

BRUSH UP YOUR THUCYDIDES,
START QUOTING HIM NOW.
BRUSH UP YOUR THUCYDIDES,
AND THE PUNDITS YOU WILL WOW!

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*Brush Up Your Thucydides,
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I

In recent years there has been renewed interest in the causes of war, particularly wars involving major powers. In fact the subject has become something of a cottage industry for historians.

This paper deals with the principal theories which have been advanced. The paper is focused on conflicts between major powers and not on wars between minor powers, such as between Iraq and Iran or Serbia and Croatia, nor on civil wars, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia or the internal conflicts which occurred in Ruanda and Burundi.

One may ask whether the study of the causes of wars between major powers is only of historical interest and whether it has any relevance or importance in a world where nuclear weapons are possessed by a number of states and, at least at present, there is only one superpower: the United States.

My answer, and that of the historians I will discuss, is that wars have always occurred throughout history and that wars between major powers probably will continue to take place in the future unless and until some all powerful central world authority arises that can prevent interstate conflict. Just as major wars occurred after the development of poison gas

and the bombing plane so will wars probably occur between nations possessing nuclear weapons.

The primary effect of possessing nuclear weapons is to neutralize and deter their use by one's adversary and enable a state to wage a conventional war under such nuclear umbrella. This is probably the best argument in favor of a limited missile defense system: that possession of same would allow the United States to use conventional forces, without fear of nuclear retaliation or blackmail, to counter aggression by a rogue state possessing a small arsenal of long-range nuclear armed missiles such as North Korea or Iraq.

If the possibility of future wars between major powers does exist, then the study of the causes of war is of more than academic interest and can assist in the prevention of such wars.

The principal theories as to the causes of major power wars which have been promulgated in recent years are set forth in the following books: On the Origins of War by Donald Kagan, Bass Professor of History, Classics, and Western Civilization at Yale University [published in 1995]; The Tragedy of Great Power Politics by John Mearsheimer, Professor of Political Science and co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago [published in 2001]; and The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order by Samuel Huntington, Albert J. Weatherhead III, University Professor and director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University [published in 1996 and expanded from a 1993 article in Foreign Affairs].

II

The first book to be discussed is On The Origins of War by Donald Kagan. He observes that Thucydides had the best explanation of why states are motivated to fight wars: that people go to war out of “honor, fear, and interest.”

Professor Kagan departs from the old views of mainstream historians that major wars chiefly result from the competition for power and economic gain through acquisition of territory and natural resources, or from a clash of ideologies and class struggle, or because of arms races and alliance systems, or because of the basic aggressive nature of man. Instead, in his view wars between great powers primarily arise from one or both of two situations.

The first situation is where a nation perceives that its honor and place in the sun is being challenged by other great powers and that its importance and views are not sufficiently respected by such other powers. By honor is meant deference, esteem, regard, respect, and prestige. Honor and power occupy a reciprocal relationship. As a nation’s power increases so does the deference and respect it receives from other powers. But if the deference and respect accorded to a country declines, even though its material power appears to remain the same, its power really declines. The prime example of this is when a nation is seen to lack the will to use its material power.

The second situation is where the adversaries of such disgruntled power fail to maintain adequate military strength to deter aggression by the dissatisfied power.

When there is a major power that believes that sufficient deference is not accorded to its views, interests and strength and when its adversaries have failed to maintain a military capability that will deter such aggrieved power, the outcome is often war.

Professor Kagan supports this thesis by analysis of the causes of four great power wars as well as a discussion of a situation which came very close to war: the Cuban missile crisis.

The first two wars discussed are those where Kagan states that fundamental cause was the belief that considerations of honor and prestige required that military action be undertaken. The last two wars discussed are those basically caused by the failure of the opponents of a dissatisfied great power to maintain sufficient military strength to deter aggression by such power.

(1) In Professor Kagan's view, the basic causes of the Peloponnesian War [431-404 B.C.] were the determination of Corinth, an ally of Sparta, to protect its honor by avenging slights suffered at the hands of Corcyra ^{Cor - Sigh - Ra} [modern Corfu], an ally of Athens, and to elevate Corinth's prestige among the Greek states. Athens, fearful of an unfavorable change in the balance of power if Corcyra and its large fleet were to fall into the hands of Corinth, came to Corcyra's assistance. Sparta in turn, out of fear that an ally would be destroyed and to avoid the loss of honor that would result from abandoning an ally, sided with Corinth. The result was a long and exhausting war which ended with the destruction of Athens as a great power in the Greek World.

(2) Kagan then discusses the First World War and the feeling by Germany that its growing economic and military strength was not sufficiently recognized and deferred to by Britain, France, and Russia with its honor and prestige suffering injury. Gradually Germany developed the belief that by reason of its rising strength it was destined to dominate Europe and perhaps the world and that there could be no halt in its efforts to expand its power because halt would produce decline.

Confronted with Germany's growing power and ambitions, Britain was unwilling to take the only measures that might have deterred Germany: entering into a formal and open alliance with France and Russia and creating a large army that could rapidly be deployed in France.

Austria-Hungary, alarmed by the growing power of Serbia and fearful that Serbia's support of Pan-Slavism would lead to disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, seized upon the pretext provided by Serbian complicity in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Austria-Hungary converted what basically was an affront to its prestige and honor into fear that its very survival was at stake and that it must use this opportunity to settle accounts with Serbia.

To preserve its honor and prestige, Russia felt that it was necessary to abide by its prior statements that it would protect Serbia – that it would be viewed as a decadent state if it abandoned Serbia. The question of prestige dominated Russia's concerns even though its material interests in Serbia and the Balkans were nonexistent.

(3) Professor Kagan then moves on to the Second Punic War [218-201 B.C.]. Rome had imposed a humiliating and onerous peace upon Carthage after its victory in the First Punic War [238 B.C.] and compounded such humiliation by subsequently increasing the indemnity to be paid by Carthage and seizing Sardinia. But at the same time the peace did not cripple Carthage permanently and left it with the ability to recover its strength.

Rome failed to take action as Carthage restored its fortunes by conquering eastern Spain and its rich silver mines, partly because of arrogance and the belief that Carthage no longer posed a threat and partly because of preoccupation with other threats. Finally Hannibal and his army crossed the Alps and the Second Punic War began in 218 B.C., a war that almost destroyed Rome.

The peace that Rome imposed on Carthage in 238 B.C. was of the least stable kind: it embittered Carthage without depriving Carthage of the capacity for seeking revenge and without establishing a system able to restrain Carthage. The policy that Rome pursued was both too hard and too soft.

(4) The final war analyzed by Professor Kagan is the Second World War with his focus confined to Europe. Like the Second Punic War, the Second World War primarily resulted from the harsh and humiliating peace imposed on Germany after the First World War including large territorial losses, substantial reparations, and occupation of the Rhineland. This produced a determination to undo the Treaty of Versailles and restore German honor and strength.

At the same time, France and Britain failed to enforce the Versailles restrictions on German rearmament or to use force to prevent reoccupation of the Rhineland when it was easily within their power to do so. Subsequently both countries followed a policy of appeasement and inaction with respect to the military involvement of Germany and Italy on Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War, the Austrian Anschluss, and the transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany at Munich.

~~At the same time~~ ^{And} Britain refused to rearm until the very last minute. All of this led Hitler to believe that France and Britain would once again back down and not honor their treaty obligations to Poland.

Britain, France, and their allies made the mistake in 1919 of not either granting Germany a peace settlement conciliatory enough to remove German desire for change and revenge or committing themselves on a long-term basis to enforce the Versailles Treaty disarmament provisions which would have made the revival of German military strength impossible.

Britain in particular was greatly influenced by its human and economic losses in World War I and the rise in the late 1920's of the view that the war was the consequence of the arms race, the alliance system, miscalculations by the great powers, and the pressure of "merchants of death," and that Germany was no more responsible for the outbreak of the First World War than the Allies.

These views were fueled by such books as Robert Grave's Goodbye to All That, Siegfried Sasson's Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, and Erich

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Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front as well as by many revisionist books by academics in both Britain and the United States.

In summary, like the Second Punic War, World War II was the product of the failure of the victors to construct a solid basis for peace at the end of the First World War and to work consistently to preserve the peace that ensued. The British in particular followed the vision that evil could be overcome by the example of unilateral virtue, trust, and goodwill and ignored the darker nature of man painted by Thucydides, a nature that has remained largely the same over the centuries.

(5) Lastly, Professor Kagan discusses the Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962. In his view the crisis was brought on by Khrushchev's belief, similar to Hitler's view of Britain and France before World War II began, that President Kennedy was weak and lacked the will to use force against the Soviet Union and its allies, having failed to do so in previous Cold War confrontations and crises such as the Bay of Pigs, construction of the Berlin Wall, and the Soviet supply of military equipment to Cuba. This view was reinforced by Kennedy's seeming acquiescence in Khrushchev's belligerent behavior at the Vienna Summit in June, 1961. In essence the Cuban Missile Crisis resulted from the Soviet perception of an America lacking resolve and therefore not to be accorded the deference and respect that otherwise would exist by reason of its conventional military superiority in the Caribbean and its overwhelming superiority in nuclear missiles.

Kennedy's general approach to the Soviet Union was based upon the concept that wars, such as World War I, came about chiefly through

miscalculation and therefore it was important to demonstrate America's pacific intentions. Kennedy incorrectly assumed that Khrushchev was playing by the same rules and had goals similar to Kennedy. He ignored the possibility that the Soviets might be bluffing and that inaction would be interpreted as weakness and embolden the adversary to press harder.

Khrushchev, of course, failed to understand the political necessity for Kennedy finally to forcefully respond to such a blatant challenge to American prestige and honor. However, Khrushchev's actions were not all that misguided: in the end, the United States secretly agreed to withdraw its Jupiter missiles from Turkey without securing the consent of Turkey and NATO to same, agreed not to invade Cuba, and acquiesced in the continued stationing of over 40,000 Soviet troops in Cuba and the continued supply of Soviet armaments to Cuba.

In summary, Professor Kagan correctly points out that in the conduct of foreign policy, the impact of actions upon the prestige and honor of other nations cannot be ignored. Ultimately Kennedy's policy in the Cuban Missile Crisis did not paint the Soviet Union into a corner but rather allowed Khrushchev to conduct a somewhat dignified retreat with the knowledge that he had obtained significant private concessions from the United States. Similarly, in dealing with a nation that is acutely sensitive to perceived slights to its honor and to perceived overbearing actions on the part of the United States, the present Bush Administration handled with appropriate care and non-provocative rhetoric the collision caused by a Chinese fighter pilot that resulted in the American intelligence gathering plane having to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island.

III

I next turn to The Tragedy of Great Power Politics by John Mearsheimer. In propounding his views on the causes of great power conflicts, Mearsheimer cites the statement of Thucydides that in relations between states “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

Professor Mearsheimer’s basic thesis is that there is a natural tendency on the part of all great powers to pursue opportunities to gain power over their rivals and to seek domination [hegemony] in their part of the world. This tendency is a product of their desire for security and their fear of rivals. To achieve hegemony a nation seeks to acquire as much economic and military power as possible.

While it is impossible for one great power to establish hegemony over the entire world, a great power can establish hegemony over a region of the world as the United States has done in the Western Hemisphere. This tendency and characteristic of great powers is labeled “offensive realism” by the author. War and other conflict can be a product of such tendency. The greatest risk of conflict exists when there is one potential hegemon among the great powers in a particular region [unbalanced multipolarity] rather than having power distributed more or less evenly among the great powers in the region [balanced multipolarity].

The desire for hegemony exists because we live in an anarchic world of independent states with no all-powerful central authority over them.

Great powers can never be certain about other states' intentions with survival being their primary goal. Because of this there are powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively towards each other. Their behavior is the product of fear, self-help, and power maximization.

While great powers that are regional hegemons normally are satisfied status quo powers, at the same time such hegemonic powers seek to prevent great powers in other regions of the world from achieving hegemony in their regions. This was the policy of the United States in entering the First World War in 1917, in actively aiding Britain in 1940-1941, and cutting off the supply of scrap metal and oil to Japan in 1940-1941.

Mearsheimer addresses the argument that both Britain and the United States appear to constitute exceptions to his "offensive realism" theory. His answer is twofold. First, and this is his weakest argument, that seeking hegemony was barred by the "stopping power" of the water barriers between Britain and the European mainland and between the United States and both Europe and Asia. Second, the United States did pursue and achieve hegemony in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th Century and while neither Britain nor the United States sought hegemony in Europe or Asia, first Britain and then the United States adopted the role of offshore balancers, intervening abroad to thwart an attempt by another great power to secure hegemony in Europe or Asia.

Professor Mearsheimer supports his theory by examining European history from the French Revolution until the end of the Cold War. In his

view the wars between Revolutionary and Napoleonic France on the one hand and the other major European powers on the other occurred during a period when there was an imbalance of military and economic power between France and its adversaries with France seizing its opportunity to establish hegemony over Europe and nearly succeeding in the effort.

In contrast, a balance of power among the great powers of Europe was achieved at the Congress of Vienna and ended only in the first years of the 20th Century. This prevented any European power from becoming a potential hegemon. It was only after Germany's great increase in relative industrial power and military manpower created the possibility of German hegemony over Europe that other European great powers belatedly began to ally themselves against Germany. The balance of power Germany's opponents sought to achieve was tenuous and not sufficient to deter Germany, especially because Britain was unwilling to restrict its freedom of action by entering into a formal agreement to become part of the Triple Entente with France and Russia. As a result Britain might well have stayed out of the First World War if Belgium had not been invaded.

Following World War I there again was a balance of power in Europe until 1938. However, by the time Hitler invaded Poland in September, 1939, a significant imbalance in power, industrially, in population, and in quality of its armed forces, had arisen in favor of Germany and which almost resulted in German domination of Europe.

From 1945 to the end of the Cold War a bipolar world existed with a rough balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States that prevented direct military conflict between the two superpowers.

Mearsheimer finally takes a look at what can be expected in the first part of the 21st Century. While his book was written before September 11th, he believes that the inclination of the United States to withdraw militarily from Europe, Northeast Asia, and elsewhere will increase and that within the next two decades the American military presence will be removed from both Europe and Northeast Asia [i.e.: South Korea and Japan]. This will eventually result in the revival of great power rivalry in Europe with the probable acquisition of nuclear weapons by Germany, especially if Russia again becomes a major economic and military power.

Similarly, great power rivalry will resume in Northeast Asia with substantial rearmament and probable acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan. This will be particularly the case because of the inevitable great increase in China's economic and military power and the incentive this will provide China to seek to be the hegemonic power in Eastern Asia. The rise of China, in Mearsheimer's view, will present an enormous military challenge to the United States since, under his theory, America automatically will oppose Chinese hegemony in East Asia just as it did with respect to Japan. The possibility of a military conflict between China and the United States will be great. For this reason the policy of "engagement" with China, promoted by the Clinton Administration, is a mistake. This was also the view of Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro in their famous 1997 article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled The Coming Conflict with China.

Mearsheimer does not believe that his theory of great power politics is challenged by such factors as European efforts at further integration, globalization, existence of the United Nations, etc. He strongly doubts that

European nations will give up their sovereignty and, even if they do, a politically united Europe would simply be another great power with great power ambitions and security concerns. In his view nationalism remains a powerful force in Europe and elsewhere.

IV

The final book to be discussed is The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order by Samuel Huntington. The book's thesis is that conflict between civilizations increasingly marked the latter part of the 20th Century and will be the dominant factor in at least the first part of the 21st Century. Both the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the Gulf War began as straightforward invasions of one country by another but were transformed into civilization wars as time went on. Although initially a number of Muslim governments supported the anti-Iraq coalition, in the face of the overwhelming opposition of Arab and Muslim public opinion, these governments gradually parted company with the West. The wars in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo were basically wars between civilizations.

Many observers would argue that September 11 can only be understood in the context of a civilizational war between Islam and the West. While Professor Huntington has been hesitant to arrive at such conclusion, Osama bin Laden and his followers have sought to so characterize September 11 and its aftermath as has much of the Muslim world.

Huntington divides the world into at least seven major civilizations: Western, Sinic [Chinese], Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, and Latin American. Africa south of the Sahara is a possible eighth civilization. These civilizations differ substantially from each other in terms of cultural factors such as religion, history, customs, institutions, language similarities, and self-identification of people.

It is Professor Huntington's view that the clash of civilizations and their cultures, rather than ideological or economic differences, will be the fundamental source of conflict and war. Nation states will remain the most important actors in world affairs but the principal conflicts of global politics will be between nations and groups from different civilizations. The fault lines between civilizations, such as between the Islamic world and the Slavic-Orthodox world, will be the battle lines of the future.

Previously the conflicts of the Western world were largely between monarchs attempting to expand the territory they ruled and their economic strength; then the French Revolution brought conflicts between nations; and after World War I and the Russian Revolution the conflict of ideologies was central. Such conflicts were primarily within Western civilization and were in essence "Western civil wars." Now international politics is moving out of its Western phase and its centerpiece is becoming the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations. The peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer are the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism but are joining the West in being movers and shapers of history.

As Huntington sees it, people everywhere are increasingly defining their identity in ethnic and religious terms. Such factors as economic modernization and social change are separating people from longstanding local identities and weakening the nation state as a source of identity. In addition, the increasing interaction between people of different civilizations intensifies civilization consciousness and the awareness of differences between civilizations and the commonalities within a civilization. Religion, often in the fundamentalist form, is providing a new identity that transcends national borders and unites civilizations.

The Western belief in the universality of Western culture and that a universal civilization is emerging is false and dangerous. The efforts of the West to promote its values of democracy and liberalism as universal values, to maintain its military predominance, and to advance its economic interests engender countering responses from other civilizations.

Civilizations will clash because differences of culture and religion are far more basic than those involving political ideologies and political regimes. As people define their identity in ethnic and religious terms, they are likely to see an “us” versus “them” relationship with people of different ethnicity or religion.

When groups or states from one civilization become involved in a war with people from another civilization, they try to rally support from other members of their own civilization: the “kin-country” syndrome. This is replacing political ideology and traditional balance of power considerations as the principal basis for cooperation and coalitions. The Gulf War and its aftermath is an example as are Bosnia and Kosovo.

In Professor Huntington's view, the central axis of world politics in the future is likely to be the conflict between "the West and the rest" and the response of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values. Non-Westerners see the West as using international institutions, military power, and economic resources to run the world in ways that will maintain Western predominance, protect Western interests, and promote Western political and economic values. Furthermore, Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, etc. often have little resonance in other cultures. Western efforts to propagate such ideas produce a reaction against "human rights imperialism" and a reaffirmation of indigenous values such as support for religious fundamentalism.

Contrary to the hopes of many in the West, more democracy and the overthrow of monarchies and oligarchies ruling non-Western nations increases the tendency of the population to identify themselves with their own civilization and increases antagonism towards other civilizations. Nativist and anti-Western political movements secure power as in Iran and as attempted in Algeria.

In the world of competing civilizations important arenas of conflict, in addition to fault lines between civilizations, will be in countries containing substantial numbers of people from different civilizations within their borders [cleft countries] such as Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Philippines, and the Sudan and in countries that are trying to shift their civilization identity to a different civilization [torn countries] such as

Russia [from Slavic-Orthodox to the West], Turkey [from Islam to the West], and Mexico [from Latin America to the West].

The dangerous clashes of the future are likely to arise from the interaction of Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and Chinese assertiveness.

As Huntington sees it, the clash of civilizations is, and will be, accentuated by the fact that the West, including the United States, is in a state of slow decline in its economic, political, and military strength relative to East Asian nations, India and Islam and is increasingly concerned by internal problems. This relative decline has a demographic component as well with Westerners, already a minority, constituting a steadily decreasing portion of the world's population and with non-Western peoples becoming healthier, more urban, more literate, and better educated.

In Professor Huntington's opinion, of critical concern to the West, and particularly to the United States as the mainstay of Western Civilization, is the problem of heavy migration of peoples from non-Western societies and the possibility – at least in the United States – that a “cleft” society will result with the United States, and especially the American Southwest, containing a large and more or less unassimilated Hispanic population. In this regard the U.S. Bureau of the Census projects that if current trends and immigration policies continue, by 2050 Hispanics will comprise 25% of the United States population.

Because of inherent cultural differences, and the increasing tendency of nations and groups in one civilization to identify with and work with

other nations and groups in the same civilization rather than with nations and groups from other civilizations, Huntington questions the wisdom of expanding institutions such as NATO and the European Union to include nations that are part of the Orthodox or Islamic Civilizations, such as Romania, Bulgaria, and the Ukraine, and suggests that over time the ties of Orthodox Greece with both institutions and the relationship of Turkey with NATO will become increasingly tenuous and more and more difficult.

V

Before concluding, I would like to make one further observation about relations between China and the West. In my opinion both Professors Mearsheimer and Huntington are correct in their identification of the continued growth in China's economic and military power and its desire for hegemony over East Asia which will intensify from possessing same, as the principal source of great power war in the future. However, I disagree with Mearsheimer's conclusion, that, therefore, the policy of "engagement" with China is misguided. Of course, the West must be careful about trade or setting up ventures in China that involve products or technology with important military applications. But to attempt to erect barriers to China's economic growth or to isolate China will create the very affronts to China's self esteem and honor which Professor Kagan so eloquently warns against.

In closing I would comment that not all aspects of the causes of major power war discussed in the three books are that much of a

departure from previous thinking. In particular, many commentators have dwelt both upon the fatal consequences of victors failing to maintain adequate military strength to deter losers from embarking upon a new war of revenge and upon the importance for peace of achieving a balance of power to deter aggression. Nevertheless, in the views discussed above there are important considerations to be kept in mind in the conduct of foreign policy:

First, as stated by Donald Kagan, policies must be formulated and articulated in a manner which tries to minimize any injury to a nation's self esteem – its "honor." This is particularly important with respect to such powers as China and Russia.

Second, as discussed by all three writers, the West must maintain its military superiority over potential adversaries and should do what it can to limit the military capability of potential adversaries and in particular that of China.

Third, to avoid the consequences of withdrawal discussed by John Mearsheimer, the United States should maintain a military presence in Europe, South Korea, and Japan as long as same is acceptable to the host nations.

Fourth, ^{Lastly,} the West should take to heart the warnings of Samuel Huntington and downplay policies which seek to impose Western values on nations belonging to other cultures and civilizations.