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When peacekeepers fail

by Arthur Waldron

A review of *On the Origins of War: And the Preservation of Peace* by Donald Kagan

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Books in this article

Donald Kagan

On the Origins of War: And the Preservation of Peace

Anchor, 624 pages, $20.00

An analytical distinction, first made more than two thousand years ago by Thucydides, continues to shape most intellectual consideration of war. The Peloponnesian conflict destroyed the Athens of Pericles even more completely than the First World War did Europe, and Thucydides found its cause not in the immediate train of events that led up to it—the crisis in Epidamnus, the Corinthian and Corycrean interventions, the Megarian Decree, and so forth—but in something much deeper, namely "the growth of Athenian power, which presented an object of fear to the Spartans and forced them to go to war."

Most modern historians have followed Thucydides' lead and accepted that wars have "underlying" as well as "immediate" causes, and that, of the two, the underlying causes are the more important. Greatly strengthened by the rise of sociology, this approach has contributed to the eclipse, in historical writing, of the study of diplomacy and of battles and military strategy.

An important exception to the pattern, however, is the work of Donald Kagan. His justly celebrated four-volume study of the Peloponnesian War argues that the underlying causes adduced by Thucydides were in fact not present: Athenian power was not growing during the period leading up to the war; "the imperial appetite of the Athenians was not insatiable but, under the leadership of Pericles, was satisfied fully; … the Spartans as a state were not so afraid of Athens as to seek war, at least until the crisis had developed very far." War between Athens and Sparta was far from inevitable; rather, "[t]here was good reason to believe that the two great hegemonal states and their alliances had come to terms and could live side by side in peace indefinitely." Where then did the Peloponnesian War come from? According to Kagan, "it was not the underlying causes but the immediate crisis" that produced it.

In his new book, *On the Origins of War*, which grows from a popular course he has long taught at Yale, Kagan begins with the Peloponnesian War and then brings the same analytical approach to bear on four additional cases: the First World War, the Second Punic War, the Second World War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis.[1] In each of these, instead of enumerating factor after factor that may have contributed to the conflict, Kagan asks simply: What would it have taken to avoid war? Failure to provide whatever that is, he argues, is the cause of the conflict.

Thus, the Peloponnesian War could have been stopped if Athens had sent a real battle fleet to support Corcyra. Such a firm action would have either deterred or defeated Corinth, and would certainly have convinced Sparta not to join in. But Athens did not want to appear provocatively warlike, and so sent only ten ships. Likewise, if Rome had sent legions to defend Saguntum when the Carthaginians first laid siege in 218, a long and nearly fatal war could have been avoided. Turning to the modern period, if Sir Edward Grey had announced, early in the 1914 crisis, that Britain would come to the aid of France, then Germany would have changed course—as Bethmann-Hollweg sought to do after Grey finally showed his hand. Finally, if Hitler had only been challenged in the Rhineland, or another such critical turning, the most horrible war in history could have been avoided.

From these examples, Kagan draws the lesson that gives the book both its intellectual unity and its broader relevance: "Peace does not keep itself." It is possible, in Kagan's view, to identify in most historical periods a power that, perhaps uniquely, has the capacity to keep the peace. If that power fails to do what is necessary, then it is responsible for wars that result. By this argument, Athens bears the blame for the Peloponnesian War, Rome for the Second Punic War, and Britain for the First World War (and the Second). And had the Cuban Missile Crisis ignited the Third World War, then the United States (as will be seen) would have borne the blame.

This rather striking list of responsible parties should indicate that the blame Kagan is assigning has little to do with "war guilt" as thought of after Versailles; with who was the aggressor and who the victim. In every case (except perhaps the Punic war) the guilty party is also the more appealing one

to anyone having civilized values: Athens is clearly preferable to Sparta, liberal Britain more attractive than Wilhelmine Germany—and almost anybody is better than Hitler.

This perverse correlation (based on a non-random set of only five examples) in turn raises the question of whether there may be something about just such attractive civilizations that in fact predisposes and inclines them to commit the sin of not stopping wars, even when they are entirely capable of doing so. Could it be that they fail precisely because of their aversion to conflict, and their consequent failure to think searchingly about war or to prepare for it realistically? Such seems to be the core of Kagan's argument.

Deterrence requires the creation of fear. States like Athens and Britain fear war, and they assume that force sufficient to deter them will likewise cause others to think twice. The result is that they tend to assess as very small the amount of military power required to stop a conflict: a few ships or a few thousand soldiers intended to "send a message"; enough nuclear weapons to destroy a few key cities. Related to this line of thinking is the conviction that to do otherwise increases the risk of conflict: if one power prepares or uses more than minimal force, then others may mistakenly conclude they in fact want war, and be driven to make war themselves. The way to avoid this trap is to limit forces even in peacetime, postpone military action in time of crisis, and then, if it becomes unavoidable, to use only the smallest practicable force.

Such an approach is called "minimal deterrence" in the language of strategy, and its acceptance is at the root of each of the failures Kagan analyzes. The reason is that belief in minimal deterrence affects not only behavior during crises but also the peacetime force structures and general diplomatic stance of a state. Here the prototypical example is Pericles' strategy for Athens, which was to ensure security by making the city invulnerable to attack, but without developing a capacity to counter-attack. The concept is appealing logically: who would want to attack a city that could not be taken? and by the same token, who would feel threatened by a state having no offensive potential? Therefore the Athenians enclosed their city and its harbor within walls that existing infantry could not breach, while securing their supply lines by means of an overwhelmingly strong navy. If attacked, the Athenians would withdraw behind their walls and wait for the enemy to go away. Ultimate decision would be not military but psychological: it would come when the enemy realized that no effort could ever defeat Athens and that peace was therefore the only choice.

This reasonable-sounding strategy failed in the Peloponnesian War because it did not frighten the Spartans enough. They could not imagine that the Athenians really meant it when they said they would decline battle on land, nor could they see any sign of an Athenian capacity really to hurt them.

Confident that they would win in the expected land battle with the Athenians, the Spartans went to war. Deterrence failed because Athens possessed no "obvious, credible, frightening offensive threat."

In defense of Pericles, Kagan points out that Athens lacked the capacity to create a land army that could defeat Sparta while at the same time maintaining their critical command of the sea. Hence the great importance of using the fleet to deter early on. But such extenuating circumstances cannot be pleaded for Rome, which could have sent legions to Spain against Hannibal, nor for Britain or the United States.

The behavior of Britain before both the First and the Second World Wars underlines the importance, in peacetime, of correctly understanding potential threats and creating forces to deter them. The German Schlieffen Plan was designed to avoid the catastrophe of a two-front war by landing decisive blows successively against France and Russia. Victory in the West depended crucially on German forces being stronger than the French, which was nearly certain so long as Britain stayed out.

Britain, in turn, signaled that such was her intention. She prepared no army that could be deployed to the Continent, but instead, like Athens, relied on her navy alone. Kagan quotes Asquith's letter to a friend on hearing of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia. He expected a Continental war, "a real Armageddon," but took comfort in the thought that "happily there seems … no reason why we should be more than spectators." Hence the catastrophe: Britain intervenes, in time to lose almost a million dead, but too late to deter Germany.

In Britain's favor, one can argue that no one on any side had imagined the war as it eventually took shape. But no such extenuation is available for Britain's failure in the Second World War. In that case a mindless and powerful pacifism among the intellectual classes, combined with pressure to cut spending and some very misguided military analyses (Kagan singles out Liddell-Hart's ideas about the British "indirect approach"), reduced forces to a level that made risking war with Hitler almost inconceivable.

Even Churchill was bent by the climate of opinion: as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Baldwin's government, he huffed, "Why should there be a war with Japan? I do not believe there is the slightest chance of it in our lifetime." The Admiralty should make plans "on the basis that no naval war against a first-class Navy is likely to take place in the next twenty years."

(Such arguments are hardy perennials. The lead editorial of the February 5 *New York Times*, on my table as I write, ridicules the Pentagon for basing plans on the "fantasy"— would that it were!—"of waging two [regional] wars at once.")

Inappropriate force structures and consequent yielding in crisis, then, are —to put Kagan's argument in the Thucydidean framework he casts off— the "immediate" cause of certain wars, but their "underlying" cause is acceptance of minimal deterrence. This is a very different sort of underlying cause, however, from what is familiar. It is not a deep and objective economic or social force, but rather almost an intangible: how we *think* about war, and our consequent behavior. Kagan draws perhaps the most impressive demonstration of its importance from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

John Kennedy "had taken a course on the origins of the First World War at Harvard just before the Second World War, when the revisionist views of Harvard's Sidney Fay were dominant in colleges across the country."[2] Fay wrote that no one wanted the First World War, but nevertheless it broke out "[b]ecause in each country political and military leaders did certain things which led to mobilizations and declarations of war, or failed to do certain things which might have prevented them. In this sense, all the European countries, in a greater or lesser degree, were responsible." Kennedy was impressed by the ease with which "one nation's misinterpretation of another's intention could set them sliding into war"; he was, moreover, an enthusiastic reader of Barbara Tuchman's *Guns of August*, which he recommended to his staff, while lecturing them on "the fatal miscalculation known to experts as 'accidental war.'"

Thus educated, the young president bent every effort to avoid such a disaster. He repeatedly declined to deter or challenge Moscow, and attempted instead to signal pacific intent. He abandoned the Bay of Pigs; he allowed the Berlin Wall; at Vienna he instructed Khrushchev about the risks of accidental war. But like the Athenians and the British, Kennedy was also objectively constrained by his own country's existing military strategy. Designed by Eisenhower, this rested on the implausible threat of massive nuclear war, embodied in the Single Integrated Operating Plan (SIOP). We have the familiar ingredients: a leader who declined to deter and forces not suited to the tasks at hand—another example, one might correctly think, of the peacekeeper failing to keep the peace. Yet this time there was no war.

Certainly Kennedy failed to deter. He knew about the missiles before they had arrived or been made operational, yet he said nothing when he met Gromyko on October 19. Fyodor Burlatsky later regretted this as a lost opportunity: "I am convinced that if John Kennedy said when he met Gromyko, 'We know everything about rockets in Cuba,' maybe there would be no crisis; because Khrushchev must understand he was discovered and that he would need now to negotiate about a new situation."

Nor did he take resolute action once the missiles became known. Tenuous rationalizations were invoked to postpone air strikes: Robert Kennedy argued that a sneak attack on the Cuban missiles would be a violation of American tradition and undermine "our moral position at home and around the globe." But in fact the president probably had no intention of using force at all. McNamara recalled years later, "I *knew* what I was going to do with SIOP. *None* of the options was going to be used at all." What then was the United States to do if Khrushchev did not accept Kennedy's terms? Again according to McNamara, "Turn the screw on the blockade and avoid the air attack and invasion"—but that most likely would never have gotten the missiles out.

Kennedy feared impeachment if the missiles stayed put, so to get them out he decided to trade NATO missiles in Turkey for Soviet missiles in Cuba. This was kept secret even from the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, and when the diaries of Robert Kennedy, one of those who conveyed the offer, were published, Theodore Sorenson dutifully edited out the record of it. But the Soviets accepted and the crisis ended.

Kagan points out that under the circumstances Khrushchev could have demanded a far higher price and that Kennedy would almost certainly have paid it. But Khrushchev did not press his advantage. Why? Kagan speculates that he was worried that the general situation was getting out of control. The Soviet military in Cuba had shot down an American U-2 without Kremlin permission; Castro had ordered Cuban anti-aircraft to fire on U.S. planes and was refusing Soviet demands to rescind the order. Khrushchev may have recalled how the Chinese had carried him to the brink of nuclear war over Quemoy a few years earlier, and did not want Castro to do the same. Furthermore, Khrushchev was realizing that although he might correctly have read Kennedy's weakness, he had failed to consider American *national* reaction. "A man as weak as [Khrushchev] thought Kennedy to be could not for long prevent stronger action by stronger men." The Soviet leader was close to making the same mistake with Kennedy that Hitler had made with Chamberlain, but stepped back just in time. So we have the anomaly of the initial aggressor, the USSR, saving the peace.

Kagan writes like a true classicist, which is to say he assumes the reader is already interested in the topic and simply lays out his analysis. The five sections of this book are enormously informative—in every case the best short summary I know of the complex events treated—but their presentation is enlivened only occasionally by flashes of irony and well-chosen quotations.

The title, moreover, is misleading. This is not a full study of the "origins of war," but rather a well-documented discussion of one particularly dangerous pathway to conflict. Nor is it comprehensive. The cases are *exempla*: no attempt is made to show that they are representative, although the twentieth-century examples are so important that they must be considered significant.

Kagan's assessment of what states value, and therefore what they are willing to fight over—"honor, fear, and interest"—is taken from Thucydides, and might strike a political theorist as a little bit fuzzy. But as Kagan shows, they are in fact not bad shorthand for bundles of human emotions that are easier to recognize and name than to describe in detail.

Intellectually, the book's great value is as an example of how to think analytically about war. The sufferings caused by war have led many to see it essentially as a kind of madness, a horrible unleashing of dark and irrational passions, whose essence might be captured by a Picasso but never by a rational analyst. Hence the general intellectual retreat when confronted by violence— whether into a Braudelian *longue durée* that dissolves it into gentler historical tides, or nihilistic irony, as in A. J. P. Taylor's writings, or the moralism so characteristic of more recent academic work.

But if denying its irrationality certainly misses the essence of war, so does laying too much stress on it. For war is not simply a matter of pathology or madness. Pericles, Grey, and Chamberlain were men of intelligence and even virtue. Their careers illustrate that war is also tragic, which is to say that it is a product of complex failures that mix reason and even nobility with baser things; it is something that men know and whose advent they fear, but which they often prove powerless to prevent, with the best and most thoughtful often proving the most powerless.

Ironically, this tragedy is to some extent a result of the intellectual sophistication of human civilization. Animals make snap decisions between flight and fight, and when it is the second, they make no secret of it— using all sorts of noise and display to get the message across before they actually

strike. But human thought processes are more elaborate; their decisions are less crisp, and their communication is less direct. If Sir Edward Grey had been a rattlesnake, he would probably have avoided the First World War, but he was very far from it.

In this humane and penetrating study, Kagan shows how, tragically, measures undertaken precisely to prevent war have in the past repeatedly brought it closer. The suppressed passion that one senses here and there in the text seems to manifest a hope that, just possibly, if the lessons are clearly enough drawn, we may yet be able to learn from history.

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1. *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, by Donald Kagan; Doubleday, 606 pages, $30.

2. undefined

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