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## WAR ON THE STREET OUTSIDE

Beirut, 1980

I have studied war as a professor for decades, but have been in a war zone only once. It was April 16, 1980, and I was driving into Beirut, Lebanon, from the airport with Black Panther founder Huey P. Newton and a half dozen of his friends to visit the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and meet its leader, Yasser Arafat. I was a white, Jewish, nonviolent twenty-seven-year-old who had met Huey just a few times but had worked on Black Panther community programs in the party's "put down the gun" phase in the early 1970s. The PLO was bringing in foreign big-shots to see its state-within-a-state in Beirut, and evidently did not know that the Black Panthers had fallen apart years ago and that Huey personally was on a cocaine-strewn path to self-destruction that would kill him within the decade—shot on the streets of Oakland.

When the PLO invited Huey to assemble a delegation for an expenses-paid visit, he took his wife, brother-in-law, secretary, and a white supporter who was a friend of mine. I got myself invited along because there was extra space and I hoped to (and did) help Huey visit Israel afterward, as he had expressed a desire to do. We rode in from the Beirut airport

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and through the city in two cars, Huey's inner circle in the first and me with two other people in the second.

When I heard popping sounds ahead, I thought fireworks. After all, there was a lull in the civil war. Our airport arrival had been smooth (for one thing, the PLO seemed to bypass the Lebanese authorities altogether) and nobody mentioned trouble. True, the city was traumatized still from its recent years of civil war, and whole buildings gaped open from unrepaired shell damage. But there was a stable dividing line and cease-fire between the Muslim side, where we were, and the Christian side. If you stayed away from the dividing line and the Israeli border you were safe—unless the crazy traffic killed you, but that's another story. So the popping sounds did not alarm me at first.

As we continued, though, the shots got louder and it became clear they were not fireworks but automatic weapons fire in the city streets. A gun battle was soon taking place a block ahead of us and our driver, completely calm, said, "OK, something's happening; we'll go another way," and turned the car around. He said, "Don't worry," and I commented, "I *am* worried." He remarked of the fighting, "You get used to it," and I replied, "I hope *I* never get used to it." I remember slouching down in the backseat of the car so that a stray bullet would have less chance to hit me if one came our way. But none did.

When we got to our hotel, Huey and his friends showed a certain amusement with the street fighting. "Did you see that guy running along with the AK-47 nipping at his heels?" they laughed. (Huey instructed us that as a civilian caught in a firefight you should walk away, since running makes you look like "part of the action"—advice I thankfully have never had occasion to use.) I could not understand the driver's calmness and Huey's friends' attitude about the fighting.

Up until then, for me, war was an absolute. Being in a war zone meant dying, and there was no connection in my mind between a war zone and daily life. But in Beirut I began to learn that war is relative, that most people in a war zone survive, that war is hell but also life goes on. In Beirut in 1980, if war took place a block away, you went on with your day. If war came onto *your* block, well, then you went inside.

That night, out the hotel window, I saw outgoing artillery fire from some blocks away—not *our* block, though. A few minutes later incoming artillery set off big booms, but not close enough to break anything where

we were. I realized that the incoming shells had landed pretty close to where the outgoing shells had come from. This made me feel safer because they seemed to know what they were shooting at and it was not me.

A five-year-old boy on his balcony was also not what the fighters were shooting at that day, but a stray bullet killed him. The day's fighting had killed five people in all. I saw it in the next day's newspaper. War took away this young child's life, with all the hopes and plans for the rest of it, and left a permanent gap in the fabric of his family and community.

For that five-year-old child, war was *not* relative; it was absolute. It does not matter whether he died among five that day or five thousand. It does not matter, for him, whether the street fighting in Beirut that day was a tiny fragment of a world awash in big wars, or the last skirmish on earth. (Similarly, the fact that deaths in Iraq hit a new low level in October 2008 did not matter for the family in Kirkuk that lost the last of its three sons, a seven-year-old killed by a stray grenade while playing soccer.)

But it does matter for us, the living. It matters for the *other* children around the world who would die and suffer if the world were awash in big wars, but would live peaceful lives if Beirut were the last skirmish on earth. Less of a bad thing is a good thing. Fewer and smaller wars are better than more and larger wars. They are better, not for one five-year-old in Beirut but for the world as a whole. I think that our brains naturally focus on human-interest stories such as the five-year-old and have a harder time with macro-scale assessments. But sensible policies depend on getting the big picture right.

The fighting that I drove into in Beirut that day marked the prelude to the Iran-Iraq War, which started five months later. (Many proxy battles played out in Beirut over the years.) The Iran-Iraq War would last eight years and kill more than half a million people. The Beirut clash lasted three days and killed thirty people. As terrible as each was, from a big-picture perspective the Iran-Iraq War was much worse than the Beirut battle.

So there is a scale from small to large, and this book is all about movement along that scale. At the high end of the war scale is global thermonuclear war, which has never occurred. A bit lower are world wars and lower still interstate wars and then smallish civil wars and terrorism. Peace also has gradations—the negative end of the war scale, if you

will—from fragile cease-fire to stable cease-fire to formal peace agreement and transitional government to disarmament and democracy.

## The Possibility of Progress

Can the world, step by step and with ups and downs, actually reduce the amount of war violence taking place? Can it move down the scale of war over time? Actually, this has been happening already for decades.

In the first half of the twentieth century, world wars killed *tens of millions* and left whole continents in ruins. In the second half of that century, during the Cold War, proxy wars killed *millions*, and the world feared a nuclear war that could have wiped out our species. Now, in the early twenty-first century, the worst wars, such as Iraq, kill *hundreds of thousands*. We fear terrorist attacks that could destroy a city, but not life on the planet. The fatalities still represent a large number and the impacts of wars are still catastrophic for those caught in them, but overall, war has diminished dramatically.

In the post-Cold War era that began in 1990, far fewer people have died in wars each year than during the Cold War. And within the post-Cold War era, the new century so far has seen fewer deaths per year from war violence than in the 1990s. More wars are ending than beginning, once ended they are less likely to restart, and the remaining wars are more localized than in the past.

### 1980 VERSUS 2011

Let us start with just one point of comparison to illustrate this dramatic change—the world situation around the time I visited Beirut in 1980, thirty years ago, compared to 2011. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar describes the state of the world when he became secretary-general of the United Nations (UN) in 1982: Iraq and Iran were in a “cruel war,” Israel and the PLO were battling over Lebanon, the Soviet Union occupied and brutalized Afghanistan, U.S.-Soviet relations had hit a low, apartheid ruled in South Africa and postcolonial conflicts raged elsewhere in Africa. Central America had “social strife and insurgency. . . . And casting its ominous shadow over all was the mounting arsenal of nuclear weapons, bearing in them

the threat to humanity's very survival." In the face of these wars and problems, the "Security Council had long been largely immobilized" by the Cold War standoff, since each superpower had a veto. In 1986 Pérez de Cuéllar "could not point to a single conflict that had been resolved during the previous five years as a result of the United Nations' efforts."

The Iran-Iraq War deserves note among these wars of the 1980s as one of the few cases in recent decades of *interstate war*, with regular armies (armed with tanks, missiles, and other heavy weapons) on both sides. Those wars generally cause more death and destruction than do the more common *civil wars*—including all of today's remaining wars—in which a government army on one side fights rebel militia groups (usually more lightly armed) on the other side.

The Iran-Iraq War was massively brutal and futile. Iran's ayatollahs sent teenagers by the thousands to their deaths, promising them paradise. Iraqis electrified swamps to kill Iranians wholesale. They used chemical weapons—the only such case in recent decades—and found them lethally effective. Both sides rained missiles on each other's cities. And in the end, hundreds of thousands of the deaths and a wasted decade later, the border was right where it had started, and both regimes were still in power, Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini. Within a few years Saddam had invaded another of his neighbors, Kuwait.

How does that world of the 1980s compare to today's world? In Lebanon, the civil war finally ended in 1990. Hezbollah became a political party and won seats in parliament, although it also remained heavily armed and provoked a destructive war with Israel in 2006. In 2009, when pro-Western parties won elections, dealing a setback to Hezbollah and its allies, the losers did not turn to war. They turned to doing better in the next election and playing a key role in coalition politics in the government.

Similarly, in El Salvador the former rebel party won the presidency in 2009, some seventeen years after the end of the war there. In Nicaragua, since the war ended twenty years ago, power has twice changed hands peacefully through elections between the former rebels and former government. Elsewhere around the world, wars have ended and societies are enjoying the fruits of peace, albeit with the scars of war still aching. I will paint a more complete picture of this process in the coming chapters.

In fact, worldwide, wars today are measurably fewer and smaller than thirty years ago. By one measure, the number of people killed directly by

war violence has decreased by 75 percent in that period. (Changes in indirect deaths from war, such as by epidemics, do not negate this trend, but I will postpone discussion of that complicated subject to Chapters 9 and 10.) *Interstate* wars have become very infrequent and relatively small. Wars between “great powers” have not occurred for more than fifty years. The number of *civil* wars is also shrinking, though less dramatically, as old ones end faster than new ones begin. This tremendous progress goes unheralded for the most part, as people’s attention and media coverage gravitate toward the remaining trouble spots.

The overall peaceful trend since 1990 may be a harbinger of even greater peace, or just an interlude before new and more terrible wars. It may be robust or fragile. It may result from understandable causes or from an unknown confluence of events. But, for now, peace is increasing. Year by year, we are winning the war on war.

One explanation for the recent reductions in war that I will *not* propose is that people are peaceful by nature. Many theories and writings hold that our “true” peacefulness has been obscured by capitalism, the political opportunism of bad leaders, or some such interfering reason. This is clearly not the case. As Chapter 2 shows, the human species has been fighting since the get-go and our “true” nature includes the potential for lethal violence (as well as the capacity to avoid or overcome this potential). Over the centuries we have remained violent, and the first half of the twentieth century was a step backward from some progress that had been made. Mainly in the past hundred years the popular idea has grown that war is not the normal and expected state of the world but something to be avoided and reduced. In making these imperfect steps forward, we are not falling back on our true selves, but rather redefining ourselves and making new rules.

Another argument I do not make is that reductions in war are inevitable, irreversible, or part of an immutable trend. On the contrary, history tells us that the gains humanity makes in building peace are generally fragile, reversible, and require ongoing effort to sustain. Shortly before World War I, British journalist and activist Norman Angell published *The Great Illusion* to great public acclaim. He argued that economic interdependence, with wealth deriving not from territory but credit and commerce, had made war and conquest self-defeating and pointless. At that time, relative peace had prevailed for almost four decades since

1871—less peace than is sometimes claimed, as Chapter 2 will show, but still relative peace by historical standards. A really massive great-power war had not occurred in nearly a century. It was easy to think, in 1910, that war had withered away. Instead, the World Wars followed, even though they created the economic devastation in Europe that Angell had foreseen.

But does the failure of a hopeful lull in war a century ago mean that all lulls will end in disaster? Does a reversal of progress bar the possibility of later progress? This would be like saying that because the flying machines of the 1890s crashed, airplanes are impossible. Or that the failure of the Newton in the late 1990s meant that Apple could not build a tablet computer.

So, no, the culmination of today's hopeful trends in the permanent end of war is not inevitable, but neither is their reversal. We have good reason to worry, in a world of more and more powerful weapons, that a new outbreak of major war would be more devastating than ever. But at the same time we have good reason for hope, that such a disaster need not happen. World peace is not preordained and inevitable, but neither is a return to large-scale war.

## THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The reduction in war over several decades suggests that the international community is doing something right in trying to tame war. We are winning the “war on war,” by which I mean the efforts of international peacekeepers, diplomats, peace movements, humanitarian aid agencies, and other international organizations in war-torn and postwar countries. Considering how few funds and resources they get, these international peace operations have succeeded remarkably well.

The “international community” consists primarily of national governments and the organizations they belong to, such as the UN, EU, NATO, and African Union. It also includes nongovernmental actors and individuals, and it draws strength from people's nascent identities as human beings, caring about others from different lands or tribes. But at heart the “community” is a club of governments, and they are none too idealistic or altruistic in their motivations. As we shall see, the mechanisms of the war on war operate creakily and inefficiently, as humanitarian ideals

frequently bump up against cold national interests. Nonetheless, by participating in an international community, governments jointly achieve some mutually beneficial outcomes that could not be realized separately. The reduction of war worldwide is one of those outcomes.

The kinds of activities the book describes—such as peacekeeping, diplomacy, and humanitarian assistance—have the character of interventions in the sense that the international community comes in as foreigners to help make peace in war-torn countries. Of course, peace results from many influences, including local and national actions, and not just from the international community galloping around trying to put out fires. Nonetheless, as I hope to show, these international actions hold the central place in the process of building peace worldwide.

The UN lies at the heart of the “war on war.” And that institution has many problems. Dictators from around the world gather to give long-winded speeches in the General Assembly, although not usually with a holster strapped on as Arafat had in 1974. Human-rights abusers led the UN’s human rights commission. The oil-for-food program for Iraq was corrupt. Sex scandals have tarnished peacekeeping missions. The UN system is founded on the contradictory principles of universal human rights and paramount national sovereignty. The UN sometimes screws up spectacularly: For instance, in 1993, French UN peacekeepers providing secure transportation for Bosnian officials to reach the airport opened an armored vehicle with a vice president inside and allowed Serbian forces to shoot him dead. Some of the UN’s problems are genuine failings that the UN struggles to correct over the years and decades. Others are mere theater. But they should not distract us from the tremendous good that the UN has accomplished, despite its problems, in reducing war since 1945.

Heated political rhetoric, such as calls from some “Tea Party” candidates in 2010 to withdraw the United States from the UN, sometimes gives the impression that Americans do not support the UN. But this is not true. In a 2007 public opinion survey, an overwhelming 79 percent of Americans favored “strengthening the UN” in general. Some 60 percent agreed that “when dealing with international problems, the United States should be willing to make decisions within the United Nations even if this means that the United States will sometimes have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice.” In this survey, the U.S. public revealed



a mature understanding of the benefits of the UN to the United States, despite its shortcomings, and the fact that they come at a certain cost in national sovereignty.

## Why It Matters

Why does it matter if wars are diminishing or increasing? It matters because the question “Are things getting better or worse?” must be the starting point for making decisions about courses of action over time. If I have a disease and am trying a treatment, the first thing I want to know is whether the disease is getting better or worse. If better, I will figure out what I am doing that is working, refine and strengthen those approaches as I learn more, and see if I can sustain and complete the improvements seen already. If I am getting worse, though, I will more radically change course, abandoning existing approaches and looking for new ones. This is risky, because it might accelerate the disease rather than reverse it. But since things are getting worse I can see that what I have been doing has not worked.

A similar logic applies to other areas of life and society. Is the economy getting better or worse? Is crime getting better or worse? Are my child’s grades in school getting better or worse? Yet, amazingly, few people think about the problem of war in our world that way. Is war getting better or worse? Many people seem to just assume war is getting worse, because we hear about such terrible crimes as the genocide in Darfur, the violent insurgency in Afghanistan, and the recurrent terrorism of al Qaeda around the world. But is it getting better or worse? If the world’s wars are getting worse, then a radical change in strategy may be called for, but if wars are shrinking, then strengthening existing approaches such as diplomacy and peacekeeping would work better.

As an example of what happens if we get this “better or worse” question wrong when it comes to the world’s wars, consider the argument of political psychologist James Blight and Robert McNamara, former World Bank president and U.S. defense secretary. They seek to apply the lessons of the bloody twentieth century to make the twenty-first more peaceful (good idea). But they start from the assumption that war is

getting worse. Noting the high casualties of the two World Wars, they conclude that “in the twentieth century, war was a common occurrence, it was increasingly lethal, and its toll fell primarily on civilians.” This idea that war was increasingly lethal over the past century is clearly wrong, however—certainly if you just compare the first half of the century with the second (as Chapter 2 will show).

Blight and McNamara project the level of warfare forward into the twenty-first century based on population growth, and suggest a “speculative” but “conservative” estimate of “at least 300 million” fatalities from war in the twenty-first century, of which perhaps 75 million would be military. That is to say, the new century would see an average of 3 million war deaths per year, with 750,000 of them military deaths. They acknowledge the tremendous uncertainties in war data and difficulties in projecting forward a hundred years, but note that “our projections . . . may well be *underestimates!*” (emphasis in original).

Based on these projections, Blight and McNamara call for major changes in the way the international community approaches the problem of war. Since what we have been doing is not working (war is getting worse), we need a new approach, in their view. They write, “Without significant reform of the UN Security Council, little can be done to stop communal killing around the world.” This puts peace in line behind an intractable issue, Security Council reform. Recognizing these difficulties, Blight and McNamara say that if, prior to being reorganized, the Security Council cannot agree to a military invention to stop a war, then a “‘coalition of the willing’ should be assembled to approve the intervention and authorize it.” (This was before such a coalition invaded Iraq.) Indeed, they say the UN Charter is “out of date and needs revising. . . .”

These radical suggestions would make sense if wars were becoming more numerous and lethal, just as it would make sense to try an experimental medicine for a cancer that had not responded well to conventional treatments. But for our world, today, the cancer of war *is* responding. The United Nations *is* succeeding, although it could work better with more support and resources. This stark difference in policy approaches illustrates why the question of “better or worse” affects actions and policies regarding wars.

More generally, political discourses driven by fears and worst-case scenarios, as today’s discussions of war often are, promote dysfunctional

policies such as very high military spending and aggressive military actions. Fear of war—a sense that war is pervasive and could get us at any moment—does not lead to the pursuit of peace, but rather to pessimism and policies likely to bring about the very thing we fear. The political dynamics leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 illustrate this problem and its serious consequences.

Returning to the idea of a scale of war, we can look at changes through time along that scale, the same way your doctor would track changes in your cancer. The scale lets us ask whether things are getting better or worse. My main focus in this book is the period since 1945, but to make sense of that period we need to understand it both in its own terms and in the context of a deeper historical context. As we shall see, the big picture of war in the human experience shows how remarkable the recent period (a sustained low along the scale of war) has been.