Winning the War on War is an influential new addition to the growing literature on the decline of war. That literature demonstrates that contrary to popular images of continuous warfare, we have been living in a historically unprecedented era of relative peace. In the nearly seven decades since World War II, there have been no wars between major powers or between advanced industrial countries, continuing a five-century decline in major-power war that was interrupted only by the two world wars. The major powers continue to arm and continue to intervene in weaker states, and minor powers continue to fight, but the frequency of interstate wars, which has fluctuated around a stable average for about three centuries, has declined since the mid-1980s. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War is the world’s only war between states in the last decade. Europe, the historical cockpit of major-power warfare, has been remarkably peaceful, other than the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. East Asia, which was the most conflictual region in the world for the first three decades after World War II, has seen a striking decline in armed conflict of all kinds since 1980, to the point that conflict analysts now speak of the “East Asian Peace” and analyze its facilitating conditions. Civil wars, which accelerated sharply and steadily in frequency in the late 1990s and reached a peak in the early 1990s, have declined irregularly since then, with an uptick since 2003.

Joshua Goldstein recognizes that multiple factors have contributed to the decline of war, and argues that a reasonable explanation “would kick in mainly after 1945, and would accelerate after 1989” (p. 44). Goldstein argues that a key factor fitting this criterion is the United Nations system in general and peacekeeping in particular. For him, UN diplomats and peacekeepers are the “central thread” in reducing the levels of violence in conflict-ridden countries and in keeping the peace in postwar societies.

I leave it to others to comment on the causal impact of peacekeeping, a question that raises difficult methodological issues. Instead, I expand on Goldstein’s brief treatment of other explanations for the long peace since World War II (pp. 42–44), and then use the pre-1914 era (which the author mentions briefly (pp. 6–7)) to illustrate the hazards of extrapolating from recent trends.

Explanations for the Recent Decline in War

As suggested, different kinds of war (and of violence more generally) have declined at different rates and beginning

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at different times. This implies that different factors account for these noncorrelated phenomena and that a single integrated explanation, desirable in principle, is probably out of reach. Testing the validity of alternative explanations requires a sophisticated research design, but here I can only provide a brief summary.

With respect to great-power war, the single most important driver of its decline over five centuries is the growing severity or lethality of warfare, which increases the costs of war relative to its benefits. In addition, the benefits of war gradually diminished with the consolidation of the modern state system and the gradual settling of territorial borders, and later with industrialization and the growth of economic interdependence. These factors diminished the territorial basis of military power, decreased the utility of territorial conquest relative to trade as strategies for the accumulation of wealth, and increased the economic opportunity costs of war.

Scholars have given more attention to explanations of the “long peace” since World War II. The leading factors that Goldstein (pp. 42–43) briefly mentions—changing norms of violence, nuclear weapons, growing prosperity, the democratic peace, and the end of the Cold War—require some elaboration. Norms of behavior (and the broader category of attitudes toward war) unquestionably shifted after the two world wars and the romantic militarism and social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century have vanished. The question is the extent to which shifting attitudes toward war are endogenous to the increasing destructiveness of war, especially with the emergence of nuclear weapons. Autonomous attitudes toward war may help to explain postwar norms against territorial conquest and Western (and especially European) hesitancy to intervene in ongoing conflicts, but they have had less causal impact on superpower behavior and on regional conflicts.

The conventional wisdom is that nuclear weapons played a stabilizing role during the superpower rivalry of the Cold War period. They reinforced deterrence by enormously increasing the costs of war and reducing any uncertainty about those costs. Although some have questioned the stabilizing effects of nuclear weapons, the majority who accept the idea of a nuclear peace between nuclear powers are more confident than those who do not that future Sino-American disputes—over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or other issues—will be resolved peacefully. Of course, inadvertent wars occasionally occur, and there is no reason to believe that the psychological biases driving threat perception and decision making have diminished in any way, but psychological biases must overcome much greater structural disincentives than they faced in the past in order to lead to war.

Whether further nuclear proliferation would be stabilizing is a different question, one that has generated considerable debate. Critics emphasize crisis instability between states with limited weapons and insecure second-strike capabilities, which can generate temptations for preemption. In addition, fears that an adversary might soon acquire nuclear weapons capability increase incentives for a preventive strike to eliminate or delay that possibility.

Goldstein mentions prosperity as a source of peace. Growing prosperity undoubtedly helps to explain the decline of civil wars, although the organizational strength of the state is an equally important factor. The idea of economic forces pushing toward peace among advanced industrial states is usually framed in terms of economic interdependence rather than prosperity, and in fact the “capitalist peace” now rivals the “democratic peace” as primary explanations for the near absence of wars between democracies in the last two centuries. Both contribute to peace in the West, but neither can explain peace between the superpowers during the Cold War.

Finally, Goldstein invokes the end of the Cold War as an explanation for the decline in civil war since 1989, emphasizing the withdrawal of external financial support for rebels. Many go further and argue that U.S. hegemony has helped to maintain order and minimize the numbers of wars, and that the decline of U.S. dominance will increase the likelihood of conflict. They often refer to power-transition theory, long-cycle theory, and theories of unipolarity, which argue that high concentrations of power significantly reduce the likelihood of great-power war by eliminating hegemonic rivalry and counterhegemonic balancing. However, the theoretical linkages between unipolarity and other forms of warfare (major–minor, minor–minor, and internal) are less well developed, and one can find lengthy periods of relative peace in multipolar worlds. Hegemonic theories have important but conditional implications for the consequences of a possible Sino-American rivalry for dominance, but no clear implications for other forms of warfare.

The Hazards of Forecasting

Goldstein emphasizes that the continued decline in war is not inevitable (pp. x, 6, 42), but he is cautiously optimistic about the future. I agree with him that the likelihood of a major–major war is quite small (though nontrivial in the case of a Sino-American war), but I do not share his optimism about other types of war. The combination of resource scarcities (especially food and water), droughts and other climatological shocks, and ensuing migrations, along with certain demographic trends (the anticipated increase in potentially disaffected young male populations in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the Middle East), and the lack of congruence between state and national boundaries could create conditions conducive to civil wars and their possible internationalization. Numerous flash points, in the Middle East and elsewhere, make it unlikely that the relative interstate
peace of the last decade will persist. However, rather than defend these speculative remarks, I want to emphasize the hazards of forecasting.  

Imagine a Perspectives on Politics symposium on the decline of war taking place a hundred years before this writing, in early November 1912. The dialogue would have focused on Norman Angell's The Great Illusion (1910) and perhaps on Ivan Bloch's book subtitled Is War Now Impossible? (1899). Each argued that a war between the leading industrial powers would be long, economically devastating, socially disruptive, and consequently irrational. Pessimists might have noted that a war had begun in the Balkans a few weeks before, but no one expected the major powers to intervene, and in fact they did not. Contributors would have noted that they were living in one of the most peaceful periods in modern history. The "long peace" between the major powers of Europe had persisted for more than four decades, the longest such period in four centuries. A hegemonic war involving nearly all of the major powers had not occurred for nearly a century. In addition, the average duration of great-power war and median number of battle deaths in wars continued to decline. The four great-power wars since the Congress of Vienna had each lasted less than a year on average, reflecting a significant decline from the wars of previous centuries. There had only been one European war in the previous three decades (the Greco-Turkish Thirty Days' War of 1897), and the frequency of civil wars had declined by half over the previous four decades. 

True, there had been frequent crises involving the major powers—over Morocco in 1905, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and Agadir in 1911—but each crisis had been resolved peacefully, enhancing confidence in the effectiveness of crisis management. True, some military leaders advocated a preventive war, but those pleas had been rejected by statesmen like Otto von Bismarck. No European great power had incorporated preventive war into its national security strategy or publicly used preventive logic to justify military action.

There were other grounds for optimism. A détente continued between the two leading European powers, Great Britain and Germany, enhanced by the strong commercial and financial relationships between the two countries. The historically unprecedented levels of economic interdependence further reinforced the peace, based on the increasingly popular arguments of Norman Angell, Manchester liberals, and others that wealth was based on credit and commerce, and that territorial conquest was no longer an efficient strategy for increasing wealth. The leading powers had too much at stake to go to war.

For all these reasons, the contributors to a 1912 Perspectives symposium would have had strong grounds on which to forecast a continuation of the long peace. In fact, in many respects, the quantitative trends pointing in that direction were stronger than those emphasized by the "declinists" of 2012. There was a more sustained decline in great-power war and a longer period without a hegemonic war. The occurrence within two years of what George Kennan called the "the great seminal catastrophe" of the twentieth century, resulting in more than eight million battle fatalities, serves as a cautionary tale about the limitations of forecasting.

Notes
2 Six decades since the Korean War, if you count China as a major power in 1949. Either way, this is the longest period of great-power peace in the last five centuries of the modern interstate system.
3 Levy and Thompson 2011.
4 Human Security Report Project 2011, Chap. 3. Interstate wars are conventionally defined to involve violent conflicts between the military forces of two or more states and (following the Correlates of War Project) at least 1,000 battle-related deaths. Armed conflicts involve at least 25 battle-related deaths (Uppsala Conflict Data Program).
6 Goldstein's kicking-in-after-1945 criterion is puzzling in light of the fact that civil wars did not begin to decline until the early 1990s. His narrative, however, is consistent with patterns of civil war behavior.
7 Fortna 2008.
8 For a unified theory of the decline of violence, see Pinker 2011. For a critique, see Levy and Thompson 2013.
9 The increasing severity of war is due not only to the growing destructiveness of weaponry but also to the increasing extractive and organizational power of the state, the growth of armies and the sophistication of military organizations, and changes in the underlying political economy, each of which has co-evolved with changing threat environments and war (Levy and Thompson 2011).
10 Territorial disputes are significantly more likely to escalate to war than are other types of disputes (Vasquez and Henehan 2011).
11 Rosecrance 1986.
12 Gaddis 1989.
13 Pinker 2011 traces these changes to the Enlightenment. Mueller 2011 emphasizes the transformational ideational change after World War I, and describes World War II as an anomaly that would not have occurred without Hitler.
16 Bundy, 1988; Gaddis 1989; Jervis 1989. Admittedly, validating this proposition empirically raises
some difficult issues of counterfactual analysis (Levy 2008a).
17 This includes power transition theorists. See Tammen et al. 2000. John Mueller (2011, Chap. 1) argues that the increasing destructiveness of conventional warfare would have been enough to deter major war, even in the absence of nuclear weapons.
18 George 1991.
19 Huddy, Sears, and Levy 2013.
21 On preemption and preventive war, see Levy 2008b.
22 Collier et al. 2003.
25 Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Balcells (2010) distinguish types of civil wars. They demonstrate that Cold War conditions contributed to asymmetric wars like insurgencies, while post–Cold War conditions favor symmetrical unconventional wars.
26 Thayer 2006.
27 Tammen et al. 2000; Thompson 1988; Wohlfarth 1999. For an opposing view, see Montiero 2011/12.
28 A crude calculation based on the Correlates of War data (Sarkees and Wayman 2010, Chap. 3) reveals that the frequency of new interstate war outbreaks was .16/year in the multipolar Concert of Europe period (1815–52), compared to .40/year in the unipolar 1992–2011 period (excluding the Gulf War and including the Russo-Georgian War). Despite earlier theoretical debates on the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems, there have been few systematic empirical studies, leaving no conclusive historical evidence of a relationship between polarity and the overall frequency of war.
29 Goldstone 2010; Hudson and Den Boer 2005. Overall, however, the aging of most populations throughout the world should have stabilizing effects.
30 Miller 2012.
31 This expands on the treatment in Levy and Thompson 2013.
32 And also short wars between Italy and Turkey in the Middle East and between Spain and Morocco in Africa.
33 Kennan 1979, 3.
34 Compounding the failure to recognize the risks of war in 1912 was the failure to anticipate the nature of war. As Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (1999, 8–9) conclude in their study of military thinking in Germany and in the United States after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, military and political leaders were “blind... to the manifold forces that were transforming warfare into a protracted, comprehensive, and ruinous ordeal.” They had “no realistic plans” to fight war, but instead engaged in a “titanic exercise in improvisation. The mobilization of armed forces, economies, and societies proceeded everywhere with no prior design, no precedent, and no clear goals.” In Germany, the General Staff clung to a conception of war that was characterized by decisive battles, ended in a victor’s peace, and rewarded offensive strategies. What they got was a long war of attrition that was dominated by the defense, exhausted participants, and precluded a clear-cut victory by either side.

References


