

## **REITH LECTURES 1998: War in Our World**

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### **Lecture 5: Can There Be An End To War?**

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“We must know”, wrote Heraclitus of Ephesus in the 5th century BC, “that war is common to all, and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife”. His was a deeply classical view formed by the relentless conflicts of the Greek world, both between Greek and Greek and against the power of the Persian Empire. It was a view held by most free Greeks of his time: men who thought of themselves as warriors quite as much as they did as farmers, philosophers or historians, and who took it for granted that they would during the course of their lives fight as spearmen in the Phalanx or as sailors at sea.

Is this true today? Having considered in previous lectures the origins of war and the changing role of individuals and states, in this final lecture I must address the outlook for the future: can there ever be an end to war?

The classical idea of conflict as central to human life was to persist beyond the ancient world. Deprecated both by Christianity and Islam, the pious Muslim holds that the greater jihad or holy war is the war against self. It achieved a powerful revival in the 19th century when science, through the work of Charles Darwin, moved to an interpretation of the life process itself as one of struggle within and between species. His theory of the natural selection of the fittest migrated into philosophy, the social sciences and politics - having its direst outcome in various forms of socialism, particularly the Bolshevism of Lenin and the national socialism of Adolph Hitler.

It is not surprising that in the course of the modern world's rejection of communism and fascism and all their works, Heraclitus' belief in the necessity of strife as a creative and corrective force has been rejected also. We live in an age that deprecates conflict and sets the ideals of harmony, compromise and commonality above all others.

Communitarianism, a third way between socialism and capitalism, is now the political movement that under a variety of names and guises most attracts democratic politicians. It commands also powerful support among electorates. “We have had enough conflict in our century”, the ordinary voter seems to be saying. “What we want is a way of life without strife”. It would seem an attainable object, particularly to voters in this country. Britain has had a blessed half century since 1945. After two terrible world wars, in the second of which we played a deeply honourable part, we have been spared almost every trouble that has afflicted so many of the world's other leading states in the aftermath. There may have been conflicts during our withdrawal from empire, but we managed the transition without provoking any war on a scale comparable to that fought by France in Algeria or Portugal in Africa. We avoided costly foreign strategic interventions of the sort the United States made in Vietnam and Russia in Afghanistan.

Our only unilateral war - that in the Falklands - was both legal and victorious. Our participation in the Korean and Gulf Wars was legal and laudable. We have made no serious enemies, and kept many friends, while responsibly discharging onerous military duties sanctioned by the United Nations in scores of trouble spots about the globe. The ordinary British citizen has good reasons for concluding that conflict in our time has been brought under control through wise diplomacy and the deployment of judiciously calculated force. Unluckier countries - less well governed, less well defended - have had different and unhappier experiences. Where we have shown the way however, collective national opinion might argue, they can follow. Strife, the British would think, is not justice and war need certainly not be common to all.

These are comforting thoughts. They are also illusions. The central strategic fact with which we live and with which our descendants must live in perpetuity is that of nuclear weapons. The development and use of nuclear weapons during the Second World War changed the way the world worked forever. Even before the First World War, the international community may already have been groping its way towards a system within which international agreement would control the characteristics of weapons that might legally be used in war and any conflict threatening war would be submitted to supranational arbitration.

It was however only when the world was confronted in 1945 by a sort of weapon, guaranteeing an unbearable excess of costs over benefits in any war in which it was used, that the absolute necessity of averting war between powers that possessed such weapons was grasped. The necessity remains and will persist.

Although it was the balance of terror throughout the Cold War which prevented nuclear war, can nuclear war be averted in perpetuity? I am optimistic. Man is a volatile and risk-taking species, but a rational one also. In our relationship with nuclear weapons since 1945, it is rationality rather than volatility or risk-taking that has prevailed. There has been only one genuine nuclear crisis - that over the Russian deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962, a crisis in any case resolved by reasonable negotiation. To set against that episode, we should recognise that outside an atmosphere of crisis, there are many other negotiated settlements that have restricted the number of states permitted to possess nuclear weapons, the number of nuclear weapons that nuclear powers may themselves possess, the type of nuclear weapons that may be deployed in particular regions, and the regions in which nuclear weapons may be deployed at all.

Space has been demilitarised by international agreement; so has Antarctica. Europe is a forbidden zone for the deployment of intermediate range missiles. The United States and the former Soviet Union are bound by treaties that have reduced and aim to reduce still further the number of nuclear weapons they may deploy, while most of the world states are signatories to a non-proliferation treaty that binds them not to become nuclear powers in perpetuity.

The history of proliferation is in itself encouraging, particularly if an analogy is drawn with the rise of the last capital weapon system, the Dreadnought battleship at the beginning of the century. Between 1906 and 1914, eleven states followed Britain in becoming Dreadnought powers - quite pointlessly in many cases. Between 1945 and 1960, only four states imitated America in acquiring nuclear weapons and all adhere

to the principle of non-proliferation; that is, that the number of nuclear states is now closed.

To pursue the optimistic note, we should also recognize the successes achieved in the limitation of non-nuclear weapons. 'Disarmament' is a word that evokes a weary response, perhaps because of the well-known failure of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 to outlaw in practice the aerial bombardment of civilian targets - one of the chief causes of suffering in war during the 20th century. On the other hand, the 1925 Geneva Protocol, restating the Hague prohibition of the use of gas in war, was observed throughout the Second World War - as it was not in the first - and has been ever since. The two serious breaches of the protocol, by the Italians in Ethiopia in 1936 and by Saddam Hussein inside Iraq, attracted universal condemnation.

Last year another international agreement, signed by almost every state in the world, prohibited the use of anti-personnel mines and I expect it eventually to achieve the same force as that outlawing chemical agents. I would further predict the eventual abolition of other abhorrent weapons such as blinding lasers, cluster missiles and high fragmentation projectiles.

We must, however, be realistic about war's current reality, and that entails admitting to pessimism as well as optimism. Particular causes for pessimism are supplied by the spectacle of war-making between poor states which should find better ways to spend their money, and by the rise of what is now called non-state warfare. Both are undeniable phenomena. While the old established states, particularly those of Western Europe and North America, have been transforming themselves from belligerent to benevolent entities, many of the newer states - particularly those brought into being by the dissolution of European empires - have been unable to liberate themselves from the grip of internal hostilities that pre-date colonisation or from external animosities against former colonial neighbours that the rule of empire held in check.

European ideologies acquired through colonisation are another cause of both external and internal enmities - as, for example, in Cambodia where the requirement of adherence to an extreme form of Marxism led to the death of two million people. There the chilling preliminary to the murder of those judged politically incorrect took the form of an invitation to "come with us for further study". In other societies, the disappointment of economic and political hopes aroused by liberation has resulted in the reinterpretation of religious belief in an aggressive and specifically anti-Western form. Terrorists inspired by Islamic fundamentalism have convinced themselves that the economic woes their societies suffer are caused by a Western conspiracy to keep them in poverty. Tragically such convictions may resolve, as in Algeria, into bloody warfare between those factions which seek national revival through modernisation and those which appear to reject modernisation altogether.

But it is not just economic well-being that dampens the causes of conflict. The most intransigent conflicts of all have arisen in regions of very ancient mixed ethnicities as in former Yugoslavia and Caucasia. There the withdrawal of superordinate authority has cast the populations back into a condition which, although anthropologists disagree over whether what they call 'primitive warfare' is primordial or not, is certainly a regression from civilised order.

It does appear then that economic poverty or instability and cultural insecurity each feed the belligerence of such states; but we need also to consider, alongside the characteristics of current warfare, the means by which it is waged. War is increasingly becoming an activity undertaken by poor rather than rich states, and neither non-state warfare, nor warfare between poor states would trouble the world's conscience or threaten its stability were it not for the ready availability of cheap weapons.

Since it is poor states which mainly fight wars, the availability of cheap weapons is one of the most alarming ingredients of contemporary military significance. From the age of the chariot 3,000 years ago, to that of the Dreadnought battleship which came and went early in this century, military power belonged to those who could pay most. Today the costliest weapons - nuclear weapons apart - are of little utility except in the most particular circumstances. The supersonic jet fighter, for example, confers air superiority, but counts only in wars where air superiority is critical, and they are few. As a contributor to the toll of human death in warfare, the supersonic fighter scarcely figures. Its role equates with that of the Formula 1 racing car in the computation of road traffic fatalities. The mass produced assault rifle, costing one millionth of the jet fighter's price, is by contrast an almost universal scourge. Many of the 50 million dead of the wars of this century's second half have been killed by the cheap assault rifle. Its high rate of fire makes it deadly against the many in the hands of an individual, while its lightness and simplicity allow even untrained children who figure increasingly frequently in the ranks of unofficial armies to kill with a profligacy the veteran of the past could not achieve.

So abundant and so cheap are cheap weapons that I believe we ought now to consider as a matter of urgency whether the next initiative in the international disarmament endeavour should not be that of restricting their distribution and eventually their production. It is not true that the trade in cheap arms is a private commercial enterprise. Most cheap weapons have been released into the market by governments, often for political rather than commercial reasons. Either way, whether the trade in arms has a political or an economic motive, it is chiefly a government activity; and, that being the case, and given that the trade's results are so wholly deplorable, the more secure, influential and responsible governments ought now to combine to bring it under control. If it has been possible to terminate the production of chemical weapons, and - as now seems probable - that of anti-personnel mines, the restriction of the trade in cheap, small arms is attainable also.

We should not, however, delude ourselves that the progressive restriction of arms production and distribution will of itself rid the world of war. Disarmament is a necessary step in that direction, demonstrated by the low level of murder in states prohibiting the private possession of firearms.

In those regions where significant measures of arms control, disarmament and reduction in the size of armed forces have been achieved, the infrequency, indeed total absence of armed conflict is also noticeable. Such regions are now extensive and extending. Those dedicated to the disarmament movement of national, international and supranational level may take some credit for that.

We must recognise, however, that those who want weapons will usually acquire them - by improvisation or by traffic on the commercial or political black market - and that,

as a result, those who want to fight will do so. That has been the case recently in areas of high ethnic hatred. Many of the 200,000 Tutsi killed in Rwanda were hacked or bludgeoned to death, and in areas of political disintegration. The Civil War in former Yugoslavia, a country that sustained an arms industry wholly disproportionate to its size, was carried on with weapons looted from national arsenals or fed into the conflict by interested external parties.

In such circumstances, and until the distribution of cheap weapons can be brought under stricter control, how should the enemies of war act? Act they must, for the waging of low level war is no more in the interest of responsible governments than is the waging of high level war. They should begin, I think, by recognising the culpability for the form war has so frequently taken in the recent past, and too often takes at present, belongs in part to them. The decision of the great powers taken during the struggle against Hitler to arm guerrilla and partisan forces and to raise civil war as a means of bringing him down set an example easily followed, as it has been by national liberation movements and now by fundamentalists and ethnic extremists around the globe.

The encouragement of subversion as a strategy was short-sighted, and the long-term price is now being paid. The price is paid through the erosion of the ideal of honour as the warrior virtue - an erosion that has once again made unfair fight, sabotage, assassination and massacre acceptable means of waging war.

War is a protean activity - by which I mean that it changes form, often unpredictably. It is for that reason that I have avoided attempting to define the nature of war throughout these lectures. Like disease, it exhibits the capacity to mutate and mutates fastest in the face of efforts to control or eliminate it. War is collective killing for some collective purpose. That is as far as I would go in attempting to describe it. The Second World War culminated with the deployment of a weapon, the ultimate weapon so-called, designed to rob collective killing of any logical purpose whatsoever. The nuclear weapon did indeed seem a final antidote, and it has proved, thus far, a homeopathic antidote against itself. It has not proved an antidote against the use of other weapons in the mutant forms war has taken since Hiroshima.

To what antidotes should we look? We should recall that war is now illegal, except in self-defence or unless sanctioned by the United Nations, and the elaboration of international law as it affects war as a profitable direction in which to move. The institution of a permanent court at the Hague, empowered to try and punish war criminals, has been a creative development. The progressive extension of the peacekeeping and peacemaking activities of the United Nations organisation itself is the most important of institutional antidotes. The UN has its critics and its failings, and events in Iraq this year have drawn fresh attention to its role. Yet without its machinery and the powers given to it by international consent in its charter, the world would be far less well equipped to avert, control and limit war than it is. Regional supranational organisations, specifically non-aggressive in purpose or in effect, also have important roles to play, as do external mediators acting from good will and ad hoc peacemaking or peacekeeping coalitions.

Since we know that poor states which have a fragile cultural identity are far more likely to engage in war-making, or to experience interethnic conflict as a by product of insecurity, what then can be done to secure their identity and economic well-being? Can we somehow help those fledgling states to reach a more mature and stable condition of political security and economic autonomy? An essential weapon in our war against conflict must certainly be progress in aid and development programmes allied to firmer alliances with other nations, which strengthen the economic structures of such states and help to neutralise the political insecurities against which their governments constantly battle. Only then can we help them also to reject, as we have done, Heraclitus' belief that strife is the only just and corrective force.

For in the last resort, it will not be law, nor the machinery for its administration that will keep the world's peace. If war is to be driven to and beyond the horizon of civilisation, it will be because the United Nations retains the will to confront unlawful force with lawful force, together with a capacity to resolve the conflict in which war originates; and because the governments that lend it lawful force continue to train, pay and equip men of honour to carry out their orders. The call of honour is burdensome, often dangerous, always badly rewarded. Those who discharge it - and I know them well, for I have spent most of my adult life in their company - are usually also misunderstood. Waging war when they must, warriors are suspected by the many to have an interest in war as an end in itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. No-one doubts the utility of war more than the professional warrior; no-one shuns it more actively. "Violence rarely settles anything" are the most memorable words I've ever heard because they were spoken to me by a former Chief of the Defence Staff, our country's most senior servicemen. Equally, both he and I know that there are some things that, when the threat of violence has failed, can be settled by violence alone.

Violence is the most terrible instrument that the rule of law can take into its use. If we hope to see war driven towards its end, we must not shrink from seeing its causes addressed. Equally, we must not shrink from seeing violence used, nor from according honour to those honourable warriors who administer force in the cause of peace. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.