

VIOLENCE, CULTURE, AND A PATH TO PEACE

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As in centuries past, tribal and religious wars continue to plague the world today. An analysis of US westward expansion, including military activity that resulted in a significant reduction of internecine tribal violence by the nineteenth century, provides insights to contemporary conflicts. Recent experiences in the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East suggest a successful path toward peace employing airpower, indigenous forces, special operations forces, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance tools, in a carefully calibrated manner under international consensus.

With their overwhelming collective power, coupled with a unique capability to apply force accurately and discriminately, the United States and its Allies have an opportunity to impose peace on aggressive nations and rogue rulers.

It is a Western belief that democracy is an intrinsic good that leads to freedom, and this in turn to peace. Paradoxically, peace must often be gained by force. This phenomenon was apparent worldwide and in the Americas during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Undoubtedly, imperialism was extremely brutal, causing the deaths of millions. Yet there was a remarkable byproduct that was beneficial and long-lasting: wars between native tribes that had been ongoing for centuries suddenly ceased. These endemic wars had seen a high lethality rate among both sexes and all age groups. Peace was then imposed by the conquerors. Can such peace now be obtained without the horrors accompanying past imperial efforts?

Tribal and religious wars continue to rage in the world. American history, in addition to recent experiences in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa, point to a possible formula for successful intervention to end these wars that includes the use of precise, limited, and effective force. Such operations will not be cost free, but the goal of peace is worth the effort. This article suggests a method for using carefully calibrated and internationally sanctioned force to impose peace on areas worldwide.

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Intervention for the Sake of Democracy

Political scientists argue that democracies seldom fight other democracies.¹ Although that statement can hinge on definitions—Was 1914 Germany an autocracy led by the kaiser or a democracy with an elected reichstag?—it is still largely valid.² It has thus been a tenet of US diplomacy to spread democracy to foster peace. Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage noted “every President except John Quincy Adams has been involved in the belief that the world is made better by a U.S. that is involved in the protection of human freedoms and human rights across the board.” He added that “every postwar President has believed we have a duty to spread democracy.”³ At times that “duty” has been a major factor in foreign policy.

Following World War II, President Harry Truman wrote that the American way of life was based upon the will of the majority “and [was] distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech, and religion and freedom from political oppression.”⁴ Yet, it would often take active intervention to achieve these ends. Truman took the country into war over the freedom of South Korea.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy announced, “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”⁵ The burden of Vietnam came soon after.

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, President George W. Bush stated “freedom and democracy will always and everywhere have greater appeal than the slogans of hatred.”⁶ This proposition is unquestioned in the United States, and many presidents have believed that force was sometimes necessary to produce such freedom.

In 2009, President Barack Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, arguing like Truman, Kennedy, and Bush that peaceful democracy was the goal, but words would not induce terrorists to stop; rather, “force may sometimes be necessary [and that] is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history.” He asserted that “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace” and that “force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. . . . That’s why all responsible nations must embrace the role that

1. Phillip S. Meilinger, *Thoughts on War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020), chap. 14; Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942); and Edward D. Mansfield and Jack L. Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2005).

2. Bruce M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

3. “An Interview with Richard L. Armitage,” *Prism* 1, no. 1 (December 2009): 107.

4. Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Volume II: Years of Trial and Hope, 1946–1952* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 106.

5. John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1961, Washington, DC, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, transcript and sound recording, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/>.

6. Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 3.

militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace.”⁷ The key point was the requirement for “a clear mandate”—force can no longer be used without international approval, even if the motives for intervention are humanitarian concerns.

Democracy is not a panacea that automatically carries peace and prosperity in its wake. Democratic nations can still be violent and warlike. Ironically, the United States has been engaged in war more than any other nation since World War II, even if such conflicts have aimed to enforce peace. Nevertheless, the presence of democracy has proven to be a major factor in limiting conflict. When thinking how to enforce peace around the world, it is useful to look to the past. The tribal and culturally driven nations the United States is dealing with today—such as those in the Middle East where religious sects and clans play such a large role in societal cohesion—are not unlike those it once confronted in the Americas.

Depictions of Indigenous Tribes in the Americas

Historians write in cycles, reinterpreting events and sometimes reversing conclusions of previous generations. One such topic concerns American Indians. They were once largely portrayed in history books and fiction as savages who routinely massacred white women and children. That view changed, and Native Americans were depicted in books and in movies like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (2007), and Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995) as nature-loving hunters at peace with themselves, each other, and the environment. The white man then arrived to destroy their way of life, turning them into reluctant warriors forced to defend themselves from those stealing ancestral lands and killing off the game.

This latter view was held by some natives themselves, including Russell Means of the American Indian Movement: “Before the whites came, our conflicts were brief and almost bloodless, resembling far more a professional football game than the lethal annihilations of European conquest.”⁸ Such views are no longer viable. Archaeologists examining events before European contact have discovered that most indigenous peoples were violent, intertribal war was frequent, and villages all over the Americas were surrounded by defensive fortifications—an unmistakable sign of recurring conflict.⁹

By 1300, for example, Indians on the Missouri River built villages along steep riverbanks protected by moats, stockades, and bastions. “Defensive towers were situated on

7. Barack H. Obama, “A Just and Lasting Peace” (Nobel lecture), Oslo City Hall, Norway, December 10, 2009, Nobel Prize (website), transcript and video recording, <https://www.nobelprize.org/>.

8. Russell Means and Marvin Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 16, qtd. in Richard J. Chacon and Rubén G. Mendoza, eds., *North American Indigenous Warfare and Ritual Violence* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 6.

9. Elizabeth N. Arkush and Mark W. Allen, eds., *The Archaeology of Warfare: Prehistories of Raiding and Conquest* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 7; Steven A. Le Blanc and Katherine E. Register, *Constant Battles: The Myth of the Peaceful, Noble Savage* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 1–3, 161–62; and Lawrence H. Keeley, *War before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 34, 67–69, 83–91.

the corners and at intervals along walls and could extend 20 to 30 feet beyond the plane of the walls.”¹⁰ Such construction allowed defenders to use enfilading fire against attackers. In the northeast, Indian fortifications were so formidable that Europeans referred to them as castles. These structures incorporated palisades 20 feet high with catwalks along the top so mobile sentinels could fire down upon an enemy. In front of the palisades were either moats or abatis.¹¹ Clearly, tribes feared their native neighbors and expended much effort in preparing defenses against them.

Osteologists studying bones from centuries past have found that an unusually high number of skeletons bore signs of violence: embedded arrowheads, smashed skulls, scalping, and decapitations. In some locations, the percentage of bones exhibiting such wounds exceeded 40 percent of all remains found.¹² At Crow Creek, South Dakota, in a massacre occurring around 1300, nearly 500 people were killed—men, women, and children—“their noses, hands, and feet were sometimes cut off, teeth smashed, and heads and limbs cut from the body. All the victims, from babies to elders, were scalped and mutilated.”¹³

At Sacred Ridge, Colorado, archaeologists uncovered nearly 15,000 bone fragments that were intentionally crushed to pieces—premortem. It was the largest collection of mutilated human bones ever found in the American Southwest. One expert examined all 15,000 fragments and stated there was evidence of violence “from the top of the head to the tips of the toes.”¹⁴

Around 1780 Lakota warriors attacked an Arikara settlement—in what is now North Dakota—on the Missouri River. Although protected by ditches and a palisade, the town was quickly overwhelmed. Bodies found at the site ranged in age from four years to fifty and included males and females: “The victorious attackers systematically mutilated the bodies of their victims, with these mutilations including scalping, decapitation, crushing of the skull and face, removal of hands and feet, and disembowelment.”¹⁵ That hardly sounds like a football game.

Conditions were even worse to the south. Native life prior to the arrival of the Europeans is a tale of persistent warfare marked by massacres, heart extraction, and human sacrifice. In the Chimú Empire located in present-day Peru, archaeologists found a child sacrifice site. Dated to 1450, the remains discovered were of 140 juvenile

10. David E. Jones, *Native North American Armor, Shields, and Fortifications* (Austin, TX: University Press of Texas, 2004), 3.

11. Jones, *North American Armor*, 52–57.

12. Patricia M. Lambert, “The Osteological Evidence for Indigenous Warfare in North America,” in Chacon and Mendoza, *Indigenous Warfare*; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 179; LeBlanc and Register, *Constant Battles*, 59, 125; and Keeley, *War before Civilization*, 99–103.

13. Douglas B. Bamforth, “Climate, Chronology, and the Course of War in the Middle Missouri Region of the North American Great Plains,” in Arkush and Allen, *Archaeology of Warfare*, 74–76.

14. Blake de Pastino, “Evidence of Hobbling, Torture Discovered at Ancient Massacre Site in Colorado,” *Western Digs*, June 28, 2014, <http://www.westerndigs.org/>.

15. Jones, *North American Armor*, 7.

boys and girls ranging in age from five to fourteen. All were killed with a slash across the sternum to remove their hearts.¹⁶

Radiocarbon dates showed that mass child sacrifices had started around 1050 and continued for the next 400 years: “This was a series of ritual events performed as a way to communicate with the gods and mediate between people and supernatural forces.”¹⁷ The Incas replaced the Chimú, and at the site of one massacre, of 106 individuals, 94 percent were killed by blows to the head and face with a stone mace. Over half of the victims were women and children.¹⁸ As at Sacred Ridge, those slaughtered were not collateral damage—they were targeted.

The Aztecs warred to secure prisoners for sacrifice to the gods.¹⁹ Captured enemies were brought to the capital where priests cut out each prisoner’s heart—while they were still alive. The bodies were flayed and the skin used by the priests for clothing. The corpses were then returned to the captors to eat. Afterwards, the skulls of the victims were set into a “skull rack” at a temple or in the home of the captor to indicate prestige.²⁰ Not only males were sacrificed and their skulls displayed, but women and children as well.²¹

Sacrifices were intended to appease the gods, who needed fresh blood. The Aztecs believed that if their blood lusts were not satisfied, the gods would die and the world would end. To supply this insatiable need, the Aztecs were almost constantly at war, and thousands of captives were slaughtered every year. At the dedication of a temple to the god Huítzilōpōchtli, 80,400 people were ritually sacrificed.²²

Anthropologists have interviewed present-day Indian elders regarding oral traditions that stretch back centuries. These stories confirm the physical evidence, speaking often of massacres and revenge-taking on neighboring tribes.²³ Notably, the warrior culture is central to Indian lore, in virtually all tribes across the Americas. These traditions stressed the nobility and importance of warriors, so Kachina dolls, painted buffalo skins, and skull racks were made to perpetuate their memory.²⁴ Hunkpapa

16. Kristin Romey, “Ancient Mass Child Sacrifice May Be World’s Largest,” *National Geographic*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/>.

17. Jarrett A. Lobell, “Peru’s Great Urban Experiment,” *Archaeology* (May/June 2023): 41–42.

18. Andrew K. Scherer and John W. Verano, eds., *Embattled Bodies, Embattled Places: War in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Andes* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 2014); and see also J. Marla Toyne and L. Alfredo Narváez Vargas, “The Fall of Kuelap: Bioarchaeological Analysis of Death and Destruction on the Eastern Slopes of the Andes,” in Scherer and Verano, *Embattled Bodies*, 346–54.

19. Eric Carlton, *War and Ideology* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble, 1990), 32.

20. Carlton, 136–37; and Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 36, 114–16.

21. Cleve R. Wootson Jr., “Scientists Flesh Out Theories for an Aztec Tower of Skulls,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 2017, 14.

22. Hassig, *Aztec Warfare*, 121; and Carlton, *War and Ideology*, 33.

23. John R. Johnson, “Ethnohistoric Descriptions of Chumash Warfare,” in Chacon and Mendoza, *Indigenous Warfare*.

24. Polly Schaafsma, “Documenting Conflict in the Prehistoric Pueblo Southwest,” in Chacon and Mendoza, *Indigenous Warfare*, 119.

chief Bear Ribs said of Lakota warriors, “war with them was not only a necessity but a pastime.”²⁵ War was thus a way of life.

Firearms were a powerful symbol and practical instrument to foster the warrior spirit and were a decisive factor in wars between Indians and Euro-Americans. The tribes realized this and wanted such weapons for themselves. Although colonial governments questioned the wisdom of providing them guns, such trade was inevitable. Euro-Americans needed pelts such as beaver, fox, and otter, supplied by the Indians to sell to Europe. This was a huge business, but in return the Indians demanded guns, ammunition, powder, and parts to repair damaged weapons.

Over the decades, a “gun frontier” spread across the continent from east to west as the Indians gained firearms and became expert marksmen. Although usually outnumbered, Indians employed their new weapons to fight the whites to a standstill on many occasions.²⁶ Eventually, white superiority in numbers spelled the difference.

Intertribal warfare continued after the whites arrived: Iroquois continued to fight Hurons, Seminoles raided the Creeks, Apaches warred against Comanche, Osage fought the Blackfeet and Crows, the Navaho battled the Zunis, and the Lakota fought anyone that threatened their dominance.²⁷ Throughout the Americas the result was an arms race among the tribes “that ultimately became a race to the bottom as the people exhausted their natural resources and turned their weapons against each other.”²⁸

The depletion of beaver, otter, and buffalo heightened tensions among tribes, leading to more conflict. It was a paradox of Indian life that as much as they feared and resented white encroachment, they were dependent on them for guns, ammunition and weapons of iron. In sum, life was nasty, brutish and short for most American Indians in both hemispheres before 1500 and the arrival of the whites and for centuries thereafter: “Warfare was ubiquitous; every major cultural area of native North America reviewed herein has produced archaeological, ethnohistorical, osteological, or ethnographic evidence of armed conflict and ritual violence.”²⁹

Motives for War Today

What is the relevance of these facts to a modern defense analyst or decisionmaker? Several issues are interesting, including war causation. Common motivations for tribes making war against neighbors for generations included revenge, religion,

25. Pekka Hämmäläinen, *Lakota America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 235.

26. David J. Silverman, *Thundersticks: Firearms and the Violent Transformation of Native America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016), 25.

27. Charles A. Bishop and Victor P. Lytwyn, “Barbarism and Ardour of War from the Tenderest Years,” in Chacon and Mendoza, *Indigenous Warfare*, 37, 40; George P. Milner, “Warfare, Population, and Food Production in Prehistoric Eastern North America,” in Chacon and Mendoza, 185; LeBlanc and Register, *Constant Battles*, 68–71; and Keeley, *War before Civilization*, 67–69, 83–88.

28. Silverman, *Thundersticks*, 189.

29. Chacon and Mendoza, *Indigenous Warfare*, 4; and see also George Franklin Feldman, *Cannibalism, Head-hunting and Human Sacrifice in North America: A History Forgotten* (Chambersburg, PA: Alan C. Hood, 2008).

prestige, slavery, and resource accumulation.³⁰ Although wars were sometimes fought over hunting grounds, maize fields, and precious objects made from metal or shells, in most cases cultural and revenge motives dominated: feuding was constant, and a tribe simply hated another and wished its destruction.

Cultural, religious, and societal motives still exist, driving conflict worldwide. Wars based on tribal differences and ancient grudges are currently raging in Chad, Mali, Somalia, Nigeria, and elsewhere in Africa. At the same time, the reasons for strife between Muslims and Jews transcend traditional notions of justice, land, wealth, or logic. The religious leaders of Iran hate Israel, as evidenced when its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called Israel a “cancerous tumor” that must be eradicated.³¹ The two countries have never been at war, they share no borders, and in fact are hundreds of miles distant and do not covet each other’s territory or wealth. There are other factors involved, but religion is crucial and must be understood to devise a peaceful solution to problems.

Furthermore, a civil war is now being waged among Muslims. On one side are fundamentalists who desire a caliphate that governs by Sharia law. Moderate Muslims, on the other hand, see the Koran as a book of peace. World stability requires that moderates win this battle.³² How can the United States help and assist peaceful Muslims to coexist with other ethnic groups and religions? History in the Americas offers an interesting perspective.

Decreases in Tribal Conflict

Warfare between Indian tribes in the Americas virtually ceased by the middle of the nineteenth century—similar trends were noted among native cultures overrun by Europeans elsewhere around the world at the same time.³³ This is a touchy subject many historians are loath to discuss, fearing that referring to the great peace of the nineteenth century would be construed as a justification for colonialism. They have a point: one must not ignore the exploitation, aggression, and genocide that too often characterized white-native relations. Even so, the fact that native warfare decreased so dramatically worldwide in such a short period of time—relative to the centuries it had been ongoing—needs to be addressed. Several factors came into play during this period.

Enemy of My Enemy

The severity of war initially increased as Europeans contacted natives. The whites came to conquer, and their superior weapons, numbers, technology, and political

30. See Gat, *War in Civilization*.

31. Amir Vahdat and Jon Gambrell, “Iran Leader Says Israel a ‘Cancerous Tumor’ to Be Destroyed,” Yahoo! News, May 21, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/>.

32. See David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Knopf, 2017), 5–11.

33. LeBlanc and Register, *Constant Battles*, 201–2; Burch, “Traditional Warfare,” 29; Bishop and Lytwyn, “Barbarism and Ardour,” 54; and Gat, *War in Civilization*, 15.

solidarity were compelling advantages. In some areas, tribes united in opposition to the newcomers. This alliance model—as practiced by the Iroquois Confederation, the Catawbas in South Carolina, and the Sioux in the Dakotas—reduced warfare between tribes that had been ongoing for generations. Tribes began to forget old enmities and grew accustomed to living at peace with neighbors, even if only to unite against a common foe.³⁴

Religion

Europeans brought missionaries who preached a message of pacifism. Their agenda was self-serving: the clerics, who lived alongside the colonial governments, had a vested interest in lowering native resistance. If absorption could be aided with a message stressing peace and acceptance, the results would assist white rule, but the decreased level of warfare would also benefit the Indians.³⁵ As one historian put it, “The recognition of a common set of religious ideas might serve to appease recalcitrants and malcontents.”³⁶

Economy

Economics limited violence, and a major role was played by trading companies. The Hudson’s Bay Company, a fur trader, had its own army for policing Canada.³⁷ Private armies were used because it was bad for business if the gathering of pelts was disrupted by raiding parties, or if their transport was halted by tribal warfare. Although some industry profits from strife, war is usually bad for commerce: trade is disrupted, the labor force goes off to war, insurance rates rise, and governments impose price controls and resource allocation procedures. Economic interests, then and now, push for tranquility and order.

National Militaries

A policing role was played by the US Army throughout the nineteenth century.³⁸ Governments seek a monopoly of violence within their territory and form police forces to keep the peace. Weapons are often forbidden and criminals are caught and punished. Initially, the policing mission of the US Army was to prevent Indians from attacking white settlers, but keeping the peace was soon extended to protect Indians from white encroachments and between tribes as well.

34. Frederick E. Hoxie, *Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 102–03, 298–302; and Hämäläinen, *Lakota America*, passim.

35. Gat, *War in Civilization*, 55; and Steele, *Warpaths*, 31.

36. Eric Carlton, *Occupation: The Politics and Practices of Military Conquerors* (Savage, MD: Barnes & Noble, 1992), 5.

37. Peter C. Newman, *Company of Adventurers: The Hudson’s Bay Company*, vol. 1 (Toronto, CA: Viking, 1985).

38. William C. Banks and Stephen Dycus, *Soldiers on the Home Front: The Domestic Role of the American Military* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

All violence, regardless of who were the perpetrators, was condemned and punished. One historical analysis notes these results: “From the mid-1800s on, the United States Army enforced peace in the Southwest. From that time, the Hopi were not allowed to, nor did they need to, engage in intense warfare to survive. By the late 1800s, this was the case all over North America.”³⁹ This same phenomenon occurred in South America and Mexico after the Spanish took control, and elsewhere around the world in areas colonized by the British and French.

Imposing peace on controlled territories meant that crops were no longer burned or looted, fields no longer stood untended because the population was off at war or had been killed, and trading was not brought to a complete standstill. There were more resources available and these were more equitably distributed, thus removing a cause for the tribes to go to war in the first place.

One revealing account exemplifying the trend toward peace among indigenous peoples during the nineteenth century concerns the Sioux Nation, composed of seven major tribes, the largest and most aggressive being the Lakota. Initially living near Lake Superior, the Lakota began moving west around 1700 as their homeland was being overrun by tribes fleeing from white settlement pressure, and for the next 150 years they waged wars of conquest against other tribes as they migrated westward and formed what became the most powerful native empire in North America.

The Lakota fought, conquered, assimilated, or drove out dozens of native tribes, including Cree, Omaha, Assiniboine, Shoshone, Arikara, Pawnee, and Otoe. Around 1850 the Lakota encountered the US Army, bent on pacifying the northern great plains to make room for white settlers. After a few sharp battles, the two sides broke contact and the Lakota moved farther north and west. Within two decades they were lords of virtually the entire territory between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, and from the Canadian border to present-day Kansas. It was a huge empire smack in the center of the United States.

To control this empire, the Lakota continued to war against Crow, Kiowa, Ute, Arapaho, Flathead, Blackfeet, and several other tribes. Then gold was discovered in the Black Hills—the heart of Lakota land—and railroad companies appeared to lay rails through this area. The Lakota resisted these incursions and fighting was constant. The US government sent an army to stop the bloodshed, push back the Lakota, and ensure the safety of white settlers and miners wishing to move into the area. The result was the Battles of the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn in 1876.

The humiliation felt by Washington and the Army over these disasters called for immediate and massive retaliation. Within two years the Lakota were overwhelmed and their empire destroyed. The Army was avenged, but the biggest winners were the countless tribes who had served as Lakota prey for the previous two centuries. Intertribal warfare largely ceased.⁴⁰ One historian looking at violence between natives and

39. LeBlanc and Register, *Constant Battles*, 201.

40. Hämäläinen, *Lakota America*.

whites noted statistically that there was a very sharp decline in both “fights” and deaths between 1850 and 1900.⁴¹

The suggestion that colonialism benefits humanity by bringing peace to natives can be easily twisted and must be approached with caution. It was seldom the purpose of imperialists to aid indigenous peoples: if that occurred as a side effect of conquest and exploitation, it was a bonus. And yet, the statistics are compelling.

One study of primitive warfare found that male mortality rates due to war often exceeded 20 percent in tribes in New Guinea, the Amazon Basin, the Arctic, and during the nineteenth century in North America—the Blackfeet tribe was 50 percent deficient in adult males due to intertribal warfare.⁴² These horrendous figures dropped precipitously when peace was enforced by outside powers. “Civilized” warfare has also been deadly, and some of the highest mortality rates in modern times were suffered by Germany and Russia in the World Wars. Even so, death rates were one-seventh that of the tribes in the areas noted above. Counting all deaths in war during the twentieth century, the mortality rate was “*twenty times smaller* than the losses that might have resulted if the world’s population were still organized into bands, tribes, and chiefdoms [emphasis in original].”⁴³

Strong central governments have imposed peace on their realms since ancient times. When those states crumbled, ethnic hatreds held in check often resurfaced. The collapse of the Roman Empire during the fifth century led to fragmentation and warfare—the descent into the Dark Ages. More recently, the end of colonial empires in Africa have often led to intertribal wars. Similarly, the death of Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito and his strong-armed rule eventually plunged Yugoslavia into fragmentation, ethnic cleansing, and bloodshed as the provinces of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia rediscovered their distaste for each other. Peace was only restored by the military intervention of NATO. Likewise, the ousting of Saddam Hussein led to two decades of internecine violence. How can such fragmentation be prevented under democracy?

Toward Peace

History has shown that peace can be imposed on peoples with a history of recurrent strife. Warlike tendencies can be curbed, and populations can be coerced into living in harmony with neighbors. Obviously, the excessive policies used in the past by colonial powers are unacceptable, but the resulting peace is so important that perhaps it is acceptable to impose such a modern-day Pax Romana.

41. Bill O’Neal, *Fighting Men of the Indian Wars* (Stillwater, OK: Barbed Wire Press, 1991), 4–6.

42. Keeley, *War before Civilization*, 91–95.

43. Keeley, 93, 195; and Gat, *War in Civilization*, 131–32.

Support for Military Interventions for Peace

Nongovernmental organizations. A 2003 Refugees International report contended that the military capability of the West allowed it to intervene in civil wars or to counter aggression with low risk to all involved. In fact, the report argued the West had a responsibility to intervene in internal conflicts in order to save lives.⁴⁴

Our hypothesis is that new military technology and tactics can be used to increase the effectiveness and reduce the costs and risks of forcible humanitarian interventions. If such operations can be made more effective and less costly, the political barriers to undertaking them should be lower, making it easier for individual countries and the UN to fulfill their responsibility to protect.

More recently, Human Rights Watch condemned the civil rights abuses in Ukraine, and issued a statement that there be “principled support for accountability [that] should be replicated in other situations where civilians suffer widespread abuses, such as in Yemen, Ethiopia, and Palestine. To do otherwise would undermine the international justice system as a whole.”⁴⁵

Conflict scholars. Noted Just War theorist Michael Walzer has endorsed such views, writing that “nonintervention is not an absolute moral rule: sometimes, what is going on locally cannot be tolerated. Hence the practice of ‘humanitarian intervention’—much abused, no doubt, but morally necessary whenever cruelty and suffering are extreme and no local forces seem capable of putting an end to them.”⁴⁶ Referring specifically to NATO’s intervention in Kosovo to stop the ethnic cleansing by Serbia in 1999, Walzer states that such intervention was “entirely justified, even obligatory.”⁴⁷

UN precedents as models. In 2011 the Libyan situation had deteriorated and the United Nations decided to act.⁴⁸ “In approving a no-fly zone over Libya to be enforced by NATO airpower”—outlined in Council Resolution 1973—“Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the international community must ‘act with speed and decision . . . to avert a potential large-scale crisis.’” He added, “In all my meetings, public and private, I took special care to stress that action under resolution 1973 is governed by an overriding objective—to save the lives of innocent civilians.”⁴⁹

According to one expert, the UN Security Council reinterpreted the law as it pertained to the use of force. Muammar Gaddafi’s brutality had reached an unacceptable level. “The League of Arab States, however, rejected an invasion of Libya as a violation

44. Clifford H. Bernath and David C. Gompert, Refugees International, *The Power to Protect: Using New Military Capabilities to Stop Mass Killings* (Oxford, UK: Refugees Studies Centre, 2003), 3.

45. Human Rights Watch, “Human Rights Council Special Session on Ukraine,” 34th Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council, May 12, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

46. Michael Walzer, *Arguing about War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 69.

47. Walzer, 99.

48. Meilinger, *Thoughts on War*, 221.

49. Department of Public Information, Security Council, “Secretary-General, Briefing Security Council, Says International Community Must ‘Continue to Act with Speed and Decision’ for Sake of Libyan Civilians,” press release, United Nations (website), March 24, 2011, <https://www.un.org/>.

of the country's territorial integrity and therefore against the UN Charter."⁵⁰ Yet, the League agreed to an air intervention. "The initiating argument of the League of Arab States was that an air-only operation in the form of an enforceable no-fly zone would be lawful (and thus legitimate) because it preserved Libyan territorial integrity."⁵¹

The analysis notes air intervention was no different legally than a land invasion, but it was perceived differently by the world. The UN Security Council shared this view, and when air intervention escalated from enforcing a no-fly zone to permitting air strikes to help topple the regime, it continued to grant it legitimacy.⁵² Another observer stated, "never before was aerial intervention pursued so intentionally as a strategy—introducing ground forces into the Libyan civil war was proscribed not only by the desire to avoid another quagmire in the region, but explicitly by the very U.N. resolution that the operations were conducted to enforce."⁵³

In 2015, the UN unanimously adopted resolution 2170 condemning the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) terrorist organization and called on all UN members to "join the fight against [the] Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and redouble efforts to prevent further attacks by the militant group."⁵⁴ The Security Council specifically authorized nations to combat ISIS groups in whatever territory they were located. In December 2018, the UN announced an investigation into the "heinous" war crimes committed by ISIS and asked all member states to assist in bringing the culprits to justice.⁵⁵

Twenty-first century US administrations. It was a goal of George W. Bush to "establish democratic governments in Afghanistan and Iraq to encourage the spread of democracy throughout the region. This 'inverse domino theory' imagined that nascent democracies would bring peace to a troubled area of the world" which was "a useful vision, even if so badly implemented."⁵⁶ This is an important precedent for the legitimization of force to achieve humane objectives.

Given former President Donald Trump's proactive strategy against ISIS, he too believed peace should sometimes be imposed on lawless areas.⁵⁷ President Joseph Biden also believes in the use of force to compel peace: the United States, and the West in general, now support and supply Ukraine in order to halt Russian aggression.

50. Meilinger, *Thoughts on War*, 221.

51. Angeline Lewis, "Air Power in the Rules-Based Global Order," Air Power Development Centre Paper No. 44 (Canberra, Australia, March 2018).

52. Lewis, 7–14.

53. Karl P. Mueller, "Examining the Air Campaign in Libya," in *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, ed. Karl P. Mueller (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), 8.

54. "Security Council Unanimously Calls on UN Members to Fight ISIS," *Guardian*, November 20, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

55. "UN Will Start to Investigate War Crimes Committed by ISIS from Early 2019," Al Shaid, December 7, 2018.

56. Meilinger, *Thoughts on War*, 222.

57. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Airpower in the War against ISIS* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021).

The Question of Promoting Democracy

As I discuss in my book, *Thoughts on War*, notwithstanding the position of recent administrations, the United States needs to think through such a strategy and its implementation. Is democracy a realistic goal in places such as Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, tribal Africa, or former Soviet possessions? If so, how can it be achieved, keeping in mind that freedom and democracy have different meanings there than they do in the West? Indeed, these notions are antithetical to Muslims who believe in Sharia law. Are the interventions in Libya and against ISIS, including UN mandates that did not include occupying the countries in question, a model for the future?

There are dangers in such a policy. Such intervention, despite the claims of humanity and noble purpose, might lead to a renewed imperialistic urge. Once a country involves itself in the internal affairs of another, mission creep might occur, and the interventionist might seize control and exploit the situation. In truth, however, that seems no longer a concern regarding Western countries. Territorial aggrandizement has not resulted where the West has intervened over the past six decades. Did nations hope to gain from the peace and stability that would follow their actions? Certainly. Perhaps these benefits would redound in economic terms, such as favorable trade agreements with oil-rich countries. But the hope was that world prosperity would be enhanced by the spread of democracy and peace. That was the payoff sought.

Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell once remarked that the United States had sent many of its sons and daughters abroad to fight wars to achieve the liberation of oppressed people over the past century, and the only territory it asked for in return was enough ground to bury its dead.⁵⁸ Colonialism seems now to be an obsolete practice in the West. Cultural imperialism—a desire for the world to be just like Western nations—still exists, but that is far different from the exploitive policies in centuries past.

There is another danger to humanitarian interventions. One analysis traces the history of Western liberal ideology over the past few centuries, an ideology which takes as a postulate that freedom leads to democracy which then leads to world prosperity.⁵⁹ Peace is a necessary prerequisite in this formula. Yet numerous factors led to war, and various culprits were identified: aristocracies, militaries, imperialists, capitalists, fascists, communists, and so on. “There seemed an endless supply of such wreckers, but one by one they were forcibly confronted and pushed aside.”⁶⁰

Still, global peace seemed always just out of reach. This presented a dangerous paradox. Enemies of peace were persistent, and to overcome them, force had to be employed. It was a dilemma President Barack Obama noted in his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize speech: two months later he deployed 34,000 combat troops into Afghanistan to enforce peace there.⁶¹

58. Colin Powell, “Dialogue with the U.S. Secretary of State” (remarks made at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, January 26, 2003), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/>.

59. Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978).

60. Meilinger, *Thoughts on War*, 223.

61. Meilinger.

Inherent in these ideals is the assumption that people everywhere and in every culture thirst for freedom, and that democracy is intrinsically viewed as good. That is not always the case. The 2021 debacle in Afghanistan showed that despite 20 years of military, financial, technical, and moral support, much of the population—and especially its army—were unwilling to defend themselves from what United States officials thought were their hated enemies. The US government was dramatically wrong in its assessment of what the Afghan people wanted. The result was an Afghan army trained and equipped by the US Army—with high-tech weapons and sensors worth tens of millions of dollars—that collapsed like a house of cards in a matter of weeks.

The analysis of Western liberal ideology mentioned above has an underlying theme—the cultural insensitivity to those one seeks to help. To put it bluntly, the world does not always accept the goals, desires, and aspirations of the West. Moreover, it is important to realize that democracy, by itself, is not a nostrum that will magically dispense peace and prosperity. Yet the history of the past two centuries, worldwide, illustrates that democracy has often been a necessary prerequisite for peace. Is there a solution to these dilemmas?

Recommended Strategy

To enforce peace in the future, the United States should employ a combination of airpower, special operations forces (SOF), indigenous forces, and pervasive intelligence sources. Precision weapons allow a more discrete application of force. In Libya, 100 percent of all air munitions delivered by NATO were precision-guided.⁶² Military operations now plan to minimize casualties and collateral damage. Avoiding risk to US forces is also a factor in the increasing use of unmanned air vehicles.

Besides precision weapons, networked operations and instantaneous global communications and intelligence have revolutionized how the United States and its Allies fight. Planners must focus on past successes and failures to craft strategies maximizing the chances of political success at the least cost. For example, in 2001 in Afghanistan, US Special Operations Forces teamed with the Northern Alliance and, backed by airpower, executed a rapid, though as it turned out temporary, victory.⁶³ In Libya in 2011, NATO airpower teamed with indigenous ground forces to overthrow Gaddafi. In 2017 airpower combined with SOF and indigenous ground forces to defeat ISIS.⁶⁴

During the opening stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom there were 13 Iraqi divisions in the north to defend against an invasion from Turkey. Only 600 US SOF were in the north—plus the 173rd Airborne Brigade air-dropped into Bashur, minus its heavy equipment. Nonetheless, the entire northern front collapsed on April 10 with the 5th Iraqi Corps surrendering and Kirkuk falling to coalition troops. In the words of one observer,

62. Mueller, *Precision and Purpose*, 4.

63. Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E. Griffith Jr., “Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model,” *International Security*, 30 (Winter 2005/06), 139.

64. Lambeth, *Airpower*.

In short, against all prewar expectations, SOF operations in northern Iraq were fantastically successful. Despite numerous logistical and political obstacles, a small SOF group working with unskilled indigenous allies and highly constrained airpower defeated a significant portion of Iraq's army. Moreover, it did so without suffering a single American death.⁶⁵

The use of indigenous forces in military operations has a long tradition in American history. During the French and Indian War, the French, British, and colonials allied with tribes that had a far better feel for fighting in dense woods.⁶⁶ A century later, Brigadier General George Crook used Indian allies because he believed it would have a “civilizing” effect and would “break up tribal loyalties.”⁶⁷ His policy was extremely successful. Indigenous troops were essential in these operations—as they would later be in the Balkans when Croats and Kosovars benefitted from NATO airpower. These forces were not considered of high quality prior to hostilities: the Kosovars, Kurds, and the Northern Alliance, for example, were deficient in quantity, training, and weapons—they had been unsuccessful in fighting the Serbs or Taliban previously. Yet, when stiffened with SOF and airpower, they were successful. In Libya, the same formula brought down the long-standing Gaddafi regime—with zero NATO casualties.⁶⁸

Of importance, the use of indigenous ground forces does not mean that people will not die. Rather, it means that US ground forces will not. A nation fighting for its freedom must be prepared to face risk. If its people are not willing to take such risks, then how can they expect others to do so for them? Attempts to impose peace by using force may be a Western urge, but it must come at an acceptable cost.

Legitimate Use of Force for Peace

The vital interests of the United States and the West in general are now seldom at stake; instead, they intervene to punish aggressors or topple vicious dictators to bring peace to troubled regions. This goal of imposing security and democracy on foreign peoples remains as desirable today as it was in the nineteenth century. Notions previously useful, such as collective security, religion/morality, economics, and intervention, may again be in order.

To achieve success, public support must be maintained, but the surest ways to lose that is to suffer high casualties or, worse, to inflict them on the societies the United States is attempting to help. The goal of limiting cost and casualties is hindered by the introduction of large numbers of foreign ground troops—especially in the societies of the Middle East. General John Abizaid, then heading US Central Command, noted

65. Richard Andres, “The Afghan Model in Northern Iraq,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29 (June 2006), 412.

66. Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

67. Martin F. Schmitt, ed., *General George Crook: His Autobiography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 213–14.

68. Mueller, *Precision and Purpose*.

tellingly in 2005 that “US troops were an antibody in Iraqi society.”⁶⁹ The question then becomes, How can the West compel peace without flooding an area with antibodies?

As in the nineteenth century, peace can be enforced on areas where violence has been endemic. But those interventions must be based on humanitarian ideals and not naked aggrandizement. As Obama suggested in his Nobel Prize speech, religious, cultural, and ethnic differences can be bridged by the correct and discreet use of military force. But discovering the correct balance for achieving such results requires a delicate and deft strategy, and it must include the legitimacy provided by the UN or a similar international body. The United States must not create a situation where the cure is worse than the disease.

The Afghanistan disaster will likely sour American leaders on the efficacy of mounting humanitarian efforts. Yet, it is American policy to support Ukraine with money and weapons. It is thus unlikely that the American innate belief of the responsibility to enforce peace and foster democracy will end. There seem very few isolationists left in American political life. Although one can certainly debate the wisdom of intervention, the fact is the United States is likely to continue to view spreading freedom around the world as its duty.

Assuming that is the case and America decides to engage again in such activities, then US officials must think it through more soberly than they have in the past. The combination of airpower, SOF, indigenous forces, and pervasive intelligence sources seems to be a winner, and although it will probably not work in all cases, it deserves to be considered as a favored strategy to bring peace to habitually troubled areas of the world. **Æ**

69. David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2013), 145.

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