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## THE ONLY CAUSE OF WAR

**Mortimer Adler**

Part 2 of 2

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In saying that anarchy is the only cause of war, I mean to imply that it causes the condition I have called “potential war,” as much as the actual war all of us recognize when shooting begins.

Failure to understand that the absence of shooting is not the absence of war has blinded many persons to the realities of the international scene. They fail to see that no essential change has occurred in the transition from the diplomatic to the military means of carrying on the war between states.

Those who think that Prussian militarism is the cause of war often quote von Clausewitz, with the implication that if men did not think this way there would be no wars. Von Clausewitz said:

War is not merely a political act, but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, an execution of the same purpose with other means.

What he meant, of course, was that actual war or physical fighting merely continues the potential war or the economic, social, and psychological fighting that goes on during a truce. Overt war is merely the fulfillment of everything that is latent in international politics.

The cost of armaments is great, the risk in using them tremendous. Preference for gaining an objective by diplomatic means is not peculiar to modern civilized nations. Darius and Xerxes, Philip of Macedon and Alexander, Julius Caesar and other Roman conquerors, usually sent ultimatums before they undertook campaigns.

Under the word “diplomacy” I include every act, short of shooting, which one nation undertakes against another to better its position in the competition for power.

The power which a nation will have available when shooting begins depends, in large part, on the power it has accumulated by diplomatic means. The distinction between the great powers and the second- or third-rate powers holds just as much for their bargaining power in the council chamber as for their military power on the battlefield. Each in fact tends to vary with the other.

The diplomat or any other representative of a country on foreign soil works solely, or at least primarily, for his country’s interests. In this he does not differ one bit from the general or the admiral. Sir Henry Wotton’s definition of a diplomat as a man who lies abroad for his country distinguishes him from the soldier in one respect only. The soldier may have to continue lying there when the combat is over.

The saying that all is fair in love and war should be amended to include diplomacy and international negotiations of every sort. Diplomacy is, after all, nothing, but war masquerading under the aspect of love. A former president of the League of Nations Assembly reports that in the Near East the letters “D.C.” on the license plates of autos belonging to the diplomatic corps are rendered by the words “Distinguished Crook.”

With malice to no individual, this epitomizes an obvious truth. In the anarchic world of sovereign nations, foreign policies and foreign transactions can be aimed straight only when they are aimed at the goal of self-interest. From any goal such as the *common*

good of *all* peoples, they necessarily skew aside in all sorts of devious and crooked ways.

Von Clausewitz speaks the truth, but not the whole truth. Interested primarily in the military, he looks only at one side of the matter—the way in which actual war continues and fulfills a nation's trucetime maneuvers and deployments. But it is just as true to say that when the shooting ceases, diplomacy and international business take up where the soldiers leave off.

The victors try to consolidate and augment the advantages won by the sword. The vanquished try to undermine, or compensate for, those advantages. And in both directions, the pen is often mightier.

The diplomats work hard to give the generals an advantageous position in the next war, just as the generals work hard to give the diplomats an advantageous position during the next truce. Diplomacy may be a sublimation of the political neurosis underlying war. Actual fighting is needed periodically to relieve the impulses which diplomacy represses.

I do not say any of these things with a concealed moral judgment. So long as there are sovereign nations and international anarchy, war—actual or potential—is the order of the day. The morality which governs the conduct of individual men living together in a community and under law cannot govern the conduct of nations living together, but in no community and under no enforceable law. So long as national self-preservation remains the dominant end for which prudence must choose means, the principles of morality cannot be reconciled with the counsels of prudence.

Von Clausewitz may also have been a militarist in the worst sense of the word, a man who could think, as von Treitschke did after him, that military exploits alone bring out the highest virtues of a people. But that does not detract in the least from his realistic insight that, under existing circumstances, only the self-deceived can suppose that there is any moral difference between international activities in potential and in actual war.

In both cases, the lapses from morality have the same cause, for both are war. Militarism and armaments are no more the cause of war than pacifism and disarmament conferences are means to peace. Were universal disarmament to occur after this war, it would not signify the advent of world peace. The era of peace will not begin with a superficial Armageddon, but with the demise of diplomacy and with the end of all need for foreign policy.

Mr. Walter Lippmann has pointed out that failure to understand these things has misled people

. . . to entrust the conduct of war to soldiers who do not understand politics, and to leave the arrangements of peace [he means “truce”] to politicians who do not understand war. They have failed to understand the profound truth of von Clausewitz’s doctrine that “war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse.” This failure has produced the militarist who supports wars but cannot conclude them, and it has produced the pacifist who declaims against wars but does not prevent them.

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Though the positive and negative factors which produce potential or actual war are the same, the transition from the one to the other is usually brought about by special causes.

These causes are the occasions thought to justify military expedients—the so-called “last resort” when the penultimate pressures of diplomacy have proved too weak. They are the dramatic occasions and incidents which, in the judgment of a people or their officials, demand or warrant the substitution of overt war for covert war.

It makes no difference whether these *exciting* causes consist of acts of aggression which must be met by self-defense or acts which require a nation to be aggressive in order to defend what it *thinks* its interests to be. The traditional distinction between just and unjust war (meaning, of course, actual warfare) never goes deeper than the exciting causes of military action.

It overlooks the fact that no occasion or incident could excite actual warfare unless the nations were already potentially at war. The activating cause of military operations may be some real or fancied injustice suffered by one or both sides. But this by itself could not cause fighting. If law and government operated, the injustice could be rectified by peaceful means.

When we pay attention to the underlying causes of war, not to the last-minute incidents before military movements begin, we cannot find a single criterion for distinguishing between just and unjust war. Each sovereign nation participates in the international anarchy as much as every other.

In the eyes of God, justice may be more on the side of one nation than another at the moment when hostilities become overt. In de-

claring or undertaking overt warfare, nations usually appeal to God for victory, claiming He knows that justice is on their side. But only God knows. Nations are quite right in addressing their appeal to Him. They can appeal to no one else. They would do well to avoid couching their appeal in defiant language, and to speak, as Lincoln suggested, with the prayerful hope that “we are on God’s side, not that God is on ours.”

But, as a matter of fact, such humility seldom prevails. Mr. Emery Reves rightly points out that

All wars in history were so prepared that, the soldiers and nations who fought them were convinced that they were fighting a *Bellum Justum*. Every war of every nation was fought for a “righteous cause,” for “justified national interests” and “in self-defense.”

The theory of *Bellum Justum* can be used, he adds, “to justify all wars and, therefore, is merely a sophistic argument.”

During all the ages when men have talked about just cause in waging war, there has been no way of making the discussion of justice lead to a settlement of rights and wrongs in dispute without recourse to fighting. Men will continue to talk about just cause as long as there are wars.

Not until international anarchy is replaced by world government will it be possible to substitute effective courts and public power for self-judgment and self-help. But then there will no longer be any need to talk about “just war.” War itself will be abolished by the very conditions which can make a determination of justice practically effective.

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When we speak of “the occurrence of war,” we mean nothing more than the transition from a potential to an actual state of war. But that is a great deal, indeed. It is the brutality and bloodshed of actual war we all abominate.

Whether men would perceive the evils of international anarchy *if nations always remained in a state of potential war* is an interesting, but academic, question. An extremely sensitive and refined conscience might deplore the discrepancy between the ideal of human brotherhood and the realities of national self-interest. But, with the facts as they are, anyone should be able to see that the state of potential war must be abolished in order to prevent the occurrence of actual war. Anyone who thinks the world should be rid

of the horrors of martial combat must seek to abolish the state of potential war. Though its own horrors are more polite and less obvious, it cannot be absolved from the bloody violence in which it issues.

Nations *cannot* remain in a state of potential war. The truce always terminates in warfare, even as fighting always terminates in a truce. Anarchy is not merely responsible for the potential war between the nations. It also fails to prevent the transition to actual combat.

In the days just before “war” breaks out, diplomatic activity reaches feverish intensity. In the last hours of the truce, which journalists and most other men call “peace,” the correspondents report, in the language of the foreign offices, that “conversations are rapidly deteriorating.” At the end of one day we learn that “conversations have completely broken down.” At the dawn of the next, the armies march, the navies sail.

Conversations are rapidly deteriorating. Conversations have ceased. Potential war has become actual. Whatever causes the breakdown of conversation causes the breakdown of “peace”—the onset of “war.”

How could the conversations have been sustained? How could they have been made to produce reasonable decisions, instead of giving way before brute force?

We know the answer. Only the institutions and machinery of government can sustain the conversations. Only government can make reasonable the force needed to support reasonable decisions.

The language used by the foreign correspondents attending the birth of “war” epitomizes a truth every man should be able to see. But this truth is not new, nor is the language which so strikingly reveals it a modern turn of phrase.


In the fifth century B.C., Thucydides reported the opening of the *Peloponnesian War*—the war between the Athenian axis and the allies of Sparta. In the first book of his *History*, he recounts the events, the incidents and occasions, leading up to the outbreak of hostilities.

The dispute between Athens and Sparta and Corinth had been debated at some length by the envoys and diplomats of the several cities. But after many brilliant speeches on both sides, Thucydides

tells us that “the envoys departed home, and did not return again.” They were doomed to fail by the very conditions under which the conversations took place.

Then, at the beginning of Book II, Thucydides writes:

The war between the Athenians and Peloponnesians and the allies on both sides now really begins. For now all *communication* except through the medium of heralds ceased, and *hostilities* were commenced and prosecuted without intermission.

I have italicized the words which tell the story. That story is not simply the account of how the Peloponnesian War began. It is the whole history of war and peace. 

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