American Peace
in an Age of Endless War

SAMUEL MOYN


In a recent episode of Silicon Valley, the biting parody of contemporary tech culture, a startup builds an antiwar app. On the show, everyone is always promising “to make the world a better place.” After you download “PeaceFare,” you can send “virtual corn to feed virtual starving villages,” in effect “turning your mobile device into an empathy machine.” The founder has no trouble feeling good, justifying his marketing budget with effortless sanctimony: “We really think our company’s message is worth getting out there.” Like much else on the program, the scene is a harsh indictment of our pseudomorality.

The conversion of peace into an opportunity for clicks is only one of the indignities visited on the historic dream to beat swords into plowshares—the dream that climaxed in the twentieth century in the midst of total war. Far worse than trivializing peace as a marketing strategy, Americans have allowed their state to embark on an endless war that shows no sign of abating. Donald Trump has made the war making more egregious, but it is built on the foundation laid by George W. Bush and Barack Obama, using a rationale of antiterror that has left a long-standing American criticism of war nearly irretrievable.
“I lived in the first century of world wars,” Muriel Rukeyser wrote in a 1968 poem. We live in a century of endless war. It is literally global for the first time, with American special ops present last year in 150 countries, which amounts to three-quarters of them. Yet our new brand of warfare is less spectacular and visible. “The news would pour out of various devices/Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen,” Rukeyser continued. She responded by seeking an imaginary community, writing “poems for others unseen or unborn.” But even as the literature of endless war has crystallized into an identifiable genre, the difference is that it is much easier today even for the morally sensitive to skirt the news. Our empathy machines have not worked well in the past, and now they face a new challenge—a way of war that is all but invisible.

Rukeyser’s poem is one of the many remarkable documents in Lawrence Rosenwald’s Library of America compilation of antiwar and peace writing from the last few centuries. Surveying it gives a strong sense of how we got here—what traditions have mattered, and when, before they died in our time, almost beyond recovery. If they find expression now, it is in a damning but ineffectual indictment of virtual empathy as the best that Americans seem to be able to muster. As the new accounts of pivotal twentieth-century developments by the historian Michael Kazin and the law professors Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro inadvertently suggest, a noble impulse to ban war was instrumentalized for the sake of a new form of control, with acid self-contempt the only, and unacceptable, refuge of that impulse today.

After a spare introduction that establishes the distinction between “antiwar” writing that opposes a particular conflict and “peace” writing that more constructively imagines a world without war, Rosenwald presents his resourcefully and wisely curated edition without explicit organization, but within the long chronology from the beginning of recorded history on our continent to the present day. Though the Native wisdom of the Iroquois opens the volume,
readers are quickly vaulted into the midst of the essential antecedents to twentieth-century reflection, in the form of white Christian peace ideology and organization, from the Quaker John Woolman’s strictures on violence to William Lloyd Garrison’s 1838 Declaration of Sentiments, with its affirmation that “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, has been abrogated by Jesus Christ; and...under the new covenant, the forgiveness, instead of the punishment of enemies, has been enjoined upon all his disciples.”

It was not until the nineteenth century, as Rosenwald’s volume makes clear, that dreams of peace in the end of days became for a few Christians a political aspiration in the here and now. Bellicosity has been endemic to humanity from its beginnings. This does not make all cultures identical, since each justifies war in its own way—most certainly including the Christian. But it does make the nineteenth-century Anglo-American dream of this-worldly peace remarkable. Historians on both sides of the Atlantic have identified a combination of Enlightenment values, revolutionary politics, and Christian evangelicalism as fostering new visions of a world beyond penury and slavery, and some hoped humanity stood on the brink of a peaceful millennium, too. And Americans of the time were as involved as others across the Christian world. “Every nation, that should lift again/Its hand against a brother,” anticipated Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1845, “Would wear forevermore the curse of Cain!” He continued:

   Down the dark future, through long generations,
   The echoing sounds grow fainter and then cease;
   And like a bell, with solemn, sweet vibrations,
   I hear once more the voice of Christ say, “Peace!”

If Americans were distinguished in the transatlantic invention of antiwar sentiment and peace ideologies, it was thanks to two crosscutting forces. One was the centrality of their Civil War, which Rosenwald’s collection covers generously. But the other was their sense, before and after that murderous conflict, that, far away from
their European origin, Americans could steer clear of the international strife that had proved the way of the world. Though Rosenwald’s collection does not incorporate this more exceptionalist and narcissistic trope in American attitudes toward war, it was a common thread that thrummed from the days of the Puritans down to the twentieth century. By 1900, in spite of the living memory of bitter internecine discord, some Americans were ready to strive for a final peace, whether on traditional Christian premises or in newer non- or post-Christian terms.

Then came the wars of the twentieth centuries, with massive outbursts of opposition to World War I and Vietnam, to which Rosenwald gives the most attention because of the sheer volume of criticism at both times. World War II, meanwhile, recedes, after the great debate about American participation gave way to what conventional wisdom has consecrated as “the good war”—in spite of the occasional challenger such as Nicholson Baker, whose commentary on the uses and abuses of its memorialization is excerpted. Moral outrage and pragmatic qualms alike also were provoked by the fearful nuclearization of war during the several decades after World War II, including from those who had helped bring the new weapons about, such as Robert Oppenheimer and Leo Szilard. Responses ranged from the ethical to the tactical and the secular to the metaphysical, and Rosenwald spotlights the evolution of Albert Bigelow, a naval officer who became a Quaker, hosted “Hiroshima maidens” who came to the United States for plastic surgery to repair their nuclear burns, and illegally sailed into the Marshall Islands atomic test site in a courageous attempt to interfere with the drift to Armageddon.

Broader causes such as socialism surge within an antiwar mentality during the twentieth century, as distant a memory as that collectivist impulse may seem today. An even more important thread within the story is that of women finding a public voice, which many thought would signal the beginning of the end of war. Rosenwald registers the importance of antiwar feminism clearly, from Julia Ward Howe, who in 1870 directed a pacifist appeal to Christian women across the
world; to activist Jane Addams and poet Sara Teasdale, who urged against intervention in World War I; to the amazing deeds in both 1917 and 1941 of Jeannette Rankin—the first female congressperson, who voted against both world wars.

This history is harsh evidence that, even more than socialism, female pacifism has been mostly liquidated in our time. One of Rosenwald’s last inclusions, an excerpt from Barbara Ehrenreich’s coruscating *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (1997), reminded me that her daughter, Rosa Brooks, recently published her own book reporting on her service in the Defense Department, a book that describes her grim realization that since 9/11 “everything became war, and the military became everything”—even as war became nearly invisible in the public sphere. How did this paradoxical result emerge? Between mother and daughter, one moves from a bitter critique of war to rueful acceptance that it defines our time unalterably.

Michael Kazin’s beautifully executed narrative in *The War against War* allows readers to place Rosenwald’s excerpts from the early twentieth century in context. As a work of history, it is a masterpiece, vividly recreating a lost era, showing how people make different choices across the same turbulent period, and reminding its readers how differently configured American politics was, not very long ago.

Kazin makes many of the antiwar tendencies in the Library of America volume exceptionally vivid, including the feminist participation of Addams and Crystal Eastman and that of socialists such as Eugene Debs and Morris Hillquit. Kazin observes that it was feminists, excluded from the male-dominated peace movement before 1914, who possessed the independence to take it to the streets, and led in devising newer strategies as events like the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 made war seem perilously close. Kazin also gives full coverage to socialist activists across the progressive spectrum, reserving special attention for Hillquit, a calm but implacable advocate for subordinating matters of war and peace to larger concerns for national and international social justice.
More than Rosenwald, Kazin pays attention to mainstream politicians, revealing the prominence of the critique of American involvement in World War I—and how various were the motives that drove opposition, not only across the left but deep into the territory of the political right. Wisconsin Republican Senator Robert La Follette is Kazin’s main example. His “realist” reluctance to embrace foreign intervention is worth remembering for its living presence today in minority sectors of American conservatism, among supporters of Rand Paul as well as readers of The American Conservative. For La Follette, war could drive the unacceptable empowerment of the executive, not to mention the victory of coastal business interests that coveted massive profits from a war machine. In both ways, La Follette feared, intervention would upend the historic identity of the country. For some Democrats, such as Southerner Claude Kitchin, in the traditions of William Jennings Bryan (one of Kazin’s prior subjects), foreign war seemed crackpot. It was a vast expense for no good reason.

It came anyway, of course, after Germany announced unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917. Declaring his sympathy with the critics of American intervention in World War I at the start of his book, Kazin is vociferous in rejecting the label “isolationist” to describe these motley ancestors. Woodrow Wilson’s decision to buck the tide of antiwar sentiment set a fateful precedent for future interventions abroad, and Kazin makes clear that there is much to learn from those who resisted the interventionist outcome. After all, Wilson’s crusade sparked the invention of the American surveillance state (and civil liberties law in eventual and inadequate response). And, after twenty years of uncertainty, the Wilsonian precedent opened a permanent war footing that the country has never since relinquished. Finally, as Kazin’s epilogue reveals, after World War I, American socialist politics declined precipitously from its former heights.

What these kinds of arguments omit, however, is any recognition that the American debate about whether to enter the conflict was not identical to a larger global debate about the fate of war, especially since Kazin acknowledges forthrightly that American abstention could have meant a longer World War I. For American interventionists then and now, it was not solely domestic political implications but a more
expansive vision that drove them to embrace what they called “internationalism.” Wilson himself and many of his advocates believed in a final war to serve the cause of global peace. Purely domestic concerns about the ethics and politics of war, especially given America’s power and wealth, have been easy for moralists and militarists with a more global view to disarm. The sheer difficulty that Kazin faces in lifting the opprobrium of the slanderous term “isolationism” suggests as much.

Kazin, who published an early installment of his book in these pages, makes himself the tribune of Randolph Bourne and, before him, William James (both of whose epoch-making critiques of war Rosenwald features). Neither great intellectual could understand war parties that justified aggression in terms of the health of the nation or, as Bourne’s erstwhile mentor Dewey did during World War I, for the sake of the achievement of progressive democracy at home. One sympathizes with Bourne and James, and with Kazin’s revival of their arguments. And it is critical, as he shows, to regard their domestic concerns as a far cry from “isolation.” Still, without some answer to the critique that an America standing apart leaves the warlike globe as it is, such voices are limited—especially given how many have since placed their hopes in the dream of a final world peace under American auspices.

Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro are two of them. In The Internationalists, they hardly mention American antiwar traditions, instead setting out to demonstrate the value and necessity of international law as a device to pacify the globe—and to prove that it worked. Yet they tell a strikingly American story. Their conceit is that the much ridiculed General Treaty for the Renunciation of War (1928), known to posterity after the names of the American secretary of state Frank Kellogg and French foreign minister Aristide Briand, actually worked. The treaty emerged in a moment after World War I when many on both sides of the Atlantic hoped to avoid another world war, given what tremendous suffering they had experienced and witnessed. It is
regularly cited as an illustration of how elusive peace is—and how useless international law is in securing it. Given the outright contempt in which it is held in some quarters, Hathaway and Shapiro’s rehabilitation of the Kellogg-Briand Pact is nothing if not daring.

As legal scholars, Hathaway and Shapiro are most intent on proving the law’s role in making dreams of peace a reality—a project they augment with well-drawn character portraits of politicians and diplomats, alongside several interesting studies of philosophers. Hathaway and Shapiro (who are my treasured colleagues) begin with the old regime before the Kellogg-Briand Pact, reconstructing a legal world in which war for the sake of conquest was both permitted and routine. Then they devote most of their attention to how the rules changed after—especially after the United Nations Charter adopted the pact’s original goals and the Nuremberg trial held Nazis accountable for waging aggressive warfare. Hathaway and Shapiro’s aim is simple: to demonstrate that, after the 1928 treaty changed the default rules from allowing to prohibiting war, the difference was extraordinary. It was not the case that nations laid down their arms, but their age-old practice of conquest ended, and interstate violence dwindled.

It would be easy to raise objections to the book as a contribution to history, but it is not really the authors’ goal to provide a comprehensive account of what happened—or why—so much as prove that law changed the world. Even so, it is a little shocking after savoring Rosenwald’s compilation and reading Kazin’s account of World War I that Hathaway and Shapiro abruptly begin their story of rule change with diplomats and lawyers in 1919. They say they want to prove that ideas matter, while providing no genealogy of the idea of ending war. For their argument, however, the percolation of antiwar sentiment through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may not be relevant. And they have a point. Retrieving America’s antiwar traditions is less difficult than determining precisely how they could finally gain a foothold in international affairs, after centuries of violence, in the form of a new project to outlaw war.

Hathaway and Shapiro’s decision to start so late stems from their beliefs about where useful political change typically originates. Legal
historians have spent a generation showing how ordinary people and political movements drive legal transformation. But these authors give full credit to Chicago corporate lawyer Salmon Levinson for his contribution after World War I spurred him to action, a position that relies on an implicit theory of progress that accords professional elites the largest catalytic importance. (Dewey, recovered from his own enthusiasm for American entry in the conflict, helped Levinson.) Hathaway and Shapiro use the word “radical” in their subtitle—and it is true that outlawing war was once a “radical plan.” But what counted for Levinson, they hasten to add, was in fact that he was “not a wide-eyed radical.” Apparently committed to the proposition that the real visionaries are the politicians who push through change and lawyers who bind states rather than ordinary activists who merely dream about it or artists who write poetry for its sake, Hathaway and Shapiro have made a genuine contribution. On the other hand, it turns out that their story is equally one of radicalism’s domestication and truncation as one of its fulfillment and realization.

The journey down the road to Kellogg-Briand and through the end of World War II, as Hathaway and Shapiro lead it, is genuinely thrilling. One can quibble with many aspects of their lovely narrative history while still finding their fundamental contentions both novel and plausible. It does not puzzle them enough that defiantly noninternationalist Idaho Senator William Borah—great enemy of the League of Nations after World War I—became the leader in Congress of the outlawry movement. For him, it presented a way to impugn European war, not to expose the United States to international governance, let alone to permit making hay of America’s own already far-flung imperial possessions. Nor do Hathaway and Shapiro reflect sufficiently on another troubling feature of the origins of the new regime that they themselves stress. For great powers with formal and informal empires, a peace pact ratified old conquest, changing the rules only for new pretenders—like Germany and Japan—that had been delayed out of the gate in the imperial race. Why celebrate a new world of “peace” if it entrenches the very old world hierarchies to which war once led—and prohibits their undoing?
As for Kellogg-Briand itself, Hathaway and Shapiro find their way to praising it in spite of some very real shortcomings that they entertain but take less seriously than they should. Many states signed the pact with one hand and eviscerated it with the other. States entered reservations to the treaty, as the German political theorist Carl Schmitt (Hathaway and Shapiro’s bête noire) caustically observed at the time, that made sure the new law in fact allowed rather than prohibited war. In a once-notorious note regarding the pact, Austen Chamberlain, the British foreign secretary who had won the Nobel Peace Prize a few years before Briand and Kellogg did for the treaty, reserved his country’s right not simply to defend itself but also to deploy armed force in unspecified places deemed vital to its imperial interests. Americans, meanwhile, made clear the pact did not affect their own hemispheric security zone defined by the Monroe doctrine. In short, nations claimed to renounce war while making clear they retained the last word about when they could resort to it anyway.

For Hathaway and Shapiro, however, such potentially revealing facts about Kellogg-Briand turn out to be subordinate to their deeper claim that, whatever its mixed origins, a law of peace ultimately took hold and had dramatic effects. They acknowledge that it took some years and World War II’s end for the peace agenda to have a chance at institution-building—most notably in the founding of the United Nations in 1945. Breaking with most recent accounts that regard the United Nations as much like the League of Nations before it, except that in place of the old imperial European states a new hegemonic American ascendance was given outsized power, Hathaway and Shapiro insist on 1945’s novelty. Not only did the United Nations institutionalize a new legal prohibition of war, but Americans had now ushered in a new era of peace. And they used law to do it. At Nuremberg, furthermore, Kellogg-Briand allowed for punishment of Nazis for perpetrating “aggression.”

After their narrative of the interwar period and postwar moment, Hathaway and Shapiro turn to analysis, proving that Kellogg-Briand set in motion an end of war. It is a position with much to say in its favor. Whether international law helped cause the change alongside
the birth of nuclear weaponry, or whether it could be cited in retrospect or created later to entrench a new consensus, are two rather different propositions. The peace that Kellogg-Briand brought about, in sum, was not an immediate but a retroactive effect, crystallized not in the document’s fine words but their belated ratification in new circumstances. The truth is that, had Adolf Hitler prevailed, a very different trend would have been visible. Even legally, contrary to some American visionaries among postwar planners such as Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles (cashiered after his enemies threatened to publicize his homosexuality), the United Nations Charter gave states the right to conduct “defensive” war against the aggression of others. Still, Hathaway and Shapiro are convincing that, at least after Hitler was put down, ubiquitous and unapologetic conquest became almost nonexistent. “Might,” they write, “was no longer Right.”

Yet there is a dark side to this tale that the upbeat disposition of the authors cannot disguise: informal domination by great powers has hardly ended. Even as Kellogg-Briand allowed the locking in of prior conquest, it merely changed the terms of international rule—allowing it insofar as it occurred without formal territorial annexation. In this regard, the key date may have been not 1928 and Kellogg-Briand, but 1937 and the first birth of Iraq, when great powers learned to exercise what historians have called “the imperialism of decolonization”—many features of conquest without the necessary oversight (and price tag). The new world of peace may, in short, have been one of a more insidious kind of domination than before.

There is no way not to grant Hathaway and Shapiro that the Kellogg-Briand Pact was an epoch-making departure. Peace now had a chance. But it seems equally important that war remained available if justified as “defensive,” which has continued to be an easy job, at least when the powerful have felt the need to conduct it. And since conquest has increasingly taken new forms, it is hard not to conclude that the peace rationale helped usher in a new system of geopolitics. Though forbidding conquest, it ensured the persistence of unjust gains, informal hegemony, and great power predominance. Outlawing war, one might conclude, succeeded in birthing legally “defensive”
war along with extraterritorial control in a series of new forms over the decades since. As the conservative intellectual Robert W. Tucker showed in *The Just War* decades ago, American policymakers appropriated the dream of peace for their own purposes, by promoting the ideology that all their wars are defensive and just. Other states have since followed suit. And even defensive war became an option of last resort, as states pioneered new forms of predominance that no longer required war.

To be sure, violence in interstate war is now far less common, a point Hathaway and Shapiro stress, adding that Kellogg-Briand has been left out of the explanations. But this does not mean that interstate rule is gone, only that its forms are not as destructive as before (bracketing, as always, the persistent threat of accidental or deliberate nuclear attack). In fairness, Hathaway and Shapiro themselves stress new forms of control that the international community can use to rein in a wayward state but do not adequately assess who can wield them and to what ends. Control functions across gradients of wealth and power, for good and ill, just as the more primitive tools of conquest and violence once did. The dream of peace was not fulfilled in any simple way but made to concur with other outcomes, notably the entrenchment of a new global hierarchy with the United States at the top.

Hathaway and Shapiro acknowledge, in surveying a disorderly world, that enduring peace remains far off. Even so, they do not note that Americans have been fighting an endless “defensive” global war for nearly two decades. It has had many of the domestic consequences that Kazin’s and Rosenwald’s critics might have feared, with the American social compact continuing to fray, and not merely because of the budgetary stress of a global military footprint. It has caused a good bit of international trouble, too, and nowhere more than in the Middle East, where the international community has toppled miscreants only to find worse anarchy and misrule taking their place. Most disturbingly for their argument, the deepest conditions for our current global engagement lie back in the very period Hathaway and Shapiro have studied, in the roots of American hegemony. True, only recent technological change made it more fully compatible with a continuing
decline of violence, since smart bombs allow for unprecedented precision. But absent the embrace by Americans of global rule in 1945, they would never have needed to seek a new and more pacific face for it.

Across the decades straddling World War II, Americans signed on to peace not on terms that would have made sense to any of our ancestors but rather in the form of geopolitical dominance and a global military presence—which of course has meant ceaseless military engagement, in the Middle East not least. It is heartening that there is no conquest and less violence, but nobody should mistake that both changes have fed a new form of control. Swords were not beaten into plowshares, but melted down for drones.

And this result forces the hard question, whether American dreamers of peace have achieved their full or even their main goal, if the elimination of conquest or the relative obsolescence of violence in interstate war implies a form of empire. Offering up a heady tonic for American liberal internationalists and especially the legalists among them, Hathaway and Shapiro do not appear to believe this is a real dilemma. But it is in fact the burning one for heirs of America’s anti-war traditions.

After the interventions of the Cold War and the later ones in Afghanistan and Iraq soured the American people on the costly toll of boots on the ground, drones and other technologies of “light footprint” war have taken their place. Precisely because war is waged through technological advantage without the dreadful loss of life to our soldiers—who are now a volunteer force (or outsourced labor) rather than the conscripted sons, brothers, or husbands whose deaths once so powerfully stoked antiwar rage—it is less troubling to American citizens. Given the relative safety on both sides relative to the gory contests of the past, the new forms of war are harder to single out for criticism and easier to perpetuate. Antiwar sentiment was catapulted far at midcentury and institutionalized in law, but behind that very
success lurked a failure nobody yet has learned to face: war is now everywhere, and the peace movement is nowhere.

“All history is the decline of war,” Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted in 1838, in a lecture before an early peace group. “The question for us is only How soon?” Were he alive today, it is likely that Emerson would struggle to decide whether our goal is in sight or as elusive as ever. The paradoxical truth is that a victory lap for the end of one kind of war is possible to run when, in a disquieting new version, it continues without end.