

## EPILOGUE

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### Duelling Counterfactuals

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**M**OST of the essays in this volume defend, or seem to want to defend, a widely accepted proposition that can be called the 'Churchill counterfactual'. As reproduced in Ernest May's introduction, this proposition stresses the emergence after World War II of a 'curious paradox' and a 'sublime irony' in which, Churchill suggests, nuclear weapons vastly expanded 'the area of mortal danger' with the potential result that 'safety will become the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation'. Elsewhere, and more specifically, Churchill advanced the 'melancholy thought' that 'nothing preserves Europe from an overwhelming military attack except the devastating resources of the United States in this awful weapon'.<sup>1</sup>

Rendered in more pointed, if less eloquent, phraseology, the Churchill counterfactual holds that if, counter to fact, nuclear weapons had not been invented, disaster was pretty much inevitable. That is, the people running world affairs after 1945 were at base so risk-acceptant, so incautious, so casual about the loss of human life, so conflagration-prone, so masochistic, so doom-eager, so incompetent, and/or simply so stupid that in all probability they could not have helped plunging or being swept into a major war if the worst they could have anticipated from the exercise was merely the kind of catastrophic destruction they had so recently experienced in World War II.

As John Gaddis puts the Churchill counterfactual (but with my emphasis), at least during the Cold War nuclear weapons played '*the determining role* in making great power war obsolete'. In other words, without the vivid images of mushroom clouds, statesmen like those discussed in this book would likely have tumbled into another massively self-destructive war.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, those of us who abhor catastrophe presumably should take the advice of Kenneth Waltz and 'thank our nuclear blessings' or, as Elspeth Rostow proposes, bestow upon it the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>3</sup>

To me, the opposite counterfactual seems more plausible. It suggests that if, counter to fact, nuclear weapons had not been invented, the history of world affairs would have turned out much the same as it did. Specifically, it seems to me that nuclear weapons and the horrifying image of warfare they so vividly

inspire were not necessary to induce the people who have been running world affairs since World War II—in particular the Cold War figures so ably discussed in this book—to be extremely wary of repeating the World War II (or for that matter, the World War I) experience.

After all, most of these figures are either the same people (Stalin, Churchill, Dulles) or the direct intellectual heirs (Truman, de Gaulle, Khrushchev, Eisenhower, Kennedy) of the people who tried desperately, frantically, pathetically, and ultimately unsuccessfully to prevent World War II. They did so in part because they feared—correctly, it gave them no comfort to discover—that another major war would be even worse than World War I. I find it difficult to understand how people with those sorts of perceptions and with that vivid and horrifying experience behind them would eventually become at best incautious about, or at worst eager for, a repeat performance. But that, essentially, is what the Churchill counterfactual asks us to believe.

### War Aversion among the Cold War Statesmen

Taken either as a whole or individually, the essays in this volume certainly do not seem to suggest that the figures examined were either eager for, or complacent about, major war. On the contrary, they depict a group of leaders who were substantially war averse—sometimes to their very bones. As David Broscious notes, it was in 1938 that Harry Truman declared ‘I am for peace now and forevermore.’ Eisenhower, observes Andrew Erdmann, ‘viscerally abhorred war, condemning it into his old age as the height of human folly’ and ‘consistently stressed that another world war would bring unspeakable horrors, perhaps worse than those of the Second World War’. In 1939 John Foster Dulles had published a book devoted to exploring mechanisms by means of which it might be possible to ‘eradicate’ war, an institution that the ‘peoples of the world’, Dulles approvingly noted, had come to consider ‘no longer tolerable’.<sup>4</sup> This was the focus, too, of John Kennedy’s 1940 book, *Why England Slept*, and Kennedy’s cautious wariness about war—even in crisis situations when he knew the US enjoyed a ‘towering’ advantage militarily—is made abundantly clear in Philip Nash’s discussion.

As Annette Messemer observes, Konrad Adenauer was deeply fearful of communist expansionism and was particularly concerned that the Soviet Union might try to take over Germany, probably without direct warfare. But given Germany’s dismemberingly devastating experience—the ‘horrible memory’—of the recently concluded ‘most catastrophic battle of mankind’, and given the deep antipathy toward war within the German public, Adenauer was hardly likely to advocate anything that could resemble a repetition, even though he sometimes anticipated that a major war might possibly be carried out under a stalemate in which nuclear weapons, like gas in World War II, would not actually be used.

As for the communist side, Vladislav Zubok points out that Stalin did anticipate that a war between East and West might eventually break out although

'he did not expect a war at any time soon'. Nevertheless, he and other Soviet leaders were hardly enthusiastic about repeating the 'terrible experience' they had just been through.<sup>5</sup> And Zubok and Hope Harrison stress that Nikita Khrushchev 'was deeply affected' by World War II and that the war had left him 'determined not to let anything similar happen to the Soviet Union'.

At a conference of the Nuclear History Program in Washington, in September 1990, Georgy Kornienko, a member of the Soviet foreign ministry since 1947, said he was 'absolutely sure' the Soviets would never have initiated a major war even in a non-nuclear world. The weapons, he thought, were an 'additional factor' or 'supplementary', and 'not a major reason'. In his memoirs, Nikita Khrushchev is quite straightforward about the issue: 'We've always considered war to be against our own interests'; he says he 'never once heard Stalin say anything about preparing to commit aggression against another [presumably major] country'; and 'we Communists must hasten' the 'struggle' against capitalism 'by any means at our disposal, *excluding war*'.<sup>6</sup> The Soviets had always been concerned about wars launched *against* them by a decaying capitalist world, but at least since 1935 they had held such wars to be potentially avoidable because of Soviet military strength and of international working-class solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

The one leader from those examined in this book who seems still to have relished war—or, at any rate, considered it inevitable, potentially productive, and perhaps desirable—was Mao Zedong. But even Mao, like the Soviet Communists, stressed advancing the class struggle through revolution, revolutionary war, and various kinds of class warfare, not through direct major war.

Then there is the man of the hour, Winston Churchill. As Jonathan Rosenberg stresses, Churchill was something of a 'warrior at heart', and during World War I he seemed to display 'a lust for battle'. He found something fascinating and exciting about war: 'nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result', he observed in his first book.<sup>8</sup>

But because something is held to be fascinating, doesn't mean people will still want to *do* it. Formal duelling retains its fascination, but it has still become obsolete. Chainsaw massacres apparently continue to intrigue, but that does not mean people will necessarily rush out to engage in the practice. The people writing this book find something fascinating about atomic bombs, but that, I strongly suspect, doesn't mean they would want to drop one on somebody.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as Rosenberg notes, Churchill was fully aware of the 'horrors of war', and, even before World War I he reflected that 'much as war attracts me and fascinates my mind with its tremendous situations', he could still see what a 'vile and wicked folly and barbarism it all is'.

In addition, and more to the point for the purposes of this book, Churchill's experience with World War I convinced him that 'War, which was cruel and magnificent, has become cruel and squalid.' In fact, Churchill continued, 'it has become completely spoilt', the fault, he concluded, of 'Democracy and Science. From the moment either of these meddlers and muddlers was allowed to take part in actual fighting, the doom of War was sealed.'

No longer, he bemoaned, could the Dragoon, the Lancer, and the Hussar claim their 'time-honoured place upon the battlefield' where one could find 'wheeling or moving in échelon a front' and 'that greatest of all cavalry events—the Charge'. He pronounced it 'a shame that War should have flung all this aside in its greedy, base, opportunist march, and should turn instead to chemists in spectacles, and chauffeurs pulling the levers of aeroplanes or machine-guns'. Thus, 'instead of a small number of well-trained professionals championing their country's cause with ancient weapons and a beautiful intricacy of archaic manoeuvre sustained at every moment by the applause of their nation, we now have entire populations, including even women and children, pitted against one another in brutish mutual extermination, and only a set of bleary-eyed clerks left to add up the butcher's bill'.<sup>10</sup>

In a more sombre essay, entitled 'Shall We All Commit Suicide?' written in 1925, and reprinted in a collection in 1932, Churchill expounded further on this profound, and perhaps regrettable, change. 'In barbarous times,' Churchill noted approvingly, 'superior martial virtues—physical strength, courage, skill, discipline—were required' to win wars, and 'in the hard evolution of mankind the best and fittest stocks came to the fore'. But he argued that war had now lost 'the crude but healthy limits of the barbarous ages'. And, expressing a view that was common at the time, he concluded that war had now become 'the potential destroyer of the human race. . . . Mankind has never been in this position before. Without having improved appreciably in virtue or enjoying wiser guidance, it has got into its hands for the first time the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination.'<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, however fascinating and exhilarating war might be—or might once have been—Churchill considered the avoidance of another major war to be 'the first aim of all who wish to spare their children the torments and disasters compared to which those we have suffered will be but a pale preliminary'.<sup>12</sup> In that state of mind, Churchill in the 1920s and 1930s, as William Manchester observes, 'though a born warlord', was 'prepared to sacrifice all save honor and the safety of England to keep the peace'.<sup>13</sup> Or as Churchill put it, 'War ceased to be a gentleman's game. To Hell with it! Hence the League of Nations.'<sup>14</sup> And, on the eve of the war he had been unable to prevent, Churchill predicted, gloomily if accurately, that it would be characterized by 'indescribable horrors'.<sup>15</sup>

It seems hugely unlikely to me that it was only the arrival on the scene of the atomic bomb that kept leaders with such views from altering their deep aversion to major war, especially after the confirming cataclysm of World War II.<sup>16</sup>

## The Bomb and Diplomatic Thinking

Many of the chapters in this book propose to undermine my counterfactual by applying a test which I consider invalid. They seek to demonstrate that nuclear weapons had a conspicuous impact on diplomatic thinking. In their chapter

on Khrushchev, for example, Vladislav Zubok and Hope Harrison cite a test once proposed by John Gaddis: 'if we can show that one or more major leaders . . . changed their views about the utility of force as a result of the development of nuclear weapons, then the Mueller argument would be falsified and a strong presumption about the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons would then be constructed'.

But I readily acknowledge that nuclear weapons helped leaders change their views about the utility of force at least as it pertained to major war and therefore, to that degree, I agree that nuclear weapons had a stabilizing effect. I maintain, however, that, while this change may have been *notable*, it was not *consequential*: the Cold War figures examined in this book would deem a World War III prosecuted *without* nuclear weapons to be an excruciatingly bad idea, while they would deem a World War III carried out *with* them to be an unbelievably excruciatingly bad idea. Erdmann's discussion of the evolution of Eisenhower's thought processes nicely catches the point: in Eisenhower's mind major war went from being (merely) unspeakably horrible to being utterly preposterous.

Similarly, I don't particularly disagree with Philip Gordon's conclusion that nuclear weapons have 'changed the character' of international relations, John Gaddis' argument that nuclear weapons 'changed the nature of warfare', or Philip Nash's observation that Kennedy had come to the view that 'atomic weapons had decisively altered the nature of war'. The world *is* different with nuclear weapons around and so, clearly, are military calculations. I question, however, whether such changes have made any truly substantial difference in the diplomatic behaviour of the war-averse statesmen who have been running world affairs since World War II.

It seems to me that international stability was vastly overdetermined in that era—nuclear weapons may have been sufficient for the stability, but they were not necessary for it. I have likened the effect to the difference between a jump from a fifth storey window and a jump from a fiftieth storey one.<sup>17</sup> The latter is surely much more horrifying to contemplate, but anyone who finds life even minimally satisfying is readily dissuaded from either adventure.<sup>18</sup>

## Rationality and the Thermonuclear Revolution

In his provocative and nuanced concluding chapter John Gaddis shifts the focus somewhat. He suggests that during the first decade of the Cold War, the atomic bomb did not actually alter the military situation terribly much, and in consequence 'there was as yet no consensus that a new world war would be much worse than the one that had preceded it.'<sup>19</sup> He then argues that a consensus that a nuclear war would be much worse than World War II emerged only with the arrival of thermonuclear weapons in the mid-1950s.<sup>20</sup> Until that point, he contends, at least some of the Cold War figures held atomic war to be 'rational' in some sense. After that, major war became, to use Eisenhower's expression, preposterous.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, even though military realities, in his view, had not changed very much in the pre-thermonuclear era, Gaddis observes that ‘certainly all’ of the early Cold War statesmen still held a ‘new world war’ to be ‘undesirable’ (a bit of an understatement in my view).

Because something may be ‘rational’ in some sense, however, doesn’t mean it will take place. In fact, rational people do not, essentially by definition, select alternatives they consider undesirable. It happens that they *also* tend to avoid ventures they consider preposterous. That is, in Gaddis’ assessment, a policy that was already universally held to be undesirable became even more so with the arrival of the thermonuclear bomb. But for rational people there are no differences in the behavioural consequences of these evaluations. Gaddis may be correct when he suggests that ‘nuclear weapons, from the very beginning, gave rational people pause’.<sup>22</sup> But in my view, they were already dead in their tracks.

If all the people who could start one hold major war to be undesirable, and if, in addition, they remain rational and in control, no major war will take place. It is this, it seems to me, that explains the long peace, not the novelty of the dramatic and impressive weaponry that accompanied it.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how a major war could have taken place among the war-averse statesmen assessed in this book. Clearly if one of them had come, like Hitler, to desire or to be willing to risk a major war or, like some leaders in 1914, at least to look upon the prospect with fondness, the others might find themselves unwillingly dragged into one. But there clearly were no Hitlers in this group. Some of the communist leaders did still hold lesser forms of conflict, like civil war and revolutionary uprising, to be natural, necessary, and desirable, and as Shu Guang Zhang notes, Mao in particular could get quite romantic about such ventures. But none held major war to be sensible or desirable, and when lesser-scale warfare did erupt, as in Korea and Vietnam, the world leaders were careful to keep them limited.

Many people have been concerned that a major war might have emerged from the various crises in the Cold War. But even here, especially in retrospect, it is clear that the people in charge—Kennedy and Khrushchev in the Cuban missile crisis, most notably—were determined from the start to keep such conflicts from escalating dangerously and to accept very substantial political embarrassment to do so.<sup>23</sup> It is possible, perhaps, that things could have somehow gotten out of control, but that is not the way wars tend to start—the popular notion that World War I began that way has been rather substantially debunked.<sup>24</sup>

Despite his belief in the deep international stability that thermonuclear weapons inspired during the Cold War, Gaddis still suggests that we have been ‘extraordinarily lucky’ that none of those peace-inspirers so hallowed in the Churchill counterfactual went off accidentally. Perhaps we have been, but, given how war-averse the statesmen were, it is far from clear that any sort of accident would have escalated to anything like major war: as Henry Kissinger puts it ‘despite popular myths, large military units do not fight by accident.’<sup>25</sup>

## Essential Versus Complete or Conceivable Irrelevance

While I maintain that nuclear weapons have been *essentially* irrelevant to the course of post-World War II history, I do not maintain that they have been *completely* irrelevant. The question in all this is not whether nuclear weapons have made any difference whatever, but whether they have been a crucial—determining—influence in keeping leaders cautious and the world free from major war.

As Neal Rosendorf notes, my position is that ‘while nuclear weapons may have substantially influenced political rhetoric, public discourse, and defence budgets and planning, it is not at all clear that they have had a significant impact on the history of world affairs since World War II.’ He then goes on to suggest, in apparent refutation, that nuclear weapons ‘consumed much of the psychic energy of America’s policy formulators’.

I do, of course, agree that nuclear weapons very strongly affected planning and rhetoric and budgets and psychic energies—they ‘irrevocably transformed the requirements’ for national security, as Erdmann suggests. But I maintain that these effects were essentially inconsequential to the broader course of world affairs.<sup>26</sup>

I have also acknowledged that nuclear weapons ‘added a new element to international relations—new pieces for the players to move around the board, new terrors to contemplate’.<sup>27</sup> The players could not have spent money on nuclear weapons had they not been in existence, nor could France (and more lately India and Pakistan) have taken them on as status or virility symbols or, like China, acquired them in an effort to garner respect, nor could we have had a nuclear crisis over Cuba,<sup>28</sup> nor could they have rattled their rockets (Eisenhower, Dulles, Khrushchev, and Kennedy all did that from time to time), nor, for that matter could this book ever have been written. Nor do I dispute Philip Gordon’s contention that France’s bomb generated ‘psychological benefits’ and a ‘feeling . . . of national independence’ and that it served as ‘a source of pride and unity’ for at least some Frenchmen (including, of course, Charles de Gaulle). But as far as he can determine, the French bomb had little actual impact on international relations.

And, while I maintain that nuclear weapons have not been necessary to keep the war-wary and risk-averse world leaders who have actually been in place, like those chronicled in this book, from plunging or being swept into major war, I do not argue that nuclear weapons are irrelevant under all *conceivable* circumstances. There are imaginable circumstances under which the weapons might be decisive in altering the course of events.<sup>29</sup>

For example, if Khomeini had had nuclear weapons in 1980, Iraq might not have invaded Iran. If Grenada had had nuclear weapons in 1983 or if Noriega’s Panama had had nuclear weapons in 1989, the United States might well have been able to contain its enthusiasm for attacking them. It seems possible, moreover, that nuclear weapons could have deterred Hitler in the 1930s (though determined and credible warnings from an effective, armed East-West

alliance of the sort he eventually confronted in the war might have done so as well). And it is always possible that nuclear weapons could be useful in the future should such a risk-acceptant, war-eager, and highly skilled fanatic once again rise to a position of world leadership in an important country.

## Proof and Disproof

It is argued in the introductory and concluding chapters of this volume that my counterfactual—and by extension the popular and attractive Churchill counterfactual implicitly and explicitly maintained in most of the book—can be neither proved nor disproved because there is no way to rerun the history of the Cold War without nuclear weapons to see if things would come out importantly different.

It is true, of course, that history is not an experimental science, but sensible analysis over the validity of a historical counterfactual can still often be accomplished. Historians are often intensely interested in cause and effect and in weighing elements that went into an important decision. With such skills and interests, it might be possible to establish that the fear of nuclear weapons was a crucial or determining reason (not simply an embellishing or reinforcing one) in causing a Cold War statesman to refrain from a military attack or adventure—or perhaps to take one.

For example, in late 1990, George Bush was clearly eager for a war against his nemesis, Saddam Hussein. If, however, Hussein had had a nuclear weapon or two to lob on attacking American troops, Bush would very probably have been able to contain his war-eagerness since the likely costs to American troops in a war with Iraq would have been prohibitive.<sup>30</sup> That is, in that instance, nuclear weapons would have been decisive—highly relevant indeed—and it is likely that the historical record would show that.

Similarly, Shu Guang Zhang notes that some Chinese Communist leaders apparently opposed intervention in the Korean War out of fear of the American atomic bomb. Their view, of course, didn't prevail; but had it done so, it would form a case in which it could be said that the bomb altered the course of international history significantly, though it would have to be established that the atomic argument was the decisive one.<sup>31</sup>

Or perhaps historical research could indicate that Truman was correct in his memoirs when he claims that it was his nuclear-backed ultimatum that forced the Soviet Union to withdraw from Iran in 1946—though it would be important in the process to be able to demonstrate in the process that any such ultimatum would not have been effective without the nuclear backing. However, as Zubok observes, the accumulating evidence does not seem to support Truman's assertion.<sup>32</sup> And Eisenhower and others have argued that his threat to use nuclear weapons caused the Korean War to end. This proposition can be examined, although when that has been done, the conclusion seems to be, as Erdmann notes, that any threats were 'ambiguous and equivocal' and probably of less than central import. Moreover, as Zhang puts it, 'there is no



evidence that Mao was aware of the possibility that the US would use tactical nuclear weapons to end the Korean War in the spring of 1953.<sup>33</sup> Nash suggests that Kennedy decided not to send troops to Laos in 1961 ‘probably in part because such a decision might have led to nuclear use’. If a study could show that this aspect of Kennedy’s decision calculus was decisive or determining, rather than simply contributing, it would indicate that the existence of nuclear weapons was of substantial consequence in this instance.

Or support might be found for the proposition that Stalin was impelled to initiate the Korean War in a spirit of over-confident arrogance after the successful Soviet atomic test of 1949. Zubok does not completely dismiss this speculation, though it seems clear from his analysis that other factors were far more important, and probably fully sufficient, to explain the origins of the communist attack in Korea. And John Gaddis speculates that ‘it is possible that without [the bomb] the Americans would never have run the risks involved in defending Berlin, encouraging the formation of an independent West German state, and creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.’<sup>34</sup>

I suspect that the best case against my counterfactual might be found in the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954–5. As Zhang notes, there seems to have been a great deal of self-conscious bluster by the Chinese during and after the crisis boasting that ‘we are not afraid of atomic bombs’. The impression arising from such protesting-too-much activity and from other evidence is that perhaps they would have been engaged in far more belligerent acts but for the US atomic threat. Historical analysis might be able to determine that.<sup>35</sup>

However, as it stands, none of the essays in this book seems to have been able to come up with such evidence and so, to that degree, it seems to me that the Churchill counterfactual has been disconfirmed and mine confirmed.

## **The Broader Issue: The Rise of War Aversion**

As Ernest May’s Introduction observes, my conclusions about the essential irrelevance of nuclear weapons and my efforts to refute the eternally popular Churchill counterfactual arise from the proposition that there has been, particularly over the course of the last 100 years, a broad secular trend in which people and relevant decision-makers have come to believe that major war—war among developed countries—is, to apply Gaddis’ word again, ‘undesirable’. It is also my contention that this change has been highly consequential and that it, not the advance of weaponry, best explains the long peace.

At one time Europeans—certainly including Winston Churchill—widely viewed warfare as something that was natural and normal: as Michael Howard has observed, ‘war was almost universally considered an acceptable, perhaps an inevitable and for many people a desirable way of settling international differences.’<sup>36</sup> In partial consequence of this point of view, Europe was a cauldron of both international and civil conflict—the continent was, in fact, the most warlike in the world. Thomas Jefferson, with a mixture of amazement

and disgust, called it an 'arena of gladiators' where 'war seems to be the natural state of man'.<sup>37</sup>

Attitudes toward war have changed profoundly in the twentieth century in Europe. This change is reflected in the intellectual development of Winston Churchill as discussed above, and it can be seen perhaps through a rough sort of content analysis: a hundred years ago it was very easy to find serious writers, analysts, and politicians in Europe and the United States who hailed war 'not merely as an unpleasant necessity', as Roland Stromberg has observed, 'but as spiritual salvation and hope of regeneration'.<sup>38</sup> By now, however, such views have become extremely rare. This suggests that the appeal of war, both as a desirable exercise in itself and as a sensible method for resolving international disagreements, has diminished markedly on that once war-racked continent. War has hardly become obsolete, but international war in the classic European sense has, I think, started to become so—it has begun to go out of style.

Much of this change took place at the time of World War I, not at Hiroshima. Attitudes toward war did not change, I think, simply because World War I had been peculiarly painful—there had been plenty of massively destructive, even annihilative, wars before. Rather, the war seems to have been quite unique in two important and somewhat related respects.

First, it was the first major war in history to have been preceded by substantial, organized anti-war agitation. Individual voices, some of them very eloquent, had been raised against war in the past, but as a significant political issue, the notion that war is a bad idea and ought to be abolished is only about a century old. Thus, in the decades before 1914 anti-war agitators were preparing international thought to be receptive to their notions, and they were assiduously developing the blueprints for institutions that might be viable substitutes for war should the desire for such plans become general.<sup>39</sup>

And second, the war followed a century that was most peculiar in European history, one in which the continent had managed to savour the relative blessings of substantial periods of peace. As a result, in the century before 1914 Europeans gradually became, perhaps without quite noticing it, accustomed to the benefits of peace, and they garnered an enormous and historically unprecedented improvement in material well-being and in life expectancy.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the traditional appeals of war persisted. For the abolition of war to become a widely accepted idea, it was probably necessary for there to be one more vivid example of how appalling the hoary, time-honoured institution really was. World War I may not have been all that much worse than some earlier wars, but it destroyed the comforting notion—so beloved by romantics like Churchill—that wars in Europe would necessarily be long on dashing derring-do and short on bloodshed, and it reminded Europeans of how horrendous wars on their continent could become. Thanks to the pre-war fulminations of the peace movement and thanks to the experience with an unprecedented century of comparative warlessness, people in the developed world were at last ready to begin to accept the message.<sup>41</sup>

Because of the change, it became the central policy of almost all countries in the developed world after World War I to avoid war—at least war with each other. The experience of World War II embellished this process (and it was probably crucial for the distant Japanese), but I think that war came to Europe in 1939 not because it was in the cards in any important sense, but because it was brought about by the maniacally dedicated machinations of an exceptionally lucky and skilled entrepreneur, Adolf Hitler—history’s supreme atavism.<sup>42</sup>

To opt out of the war system there were two paths war-averse countries could take. One was the pacifist (or Chamberlain) approach: be reasonable and unprovocative, stress accommodation and appeasement, and assume the best about one’s opponent. The other was the deterrence (or Churchill) approach: arm yourself and bargain with trouble-makers from a position of military strength. The chief lesson garnered by the end of the 1930s—strongly advocated by John Kennedy in his 1940 book, *Why England Slept*—was that, while the pacifist approach might work well with some countries, an approach stressing deterrence and even confrontation was the only way to deal with others. To that degree, war remained part of the political atmospherics even for the war-averse.<sup>43</sup> It does not follow, therefore, that because countries maintain strong militaries and the will and ability to use them, that they are necessarily in favour of war. Rather, it seems that, as Michael Howard has put, ‘today everyone in developed societies belongs to the “peace movement”, even those who, in the name of stability, are most zealously building up their national armaments’.<sup>44</sup>

After World War II, there was an important contest between East and West. It stemmed, I think, from the essential belief by many important Communists that international capitalism, or imperialism, was a profoundly evil system that must be eradicated from the face of the globe. As I have suggested above, it does not appear that the Soviets and their ideological allies ever envisaged that the initiation of major war was a sensible (or desirable) method for carrying out this scheme, though they did consider valid such tactics as violent revolution, bluster and crisis, and revolutionary wars in what came to be called the Third World.

By the time *Retreat from Doomsday* left my hands at the end of 1988, it seemed to me that communist ideology—which I take to be the central cause of the Cold War confrontation—was in the process of very substantially mellowing, and therefore that the Cold War might end, that the arms race might reverse itself, and that East and West might soon find themselves linked in previously inconceivable alliance relationships.<sup>45</sup> In the period since the book came out, much of that has transpired, though with a speed and thoroughness I still find breathtaking. And, while armed conflict has hardly vanished from the globe, the likelihood of a major conflagration among developed nations—the kind of war most feared during the Cold War—has further diminished.<sup>46</sup> We seem to have retreated even farther from doomsday.

An important consequence of the change in attitudes about the desirability of major war is that Europe (and the developed world in general) has experi-

enced a complete absence of major international warfare for over half a century—a condition unknown in Europe, as Paul Schroeder has pointed out, since the days of the Roman Empire.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout all these remarkable historical changes, in my opinion, nuclear weapons, while very noticeable, have been essentially irrelevant.<sup>48</sup> In counter to Albert Einstein's oft-quoted remark that 'the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking', it might be suggested that nuclear weapons have changed little *except* our modes of thinking—or, more specifically, our way of posturing and spending money.

In one of his central questions for writers and readers of this book, Ernest May asks them to consider whether the Cold War statesmen considered war—or major war—to be *obsolete* before the arrival of nuclear or thermonuclear weaponry. It is not my contention that they have ever considered major war to be obsolete (or even that anyone does now), nor do I contend that major war has become either impossible or infeasible.

In so far as military considerations have been relevant, it is the fear of escalation (whether to the nuclear or World War II level) that deterred major war, a fear that may well be something of a myth. Indeed, the lesson of the Cold War era could be taken to suggest not that escalation is dangerously easy or automatic, but that it is quite possible to keep conflict contained at a bearable level and that mutually self-interested limits of the sort imposed in the Korean War could be applied in other, broader conflicts. In fact, it is conceivable that a major war between the United States and the Soviet Union could have been fought entirely with conventional weapons (following the pattern of World War II where as an important weapon, gas, went unused), and that the economic costs and casualty levels of such a war could have been kept well below those of World Wars I and II. Thus even in the nuclear era a sufficiently discontented or quarrelsome country led by a Hitler-like figure could be tempted to try out a war to advance its interests.<sup>49</sup>

I think, however, that, myth or no myth, war in the developed world is highly and increasingly unlikely. It has been rejected not so much because it has become unfeasible or impossible but because people have come to consider it to be, to use Gaddis' mild word, singularly undesirable. As the experience with slavery and duelling suggests, institutions which fall into disrepute because they are increasingly held to be undesirable do go out of style, and, in due course, can become obsolete. But they become obsolete—subrationally unthinkable, in my jargon—because they are deemed undesirable, not the other way around.