What can be done to Abolish War?

For the entirety of human history, war has been with us. It stood behind the expansion of great civilisations - and their subsequent collapse; it has funded entire economies and industries - and razed cities to the ground; even our earliest archaeological records are soaked in blood, with some estimating as many as 15% of all prehistoric human deaths being caused by their fellow man[1]. To now extricate our species from war's chokehold is one of the most ambitious undertakings we could possibly attempt, yet there is hope: we now have an unprecedented level of development, international cooperation and public support. If we are ever to abolish war, now is the time.

Before going any further, there are two serious misconceptions about war which I would like to address. The first is the fatalistic idea that war is inevitable, usually invoking the idea of *human nature*. There is perhaps a grain of truth to this view, in that so long as there are groups of people with different beliefs there will be an ideological conflict between them, but I do not believe it follows that this must take the form of violent conflict.

In particular, one should not overestimate the influence of biology. Nature's contribution to human conflict consists mainly of the sympathetic nervous system, which regulates the "fight or flight" response. How humans then respond to a threat depends far more heavily on upbringing and culture - especially when it comes to long term, indirect and highly organised conflict, as in warfare. Furthermore, the idea that we have evolved to solve problems violently is sheer fantasy. In fact, compared to other social predators (chimps, wolves, etc.), humans are uniquely nonviolent. Human nature puts hormones in our bloodstream; it certainly doesn't put guns in our hands.

The second misconception that I would like to address is the idea that war's cessation is inevitable. It is true that the frequency and deadliness of war is, in broad terms, decreasing over time[1], but this is only by certain metrics: for instance, the number of war casualties is increasing, whereas it is only the number of war casualties *per unit population* that is decreasing. The trend is modest at best, and could easily reverse in the short term future, for reasons such as climate change, overpopulation or resource scarcity.

There are two very real possibilities besides war being abolished: war could remain with us perpetually in one form or another, or - if and when our offensive technology reaches that level - it could be the end of us. It is no empty threat; war has already brought about, or at least contributed to, the complete collapse of various ancient societies[2]. One should certainly not underestimate the challenge we face in seeking to abolish war.

More generally, it may be dangerous to judge how future wars will be based solely on wars of the past, as war had changed dramatically, and is continuing to change all the time. Important trends include, for instance, increasing indirectness, potency and indiscrimateness of

weaponry used in warfare. These trends began with the invention of the bow and arrow, and have since progressed through firearms, incendiary and explosive weaponry, chemical weapons, and remote drones, finally reaching the level of nuclear and biological weapons - where simply pressing a button can kill hundreds of thousands of people. There is no reason to suppose this trend will not continue.

Similarly, the causes of war have changed. Wars fought in the name of religion, such as the Crusades, or colonialism are increasingly rare, whereas wars in the name of emancipation appear to be on the rise. Another newer phenomenon is wars fought by proxy between major powers, including the Vietnam war and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Many of the recently emerging causes of war can, in theory, be negotiated diplomatically, which offers hope for the future.

I would now like to offer three proposals for methods to abolish war. I am not including obvious approaches such as limiting arms trade or investing in international development, as these have already been proposed and discussed at length.

My first proposal is to make war more personal. Firstly, consider the fact that no reasonable person actually wants or enjoys war; even its proponents only support it as being necessary. Secondly, individuals behave differently to groups, especially in how they bear responsibility. Every citizen in a country at war is complicit if they do not make an effort to oppose it, but few actually experience this complicity, as they did not personally choose to go to war. This effect is known more generally as *diffusion of responsibility*.

One suggestion of how to make use of this is to instate an international law requiring a referendum before being able to legally declare war. In this case, every member of the electorate who votes in favour bears the personal responsibility of supporting the killing of other people, which may make them think more seriously about the alternatives. Further steps would need to be taken to prevent indirect or proxy wars, however.

My second proposal is to associate the concept of war with disgust. War in the abstract often invokes strong feelings - in proponents and opponents alike - most notably fear. This sort of visceral feeling of being threatened can override more logical reasoning, and can lead to psychological splitting, also known as black-and-white thinking (e.g. "It's us or them", "If we don't stop them no one else will"), which neglects the often more nuanced paths towards peace.

I propose disgust as it acts on a similarly fundamental level as fear but does not impair judgement in the same way, and because it should be quite simple to invoke: after all, war *is* disgusting. Discussions of civilian deaths and casualties are already reasonably common, but these are often presented so as to invoke outrage. To invoke disgust, one should focus not just on the unfairness, but on the degrading nature of being in a war, for instance the way those involved can end up forced to perform acts they find reprehensible (such as torturing

prisoners of war for information). This approach may seem disingenuous or manipulative, but I would argue that emotionally engaging with people is vital in this cause.

My final proposal is universal internet access. Many existing organisations, such as the SCI, already recognise the importance of international communication and intercourse in preventing future wars, but I propose that only the internet has the scope and existing personal integration to bring this about for the general populace. Those in less developed countries are still largely voiceless, and risk having their intentions being misrepresented or others acting "in their best interests". This seclusion can also be a factor in fostering extremism or unrealistic demonization of potential enemies.

There already exist several groups campaigning for internet access to be recognised as a human right, and this has been successfully enshrined in law in several countries.[3] Nonetheless, many focus simply on developmental or economic consequences, rather than the potential benefits in preventing future conflicts.

War has, and will continue to change dramatically over time. I firmly believe we must now grasp the nettle and take steps to seriously guide its path, or we risk being swept away in another world war, or worse. A hundred years ago the idea of nuclear proliferation, biological weapons or remote drones would have been inconceivable. Let us hope that in a hundred years' time they will have become inconceivable again.

References

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