

Alert Citizenry as an Antidote to War

by
Giacomo CORNEO

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Corresponding author:

Prof. Giacomo Corneo
Department of Economics
Free University of Berlin
Boltzmannstr. 20
14195 Berlin
Germany
giacomo.corneo@fu-berlin.de

What can be done to reduce the likelihood of future wars? While states' decisions that bear on war are ultimately made by their political leaders, strengthening ordinary citizens' control of those leaders is vital to reduce the risk of future wars. This thesis can be broken down into two claims: first, there is a war bias of political leaders; second, people's control over those leaders may successfully counteract that bias. Claim n°1 has that in some situations political leaders and citizens have substantially divergent interests with respect to policies that risk the outbreak of war. Political leaders may have a war bias that is so strong that they prefer war occurring with high probability whereas citizens prefer peace occurring with high probability. Claim n°2 has that in some situations strengthening citizens' control of political decision-makers may be decisive to prevent a war. As I'll argue shortly, this empowerment can be beneficial only if sufficiently many citizens have previously become alert by productively engaging in a distinctive cognitive effort. This requirement points to a precise responsibility of intellectuals.

I. The war bias of political leaders

Political leaders are not always and everywhere more willing to risk war than ordinary citizens: the degree of bellicosity of political leaders can vary from Mahatma Gandhi's one to the one of Genghis Khan. My claim refers to the current state of affairs and has

the status of a statistical statement: in our times, political leaders biased towards war are a significant fact of life. Furthermore, political leaders are more knowledgeable about international relations than ordinary citizens and some wars may be justified. Hence, there might be cases in which giving more control to people would induce a too pacifist policy even from the viewpoint of those people's welfare. As the subsequent discussion will reveal, such cases can be dismissed as practically irrelevant.

The war bias of political leaders stems from some special net benefits from risking war that only accrue to political leaders and thus distort their incentives away from the pursuit of the citizenry's welfare. Conceptually, three main types of such distorting benefits may be distinguished, although they are often intermingled in real life.

The first category is the one that was alluded to by US-president Eisenhower in 1961 in his well-known farewell address.¹ The military-industrial complex is in a position to offer substantial financial gains to those politicians who can coax states to build up weapons. As an example, in 1997-1998 alone American arms manufacturers spent over fifty million dollars to lobby the US-Congress to pass NATO expansion into Eastern Europe – which they rationally expected to generate much more profitable procurement contracts.² The East India Company, various oil multinationals and other engines of colonialism have a remarkable record in generating financial gains for politicians who helped to launch military interventions that were instrumental to further the private enrichment of wealthy elites.

The second special benefit from war is the personal glory and fame that lures political leaders in case of a great military success, often associated with their idealistic attachment to the might and honor of the country they are called upon to serve. The millennial story of men waging war because they strove for immortality is too well-known to be retold here. More relevant for assessing the war bias in modernity are the rise of nationalism and politicians' development of a strong form of group narcissism where the nation and the self merge in an almost mystical unity. Risking war in order to accomplish their country's mission in world history is for those politicians a compelling move to enhance their self-esteem. If a nation has not been invented yet or is devoid of the required aura, a whole civilization can become the object of the same kind of idealistic attachment. We then observe politicians who commit their self-

¹ *"In the councils of government, we must guard against acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together."*

² LaFeber, W., *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2002*, Ninth Edition, 2002, McGraw-Hill, Boston, p.382.

esteem to the fate of Christianity - which yields the crusades – or liberal democracy – which yields various recent wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

The third category of special benefits stands for the gain in power that is obtained by political leaders when they wage war, or just prepare for it. War entails massive killing, i.e. forcing people to give up their life – the most extreme form of coercion. Telling ordinary people who were drafted into the army to overcome their inhibition and kill other people expresses that coercion at a meta-level and is perhaps the utmost manifestation of the power of political decision-makers. Many novels and movies have portrayed the delirious state enjoyed by generals when sending their armies into carnage battles gave them a feeling of omnipotence. But the power-enhancing effect of risking war may have more mundane expressions. The admirals of the German Navy before World War I promoted the German military buildup also in order to increase their personal power to decide over the use of resources, including human resources. Incumbent governments at every latitude have repeatedly resorted to some international military conflict as a tool to distract their subjects from failures at home and strengthen their hold on the domestic population – an example among many being the tragic Falkland adventure that was pursued by the Argentine junta in 1982.

II. Citizens' struggles for peace

Since medieval times, all kind of wars have received the blessing of legitimacy by the intellectual elite of the day, mostly priests who supported warrior leaders by assuring the ignorant masses that the war they waged was just. Nowadays, the war bias of political leaders needs the help of the media to prevail over people's reluctance. The most vivid current example is Putin's regime and the invasion of Ukraine. Western liberal democracies themselves are not immune from media capture aimed at the advocacy of war. By way of a recent example, the substantial media disinformation about Libya's uprising in early 2011 was instrumental in justifying NATO's military intervention there.³

Political leaders that in the past risked war, or even waged it, in some cases managed to obtain the acquiescence of ordinary people by means of government propaganda and censorship. In other cases, people's political activism succeeded in offsetting the war bias of the establishment. This is good news because it suggests that citizens' resistance may also work in the future.

In the twentieth year of the Peloponnesian War, Aristophanes produced his comedy "Lysistrata", in which Athenian and Spartan women agree to enter a sex strike to be

³ Kuperman, A. A model humanitarian intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya campaign, *International Security* 2013 (38), 105-136. On Iraq see e.g. Kull, S., Ramsay, C. and E. Lewis, *Misperceptions, the media, and the Iraq war*, *Political Science Quarterly* 2003 (118), 569-598.

terminated only after a peace treaty is signed between the two Greek powers. The male elites of both sides fight back onto their respective interior front but eventually give in: love prevails over war. Fiction, yes; but thinkable enough to demonstrate, after almost two and a half millennia, that clever courses of action exist thanks to which the united citizenry can overtrump the political establishment.

The antiwar movement that began in the US in 1965 in the wake of the US military involvement in Vietnam initially faced a firmly pro-government media industry but managed over the years to stir a great share of the population, also well beyond the US borders. It exposed the lies of the US government, profoundly affected popular thinking on the war, and significantly contributed to finally bring about the withdrawal of American troops from Indochina. Among the various civilizing effects of the antiwar movement was the official recognition that the US electorate is unwilling to accept a large number of casualties among the own armed forces, a binding constraint on the subsequent available range of military options for the American superpower.

Sometimes, routinely scheduled democratic elections are enough to make people's desire of peace prevail. In 2002, the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder faced scant chances to be re-elected because of a stagnant economy, rapidly deteriorating public finances, and, most importantly, mass unemployment never seen before in the history of the FRG. In the background of an impending US military attack on Iraq, both the incumbent German chancellor and his contender were expected to follow the US lead in that matter, similarly to what the German government had done a year before when joining the Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Yet, Schröder decided differently, namely to endorse the opinion of the vast majority of the German electorate that was strongly against participating in another war. Schröder was re-elected and Germany did not send troops to Iraq.

III. War prevention begins in the mind

For individuals who are not directly concerned with decisions affecting the occurrence of war it takes a demanding cognitive and moral effort to become aware of the issues at stake. The subject of international relations is highly complex and the ordinary citizen has no individual incentive to scrutinize it in depth. Propaganda and deep-seated prejudices make it still more difficult for human intelligence to operate freely in this area. All this explains why in many instances the citizenry does not self-organize to get the peace it deserves, and wars eventually occur.

This structural weakness of democratic control can be mitigated and eventually superseded if scientists and intellectuals play their part. The call they face is plain: employ your ability to explain matters and your privileged access to public discourse

in order to promote the kind of “alert and knowledgeable citizenry” preconized by Eisenhower in his farewell address. A strong and resilient peace movement begins with ordinary citizens that can think clearly on matters of war and peace because they have previously become aware of some limits, dangers, and myths that obfuscate truth. The following five are examples of considerations that intellectuals may help getting into everybody’s mind.

1. Eros and Thanatos

Humans can love, but are also inhabited by aggressive drives. Differently from animal instincts, human drives can target an object that is different from their original trigger; e.g. “the foreign enemy” instead of “the boss” or “the rival”. We all are vulnerable to such distractions and easily fall prey of the temptation to mentally transfer all evil that is inside us to the outside of us, especially into anonymous and abstract entities that can become pure evil in our imagination because they have no chance to show us that, in most cases, they blend good and bad – and thus behave quite similarly to the way we behave.

2. Nobody has the crystal ball

The system of international relations is so complex that the consequences of approaching war are enshrouded by a great uncertainty, which increases with the length of the time horizon. Today, this uncertainty also alludes to the possible use of nuclear weapons and the extermination of mankind. Any politician’s bald assertions predicting how a military conflict will develop and end should be met with deep skepticism. Given the intrinsic complexity of the subject and politicians’ potent incentives to misrepresent matters, citizens should always doubt by default.

3. There are multiple options to fight evil

States’ malign behavior should not be tolerated. Diplomacy is necessary and waging war might in some cases be an ethically justified last resort. But it is essential to realize that these are not the only instruments we have. Beyond political elections, non-violent resistance, e.g. protests, strikes, and boycotts, may be effective at defeating evil at much lower costs than a war. Just think about how the First Cold War came to an end.

4. The risible morality of nationalism

Bertrand Russell once asked what we should think of an individual who proclaimed: „I’m morally and intellectually superior to all other individuals, and, because of this superiority, I’ve a right to ignore all interests except my own!“ Probably, we should think that such an individual is insane and for sure so dangerous that, as far as possible, we should try to avoid any interaction with it, lest harm fall upon us. Unfortunately, we tend to react quite more tolerantly if the claim is made in a collective form and refers to a nation. This is unfortunate because governments that act according to such a maxim can inflict a much greater harm than a single insane individual.

5. Realizing the real impact of the officially disputed issues

A war is waged if an international dispute is not settled in peaceful terms. This truism lays the ground for a striking observation: sometimes, issues that are officially at stake are barely related to the concrete life and welfare of the vast majority of the populations across the two sides of a dispute. The vast majority of people primarily cares about love, family and friendship, good health, a decent job, and some material comfort. These concerns are virtually unaffected by issues that governments sometimes maintain to be worthwhile the carnage of war. As an example, World War I erupted in the wake of a controversy about the participation of Austrian officers in the trail of the Sarajevo murders in 1914. It is hard to see how any way in which that controversy could have been settled would have mattered for the lives of the Balkan peasants that were used later on as cannon fodder. Something of the like may be said with regard to the official disputes that led to the current war between Russia and Ukraine: NATO membership and the status of Donbass and Crimea. Had Ukraine become a NATO member early on, say along with the Baltic states, this would have likely had no noticeable impact on the quality of life of the average citizen of the Russian Federation. It would have been a bitter blow for the leaders of its military-industrial complex, but, had they acquiesced, ordinary people would have continued their lives as before. In that case the average Russian citizen may have even benefitted from an early encirclement by NATO. If the leading side in a race increases its margin so as to make it almost impossible for the rival to catch up, then a discouragement effect sets in, and the losing side ceases to deploy resources in the race. By the same token, encirclement by NATO could have convinced the Russian polity of the futility for a country with a GDP between the Spanish and the Italian level to pursue imperial ambitions. In that event, huge public expenditures could have been reallocated from the military to the welfare state. If instead the Russian establishment actually viewed NATO expansion as an existential threat, it had in turn been in the interest of the average Ukrainian citizen to keep away from NATO. A superior alternative for ordinary Ukrainians would have obtained if their government had carried out structural reforms to make Ukraine fit for a closer integration with the EU. And what if Donbass and Crimea had got early on the kind of regional autonomy they strived for? The populations in those regions would have likely benefitted while the other Ukrainians and, a fortiori, the Russians would have hardly taken notice. Helping people to get a lucid mind on simple points like these would do a great service to peace.