

World peace, more than any other practical problem, requires men everywhere in the world to acknowledge the same facts and to be guided by the same ideas. The members of the human race must be able to think about war and peace in the same way without the distortion of local prejudice or the blinders of partisan interest. Until they do, they do not belong, in thought or action, to the one world whose physical unity sets the stage for a peace that is likewise one and indivisible. —Mortimer Adler

---

---

## How to Think About WAR and PEACE

### A Plea to the Reader \*

By Clifton Fadiman

I CALL these words a plea because it is that and only that, and not a foreword, an introduction, or a preface. I make it because the author is by nature a limited man. He is incapable of making pleas, being capable only of making demonstrations.

Now, this plea of mine is unimportant, except insofar as it may move you to pay attention to the demonstration. That demonstration is important, being quite literally a matter of life or death. I do not mean that you cannot survive without reading it. I do mean that it deals with survival, perhaps yours or mine, but certainly the survival of civilized man.

I am pleading with you to do something difficult—to read a book that has to be hard in order to be good, and is both. These pages (and this is not praise) are swept bare of emotion. They are minus the seductions of a personal style. They do not glint with humor. The delightful pleasures of mental compromise may not be sought here. Yes, this is a hard book, hard not because it is involved or obscure, but because it gets down to bedrock, to hardpan. It is hard because it is basic; because it asks us to think things out to the end; because it asks us to grow greater than ourselves, to undergo a conversion of the passions and the intellect almost as awesome as that higher conversion that comes only by the grace of God.

The title of this book is *How to Think About War and Peace*. Not *How to Prevent War*. Not *How to Make Peace*. But how to think about war and peace. And right there is where the screams of anguish start. Very few of the rest of us who say we hate war and want peace are willing to do the hard and painful thinking that must precede the abolition of war and the creation of peace. For that kind of thinking leads to the conclusion most of us are willing to face only at the point of a gun: the conclusion that *we must change our minds*. But, when the gun is there, it is already too late.

Who is doing this kind of thinking today? Precious few men in high positions. Mainly plain citizens here and there, mothers and fathers and soldiers, businessmen and mechanics and farmers. These are not yet articulate, though their time is coming. In the meantime, this kind of thinking has come to my attention recently from two odd sources. One is the brain of a philosopher working at his desk in the city which many think of as the very center of American isolationism and nationalism. The end product of that thinking is the book you hold in your hands.

Odder still is the second source. Now that I am no longer a member of the staff of that deeply and seriously civilized humorous magazine, I can say without embarrassment that in the editorial columns of *The New Yorker* during 1943 there appeared the clearest political thinking (presented in the most casual and even whimsical form) that American citizens have produced since the war began. You will find several quotations from *The New Yorker* in Mr. Adler's pages. Indeed, his whole book is but a systematic and logical extension of these quotations.

Because I would like you to know and trust him, may I say a word or two about the man who wrote it? He has been my friend for over twenty years, and I have been in hearty intellectual disagreement with him for many of those years. But I am not engaged in puffing the work of a friend; I am engaged in pleading for the work of a wide-visioned fellow citizen.

Mortimer J. Adler, now forty-one, is Professor of the Philosophy of Law at the University of Chicago. A few hundred thousand Americans know him as the author of that surprising best seller, *How to Read a Book*. Thousands of teachers, here and abroad, know him (not always with unalloyed affection) as the gadfly of American education, a denying spirit who is dissatisfied with the quality of the production of our educational mill and with the quality of the minds of our teachers who turn its handles. He is deeply learned in philosophy and cognate subjects, which is nothing to his credit, for the same is true of hundreds of his colleagues.

Amazingly fecund and at the same time intimidatingly nonsuperficial, he has written many books on problems of morals (including one on the morals of the movies) and metaphysics, books beyond my depth and read by but a small minority. He is to my mind a great, though not a popular, teacher.

An analyst in the field of democratic philosophy, he has grown out of many errors and false turnings into larger and larger truths. He possesses little of the charm, the passion, the artistic talents of those thinkers, like Pascal and Rousseau, who, though much greater men, nevertheless inhabit his universe of discourse. He is only clear, only logical, only uncompromising; and these, though they may be enduring qualities, are not endearing ones.

I referred above to “errors and false turnings.” Mr. Adler himself, in an Augustinian confession in his Preface, cries out his own *mea culpa*. It is not important, however, that this book is Mr. Adler’s attempt to set himself right; it is important that it is an attempt to set you and me right.

This attempt may not make Mr. Adler’s highly beloved figure. We all love what is pleasant; and much of what Mr. Adler has to say is not pleasant. The Moscow Pact is a good thing; the ideas of Senator Ball are good; even the vague resolution of Representative Fulbright is good; but none of them can secure, peace, any more than Locarno did. Those publicists who assure us to the contrary are doing us a disservice, because they are unwittingly leading us up to the brow of the cliff from which we shall some day fall in disillusionment.

I am myself less cautious than Mr. Adler and believe that there is no theoretical obstacle to the creation of universal (though not necessarily internal) peace after this war. Yet I applaud his resolute determination to accept halfway measures only for what they are, and not as the panaceas our well-meaning optimists would make them out to be.

There have been a hundred books about peace and postwar planning; and, let us confess it, we are confused by most of them, and bored by the others. Here is still another. How does it differ from its competitors? It

differs in that it is written from the point of view of a citizen of the world, not that of an American, a Frenchman, an Englishman, a European, a politician, an economist, a geographer, a Communist, a Fascist, or a moralist. “It differs,” says the author, “from most of the current books about peace in that it is primarily concerned with the ideas that should be in every citizen’s mind, not the plans or blueprints which deserve a place at the peace table.” It is concerned only with *how to think* about peace—and war. “It is a book of ideas to think with.”

What are some of these ideas? First, read the six questions that begin Chapter 1. Is there a thinking man or woman alive who is not interested in finding the answers to them? Are there any other questions, short of those that pertain to religion, that are more vital, more awesome, more overpoweringly necessary for us to answer? I can think of none. They are the questions, phrased simply and in their proper order, the answers to which will determine the major course of our lives and the lives of those to come after us. If you are not interested in them, then this book is not for you, and you are willing to let another man, who may turn out to be a Hitler, do your thinking for you.

First to grasp, then to answer these questions, we must consider what Mr. Adler calls the Four P’s of Peace—the Problem, the Possibility, the Probability, the Practicality.

It is the second of these P’s that, I conceive, stops many of us dead in our tracks.

Is perpetual peace at all possible? If we think it is not, we shall merely try to work out coalitions, balances of power, alliances, whose aim will be not *to make or preserve the peace*, but *to prolong the truce*. Then we shall call ourselves, with a certain satisfaction, “realists,” as if there were some special virtue in the mere limiting

of our objectives.

But what if it can be demonstrated, far more cogently than the “realists” demonstrate the opposite, that perpetual peace is possible, not tomorrow, not necessarily in our lifetime, but within the conceivable future? What if it can be shown, as I think the author does show in his third chapter, that war is *not*, like death, inevitable? How if it be more like chattel slavery which not so many years ago was considered the inevitable lot of some men—but which now we know to be a totally eradicable evil? What then? It is with this “What then?” that much of Mr. Adler’s book deals.

If you are a Fascist, if you are a special kind of hard-boiled sentimentalist, you will asseverate that war is the normal condition of man. If you are a rational animal, as I conceive every reader of this book to be, you will come to Mr. Adler’s conclusion, that *war is an abnormality*, that it is the *natural* condition of man to live in peace—and, furthermore, that history itself provides us with varied proofs that this is so. But what this peace is that man aspires to, it is necessary to define clearly; and one of his many brilliant insights lies in Mr. Adler’s precise clarification of a word used far too loosely by too many respected thinkers—and by many too respected thinkers. You will, among other things, learn that peace is not perfect concord or harmony, and has nothing to do with Utopia.

Something *causes* peace. It is government. Something will *cause* world peace. It is world government. Something *causes* war. It is anarchy. Something *causes* world wars. It is world anarchy. For the logical and reasonable demonstration of the truth of these simple affirmations, see the whole book, but more particularly Chapters 6 and 7.

Mr. Adler takes the bull by the horns. By this time we know what the bull’s name is. The bull is called

Sovereignty. Sovereignty may be defined in many ways; it may be defined, for example, as an idea which certain Senators and Congressmen are unwilling to examine reasonably, preferring instead to orate about it emotionally. More useful definitions you will find in Chapter 8; there, too, you will find that, in Mr. Adler's opinion which is open to argument—if we really wish for world peace, we must be prepared not merely to *limit*, but to *relinquish* entirely our *external* (as separate from our *internal*) sovereignty to a world government, as the thirteen colonies relinquished their *external*, not their *internal*, sovereignty to a federal union.

But this idea is a hard one to accept. It is hard for me to accept it, because I am so used to the idea of a sovereign nation, and so attached to my own sovereign nation. Most of my readers will feel the same way. The Pennsylvania farmer, the Virginia planter, the Massachusetts mechanic felt the same way in 1787. How do they feel today?

I am putting the problem far too simply. Mr. Adler devotes several chapters to a rational, even-tempered discussion of the idea of the relinquishment of sovereignty and the many objections that may be urged to it. I do not ask you to agree with him; I ask you to listen to him. His inquiry into the subject is *the* question of the next fifty years. No man alive, however unpolitical he thinks he is, will be free from the influence and effects of that inquiry; as no American alive in 1861 was free from the influence and effects of a somewhat similar inquiry that came to a head at Fort Sumter.

Mind you, Mr. Adler is not asking for the immediate relinquishment of sovereignty. He does not expect a world government tomorrow. He merely proves that the surest way of getting *peace* tomorrow—or, at any rate, a long and fruitful truce—is to work for a world government that may come at some remote but not

unimaginably remote date. He is an idealist only in that he believes in the tendency of man toward peace. He is a practical idealist in his perception of the slow tempo at which that tendency works. In my opinion, he is *too* practical, too conservative in his estimate of the length of time needed to establish peace.

He is convinced that the existence of democracy and its gradual, though often interrupted, extension comprise true and valid grounds for optimism. He is a rational optimist in that he insists on examining carefully and without passion all the well-known obstacles to world peace, and all the moral factors that make it highly improbable in the immediate future. He cannot be accused of wishful thinking; he can only be excoriated, by the irrational, for thinking at all.

Well, how do we go about it? What can education do, what can the growing unity of the globe do, what can the abandonment of race prejudice, imperialism, economic injustice do? Much? Little? Nothing at all? Mr. Adler has pertinent and fresh things to say on all these matters.

He reminds us that, though we in our generation cannot in all probability *make* peace, we can *promote* it by action open to all of us, action in thorough consonance with our pride in ourselves as citizens of a democracy. What action? See the chapter called "Means." It is not exhaustive, it is open to argument; yet it is a clear-visioned start.

But, even if we all work busily and with all our hearts toward world peace, we must work toward it with the full and grave consciousness—I would call it a religious, a truly Christian consciousness—that the work is being carried on by men who will not live to see it finished. As Mr. Adler points out, the builders of the Gothic cathedrals worked for hundreds of years, knowing that only some future generation would enjoy



the full glory of these temples of God. Are we less men than they were?

No, it cannot be done tomorrow. But how many of our important actions are determined by the assurance that we will enjoy their fruits tomorrow? Do we pay life-insurance premiums for tomorrow? Make last wills and testaments for tomorrow? Build up a happy family life only for tomorrow? Instruct our children for tomorrow? Revere God for tomorrow? In sober truth, much of the life we live today is but posthumous, and the actions of our mortality are fit only for the creation of things immortal.

So, let us ask ourselves, is a remote objective to be cast aside merely because it is remote? Or has this terrible war matured us at last, filled us with the quiet determination that we must, sooner or later—and better sooner than later—escape from this devilish cycle of self-annihilation. Has it taught us that truces are not enough, treaties not enough, a narrow and self-glorifying patriotism not enough?

It is my firm conviction that here, in the most democratic of countries, a growing minority is ready to cry, “These are not enough!” To them, to their friends, and even to their enemies, this book, offering as its only charm the dry light of reason, humbly, modestly submits itself.

One last word before I turn you over to Mr. Adler. During a war, the dread pair of alternatives facing the soldier, and less directly, the civilian, is: *Fight or Die*. But below this set of alternatives lies a deeper and more persistent one, for it will confront us when the fighting is over. That set of alternatives is: *Think or Die*. Mr. Adler’s book is highly undramatic in tone, yet underlying the quietest, the most abstract of his sentences is that dread, concrete imperative: *Think or Die*. We didn’t *think* in 1919; and we are dying now.

If you say, "Thinking is not enough," who would disagree? But action without reflection, the jerry-built formulas that our legislators are presently emitting, this is still worse. We are not a lethargic people and move fast enough once we understand something; but we hate (who does not?) to go to the painful *trouble* of understanding it. All Mr. Adler asks us to do is try to understand, for proper and orderly action will follow proper and orderly thought, if the thought is common to a sufficient number of people.

And when that thought at last is common, or at least prevalent, we will inevitably be set firmly on the one road this bleeding globe must traverse if ever its perennial wounds are to be stanchd. For these wounds will be stanchd only by a Veronica's veil woven of the intangible threads of thought and conscience, the thought and conscience of all men and women working together with the grave resolution that there shall some day be, not a society of nations, but, as great thinkers from Marcus Aurelius to William Penn and Tom Paine (with Jesus standing sorrowfully above them all) have imagined—A Society of Men.

November 1, 1943

-----

\* From Mortimer Adler's book *How to Think About WAR and PEACE*, originally published in 1943 by Simon and Schuster, NY. Republished in 1995 by Fordham University Press, NY.

This book is readably available from our Homepage link to Barnes and Noble.

=====

The Preface to the book:

THIS BOOK contains the facts and ideas I wish I had been taught in school and college. It contains the principles and conclusions which I should have been teaching students in every class these last twenty years. I was given no understanding of war and peace at any point in my own education. And I have failed as a teacher to give a later generation the fundamental insights which should be everyone's possession.

In the introduction to his recent book on American foreign policy, Mr. Walter Lippmann described himself as "one young man who was not mentally prepared for the age he was destined to live in." Neither Harvard nor travel abroad nor years of editorial work on *The New Republic* and the old *New York World* gave him the education he needed in American history or the understanding he now has of the problem his country faces in foreign affairs. "The conclusions set down in this book," he wrote, "represent what I now think I have learned, and not at all what I always knew."

Without having gone to Harvard, most of us are as vague about the significance of American history as Mr. Lippmann confesses himself to have been. Most of us, without having written editorials on the burning issues of the day, are as unaware of the principles which should determine a country's foreign policy and its thinking about war and peace. The fault is not that American history is slighted in school or college, but that American history—in fact, all history—is so poorly taught, so blindly written, and so blindly read.

There is a deeper failing which Mr. Lippmann's admirable candor inspires me to confess—for myself at least. Until very recently, I was ignorant of more important things than American history., I had no understanding of the basic simple truths which make peace on earth an intelligible ideal; I had no conception,

which historical insight might have given me, of man's progress toward peace and the probability of its eventual accomplishment.

I must add, with immodesty, that my shame is greater than Mr. Lippmann's. I profess to teach the philosophy of law. I have taught political philosophy for many years. Now that I think of it, it seems to me that I should have known better. I should have known that the theory of law and government is, above all, concerned with war and peace. I should have known that any philosophy of history worthy of the name has a profound bearing on this problem.

I should have taught my students that war and peace are the central terms in political theory, and that the gradual development of peace is the deepest trend in the world's history, as well as the deepest aspiration behind man's struggle to civilize himself.

It took the present war to arouse me, as it has aroused others, from neglect of these matters. In the last five years I have discovered what every schoolboy should know about war and peace through a study of history and politics. The terrible magnitude of this war and its ominous foreshadowing of the future made it impossible to be satisfied any longer with hazy ideas about the conditions of peace, or vague presentiments about the wars to come in endless succession. Utter despair seemed too high a price to pay for disillusionment; and it seemed as if it should be possible to hope, and even to act, for a better world without complete self-deception.

I cannot give the war itself full credit for my enlightenment. Within the last few years, the war has produced a series of books about the peace which should follow it, written from many angles and with different purposes. I have read a great many of these, only to become, at first, confused and of many minds where

before I was ignorant and of no mind at all. I say “at first” because discontent with this dubious frame of mind led me to look for the principles and notions which might clarify the problem and bring all its elements into perspective and good order.

I found, what I should have suspected, that the history of human thought contains all the ideas anyone needs with which to think clearly and with reasonable certitude about peace; and that the history of human action records all the developments needed to infer what can be done from what has been done, and to inspire faith that what can be done will be done.

As a result of such efforts at self-clarification, this book tries to expound the rudimentary notions which anyone must use to think clearly about war and peace. It tries to set forth the fundamental facts of history on which anyone must rely to make his thinking certain and definite rather than full of doubts and cross-purposes. I hope that reading it may prove as clarifying to others as writing it has been for me.

Because it is a reaction to other books on the subject, as well as a consideration of the subject itself, this book may serve to mediate between the facts all of us have to think about and the thinking many of us have already done for ourselves, or the thinking of others with which we are acquainted. *It differs from most of the current books about peace in that it is primarily concerned with the ideas which should be in every citizen's mind, not the plans or blueprints which deserve a place at the peace table.*

The title is accurate. It is not a book about how to make peace after this war is over or about what should be done at the peace conference. It is concerned with how to think about peace—and war—and how to do that from now until peace is finally made. But it is not a

book of rules, as was *How to Read a Book*. It is a book of ideas to think with.

Finally, it is a book for Americans only by reason of the accident that it is written by an American and published in America. In writing it I have tried to keep in mind that what I had to say could have been written, as it can be read, by men of any nationality or culture. The problem of war and peace is a human problem, not a provincial one. The ideas which can solve it are universal, not American or European. The facts on which sound conclusions rest belong to world history, not to the history of this country or any other.

World peace, more than any other practical problem, requires men everywhere in the world to acknowledge the same facts and to be guided by the same ideas. The members of the human race must be able to think about war and peace in the same way without the distortion of local prejudice or the blinders of partisan interest. Until they do, they do not belong, in thought or action, to the one world whose physical unity sets the stage for a peace that is likewise one and indivisible.

Mortimer J. Adler

August 31, 1943

\*\*\*\*\*

**THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE**

is published weekly for its members, by the  
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas

Founded by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann (1990)

E-mail: [TGIdeas@speedsite.com](mailto:TGIdeas@speedsite.com)

Homepage: [TheGreatIdeas.org](http://TheGreatIdeas.org)

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.