

Article

On the Relativizing of War and Peace: Justice, Competing Conceptions of War, and the Decisive Role of the Non-Religious[†]

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Abstract

The rise of the non-religious, especially the young “nones”, will increasingly affect the way US culture views war, but with what result? The key to approaching this question is not only what the nones are advocating, but establishing what mixture of prominent topical ideas history has handed them. To get at the nature of this mixture by beginning with a general question: what is the most desirable mental attitude among free states with which to attend to the preparation for war? If the nones were to respond to this question, what ideas from other sources and, for the young nones, from older generations do they have to work with? What intellectual historical trends have come down to them? Classical thinking on war and justice continues to recede, so what has been proposed that would take its place? Lethality has been injected more recently into the milieu the young nones are entering. However, lethality is more an attempt to resolve tensions among contradictory agendas. A second, older possibility is a total war mindset, subsuming the state’s entire resources to warring. A third, likewise older option, is prosecuting wars of ideology that seek to crush antagonistic ideas and the political systems that hold them. The author argues the nones will not necessarily choose any of these, but will enable cultural receptivity to each of these three constructs. Alternatively, what about the contributions of classical philosophy to this question? This bypassed fourth avenue, with its emphasis on what constitutes a healthy polis, may provide a richer basis for leading militaries and cultures. The goal here, which the rise of the nones unintentionally imperils, is to secure the State and the soul of the warfighter by constituting or restoring the classical sense of the military’s reason to exist: not as a temporary inherent evil merely to serve state interests, but as a permanent dimension of society in service to the common good, as classically understood.

Keywords: religious decline in America; nones; secularization; conception of war; total war mindset; progressivism; restraints on practice of war; just war principles



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1. Introduction

...When you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

--Friedrich Nietzsche

...A culture is the incarnation of a religion.

--TS Eliot

Nietzsche’s aphorism should unsettle readers, as he no doubt expected it to. His words imply one can somehow have a relationship, or at least a transaction, with nothingness.

They also suggest that, in the act of contemplating an emptiness without structure, as Nietzsche intended us to see the universe and its metaphysics, the emptiness “enters us”, and one can “lose oneself”—an eroding of identity, a loss of anchor points, an evaporation of any guidance whatever. What if this were to happen on a cultural level? As the next sections will make clearer, this paper argues the following: if the US culture’s present grasp of how it conceives of war, peace, and the reasons for restraining war has depended on religious as well as philosophical sources, a significant increase in the non-religious portion of the population would portend a growing disaffection towards these religious sources, engendering for an undetermined time fragmented and relativized conceptions of war, peace, and when to restrain war. Recent research has detailed the loss of a shared religious sense that the US formerly had, which Eliot in his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* saw as basic to the maintenance of an intrinsic identity and of a method of making external events intelligible (Davis 2025). As the culture strives to adjust to the shift and develop clear conceptions, the growing pains would complicate and potentially corrode the practice of war and initiating of peace, to the detriment both of the warfighter and of the community and its common good.

Cultures are always at risk of blurring their comprehension of the line between war and peace. Confusing the two makes it impossible for the political rule of a culture to fruitfully achieve either war or peace, leaving the political rule bereft of any other option than a sustained use of violence to secure advantage. Current arguments, presented with companionable rhetoric, that modern warfare and the role of modern technology *require* the shedding of this distinction and its replacement with an updated conception regarding legal non-constabulary state violence outside the State are unreasonable, unsustainable, and obscurantist.¹ War and peace existed long before such technology and derive their meaning from the humans practicing them—not from the evolution of tools. Where to go from here in our examination of these two terms—war and peace?

Regarding this notion of a blurring of war and peace, consider the claim that a hypothetical culture is “too warlike”. Judgments against such cultures in history are generally harsh, be it the Spartans, the medieval Huns, or Napoleon’s France. This statement denotes that such a culture has a flawed conception of war, which is helpful, of course, only to the extent that it is accurate. However, the flaw’s nature is the more significant query. Is it that the hypothetical culture craves war, viz., war for its own sake?

This seems too simplistic an account. In historical practice, the author suggests that the term *warlike* instead illuminates that such a culture is *too ready* to go to war. This alternative view indicates that the binary construct “culture craves war” or “culture detests war” is too facile and, indeed, false. The true issue is not that some cultures love war and others hate it, but it may be that, while all cultures recognize war as a tool of statecraft for achieving ends beyond war, some cultures may, from a lack of mechanisms for avoiding war, turn to it too readily and begin to operate *as if war were the end of the State’s activity*. A vast literature has repeatedly testified to this element as a permanent feature in human nature, this tendency to be too open to war.

Giants in the field, the likes of Machiavelli and Hobbes, have weighed in on this, often in the context of describing a “state of nature” as a necessary prologue to situate their theory of politics. Shakespeare’s line from *Julius Caesar* about *letting slip* “the dogs of war”, quoted later in full, comes to mind here. Clearly, the “dogs” must already be planted within our consciousness if they are to at some point slip, such that whatever was holding them back has somehow crumbled. Hobbes’ particular passage on this tendency is among the most famous: our condition is called “Warre (sic), and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man”.² Notably, to confirm this view, Hobbes earlier refers to events from the same Shakespearian play, *Julius Caesar* (ibid, p. 17). In the modern age,

many scholars have attended to this problem, usually by analyzing pieces of it. An example from the philosophical perspective is Rene Girard and his theory of innate imitative or “mimetic” violence, that originates in *mimetic desire*—we by nature “want what our neighbor possesses” (Girard 2001, p. x). An example from historical research is retired US Army Colonel Andrew Bacevich’s book *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, which asks if US culture has developed undue war-proneness prompted by human responses to historical conditions. His claim is that post-Vietnam self-preservation concerns within Army culture combined with a pattern of post-Cold War decisions by the Clinton and Bush Administrations have generated a militarism that persists and is now baked into the US’s cultural DNA. Other features in our culture must therefore turn and fight it (Bacevich 2013, pp. 205–38). However, no one country or culture has monopolized or exemplified this problem. One might go so far as to claim that this problem of a tendency to warring is *the* tragedy that is human history. Left to its own devices, thus in perpetual emergent antagonism, humankind is an enemy to itself.

What of the possibility that human collectives and organizations can perpetuate and reproduce war-proneness? Scholarship has provided a cogent and persuasive model of organizational culture that accounts for this process, including national cultures, in which assumptions such as this one about war embed themselves in the cultural DNA and become invisible and at the same time powerful explanations of cultural behaviors (Schein 2016, p. 18). In short, cultures can develop an implicit, unacknowledged *worship of war* as an end—the more ingrained, the more hidden from view, and thus harder to isolate, detect, and check.

The example of the Nazi Reich to illustrate the above point is almost too salient, but it is useful here in an immediate sense, since the primary organizing tools the Nazi movement formed around were war, an ideology presenting as a false religion and hate. In Heinrich Himmler’s famous 1942 speech to SS leaders, he characterized the movement as a war on Christianity, such that the Reich would never flourish without Christianity’s total effacement (Besancon 2018, p. 17). By implication, the war is necessarily eternal in that any reappearance of contrary values threatened the Reich. The now silent Soviet drum of “endless revolution”, mirrored today in the Chinese Communist Party’s similar, repetitive narrative, shares the cultural pattern, played out as a constant search for the revolution’s new enemies in the context of a dominating existential threat reminiscent of Orwell’s invented antagonist “Oceania State” (Orwell 1950, p. 3). In 1984, totalitarian Oceania controls its people by burdening them with narratives of an endless existential fight with enemies Eurasia (USSR) and Eastasia (Nazis). The elevation of war from tool of statecraft to an organizing idea and to a quest or, indeed, to an object that becomes an end or a major instrument to other ends can begin to resemble a kind of worship of war that is a dangerous and, unfortunately, constant temptation.

The historical counterweight to this tendency of war over-readiness has always been the insistence on and articulation of a moral dimension that sits atop of and thereby encompasses war, which for millennia has been in the wheelhouse of theologians and the institutional religions, along with their church lawyers. From ancient Rome’s *fetiales* priests to dour Augustine of Hippo to the rotund Thomas Aquinas and late medieval Catholic Spain’s priest Francisco de Vitoria and his defense of the rights of indigenous peoples—these were the giants whose task was to prevent the meaning of war from over-taking and subsuming the meaning of the State (Reichberg 2006, pp. 47–288). Thus, classical views of morality and war also formed largely along religious lines—veins in the cultural bedrock intended to regulate war, to keep it somehow human and reconcilable to justice’s demands. War *had to* serve something other than itself or human sin and vanity.

The above analysis allows us to arrive at the following idea: that intact cultures do not ever really love or hate war, approve or disapprove of war, for they acknowledge war's instrumentality or, if you will, conceptual "middle space". War becomes good or bad, justified or unjustified once humans use it for some purpose—and organized religion in the background and often at the forefront provided the distinction between good and bad purposes.³ The healthier the culture, the more coherent will be the culture's conceptions of war, peace, and the proper basis for restraining war. In short, wars can be good or bad, justified or unjustified. As proof, history shows that the most brutal of cultures have still tended to use argument to publicly justify their use of war. One is reminded of Aesop's fable in which the wolf on the riverbank feels the need to morally validate his intended consumption of the lamb downstream.

2. How Cultures Conceive of War and How They Resist Using It Matter

For a state striving for peace that seeks to use war properly, being blessed with an effective and obedient military is not enough. Decision-makers need more and will receive it in proportion to the intellectual health and wealth of their culture. They require mechanisms of two types: cultural concepts that build a proper conception of war, and additional concepts that create resistance to using war too readily. The absence or loss of these mechanisms will permit a warlike mindset that recent scholars have termed *militarism*.⁴ (Bacevich 2013) Neither set of mechanisms is a foregone conclusion. A culture must diligently build them and vigilantly maintain them—once possessed, they can become corrupted via poor track records on the part of the philosophers as much as the policymakers.

This means any culture has the capacity to lose or never to have a sufficient set of mechanisms for resisting the recourse of war, which undermines the State's practice of justice and its duty of always working toward a "better peace of tranquility", as far as such a peace is possible⁵ (Reichberg 2006, pp. 77–80). So, where do states wishing to treat war as a last resort, or at least not as a first resort, find an appropriate storehouse of ideas on which to base such resistance?⁶ What sources can inform us on how *not to build* a warlike culture or to lose our cultural integrity and become warlike?

For assistance, the author chooses to turn to a religious source as an entry point to uncover a political philosophical truth, that of Saint Augustine of Hippo (b.354–d.430). His brazen question to political rulers and everyone else is as timely, demanding, and beneficial today as it was to the statesmen and fellow Christians of his day: "Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale?" (Saint Augustine 1972, p. 139). Ever the worried Catholic prelate after his conversion, ordination, and rise in rank, Augustine was extraordinarily pessimistic about the achievements of politics generally and the ability of any political rule to follow Christ. His burden of the personal salvation of many souls was his cross and his hope—this guided and bounded all his intellectual efforts. Thus, he perennially saw the beleaguered city of man as captive to the urge to sin. Nevertheless, he saw God's authority as necessarily passing down to human political authority for the maintenance of peace and order as a bulwark against sin and recognized that the city of man's inhabitants as God's creatures desired at least an earthly peace and therein retained the possibility of, however imperfectly, aiming at true peace (ibid., pp. 599–600). What is the underlying political philosophical truth here? *The State is not its own justification, and the end of the State is peace for persons.*

The State may be, as Thomas Aquinas put it, patterning his ideas on Aristotle, the "perfect community", meaning it does not require authoritative management above it at the supranational level and can provide for itself—but it never merely serves itself (Bigongiari 1997, pp. x–xi). Of course, for Aquinas and similar thinkers, the community's highest good was always spiritual. Nor did these Christian minds mean to imply that a divine

perfection was possible from the State, as Augustine made clear centuries before Aquinas in *City of God* with his distinction between the heavenly City of God and the corrupt “city of man”. However, the political philosophy that developed from these sources, primarily Augustine’s emphasis on the need for order in the *polis* and Aquinas’ on the practice of civic virtues, provided a framework of the *polis* to Europe for a millennium. This vision of the *polis* refined the Aristotelian sense that politics is given to humankind as a means of transmitting and preserving order, and clarified that the benefactors of the achievements of politics, including the apparatus that is the State, were always to be the actual members of the community. . . *persons* (Dawson 1930, pp. 11–78). In sum, the scholarship here and its circumscriptions upheld and distinguished between God’s realm and the human political realm, seeing and justifying the need not just for maintaining justice as an ideal, but for practical activity that aims at achieving justice, through means including the secular state and international alliances.⁷ Four consequent truths immediately follow from this treatment.

First, the State and the justification of its existence proceed from justice, never the reverse. Justice comes first, the State literally serves justice, and the State is judged according to the demands of justice—not according to its own lights. The state does not *create* justice. Second, justice, not the State, explains the meaning and conditions of war and peace. States are free to attend to or to ignore this meaning and these conditions, but did not invent war or peace. War and peace are reflections of justice and thus, like justice, precede the State. Third, as such reflections, war and peace do not explain themselves, nor do they explain each other—justice is the marker of account in the study of war and peace. To wit, the absence of war is not peace, and neither is peace the absence of war. Augustine teaches us this through his conception of the false “peace of subjugation”, each historical example having its own archipelago of concentration camps and system of ideological pressure, which is no peace at all, as the subjugated can vouchsafe⁸ (Reichberg 2006, p. 79). These three consequent truths together point to the fourth and most significant for this article’s aim.

War and peace, descended from an understanding of right order that walks alongside and informs justice, can never become the same, nor can they even become hard to distinguish—they are permanently sundered *as concepts*. Given the incidence of recent writings that, in proposing new terms such as hybrid wars and gray zones, appear to impart sovereignty to contemporary technology and obsolescence to the very terms war and peace, these sources would benefit from Augustine’s correction. Simplified, his line of reasoning runs thus: right order organizes or gives form to justice, wherein war and peace as human practices are born, and justice organizes or gives form to the State which, in turn, becomes obligated to uphold justice at home and abroad, both in war and in its other pursuits. It is just exactly this imperative of upholding justice in peace and in war that is the catalyst of the Western just war tradition and its literature.

This variant of the attempt to align justice and war (there are plenty of non-Western variants) finds its origins in ancient Greek and Roman philosophical thought, as each milieu, already steeped in the idea of persons as political creatures, wrestled with the notion of humankind as a moral creature. This corpus’ systemization occurred incrementally and via many hands, while two pairs of those hands stand out: Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. The literature during and after their time that followed their contributions, that one would call “classical” just war, developed along two imperatives: the justice in initiating war (*jus ad bellum*) and the justice in practicing war (*jus in bello*). The core among its six *jus ad bellum* principles arose under the two above thinkers, and some call them the deontological or duty-based (must do) requirements: just cause, proper authority, and right intention. The next group of three principles some refer to as prudential (room for

case-by-case judgment): proportionality, last resort, and reasonable chance of success. The last two commonly recognized principles are *jus in bello* concerns: proportionality again, but this time tuned toward what is militarily necessary, and discrimination, or, as often termed, civilian immunity. Not only does this corpus clarify the meaning and role of war and peace for the State. For this paper, a just war mindset would clearly proscribe indiscriminate lethality and prevent the incursion of a total war mindset, as well as serving as a tool of discernment, anticipating sections four through six, to avoid active international engagement derailing into progressivist ideological obsession.

Here is the point, for those wishing to preserve the distinction in practice between the terms war and peace and who foresee grave risk in their relativization. Only at the terminus of the above journey through terms and definitions, informed by Augustinian political philosophy and, for a nice touch, aided by just war principles, does one arrive at the place of empowerment to render to *interests of state* their proper stature in the life of political rule—never guiding, always requiring measurement against the dictates of their superior, justice. To reverse the sequence with wordplay, raising interests of state above justice is to upend right order, committing the State to the end of gain at the expense of all else including its identity, with gain or, as we sometimes hear, “advantage” as the ultimate end.

Surely, such a path of decadence reflects the long-acknowledged pattern that abuse of language precedes and produces abuse of power, such that “if the word becomes corrupted, human existence itself will not remain unaffected and untainted”.⁹ This same pattern clarifies for us the following thoughts pertinent to the difference between the use and abuse of the terms war and peace. Nothing is aberrant or abhorrent in the terms war and peace *as terms*.

Why, then, 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

--Hamlet, Act II Scene 2

War and peace denote changes in relationships and in the practice of justice appropriate to their distinct meanings—war as that condition wherein the State makes war on an enemy for the restoration of justice and a following peace, and peace as that condition absent of war wherein justice strengthened permits the flourishing of the common good.

However, decision-makers, bodies of political authority, and our burgeoning variety of commentators and pundits can twist the meanings of war and peace, and the distinction between them, as modern representatives of the sophistic impulse that abuses words to manipulate the unconvinced. Having corrupted how the terms are used, with the result that “everything can be justified”, the larger culture necessarily deteriorates, both in its incomprehension of these terms and in the weakening of its sense of connection between statecraft and justice (Pieper 1992, pp. 8–10). At the end of this path, all wars become “wars of advantage”, and peace loses its savor as the aim of war and statecraft. A culture thus reduced reduces all its relationships to a basis of power. Insensate, it is blinded to full reality and impervious to the benefits of any human powers for good (Pieper 1992, p. 33). In sum, how such a culture thinks—and acts—has become decayed unawares, not harming the terms war and peace *as terms*, but wounding itself deeply with the poison of intellectual pathology.

This is precisely where the decisive role of the burgeoning nones in US culture comes into play. Without a positive theory of politics and a positive conception of the State’s existence that keep everyone’s eyes fixed on the defining, authoritative, and guiding virtue of justice, interests of state and every other lesser justification for the State’s activities compete for the title of crown pretender—ideological triumph, *raison d’être*, *realpolitik*, acquisitiveness, *lebensraum*, or even survival. These lesser causes will deteriorate our conception of

war, abuse any attempt to articulate conditions of a true peace, and metastasize moral hazard for statesmen and warfighters. That such a vapid culture would never provide the mechanisms to clearly conceive the meaning of war or to resist militarism is abundantly clear. Do the nones have the inclination to produce or receive such a positive theory of politics and of the State's existence that so heavily depends on a classical understanding of justice?

3. “My Justice—Your Justice” Is Incompatible with Coherent Views of War and Peace

In light of the above considerations and how they might affect European and US cultures, and specifically the milieu shaped by previous ages bequeathed to the US nones, a crucial step is to identify whether in this milieu is a special kind of intellectual pathology that could warp conceptions of war and peace toward certain harms. Certainly, one can see prevalent in this cultural landscape various counterproductive confusions, contradictions, fears, and forms of despair—much of it dating, say, from the fin de siècle. Of this concatenation in the mind, scholars attuned to it have overwhelmingly testified that, while the current combination of features describes the modern intellectual landscape, each feature is a product of older intellectual and cultural forces.

A representative judgment is Herman Rauschning's, who saw after WWII in this landscape a virulent *modern* nihilism he defined this way: “(A)n essential trait of man has entered fully into historical consciousness; his yearning for self-destruction”. At a 1962 scientific conference in London, scholars voiced their common concern as the following existential threat: is humankind now subject to uncontrollable forces that will decide its future fate?¹⁰ This is a bleak outlook, but the proposal of a twentieth-century or post-WWII “Western malaise” that scholars, artists, and many others have widely acknowledged under other names—mass alienation, existential despair, “The Suicide of the West”, and so on. Norwegian Edvard Munch's indelible and haunting 1893 “Scream” painting is an early physical evocation of this shared sense of dread.

What if in this ferment is a corollary mechanism that has dissipated the basis that coherent views of war and peace require? What if this constitutes a “double-loop problem”? This would mean that (1) the cultural mindset is beset by a fragmentation of ideas incapable of building a coherent common conception of such universal terms; and (2) the minds in that culture have persistently rejected or are ignorant of previously existing coherent conceptions. This “second loop” is intended to be understood on the level of a *loss of cultural inheritance*.¹¹ What would “war” and “peace” then become in minds affected by this double-loop problem?

An obvious and dangerous option from these minds would be a conception of war that serves itself—a view of the purpose of war being to use or to perfect its means and methods, or to gain advantage, to wreak the “necessary destruction”, all of which hangs from a perspective of war without objective restraints exterior to itself and to immediate policy aims. Significantly, such minds generating this option need not recognize it in its totality. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, GK Chesterton, Joost Meerloo, and Hannah Arendt are just four of the European scholars who have explained that, historically, most people involved have failed to comprehend the entirety of the program of mass murder, mass degradation, mass oppression, or mass delusion that they either helped perpetrate or suffered under.¹² (Meerloo 1945, 1956) In fact, the argument here is that, in the absence of better conceptions, the nones' milieu will move toward just such an impoverished view of war, disconnected from the moral dimension, from positive theories of politics and of the State, and from the defensible purpose of war. Will the nones pierce through the challenges and forego weaker

alternatives to forge a better conception of war—and of peace—and why does it matter that they succeed in this? The simple truth—it does matter.

For these nones will influence the predominant conceptions of war and of valid bases of resistance to the recourse to war, as they take up positions in the formulation and direction of policy, the devising of political and military stratagems, and the research and development of war instruments, thereby influencing in numerous ways the character, direction, and purpose of our machines of war. That this influence could lead us further away from classical paradigms that made war and peace make sense as terms, that folded in a coherent sense of universalized justice, producing literatures such as the Western just war tradition that specialized in reconciling war and justice: this is at the heart of the author's thesis.

The nones, subject to cultural forces including modern nihilism, critical theory, and progressivism that, on balance, would increase receptivity to any postmodern conception of terms, will tend to relativize war, peace, *and justice itself*. Consider the import of the absence of a commonly held concept of justice. What does one then understand as “justice”? In postmodern parlance, justice, like anything else, becomes “socially constructed” and therefore at once meaningless and whatever you make it to be or the powerful make it to be, moment to moment. Such a “my justice—your justice” formulation, while comforting to a postmodern audience scandalized by universal claims, threatens the necessary and vulnerable connections among the State, the military, and the objects of war aimed at the peace of the community and its common good. This article's thesis offers this warning: the milieu the nones are inheriting, *that they did not create themselves*, with its incapacity for coherent conceptions of war and peace, enables the prospect of unrestrained war under a revolving slew of competing sophisms that imperils the moral life of warfighters, policymakers, and the State—with the untenable endgame that war so unleashed will serve only itself. Furthermore, three competing ideas present in the nones' milieu that propose distinct paths to effective war preparation—lethality, a total war mindset, and the values of progressivism—enable the incoherence the nones face in the intellectual marketplace. These three ideas would serve as the source of many such sophisms, whose clashings would exacerbate the same incoherence. Will the nones think their way through this maze or remain stymied from this inheritance?

Four facts seem persuasive evidence of the likelihood of such an eventual impasse on the subject of war—an impasse in which we stumble in our age-old, much spotted pursuit of legitimate warfare aimed at justice and peace and give ourselves over to a worship of war. First, humans have never been very good at pursuing *in practice* in any complete sense the ideals of a war aimed squarely at peace—this needs no citation. Second, this impasse need not happen overnight, nor need it be a conscious act to all players. Indeed, many of human history's darker moments, their culmination hidden to many on all sides, such as the Third Reich's final solution enactment, occurred in lumbering stages that scholarship has sharply defined in hindsight—the 1935 so-called Nuremberg Laws, 1938's “Krystallnacht”, the sterilization and elimination of the “mentally and physically unfit”, and so on. Third, President Dwight Eisenhower's 1961 “Military-Industrial Complex” speech predicted as much, namely that the increasingly expensive engines of war, untrammelled, would one day direct the decisions and fortunes of war for their own sustenance's sake and no other restraint. His words of warning linger: “...we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist”. Surgeons cut, and war machines bereft of prescient human restraints serve the needs and directions of making more war.

Fourth, humans, severed from all practical commitment to peace, have long shown their inventiveness in the arts of that self-deception and self-destructiveness that lead to the practice of a war that serves itself and to a forgetfulness of the point of war and of legitimate violence—to a worship of war. Witness the history of Julius Caesar’s brief divinity and demise, followed by the equally bloody falls of Brutus and of Mark Antony, and of their collective creation of wars that beget war and continued harms. Think on the liberalized retelling of these events courtesy of Shakespeare, the playwright speaking here through Antony’s mouth:

... (O)ver thy wounds now do I prophesy. . . A curse shall light upon the limbs of men; domestic fury and fierce civil strife shall cumber all the parts of Italy; blood and destruction shall be so in use; and dreadful objects so familiar that mothers shall but smile when they behold their infants quartered with the hands of war, all pity choked with custom of fell deeds; and Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge. . . shall in these confines with a monarch’s voice cry “Havoc!” and let slip the dogs of war. . .

With history’s weight pressing upon us and the widely admitted frailty of our human powers to do good, it is imperative to examine precisely what we are asking for from the brave new world the nones are increasingly occupying and what we can expect from its shaky postmodern foundations. For these answers, the next step is clarifying some contents of the nones’ collective headspace and appreciating the defining role of the idea and the idealization of progress in this headspace.

4. The Milieu Handed to the Nones: The Idolatry of Progress

What is the most desirable mental attitude among free states with which to attend to the preparation for war? Knowing the competing ideas vying for the title of “most desirable” matters, for this competition’s nature is such that it is simultaneously and continually reshaping cultural views of war and peace. The author’s thesis encompasses two realizations. First, the “nones” in the US, those who, after deliberation, profess to no religious belief or religious affiliation, represent a widening portion of the population, to the extent that they will certainly have a major hand in evolving our cultural conceptions of war and peace. Trends among the nones suggest that, far from operating as a block, their political thinking, while certainly experience-based, is eclectic or syncretic. Recent analysis of empirical research, including demographic studies, indicates that the increase in nones “will have a significant impact on the United States’ cultural and political future” and that this shift “will impact US foreign policy”. A recent article has described this shift as catalyzing a “cultural war. . . between secular and religious citizens where both sides are attempting to win the intellectual contest”. The author of that article, in his closing comments, predicts that this shift will change and weaken the country’s identity, which conceivably will not only seriously reshape collective views of big concepts such as war and peace, but will make it harder for the culture to maintain any coherence in such views.¹³ Second, the web of tensions in our current US cultural conditions, placed there as much by our intellectual inheritance as by our democratic nature, underscores enough incoherence in our views of war and peace to be noteworthy. As implied above, the incoherence previous ages provided *is not* the fault of the nones who, in the main, are presently filling out religious affiliation surveys. Their age range of 18–39 precludes them from having built either our intellectual inheritance or our democratic traits—rather, they are consumers of both and will have an increasing influence on mid-21st century currents of thought.

As our intellectual heirs, then, the author’s research question is whether the nones have the inclination to produce the necessary cultural mechanisms described above, *mechanisms to properly conceive of war and to resist using war too readily*. Or, if the basis of these mechanisms

is somewhere in our intellectual past, do the nones share the inclination to adopt it? In the end, what will the nones come up with in their account of war's meaning? To get at the answers, a valuable pursuit is knowing what themes present in our cultural thinking *are unhelpful* to the nones in achieving these tasks. Ironically, the themes that would distract or seduce the nones away from thinking coherently about war are the very ideas serving as options for the most desirable mindset for war preparation and undoubtedly have already influenced the nones' mindset.

The *first* such theme to consider, a relatively recent entry in the sense that the current manner of its presentation is in an isolated form, is lethality. As an organizing tool, the term, according to current usage in US military and national security circles, appears to propose that militaries facing 21st century threats need to be more comfortable with killing, or perhaps *more* ready to kill. What turns this perspective into a potential impediment to nones' thinking is the manner of the term's isolation from other concepts. The *second* theme vying for selection as the best means of war preparation is what the author has previously referred to as a *total war mindset* (Connelly and Hughes 2021, p. 61). This mindset presupposes beliefs in the State's ready access to war on a grand scale and in the unrestrained commitment of the society's entire range of resources to the war effort. In modern parlance, the total war mindset warns that the next "big fight" will be necessarily an "all in" event whose "existential" nature will pit our entire way of life against the enemy's and proposes to organize all dimensions of culture around this claim. *Third* is the concept of ideological warfare—rendered in capsule form today as a "clash of eternal values"—and its relation to the Enlightenment-propelled impulse in Western philosophy known as *progressivism*.

This third option bears more explanation at this point. The notion is that ideological warfare exists, and even that we are and have been operating in a long age of "wars of ideology" accelerated with the onset of the Cold War between the US and USSR, but scholarly views of these wars' origin do not hone in on the late 1940s. They look much earlier. Many thinkers contributed concepts regarding the moral use of warfare, and specifically the central ideas of just war. Of these, several of the most influential concerned themselves with articulating the limits to the proper use of warfare. Notables include Vitoria mentioned above, Francisco Suarez, another Spanish Catholic priest, who situated war in larger themes such as charity to provide guidelines and also articulated war in its role as vindictive justice, or lawyer Johannes Althusius, who insisted that normal citizens have a voice in decisions of war. However, one thinker stands out as particularly relevant to this section's attention on developments leading to an idolatry of progress. Hugo Grotius' contributions in the 17th century to the Western and European just war literature, motivated by the litany of wars of religion, and most especially the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), proposed to his intellectual successors the existence of an unwritten divine "law of war", imparting to war an eternal savor.

As a consequence of this savor, the Dutch scholar Grotius imbued his works with the notion of war as a grand moral enterprise. For example, he frequently advocated wide-ranging rights for sufficiently resourced sovereigns to punish other parties around the world. These rights extended to the redress of a host of injustices and to warring on parties over whom the sovereign held no legitimate political authority—in particular referencing "barbaric peoples" deemed incapable of effective self-rule (Tuck 1999, pp. 102–3). This expansive view of war, especially as unlimited in its moral scope, sharply contrasted with the more common European perspective, rooted in its medieval culture, of wars as kings' wagers that were dependent on chance (Whitman 2012, pp. 52–53). What primarily explains this departure from the "wagers of kings" view was Grotius' persistence in theologizing war.

This theologizing presents an intriguing and revealing paradox, complete with “two Hugos”—Grotius the theologian and Grotius the legal scholar. As theologian, Grotius placed all human activity under a divine agency that not only totally governs Earth’s activity, but also produced its universal law of war, one naturally covering every possible contingency. As legal scholar, Grotius argued that this divine law was humanly knowable in a complete sense *that included the transfer of agency*, hence his 800-page project *The Law of War and Peace*, published in 1625. The granting of such agency at the human level carried with it the implication that rulers and military commanders with access to the law, possessing “God’s universal normative assessment of war”, could act with confidence—even impunity, as seen in the ensuing paradox.¹⁴

While obedience to a higher divine law demanded that states practice caution and judgment before initiating war, paradoxically Grotius insisted that, once the cause is found just, being “on God’s side” of the dispute required the commitment of *maximum resources to use maximum force*.¹⁵ The indication and justification for unrestraint was that the war was as much a fight against evil itself as it was against one’s enemy. Grotius’ re-conception of war as a giant clash of values—imbued with a religious character, while not explicitly about religion—proceeded into modernity through various intermediaries and is, of course, easily recognizable in the secular but apocalyptic vocabulary of 20th and 21st century armed conflicts as wars over ideas, for democracy or for liberation, and so forth. One can call this the “ideologization” of war, in which the contextual focus is no longer merely the achievement of victory and the winding course of justice, but winning the war of ideas—such are progressivism’s effects. The young ones must deal with progressivism’s influence, as the rest of the culture must. Meanwhile, without the benefit of living through or knowing the intellectual history that produced it and gave it prominence, the young ones are ill-equipped to discern it and navigate its pathologies—not that anyone else is necessarily better off in this regard.

5. The French Revolution’s and Progressivism’s Roles in the Rise of Ideological Warfare

Two of these intermediaries deserve mention here, prior to an elaboration later in this article’s body of all three competitors for the prize of best mental posture for war preparation: lethality, total war mindset, and this third one of ideological warfare. These intermediaries are the French Revolution and the philosophical movement of *progressivism*. The architects of the French Revolution (1789–1795) and its succession of dictators organized their activities around a total destruction of order, the old and hated order of kings and priests, and its supplanting with an entirely new “enlightened order”—built, moreover, not on people but on ideas, and eternal ideas at that. This change in thinking engaged all of Europe and was later to become a model for a succession of left-oriented revolutions and modern dictatorships. Thus, the demands of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité!” took on a character far beyond the limits of France. Here was an ultimate clash of good and evil, boundless to the point that it purveyed a global significance and more. A new humanity, a new history, a new world was the Revolution’s dream.

Indeed, in the view of some historians, the revolutionaries embodied and exploited a specifically *theological* scope for their achievements intended to accomplish multiple key tasks, including the provision of a dominating structure—an omnipresent cultural mechanism—capable of wiping out and replacing French Catholicism and all other competition for the people’s souls, as well as the validation of the most extreme measures for completing the revolution’s work self-proclaimed as sacred.¹⁶ In discussing the other intermediary of significance here—*progressivism*—the author must acknowledge the crucial

role in its development played by German philosopher Karl Marx, whose school of thought in scope and operations likewise has religious elements.

His significance in the rise of progressivism and in the milieu of the nones is unmistakable and indelible. Marx (1818–1883) organized his re-conception of reality around two enemies, which were really two related sets of ideas: one was the concept of private property, and the other he called “superstructure”. In a wordplay gambit of towering significance for European history and culture, his next step was to invent a supportive vocabulary of what Richard Weaver later was to call “god-terms” of uncertain meaning and wide-ranging capacity for weaponization (Weaver 1985, pp. 212–13). A key operative element of these terms is that the ideologue may use them to simultaneously mean an idea or persons purportedly representing that idea, hence the deliberate uncertainty. The god-terms were a necessary, crucial building block in enhancing receptivity to and enforcement of Marxist theory.

Thus, in practice, this abuse of language created the precise permissive environment to prosecute various persons as “guilty” of perpetrating harms that the ideologue attached to the term, whose fluidity of meaning allowed to follow the most absurd of prosecutorial procedures. Nonetheless, the labels would usually stick, and the accused, rendered voiceless and unable to defend themselves under the press of the weaponized vocabulary and accompanying propaganda and ideological pressure, would be subject to whatever awaited them at the end of their cancellation’s arc (Pieper 1992, pp. 32–33). A second operative element of importance in clarifying the world the nones have inherited, intensified by Marxism’s religious character, is the false bifurcation of the world into “those for” and “those against”—“supporters” versus “enemies of the revolution”, and so on.¹⁷ The forced choice intentionally curtailed everyone’s humanity, reconfigured the world as merely or only political, thus subordinating every other dimension of human living to it (most especially the spiritual), and in theory and practice made the task of exposing and rounding up the opposition to determine their final fate infinitely easier.

With the stage set via this reconceived reality and the supportive vocabulary to imprint it on the mind, the manipulative cry to tear down the superstructure became simple to issue and just as easy to receive and take action, whether in the form of Lenin’s “Kill the kulaks!” or Mao’s call to fight “the enemies of the people” or other historical examples. Marx’s “substructure”, the “true” or core nature of reality, was the harsh fact of omnipresent economic exploitation, meaning that the only human relationship of consequence was that of the oppressor to the oppressed (Barron 2023, pp. 4–5). All other relationships and dimensions of human life were to fit under and to derive meaning from this substructure.

The superstructure that sits atop it, that normally one addresses as culture or society, is the supposed web of mechanisms and institutions—a web of oppressors—ranging from the arts to bodies of governance to the schools to the police, whose real purpose is to maintain uninterrupted the functioning of the substructure—in short, to keep the oppressors oppressing. Hence, the Marxist revolutionary’s aim was to pierce, expose, and upend the superstructure, thereby gaining access to its underlying substructure, and to convert that into a vaguely defined and earthbound heaven.¹⁸ Thus, the third option of optimal war preparation, which is the framework of ideological warfare that always wants to make of war a clash of eternal values, demonstrates in its developmental arc a close connection to the rise of philosophical progressivism and its containment of the seeds of today’s critical theory.

6. “Binaries in Thought”: Progressivism’s Historical Role in Our Present Bifurcated Mindset

Progressivism’s story begins in Biblical scripture and in something called the *eidos* (Gr.: “essence” or “being”) of history. The Gospel of St. John and his Book of Revelation both anticipate the paradise of Heaven and the onset of the Kingdom of Heaven, often termed the “New Jerusalem”. Other passages tell the reader that “the Kingdom of Heaven is [already] within you”. These teachings raise at least three big questions: (1) when is the Kingdom coming; (2) what event will mark its arrival; and (3) will this occur via divine or human agency? Recent religious teachings that claim a tie back to the Christian Gospel, such as the writings of Pope Saint John Paul II or Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Spe Salvi*, assert that the Kingdom and its peace are not to be understood as human-derived processes, but rather that true peace is a product of God’s invisible Kingdom—and not up to humankind. However, long before and after these teachings, various groups of humans have always imagined, sought, and engineered various progressive pathways that do not leave room for divine agency.¹⁹ (Dawson 2001; Weaver 1985) These efforts, as referenced in the above section, sometimes develop into an obsession with progress. Notably, these progressive pathways often have included noble and beneficial ends, especially peace, and these originating in secular sources such as the orders of alliances following WWII and their related influential documents, including the Geneva Conventions.

The claim that the following three Western concepts—utopia, progress as a faith, and critical theory—are rooted in Christian eschatology is not too surprising, at least in academia. The scholarship on this is far too vast to enumerate here, and unnecessary. After all, the early disciples were “proto-utopians” in a sense, ready for the heavenly kingdom and for whatever action they needed to take to establish this paradisaical realm. What is noteworthy and surprising to many is the unique relationship between this eschatology how its misapplication has produced much of the mindset of the current zeitgeist now affecting the nones. Many Christians never relinquished their insistence on the kingdom’s imminence, insisting not on how they were to accept that the Kingdom was “within them”, but on how and even when human political rulers would achieve it on earth.

Joachim of Flora (1135–1202) was one of many such examples, when he proposed progressive stages of the world in which the final stage was the Kingdom’s establishment—not as a personal, interior religious practice but as a dominating and global political fact. Dante in his political writings reflected a very similar view, still organized under the notion of divine power.²⁰ As the Western mood shifted from divine to human agency, the notion of historical progress naturally fell to the question of which human leaders would bring about the Kingdom.

In many philosophers’ minds, this search for the time and place and personalities meant that the Kingdom’s establishment and the necessary upheaval to usher it in was to be on the leaders’ own terms. The European writing on this concept of “grand stages of progress” became overtly atheistic, or at least increasingly secularized, while retaining the Joachitic cycle under the pens of thinkers including Friedrich Hegel and Auguste Comte.²¹ For example, Hegel believed that history had its own internal law, suggesting it somehow possesses both its own chronology and the power to impose human obligations on it.²² (Dawson 2001) Comte’s version of the Joachitic cycle declared that human thought needed to pass through three stages toward perfection, each rejecting the stage before it—religious, metaphysical, and finally positive or “purely rational”—and that history would necessarily follow this identical path. The crux of humanity’s walk through Comte’s stages was the liberating, progressive rejection of “the monotheistic idol”—God (de Lubac 1967, p. 91). All that this pattern of thought needed to bring about a call for faith in a deified, unending

progress and for a human-engineered utopia to secure it was an accelerant, which became the concept of “history’s *eidos*”.

What if history, as *history*, has not only a deluge of books and historians that explains its existence and growth, but also has—on some level—*being*, an essence or a reality apart from its life as an academic discipline, as a record of events and their significance? This notion of history possessing the status of a self-contained entity, a scholar has contended, did not take on force until 1789—with the uprising that became the French Revolution.²³ As that Revolution unfolded, some observers developed in their intellectual successors such as Hegel and Comte a *19th century obsession with progress*, seeing in the events from the Bastille’s storming to the guillotine’s Parisian river of blood that humans by their decisions and actions either forge a link in the chain of progress toward history’s “end”, here conceived as a human-engineered state of perfection, or they stand in its way.²⁴ This process of investing the idea of progress with religious force and significance and its natural consequence, which is to invent the camps of “those for” and “those against”, is a reflection of the social formation of in-groups and out-groups in schools, places of work, societies, cults, and political prisons and has the potential for certain common effects.

Among the possible effects of such bifurcation are the curtailment of our human powers and identities, the sublimation of all human dimensions to the political, and movement toward the total control of individual persons—activity, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. The relevant passage from Orwell’s dystopian comment on the results of a totalitarian-imposed progress, *1984*, is as follows: “The possibility of enforcing. . .complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time. . .A Party member is expected to have no private emotions and no respites from enthusiasm. . .to live in a continuous frenzy of hatred of. . .enemies and. . .triumph over victories. . .” (Orwell 1950, pp. 205–6, 211).

This bifurcation appears to hold in the minds of many today, seen implicitly and explicitly in the concepts that bind a now mature progressivism in Western thought and in its various tendrils, from Marxism to socialism to “various social idealisms” such as the war to end poverty or the war to end war itself, to Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History”, to the more recent development of critical theory.²⁵ This bifurcation is implicit in Immanuel Kant’s prediction of an earthbound heaven accelerated by the ascendancy of universal reason and self-sovereignty.²⁶ In the cry of French surrealist André Breton—sometime communist, eventual anarchist, and always Marxist idealist—in his *Surrealist Manifesto*, it is quite explicit, for in his call to eradicate the existence of the family, the State, and religion as fact and even as *idea*, a person has only two options. One must either commit to tearing these institutions down to forcibly bring about Breton’s anarchist sense of liberation *from all structures* or to standing with these forces against human liberation, as repugnant obstacles to progress.

This bifurcated mindset is a compelling way to reimagine history and reality—reductive and oversimplified and, of course, conducive to a type of immediate knee-jerking political action. It is also irredeemably false, if one is to simultaneously advocate for a human life permissive of freedom across multiple dimensions of human living. An insistence on “binaries” in thought and in the population, the culture strand that progressivism has cultivated that one stands with or against the inevitable “motion of history”—one is only either for or against the revolution—is fundamental to the 20th century rise of critical theory (Barron 2020). Its presence in the current intellectual milieu is undeniable and underappreciated.

Critical theory became established first in the field of literature via Jacques Derrida and has now evolved into a kind of “theory of everything”—a grand, dichromatic account of reality. Derrida’s “nothing outside the text” reduces reality to the power struggle fundamental to critical theory between oppressors and oppressed. This article’s concluding sections will argue that this sense of an all-encompassing power struggle is at the core of

the nones' milieu and of their ways of understanding (Barron 2023, pp. 4–6). It is precisely the impoverished conception of reality organized around a struggle for power that defines the limitations of the nones' milieu—it can conceive of no other end for itself than that of acquiring more power and proceeds in a self-absorbed manner reminiscent at once of Machiavelli's fearful prince, of the Gnostic heretics of old, and of Sir Walter Scott's wretch in the poem "Breathes There the Man":

*Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land! . . .
High though his titles, proud his name,
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim;
Despite those titles, power, and pelf,
The wretch, centred all in self,
Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying, shall go down
To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung.*

What is interesting about self-absorption's pride of place in the nones' inherited milieu is that it operates on a power ethic but within a savor of a revolutionary, if fickle, humanitarianism—no cause being too small, no salvific impulse too faddish and momentary to demand the upending of the present order for it (Mahoney 2018, pp. 67–75). In this sense, Machiavelli holds pride of place in his much more abrupt—and honest—portrayal of an ethic and a reality organized around power as both dominating means and dominating end.

7. Analysis of Three Competing Themes of Warfare Preparation: Lethality

Returning to the perusal of competing ideas accessible to the nones around which to organize warfare and preparation for war, an interesting recent development is the promotion of the terms "lethality" and "lethal" in reference to many things military, including a military's character, purpose, and effectiveness. Is lethality, in fact, not just a useful idea, but a necessary idea, even a sufficient idea for tuning up a military force ahead of the next big conflict, which some voices are proposing will be an existential war? Furthermore, is this quality missing in a current military? If so, one could logically press on and form a military around the concept of lethality and operating as a lethal force. If not, either because the term alone is insufficient, or is present as one of many qualities a current military possesses, then no need remains for emphasizing the term. Either way, the proposal here is that lethality misses the mark if regarded as a concept that the nones can employ towards the formation of coherent conceptions of war and peace.

Those emphasizing the terms lethal and lethality in relation to a military clearly cannot be doing so because the notion is a new one. Not only is the notion quite old—it is also valid. An honorable and just military that serves the greatest good with regard to its political community and to the world around it must still train, practice, and accept the task and responsibility of committing lethal force. Remarking on the fact that any military today cannot be ignorant somehow of its mission to use lethal force, consider the following. Given this third decade of the 21st century, the number of deaths from military and paramilitary activity is starting, only starting of course, to approach the unprecedented numbers reached in the 20th century. Thus, if any military member today is confused on this point, that indicates a training failure. The answer for the current scale of emphasis on these terms must lie elsewhere.

Part of the oddity in the terms' usage rests in the stretching of grammatical sensibility. "Lethal" has been, since its etymological origins, a term one can apply either to an inanimate means—a weapon, a delivery platform, a technique—or to an equally inanimate level of force, usually via human or some combination of human and technical exertion. As such, a person, military or not, or a military organization, cannot *be lethal*. Another oddity is in the manner of expression of these terms, in which lethality and lethal appear in isolation from other concepts, including ones that would normally help the terms' usage make sense. For example, when considering the conditions for the local police's use of lethal force, one must connect lethality to a variety of related concepts, including applicable laws, the ethical practices and training of law enforcement, mitigating and other circumstances, and so on. One possibility that could explain the increased attention placed on these terms and even the above linguistic oddity is the weaponization of new technologies.

However, this becomes too facile an explanation to provide a complete account. Certainly, increasing reliance on IT in warfare and national defense, automated targeting, the rise of cyber warfare, the prospect of AI enablement, and the employment of remotely piloted drones, along with the speculative development of lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs), has increased the attention paid to the relation between technology and killing in warfare. Some of this recent inquiry focuses on the impact on ethical judgments of "killing by remote", as it is sometimes called. Where do we place responsibility for lethal events when human judgments and acts are in a reduced proportion compared to automated technologically derived calculations? Does a lethal event fall less on the shoulders of the office of human authority or on the "trigger-puller" due to the degree of automation? Where does human responsibility lie in the planning and operation of LAWs? Other investigations have called attention to the psychological impact on the warfighter. How might the distance—psychical as much as geographical—that technology can place between shooter and target attenuate the event's associated trauma (Chapa 2022, p. 97)? Society and expertise are just beginning to grapple with these questions.

At least some of the evidence coming out in this era of unprecedented reliance on technology in warfighting indicates that such attenuation is occurring only in a very limited sense, and that it certainly does not insulate in any guaranteed way the warfighter's psyche from harms. Operators of remotely piloted aircraft who have employed lethal force in fact experience a matrix of "hidden" or interior harms, indicating that not only does the technology fail to serve as a buffer against such harms, but the expanding use of technology in lethal operations has complicated or blunted operators' psychological care (Norrholm et al. 2023). Similarly, when considering the swath of media coverage of casualties in warfare over the last several decades, the idea that technology-enabled increased targeting precision has minimized violence's social footprint in war tends to be offset by many factors.

These factors include those mentioned in recent reporting on larger-scale casualties from drawn-out conflicts such as in Sudan and especially in the Russia–Ukraine War, which has witnessed frequent use of high-tech platforms, the frequency of unintended casualties due to imperfections in the technology employed, and public impressions formed from eight decades of fear over the mass casualty scale that nuclear weapons technology has presented. Seen in this light, that the motive in using the terms lethal and lethality is due to technology's ability to buffer or eliminate most of the reality and effects of violence, such that authorities would need to compensate for this by reintroducing forces to the idea of "aggression in killing", seems implausible. History has backed this up repeatedly in its demonstration that the mere intrusion of a tool does not by itself convince combatants they are not using killing force against other humans—but it may dangerously suppress such awareness at the cost of long-term psychological health and damaged relationships

(Chapa and Blair 2016, pp. 171–73). If technology's heightened use in modern warfare does not appear to explain the call for lethality, perhaps the post-Cold War increase in HADR missions—humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions—among some militaries is the explanation, as involving military operations specifically aimed at preserving life and minimizing or eliminating all manner of casualties.

In keeping with the US grand strategies of engagement and enlargement of the community of democratic states that followed the drawdown of that all-encompassing ideological contest against the USSR and its totalitarian value system, Washington and its allies pursued HADR in many varieties in tandem with a 30-year-long expeditionary mindset being overcome in stages by the return to great power competition. This expansion in the use of the military into once novel contexts has been self-consciously aimed at seemingly novel enemies—from weather and famine to state tyranny and malicious nonstate activity abroad. The shift to HADR was undoubtedly difficult for the militaries executing them, raising questions of identity, professional duty, and adaptability within organizational cultures that are traditionally inflexible and conservative in their thinking (Dixon 1976, pp. 402–4). However, the truth surrounding the time period of these HADR operations belies the notion that years of HADR have depleted militaries' sense of responsibility for state-authorized legal killing abroad.

For the “HADR years” have also seen years of expeditionary operations, including combat and combat support missions, most notably in Afghanistan, Former Yugoslavia, Horn of Africa and the Sahel, Iraq, and Syria, before and after 9/11, that have involved numerous casualties on all sides—including a high proportion of combat-related injuries and deaths. Moreover, military forces large enough and capable enough to sustain significant regional or global HADR campaigns have had to flex to expeditionary warfare or “aggressive peacekeeping” within and alongside HADR, such that none have experienced these relief missions in a pure enough sense to create excessive psychical distance from lethal engagements. A final possible cause of the turn to a language of lethality is the inclusion of critical theory concepts in the military's cultural ethos.

A shift has been taking place in the ethos of several Western militaries, one that reflects an embrace of trends in sociology, popular psychology, and social media that may find a common basis in the recent predominance of critical theory. Ostensibly to compensate for the earlier-mentioned conservative, inflexible, and even authoritarian themes said to pervade these militaries' cultures, militaries have sometimes embedded critical theory projects into their attempts to engineer better cultures.²⁷ This process within the US military, anticipated earlier by President Truman's efforts in the early years after WWII, followed from the onset of critical theory, whose prominence academically began in the 1960s in Europe and in the US in the 1990s. The early 1990s were an ideal time for change in military culture, repeating history in its timing that directly followed the demise of a global conflict—the end of the Cold War with the USSR. While critical theory first began as a nationwide or even global impetus for broader social change, attention did turn to the military, targeting its culture to raise its consciousness to meet the evolving national social mores and conceiving of military culture as consisting of “those for” and “those against” positive social change (Dunivin 1994, pp. 540–43). A specific example of the campaign organized around critical theory concepts is the movement to redefine ethics as empathy.

The construct of empathy organizes around receptivity and understanding of “the other”, which immediately sets up an antagonism with the study of ethics, which traditionally organizes around the necessity of objective, possibly harsh judgments about distinguishing right actions from wrong actions—harsh because the call to objectivity is seen as rendering the unique origin and circumstances of the actor irrelevant. From a critical theory standpoint, inherited systems of ethics are part of the problem, and consequently the

objectivity is not objective—rather it is bias against the weaker group members to keep the stronger members in their preferred positions of power (Cotton 2021, pp. 71–91). Similarly, from a related critical theory concept demonstrative of the theory’s postmodern orientation, which is Jacques Derrida’s “nothing outside the text” teaching, the scholarship of ethics being already suspect, one must get beyond the texts of ethics to get at a subjective truth which derives from the individual person—wants, needs, and unique context.

That this emphasis on subjectivity and on the superimposing of empathy on ethics runs athwart of the assumption of generalizability consistent in all modern and earlier ethical theory, as well as the traditional ethos of Western militaries—with their practice of traditional Western ethics, reputation for insensitivity, and record of justice from drumhead trials to modern military tribunals—is incontrovertibly the case.²⁸ (Dunivin 1994) If Norman Dixon’s description of the authoritarian personality as a condition of Western militaries, which is consistent with Samuel Huntington’s earlier account of the predominant Western “military mind”, still holds at least some of the explanatory power it did at the time of his study, it is a persuasive causal feature of the resistance the literature identifies in these militaries against various forms of positive social change.²⁹

Some of this resistance in a military setting is recognizable in the often-stated concern regarding an overemphasis on “soft skills” leadership—a topic of care rooted in several cultural factors, among which is the critical theory concept that one in power can never understand the experiences and fears of one without power. Briefly put, soft skills critics worry that overemphasizing empathetic leadership, leaders frequently expressing care and concern, and establishing programs that insist on cultural change in the form of inclusiveness of others as a leadership quality, or the building of a diverse workforce, or simply lessening judgmental thinking will deter a military’s will to fight and its ability to absorb losses and ultimately to defeat an enemy. Thus, the effects of critical theory, when they threaten the military’s preferences in perceiving the world or in managing the internal integration of its culture, would be to instill fear of change, loss of mission, or loss of focus and initiate the need to respond as a protective stance. In light of the above, a “call to lethality” makes sense as a rebuttal of any perceived negative effects of critical theory and of an over-reliance on related soft skills, lest a military forget its purpose of legally authorized violence abroad.

The challenge such a call to lethality presents is that if it is presented as a concept in isolation it is unmoored from the conceptual context that clarifies its special significance in the Western practice of the profession of arms. What exists inside this conceptual space that would show the orientation and purpose of lethality in the military as a “moored concept”? Only a sketch of this space is possible here.

In contrast to nihilistic accounts of the political state as a self-supporting fact of the international order, the Western Augustinian account that dominated political philosophy for a millennium made the State, in a sense, the embodied “fact” of justice in the human community. “For what is the State”, Augustine asked, “without justice? A gang of armed robbers”. Thus, in this view, the State derives its purpose and its very existence from a sense of justice that necessarily precedes the State as idea and as fact. Standing firmly against the notion of a state existing merely to serve its interests, and its military existing merely as a tool of the State to achieve those interests, the Western just law tradition flowed organically from the above Augustinian conception of the State as “justice in action”. The power of this nesting of concepts is that it anchors military violence in a web of higher concepts that restrain it and bestow on it the moral stature it by nature demands. Lethality in isolation loses these fair trappings which make it politically coherent, in both a Clausewitzian sense and a more general sense, and make lethality capable of absorption into the dimensions of legitimate human living.

To continue on this path of reasoning, with this shared sense of violence flowing directly and only from the State's relationship to justice, the Western just war tradition's principles of restraint can properly channel violence into serving the common good—not the interests of the State alone, nor revenge alone (or ever as mere revenge), and certainly not the prospects by themselves of gain or advantage. All of this in turn, including a more expansive conception of the common good, descends from a particular Western ontological sense that teaches, in the words of Immanuel Kant, that persons are ends and never mere means—including the civilians of one's state, the State's soldiers, enemy combatants and civilians, and third parties in the operating environment. Violence, thus bounded, makes logical sense and does not in theory permit war to serve itself, as if it had its own ends.

Conversely, lethality as an isolated term may be useful as a single teaching point but is inadequate as a stand-alone organizing idea for war preparation—the term best sits within a wider philosophical perspective. Moreover, its permissiveness in terms of its lack of anchoring to related concepts and a consistent moral tradition can appear as a whip to spur on the “dogs of war”. The lack of restraint that an unqualified lethality suggests adds to the intellectual poverty besetting the nones' inherited milieu. This version of lethality contrives neither to the formulation of a coherent and distinctive conception of war, nor to a conception of peace, which leaves us with either a mindset of total war or the values of progressivism as the remaining competitors within this milieu for properly distinguishing war and peace.

8. Analysis of Three Competing Themes of Warfare Preparation: Total War Mindset

Do not take counsel of your fears.

General “Stonewall” Jackson

At first glance, the theme the author describes here as a *total war mindset* would seem to be linked to lethality, in that both strongly relate to death. However, a key difference is that, while lethality offers a reminder to a military of its special status as executor of state-authorized violence, the intellectual origin of a modern total war mindset is a condition of pervasive fear, which lethality need not share and does not seem to share, based on recent calls for it. Joseph Pieper is one astute observer of the operations and origins of this kind of all-encompassing expression of fear, which one can study in the assumptions and behaviors that form and reveal a particular culture. Fear as a surrogate ethic paralyzes approaches to the Good and inhibits the practice of reason.

And fight and die is death destroying death; where fearing dying pays death servile breath.

Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act III, Scene 2

Pieper wrote in his landmark essay “The Art of Not Yielding to Despair” about historical periods in which a culture limped devoid of a persistent hope, such as was reflected in the attitudes of WWII-era Soviet military officers. Raised on Marxist doctrine, these soldiers *looking past WWII* linked the possibility of widespread victory for Marxism with a coming cascade of inevitable “wars of unprecedented savagery” (think Cambodia's 1975–1979 killing fields under Communist rule), and with these wars “only then would the ruthless extermination of human beings reach its peak, ‘for the sake of the greater good!’”³⁰ From what is apparently the other end of the linearly-conceived political spectrum, Roger Forsgren captured the presence of a similar mass despair.

Notably, this spectrum much more closely resembles a circle that “right” fascist and “left” communist ideologies permit to meet by virtue of their shared mass murdering, politicization of all life, erections of soul-crushing police states, false utopias, and wantonly violent practical dystopias. Through the vehicle of a study of Nazi architect Albert Speer,

Forsgren identified the anesthetized consciences, psychical compartmentalization of horror, and events such as the mass distribution of cyanide suicide capsules to Berlin's helpless civilians and complicit officials prior to the impending arrival of victorious Allied forces that partly comprised the interior despair of the millions-strong Nazi killing machine (Forsgren 2012, pp. 52–59). Many scholars through time similarly have tried to describe the lived reality of a culture whose enthusiasm and confidence masks an interior self-derision, decay, and overwhelming despair. James Burnham's "Suicide of the West" is one of the more flamboyant attempts to explain the progress and manifestation of this type of cultural pathology.

However, more to the purposes of the argument here are the works of James Turner Johnson and Joost Meerloo, because both of these men detail the parameters and scale of such pathology when its core value is a cultural hypertrophy of the significance of war. CS Lewis gets at just this idea in his insightful Anglican sermon often called "Learning in War-Time". Delivered during WWII, his critique of an attitude in which all the dimensions of human living become subsumed by both the fact of the war as well as the fears, terrors, hopes, attention, and significance of what people *think* the war is peaks with this telling remark: "The war will fail to absorb our whole attention because it is a finite object and, therefore, intrinsically unfitted to support the whole attention of a human soul" (Lewis 1980, p. 52). Lewis is warning us not to divinize war, to bestow on it an eternal quality it cannot sustain in any healthy sense and does not deserve. The Catholic Church in its doctrine has been especially vocal in its dismissal of a total war mindset as intrinsically evil. The Council of Vatican II encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council 1965) is representative of the See's position in its wholesale injunction against a warlike mindset and the permissiveness toward mass violence that scientific advances in weaponry have insinuated into cultures. This error of divinizing war is strikingly similar to the mistake of the progressivists described much earlier, whenever they have falsely bequeathed an essence to history, trying to infuse it with a sense of being unsuited to its nature.

Not everyone sees value in the term total war, and some have expressly denied that, as a concept, the term is real. One example of such a position comes from some historians and from military and strategic studies and holds that, referencing Karl Clausewitz and examples of actual wars, there has never been, nor will there ever be, a war one can describe as *total*. No combatant power would ever be able to place every one of its resources at the service of its war machine. Moreover, theorists may have used the term, but only in an absolute and therefore hypothetical sense—an instrument of argumentation—such as Clausewitz is supposed to have done in his *On War* (Stoker 2016, pp. 21–23). Advocates of this position even see harm in the term's application because, as "merely a myth", terms such as this can mean everything and nothing at the same time and consequently are empty and confuse, rather than clarify, debate.

No doubt in the study of strategy or of the factual events of a war in a pure or isolated sense, and within the confines of research that is very distant from moral concerns, "total war" could be distracting. However, these scholars do not engage the moral and mass psychological significance of what the term total war attempts to describe. James Turner Johnson has written extensively on the concept of total war in his capacity as a preeminent theology professor and leading scholar of the just war tradition (Johnson 1981, pp. 229–78). His lifetime of work has demonstrated the value of locating the presence of total war as an attitude or condition within a political and military force's identity, its moral sense, and its ideological disposition, and finds in a force so disposed a debased calculus in which the meaning of the war obliterates its valid justification—in pieces or holistically, driven by time, circumstances, and the choice to ignore the demands of justice and of civilization.

Johnson's research sifts a wealth of data organized around four characteristics constituting a belligerent's approach to total war: (1) expressions of belief in an ultimate cause of the war, in the manner of eternal values; (2) propagandized popular support; (3) excessive subordination of society's normal functions; and (4) disregard of restraints sourced in morality, law, cultural practices, and so forth (ibid., p 229). If Johnson finds utility in the term as a negative ideal that belligerents can and do approach at great cost to others, to themselves, and sometimes to the world, that proceeds toward a mass irrationality but that scholars can account for in terms of rational explanation, it was left to Dutch psychiatrist Joost Meerloo from personal and professional experience to explain total war as a mass psychological event.

Meerloo's account of total war experienced physically and psychologically and on all sides becomes crucial to perceiving both the reality and moral and intellectual poverty of a prevalent total war attitude. One-time Major Meerloo, MD, FRSM, of course employed his academic work and clinical experience to produce an account of the kind of warfare against an opponent which is at once a physical assault but really producing a physical degradation, an attack on the enemy's moral life, an attack on their sense of existential meaning, and altogether a deliberately inflicted process of "spiritual disintegration" that he called total war, but also relied on his 2 years as a victim of Nazi occupation (Meerloo 1945, pp. 18–26). He specialized in explanations of the methods of and damage from a belligerent's war machine that combines the elevation of "the war" as a mechanism to destroy the will of the enemy by destroying him and all his relationships interiorly, with the press of the war on its own forces to subjugate comrades, participants, and ordinary citizens in a complementary enslavement of all to the machine and to the perpetually hungry "war effort".

Research on the nature of mass evil such as this is staggering in scope, to the point where most scholars avoid it or cannot arrive at a complete account of the phenomenon. Without examples of a corpus such as Meerloo's, then, the academy would suffer gaping holes in its historical analysis. Thus, Meerloo's work includes treatment of the use of mass terror on one's own force and the enemy as a policy, the social process of brainwashing entire populations which he popularized as a "rape" of the collective mind, all of which, when combined with his analysis of what occurs in individual minds under such intense, destructive pressure removes from scholarship the possibility of sidestepping these realities (Meerloo 1956, pp. 92–105). This avoidance, witting or not, amounts to placing the historical narratives of the staggering mass casualties of regimes from Hitler's Nazi holocaust to Lenin's and Stalin's "gulag archipelago" and mental-spiritual destruction of millions of Soviet citizens to Maoist China's death-choked "Long March" and "Cultural Revolution" and so on into an opaqued black box surrounded by raised hands and utterances of confusion and "how did this happen...again?".

Thus, it is really with Meerloo's contributions that one arrives at the true potential for comprehending the power of a total war mindset through the creation of overwhelming fear to pillage a culture's integrity, intellectual life, and moral stature, and most especially its relation to justice. Consider these words in his epilogue to *Total War and the Human Mind*: "It is a fact that where a man cannot succeed in overcoming fear, his inner life is permanently warped, and the aggressiveness which he evokes to combat fear ends by consuming the individual himself".³¹ Accounts of this process of intentional disintegration of the person are too numerous to comprehensively cite, but a few references are worth addressing here. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's celebrated corpus represents a vast and astounding account of how an ideologically-obsessed culture can *delete* people and ideas from mass consciousness, wherein just *The Red Wheel* and *The Gulag Archipelago* comprise thousands of pages.³² For a philosophical treatment of the arresting similarities and differences between Hitler's

Nazi and Stalin's socialist-communist apparatus and their physical, moral, and political destruction of persons and cultures, there is no better short text than French scholar Alain Besancon's *A Century of Horrors: Communism, Nazism, and the Uniqueness of the Shoah*.³³ (Besancon 2018) It is possible to see US Justice Earl Warren's support of the internment of US citizens of Japanese ancestry during WWII in this light as a function of the total war mindset's influence on justice, law, and politics. Finally, late German political theory scholar Gerhart Niemeyer, in one attempt to summarize the above collective analysis of the impetus toward total war and any cultural resistance to its corruption, proposed the situation as a metaphysical contest between forces arrayed under an unrestrained and nihilistic will-to-power and other forces under a "deference for being" that presumes the dignity of the person as a good in itself, refuses the utilitarian reduction of the person's meaning to an instrument, resists ideologically-driven imperatives, and so forth (Niemeyer 1993, p. 10). This synthesis makes clear the unlikelihood of a culture imbued with a total war mindset in performing its necessary, psychically healthy integrative functions. To be clear, the nones did not invent total war as a mindset or ideology and certainly may never approve it directly. However, this mindset is a feature in the mixture of ideas they must contend with, and their contention is complicated if they are unaware of its origins and means of influence.

As the narrative turns next to the third and last competing idea in the nones' inherited milieu for an effective organizing tool for a free state's war preparation—ideological progressivism—suffice it to state here that the dominant themes within a total war mindset of the moral subjugation of persons and cultures to the service of the propagandized war machine, a self-destructive nihilism crushing under it all rival values, and a consequent emptiness render this mindset utterly unsuitable as a stable basis for coherent conception of war and peace, but also clearly harmful to anyone and anything under its influence. The mindset brings about an "absolutization of politics", under which support for the war is everything, and dissent and even distraction is anathema, and a consequent subsuming of politics "within the idea of war" (Lancelotti 2017, pp. 327–29). Politics, justice, and the war machine are now exclusively serving war itself. What manifests is a return to the justice of Plato's Thrasymachus in the *Republic*: "Justice is the will of the stronger". Any possible connection from the casualties of this interior harm to the aims and practices of true justice would be riven into ineffectual and disconnected shards—into a complementary nothingness.

9. Analysis of Three Competing Themes of Warfare Preparation: Progressivism

While the themes and universal values of progressivism strongly depart from the mechanisms found where a total war mindset is present, a notable similarity between the two is a cause for concern. Both, in the end, tend toward the above-mentioned absolutization of politics, which warps political life away from its proper seating in service to justice and the community. Practitioners of both themes select and impress an "ideological narrative" whose purpose, resembling Orwell's Newspeak in 1984, is to replace rational discourse and in fact become the *only* allowable discourse, simultaneously squelching any practice of reason and all criticism. The terms of describing the "enemy within" will often differ in wording, but the function is the same—deleting and prosecuting these voices as "bigots" or "traitors" or "the unenlightened".³⁴

The historical arc of ideological progressivism having been traced earlier, at this point the current emphasis on vocabulary and terms requires more attention and analysis. On the level of language, the energy of progressivism derives from the discarding of antagonistic terms in the name of progress. Therefore, the system depends on proper framing such that

the process of discarding is accelerated—this of course includes terms of approbation such as “progressive” and of condemnation such as “conservative” or “hater”, and so forth. Some have made the link between this form of control of language and our historical experience with totalitarian regimes that have used related verbal dichotomies, including “heroes of the State” or “Stakhanovites” versus “parasites” and “enemies of the people” (ibid., p. 331). The suggestion here is that both themes of total war and ideological progressivism run on totalitarian principles—openly acknowledged or not—and thus, when either is prevalent, the opportunity for clear thinking on war, peace, and justice *as concepts* is severely impaired. One scholar, mentioned earlier, had depicted this abuse of language by introducing the term of “god-term”.

What if, by imparting divinity to certain words, one could command the desired discourse without any active intervention and rely on a self-policing to eliminate opposition? This is the function and the aim of a god-term. In the scholar’s analysis of this appearance in Western cultures some decades ago, the specific term he used as a very popular god-term was progress itself (Weaver 1985, pp. 212–13). Correspondingly, any attempt to question any policy, argument, or attack of a person understood as an approved “progressive” was to be excoriated, and the speaker expunged. In line with Alisdair MacIntyre’s description of such cultural conditions, emotions and will-to-power have overtaken all discourse, and the implications for any milieu are necessarily grim. Related to ideas previously addressed, the element of an unforgiving attitude which an ideology demands potentially carries over to the practice of statesmanship and foreign policy as well, with significant implications for how a culture and the State see war, justice abroad, and their own military. A final feature of the theme of ideological progressivism to consider is, ironically, a lack of conviction in this third theme of war preparation.

The point here is to distinguish fervor from conviction. Fervor as an energy of body and mind without necessarily an origin or orientation—without a considered context it sits in—can run afoul if it follows a harmful course. Conviction carries with it the presumption of a larger body of knowledge and a pattern of attempts at a moral and philosophical foundation. Some years ago, US literature scholar Richard Weaver indicated that ways of thinking related to ideological progressivism suffered not from a lack of passion, but from a lack of conviction; that the sole conviction of such thinkers was to have no conviction (Weaver 1959, p. 32). This seems unlikely at first glance, and the roots of classical liberalism in its valuing of the dignity of the individual person and as an extension of the earlier humanism reaching back to ancient Greece is not at task here. Rather, the tendency in progressivism’s movement from one issue to another, seeking to address cultural and political ills, but without a clear conception of a cure that precedes these ills, a formed sense of a polis organized around justice in service to the common good *is at task*, and its critiques follow the judgment GK Chesterton emphasized decades ago.³⁵ That this “lack of a bottom” or a metaphysical ground points fairly to and resonates with the general sense within the nones’ milieu with its experience of postmodernism and subjectivism seems clear.

10. Conclusions: The Milieu the Nones Received and the Current Predicament

Turning now to the nones and the features of their inherited milieu, in part mapped by the above analysis of historical intellectual trends, the proposal is that this milieu consists of an interactive triumvirate of progressivist ideas, critical theory, and nihilism. These cultural influences “talk to each other” but are not the same thing, by any means. Moreover, their intellectual origins differ significantly. However, it is possible to attribute some of the current trends in cultural thought along the lines of these influences and, further, one can surmise a matrix of possible ideas as outcomes of the interactions of the triumvirate.

Scholarly attempts to describe the contents of this milieu vary widely in themes and in quality. Our approach here begins in the milieu's sense of brokenness at the beginning of things, related to Chesterton's observation of the progressive impulse to fix without a clear conception of the original health of the body in question. This lack of conception can account for the "faux humanitarianism" some authors see in this cultural environment, possibly explaining the movement from issue to issue and vindictiveness in prosecuting ideological opponents (Mahoney 2018, pp. 67–75). Rene Girard has attempted to capture related features in the landscape, including a pattern of mimetic violence—the turn to a scapegoat and impulse to lash out as lashing back to what one imagines—and the belief that there is not ever a truly innocent victim in one's context (Girard 2001, pp. 170–74). Altogether, the pattern is strongly redolent of nihilism, of an ideologically driven culture hostile to reasoned discourse and organized around reinforcing bifurcations and never-ending recourse to disconnected ideological impulses. Thus, in the nones' milieu there pervades a radical rejection of the past, but with this an inability to offer coherent, persistent new values. In short, the process these forces create is, self-destructively, one of cultural disintegration, which may be the most apt way to conceive of the intellectual life the nones are inheriting and learning to practice, in the absence of agreed-upon ideals that alone can prevent such cultural fragmentation. Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce has called this process "negative millennialism" and a "totalitarianism of *disintegration*" to emphasize its resulting incoherence (Lancelotti 2017, p. 331). Strongly at risk in the above account is order itself.

Western philosophy has long addressed over the centuries the intimate and necessary connection between order and justice. This connection undergirded Augustine of Hippo's political philosophy and has carried over into many modern formulations of the good society. Flowing from this conception of the good society is the extreme importance of ordered relations in the community. Concomitantly, ordered justice descends from and preserves the right ordering of these relations, per the demands of justice's three levels: distributive, what the community owes the person; commutative, what persons owe each other; and general, or what persons owe the community (Pieper 1966, pp. 70–75). Disorder, especially on the level of the cultural fragmentation described above, shatters these relations' proper practice, which in turn disrupts and disintegrates the shared conception of justice that may have once existed. This becomes the heart of the matter that is the pathology in the nones' milieu.

Without a clear, shared conception of justice, that is at once the foundation of the State and of all politics and is of central importance to properly conceiving the military's purpose and the proper means and ends of war, the time period is not only not likely to make progress on better conceptions, but is more than ever likely to decay into further fragmentation. Again, this is not the fault of the nones themselves. Rather, the capacity for maintaining and refining a clear, shared conception of justice had been under assault centuries before them. This does entail more work for the nones and those alongside them—someone must engage in how the pillars of a shared view of justice might be once again erected in service of the culture's requirement to preserve itself, respect other cultures, roundly serve justice in practice to all, and not disengage from justice and further harm itself.

A final example of the coming battle between cultural coherence organized around justice and forces of cultural disintegration is the current debate in the historical sub-discipline of combat motivation. That there has been a stream of thought in this field centered on cultural disintegration, both as a past and present reality and as a path forward that several scholars have pointed out. An overarching way to describe this school of thought is the "tribe mentality"—advocates insist that, given the relative fracturing of

cultures past and present, especially among dominant cultures, soldiers have never found motivation in the wider conceptions and principles of their home culture, and moreover any such values are suspect in the first place. Rather, soldiers have found their motivation in the comrades closely surrounding them who understand their suffering because they share it. Advocates suggest that modern politics and militaries realize this limitation and that, rather than go deeper to improve the situation, they should “go shallower”, emphasizing the tribe culture to ensure fighting spirit and readiness. Historian Gregory Daddis has dispensed with this tribal-based idea as an exclusive motivation as fictional, absent of an historical basis, and reflective of a mindset suited to nihilistic thinking, anti-democratic tendencies, and worse: conducive to a cognitive break between war and justice that we would today call a total war mindset. Daddis described this false narrative as “the utilitarian narrative of unit cohesion, suggesting its ideologically driven orientation and its willingness to ignore the fuller reality”. In his words, “[i]n the end, the discourse of the band of brothers is at odds with the reality of the American experience in World War II” (Daddis 2010, p. 117). Larger beliefs, a sense of justice and its aims, and ideals do matter, as do shared conceptions of war, peace, and justice, and as does the strength of a culture to preserve and refine these conceptions to lead to better political practice and justice in warfare.

In that the increase in a total war mindset is one of the possible outputs of the nones’ milieu, which the nones would never have intended, and given the tendency for progressivist movements to accept harsh measures as necessary evils and the capacity of nihilism and bifurcations of the population by influences in critical theory and various progressive movements to exacerbate cultural friction, a final quotation by a military officer is worth visiting.

People who are anxious to bring on war don’t know what they are bargaining for; they don’t see all the horrors that must accompany such an event.

—General “Stonewall” Jackson

Similarly, not to wrap this article’s closure in negativity, but to see where—culturally—we may be having to push off from in countering the present tendencies toward nihilism and total war attitudes, three stanzas of The Doors’ song “The End” are worth quoting verbatim. This song, combined with the *sotto voce* of whirring helicopter blades, opens the 1979 Vietnam war movie *Apocalypse Now*, whose plot is rooted in Joseph Conrad’s brilliant psychological novel *Heart of Darkness*. The song’s words and music typify US Army Captain Ben Willard’s interior emptiness, which actor Martin Sheen masterfully sketched out in his superb portrayal of the movie’s protagonist, who has become a “thing of war” whose regaining of humanity is an open question after the catharsis of the movie’s ending. As Clausewitz indicated when he insisted that it has its own grammar, but not its own logic, war—lifted from its proper relation to the State and the State’s purpose and the State’s obligation to its warfighters—tends inherently to obliterate everything else, including what matters most:

This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end
My only friend, the end

Of our elaborate plans, the end
Of everything that stands, the end
No safety or surprise, the end
I’ll never look into your eyes again. . .

It hurts to set you free

But you'll never follow me
The end of laughter and soft lies
The end of nights we tried to die

This is the end

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Notes

- ¹ For an example, see military theorist Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first Century Combat as Politics* (NY: Oxford University Press) (Simpson 2013). Simpson's claim is that we have no conceptual space left for victory in war or for peace, and that militaries are in a constant state of warfare in which the only option is to seize continuing advantage by controlling the narrative.
- ² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books), (Hobbes 2017, p. 102). Note: it is commonplace in professional military education environments to juxtapose Hobbes with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hobbes represents the thesis of a natural war-prone attitude versus Rousseau's claim that civilization externally imposes this attitude on natural humankind's psyche.
- ³ Karl von Clausewitz, in his strategy classic *On War*, embedded this idea in his famous and oft misapplied passage: "War may have its own grammar, but not its own logic". See *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) (von Clausewitz 1976, p. 706).
- ⁴ For example, see Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (Bacevich 2013).
- ⁵ (Reichberg 2006, pp. 70–90).
- ⁶ Using war as a *last resort* is a prudential principle of good statecraft from the just war literature, attributed to Ancient Rome's Cicero. See Cicero, *On Obligations* (NY: Oxford University Press) (Cicero 2008).
- ⁷ For example, see the papal encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and *Populorum Progressio* (1967).
- ⁸ See note 5.
- ⁹ (Pieper 1992, p. 15)
- ¹⁰ For these references, see Josef Pieper: *an Anthology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), (Pieper 1989, p. 225). For examples of similar scholarly views, also see Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press) (Marcel 2008) and Augusto del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press) (del Noce 2014).
- ¹¹ From the vast literature on this notion of a Western loss of cultural inheritance, a few examples will suffice: Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) (Weaver 1948); Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) (Voegelin 1952); Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press) 2007.
- ¹² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (NY: Harper & Row, 1974); GK Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils: An Argument Against the Scientifically Organized Society* (London, NY: Cassell, 1922); Joost Meerloo, *Total War and the Human Mind: A Psychiatrist's Experiences in Occupied Holland* (NY: International Universities Press, 1945); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 7th ed., (London: Penguin).
- ¹³ (Davis 2025, pp. 16–17).
- ¹⁴ (Reichberg 2006, pp. 385–86).
- ¹⁵ (Whitman 2012, p. 90).
- ¹⁶ The multitude of evidence demonstrating the French Revolution's theological character includes such documented artifacts of worship as vestments, liturgy, altars, and so on. For example, see D.G. Wright, *Revolution and Terror in France 1789–1795* (NY: Routledge) (Wright 2013). For additional historical research on the role of theology in the French Revolution as movement, see Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press) (Dawson 2015) and also his *Progress and Religion: An Historical Inquiry* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press) (Dawson 2001, pp. 151–54).
- ¹⁷ (Dawson 2001, pp. 162, 177–78).
- ¹⁸ (Barron 2023, "Ideas," pp. 3–5).

- ¹⁹ (Weaver 1985, pp. 212–13). See also (Dawson 2001, pp. 15–16).
- ²⁰ For a detailed treatment of the influence of Joachim’s concept, including its transfer to Dante, Hegel, Comte, and others, see Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, esp. pp. 110–21. Dante Alighieri, *De Monarchia* (NY: Liberal Arts Press) (Alighieri 1957).
- ²¹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 112–13. On Hegel and Comte, see also Albert Salomon, *The Tyranny of Progress*, p. 87: “Both men were convinced that their respective theories of society could in practice produce a truly perfect organization. And both men were outstanding examples of the megalomania of modern Romantics for they were the first pagan philosophers of the modern world, men who tried to turn religion into simply one aspect of a philosophical system which combined the metaphysical past with the scientific present”.
- ²² (Dawson 2001, p. 35).
- ²³ Eric Voegelin was likely the first scholar to employ the phrase “*eidos* of history”. See *The New Science of Politics*, p. 120. For the significance of the year 1789, see Albert Salomon, *The Tyranny of Progress: Reflections on the Origins of Sociology* (NY: Noonday Press), (Salomon 1955, pp. 3–4).
- ²⁴ Danton (1759–1794), one of the supreme leaders of the French Revolution who, like his successor Robespierre later, died in the guillotine’s stocks like so many of his victims, employed the metaphor “river of blood” to justify his massacres. See Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution*, p. 71.
- ²⁵ (Voegelin 1952, p. 121).
- ²⁶ (Pieper 1989, p. 222).
- ²⁷ (Dixon 1976, pp. 256–79).
- ²⁸ Karen Duvinin, “Military Culture,” pp. 533–534. See also (Cutright 2019).
- ²⁹ (Dixon 1976, pp. 256–79; Huntington 1957, pp. 59–79). For some of the vast evidence of this resistance, see Karen Duvinin, “Military Culture,” pp. 533–34; Kevin Cutright, “The Empathetic Soldier,” pp. 13–15. See also George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac books, 2015), pp. 48–66.
- ³⁰ (Pieper 1989, pp. 223–24).
- ³¹ (Meerloo 1945, p. 76).
- ³² The notion of “deleting people” comes from a reference by a main character in the 1994 Academy Award-winning Russian movie *Burnt By the Sun* (Jean-Louis Piel Studio, Nikita Mikhailov directing), which in its examination of Stalinism highlighted the destructive effects of any totalitarianism on persons, especially destruction of their interior life—a spiritual destruction.
- ³³ (Besancon 2018).
- ³⁴ (Lancelotti 2017, p. 324).
- ³⁵ GK Chesterton, *Eugenics and Other Evils*.

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