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Source: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Spring, 1988, Vol. 18, No. 4, The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars (Spring, 1988), pp. 591-613

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/204816

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Journal of Interdisciplinary History, XVIII:4 (Spring 1988), 591–613.

Robert Gilpin

The Theory of Hegemonic War

In the introduction to his history of the great war between the Spartans and the Athenians, Thucydides wrote that he was addressing "those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it. . . . In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time."[1] Thucydides, assuming that the behavior and phenomena that he observed would repeat themselves throughout human history, intended to reveal the underlying and unalterable nature of what is today called international relations.

In the language of contemporary social science, Thucydides believed that he had uncovered the general law of the dynamics of international relations. Although differences exist between Thucydides' conceptions of scientific law and methodology and those of present-day students of international relations, it is significant that Thucydides was the first to set forth the idea that the dynamic of international relations is provided by the differential growth of power among states. This fundamental idea—that the uneven growth of power among states is the driving force of international relations—can be identified as the theory of hegemonic war.

This essay argues that Thucydides' theory of hegemonic war constitutes one of the central organizing ideas for the study of international relations. The following pages examine and evaluate Thucydides' theory of hegemonic war and contemporary variations of that theory. To carry out this task, it is necessary to make Thucydides' ideas more systematic, expose his basic assumptions, and understand his analytical method. Subsequently, this article

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[1] Thucydides (trans. John H. Finley, Jr.), *The Peloponnesian War* (New York, 1951), 14–15.

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discusses whether or not Thucydides' conception of international relations has proved to be a "possession for all time." Does it help explain wars in the modern era? How, if at all, has it been modified by more modern scholarship? What is its relevance for the contemporary nuclear age?

THUCYDIDES' THEORY OF HEGEMONIC WAR The essential idea embodied in Thucydides' theory of hegemonic war is that fundamental changes in the international system are the basic determinants of such wars. The structure of the system or distribution of power among the states in the system can be stable or unstable. A stable system is one in which changes can take place if they do not threaten the vital interests of the dominant states and thereby cause a war among them. In his view, such a stable system has an unequivocal hierarchy of power and an unchallenged dominant or hegemonic power. An unstable system is one in which economic, technological, and other changes are eroding the international hierarchy and undermining the position of the hegemonic state. In this latter situation, untoward events and diplomatic crises can precipitate a hegemonic war among the states in the system. The outcome of such a war is a new international structure.

Three propositions are embedded in this brief summary of the theory. The first is that a hegemonic war is distinct from other categories of war; it is caused by broad changes in political, strategic, and economic affairs. The second is that the relations among individual states can be conceived as a system; the behavior of states is determined in large part by their strategic interaction. The third is that a hegemonic war threatens and transforms the structure of the international system; whether or not the participants in the conflict are initially aware of it, at stake is the hierarchy of power and relations among states in the system. Thucydides' conception and all subsequent formulations of the theory of hegemonic war emerge from these three propositions.

Such a structural theory of war can be contrasted with an escalation theory of war. According to this latter theory, as Waltz has argued in *Man, the State, and War*, war occurs because of the simple fact that there is nothing to stop it.[2] In the anarchy of the international system, statesmen make decisions and respond to the decisions of others. This action-reaction process in time can lead to situations in which statesmen deliberately provoke a war or lose control over events and eventually find themselves propelled into a war. In effect, one thing leads to another until war is the consequence of the interplay of foreign policies.

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[2] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, 1959).

Most wars are the consequence of such an escalatory process. They are not causally related to structural features of the international system, but rather are due to the distrust and uncertainty that characterizes relations among states in what Waltz has called a self-help system.[3] Thus, the history of ancient times, which introduces Thucydides' history, is a tale of constant warring. However, the Peloponnesian War, he tells us, is different and worthy of special attention because of the massive accumulation of power in Hellas and its implications for the structure of the system. This great war and its underlying causes were the focus of his history.

Obviously, these two theories do not necessarily contradict one another; each can be used to explain different wars. But what interested Thucydides was a particular type of war, what he called a great war and what this article calls a hegemonic war—a war in which the overall structure of an international system is at issue. The structure of the international system at the outbreak of such a war is a necessary, but not a sufficient cause of the war. The theory of hegemonic war and international change that is examined below refers to those wars that arise from the specific structure of an international system and in turn transform that structure.

Assumptions of the Theory Underlying Thucydides' view that he had discovered the basic mechanism of a great or hegemonic war was his conception of human nature. He believed that human nature was unchanging and therefore the events recounted in his history would be repeated in the future. Since human beings are driven by three fundamental passions—interest, pride, and, above all else, fear—they always seek to increase their wealth and power until other humans, driven by like passions, try to stop them. Although advances in political knowledge could contribute to an understanding of this process, they could not control or arrest it. Even advances in knowledge, technology, or economic development would not change the fundamental nature of human behavior or of international relations. On the contrary, increases in human power, wealth, and technology would serve only to intensify conflict among social groups and enhance the magnitude of war. Thucydides the realist, in contrast to Plato the idealist, believed that reason would not transform human beings, but would always remain the slave of human passions. Thus, uncontrollable passions would again and again generate great conflicts like the one witnessed in his history.

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[3] *Idem*, *Theory of International Relations* (Reading, Mass., 1979).

Methodology One can understand Thucydides' argument and his belief that he had uncovered the underlying dynamics of international relations and the role of hegemonic war in international change only if one comprehends his conception of science and his view of what constituted explanation. Modern students of international relations and of social science tend to put forth theoretical physics as their model of analysis and explanation; they analyze phenomena in terms of causation and of models linking independent and dependent variables. In modern physics, meaningful propositions must, at least in principle, be falsifiable—that is, they must give rise to predictions that can be shown to be false.

Thucydides, by contrast, took as his model of analysis and explanation the method of Hippocrates, the great Greek physician.[4] Disease, the Hippocratic school argued, had to be understood as a consequence of the operation of natural forces and not as a manifestation of some supernatural influence. Through dispassionate observation of the symptoms and the course of a disease, one could understand its nature. Thus, one explained a disease by recognizing its characteristics and charting its development from its genesis through inevitable periods of crisis to its final resolution in recovery or death. What was central to this mode of explanation was the evolution of the symptoms and the manifestations of the disease rather than the search for the underlying causes sought by modern medicine.

Thucydides wrote his history to fulfill the same prognostic purpose, namely, to recognize that great wars were recurrent phenomena with characteristic manifestations. A great or hegemonic war, like a disease, displays discernible symptoms and follows an inevitable course. The initial phase is a relatively stable international system characterized by a hierarchical ordering of the states in the system. Over time the power of a subordinate state begins to grow disproportionately, and that rising state comes into conflict with the dominant or hegemonic state in the system. The ensuing struggle between these two states and their respective allies leads to a bipolarization of the system, to an inevitable crisis, and eventually to a hegemonic war. Finally, there is the resolution of the war in favor of one side and the establishment of a new international system that reflects the emergent distribution of power in the system.

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[4] W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, 1984), 27.

The dialectical conception of political change implicit in his model was borrowed from contemporary Sophist thinkers. This method of analysis postulated a thesis, its contradiction or antithesis, and a resolution in the form of a synthesis. In his history this dialectic approach can be discerned as follows:

> (1) The *thesis* is the hegemonic state, in this case, Sparta, which organizes the international system in terms of its political, economic, and strategic interests.
> (2) The *antithesis* or contradiction in the system is the growing power of the challenging state, Athens, whose expansion and efforts to transform the international system bring it into conflict with the hegemonic state.
> (3) The *synthesis* is the new international system that results from the inevitable clash between the dominant state and the rising challenger.

Similarly, Thucydides foresaw that throughout history new states like Sparta and challenging states like Athens would arise and the hegemonic cycle would repeat itself.

Conception of Systemic Change Underlying this analysis and the originality of Thucydides' thought was his novel conception of classical Greece as constituting a system, the basic components of which were the great powers—Sparta and Athens. Foreshadowing later realist formulations of international relations, he believed that the structure of the system was provided by the distribution of power among states; the hierarchy of power among these states defined and maintained the system and determined the relative prestige of states, their spheres of influence, and their political relations. The hierarchy of power and related elements thus gave order and stability to the system.

Accordingly, international political change involved a transformation of the hierarchy of the states in the system and the patterns of relations dependent upon that hierarchy. Although minor changes could occur and lesser states could move up and down this hierarchy without necessarily disturbing the stability of the system, the positioning of the great powers was crucial. Thus, as he tells us, it was the increasing power of the second most powerful state in the system, Athens, that precipitated the conflict and brought about what I have elsewhere called systemic change, that is, a change in the hierarchy or control of the international political system.[5]

Searching behind appearances for the reality of international relations, Thucydides believed that he had found the true causes of the Peloponnesian War, and by implication of systemic change, in the phenomenon of the uneven growth of power among the dominant states in the system. "The real cause," he concluded in the first chapter, "I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta], made war inevitable."[6] In a like fashion and in future ages, he reasoned, the differential growth of power in a state system would undermine the status quo and lead to hegemonic war between declining and rising powers.

In summary, according to Thucydides, a great or hegemonic war, like a disease, follows a discernible and recurrent course. The initial phase is a relatively stable international system characterized by a hierarchical ordering of states with a dominant or hegemonic power. Over time, the power of one subordinate state begins to grow disproportionately; as this development occurs, it comes into conflict with the hegemonic state. The struggle between these contenders for preeminence and their accumulating alliances leads to a bipolarization of the system. In the parlance of game theory, the system becomes a zero-sum situation in which one side's gain is by necessity the other side's loss. As this bipolarization occurs the system becomes increasingly unstable, and a small event can trigger a crisis and precipitate a major conflict; the resolution of that conflict will determine the new hegemon and the hierarchy of power in the system.

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[5] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York, 1981), 40.

[6] Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 15.

The Causes of Hegemonic War Following this model, Thucydides began his history of the war between the Spartans and the Athenians by stating why, at its very inception, he believed that the war would be a great war and thus worthy of special attention. Contrasting the beginnings of the Peloponnesian War to the constant warring of the Greeks, he began in the introduction to analyze the unprecedented growth of power in Hellas from ancient times to the outbreak of the war. Although, as we have already noted, Thucydides did not think of causes in the modern or scientific sense of the term, his analysis of the factors that altered the distribution of power in ancient Greece, and ultimately accounted for the war, is remarkably modern.

The first set of factors to explain the rise of power in Athens and the expansion of the Athenian empire contained geographical and demographic elements. Because of the poverty of its soil, Attica (the region surrounding Athens) was not envied by any other peoples; it enjoyed freedom from conflict. As a consequence, "the most powerful victims of war or faction from the rest of Hellas took refuge with the Athenians as a safe retreat," became naturalized, and swelled the population.[7] With an increase in population Attica became too small to sustain its growing numbers, and Athens began to send out colonies to other parts of Greece. Athens itself turned to commerce to feed her expanding population and became the "workshop of ancient Greece," exporting manufactured products and commodities in exchange for grain. Thus, Athens began its imperial career from demographic pressure and economic necessity.

The second set of influences was economic and technological: the Greek, and especially the Athenian, mastery of naval power, which had facilitated the expansion of commerce among the Greek states and the establishment of the hegemony of Hellas in the Eastern Mediterranean. After the defeat of Troy, Thucydides tells us, Hellas attained "the quiet which must precede growth" as the Greeks turned to commerce and the acquisition of wealth. Although Athens and other seafaring cities grew "in revenue and in dominion," there was no great concentration of power in Hellas prior to the war with Persia: "There was no union of subject cities round a great state, no spontaneous combination of equals for confederate expeditions; what fighting there was consisted merely of local warfare between rival neighbours."[8] The technical innovation of naval power, the introduction into Greece of fortification techniques, and the rise of financial power associated with commerce, however, made possible an unprecedented concentration of military and economic power. These developments, by transforming the basis of military power, created the conditions for the forging of substantial alliances, a profound shift in the power balance, and the creation of large seaborne empires. In this novel environment, states interacted more intimately, and an interdependent international economic and political system took shape. These military, technological, and economic changes were to favor the growth of Athenian power.

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[7] *Ibid.*, 4.

The final factor leading to the war was political: the rise of the Athenian empire at the conclusion of the war with Persia. That war and its aftermath stimulated the growth of Athenian power at the same time that the war and its aftermath encouraged Sparta, the reigning hegemon and the leader of the Greeks in their war against the Persians, to retreat into isolation. With the rise of a wealthy commercial class in Athens, the traditional form of government—a hereditary monarchy—was overthrown, and a new governing elite representing the rising and enterprising commercial class was established; its interest lay with commerce and imperial expansion. While the Athenians grew in power through commerce and empire, the Spartans fell behind and found themselves increasingly encircled by the expanding power of the Athenians.

As a consequence of these developments, the Greeks anticipated the approach of a great war and began to choose sides. In time, the international system divided into two great blocs. "At the head of the one stood Athens, at the head of the other Lacedaemon, one the first naval, the other the first military power in Hellas."[9] The former—commercial, democratic, and expansionist—began to evoke alarm in the more conservative Spartans. In this increasingly bipolar and unstable world a series of diplomatic encounters, beginning at Epidamnus and culminating in the Megara Decree and the Spartan ultimatum, were to plunge the rival alliances into war. In order to prevent the dynamic and expanding Athenians from overturning the international balance of power and displacing them as the hegemonic state, the Spartans eventually delivered an ultimatum that forced Athens to declare war.

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[8] *Ibid.*, 9, 11.

[9] *Ibid.*, 12.

In brief, it was the combination of significant environmental changes and the contrasting natures of the Athenian and Spartan societies that precipitated the war. Although the underlying causes of the war can be traced to geographical, economic, and technological factors, the major determinant of the foreign policies of the two protagonists was the differing character of their domestic regimes. Athens was a democracy; its people were energetic, daring, and commercially disposed; its naval power, financial resources, and empire were expanding. Sparta, the traditional hegemon of the Hellenes, was a slavocracy; its foreign policy was conservative and attentive merely to the narrow interests of preserving its domestic status quo. Having little interest in commerce or overseas empire, it gradually declined relative to its rival. In future ages, in Thucydides' judgment, situations similar to that of Athens and Sparta would arise, and this fateful process would repeat itself eternally.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THUCYDIDES' MODEL Thucydides' history and the pattern that it reveals have fascinated students of international relations in all eras. Individuals of every political persuasion from realist to idealist to Marxist have claimed kinship to him. At critical moments scholars and statesmen have seen their own times reflected in his account of the conflict between democratic Athens and undemocratic Sparta. The American Civil War, World War I, and the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union have been cast in its light. In a similar vein, Mackinder and other political geographers have interpreted world history as the recurrent struggle between landpower (Sparta, Rome, and Great Britain) and seapower (Athens, Carthage, and Germany) and have observed that a great or hegemonic war has taken place and transformed world affairs approximately every 100 years. The writings of Wright and Toynbee on general war are cast in a similar vein. The Marxist theory of intra-capitalist wars can be viewed as a subcategory of Thucydides' more general theory. More recently, a number of social scientists have revived the concept of hegemonic war. The "power transition theory" of Organski, Modelski's theory of long cycles and global war, and the present writer's book on international change are examples of elaborations of Thucydides' fundamental insights into the dynamics of international relations.[10] Although these variations and extensions of Thucydides' basic model raise many interesting issues, they are too numerous and complex to be discussed here. Instead, the emphasis will be on the contribution of Thucydides' theory, its applicability to modern history, and its continuing relevance for international relations.

The theory's fundamental contribution is the conception of hegemonic war itself and the importance of hegemonic wars for the dynamics of international relations. The expression hegemonic war may have been coined by Aron; certainly he has provided an excellent definition of what Thucydides called a great war. Describing World War I as a hegemonic war, Aron writes that such a war "is characterized less by its immediate causes or its explicit purposes than by its extent and the stakes involved. It affect[s] all the political units inside one system of relations between sovereign states. Let us call it, for want of a better term, a war of hegemony, hegemony being, if not the conscious motive, at any rate the inevitable consequence of the victory of at least one of the states or groups." Thus, the outcome of a hegemonic war, according to Aron, is the transformation of the structure of the system of interstate relations.[11]

In more precise terms, one can distinguish a hegemonic war in terms of its scale, the objectives at stake, and the means employed to achieve those objectives. A hegemonic war generally involves all of the states in the system; it is a world war. Whatever the immediate and conscious motives of the combatants, as Aron points out, the fundamental issues to be decided are the leadership and structure of the international system. Its outcome also profoundly affects the internal composition of societies because, as the behavior of Athens and Sparta revealed, the victor remolds the vanquished in its image. Such wars are at once political, economic, and ideological struggles. Because of the scope of the war and the importance of the issues to be decided, the means employed are usually unlimited. In Clausewitzian terms, they become pure conflicts or clashes of society rather than the pursuit of limited policy objectives.

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[10] Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," in Anthony J. Pearce (ed.), *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York, 1962), 1–2; Quincy Wright, *A Study of War* (Chicago, 1942); Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, 1961), III, IV; Vladimer Ilyich Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York, 1939). See, for example, A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York, 1968; 2nd ed.); Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago, 1980); George Modelski (ed.), *Exploring Long Cycles* (Boulder, 1987); Gilpin, *War and Change.*

[11] Raymond Aron, "War and Industrial Society," in Leon Bramson and George W. Goethals (eds.), *War—Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology* (New York, 1964), 359.

Thus, in the Peloponnesian War the whole of Hellas became engaged in an internecine struggle to determine the economic and political future of the Greek world. Although the initial objectives of the two alliances were limited, the basic issue in the contest became the structure and leadership of the emerging international system and not merely the fate of particular city-states. Ideological disputes, that is, conflicting views over the organization of domestic societies, were also at the heart of the struggle; democratic Athens and aristocratic Sparta sought to reorder other societies in terms of their own political values and socioeconomic systems. As Thucydides tells us in his description of the leveling and decimation of Melos, there were no constraints on the means employed to reach their goals. The war released forces of which the protagonists had previously been unaware; it took a totally unanticipated course. As the Athenians had warned the Spartans in counseling them against war, "consider the vast influence of accident in war, before you are engaged in it."[12] Furthermore, neither rival anticipated that the war would leave both sides exhausted and thereby open the way to Macedonian imperialism.

The central idea embodied in the hegemonic theory is that there is incompatibility between crucial elements of the existing international system and the changing distribution of power among the states within the system. The elements of the system—the hierarchy of prestige, the division of territory, and the international economy—became less and less compatible with the shifting distribution of power among the major states in the system. The resolution of the disequilibrium between the superstructure of the system and the underlying distribution of power is found in the outbreak and intensification of what becomes a hegemonic war.

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[12] Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 45.

The theory does not necessarily concern itself with whether the declining or rising state is responsible for the war. In fact, identification of the initiator of a particular war is frequently impossible to ascertain and authorities seldom agree. When did the war actually begin? What actions precipitated it? Who committed the first hostile act? In the case of the Peloponnesian War, for example, historians differ over whether Athens or Sparta initiated the war. Whereas most regard the Megara decree issued by Athens as the precipitating cause of the war, one can just as easily argue that the decree was the first act of a war already begun by Sparta and its allies.

Nor does the theory address the question of the explicit consequences of the war. Both the declining and rising protagonists may suffer and a third party may be the ultimate victor. Frequently, the chief beneficiary is, in fact, a rising peripheral power not directly engaged in the conflict. In the case of the Peloponnesian War, the war paved the way for Macedonian imperialism to triumph over the Greeks. In brief, the theory makes no prediction regarding the consequences of the war. What the theory postulates instead is that the system is ripe for a fundamental transformation because of profound ongoing changes in the international distribution of power and the larger economic and technological environment. This is not to suggest that the historic change produced by the war must be in some sense progressive; it may, as happened in the Peloponnesian War, weaken and eventually bring an end to one of mankind's most glorious civilizations.

Underlying the outbreak of a hegemonic war is the idea that the basis of power and social order is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Halévy must have had something like this conception of political change in mind when, in analyzing the causes of World War I, he wrote that "it is thus apparent why all great convulsions in the history of the world, and more particularly in modern Europe, have been at the same time wars and revolutions. The Thirty Years' War was at once a revolutionary crisis, a conflict, within Germany, between the rival parties of Protestants and Catholics, and an international war between the Holy Roman

Empire, Sweden, and France."[13] Similarly, Halévy continues, the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon as well as World War I must be seen as upheavals of the whole European social and political order.

The profound changes in political relations, economic organization, and military technology behind hegemonic war and the associated domestic upheavals undermine both the international and domestic status quo. These underlying transformations in power and social relations result in shifts in the nature and locus of power. They give rise to a search for a new basis of political and social order at both the domestic and international levels.

This conception of a hegemonic war as associated with a historic turning point in world history is exemplified by the Peloponnesian War. A basic change in the nature and hence in the location of economic and military power was taking place in Greece during the fifth century B.C. This changing economic and technological environment had differing implications for the fortunes of the two major protagonists. The Peloponnesian War would be the midwife for the birth of the new world. This great war, like other transforming wars, would embody significant long-term changes in Greece's economy, military affairs, and political organization.

Prior to and during the Persian wars, power and wealth in the Greek world were based on agriculture and land armies; Sparta was ascendant among the Greek city-states. Its political position had a secure economic foundation, and its military power was unchallenged. The growth in the importance of naval power and the accompanying rise of commerce following the wars transformed the basis of power. Moreover, the introduction into Greece of fortification technology and the erection of walls around Athens canceled much of the Spartan military advantage. In this new environment, naval power, commerce, and finance became increasingly important components of state power. Thus, whereas in the past the nature of power had favored the Spartans, the transformed environment favored Athens and other rising commercial and naval powers.

Athens rather than Sparta benefited from this new military and economic environment. Domestically, Athens had experienced political and social changes that enabled it to take advantage of the increased importance of seapower and commerce. Its entrenched landed aristocracy, which had been associated with the former dominance of agriculture and land armies, had been overthrown and replaced by a commercial elite whose interests lay with the development of naval power and imperial expansion. In an increasingly monetarized international economy, the Athenians had the financial resources to outfit a powerful navy and expand its dominion at the expense of the Spartans.

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[13] Eli Halévy (trans. R. G. Webb), *The Era of Tyrannies* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), 212.

By contrast, the Spartans, largely for domestic economic and political reasons, were unable or unwilling to make the necessary adjustment to the new economic and technological environment. It was not merely because Sparta was land-locked, but also because the dominant interests of the society were committed to the maintenance of an agricultural system based on slave labor. Their foremost concern was to forestall a slave revolt, and they feared external influences that would stimulate the Helots to rebel. Such a rebellion had forced them to revert into isolation at the end of the Persian wars. It appears to have been the fear of another revolt that caused them eventually to challenge the Athenians. The Megara decree aroused the Spartans because the potential return of Megara to Athenian control would have opened up the Peloponnesus to Athenian influence and thereby enabled the Athenians to assist a Helot revolt. Thus, when Athenian expansionism threatened a vital interest of the Spartans, the latter decided that war was inevitable, and delivered an ultimatum to the Athenians.[14]

The differing abilities of the Athenians and the Spartans to adjust to the new economic and technological environment and the changed nature of power ultimately led to the war. The development of naval power and acquisition of the financial resources to purchase ships and hire sailors necessitated a profound reordering of domestic society. Whereas the Athenians had reformed themselves in order to take advantage of new opportunities for wealth and power, the Spartans would or could not liberalize due to a constellation of domestic interests and their fear of unleashing a rebellion of the Helots. The result was the uneven growth of power among these rivals that Thucydides viewed as the real cause of the war.

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[14] G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London, 1972).

The critical point arrived when the Spartans began to believe that time was moving against them and in favor of the Athenians. A tipping-point or fundamental change in the Spartan perception of the balance of power had taken place. As certain contemporary historians assert, Athenian power may have reached its zenith by the outbreak of the war and had already begun to wane, but the reality of the situation is not particularly relevant, since the Spartans believed that Athens was growing stronger. The decision facing them had become when to commence the war rather than whether to commence it. Was it better to fight while the advantage still lay with them or at some future date when the advantage might have turned? As Howard has written, similar perceptions and fears of eroding power have preceded history's other hegemonic wars.[15]

The stability of the Greek international system following the Persian wars was based on an economic and technological environment favoring Spartan hegemony. When agriculture and land armies became less vital to state power and commerce and navies became more important, the Spartans were unable to adjust. Therefore, the locus of wealth and power shifted to the Athenians. Although the Athenians lost the war when they failed to heed the prudent strategy laid down by Pericles, the basic point is not altered; the war for hegemony in Greece emerged from a profound social, economic, and technological revolution. Wars like this one are not merely contests between rival states but political watersheds that mark transitions from one historical epoch to the next.

Despite the insight that it provides in understanding and explaining the great wars of history, the theory of hegemonic war is a limited and incomplete theory. It cannot easily handle perceptions that affect behavior and predict who will initiate a hegemonic war. Nor can it forecast when a hegemonic war will occur and what the consequences will be. As in the case of the theory of biological evolution, it helps one understand and explain what has happened; but neither theory can make predictions that can be tested and thereby meet rigorous scientific standard of falsifiability. The theory of hegemonic war at best is a complement to other theories such as those of cognitive psychology and

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15 Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 16.

expected utility and must be integrated with them. It has, however, withstood the test of time better than any other generalization in the field of international relations and remains an important conceptual tool for understanding the dynamics of world politics.

HEGEMONIC WAR IN THE MODERN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM In the modern world, three hegemonic wars have successively transformed the international system. Each of these great struggles not only involved a contest for supremacy of two or more great powers, but also represented significant changes in economic relations, technological capacities, and political organization. The war arose from profound historical changes and the basic incongruity between new environmental forces and existing structures. Each was a world war involving almost all of the states in the system and, at least in retrospect, can be considered as having constituted a major turning point in human history. These long and intense conflicts altered the fundamental contours of both domestic societies and international relations.[16]

The first of the modern hegemonic wars was the Thirty Years' War (1619 to 1648). Although this war may be regarded as a series of separate wars that at various times involved Sweden, France, Spain, Poland, and other powers, in sum it involved all the major states of Europe. As Gutmann points out in his contribution to this volume, the origins of the war were deeply embedded in the history of the previous century.[17] At issue was the organization of the European state system as well as the internal economic and religious organization of domestic societies. Was Europe to be dominated and organized by Habsburg imperial power or autonomous nation-states? Was feudalism or commercial capitalism to be the dominant mode of organizing economic activities? Was Protestantism or Catholicism to be the prevalent religion? The clash over these political, economic, and ideological issues caused physical devastation and loss of life not seen in Western Europe since the Mongol invasions of earlier centuries.

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[16] Summary accounts of the wars and their backgrounds are contained in R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present* (New York, 1984; 2nd rev. ed.), 522–546, 730–769, 915–990.

[17] Myron P. Gutmann, "The Origins of the Thirty Years' War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII (1988), 749–770.

Underlying the intensity and duration of the war was a profound change in the nature of power. Although the power of a state continued to be based primarily on the control of territory, technology and organization were becoming more important in military and political affairs. From classical times to the seventeenth century, military technology, tactics, and organization had hardly changed; the pike, the Greek phalanx, and heavy cavalry continued to characterize warfare. By the close of that century, however, mobile artillery, professional infantry in linear formations, and naval innovations had come to dominate the tactics of war. In conjunction with what has been called the Military Revolution, the modern bureaucratic state also came into existence. This development greatly enhanced the ability of rulers to mobilize and increase the efficient use of national resources. With these military and political innovations, the exercise of military power became an instrument of foreign policy; war was no longer "the [unrestrained] clash of societies" that was characteristic of warfare in the ancient and medieval worlds.[18]

The Thirty Years' War transformed the domestic and international political scene. The Habsburg bid for universal empire was defeated, and the nation-state became the dominant form of political organization in the modern world. In the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the principle of national sovereignty and non-intervention was established as the governing norm of international relations; this political innovation ended the ideological conflict over the religious ordering of domestic societies. For the next century and a half, foreign policy was based on the concepts of national interest and the balance of power; as a result, the scale of European wars tended to be limited. The commercial revolution triumphed over feudalism, and the pluralistic European state system provided the necessary framework for the expansion of the global market system.[19] With their superior armaments and organization, the several states of Western Europe created overseas empires and subdued the other civilizations of the globe.

In the closing decade of the eighteenth century, a second great war or series of wars once again transformed international affairs and ushered in a new historical epoch. For nearly a century France and Great Britain, operating within the framework of the classical balance of power system, had been fighting a series of limited conflicts both in Europe and overseas to establish the primacy of one or the other. This "hundred years' war," to use Seeley's expression, culminated in the great or hegemonic wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte (1792 to 1815).[20] As in other hegemonic conflicts, profound political, economic, and ideological issues were joined: French or British hegemony of the European political system, mercantilistic or market principles as the organizing basis of the world economy, and revolutionary republicanism or more conservative political forms as the basis of domestic society. The ensuing conflagration engulfed the entire international political system, resulting in unprecedented violence and the opening of a new age of economic and political affairs.

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[18] Howard, *Causes*, 16; Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560–1660* (Belfast, 1956); George Clark, *War and Society in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1958).

[19] Jean Baechler (trans. Barry Cooper), *The Origins of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1975), 73–86.

During the second half of the eighteenth and the first decade of the nineteenth century, economic, technological, and other developments had transformed the nature of power and undermined the relative stability of the previous system of limited warfare. At sea the British had gained mastery of the new tactics and technology of naval power. On land the military genius of Napoleon brought to a culmination the revolution wrought by gunpowder as the new weaponry, tactics, and doctrine were integrated. The most significant innovations, however, were organizational, political, and sociological. The conception of the levée en masse and the nation at arms made it possible for the French to field mass armies and overwhelm their enemies. Under the banner of nationalism the era of peoples' wars had arrived. The new means of military organization had transformed the nature of European warfare.[21]

After twenty years of global warfare extending to the New World and the Middle East, the British and their allies defeated the French, and a new international order was established by the Treaty of Vienna (1815). On the continent of Europe, an equilibrium was created that was to last until the unification of German power in the middle of the century. British interests and naval power guaranteed that the principles of the market and laissez faire would govern global economic affairs. Underneath the surface of this Pax Britannica, new forces began to stir and gather strength as the decades passed. Following a century of relative peace, these changes in the economic, political, and technological environment would break forth in the modern world's third hegemonic war.

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[20] John R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England: Two Courses of Lectures* (Boston, 1905), 28–29.

[21] See Gunther G. Rothenberg, "The Origins, Causes, and Extension of the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XVIII (1988), 771–793.

Like many other great wars, World War I commenced as a seemingly minor affair, even though its eventual scale and consequences were beyond the comprehension of contemporary statesmen. In a matter of a few weeks, the several bilateral conflicts of the European states and the cross-cutting alliances joined the Europeans in a global struggle of horrendous dimensions. The British-German naval race, the French-German conflict over Alsace-Lorraine, and the German/Austrian-Russian rivalry in the Balkans drew almost all of the European states into the struggle that would determine the structure and leadership of the European and eventually of the global political system.

The scope, intensity, and duration of the war reflected the culmination of strengthening forces and novel forms of national power. The French under Napoleon had first unleashed the new religion of nationalism. During the ensuing decades of relative peace, the spread of nationalistic ideas tore at the traditional fabric of European society, undermined stable political structures, and set one people against another. The Industrial Revolution also had diffused from Great Britain to the Continent. War had become industrialized and fused with the passion of nationalism. An era of rapid economic change and social upheaval had also given rise to radical movements threatening revolution and challenging the domestic status quo of many states.[22] In this new environment of industrialized and nationalistic warfare, the political leaders lost control over the masses, and war reverted to what it had been in the premodern era: an unrestrained clash of societies. Nations threw men and machinery at one another causing massive carnage and social dislocations from which Europe found it difficult to recover. Only mutual exhaustion and the intervention of a non-European power—the United States—ended the destruction of total war.

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[22] Robert E. Osgood and Robert W. Tucker, *Force, Order, and Justice* (Baltimore, 1967), 3–192; Halévy, *Era*, 209–247.

The terrible devastation of the war brought to a close the European domination of world politics and resulted in a new attitude toward war. The democratization and industrialization of war had undermined the legitimacy of military force as a normal and legitimate instrument of foreign policy. In the Treaty of Versailles (1919), statesmen outlawed war, and the revolutionary concept of collective security was embodied in the charter of the League of Nations. States for the first time were legally forbidden to engage in war except in self-defense and were required to join together in the punishment of any aggressor. In contrast to the other great peace conferences and treaties of European diplomacy the settlement failed to reflect the new realities of the balance of power and thereby was unable to establish a new and stable European political order.[23] This failure laid the foundation for World War II, which should be seen as the continuation of the hegemonic struggle begun in 1914 with the breakdown of the European political order.

The postwar international order has been based on American-Soviet bipolarity and the concept of mutual deterrence. Peace has been maintained and war as a means of settling conflicts between the superpowers has been stayed by the nuclear threat and the possibility of mutual annihilation. Whether or not this sytem will also one day be undermined by historical developments and utterly destroyed by a hegemonic war fought with weapons of mass destruction is the fundamental question of our time.

THE NUCLEAR REVOLUTION AND HEGEMONIC WAR Although the theory of hegemonic war may be helpful in understanding the past, one must ask whether it is relevant to the contemporary world. Has it been superseded or somehow transcended by the nuclear revolution in warfare? Since no nation that enters a nuclear war can avoid its own destruction, does it make any sense to think in terms of great or hegemonic wars? Morgenthau was referring to this profound change in the nature of warfare and its political significance when he wrote that the "rational relationship between violence as a means of foreign policy and the ends of foreign policy has been destroyed by the possibility of all-out nuclear war."[24]

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[23] Howard, *Causes*, 163.

That a revolution in the nature of warfare has occurred cannot be denied. Nuclear weapons have indeed profoundly transformed the destructiveness and consequences of a great war. It is highly doubtful that a war between two nuclear powers could be limited and escalation into a full-scale war prevented. Nor is it likely that either protagonist could escape the terrible devastation of such a great war or find the consequences in any sense acceptable.[25] In the nuclear age, the primary purpose of nuclear forces should be to deter the use of nuclear weapons by one's opponent and thereby prevent the outbreak of hegemonic warfare.

It does not necessarily follow that this change in the nature of warfare, as important as it surely is, has also changed the nature of international relations. The fundamental characteristics of international affairs unfortunately have not been altered and, if anything, have been intensified by the nuclear revolution. International politics continues to be a self-help system. In the contemporary anarchy of international relations, distrust, uncertainty, and insecurity have caused states to arm themselves and to prepare for war as never before.

To be able to say that nuclear weapons have changed the nature of international relations and thus made impossible the outbreak of hegemonic war, a transformation of human consciousness itself would have to take place. Humankind would have to be willing to subordinate all other values and goals to the preservation of peace. To insure mutual survival, it would need to reject the anarchy of international relations and submit itself to the Leviathan of Thomas Hobbes. Little evidence exists to suggest that any nation is close to making this choice. Certainly in this world of unprecedented armaments of all types, no state is behaving as if nuclear weapons had changed its overall set of national priorities.

One cannot even rule out the possibility of a great or hegemonic war in the nuclear age. The theory of hegemonic war does not argue that statesmen "will" a great war; the great wars of history were seldom predicted, and their course has never been foreseen. As Thucydides argued in his discussion of the role of accident in war, once it has begun, war unleashes forces that are totally unanticipated by the protagonists. In the nuclear age there is no guarantee that a minor conflict between the superpowers or their allies will not set in motion untoward developments over which they would soon lose control. In brief, the fact that nuclear war would wreak unprecedented devastation on mankind has not prevented the world's nuclear powers from preparing for such a war, perhaps thereby making it more likely.

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[24] Hans J. Morgenthau in *idem*, Sidney Hook, H. Stuart Hughes, and Charles P. Snow, "Western Values and Total War," *Commentary*, XXXII (1961), 280.

[25] Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, 1984), 19–46.

What nuclear weapons have accomplished is to elevate the avoidance of a total war to the highest level of foreign policy and the central concern of statesmen. Yet this goal, as important as it surely is, has joined, not supplanted, other values and interests for which societies in the past have been willing to fight. All of the nuclear states seek to avoid nuclear war at the same time that they are attempting to safeguard more traditional interests. The result has been, for the superpowers at least, the creation of a new basis of international order. In contrast to the balance-of-power system of early modern Europe, the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century, or the ill-fated collective security system associated with the League of Nations, order in the nuclear age has been built on the foundation of mutual deterrence.

The long-term stability of this nuclear order is of crucial importance, and the threat to its existence over time certainly cannot be disregarded. Each superpower fears that the other might achieve a significant technological breakthrough and seek to exploit it. How else can one explain the hopes and anxieties raised by the Strategic Defense Initiative? In addition, with the proliferation of nuclear weapons to more and more states, there is a growing danger that these weapons might fall into the hands of desperate states or terrorist groups. The nuclear order is a function of deliberate policies and not, as some argue, an existential condition.

Historically, nations have consciously decided to go to war, but they have seldom, if ever, knowingly begun hegemonic wars. Statesmen try to make rational or cost/benefit calculations concerning their efforts to achieve national objectives, and it seems unlikely that any statesman would view the eventual gains from the great wars of history as commensurate with the eventual costs of those wars. It cannot be overstressed that, once a war, however limited, begins, it can release powerful forces unforeseen by the instigators of the war. The results of the Peloponnesian War, which was to devastate classical Greece, were not anticipated by the great powers of the day. Nor were the effects of World War I, which ended the primacy of Europe over other civilizations, anticipated by European statesmen. In both cases, the war was triggered by the belief of each protagonist that it had no alternative but to fight while the advantage was still on its side. In neither case did the protagonists fight the war that they had wanted or expected.

The advent of nuclear weapons has not altered this fundamental condition. A nation still might start a war for fear that its relative strength will diminish with time, and an accident still might precipitate unprecedented devastation. It is not inconceivable that some state, perhaps an overpowered Israel, a frightened South Africa, or a declining superpower, might one day become so desperate that it resorts to nuclear blackmail in order to forestall its enemies. As in war itself, an accident during such a confrontation could unleash powerful and uncontrollable forces totally unanticipated by the protagonists. Although the potential violence and destructiveness of war have been changed by the advent of nuclear arms, there is unfortunately little to suggest that human nature has also been transformed.

CONCLUSION One can hope that the fear of nuclear holocaust has chastened statesmen. Perhaps they have come to appreciate that a nuclear order based on mutual deterrence should be their highest priority. But against this expectation one must set the long history of human foibles and mankind's seeming inability to sustain peace for very long. Only time will tell whether the theory of hegemonic war holds true in the nuclear age. In the meanwhile, avoidance of a nuclear war has become imperative.