

# AFTER THE COLD WAR

Walter Laqueur

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When the Cold War came to an end in 1989 with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, when the countries of Eastern Europe regained independence, and when finally the Soviet Union disintegrated, there was widespread feeling throughout the world that at long last universal peace had descended on Earth. The fear of a war in which weapons of mass destruction would be used had vanished. A leading political scientist wrote a book titled *The End of History*; this did not, of course, imply that history had come to a standstill, but he meant that serious, major conflicts between nations no longer existed and that on certain essentials all were now in agreement.

It was a beautiful moment but the euphoria did not last long. Skeptics (which included this writer) feared that there was plenty of conflict left in the world, which had, however, been overshadowed or suppressed by the Cold War. In other words, as long as the confrontation between the two camps continued, all kinds of other conflicts, which seemed minor at the time, would not come into the open. On the contrary, the Cold War had in a perverse way been responsible for the preservation of some order in the world; it had been a stabilizing factor.

And it was also true that the danger of a new, horrible world war had probably been exaggerated. For there existed a balance of terror; there was mutual deterrence— precisely because there was a big arsenal of devastating weapons. And since both sides in the conflict were acting rationally, because they knew what the consequences of such a war would be, peace was preserved.

Would such mutual deterrence still be in force once the Cold War had ended? Or would the new age result in great disorder? The Cold War had not put an end to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other means of mass destruction. But it had certainly slowed it down. This is no longer true today; there is not just the danger that a few more countries would achieve these weapons.

The real threat is that the acquisition of these weapons by a few will generate a general rush to follow them, because their neighbors will feel exposed and threatened. Furthermore, can it still be taken for granted that those in possession of weapons of mass destruction will act as rationally as the two sides in the Cold War did? Or will they, driven by religious or nationalist or ideological fanaticism, forget the suicidal risk they would run if they used the weapons? Or will they perhaps persuade themselves that they could use these weapons with impunity against their enemies and yet obliterate their traces in a proxy war?

## Quest for Leadership

These are troubling questions, which have arisen in recent years and are becoming more acute all the time. There is no arbiter, no ultimate authority for the resolution of conflicts. The United Nations should have fulfilled this function. But they could do so no more than the League of Nations between the

two world wars. The United Nations consists of nearly 200 member states, big and small, democratic and authoritarian, with all kinds of shades in between. Some respect human rights; others do not. They have conflicting interests; they lack a military capacity to intervene in an emergency. They can sometimes help with negotiations to reach agreement, but they are powerless if diplomacy breaks down.

When the Cold War ended, the United States emerged as the only superpower and this involved great responsibilities as far as world peace was concerned. No other country was in a similar position to deal with dangers to world peace—not only its own security. But even a superpower is not omnipotent; there are limits to its capacity to do its international duty. It cannot and should not go it alone, but ought to act as a leader in international action by persuasion as much as by pressure, if necessary.

However, superpowers are never popular. This has been the case since the days of the Roman Empire, and all other empires before and after. They are feared and suspected by weaker nations, not only by their neighbors. This is a dilemma from which there is no escape. However reasonably and decently they behave, there is always the fear that suddenly their mood and behavior could change. There is the tendency of smaller nations to gang up against the leader. Hard as the superpower may try, there is no panacea to gain popularity—except by way of abdication. Once they cease to be very powerful, their chances greatly increase to become more popular. But few superpowers in history have chosen this way.

With the end of the Cold War, new centers of power have emerged, above all China and India. They have made spectacular economic progress, deemed almost unthinkable even a decade ago. But so far these countries have shown no desire to play a role in world politics commensurate with their economic strength. They are regional great powers and, in due time, will undoubtedly become more than that. But this could be many years off, and, in the meantime, they have shown no eagerness to shoulder responsibilities in keeping world order.

For a while, after the end of the Cold War, it appeared as if Europe could play such a role alongside, if not always in unison, with the United States. There were some observers of the political scene who claimed that the 21st century would be the century of Europe, mainly because the European model had been so attractive and would be copied by the rest of the world. This was the idea of Europe as a civilian and moral superpower.

Of late, these optimistic voices have been few and far between. True, Europe had much to offer to the rest of mankind, and the movement toward European unity after 1948 has been a great success story. But the movement ran out of steam once a Common Market came into being, and even the economy functioned less well than had been hoped for; there was not enough growth to finance the welfare state, the pride of the continent. Many new members had joined the European Union, but there was no European foreign policy, let alone military capacity.

In the course of many years, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) had provided a shield for Europe and it continues to do so. There were voices arguing that NATO had lost its *raison d'être* at least in part, simply because the threat that had caused the alliance to come into being in the first place had vanished. But if the old threats had disappeared, new ones had replaced them.

The case of the doubters of NATO would have been stronger had they made an effort to establish a defense organization of their own, but this they failed to do. All this combined with Europe's demographic weakness—the shrinking and graying of the continent—were signs of weakness. Its independent diplomatic initiatives, such as in the Middle East, were unsuccessful, and when a bloody civil war broke out on its very front steps in the Balkans, it proved incapable to deal with it without outside help. The age of a moral superpower, however desirable as an ideal, had quite obviously not arrived yet.

Few would argue that time has come to abolish police and other security forces on the domestic level. Yet many have acted as if no forces of order are needed on the international level, and this at a time when dangers such as weapons of mass destruction loom larger than ever, as the damage and the casualties caused by them could be infinitely greater than at any time in the past.

### Tensions and Terrorism

There have been few volunteers to act as world policemen—it is admittedly not an attractive job, unpaid, with little gratitude to be earned. Perhaps it is unnecessary, perhaps the international order will somehow take care of itself?

Possibly, but scanning the world scene there is not much reason for excessive optimism. Russia has not yet accepted its new status in the world; there is resentment, not unnaturally, as the result of the loss of empire. There is a strong inclination to make all kind of outside factors responsible, and some are dreaming to restore the old power and glory.

There is Africa, with its millions of victims in horrible civil wars, which the international community failed to prevent.

Above all, there is the Middle East with its many tensions and terrorism, national and international. Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in the annals of mankind; it is as old as the hills. It has appeared in many forms and guises, nationalism-separatist, inspired by the extreme left and the radical right. But contemporary terrorism fueled by religious and nationalist fanaticism, operating in failed states, and sometimes instigated, financed, and manipulated by governments, is more dangerous than ever before.

There have been and are many misconceptions about the origins of terrorism. It is often argued that poverty and oppression are the main causes. Remove poverty and oppression, and terrorism will disappear. But terrorism does not appear in the poorest countries, and ethnic conflicts are seldom easily solvable; what if two groups claim the same territory and are unwilling to compromise?

The real danger is, of course, not the victory of terrorism. History shows that terrorism can operate only in free, or relatively free, societies. There was no terrorism in Nazi Germany or in Stalin's Russia; there was (or is) none even in less harsh dictatorships. But this means that in certain circumstances, if terrorism has been permitted to operate too freely and become more than a nuisance, a high price has to be paid in terms of limitation of freedom and human rights to put an end to it. Naturally, free societies are reluctant to pay such a price. This is one of the great dilemmas of our time and no one has so far found a painless way to solve it.

# WALTER LAQUEUR

Walter Zeev Laqueur (born 26 May 1921) is an American historian and political commentator. He was born in Breslau, Germany (modern Wrocław, Poland), to a Jewish family.

In 1937 Laqueur left Germany for the British Mandate of Palestine. His parents who chose to remain, died in the Holocaust. He lived in Palestine/Israel 1938-53 and since then in the UK and USA.

He wrote the foreword to Wilhelm Wulff's book *Zodiac and Swastika*.

He was Director of the Institute of Contemporary History and the Wiener Library in London in 1965-1994. He was founder and editor with George Mosse, of the *Journal of Contemporary History* and of *Survey* 1956-1964. He was founding editor of the *The Washington Papers*. From 1969 he was member, later Chairman (until 2000) International Research Council CSIS Washington. He was Professor of History of Ideas at Brandeis University 1968-1972, University Professor at Georgetown University 1976-1988. He has been visiting professor of history and government at Harvard, Chicago, Tel Aviv and Johns Hopkins.

His main works deal with European history in the 19th and 20th century, especially the Russian history, German history and the Middle East.

He written on many topics from the German Youth Movement, Zionism, Israeli history, the cultural history of the Weimar Republic and Russia, Communism, the Holocaust, fascism and diplomatic history of the Cold War.

His books have been translated into many languages and he was one of the founders of the study of political violence, guerrilla warfare and terrorism. His comments on international affairs have appeared in many American and European newspapers and periodicals.