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Among Britains 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, a resume of the history of international relations, while those on international and constitutional laws are innumerable. But I know of none before Philip Bobbitts The Shield of Achillesthat has dealt with all three, analysed their interaction throughly, and made that analysis describe the world in which we live and how it is likely to develop. Even a decade ago Bobbitts book would have seemed shocking. The conventional wisdom of the western world, derived from Kants thought, Jeremy Bentham, praised by Woodrow Wilson in 1919 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. The basis had been constructed by the League of Nations and the world courts on which we allegedly depend today for the maintenance of international order, which is not manifestly false to provide it. Bobbitt goes back to an older and more direct tradition that associated Machiavelli, who was a thinker more - or less - comparable to our own. But as now the accepted paradigm of legitimate war, in his day, was breaking down. A new paradigm of legitimacy could be provided only by a new institution, the state, which would be prepared to defend and its members in return for their allegiance, their service, and, if need be, their lives. But the state could sustain itself only through its success in war. The structures developed by successful states the army, the financial arrangements required by war, and the constitutional relationship between ruler and ruled that made those arrangements possible became the new paradigms for political authority throughout Europe.

"Extralegal relations" that became the realising between sovereign states, but whether these states derive their legitimacy from this paradigm, the 19th century and the 20th were 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 or consent in constitutions. But in the European states a different analysis had developed. The French and the Spanish. As the state had come into being through war, they argued, it could only survive through war. This philosophy was to show German policy in the first half of the 20th century. Germany had won the two world wars, the subsequent settlement would have been the naming of Hegel rather than of Bismarck. This is Bobbitts starting point. Law and strategy, he writes, are mutually interlinked. "Legitimacy itself is a constitutional idea that is sensitive to strategic events" - not least to one strategic event of a scale, although the wars create states, it is the state that creates legitimacy and it is a legitimacy that maintains peace. If states 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, as preached by Hitler. To ignore the strategic aspect, as did Woodrow Wilson, is to ignore the fact that states have the capacity to create an international order reflecting their own inter-state system as it is determined. The very nature of the state has been determined by the demand of war, and how it developed through a series of what Bobbitt terms "epochal wars" that divided society, insiders, Europe, powers had to create mechanisms to extracts order for war. At the same time they could generate a common structure for reciprocal acceptance, a society of states that was established by the peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The legitimacy of this international order was defined by territorial boundaries and rules by dyarchy was established at the end of the 18th century by the concept of the "nation," which could now provide the numbers and motivation for a new age of mass warfare. But if these forces were to be militarily effective the state had to provide not only defence but welfare and education, if they did not, the "fault of war" would find them out. This is what happened in the last war, which destroyed the European regimes that proved unable to provide their peoples. But no cause was possible. A similar alternative to an alternative to that emerged. A three-cornered struggle had to take place between the liberal democracy of the west, the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany, and the authoritarianism of the Soviet Union. The West, Bobbitt the "best war," that operation had ended only with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the apparent triumph of western concepts of legitimacy.

The settlements reached at Paris in 1919 might have been expected to introduce a long peace. Both Germany and Russia were now democrats, nations and accepted western norms. But there was also a fundamental difference between the 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 democracy, as the "soft" or "unilateral" power of the West, but the emergence of an "Epochal war" Europe was now only one region in a global system in which the existing settlements had not even begun to address. Even within Europe, it could not deal with the challenges that had inspired the Western world views of the future. Nations are not "given"; they have to be created. Nations do not create states, though they can destroy them. On the contrary, nations create states. Even in Europe the problem of "race-building" in the Balkans remained and remains unresolved...