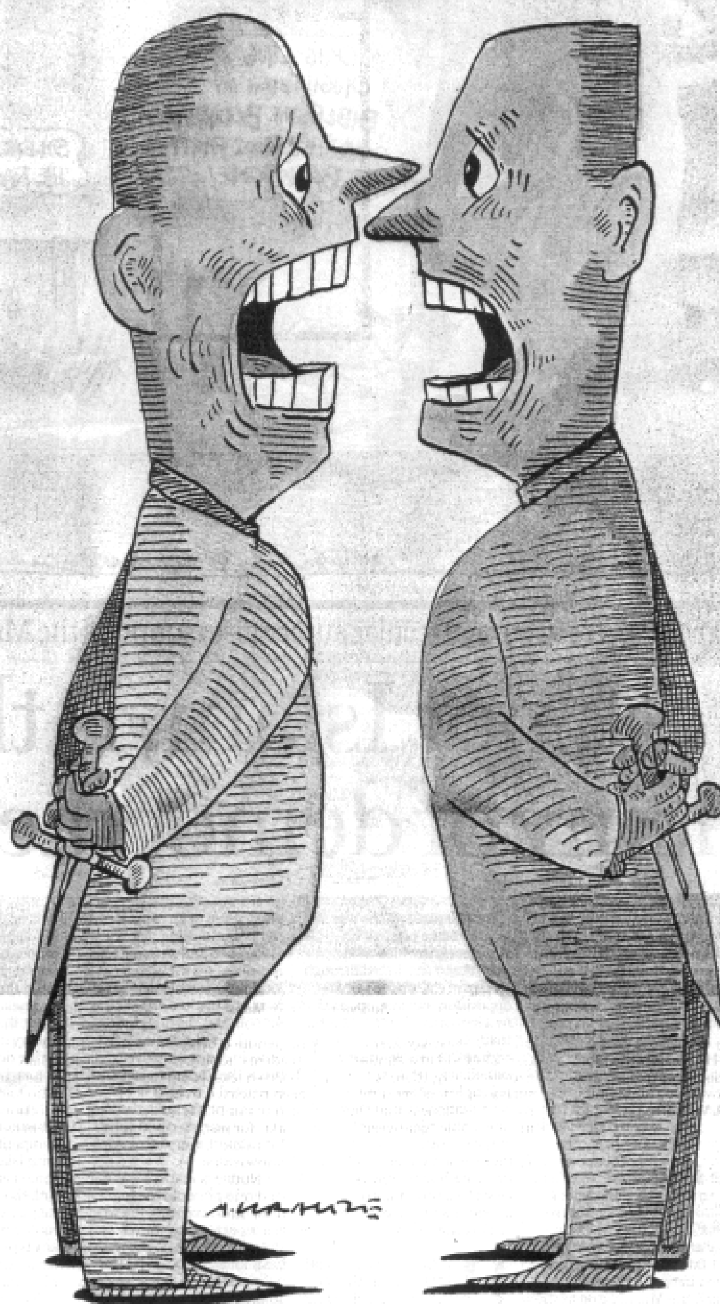
Comment & Ar

Michael Howard Among Britain's most powerful, one book has become required reading. And its thesis is grim

Best get used to war



There have been many studies of the development of warfare, even more of the history of international relations, while those on international and constitutional law are innumerable. But I know of none before Philip Bobbitt's The Shield of Achilles that has dealt with all three, analysed their interaction throughout European history, and used that analysis to describe the world in which we live and how it is likely to develop.

Even a decade ago Bobbitt's book would have seemed shocking. The conventional wisdom of the western world, derived from Kant through Jeremy Bentham, proclaimed by Woodrow Wilson in 1918 and implemented by Franklin D Roosevelt in 1945, was that war was a condition of international disorder that would be remedied by the development of international law. On that basis had been created the UN and world courts on which we allegedly depend today for the maintenance of international order and which quite manifestly fail to provide it.

Bobbitt goes back to an older and bleaker tradition: that associated with Machiavelli, who wrote in a time very comparable to our own. Then as now the accepted paradigm of legitimate order, in his day feudalism, was breaking down. A new template of legitimacy could be provided only by a new institution, the state, which promised peace and defence to its members in return for their allegiance, their money, and, if need be, their lives. But the state could sustain itself only through success in war. The structures developed by successful states — the armed forces, the financial arrangements required to pay for them, and the constitutional relationship between rulers and ruled that made those arrangements possible — became the new paradigm for political authority throughout Europe.

"International relations" thus became the relationship between sovereign states. But whence did those states derive their legitimacy? By the 19th century two different schools of thought had developed. In western Europe and the US it was assumed that the legitimacy of the state arose from popular consent enshrined in constitutions. But in 19th-century Germany a different analysis had been developed by Hegel and his disciples. As the state had come into being through war, they argued, so it could only survive through war. This philosophy was to shape German policy in the first half of the 20th century. If Germany had won the two world wars, the subsequent settlement would have borne the stamp of Hegel rather than that of Bentham.

This is Bobbitt's starting point: "Law and strategy," he writes, "are mutually affecting." Legitimacy itself "is a constitutional idea that is sensitive to strategic events" — not least to one so cataclysmic as losing a war. Nevertheless, although wars create states, it is the state that creates legitimacy and it is legitimacy that maintains "peace." If states can no longer maintain their legitimacy, there will be another war, the outcome of which will create a new legitimacy. To ignore the legal aspect of international order is a recipe for permanent war preached by Hitler. To ignore the strategic aspect, as did Woodrow Wilson, is at best to forfeit the capacity to create an international order reflecting one's own value system; at worst, to see it destroyed.

The very nature of the state has been determined by the demands of war, and how it developed through a series of what Bobbitt terms "epochal wars". In early modern Europe, princes had to create mechanisms to extract taxes for wars. At the same time they created a common structure for reciprocal acceptance, a "society of states" that was established by the peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The legitimacy of this structure — states defined by territorial boundaries and ruled by dynasties — was challenged at the end of the 18th century by the concept of the "nation", which could alone provide the numbers and motivation for a new age of mass warfare. But if these masses were to be militarily effective the state had to provide not only defence but welfare and education; if they did not, the "audit of war" would find them out.

That was what happened in the first world war, which destroyed the dynastic regimes that proved unable to motivate their peoples. But no peace was possible until an alternative criterion of legitimacy emerged. A three-cornered struggle had to take place between the liberal democracy of the west, the tribalism of Nazi Germany, and the authoritarian socialism of the Soviet Union. So for Bobbitt the "long war" that opened in 1914 ended only with the Soviet collapse in 1990 and the apparent triumph of western concepts of "legitimacy".

The settlements reached at Paris in 1990 might have been expected to introduce a long peace. Both Germany and Russia were now democratic nation-states and accepted "western values". But there was a fundamental difference between this peace settlement and its predecessors. Those had established a stability between nations that rested on a balance between the powers. This recognised not so much the triumph of western democratic values as the apparently unchallengeable power of the US. America's European allies were at best subordinate associates. This, so it was hoped, would be a unipolar world of a kind not seen since the fall of the Roman Empire; but like the Roman Empire, it would be based on a rule of law.

What went wrong? It is here that Bobbitt's thesis becomes controversial. Europe was now only one region in a global system whose complexities this settlement did not begin to address. Even within Europe, it could not deal with the fallacy that had invalidated the Wilsonian world vision from the beginning. Nation-states are not "given": they have to be created. Nations do not create states, though they can destroy them. On the contrary, states create nations. Even in Europe the problem of "state-building" in the Balkans remained, and remains, unsolved, while elsewhere in the world stable nation-states are the exception.

> Nations, Bobbitt argues, are mutating into 'market states'

More common are states that have failed to create nations, and can barely function as "states" at all. Further, even the great nation-states were already becoming obsolete. It did not require a mass effort of national dedication to produce the weapons that destroyed Hiroshima. It was largely the realisation of their reciprocal vulnerability that prevented the conflict between the west and the Soviet Union from erupting into violence, and made it possible for the Soviet Union to be defeated by American "soft power". For if weapons of mass destruction could so easily penetrate the defences of the nation-state so could, in peacetime, economic strength and cultural dominance. Instant communications were creating a global society within which no nation-state could regard itself as independent and invulnerable: not even the US, as it discovered on September 11, 2001.

So as the development of guns had destroyed the feudal order, and the development of railways the dynastic order, now the development of computers has destroyed the nation-state. Now nation-states are mutating into what Bobbitt terms "market states". Bobbitt provides no single scenario for the future but mu tiples: we are required to choose among range of dystopias. We are also required to choose among a range of possible wa because Bobbitt is under no illusion tha market-states will provide perpetual peace. At worst there may be cataclysm: at best a continuation of the low-key global violence to which we have becom accustomed over the past 10 years and from which not even the most powerful communities will be able to escape. The best they can do is reduce their vulnerability, and the only victory they can look forward to is avoidance of defeat.

Bobbitt believes that mankind could b facing a tragedy without precedent in it history. It is not clear that he is wrong.

Professor Sir Michael Howard was regi professor of modern history at Oxford 1980-89. This is an extract from the fore word to The Shield of Achilles, by Philip Bobbitt, published by Allen Lane.

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