

A paradox: War or Peace?

Robert North is a political scientist from Stanford University. He has spent the last 35 years studying and writing about the causes, of and alternatives to war. North visited the U of A recently, and gave this speech.

by Robert North

This evening I would like to talk to you really on three foci which I think may help us to understand the problem of war and peace we're caught up in, but from a quite different perspective from what is usually given.

War is the outcome of a great many factors. It starts really with human concerns that would appear to be quite unconnected, or, to turn it around, some of the motive powers that gets us into a war-prone situation are normal everyday activities which have unexpected consequences.

It goes without saying that all of us as living creatures require certain resources on a day to day basis merely to survive. We take this so for granted that we really pay very little attention to it unless we're deprived of it. We need to have a certain minimal amount of food and air and space

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and so on, no matter who we are or where we live or what we do.

Now in order to acquire these resources, human beings use technology, which I define as knowledge and skills.

With technology we can acquire resources previously not available, or we can find new uses for old resources that previously seemed useless.

This proposition is so self evident that it is a real temptation for all of us to look upon technology as the answer to everything. No matter how serious our problems, we have a kind of blind faith that we'll find the technology that will get us out of this most recent fix we're in.

Now, there is a catch. It is that every technology requires resources. At the very least, technology requires some motive power - whether it is human, or water, or steam, or nuclear power - so that generally speaking the more advanced the level of technology the wider the range and the greater amount of resources that are needed in order to harness the knowledge and skills and to sustain their implementation.

And then technology has a further, somewhat elusive, essentially psychological consequence, namely that the more advanced the technology the greater the amount and wider the range of resources people think they need above and beyond their mere existence and survival. And after a while they do become in a sense real needs.

When we put these factors together - growing populations with exponentially increasing demands for 'basic' resources, exponential advances in technology which require exponentially amounts of resources, and then the standard of living, expectations phenomenon that rises with technological capacities - it means that especially the industrial countries are producing, every day of every year, exponentially rising demands.

As more and more (local) resources are used and as they are depleted we have to look further afield for our resources. And as our activities and interests expand there tends to be a feeling that they ought to be defended.

The higher demand a society has generated and the greater the capacity it is achieving, the more powerful is this external pressure. Just in the normal course of daily affairs, you don't have to have any

evil intent in order to do this - you do it just to meet your own demands.

But as one expands these activities, sooner or later these perimeters of interest begin to intersect with the expanding perimeters of interest of other powers, especially if you yourself are a major power.

I think we have here a potential explanation of what is normally referred to as imperialism. It may not have been undertaken because Britain or any other country decided it was going to be imperialistic - it need only be that the British were meeting their own self-generating demands.

We can see the same dynamics working in the present and it is now the United States and the Soviet Union and their client states and so it goes.

Here we have the dynamics which need not be explained in terms of evil intent. They may look like evil intent and they may be, but it doesn't have to be. It's only the dynamics of growth.

It is much easier to explain in terms of evil and we should say, then, if we could only get rid of those evil leaders then everything would be all right. What I'm saying is, get rid of one set of leaders, whether they're evil or not, and you haven't changed the situation one iota.

My enemies were the Germans and the Japanese. I went into training to learn that my duty to my country was to get rid of these evil people. What good did it do us? Now we've got another set of evil people.

I want to underscore that we're all a part of this. It is not only that I pay my taxes and therefore that I support the Pentagon. But everytime I buy a gallon of gasoline I'm contributing to this dynamic - to United States' interests in the Middle East or wherever else they get their oil.

Everytime I pick up the phone I'm picking up materials that come from every corner of the earth, the sources of which we feel we have a necessity of access to. We don't need any other justification. Nor do the Russians. They're going through the same thing. It is not because they're evil people. It is because they're people organized in the state - in a system of competing states, competing for the life blood of mother earth. That's why they're always clashing. This makes it even worse because it doesn't do any good to get rid of the leaders or the regime, it doesn't even do any good to change the system as long as the system is still the state system. It probably won't even do any good if we try to destroy the state system because something will serve the same dynamics.

I'm not trying to discourage anyone here. People say I'm pessimistic. I'm not here to scare anybody. But I'm putting forward the notion that it is as important to understand these dynamics, assuming they're true, as it is to understand the

dynamics of the tensions of the crust of the earth.

I might add that I've lived in the San Francisco Bay area since 1946 and there has been a Commission every four or five years or so to study the earthquake situation. They always give a long list of things that have got to be done in order to minimize the damage that will occur if the earthquake happens. Nobody has ever done a damn thing about those recommendations. Not a thing! I think there is a certain parallel here. It's very different to look ahead and to prepare for an awful possibility; we would rather not think about it.

By and large a country will try to extend its influence as far out in the external environment as it can by the terms of its bargaining capabilities.

If you're a small power, you don't have as much bargaining capability as does the Soviet Union or the United States. There are ways small countries can bargain. Cuba found ways to bargain with the United States. I would say the Cuban crisis of 1962 was first of all an attempt by Castro to raise the ante a little bit. He got into trouble, so he raised the ante a little further and then they got down - Kennedy and Krushchev - to some eyeball to eyeball bargaining, with the highest stakes there are. There came a time when the missiles were brought out on both sides in that bargaining situation. And you can only go about one step further.

Whether or not the missiles are brought out of the silos, everybody knows they are there, and everytime a certain kind of statement is made in Washington, it's understood in Moscow that those silos are behind that statement and vice versa. Both sides are subject to the same dynamics that I've been describing and both of them have essentially the same bargaining tools, and also the more subtle kinds of bargaining tools like the C.I.A. and the K.G.B. - and we use them all every day. Every day.

This, I submit, is the world we live in. And the meaning is never lost on the people who make the boos, because they know the missiles are there, and the submarines plus the conventional weapons - it's a big game, a big, world-wide global game. And we've got so accustomed to it that the game passes us by until a crisis occurs and then we stand back and say 'My God, what's happened?'

It didn't use to be that way. Societies 1000 years ago were buffered from one another by time and distance. What we've destroyed is the time and distance, so that now every corner of the world is only about 30 minutes from total destruction.

(What has also changed, North said later in the lecture, is our capacity to destroy. You couldn't do much damage with a stone axe. You could do a little more damage with a bow and arrow, and quite a

bit more with gunpowder.)

Now, we begin to get the warning signals in World War One. World War Two doubled the signals.

Now, if you want a solution to this, I haven't got one. But I can point out something else that isn't altogether evident. Our own systems of law and order are based on superior power. That's what the state is. It's a monopoly, whatever the state is, whether it's the United States or the Soviet Union or China, any state. It's the only way we enforce our laws. Now, we don't call the whole United States' Army out when there is a riot, but if it goes too far, who shows up? The army, in any country. The whole legal system is backed up by the monopoly of force.

What are the implications? They are that we don't know how to govern one another any other way. We haven't since the state was invented. But human beings - who are traced back 3.8 million years, lived for by far the greatest part of that time without a monopoly.

They lived in hunting and gathering bands where there was no superior force. The only way the band was tied together was because the members survived better

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banded together than if they broke up.

The chief had no power. If he wanted to do something he had to persuade everybody else that that was the way they ought to do it. That is why they could keep such order in primitive societies. The chief had to persuade everybody and if he couldn't persuade them, and people didn't like him, they got somebody else to lead them. It was absolutely rule by consensus. It was egalitarianism. The history of human beings has not been from slavery towards democracy and equality.

We started in democracy, free. And we've made ourselves slaves to the state. We invented the state. We did it all ourselves and we're still doing it. Now we don't know how to do it any other way. Now the only way we can do it is through force or threat of force, filtered through a legal system of one kind or another.

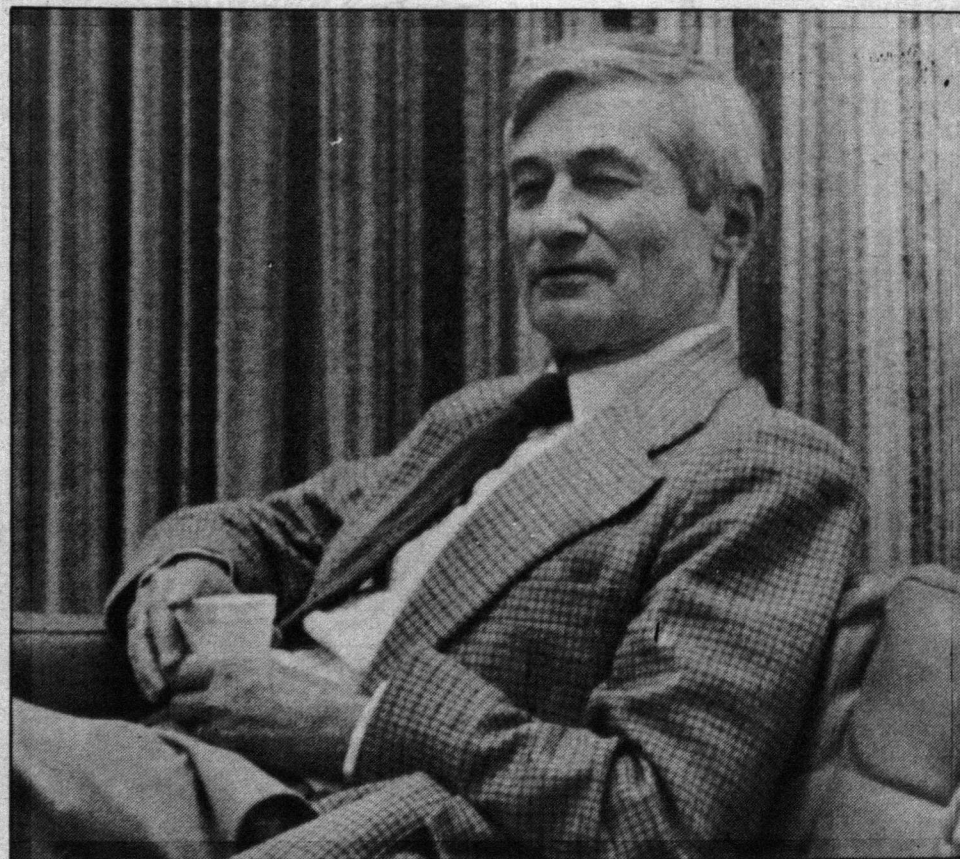
And now, through our technology, we've reached the point where the state can't handle things anymore. We've got the evidence all around us. The only way the state is maintaining itself today is by threatening itself with annihilation. That's what civilization today is depending on to keep the peace. Because when push comes to shove, what do we begin reaching for? Now that's a transformation we've gone through and we don't even know it. So far, mutual deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union has been what keeps the world from going up, deterrence based on the capacity to blow itself up.

But have you been listening to the voices lately? They're beginning to talk themselves into a new position. That maybe we've got to be willing to use these weapons or the deterrent won't be of any use anymore. We're talking ourselves closer and closer to using the damn things.

And that's the paradox. Where the means you use to accomplish "X" had a good possibility of causing "non-X".

So here I am. I've come and scared the hell out of you, spread my gloom and doom all over. You have every right to ask me, 'Well, what's the alternative?' And I have to tell you, I don't have one.

And further more, I don't think anybody on this earth has got a solution. This is not to say there might not be a solution and if enough people didn't put their minds to it they might find a solution; I'm just saying that nobody I can think of have even an inkling about how to get out of this situation. And everyone is in it. That's the war and peace paradox.



Robert North

photo Martin Beales