

JOHN MUELLER

THE STUPIDITY OF WAR

AMERICAN FOREIGN
POLICY AND THE CASE
FOR COMPLACENCY



“Smart, provocative, and clearly argued, *The Stupidity of War* charts a path forward that is important for theory, policy, and how we as citizens think about our world.” - **Robert Jervis, Columbia University**

THE STUPIDITY OF WAR

It could be said that American foreign policy since 1945 has been one long miscue; most international threats—including during the Cold War—have been substantially exaggerated. The result has been agony and bloviation, unnecessary and costly military interventions that have mostly failed. A policy of complacency and appeasement likely would have worked better. In this highly readable book, John Mueller argues with wisdom and wit rather than ideology and hyperbole that aversion to international war has had considerable consequences. There has seldom been significant danger of major war. Nuclear weapons, international institutions, and America's role as a super power have been substantially irrelevant; post-Cold War policy has been animated more by vast proclamation and half-vast execution than by the appeals of liberal hegemony; and post-9/11 concerns about international terrorism and nuclear proliferation have been overwrought and often destructive. Meanwhile, threats from Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, or from cyber technology are limited and manageable. Unlikely to charm Washington, Mueller explains how, when international war is in decline, complacency and appeasement become viable diplomatic devices and a large military is scarcely required.

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Ohio State University and the Cato Institute



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War is mankind's most tragic and stupid folly.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commencement speech at the United States Military Academy, West Point, June 3, 1947. Quoted by President Barack Obama at the same venue, May 28, 2014.

War is a profanity because, let's face it, you've got two opposing sides trying to settle their differences by killing as many of each other as they can.

General Norman Schwarzkopf, 1991.

PROLOGUE

The Rise of War Aversion and the Decline of International War

The idea that war is profoundly stupid has likely been evident pretty much for ever. One of the most famous wars in history (or mythology), after all, was fought over an errant wife, lasted for ten brutal years, and ended in the violent annihilation of an entire city-state. Later, Shakespeare had one of his characters rather ungraciously reflect on the essential stupidity of the much-storied enterprise in sentiments that had likely occurred to other people from time to time: “For every false drop in her bawdy veins a Grecian’s life hath sunk; for every scruple of her contaminated carrion weight, a Trojan hath been slain: since she could speak, she hath not given so many good words breath as for her Greeks and Trojans suffer’d death.”¹

It took until recent decades, however, for substantial numbers of people effectively to act on and abide by the idea – and then only on one part of the planet (at least at first) and, for the most part, only for international war. By May 15, 1984, however, estimates historian Paul Schroeder, the countries in Europe had substantially managed to remain at peace with each other for the longest continuous stretch of time since the days of the Roman Empire. That rather amazing record has now been further extended, and in 2004, economist Bradford de Long proclaimed that by then we had gone through the longest period of peace on the Rhine since the second century BCE. The word, or term, “Europe” appears only to have been coined in the fourth century BCE, so that, by now, the continent may well have experienced (and, for the most part enjoyed) the longest period free from interstate war since the continent, itself, was invented as a concept.²

This is particularly impressive because Europe was once the most warlike of continents: Thomas Jefferson, for example, proclaimed it to be “an arena of gladiators.” Commonly, as military and diplomatic historian Michael Howard puts it, war there “was an almost automatic activity, part of the natural order of things,” and Charles Tilly observes, “It is hardly worth asking *when* states

warred, since most states were warring most of the time.” “Given the scale and frequency of war during the preceding centuries in Europe,” notes Evan Luard, the decline of interstate war in Europe is “a change of spectacular proportions: perhaps the single most striking discontinuity that the history of warfare has anywhere provided.”³ Increasingly, that kind of war has come to seem not only futile, destructive, and barbaric, but profoundly stupid.

In reviewing *Retreat from Doomsday*, my 1989 book suggesting that major war – war among developed states – was obsolescent, Howard expressed a degree of skepticism, helpfully suggesting that “the prudent reader will check that his air raid shelter is in good repair.”⁴ However, by 1991 he was musing that it had become “quite possible that war in the sense of major, organized armed conflict between highly developed societies may not recur, and that a stable framework for international order will become firmly established.” Two years later, the military historian and analyst John Keegan went somewhat further, concluding that the kind of war he was principally considering could well be in terminal demise: “War, it seems to me, after a lifetime of reading about the subject, mingling with men of war, visiting the sites of war and observing its effects, may well be ceasing to commend itself to human beings as a desirable or productive, let alone rational, means of reconciling their discontents.” By the end of the century, Mary Kaldor was suggesting that “The barbarity of war between states may have become a thing of the past,” and by the beginning of the new one, Robert Jervis had concluded that war among the leading states will not occur in the future, or, in the words of Jeffrey Record, “may have disappeared altogether.” In 2005, historian John Gaddis labeled war among major states an anachronism.⁵ Moreover, suggests Jervis, this “is the greatest change in international politics that we have ever seen.” Notes Paul Johnson, “As a historian, I can confidently say that this is unique: There is no precedent in world history for war being ruled out of calculations at such a high level.”⁶

Thus, reversing the course of several millennia, developed countries (whether in Europe or not) no longer really consider war among them to be a sensible method for resolving their disputes. In fact, however, not only have developed countries, including the Cold War superpowers, managed to stay out of war with each other since 1945, but there have been remarkably few international wars of any sort during the period, particularly in recent decades, as [Figure 0.1](#) suggests.

Although armed contests between the Israeli government and Palestinian rebels have frequently erupted, no Arab or Muslim country has been willing since 1973 to escalate the contest to international war by sending its troops to participate directly. And after a series of international wars, India and Pakistan have not really waged one since 1971. The only truly notable exception between 1973 and the end of the Cold War in 1989 (and it is an important

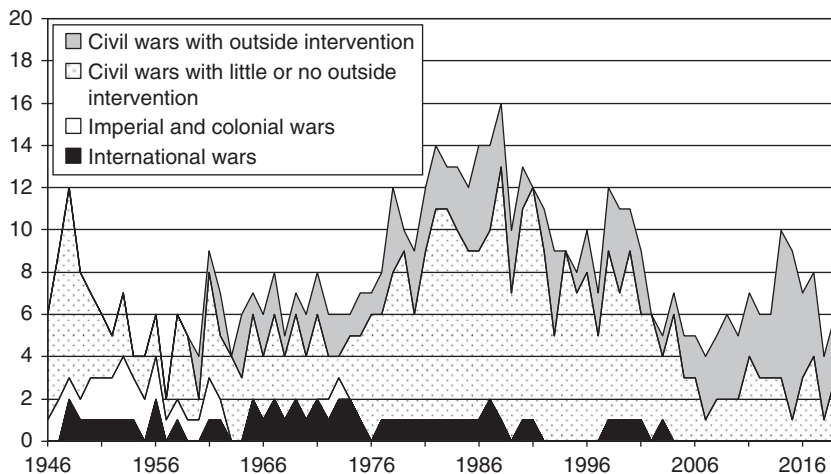


FIGURE 0.1 Number of ongoing wars in each year, 1946–2019

one) was the war between Iran and Iraq that lasted from 1980 to 1988.⁷ Meanwhile, colonial wars, once an major preoccupation of many European countries, died out with the institution of colonialism.

After the Cold War, there have been some policing wars in the Middle East engendered by the United States – one in 1991 to eject invading Iraq from Kuwait, and two post-9/11 wars that succeeded in pushing out offending regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq but then degenerated into extended civil conflict waged by insurgent forces against the invaders. There have also been armed conflicts between Israel and substate groups on its borders. But of the international wars waged since the end of the Cold War, there has been only one that fits cleanly into the classic model in which two countries have it out over some issue of mutual dispute, in this case territory: the almost unnoticed, but quite costly, conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea that transpired between 1998 and 2000. And, a fifth of the way through the twenty-first century, the brief regime-toppling invasions by the United States of Afghanistan and Iraq stand out as the only international wars of the period.

It should also be noted that there was a considerable expansion over the last half-century or more in the number of independent states. When these states were colonies, they could not, by definition, engage in international war with each other. It is particularly impressive that there have been so few international wars during a period in which the number of entities capable of conducting them has increased so greatly.

As [Figure 0.1](#) also demonstrates, however, there have been quite a few civil wars – though perhaps declining somewhat in number since the 1980s. Moreover, although states may have been restrained from conducting wars directly between themselves, they have often intervened on one side or the other in civil wars, a phenomenon that has, if anything, increased in recent years – seen most prominently in civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

THE RISE OF AVERSION TO INTERNATIONAL WAR

This book is something of a biography of the rise of the idea that war, particularly international war, is really very stupid, and it often draws on, updates, extends, and reconsiders my earlier writings. I argue that it was primarily the rise of an aversion to international war (not, for example, nuclear fears or American efforts at security provision) that has led to the remarkable, and expanding, condition of international peace that has arisen since 1945. More broadly, it really seems time to take into account the consequences of the fact that countries, particularly leading or developed ones, reversing the course of several millennia, have come to envision international war as a stupid method for resolving their disputes.⁸ That is, the aversion to international war or the rise of something of a culture or society of international peace that has substantially enveloped the world has consequences: it should be seen as a causative or facilitating independent variable.

There may be some danger, however, in using the phrase “a culture of international peace” because this can conjure up images of grinning cherubs, cooing doves, and choirs of angels singing “peace on earth, goodwill to persons of all genders.” In my view, it simply means a condition in which war has substantially been abandoned by states as a method for dealing with each other, not that perfect harmony or justice has been achieved.⁹ There may well have been no essential improvement in the behavior or personalities of young men of the dueling class when that method of dispute resolution disappeared from their repertory. They likely remained as self-interested, grasping, petulant, small-minded, and disagreeable as ever. Indeed, in net, it is possible that civility may even have declined some. In the dueling age, to loudly and boorishly assert to a man in public that he is a bloody liar or (as happens in Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*) that his wife has been sleeping around, might well lead to a dueling challenge with decidedly unpleasant results for the offending boor. That deterrent to incivility evaporated when dueling went out of fashion – when dueling came to be deemed stupid.¹⁰ In like manner, a culture of international peace will not necessarily lead to the demise of war or of warlike behavior in total. Indeed, states may well feel freer to engage in

behavior that might once have been taken to be *casus belli* such as tinkering in civil wars, seizing bits of territory, firing shots across bows, lobbing cyber balloons, exacting economic sanctions, or poaching fish.¹¹

For my purposes, then, “peace” simply means agreement with the observation of American General Norman Schwarzkopf that “War is a profanity because, let’s face it, you’ve got two opposing sides trying to settle their differences by killing as many of each other as they can.”¹² That the process is less than fully cherubic, much less perfect, is suggested by the fact that Schwarzkopf uttered those words three months before ordering half a million troops into combat in the Gulf War of 1991.

However, whatever the flaws and whatever international incivility may remain, a pronounced, essentially Schwarzkopfian, shift in attitudes toward international war has taken place over the course of the twentieth century. This can perhaps be quantified in a rough sort of content analysis. Before World War I it was very – even amazingly – easy to find instances in which serious writers, analysts, and politicians in Europe and North America, far from regarding wars between states to be stupid, enthusiastically proclaimed them to be beautiful, honorable, holy, sublime, heroic, ennobling, natural, virtuous, glorious, cleansing, manly, necessary, and progressive. At the same time, they deemed peace to be debasing, trivial, and rotten, and characterized by crass materialism, artistic decline, repellant effeminacy, rampant selfishness, base immorality, petrifying stagnation, sordid frivolity, degrading cowardice, corrupting boredom, bovine content, and utter emptiness.¹³ After World War I, such people become extremely rare, though the excitement of the combat experience continued (and continues) to have its fascination to some. Where international war had been accepted as a standard and permanent fixture, the idea suddenly gained substantial currency that it was actually quite stupid, that it should no longer be an inevitable or necessary fact of life, and that major efforts should be made to abandon it.

The change has often been noted by historians and political scientists. Arnold Toynbee points out that World War I marked the end of a “span of five thousand years during which war had been one of mankind’s master institutions.” In his study of wars since 1400, Luard observes that “the First World War transformed traditional attitudes toward war. For the first time there was an almost universal sense that the deliberate launching of a war could now no longer be justified.” Bernard Brodie points out that “a basic historical change had taken place in the attitudes of the European (and American) peoples toward war.” Eric Hobsbawm concludes, “In 1914 the peoples of Europe, for however brief a moment, went lightheartedly to slaughter and to be slaughtered. After the First World War they never did so

again.” And K. J. Holsti observes, “When it was all over, few remained to be convinced that such a war must never happen again.”¹⁴

What was so special about World War I? There seem to be several possibilities.

The first is the most obvious: the war was massively destructive. But in broader historical perspective, the destructiveness of the war does not seem to be all that unique.¹⁵ There had been hundreds, probably thousands, of wars previously in which far higher casualty rates were suffered – the “sack” of cities like Troy, for example, resulted in utter annihilation through massacre and enslavement (often sexual) and through the looting and incinerating of the city itself. Rape was also routine. Genghis Khan exultantly expressed the narcissistic sadism of the enterprise: “the greatest pleasure in life is to defeat your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to ride their horses, and to clasp to your breast their wives and daughters.”¹⁶ According to Frederick the Great, Prussia lost one-ninth of its population in the Seven Years War.¹⁷ This was a proportion higher than almost any suffered by any combatant in the wars of the twentieth century.¹⁸ Holsti calculates that, “if measured in terms of direct and indirect casualties as a proportion of population,” the Thirty Years War was Europe’s most destructive armed conflict.¹⁹ In addition, there was a substantial belief that many of the wars had been even more horrible than they actually were. For example, a legend prevailed for centuries after the Thirty Years War holding that it had caused Germany to suffer a 75 percent decline in population.²⁰ Yet disastrous experiences and beliefs like this had never brought about a widespread revulsion with international war as an institution nor did they inspire effective, organized demands that it be banished. Instead, war continued to be accepted as a normal way of doing things.

Actually, in some respects World War I could be seen to be an *improvement* over many earlier wars. Civilian loss, in the West at least, was proportionately quite low, while earlier wars had often witnessed utter annihilation. And a wounded soldier was more likely to recover than in earlier wars where the nonambulatory wounded were characteristically abandoned on the battlefield to die in lingering agony from exposure and blood loss. Disease was also beginning to become less of a scourge than in most earlier wars.

Nor was World War I special in the economic devastation it caused. Many earlier European wars had been fought to the point of total economic exhaustion. For example, Richard Kaeuper’s analysis of the economic effects of decades of war in the late Middle Ages catalogues the destruction of property, the collapse of banks, the severing of trade and normal commerce, the depopulation of entire areas, the loss of cultivated land, the decline of

production, the reduction of incomes, the disruption of coinage and credit, the hoarding of gold, and the assessment (with attendant corruption) of confiscatory war taxes.²¹ By contrast, within a few years after World War I, most of the combating nations had substantially recovered economically: by 1929 the German economy was fully back to prewar levels, while the French economy had surpassed prewar levels by 38 per cent.²²

World War I toppled several political regimes – in Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman Turkey – but it was hardly unusual in this respect. And to suggest that the war was new in the annals of warfare in its tragic futility, sustained stupidity, and political pointlessness would be absurd – by most reasonable standards, huge numbers of previous wars would rival, and often surpass, it on those dimensions

World War I is often seen to be unusual because it was so unromantic. But if that is so, it is because people were ready to see, and to be repulsed by, the grimness of warfare. Mud, filth, leeches, lice, and dysentery were not invented in 1914, but are standard accompaniments of warfare as are terrible food; germ-ridden water; stale cigarettes; the absence of women; bone-deep fatigue; syphilitic prostitutes; watered or even poisonous liquor; sleep deprivation; family separation and homesickness; absence of privacy; constant and often brutal and pointless harassment or physical abuse by superiors and by the incoherent system; exposure to extremes of weather; masturbatory fantasies that become decreasingly stimulating; and boredom that can become cosmic, overwhelming, stupefying – an emotion, though only occasionally remarked upon, that is far more common in war than the rush that comes with combat.

For Europeans and North Americans, World War I was special in that it followed a century characterized by the beginnings of phenomenal economic growth, something that may have been in part facilitated by a century of decreased warfare in Europe.²³ However, the growth by itself did not change attitudes toward war. Even as they were enjoying the benefits of periods of comparative peace, people continued to assume war to be a normal fact of life and most continued to thrill at the thought of it.

In the end, the war seems to have been unique in one important respect: it was the first war in history to have been preceded by organized antiwar agitation. There had been some glimmerings earlier.²⁴ However, organized opposition to war substantially began only in 1889 with the publication of an antiwar novel *Lay Down Your Arms* by an Austrian noblewoman, Bertha von Suttner, that became a surprise international best seller. Suttner says the novel's remarkable success was "accidental," but it was an idea whose time had come, or, as she explained, "an idea that is in the air, that is slumbering as an idea in untold minds, as a longing in

untold hearts.” Applying a fanciful metaphor, she continued, “the stroke of lightning is only possible if the air is loaded with electricity.”²⁵

The novel tells the story of a woman, not unlike Suttner herself, who gradually comes to abhor war and its barbaric excesses, its consummate stupidity, and its absurd and often incoherent justifications. Like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to which the novel has often been compared, it is a brilliant piece of propaganda. When the woman’s husband, an officer who has come to share her antiwar convictions, is missing in action in the two-month-long Austro-Prussian War of 1866, she goes to look for him and, late in the book, on page 249, she begins to describe the aftermath of battle:

Before my feet, they laid a man who made, without cessation, a continuous gurgling sound. I bent down to speak a word of sympathy to him, but I started back in horror, and covered my face with both hands. The impression me had been too fearful. It was no longer human countenance – the lower jaw shot away, one eye welling out, and, added to that, a stifling reek of blood and corruption.²⁶

Descriptions like that then continue for 40 pages, rather deftly supplying a counter to the popular image of war as beautiful, sublime, ennobling, glorious, and cleansing – although Suttner is too delicate to mention rape and dysentery, two of warfare’s most common accompaniments.

Suttner thereafter was a major figure in a peace movement that rapidly grew, and in 1903 she was declared by a Berlin newspaper after a survey to be the most important woman of the time.²⁷ Peace societies proliferated; famous businessmen like Andrew Carnegie and Alfred Nobel (Suttner received the peace prize in 1906) joined the fray; various international peace congresses were held, and governments began to take notice and even sometimes to participate. Some joined the movement because, like Suttner, they had come to regard the institution as ridiculous and barbarous (her favorite descriptor), others, like the Quakers, because they considered it immoral, and others, like Norman Angell, another best-selling author, because they found it to be economically futile and stupid in that sense.²⁸ Meanwhile, political liberals and feminist leaders were accepting war opposition as part of their intellectual baggage. And many Socialists were making it central to their ideology.²⁹

Although it was still very much a minority movement and largely drowned out by those who exalted war, its gadfly arguments were persistent and unavoidable. And the existence of this movement may well have helped Europeans and North Americans to look at the institution of war in a new way when the massive conflict of 1914–18 entered their

experience. At any rate, within half a decade, war opponents, once a derided minority, became a decided majority: everyone now seemed to be a peace advocate, and international war of that sort came to be regarded as profoundly stupid.

Before the war, artists had been among the loudest lauding war. French novelist Émile Zola proclaimed that “war is life itself. . . it is only warlike nations which have prospered”; English art critic John Ruskin animatedly designated war to be “the foundation of all the high virtues and faculties of men”; Russian composer Igor Stravinsky claimed that “war is necessary for human progress”; and, as he enlisted for combat in 1914 (where he was to perish from an infected mosquito bite in the war’s eighth month), the English poet Rupert Brooke penned a poem ironically entitled “Peace” in which he deemed going to war to be like leaping “into cleanness.”³⁰ In stark contrast, recalls Bernard Brodie, “one must have lived through that postwar period to appreciate fully how the antiwar and antimilitary attitudes engulfed all forms of literature and in time the movies.”³¹

As something of an indicator of the change, one might look at Wikipedia’s “List of plays with anti-war themes.” As accessed on June 26, 2020, the anonymous compilers include three from the 5th century BCE: two by Aristophanes and one by Euripides. The next entry was staged in 1928, and it was followed by dozens more. The list-makers may have missed a few during the remarkable gap of two millennia such as Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. And, after that gap, they surely should have included the 1927 musical *Strike Up the Band*, the title song for which includes these irreverent lines: “We’re in a bigger, better war/For your diplomatic pastime/We don’t know what we’re fighting for/But we didn’t know the last time.”³² As for the movies, King Vidor’s anti-war epic *The Big Parade* became the second highest grossing film of the silent era.

The real threat and the true enemy, then, had become *war itself*, and the preservation of international peace became a prime goal. Accordingly, the peacemakers of 1918 adapted many of the devices antiwar advocates had long been promoting, at least in part. A sort of world government, the League of Nations, was fabricated. Aggression – the expansion of international boundaries by military force – was ceremoniously outlawed. Legal codes and arbitration bodies that might be able to deal peacefully with international disputes were also set up, and quite a bit of thought went into the issue of arms control and disarmament.

World War I essentially served as a catalyst. It was not the first horrible or profoundly stupid international war in history, but, perhaps at least in part because of the exertions of the prewar antiwar movement, it was the first in

which people were widely capable of recognizing and being thoroughly repulsed by those horrors and stupidities and in which they were substantially aware that viable alternatives existed.

It could be said that the war proved to be something of a “Black Swan,” a concept invented by Nicholas Taleb to depict an event or episode that has “an extreme impact” and is characterized by being substantially unexpected and by grabbing the emotions and becoming popularly embraced as a major happening.³³

However, one could also see the change as part of broader, longer-term developments. In particular, Steven Pinker has argued that “violence has declined over long stretches of time,” and he documents declines, particularly in Europe, in chronic raiding and feuding, in homicide, and in such once socially sanctioned forms of violence as despotism, slavery, dueling, judicial torture, superstitious killing, sadistic punishment, cruelty to animals, capital punishment, and infanticide. He attributes the changes to declines in the appeals of dominance, revenge, and sadism, and to rises in empathy, self-control, moral progress, and reason, and he sees the mechanism of such changes in the rise in better governance, “gentle commerce,” “feminization,” and “the escalator of reason.”³⁴ It is certainly possible to see some reverse trends, or as-yet inadequate developments, in the remarkable rise in the acceptance of a high-tech form of infanticide, abortion, which over the last decades has resulted in the extinguishment of more lives than World War II, and in the almost astonishing lack of empathy in the American public over the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been lost in the Middle East as a result of the American military interventions there.³⁵ But an aversion to international war, as Pinker discusses extensively, certainly fits into the trends in violence he documents.

In addition, there have been long-term developments in international affairs in Europe and North America that might have contributed to, or presaged, the change after World War I.³⁶ For example, in his survey of war since 1400, Luard notes an interesting change in the way war has been justified. In the first century or two of that period, no justification seemed necessary – war was seen as a “glorious undertaking” and a “normal feature of human existence, a favorite pastime for princes and great lords.” By 1700 or so, however, attitudes had changed enough so that rulers found they were “expected to proclaim their own love of peace and their desire to avoid the tragedies of war.”³⁷ They also gained a degree of control over war. Paul Schroeder suggests that “a fair generalization about international politics in the fifteenth, sixteenth, or seventeenth centuries is that most wars that could have started, did, and that most crises led within a relatively short time to war.”

Later, particularly by the nineteenth century, “most wars that could have happened did not happen; most crises were managed more or less successfully.”³⁸ And it should also be noted that some countries were altering their international life-style and seeking to avoid war entirely. These included the Netherlands, which came to concentrate on commercial and colonial ventures and sought to avoid all international war in Europe, a pattern Richard Rosecrance has examined more generally.³⁹ And Sweden, once a very warlike country, came eventually to regard war as stupid and has avoided it for centuries. However, although Europe did manage substantially to avoid international war from 1815 to 1854 and from 1871 to 1914, it still engaged in plenty of warfare elsewhere: fully 199 of the 244 wars that took place in the world between 1789 and 1917 were wars of colonization or decolonization – including by the Netherlands.⁴⁰ And, as noted, war remained, in general, an exalted and admired enterprise.

Finally, it is also possible that the antiwar movement, building on such trends and developments, was in the process of gathering an unstoppable momentum like the earlier antislavery movement.⁴¹ For example, Norman Angell argues in his memoirs that if World War I could have been delayed a few years, “Western Europe might have acquired a mood” which would have enabled it to avoid it.⁴² And some members of the prewar peace movement were in fact beginning to feel a not entirely unjustified sense of optimism. As the distinguished British historian G. P. Gooch concluded hopefully in 1911, “We can now look forward with something like confidence to the time when war between civilized nations will be considered as antiquated as the duel.”⁴³

The central problem with assigning a role to such gradual developments, however, is that before 1914 the institution of war still retained much of the glamor and the sense of inevitability it had acquired over the millennia. It still appealed not only to woolly militarists, but also to popular opinion and to romantic intellectuals as something that was sometimes desirable and ennobling, often useful and progressive, and always thrilling. Indeed, before 1914 the anti-war movement was still being ridiculed as a flaky fringe group. Bertha von Suttner was characterized as “a gentle perfume of absurdity” and the public image of her German Peace Society as “a comical sewing bee composed of sentimental aunts of both sexes.” Angell reports that blunt friends advised him to “avoid that stuff or you will be classed with cranks and faddists, with devotees of Higher Thought who go about in sandals and long beards, live on nuts.”⁴⁴ As Schroeder puts it, “the great majority of leaders and opinion-leaders everywhere believed . . . that war was natural and more or less inevitable.” Wrote the exasperated von Suttner in 1912, “War continues to exist not because there is evil in the world, but because people still hold war to be a good thing,” while

the pacifist William James lamented, “The plain truth is that people *want* war.”⁴⁵ As Luard puts it, “what had not changed was the conviction that war remained an inevitable feature of human existence.”⁴⁶

Longer-term trends may have played a role, but in this case the change in attitudes toward war was sudden, not gradual. For the abolition of war to become an accepted commodity, it was probably necessary for there to be a black swan event: one more vivid example of how appallingly stupid the hoary, time-honored institution really was. As it happened, people in Europe and North America were at last ready to begin to accept the message.

Obviously, however, there were two key countries where, in different ways, that message failed to be delivered.

One was Japan, a distant, less developed state that had barely participated in World War I. Many people there could still enthuse over war in a manner that had largely vanished in Europe: it was, as Alfred Vagts points out, the only country where old-style militarism survived the Great War.⁴⁷ For example, a Japanese war ministry pamphlet of 1934 proclaimed war to be “the father of creation and the mother of culture.”⁴⁸ It took a cataclysmic war for the Japanese to learn the lesson almost all Europeans had garnered from World War I. But the Japanese were to embrace it well. The war in the Pacific, then, while not inevitable, was clearly in the cards due to Japan’s general willingness to risk all to achieve its extravagant imperial ambitions.

This was not the case in the second country, Germany. In contrast to Japan, it appears that only one person there continued to embrace war. He proved to be crucial, however. As military historian John Keegan puts it, “only one European really wanted war: Adolf Hitler.”⁴⁹ In order to bring about another continental war it was necessary for Germany to desire to expand into areas that would inspire military resistance from other major countries and to be willing and able to pursue war when these desires were so opposed. There was simply no one else around who had these blends of desires and capacities. As Gerhard Weinberg concludes, Hitler was “the one man able, willing, and even eager to lead Germany and drag the world into war.”⁵⁰

That is to say, but for Hitler, the massive war there would likely never have come about – he was a necessary cause (if not, of course, a sufficient one).⁵¹ As Jervis notes, few scholars believe that World War II would have occurred in Europe “had Adolf Hitler not been bent on expansion and conquest.” And F. H. Hinsley says, “Historians are, rightly, nearly unanimous that . . . the causes of the Second World War were the personality and the aims of Adolf Hitler. . . . [I]t was Hitler’s aggressiveness that caused the war.” Similarly, William Manchester observes that the war Hitler started was one “which he alone

wanted,” while John Lukacs finds that World War II “was inconceivable and remains incomprehensible without him.”⁵²

Indeed, Hitler was successful in the 1930s in part because no one else on the continent could imagine that anyone could possibly be so stupid as to desire war. As Jeffrey Record notes, “few suspected that Hitler *wanted* war,” while Paul Kennedy points out that “The long shadow cast by the memories and losses of the First World War, a self-inflicted disaster for Europe, [was] of such magnitude that it was impossible to imagine that governments would want to go to war again,” and Ernest May notes that “Understanding of Hitler’s aims and policies was clouded . . . by a general unwillingness to believe that any national leader might actually *want* another Great War.”⁵³

World War I, then, shattered what some have called the “war-like spirit” in Europe and North America and made large majorities there into unapologetic peace-mongers. World War II, it appears, reinforced that lesson in those places (probably quite unnecessarily), and it converted the previously militaristic Japanese in Asia. As General Dwight Eisenhower said in a commencement speech at West Point in 1947, “War is mankind’s most tragic and stupid folly.” Moreover, the aversion to international war has gradually spread throughout the world in subsequent decades.

Thus, international war seems to be in pronounced decline because of the way attitudes toward it have changed, roughly following the pattern by which the ancient and once-formidable formal institution of slavery became discredited and then obsolete.⁵⁴ And the process of change suggests that international war is merely an idea, an institution or invention that has been grafted onto international society.⁵⁵ Its replacement in much of the world by a culture or society of international peace has come about, it seems, without the intervention or service of cherubs, doves, and choirs of angels; without changing human nature; without creating an effective world government or system of international law; without modifying the nature of the state or the nation-state; without fabricating an effective moral or practical equivalent; without enveloping the earth in democracy or prosperity; without devising ingenious agreements to restrict arms or the arms industry; without altering the international system; without improving the competence of political leaders; and without doing much of anything about nuclear weapons.

Steven Pinker understandably yearns for “a causal story with more explanatory muscle than ‘Developed countries stopped warring because they got less warlike’” and, although he does hold that “new ideas” can sometimes have such an impact, he suggests that “the most satisfying explanation of a historical change is one that identifies an exogenous trigger.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Azar Gat, allows that “attitude change has undoubtedly been involved in the modern

decrease of war,” but questions its historic importance and is decidedly uncomfortable with the notion that “the ‘attitude change’ toward war had no particular reason and was not different from a fashion or a fad that suddenly catches on.”⁵⁷ And Jack Levy and William Thompson, while acknowledging that “ideas are not unimportant,” contend that they do not “drop from the sky,” but “emerge from and coevolve with more material changes.”⁵⁸

Yet, as Ernest Gellner observes, “A great deal can happen without being necessary and without being inscribed into any historic plan,” and Francis Fukuyama has pointed to what he calls “the autonomous power of ideas.”⁵⁹ The remarkable rise of aversion to international war seems to be a case in point. That is, as Luard stresses, “a general unwillingness for war” can be a quality that is very consequential.⁶⁰ It can be a cause with plenty of explanatory “muscle.”

Robert Dahl argues that beliefs, ideas, ideologies, and attitudes are often “a major independent [or as Pinker would have it, exogenous] variable,” and that they must remain in the consideration. He is uneasy, however: “one can hardly exaggerate how badly off we are as we move into this terrain” because “if it is difficult to account satisfactorily for the acquisition of individual beliefs, it is even more difficult to account for historical shifts of beliefs.” Nonetheless, he recommends paying more attention to what he calls “the historical movement of ideas.”⁶¹ Indeed, contrary to the contention of Levy and Thompson, it is often difficult to come up with material reasons to explain important historical developments. For example, slavery declined over the nineteenth century even though the Atlantic slave trade was then entering what was probably the most dynamic and profitable period in its existence. The same can be said for the way formal dueling went out of style. And democracy began to take root in substantial countries only by the end of the eighteenth century even though it had been known as a form of government for millennia and even though there seem to have been no technological or economic advances at the time that impelled its acceptance.⁶²

Yet, argues Dahl, “because of their concern with rigor and their dissatisfaction with the ‘softness’ of historical description, generalization, and explanation, most social scientists have turned away from the historical movement of ideas. As a result, their own theories, however ‘rigorous’ they may be, leave out an important explanatory variable and often lead to naive reductionism.”⁶³

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE RISE OF AVERSION TO INTERNATIONAL WAR

Over the twentieth century, then, something that might be called a culture or society of international peace or a widespread aversion to war (or a sensitivity

to its essential stupidity) has been established with regard to how countries relate to each other, particularly within the developed world. And the chief consequence of this rise has been the remarkable decline – or, in the case of the developed world, the almost utter absence – of the venerable institution over the last several decades. Related is another development. “All historians agree,” observed Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace* in 1869, “that states express their conflicts in wars and that as a direct result of greater or lesser success in war the political strength of states and nations increases or decreases.”⁶⁴ Whatever historians may currently think, this notion, it certainly appears, has become substantially passé. Prestige now comes not from prowess in armed conflict, but from economic progress, maintaining a stable and productive society, and, for many, putting on a good Olympics, sending a rocket to or toward the moon, or managing a pandemic.⁶⁵ That is, triumph in war is not required for countries to gain political strength or standing as can be seen in the cases of Germany and Japan, and the activity itself has increasingly come to seem futile, disgusting, and stupid.⁶⁶

It is questionable, then, whether it is wise to place the concept of power at the center of any construct that tries to deal with international affairs. The concept has been important to a great deal of theorizing about international affairs particularly after realist Hans J. Morgenthau grandly declared in 1948 that “international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power,” defining “power” as “man’s control over the minds and actions of others.”⁶⁷ In that context, the word compellingly tends to imply military strength: as Samuel Huntington observed, “realist theorists have focused overwhelmingly on military power.”⁶⁸ Indeed, declares Morgenthau without much elaboration, “The dependence of national power upon military preparedness . . . is too obvious to need much elaboration.”⁶⁹ As Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz conclude, “the seriousness of a state’s fundamental intentions is conveyed fundamentally by its having a credible military posture. Without it, a state’s diplomacy generally lacks effectiveness.”⁷⁰ The notion that a disarmed country could possess great “power” is all but inconceivable under these patterns of thought. But it is not respect for these forces that makes the diplomacy of Japan or Germany effective. If “power” can be achieved with very little military capability or preparedness, the word, with its attendant and inevitable military implications, has become misleading or misdirecting at best.⁷¹

In this book, I survey and critique the foreign policy history of the post-World War II era during which an aversion to international war, or an acceptance of the idea that it is fundamentally stupid, has grown. Included is an assessment of the current threat environment. I also examine three additional and associated consequences of the rise of aversion to international

war. First, under the circumstances, there is potential virtue in the traditionally maligned techniques of complacency and appeasement for dealing with international problems. Second, the phenomenon suggests that there is little justification for the continuing and popular tendency to inflate threats and dangers in the international arena – even to the point of deeming some of them to be “existential.” And third, although problems certainly remain, none of these are of a kind and substantial enough to require the United States (or pretty much anybody) to maintain a large standing military force for dealing with them. I discuss an additional consequence of the rise of aversion to international war in this book’s Afterword – the rather natural and substantially immutable establishment of something of a world order that has scarcely required the active machinations of the United States.

The Potential Application of Complacency and Appeasement

In a condition of international peace a certain degree of complacency is often justified, and it is frequently superior to the routine opposite: agitated confrontation characterized by determined and often militarized alarmism.

Although troubles do exist, those inclined to alarm might from time to time bear in mind an observation of Calvin Coolidge, the president, suggests columnist George Will, with the “highest ratio of wisdom to words.” In Will’s rendering, Coolidge advised, “When you see 10 problems coming down the road at you, you can be pretty sure that nine of them will wind up in the ditch before they run over you.”⁷² As Coolidge suggests, complacency may not *always* be the wisest course, but it should surely be on the table for consideration. Indeed, as I will attempt to show, security threats once held to be dire – including the military one seemingly presented by the Soviet Union in the Cold War – did not simply drive into Coolidge’s ditch, but actually, or effectively, did not exist at all.

Moreover, if Communist incursions in South Vietnam in the 1960s had been met with complacency rather than with militarized alarmism, some 55,000 young Americans and a million or more Vietnamese would not have been killed. Of course, the Communists might have won but, as it turned out, that happened anyway, and today the resultant regime is quite friendly with the United States as they jointly make glowering faces at dangers they fancy to loom in the area from China.

Complete complacency in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack would not have been appropriate even to Coolidge. However, a more laid-back – and therefore Coolidge-like – approach would have been to go after the al-Qaeda perpetrators directly rather than to wage war against

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban group, which had nothing to do with the terrorist attack. Helping in the effort might have been Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the chief (and almost only) supporters of the Taliban. In result, al-Qaeda might have been routed and a frustrating and disastrous 20-year war might well have been avoided.

And a complacent approach to Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 would have stressed that the pathetic, if sometimes roguish, state was fully containable and deterrable with measures already pretty much in place. In the process, a war which has resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, including twice as many Americans as perished on 9/11, would have failed to come about.

As a diplomatic technique, appeasement has also frequently proved to be a useful approach. It worked like a charm in the Cuban missile crisis. When US President John F. Kennedy sternly suggested he would use his military to remove offending nuclear missiles in nearby Cuba, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev obliging appeased him, Kennedy pronounced himself satisfied, no attack took place, and all lived at least semi-happily thereafter.

However, appeasement has been given a bad name as a diplomatic technique by an experience in 1938 when Adolf Hitler insisted at an international conference in Munich that a German-filled area in neighboring Czechoslovakia be turned over to him, promising that this would be his last territorial demand in Europe. The British and French accepted this demand, but Hitler, contrary to his promise, was soon off invading other countries. The lesson often drawn is that Hitler's appetite for territory grew with the feeding, and therefore that the Munich appeasement led to a world war. However, Hitler had long had an ambition for future military expansion, and the experience at Munich was scarcely necessary or impelling. As historian Paul Kennedy puts it, "Hitler was fundamentally *unappeasable* and determined upon a future territorial order which small-scale adjustments alone could never satisfy."⁷³

Moreover, it seems likely that peaceful dealmaking – appeasement – would have worked with any German other than Hitler. The Germans did have grievances, but most of these could not by themselves have led to another world war because the victors of World War I either assisted in removing the grievances or stood idly by as the Germans rectified the peace terms unilaterally.⁷⁴ In order to bring about another continental war it was necessary for Germany to desire to expand into areas that would inspire military resistance from other major countries and to be willing and able to pursue war when that desire was opposed. Only Hitler possessed that desire and war-willingness, and the capacity to carry it out. Most of the other top German leaders were toadies or sycophants, and certainly none could

remotely arouse the blind adulation and worship Hitler inspired. As historian Matthew Cooper points out, “none of the military leaders of those critical years from 1933 to 1938 possessed any political ability.”⁷⁵ Nor was there a drive for war among the German public: as William Manchester concludes, “the German people hated war as passionately as their once and future enemies.”⁷⁶ “Had Hitler dropped dead the day after the Munich conference,” notes Record, “that conference in all likelihood would be an historical footnote and ‘appeasement’ a nonpejorative word.”⁷⁷

Complacency and appeasement, then, have much to recommend themselves. After all, they are standard features of successful economic, or business, bargaining. In this, each bargainer more or less complacently assumes that, while both are acting out of self-interest, each has an interest as well in accommodating, or appeasing, the other and that the best bargain is one in which both leave happy with the deal struck. The same often holds for negotiations over legal disputes: as one experienced attorney has put it, “The worst settlement is better than the best judgement.”⁷⁸ Hard bargaining in which only short-term advantage is the motivation is bad business in the long term. As P. T. Barnum put it, “Men who drive sharp bargains with their customers, acting as if they never expected to see them again, will not be mistaken.” It actually took a long time for the wisdom of this approach to sink in among capitalists, but when it did, the massive, even miraculous, economic development of the last two centuries was launched.⁷⁹

In international relations, theorists have for decades thundered that in that realm, all politics is motivated not by a quest for mutual benefit, but by a “lust for power” and that, due to the “anarchy” that prevails in the world, “there is little room for trust among states.” Yet, eschewing such grim assessments, mutually-beneficial international bargaining, often relying on complacency and appeasement, has become commonplace in many areas. As will be discussed more fully in [Chapter 6](#), China and Russia today seem not only to want to become rich, but to play a larger role on the world stage, overcoming what they view as past humiliations. However reprehensible some their internal policies may be, neither state seems to harbor Hitler-like dreams of extensive expansion by military means, and to a considerable degree it seems sensible for other countries, including the United States, to accept, and even service, such vaporous, cosmetic, and substantially meaningless goals. But that, of course, would smack not only of complacency, but appeasement. Instead, the two countries are frequently deemed to present a dire and gathering threat requiring perpetual and often militarized confrontation.

The Continued Quest to Identify and Inflate Threat

Rather than adopting a laid-back policy emphasizing complacency and appeasement, there has been a determined quest to identify, evaluate, and confront new threats – or to search for “monsters to destroy,” as John Quincy Adams famously put it in a fourth of July speech in 1821. Massively extrapolating from limited evidence, determining to err decidedly on the safe side, dismissing contrary interpretations, and often striking a responsive chord with the public, decision-makers can become mesmerized by perceived threats that scarcely warrant the preoccupation and effort. Indeed, in *Overblown*, a book published in 2006, I argued that, with the benefit of hindsight, “every foreign policy threat in the last several decades that has come to be accepted as significant has then eventually been unwisely exaggerated.”⁸⁰ That is, alarmism, usually based on what Brodie once called “worst case fantasies” perpetrated by a “cult of the ominous,” has dominated thinking about security.⁸¹

Thus, historian John Lewis Gaddis observes that in 1950, at the time of the Korean War – quite possibly the most consequential event of the Cold War – *no one* at the summit of foreign policy (chief members of what was later rather irreverently labeled “the blob”) imagined that “there would be no world wars” over the next half-century and that “the United States and the Soviet Union, soon to have tens of thousands of thermonuclear weapons pointed at one another, would agree tacitly never to use any of them.”⁸² To do so, of course, would have been to wallow in complacency.

However, that another world war, whether nuclear or not, might be avoided was compatible with facts and observations that were fairly obvious and fully available at the time. To begin with, those running world affairs after World War II were the same people or the intellectual heirs of the people who had tried desperately to prevent that cataclysm. It was entirely plausible that such people, despite their huge differences on many key issues, might well manage to keep themselves from plunging into a self-destructive repeat performance. Moreover, Communist ideology, while assertive and threateningly unsettling to the Western world, stressed class warfare, revolution, and civil war as methods for advancing its cause, not the direct military invasion of developed capitalist states.⁸³ Thus, it could have been reasonably argued at the time that major war was simply not in the cards and that the Korean War was essentially an opportunistic one-off – that is, an aberration rather than a harbinger. This less alarmist perspective was not, of course, the only one possible, but there was no definitive way to dismiss it. Thus, as a matter of simple, plain, rational decision-making, this comparatively complacent prospect – the one that proved to be true – should have been on the table. But, for the most part, it was not.

A similar phenomenon about threat took place in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 – quite possibly the most consequential event of the post-Cold War period. At the time, Michael Morell was the CIA agent in charge of briefing the president, and he recalls the atmosphere vividly. “We were certain we were going to be attacked again.” There was “an avalanche – literally thousands – of intelligence reports in the months following 9/11 that strongly indicated that al Qa’ida would hit us again,” and some of these indicated that the terrorists might use chemical or biological weapons or “even crude nuclear devices.”⁸⁴ Similarly, journalist Jane Mayer observes that “the only certainty shared by virtually the entire American intelligence community” in the months after September 11 “was that a second wave of even more devastating terrorist attacks on America was imminent,” while, according to Steve Coll, CIA leaders “were thoroughly convinced that there would be another attack inside the United States soon and that it would be even more spectacular than September 11.” And Rudy Giuliani, who was mayor of New York City at the time, recalls that “anybody, any one of these security experts, including myself, would have told you on September 11, 2001, we’re looking at dozens and dozens and multiyears of attacks like this.”⁸⁵

Such fears and concerns about the threat presented by international terrorism were, of course, reasonable extrapolations from the facts then at hand. However, that *every* “security expert” should fervently embrace such alarmist – and, it turned out, erroneous – views, and that the intelligence community should be *certain* and *thoroughly convinced* about them, is fundamentally absurd. As with Korea, a less alarmist, even complacent, perspective was entirely possible even with the facts then in hand.

For example, immediately after 9/11, a reporter for the *Columbus Dispatch* queried several academics who, innocent of, or unencumbered by, any benefit that might derive from reading those thousands of dire intelligence reports, proposed a set of entirely plausible contrary observations: “There’s a natural tendency to believe that because this is a big event, it’s caused by big forces, when it’s really somebody who just got lucky with two potshots,” or “If we overreact, we’re likely to generate a whole new group of opponents, which is exactly what these groups would like us to do.” And we suggested that the problem could be handled as an international policing matter (as was done after a terrorist attack that had downed an American airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988) or with methods previously used against pirates and slave traders.⁸⁶ It was also entirely plausible, if unconventional and of course complacent, to conclude from facts then at hand that, like the Korean War (and, for that matter, like the attack on Pearl Harbor to which 9/11 was often compared), 9/11 could well prove to be an aberration rather than a harbinger.⁸⁷

Morell's recollections are included in a 2015 book about the fight against Islamist extremism that he extravagantly and portentously entitles *The Great War of Our Time*. Interestingly, even with 14 years of hindsight, at no point does he pause to reflect on why or how those "thousands" of alarming, hysteria-inducing intelligence reports that so "strongly indicated" that the terrorists were about to "hit us again" could have been so hopelessly and so spectacularly wrong. Not only has the al-Qaeda monster failed to "hit us again," but it hasn't even come close.⁸⁸ Indeed, contrary to the popular (or knee-jerk) post-9/11 perspective, the attack stands out a spectacular outlier: no other terrorist event before or after, in war zones or not, has visited even one-tenth as much total destruction. And al-Qaeda, the group responsible, has proved to resemble President John Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald – a fundamentally trivial entity that got horribly lucky once. Yet the event was taken to be some sort of new normal, the rise of a monster that had to be destroyed through a pair of destructive and unnecessary wars in the Middle East going after regimes that had nothing to do with the attacks.

Thus, *no one* in 1950 anticipated the distinct possibility that World War III might be avoided and *every* security expert was *certain* in 2001 that there would soon be a large repeat terrorist attack. In the process other plausible – and as it turned out correct – interpretations of the information available were simply ignored or dismissed as complacent.

Throughout, simplicity and spook, as political scientist Warner Schilling called it, have reigned.⁸⁹ In the process, American foreign and defense policy has very often inflated threat – routinely elevating the problematic to the dire – and urgently focused on problems, or monsters, that essentially didn't exist. This phenomenon is essentially farcical in its frequent misperception of information and avoidance of contrary explanations.

In a farce, a man might become suspicious that his wife and his best friend are having an affair. Various bits of evidence, including evasive statements by the presumed lovers, feed his suspicion. Although there are alternative explanations for the pair's behavior and for their statements, he increasingly excludes these from consideration and he emphasizes instead information that supports his suspicions. Eventually he animatedly, and in great anguish, denounces the couple at a gathering of friends and relatives. Someone then pulls back a screen and a well-stocked banquet table is revealed as balloons cascade from the ceiling. It turns out the pair had been indeed been meeting in secret, but that was because they were planning a surprise party for him.

That sort of process can be seen in operation when, throughout the Cold War, the major contestants engaged in what is often called a "security

dilemma.” Neither had the slightest interest or desire to go to war with the other, but each warily accumulated an impressive and hugely costly military arsenal to deter a threat of direct military aggression that, as it happened, didn’t exist, and each took the other’s buildup to be threatening, requiring them to amass ever more armaments in order to deter the non-existent threat. Robert Jervis characterizes the security dilemma as “tragic.”⁹⁰ But surely, because it resulted primarily in massively unnecessary expenditure and planning and in frantic, if fundamentally insignificant, sound and fury, the theatrical form it most resembles is farce – or perhaps theater of the absurd.

It should be noted, however, that, although there are always people trying to spy monsters – sell fears and threats – their efforts are no guarantee that a promoted threat or fear will “take,” that people and policymakers will be convinced it is notable and important, worth spending time and effort worrying about. If extensive promotion could guarantee acceptance, we would all be driving Edsels and drinking New Coke – legendary marketing failures in 1958 and 1985 by two of the (otherwise) most successful businesses in history: the Ford Motor Company and Coca-Cola.

Thus, the American public and its leaders have remained remarkably calm about the dangers of genetically modified food while becoming very wary of nuclear power. The French see it very differently. In the United States, illegal immigration is seen to be a threat in some years, but not in others. The country was “held hostage” when Americans were kidnapped in Iran in 1979 or in Lebanon in the 1980s but not when this repeatedly happened during the Iraq War or over the decades in Colombia. Slobodan Milošević in Serbia become a monster about whom we had to do something militarily, but not Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe or thuggish militarists in Burma or Pol Pot in Cambodia or, until 9/11, the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the 1930s, Japan’s ventures into distant China were seen to be more threatening than some of the actions of Hitler in Europe. Predicting what will arouse people’s apprehensions in the future is difficult at best, and anyone who could accurately and persistently do so would likely quietly move to Wall Street and in very short order to become the richest person on earth.⁹¹

The Military Record: Are You Being Served?

It is also important to evaluate the accomplishments of the American military, which has often been put into service to deal with the threats that have been espied, sometimes with disastrous results, and to evaluate whether the money and effort spent has been worth it.

To do so, it would be worthwhile to apply a test proposed by Newt Gingrich. It is often said, even by many of his admirers, that at any one time Gingrich will have 100 ideas of which five are pretty *good*. Falling into the latter category was his remark when running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012 that “defense budgets shouldn’t be a matter of politics. They shouldn’t be a matter of playing games. They should be directly related to the amount of threat we have.”⁹² As it happens, on his 95 percent side, Gingrich does imagine many threats and perils.⁹³ However, his test is a sensible one. It is determinedly bottom-up: instead of starting with defense spending as it is and looking for places to expand or to trim, it assesses the threat environment – problems that lurk, or appear to lurk, in current conditions and on (or even over) the horizon. Then, keeping both the risks and opportunities in mind, it considers which of these threats, if any, justify funding.

I apply that approach in this book. I evaluate the history of American foreign and particularly military policy since 1945 and conclude that, although there have been problems – or “challenges,” as they are sometimes called – the United States, despite fears and imaginings that have often been widely and fervently embraced, has never really been confronted by a truly significant security threat, a condition that persists to the present day.⁹⁴ At least since 1945, any imagined security threats vanished because the supposed threatener/challenger either lacked the capacity to carry the threat out or obligingly self-destructed or because the perceived threat pretty much failed, actually, to exist. There are policy implications of such an agreeable condition, and one might even be inclined to flirt unpleasantly with the notion that, just possibly, the United States would be better off if it followed the policy pursued by Costa Rica, which 70 years ago dismantled its military forces entirely – though perhaps postwar Japan and Germany provide more directly applicable models. But at any rate, an application of the Gingrich gospel/equation/wisdom leads to the conclusion that there is not now, nor ever has been, a good reason to maintain a huge military force-in-being.

In the last years, it has become common, even routine, in the United States to say to members of the military, with varying degrees of sincerity, “Thank you for your service.” The phrase was used as the title for an acclaimed book in 2013 and for a well-received, if financially unsuccessful, theatrical film in 2017 that was based on the book. The title was presumably meant to be at least partly ironic because both the book and the film dealt with postwar mental problems experienced by some veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.