Through the Glass Darkly

The Unlikely Demise of Great-Power War

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As you know, you have to go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you want.

—Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld
9 December 2004

The Former secretary of defense's comment about the state of armored vehicles in Iraq captures a critical, if sometimes forgotten, truth about the future force structure of the US military: the choices we make today affect how the nation will fight tomorrow. Additionally, radical changes in the structure of the armed forces could influence the types of adversaries the United States would be willing to confront in the future. In the face of the ongoing struggle in Iraq it is easy to lose sight of these truths and, instead, focus on the immediate situation. Nonetheless, hidden among contemporary arguments about numbers of troops or types of weapons needed to fight and win a counterinsurgency are unexamined ideas about the nature and future of warfare, and while it is impossible to predict with certainty the nature of a specific future conflict, it is possible to understand the assumptions that underlie such visions.[1]

In fact, much of what we read and hear about the future of war rests on a belief that tomorrow will be a repeat of today. That is, small numbers of highly deadly, very capable US forces will take on smaller, largely out-

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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
2007		**00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Through the Glass Darkly. The Unlikely Demise of Great-Power War	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Air University,Strategic Studies Quarterly,155 N. Twining St BG 693,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6026**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**20**	

gunned opponents either in conventional combat or in battles with terrorists or insurgents. There is truth to these observations, but they might be truer if the caveat "for the time being" had been added. The truth is, we cannot bet on fighting only today's enemy in the future, particularly when we extend the future out 25 or 50 years. What we do know about the future is that states have often misgauged it. We are told, for example, that there is no finer example than that of Great Britain in the nineteenth century. A force of just 331,000 and a budget that amounted to only 2.4 percent of the British gross national product (GNP) "safeguarded an empire that covered 25 percent of the globe."[2] Yet, by focusing on such operations the British neglected the challenges of fighting a great power and helped invite German aggression in 1914 and 1939 at a staggering cost.[3] The same might be happening today. As analysts continue to focus on the challenges posed by terrorists and insurgents, they overlook or downplay a real danger that might lie ahead: namely, war among the great powers. The zeitgeist of our day tells us that great-power war is dead, but is it really?

Before answering that question, it is important to stress that the demise of great-power war is morally uplifting, which is why it appeals to the "better angels of our nature." Even within military circles, where hardheaded analysis is the order of the day, a heady consensus has emerged around the notion that war has changed. In *The Pentagon's New Map,* a book widely read both by insiders at the Pentagon and the general public, Thomas Barnett argues that "big wars are out, small wars are in." He even goes so far as to conclude that "state-on-state war has gone the way of the dinosaur."[4] Similarly, Thomas Hammes in *The Sling and the Stone* makes the case that the "strategic concepts, operational execution, and tactical techniques of fourth-generation warfare require major changes in the way we think" about war and peace.[5] This view of war, which is closer in comparison to a giant versus a pygmy than a new way of war, incorrectly and dangerously assumes away the potential of great-power wars in the future. Moreover, these authors seem to believe that the United States will remain, for an indefinite period of time, hegemonic. The idea of hegemony is an old one, but the term can be misleading. Generally, it is used to describe the state most capable, in terms of economic and military strength, to organize relations among other states. This does not mean, however, that this state can do all it wants all of the time; no state can do that. That the United States carries wide sway over events throughout the world is not the same as saying that it is a global hegemon. True global hegemony

is hard to come by. The Ancient Greeks were certainly hegemonic in their relatively small region of the world. The Romans were, too, on a much grander scale. Even Britain enjoyed wide latitude in the comings and goings of other nations, yet it could not get its way within the rebellious American colonies. From 1776 to 1783, Britain's primary military problem remained how to conquer a country as vast as North America without engaging in a vaster military and economic campaign that was beyond her logistical and manpower capacities to sustain.[6] With an ongoing war in the Middle East, one sees similarities with the United States. No doubt, the United States enjoys regional hegemony with a docile Canada to its north and a complacent Mexico to its south. However, even this hegemony is relative as recent events in Venezuela and other parts of Latin America attest. The uncomfortable fact is that American leadership is not as attractive or as powerful as we once thought.

Nonetheless, throughout the world, the idea of a great-power war occurring anytime soon, or even at all, seems anachronistic. After some 60 years of peace, European nations, especially Germany and France, are intent on building a more united, peaceful Europe.[7] In Asia, though the rifts between China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan exist, the current prospects for large-scale war appear to be remote.[8] Within the United States, the idea of fighting a large-scale war seems equally farfetched; here, talk of a peer competitor draws mockery from some and scorn from others.[9] By most accounts, great-power war is unthinkable, but is it really? And, if so, what evidence exists to support such a strong claim? It is important to be clear—many of the arguments presented here are not new. Indeed, most have a long history within the study of history and international politics and are familiar to academic specialists in these fields. In light of claims being discussed today, however, it is important for generalists to be as equally familiar, and it is to that end that we take up our task.

Typically, the arguments used to consign great-power war to the dustbin of history rest on a cosmology of interrelated and highly optimistic assumptions regarding the relationship among technology, economics, democracy, norms, and military affairs. It is important to stress that these ideas are not just academic musings. They have already taken hold and form the backbone of the United States' transformation efforts—a set of reforms that have influenced policy decisions, which will affect the nation for years to come—launching what one analyst calls a "radical restructuring of US defense policy that is neither necessary nor desirable."[10] The necessity or desire

to transform America's military ultimately rests with policy makers, but it is high time that scholars question what can only be described as a wellspring of belief that the era of great-power war has ended, lest we find ourselves going to war with a military that we do not want.

This examination is divided into five sections. The first considers the events of September 11 and the effects that they did *and* did not have on international politics. The second looks at the relationship between technology and deterrence. The third section focuses on the supposed pacifying effect of economics on state behavior, while the fourth does the same for democracy. The final section considers the trendy notion that great-power war is going the way of slavery—that is, war is becoming normatively prohibited. At the outset we should be clear—the question is not whether technology, economics, democracy, or ethical norms put a brake on war. In some cases they do. Rather the issue is, does any one of these make great-power war unthinkable? In the end, while all of these arguments remain appealing in theory, in practice they are at best optimistic; at their worst they are unrealistic.

September 11 and International Politics

"We're living in a whole new world," is the central claim of those who tout the idea that the attacks of September 11 changed international politics.[11] Yet, to claim that the world has changed is not particularly illuminating. Instead, one must show *how* the world has changed. There is no doubt that we are living in a different world. With the Cold War over, we have seen an end to superpower rivalry. The conclusion of this 50-year standoff has had a pronounced effect on international politics. By radically altering the balance of power, and hence the balance of both nuclear and conventional forces, the ending of the Cold War produced systemic effects which made the world less vulnerable to catastrophic nuclear war. On the other hand, the attacks that brought down the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon killed thousands, but they did not change the balance of power, nor have they dramatically increased the possibilities of another catastrophic attack. True, these events opened the eyes of the world to the possibility of terror attacks, but they have been with us for a long time and are not likely to disappear anytime soon. Interestingly, however, the ending of the Cold War helped create the conditions necessary to set in motion the kinds of terror attacks we have recently witnessed and

are primarily concerned with. As a vast portion of Central Asia crawled out from under Soviet domination, strategic pockets opened, allowing those like Osama bin Laden to rush in. It is important to note that the same systemic effects that reduced the chance of nuclear war between the superpowers have increased the likelihood of terror attacks elsewhere.

This is not to say that the events of September 11 have had no effect. The acts shocked much of the world, and states have altered many aspects of the way they do business. Neither domestic nor international travel may ever be the same again. Likewise, concerns over homeland security will affect—and even dominate—citizens' behavior over the coming years. But while changes in travel and homeland security may dominate political discourse in the short term, it is war—or more specifically the threat of great-power war—that could prove to be the biggest danger in the years ahead. Why? Because at the end of the day, the world is still made up of states, large and small, that must look out for themselves. In such a world, where there is no world government to protect states from the harmful intentions of others, survival is the name of the game, and nothing has threatened the survival of states more than great-power war.[12]

In the past 200 years great-power war has decimated empires, laid waste to countries, and claimed over 60 million lives with an unmatched ferocity. All told, Napoleon's wars and the Crimean, Franco-Prussian, and Russo-Turkish wars claimed perhaps two to three million combatants. This, while significant, pales in comparison to the nine million soldiers and untold millions of civilians who died as a result of World War I, or the 50 million men, women, and children who perished in World War II. In Korea, the world's first limited great-power war in the nuclear age, nearly three million fell in the shadows of the superpowers. All of these are colossal numbers by today's standards. For example, 625 people died as a result of international terrorism in 2003; 35 were Americans. This figure is less than the 725 killed during 2002.[13] It should be clear, terrorism is a weapon of the weak, and as these numbers indicate, terrorists have incredible will but not incredible power. Until such time as terrorists can match the power of the state, the biggest dangers in the world will continue to stem from the strongest powers, the smallest from the weaker ones. This is not meant to downplay the importance of deterring acts of terror or stopping terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The thought of Osama bin Laden with WMDs is truly terrifying. It is important to point out, however, that should the day come when terrorists like bin Laden gain access to WMDs,

they will, in all likelihood, acquire them from men or women who live in states. Despite arguments to the contrary, states remain important actors in international life because they monopolize the most destructive power in the world. Although the events of September 11 shocked the world and changed some of the ways in which states do business, they have done little to alter the nature of international politics and virtually nothing to reduce the likelihood of great-power war.

Technology Will Not Deter Great-Power War

Another line of reasoning suggesting that great-power war is a thing of the past often begins with a statement asserting that improved methods of waging war have created unbearable costs, the likes of which we have never seen.[14] Furthermore, these costs are unambiguous and transparent, clear to everyone with any interest in aggression. No doubt, technological shifts have continuously altered the methods of war—the machine gun, the submarine, and the airplane changed the way of war, and nuclear weapons, some argue, raised both the psychological and physical costs of war to a level most states are unwilling to pay. There is truth to these observations. Nuclear weapons contributed to the long peace between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. What is often overlooked, however, is that nuclear weapons also gave the superpowers many opportunities to vent their aggressions, including the practice of coercive diplomacy, military interventions, and proxy wars.[15] Yet, deterrence held. Why?

Although nuclear weapons played a role in keeping the superpowers in check, political arrangements, the by-product of the distribution of nuclear power among the two key protagonists, also loomed large.[16] Deterrence was also simplified because there were essentially only two players in the game.[17] The superpowers could accurately gauge each other's responses and calculate risks more easily because they only had to focus on each other. While there were plenty of other problems to contend with, at the end of the day policy makers only had to truly worry about the actions of one state. There was no third superpower to appeal to, no balancer capable of reconciling differences. In short, bipolarity increased the freedom of action between the superpowers, enabling them to balance against one another and making it clear what the other side was doing.[18] That nuclear weapons sustained the

Cold War peace is not denied here, but, in the end, the political structure that resulted from them mattered more than the weapons themselves.

Although nuclear weapons are no longer the centerpiece of deterrence, there are those who still insist weapons matter more than political arrangements and who put their faith in technology and the Revolution in Military Affairs.[19] Improvements in information, precision, and stealth have increased the ability to use force in an offensive manner and at a reasonable cost. During the Gulf War, the F-117A fighter-bomber flew only 2 percent of US sorties but accounted for 40 percent of the damage done to strategic targets. Furthermore, the F-117's effectiveness vastly exceeded other aircraft. For example, F-111Es using unguided Mk-82 bombs destroyed two targets in 12 sorties with 168 bombs, while F-117s struck 26 targets in their 12 sorties with 28 precision-guided weapons.[20] In Afghanistan, the introduction of US airpower, together with special operations forces troops on the ground, tipped the scales in favor of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, breaking up a brutal and wasteful stalemate on the battlefield that had great similarity to the trenches of WWI. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, precision attacks pummeled Iraqi Republican Guard tank divisions as they tried to move under the cover of a blinding sandstorm.[21]

These are remarkable results by any standard, but a more pressing concern ought to be whether advanced conventional technologies produce the kinds of political structures necessary to enhance deterrence.[22] That is an open and important question. On the one hand, one might conclude that the United States has already achieved conventional deterrence, evidenced by the fact that no state appears to be seriously thinking of attacking the United States, at least conventionally. Indeed, the entire asymmetric debate runs on this logic. However, there is every reason to believe that advanced conventional technologies, by themselves, are not as stabilizing as nuclear weapons and, therefore, may not enhance deterrence. Indeed, as conventional weapons become stealthier, deterrence may become more difficult. For example, the emphasis on speed and lethality, which are only two characteristics of advanced conventional weapons, may decrease the likelihood of escalation break points which would allow time for an enemy to reconsider its actions and, perhaps, back down. Lightning-fast communications technologies only further complicate matters because they heighten the expectation that something can and, therefore, must be done instantly. In short, because of their offensive nature, advanced technologies

may complicate diplomatic initiatives to resolve conflicts short of war, rendering their deterrent attributes irrelevant. In the end, political arrangements matter, and the deterrent effect of any weapon should be evaluated within the context of the structure of the international system.[23]

Today, the international system seems to be transitioning from unipolarity to multipolarity, where three or more great powers will compete and contend. As the end of the Cold War reminds us, historic global change can come quickly but only somewhat predictably. That is, while history indicates that states will balance against one another, it offers little in the way of predicting when power transitions like the one that occurred in 1989 will take place. Who are the contenders that will shape the future of international politics? Germany and China are certainly candidates. With a population of 82 million and a GNP of 2.2 trillion dollars, Germany outstrips all of the other European powers. France is second with a population of 59 million and a GNP of 1.47 trillion dollars. The United Kingdom, Italy, and Russia all fall behind. In Asia, China is the rising power with a GNP of 1.18 trillion dollars and a population of 1.24 billion. If China managed to equal South Korea's per capita GNP, the Chinese GNP would be 10.6 trillion dollars. If it had just half of Japan's the figure would rise to 20.6 trillion, and if China's per capita equaled Japan's it would soar to 40.08 trillion. In short, China has the potential to surpass the United States, which leads the world with a GNP of 7.9 trillion dollars.[24] This is certainly not an exhaustive treatment of potential competitors, but it does indicate potential future trends.

As Germany and China continue to grow economically and expand their influence in Europe and Asia, security pressures may mount inside both countries. As they seek to make themselves more secure, they will likely consider expanding their military forces—which could, in turn, contribute to the insecurity of others. Contrary to optimistic assertions, the presence of new offensive, conventional technologies in such a world may not enhance deterrence. Why? As alluded to above, conventional weapons do not seem to produce the same deterrent effects as nuclear ones. Nuclear weapons, by their very nature, are so destructive everyone but the insane grasps their deterrent potential.[25] Further, as our experience with nuclear deterrence suggests, it is easier to achieve and enhance when there are fewer players in the game. Small numbers clarify relationships and, as a result, reduce the dangers of miscalculation and overreaction.[26]

In such a world, states competing for power can do one of three things: build their own military forces to strengthen their relative position; add to their power through alliances; or withhold their power, thus weakening opponents. During the Cold War, the superpowers chose the first option and sought to maintain the balance by building up conventional and nuclear forces that could both fight and deter war. This is an expensive policy affordable to only the greatest of powers, which is why states, in a world of three or more great powers, often choose from options two and three and rely on alliances. In themselves, alliances are not a cause for alarm or a cause of war, but they do increase interdependence, decrease interaction opportunities among states, and increase the likelihood of wider wars should war come. Tight alliance systems, such as the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance mutual defense pacts that existed in Europe before World War I, are especially dangerous because they increase the incentives for preventive war which, while local at the outset, can spread quickly through the alliance structure.

Extending this logic to existing conditions today, we ought to expect an alliance structure to emerge that will balance against the United States. In fact, there are already signs of what some analysts are calling soft balancing.[27] Indeed, prior to the outbreak of Operation Iraqi Freedom, France, Germany, and Russia sought to balance against the United States using the most effective means available—the United Nations. In the future, China and Russia might cooperate with each other to check American power in Asia. Should that occur, India would, in all likelihood, grow even closer to the United States to check a Chinese–Russian-dominated South Asia. Should US forces leave Germany, a European security arrangement may emerge, which could potentially include Great Britain and the other European powers. However, should that fail to materialize, an equally likely scenario would be a German-Franco security pact, which could leave Britain vulnerable. Unless we are ready to make a collective leap of faith and assume that this vulnerability will always take the form of something other than coercive diplomacy or preventive attack, something we have seen in the past in this part of the world, the optimism that surrounds the hope that the alliances of today will extend into the future ought to be hedged.

It is also worth remembering that preventive war has long been feared among great powers. Less than 100 years ago, in 1914, with the rise of German power, the relative position of Britain and France declined. Ethnic tensions inside the Austro-Hungarian empire, stemming from Serbian nation-

alism, threatened the stability of that empire as well as of the alliance system itself. Responding to what was thought to be local pressures, Emperor Franz Joseph launched a preventive war against Serbia, which was believed would quell Serb nationalism. As a result, a seemingly local conflict erupted into the unthinkable and ushered in the twentieth century's first global war.

There is no compelling reason to believe that advances in conventional weapons technology can stop such slides to war. For example, during the Cuban missile crisis, the United States came perilously close to launching a preemptive strike against Cuba with the hopes of destroying Soviet nuclear missiles as well as halting Soviet aggression in the hemisphere. Had the crisis taken that trajectory, the Soviets might have followed with an attack on American bases in Turkey. Presumably, US forces would have responded, perhaps with a nuclear strike, and an all-out nuclear exchange could have resulted.[28] In October 1962, the great powers came close to world war despite the presence of nuclear weapons, which truly revolutionized military affairs. How was war avoided? President Kennedy chose a decidedly political option, electing to blockade Cuba rather than to invade or attack her. In effect, peace became an extension of politics. Certainly the fear of nuclear war tempered Kennedy's decision, but so did the ability to focus on only one adversary. Yet, the world still came close to a nuclear exchange.[29]

Globalization Will Not Bring Eternal Peace

Some authors focus on technology for another reason—the growing interconnectedness commonly called globalization—and its peaceful attributes. Few issues have captured the attention of policy makers and pundits like globalization. During the Clinton years, the word *globalization* meant more than a mere shift in economic policies; it was transforming state relations and remaking international politics right before our very eyes. One cannot deny that globalization is occurring. Foreign trade, travel, and communication seem to be changing the world into an open, global trading bazaar for goods and services where war among the great powers appears less and less likely. But while international economics might be changing, international politics are not. The world remains an anarchic place where states must look out for themselves.

Economic interdependence does bring nations closer together, but interdependence does not seem to be capable of altering the basic nature of

international relations, which deals in the currency of politics, not economics. Globalists fail to see this because they misconstrue the relationship between peace and economics, or cause and effect. International peace, which is underwritten by the great powers, produces interdependence—and not the other way around.[30]

Globalists have long argued that trade promotes peace. Norman Angell in *The Great Illusion* contended that economic interests would usurp political interests because the world of 1914 was becoming more prosperous and peaceful.[31] Thomas Friedman in his national bestseller, *The World is Flat,* makes a similar case, believing that the world in which we are now living is tied together economically and electronically.[32] Barnett makes the strongest argument, prophesying that "extending globalization's rule sets lead ultimately to less violence" and that failing to do so "forfeits globalization's promise of eternal peace."[33] As lofty and appealing as these ideas might seem in theory, they have never worked in practice because interdependence has failed to produce peace. Instead, it has produced insecurity.

Consider Europe prior to World War I. Before that war, many believed that increases in trade, travel, and communication were making war improbable. A new cosmopolitanism—characterized by the universal language movement Esperanto—was transforming the old world into something new. This new world would be one characterized by an ever-increasing quality of life. Certainly the increase in trade among Britain, France, and Germany indicated a new interdependence.[34] In fact, global trading was the order of the day. According to one expert, "In relation to output, exports of both merchandise and capital reached volumes not seen again until the 1980s."[35] Likewise, the technology of that time played a role as the steam engine, locomotive, and telegraph brought people closer together. But as increases in trade, travel, and communication increasingly intertwined Europeans, suspicions and antagonisms resulting from changes in the balance of power drove them further apart. In the end, the nations of Europe became more insecure as interdependencies tightened.

Germany's experience illustrates this trend. In 1913, 44 percent of its foreign investment was in Europe. Yet, as Germany's economy became more integrated with the rest of the continent, it became less secure. As it grew economically, it developed labor and capital shortages—helping to propel Germany to war. As late as 1911, Germany was drafting only 53 percent of its available candidates compared to France's 84 percent.[36] Similarly, the cost of naval armaments strained Berlin's ability to keep

pace with its ambitious arms buildup. The cost of three armored capital ships rose from 4.5 million marks in 1893 to 9.6 million in 1898, while France and Britain saw similar increases.[37] What was the result of all of this? Fear, as Germany could not muster the men it needed to fulfill its security requirements as laid out in the Schlieffen Plan. Interdependence did not make the Germans feel safer. The changes that came about inside Germany to ensure security—reliance on reserves, incentives to mobilize, offensive doctrines, and a deliberate exaggeration of rival states' capabilities—did not result in peace. Instead, they resulted in war. In this case, interdependence created perceived vulnerabilities. That a state gains in an economic transaction is never the issue. The issue is always who gains more.[38] In the case of Germany, while foreign investment grew, feelings of insecurity in relation to the other great powers rose as well.

In general, the relationship between interdependence and peace might be more apparent than real. On the eve of the Great War, the European economy was more integrated than ever before. Yet, war came. Why? Some think war was the result of nationalistic pressures mounting in the Balkans. Others argue that the war was a horrible mistake, a failure of leadership. Both are partially correct. However, the underlying cause of WWI was the changing nature of the balance of power, a shift that was exacerbated by the increasing interdependence of the great powers. Second, the idea that cosmopolitanism—a result of trade, travel, and communication—produces peace also seems to be incorrect. The cosmopolitanism that existed within Europe—along with the Esperanto movement—vanished as men raced off to answer their home states' calls for mobilization. Lastly, the idea that war results from ignorance or want is also misguided. While it is true that ignorant people fight wars and poor people fight wars, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is the well-educated, rich countries that have the resources and the power to wage the deadliest wars. What conclusions can be drawn? In 1914, war came to Europe in spite of high levels of economic interdependence. Today, as globalization continues to occur, it is appropriate to wonder if great-power war will find a way. If the past is any guide, interdependence, alone, cannot guarantee peace.

Democracies Will Not Guarantee Tranquility

A third reason cited by many who believe that war among the great powers is unthinkable has to do with democracy. Democracy has had an

impact on international life; it has both caused and effected the promotion of liberal capitalism. No doubt, democracy and free-market capitalism have taken hold of the world, and the apparent peace among the world's democratic states—both large and small—constitutes the "closest thing we might have to an empirical law of international behavior."[39] Put simply, democracies do not fight one another. Why not?

Some believe domestic institutions guard against the bellicose behaviors of kings, emperors, or tyrants.[40] Democratic leaders, if for no other reason than self-preservation, tend to hedge against risky wars because their own fortunes are tied either to maintaining the status quo or assuring a victory, or both. Others are convinced that democratic states seem to prefer adjudication and bargaining to fighting.[41] In short, it is not that liberal states would rather trade than invade, as interdependence theory suggests, it is that liberal leaders prefer to "jaw, jaw rather than war, war" as Churchill might have put it.

As compelling as both explanations might seem, neither captures the essence of great-power politics, and neither comes close to accurately describing what a democracy is like when it goes to war. Democracy, as George Kennan put it, fights in anger. Democracy "fights for the very reason that it was forced to go to war. It fights to punish the power that was rash enough and hostile enough to provoke it—to teach it a lesson it will not forget, to prevent the thing from happening again. Such a war must be carried to the bitter end."[42] Democracy also fights with vengeance, which is why democratic wars resemble crusades, characterized by unlimited means, ultimate ends, and popular calls for unconditional surrender.

Above all else, relations between democratic states are not by default peaceful because democracies are states, and all states, presumably, have interests, not the least of which is survival. It is difficult to imagine a world of states—be they democratic or otherwise—where the possibility of war does not exist and the need for military defenses is moot. When interests compete, as they tend to do, conflict arises—regardless of the form of government. War is the extension of that process. Thus, peace among the world's democracies may not, by default, last forever. Democracies have interests that will inevitably come in conflict with other democracies. In fact, contrary to proponents of the democratic-peace thesis, the list of wars among democracies is long. Depending on how one chooses to define democracy or war, or both, a case can be made that the War of 1812, the American Civil War, the Boer War, the Spanish-American War, and even World War II saw democracies fighting against other democracies.

Encouraging and supporting democracy is a noble goal and one that the United States will no doubt continue to pursue, but we should not hope that doing so will eliminate great-power war.

Norms Are Not Enough

Lastly, there are those who believe that the norms governing the acceptable behavior of states have made war untenable, comparing the change in norms about war to views towards slavery.[43] A great debate rages within the halls of academia regarding the role norms play in international politics.[44] Some think norms tame state behavior. Often attributed to institutions, which do lower transaction costs between states by establishing formal and informal sets of rules, norms are at work in nearly every area of international cooperation. From the environment to arms control, norms—not interests—explain why states strike bargains with one another. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is often cited as an example of an institution that provides both economic and military security for its members. The normative result of this arrangement is believed to be a peace-prone Europe. In sum, those who think war has become obsolete believe that war among the European powers is unthinkable not because of military capabilities, which are an essential element of deterrence, but because war is considered to be a "bad" thing. Others remain doubtful as to the power of institutions and norms, believing the structure of the international system dictates state behavior. For them, NATO, which was originally designed to halt Soviet aggression, remains intact because of US interests. Put simply, if the United States were to pull out, NATO would fold. Of course, the United States will not pull out because it wants to remain influential within Europe, which is why current plans call for reducing the number of US troops in Europe, not eliminating them altogether.

Essentially, the argument about norms is an argument about power and the role it plays in international life. Edward Hallet Carr observed, "While politics cannot be satisfactorily defined in terms of power, it is safe to say that power is always an essential element of politics."[45] Thus, when states seek to cooperate with one another on issues like postal or transport services, they are working what can be called "nonpolitical" or "technical" issues. When, however, an issue arises which involves, or is thought to involve, the power of one state over another, the matter becomes political. In a very real way, those who advocate the importance of norms downplay the importance

of power. For norms to play the determining role in international politics would require a politics devoid of power. That is never the case. All politics, as Carr argued beautifully in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, are power politics.

Nonetheless, those who argue for the importance of norms to stop war often use the analogy of the disappearance of slavery because it became normatively wrong. This argument, however, ignores the fact that slavery, at least within the United States, did not go away because it became normatively prohibited. Instead, it was smashed by a war that was as brutal as anything we have to compare it to. In effect, slavery went the way of other heinous political movements like Nazism. It was drawn and quartered by a liberating army that was led by an idiosyncratic general who risked the lives of his troops by marching them deep into enemy territory in order to right a wrong. This phenomenon has been described as war and moral statecraft, and it just might be the long-lasting legacy of democratic armies on the march.[46] Thus, contrary to those who argue that war serves no moral purpose, great-power war can and often does serve moral ends. The world would be a very different place had the Confederates or the Nazis won.[47]

Moreover, norms offer no guarantees. Indeed, the analogy of slavery having become a norm that is observed rests on a selective and narrow view of the issue. Indeed, slavery still exists in the world today, as noted by the United States Department of State in its annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* to Congress: "This Report is intended to raise global awareness and spur foreign governments to take effective actions to counter all forms of trafficking in persons—a form of modern day slavery."[48] Certainly the idea of owning human chattel has acquired, at least in many countries, an opprobrium that was not the case 200 years ago. Yet, this norm has to be enforced through laws and the actions of people who will enforce those laws.

This last point strikes at the heart of a two-pronged problem with norms. As long as the world is made up primarily, though not exclusively, of states, where there is no world government to protect citizens from the evil intentions of others, states and statesmen must be on their guard. Clearly, the possibility for evil exists, and it is tragic that we needed the events of September 11 to remind us of this fact. Indeed, the number of tyrannical leaders throughout history is striking. Men like Attila, Alexander, Caesar, Napoléon, and Hitler had one thing in common: they were intent on dominating others. This leads to the conclusion that war among the great powers is not unimaginable. Indeed, the most pressing strategic

concern for the United States today is to figure out how it will live in a world where three or more great powers—one of which might be ruled by someone seeking to enslave or destroy us all—compete for influence in the international system.

Conclusions

The United States cannot prepare to put down any and all potential rivals. The costs of such an undertaking would quickly prove to be enormous, especially when domestic spending on programs like social security and Medicare are factored into the security equation. Over the long haul rivals will emerge, and there is little the United States can do except balance against them, as they will prepare to balance against us. In such a world, where states compete for power, one must be concerned with survival. That being the case, it is worth remembering that the most serious threats to the great powers have historically stemmed from other great powers. In the years ahead, as strong challengers emerge, conflicts will arise, making war among the great powers more, not less, likely.[49]

Contrary to popular belief, we are not living in a whole new world. The events of September 11 and the wars that have followed have had a pronounced effect on US foreign and defense policy, but they have not done away with the state system. The world is still made up of states that must look out for themselves. To pretend otherwise is to neglect history or to fall prey to presentism—something common among pundits but dangerous for statesmen and men and women of the armed forces. Historically, the most efficient and effective way to ensure state security is through military means. Thus, the importance of the balance of power, which exists to prevent one great power from dominating the rest, has not diminished. Instead, it has been reinvigorated as states are reminded of the need to defend themselves.

The implications of acknowledging the possibility of a great-power war are easier to grasp than to implement. Despite the urgency of the war in Iraq, we need to think seriously about what a great-power war would look like, how it could occur and be prevented, and how it would be fought so that we can gain some understanding about the equipment and forces needed to fight and win. The groundwork for the technologies needed for such a contest needs to be laid today. The difficulties in putting armor on vehicles for Iraq pale in comparison to creating the lead time and

resources needed to fight a great-power war. Failing to do so risks lives and jeopardizes US security goals.

This does not mean that we should ignore current threats or overlook the need to relieve misery and suffering around the world, what one strategist terms "minding the gap."[50] As citizens, we should be concerned with the political and human consequences of poverty, ecological degradation, and population growth. We must also fully address the problem of terrorism. But as real as the consequences of poverty, ecological degradation, population growth, and terrorism might be, it is hard to come up with a realistic scenario involving these tragedies that would alter the balance of power.[51] Put simply, in an age of transformation, we cannot neglect the basics. Should the United States find itself in another great-power war, things that are taken for granted today, like air superiority or control of sea lanes, might come up short tomorrow. That technology, economics, democracy, and norms play a role in preventing great-power war is not the issue. The issue is whether they make it unthinkable. Regrettably, they do not, and because they do not, great-power war has a bright future, however tragic that might seem. SSQ

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank Steve Chiabotti, Kevin Holzimmer, Tom Hughes, J. T. LaSaine, Rich Muller, Jeff Record, Gary Schaub, and Hal Winton for their careful thoughts and suggestions.

2. Max Boot, "The Struggle to Transform the Military," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 104.

3. Ibid., 118.

4. Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004), 271, passim. Barnett's theory and policy prescriptions are based on the idea that state warfare is extinct.

5. Col Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004), 5, passim.

6. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1976).

7. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), passim.

8. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 44–79.

9. Within military circles, talk of great-power war has been subsumed by talk about terrorism and the Revolution in Military Affairs. In fact, one scours the professional literature in vain to find anything written on the possibility of great-power war. This is not surprising. As Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach made clear, the study of international politics, and particularly security and defense studies, tends to reflect the spirit of their age. See Yale H. Ferguson and

Richard W. Mansbach, *The Elusive Quest: Theory and International Politics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

10. Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

11. This theme reverberates throughout James Mann's discussion of the history of the Bush war cabinet. See James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004).

12. This is essentially a realist claim, and we are obviously sympathetic to it. There are many realist authors and many forms of realism. The classical argument begins with Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, and Niccolo Machiavelli. The theological argument is found in the works of Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield. Nicholas Sypkeman and A. T. Mahan represent the geopolitics school. The modern account begins with Hans Morgenthau, E. H. Carr, and George Kennan. The English School is best represented in the work of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. The contemporary argument is found in the writings of Kenneth Waltz, John Herz, Robert Tucker, Robert Osgood, and John Mearsheimer.

13. It is difficult to obtain precise casualty figures for these wars. Counting battlefield deaths often proves problematic, and civilian deaths in great-power wars are even more difficult to compute. As just one example, there is no consensus on whether the deaths from the influenza epidemic in 1918–19 should be counted as part of the toll from World War I. The figures cited above come from a number of sources and represent generally agreed upon numbers: Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *World War I Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 273; I. C. B. Dear, general ed., *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 289–92; Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson, *International Conflict: A Chronological Encyclopedia of Conflicts and Their Management, 1945–1995* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1997), 67–68; and Andre Corvisier, ed., *A Dictionary of Military History and the Art of War* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 463–71. For figures on terrorism deaths, see US Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*, annual report (Washington, DC: US Department of State, April 2004), 1, 180.

14. See Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995). Waltz argues that more nuclear weapons might be better for world stability. Sagan argues the opposite.

15. This is one of Sagan's most critical points.

16. This theme reverberates throughout Waltz's writings. However, he does distinguish between weapons and political structures. Again, see Sagan and Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*. See also Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and William H. Riker, "An Assessment of the Merits of Selective Proliferation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 26, no. 2 (June 1982): 283. For other perspectives, see Stephan Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1990/91): 54; and Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," S*urvival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 44–45.

17. Although Waltz does contend nuclear weapons deter, his analysis centers on the structure of the international system. For the definitive account, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1979). See also John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 5–56.

18. For the complete discussion, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 161–93.

19. For an optimistic account, see Adm Bill Owens with Edward Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). For a pessimistic account, see Biddle, *Military Power*.

20. John Orme, "The Utility of Force in a World of Scarcity," *International Security* 22, no. 3 (Winter 1997/98): 138–67.

21. Howard D. Belote, "Paralyzed or Pulverized? The Fall of the Republican Guard," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 37 (April 2005): 40–45.

22. Deterrence, as Waltz has noted, is a policy formulated around the notion of compelling people not to do something. In international politics, deterrence frightens a state away from attacking, not because the attack itself might be difficult to carry out, but because the expected reaction of the opponent would result in one's own severe punishment. Contrary to those who might think of deterrence in terms of its rationality, successful deterrence policies rest on the assumption that an opponent is capable of reasoning.

23. Here it can be argued that the procurement of a weapon like the F-22 in a unipolar world would allow the United States to lock in its strategic advantage for some time to come. Thus, the debate about a weapon like the F-22 should not revolve around whether or not it should be fielded but what number is sufficient to ensure its deterrent effect.

24. John J. Mearshimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 397–98.

25. See Sagan and Waltz, *Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, 98.

26. Mearshimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 343–44.

27. Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 46–72. For criticism, see Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005): 72–108.

28. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edition (New York: Longman, 1999), 201.

29. For an account of America's early nuclear war fighting thinking, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

30. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 7.

31. Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage* (London: William Heinemann, 1910).

32. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005).

33. Barnett, *Pentagon's New Map*, 82, 224.

34. David M. Rowe, "World War Economic Expansion and National Security," *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 195–233.

35. Niall Ferguson, "Sinking Globalization," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 64.

36. Rowe, "World War Economic Expansion," passim.

37. Ibid., 207. Rowe argues that costs rose due to the increased expense of new technological innovations, the higher cost of manufactured inputs and labor, and the desire for greater profits.

38. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 104–6.

39. Jack Levy makes this observation in "The Causes of War: A Review of the Evidence," in *Behavior, Society and Nuclear War,* eds. Phillip E. Tetlock, Jo L. Husbands, Robert Jervis, Paul Stern, and Charles Tilley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

40. The literature on democracy and war is voluminous. For the philosophical argument, see Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Parts I and II," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, nos. 3 and 4 (Summer/Fall 1983): 205–35, 323–53. For a quantitative

account, see Rudolph J. Rummel, "Libertarianism and International Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 1 (March 1983): 27–71. For an example of the structural account, see Clifton T. Morgan and Sally Campbell, "Domestic Structure, Decisional Constraints, and War: So Why Kant Democracies Fight," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (June 1991): 187–221.

41. Similarly, see Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post–Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), as well as *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence and International Organizations* with John Oneal (New York: The Norton Series in World Politics, 2001).

42. George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 66.

43. For the strongest account, see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). See also James Lee Ray, "The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War," *International Organization* 3 (Winter 1989): 405–39.

44. For an optimistic account, see Robert O. Keohane and Lisa Martin, "The Promise of Institutionalist Theory," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 39–51. For a pessimistic account, see John J. Mearshimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 5–49.

45. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1939).

46. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Soul of Battle* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

47. We are not suggesting that Southerners were the "same" as Nazis or that Confederate soldiers fought for what we might call "unjust" reasons. We are suggesting that the institution of slavery and National Socialism were evil, in the ordinary sense of the word. Moreover, evils such as these tend to increase the likelihood of war.

48. US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Publication 11252 (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary for Global Affairs, June 2005), 5.

49. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1976); and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

50. Barnett, *Pentagon's New Map*, passim.

51. The exception, of course, is a ballistic missile attack from a nonstate actor. Should, however, any actor—person, state, or otherwise—launch a nuclear missile at the United States, that actor would be targeted and destroyed. What is more, states know this in advance, which is why we will not see anything close to what asymmetric doomsayers claim.