



## PEACE, WAR, AND CRITIQUE

*There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.*  
–Gandhi

Thousands of essays and books, indeed entire libraries have been written about the matter of peace and war, and yet from at least one perspective, our understanding of the relation between these two equally elusive terms has not advanced much beyond the oft-repeated Latin motto of my Roman forefathers: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. If you want peace, you must prepare for war. While, like many classic Roman ideas, also this one can be traced back to a Greek root in Plato's *Laws*, its earliest Latin formulation occurs in the *Epitoma rei militaris* by the late fourth-century BC writer Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, commonly referred to as Vegetius. *Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum*, that is, "Henceforth, those who aspire to peace should be ready for war" ("Si vis pacem"). Now, if we make a huge historical leap over to 1830, we will find Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, Napoleon Bonaparte's private secretary, playing upon this Latin motto in a deliciously perverse way: "Tout le monde connaît l'adage [...] Si Bonaparte eût parlé latin, il en aurait, lui, renversé le sens, et aurait dit: *Si vis bellum para pacem*" (De Bourrienne 1829: 84). Everyone knows the adage [...] Had Bonaparte spoken Latin, he would probably have reversed it and said, *Si vis bellum para pacem*. Napoleon, according to Bourrienne, understood that

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the best way to plan a war was to have one's opponent lower his guard, thus rendering him more easily assailable.

Only two years later, another war theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, famously argued in his *Vom Kriege, On War*, that “war is the continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz 1984: 87). He too refused to see peace (that is, the world of politics) as truly separate from war. It is hardly surprising, then, that a century and a half later, we would find Michel Foucault cleverly reversing the Clausewitzian formula, by arguing that politics was the continuation of war by other means, highlighting what is already implicit in all these formulations, from Vegetius to Bourienne to Clausewitz. There is no such thing as “peace”—there’s only war. As Foucault argues, “While it is true that political power puts an end to war and establishes or attempts to establish the reign of peace in civil society, it certainly does not do so in order to suspend the effects of power or to neutralize the disequilibrium revealed in the last battle of the war” (Foucault 2003: 15). In short, from Foucault’s grim perspective, we may well delude ourselves that, in the absence of open warfare, we live in a state of “peace,” but the conditions of that peace are largely if not totally dictated by war. Even though in fairness to Foucault it should be added that he considered the lectures collected in the volume “*Society Must be Defended*” (from which I have been quoting) only a provisional and tentative exploration of this topic, what matters here is that his argument has the merit of showing how very close we remain, a millennium and a half down the road, to Vegetius’s formula.

The pressing question that emerges from this cursory overview is, obviously, how can peace be thought of as an alternative to war, if it is always, relentlessly, defined as the product of (or the precondition for) war? In his 1984, George Orwell, as everyone knows, imagined “War is Peace” as one of the three slogans of the Ministry of Truth, but I think it can be easily proved that while this slogan may be an excellent example of the Newspeak common to all totalitarian states, it is actually also one of the key beliefs of democratic societies all the world over. Once that is understood, one begins to wonder whether it makes any sense to cry “Hypocrisy!” whenever the Nobel Peace Prize goes to people with a variable quantity of blood on their hands like Henry Kissinger

and Barak Obama, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat and Menachem Begin. They were all believers in the notion that peace could be secured only through the use of force, faithful followers of the apparently ineradicable notion that, without war, you can have no peace.

I suppose I hardly need to stress that where the distinction lies between peace and war is far from being a merely academic, linguistic, or philosophical dispute. The question of whether peace can ever be extricated from a logic of war, is, *literally*, a matter of life and death. The current war in Ukraine, is, of course, a case in point. In what follows I will try to be as objective as possible, by presenting how each side constructs rhetorically its own version of reality, and therefore their own *casus belli*. In February 2022 the Russian army invaded a sovereign country but, like all nations that decide to wage war, Russia too claimed to be acting in self-defense. Russia is a peace-loving country, Putin argued, but at the prospect of seeing a key neighboring country like the Ukraine join NATO—that is, a military alliance that Putin considers inimical to Russia’s geopolitical interests—he had to send in the army to “denazify” Ukraine and to bring peace to the Donbas region, where war between the Russian separatists and the Ukrainian army had been going on since April, 2014. Obviously, many would object that what Putin calls “peace” is simply another name for the political goals he pursues. However, questions must also be asked about how the other side construes its own version of “peace.” Before the Russian invasion, there was nothing like “peace” in the Donbas region. According to UN sources, between April 6, 2014 to December 31, 2021, over 14,000 people had lost their lives in the conflict, with nearly a quarter of them being civilians. Moreover, an argument can be made, and indeed has been made, that Ukraine’s military alignment with the West, was far from being a gesture of “peace” towards Russia, especially considering that Putin had many times expressed his opposition to the enlargement of NATO to the east. Finally, NATO too, as one can read on its webpage, has as its primary purpose to ensure “peace and security in Europe and North America,” but it aims at doing so by both political and *military* means. NATO makes no mystery, then, that it firmly believes that if you wish to keep

the peace, you must be ready for war. And indeed, even though Ukraine at the time of the Russian invasion was not a NATO member, from the very start NATO provided military assistance to Zelensky. Of course, if that did not happen, the Russian army would have most likely sooner, rather than later, taken control of the whole country. But it is an objective fact that by providing the resistance with more and more weapons, NATO countries are instrumental in prolonging the war, and a longer war means more deaths. Of course, the Ukrainian response is that these regrettable deaths—which at the time of this writing total more than 70,000 on the Ukrainian side alone—are worth it, as the only other option would be to surrender to the aggressor.

While resistance against foreign aggression qualifies as an undisputable act of self-defense, it is also a use of force that falls within the perimeter of the *si vis pax para bellum* continuum. In fact, regardless of who may be right and who may be wrong, as I have insisted, both sides claim to be fighting for peace though regrettably, in order to achieve peace, they must resort to war. This is hardly surprising given that the historical record shows beyond any shadow of doubt that nations *always* go to war because they seek to realize what they choose to call “peace.” This may be especially easy to see in the modern age, when nations need to justify their going to war by construing their decisions not only as acts of self-defense (for an infamous contemporary example, see the Anglo-American war against Iraq, with its never found WMD’s) but as *moral* interventions (that’s what the notion of “humanitarian warfare” is all about) to secure peace. No matter how obscure the claim of acting in self-defense might be—as in the case of the current genocidal attack of the Israeli “Defense” Forces on the population of Gaza—that is what all nations claim to do when they go to war. They claim to be “defending” themselves. But there is a deeper sense in which the object of war is always “peace.” No country goes to war with the idea of being at war permanently. On the contrary, all wars are fought to bring about “peace,” that is with the objective of forcing the enemy to accept a new social and political configuration. So, while Foucault may be extreme in claiming that politics is the continuation of war by other means, it would be much harder to deny that “peace”

is in the majority of cases the continuation of war: its inevitable byproduct. The fifty-year peace that Western Europe has enjoyed, for example, was the byproduct of World War II, just as the peace between North and South Korea is the byproduct of the stalemate reached at the end of the Korean war, or the peace reached in the Balkans is the outcome of the wars unleashed by the falling apart of the former Yugoslavia.

Now, to go back to the Ukrainian war, it is obvious that the “peace” sought by one side has very little to do with the one the other side is struggling to achieve. True enough, but what is shared by both camps is the notion that only through war (whether defensive or offensive) peace can be obtained. We are thus completely mired in a rhetorical paradox that perhaps few have analyzed more effectively than Kenneth Burke, one of the most intelligent students of rhetoric, literature, and culture of the twentieth century. As he wrote in his 1945 *A Grammar of Motives*, if the best that people who care about peace can do is to point to the horrors of war, we will continue to be stuck in a situation in which “what we [are] admonished against [would be] just about the only tangible thing there for us to be” (Burke 1945: 332). In other words, we want men and women to become peaceful, but all we can do is marshal written and visual narratives that show them practicing the art of war. Burke was talking about literature and rhetoric, but his point has clear political implications. Wars are fought in the name of peace, but in order to become peaceful we must first turn into warriors—we must, in other words, mimic the violence (real or imagined) we are confronted with by our opponent.

I know that at this point I could be accused of indulging in sophistry, ignoring that in a case like the war in the Ukraine, where many would argue there is a clear-cut distinction between an aggressor and a victim, there should also be an equally unambiguous difference between a “bad” versus a “good” violence. Or, if you prefer, granting that violence can in no circumstances be deemed “good,” one may wish to argue that in the Ukraine war a difference holds between an acceptable versus an unacceptable form of violence. But if, with Judith Butler, “we accept the notion that all lives are equally grievable, and thus that the political world ought rightly to be organized in such a way that this principle is affirmed by eco-

conomic and institutional life” (Butler 2021: 96), it should be clear that, no matter how justified or unjustified they might be in doing so, both sides are equally committed to the violation of what Butler identifies as “the radical equality of the grievable” (96). Like Butler, I too believe that it would be a mistake to consider nonviolence as an absolute principle and that there may be indeed cases where to defend oneself one may have to resort to violence. However, especially considering the way wars are waged today, the “just cause” (*jus ad bellum*) of a specific war no longer translates—if it ever did—into “just rules” (*jus in bello*). Modern warfare has made any subordination of the immorality of killing to the morality of a just cause increasingly complicated. The clearest example of this is that in contemporary wars the number of civilians killed exceeds by far the number of dead combatants.

So, where does all this leave us? It may well be that at the stage we have reached in this enfolding tragedy, all possible solutions will be unsatisfactory and riddled with several moral and political complications. This, however, should not exempt us from considering the matter from a wider historical as well as theoretical perspective—both for the sake of reaching a better understanding of the current crisis, and in the hope of establishing conditions under which such crises may not occur again in the future.<sup>1</sup> Therefore,

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1. In such a brief essay, where my point is to investigate how “peace” continues to be inextricably tied to its purported opposite (war), I cannot discuss at any length what might have been practical, political alternatives, to the defensive war undertaken by Ukraine to repeal the Russian invasion. Was a non-violent, political defense of Ukraine possible? I happen to believe that it should have been tried. If Gandhi had never embraced non-violence to conduct his anti-colonial struggle, opting for the more traditional armed struggle that nearly all anti-colonial movements were embracing at the time, we would not have an example of what a non-violent mass movement could be like. To break the cycle of violence, a truly “heroic” choice must be made, and I don’t think this would entail giving up the fight for freedom. I repeat, I cannot explore this issue here. But I do wish to point out that while NATO countries insist that the Ukrainian resistance must be provided with weapons to fight the Russian occupation, in the case of the more than 50 year-long illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, not only they have never been willing to provide any military assistance to the Palestinian resistance, but they have always insisted that Palestinian should renounce armed struggle and choose non-violence.

allow me to return to Judith Butler's book, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, published by Verso in 2021, from which I have already quoted. One of the premises of Butler's inquiry is that,

To argue for or against violence requires that we establish the difference between violence and nonviolence, if we can. But there is no quick way to arrive at a stable semantic distinction between the two when that distinction is so often exploited for the purposes of concealing and extending violent aims and practices. In other words, we cannot race to the phenomenon itself without passing through the conceptual schemes that dispose the use of the term in various directions, and without an analysis of how those dispositions work.... To start down such a path, we have to accept that "violence" and "nonviolence" are used variably and perversely, without pitching into a form of nihilism suffused by the belief that violence and nonviolence are whatever those in power decide they should be. (Butler 2021: 25–26)

Butler is responding to a situation analogous to the one I have tried to sketch in my argument so far: stable semantic—as well as, I would like to add, practical—distinctions between violence and nonviolence, war and peace are difficult to formulate precisely because they are part of what conflict is all about. As Australian philosopher Nick Mansfield has put it in his *Theorizing War*, "the deployment of the term 'war' is inevitably a deployment of something else as well, the 'other' of war, something called variously peace, or civil society, or sovereign authority, or love or friendship" (Mansfield 2008: 2). This "other" of war is *not* "a simple opposite of war, something that we aim to protect from war or retrieve from it somehow" (2). This other—that is, "peace"—is what war needs to constantly refer to "in order to make sense at all" (3).

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Thus, Western countries hypocritically choose to ignore that whenever Palestinians have embraced civil and largely non-violent protest they have met with violent repression. In the "Great March of Return," for example, according to Amnesty International over 150 Palestinians were killed, with over 10,000 injured. But the reason why Palestinian non-violence has failed lies not only with Israel's criminal behavior—it also lies with the Western countries' refusal to subject Israel to the kind of political pressure that would force the country to change its policies. As both Gandhi and King insisted, the moral outrage of public opinion is a *conditio sine qua non* for the success of non-violence—as long, of course, such moral outrage is translated into practical governmental actions.

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I guess it should be clear by now that, while I concede the moral and political complications that such a choice entails, the argument I am trying to build here is an argument in favor of nonviolence. In this regard, let me quote Butler again: “In response to the objection that a position in favor of nonviolence is simply unrealistic [one should maintain] that nonviolence requires a critique of what counts as reality, and it affirms the power and necessity of counter-realism.... Perhaps nonviolence requires a certain leave-taking from reality as it is currently constituted, laying open the possibilities that belong to a newer political imaginary” (Butler 2021: 32). In other words, as far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, if we wish to contribute to the building of a peace that may be truly something else than an extension of the logic of war, we must be skeptical of what is presented to us as reality.

Make no mistake, I am by no means suggesting that the killings, the misery, the bombings, the unspeakable cruelties of the war are not real. What I am suggesting is that there is much more that escapes the eye of a viewer conditioned not only by what the media and most politicians construct as reality, but also by a hegemonic way of perceiving war matters that remains rooted in the understanding that only war can bring us peace. Now, what would happen if we set aside for a moment this often unstated but widely shared ideological premise, and adopted as our guiding principle the slogan launched by *Medecin sans Frontiers* at the beginning of the invasion? That slogan is, simply *Si vis pacem para pacem*—if you want peace, you must prepare for peace.<sup>2</sup> Or perhaps, even better, build peace. The etymology of the Latin verb *parare*, in fact, suggests that the verb refers to setting the conditions for something to take place, while another meaning associated with it is “to defend something” (as in the contemporary Italian phrase *parare un colpo*—to absorb a blow). To the question of whether any side in this war has prepared for peace, the only honest answer must be a resounding NO! Both NATO and Russia, in fact, have done just the opposite, because their respective political imaginaries understand military matters only in light of Bourrienne’s preoccupations. They are

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2. The slogan is just another way to say what the epigraph from Gandhi I chose for this essay says. True peace is achieved through peace, not war.



both committed to building up their arsenals because they fear that a peaceful stance will render them vulnerable.

This is, however, where we must engage in that leave-taking from reality as currently constituted that Judith Butler recommends. And here, too, is where a very important *American* tradition of what Albert Einstein would have called “militant,” *aggressive* pacifism can be of great help. I will not try to summarize my understanding of the important intellectual and political achievements of this tradition that extends from Emerson and Thoreau to William James, Jane Addams, Richard Bartlett Gregg, Martin Luther King, and many, many others. I will only mention that one of the arguments of my 2015 book *Waging War on War. Peacefighting in American Literature*, is devoted precisely to showing that “peacefighting” is anything but the choice of the weak and ineffectual. As Emerson put it, “the cause of peace is not the cause of cowardice.”

Rather than repeat what I have argued elsewhere, however, here I would like to call attention to how this issue of failing to build the peace was highlighted as setting the stage for war even before figures like Emerson and Thoreau took the stage. Long before Henry David Thoreau’s impassioned argument on a standing army being only an arm of the standing government, and William James’s warning, in his 1898 contradictory but fundamental essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” that “the intensely sharp preparation for war” is “the real war” (James 1898: 1283), one of the Republic’s Founding Fathers, James Madison, stated that, “A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defence agst. foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people” (Madison 1902: 317). Here, not only Madison warned that a standing army was the precondition for what, in another well-known statement, he defined as the evil “most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops every other” (Madison 1997: 106)—that is, war—but he also stated in unequivocal terms that an overblown military arsenal was simply incompatible with democracy. “In war, too,” he continued, “the discretionary power of the executive is

extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds are added to those of subduing the force of the people! No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare” (Madison 1997: 106–107).

Considering that since 9/11 the United States have been permanently at war one wonders what Madison would have thought about the state of contemporary American democracy. But there’s more, of course. In 2001, the Pentagon Budget was \$287 billion. In 2021 it had gone up to \$782 billion. This year, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it has reached \$801 billion, accounting for 3.2 per cent of the US GDP. Of the 20 largest military spenders in the world, only Saudi Arabia (6.6) and Israel (5.2) spend a larger percentage of their respective GDPs to arm themselves. Russia, interestingly, invests only a tiny 0.1 percent less of its GDP than the US, though in absolute terms, both China and Russia—the two great competitors of the US on the world scene—account for only 14% and 3.1%, respectively, of the world’s military spending, with the US reaching a staggering 38%.<sup>3</sup>

At this point it may be worth recalling the words used by a man who had certainly lived all his life believing that if you wanted peace you had to be ready for war. Dwight Eisenhower—a former World War Two general and US president from 1952 to 1960—in his famous “military-industrial complex” speech, argued that “Disarmament, with mutual honor and confidence, is a continuing imperative. Together we must learn how to compose differences, not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose” (“Military-Industrial”). No wonder this text is featured in all the major anthologies of peace and anti-war writing published in the US over the last twenty or so years. Here, however, I would like to quote at some length a lesser-known passage from his address to the American Society of Newspaper editors: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold

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3. All data are from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2022 Fact Sheet (for 2021), as reported in “List of countries by military expenditures,” *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_with\\_highest\\_military\\_expenditures](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_with_highest_military_expenditures).

and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron" ("The Chance for Peace"). *Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron*: if we continue to threaten war—if we continue, that is, to make of Vegetius' s motto the polar star of our thinking about political and military matters, all human beings will be facing crucifixion.

I don't know to what extent Eisenhower meant what he said or understood the implications of his statement, but let's forget for a moment that these were the words of an Army general, and stick only to what they say, or better, what they *do*. In my view, what they do, is offer us a fresh new "cognitive mapping" of the world. I use intentionally the concept that Fredric Jameson took from urban planner Kevin Lynch, to suggest that traditional military cognitive mapping has always privileged—and in many ways continues to do so—the space of the nation. This is to some extent hardly surprising. As Philip Wegner has usefully put, "It is what Benedict Anderson famously calls the 'imagined community' of the nation that unifies and draws together into a coherent ensemble the lived experience of individuals and the abstract economic and political realities of the newly emerging capitalist states" (Wegner 2014: 72). Military reality could only follow suit. However, in the post-modern, *post-atomic* age, this older cognitive mapping is no longer adequate. It may still work as far as conventional warfare is concerned, but it becomes useless when a nuclear superpower threatens to use its atomic weaponry. The old maps no longer help us in making sense of the world. We enter a truly global space where there's only humanity and the bomb, so to speak. But here, at this incredibly bleak juncture when apocalypse seems only a few minutes away, "a new and heretofore unimaginable politics" may begin to emerge. The threat of complete annihilation—a reality we cannot perceive unless we take leave from another, outmoded reality—sets the preconditions for a new form of cognitive mapping no longer based on the unit of the nation but on that of the planet. And in this new form

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of cognitive mapping, the old Latin dictum must be discarded as an old rusty tool of a bygone era.

Since thus far I have hardly said anything about how literature may help us in our search for better answers to allay the sorrows of this wa and prevent those of future wars, I would like to conclude by quoting a passage that has always struck me as one of the most beautiful and poignant moments in twentieth-century American literature. It is a passage from Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony*, where the protagonist Tayo, a traumatized World War Two veteran from Laguna Pueblo, is finally able to trace a pattern—a cognitive map, that is—in what thus far he has experienced as a series of disconnected and painful fragments.

He had been so close to it, caught up in it for so long that its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest: Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of him now, still surrounded by high electric fences and the ponderosa pine and tawny sand rock of the Jemez mountain canyon where the shrine of the twin mountain lions had always been. There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognised why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices [...]; the lines of cultures and world were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate color of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (Silko 1986: 245–246)

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What the novel identifies as “the witchery” may well be translated into the obscene military budgets of all nations, which not only pave the way to Armageddon, but daily deprive people of food, shelter, medical care—in a word deprive people of *peace*, in the name of a “peace” that reeks of war. But if we are “one clan again”—as I think we are—it is high time to say goodbye to Vegetius and prepare for peace because we want peace.

*Abstract:* This article offers a brief exploration of the contradictory meanings of “war” and “peace,” beginning with the ways in which, paradoxically, one term is supposed to engender its opposite. Inspired by sources as diverse as James Madison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and Judith Butler, the author tries to imagine what it would take to break the war-and-peace continuum.

*Keywords:* peace, war, America

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