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Do Not Take Lightly the Perils of Peace

Is Peace beyond Humanity's Reach

By Richard Spencer, Ph.D.

Upon completing college, teaching a year, and waiting to be drafted, I volunteered for active duty with the USAF in 1961. The country soon became embroiled in the Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the start of the Vietnam War, the India/Chinese Border War, and a continuing worldwide commitment to the Cold War. I became directly or tangentially involved in all of these while flying thousands of miles every month delivering military cargo. We always considered “peace as our profession” and we were proud to serve the country.

However, during all of these years, those of us in military uniform were largely derided by the public as those who somehow pursued war rather than those who served the country in order to protect its citizens from the ravages of war. We were not seen as purveyors of peace, and it was always an eerie feeling when in public and while in uniform to be treated as the enemy. After all, this was only a few years after the end of WWII and we had great reverence for veterans of that era, many of whom were family members. As well, there was the same public distrust of public and federal law enforcement officers. What had gone wrong? We were at War.

As it happened, several years later while visiting the Museum of the USMA at West Point I noted in the history section a quote by Thucydides the Greek (471 – 400 B.C.), “Peace is an armistice in a war that is continually going on.” Given the world during the 20th century that may seem self-evident; but it has not been the teaching of modern Western Civilization. I began to think seriously, “What actually is peace?” Michael Howard, a leading British military scholar over the past 50 years, takes this question on in a short but powerful essay, *The Invention of Peace*. He explains why peace is a far more complex affair than war. So complex, that it often seems beyond humanity’s reach.

Howard’s thesis that the idea that a Society could be organized without war was something developed during the 18th century Enlightenment and ultimately became the accepted view of Western societies. Then, during the 19th and 20th centuries the philosophy of social Darwinism and its ensuing ideologies suggested conflict is inevitable; that one must either conquer or be conquered; and that fighting was necessary and desirable. That sense was further enhanced by the First World War, carried into WWII, and was a significant factor during the Cold War: dominate or be dominated.

One of the most interesting arguments put forth by Howard relates to the Cold War. We all viewed in wonderment during 1989 as the War came to a sudden and dramatic end with the demolition of the Berlin Wall by the inhabitants of East Germany. That act alone left no international doubt but that the West won without another catastrophic worldwide conflict as witnessed twice before in the 20th century. Why?

Howard’s view is that the United States, as opposed to the Communist countries, could set the pace for rapidly evolving weapons technology at an acceptable cost to its national economy. But, the Soviet Union

could only keep pace by starving its population and reversing any improvement they may have had in their standard of living. With the then new and developing era of information technology that was leading to greater military effectiveness it became clear to the Soviets that keeping the military balance was an unacceptable cost. The Communist system had not delivered upon the promises for its citizens while capitalism was flourishing throughout the free world. Communism then vanished as an alternative ideology to that of Western Democracy.

After the collapse of Communism many opined that the newly established world order would be forever peaceful. Remember the budgetary peace dividend? What could take the place of the murderous Communist ideology to create another worldwide international conflict? Note that *The Invention of Peace* was published in 2000. Howard's last thoughts in his essay are, "...although it is tempting to believe ...a new and stable world order will come into being, we would be unwise to expect anything of the kind."

And, on September 11, 2001, came a direct attack upon our soil and we entered into a worldwide conflict against Islamic/Fascist terrorism. This terrorist attack is a watershed event and has presented us with a challenge as profound as any our country has ever faced. Even now, almost a decade later, no one knows where it will lead; we just know that we are up against an implacable enemy dedicated to the destruction of our way of life. Again, it raises the question of whether peace is so complex that it is beyond humanity's reach and is merely an invention of the international bourgeois community.

Ironically, it turns out that the only human endeavor almost as complex as peace is war itself; and, the mobilization of large numbers of citizens to fight during the defense of their country has had a dramatic effect upon a nation's interaction with its citizens. Because of the political dislocations of the 1960's, the U.S. now has an all-volunteer military to lead and protect its citizens during its organized conflicts. Even though the volunteer military has been judged to be the best ever, it has not yet been determined if it would be successful in a worldwide conflagration without conscription.

Appropriate defense by a country is an important lesson for the ages that many of its citizens fail to properly digest. Thousands of years of war and world history suggest the fate of civilizations is determined by the fate of their military events; we are at risk if under prepared. We destroyed much of our military capabilities after both World Wars only to be caught lacking when major threats once again reared their ugly heads through worldwide ideologies favoring despotism.

The driving force of Western Civilization and the U.S. in particular has been the concept of individual and economic freedom. That combination may be the most influential intellectual force the world has known and led to the U.S. becoming a worldwide economic and military power. The wisdom of history suggests that we must extract the past lessons that apply to today's role of a superpower. Ignoring the patterns of history is a false choice and is to risk repeating the mistakes that have toppled other nations. Another historian notes that we are living in an "ahistorical age - an era when too many people are willing to invest in a dangerous delusion that science, technology, and the information superhighway make us immune to history."

Acceptance of the history of world warfare irrefutably supports an old but ever relevant Chinese proverb, "The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in War." I am spending the winter next to Naval Air Station Key West, a major air combat training center, and I am on base almost every day. It is the home for the Top Gun school on the East Coast for Navy fighter pilots, and that hangs for all to see. They live it and they know it. Our citizens should as well.

For thousands of years, wars among nations and societies have left a deep imprint upon the social life and culture of those involved. War is not something desired but something that seems inevitable. As Durant informed us some time ago, war is one of the constants of history with only 268 years out of the last 3,421

years being free of it. An important implication is whether the U.S. will experience the same ultimate fate as the major democracies and superpowers of the past? It is not inconceivable as internal and external forces can be equally dangerous as freedom is not a universal value. Maybe, Thucydides was correct in his analysis and a modern version of his quote would be that “History has shown that peace is merely the interlude between wars?” Maybe, peace truly is too complex for humanity to attain. It certainly has been during my lifetime that included much of the bloody 20th century.

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