

## Chapter 2

# Truce!

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**Abstract** We have not thought enough about truces. Our political imagination is committed to a false dichotomy between war and peace. Since truces are neither, we don't pay them serious attention. When we do think about truces we consider them as "mere truces": stepping stones in the transition beyond themselves, to something better and more durable – a permanent peace. Truces are acceptable for a while, but then they must be left behind. Staying in one for too long signifies failure. It is time to take truces much more seriously. By dismissing them and continuing to focus on the war-peace dichotomy we are denying ourselves a useful descriptive tool that could help us make sense of the way many conflicts actually subside. Furthermore, by insisting that the only acceptable and legitimate ending of a war is a lasting, stable peace with justice we may be putting ourselves at risk of fighting longer and harder than we have to. Finally, Political Islam has a nuanced theology and jurisprudence of truces. Given the history of tensions between Islam and the West, it is problematic that the former has a way of curtailing violence that we in the West have not thought about.

Truce, truce. A time to test the teachings: can helicopters be turned into ploughshares?

We said to them: truce, truce, to examine intentions.

The flavour of peace may be absorbed by the soul.

Then we may compete for the love of life using poetic images.

– Mahmoud Darwish/A State of Siege

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War ends with a kiss. On August 14th, 1945, Edith Shain, a 27 year old nurse at Doctors Hospital in New York, left her shift and ran into the street to celebrate the surrender of the Japanese. A few moments after she reached Times Square, a sailor embraced her. “Someone grabbed me and kissed me, and I let him because he fought for his country,” She told the Washington Post many years later.<sup>1</sup> A snapshot of the kiss, taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt and published by Life Magazine, became one of the most famous images of the last century. Ms. Shain’s explanation for its popularity is as good as any: [The picture] “says so many things: hope, love, peace and tomorrow. The end of the war was a wonderful experience, and that photo represents all those feelings.”<sup>2</sup> This is how wars come to a close. Men stop killing each other and start kissing pretty nurses instead. We leave the fighting behind. Permanently. We demobilize. We go back to work. We go back to school. We start families and have babies. Violence is replaced by its opposite.

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At a luncheon given in 1916 to honor James M. Beck, author of a book about Germany’s moral responsibility for “the war of 1914,” the host, Viscount Bryce, had the following to say about calls circulating in America to end the war: “Peace made now on such terms as the German Government would accept, would be no permanent peace, but a mere truce. It would mean for Europe constant disorder and alarm... more preparation for war, and further competition in prodigious armaments.”<sup>3</sup> Peace denotes permanence. A “mere” truce is dangerous, unstable, temporary, a dishonest cover under which to prepare for more war.

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In a “fireside chat” broadcast over the radio in December of 1943, soon after his return from the Teheran and Cairo Conferences, President Roosevelt dismissed the “cheerful idiots” who thought that Americans could achieve peace by retreating into their homes: “The overwhelming majority of all the people in the world want peace,” he asserted. “Most of them are fighting for the attainment of peace – not just a truce, not just an armistice – but peace that is as strongly enforced and as durable as mortal man can make it.”<sup>4</sup> War ends with a stable peace. Real peace, not “just a truce.” As lasting as men can make it. Nothing else is worth dying for.

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Three days after Israel and the Hamas-led government of the Palestinian Authority reached a ceasefire in November of 2006, Israeli writer Amos Oz had the following to say about the agreement: “If it lasts, the cease-fire that Israel and the Palestinians announced... is a first step. At least three more steps need to be taken in its wake... We need direct negotiations. Negotiations about what? ... Not about a *hudna* or a *tahadiya*, the Arabic words for the temporary armistice or truce that Palestinian leaders have suggested. We need an all-inclusive, comprehensive, bilateral agreement

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<sup>1</sup> Brown (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Brown (2010).

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, July 6, 1916, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt (1943).

that will resolve all aspects of the war between Israel and Palestine.”<sup>5</sup> War ends when we bury the hatchet. When there is nothing at all left to fight about. Not with a *hudna*, not with a *tahadiya*. These are just temporary fixes.

Why do we think that war ends only when its opposite – peace – is ushered in? How did the idea of peace come to mean durable, fair, stable agreements involving the resolution of all controversies, mutual recognition, and the complete repudiation of violence? Do wars really end like that? What are the risks of sticking to this way of thinking about war’s end? We have not thought enough about truces. Our political imagination is committed to a false dichotomy between war and peace. Hobbes tells us that “during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war.” He then goes on to add, laconically: “all other time is peace.” In the years leading up to World War I the political and intellectual elites of Europe divided their enthusiasms between two popular books. The first, published in 1910 and promptly translated into a dozen languages, was titled *The Great Illusion*. Its author, Norman Angel, argued that war had become obsolete due to the financial interdependence of modern states. A year later the prominent German military theorist von Bernhardi published *Germany and the Next War* in which he insisted that war was “a biological necessity,” expressing the laws of evolution in human affairs.<sup>6</sup> The same dichotomy was replicated by the debate, more than 80 years later, between Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. The former held that liberalism and its attendant commercial peace represented the final stage of historical development. The latter retorted with the thesis of the Clash of Civilizations, predicting that cultural conflict, primarily along religious lines, would dominate the post Cold-War world.

Historical, economic, or cultural necessities dictate that we must have peace. Or they dictate that we must have war. Since truces are neither, we don’t pay them serious attention. As the brief but representative excerpts above suggest, when we do think about truces we consider them as “mere truces”: stepping stones in the transition beyond themselves, to something better and more durable – a permanent peace. Truces are acceptable for a while, but then they must be left behind. Staying in one for too long signifies failure. When we do find ourselves in a long-term truce we tend to obscure that reality by employing the terminology of war and peace all the same. The US and the Soviet Union had a “Cold War” for more than 40 years although they never fought directly. The Americans and the Russians were not at war. And they were not at peace. Why don’t we have a clear way of thinking about that in-between state?

It is time to take truces much more seriously. By dismissing them and continuing to focus on the war-peace dichotomy we are denying ourselves a useful descriptive tool that could help us make sense of the way many conflicts actually subside. More significantly, by insisting that the only acceptable and legitimate ending of a war is a lasting, stable peace with justice we may be putting ourselves at risk of fighting longer and harder than we have to.

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<sup>5</sup> Oz (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion of both books see Tuchman 2004, Chapter 1.

In regular usage the term “truce” denotes an agreement (formal or informal) between belligerents to stop hostile acts without terminating the war itself. The cessation of hostilities may be total or partial extending to some fronts of the combat zone, some purpose (such as the collection and burial of the dead), or some period of time. In this paper I will introduce and legitimize the idea of “Truce Thinking”: contrary to the spirit of the examples cited above, sometimes political leaders *should* focus on the reduction of violence, its partial abatement, its temporary cessation. Sometimes they *should* prefer these to permanent, just and lasting peace agreements. That we have failed to conceptualize and accept unsatisfying, less than completely stable indeterminate ideas about the end of war is problematic both theoretically and practically. The paper has two sections. The first makes the case for taking truces more seriously. The second characterizes Truce-Thinking – the state of mind involved in seeking and making them.

## 2.1 The Case for Truces

### 2.1.1 *The Peace That Kills*

Our tendency to posit lasting and stable peace as the only acceptable way of ending a war makes wars longer and more brutal than they have to be. What Wilson called “the war to end all wars” has a good claim on intensity, given the promised benefit.

In the Luncheon mentioned earlier, Bryce described World War I thus: “... We are fighting for great principles – principles vital to the future of mankind, principles which the German government has outraged and which must at all costs be vindicated to defeat militarism... This is a conflict for the principles of right which were violated when innocent noncombatants were slaughtered in Belgium and drowned on the Lusitania. The Allies are bound and resolved to prosecute it till a victory has been won for these principles and for a peace established on a sure foundation of justice and freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

A peace that establishes “the principles vital to the future of mankind” can justify, perhaps even consecrate, a lot of suffering and carnage.<sup>8</sup> In a recent book about the Napoleonic Wars, American historian David Bell reminds us that we have inherited from the enlightenment the idea that peace is our birthright, that war and violence are irrational aberrations to be uprooted. But such an uprooting, by the very fact that it is seen as the eradication of an abnormality, precisely because it promises to return us to our original state of peace, gains a substantial claim on violence. Bell writes: “A vision of war as utterly exceptional – as a final cleansing paroxysm of violence – did not simply precede the total war of 1792–1815. It helped,

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<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, supra note 3.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to James Carroll for several conversations on this point.

decisively, to bring it about. Leaders convinced that they were fighting “the last war” could not resist committing ever greater resources to it, attempting to harness all their societies’ energies to a single purpose, and ultimately sacrificing lives on an industrial scale so as to defeat supposedly demonic enemies.”<sup>9</sup>

When war is understood as an anomaly or disease rather than as an inescapable human reality – when we think of peace as our birthright, then the battle that is meant to restore peace becomes very vicious indeed. But this suggests that it is harmful, deadly harmful, that we don’t know how to aim lower than “ending all war.” That, children of the enlightenment, abhorring war, we can’t imagine more modest, limited alternatives to it than peace. What if we legitimized truces as a possible way of halting war? Bell’s analysis suggests that there are cases where this would have a mitigating effect on the intensity of fighting.

An analogous argument can be made about Roosevelt’s insistence on the Axis Powers’ “unconditional surrender”. The demand, issued after the Casablanca Conference (in spite of Churchill’s skepticism), was supposed to prevent Germany from rearming as it did after World War I. Roosevelt was, in effect, telling the Nazis and the Japanese that there was only one kind of peace the allies would accept, that it involved very harsh conditions, and that it was not negotiable. The war could only end with an *absolute, thoroughgoing, unambiguous* victory for the allies. Did this demand prolong the fighting unnecessarily? Did it take the wind out of the sails of Hitler’s opposition? Did it force the Germans into a desperate fight, which they may have given up earlier had the possibility of a negotiated surrender been open to them?

“Unconditional surrender,” writes James Carroll in his *House of War*, “meant that the enemy would have no reason to mitigate the ferocity of its resistance. It was an invitation to the Germans and the Japanese, as their likely defeat came closer, to fight back without restraint.”<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on Churchill’s resistance to the idea, Carroll adds: “Churchill understood that by foreclosing any possible negotiations towards surrender, the allies were making it more likely that the axis powers would fight to the bitter end at a huge cost to lives on both sides, resulting on a level of devastation that would itself be the seedbed of the next catastrophe...”<sup>11</sup>

Carroll’s analysis, like Bell’s, raises a haunting question: what if we had a richer repertoire for thinking about how wars wind down? What if we were in the habit of accepting that they do not always end once and for all with a Kantian or Wilsonian peace or with a harshly imposed, long-lasting Pax Americana à la Roosevelt? Would our wars be shorter? Would they become less bloody?

The tortured history of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict provides another illustration. In the summer of 2000, the parties were on the verge of a historic breakthrough. President Clinton issued invitations for a summit in Camp David. Before departing

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<sup>9</sup> Bell (2007: 316).

<sup>10</sup> Carroll (2006), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Carroll (2006), 9.

for the talks, Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, declared that there were only two possibilities. Either he would return with a "final status" agreement ending "all claims" between the parties, or he would "expose" the Palestinians and their leader as obdurate opponents of peace, in which case war would ensue. The rest is history. The Palestinians did not accept Barak and Clinton's proposals for ending the conflict and war did follow. But was the dichotomy that Barak set up helpful? Were there really no options between lasting peace and war? And wasn't the positing of this dichotomy one of the reasons that war broke out?<sup>12</sup>

### 2.1.2 *Truces Can Keep Us Safe Too*

We assume that peace is required to keep us safe. That's part of its allure. We speak of a "lasting" or "stable" peace supposing that once we have achieved it (even if at a considerable price) we could finally begin living as private men and women focusing on our work and families. At peace, the liberal nation finally fulfills its *telos* and becomes an enabler rather than a taker of lives.

But a cursory glance at history suggests that peace is not always necessary to keep us safe. The policy of *Détente* between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was essentially a truce, and for all of its cynicism and amorality, it kept them from destroying the world, until the conditions ripened for a more principled and ambitious relationship.

For more than 30 years Israel has had a peace treaty with Egypt and an armistice with Syria. It is far from clear that its northern border is more dangerous than its southern one. There have been almost no direct confrontations over the last decades on both fronts. While the Syrians have enabled Hezbollah to arm itself to the teeth, the Egyptians looked away while Hamas used their territory to smuggle munitions into the Gaza strip. There is certainly no dramatic evidence that peace with Egypt has kept Israel much safer than its long-term truce with Syria.

To look back much further, the so called "Concert of Europe" created after the end of the Napoleonic Wars was an attempt to enforce the agreements reached in the Vienna Conference – primarily the preservation of the balance of power between European powers, and the containment and reintegration of France. This was much more of a truce than a principled Kantian peace – the parties had little concern for mutual attitudes, forms of government, or international norms of conduct. And yet, the arrangement kept Europe quiet for almost a century.<sup>13</sup>

Examples can be multiplied but the point should be clear: formal, ambitious peace agreements that purport to end conflict fairly once and for all often guarantee

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<sup>12</sup> Some good accounts of the Camp David meetings and their aftermath include: Ross (2004), Ben Ami (2006), Enderlin (2003).

<sup>13</sup> On this see Howard (2000), 43.

the security of the parties who sign them. But such agreements do not represent the only alternative for obtaining stability. In some cases the interests, capabilities and ideologies of the parties bode well for prolonged calm even in the absence of formal peace agreements.

### ***2.1.3 How Wars Actually End***

War rarely ends with a clear-cut victory followed by a stable peace. The Treaty of Paris remaking Europe after the defeat of Napoleon and the victory parades to mark the vanquishing of the Nazis are the exception rather than the rule. This is especially true if we adhere to the Clausewitzian definition of war as an instrument of policy (and of victory in war as the ability to impose our policy aims on our enemies). On such an understanding, the American Civil War did not end with the unambiguous victory of the North because, within a decade, the South was able to frustrate the northern vision of extending political rights to blacks. World war I did not end with the unambiguous defeat of Germany. In spite of America's desire for a swift and clearly determined confrontation, the first Gulf War ended with Saddam Hussein still in power, slaughtering the same insurgents the Americans had encouraged to rise up against him. Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon has, in one permutation or another, never ended, morphing from a brief, intense war with the PLO, to a war of attrition with the PLO and later with Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, to a series of cross border skirmishes with Hezbollah, to another brief intense war against Hezbollah, back to the heightened cross border tensions obtaining as of this writing.<sup>14</sup>

These "ragged endings"<sup>15</sup> have become more noticeable after World War II. Since the late 1940s, most military conflicts have become asymmetrical.<sup>16</sup> They typically involve a competition between a technologically capable military power with an orderly chain of command and a weaker, loosely organized force that relies on guerilla tactics. Guerillas exhaust conventional armies by turning indigenous populations against them and inflicting enough damage to weaken the regulars' domestic political support.

Anyone following recent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Palestine can see these dynamics in play. Asymmetrical warfare defies our notions of clear military victory and the establishment of lasting peace. As David Kilcullen argues in a recent book, the only effective strategy for fighting such wars is isolating the ideological hard core of the enemy from its incidental supporters by providing security and economic opportunity to the indigenous population. The execution of

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<sup>14</sup> The historical survey presented here is based on Jeb Sharp's excellent five part series (2008) for PRI titled "How Wars End".

<sup>15</sup> I borrow the term from Ms. Sharp.

<sup>16</sup> For a good discussion of the growing significance of such conflict see, e.g. Van Creveld (1991).

such a strategy takes a long time and a great degree of persistence. Success is not stable even when it is finally achieved. It is hard to defeat guerillas. Even when we do, the outcome is not best described as peace. Asymmetrical conflicts are kept at bay, stabilized, managed until they are brought to a bearable level.

All of this suggests that the traditional dichotomy between war and peace is too simplistic for thinking about contemporary armed conflict. Winning and the institution of peace have traditionally meant that one side can impose its political agenda on another. But guerilla warfare upsets this Clausewitzian view of war, often rendering it irrelevant. A party which has been defeated in conventional warfare can switch to guerilla tactics (as did the Taliban, the Iraqis and, according to some historians, the Southern Democrats after the American Civil War) in order to make sure the stronger side cannot obtain their political goals militarily.<sup>17</sup> When this happens the very aims of war often change to stabilization, the reduction of killing, the restoration of some degree of public order. None of these achievements presupposes a permanent, just end to conflict and all of them are closer to our definition of truce than they are to the classical idea of peace.

### 2.1.4 *Truces in Political Islam*

From Palestine to Afghanistan to Iraq much of the (largely asymmetrical) fighting Western powers have been doing lately has been with Muslims. An important advantage of introducing truces into our thinking is that Islamic Jurisprudence devotes a good deal of attention to them. The first truce in the Islamic tradition can be traced back to the Treaty of Hudaibiyah signed in 628 AD between Mohammad and the people of the tribe of Quraysh who controlled the city of Mecca. Mohammad and his followers wanted to perform a pilgrimage to Mecca but the local inhabitants did not welcome them. In order to avert a bloody confrontation, the parties reached a 10-year armistice regulating future pilgrimages. This agreement is the source of legitimacy of truces in Islam.<sup>18</sup>

An Islamic truce or “*hudna*” consists in the suspension of the duty of Jihad against non-believers. It is permissible for Muslims to enter into such an agreement under a variety of circumstances – ranging from the perceived military weakness of the Muslim army through the remoteness of the battlefield to the scarcity of resources necessary for fighting.<sup>19</sup>

Muslim thinkers allow for a wide range of *hudnas* – some lasting only a few days, intended primarily for rest and rearmament, others enduring 6 or, as in the

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<sup>17</sup> See Stephen Biddle, *Interview with Jeb Sharp*, supra note 14.

<sup>18</sup> As one scholar puts it: “the treaty signed by the Prophet with the Meccans at Hudaibiyah ... was adopted as a model to be followed in respect to its stipulations, implementation and for the reason of its eventual revocation.” See Weigert (1997, 400–401).

<sup>19</sup> Weigert (1997, 400).



case of Hudaybiyah, 10 years. Furthermore, most Sunni scholars accept the idea of unlimited *hudnas* when it is clear that the Muslim army cannot defeat its enemy.<sup>20</sup>

The historical record provides numerous examples of truces between Muslims and “infidels.” Saladin and the Crusaders signed eight such agreements in the twelfth century (4 initiated by the Crusaders, 4 prompted by Saladin). Only one of these was broken.<sup>21</sup> The French and their Algerian foes under the command of Abd Al-Qadir signed two *hudnas* in the 1830s,<sup>22</sup> and the Spanish and the Moroccans signed a *hudna* in 1860 that eventually developed into a full-blown peace agreement.<sup>23</sup>

*Hudna* is not the only term in Islamic jurisprudence denoting a temporary cessation of hostilities. The related notion of *tahadiya* shares the identical Arabic root h-d-n, denoting quiet or calm. While a *tahadiya* is usually a short, informal, often unilateral ceasefire, *hudnas* are formal, binding agreements between two parties and it is rare for them to be broken, as their stability and endurance are tied with the honor of the signatories: “*Hudna*,” writes one scholar, “denotes something sacred, although it is not a religious notion *per se*. Once a person has signed or shaken hands on a *Hudna* agreement for a certain period of time, he might not renew it, but he will not resume fighting before the term of the agreement is over. There is a belief among Muslims that whoever breaches a *Hudna* will be punished by the almighty: one of the breaching party’s family members may die or contract an incurable illness. If one breaches a cease-fire that is not a *Hudna*, there will be no retribution from Heaven. The annulment of other terms or agreements, even of a peace treaty, is not as severe as the annulment of a *Hudna*.”<sup>24</sup>

Muslims take *hudnas* seriously. They view such agreements as a way of curtailing, sometimes even permanently ending wars. Western powers have been doing a lot of fighting with Muslims. Shouldn’t these powers think more carefully about a method of conflict reduction central to the political tradition of their enemies?

Consider the recent history of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Ever since the early 1990s moderate Israelis have been claiming that they want to reconcile with the Palestinians – to reach a peace accord ending all mutual claims and involving mutual recognition. The operative terms are Kantian – perpetual peace with justice and recognition. But these terms are foreign to a good deal of Islamic jurisprudence. Instead, Hamas, and increasingly other Palestinian factions, have claimed that they cannot recognize Israel as a Jewish State but would, rather, sign a long-term *hudna* with it. The Israelis, in turn, have taken such statements as evidence of Palestinian rejectionism. But what is it that is being rejected? Could it be that what is being rejected is the metaphysical baggage that comes with the idea of permanent peace and recognition rather than the reality in which people commit to stop killing each

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<sup>20</sup> Weigert (1997, 402).

<sup>21</sup> See Ginat (2006, 255).

<sup>22</sup> Ginat (2006, 257).

<sup>23</sup> Ginat (2006, 258).

<sup>24</sup> Ginat (2006, 254).

other? And if people really are willing to stop killing each other for a long time can their enemies be justified in rebuffing them because of their refusal to label the new state of affairs “peace”?

A famous commentary on the truce of Hdaybiyah by Az-Zuhri tells us that “when the truce came and war laid down its burdens and people felt safe with one another, then they met and indulged in conversation and discussion.”<sup>25</sup> There is, according to this account, no need for a formal and final peace agreement in order for the combatants to talk (even “indulge” in talking) with each other. A reliable setting down of the burdens of war can suffice. The emphasis is not placed on the rationality of peace, nor on the rights of former combatants and their need to have their political identity reaffirmed, but on what happens when we focus on the more modest goal of easing – not completely and not forever – the rigors of battle.

### 2.1.5 War’s Allure

War has its attractions. It is easy to sell the “old lie” that “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” to “Children ardent for some desperate glory”<sup>26</sup> because, on many levels, the lie is appealing.

The psychologist Lawrence LeShan tells us that war is appealing because it fulfills two conflicting human needs: for individuation on the one hand, and for merging into something greater than ourselves on the other. War provides a “means of resolving the tension between our...needs for singularity and group identification... [it] sharpens experience, heightens perception, and makes one more and more aware of one’s own existence. At the same time, war allows us to become part of something larger and more intense... The Way of the One and the Way of the Many are followed simultaneously and each intensifies the other.”<sup>27</sup>

War is appealing because it provides an outlet for our aggressive instincts. “Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked,” Freud notes in *Civilization and its Discontents*. He continues, famously, bleakly: “they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion?”<sup>28</sup> In a later correspondence

<sup>25</sup> See Pickthall (2004), Surah 48, 557.

<sup>26</sup> The quotes are from Wilfred Owen’s famous poem “Dulce et Decorum est.”

<sup>27</sup> LeShan (2002, 28).

<sup>28</sup> Freud (1961, 69).

with Einstein, Freud blames this aggressive, destructive impulse (which he describes as co-equal with our erotic instinct to “conserve and unify”) for the ease with which men can be “infected with war fever.”<sup>29</sup>

War is appealing because it is exhilarating. In Act IV, Scene V of *Coriolanus* Shakespeare has one of the serving men declare: “Let me have a war, say I: it exceeds peace as far as day does night; it’s spritely, waking, audible, full of vent. Peace is very apoplexy, lethargy, mulld, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war is the destroyer of men.” A soldier stationed in Ramadi, Iraq makes a similar point with rather fewer flourishes:

There’s a rush that comes on the heels of a significant event here. After the IED explodes, or the RPG whistles overhead, or the shot cracks past, there’s a moment of panic as you process the fact that you are still alive – that this time, they missed you. After that second’s hesitation, the rush hits. No one really knows what it is, exactly, but we all feel it. It’s physical. It’s emotional. For some, it’s spiritual. Some say it’s endorphins or adrenaline; some say it’s rage, or hate, or joy. Some say it’s safety – the knowledge that someone is watching out for you. It’s different for everyone, but it’s always there. For me, the rush is mostly exhilaration. It’s a feeling of invulnerability. I’ve heard the unforgettable sound of an RPG somewhere very, very near my little sector of space, and stood a little taller yelling ‘Missed me, you bastards!’ as I spun the turret and looked for the shooter. The first time I got blown up, I had to remind myself to get up and look around for the trigger man, or possible gunmen set to take advantage of the confusion. I felt like I was floating through a world where time stood still. There’s something about looking directly at an artillery shell, and seeing it vanish with a sharp crack and rush of dust and debris, that changes you. My brain was yelling at me ‘This isn’t normal! You shouldn’t be alive and thinking right now!’, and my body was yelling back ‘Well, I’m definitely alive, so hoist your doubting ass up into the turret!’ I’ve never felt more alive than I do in the moments after a near miss. I feel the same way after a big jump skiing, or after jumping off a bridge, but here the feeling is magnified a hundredfold. It’s incredible when you do something that you shouldn’t live through, but do. Some might call me sick, or crazy. I assure you that I am sane, and very much alive.<sup>30</sup>

We have been trying to eradicate war for five millennia. Part of the reason we have not been able to is that war, in addition to being horrific and absurd can also be (often at the same time) satisfying, interesting and exciting. It presents challenges, friendships, attachments and achievements that the combatants, if they are not too maimed or psychologically broken, often think back to nostalgically for the rest of their lives.

Here then is an additional, troubling reason to introduce the notion of truce into our thinking about international affairs: the dichotomy between war and peace suggests that the only acceptable alternative to war is its complete elimination. But war is too irresistible to be eliminated. There is strong historical, psychological and literary evidence suggesting that war cannot be done away with. It cannot be permanently removed or cured. We may be better off thinking about ways to contain, reduce and control it. There are many areas of political life in which we can, as Freud reminds us, “expect gradually to carry through such alterations in our

<sup>29</sup> *Why War? A Correspondence between Einstein and Freud (1931–1932)*.

<sup>30</sup> <http://acutepolitics.blogspot.com/2007/03/war-cocaine.html>

civilization as will better satisfy our needs and will escape our criticisms.” But not all areas are like that: “we may also familiarize ourselves with the idea that there are difficulties attaching to the nature of civilization which will not yield to any attempt at reform.”<sup>31</sup>

## 2.2 Truce Thinking

The arguments offered in the preceding section are not necessarily of equal weight. It may well be that some of them are more persuasive than others. Perhaps war’s allure is, with great effort, resistible. Perhaps we should be exporting our Kantian ideas about fair and final peace arrangements to the rest of the world rather than importing less perfect concepts. Perhaps, taking the very long view, peace agreements are the best way to keep ourselves safe. But the cumulative effect of the arguments in part 1 is to shift the burden of proof to those who argue that nothing less than a final, permanent and just peace should be accepted as the appropriate way to think about the end of war. The case for truces, like most cases that can be made in political philosophy, is provisional. Before we rest it let us characterize the state of mind involved in making truces: what are some of the most important assumptions involved in accepting truces as part of the legitimate repertoire for mitigating political conflict?

### 2.2.1 *Optimism About the Passage of Time*

An old Jewish story tells of a despot who decides his dog must learn to speak. He reviles the Jewish community living under him but admires their Rabbi for his wisdom and erudition. One evening the tyrant summons the rabbi. “You are one of the smartest people around,” the tyrant begins. “I don’t like you or your people, but I need help,” he continues. “See this dog at my feet– I need you to teach him to talk. If you succeed I will be kind to your people. If you fail – God help you all.” The Rabbi strokes his beard for a long moment. “Teach your dog to talk... not easy...it will take a long time and a lot of money...give me five years and three thousand Dinars and I will do it.” The tyrant agrees, but not before he repeats his threat. The Rabbi goes home and knocks on the door with excitement. “Bluma,” he tells his wife, “look! I have three thousand Dinars!” “That’s wonderful!” She exclaims. “How did this happen?” The Rabbi tells her. Bluma’s face turns grey. “What have you done? You can’t teach a dog to speak! We are done for.” “Slow down, Bluma” The Rabbi replies. “Five years is a long time. Maybe the dog will die, maybe the tyrant will die, or maybe the Messiah will come. We’ll see.”

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<sup>31</sup> Freud (1961, 74).

Truce Thinking emphasizes immediate benefits – temporary relief, rest, quiet over more abstract considerations regarding the rights of the parties, mutual acknowledgment and settling questions about distributive justice. More precisely, Truce Thinking suggests that it is worthwhile pursuing immediate benefits even when we have absolutely no idea if the more permanent concerns can ever be addressed. Like the Rabbi, the Truce Thinker wants to buy us time. During that time circumstances may change. The dog or the tyrant could die, or the Messiah might come: new, more moderate political parties could come to power, the balance between the global political parties supporting each of the combatants could shift, a manmade or natural cataclysm could put local tensions into perspective. Or the very fact of quiet and rest could generate stakes in continued quiet and rest. People could get used to not killing each other and hesitate to return to it.

Peace Thinking is future oriented. The references to “the future of our children” pervade most great peace speeches. “We want our children and your children to never again experience war;”<sup>32</sup> “for the generations to come, for a smile on the face of every child born in our land, for all that I have taken my decision to come to you...to deliver my address;”<sup>33</sup> “I do not believe that you want Northern Ireland to ever again be a place where tomorrow’s dreams are clouded by yesterday’s nightmares.”<sup>34</sup> Truce Thinking, by contrast, is oriented towards the present. It deemphasizes the future. It leaves some of the hard work for the next generations. If the Israelis and the Palestinians can stop shooting at each other for 5 years without resolving questions about borders, the status of Jerusalem, or the “right of return,” so be it. A lot could happen in 5 years. If the Sunnis and Shiites can recreate a vibrant commercial life in Iraq without resolving the constitutional arrangement dividing power between them, and without completing the accounting for Saddam’s Hussein’s crimes, so be it. Commercial life and the fact of quiet have their own dynamic. The constitutional difficulties and the crimes of the past will still be there to be addressed at a later time.

### 2.2.2 *Aim Low*

A time-tested negotiating strategy recommends that we aim higher – ask for more – than we would settle for: set a high asking price for your home so there is room to go down, demand a bigger raise than you would be satisfied with, push your children for straight A’s in math so they can bring home a B+ average and so on.

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<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, speech at Bar Ilan University, June 14th, 2009. English version available online: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1092810.html>

<sup>33</sup> President Anwar Sadat’s address to the Israeli Knesset, November 20th, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> President Bill Clinton on Northern Ireland’s Good Friday Agreement, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Available online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/clinton-urges-peace-in-farewell-ulster-speech-626328.html>.

The strategy has a diplomatic correlate: articulating ambitious goals as part of a process of conflict resolution in hope that the parties will be pressured into making more progress. Aim at reconciliation and you end up with coexistence. Aim at coexistence and you end up with the status quo.

The setting of ambitious diplomatic goals may be less the product of tactical calculation than the expression of strategic vision – the conviction that extraordinary effort is required to break out of a prolonged stalemate. Some historians have claimed that President Carter’s ambitious agenda for the Middle East in the late 1970s resulted from his disappointment with the skepticism of his advisors who urged him not to pressure Begin and Sadat to make peace.<sup>35</sup> Contemporary commentators argue that it is a similar desire to redefine the playing field, which is behind President Obama’s bold early push in Middle East diplomacy.

High expectations can, indeed, motivate a negotiating partner. But they can also paralyze her. They can signal that she is bound to disappoint and, as a result, instill a sense of helplessness. The risk is not limited to a specific party bowing out of the negotiation. Setting goals too high may well create a sense of cynicism about the activity itself. Buyers may stay away from our home altogether; our children may simply give up on math. The combatants may decide that “if this is what peace is about – if this is what we have to do for it – we have no interest.”

Truce Thinking works in the reverse direction. It aims low in order to strike high. It seeks to generate a measurable, visible reduction of war. To give combatants a “taste” of peace, hoping that the taste will create an appetite, hoping, to use the words of Darwish, that “the flavor of peace may be absorbed by the soul.”

The Freeze movement ignited by Randall Forsberg in the 1980s provides a striking example of the power of aiming low. A two paragraph proposal to first “decide when and how to achieve a mutual and verifiable freeze on the testing, production and future development of nuclear warheads” and later to “to pursue... verifiable reductions” in the number of such warheads caught on like a brush fire in the United States, sweeping up scores of civic and professional organizations, city councils and state legislators. Within 2 years of its publication, the Freeze proposal became the most “successful American grassroots movement of the twentieth century.”<sup>36</sup> It brought out millions into the streets, was adopted by the House of Representatives and, eventually, convinced President Reagan that his policy of preparing for, rather than trying to avoid, a nuclear war with the Russians had to be reversed. Part of the reason why the Freeze movement was so effective lay in its modesty. The proposal was a quintessential example of Truce Thinking – it stated an obtainable, tangible goal which regular people who knew nothing about international security could relate to. Rather than “banning the bomb” or ending the state of war with the Russians, Forsberg and her followers called for freezing nuclear weapons at their current levels. They demanded a truce in the nuclear arms race

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<sup>35</sup> Stein (1999, 40).

<sup>36</sup> The assessment appears in Carroll (2006). For an excellent overview of the Freeze movement see pp. 385–397.

rather than pushing for ending it all together. The effect, however, was to begin the process of arms reduction. Eight years after the publication of Forsberg's manifesto the Cold War was over.

### 2.2.3 *Irreconcilable Enemies Don't Have to Fight*

It is possible to avert war with those who will not make peace with us. Israel and Hamas are genuinely irreconcilable. The Soviets and the Americans were genuinely irreconcilable during much of the Cold War. But the realization that others are radically, wildly different from us, that they see the world in terms that we can never accept, does not have to lead to belligerence.

In early 1946, the American Diplomat George Kennan sat down at his desk in Moscow to write a reply to a query sent by the State Department. His superiors wanted to know why the Soviets refused to join the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Kennan's response, which became known as the "Long Telegram," (it was 8000 words long and opened with an apology for "burdening the telegraphic channel") went far beyond the question. It took up the future of the relationship between the two powers in the broadest terms.<sup>37</sup> Kennan argued that the radical difference between American and Soviet ideologies did not imply that military confrontation was inevitable. First, because Soviet ideology itself did not dictate war: "we are going to continue for long time to find the Russians difficult to deal with. It does not mean that they should be considered as embarked upon a do-or-die program to overthrow our society by a given date. The theory of the inevitability of the eventual fall of capitalism has the fortunate connotation that there is no hurry about it. The forces of progress can take their time in preparing the final *coup de grâce*."

Second, because ideological difference alone neither starts nor sustains a war – "[World War II] has added its tremendous toll of destruction, death and human exhaustion. In consequence of this, we have in Russia today a population which is physically and spiritually tired... There are limits to the physical and nervous strength of people themselves."

Kennan reminds us that those who are, in theory, ready for a "duel of infinite duration" with us do not have to become our enemies in practice. An opposing political entity can stand on the other side of an ideological abyss and yet harbor no tangible desire to harm us. The ideology itself, simple exhaustion or a combination of both may well bode for quiet.

There is a gap, Kennan suggests, between ideological difference and military action. And we can exploit that gap; we can buy time, perhaps even a lot of time.

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<sup>37</sup> The Telegram was later revised and published anonymously in Foreign Affairs. It became known as the X Article. I quote from the Foreign Affairs version of the essay. It is available online at: <http://www.historyguide.org/Europe/kennan.htm>.

And during that time, if we become the best, most principled example of ourselves, if we show off the ways in which our own ideological and cultural commitments are more benign than those of the competition, things may change in our favor. For Kennan, “containment,” the term he became famous for, was mainly a cultural, diplomatic project. Prevailing in the contest with the Russians depended largely on whether the US could “measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.”

Tragically, Secretary of Defense Forrestal, who initially encouraged Kennan to rewrite his telegram as an essay for *Foreign Affairs*, badly misread his protégé’s argument. Focusing exclusively on the discussion of the unbridgeable ideological difference between the Soviets and Americans, he concluded that the Soviets were, by definition, an enemy and had to be met with equal force anywhere they made military headway. It was this militarized understanding of containment that, to a large extent, animated the American involvements in Korea and Vietnam.

Forrestal distortion notwithstanding, Kennan’s essay embodies an important facet of Truce Thinking. Long term quiet and real enmity are compatible. Though it would certainly be nice, we do not have to stop hating, fearing or disagreeing with others in order to prevent war. The very ideologies we balk at can become the source of calm. Marxism did not require a War of Armageddon with the West. Neither does Political Islam. There are openings. There are cracks. The question for the Truce Thinker is not whether we can make friends out of our enemies. It is, rather, whether we can get to know our enemies well enough, as Kennan did, to find ways of not fighting them.

## 2.3 Conclusion

Truce Thinking suggests that some of the problems of international relations can’t be resolved. It accepts that political conflict can take the form of a chronic disease to be managed rather than cured. Just as doctors treating a patient with such a condition focus on managing her symptoms and maximizing her quality of life, it is sometimes the task of political leaders to make our lives bearable rather than peaceful. The trick, of course, is learning to distinguish between the conflicts that can be resolved and the ones that must be managed. But that is not a task for philosophers. It is a purely practical matter, determined by the circumstances and political history of each conflict.

In the final analysis, peace cannot always be had, there are circumstances when seeking it at all costs can be harmful, and yet, the fact that some conflicts are unsolvable does not suggest that life for those living through them must become unbearable.

There is, of course, much more work to be done. One would need to consider objections. Two major concerns come to mind. The first is that legitimating truces promotes appeasement in international relations – that the willingness to reach accommodations with unsavory actors who reject basic tenets of political decency can encourage and empower them. A second, related objection is that truces stunt



political progress – by favoring quiet and the immediate alleviation of local tensions they divert attention from the dramatic, long-term, structural changes that must be made in order for stable peace to take hold. There are also further conceptual questions to explore. One of the most important ones concerns the dynamics of trust involved in making a truce. Truces represent the first limit or curtailment on war. Why would anyone trust an enemy enough to enter into one? What does it take to develop such trust under conditions of belligerence? A careful focus on reciprocity? A unilateral gesture which creates what Thucydides called “a debt of honor to be repaid in kind”? These questions will have to wait for a closer, more detailed consideration.

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