John Keegan Essay, Research Paper

War and Politics: Are both one in the same?

?I was not fated to be a warrior. Fate, nevertheless, cast my life among warriors.? ?John Keegan

His home in England was near the main gathering point for the D-Day invasion. Along with his father?s service in World War I, Keegan felt himself drawn towards the military and it?s workings. Unfortunately Keegan was unable to serve in the British Military due to a childhood illness. Although Keegan was unable to serve his country, he was determined to find his way into some aspect of the military. With a degree at Oxford, Keegan became a military historian. This essay will take a look into Keegan?s work, A History of Warfare, and his thesis that war is not a continuation of politics. This essay will refute his thesis with evidence from Clausewitz, fallacies in Keegan?s novel and military conflicts over the past thirty years.

Keegan has dissected the workings of the military and the military soldier. In his novel A History of Warfare, Keegan disputes the Clausewitzen theory that war is the continuation of policy by other means. Keegan supports his theory by giving explanations of how Clausewitzen?s theory is invalid.

To understand Keegan?s position one must first be familiar with Clausewitz. Clausewitz was a Prussian regimental officer during the Napoleonic wars. Upon retirement, he wrote the book On War. The books main thesis was war is the continuation by policy by other means.

Keegan disagrees with Clausewitz by saying:

Such at statement implies the existence of states, of state interests and of rational calculation about how they may be achieved. Yet war antedates the state, diplomacy and strategy by many millennia. Clausewitz, a child of Aristotle, went no further than to say that a political animal is war making animal. Neither dared confront the thought that man is a thinking animal in whom the intellect directs the urge to hunt and the ability to kill.

Keegan suggests that war precedes states by many millenniums. First, Clausewitz?s thesis does not imply there must be existence of states. Perhaps the political entity of the state did not exist but tribal life did. The tribe is a political entity. The bible has many accounts of tribal warfare for political gain. It varies from Moses leaving Egypt to David defeating Goliath. Keegan also states that war precedes diplomacy and strategy as well. The bible also recounts many strategies and diplomacy between tribes and states. Some historians might object to the bible being a reliable source but no one can refute that what happened in the bible was not true or accurate.

We are cultural animals and it is the richness of our culture which allows us to accept our undoubted potentiality for violence but to believe nevertheless that its expression is a cultural aberration. History lessons remind us that the states in which we live, their institutions, even their laws, have come to us through conflict, often of the most bloodthirsty sort.

Keegan is referring to the statement made by Aristotle in which he said, ?Man is a political animal.? Keegan said that Clausewitz is a child of Aristotle and he believes that a political animal is a war-making animal. Keegan refutes them by saying, ?Neither dared confront the thought that man is a thinking animal in whom the intellect directs the urge to hunt and the ability to kill.?

How can he say that he disagrees with Clausewitz?s theory when he himself claims that the states we live in now have come to be by conflict? Doesn?t that support Clausewitz?s theory? The point about neither Aristotle nor Clausewitz confront the fact that man is a thinking animal is a bit confusing. Yes man is a thinking animal and throughout history there has been countless rulers, dictators and emperors who have used war to gain political control. A prime example would be the conflict between Julius Caesar and Pompey. While Caesar was in Gaul waging war, he used agents to dominate politics in Rome. Caesar used politics and military strength to seize control of Rome and become the emperor. Man is a thinking animal and those in power, especially in the early years of history, were continually thinking on how to get more.

Keegan?s big fallacy is his statement; ?Politics played no part in the conduct of the First World War worth mentioning.? He goes on to say;

The Germans, French, British and Russians found themselves apparently fighting war for war?s sake. The war?s political objects, difficult enough to define in the first place, were forgotten. Political restraints were overwhelmed, politicians who appealed to reason were execrated, and politics even in the liberal democracies was rapidly reduced to a mere justification of bigger battles, longer casualty lists, costlier budgets and overflowing human misery.

The Encarta Encyclopedia states the following;

The underlying causes of World War I were the spirit of intense nationalism that permeated Europe throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, the political and economic rivalry among the nations, and the establishment and maintenance in Europe after 1871 of large armaments and of two hostile military alliances. The fundamental causes of he conflict were rooted deeply in the European history of the previous century, particularly in the political and economic policies that prevailed on the Continent after 1871, the year that marked the emergence of Germany as a great world power.

Keegan fails to give one argument supporting his statement. How he can say that politics played no role worth mentioning is beyond me. He not only gives no arguments but goes on to say, ??we are nevertheless right to see Clausewitz as the ideological father of the First World War, just as we are right to perceive Marx as the ideological father of the Russian Revolution. The appalling fate that those armies brought upon themselves by their dedication to it may be Clausewitz?s enduring legacy.?

To compare Clausewitz and Marx is stretching it a bit. To blame Clausewitz for World War I is ludicrous. Once again Keegan fails to support his theory. Keegan goes on to say that Clausewitz is the ideological father of World War I. One can concur that if Keegan states Clausewitz?s is to blame for World War I then wouldn?t he be supporting Clausewitz?s theory? If war is the continuation of politics and Clausewitz is to blame, then isn?t it correct to say that war is the continuation of politics?

Keegan he was not the only one who had this theory. Radical military writers such as the British historian B.H. Liddell Hart had such theories as well. He accuses him of urging the largest possible offensive with the largest possible numbers as the key to victory. Later Liddell?s thoughts were dismissed. Keegan, adhering to Liddell?s theory, once again has himself in a no win situation. He has stated that man is a thinking animal so shouldn?t man be intelligent enough to figure out war and conflict without going to the past? Shouldn?t a general wage his own war, not an officer who wrote a book in the past?

Keegan concludes his theory with these thoughts; Culture is a prime determinant of the nature of warfare, as the history of its development. Politics must continue; war cannot. That is not to say that the role of the warrior is over. The world community needs, more than it has ever needed, skilful and disciplined warriors who are ready to put themselves at the service of its authority. Such warriors must properly be seen as the protectors of civilization, not its enemies. There is an even greater wisdom in the denial that politics and war belong with the same continuum. Unless we insist on denying it, our future, may belong to the men with bloodied hands.

It is great to say that politics must continue but war cannot, but is it realistic? For centuries war and politics have gone hand and hand. What events or individuals have given us a hope for change? Are recent conflicts a testament to the future? The United States involment in Bosnia, Somalia and the Gulf War has proven that. Would Keegan say that politics were not involved in those conflicts?

Keegan fails to address a few major conflicts in history. The Vietnam War and Korean War are not mentioned at all. The current theory underlying Vietnam and Korea were political reasons for the conflict. It is true that we went to Korea to support the South Koreans who were invaded but why were they invaded? Political reasons are why. We were politically obligated to support the South Koreans. China?s involment was purely political. The United States was not going to invade China. To the Chinese, having communist North Korea on their border was better than having the United States. Saying that Vietnam was not a political conflict does not give a reasonable explanation. The Vietnam War was the United States supporting a helpless South Vietnam and the United States fighting to keep their influence in South East Asia. With Keegan?s failure to address these major conflicts he leaves the reader wondering why.

There are some errors of interpretation and fact in his novel as well. The atomic bomb was not designed to end wars without commitment of manpower on the battlefield as the author contends. The atomic bomb was another weapon, which we potentiality we only discovered after its use. Not until a decade later did nuclear weaponry come to take its place among equals in military establishments, at least in the United States.

Keegan?s main goal was to refute the Clausewitz theory of war and politics. Keegan failed in this task. His inability to discuss such politically orientated conflicts such as Vietnam and Korea aids in his failure. His contention that World War I was not political was refuted by a definition in an encyclopedia. Keegan tries to offer the reader a new concept in studying military history but he is unable to get the reader to follow his train of thought.