



Pablo Picasso's The Face of Peace

THINKING STRAIGHT ON WAR AND PEACE

Mortimer Adler

Some answers men have given to the problem of war and peace...a tallying of the pessimist and the optimist views

Contemporary thinking about war and peace seems to divide into two major patterns.

According to the predictions men make on this most predicted-about-of-subjects, they can be classified as pessimists or optimists. According to their objectives, and the means they recommend, they are usually characterized as realists or idealists.

By seeing these two classifications in relation to each other, we can avoid the invidious tone which attaches to the words “realist” and “idealist.” If his optimistic predictions are sound, the man who proposes the more desirable goal is thoroughly realistic. His ideal solution cannot be dismissed as Utopian if the facts show it to be quite practicable. And the man who advocates the less perfect solution does not necessarily relish making this choice. He need not cynically reject all lofty aspirations in order to insist that we make facts rather than wishes the measure of the attainable.

Ideals are no more the exclusive possession of the idealist than reality is the private property of the realist. Nevertheless, it is difficult to overcome the associations which make “realist” and “idealist” name-calling words. I shall, therefore, use the more descriptive words “pessimist” and “optimist” in describing the two main positions taken on the question of peace in our—or in any—time.

The Pessimistic Position Can Be Summarized as Follows:

PREDICTIONS: Future wars, including world wars, are inevitable. The extreme pessimist will add: “until the end of time.” The more moderate pessimist will be content to say: “for some time to come.”

In terms of perpetual peace, the extreme prediction is that it is utterly impossible on earth. The more moderate prediction is that its realization is improbable for many centuries, that improbability being even greater in our own lifetime.

OBJECTIVE: The only practicable goal for which we can work is the prolongation of peace in our time, or the postponement of the next world war. It would be too much to suppose that we can prevent all forms of war, but not too much to aim at preventing for several generations another world war.

MEANS: We must employ the familiar devices of power politics, whether or not we call them that: such things as treaties, alliances, or coalitions, aiming at a balance or a predominance of military power.

Agreements for collective security and an “international police force” to execute repressive or punitive measures must be regarded as implements of a coalition of great powers.

Such things as a league of nations, world courts for arbitration of international disputes, and other international agencies can be recommended as supplementing the nuclear alliances; but they cannot

be advocated as adequate by themselves to postpone the next world war, and certainly not to prevent it.

If the pessimist is cynical, he does not add any qualifications concerning justice and liberty; he does not pretend that the game of power politics need be played more politely, or can be played more effectively, by a just administration of the world's affairs, and with some regard for the liberties of smaller or less powerful nations. But if he is a "liberal," he usually seeks to incorporate the ideals of justice and liberty into his plans for postponing war by coalitions of power, insisting that there is a greater chance of succeeding this way.

REMARKS ON THE OPPOSITION: The pessimist does not deny that world government or world federation could abolish international wars, local or general. He merely says that any scheme which goes beyond a confederacy or league of *independent* nations is at present out of the question, precisely because it requires the abrogation of national independence and all that that implies.

Only despair and disillusionment can result from trying to put such schemes into practice before the time is ripe. The optimist, he contends, fails to recognize the existing realities—the economic rivalries, the diversity of cultures, the bellicose nature of man, the inequalities in education, standard of living, and political maturity, and, above all, the ever-resurgent nationalistic spirit, whether it be condemned as pride or praised as patriotism.

The Optimistic Position Can Be Summarized as Follows:

PREDICTIONS: International wars, local or general, can be prevented.

It is highly probable that permanent peace can be made at the end of this war.

OBJECTIVE: Perpetual peace is not the only goal for which we *can* work, but since it is obviously so much more desirable than merely postponing the next world war, it is the only goal for which we *should* work.

MEANS: We must establish a world government, federal in structure, including all the peoples of the earth.

No form of power politics and no merely international organization are adequate, either for initiating or preserving world peace.

Beneath the diversity of plans for the institution of world government, there is agreement that such government must be constitutional rather than despotic; that it must be built upon principles of political justice and liberty for all; and that it cannot be accomplished by conquest or imperialism, but only by voluntary acts of union on the part of all the states to be federated.

If the optimist is clear, he recognizes that federated states retain *none* of their sovereignty in external affairs, and hence that world government requires the complete abolition of national independence. If he is confused, he tries to say that world government is incompatible *only* with “absolute” sovereignty, and that federation permits nations to retain a “limited” sovereignty, or some degree of independence in external affairs.

REMARKS ON THE OPPOSITION: The optimist calls attention to the fact that his opponent identifies peace with a mere absence of shooting. But the sheathed sword is still a sword; the bomber will not be beaten into a transport so long as nations remain potentially at war. The very phrase “peace treaty” is a contradiction in terms, for treaties make, not peace, but truces—temporary interludes between periods of shooting.

It is the pessimist, therefore, whose proposals are dangerously deceptive, likely to result in disillusionment and despair; for the pessimist promises peace when what he really means is the maintenance of large military establishments to safeguard a tenuous truce.

Furthermore, despite anyone's liberal pretensions, an alliance of the victors to preserve what they call “the peace” cannot help becoming, like all monopolistic enterprises, an effort in self-perpetuation and aggrandizement. A less polite, but more honest, name for this proposed nuclear alliance would be “world domination.” Despite all the talk about liberty and justice, there is enough dynamite in the pessimist's plans to blow the world wide open again—and sooner than he thinks.

So far as popular opinion is concerned, the pessimistic position prevails in this country, and probably in all others.

A recent nationwide survey undertaken by the University of Denver recorded that only twenty-six percent of the people think it probable that, “after this war, a way will be worked out to prevent any more wars.” Another fourteen percent believe that “someday wars will be prevented, but this war will not be the last one.” And

fifty-five percent take the pessimistic position that “No matter what is done to prevent them, there will always be wars” (36%), or that “It is possible to prevent all wars, but people will never do what is necessary to prevent them” (19%).

It is worth observing the distinction between those who think that perpetual peace is impossible and those who think it possible, but highly improbable because men *will not do* what they *can do*.

Except for those who straddle the fence, the two positions seem to present an inescapable dilemma for thought and action. The straddlers do not really escape. Anyone who understands the minimum conditions of world peace, especially with regard to national independence, knows on which side of the fence they are doomed to fall. The advocates of merely international agencies (as opposed to truly *supranational* government) propose means for peace which cannot prevent war.

It matters little whether they include an international police force. They must face the question raised by a recent editorial in *The New Yorker* magazine:

“You people realize, of course, that a police force is no good if simply used as a threat to strengthen agreements between independent powers, that to have meaning it must be a certified agent of law, that to have law we must first have a constitutional world society, and that, to achieve that, each nation must say goodbye to its own freedom of action and to its long-established custom of doing what it damn well pleases. *Now* how many of you want an international police force?”

The implication of the question lies in the choice it offers between international anarchy and world government. That public-opinion polls have recorded a large majority favoring an international police force must remain a fact of ambiguous significance until such sentiment is clarified by reference to the real issue. The Editors of *Time*, in one of their “Background for Peace” series, shrewdly observed:

“A world cop attached to a world court, standing alone, could never serve to keep the peace of the world. To achieve this end, the world cop would have to be backed by a full-fledged world government—by a legislature to translate political decisions into written laws, and an executive to give such laws substance in action. John Citizen may not have contemplated any such far-flung scheme when he upped with a 'Yes' to the notion of an interna-

tional police force...The whole idea of establishing such a force inexorably raises all the problems connected with the creation of a complete world government.”

Those who talk about international police in the absence of world government, like those who try to smile away the contradiction of *united*, but *independent* nations must fall off the fence, and usually fall into pessimism and power politics, as soon as they abandon the weasel words which cannot bridge the unbridgeable chasm between *alliance* and *federation*. As Robert M. Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, pointed out in a recent address: “In the absence of world law and world government...conquerors asserting a right based on power alone are no more entitled to the name of police than Himmler's men in Czechoslovakia.”

It is always pleasant to find some points on which opponents can agree. We feel reassured that they are moving in the same universe of discourse. Not only do their differences become more intelligible in the light of some common understanding, but in their agreements may be found the beginning of a resolution to their dispute.

The pessimist and the optimist do agree on certain fundamentals: not the extremist or the befuddled in either camp, but the *liberal* exponent of the position that the next war can be postponed and the *clear-sighted* exponent of the position that all wars can be prevented.

The liberal pessimist tries to *combine* power politics with international morality. The clear-sighted optimist denies that international morality *without* supranational government will work.

Neither is an isolationist, a militarist, or a pacifist.

Neither is an isolationist because neither thinks that the next world war can be effectively postponed or prevented by an effort on the part of his nation, or any single nation, to keep out of world affairs.


Neither is a militarist because neither admires war as a noble enterprise fulfilling the human spirit; both feel that the prevention of war to any degree, temporarily or permanently, is an unmitigated good.

Neither is a pacifist because neither is satisfied that a widespread desire to avoid war is sufficient to postpone it, much less to abolish it entirely. Both think traditional pacifism *impractical*, unregenerate militarism *immoral*.

Underlying these three points of meeting is their most fundamental agreement: *power is needed to prevent war or to maintain peace*. Either independent nations, separately or in coalition, must exercise the ultimate power in world affairs, or that power must be wielded by a single government to which all peoples are equally subject.

Both accept this dilemma, choosing opposite horns. Both agree that there is nothing in between these alternatives. Those who would insist that a league of nations is in between are saying that it is nothing—*powerless*. It may be something in the sense of a promise of better things to come, but the gap between promise and performance is infinite in practice.

Powerless conventions or congresses or courts either provide the facade behind which real coalitions of power must operate, or they dangle in midair, like goodwill without foundation in force. To whatever extent a league, or any other international agency, is a *powerless* institution, to that extent it provides no solution to the problem—neither the postponement of future wars nor their utter prevention.

A monopoly of power offers the only solid ground for any practical solution of the problem of war and peace. But shall it be concentrated, by treaties and alliances, in the hands of those nations whose mutual self-interest dedicates them to the “pursuits of peace”? Or shall it be consolidated to the institutions of world-government? 

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