

Evolution of International Peace and Security:

Changing Our Modes of Thinking¹

Kennette Benedict

Thank you for the opportunity to celebrate the extraordinary history and accomplishments of Cornell's Peace Studies Program. I am deeply honored to be with you this evening and to join in honoring the steady vision and remarkable contributions of Judith Reppy—to the Cornell program, and to the evolution of the peace and international security field. If I speak with any authority this evening, it is because I have had brilliant teachers, like Judith, many of whom are gathered here for this conference.

Imagine my good fortune. As an officer of the MacArthur Foundation from 1987 through 2005—for nearly 18 years—I participated in an ongoing seminar in which I was the only student and all of you and literally hundreds of others of the very best scholars in the world tutored me and the Foundation from nearly every disciplinary, national, and policy perspective on the complex issues of international peace and security.

I cannot possibly repay all of you for the education I received, but I do hope that in a small way I can pay tribute to some of you—and especially to Judith on the occasion of her retirement—by sharing a few observations about the study of international security and the practice of peace.

¹ Remarks presented at the Peace Studies 40th Anniversary Conference, Cornell University, April 9-10, 2010. Kennette Benedict is Executive Director and Publisher of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. She previously served as Director of International Peace and Security at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Although I've been asked to talk about the evolution of the field over the past 40 years—since the creation of the Peace Studies Program at Cornell—a proper survey must really begin with the invention and use of the atomic bomb in 1945. It was the realization, in the few years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that humans now could destroy themselves and nearly all life on Earth, that propelled scholars and policymakers to ask fundamental questions: “What is international security? How can it be achieved?” Many in this field have grappled, whether they knew it or not, with the observation attributed to Albert Einstein after the first atomic explosion: “With the unleashed power of the atom, everything has changed save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.”

As the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union accelerated into the 1950s, it became increasingly clear that these two states were developing weapons that could destroy nearly all of humanity. Moreover—and here's the kicker—the state no longer had the ability, the capacity, to protect its own citizens from the horrible ravages of the most destructive and terrifying technology ever invented. The social contract between citizen and state had been abrogated. And yet very few seemed to notice.

We have evidence that a few physicists intuitively grasped the situation. Some of their essays appeared in the pages of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, where even Edward Teller called for world government to answer the question of how to control nuclear weapons. In 1947 this seemed the only logical way to save civilization from total destruction.

Logic, however, did not win the day. With the first Soviet test of an atomic bomb in 1949, and hostilities growing between the United States and the USSR, leaders and military strategists dismissed international control of nuclear weapons as a most dangerous folly. Scholars of strategic studies, resting their assumptions on a view of the state as protector of its

citizens, developed theories of deterrence and mutual assured destruction to frame and rationalize policy decisions that, seen from Mars, could only be characterized as simultaneously genocidal and suicidal.

By 1970, when Frank Long, Judith Reppy, and others founded the Cornell University Peace Studies Program, challenges to the idea of the state as protector were forming, however. Scholars and citizens were questioning the wisdom of the U.S. war in Vietnam, spurred in part by television images of ordinary people killed and wounded in a war that seemed based more on strategic theory than on national security interests.

The origins of peace studies were rooted in the perspectives of those who are harmed by war. At Cornell the program drew from faculty in science and technology, economics, history, and area studies, including the history and politics of Vietnam.

Even beyond Vietnam, there was plenty of material to work with. Proxy wars in East Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and Southwest Asia, prosecuted by the United States and the Soviet Union throughout the 50-year “long peace,” killed millions of people, tore societies apart, and wrecked economies. These conflicts brought attention to how little we in the United States and the Soviet Union knew about the cultures, economies, histories, and perspectives of those regions. Area studies programs were funded by foundations and governments to address this ignorance. In my telling of the story, these university programs play a substantial role in the broadening of the field and the redefinition of international security studies.

Researchers began to shed light on the problems of underdevelopment, the exploitation of developing countries by industrialized societies, and to focus on the sources of conflict and war.

During the late 1960s and ‘70s, as well, transnational human rights organizations sprang up and began to address violations of citizens’ political rights by their own governments. The

state was not viewed as a protector; on the contrary, it was a predator. Concern about international human rights made its way into U.S. policy during the Carter administration, and was taken up in universities and law schools as well, providing another thread to what would become a tapestry of peace and security studies.

In 1981 the United States began a new arms build-up to counter the continuing production of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union. The new expenditures on military weapons, including renewed plans for a U.S. national missile defense system (the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI) were accompanied by increasingly harsh and strident rhetoric. As the U.S. president called the Soviet Union an “evil empire” in 1984, the USSR was reaching its highest level of nuclear weapons—about 45,000 (the most that any country has ever possessed). Throughout the early 1980s, independent scientists based in universities challenged the technical feasibility of SDI, calling into question the growing military budgets, as well as the necessity of these new systems. (Again, Cornell-trained academics led the public debate.)

In Europe, “ground zero” in any nuclear war between the superpowers, political leaders and scholars were developing a theory of international security based on a recognition that the greatest threats to security come more from global problems shared by the entire international community than from the actions of individual states. Nuclear weapons, the economic burden of militarism and war, disparities in living standards within and among countries, and global environmental degradation threaten all societies with destruction and disintegration. The 1982 Palme Commission report provided a summary outline of this perspective, and though the idea of common security that emerged from the report still focused on the burdens and threats of militarism and weapons, the report planted the seeds for the idea of “human security” through its references to human rights as part of the calculus of peace and security.

Following on the Palme Commission report came another commission funded jointly by the Carnegie Corporation and the new MacArthur Foundation. Its 1984 report addressed what were perceived as the “deficiencies” in international security studies and training that had led, the commissioners argued, to flawed policies that failed to address the dangers from superpower competition, regional wars, economic underdevelopment, resource scarcity, and environmental damage.

What the commissioners saw as a lack of analytic power and imagination in the field could be remedied, they felt, by supporting those outside of traditional peace and security studies, including area studies scholars, journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and economists, and most important, graduate students and younger scholars who would ask rude questions and provide an “engine of change.”

The success of those attempts to broaden and strengthen the field in the 1980s, however, benefitted from great timing and spectacular events, as well as from research and communication between and among scholars around the world.

With the dramatic dismantling of the Soviet Union and the break-up of Yugoslavia, the fragility of state institutions in the face of economic and political pressures from within and from without left the field of international security in seeming disarray. So many had been “stuck on the state” that they failed even to try to engage in “thought experiments” about what might happen if the Soviet Union changed. [Judith Reppy, I am told, had the good sense to ask her Cornell University students to engage in just such speculation. As usual, ahead of her time.]

A few others were prepared though. I will never forget the conference I attended in February 1990 in Potsdam that convened think tanks from eastern and western Europe to consider how they might collaborate on peace and security research. I accompanied one of my earliest

MacArthur “professors,” Catherine Kelleher, to the conference, where we were treated to an unexpected address by then German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. To audible gasps from the audience, he announced that West and East Germany would be unified within six months and they would even share a common currency. The Berlin Wall had just come down three months ago, and suddenly there would be one Germany.

Europeans, and especially Germans, shaped by the experience of European integration, schooled in *Ostpolitik*, and with too many years sitting at “ground zero” of any nuclear conflict between the superpowers, were less concerned about the security of states and focused more on the welfare and security of their citizens. Political interests and nationalist sentiments surely played a role, as well, in the dramatic actions of the West German government. But without an underlying conception of common security, and the practice of developing a European Community, such radical changes likely would not have been possible.

Even in the apparent disarray of the late 1980s and early ‘90s, new perspectives in international peace and security began to take root in the United States. Three streams of research seem particularly fruitful, and with hindsight, ominously prescient. They also raise significant challenges to traditional security studies. I sometimes called these streams the three Es: “ethnicity” and religious conflict as a cause of civil wars, environmental change, and economic globalization.

In the aftermath of the Soviet break-up, including the disintegration of Yugoslavia, civil wars and other violent conflicts seemed to break out everywhere—in places as diverse as middle Europe, central Africa, Mexico, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. We know them by the sites of genocide—Kosovo, Rwanda, Oaxaca, Sri Lanka, and East Timor, initially thought to be the results of long-simmering tribal disputes based on essential identities, new research by anthro-

pologists now interested in peace and security showed that the “ethnic” or “religious” identities upon which conflicts seemed to be based were more often the result of “constructed” identities—handy symbols around which to mobilize. The underlying and deeper sources of conflict often lie in economic disparity, resource scarcity, and demographic imbalance.

The idea of the construction of identities has compelling implications for international security policy. If ethnicity is not essential, but is rather a changing category with political uses, then these civil wars are amenable to intervention. Although fear and hatred may seem to dominate, peacemaking efforts that heed underlying power relations and address economic hardship may have a chance of success.

Peacemaking and peacebuilding by the United Nations was refined with the help of case studies and analytic work in university programs at Minnesota, Wisconsin, Stanford, and New York University, to name a few. And in an unusual display of policy success, we saw a decline in civil wars by 2008.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also brought to the fore the transnational economic flows permeating political borders of countries everywhere. The focus on globalization that began in the 1970s with interest in multinational and transnational corporations started to generate more fine-grained studies of its effects on domestic markets and income equality, on national and group identity formation, on technology transfer, and on the state capacity to control these flows. Cornell again was a leader by focusing on the consequences for international peace and security of globalizing trends in technology transfer.

A third line of research—on the causes and consequences of environmental change—drew attention to equitable access to food and water as a basic human right and a fundamental source of security. The inclusion of environmental degradation as a threat to security in the 1996

U.S. National Intelligence Estimate is an indicator of how these concerns were being incorporated into policy discussions.

Perhaps most important for my story today, however, is the research industry that grew up about “failed states,” “unregulated areas,” or “regions beyond state control.” The collapse of governmental institutions that provide for domestic order and the control of borders in places like Somalia, Sudan, Congo, Liberia, and parts of Uganda provoked study and occasional attempts at action. These areas appeared to be the unfortunate victims of the “three Es.”

If research on the “three Es” contributed to understandings of the causes of war and violent conflict, other lines of research over the past 30 years contributed frameworks to solve long-standing security dilemmas. Three that have found their way into policy discussions are “democratic peace,” “cooperative security,” and “human security.”

It was Immanuel Kant, of course, who observed that liberal democracies do not go to war with one another. Over the past 25 years, many have explored the logic and provided evidence to support or contest the proposition. But whether because democracies share similar values or interests, or because it is more difficult to mobilize for war when such action requires popular support, or even if it is not true, the idea of the democratic peace is appealing on the face of it. If we wish to move toward a world without war, then this argument compels us to foster liberal democracies wherever possible.

Whether democracy can be “exported” from one country to another, or even more troublesome, foisted upon a society, is a question that continues to animate debate about the U.S. role in the world. Though well-intentioned, the observation was repeated so frequently by some policy advisors that it even became an underlying rationale for bringing about regime change in Iraq—at the end of a gun.

The notion of “cooperative security” is more modest in its aims. From ideas about the role of transparency in building trust, the framework of cooperative security calls for unprecedented openness and sharing of information between and among states. Even the most vital information—about military force structures and war plans—can be provided to a rival with the aim of reducing fear, and most notably, heading off surprise attack. After all it is often from fear, misperception, and lack of information that arms races and wars begin. If countries are to live in peace, their governments must open their militaries for inspection and provide assurances to others that no attacks are in the offing.

In fact, this concept undergirded one of the most constructive policy developments of the post-Cold War era—the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program between the United States and Russia. This bilateral effort has successfully dismantled nuclear weapons here and in Russia, and secured over 60% of the Russian/Soviet nuclear weapons and materials.

Finally, I turn to “human security.” The term is more than another addition to the burgeoning list of securities—economic security, environmental security, food security, collective security, and comprehensive security. To me, the distinguishing feature of human security is its focus on protecting individuals and the suggestion that institutions and collectivities of all kinds are needed to provide that protection. In other words, human security attempts to shift the locus of the social contract from one between citizen and state to that between world citizen and international institutions. Although the authors of the “Human Security” report agree that the state has a role to play in providing human security, they explicitly reject the definition of security as involving the security of the state.

If sociologist Robert Merton were still with us, he very well might say that the recent history of war and peace, and the study of national and international security, has been a story of

“goal displacement.” What was once the means to an end—the creation of the nation-state to protect individuals from anarchy and violence—became an end in itself; the sovereignty and survival of the state—even if it required the destruction of entire populations—was to be secured. And to ensure the security of the state, huge arsenals of extraordinary weapons were developed, and secrets kept at all costs.

The idea of human security—the protection of individuals and groups—also lay the basis for a new formulation of international policy—the “responsibility to protect.” If states have failed to protect their citizens, either through incompetence or design (as in the case of genocide), the international community has a responsibility to step in to protect citizens of that state—even if it means abridging the sovereignty of the offending or incapacitated state. Human security, the protection of individuals and groups from violence and fear is the true end goal.

So my story of an evolving field comes to an end for now. With close observation, careful documentation, and imagination, you and other scholars have brought new understandings of international peace and security to light. Not only has the sovereignty of the state been tested by economic globalization that brings dangerous technologies and armaments, as well as financial capital, across more permeable borders; not only is it tested by flows of information that bypass state controls, by civil wars that disrupt internal order and rend the fabric of societies, and by environmental change that does not recognize political boundaries. State sovereignty is challenged, finally, by the recognition that states cannot adequately protect their own citizens from mass violence.

So we come full circle back to where we started with the dropping of the first atomic bomb and the scientists’ realization that no government could protect against the new weapons of genocide. Individual states cannot control the most dangerous technology on Earth; there is no

feasible defense. Nuclear weapons fundamentally challenge the capacity of sovereign nations to defend their own citizens. If individual states cannot protect their people from destruction by nuclear weapons, then it follows that the international community has a “responsibility to protect”—to challenge the state system and provide protection to individuals and groups in the face of the state’s incapacity.

By the first decade of the 21st century, we have indeed “changed our modes of thinking.” You and many others across the broad range of the international peace and security field have followed the evidence, challenged traditional conceptions, and established new frameworks that promise a safer world and security for all. The next challenge is to change our modes of acting. We’ll leave that topic for another time.