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## Closing Argument

# Are We At War?

**Michael Howard**

I  
This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the IISS. I shall not bore you with a blast on our own trumpet, except to remark how astonishing and gratifying it is to see how the acorn that Alastair Buchan then planted should have grown into such a flourishing tree and continued to bear such nourishing fruit. But I would stress the point that the founders of the Institute never had the audacity to claim to tell people *what* to think about strategic affairs, much less what to *do* about them. Our hope was simply to persuade people at least to *think* about them – not only the military and political experts whose job it was, but everyone with a vote – and to provide them with accurate information so that they could think intelligently; possibly also to provide some guide to priorities, as to what was important and what less so.

At that time there could be no doubt as to what was most important: it was the acquisition by the major powers of the world, at a time when they were bitterly divided by incompatible ideologies, of nuclear weapons capable of destroying mankind several times over. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed to open a new and grimmer era in the history of mankind, and we were only beginning to learn how to come to terms with it. So, unsurprisingly, the work of the Institute focused for several years on questions of nuclear deterrence, disarmament and arms

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control before broadening out to consider less existential, if more immediate, questions. Now I would just say that those questions of nuclear war have not gone away: the proliferation and control of nuclear weapons remains one of the ineluctable problems of our time. The nuclear dragon may be sleeping, but it is certainly not dead, and the IISS continues to keep a wary eye on it.

Then seven years ago another event occurred that was in some ways even more epoch-making than the development of nuclear weapons: '9-11', the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York by a dozen or so terrorists, with the massacre of some 3,000 people who were peacefully working there. The perpetrators had themselves been virtually unarmed, with none of the resources of a major state behind them. The implications were terrifying. How many more of them were out there? What if they had access to nuclear weapons? We had to come to terms with the fact the most powerful state in the world could now be seriously harmed, not by another state equally powerful, but by small private groups owing allegiance to no state at all. For the past 300 years wars had been waged, but also peace had been kept, by States, one of whose defining characteristics was that they enjoyed a monopoly of violence. That monopoly had now been seriously breached by elements apparently beyond state control. Fifty years ago the challenge to world order had come from the transformation of weapons systems. Now it appears threatened by the transformation, if not disintegration, of the entire states-system that has provided the framework for international relations for 300-odd years.

The American government reacted to 9-11, understandably enough, as if the attack had come from an enemy state. It declared war, and from that day to this many, if not most, Americans still believe that they are 'at war', although the precise definition of the adversary has varied over the years. But many, if not most, of America's friends and allies believed this reaction to be mistaken. For what it is worth, I was one of them. We have now had seven years to think about it and I still believe that America was wrong, and dangerously wrong. The United States and her allies are certainly engaged in armed conflicts in many parts of the world, but that is a different matter from being 'at war'; and the difference matters. I hope

that you will forgive me if I take this opportunity to share with you some further thoughts on the question. I need hardly add that they are my own thoughts, and they certainly don't carry any imprimatur from the IISS as such.

## II

When I use the term 'epoch-making' to describe 9-11, I choose the words carefully. What we are witnessing is the close of an epoch that opened some 350 years ago; an epoch generally known as 'Westphalian' after the Peace of Westphalia, concluded in 1648, that remoulded the decaying feudal order of Europe into discrete sovereign states with distinct frontiers, whose rulers went to war to protect or extend their national interests very much as they thought fit. National loyalties might be complicated by transnational affiliations: in the seventeenth century by loyalty to the Catholic Church; a century later by the appeal of revolutionary France; in our own day by that of international communism. But on the whole the state could rely on the overwhelming support of its citizens – never more so than during the First World War, when the loyalties of armies fighting for their countries was unadulterated by considerations of transnational ideologies. The object of war was simple – victory; and victory was attained by the overthrow of the enemy, the destruction of his will and capacity to resist. Once victory was achieved a peace was made that enhanced the power and interests of the victors, but the framework of the system, not least the sovereignty of its members, normally remained unaffected.

But there was one belligerent to whom this simple Westphalian pattern did not apply – the United States; or rather, the president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. When Wilson brought his country into the European war in April 1917 it was not as an ally of either side, nor did he endorse the war aims of his co-belligerents. For him the war was a crusade, one, as he himself put it, 'for a universal domination of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself free'. It was a war, in fact, to change the world.

This was not a path down which Wilson's own people were yet prepared to follow him, let alone those of his European allies. The Europeans

were still thorough Westphalians. They had made war to protect their national interests and those interests determined the peace that they eventually made. Nevertheless, Wilson's vision, of Westphalian wars being replaced by what we might term 'Enlightenment Wars', crusades for the establishment of 'a Universal Domination of Right', was to remain the declared objective of the United States throughout the twentieth century. Her wars were fought not simply to defeat her adversaries but to convert them so as to make further war inconceivable.

So unlike Westphalian wars, Enlightenment wars were fought not for purely national interests but on behalf of mankind. The object was to create a *community* of nations which, if they went to war at all, would do so not to prosecute quarrels with one another, but to enforce a commonly accepted law against a transgressor. To bring such a community into existence it might certainly be necessary to use force against a member who did not share its values. This was the case both with Imperial Germany and its Nazi successor, both of which had to be converted to democracy before they could be admitted to the comity of nations. But after the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945 the United States was able to put its principles into practice, with 'democratic values' and the principle of 'collective security' being accepted, if only notionally, by all members of the United Nations.

As we know, this happy state did not last for long. The Cold War quickly brought it to an end as the leading powers divided into two blocs, each identifying itself with a different concept of 'democracy' and a different vision of 'world order'. But stability of a curious kind did result, if only from the fact that, in the nuclear age, neither side dared go to war. New states were thus able to emerge peacefully onto the world stage, largely because, with a few exceptions, their former imperial masters had neither the will nor the capacity to prevent it. Some of them flirted with the Soviet Union so long as its ideology and power gave them some leverage on the world scene, but most joined the world of the market economy, even though this made them dependent on the West. Ultimately, the failure of the communist dream forced both the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China to do the same. It was the stability provided by the Cold War that by the end of the twentieth century enabled a new global order to come

into being that was gradually to render the Westphalian system of states obsolescent, if not yet obsolete.

This order was of a different kind from that visualised by Wilson and implemented in some measure by Franklin Roosevelt. It was not international, but transnational. It did not result from agreement between governments; indeed it had often come into being in spite of them. It had been created by the silent operation of a market economy that had originated in Europe and the Atlantic region in the early nineteenth century and developed ever faster as sail gave way to steam, steam gave way to oil, electricity gave birth to electronics, telegraph was replaced by radio and television, which in turn led to the Internet that has now made instant communication possible not only between every nation, but every man, woman, and, not least, child, on the planet. It is a process that has swept away social structures, political hierarchies and religious beliefs, opening up unimaginable opportunities for mankind but leaving in its wake a trail of confusion, bitterness and anomie. No state, even the most powerful, can remain immune from its effects: the communist world struggled in vain to insulate itself, and eventually gave up in despair.

In this post-Westphalian world the function of the state is no longer simply to create and preserve an acceptable order for its citizens and defend them against their rivals. It is also to enable its citizens to participate fully in this new transnational global order while protecting them so far as possible from its ravages; to cooperate with other like-minded states in so doing; and to assist in the evolution of such states where they do not yet exist and to restore them when they are threatened.

The Westphalian system is far from extinct and traces of it will be with us for many years yet. States may no longer enjoy a monopoly of violence but wars between them are still possible, especially between small new states with ill-defined frontiers. It is also still conceivable between great powers – China, the United States, Russia, India, and as some would have it, the European Union – and all arm to face that possibility. But today the major threats to world order do not come from rivalry between great powers, but from the inability of weak states to exert control either over their own citizens or over highly volatile regions where no effective writ

runs; and this weakness creates threats of disorder with which traditional military power has shown itself ill-adapted to deal. The world is in fact increasingly divided, not between freedom and tyranny, nor between democracy and dictatorship, but between states that are successfully adjusting themselves to membership of global civil society and those that are not.

This 'new world order' has three primary characteristics. It is *global*, embracing the entire planet. Disorder anywhere in the world may have universal implications. It is *dynamic*: today there is no region that is not experiencing increasingly rapid and socially disruptive change. The effectiveness – indeed the *legitimacy* – of governments depends on their capacity to manage that change, a capacity itself dependent on social consensus, uncorrupt administration and the rule of law.

Above all, this global society is highly *vulnerable*. I shall say nothing here about climate change, which is perhaps the greatest threat of all, but in addition to that, increasing urbanisation is making an ever larger proportion of the world's populations dependent on exogenous supplies of vital fuel, and creating huge conglomerations – hardly deserving the name of 'cities' – whose critical infrastructure can easily be disrupted by a few malevolent individuals who can cause at best widespread inconvenience, at worst destruction on a scale far transcending that of 9-11.

There is no lack of people ready to so disrupt it. Although the transformation of our societies increases the wealth, the health, the life expectancy and the opportunities open to mankind to a degree inconceivable even a century ago, it also creates losers: uprooted peoples whose livelihood and lifestyles have been destroyed, whose traditional political structures have been demolished, and whose core beliefs – beliefs that held their societies together for centuries – have been dissolved. Their grievances may be regionally and politically specific as were those of the Irish or the Jews a generation ago, or those of the Palestinians today. They may be based on a more general resentment at the injustice and oppressions inherent in a global economy that may put the prosperity of entire societies at the mercy of decisions taken in boardrooms at the other end of the world. They may be provoked simply by visceral reaction against the hedonistic secular

materialism that has destroyed faiths that sustained their ancestors for millennia. Whatever the cause, there will be no lack of angry young men and women in a generation whose numbers are swollen by increased life expectancy beyond their capacity to find employment, and who will not hesitate to use violence to redress or revenge their grievances. They may revert to atavistic tribalism. They may be recruited to messianic creeds, religious or secular, that promise a new and glorious future. Sometimes their protests may be channelled into political parties that gain control of a state, as happened so disastrously in the case of Germany after 1918. But initially they are all likely to turn to 'terror': first *demonstrative*, 'the propaganda of the deed', to give expression to their resentment, advertise their existence and recruit supporters; then *intimidatory*, to cow their opponents into submission; finally *provocative*, to tempt the government into overreaction and so delegitimise its authority.

There is nothing new about these techniques: in Europe they have a pedigree dating back nearly two centuries. But in our own day they have been rendered far more lethal: first by the vulnerability of urban societies to which I referred; and secondly by a readiness for self-sacrifice that was perhaps more common in our own societies a couple of generations ago – when young men were positively encouraged 'to lay down their lives for their country' – than it is today. For whatever our political leaders may say about the atrocities perpetrated by suicide bombers, these are not 'mindless'. They are often carefully calculated and regrettably effective. And they are certainly not 'cowardly': people who are prepared to die for a cause in which they believe may be misled, but they are not cowards. If we do not accept that we are often dealing with people who are both intelligent and courageous we would be very stupid indeed.

### III

The threat of terrorist protest thus accompanies the development of our global society like an inescapable shadow, and is likely to remain a major social problem as far forward as we can foresee. In our own day it has been made especially lethal by the coincidence of the problem of Palestine, affecting as it does the entire Muslim world, with a profound crisis of

modernisation within Islam that has produced a school of extremists whose influence extends beyond the Middle East into the Muslim diaspora in Western cities – a diaspora that has its own problems of cultural assimilation. It is a combination that presents a formidable challenge to the stability of the entire world order. But there is no point in ‘declaring war’ on it, let alone adopting the apocalyptic language of religious extremists who stigmatise their opponents as the embodiment of evil.

This is not a mere matter of semantics. There is no harm in speaking of wars against poverty, or crime, or disease. These are mere metaphors: they do not give a license to kill. But in the world of international politics ‘war’ has a specific meaning. It means quite specifically the abandonment of civil restraints and the legitimisation of the use of whatever force is necessary to achieve one’s objectives. Restraints inherent in the culture of the belligerent societies may be observed in the conduct of war – restraints recently described by one American attorney general as ‘quaint’ – but they will be very quickly abandoned under duress. The leaders of nations at war have always considered themselves entitled, if all else fails, to use any means to defeat their adversary and avoid defeat themselves, whether it be the torture of individuals or the destruction of entire cities, and they will usually enjoy massive popular support when they do so. Let us be clear about it. To ‘declare war’ is formally to espouse a set of values and to legitimise activities normally outlawed in civil society.

But in dealing with terrorists our object should be not to abandon those values. It is to enforce them. ‘9-11’ and similar atrocities should be seen, not as acts of war, but as ‘breaches of the peace’ – not just the peace created by international treaties, but the peaceful order that makes possible the functioning of a global civil society on which the well-being of the entire planet depends. Our approach in dealing with them should not be that of ‘warriors’ but of *police*, whose function is the preservation of civil order, and for whom the use of force is the last and least desirable resort. The object of terrorism is to destroy the legitimacy of the incumbent authority. The object of government must be to preserve and exert it, and to avoid being dragged into a conflict on the same level as its adversary. That is

possible only so long as it retains the confidence of the community on whose behalf it claims to act.

This should not be too difficult in dealing with domestic terrorism, unless the extremists have a cause – as they did in Northern Ireland – that can command substantial public support. But intervention to deal with terrorist activity in foreign countries is a very different matter. It is true that the global civil society whose peace we are trying to keep has yet to develop its own transnational structure of government, so its agents have often to be the armed forces of old-fashioned Westphalian states whose very presence, however well-intentioned, is likely to arouse a very natural xenophobia; especially if they carry a great deal of their own tribal culture with them. However well they may behave, however many sweets they give children, foreign soldiers can never be very popular, certainly not for very long, and certainly not if they believe that they are ‘at war’ and are therefore immune from normal civil restraints. It then becomes all too easy for their opponents to depict them as the agents, not of a global civil society, but of an alien hegemony, and condemn those who support them as traitors.

For all these reasons we should not become involved in the affairs even of the most incompetent and failing states unless our intervention is a matter of vital importance to global stability and has clear international legitimacy. I would argue that our intervention in Afghanistan meets these criteria, while that in Iraq did not. And if we do become involved, our object must be neither to subdue nor to convert – not even convert to Western-style democracy. It is to assist where necessary in destroying hard cores of nihilistic extremists and to aid the construction, or reconstruction, of a civil society whose government can fulfil its basic obligations: to maintain a socially acceptable order; to connect its citizens with the benefits of transnational civil society while protecting them from its hazards; and to act as a dependable member of the community of states. If there is no immediate prospect of doing any of this, we would be ill advised to try.

I am afraid that all this is now pretty platitudinous, but it would not have been seen as such in Washington – or even, I am afraid, Downing Street – five years ago. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has now made

us sadder and I hope wiser people. After a similar if rather less traumatic experience suffered by the British in South Africa at the beginning of the last century, the poet Rudyard Kipling – whose observations on war in Afghanistan still have a poignant relevance – remarked:

Let us admit it fairly, as a business people should  
We have had no end of a lesson; it will do us no end of good.

At least, I hope it will.