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War is Peace: A Review of Orwell's Wartime Vision in *Nineteen Eighty Four* and its
Implications for the Future of Warfare

Over the past century, the global landscape of war¹ has changed profoundly, whether by the advent of trench warfare, toxic gases, or, most strikingly, nuclear weapons. Marred by two world wars and a series of international conflicts associated with the deadlock test of wills that was the Cold War, the future of the geopolitical landscape was far from certain. After World War II, George Orwell wrote the quintessential dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, which painted a dark world that drew disturbing caricatures of the great world powers from this latest war. Looking back, we have passed that title year, but the tradition of Orwell's predictions have stayed alive within our culture. In the novel, war is a critical element of the INGSOC society; the government is in a constant state of war, wherein the three major powers fight a limited war with minimal loss of life and minimal territorial gain. Current predictions of the future of global warfare usually focus on the decentralization of conflicts against enemies like terrorists or the implications of a MAD² or whether an equilibrium peace state will eventually be reached. We tacitly assume that our goal state is a peaceful, war-free system. However, the possibility of an Orwellian perpetual-war landscape is rarely considered, despite the fact that many of the conditions specified in Orwell's world are similar to conditions found in our contemporary world. We must ask ourselves: is an Orwellian state of perpetual, limited war possible, and if so, is it a likely future? Given the current balance of power, international mutual nuclear deterrence,

¹ War will be defined, unless otherwise noted, as an international conflict involving violence.

² Mutually assured destruction; a state in which both countries are able to fully absorb a first strike nuclear attack and launch second strike counter-value attacks capable of destruction of the opposing society.

and intertwined nature of economic interests, the future of warfare described in *Nineteen Eighty Four* is not likely; however, it is not a negligibly improbable possibility, and elements of his war landscape, namely the limited goals and scope have already manifest.

In Orwell's world, there is an extreme "tri-polar" balance of power; there are only three nations—Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia—which are culturally distinct and each control a roughly equivalent share of the global resources. The countries fight "a warfare of limited aims between combatants who are unable to destroy one another³, have no material cause for fighting, and are not divided by any genuine ideological difference."⁴ In this world, resources are viewed to be cumulative, as the borderlands which are in contention hold cheap labor and mineral resources.⁵ However, as each country ostensibly makes enough to care for its populace, these resources are aggrandized solely for militaristic benefit in future conflicts. Conquest is incredibly difficult, both due to the similarity of weaponry, the cultural/ethnic differences between countries that make assimilation of conquered peoples almost impossible, and because of the nuclear capabilities (in which defending countries have an advantage because they will almost unconditionally be willing to risk use of nuclear weaponry and take larger losses in defense of their freedom.) The difficulty of conquest leads to limited aims of war, allowing "very small numbers of people, mostly highly trained specialists [to fight], and causes comparatively few

³ This is implicitly "unable to destroy each other [without mutual destruction];" the Orwellian world is post nuclear-revolution and the countries have the capacity to bomb each other mercilessly, but choose not to, after having nuclear usage on a large scale in the Nineteen-fifties; this destruction "convince[ed] the ruling groups of all countries that a few more atomic bombs would mean the end of organized society, and hence of their own power." (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pg. 195)

⁴ Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1949), 195.

⁵ Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1949), 188.

casualties... [they fight] on the vague frontiers ... [and on] strategic spots on the sea lane,”⁶ which reduces the conflict to a test of strategy and alliances (which flip-flop roughly every half-decade) and a quest for better military technology that will give the country of discovery a simultaneous first strike advantage and window of opportunity to deliver a first-strike counterforce attack that is so debilitating that the enemy’s second strike counter-value or counterforce capabilities are destroyed.⁷ All of this culminates in a state of perpetual war, which consumes the excesses of the proletariat industrial production, while keeping the populace in poverty to keep them controllable. The populace is then further controlled by fear of the enemy rival state and can be coerced into accepting the dismal lifestyle or into adoring the savior that is “Big Brother” by justifying all actions as necessity for wartime. As the war is perpetual, there is a pseudo-first strike advantage for surprise switches of alliances and nominal advantages achieved by better fighting technology; however, the conflict is essentially stagnant and given the aforementioned limited amount of human life that is expended in these unending conflicts, this perpetual war, *de facto*, is a twisted sort of peace; this gives rise to one of the iconic Party slogans “War is Peace.”⁸

At the heart of this argument lies the question of whether perpetual war is possible and if so, at all probable for our world. One of the central factors on Orwell’s world is the equitability of resource and war making capacity of the major powers; the balance of power is extremely multipolar. The global balance of power, to a large extent, sets the stage for how war will occur.

⁶ Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1949), 187

⁷ Orwell, on page 196 describes: “The plan is... to acquire a ring of bases completely encircling one or other of the rival states... [and launch an attack] with effects so devastating as to make retaliation impossible.”

⁸ Orwell states on page 200: “A peace that was truly permanent would be the same as permanent war... is the inner meaning of the Party slogan: WAR IS PEACE.”

Economically, the world is multi-polar, with the economic giants being the United States, the European Union, and the growing power of China. This is relevant, because historically, economic/industrial might has been a good proxy to militaristic capabilities; however, in a strictly militaristic sense, the United States maintains a unilateral advantage with superior technology, yielding a militarily unipolar world. Practically, the military situation seems to manifest as a unipolar situation (i.e. military dominance trumps economic dominance); if we look at the behavior of historically bipolar or multipolar systems, which have traditionally resulted in large scale global wars between those powers, with minor powers bandwagoning to one side or another (i.e. the Cold War between the US and USSR, and conflicts between Britain and France for centuries prior to the 20th century) we see a disparity between those situations and that which we currently see. The US has, post Cold War, been acting unilaterally and in a pseudo-policing capacity, which is more characteristic of a sole power than of a shared power.

Furthermore, with respect to the centralization of power, not all is centralized in these three powers; other countries, like India, have significant portions of the global population (and thus industrial and war-making capability) and nuclear capabilities. This is different from the strictly tri-polar Orwellian world and also differs in that the economies of these powers are strongly linked and interdependent. Blackmailing/bracketing with economic sanctions/threats may have significant weight in decision making processes, so the spheres of “military” versus “economic” power are strongly linked. Thus, the ramifications of alliance changes are greater than just having to switch the propaganda disseminated to the public; sanctions and tariffs could greatly threaten the economic security of a nation. Also, despite the trend globally to make *more* nations since the beginning of the 20th century, it is not certain that the world could not behave as if there were only a few powers. For example, in the Cold War, the struggle was between the

United States and the USSR, but the manifestation of this struggle took place in arenas worldwide and involved many other countries, such as Korea and Vietnam. Other countries exhibited band-wagoning tendencies and also provided the “playground” upon which the two great powers fought.

After the Cold War, however, the great powers have been existing in a historically uncharacteristic peace. It is also interesting to note what “peace” means in this context; the United States at least has had a minimum of 1,400,000 troops deployed worldwide since 1969.⁹ That coupled, with involvement in many minor wars—such as the Vietnam War, the Korean War, interventions in the Middle East, the war in Iraq, and the ongoing battle versus terrorism, suggests an almost continual war regime. The troop deployment is, as in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, occurring outside of the home territory. The benefit of these troop deployments is often hotly debated, lending credence to the idea that it is reasonable for governments to engage in continued, not tangibly beneficial warfare. The occurrence of such actions also suggests that leaders see a benefit to such deployment, regardless of whether such benefit actually exists; such leaders, would also hypothetically be persuaded with similar arguments of the benefits of protracted war with other powers.¹⁰

⁹ US Military Deployment 1969 to present, PBS, (2004)
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/pentagon/maps/9.html>.

¹⁰ Terrorism has also created a new element to the global power struggle; terroristic attacks and related insurgencies have also made their mark on the war-making framework, as they are a largely in-deterrable group who launches counter-value attacks and are difficult to retaliate against with either counter-value or counterforce. If terroristic efforts continue to be the largest security threat, the trend in global warfare may be to fight non-state actors and for large powers, with similar stakes to cooperate in fighting common terroristic threats.¹⁰ This is, however, to some extent only a conjecture as to possibilities, and does not supersede the possibility of great power wars in conjunction or in lieu of these counter-terror struggles.

In Orwell's world, there are several elements that make perpetual war feasible; one such element is using limited man-power over a specified contested border region; thus, the land that is needed to fuel the war machine is preserved, so continual output is possible and few enough soldiers are fighting and dying on the front lines that battle fatigue does not set in overly. The idea of fatigue of a populace with a conflict is somewhat central here, because in recent past we have seen protracted conflicts cause extreme weariness among the combatants (for example, the fatigue of the Entente powers after WWI and of the Allies in World War II.) This type of fatigue, after a few years of fighting, may be a function of the intensity / modernity of the war; antiquity has many examples of protracted conflicts, such as the logically named Hundred Years War¹¹ or Thirty Years War. Struggles for national freedom (e.g. the Indochine conflict involving Vietnam) often last for protracted periods of time.¹² We thus have some body of evidence suggesting that populaces and militaries are capable of dealing with protracted wars, although the trend has been for fatigue and opposition to set in after several years.

It should also be noted that the trend during the Cold War, at least, has been to move the conflict away from either of the two great powers and into other contested areas worldwide, which satisfies not only the aforementioned problem of dealing with fatigue of occupied populaces, but also makes the war very separate from civilian life. This separateness makes propagandizing of the war easier, as no witnesses on either side can contradict evidence, which could protract a war if the impetus for peace were to lie with the populace (who ostensibly would

¹¹ The Hundred Years War notably lasted longer than 100 years, but was punctuated by periods of peace. However, the tensions remained during this time period, as the French throne was still contested and this period was marked by significant periods of battle, thus it is included as a "protracted conflict."

¹² It should be noted, that while it evidences and ability for humans to cope with protracted war, this does not necessarily pertain to the same issues, as defenders of a homeland "care more" and have greater stakes than a nominally involved conquering power.

suffer most from deprivations resulting thereof); it also provides a disjunction between civilian and military personnel, which can be a cause of war in and of itself. As was seen with the Prussians in particular, having the military elite entirely separate from the population bred a pseudo military-cult that was very hawkish and out of touch with civilian needs. The military hierarchy in the situation described here would likewise have the opportunity to indulge their stratagems and methodology without the same level of civilian input and censure as it would in a more proximal location. Distance between the war and governing bodies also can lead to greater misperceptions, as error-ridden reports are more difficult to uncover (i.e. Governor Dinwiddie's reports unjustly blaming the French for aggression against the British colonies during the Seven Years War) and an illusionary state of success is easier to maintain if defeat is not staring you in the face (such a "state of success" is often fueled by officers' tendency to inflate reports of successes).

One of the major differences between the Orwellian world and our own is that we never had the crisis situation which degraded the overall standard of living to such a point that the totalitarian, communistic governments have taken hold.¹³ Unless we have totalitarian governments^{14, 15} like those described by Orwell who do want to use the machinations of war to

¹³ This "crisis situation", in Orwell's book, was nuclear attacks, as aforementioned.

¹⁴ Given that the main military power and two of the three economic giants are democratic (or comprised of democracies), we will not address the likelihood that these tyrannical governments are totally in control.

¹⁵ One striking aspect of Orwell's world is that the citizens of INGSOC live in poverty, while their labors, unbeknownst to them, are fully sufficient to provide for the population. However, all this surplus is used for the war-machine. While the fact that these societies are highly dictatorial may at first seem to be a critical factor in this diversion of resources to be effective (thus making democracies an effective deterrent to this sort of war), it should be noted that war-time civilians are often willing to make sacrifices to allow resource diversion, even in democracies. It must be noted, however, that some degree of control of information dissemination is required, as the people need to believe in the war to make such sacrifices.

oppress and control their own populaces, it is unlikely that a government or society would willingly choose a state of perpetual war. The question thus becomes, can such a state arise without prior planning (implicitly, by a government with ulterior motives)? The reasons that wars tend to continue or escalate are very similar to the reasons why wars are caused; for example, there may be continual misperceptions that victory is near or that a window of opportunity is, or will soon be, present. The latter is specifically referenced by Orwell as a driving force in the global conflict, while the former is also implicit in the logic of switching alliances to turn the tables. In such protracted conflicts, the idea of backing down may be seen as a sign of weakness, to a greater sense than usual since the length of the fight has associated a great deal of resources and man-power to it.¹⁶ If the other country is not a status quo power, efforts to end conflict may indeed insight further aggressive actions by that country, who may see a window of opportunity in that display of weakness. During the Cold War, which is arguably the nearest analogy to this situation we have seen, neither side was willing to make concessions, even for ostensibly unimportant¹⁷ countries (like Korea) to demonstrate a continued policy of hard-line deterrence. In looking then, at the end of the Cold War, it is interesting to note that economic factors are the critical pieces here; the crumbling Soviet economy seriously handicapped both civilian and military efforts, a fact which the US then exploited by a series of strategic economic “attacks”—driving down oil prices and delaying natural gas pipeline construction.¹⁸ The conditions that this economic downturn evinced on Soviet life eventually led

¹⁶ This ties in with the phenomenon that people often believe “if I have put this many hours into it, I need to continue to justify the hours I have already put in,” regardless if this is the most beneficial course of action.

¹⁷ Economically and strategically unimportant, as Professor Van Evera explained in lecture.

¹⁸ Encyclopedia Brittanica, *International Relations*. “The end of the cold war”.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/291225/international-relations/32991/The-end-of-the-Cold-War>

to a change of thinking among many Soviets, especially the younger generation, and eventually easing of the Cold War tensions by Gorbachev.¹⁹ Without this impetus, is it possible that the Cold War could have continued? In a world with economies that are less strongly linked, such pressuring would not be possible, and the mindset that did not allow either side to back down prior would have been able to persist. Looked at another way, the balance of power was *not* bipolar in an economic sense and this advantage allowed the US to claim victory. Dovetailing with the idea that “power disparities promote peace,”²⁰ a bipolar distribution of power across both military and economic lines would not have allowed the conflict to end. Historically, bipolar situations *are* high-tension and fraught with warfare; the British and French, as aforementioned, are a notable example. When the stakes in a struggle are backed by nuclear threats, and a sign of weakness may mean the other side sees a window in a nuclear attack, even the brief periods of intervening peace may disappear because backing down is never a feasible option due to the high stakes.²¹

Looking at a perpetual war situation as an outgrowth of a deadlocked contest of wills between major powers, the idea of such a protracted war seems more likely. At this time, our world does lack several of the critical elements that would make an Orwellian perpetual state of limited war likely; namely, the balance of power is not fully bi (or multi) polar, meaning that, as in the Cold War, one side may be able to leverage concessions as the other side finds the

¹⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica, *International Relations*. “The end of the cold war”.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/291225/international-relations/32991/The-end-of-the-Cold-War>

²⁰ Lynn-Jones, Sean M., & Miller, Steven E., *The Cold War and After* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 344.

²¹ Here, I am assuming that the USSR found the risk of repercussions as a result of backing down to be more favorable than the known repercussions of allowing the severe economic crisis they faced to continue ravaging the country.

alternative to those concessions worse than the idea of a possible display of weakness. The fact that further armament of other nations may lead to security dilemma type of escalation (since it is in this realm that the world is unipolar), may mean that any attempt to arm further will incite US intervention, which may in turn lead to a continually unipolar world (if such deterrence is effective). Alternatively, if the military situation is enough in the “flat of the curve” such that the United State’s superior technology does not matter overly, such an escalation may be the inciting point for a protracted war. However, the fact that the global economies are tied together by trade also may help countries leverage peace; currently, the major economic powers (US, EU, & China) rely heavily on imports for items ranging from food to fuel, despite the fact that the overall balance of economic power is more equitably shared.

However, there are also elements of Orwell’s future that we have already embraced that make perpetual war more likely, such as the tendency to displace conflict to other areas (not in the homeland) and to use increasingly mechanized war machines.²² These factors are secondary, in the sense that they will not be the proximate causes of war; however, they can very well contribute to a war’s continuation, as they make it “easier to stomach” in many ways.²³

So, while Orwell’s future described in *Nineteen Eighty Four* may not be a road-map for the future of society and our military, we are much closer to his vision of perpetual, limited war than we might seem at first blush. Since we have already seen the Cold War through to completion, we may have learned lessons that will inform decision makers if a situation similar to that described by Orwell arises. Using such knowledge, maintaining close economic ties, and

²² The United States has invested billions into weaponry that is more automated and better uses minimal human labor and life.

²³ This relies on the idea that war is likely if “cost is low.”

practicing diplomatic and military practices that generally eschew war (since the prolonging and causal factors remain unchanged), such a state of perpetual war should be avoidable.

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