

OUR INTERESTS AND OUR HONOR

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For the last 2,500 years, at least, states have conducted their affairs and often gone to war moved by considerations that would not pass the test of “vital national interests.” On countless occasions they have acted to foster or to defend a collection of beliefs and feelings that have run, or appeared to run, counter to their secular practical needs, persisting in this course even when the danger has been evident and the cost high.

Modern politicians and students of politics commonly call such motives irrational. But the notion that the only thing rational or real in the conduct of nations is the search for economic benefits or physical security is itself a prejudice of our time, a product of the attempt to treat the world of human events as though it were an inanimate, motiveless physical universe. Such an approach is no more adequate to explain behavior today than it ever was.

Honor is the name of one category of concerns and motives that has dominated relations among peoples and states since antiquity. Honor includes such elements as the search for fame and glory; the desire to escape shame, disgrace, and embarrassment; the wish to avenge a wrong and thereby to restore one’s reputation; the determination to behave in accordance with certain moral ideals. Although concepts of what is honorable and dishonorable can vary over time and place, sometimes superficially and sometimes deeply, and although other people’s ideas of honor, especially those of an earlier time, can seem silly or outmoded, such surface variations often conceal a fundamental similarity or even identity.

To say that the pursuit of honor can run counter to a “realist” view of the national interest, of course, is not to say that it has no place in the competition for power or tangible advantage. That place may be easier to grasp if we translate honor into such terms as deference, esteem, just due, regard, respect, or, especially, prestige. When a state’s power grows, the deference and respect in which it is held are likely to grow as well. Conversely, when the prestige of a state wanes, so, too, does its power—even if materially, or “objectively,” that power appears to remain unaffected. The first man carefully to observe the relationship of power and honor in the sense of prestige was the Athenian historian Thucydides. Like a modern-day “realist,” he understood international relations as the competition for power, and war as the resort to arms in that competition. But he went beyond most modern scholars in explaining that in the struggle for power, whether for a rational sufficiency or to amass all the power there is, people act out of a variety of motives. In his account of the causes of the Peloponnesian War, and particularly in his narration of the dispute between the states of Corinth and Corcyra, Thucydides makes plain how “fear” and “interest,” commonplace as they are, often yield decisively to considerations of “honor” or threats to honor.

Honor in the particular sense employed by Thucydides—that is, honor as prestige—has played a critical role throughout history. In the period just before World War I, starting when Germany embarked on its “new course” in 1897, much of what was happening in

Europe amounted to prestige politics. The German battleship navy was, after all, what Winston Churchill called it—a “luxury fleet.” Though it played a major role in causing the war, it took no significant part in the fighting and never did Germany any practical good. Both the 1909 and 1911 crises with France over the status of Morocco were provoked by Germany’s search for prestige, and the same could be said of Germany’s excessively harsh and unnecessary ultimatum in the Bosnian crisis of 1908-9. These were the policies that created, in turn, the prewar alliance system and the arms race on land and sea, and that set Austria and Russia on a collision course in the Balkans.

Great Britain’s concern for honor, and for the danger that dishonor posed to its safety and therefore its power, played a large role in the decisions taken by the British government prior to the war. In his famous Mansion House speech of 1911, David Lloyd George said:

I believe it is essential . . . that Britain should at all hazards maintain her prestige among the Great Powers of the world. . . . [I]f a situation were to be forced upon us in which peace could only be preserved by the surrender of the great and beneficent position Britain has won by centuries of heroism and achievement, by allowing Britain to be treated, where her interests were vitally affected, as if she were of no account in the Cabinet of nations, then I say emphatically that peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure.

Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, spoke in similar terms. On August 3, 1914 he told parliament that Britain could keep out of the war by issuing a proclamation of unconditional neutrality, but he rejected that course:

If we did take that line by saying: “We will have nothing whatever to do with this matter,” . . . we should, I believe, sacrifice our respect and good name and reputation before the world, and should not escape the most serious and grave economic consequences.

Years later, Grey wrote that “The real reason for going into the war was that, if we did not stand by France and stand up for Belgium against [German] aggression, we should be isolated, discredited, and hated; and there would be nothing for us but a miserable and ignoble future.” The British, in short, were moved by fear of the danger Germany presented to their most vital interests, but they understood the danger, and brought themselves to face its consequences, by seeing it as a threat to their honor.

At least one kind of honor, then, clearly has a place in calculations of national power—more difficult to measure, perhaps, than tangible “interests,” but measurable nevertheless. But nations, like individuals, uphold other conceptions of honor as well, and they also pursue honor in ways that are the product not of calculation but of

feeling. Thucydides’ account of Corinth’s quarrel with Corcyra shows, indeed, how these different ideas and impulses are often intertwined. The Corinthians, he writes, became involved in an unimportant civil war on the fringes of the Greek world

out of hatred for the Corcyraeans, for [the latter] paid no attention to the Corinthians even though they were their colonists. In the common festivals they did not give them the customary privileges, nor did they begin by having a Corinthian commence the initial sacrifices, as the other colonies did, but treated them contemptuously.

It was this blow to their dignity, this failure of respect, that produced the hatred which caused the Corinthians to act. No question of economic interest, no requirement of the competition for power, no danger to security, no practical fear, but rather a sense of unrequited grievance and shame provoked them to unleash a terrible war.

If the Corinthians acted out of a sense of honor violated, so too did Mussolini many centuries later when he set out to avenge a defeat suffered by the Italian army at Adowa in Abyssinia—that “shameful scar,” in the words of the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio. But Mussolini’s Abyssinian campaign of 1935 was undertaken not only for the sake of revenge and to erase a four-decades-old dishonor but in quest of something as well: it was meant to glorify his Fascist regime and, even more exaltedly, to recapture the ancient glory of the Roman empire.

Throughout the ages, for better and for worse, honor in this sense—of fame, glory, renown, and splendor—has likewise motivated decisions about international relations and war and peace. In the heroic world depicted in the Iliad, Achilles would rather fight at Troy where he knows he must die than stay safely at home and be immortal, because that would deprive him of the fame and glory that alone make a hero’s life worth living. In dynastic ages, sovereigns have risked the prosperity and security of their kingdoms and their persons to achieve glory. In religious eras, crusading monarchs have done the same in the name of true religion.

The 20th century, I would argue, introduced yet a new sense of honor into international relations. World War I effectively put an end to the old dynastic order; thereafter, the struggle would be between increasingly democratic states on the one hand and, on the other, tyrannies or dictatorships of one form or another. The victorious nations in the Great War were themselves democracies, dependent for their legitimacy on the support of the whole people, and this circumstance gave birth to a new set of ideas as to what was honorable in the conduct of nations. War itself, in the new conception, was believed to be morally wrong, its causes connected with the aggressiveness natural to authoritarian and despotic regimes. Democracy, by contrast, was right and good in itself and also a force for peace. Over time, the idea took root that the only just war was a war in defense of democracy and self-determination.

Woodrow Wilson was thus not speaking for himself alone when he said that a crucial aim of the Great War had been the defense and extension of democracy. Moreover, in contrast to older coalitions like the Quadruple Alliance of the 19th century, the device Wilson introduced for resisting aggression and keeping the peace—collective security in the form of the League of Nations—was the product not of private negotiations among a few diplomats but of great, open, public discussions, supported by politicians, public associations, and widespread propaganda. Political elites in the democracies might regard all this with cynicism, but they would henceforth need to deal with a

public opinion that took it seriously, and that firmly linked the need to resist aggression with the concept of moral honor.

The Western response to Italy's attack on Abyssinia in 1935—itsself undertaken, as we have seen, in the name of honor in an older sense—provides a good example of the critical role of honor in the new. Before the Great War it would have been extremely unlikely that a European assault on a weak African nation of no particular value or interest to other European powers would have provoked a meaningful reaction. And even now there was little sentiment within the British government for a strong stand against Italy. Some argued for a prudent, “realist” policy. Such a policy, recognizing British military weakness and the need to hold Mussolini as an ally against Hitler, would be prepared to sacrifice Abyssinia in the name of British national interests.

But as the historian Correlli Barnett has pointed out, this “was 1935, not 1835 or 1735. English foreign policy was no longer a matter simply for the Foreign Secretary or even the Cabinet.” By 1935, many British felt they could not ignore the commitment to resist aggression, *whether or not* their country was capable of resisting it effectively. The result was that although Britain's Foreign Minister Samuel Hoare and France's Pierre Laval both felt that no real effort should be made to stop Mussolini, they also sensed that such a decision could not be admitted to the British public. And they were right: the subsequent Hoare-Laval agreement, meant to accommodate the Italian successes in Abyssinia, was greeted in Britain by an outburst of angry disapproval and was widely condemned as a reward for aggression, a blow to the idea of the League, and an act of cowardice. Hoare was forced to resign.

The efforts of Neville Chamberlain two years later to conduct a policy of appeasement based on hard-headed calculations of interest ran into the same new reality, intensified now by the dishonor of 1935 and its consequences. When Chamberlain, speaking to his Cabinet, portrayed England's intended abandonment of Czechoslovakia as a matter of practicality and common sense, one member was indiscreet enough to suggest that the required concessions were “unfair to the Czechs and dishonorable to ourselves.” Another compared the present crisis with 1914, when the Germans invaded Belgium: “There was a hard fiber in the British people which did not like to be told that, unless they acquiesced in certain things, it was all up with them.” In parliament, the opposition Labor and Liberal parties made their case, as Barnett writes,

not on strategic grounds, but on the score of morality and ideology. A robber power—and, what was worse, a Fascist power—had been positively helped by the British government to enlarge itself at the expense of a small country, and, what was worse, a democratic country.

Chamberlain and his colleagues, it is well known, misjudged the true nature of Hitler and the threat that he posed. But they also badly misunderstood the new realities of international relations conducted by democratic nations. Those realities were well and truly grasped by Winston Churchill, who became Britain's new leader after the fall of Norway and Denmark in the spring of 1940 finally forced Chamberlain from office in disgrace. Firmly rejecting a peace offer from the apparently irresistible Hitler, Churchill formulated a policy of resistance that accurately reflected the feelings of most of the British people, who preferred the risks and suffering of a terrible war to the

dishonor of a shameful peace with a dictator who personified ideas and institutions that were anathema to them.

Britain's example has had a great influence on Western and especially on American attitudes ever since. The "Munich analogy" was, of course, a major force in shaping the policy of the United States in its confrontation with the Soviet Union. That confrontation was certainly a contest for power, and it certainly included elements of fear and interest, to use Thucydides' categories; one need only mention the fear of nuclear war, and the interest in avoiding it. But no less important was the conflict of values and ideas, in which questions of honor were inextricably entwined.

To most Americans, the Soviet Union was an aggressive, militaristic dictatorship not very different from the ones they had just vanquished in World War II. Not only American security but also decency and honor argued for its containment, if not its defeat. It is impossible to believe that the American people would have accepted compulsory military service, higher taxes to pay for increased armaments, a permanent European alliance, and both the prospect and the reality of actual warfare had they not been motivated by factors that went beyond a conception of their material interest.

To be sure, those same nonmaterialist impulses—passionate anti-Communism, the determination to resist its expansion anywhere in the world, even the intention of defeating it—appalled and alarmed the "realist" sectors of the American foreign-policy establishment, who feared that acting on them would lead to dangerous crusades, an exhaustion of America's resources, or all-out war and mutual annihilation. Arguing from calculations of interest, the realists urged instead that we accept the permanence of world Communism and concentrate on finding areas of mutual accommodation. When, in the wake of America's defeat in Vietnam, the balance of world power seemed to be shifting in favor of the Soviets, realists urged a policy of still greater accommodation; and such a policy, under the name of *détente*, was in fact put into place by the administration then in Washington.

Unfortunately, *détente* produced not reciprocal accommodation but more aggressive expansionism on the part of the Soviets, and gains in the arms race that upset the balance of power still further. The aftermath is well known. In the late 1970's, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan helped to galvanize the sentiments of millions of Americans who had long regarded *détente* not merely as mistaken but as a dishonorable retreat, and to sweep into office a new administration committed to restoring American strength and honor. To the confusion of the realists, Ronald Reagan's determined effort to build up American defenses and consign the "evil empire" to dust was followed neither by American economic implosion nor by suicidal war but by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the discrediting of Communist dictatorship, and the vindication of freedom and democracy.

That happy outcome could never have been achieved merely by the pursuit of what experts considered to be our practical national interests, any more than the persistent and costly policy of global engagement in the early decades after World War II could

have been maintained without the commitment of Americans at large to values deeper and more humanly compelling than concern over economic and geopolitical advantage. Realists are quite right to point to the centrality of the contest for power in international relations, and also to the dangers of imprudence and immoderation that can arise from the pursuit of intangible goals like honor. But dangers of a no lesser seriousness attend the competition for power itself, however rationally calculated. Moreover, power is never pursued for itself, but always for the sake of some value or values.

In modern democratic states, those values tend to be moral in nature, and to involve a peculiarly democratic conception of honor. To attempt to exclude them from consideration is the height of fantasy, and the opposite of realism.