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War and Diplomacy

It is not what people do, the physical motions they go through, that are crucial but the institutions, practices, conventions that they make. Hence the social and historical conditions that “modify” war are not to be considered accidental or external to war itself for war is a social creation.

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The last chapter raised questions about the cause or constitution of war, against the background of two alternative claims: war is a reflection of the human condition vs. war is a social artifact. At stake is whether war is determined by human nature or is a social product. Other animals, and not only human beings, are violent. Some, such as packs of wolves, engage in group violence. These activities would undoubtedly look the same whether a particular pack of wolves was located in twelfth-century Europe or twentieth-century Asia, assuming we are dealing with the same species of animal. War between human beings involves many more levels of organization and convention than violence between animals. Its reasons go beyond the need for food or protection to a range of more complex motives, ranging from glory to justice to economic gain. While war requires some level of group identity and conflict, this can take many different forms with consequences for how violence is organized. Wars between monarchs in the eighteenth century clearly differ in structure, intent, and forms of weaponry than the “War on Terrorism” at the beginning of the twenty-first.

War is a concept that shares a family resemblance with a range of other concepts. Conflict, fighting, violence, and intervention are all concepts that can overlap with or be used in conjunction with war. War is a form of conflict, for instance, but conflict is not by definition war.
War usually involves fighting between groups, but not all conflicts between groups are wars. Conflict also does not by definition involve a mutual contest of violence, as is evident in historical examples of non-violent conflict, such as Gandhi’s India Campaign. The brute act of violence can also be distinguished from war. War involves a high degree of organization, through a system of socially sanctioned rules. War has traditionally been declared formally between states, and has been shaped and circumscribed by various moral and legal principles, as we will examine in the next two chapters. Yet, we do refer to guerrilla wars or the War on Terrorism. In these cases, at least one of the actors is not a state, and thus it may be less than clear how the rules of war apply.

Forceful intervention may also be closely related to war. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait was an intervention, without consent, that was an act of war. The international community then intervened to uphold international principles of sovereignty and nonintervention. The former was considered belligerent and the latter was for the purpose of restoring international peace and order. In this respect, as Hall states, “although intervention often ends in war, and is sometimes really war from the commencement, it may be conveniently considered abstractedly from the pacific or belligerent character which it assumes in different cases.” The traditional definition of intervention overlaps with the concept of war, and the act may be constitutive of war. Intervention as developed in this book, by contrast, looks to the many layers of human agency that have shaped the experience of war or its transformation. In this respect, forceful intervention in and of itself is an act which is constituted by a range of other interventions.

The distinctions reveal the extent to which war, as distinct from other forms of conflict, is a social artifact, even while it may be given impetus by powerful human drives. Once war is understood to be a social artifact, the reality is more malleable and subject to interventions that alter its shape. The question then becomes whether intervention is understood to be an act that alters the “reality” of war or is part and parcel of the same social artifact. In the first case, war is a brutal reality and the various interventions to alter this objective condition are destined to fail precisely because they represent attempts to change the unchangeable. In the second, the relationship is less one of add and stir than of a maze of intersecting social constructs that are always in a process of transition and transformation, generated by the inevitable tensions between them. From this angle, war itself is no less a social construct than the various efforts presented in the rest of this book to limit or alter its course. The two have emerged and developed in tandem.