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Disinterest and Frivolity: Assessing Luttwak's 'Give War a Chance'

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WILL PLOWRIGHT, DEC 10 2010

Within the discourse of conflict and peace studies, there exists an argument asserting that in order to seek final and lasting solutions to instability, conflict must be allowed to end on its own terms. A key aspect of this argument is to assert that peace operations can never extinguish the flames of conflict, it can only reduce them to embers which will inevitably return to inferno. The 'give war a chance' view was presented by Edward Luttwak. This essay will show that this stance is based three fallacious assumptions, rendering the argument invalid. Additionally, the cases of Sudan and Sierra Leone are used as examples contrary to Luttwak's arguments. The former will show that low-level international involvement can be successful in bringing closure to conflict using primarily political means. The latter will show possible success in intervention by military means. Such analysis will yield three key conclusions. Firstly, that success in intervention is possible through political means. Secondly, that withdrawal and disinterest worsens conflict. Thirdly, and finally, that conflict can be brought to a decisive end through military intervention which addresses the underlying causes of conflict. It follows from this argument, that the 'give war a chance' approach is not only dangerous, but fails the tests of historical analysis and logical scrutiny.

Edward N. Luttwak's 1999 article "Give War a Chance" puts forward the argument that there is benefit to every war, that they eventually end and bring peace. Additionally, he asserts that wars have not progressed towards this outcome, due to meddling on the part of the Global North.[1] This, for Luttwak, is due to "disinterested and indeed frivolous motives" on the part of Western nations.[2] He does acknowledge that allowing war to persist will "certainly [cause] further suffering and lead to an unjust outcome." However, for him, this outcome is more desirable as it will create a stable situation once one belligerent marches in victory over the ruined armies of the other.[3] Luttwak's conclusions assert peaceful ends by violent means, while additionally proposing that those who most detest war should embrace it as a necessary evil which will lead to peace.

This argument is not only counterintuitive on paper, it is also based on a set of spurious assumptions far too broad to be ignored. Three such assumptions pervade Luttwak's analysis, and can be identified as the false assumptions that (1) war leads to peace, (2) that peace brought about by war will be stable, and (3) that failed interventions cause further conflict by delaying this process. The falseness of each assumption, combined with the existence of examples to the contrary, lead the argument to be deprived of validity. Though Luttwak does use some examples to back his argument, the conclusion that one or several failures necessitates that it is necessary to here analyze each assumption based on its individual merits – or lack thereof – and then to assess them collectively by testing them against actual case studies.

Luttwak's first assumption – that war leads to peace – is further based on a secondary assumption that we can assign definitive temporal limits to warfare. This concept, influenced heavily by Clausewitzian thinking, asserts that we can assign a clear beginning and end date to any conflict.[4] The assumption that there are temporal limits to warfare, somewhat paradoxically, is also one which does not assert temporal boundaries to what constitutes on-going conflict. What this means is that any war which is continuing, according to Luttwak's stance, is simply continuing because it has not 'burnt itself out', and so should be left to do so. According to Luttwak's broad definitional approach, every conflict which exists is continuing due to it not having 'burnt out.' This is the sense in

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which there are temporal limits (beginning and end dates) without temporal boundaries (in the sense that it is academically useless to assert that all conflicts are continuing because they are continuing). Luttwak is essentially adopting the argument that wars end when they end, and therefore, we shouldn't seek to interfere with this process, as it will only delay the inevitability of their ending. This is a frustrating and circular – as will be shown in later assessment of case studies – while at the same time, we have no means of knowing if Luttwak's supposed peace will come after ten days or ten years.

Wars do end – eventually – but to assert that conflicts end when they end is as academically useful as the statement that a bullet comes out of a gun, therefore we shouldn't attempt to prevent the trigger being pulled. Additionally, this first assumption is based on the notion that ignores three eventualities which conflict could produce: (1) a deadlock in a war of attrition (e.g. the Iran-Iraq War); (2) prolonged conflict which results in maintenance of the *status quo ante bellum* (e.g. the Burundian Civil War) and (3) that there are those who benefit from the war continuing, and without intervention, will assure that it does (e.g. the conflicts of the Democratic Republic of Congo). If we are to adopt Luttwak's standpoint, it becomes near impossible to assess the manner in which protracted civil conflicts actually end, as well as the causes which bring about the recourse to violence.

Addressing the underlying root causes of conflict provides segue to Luttwak's second key assumption; that the peace created through violent means will be a stable one. There seem to be few historical examples which would support this view. This assumption is implicitly predicated on the concept that particular groups and individuals are responsible for the recourse to violence, and victory is achieved as one army achieves victory over the other. The peace that this will create is certainly not a long-lasting or 'positive peace' in the Galtungian sense, the structures that generate or produce violence will not be addressed or changed. Instead, the outcome would be a Galtungian 'negative peace' in which there is solely an absence of war.[5] As Collier and Hoeffner noted, a history of recent conflict acts as a primary causal factor influencing the likelihood of further violence.[6] Viewing the end of conflict as simply the physical cessation of hostilities completely ignores structural causes of violence, and the likelihood of conflict returning.

It is Luttwak's complete disavowal and disregard of the causal factors of conflict that underlie his third assumption; that intervention leads to more war. This assumption is highly tied to the temporal paradox highlighted above; when can we say that war is beginning or ending, and at which point do we assert causal significance for conflict on the intervention instead of on the preceding causes? Whereas it is impossible to argue against the notion that conflict may follow a failed intervention, is likewise impossible to argue that conflict continues *solely because* of the failed intervention, and therefore all interventions are doomed to failure. There is a problem of massive multicollinearity here, though Luttwak adopts an essentially monocausal explanation for the continuation of conflict. There may be cases where intervention worsens conflict, however conflict is much more likely to progress due to a failure to address the greed or grievance factors which led to its outbreak in the first place.

The assumptions of the 'give war a chance' create an argument in which causal factors for conflict – as well as the variables that define its duration and intensity – become irrelevant. The assumptions that war will end and create peace ignores the idea that there are actors who benefit from war and its continuation, and have no desire to see it end. Luttwak's analysis discounts the political economy of war, and the role that predatory actors can play in directly seeking a prolonging of conflict. Causal factors of both greed *and* grievance which existed prior to a failed intervention will exist afterwards if not addressed, and at best, can only change hands as one belligerent force seeks dominance over another. Luttwak's assumption contains a massive problem of endogeneity, as it is impossible to ascertain whether or not conflict would or would not have continued given a failed intervention or peace process. This causes a causality dilemma, in which intervention of a conflict is granted causality for war instead of the actual causal mechanisms which caused it in the first place.

After addressing Luttwak's three key assumptions, it is necessary to test them against historic examples. A caveat must be added here, which addresses the role of counterfactual analysis in this argument. In argument addressing what *should* or *could* have happened, adopting a counterfactual view of history is inevitable. It must be acknowledged that it is impossible to identify all intervening variables in any process tracing account of conflict, and it is therefore logically impossible to assert that a certain sequence of events *would have* happened. However, through

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the use of a rational actor approach – a methodology implicit in Luttwak's analysis – it is possible to identify a view of what *likely could* have happened. Though this paper does not seek to delve too deeply into the methodological debate of comparative analysis, it is essential for the argument that such problems be addressed. Because the 'give war a chance' rationale is so heavily reliant on the use of counterfactuals, any argument to the contrary must also address the risks of counterfactual analysis.

The first example explored here will assert the potential success of intervention by political means, and the role that both third-party mediation and low-level Western involvement can play in a successful peace process. Specifically, this analysis will look towards the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (or 'Naivasha Agreement') which brought a close to the Second Sudanese Civil War. In their analysis of why this conflict continued for twenty-two years, at the cost of almost two million lives, Ali, Eldadawi and El-Batahani assert key causal significance to the duration on external intervention on the part of neighbouring regimes supporting rebel movements. This, they assert, allowed the rebels to continue fighting much longer than they would have materially been able to.[7] Whereas at first glance this may confirm Luttwak's hypothesis – that intervention prolongs war – it actually speaks to the dangers of disengagement by the international community.

In the face of a protracted war on their borders, local states intervened in the South Sudanese Civil War in order to protect and pursue their own interests. A simple rational actor approach would assert that leaders of states bordering countries at conflict will intervene in whatever way they see fit to pursue their own interests. They support their allies to 'fight to the bitter end' and pursue victory in the sense that Luttwak advocates. This form of intervention motivated not by peace but by bellicosity is another factor ignored by Luttwak. J. Stephen Morrison and Alex De Waal asserted that it was only the effort of third-party mediators – with committed low-level involvement – to intervene to compel belligerents of the Sudanese Civil War to break the deadlock and embrace peace.[8] The twenty-two year war failed to produce a decisive victory, a period throughout which the international community certainly 'gave war a chance'. Though this essay is not attempting to assert that Naivasha was a complete success – there are problems with it, as there are with any peace process – the role that the international community played, and the successes encountered, cannot be ignored. In South Sudan, the method of 'giving war a chance' resulted in nothing but the continuation of war itself, and the loss of millions of lives. In this case, the 'frivolous and disinterested motives' are evident in those who allowed the conflict to continue, but within Sudan, its neighbouring states, and those against any form of diplomatic intervention.

Whereas Sudan provides an example of a protracted conflict brought to a close by a successful political process, Sierra Leone provides an example of an intervention encountered through military means. As David Keen noted, the Sierra Leonean Civil War was marked by its gratuitous violence and predation from both government and rebels, and was largely ignored or misconstrued by the international community.[9] Though analysis of all complexities of the conflict cannot be analyzed in this paper, a brief process-based account can be here drawn to briefly assess the manner in which interventions will or will not succeed.

According to Paul Richards, the rebellion of the Revolutionary United Front began as a rational response to government corruption and illegitimacy.[10] This movement found support in Sierra Leoneans with deep grievances against the state which, in time, became coupled with 'greed' motivations that came with the appearance of the war economy, as shown by Gberie.[11] This, in turn, perpetuated a breakdown of the low-capacity state into adopting increasingly predatory methods in order to support its counterinsurgency operation.[12] The Nigerian government decided to intervene in both Liberia and Sierra Leone under the guises of the ECOMOG force. David Keen argued that corruption within the Nigerian government led to a lack of pay for soldiers, who David Keen points out, were then forced to abuse the population out of necessity.[13] As Mary Kaldor noted, this forced the ECOMOG forces into a position whereby they necessitated the adoption of predation methods against the civilian population.[14] To summarize this account of process tracing: the use of a non-professional military as a means to intervene in a conflict marked by predation, the intervention itself to adopt predatory techniques.

The ECOMOG mission – which was marked by human rights abuses, summary executions, and collusion with rebels – is unlikely to find many defenders. Luttwak himself is a strong critic of the intervention, and uses it as one of his examples to justify his assertion that interventions will only create further war.[15] At first glance, the case of Sierra

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Leone would seem to confirm Luttwak's hypothesis; the largely Nigerian ECOMOG forces did indeed play a role in worsening the conflict. This paper would find agreement with Luttwak here: such interventions are, indeed, undesirable. Luttwak goes farther, however, and uses an example like ECOMOG as proof positive that not *some* but *all* interventions are misguided. A more nuanced approach would acknowledge the failures of the ECOMOG intervention, while looking past it to the British-led Operation Palliser of 2000. A complex history of this intervention is not required, its military successes are well documented in the literature on Sierra Leone. What is most salient for this analysis is to acknowledge the rapid success the British forces achieved in halting the conflict in Sierra Leone.[16] Though Luttwak may be forgiven for having failed to foresee the British intervention or its success (it began the year after his article was published), he should not be granted credulity in his assertions regarding the inherently counterproductive nature of intervention.

The 'give war a chance' argument is one which argues against disinterested and frivolous motives, however it would seem to be Luttwak himself is overwhelmed by disinterest and frivolity of argument. Whereas most would likely agree that disinterested interventions are undesirable, Luttwak's extension of this to include all interventions is inappropriate. The key assumptions of his argument simply do not stand up to logical analysis, while the cases of Sudan and Sierra Leone present clear examples of conflicts which were brought to an end by both political and military intervention. A caveat should be here added, that the argument presented in this paper is not a determinist approach citing that interventions *will* always succeed. Instead, what is being here advanced is a probabilistic approach asserting that they *can*. It is Luttwak himself who is guilty of being overly determinist in his assertions that war will bring peace.

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[3] *Ibid*, 37-28.

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