Part I: A Brief History of War

The ruins of Jericho, one of the world’s oldest towns, attest to the ancient origins of warfare. Archaeologists have found that roughly eight thousand years ago Jericho’s inhabitants constructed a huge stone wall and dug a moat twenty-four feet wide and eight feet deep to protect themselves from outside attack.

What was “total war” in the ancient world?
The people of Jericho had good reason to be concerned about self-defense. War in the ancient world was often “total war,” with the fighting extending far beyond the battlefield. Not only were the soldiers of a conquered community often killed, but women and children were typically enslaved. The land, livestock, and possessions of the defeated were divided among the victors as war booty. In the twentieth century, such brutality might be labeled as “genocide,” the planned extermination of a people.

An example of this kind of destruction comes from the Roman Republic, the model from which the founders of the United States borrowed heavily in designing the U.S. Constitution. In the third century B.C., Rome twice defeated Carthage, its North African rival, to gain dominance in the Mediterranean. The Carthaginians were stripped of their colonies and their navy, and were forced to pay large sums of gold and silver to Rome. Nonetheless, many members of the Roman senate feared that Carthage would revive to again threaten Rome, and insisted on nothing less than the total destruction of their long-time foe. In 149 B.C., they put their plan into action. After Carthage turned over hostages and weapons in attempts to appease the Romans, Rome attacked once again. Carthaginians resisted, but eventually they were beaten into submission. The triumphant Romans razed Carthage to the ground, sold the remaining fifty thousand Carthaginians into slavery, and plowed the surrounding fields with salt. The Roman people, who annually voted for their top officials, strongly approved the actions of their leaders and their army. The term “Carthaginian peace” has since been used to describe the utter destruction of an enemy.

How did the Christian church attempt to limit the destructiveness of war during the Middle Ages?
A thousand years later, the Christian church made efforts to limit the devastation caused by war. In 989, a church council began what would later be called the “Peace of God” movement, calling on Christians to refrain from attacking priests and livestock. This protection was soon extended to women, peasants, merchants, persons on their way to church, mills, vines, seeds, and farm implements. The so-called “Truce of God,”
proclaimed in 1017, prohibited fighting from Saturday afternoon until daybreak Monday. The truce period was later extended to include Thursdays, Fridays, and church holidays. Eventually, a church council in 1054 declared, “A Christian who slays another Christian sheds the blood of Christ.”

The Christian church, however, did not embrace pacifism, the absolute rejection of violence. Rather, church officials during the Middle Ages developed the concept of the “just war.” Private wars of aggression by feudal lords seeking personal gain were condemned as unjust. In contrast, church officials viewed wars as just if they were fought to resist attack, restore the peace, punish evil-doers, avenge injuries, prevent injustice, or promote the interests of the church.

**How did Christian principles affect battlefield tactics?**

The principles laid out by the church influenced not only the decisions of European leaders, but battlefield tactics as well. A formal code of behavior known as chivalry (a word derived from *cheval*, the French word for horse) gained acceptance among the heavily armored mounted knights of Europe in the Middle Ages. The code of chivalry, however, was generally ignored when the foe was a non-Christian or thought to be a Christian heretic (dissenter). In a famous example, King Richard the Lion-Hearted of England ordered the beheading of twenty-seven hundred Muslim prisoners in the twelfth century. According to the rules of chivalry, executing Christian prisoners would have been unthinkable.

Further limits to the violence of war were developed in the 1600s when Dutch scholar Hugo Grotius drew a clear distinction between combatants and non-combatants, as well as between state property used to wage war and private property. The next large-scale war in Europe did not occur until the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in France.

**How did the Napoleonic Wars lead to an acceptance of a return to “total war”?**

The Napoleonic Wars of 1796-1815 illustrated the deadly power of new military technologies and the tremendous resources at the disposal of modern states. Until the Napoleonic Wars, European countries had maintained small armies, often staffed by foreign mercenaries. Military campaigns and objectives were limited by modern standards. Before Napoleon, soldiers were more likely to die from disease caused by poor sanitation than from battlefield action.

In contrast, Napoleon mobilized all of France and instilled a sense of patriotism in his troops. The huge national armies that fought during the Napoleonic Wars recalled the practices of ancient times, when an entire city-state or kingdom took up arms. Roughly one million troops died during nearly two decades of fighting. In addition, civilians suffered greatly, since crops and livestock were confiscated to support the military forces on the march throughout Europe. The British led a naval blockade of France that was intended to deprive Napoleon of military supplies.

In the years after Napoleon’s final defeat, Karl von Clausewitz, a military theorist from Prussia, wove the lessons of the Napoleonic Wars into an influential book that further widened the field of battle. He focused attention on the military significance of the morale of the civilian population. Just as in ancient times, Clausewitz justified efforts to destroy the will of the enemy as a military necessity—a lesson taken to heart during the American Civil War.

**“War is...a continuation of policy by other means.”**

—Karl von Clausewitz

**Why is the American Civil War referred to as the first modern war?**

The American Civil War has been called the first modern war. Improvements in artil-
lery and more accurate rifles meant that troops were more vulnerable than ever when they attacked heavily fortified positions. Battlefield casualties reached new heights. During the three-day battle at Gettysburg in 1863, nearly fifty thousand soldiers were killed or seriously wounded.

In the fall of 1864, General Sherman’s march through Georgia brought home the horrors of war to the civilian population of the Confederacy. Although they met little resistance, Sherman’s Union troops left a path of devastation sixty miles wide from Atlanta to the coastal city of Savannah. Farm buildings, crops, homes, and virtually everything else of possible military value were burned. The destruction of property was intentional, unlike in previous military campaigns.

How did the international community attempt to reduce civilian casualties?

The period between the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914 saw increased international concern about the conduct and destructiveness of war. The St. Petersburg Declaration in 1868 outlawed certain bullets as “inhumane.” The International Peace Conferences at the Hague in the Netherlands in 1899 and 1907 led to treaties that affirmed earlier attempts to govern the rules of war. The 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare, for example, reinforced the distinction between civilian and military targets.

Article 25 prohibited “the attack or bombardment, by whatever means, of towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings which are undefended.” Article 27 declared that “In sieges and bombardments all necessary steps must be taken to spare, as far as possible, buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected.”

How did technological advances contribute to destruction in World War I?

The principles of the Hague treaties, however, did little to hold down the death toll in World War I. Technological advances and new military strategies heightened the toll on civilians and soldiers. From 1914 to 1918, ten million soldiers died on the battlefield and at least five million civilians perished from disease and starvation. Submarines, naval blockades, and the first warplanes extended the suffering of the war well beyond the front lines.
Ending the War Against Japan: Science, Morality, and the Atomic Bomb

Initially, aerial bombardments targeted military installations. However, unpredictable winds, the inaccuracy of bomber pilots, and the fact that military targets were often located in towns and cities exposed civilians to attack from the sky. The first significant incident of aerial bombardment occurred in May 1917, when twenty-one German Gotha biplane bombers struck the British town of Folkestone. The German pilots had intended to raid military targets near London, but their fuel supplies ran low before they reached their destination. Instead, they tried to release their bombs over a military camp housing Canadian troops several miles from Folkestone. While no one in the camp was injured, ninety-five townspeople were killed.

Within weeks, German planes had begun regularly bombing British towns and cities, especially London. British bomber pilots soon staged their own raids over Germany. By the end of the war in November 1918, German and British pilots had dropped 100 tons of explosives and killed or wounded more than seven thousand civilians. The technology of aerial bombardment had also progressed rapidly. The largest bombers at the end of the war possessed a wingspan of 138 feet, were powered by four engines, and were capable of dropping a two thousand-pound bomb.

"You must not suppose that we set out to kill women and children. We have higher aims. You would not find one officer in the German Army or Navy who would go to war to kill women and children. Such things happen accidentally in war."
—World War I German bomber pilot

While aerial bombardment in World War I inflicted little damage on military targets,

U.S. War Department: 1940 Principles of War

In 1940, the U.S. War Department issued a revised code governing the actions of U.S. armed forces in wartime. The code was based on the assumption that “Among civilized nations the conduct of war is regulated by certain well-established rules known as the rules or laws of war.”

According to the War Department, the conduct of U.S. soldiers should be guided by three principles:

• The principle of military necessity, under which, subject to the principles of humanity and chivalry, a belligerent is justified in applying any amount and any kind of force to compel the complete submission of the enemy with the least possible expenditure of time, life, and money [Under the principle of military necessity, U.S. forces would be justified in destroying civilian property and blockading transportation and communications routes to defeat an enemy, but not in indiscriminately killing civilians.];

• The principle of humanity, prohibiting employment of any such kind or degree of violence as is not actually necessary for the purpose of the war [Under the principle of humanity, U.S. forces would be justified in attacking military camps and ammunition depots, but not hospitals, schools, and other non-military targets.]; and

• The principle of chivalry, which denounces and forbids resort to dishonorable means, expedients, or conduct [Under the principle of chivalry, U.S. forces would be justified in fighting with all of their strength, but not in using poison gas or torturing prisoners.].

Although no international body existed to enforce the rules of war, the War Department planned to strictly observe them in the event of conflict and expected “all civilized nations” to do the same. Exceptions to the code were permitted only to carry out “legitimate reprisals for illegal conduct by the enemy.”
the attacks left civilians terrified. Military planners were quick to appreciate how aerial bombardment could weaken the morale of an enemy.

*How did nations attempt to deal with the unprecedented killing of World War I?*

World War I renewed the long-standing debate about the morality of war. In democratic societies in particular, the public was stunned by the failure of Western civilization to prevent such unprecedented slaughter. Many hoped to harness the moral force of public opinion to make World War I “the war to end all wars.”

This feeling influenced the course of international relations in the 1920s. International conferences were convened to halt the build-up of naval armaments, poison gas, and other weapons. The United States and France forged a treaty in 1928, known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, to outlaw war. Eventually, the treaty gained the signatures of sixty-four countries, calling on them to “condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies, and renounce it as an instrument of national policy.”

The events of the 1930s showed that good intentions were not enough. The Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 gave the world a preview of what was to come. Nazi Germany strongly supported the rebel fascist forces of General Francisco Franco and sent several squadrons of bombers to fight Spain’s republican government. In March 1938, German bombers struck the government stronghold of Barcelona while Franco’s forces pounded the city with ground artillery. Much of the world was outraged by the Nazi air raid. Secretary of State Cordell Hull expressed American anger when he asserted that “no theory of war can justify such conduct.”

Over the next several years, the Kellogg-Briand Pact would do little to stop the aggression of Japan, Germany, and Italy. Rather, the resolve of the democratic states to maintain the peace and regulate warfare was called into question. Distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, soldier and civilian, were virtually erased, despite a new U.S. Code of Conduct issued in 1940. Eventually, all major countries involved in World War II were to wage the total war of the ancient world. The concept of military necessity was to be expanded to include almost any action designed to weaken the ability of the enemy to resist.