With the end of the Cold War, perhaps no topics in military affairs have demanded more thought or energy than those concerned with the future of war. As the size of the American military establishment declines, the importance of answering questions related to the future environment of conflict increases.

The material which follows originated in a speech given to the University of Otago branch of the New Zealand Institute for International Affairs. It is presently undergoing revision, but because of the current interest in the topic, I have decided to include the original in the book on a temporary basis.

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All too often thinking about the future of war resembles science fiction, with wars described as high tech affairs dominated by lasers, robot weapons, computerized decision making, neutron bombs, energy beams, and fighting space stations. Unfortunately, such fantasies have their counterpart in normal military thinking. For decades both American and Soviet planners viewed war as something involving large numbers of troops, the latest in weapons technology, and, if worst came to worst, the use of nuclear explosives. Both sides spent billions preparing for large scale conventional and nuclear conflict; both spent billions more fighting unsuccessful unconventional and limited wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

That highly abbreviated bit of Cold War history highlights a very important distinction between "imaginary war" and "real war." Often the conflicts we worry about and prepare for exist only in our imaginations, but with so much effort devoted to thinking about the imaginary wars we are frequently unprepared for the real conflicts when they come.

The tendency to plan for imaginary war continues, however, stimulated, among other things, by the example of the Gulf War. Despite its futuristic look, however, the Gulf War is a poor model for future conflict, although it appears to be the primary model in the industrialized West as far as planning and weapons development is concerned.

The waning of the Cold War has lessened the probability of a global nuclear holocaust. Many individuals continue to focus on nuclear threats, particularly
proliferation, as in the case of North Korea, but worry about proliferation seems exaggerated. Although proliferation may increase the risks of nuclear explosives being detonated, either intentionally or accidentally, such a catastrophe could have a beneficial "revaccination" effect. Like the use of the atomic bombs in WW II or the Chernobyl disaster, any future nuclear event would have an important sobering impact, particularly on groups controlling nuclear explosives. Better to have a nuclear exchange between two small states in some global backwater than the nuclear holocaust so feared during the Cold War.

The history of the Cold War provides an even better reason for not worrying too much about proliferation. Mutual possession of nuclear explosives made both sides cautious at a time of great antagonism. War might easily have resulted had the fear of the potential nuclear consequences been absent. Assuming that similar fears will accompany the acquisition of nuclear explosives by others, the fears associated with proliferation appear to represent another manifestation of imaginary war thinking that diverts our attention from the real wars in our future.

While politicians worry about North Korea with the bomb and military planners study the lessons of the Gulf War, every day on television and in the newspaper we see what war has become, and it bears little resemblance to the conflicts often studied in war colleges and national security think tanks. Most of the real wars around us are small in terms of the absolute numbers of combatants involved, but they are protracted, fought over periods of years, even decades. In many places warfare appears to be endemic, continuing over generations, often in a discontinuous and episodic way, with an ebb and flow that defies description. Negotiation has been subsumed into fighting, and instead of lasting peace one sees only periods of rest and recuperation, followed by renewed fighting. Because the real wars around us frequently involve multiple parties rather than two distinct belligerents, the conflicts are particularly confusing to outsiders and more difficult to end, through intervention or mediation.

Although the weapons used are rarely the most sophisticated in the global arsenal, contemporary wars are fought with a devastating intensity. Where in WW I over 90% of the casualties were military, at present the vast majority of the casualties are non-combatants. Today's wars also produce vast numbers of refugees.

Many contemporary wars remain hidden from view in global backwaters away from the prying eyes of reporters and TV cameras—in Kurdistan, the southern Sudan, or the high Andes. In some places they are guerrilla wars; elsewhere they are wars of terrorism, pitting small bombs and snipers' bullets against the torturers and death squads of authoritarian governments. Such wars are rarely amenable to solution through the use of the high tech military power of the modern state, and the supposed military prowess of the great powers seems almost irrelevant in such conflicts.

Because international politics takes place in an environment containing no ultimate
authority or universally accepted method of peacefully reconciling conflicts of interest, the final arbiter of disputes is too often a resort to violence. Although war is avoided in many situations, the possibility of war exerts a continuous influence on interaction in the international arena.

The environment within states is not fundamentally different from that in the international arena, particularly in states that are highly polarized along ethnic, religious, class, or comparable lines. Both the threat of violence and the reality are a part of normal state politics, even in liberal democracies.

The nature of contemporary conflict in the dog eat dog environment of the post-Cold War world can be explained by reference to a number of historical trends that have altered the face of war. The major changes in interstate war were evident by the 1950s, at least to Walter Millis, whose brilliant analysis in *Arms and Men* remains one of the most intelligent surveys of the history of modern warfare.

Millis showed war developing through a series of interconnected stages, each providing a greater capacity for violence than the previous stage. The revolutionary nationalism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries enabled the state to tap a vast reservoir of manpower; the industrial revolution provided the means to equip and sustain ever larger armies and increasingly powerful navies. A managerial revolution in the last half of the 19th century provided both the techniques and the technology needed to pull together the human and material resources made available by the two revolutions that preceded it.

The mechanization of war, evident in World War I, and the Second World War's scientific revolution greatly increased war's destructive capacity and its global reach, so that by 1945 the entire process had led to what Millis deemed the "hypertrophy of war." War had become "a naked instrument of defense," and then "only in an extremity of crisis." With nuclear explosives, said Millis, "its utility even to this end was questionable."[1]

Recent examples of conventional battle support Millis's conclusions. In three days of fighting on the Golan Heights during the 1973 October War, for example, Israel lost some 93 of 100 tanks engaged; Syria lost about 500 of some 900. Syrian tanks were destroyed on average within five seconds of being identified. In a single month of the Iran-Iraq war in 1984 some 20,000 Iranians and 7,000 Iraqis died in a Somme-like battle of attrition. Although technology provided an equalizer for the combatant with the lower population, the outcome of both conflicts was indecisive.

Nevertheless, the use of force as a tool of policy continues, and many leaders still believe that war can decide issues when diplomacy has failed. A belief in the efficacy of war may also remain because of an absence of clear alternatives, although the respective great power military disasters in Vietnam and Afghanistan have made many military and civilian leaders in the industrialized world more acutely aware of the unpredictable nature of war, leading them to counsel restraint and caution. When
looking to war as a potential instrument of policy, leaders in nations such as the United States no longer seem confident that they possess the necessary tools to achieve their goals, particularly without a significant political as well as material cost.

My own studies of revolutionary warfare have revealed a more cyclical pattern that produced results similar to those Millis saw in the more linear evolution of interstate war. Although the balance of power between revolutionary groups and established governments has shifted more than once over the past five centuries, at present stalemate is the most probable outcome of attempts to overthrow all but the weakest states. Recent revolutionary conflicts have been highly destructive and protracted until at least one party has lost its will to fight or both have become too war weary or exhausted to continue.

In the February 1994 issue of The Atlantic Monthly an article by Robert D. Kaplan mirrors much of my own thinking on the probable nature of war in the not so distant future. Entitled "The Coming Anarchy," it began with an exceedingly dismal description of West Africa. Kaplan's image of Sierra Leone stands as a quick summary of things to come: the government, "run by a twenty-seven-year-old army captain, Valentine Strasser, controls Freetown [the capital] by day and by day also controls part of the rural interior. In the government's territory the national army is an unruly rabble threatening drivers and passengers at most check points. In the other part of the country units of two separate armies from the war in Liberia have taken up residence, as has an army of Sierra Leonian rebels. The government force fighting the rebels is full of renegade commanders who have aligned themselves with disaffected village chiefs. A pre-modern formlessness governs the battlefield, evoking the wars in medieval Europe."[2]

For Kaplan the environment is "the national-security issue of the early twenty-first century," as surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution, and, possibly, rising sea levels in critical, overcrowded regions like the Nile Delta and Bangladesh trigger "mass migrations and, in turn, incite group conflicts." (p. 58)

Historian Paul Kennedy has argued that these transnational problems "cannot be met by military force," noting that "carrier task forces and armored divisions" can not prevent such international problems as "the global demographic explosion" or "stop the greenhouse effect."[3] That is not to say, however, that state leaders will make no attempt to deal with such transnational problems by resorting to the use of national military power. Moreover, the effects of such problems on states and people will surely create new reasons for war, while traditional rivalries and tensions will remain or increase, particularly with the growing number of actors on the international stage.

We know less about the causes of interstate war than we would like, but we do know that as new states proliferate the number of conflicts over boundaries also increases. Similarly, as the total number of states increases, so does the overall number of
interstate conflicts. The heightened nationalism of exceedingly small units, combined with the absence of the empire building, consolidating forces of the past, will feed the process of collapse outlined by Kaplan.

Traditional analyses of national security concerns have focused primarily on states, but in the future non-state actors will be of increasing importance. Access to highly sophisticated weapons has given dissidents greater power to disrupt than at any time in history, and in the future non-state violence may spread with a speed and scope heretofore unknown, a result of increases in communication, human mobility, and weapons' availability.

Because fewer people with smaller forces can do more damage than in the past, vast armies are no longer needed to make war. As a consequence, the wars of the future will often bear little relationship to what we have historically come to know as war. Instead of a well defined phenomenon in which the organized forces of an existing state fight on one or both sides, war will increasingly take place within states incapable of maintaining order. To understand war in its new, mutated form we must revise our existing definition of war to incorporate such concepts as gang warfare and mob violence. As states break down, so will the various conventions and organizational forms of traditional inter-state warfare, as armed political, social, and cultural actors confront each other in a confusing collage of violence.

In the new environment, the high tech military forces of the great powers will be increasingly irrelevant to the outcome of most conflicts, although they will still enable industrialized states such as the United States or Great Britain to defeat third and fourth rate powers such as Grenada, Panama, or Argentina in interstate conflicts. As they have already demonstrated in Vietnam and Afghanistan, however, those same forces will be less likely to defeat determined enemies fighting protracted unconventional wars.

The most significant military result of post-WW II arms development has been a certain leveling of the playing field, as the relatively cheap and easily deployed mid tech weapons developed in the industrialized world find their way into the hands of virtually anyone who can buy or steal them, including not only such traditional non state actors as revolutionaries and nationalist separatists, but also drug cartels and fringe groups totally unrepresentative of the societies giving birth to them. As a consequence, the costs of war in human life and misery escalate, accompanied by an incalculable negative impact on the environment, and when the fruits of past progress are destroyed, the burdens of reconstruction fall upon an earth increasingly depleted of resources. To build a clinic, school, or power plant, only to have it destroyed and rebuilt, is a waste of resources which, multiplied many times over in conflict after conflict, may be a greater evil than the taking of human life that accompanies such destruction. The lives are more easily replaced than the infrastructure, and there is no guarantee that the rebuilt structures will survive subsequent conflicts.
In the developed world, modern military forces continue to spend millions to deploy a single high tech weapon. New Zealand, for example, has contemplated spending NZ$32 million for two Phalanx air defense Gatling guns for its frigates. Such expenditures take place at a time when the high tech approach to war continues to fall short of the promised outcomes. A recent book by a member of Britain’s Special Air Service, one of those elite forces that like to think of themselves as "the best of the best," demonstrates that the military benefits of high tech capabilities may be vastly overrated. During the Gulf War an eight man force was inserted into an area filled with far more Iraqi troops than the highly touted resources of modern intelligence gathering machinery anticipated. The team's equally modern radios failed to function, which meant that it could not be withdrawn. The result: three dead, four captured, one escaped.[4]

More recently we have seen an air strike in Bosnia in which one bomb failed to release, and only one of the other three exploded. Shortly after that, American planes in northern Iraq shot down two of their own helicopters, killing 26. Earlier in the year, when UN peacekeepers ambushed in Bosnia called in planes to aid them, the planes did nothing because no target could be identified.

In the most likely future of war--long, drawn-out conflicts that are rarely decisive but highly destructive--some stable and relatively prosperous states may decide to pursue policies of nonintervention, even at the cost of allowing forces they deplore to run rampant. Alternatively, states, either individually or working through regional or global organizations such as the UN, may attempt to help whatever side they believe to be right, providing they can make such difficult political decisions and also find ways to use their military forces effectively.

Pressures for UN action appear to be increasing, and when Terrance O'Brien spoke to the Institute of International Affairs branch in Dunedin he identified Bosnia as "a defining moment for the UN." The probable results of the defining process are less clear. O'Brien observed that many donors are already suffering from what he termed "aid fatigue," manifesting a decreasing willingness to meet the growing global demands for help. Intervention fatigue is also evident, particularly in nations such as the United States, where people assumed that the end of the Cold War would bring a "peace dividend" of significantly lower defense expenditures.

While states as individual actors appear to have lost power, as an organization of recognized states the UN is poorly positioned to play the role of a neutral outsider. Many UN members already face threats of their own from groups seeking autonomy or separation, and as a representative of collective state power the UN is unlikely to champion the interests of dissident factions within states. Also, as Paul Kennedy and others have noted, past experience with international treaties such as the Washington and London naval agreements and with earlier international organizations such as the League or the court at the Hague indicate that neither can keep sovereign states from going to war. Such instruments would appear to have even less ability to pacify
militant nationalists and sectarian groups within states.

In the United States people talk a lot about "the Vietnam syndrome," the widespread reaction against overseas intervention that followed the American failure in Indochina. Many people decry its paralyzing effects, but examples of the use of military power by the United States in local conflicts over the past century highlight the value of caution. In the American experience, military power has been most effective in its more negative aspects. At the turn of the century, for example, the United States military could destroy the Philippine revolution, but it could not achieve President McKinley's rhetorical vision of "benevolent assimilation." Later, in the Caribbean and Central America, the results of intervention invariably fell far short of the high minded goals articulated by American leaders.

In Vietnam the United States failed miserably in its application of military force, proving incapable of establishing a non-communist democratic state in the South. It could not even establish the kind of stable dictatorship that it had created and defended more than once in Latin America. Furthermore, the American failure in Southeast Asia came at significantly greater cost to the people in whose territory the United States fought and to the United States itself.

The limits of military power are great, even when it is used for the best of motives, and as Paul Kennedy observed, the development and use of military power eventually undermine the productive and growing economy which constitutes the true foundation of state power. Nevertheless, given the volatility in the international system, the complexity of the changing international environment, the growth of regional powers, the declining power of many long established states, and the pressures created by militant nationalism and sectarian fanaticism, both governments and non state actors will undoubtedly continue to prepare for war and devote precious resources to military purposes.

At the same time, the chances of using military power to any truly good result have diminished to the point that one can question the entire concept of intervention. Whether such power can still be used to resolve many international disputes in the post-Cold War world remains to be seen, but one should not be overly optimistic about the possible outcomes.

As long as it avoids internal collapse, New Zealand would appear to have little to fear in the future I envision. Large scale, global conflict is unlikely, as is war in which an external enemy directly threatens New Zealand. Equally unlikely is that New Zealand will be able to use military force to accomplish whatever goals it might have outside the very limited geographic area of the South Pacific. The ability of the United States to use its military power to achieve significant ends in an increasingly anarchistic world may be only marginally greater than that of smaller states such as New Zealand. For the United States today internal collapse, although unlikely, is a far greater danger than either large scale global conflict or attack by an external enemy.
We face an age old problem. Ethical concern and power are two separate entities. We may abhor what we see and wish to change it, but that does not mean that we have the power to engage in effective action. For the foreseeable future we may have to recognize and live with our powerlessness. Realizing that all human problems may not be amenable to solution, I turn for comfort to the words of the American philosopher J. Glenn Gray: "the larger purposes of the universe, though far transcending our weak powers of comprehension, may, after all, not be dependent on the history of man."[5]

[]1 Walter Millis, Arms and Men (New York, 1956), 364.


[]3 Paul Kennedy, Preparing for the Twenty-First Century (New York, 1993), 129.


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