

Chicago Manual Format: Argumentative Essay Example

Debating the End of War: Re-examining Mueller's Optimism in the Face of International Conflict

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Debating the End of War: Re-examining Mueller's Optimism in the Face of International Conflict

Student Name

Course Name

Professor Name

Date

War has been a recurrent event throughout human history, with countless lives lost and destruction left in its wake. However, some historians argue that there has been a significant shift in the past decades, leading to a new era of peace, particularly with regard to international conflicts, since the end of World War Two. John Mueller, a prominent scholar, supports this claim by arguing that war has become "sub-rationally unthinkable" as states have moved away from it as a means of resolving disputes. Instead, they have chosen to seek other solutions, such as democracy, to resolve conflicts that would have previously resulted in war¹. This essay will examine Mueller's arguments, which are based on two perspectives. The first is the observation that war has become less popular, while the second is an explanation of why this pattern has emerged. It is only by examining both of these viewpoints that we can fully appreciate the relevance of Mueller's perspectives to the current world situation.

In examining John Mueller's arguments on the decline of war since the Second World War, it is essential to understand the distinctions and different definitions of the term "war." While the term is often used broadly to refer to any conflict or strife, it is most relevant when used to describe serious, extended armed conflict within or between states. For Mueller's argument, war is defined as "sustained coordinated violence between political organizations"² between international bodies. He posits that major war between important states has not occurred since the Second World War, and this long period of peace is due to a change in the perception of war. Therefore, understanding the nuances of the term "war" is critical in evaluating Mueller's argument.

¹ Kaysen, Carl. "Is war obsolete? A review essay. Retreat from doomsday: the obsolescence of major war by John Mueller." *International Security* 14, no. 4 (1990): 42-64.

² Levy, Jack S., and William R. Thompson. *Causes of war*. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010: 5-6.

The argument that major wars have become obsolete does not imply that war never occurs, but rather suggests that it has become a less viable option and is only considered under extreme circumstances³. While rare, it is still possible for war to occur. This idea is supported by a considerable amount of evidence. For instance, since the late 1980s, the global level of large-scale violence has decreased significantly, both in terms of the number of conflicts and the number of fatalities. Additionally, non-state conflicts have also become less prevalent during this period⁴.

Mueller's argument suggests that war has become a thing of the past, largely due to a shift in perceptions, making it no longer considered as a viable option⁵. However, the causes and prevention of war are complex and multifaceted. There are many relevant factors that interact with each other to contribute to the decline in large-scale violence. For instance, there are fewer rivalries between great powers, and this decreases the likelihood of large-scale international war. This is influenced by the fact that the world is currently in a unipolar system, with the United States as the sole superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union⁶. As long as this remains the case, it is likely that international wars will continue to be rare occurrences.

Human history has been marked by a long and violent relationship with war, but some historians argue that we have been experiencing an unprecedented era of peace since the end of World War II. John Mueller is a prominent supporter of this view, arguing that war has become "sub-rationally unthinkable" and is no longer seen as a viable option for resolving disputes

³ Fettweis, C.J. "A revolution in international relation theory: or, what if Mueller is right?" *International Studies Review* 8 (2006): 678.

⁴ Kriesberg, Louis. "Long peace or long war: a conflict resolution perspective." *Negotiation Journal* April (2007): 97-116.

⁵ Fettweis, 678-682.

⁶ Krauthammer, C. "The unipolar moment revisited." *The National Interest* (2003): 5-17

between nations. While there are multiple factors contributing to this shift, including the decline of major power rivalries, the unipolar system dominated by the United States, and the decline of non-state conflict, one factor that stands out is the development of nuclear weaponry. The devastating impact of these weapons, exemplified by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has convinced much that war is no longer a desirable or viable option, with nuclear weapons acting as a deterrent against its outbreak⁷⁷. Therefore, while war has not been eradicated entirely, it has become much less frequent and much less popular.

Recent evidence indicates that the global environment is undergoing changes, potentially signaling an end to the long period of peace⁸. Additionally, both the United States and Russia have publicly declared their intent to revive their nuclear programs, indicating that arms control, especially with respect to nuclear weapons, may no longer be a viable option. This implies that states prioritize their military capabilities, be it for defensive or offensive purposes, over their standing in the international community. Such decisions are not made lightly, as evidenced by the United States' willingness to go to war with Iraq over its purported possession of weapons of mass destruction⁹.

Mueller's argument is flawed due to poor definition of actors and actions. His theory addresses "major wars" between "great powers"¹⁰, but the criteria for what constitute a great power and how to differentiate between minor and major wars or skirmishes are not clearly defined. Different authors have varying definitions, such as including all developed countries,

⁷ Bernstein, B.J. "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered." *Foreign Affairs* (1995): 135-52.

⁸ Kriesberg, 97-116.

⁹ Steven, K., R. Clay, and L. Evan. "Misperceptions, the media and the Iraq War". *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 4 (2004): 569-9

¹⁰ Fettweis, 678-679.

countries in the first or second world, or the 44 wealthiest states. Some use quantitative values such as the number of deaths, percentage of country's resources used, or number of states involved in the conflict. These varying definitions make it difficult to determine when a war has occurred and whether Mueller's theory applies.

The Iraq War is an example of an event that does not fit neatly into Mueller's model. The United States initiated the war based on perceived threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, despite no direct evidence of their existence and lack of approval from the United Nations Security Council¹¹. While the United States fits into the category of internationally significant states, Iraq does not. Therefore, the Iraq War challenges Mueller's theory, but it also comes close to fitting the model he described.

The implications of this are significant, as they suggest that Mueller's theory constructs war in a particular way in order to argue that it no longer occurs. Mueller's central argument is that war has become unthinkable, yet it is possible that the nature of war has simply changed. The evidence discussed so far provides strong support for the argument of a long period of peace that has prevailed since the end of the Second World War until the present day; however, this is only true if war is considered solely at the large scale. While international wars have been mostly non-existent during this period, the prevalence of civil war has been increasing. Prior to 1945, the ratio of external wars to internal wars was one to two, while after the war, this ratio increased to one to five¹². Civil wars are highly destructive, causing significant damage to society and the

¹¹ Steven, Clay and Evan 569-9

¹² Levy and Thompson, 12

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