

## The Ethics of Collective Security

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**I**n his *Abstract of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted the elements of interdependence among the inhabitants of Europe that made it “a real society.” The ease of communications, the rise of a community of knowledge and studies, the complicated ties of commerce that rendered each nation necessary to the others—all had produced in Europe “not merely, as in Asia and Africa, an ideal collection of people, who have nothing in common but a name, but a real society, which has its religion, morals, customs, and even its laws, from which none of the people composing it can separate without causing an immediate disturbance.” Far from producing peace, however, the intimacy of their connections had only made their dissensions more fatal:

To behold...the perpetual dissensions, depredations, usurpations, rebellions, wars, and murders, which are constantly ravaging this respectable abode of philosophers, this brilliant asylum of the arts and sciences; to reflect on the sublimity of our conversation and the meanness of our proceedings, on the humanity of our maxims and the cruelty of our actions, on the meekness of our religion and the horror of our persecutions, on a policy so wise in theory and so absurd in practice, on the beneficence of sovereigns and the misery of their people, on governments so mild and wars so destructive; we are at a loss to reconcile these strange contrarities, while this pretended fraternity of European nations appears to be only a term of ridicule, serving ironically to express their reciprocal animosity.<sup>1</sup>

What Rousseau said of the old European system may also be said of the new world order. Instantaneous global communications (the “CNN effect”), the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Abstract of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace* (1761), in Moorhead Wright, ed., *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914* (Towata NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 75.

progressive codification of international law, the growth of international trade, and the newly found prominence of international organizations have all contributed to an unprecedented degree of interdependence among the nations of the world. As in Rousseau's time, however, interdependence is often a breeder of intractable conflict. More pointedly, we are caught up in "strange contrarities" of our own, and often have cause to reflect on the contrast between the humanity of our maxims and the cruelty of our actions, on policies that are wise in theory but absurd in practice. The new world order, confidently proclaimed by President Bush before and after the Gulf War, is normally invoked today as a form of ridicule, or at least of reproach. The end of the Cold War, and the successful eviction of Iraq from Kuwait, have not been accompanied by a more orderly international environment. Whether one looks at the civil war within Iraq, or the breakdown of Yugoslavia into savage fighting, or the appalling scenes of famine in the Horn of Africa, there is considerable evidence that we are as yet remote from the vision of a new world order proclaimed by the president.

In one respect, to be sure, much of the criticism directed against the president's vision of an orderly world moving steadily toward free institutions seems exaggerated. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse have not suddenly made an appearance in human history, making our own age unique in the horrors that it witnesses. Nor indeed is despotic government a recent innovation. What sets the present age apart from the past is, if anything, the belief that the twin ideals of a *Pax Universalis* and a world governed by liberal democratic regimes represent historical possibilities whose absence is a standing reproach to us. Wishing for something that never was, we appear fated to be disappointed by the gap between an idyllic vision and a depressing reality.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is responsible, above all else, for the resurgence of the hopes for a more democratic and peaceful world. If our most powerful adversary could collapse from its own inner contradictions, there was reason to hope that lesser despotisms might undergo the same process. For many in the West, and particularly in the United States, this development prompted the hope that increased pressure on despotic regimes might yield further successes. At the same time, the emergence of a Russian federation prepared to cooperate with its former adversaries in the UN Security Council made it seem equally plausible that the United Nations, freed from its Cold War stalemate, might succeed in realizing the vision of collective security that animated many of its initial architects.

These developments have produced an unprecedented situation in international society. They have persuaded many observers that we stand today at a critical juncture, one at which the promise of collective security, working through

the mechanism of the United Nations, might at last be realized. Just as every discrete crisis during the Cold War came to be seen as symbolic of the larger contest between the United States and the Soviet Union, so every war and civil war today is seen as a test of the new order. Failure, whether in the Gulf, or Yugoslavia, or Cambodia—to name only the more prominent examples—is often portrayed as heralding the collapse of the new order, just as the spread of communism in any country, and by whatever means, was often seen during the Cold War as heralding the collapse of the old order. Global containment lives, but in a new guise: it is now the containment not of an identifiable adversary but of aggression itself, and it is to be organized not through traditional alliances but through an international organization representing the whole of the world community.

### **The Logic of Collective Security**

Collective security as a device for the maintenance of international security is based on the assumption that states form a society, membership in which confers both rights and duties. The principal right each state enjoys is the ability to maintain its political independence and territorial integrity against external aggression; its principal duty is not only to refrain from aggression but also to aid the victims of aggression. Under collective security, war is seen, in Hans Kelsen's words, as either a delict or a sanction.<sup>2</sup> It is either an illegal act that violates the social order or an action of law enforcement that preserves that order.

An essential feature of a collective security system is the conviction that peace is indivisible. "If history has taught us anything," Harry Truman declared in justifying American participation in the Korean war, "it is that aggression anywhere in the world is a threat to peace everywhere in the world."<sup>3</sup> George Bush gave expression to the same conviction in declaring, in 1990, that "every act of aggression unpunished...strengthens the forces of chaos and lawlessness that, ultimately, threaten us all."<sup>4</sup>

If aggression is a crime against not only the immediate victim but also the entire foundation of international society, the clear implication is that states have not only a right but also a duty to respond to infractions of the law. There should be no neutrality before the aggressor and his victim. The fulfillment of duty, however, is not seen as requiring the sacrifice of self-interest. Though

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Kelsen, *Collective Security Under International Law* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Address of April 11, 1951, excerpted in Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy, Volume II: Since 1914* (Lexington MA: D.C. Heath, 1989), 408.

<sup>4</sup> President Bush, "Remarks at a Fundraising Luncheon for Rep. Bill Grant," Sept. 6, 1990, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 26, no. 36, p. 1331.

there may be an apparent conflict between the dictates of self-interest and the duty to international society, it is an apparent conflict only. The indivisibility of peace—the assumption that aggression will spread like a wildfire unless suppressed by the peace-loving members of the international community—indicates that the real choice is not between the duty to oneself and the duty to others but between the present dangers of involvement in the suppression of crime and the far worse future danger that will inevitably come about if aggressors learn that they can profit from their misdeeds.

The more states reason in this fashion, the more likely it is that collective security will constitute an effective system of international security. Collective security aims not at establishing a balance of power among states but at creating a preponderance of power against potential lawbreakers. The more states consult their immediate self-interest and decline effective participation in a collective security system, by contrast, the more that system comes to resemble the system of alliances and spheres of influence it is meant to replace.

Indeed, the contrast between a system of collective security and a traditional statecraft is striking. Whereas the essence of a traditional statecraft is discrimination on the basis of power, interest, and circumstance, the essence of collective security is precisely the absence of discrimination on the basis of these same factors. To the former, it makes all the difference whether aggression is committed by a small or a great power. To the latter, this distinction is irrelevant. To the former, a state's geographic position must normally determine its response to aggression. To the latter, this too must be viewed as irrelevant: aggression is aggression, irrespective of the identity of the aggressor; the indivisibility of peace precludes a response determined by considerations of geography.

Collective security stands in sharp contrast with the system of international law that prevailed in the nineteenth century. Whereas nineteenth century publicists conceded to states a right to resort to war and made no distinction between just and unjust causes in the resort to force, collective security pushes considerations of *jus ad bellum* to the forefront—a difference in approach that, as we shall see, has important implications for the status of the rules regulating the conduct of war. Whereas the nineteenth century doctrines considered neutrality a highly valuable institution for the geographic limitation of armed conflict and prescribed an intricate set of rules for belligerents and neutrals intended to minimize the disruptions that war entailed for international society, collective security casts into moral disrepute the institution of neutrality and, if the UN Security Council so decides, makes neutrality illegal when an enforcement action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter is undertaken.

Whereas nineteenth century doctrines considered particular alliances as a

normal and justifiable feature of international society, collective security must view alliances between particular states with alarm. Such particular alliances are either superfluous or dangerous; superfluous insofar as they provide a security guarantee to particular states which they already enjoy by virtue of their membership in the society of states, and dangerous insofar as they advertise the fact that those states participating in a particular community of states consider their own security of greater importance than the security of states generally. It is true that the Charter of the United Nations makes allowance for regional organizations to keep the peace. Nevertheless, there is the danger that such regional organizations will become substitutes for, rather than complements of, the system of universal security that the theory of collective security prescribes.

Given the importance that the theory of collective security places on the sovereign equality of states, one of the most striking features of the institutional mechanism by which that vision is to be effected today is the extraordinary role given to the great powers in the UN Security Council. There is little that is novel in the principle of a great power directorate presiding over the peace and order of the world. That principle had been a foundation of the settlement following the Napoleonic wars in the early nineteenth century. Nor had it been absent from the plan of a new world order worked out at Versailles following World War I. Even so, the distinctive position accorded the great powers in the League Council pales when set alongside that accorded the victors of World War II by the UN Charter. The provisions of the Charter conferred on the great powers what amounted to an unlimited discretion in matters of peace and security in their role as permanent members of the Security Council, provided only that they remained united in outlook. Yet this extraordinary power vested in the great powers is difficult to reconcile with the egalitarian assumptions of collective security theory. The real justification of this power is that without it the effectiveness of the organization would inevitably decline.

The effect of collective security on traditional ideas of sovereignty and intervention is not as clear as it might seem at first sight. In theory, collective security is erected on the foundation of respect for the political independence and territorial integrity of states, and it consequently forbids intervention into the internal affairs of states. However, in practice the distinction between what is internal and what is external tends to break down. In the first place, it seems rather arbitrary to restrict international concern to aggressive uses of force between states. It seems artificial to insist that an aggressive use of force across borders, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, requires a massive display of countervailing power, while at the same time holding that internal calamities that bring a much greater amount of human suffering, such as those resulting from civil war and drought in the Horn of Africa, cannot be addressed without

obtaining the consent of the warring parties. Second, the distinction between civil conflicts and international conflicts is itself not wholly clear in particular circumstances. Nearly every civil conflict contains within itself the germ of an international dispute, since the warring parties normally represent distinct communities that can aspire to statehood of their own. If, as happened in Yugoslavia, the international community confers recognition on secessionist republics, a civil war becomes immediately transformed into an international conflict. More generally, if the international community concerns itself with preventing or settling ethnic conflicts, as many hold that it should do today, it will inevitably find itself regulating the treatment of minorities within existing states and thus involving itself ever more deeply in the most intimate details of internal governance. Finally, a collective security action may itself give rise to consequences that generate a duty to intervene further into the affairs of the aggressor state. In the Gulf War, the relatively straightforward matter of Iraq's aggression against Kuwait could not be separated from the consequences of reversing it. Those consequences included the civil war that broke out in the aftermath of Desert Storm and, more generally, the humanitarian catastrophe that subsequently descended on Iraq as a cumulative result of war, civil conflict, and economic sanctions. In that instance, claims for further intervention arose because the war itself was plausibly seen as the proximate cause of the civil war, and it appeared inhumane and unjust to walk away from a disaster that was partly of our own making. For each of these reasons, the principle of concern underlying collective security is one that is difficult to reconcile with the principle of nonintervention on which collective security is ostensibly based.

This is the third time in this century that collective security has appeared on the international horizon as a promising method for assuring international peace and security. It is perhaps no accident that it has risen to prominence each time at the conclusion of a major war (the Cold War being considered, in this context, as a worthy successor to the two world wars of this century). Yet there is little question that the version of collective security favored today is one that is substantially, and in some respects ironically, different from that which prevailed when the League of Nations was established. For Woodrow Wilson, the Covenant of the League was conceived as entailing the search for methods of international conflict resolution that would not continually raise the threat of force, as the nineteenth century system had done. He placed almost exclusive reliance on the diplomatic and economic isolation of aggressor states; while not wholly dismissing the prospect that the obligations the United States would assume under the covenant might raise the issue of force—a charge leveled by the opponents of the League in the Senate—Wilson continually reiterated that such occasions were most unlikely to arise. Today, the version of collective

security now predominant is much more conscious of the likely necessity of using force to maintain international peace and security. If the emphasis is still placed upon deterrence and not on the potential breakdowns of the system requiring the actual employment of armed force in defense of law, it is nevertheless true that the economic and diplomatic isolation of aggressors on which Wilson relied is now generally considered insufficient to realize the vision of collective security. The contemporary system places a much greater degree of reliance on the necessity of a forceful counterpoise to aggression.

### **Common Concern and the Just War**

The most common criticism directed against the idea of collective security is that it is inherently unworkable. States are, in the main, perfectly willing to pay lip service to the idea of collective security, but they are generally unwilling to make the tangible sacrifices that collective security requires, particularly regarding the commitment of military forces. Critics of collective security have characterized this obstacle in several ways, with some speaking of a conflict between interest and obligation, and others of an inherent dispute between the suppliers and consumers of security. The basic objection, as Robert Osgood once observed, is that no "nation in its right mind is willing to subordinate its special security interests to a hypothetical general interest in maintaining a stable international order, especially if that subordination would impose a claim upon its armed forces."<sup>5</sup>

Though this objection, considered abstractly, does indeed have a great deal of force, it seems less than cogent in relation to the current constellation of international power. With the collapse of Soviet power, the United States has emerged, as is often proclaimed, as the world's only military superpower. Though it would be an exaggeration to claim that the international political system is now unipolar, there is no question that the United States possesses a capability of conducting interventions throughout the world and that its military strength is in a class of its own. So long as the United States understands its own interests to be closely bound up with the maintenance of world order—understood here as requiring universal adherence to the norm forbidding aggression—the prospect arises of a world in which the purposes of collective security could be achieved. Because of the critical importance of American leadership in secur-

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<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Osgood, "Woodrow Wilson, Collective Security, and the Lessons of History," in Earl Latham, ed., *The Philosophy and Policies of Woodrow Wilson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 190. See also Roland N. Stromberg, *Collective Security and American Foreign Policy: From the League of Nations to NATO* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 47, and Josef Joffe, "Collective Security and the Future of Europe: Failed Dreams and Dead Ends," *Survival* (Winter 1992), 39.

ing this aim, this would not be an order of collective security in the sense that the champions of that system had always imagined. It has been made possible not because a true community of power has suddenly materialized where none existed before but because a hegemonic power has emerged where before there had been a balance of power. Still, if it was to develop and persist, such a hegemonically-based order might well achieve the primary objective that collective security seeks.

As noted previously, the advocates of collective security insist that a commitment to the political independence and territorial integrity of other states flows from considerations of both moral duty and self-interest. However, the latter claim rests upon a reading of the likely consequences of aggression that is highly implausible. Aggression anywhere is not necessarily a threat to peace everywhere. Peace is normally divisible, and conflicts, whatever their origin, are normally of merely local or regional significance. The primary exception to this rule arises when a great power threatens to dominate the entire states system. It was not unreasonable to find a connection during the Cold War between the successful aggression of a North Korea or a North Vietnam and the encouragement which might thereby have been given to the Soviet Union. Today, circumstances are much different. Insofar as the unanimity among the great powers required by collective security is possible today, the objectives that it seeks appear far less urgent. Indeed, one might even go further and claim that the easiest way to imperil American security interests is through a universal commitment to the territorial integrity and political independence of all states of the international system. Such a commitment is a sure road to war.

Although American security interests do not require the universal commitment that collective security demands, it can be argued more plausibly that there is a moral duty to make such a commitment. A state whose territory has been invaded and which has been robbed of its political independence by a foreign state may justifiably make an appeal for help. Outside parties clearly have a right to respond to such appeals, and this is so whether the concept of *jus ad bellum* is woven into the fabric of international law. The claim that outside parties also have a duty to respond to such appeals, however, is much more uncertain.

Perhaps the most important reason for skepticism in this matter is that an unlimited commitment to the security of other states may seriously conflict with the duties states owe to their own citizens. Insofar as this commitment requires that one's own soldiers be placed in harm's way, it stands in conflict with the duty of states not to risk cavalierly the lives of their own citizens. The commitment may be in tension with the principle of the democratic control of foreign policy; for if, as is sometimes contended, the authorization of the UN



Security Council gives the president the right to commit American forces to ~~value even without congressional~~ authorization, the commitment to collective security may succeed in nullifying the constitutional provision that gives to ~~Congress~~ the right to declare war. More generally, resources that are devoted to external purposes, however conceived, cannot be applied to internal needs, and these remain pressing even for a nation as wealthy as the United States. With substantial portions of our own population mired in poverty, living in cities where the minimum conditions of public order are barely satisfied, it is a morally defensible claim to insist that remedying such disorders is of higher priority than righting wrongs elsewhere in the world.

Because collective security is based on the community of states and not of individuals, its advocates can scarcely fail to recognize that such internal claims do have considerable weight. The value that collective security defends—sovereignty—is important because it stands as a shield behind which communities of people seek to realize their own destinies free from external interference. With one foot of the argument remaining, as it were, in the traditional world where states are thought justified in giving priority to such internal concerns, the moral weight of the collective security argument depends to a great degree on the ease with which it might be implemented. Yet it is doubtful that implementing collective security will in fact be easy, particularly for the power that must play the leading role in establishing and maintaining the system.

The idea that states are ethically justified in according primacy to the security and well-being of their own communities rests upon a principle that may be traced throughout a wide range of human transactions and institutions. Alexander Hamilton once identified its psychological basis in noting that “the human affections, like solar heat, lose their intensity, as they depart from the center; and become languid, in proportion to the expansion of the circle, on which they act.” Thus, “we love our families, more than our neighbors: We love our neighbors, more than our countrymen in general.”<sup>6</sup> So far, at least, as positive duties of aid are concerned, this psychological fact has ethical significance as well. Just as parents have far greater positive responsibilities for their own children than for children in general, so states are justified in according primacy to their own members. If this principle is accepted, it would also seem to follow that it is ethically legitimate to bring some states, but not others, within particular security communities, whether such communities go by the name of alliances or regional collective security pacts. The United States has “special relationships” with a number of countries—Great Britain, Israel, perhaps Germany and

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1970), 81.

Japan—which have arisen for complex reasons but which are nonetheless genuine and important. Yet if there is a duty to all, the duty we feel or the interest we have in protecting particular states is inevitably devalued.

Even if these considerations are put aside and a generalized duty to come to the aid of threatened states is acknowledged, there are still aspects of collective security doctrine that are morally troubling. The propensity to view foreign conflicts as involving evil aggressors and innocent victims, which is an inherent feature of *jus ad bellum*, leads almost inexorably to a way of thinking that is at odds with other elements of just war doctrine, particularly that which governs the means the combatants may legitimately use even in a just cause. The progression is by now quite familiar. States resorting to force are not only aggressors but are led by thugs and villains, and journalists and politicians engage in a kind of terminological bidding war to paint the adversary in the darkest features imaginable. The emphasis that the advocates of collective security place on the deterrent effects of crushing aggression reinforces this tendency, for it makes every particular conflict part of a more general struggle against all aggressors and, indeed, against evil itself. This way of reasoning would seem almost inevitably to have the result of loosening the restraints that just war doctrine imposes on the conduct of war. This is particularly true in relation to the requirement of proportionality—that is, the belief that there must be a rough relationship between the good secured and the evil inflicted in war. For if the good secured is nothing less than defeat of absolute evil, it seems almost a moral necessity to use any means necessary to achieve that end. Every war becomes a supreme emergency, which is to say one in which the traditional rules may justifiably be dispensed with.

This way of reasoning also conflicts with the just war requirement that every effort be made to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants in the conduct of war. One need not assume, as was commonly done during World War II, that every member of the enemy nation is guilty for the requirement of discrimination to be breached. In practice, it is often very difficult to make these discriminations. However much it is repeated that it is not our intention to punish the people of an enemy nation, they inevitably seem to suffer grievously. In the Gulf War, the economic sanctions that were intended to deprive Saddam of his financial base had the most serious effect on children; military strikes at Iraq's electrical grid, intended to strike at Iraq's system of military communications, had an equally calamitous effect on those least able to bear it.

Collective punishments, though reprobated in theory, are accepted in practice and seem in fact almost inevitable. Bowing to the reality that it is frequently impossible to strike at the guilty without also harming the innocent, something odd happens to the humanitarian sentiments that normally accom-

pany the response to aggression. Intense moral concern over two dozen Kuwaiti babies deprived of their incubators easily passes to moral indifference over a million Iraqi babies deprived of food and clean water. Though it is, of course, possible to reason ourselves out of responsibility for the suffering that might be indirectly attributable to a collective security action, normally through dubious doctrines of double effect, there is still something disturbing about the ease with which it is done.

Collective security, at least as it was practiced during the Gulf War, also seems at odds with the just war requirement of last resort. It may eliminate the requirement altogether by assuming that the victimized state has already reached its last resort and that outsiders coming to its aid are justified in taking up arms immediately. Or it may insist that the peculiar dynamics of coalition politics severely limit the length of time for trying other options short of war. One of the most insistent arguments for Desert Storm was that the coalition was bound to fall apart given sufficient time. Unless the United States went to war quickly, the opportunity for doing so would be lost. This argument may have substantially overstated the real time pressures for bringing the crisis to a rapid end, which were overwhelmingly domestic; at the same time, however, the prominence the argument had during the crisis that led to war serves as an ironic reminder that a commitment to collective security may precipitate, rather than delay, the onset of war.

The assumptions underlying the doctrine of collective security may also decrease the likelihood of reaching compromises that might lead to the peaceful resolution of disputes. The conviction that aggression is a crime leads directly to the view that under no circumstances may aggression succeed or even be seen to succeed. President Bush's formula for dealing with Iraq—"no negotiations, no compromises, no attempts at face-saving and no rewards for aggression"—was a succinct, yet complete, expression of this attitude.<sup>7</sup> The logic of collective security virtually compels its advocates to ensure that an aggressor not only lose but lose spectacularly; it dictates that the criminal nation not only retreat but suffer a profound humiliation in the process; it forecloses negotiations (because they would confer respectability or equality on the enemy). The search for a peaceful resolution of the conflict comes to be regarded as a cowardly form of appeasement, and thus constitutes a powerful impetus toward war.

Yet the war that is chosen may not be one that is capable of producing any kind of durable peace. For reasons that are not entirely clear, collective security may produce a kind of protracted stalemate. Partly this is due to the restriction on the means that intervening publics are likely to impose. Any kind of force

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<sup>7</sup> Statement by President George Bush, January 3, 1991, "Persian Gulf Crisis: Going the Extra Mile for Peace," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 2, no. 1, p. 1.

commitment that risks being protracted or as entailing substantial casualties is one from which Western publics instinctively turn away. Air power, in which the pain can be delivered from afar, thus becomes the favored military instrument. Yet air power, though indeed quite capable of sowing confusion and destruction in the enemy's ranks, cannot by itself produce a result that we would recognize as just. Its effects may instead resemble repeated blows against an ant hill, killing many of the guilty ants but also producing anarchy. If the unwillingness to consider any compromises that are characteristic of collective security doctrine is added to the restriction on means that the intervening powers will probably impose, collective security seems almost fated to produce protracted stalemates characterized by substantial amounts of intrastate violence and suffering rather than the durable peace that it promises.

Two objections may be raised against these considerations. First, it may be claimed on behalf of collective security that the deterrent value of inflexible opposition to aggressors provides benefits that, though largely unseen, are nevertheless critical for the preservation of even a modicum of world order. And second, if the humanitarian effects of going to war weigh too heavily on the conscience, it makes the criteria for going to war so exacting that it becomes almost indistinguishable from pacifism.

Neither of these objections can be dismissed out of hand. The difficulty with the first, however, is that it requires making sacrificial victims of the unfortunates caught up in their own, normally tragic, circumstances. We cease being interested in nudging the parties in Yugoslavia's civil war to compromises that would end the fighting, and instead become intent on making an example of the Serbs so that the rest of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union will not descend into chaos. This overweening emphasis on the bad precedent that would be set by compromises is a pernicious element in collective security doctrine, and it is highly doubtful that the inflammation of conflicts to which it contributes is outweighed by the deterrent effects that it brings. Because states are not normally willing to fight unless vital interests are at stake, there will usually be a considerable degree of doubt that the coalition will spring into action; the coalition must therefore be willing to prove its bona fides every time. This is especially so if collective security doctrine is wrong in its assumption that most conflicts arise because there is an evil aggressor and an innocent victim. If war normally arises through a more circuitous route, with both parties acting out of the conviction that justice is on their side, the deterrent effects of making examples out of evildoers are likely to be greatly overestimated. Most "aggressors" do not, in fact, see themselves as such. They do not generally have the consciousness of evil intent that collective security assumes they must have if they are to be deterred.

The difficulty with the second objection is that so much of what makes collective security thinking attractive is its avowed adherence to the principles of justice. By acting in accordance with the dictates of collective security, we are asked to act in circumstances where our own vital security interests are not materially threatened; the real justification for acting is that in doing so we are performing a service to mankind by virtue of the protection afforded to innocents. If this is the case, however—if the real justification for collective security is to be found not in the appeal to interest but in the appeal to justice and humanity—we are all the more obliged to take seriously the real humanitarian costs and transgressions of *jus in bello* that military action may entail. There is considerable persuasiveness in the traditional realist argument that the violation of customary legal and moral standards may be countenanced in cases of necessity when, as Machiavelli said, “the safety of the state is in question.” To countenance such transgressions in a philanthropic cause appears far less justifiable.

The commission of injustice on behalf of a just cause, to be sure, is not allowable under the just war theory to which advocates of collective security subscribe; and it is certainly the case that the philosophers and moralists who place the concept of aggression at the center of their theory do not also countenance violations of *jus in bello* save in exceptional circumstances (“supreme emergency”).<sup>8</sup> To this it might be answered, however, that wars are not fought by philosophers and moralists; and that those who do fight them, and the people who support them, tend to be much less scrupulous regarding the means when they find themselves at war. In the court of public opinion, measures taken to reduce the risk to one’s own combatants, even if they require the wholesale slaughter of enemy forces, are seen as wholly unobjectionable, and to raise an objection is deemed a sign of insufficient patriotism or deficient mental equipment. Even military actions that bring foreseeable harm to the civilian population of the enemy state are shrugged off as being part of the hard necessities of war, and a statesman who increased the risk to his own military forces to avoid such harm might well find himself indicted for having needlessly exposed his own soldiers. By postulating a duty to come to the aid of innocent states, collective security removes us from the self-interested world of political action, but we do not remain there for long. As Meinecke said, “every influx of unpolitical motives into the province of pure conflicts of power and interest brings with it the danger that these motives will be misused and debased by the naturally stronger motives of mere profit, of *raison d’ état*. The latter resembles

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<sup>8</sup> See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

some mud-colored stream that swiftly changes all the pure waters flowing into it into its own murky color.”<sup>9</sup> Collective security tends strongly toward such a result in practice. We begin with outrage over the highly publicized atrocities committed by the enemy, and we end by bombing, and more bombing.

### Conclusion

These reflections are not intended to suggest that multilateral approaches to “international peace and security” are a bad thing. The necessity of gathering a coalition together to meet any particular crisis provides a certain insurance that the intervening states are aiming for an approximation of the common good and not simply pursuing their selfish interests. The cooperation enjoined by multilateral action is also highly advantageous to international society insofar as it provides rewards to the great powers for cooperating, rather than quarreling, with one another. Since their quarrels are capable of doing the most damage, this must normally be accounted as a good thing.

Despite these considerations, it would be stretching matters to say that the mere existence of multilateralism is conclusive evidence of ethical or prudent action. The need to seek international legitimation may well serve as an excuse for not acting when acting is justifiable on either prudential or ethical grounds. This criticism was plausible during much of the Cold War; arguably, it was also well founded in the aftermath of the Gulf War, when the Bush administration pleaded the doctrine of nonintervention and the need to preserve the international consensus to justify its refusal to intervene in the Iraqi civil war. Conversely, multilateral action may in reality be the result not of a true meeting of the minds but rather of the power of a hegemonic state which others are afraid to offend. The prelude to the Gulf War can be seen in such a light, for there can be little doubt that many states had serious reservations over the course chosen by the United States but swallowed their doubts so as not to prejudice their relations with this country. A comparable phenomenon was at work in late 1991 when Britain and France, against their better instincts, went along with Germany’s decision to recognize Croatia so as to preserve a unified European front in the immediate aftermath of the Maastricht negotiations. The urge to cooperate and to preserve a united front in negotiations may paradoxically give undue influence to the most unilateral member of a coalition, whose power is increased by virtue of its obstinacy.

One is thus tempted to conclude that multilateral action on behalf of illegitimate ends is no virtue, and that unilateral action on behalf of legitimate ends is

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison D’Etat and Its Place in Modern History*, trans. Douglas Scott (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 210.

no vice. At a minimum, the existence of a multilateral imprimatur on an action is not conclusive evidence that it is free from objection on other grounds; conversely, the failure to obtain a multilateral imprimatur does not condemn an action that is otherwise legitimate.

This conclusion does not mean that we should not attempt to make the United Nations more effective, or otherwise cease to work through multilateral institutions. There are certain functions performed by the United Nations, such as the mediation activities contemplated in Chapter VI of the Charter or the provision of peacekeeping troops to uphold a negotiated settlement, that frequently cannot be performed, or performed as well, by any state or group of states acting alone. To this expression of outside concern and mutual aid there can be no substantial objection.

At the same time, however, there is the danger that the commitment to multilateralism will also be seen to imply a commitment to the distinctive method that collective security brings to the resolution of international conflict. That method carries with it a set of attributes that are highly questionable. It discourages the compromises that make possible the peaceful resolution of disputes and thus encourages the resort to war; it promotes a distorted vision of the causes of international violence by converting every particular conflict into a struggle between good and evil; and it encourages, by virtue of the inflated importance given to the ends it pursues, the loosening of the restraints imposed by just war doctrine on the conduct of war. Like the society of states described by Rousseau, the doctrine of collective security may be wise in theory, but it tends toward absurdity in practice. In practice, its most striking attribute is the contrast between the humanity of the maxims it ostensibly observes and the cruelty of the actions that it sanctions. A doctrine whose announced purpose is to create a *Pax Universalis* that will succeed in prohibiting war among nations has the paradoxical effect of exacerbating the level of violence in the particular wars to which its method is applied.