get in an argument in a bar, they

need no institutions to begin to slug it out. There may be institutions that seek to avoid bar patrons slugging it out (like the employment of bouncers), but no institutions that enable the fisticuffs. Let us label these two kinds of institutions:

Avoidance institutions: institutions that seek to avoid violence, and

Enabling institutions: institutions that mediate violence, making it possible.

So the point is that while war requires enabling institutions, individual violence does not. Adequate enabling institutions are a necessary condition for war. On the other hand, adequate avoidance institutions are a *sufficient* condition for the avoidance of violence, whether individual violence or war.

So now we can say in a schematic way how war can be avoided. To avoid war, we must either (1) insure that there are adequate avoidance institutions to stop international (including large-scale intrastate) violence or (2) insure that there are not adequate enabling institutions to facilitate it. But, to shift the tone slightly, I think we must recognize that war cannot be completely avoided, meaning that it is not possible to reduce the likelihood of its occurrence to zero. Rather, our goal must be to reduce the risk of war to a minimum. Thus, to express (2) in these terms, we must insure that our institutions are least likely to enable war, that is, least likely to successfully mediate between certain human emotions and other conditions and the occurrence of war.

One more complication must be included. Most people, pacifists excepted, believe that war is sometimes justified, that there are some causes worth fighting for. Many people, for example, would claim that the defeat of Nazism was worth the horrendous suffering the war imposed. Even those who disagree with this particular judgment are likely to believe that there are some cases in which a war is justified. Those cases would presumably mainly be where one nation engaged in aggression against another. So this indicates a feature that our institutions should have in order to reduce the risk of war. Our institutions should reduce the likelihood that one state will aggress against another. This means, at least in part, reducing the factors that cause one state to aggress against another. If there is never a first use of force, there would never be a war. This may seem to simply state the obvious, but it is important to appreciate the implications of this point, which I shall address shortly.

The fact that both avoidance and enabling institutions are involved in the occurrence of war means that we should recognize the weakness in a certain argument about the avoidance of war. According to this argument, made, for example, by World Federalists, the only way to reduce the risk of war is to strengthen international institutions to the point where they have sufficient power to intervene and impose a settlement between states about to go to war. In other words, the only route to the avoidance of war is the establishment of international governmental and policing institutions, corresponding to domestic law-enforcing institutions, in short, a strong world government. The violence-avoiding institutions of a world government would impose international peace as

the governments of nations impose domestic peace. These institutions would be what I have called avoidance institutions. The fallacy in this argument is that it ignores the role of enabling institutions. While working on the structure of avoidance institutions is one way to reduce the risk of war, it is not the only way. One can, for example, work on enabling institutions, making them less capable of playing the necessary role they play in mediating international violence.

This is a good thing because there are a number of problems with the argument that war can be avoided only through a strong world government. One is that such a government, at least at this point in history, seems utterly politically impractical or infeasible. It does not seem to be at all in the cards. But, in addition, there are seemingly strong reasons to avoid such a government, even if it were feasible. One such reason is that it creates the possibility of a universal despotism, which should be avoided at all costs. But, because war depends not only on weak avoidance institutions, but also on strong enabling institutions, we can work on weakening the enabling institutions without having to accept the strong avoidance institutions of a strong world government.

So, we need to consider what sorts of institutions are strong enabling institutions and what sorts are weak. The thesis of this paper is that democratic forms of government generally involve weak enabling institutions and nondemocratic forms of government generally involve strong enabling institutions. Why is this? The answer is simple. The sufferings of war are distributed among most of the population of a society, the ordinary people, the soldiers who fight and die, the civilians who suffer deprivation and die, while the benefits of war are usually enjoyed by a small portion of the population, an elite, for example, an economic elite. In a democratic government, power is in the hands of the people, while a nondemocratic government, power is in the hands of an elite. If the elite of a nondemocratic government is a group that would benefit from a war, it is much more likely to send the state into war than if, as in the case of a democratic government, power is in the hands of those who would suffer from war. It is a matter of self-interest.

This makes democratic government generally a weak mediator between the passions of individuals and the going to war. When those who have power would suffer greatly from war, as is the case with democracy, any passions that have that might lead them to war would be blunted by an awareness of what they would suffer. However, when a government is controlled by an elite that would benefit rather than suffer from a war, their own passions, especially greed, would tend to lead to war. There is a hypothesis discussed by scholars of international relations, sometimes called the democratic peace thesis, that democracies do not go to war with each other. The claim is that this hypothesis is supported by history. There has never been an occasion when two democracies have gone to war against each other. Every war in which a democracy has been involved has been with a nondemocracy. If this hypothesis is true, it would support the argument I have made.