

# Inquiring Minds topic – 3 August 2018

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## Questions for Discussion

- The article says that statecraft is “...the art of reconciling all sides’ claims to their own desires and perhaps to their own peace.” It also argues that the purpose of war is to have “our” version of peace. This raises several questions:
  - On this argument, when would war be justified?
  - Why can’t statecraft avert war?
  - Does this mean that wars should only be fought in defense of peace?
- It is said that in making our decisions, our interests come first and “...foreigners’ needs, desires, and views are incidental.” What are the implications of this argument for our participation in international organizations and treaties?
- According to the article, it is human nature to want an order (or a “peace”) that satisfies our wants and the only proper end of war is to achieve “our” version of peace. And yet different peoples have different ideas about what they want.
  - Does this mean that war is inevitable?
  - What if different people in the same nation state hold different ideas of the kind of peace they want?

## **“On the Natural Law of War and Peace”**

Edited for length

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In order to understand what guidance natural law gives us about war and peace in our time, it is first necessary to have some understanding of what “natural law” is. Far from being a hazy concept peculiar to some philosophers, natural law is quite simply how the world works. It is reality. Our very civilization is based on understanding that nature and man exist and behave according to laws that our minds can grasp by observation and study. Only recently has it become customary to distinguish between facts and values—that is, between what is and what we want. Formerly, the fundamental distinction was between truth (reality) and opinions (the thoughts we winnow to understand reality). The people who built the United States believed that attention to the laws of nature and of nature’s God was the key to thriving because they knew that ignoring or flouting reality does not turn out well.

Physics and chemistry remind us that natural law is inflexible and self-enforcing. You may “identify” as a bird, eat bird food, and wear feathers. But if you jump off a cliff chirping and flopping those feathers, Mother Nature’s laws regarding mass and motion will punish you. Nor will she let you make salt out of two sodium atoms, regardless of your commitment.

Plants are just as subject to laws. Regardless of anybody’s opinion, apples, oranges, and avocados require different conditions to thrive. That is why judgments about farming have to be right by nature, or else. Not so long ago, the Soviet government, following a scientific consensus that acquired characteristics are inherited, wasted millions of tons of seeds trying to modify wheat to grow in Siberia. In America today, scientific consensus has it that the globe is warming, and yet citrus growers are moving their operations southward because the trees don’t share that consensus. Mother Nature does not care what anybody thinks.

Wild animals are, as the saying goes, “hardwired” to survive and thrive, moving and reproducing to take optimal advantage of weather and food sources. They can’t help doing the right things for themselves. So far as we know, human beings are the only part of creation capable of doing the *wrong* things for themselves. But that freedom doesn’t affect nature’s peculiar requirements for human beings to survive and thrive. Human survival, like that of other mammals, starts with food and community. But the happiness of these creatures, who are more than animals but less than gods, requires more.

## User’s Manual

The Ten Commandments are the most common and concise compendium of natural law regarding man. But aren’t they, one might object, a set of peculiarly Jewish ideas that draw their authority from the claim that Moses received them from God? Think again. Try reversing each of the Commandments, and ask how humans would fare living by the reversed list: *have* many gods and disrespect them all; *never* stop to rest or to consider whence you came or whither you go; *dishonor* your father and your mother; *kill* as you please; *take what you can* from whomever you can; *fornicate* with whomever you can; *lie* and betray; *envy and scheme* against those around you. Not even criminal gangs could survive on that basis. Nor could any individual be happy who lived by such counsels. At best, he might become a tyrant. His choice would be whether to die like Stalin or like Ceaucescu. We are forced to conclude that, whatever their provenance, the Ten Commandments just happen to be a pretty good summation of what nature requires for human beings to live human lives.

Moses’ precepts concerning magic, sodomy, and much else, also invite us to consider the consequences of violating them. But the point here is not that the Torah is the apex of natural law about man. Aristotle, Cicero, and many others have delved into the subject systematically and more deeply. Rather, the point is that our civilization is full of pretty accurate descriptions of what happens when humans disregard Mother Nature.

In fact, all actions can only be understood in light of their natural consequences. Naturally, all voluntary movement aims at some state of rest. We move, walk, speak or shut up, for certain purposes. When an action aims at a purpose other than, or even opposite to, what may reasonably be expected from it, the effort is wasted at best, or counterproductive. All actions make sense insofar as they serve their proper ends. As the saying goes, “not even a dog wags his tail for nothing.” Human action follows the same logic. The farmer fixes the tractor to till the ground, to grow the crops, to help maintain family and country.

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What, then, should we expect from statesmen and warriors?

## Why Peace?

Over the past century, as American power has grown, the American people's peace and security have diminished. Even though America's armed forces have won essentially all their battles, Americans have enjoyed peace for only about 30 of the past hundred years. Common sense tells us that winning battles naturally leads to winning wars, and hence to earning peace and security. Results so contrary to common sense and intentions do not happen because of errors in policy. They happen only from mistakes regarding first principles, regarding the natural laws of war and peace.

Just as nature obliges shoemakers and shipwrights to produce certain goods, so it obliges statesmen to produce certain results. What are the goods or natural ends of statesmanship? The Chinese empire's millennial claim to rule has been to provide *tien an men*, heavenly peace. Caesar Augustus' claim to the power that replaced Rome's raucous republic was that he was the *princeps pacis*, the prince of peace. As the Roman Empire was falling, Saint Augustine defined statesmanship for the next thousand years in terms of *tranquillitas ordinis*, "the tranquility of order." The temporal ruler was to be the *defensor pacis*, "the defender of the peace." Fourteen hundred years later, Abraham Lincoln summarized his objective as "peace among ourselves and with all nations." Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes were, if anything, more insistent on judging any exercise of statesmanship by the degree of peace that it produces—especially internal peace. Indeed, just as peace seems to be the natural end of statesmanship, the incapacity to rest from war really does seem to be the punishment Mother Nature imposes for incompetent statesmanship.

If peace is so essential to well-being, why then is mankind so often at war? Simply because, by nature, each of us wants his or her way. We human beings share in Eve's appetites and in Adam's irresponsibility. Individually and collectively, we want to be a law unto ourselves. Statecraft is the art of reconciling all sides' claims to their own desires, and perhaps to their own peace. We fight wars so that we may have *our* version of peace. That is why *any* peace is what one side earns for itself by defeating the other side's attempt to get the peace *it* wants. Still, although war is the most intense of activities, it aims naturally at a state of rest neither more nor less than any other activity.

## Law of War

This is why approaching war as anything other than the pursuit of peace is naturally self-defeating. Consider how two of history's greatest warriors failed. During the Second Punic War, Hannibal subordinated strategic logic to operational logic by staying on the offensive even after having failed to break Rome or force it to negotiate. Napoleon never thought of an end to his string of battlefield victories. His failure to aim at peace nullified his valor as a warrior. As Charles de Gaulle wrote, Napoleon "broke France's sword by striking it unceasingly." Hannibal's and Napoleon's victories in battle contributed to defeat in war because the victories were not aimed intelligently at war's natural objective: an end to the fighting. Victory in war means forcing the enemy to acquiesce to one's enjoyment of one's own peace.

Aristotle noted that such peace is the natural end of the statesman's art and victory the natural objective of the warrior. Fact is, your victory is what makes possible your peace. Victory, of course, comes in different

forms—everything from the enemy’s annihilation or enslavement, as was the rule in ancient warfare, to sovereignty over border provinces, as was common in 18th-century European warfare. But victory in all its forms means the vanquished no longer disturbs the winner’s enjoyment of his peace. But to establish and maintain one’s own peace naturally presupposes a coherent understanding of that peace. If you have made war—killed and destroyed—and yet you cannot enjoy peace, it means that you have been fighting the wrong battles, killing the wrong people.

During the past hundred years, American statecraft has not produced peace because Progressive politicians of both parties, beginning with Woodrow Wilson, Charles Evans Hughes, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin Roosevelt, have pursued concepts of peace that are literally outside the realm of possibility. Indeed, the enemies these statesmen designated were purely creatures of their own minds, whether “autocracy,” “war itself,” “world disorder,” or “ancient evils, ancient ills.” Who would we have had to kill in order to defeat those enemies?

Hence, for a century American blood and treasure has been committed to kill and destroy certain people as if they embodied the abstractions in our leaders’ own minds. But who are the people whose death would end war itself, bring about world order, establish liberal democracy, end ancient evils, reconcile historic enemies? The conjuring of unreal enemies makes it impossible to ask who might be the real persons who actually trouble our peace, whose killing or constraint would restore it? This unnatural understanding of what troubles our peace is the reason why America’s military campaigns have been waged without reasonable plans for achieving peace. Unnatural objectives lead to unnatural operations. Since Korea in 1950, the U.S. government has explicitly disavowed seeking military victories.

## The Old Way vs. the New Way

Understanding this hundred-year divorce of force from purpose requires looking again at the argument between Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

T.R., who advocated “the big stick,” rejoiced in America’s emergence as a great power because he believed that the U.S. could and should use this power to secure Americans’ enjoyment of domestic peace and tranquility. Like George Washington, who he called “the best of great men and the greatest of good men,” T.R. wanted to mind America’s business, as (in Washington’s words) “our interest guided by justice shall counsel.” He regarded power as a means of keeping trouble away from America. The enemy was whoever troubled America’s peace. War was a temporary measure to secure that peace.

By contrast, Wilson had started his career denouncing the hurdles that America’s founders had placed in the way of forceful human improvement. He believed the enemy at home and abroad was anything and everything that stood in the way of his vision of progress. For him, America itself existed to defeat such enemies. To improve America, he pushed Prohibition, which started a war at home. To improve the world, he invented the League of Nations. For him, Washington’s (and the Gospel’s) admonition to mind one’s own imperfections, looking not for specks in others’ eyes, was priggishness. When senators asked him how his commitment to everlasting peace differed from a commitment to perpetual war, he was unable to answer. Wilson erased the distinction between war and peace. American statesmen have yet to redraw it.

In short, the peace at which Teddy Roosevelt aimed was America’s peace, to be secured by minding America’s business, that is, by speaking softly to foreigners and carrying a stick big enough to bash whoever

would interfere with us. George Washington, John Quincy Adams, and T.R. had taken for granted that America's business came first—always—and that this business requires jealous attention to squaring ends with means. Words had to be smaller than the stick. Wilson, however, collapsed the distinction between America's business and everybody else's business. Voicing limitless objectives, he gave little if any thought to how America's armed forces could actually achieve them.

The American people rejected Wilson. Yet he won the hearts and minds of the subsequent century's statesmen. Reading Charles Evans Hughes, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Dean Acheson, John F. Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, we might imagine that the world had united in disarming, in outlawing war, or in eliminating ancient evils, ancient ills; that it was policing the world through the U.N.; that nothing could stand in the way of freedom; that satisfying the Soviet Union had tamed it; that a New World Order was aborning; that democracy was conquering the Middle East; or that Islam was terrorism's solution. None of this was true. Although most of these men were not shy about sending Americans to fight abroad, none explained how doing so could realize the marvelous vistas they sketched.

From Washington to T.R., American statesmen had known that the world is made up of different folks who want incompatible things. That is why the essence of statecraft is jealous attention to what our own power can do to secure our own interests. But because men from Wilson's time to our own have been certain that all civilized peoples share the same objectives of peace and progress, they have felt justified in dispensing with the essence of statecraft. That is why, far from producing peace, the past hundred years' efforts have got us less peace, and more war.

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## Natural Resentment

Ordinary Americans' desire to live peacefully is natural. So is resentment of a consensus that has no plan for delivering peace. Though the establishment has become shy of voicing support for more "nation-building" or "engagement with moderate local allies," it cannot imagine anything other than what it has been doing. Thus the question must be asked: what has it been missing? What has Mother Nature been trying to teach us about how to deal with war so as to obtain peace? The lessons are neither new nor complex. They will startle only those whose intellectual horizon is the same old consensus.

First, foreign relations involve dealing with foreigners, that is, people whose cultures, priorities, and interests are their own, not ours—above all, whose business is their own. The *sine qua non* of peace is to recognize different peoples' natural, ineluctable focus on themselves, and then distinguish what is our business from what is their business. Others may not like what we do in pursuit of our own business. They are less likely to forgive intrusions into theirs.

By nature as well, statesmen are their people's fiduciaries. Minding the business of one's own nation is a task that stretches the capacity of the very finest statesmen. Just as it is impossible to serve two masters, it is impossible to serve more than one nation at a time. Nor is the attempt to do so legitimate. John Quincy Adams rightly reproved suggestions that the U.S. help one side or another in conflicts within or among foreign peoples by asking "who appointed us judges in their causes?" By nature, *they* alone get to decide what they want for themselves.

Second, by that very nature, we alone get to decide how important anything is to us and what to do about it. Because we alone are responsible for ourselves, decisions about how to mind such business as we decide is our own come first, while foreigners' needs, desires, and views are naturally incidental. Like everybody else, we are the only ones on whom we can count to defend our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor. Hence, alliances are subject to the same rule of nature as bank loans: the more you need them, the less they avail you. In short, nature seems to dictate that we must make only such commitments as we can and intend to keep with our own resources no matter what. Even questioning whether our own interests should come first is unnatural.

Third, earning the respect necessary for living peacefully as we please requires fulfilling commitments, and especially dealing harshly with whoever disrespects us. Respect is the practical meaning of "honor" in international affairs; it is hard-earned and easily lost. Words bigger than actions, dropping allies in their hour of need, responding to injuries with complaints rather than with disproportionate recompense, are the most common ways in which modern America's leaders have dishonored their country. How precious honor is may be seen in a 1791 memo from Alexander Hamilton to President George Washington on how to respond to Britain's possible movement of troops across U.S. territory to attack (former U.S. ally) Spain in New Orleans. The disasters of war with Britain at stake, Hamilton outlined the ways in which Washington could ignore or color Britain's affront. But he ended by counseling that, were Britain's transit to have violated America's honor, disasters would have to be suffered for the sake of that honor. In fact, nations exist only insofar as they are honored—especially by their own people.

Fourth, while America's armed forces have earned more honor perhaps than any in history, our leaders' failure to draw peace from their victories has drawn down the reservoir of respect for America among foreigners and, most importantly, among Americans as well. The consensus—from Henry Kissinger on down—blames the American people for insufficient support of the elite's long-range policies and for "isolationism." But the discrepancy between the declared objectives, the sacrifices, and the results has been impossible to hide. Actions in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East make sense only to those few thoroughly trained to suppress ordinary human beings' natural revulsion. Ordinary Americans' revulsion at their own government is no small tragedy.

Fifth, and finally, our experiences with nature tell us that those old simpletons George Washington, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt were right: don't go looking for trouble and make nice with everybody. As Jeanne Kirkpatrick reminded her fellow neoconservatives: "There is no inherent or historical 'imperative' for the U.S. government to seek or achieve any other goal—however great—except as it is mandated by the Constitution or adopted by the people through elected officials." By nature, no society exists to conduct foreign policy. Rather, foreign policy naturally exists to allow the society to live in peace. But if you have to fight to preserve or reestablish your peace, then fight with all you've got to accomplish that as quickly as possible. Partial commitments, "sending signals," or "shows of force" convey stupidity and invite contempt.

Yes, all wars are foggy and require adjustments. But nature supplies a compass by which to navigate the fog. Its needle keeps pointing straight to the reason you fought in the first place: your understanding of the peace you are seeking. The path to that peace is victory.