CHAPTER ONE

The Question of Realism: An Historian's View

DIFFERENT COUNTRIES WANT different things; sometimes those desires conflict; how then do those conflicts get worked out? The basic insight that lies at the heart of the realist approach to international politics is that the way those conflicts run their course is heavily conditioned by power realities. In a world where war cannot be ruled out if conflicts are not settled peacefully, rational states are bound to be concerned with the structure of power in the sense not just of the distribution of military capabilities both actual and potential, but also of the whole web of relationships that would affect what would happen if war actually broke out. But rational states not only *adjust* their policies to such power realities. If the structure of power is of such fundamental importance, it stands to reason that states might well try to *alter* it to their advantage. That striving for power political advantage in turn might well come to dominate the system. The fact that states live in an anarchic system—that is, a system not governed by supranational authority—can therefore have a profound impact on state behavior, and some of the most central problems of international relations theory thus have to do with the importance of such "systemic" or "structural" effects in international political life.

It is commonly assumed that this concern for power, and especially this striving for power political advantage, puts states at odds with each other—that the struggle for power is a major source of conflict in and of itself. Such arguments are quite familiar. Opponents of realism have always assumed that power politics leads to conflict. Woodrow Wilson's whole approach to international politics was rooted in assumptions of that sort, and even today such attitudes are by no means dead. One leading contemporary theorist, Alexander Wendt, thus takes it for granted that a world in which states behave in accordance with the dictates of Realpolitik is a violence-prone, kill-or-be-killed, Hobbesian world.[1] It is perhaps more surprising to find realists themselves ar-

[1] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 262–66. Hobbes's original argument,

guing along these lines. The prevailing assumption among realists as a whole is that "mutual fear drives the great powers apart," that "international anarchy fosters competition and conflict," and that the "anarchic nature of international politics" encourages "cut-throat behavior among states."[2]

The argument is developed in its purest form by "offensive realists" like John Mearsheimer. "The structure of the international system," Mearsheimer writes, "forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other." "Great powers," he says, "that have no reason to fight each other—that are merely concerned with their own survival—nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system." They have little choice because they fear other states and they know that they "have to seek more power if they want to maximize their odds of sur-

argues, they have to "think offensively toward other states, even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive."[3]

The basic argument, however, is by no means limited to people like Mearsheimer. Even the "defensive realists," those scholars of a realist bent who take a relatively moderate position on this whole set of issues, fundamentally agree that a dynamic of this sort plays a central role in international politics. To be sure, their analyses are more guarded, more hedged, more inclined to emphasize the importance of second-order or unit-level considerations—the offense/defense balance, most notably—which in their view determine how strong in practice that dy-

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an argument that dealt specifically with international politics, was laid out in the *Leviathan*, part 1, chap. 13.

[2] Stephen Van Evera, "The Hard Realities of International Politics," *Boston Review,* 17 (November–December 1992), p. 19; Joseph Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 485; John Mearsheimer, review of Roger Spegele, *Political Realism in International Theory*, in the *International History Review* 20, no. 3 (September 1998): 776. Note also John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 9; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), chap. 2; and Kenneth Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," in Robert Rotberg and Theodore Rabb, eds., *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 43. See also the sources cited in n. 7 of this chapter. I say "prevailing assumption" because there are exceptions. See, for example, Charles Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95); Randall Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies,* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1996), reprinted in Benjamin Frankel, ed., *Realism: Restatements and Renewal* (London: Cass, 1996); and Andrew Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing: Why Security Seekers Do Not Fight Each Other," *Security Studies* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1997).

[3] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 3, 21, 34.

namic is.[4] And they sometimes write in a way that suggests that security competition need not be a major source of international instability—that states will normally be satisfied with an "appropriate" amount of security, and will show little interest in reaching for more.[5] But the comparatively mild way in which they frame their arguments should not obscure the fact that, whatever qualifications they make, even leading defensive realists believe that in an anarchic system the major powers are pushed into conflict with each other—that anarchy is more than just a permissive cause of war.

Kenneth Waltz, for example, clearly believes that anarchy breeds conflict. Waltz, the most important theorist in the defensive realist camp, developed his argument most explicitly in an important 1988 article called "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory." "Competition and conflict among states," Waltz wrote, "stem directly from the twin facts of life under conditions of anarchy: States in an anarchic order must provide for their own security, and threats or seeming threats to their security abound. Preoccupation with identifying dangers and counteracting them become a way of life." The measures states take to deal with these problems and make themselves more secure necessarily threaten other powers, who react in kind. "Some states," he says, "may hunger for power for power's sake." But "neorealist theory"—and that means Waltz's own theory—"shows that it is not necessary to assume an innate lust for power in order to account for the sometimes fierce competition that marks the international arena. In an anarchic domain, a state of war exists if all parties lust for power. But so too will a state of war exist if all states seek only to ensure their own safety." This logic does not, of course, explain the origins of particular wars, but it does, he says, "explain war's dismal recurrence through the millennia." The "recurrence of war" is to be understood in structural terms: "The origins of hot wars lie in cold wars, and the origins of cold wars are found in the anarchic ordering of the international arena."[6] Other defensive realists share that basic view. Indeed, as one leading scholar points out,

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[4] Indeed, the defensive realists have been criticized for placing increasing emphasis on such nonsystemic factors. See especially Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999).

[5] Waltz, "Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," p. 40. In context, however, the assumption here was still that rational states would seek to maximize relative power. "Excessive strength" was to be avoided because it might lead "other states to increase their arms and pool their efforts against the dominant state"—that is, because it might actually weaken a state's position in the system. Other defensive realists, however, take a clearer position and say explicitly that states "satisfice"—that they are not necessarily power maximizers but seek only the level of power sufficient for their purposes. See Barry Posen, "The Best Defense," *The National Interest*, no. 67 (Spring 2002): 119.

[6] Waltz, "Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," pp. 43–44.

in the international relations literature more generally nowadays, the anarchic structure of international politics is "routinely cited as a root cause of or explanation for the recurrence of war."[7]

Some traditional realists, however—not every major writer, but people like George Kennan, for example—took a very different view. They took it for granted that stability depended on the ability of states to pursue a policy framed in "realistic" power political terms. Over and over again, they stressed the point that to ignore the importance of power—to allow emotion and ideology and "impractical idealism" to dictate policy—was to court disaster.[8] Implicit in that whole line of argument was the assumption that "realist" foreign policies—that is, policies attuned to power realities—were not the problem. But today most realists seem to assume that they *are* the problem, and that a system of states acting rationally in power political terms—a system of states pursuing "realist" policies, the sorts of policies the system tends to encourage—is a violent, brutal, war-prone system.

For me, this issue was particularly salient because, like those traditional realists, I had come to believe that "power politics" was not the problem—that is, I had come to believe that serious trouble developed only when states *failed* to act in a way that made sense in power political terms. My basic thinking in this area had taken shape as a simple by-product of ordinary historical work; I had never tried to think these issues through on a more theoretical level; and I was puzzled when it

[7] James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 384. It is in fact taken for granted in the scholarly literature that this view is held by neorealists of all stripes. Dale Copeland, for example, refers in passing to the "core neorealist premise that anarchy forces states into recurrent security competitions"; the assumption here is that this view is by no means limited to the offensive realists. Stephen Walt says that "the central conclusion of all realist theories—what might be termed the 'realist *problematique*'—is that *the existence of several states in anarchy renders the security of each one problematic and encourages them to compete with each other for power or security.*" Andrew Kydd says that "structural realists"—he has both offensive and defensive realists in mind—"argue that international anarchy renders states insecure, and that the search for security is the main task of states, and the main cause of conflict." And Robert Kaufman notes that "realists of all persuasions agree that the quest for power and the rivalries it engenders offer the most basic explanation for the origins of war." Dale Copeland, "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 188; Stephen Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition," in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline,* Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner, eds. (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 200 (emphasis in original text); Kydd, "Sheep in Sheep's Clothing," p. 114; and Robert Kaufman, "On the Uses and Abuses of History in International Relations Theory: Dale Copeland's *The Origins of Major War,*" *Security Studies* 10, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 180.

[8] See especially George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), chap. 4; the phrase quoted is on p. 69.

became clear to me that the prevailing view among realists today was rather different.

The aim here is thus to bring an historian's perspective to bear on this basic problem. This does not mean that I am going to make the standard "historian's argument" about how political scientists exaggerate the importance of the "system" and about how the problem of war and peace needs to be studied at a much lower level of abstraction. I myself believe that the "system" is enormously important—that a system based on power has a certain logic to it, and that to understand international politics, one has to have some sense for what that logic is. But how exactly does such a system work? Is it really the case that structural imperatives push states into conflict with each other? Or do things work in a very different way?

My basic point in this article is that the argument about the systemic sources of conflict is far more problematic, even in principle, than many people seem prepared to admit. But I want to take things a bit further than that. I want to argue that there are ways in which *systemic* forces can play a *stabilizing* role. And it is that argument, I think, that gives the analysis here its distinct character. The claim that anarchy breeds conflict has of course been challenged before. Scholars have argued that for a variety of reasons the effects of anarchy might be relatively mild. Some scholars have even argued that the system on balance plays a neutral role—that sometimes states find it in their interest to cooperate, and sometimes not. The argument here, however, is that systemic forces can actually play a positive role—and indeed that systemic pressures by and large have a stabilizing effect. [9]

That view might sound somewhat unconventional today, but it is in fact rooted in ideas that have been part of the realist tradition for centuries. Why is it important to resurrect those notions, and why more generally is the argument here worth making? I think there is a gap between the sorts of policies many realists support—moderate, cautious, rooted in a concern with the stability of the system as a whole—and certain important theoretical views those same people hold. On the one hand, you have a theory that suggests at its core that a system in which states act in accordance with the dictates of Realpolitik is a violent, warprone system. On the other hand, you have people who hold that view calling for "realist" policies—that is, policies based on power and inter-

[9] Terms like *system* and *stability* are not easy to define with any precision. For a discussion, see Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 5–10 (for *system*) and pp. 94–98, esp. p. 96 (for *stability*). For the purposes of this article, however, precise definitions are not necessary. These terms are used here in a fairly conventional way, and their meaning will be clear enough from context as well as from the examples given.

est, policies that are rational in terms of the imperatives of the system. It is as though you had a group of economists, firmly convinced that the free play of market forces would inevitably lead to economic collapse, nonetheless calling on everyone to act in accordance with market forces. The two levels of argument are just not in harmony with each other. But if we can see why certain basic assumptions about how a power political system works are misleading, we might be able to put those policy arguments on a firmer basis. If we can see how a system based on power has a certain stability, then we might be better able to see why policies that are rational in power political terms might make for a more peaceful world.

So let me begin in the next section by outlining the kind of thinking that lies behind the view that a system based on power is not inherently unstable—or, more precisely, the basis for the view that realist policies, policies that make sense in terms of the basic logic of the system, actually make for a relatively stable international order. In the following section, some key arguments on the other side, especially fundamental arguments about the way an anarchic system is supposed to work, will be examined. In the final section, I want to look at policy arguments, and especially at what they can tell us about the fundamental assumptions that lie at the heart of the realist understanding of international politics.

An Invisible Hand in International Politics?

Adam Smith, in a very famous passage, noted that an individual pursuing his own interest is "led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention." "By pursuing his own interest," Smith wrote, "he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it."[10] Do we see a mechanism of this sort at work in international life? Can states, in pursuing their own interests, generate a more or less stable international system? What sorts of dynamics come into play in a world of independent powers, and how do those dynamics affect the stability of the system as a whole?

One way to get a handle on such questions is to start with a bit of history and then work back to the theory. And in doing that, it makes sense to begin with one of those periods in history where there was no hegemon, where ideological concerns were of relatively minor importance

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[10] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 423.

in shaping foreign policy, and when there were just a handful of major powers relating to each other in a relatively closed system: namely, the classic period of European great power politics, the late nineteenth century. By looking at international politics in that period, one can hope to see far more clearly than in other cases how a system based on power works. Was this a period in which power politics was a source of instability, or did trouble develop only when the major European states put power political considerations aside and allowed other sorts of factors to shape their policy?

To a considerable degree, European statesmen in that period really did think in power political terms. Otto von Bismarck, the German chancellor from 1871 to his fall from power in 1890, is the most obvious example. In a Europe of five great states, Bismarck said, the key thing was to be one of three: "all politics reduce themselves to this formula: try to be *à trois* in a world governed by five Powers."[11] But if being one of three was good, being one of four was even better, since one's own country would be less vulnerable to a partner's threat to defect. In straight power political terms, good relations with other states are a source of strength and bad relations a source of weakness. It thus makes sense to have as many friends and as few enemies as possible.

The great source of weakness in the German position after the unification of Germany in 1871 was the alienation of France that had resulted from the German annexation that year of Alsace-Lorraine. This was an albatross hung around Bismarck's neck. It sharply constrained his freedom of action by ruling out the possibility of a combination that included both Germany and France. Germany's partners could threaten to defect to the side of France, but Germany herself could make no counter-threat to form an alignment of her own with that power. The Franco-German antagonism, moreover, vastly complicated the problem of forming a bloc of powers that would dominate Europe. A bloc of the three eastern empires—Germany, Russia and Austria—was one possibility, but the problem here was that Germany's two partners were themselves at odds over Balkan issues and might expect German support in their conflict with each other, perhaps threatening to go over to the side of France if they did not get it. An alignment with Britain and Austria, based on the containment of Russia, was the other possibility, but here too the drawbacks were obvious: that policy might drive Russia to the side of France; if a continental war did break out, Germany would have to bear the brunt of the fighting, given that Britain was not a land power; and Britain, an island power protected by a strong navy,

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[11] Quoted in Raymond Sontag, *European Diplomatic History, 1871-1932* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1933), p. 22.

would be relatively free to withdraw from the alignment, especially as new elections brought in new governments free to adopt new policies. The best Bismarck could do was to balance between those two possible alignments—to try to get Britain and Austria to balance Russia more or less on their own, to hold back from supporting that containment policy too openly, and to try to keep the wire to St. Petersburg open and thus head off a Russian alignment with France. This was not an easy policy to pursue, not least because there was no guarantee that either Britain or Russia would cooperate with it, and it was breaking down even before Bismarck fell from power in 1890.

The antagonism with France created by the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine was a source of weakness for Germany. In power political terms, it had not been in Germany's interest to annex those provinces. Yes, adding that territory gave Germany more defensible borders—a real advantage, and something that would have been even more important if Germany had opted for a defensive strategy in the west in the decades to come. And yes, bringing Lorraine with its iron ore into the Reich turned out to be one of the key factors that enabled German steel production—the heart of military power, given the military technology of the period—to rise so dramatically in the period before World War I. In narrow, purely economic terms, it is quite clear that in this case, as in so many others, conquest paid.[12]

But to focus on such points is to miss what was really important about what the new German empire did in 1871. Whatever military and economic advantages Germany got were more than outweighed by the political price that country had to pay, a point that was obvious at the time to clear-sighted observers like Lord Salisbury.[13] The decision to annex Alsace-Lorraine was rooted not in power political thinking but in the belief that France would not accept her defeat by Germany, that a war of revenge was inevitable, and that Germany had to put herself in the best position for fighting it. "The inclination of France to seek revenge," Bismarck wrote, "will remain precisely the same, whether she loses provinces or not."[14] But that kind of belief was not at all in

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[12] For a general analysis, see Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); for a summary of Liberman's findings, see his article "The Spoils of Conquest," *International Security* 18, no. *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

[13] [Lord Salisbury], "The Terms of Peace," *Quarterly Review* 129 (1870): 540–56 (origi-

[14] Bismarck to his ambassador in Paris, August 15, 1871, cited in Allan Mitchell, *Bismarck and the French Nation, 1848–1890* (New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 57. Bismarck made this point many times during this period. In September 1870, for example, he told the

keeping with the spirit of the power political approach. A true Realpolitiker would never have taken French hostility as a given, but rather would have assumed that French policy would be governed by interest, and that it was in the interest of both countries to avoid foreclosing a possible alignment. A German policy that was rational in power political terms would thus have sought to keep the door open to reconciliation with France, just as a mild peace with Austria five years earlier had made it possible for Germany to have good relations with that country. Indeed, the basic principle here was recognized by Bismarck himself. "A Great Power," he wrote in his memoirs, "will always have to keep in view not only existing, but future, relations to others, and must, as far as possible, avoid lasting fundamental hostility with any of them." [15]

Given the sort of question we are interested in here, it is important to see this issue in systemic, and not just bilateral, terms. France had a certain interest in a relatively strong Germany as a counterweight to Russia; if Germany had not taken Alsace-Lorraine, that factor might well have played a key role in shaping French policy in the post-1871 period. More generally, the two states had a strong interest in good relations with each other, if only to strengthen their position vis-à-vis third countries, and absent the Alsace-Lorraine problem, that sort of interest could easily have come into play. And a decent Franco-German relationship, a relationship based not on emotion but on cold calculations of interest, might well have affected the ability of third powers (like Russia) to pursue an expansionist policy in Europe. So if both France and Germany had thought in pure power political terms—that is, if they had pursued the sorts of policies the anarchic international system tends to encourage—a more stable international order might well have come into being.

This issue is paradigmatic. Antagonisms of this sort—the kind that the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine had generated—are always a source of weakness, and states therefore have an interest in avoiding these kinds of conflicts. They always have a power political interest in preventing such conflicts from developing and in resolving those that do develop. Any individual state, if it were thinking in power political terms, would thus want to have as many friends and as few enemies as possible. But since that same logic applies to every state in the system, the upshot, in a system where considerations of this sort shape policy,

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acting French foreign minister, Jules Favre, "I am sure that very soon we will have a new war with you and we want to do so with all the advantages." Cited in Robert Giesberg, *The Treaty of Frankfort: A Study in Diplomatic History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), p. 33.

[15] Otto von Bismarck, *Reflections and Reminiscences*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, 1898), 2:235.

is a general tendency toward stability, in the sense of the ability of the system to avoid war, and above all to avoid major, all-out, system-wide war. Conflicts in such a world would be avoided or resolved, and inter-state relations would be good all around.[16] This effect would be particularly strong since those states that pursue a policy of avoiding antagonisms and improving relations with their rivals are at a competitive advantage, and, for reasons outlined by Waltz, successful policies in such a system tend to be emulated.[17]

This particular dynamic was historically of fundamental importance, and it deserves more attention than it gets: this mechanism is a major force making for international stability. To be sure, it is not the only dynamic that comes into play in a power political system, and in fact in such a system states do sometimes have a certain interest in expanding their power and do for that reason pursue warlike policies. Bismarck's Prussia in the 1860s is perhaps the most important case in point. But even here, a power political frame of mind was in a fundamental sense a source of stability. Bismarck moved ahead only when the power political conjuncture was favorable; his policy was anything but reckless; limits on Prussian (and later on German) power were accepted when other powers threw their weight into the balance and made it clear (in 1875 most notably) that Bismarck could only go so far. The unification of Germany in 1871 brought about a major change in the distribution of power within the European system, but the system itself had not been brought down; the reconfiguration of European politics in the 1862-1871 period did not lead to the sort of war that had ended a half-century earlier or would begin a half-century later.

But if this general idea is correct—if behavior that was rational in power political terms was not the basic problem in pre-1914 Europe, and that if such behavior, the sort of behavior that the system tended to foster, was actually an important source of stability—then it follows that the most serious problems developed because policy in Europe generally during that period was *not* cut from that cloth. And indeed,

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[16] In trying to explain the limits on human aggressiveness, biologists have sometimes argued along similar lines. As George Williams, one of the great figures in modern evolutionary theory, once pointed out, "an individual who maximizes his friendships and minimizes his antagonisms will have an evolutionary advantage, and selection should favor those characters that promote the optimization of personal relationships." "I imagine that this evolutionary factor," Williams continued, "has increased man's capacity for altruism and compassion and has tempered his ethically less acceptable heritage of sexual and predatory aggressiveness." George Williams, *Adaptation and Natural Selection: A Critique of Some Current Evolutionary Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 94.

[17] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), pp. 127–28.

studying the origins of the First World War, one comes away with the strong impression that serious problems developed not because rational power political considerations shaped political behavior, but rather because they *failed* to do so—that is, because other factors come into play. In the case of the German decision to annex Alsace-Lorraine, as Salisbury pointed out at the time, "the fierce passions of war" had come to dominate policy. The Germans wanted to "see the enemy humbled to the earth." "The very consideration," he said, "which makes a cession of territory inadvisable in the judgment of calmer bystanders, makes it desirable in their eyes."[18] Bismarck himself might not have approached the problem in such terms, but, Salisbury argued, he was to a considerable extent a prisoner of the passions he had done so much to unleash.

It is important to bear in mind that the alienation of France was not just a problem for Germany. As Salisbury realized in 1871, the Franco-German antagonism was a serious problem for the system as a whole, and looking back it seems quite clear that that system would have worked much more smoothly if this particular problem had not come into being. The conflict between France and Germany over Alsace-Lorraine in fact turned out to be (along with the Austro-Russian conflict over the Balkans and the Anglo-German conflict over imperial, colonial, and naval issues) one of the three great conflicts whose coming together ultimately led to the First World War.

This, moreover, is not the only example of the instability created by a failure to act in a way that makes sense in power political terms. Germany pursued a policy before 1914 that led to conflict with the three next most powerful nations in Europe, all at the same time, which was hardly the sort of policy a country that thought "security was scarce" would have been inclined to adopt. Britain and France pursued a policy toward Germany, most strikingly at the time of the First Moroccan Crisis in 1905–06, that was rooted more in emotion than in cold power political calculation; that policy, to my mind, clearly had a destabilizing effect, not least because it increased the dependence of the western powers on Russia and thus made it easier for the Russians to pursue a forward policy in the Balkans.[19] And Russia herself, in 1914, went to war even though key officials like the war minister knew that the coun-

[18] "The Terms of Peace," p. 553.
[19] See especially George Monger, *The End of Isolation: British Foreign Policy, 1900–1907* (London and New York: T. Nelson, 1963), and Christopher Andrew, *Théophile Delcassé and the Making of the Entente Cordiale: A Reappraisal of French Foreign Policy 1898–1905* Macmillan, 1968). Note also the tone of one very well-known document from this period: Eyre Crowe, "Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany," January 1, 1907, in G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914*

try was "throwing herself unprepared into a venture beyond her strength."[20] The Russian decision to go to war for the sake of Serbia, a reversal of the original Russian policy during the crisis of advising Serbia not to resist an Austrian invasion and instead to "entrust her fate to the judgment of the Great Powers," was the climax of the "very bold offensive policy" that Russia had been pursuing in the Balkans before 1914, a policy again that was scarcely rational in power political terms.[21]

To understand power—that is, to understand how a system based on power works—is to understand why the most fundamental interests of other major states normally need to be respected, and why it is normally not to one's own interest to allow conflicts to get out of hand. There are times, of course, when more aggressive policies might need to be pursued for the sake of a state's own security—U.S. policy toward Germany in late 1941 is a good case in point—and there are times when states can pursue expansionist policies without running great risks. But moderation is normally a source of stability, above all in a world where the major states all think in power political terms. In a Realpolitik world, the great powers relate to each other on a businesslike basis; power realities are accepted for what they are; compromises can normally be worked out relatively easily because statesmen all speak the same language, the language of power and interest. And "interest" in that kind of world tends to get defined in geostrategic terms: for obvious military reasons, neighboring countries are more important than far-off areas; a region that is important to one great state may well be of secondary importance to another; great nations may therefore find it relatively easy, in such a world, to accept each others' spheres of influence and coexist with each other on that basis.

[20] Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952–57), 2:546. The Russian interior minister spoke at the time about how war would bring revolution, but "sitting at a table laden with ikons and religious lamps," crossed himself, saying "we cannot escape our fate," and then signed the mobilization decree. D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), pp. 108–9, 115.

[21] Special Journal of the Russian Council of Ministers, July 24, 1914, and Sazonov to Strandtmann, July 24, 1914, in Imanuel Geiss, ed., *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents* (New York: Scribner, 1967), pp. 186–88. For this characterization of Russia's Balkan policy, see Paul Schroeder, "Embedded Counterfactuals and World War I as an Unavoidable War," in Paul Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 186. Russia's sponsorship of the Balkan League of 1912 is perhaps the most striking case in point. The treaty establishing this alliance, as French Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré noted at the time, "contained the seeds not only of a war against Turkey, but of a war against Austria as well." Quoted in Pierre Renouvin,

The power political approach, therefore, by defining what needs to be emphasized, by its very nature defines what needs to be played down, and thus tends to rule out other kinds of policy: power, from the Realpolitik point of view, is too precious to squander on moralistic or imperialistic or ideological enterprises. The power political approach thus provides a kind of yardstick for judgments about how power might be intelligently used—and, above all, for judgments about when its use is to be avoided. In this sense also, it is by and large a source of restraint.[22]

Arguments of this sort are by no means new. The eighteenth-century "balance of power" theorists, for example, identified rationality with moderation and restraint. To reach for hegemony, in their view, was both pointless and dangerous: pointless, because other states would probably be able to frustrate an attempt to dominate the whole system, and dangerous, because to attempt to achieve such a position of power was to run great risks. As Fénelon, the most impressive of those theorists, warned, "[S]tates have often perished by these ambitious follies."[23] Traditional realists also often emphasized the importance of keeping goals limited, preventing conflicts from becoming crusades, and making sure the lines of communication remained open with one's adversaries. The very fact (as Henry Kissinger pointed out in a famous passage) that "absolute security for one power means absolute insecurity for all others" and thus "is never obtainable" as part of a settlement whose legitimacy is generally accepted implied that absolute security could not be taken as a serious goal: if the aim was stability, statesmen had to set their sights somewhat lower.[24] Policy from that point of view had to be limited and balanced; the goal was a kind of equilibrium. This was the sort of thinking that inspired the peacemakers at the Congress

[22] For a classic example, see Lord Castlereagh's famous State Paper of 5 May 1820, in Harold Temperley and Lillian Penson, eds., *Foundations of British Foreign Policy: From Pitt (1792) to Salisbury (1902)*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1938), pp. 48–63.

[23] François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, supplement to his *L'Examen de conscience sur les devoirs de la royauté,* originally written around 1700, and published (under various titles) in many editions of his works—for example, in Fénelon, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Lebel, 1824), vol. 23. An extract from an early English translation can be found in Moorhead Wright, ed., *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914* (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 39–45; the passage quoted is on p. 43. Note also the extracts from the writings of Defoe (1706) and Hume (1752), in ibid., pp. 48–49, 64. Rousseau also argued along these lines. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Abstract and Judgement of Saint-Pierre's Project for Per

Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–22* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964), pp. 144–45.

of Vienna at the end of the Napoleonic wars. The aim there was balance and equilibrium; the leading statesmen at Vienna, especially the British and Austrian foreign ministers Castlereagh and Metternich, were very much concerned with creating a stable structure of power.[25]

A century later their method was attacked quite sharply by Woodrow Wilson. The peace that would settle the war of 1914, he declared, would not be based on "such covenants of selfishness and compromise as were entered into at the Congress of Vienna." The issues of the war could not be settled by "arrangement or compromise or adjustment of interests"; peace could not be obtained "by any kind of bargain or compromise with the governments of the Central Empires." The aim now that the United States had entered the war was "the overcoming of evil, by the defeat once [and] for all of the sinister forces that interrupt peace and render it impossible." The "old order of international politics" was to be "utterly destroyed." The whole system built on "that unstable thing which we used to call the 'balance of power'" was to be swept away in its entirety.[26] But Wilson's contempt for the method of compromise, accommodation, and the "adjustment of interests" led to disaster. If a compromise peace was out of the question, then Germany had to be crushed. [27] If the rule of law was to be established, the lawbreaker had

[25] See especially Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft* (New York: Norton, 1955), esp. part 2; and W. A. Phillips, *The Confederation of Europe: A Study of the European Alliance, 1813–1823, as an Experiment in the International Organization of Peace* (London: Longman's, 1920). Kissinger's arguments, it should be noted, were developed in the context of his analysis in *A World Restored* of the Vienna settlement. Note, however, Paul Schroeder's discussion of the issue in "Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?" *American Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (June 1992). Although Schroeder's answer to the question posed in his title is essentially no, a careful reading of that article shows that he agrees that the peacemakers thought in terms of balance and equilibrium; that they, however, defined those concepts rather broadly and not just in narrow balance of power terms; but that this did not mean that balance of power thinking, even in the strict sense, played no role at Vienna. The sort of language that was used at the time, he writes, shows that "checking and balancing power was one element in the process of achieving an overall balance in the system" (p. 695).

[26] Woodrow Wilson, *War and Peace: Presidential Messages, Addresses, and Public Papers*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1927), 1:129, 133, 255, 342–43, 547–48; for another reference to the Congress of Vienna, see p. 179. The passages quoted are from speeches Wilson gave during the war and in 1919. Wilson's contemptuous references here to the peacemakers a century earlier were not mere rhetorical flourishes. His hostility to the method used at Vienna came out even in private. When the New Zealand prime minister alluded to the

See especially Wilson,

to be punished. In Wilson's view, Germany had committed a great crime, and people had to be shown "that they could not do anything of the sort the Germans attempted without suffering the severest kind of punishment."[28] This was an approach that looked not to the future but to the past; the aim was not stability but justice. And the peace that was imposed, the Versailles settlement of 1919, was very much a Wilsonian peace.[29] It was also an extremely unstable peace: the only major peace settlement to be dictated solely by the great western democracies turned out to be the most unstable peace in the modern history of great power politics. The 1815 settlement, in comparison, looks like a model of what peacemaking should be. The comparison is instructive. The balance of power approach, the approach of Metternich and Castlereagh, an approach very much in the realist tradition, is not to be seen as a source of instability.

What all this suggests is that a power political world, a world of states deeply concerned with the structure of power and behaving rationally in power political terms, is not a "brutal back-alley."[30] In such a world, there are strong forces at play making for stability. But one cannot just leave it at that. To get to the bottom of the issue, it is important to look at the arguments on the other side. Many scholars take a rather

[28] Bernard Baruch diary, entry for June 2, 1919, Baruch Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. See also S. G. Millin, *General Smuts,* 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), 2:232–33. Note also Wilson's defense of the peace treaty in the speeches he gave in late 1919. That treaty, he said on September 4, "seeks to punish one of the greatest wrongs ever done in history, the wrong which Germany sought to do to the world and to civilization; and there ought to be no weak purpose with regard to the application of the punishment. She attempted an intolerable thing, and she must be made to pay for the attempt." The same note was sounded in another speech he gave four days later: "I hear that this treaty is very hard on Germany. When an individual has committed a criminal act, the punishment is hard, but the punishment is not unjust. This nation permitted itself, through unscrupulous governors, to commit a criminal act against mankind, and it is to undergo the punishment." Wilson, *War and Peace,* 1:590–91, and 2:33–34.

[29] The myth persists that Wilson was the champion of a peace of reconciliation with Germany, and that Britain and France insisted on much harsher terms and forced him into disastrous compromises. The terms of the Treaty of Versailles were in fact very much in line with the program Wilson had laid out in his wartime speeches, and the pre-armistice agreement with Germany was based explicitly on that program. The one point where the peacemakers clearly did violate the terms of the pre-armistice agreement had to do with the inclusion of pensions in the reparation bill. The British wanted pensions included, the French would have preferred not to include them, and Wilson sided with the British for moral reasons: he thought it was right that Germany should make amends not just for the material damage her "aggression" had caused, but for the loss of human life as well. On this general issue, see, for example, Marc Trachtenberg, "Versailles after Sixty Years," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 3 (July 1982).

[30] Van Evera, "Hard Realities," p. 19.

dark view of the international system. What are the arguments that support this view, and what are we to make of them?

THE LOGIC OF ANARCHY

The argument that systemic forces push states into conflict with each other, and indeed that the fundamental structure of international politics "can precipitate open clashes of arms" even among states that "seek only to ensure their own safety," is of central importance in contemporary international relations theory.[31] The idea here is that in a system where no supranational authority can guarantee their security, states have to be very sensitive to power realities. They have to do what they can to make sure that in power political terms they are in as favorable a position as possible. But power, unlike wealth for example, is defined in relative terms. If one state's position improves, another's will inevitably be weakened. Thus states are necessarily at odds with each other. Each is bound to reach for greater power; those efforts are bound to conflict with each other; given what is at stake, no one can be relaxed about the outcome. The competition for power is thus bound to be a major source of international tension.

This is particularly the case, the argument runs, since the growth of another state's power is inevitably seen as threatening—even if that state is acting for defensive reasons, indeed even if it is understood to be acting for defensive reasons. With so much at stake, states cannot afford to remain passive when the balance of power threatens to turn against them; they themselves, regardless of their own fundamental inclinations, are more or less forced by the structure of the system to act energetically and in particular to take advantage of any opportunities to extend their power. The system thus "creates powerful incentives for aggression."[32] It is thus the "anarchic nature of international politics," and not any craving for power or conquest for its own sake, that leads to "cut-throat behavior among states."[33]

Even the defensive realists often, although by no means always, argue along these lines. War, in their view, can in principle come even

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[31] Kenneth Waltz, "Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," pp. 43–44 (for the quotations); Mearsheimer, "False Promise," pp. 9–12; John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 12; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 3, 34; Robert Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 49.

[32] Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future," p. 12; Mearsheimer, "False Promise," p. 11.

[33] Mearsheimer review of Spegele, *Political Realism in International Theory*, p. 776.

in a world of simple security-seekers—that is, powers who, if their security were guaranteed, would be happy to live with things as they were—because the policies of such powers are based on fear, and "mutual fear drives the great powers apart."[34] The system at times virtually forces them to play hardball. Indeed, it virtually forces them in certain circumstances to behave like aggressors: given certain conditions, states are led to act aggressively for essentially defensive reasons.[35] And this logic, the logic of the "security dilemma" as it is called, applies to all states in the system. This reaching for power generates suspicion and hostility; states that feel themselves threatened intensify their own efforts, provoking hostile reactions on the part of other powers; tensions spiral upward. These difficulties are all rooted in the basic structure of the system and are hard to overcome in large part because of the familiar problem of collective action. States live so close to the margin that they have little choice but to concentrate on their own narrow security interests. In such a system, "the great powers are seldom able to concert their efforts toward peace, even when they jointly desire it."[36] To be sure, some forms of cooperation—alliances, for example—are possible, but realists tend in general to view even those forms of cooperation as

[34] Van Evera, "Hard Realities," p. 19. Note also Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978), p. 139: fear is "the prime motive of international politics." In this and the following two sentences, I use qualifying phrases—"in principle," "at times," "in certain circumstances"— because the heart of the defensive realist view is its emphasis on the particular conditions, having to do most notably with the offense/defense balance, that determine the extent to which this logic comes into play. Defensive realists like Van Evera—and this is the point on which I part company with them—accept the theoretical proposition that anarchy causes violence, but stress that in practice its importance depends on the setting. The basic theoretical logic, in their view, is not very important in a defense-dominant world, or more precisely in a world where the defense is believed to have the upper hand; in such a world, people can be relatively relaxed. But in a world where the offense is believed to be dominant—where conquest is thought to be easy, where resources are thought to be highly cumulative, and where fears about the shifting military balance run deep—that logic comes into play in a major way. The defensive realists thus do not really challenge the fundamental argument that the anarchic structure of international politics is in principle a source of instability. But since their analysis focuses on a different level—on the conditions that determine in practice just how much instability there is—this argument does not loom as large for them as it does for their offensive realist friends.

[35] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 187–91. The basic idea here was not unknown to theorists like Fénelon. "We cannot abandon these towers to them without exposing ourselves to their attacks," he has one of his characters say in *Télémaque*, "and they regard them as citadels which we can use to subjugate them." Quoted in Françoise Gallouédec-Genuys, *Le Prince selon Fénelon* (Paris: PUF, 1963), p. 267. But in Fénelon's view this problem was not considered of major importance.

[36] Van Evera, "Hard Realities," p. 19. See also Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 49.

rather tenuous. The offensive realists make the point quite bluntly. Alliances, Mearsheimer writes, are "only temporary marriages of convenience"; in a "brutal" world, where "states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other," they would be foolish to put too much faith in the guarantees offered by others.[37] The general feeling among realists of all stripes is that in the final analysis, states have to rely primarily on their own resources; that fundamental fact, in their view, determines both their behavior and the basic nature of the international system.

The fundamental assumption, in other words, is that fear leads to a hardening of policy and thus to a sharpening of international tension. States fear each other, Mearsheimer argues; they know that the more powerful they are, the more secure they will be; and that is why "the international system forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other." "The more profound the fear is," he says, "the more intense is the security competition, and the more likely is war."[38] The problem with that argument is that, as Mearsheimer himself realizes, states will act aggressively only if they calculate that the benefits will outweigh the risks.[39] The fear of what war might bring might well hold a state back, especially if it is weak; the stronger state is better able to behave aggressively, but if it is strong, it has less reason to be afraid. Increased anxiety, in other words, does not necessarily lead to increased aggressiveness. It might in fact lead a state to draw in its horns, pursue more modest policies, and search more actively for political accommodations and for alliances with other powers. Such a state might also try to build up its military power. Those courses of action would not necessarily lead to an increase in tension. A successful alliance policy might have a deterrent effect and thus might actually reduce the level of risk. Even a military buildup, even if it led to an arms race, would not necessarily be a source of instability. A military competition can, in fact, be viewed as a kind of bidding war: it could serve the important political purpose of determining how a conflict would be resolved without recourse to arms, just as an art auction determines who gets which paintings. Thus Britain before 1914 outbuilds Germany in capital ships, and Britain remains the world's premier imperial power. Thus the United States is better able than the Soviet Union to sustain the burden of military spending during the later Cold War, and the Soviets end up adjusting to that basic power reality.[40]

[37] Mearsheimer, "False Promise," pp. 9, 11; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 33.

[38] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 3, 21, 32–33, 42.

[39] Ibid., p. 37.

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But are such alternative policies, and especially the policies that aim at interstate cooperation, actually viable? For an historian, one of the most striking features of contemporary American international relations theory, and not just realist theory, is the pervasiveness of the assumption that cooperation is difficult, even when interests overlap.[41] The idea that states are, as a general rule, trapped in suboptimal situations because the "obstacles to cooperation" are so great is often just taken for granted. The well-known prisoner's dilemma game, for example, is widely taken as a kind of metaphor for international politics as a whole.[42] But such notions are quite weak, both empirically and conceptually. It is simply not proven (as leading theorists themselves sometimes point out) that the sort of problem the prisoner's dilemma game illustrates actually does play a fundamental role in international political life.[43] What the empirical record suggests to an historian, moreover, is that cooperation is not particularly difficult when interests overlap: international politics, after all, is an endless series of arrangements and understandings, negotiations and accommodations, alignments and realignments.[44] Power relations are constantly shifting; political adjustments are constantly being made.[45] And the theo-

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uating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 88.

[41] One measure of how common this kind of assumption is is the fact that two leading political scientists consider the point that cooperation is actually possible when interests overlap to be a major finding; see Robert Axelrod and Robert Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions," originally published in *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (October 1985), and republished first in Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), and again in David Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). The passages in question are on pp. 108 and 113 in the Baldwin book.

[42] See, for example, Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 27. As Charles Lipson notes in his review of the Axelrod book, it is often assumed that there are "powerful analogies between this stylized game and the real world of international affairs." *American Journal of International Law* 81, no. 2 (April 1987): 470. See also Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 109n., and Jervis, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation," p. 49.

American Journal of Sociology 91, no. 6 (May 1986): 1465–66. Olson argues that one should not expect the prisoner's dilemma logic to apply to great power politics because in the real world the "players" are able to communicate with each other, and since there is a small number of "players," collective action problems are much less likely to arise.

[44] See, for example, William Langer's classic study, *European Alliances and Alignments, 1871–1890* (New York: Knopf, 1931).

[45] Churchill, in his account of the 1911 Agadir crisis, explained how the adjustment

retical arguments that one finds in the literature are not particularly strong. Waltz, for example, argues that in self-help systems in general, fears about survival make cooperation difficult, and to make the point he draws on an example from economics. "Oligopolistic markets," he writes, "limit the cooperation of firms in much the same way that international-political structures limit the cooperation of states."[46] But in industries dominated by a handful of large firms, cooperation (called "collusion" when it is frowned upon) is generally considered so easy and so attractive that antitrust laws have to be passed to prevent firms from engaging in such behavior. In this case it is not anarchy but rather the *absence* of anarchy that makes cooperation difficult. If, as Waltz believes, international politics works the same way, that would imply that international cooperation is not nearly as difficult as he and many other writers seem to think.

The idea that anarchy generates conflict is thus very much open to question. One can get a sense for the basic problem here by going back and looking at the origins of that idea, and by examining the arguments that from the start were used to support it. Rousseau was one of the first thinkers to argue more or less systematically along these lines, and his writings have had a major impact on contemporary international relations theory. The chapter, for example, in Waltz's *Man, the State and War* on the state system as a source of international conflict focuses mainly on Rousseau, and Waltz there treats Rousseau's analysis as definitive. "Rousseau's explanation of the origin of war among states," he writes, "is, in broad outline, the final one so long as we operate within a nation-state system." [47] To understand the problems with this general line of

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process worked before World War I, and in particular how the sorts of agreements that were reached reflected even subtle shifts in the structure of power—a view at variance with the notion that cooperative outcomes are grossly insensitive to the structure of power and interest. "The great powers marshalled on either side," he wrote, "preceded and protected by an elaborate cushion of diplomatic courtesies and formalities, would display to each other their respective arrays. In the forefront would be the two principal disputants, Germany and France, and echeloned back on either side at varying distances and under veils of reserves and qualifications of different density, would be drawn up the other parties to the Triple Alliance and to what was already now beginning to be called the Triple Entente. At the proper moment these seconds or supporters would utter certain cryptic words indicative of their state of mind, as a consequence of which France or Germany would step back or forward a very small distance or perhaps move slightly to the right or to the left. When these delicate rectifications in the great balance of Europe, and indeed of the world, had been made, the formidable assembly would withdraw to their own apartments with ceremony and salutations and congratulate or condole with each other in whispers on the result." Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911–1914* (New York: Scribner's, 1930), pp. 40–41.

[46] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*

argument, it thus makes sense to go back to the beginning and take a look at what Rousseau had to say on the subject.

For Rousseau the anarchic structure of international politics was the fundamental source of conflict. "All the horrors of war," he said, "take birth from the precautions [men] have taken in order to prevent them."[48] The strength of a state was "purely relative": "it feels weak so long as there are others stronger than itself." To be secure, it had to "make itself stronger than its neighbors," and it could not increase its own strength "except at their expense." Every state is driven to expand its power, simply for the sake of its security: "even if it has no need to seek for provisions beyond its borders, it searches ceaselessly for new members to give itself a more unshakeable position." States thus try to weaken, perhaps even to destroy, each other. A state of war, he argued, was therefore "natural between the powers."[49]

But Rousseau's thinking did not just stop at that point. He was very much a child of his age, and standard eighteenth-century balance of power arguments played a key role in shaping his thinking.[50] States, he went on to point out, might want to extend their power, but they could not give free rein to those inclinations. The anarchic system might have created the problem, but it also helped to solve it. The system was a source of discipline. It constrained the actual behavior of states. It was more prudent to hold on to what one had than to run substantial risks for the sake of some gain; and, given the tendency of states to balance against those reaching for excessive power, the risks of aggression were substantial indeed.[51] The balance of power mechanism, although not a perfect guarantee of peace, was more effective than many people believed: "the real strength of the existing order is, in truth, to be found

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the quotation is on p. 231. Jervis, one should note in this context, begins his "Security Dilemma" article by discussing Rousseau's argument about the problem of collective action. And Stanley Hoffmann co-edited a book of Rousseau's writings on international relations, wrote an important article on Rousseau , and called a collection of his writings *The State of War*, which was also the title of one of Rousseau's most interesting pieces on international politics.

[48] Quoted in F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 51.

[49] Rousseau, "The State of War," in Hoffmann and Fidler, *Rousseau on International Relations*, pp. 38–41; Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, p. 51. Note the echo in Waltz, "Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," p. 44: "so too will a state of war exist if all states seek only to ensure their own safety."

[50] Rousseau admired Fénelon, the most important and certainly the most widely read of the classical balance of power writers. See Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 4.

[51] Rousseau, in Hoffmann and Fidler, *Rousseau on International Relations*, pp. 62–64, 77–78.

partly in the play of conflicting policies which, in nine cases out of ten, keep each other mutually in check."[52] It was pointless and therefore foolish to try to reach for hegemony; in the system as it existed at the time, "the aggressor is always bound to find his enemy stronger than himself." War was both costly and risky, and it was wiser to keep what one had than to stake everything on a throw of the dice.[53]

The implication of this analysis, as Rousseau himself realized, was that "peace ought to come of itself." But this was a conclusion that he very much wanted to avoid:

> It may be objected that I prove too much and that, if the matter were as I put it, everyone being manifestly interested in avoiding war and the public interest combining with that of individuals for the preservation of peace, that peace ought to come of itself and last for ever without any need of federation. Given the present state of things, however, that would be to reason very ill. It is quite true that it would be much better for all men to remain always at peace. But so long as there is no security for this, everyone, having no guarantee that he can avoid war, is anxious to begin it at the moment which suits his own interest and so forestall a neighbor, who would not fail to forestall the attack in his turn at any moment favorable to himself, so that many wars, even offensive wars, are rather in the nature of unjust precautions for the protection of the assailant's own possessions than a device for seizing those of others.[54]

So wars are begun simply because there is "no guarantee" that war can be avoided in the future—that the mere possibility of war in the future leads states to start wars when conditions are deemed favorable, without regard to all the risks and problems that Rousseau himself had just spelled out? Those risks and problems, after all, remain the same, whether a state's motivation is defensive or not. The security provided by a system in which the powers "in nine cases out of ten keep each other mutually in check" no longer counts for anything; the fear that war at some point in the future *might* be unavoidable is no longer counterbalanced by the fear of what might happen if one opts for preventive war. The system is thus made to appear as far more war-prone than it actually is.

This in fact is the most basic problem with the whole body of thought that sees war as a product of the anarchic structure of international politics. Far more emphasis is placed on the forces pushing states forward

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[52] Ibid., pp. 56, 62, 64–65.

[53] Ibid., pp. 62, 77–78.

[54] Ibid., pp. 79–80. The discussion here is based on the analysis in Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace*, p. 58.

than on those holding them back; and scant attention is given to the question of why the former can be presumed to prevail over the latter. People thus tend to exaggerate the degree to which the system as such is a source of instability.

Let me give an example that relates to my own main area of interest, the Cold War. Hans Morgenthau, the leading international relations scholar of his generation, argued in 1951 that the Cold War situation was inherently unstable. The "two super-powers and their allies and satellites," he wrote, "face each other like two fighters in a short and narrow lane. They can advance and meet in what is likely to be combat, or they can retreat and allow the other side to advance into what to them is precious ground." The idea that the two fighters could just stay put and block each other's advance—that Soviet power and American power could balance each other so completely that both sides would essentially be locked into the status quo—is not even considered. Instead, according to Morgenthau,

> [T]he international situation is reduced to the primitive spectacle of two giants eying each other with watchful suspicion. They bend every effort to increase their military potential to the utmost, since this is all they have to count on. Both prepare to strike the first decisive blow, for if one does not strike it the other might. Thus, to contain or be contained, to conquer or be conquered, to destroy or be destroyed, become the watch words of the new diplomacy. Total victory, total defeat, total destruction seem to be the alternatives before the two great powers of the world.[55]

"Contain or be contained"? "Conquer or be conquered"? Why not "contain *and* be contained," or "don't conquer, but don't be conquered"? Why this unwillingness to face up to the possibility that the balance of power might be perfectly stable?

Morgenthau's argument was by no means idiosyncratic. Many writers have argued along similar lines. But the common view that the Cold War was "firmly rooted in the [bipolar] structure of international politics" (Waltz), that America and Russia were "enemies by position" (Aron), and that such conflicts are to be understood in terms of the "geometry" of conflict (Butterfield), is to my mind fundamentally mis-

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[55] Hans Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 50, 52. This book was originally published in 1951. Even as late as 1979, Morgenthau was still arguing that the world was "moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war." See Francis A. Boyle, *World Politics and International Law* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985), p. 73.

taken.[56] The United States and the Soviet Union faced each other in the heart of Europe. Neither could force the other out of the part of the continent it controlled without war, and for each the maintenance of the status quo was vastly preferable to war. Each side had a strong incentive to accommodate to fundamental power realities; Soviet power and American power could balance each other quite effectively; and if that had been the end of it—if no other considerations had come into play— the system from the start would have been quite stable.

Power constrains policy: the key thing to note about the early–Cold War period is that both sides were held back by a sense for power realities. For Stalin in particular, international politics was the politics of power. At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, he made a remark which one British diplomat considered the "high point" of that meeting. "It was not for him to teach his colleagues in this matter," the Soviet leader told Truman and Churchill, "but in politics one should be guided by the calculation of forces."[57] The Americans were also determined to take what Truman at the time called a "very realistic" line and had little

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[56] Waltz, "Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," p. 52, and also his "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 39; Aron cited in Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 44; Butterfield cited in Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics,* p. 66. Note also Raymond Aron's 1951 claim that "the bipolar structure of world politics is, in itself, unfavorable for stability"; earlier published in his *Les Guerres en chaîne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), and republished in Raymond Aron, *Une Histoire du vingtième siècle*, ed. Christian Bachelier (Paris: Plon, 1996), p. 255. Actually Aron's views were more subtle than such quotations might suggest. In his interpretation of the Cold War ideological factors loomed large, but he could still see a security dilemma-type dynamic at work. The United States and the Soviet Union, he wrote in 1948, would never accept as final a division of Europe into spheres of influence. "There is no need," he said, "to assume that either contender is striving consciously for hegemony. It is enough to assume that each is suspicious of the other's intentions, that each regards the uncertainties of the future with anxiety, and allows itself to be convinced bit by bit that sooner or later" one side or the other was bound to prevail. Ibid., pp. 229–30; earlier published in Raymond Aron, *Le Grand Schisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948). Arthur Schlesinger also interprets the Cold War in ideologically rooted security dilemma terms. See his contribution to Lloyd Gardner, Arthur Schlesinger, and Hans Morgenthau, *The Origins of the Cold War* (Waltham, Mass.: Ginn, 1970), esp. p. 68; this well-known essay was originally published in *Foreign Affairs*

different historical period, see Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), esp. chap. 19. Kagan very effectively attacks the view that the bipolar structure of international politics in Greece in the fifth century B.C. was bound to lead to war; see esp. pp. 349–50.

[57] Fourth plenary meeting of Potsdam Conference, July 20, 1945, *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, series I, vol. 1, p. 466. For the British diplomat's comment see Hayter to Howard, July 25, 1945, ibid., p. 903. "One had always known," the diplomat said, that this was Stalin's basic view, "but it was nice to get it from the horse's mouth."

trouble accepting Soviet domination of the part of Europe the Red Army occupied.[58]

Such attitudes are a very important source of stability because they provide an answer to the fundamental problem of how political conflicts can be worked out without a war: when such attitudes prevail, the structure of power roughly determines how those conflicts get resolved. Policies are attuned to the existing structure of power and are thus in harmony with each other. A world in which everyone behaves "realistically," a world in which everyone adjusts to the realities of power—that is, to the *same* realities of power—is thus a stable world. It is in large part for this reason that at least some traditional realists found such policies—those in line with political realities, those that accept the world for what it is—relatively attractive.[59] Even today, in the analysis of war causation, there is an important strand of realist thought that places great emphasis on those factors that prevent states from seeing power realities for what they are and thus from framing policies that are rational in terms of the basic structure of the system; that emphasis reflects the tacit assumption that if people had been able to see things clearly, and if they had been able to act rationally, war could have been avoided.[60]

What all this suggests is that the problem is *not* that states behave rationally in power political terms; the problem is *not* that the system pushes states to pursue aggressive policies. Problems arise when states *fail* to relate to each other on the basis of power realities because other factors come into play. A sensitivity to power realities does not, as a general rule, lead states to opt for aggressive strategies. Aggressive action is risky; the basic idea that states are driven by fear implies that they would be quite sensitive to the risks they would run if they did adopt policies of that sort, and that that sensitivity would be an effective source of restraint.

[58] Forrestal diary entry for July 28, 1945, Forrestal Diaries, vol. 2, Forrestal Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University, N.J. The result of Hitler's egomania, according to Truman, was that "we shall have a Slav Europe for a long time to come. I don't think it is so bad."

[59] "Realism," as E. H. Carr pointed out (in a passage quoted by Mearsheimer), "tends

oneself to these forces and these tendencies." E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–*
    *, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 10, quoted in Mearsheimer,
Power Politics, p. 17.

[60] See in particular Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), esp. pp. 114–24; Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," esp. pp. 380–81, 390–401; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*

Politics is in large part about striking balances—about weighing benefits against costs, about assessing risks and dealing with uncertainty, about deciding how much is enough and how much is too much. Political sense is thus a sense for the risks and costs that going too far would entail, a sense therefore for the importance of moderation and balance, compromise and restraint. The fact that warfare is embedded in a political system is therefore of fundamental importance: the use of violence is constrained and limited by the fact that it is subject to political control. This point was one of Clausewitz's most striking insights. In the famous first chapter of *On War*, he explains the tendency of warfare, *in pure theory*, to become absolute, and his argument in that section has a certain security dilemma flavor. Each side in a conflict, he says, is driven by fear: "So long as I have not overthrown my opponent I am bound to fear he may overthrow me." The two sides thus drive each other toward extremes. Each side is driven to "use force without compunction," driven to seize whatever advantage it can get, in the knowledge that if it holds back, its adversary may well get the upper hand.[61] But warfare, Clausewitz insists, is *in reality* not to be understood in that way. "War is only a branch of political activity," he writes; "it is in no sense autonomous.…Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic": the logic of war can be supplied only from the outside, through political direction and control.[62] If there is a certain tendency for conflict to spiral out of control, there is also a countervailing tendency, rooted in the fact that warfare is a political phenomenon, that works in the opposite direction. For Clausewitz the hallmark of rationality was that the latter tendency would prevail—that in a rational state, the use of force would be governed by political purpose.

But could that purpose be to expand one's own power without limit? Would such behavior be rational in power political terms? The classical eighteenth-century view was that such behavior would be irrational—that states, to preserve their own political freedom, would come together spontaneously to prevent any single power from going too far. Aggressiveness was held in check by the tendency of countervailing power to form. It was thus foolish to reach for too much power or to go too far in reducing the power of one's rivals.[63] The classical balance of

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[61] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 75–77.

[62] Ibid., p. 605.

[63] In addition to the passages from Rousseau referred to earlier, note especially the extracts in Wright, *Theory and Practice*, from Fénelon (p. 42), Defoe (pp. 47–48), and Hume (p. 64). For useful discussions of the history of balance of power thinking, see Herbert Butterfield, "The Balance of Power," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966); Martin Wight, "The Balance of Power and International Order," in Alan

power theorists thus offered counsels of moderation and restraint. They were critical when policies were pushed too far from "obstinacy and passion," as Hume said in his famous essay on the subject.[64] They were particularly critical when statesmen in time of war no longer thought in rational balance of power terms—"when once engaged," to quote Hume again, "we lose all concern for ourselves and our posterity, and consider only how we may best annoy the enemy."[65] From their point of view, power was too precious to be wasted on projects that, when examined closely, made little political sense. The political equilibrium of Europe might be worth fighting for, but even then the goal was to be limited. Enemy aspirations had to be checked, but you had to take care to "not reduce your enemy too low."[66] The system thus served to constrain state behavior. To the extent it was effective, it provided a certain degree of security and created a certain degree of stability.

Indeed, the European state system was seen as "a kind of society," "a sort of republic," whose members were bound together by a common interest in the "maintenance of order and the preservation of liberty."[67] In this system the balance of power principle played a fundamental role. A balanced distribution of power guaranteed the basic political

James, ed., *The Bases of International Order* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); and M. S. Anderson, "Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Balance of Power," in Ragnhild Hatton and M. S. Anderson, eds., *Studies in Diplomatic History* (London: Longman, 1970). For the most thorough account of the early writings on this question, see Ernst Kaeber's dissertation: *Die Idee des europäischen Gleichgewichts in der publizistischen Literatur vom 16. bis zur Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Duncken, 1906). (Only the first part, covering the early period, was ever actually published.) Note also the bibliographical essay in Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, pp. 311–25.

[64] David Hume, "Of the Balance of Power" (1752), in Wright, *Theory and Practice*, p. 64.

[65] Ibid., p. 64.

[66] Fénelon in Wright, *Theory and Practice*, p. 42.

[67] See the well-known extracts from Fénelon (c. 1700) and Vattel (1758) in Wright, *Theory and Practice*, pp. 39, 41, 71–72, and the quotations from Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire in Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace,* pp. 57–58, 162, 163. Note also Niklas Vogt, *Über die europäische Republik*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt, 1787–92); Vogt is of particular interest because he was one of Metternich's teachers. This general idea, it should be noted, was not new to the eighteenth century; note, for example, the extract from Botero (1605) in Wright, *Theory and Practice*, p. 21; it in fact has roots in the Middle Ages and indeed in ancient Rome. On the "idea of international society," see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Soci-*

rights of the European states, and a general acceptance of the principle
that power needed to be balanced and that aims needed to be limited
could be an important source of stability. The principle of the balance of
power thus became, as Martin Wight remarks, "the first article of the
unwritten constitution of the states-system."[68]

Contemporary realist writers still place great emphasis on the bal-
ance of power mechanism, and Waltz in particular considers it to be of
fundamental importance. But the striking thing here is that in Waltz's
theory balancing does not lead to peace: his theory, a theory in which
the balance of power plays such a prominent role, he says explains the
"dismal recurrence" of war "through the millennia."[69] But shouldn't
the balance of power mechanism be a force for peace? The system
teaches its lessons; attempts to achieve hegemony have repeatedly been
turned back. As Waltz himself points out, what this means is that the
problem lies at the unit level. The system may teach its lessons, but
ambitious governments refuse to listen. "The leaders of expansionist
states," he writes, "have nevertheless been able to persuade themselves
that skillful diplomacy and clever strategy would enable them to tran-
scend the normal processes of balance-of-power politics."[70] This, how-
ever, simply underscores the point that the problem does not lie at the
system level, and indeed that systemic forces have a stabilizing effect.

One of the key arguments made by the eighteenth-century balance of
power writers was that the state system could be regarded as a "kind of
republic"—that the fundamental, spontaneous balance of power mech-
anism, plus the political norms that had grown up around it, provided
the basis for a kind of political system. States in such a world need not
act in a purely selfish way. They might to a certain extent come to iden-
tify their interests with the interests of the system as a whole. They
might be willing, as Salisbury later put it, to bear some share in the

[68] Wight, "The Balance of Power and International Order," p. 102. Friedrich von Gentz,
in his *Fragments on the Balance of Power* (1806), in a well-known passage referred explicitly
to the balance of power as a constitutional principle. See the extract in Wright, *Theory and
Practice*, p. 94. This point has a particular importance, given Gentz's ties to Metternich
and the role he played at the Congress of Vienna.

[69] Waltz, "War in Neorealist Theory," p. 44. Randall Schweller makes a similar point.
"The notion that states would adopt aggressive policies to acquire security," he writes,
"simply does not square with the thrust of Waltz's argument, namely, that expansion is
self-defeating because the system induces balancing behavior. In Waltz's scheme, such
behavior is irrational." Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias," p. 118. See also Jack
Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell Uni-
versity Press, 1991), p. 11.

[70] Waltz, "War in Neorealist Theory," pp. 48–49. The argument about the importance of
the lessons the system teaches plays an important role in defensive realist thought. See
especially Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Be-
tween the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 68–69.

government of the "great international republic" as the price they would have to pay to enjoy the benefits of such a system.[71] To the extent that anarchy leads to balancing and balancing leads to that kind of behavior, a system without supranational authority might in this way as well have a certain stability.

But older insights of this sort only half-survive in contemporary realist thought. Waltz, for example, argues both sides of the issue. In one passage, he takes it for granted that only selfish behavior is to be expected. Governments, he says, are always being told to "act for the sake of the system and not for their own narrowly defined advantage." But these urgings are pointless; states have to concentrate on their own narrow interests; they "have to do whatever they think necessary for their own preservation." "With each country constrained to take care of itself," he says, "no one can take care of the system."[72] But later on in the same book, he takes exactly the opposite line. "Great power," he points out, "gives its possessors a big stake in their system and the ability to act for its sake. For them management becomes both worthwhile and possible."[73] The issue is easy to resolve historically. As Robert Jervis points out (citing an article by Paul Schroeder), "[I]t is clear that states-

[71] Salisbury, "The Terms of Peace," p. 556. It is important to note that in purely power political terms, Britain would have profited from the development of an antagonism between the two strongest continental powers, who would be prevented from ganging up against their great island neighbor, who would each have an interest in bidding for British support, and who could be threatened with a tilt toward the adversary power if British interests were not adequately accommodated. But Salisbury's interest in the stability of the system was such that he was willing to forgo the advantages that bad Franco-German relations would almost automatically bring Britain: the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine was opposed in spite of the positive effect it would have had on Britain's power position, narrowly defined.

[72] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 109. Note also ibid., p. 91: "no state intends to participate in the formation of a structure by which it and others will be constrained." But in fact states *are* often willing to help build such structures, and indeed it is precisely because they know that in such a system "others will be constrained" that they are normally willing to accept such limits on their own freedom of action. In other words, there is nothing in theory that would prevent them from reaching the conclusion that, given the benefits of such a system, this price might well be worth paying; and if enough states make a judgment of that sort, a constructed system might well come into being. In fact, one can go further still and note that in certain circumstances constraints may make sense even in purely unilateral terms: a strategy of "burning one's bridges" and thus of limiting one's own freedom of action, no matter what other countries do, may well put a state in a stronger position. The delegation to the NATO commander during the Eisenhower period of the authority to begin nuclear operations, a fundamental part of the NATO system in the 1950s, is an important case in point. On this issue, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 163–73. On the political significance of the fact that the U.S. government's hands were somewhat tied by this structure, see chapter 5 below.

[73] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 195; also p. 198 and chapter 9 in general.

men often do think in systemic terms, not only in seeking to anticipate how others will respond to their moves, but also in seeing their countries as part of a larger whole."[74] The peacemakers at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, especially Metternich and Castlereagh, were very much concerned with the stability of the system as a whole.[75] A policy of this sort, moreover, can make perfect sense in power political terms, above all for status quo powers like Britain and Austria in 1815. The basic point is worth making once again: balance of power thinking, the sort of thinking that inspired statesmen like Metternich and Castlereagh, was very much within the realist tradition; what this example shows is that a world in which power considerations loom large is not necessarily an unstable world and that there are ways in which a deep concern for the structure of power can be a source of stability.

Does this mean therefore that there is nothing to the argument about anarchic structure generating conflict? Is it the case, for example, that a world of simple security-seekers—that is, a world where every state would be happy to live with things as they were, if it could be sure it could keep what it had—would necessarily be perfectly stable? Some scholars do in fact argue along those lines.[76] But to draw that conclusion is, I think, to go too far. It is quite clear that serious problems can have essentially structural causes.

The Cold War is a major case in point. With Europe divided at the end of World War II, one might have thought that each side had little choice but to accept the other side's domination of its half of the continent and that the basic result would be a simple spheres of influence system. In such a system, the fundamental rule would be that each side would have a free hand on its side of the line of demarcation in Europe; if that rule had applied without exception, one would have had a perfectly stable international order right from the start. The problem was that there *was* one great exception to that rule, and that had to do with Germany. This was the one case in which the Soviets could not give the western powers a free hand to do whatever they wanted in their part of Europe. The USSR could not remain passive while West Germany recovered her full independence and with it the freedom to develop her military power. This was a very understandable concern, given the fact that the Soviets were in effective control of half of prewar German territory, and given the sort of military power even West Germany was

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[74] Jervis, *System Effects,* p. 137.

[75] See, for example, Castlereagh to Liverpool, February 6, 1814, quoted in Phillips, *The Confederation of Europe,* p. 67n., and the quotation from Metternich in Kissinger, *A World Restored,* p. 13. Note also the discussion of the Vienna system in Robert Jervis, "Security Regimes," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 362–68.

[76] See Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias," p. 91.

capable of generating once all the constraints were removed. But the western powers—out of a sense of weakness and vulnerability, and out of the fear that if they did not adopt a liberal policy, all of Germany might be lost—felt they had to make West Germany a kind of partner. They therefore had to restore the Germans' political rights, and they had to build up German power and make it a part of the western defense system—all the more so, since movement along that road had led to a more active and more threatening Soviet policy, which in turn had underscored the importance of building up the military power of the western bloc. Looking at the story, it is hard not to see a security dilemma–type dynamic at play. Both sides were interested in maintaining their positions; the policies of both sides were rooted in fear, not greed; and the interaction of those policies led to a certain spiraling-up of tension.[77]

These points about the Cold War bear directly on the issues we are concerned with here. If Russia and Germany faced a security dilemma in their dealings with each other, then that problem was ultimately essentially solved by the intervention of the western powers and the eventual construction of a "security regime" based largely on the military strength of those outside powers.[78] But to characterize that development in those terms is to cast in the language of contemporary international relations theory the basic insights of classical balance of power theorists like Fénelon: the goal was to avoid engagements which would "prove too beneficial to your ally" and to take care "not to reduce your enemy too low."[79] Thanks to the action of third powers, neither Germany nor Russia would become strong enough to threaten the other, and neither would be too vulnerable to the threat posed by the other. The modern theory thus connects up with a body of thought with deep roots in the past; the modern notion of a "security regime" links up with the classical idea of the world of the great powers as a "sort of republic"; and our ideas today acquire more depth and texture when we

[77] This in a nutshell is the basic argument about the origins of the Cold War laid out in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, esp. chapters 1–3. See also the important book by James McAllister, *No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943–1954* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). Note also the fascinating chapter on the origins of the Cold War (chap. 6) in Dale Copeland's *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). Copeland interprets the Cold War in structural terms, but his is what one might call a "first derivative" structural argument—that is, an argument that emphasizes the importance of the way power relations were changing over time.

[78] See Jervis, "Security Regimes," and Marc Trachtenberg, "The Making of a Political System: The German Question in International Politics, 1945–1963," in Paul Kennedy and William Hitchcock, eds., *From War to Peace: Altered Strategic Landscapes in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

[79] Fénelon in Wright, *Theory and Practice*, p. 42.

see them as new incarnations of important ideas that have been around for centuries.

A second and perhaps more basic point for our present purposes is that the Cold War case in itself shows that fundamental problems *can*, to a certain extent, be structural in nature. A major conflict *can* to a certain degree be rooted in a clash of essentially defensive, status quo-oriented, policies. But if this is a structural interpretation, it is rather different from the sort of structural explanation one finds in the literature. For one thing, it does not view conflict as automatic—that is, as spontaneously generated by the simple bipolar structure of power. It in fact took quite some time for the mechanism to get charged up: it took a good deal of Soviet aggressiveness, vis-à-vis Turkey and Iran in 1945–46, to get the machinery moving. For another thing, the dynamic here is political and not military in nature. The nature of the military system in place at the time—the degree to which it emphasized offense over defense, for example—and the specific character of the weaponry in question—the non-distinguishability of offensive and defensive forces, for instance—were not major factors.[80] The heart of the problem was that those forces might be in German (and not, for example, in American) hands. The problem, in other words, is to be understood not in general terms—that is, as rooted in the "bipolar structure of international politics"—but rather in more historically specific terms, having to do with a particular set of problems relating to Germany and to Germany's place in the international political system.

For our present purposes, however, these are second-order issues. The basic point is that security dilemma-type dynamics certainly do exist and do play a significant role in international politics. The Cold War is an important case in point, but it is not the only one, and other examples could be cited. But if the importance of this kind of mechanism is not to be dismissed out of hand, it is not to be exaggerated either. Systemic forces of this sort play a role, but not as great a role as theorists (and occasionally even historians[81]) sometimes seem to sug-

[80] In their analysis of the security dilemma dynamic, political scientists tend to emphasize military factors of the sort alluded to here. See Jervis's pathbreaking article, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," esp. pp. 186–214. This type of argument gave rise to an important school of thought, sometimes called "offense/defense theory"; note in particular Van Evera, *Causes of War*, esp. chaps. 6 and 7. It is frequently argued that war is more likely to break out in a world that places a great premium on offensive military strategies, and indeed some scholars claim the effect is so strong that in such a world wars can occur "inadvertently" or "accidentally"; the First World War is generally offered as the main case in point. For an analysis of that particular argument, see my article, "The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment," in Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[81] Two very important historical works have recently developed interpretations based on this kind of thinking: Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the*

gest. States to be sure are sensitive to possible threats to their indepen-
dence, but they can deal with such problems in various ways. It is a
mistake to assume that their only recourse is to adopt policies that their
adversary will view as threatening, and that such situations inevitably
lead to a constant ratcheting-up of tension. Power can balance power;
threats can be checked; accommodations can be worked out; states can
be relatively relaxed. Above all, it is a mistake to suppose (as Rousseau
did) that states would go to war simply because they thought that an
armed conflict *might* break out sometime in the future. It is only when
people's sense for the level of risk crosses a certain threshold that pre-
ventive war thinking begins to play an important role, and it never
dominates policy unless real threats based on an adversary's actual be-
havior loom large on the horizon. The forces that generate that sense of
risk and bring it to the point where preventive war thinking kicks in are
the fundamental factors in international political life, and generally
speaking they are not systemic in nature.

It is a basic error, therefore, to see conflict as essentially driven by
systemic forces—that is, as essentially rooted (in more than a merely
permissive sense) in the anarchic structure of international politics.
And if the system is not a basic source of instability, then it follows that
the real problems are generated by forces welling up at the unit level—
forces that give rise to policies that are not rational in power political
terms. Problems develop, as a rule, not because the system pushes
states into conflict with each other, but because states overreach them-
selves and pursue policies that make little sense in terms of the incen-
tives the system creates. Such problems can develop in an anarchic
world, but this fact does not mean that the system itself is a source of
instability, any more than the fact that the market mechanism is imper-
fect—and that in a market system unemployment, for example, is pos-
sible—means that the market mechanism as such plays a destabilizing
role in economic life.[82]

The system, as Waltz says, "shapes and shoves," but states often fight
back, and it is that resistance, and not the system itself, that lies at the
heart of the problem.[83]

Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), and
Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1994). For a discussion and a critique, see my review articles in *Orbis*, Summer 1995
(for Leffler) and Winter 1996 (for Schroeder), and also the exchange of correspondence
with Schroeder in *Orbis*, Spring 1996.

[82] This is an allusion to the Waltzian argument that "wars occur because there is noth-
ing to prevent them" and that the system—that is, the absence of centralized authority—
is a fundamental cause of war. See Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, pp. 182, 188, 232. Note
also Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," p. 8.

[83] Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," p. 24.

A Theory of War or a Theory of Peace?

Realism, and especially neorealism, according to Paul Schroeder, "is a good theory for explaining war, but not peace."[84] When I first read that comment, I did not quite know what Schroeder had in mind. I was writing a book on how a stable international system had taken shape during the Cold War period, and the interpretation I was developing was very much grounded in what I took to be a realist understanding of international politics. But it gradually became clear to me that Schroeder had been on to something—something important, and something that for some reason had escaped me entirely. Schroeder, it turned out, was simply echoing what realist writers themselves had been saying. A number of leading theorists, Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, for example, clearly did think of realism as a theory of war. They did take the view that the "anarchic nature of international politics" led to "cut-throat behavior among states."[85] Not only that, but they seemed to take it for granted that this was a reality that simply had to be accepted. "Realism," according to Mearsheimer, "is a pessimistic theory. It depicts a world of stark and harsh competition, and it holds out little promise of making it more benign."[86]

What sort of policy guidance follows from that basic theory? For Mearsheimer, at least, the implications are quite clear. "States *should* behave according to the dictates of offensive realism," he says, "because it outlines the best way to survive in a dangerous world." If great powers "want to survive," they "should always act like good offensive realists"—and given the way he defines offensive realism, what that means is that they should be "primed for offense," that they should "act aggressively toward each other," that they should take advantage of every chance they get to "amass as much power" as they can.[87]

There is no quarreling with Mearsheimer's logic here. If international politics really worked the way he says it does—if one accepts his basic premise about how an anarchic system works, about how anarchy generates conflict, even if states are only interested in making themselves secure—then his conclusions about policy follow as a matter of course. If the rules of the game cannot be changed, one has little choice but to play that game as effectively as possible.

[84] Paul Schroeder, Letter to the Editor, *Orbis* (Spring 1996): 308. That letter was a reply to a review I had done of Schroeder's *The Transformation of European Politics*, in which I had criticized him for arguing that balance of power policies were inherently destabilizing (see note 81 in this chapter).

[85] Mearsheimer's paraphrase of a "very important" Waltz argument, in the book review cited in n. 2 of this chapter.

[86] Mearsheimer, "False Promise," p. 48, esp. n. 182.

[87] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 3, 11–12, 35. Emphasis his.

But if one accepts that basic premise, how can moderate policies be defended? Many realists, especially the defensive realists, as a general rule favor moderate policies. Is that basic approach to policy consistent with the view that anarchy generates conflict? One can argue that even if that view is correct in principle, in practice the forces pushing states toward aggressive policies are much weaker than that way of looking at the world might at first glance seem to suggest. Aggressive policies might simply not be viable for reasons having to do, for example, with the nature of military technology. The defense might be so strong that aggressive strategies would probably fail. In such circumstances, for very practical reasons, moderate policies would make sense. But those who would argue along these lines would be basing their support for a policy of moderation on what in the final analysis are essentially contingent factors. What if, for example, military technology actually did favor the offense? What if it were fairly easy for one strong country to stamp out potential threats by means of a highly aggressive policy? Would such a policy then be worth adopting for that reason alone?

If the answer is no, then what this suggests is that there should be a more fundamental basis—a political and not just a military basis—for favoring relatively restrained policies. And some leading theorists who support such policies do in fact point to one fundamental political reason why overly ambitious policies are to be avoided—that is, why they are not favored by the system. If a state tries to amass too much power, they say, the other states in the system will feel threatened and will thus come together to oppose that state. The imperative to balance, in their view, is so strong that it makes sense for even strong states to draw in their horns rather provoke the formation of a hostile coalition.

But to place so much emphasis on balancing is to put the political argument for a moderate policy on a relatively weak and vulnerable base. Excessive reliance on the argument about balancing has led to exaggerated claims about the effectiveness and automaticity of the balance of power mechanism. Balancing coalitions do from time to time come into being, but more slowly and with much greater difficulty than people seem to realize. During the period when Napoleon was at the peak of his power, the other continental states tried hard to reach an accommodation with him; balancing was no automatic reflex.[88] In the case of the pre–World War I period, the gradual formation of the Triple Entente is not to be understood as a simple response to the growth of German power. It was not fear of German power—fear that Germany was reaching for hegemony in Europe—that led Russia to form an alliance with France; indeed, the Russians had been more eager to remain

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[88] For a very persuasive analysis, see Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*. Schroeder's conclusions on this point can be found at the end of the chap. 4 of that book.

on good terms with Germany when that country was at the height of its power under Bismarck in the 1880s. As for the British, they turned against Germany only after it had become clear that the Germans had in effect turned against them. They never opted for a policy of balancing German power simply because Germany's war-making potential had grown so dramatically in the late nineteenth century; a strong Germany would have been an attractive partner if her policy had been directed simply toward holding the line against Russia. And finally, with regard to the Hitler period, balancing behavior fell far short of what might have been expected, given the nature of the threat; indeed, Hitler was able to go as far as he did only because the balancing mechanism was so weak. The western powers opted for a policy of appeasement until early 1939. The USSR entered the anti-Nazi coalition only after the Soviet Union was invaded in 1941. As for the United States, that country certainly ended up playing a key role in the anti-German coalition, but President Roosevelt, although he was successful in the end, had tremendous difficulty bringing the United States into the war.

The point here is that the "spontaneous" balance of power mechanism is not particularly strong, and it therefore makes little sense to rest the political argument for moderation and restraint too narrowly on claims about balancing. The argument for a relatively moderate policy (if one accepts it, at least as a general rule) needs to be put on a much broader basis—a basis that can be brought more to the surface in two ways. First, one can try to bring out, drawing on what can be found in traditional realist thought, a whole range of arguments that point toward relatively restrained policies, and this is what I tried to do in the previous sections of this article. But one can also look at what leading realists have to say when they talk about policy issues, and one can then try to draw out the basic theoretical assumptions implicit in those policy arguments. This is what I want to try to do in this section. The assumption here is that the key to understanding the heart of realist thinking is to focus on policy, and especially on the particular policy arguments developed by the leading realist writers. The idea is that arguments about policy are of central importance because it is in this area that theory meets reality: it is the confrontation with reality that draws out what is fundamental in the theory. What then do major theorists have to say about policy issues, and what do their policy arguments reveal about their basic thinking about international politics in general?

Realist writers of course have a good deal to say about contemporary affairs, and their views are naturally rooted in their fundamental understanding of international politics. Those policy arguments tend to have a certain cast. Realists dislike highly ideological policies and pre-

fer policies based on interest and attuned to power realities. Their aim, as a general rule (Mearsheimer is perhaps an exception here), is not to make their own country as strong as possible; the ultimate goal of the American realists is not a world dominated by the United States. Their call for "realist" policies—that is, for policies that are rational in terms of the basic structure of the system as they understand it—is rooted in the assumption that such policies make for a better world, a world in which their own country could achieve its basic goals, and above all provide for its own security, without a war. If they really believe that systemic pressures pushed states into conflict with each other, realist theorists presumably would call upon governments to *resist* those pressures; they would urge governments to use whatever room for maneuver they had to struggle against the basic logic of the system, or perhaps even to try to change the basic nature of the system. But one does not quite find them taking that line.[89] Their real assumption, in fact, is that their policy prescriptions would *not*, if followed, drive states into conflict with each other, for otherwise they would hardly have embraced them so readily. In practice, they take it for granted that "realist" policies do not in themselves lead to war and instability; and they in fact tend to criticize governments for failing to adopt policies of that sort.

The Waltz case is of particular interest in this regard. He looks back on the Cold War with a certain degree of nostalgia. During that period, Waltz says, America and Russia "constrained each other."[90] "So long as the world was bipolar," he says, "the United States and the Soviet Union held each other in check."[91] All this is rather different from the

[89] The case of Hans Morgenthau is an exception here, but for that very reason is quite important in the present context. Morgenthau did believe that a system of sovereign states was prone to war. He was therefore an advocate of a world state, whose eventual establishment he considered "indispensable for the survival of the world." He in fact complained in the preface to the third edition of *Politics Among Nations* about "still being told that I believe in the prominence of the international system based upon the nation state, although the obsolescence of the nation state and the need to merge it into supranational organizations of a functional nature was already one of the main points of the first edition of 1948." It is as though an acceptance of the view that a system of sovereign states produces conflict and war had led even the premier realist thinker of his generation to take a view that would now be viewed as very much at variance with the basic tenor of realist thought. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and* , 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 539 and preface; see also p. 569 and chap. 29, "The World State," esp. pp. 501 and 509. Morgenthau had in fact come to this conclusion about the need for a world state very early on. See the excellent study by Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), pp. 140–41.

[90] Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," p. 28.

[91] Kenneth Waltz, "America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24, no. 4 (December 1991): 669. The assumption that power corrupts and therefore needs to be checked has long been a mainstay of conservative

earlier view that a great conflict like the Cold War was a simple product of the bipolar "structure of international politics."[92] That structure is seen now more as an element of stability than as an engine of conflict. The assumption now is that American power and Soviet power balanced each other quite effectively during the Cold War period, and that that was the bedrock upon which the peace was built. The broader implication is that a system based on power is not inherently unstable. The basic point now is not that power provokes power, but rather that power constrains power, that power accommodates power, and that a system in which power confronts power is therefore to a considerable extent self-stabilizing.

The assumption that the Cold War system was stable because Soviet power and American power balanced each other so effectively implied to leading neorealist theorists that the collapse of that system would be a major source of instability. American power would no longer be balanced by countervailing power. And indeed, as Waltz has pointed out, the United States during the post–Cold War period "has behaved as unchecked powers have usually done. In the absence of counter-weights, a country's internal impulses prevail, whether fueled by liberal or by other urges."[93] Yes, he admits, realists like himself had been wrong to think that "the end of the Cold War would mean the end of NATO." But that error "arose not from a failure of realist theory to comprehend international politics, but from an underestimation of America's folly."[94] The expansion of NATO was a particularly foolish policy, and Waltz lists a whole series of reasons why that policy was misguided.[95] History, he says, shows that magnanimity in victory makes sense while the opposite policy generally leads to trouble. But "rather than

thought, and, as Arnold Wolfers pointed out, what this implies is that a "preference for equilibrium" is not necessarily to be understood as a "mere rationalization of national interest." "Men with a conservative bent of mind," Wolfers noted, "need find nothing shocking, therefore, in the suggestion that all nations, including their own, should be restrained by counterpower and thereby be spared temptations as well as prevented from abusing their power." Arnold Wolfers, "The Balance of Power in Theory and Practice," in Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), p. 121. The point applies both to international and to domestic politics. It was a basis, for example, of the American founding fathers' belief in the

See Waltz, "Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," p. 52, and Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," p. 39. It is important to note, however, that long before the end of the Cold War, Waltz, as is well known, also argued that bipolarity was a source of stability. See especially Kenneth Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (Summer 1964), and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 8, esp. pp. 170–76.

[93] Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," p. 24.

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learning from history, the United States is repeating past errors by extending its influence over what used to be the province of the vanquished."[96]

A wise policy, in Waltz's view—and that means, presumably, a policy in line with basic realist principles—would thus have been to avoid kicking Russia while she was down. American behavior—the policy of extending the U.S.-dominated world eastward, indeed the policy of creating a "world order" dominated by American power—was not viewed as only to be expected, given the basic realist understanding of how the world works. But if it was unexpected, this could only be because the most fundamental realist principles suggest that a rational state would behave in a very different way. And Waltz himself makes it quite clear how he thinks America should behave. The United States, he thinks, ought to pursue a more modest policy, a policy that would "give other countries at long last the chance to deal with their own problems and make their own mistakes."[97] But the problem (and he cites Fénelon in this connection) is that countries with a great surplus of power "cannot long be expected to behave with decency and moderation."[98]

When Waltz condemns the extravagance of America's post–Cold War policy and talks in more general terms about how "the selfishness of those who tend to their own narrowly defined interests" is to be preferred to the "arrogance of the global burden-bearers," he is really expressing his appreciation for a system in which policies are constrained—that is, for a system in which competitive pressures limit what states can try to do. "Close competition," he writes, "subordinates ideology to interest; states that enjoy a margin of power over their closest competitors are led to pay undue attention to minor dangers and pursue fancies abroad that reach beyond the fulfillment of interests narrowly defined in terms of security."[99] His basic policy prescription for a country like the United States today is thus that it should act *as though* its power were more narrowly circumscribed—*as though* it were constrained by structural realities to pursue a policy based on a narrower definition of political interest. But that policy prescription reflects a more basic assumption about how a highly competitive system works. It reflects the assumption that in such a system policies are restrained and restraint leads to a kind of stability. If Waltz recommends that states

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[96] Ibid., p. 37.

[97] Ibid., p. 30.

[98] Waltz, "America as a Model for the World?" p. 668.

[99] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 205. Fénelon (who Waltz admires and sometimes cites) had also talked about how states of limited power, "void of the blind inconsiderate presumption which is incident to the fortunate," were obliged to pursue prudent and relatively moderate policies. Wright, *Theory and Practice*, p. 44.

act as though they lived in such a system, that can only mean that he really believes that such a system is not so bad after all—that is, that a highly competitive anarchic system is not inherently prone to war.

If this is the real thinking of even the most hard-core neorealists—and this type of argument does sometimes come to the surface in their writings[100]—is there any point to *not* making it more explicit? If it were true that a Realpolitik world—a world where state behavior was based on power and interest defined in power political terms—was inherently unstable, if it were true that in a world not governed by supranational authority, states were constantly driven into conflict with each other, then the argument for a very ambitious American policy, a policy whose goal was an American-dominated world order, would be quite strong. But that conclusion is rejected; what is puzzling is that people seem so attached to the premises on which it is based.

To assume that a system of states behaving rationally in power political terms is inherently brutal, violent, and prone to war is to admit that realist principles are not a recipe for stability. To proclaim that the basic structure of international politics leads to "cut-throat behavior among states" and that realism "holds out little promise" of making the world more benign is thus in a sense to hoist the white flag. The effect is to leave the field clear to those calling for a radical transformation of world politics—to those who, like Woodrow Wilson, indulge in "the colossal conceit of thinking that they could suddenly make international life over into what they believed to be their own image," that is, to those advocating the sorts of policies to which the realists are most opposed.[101] If that line of argument is to be answered effectively, the standard way in which realism is presented needs to be recast, and fundamental ideas that have been part of the realist tradition for centuries and are implicit even in certain contemporary realist arguments have to be allowed to rise to the surface once again.

The realists, after all, have little to be ashamed of. Their basic philosophy, from Fénelon through Waltz, has always—or almost always—placed a great premium on moderation and restraint. To be sure, no realist would deny that sometimes a developing threat is so great that a warlike policy might be in order. But the basic thrust of realist thought is to insist on the importance of keeping things under control. If major

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[100] See esp. the section in Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* called "The Virtues of Anarchy," pp. 111–14. Note in particular the argument on p. 113 that the anarchic international system is a political system *par excellence*. The realm of power, Waltz points out, is the realm of accommodation and mutual adaptation; "the constant possibility that force will be used limits manipulations, moderates demands, and serves as an incentive for the settlement of disputes" (pp. 113–14).

[101] Kennan, *American Diplomacy,* p. 69 (slightly altered).

conflicts have developed, it was not because realist principles have shaped policy, but rather because very different sorts of impulses have come to govern the behavior of great states. Looking back at the history of international politics over the past two hundred years, studying episode after episode, one fundamental conclusion emerges. Power political thinking is not the problem: the problem is that there is not enough of it. Policies that are rational in power political terms are not the fundamental source of international conflict: in themselves, by and large, they help make for a stable international order. To understand why this is the case is to understand why realism is at its heart a theory of peace, and why it ought to be recognized as such.