

Why War Is Not Inevitable

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Theme: [History](#)

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If war were inevitable, there would be little point in trying to end it. If war were inevitable, a moral case might be made for trying to lessen its damage while it continued. And numerous parochial cases could be made for being prepared to win inevitable wars for this side or that side.

Developing ways to avoid generating conflicts is part of the answer, but some occurrence of conflict (or major disagreement) is inevitable, which is why we must use more effective and less destructive tools to resolve conflicts and to achieve security. But there is nothing inevitable about war. It is not made necessary by our genes, by other inevitable forces in our culture, or by crises beyond our control.

Our Genes

War has only been around for the most recent fraction of the existence of our species. We did not evolve with it. During this most recent 10,000 years, war has been sporadic. Some societies have not known war. Some have known it and then abandoned it. Just as some of us find it hard to imagine a world without war or murder, some human societies have found it hard to imagine a world with those things. A man in Malaysia, asked why he wouldn't shoot an arrow at slave raiders, replied "Because it would kill them." He was unable to comprehend that anyone could choose to kill. It's easy to suspect him of lacking imagination, but how easy is it for us to imagine a culture in which virtually nobody would ever choose to kill and war would be unknown?

Whether easy or hard to imagine, or to create, this is decidedly a matter of culture and not of DNA. According to myth, war is "natural." Yet a great deal of conditioning is needed to prepare most people to take part in war, and a great deal of mental suffering is common among those who have taken part. In contrast, not a single person is known to have suffered deep moral regret or post-traumatic stress disorder from war deprivation.

In some societies women have been virtually excluded from war making for centuries and then included. Clearly, this is a question of culture, not of genetic makeup. War is optional, not inevitable, for women and men alike.

Some nations invest much more heavily in militarism than most and take part in many more wars. Some nations, under coercion, play minor parts in the wars of others. Some nations have completely abandoned war. Some have not attacked another country for centuries. Some have put their military in a museum.

Forces in Our Culture

War long predates capitalism, and surely Switzerland is a type of capitalist nation just as the United States is. But there is a widespread belief that a culture of capitalism — or of a particular type and degree of greed and destruction and short-sightedness — necessitates war. One answer to this concern is the following: any feature of a society that necessitates war can be changed and is not itself inevitable. The military-industrial complex is not an eternal and invincible force. Environmental destructiveness and economic structures based on greed are not immutable.

There is a sense in which this is unimportant; namely, we need to halt environmental destruction and reform corrupt government just as we need to end war, regardless of whether any of these changes depends on the others to succeed. Moreover, by uniting such campaigns into a comprehensive movement for change, strength in numbers will make each more likely to succeed.

But there is another sense in which this is important; namely, we need to understand war as the cultural creation that it is and stop imagining it as something imposed on us by forces beyond our control. In that sense it is important to recognize that no law of physics or sociology requires us to have war because we have some other institution. In fact, war is not required by a particular lifestyle or standard of living because any lifestyle can be changed, because unsustainable practices must end by definition with or without war, and because war actually impoverishes societies that use it.

Crises Beyond Our Control

War in human history up to this point has not correlated with population density or resource scarcity. The idea that climate change and the resulting catastrophes will inevitably generate wars could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is not a prediction based on facts.

The growing and looming climate crisis is a good reason for us to outgrow our culture of war, so that we are prepared to handle crises by other, less destructive means. And redirecting some or all of the vast sums of money and energy that go into war and war preparation to the urgent work of protecting the climate could make a significant difference, both by ending one of our most environmentally destructive activities and by funding a transition to sustainable practices.

In contrast, the mistaken belief that wars must follow climate chaos will encourage investment in military preparedness, thus exacerbating the climate crisis and making more likely the compounding of one type of catastrophe with another.

Ending War Is Possible

Human societies have been known to abolish institutions that were widely considered permanent.

These have included human sacrifice, blood feuds, duelling, slavery, the death penalty, and many others. In some societies some of these practices have been largely eradicated, but remain illicitly in the shadows and on the margins. Those exceptions don't tend to convince most people that complete eradication is impossible, only that it hasn't yet been achieved in that society. The idea of eliminating hunger from the globe was once considered ludicrous. Now it is widely understood that hunger could be abolished — and for a tiny fraction of what is spent on war. While nuclear weapons have not all been dismantled and eliminated, there

exists a popular movement working to do just that.

Ending all war is an idea that has found great acceptance in various times and places. It was more popular in the United States, for example, in the 1920s and 1930s. In recent decades, the notion has been propagated that war is permanent. That notion is new, radical, and without basis in fact.

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