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STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Can ISIS/Islamic State create a viable caliphate?

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Caliphate Redivivus? Why a Careful Look at the 7th Century Can Predict How the New Caliphate Will End

Edward N. Luttwak

When modern Muslims invoke the *Khilāfa,* the Caliphate as their ideal of governance for the *Ummah,* the planetary community of all Muslims, and indeed for all humans once converted or killed if stubbornly pagan, they do not refer to the famous caliphates of history from the splendiferous Umayyad, to the longer-lasting Abbasid extinguished by the Mongols in 1258, the Egypt-based and tolerant Fatimid in between, or the Ottoman that lingered till 1924, let alone the extant Ahmadiyya Caliphate that most condemn as heretical.

Instead they wax lyrical about the rule of Muhammad's first four "rightly guided" successors, the *al-Khulafa' ur-Rashidun*—who followed one another after his death in 632. Unable to assume Muhammad's prophetic role, his best-placed followers Abū Bakr as-Siddīq, `Umar [or Omar] ibn al-Khattāb, and `Uthmān ibn `Affān, took control of his movement in that sequence as his "successors," *Khulafaa',* whence their governance became known as the "succession" or *Khilāfa,* our "caliphate."

Muhammad had left no son to claim the leadership by inheritance, female succession was undreamed of, and son-in-law Alī ibn Abī Tālib, married to daughter Fatimah, was subordinated by the first three to become only the fourth caliph—not good enough for the dynastic-minded loyalists of the *Ahl al-Bayt,* the prophet's household. That started a deadly quarrel that the "party of Ali," *Shī'atu `Alī,* abbreviated as the familiar Shi'a, still pursues very vigorously—evoking accusations of heresy by the more severe of their Sunni opponents, the followers of the *Sunnah* or traditional path of the Muslim majority in all countries but Iran and Iraq.

In greatly celebrating the *Rashidun,* as modern Muslims afflicted by the contemporary travails of the Muslim world are wont to do, the violent instability of the institution is disregarded, no doubt because what is celebrated are mostly its colossal victories over the infidels who torment them still. Within a year of Muhammad's death in 632, his erstwhile companions and self-appointed successors lead their Muslim followers on plunder

raids into Byzantine Syria and Sassanian Mesopotamia that were so successful that they were directly followed by conquering and missionary expeditions. Muhammad's religion had promised victory and loot above all, and the advancing Muslim riding out of Arabia saw those promises triumphantly validated by the seemingly miraculous defeat of the vast, ancient, and till then all-powerful Roman and Sassanian empires, which between them had long dominated all the lands of the Middle East fertile enough to be worth ruling.

The two empires had just finished the longest and most destructive of all their wars—almost thirty years of wide-ranging reciprocal raids and outright invasions that had started in 602 ruined many of their cities, destroyed commerce, emptied their treasuries, exhausted their manpower, and wrecked frontier defenses and field armies alike, while bitterly antagonizing their provincial populations, left undefended to be despoiled by enemy looters yet harshly taxed before and after. A few years of tranquility might have restored the strength of both empires beyond any challenge by Arab raiders no matter how enthusiastic, but instead both were invaded and each suffered a catastrophic battle defeat.

In August 636, just four years after Muhammad's death, the army of the emperor and erstwhile great conqueror Herakleios was utterly defeated at the river Yarmuk. The Roman empire that had possessed Syria, Egypt, and all the lands between them for six centuries would lose every part of them within a decade.

In that same year (636), the *annus mirabilis* of Islamic conquest, the Sassanian empire of Persia, whose power had till very recently stretched from the Mediterranean to the Indus Valley was also decisively defeated, at al-Qādisiyyah in Mesopotamia, immediately losing its treasury and capital city, Ctesiphon. After a last attempt to defend the Persian hinterland at the battle of Nihawand in 642, commanded by the king of kings Yazdegerd III himself, resistance and the Sassanian empire with it waned, ending by 651.

One can readily see how the most hardened cynics among the Arabians would have been won over to intense faith by these utterly unexpected, indeed wildly improbable victories, which were soon followed by further waves of conquest that brought the raiders and missionaries of Islam right across northern Africa all the way to the Atlantic, and as far east as the eastern edges of Central Asia adjacent to Tang China, and into the Indus valley. Indeed the immense victories of those earliest years are still the mainspring of Islam's triumphalism, that contrasts so sharply with the turn-the-other-cheek spirit of most other faiths, and which generates the most acute inner tensions given the military inferiority of Muslims in almost all wars of recent centuries, at the hands of Christians, Jews, and unprotected infidels that Islam condemns to perpetual martial inferiority. That glaring contradiction inevitably raises terrible inner doubts that in turn foment the most violent

emotions, amplified in the case of the Jews because of their (post-Qur'anic) denigration as weaklings.

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The Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, and Ottoman Caliphates were all very different in many ways, from their geographic centers, in Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, and Istanbul respectively, to their prevailing ethos—though in that regard the Fatimid was more sharply different, because it was the only Shi'a Caliphate, and moreover its faith was "Sevener" Shi'ism, which like the much more familiar "Twelvers" of Iran and Iraq start with the party of Ali, whose line is perpetuated by infallible imams, the last of whom is still alive in occultation waiting his moment to emerge to redeem the world. But unlike the Twelvers, whose imam is Muhammad ibn Hasan "al-Mahdi" ("the guide"), born in 868 and still alive—vast crowds periodically implore him to emerge from the well at Jamkaran—the Seveners only recognize the same succession up to the sixth imam, then inserting their own final and immortal Imam Muhammad ibn Ismā'īl born in 721—hence they are often known as "Ismā'īlīs"; they are also known for their contemporary moderation, in sharp contrast to the Ismā'īlī Nizari state founded in 1090 in Alamut in north-west Iran, whose conventional warfare over two centuries was augmented by dedicated assassins. The Fatimids, like the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman caliphates had their times of prosperity and achievement, both warlike and peaceful, not least in the cultural sphere in their time of success and liberality that ended for the Abbasid and Ottoman caliphates when decline induced the spread of an obscurantist orthodoxy that in some ways is unshaken till now.

Nevertheless for all the martial and civil glories of the Umayyad, Fatimid, Abbasid, and Ottoman in their best days, the *ad-Dawlah al-'Islāmiyyah,* the Islamic State of the new caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who thus re-named his *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham,* the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, again disregards the later caliphates to seek its inspiration from the first four caliphates of the "rightly guided," the *Rashidun.* Like them, al-Baghdadi aspires to rule the entire *Ummah* of all Muslim-majority countries and also beyond them, for in accordance to mainstream interpretations of Islamic law, any land once ruled by Muslims must forever be Islamic regardless of the prevailing religion of its current inhabitants. Hence the black flags of the Islamic State lately seen in

Berlin, Paris, and London demonstrations alternatively featured the *Shahada,* the declaration of faith, and maps that also enclosed Spain (the erstwhile al-Andalus) and most of once Mughal India as well as the Balkans—Sicilians have yet to protest their omission in spite of two centuries of Arab rule.

It is a matter of the highest contemporary relevance that the instability of the first *Rashidun* caliphates that counterpointed their huge conquests was radical, and not merely contingent. What afflicted them is bound to afflict Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State as well. It all started with Muhammad's charismatic leadership. He had tamed the tribes of Arabia to wondrous effect, but their allegiance was given only to his person, and not to his movement and its eventual successive leaders. Hence upon Muhammad's death an organic tribalism emerged again, in natural opposition to any unitary leadership.

Moreover, as with any ideology, differences in interpretation within Islam generated differences in doctrine, which tended to be sharpened as controversies unfolded, and given that only one doctrine could be right and all others had to be wrong, there was ideological secessionism in addition to the tribal variety. In our own days, the *Jabhat an-Nusrah li-Ahl ash-Shām,* the "support front of the people of Greater Syria" of Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani might seem the acme of extremism—the instant execution of any captured Shi'a for aggravated heresy is one of its milder doctrines—but to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Jabhat an-Nusrah's failure to adhere to his Islamic State is itself un-Islamic, making a traitor out of al-Jawlani. In due course, no doubt, the new caliph al-Baghdadi and his Islamic State will be outdone in turn by another group that will somehow contrive to be more extreme.

And it all started with the *Rashidun,* in sharp contrast to their mythic status as benign and serene rulers.

The first caliph, Abū Bakr as-Siddīq (632–634), had to fight tribal secessionism throughout his short reign to impose his rule, in a struggle that was further intensified by the opposition of Fatimah's partisans. They wanted the leadership for her husband Alī ibn Abī Tālib, but there was also a bitter property dispute over the date-palm orchards of Fardak in the oasis of Khaibar, some ninety miles north of Medina, supposedly gifted to Fatimah after they were seized from their Jewish cultivators by Muhammad's warriors in 629 (just yesterday for some: on July 20, 2014 Parisian demonstrators against Israel shouted "remember Khaibar" outside the Val d'Oise synagogue in Sarcelles). According to Sunni tradition, the wise and restrained Abū Bakr as-Siddīq resisted the temptation of unleashing his more numerous followers against Alī or Fatimah, who died of grief at her father's death in that version. But according to Shi'a tradition, Fatimah died of wounds sustained in a raid on her house lead by the second of the righteous ones, a prelude to the killing of her sons Hasan and Hussein by agents of Mu'āwiyah ibn `Abī Sufyān, founder

of the Umayyad Caliphate, and the greatest criminal in history according to the Shi'a, who annually commemorate Hussein's killing in 680 with tearful lamentations and bloody cuttings and self-flagellations with bladed chains that leave streets running with blood on Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Muharram, when non-Shi'a in those parts are enjoined to stay indoors.

Abū Bakr died of illness, a privilege denied to his successors among the *Rashidun,* each one of whom was assassinated, except for the third caliph who was lynched in his own home. His successor, `Umar ibn al-Khattāb (634–644), better known as Omar the conqueror of Jerusalem (and much else), also had to fight against the Shi'a partisans of the *Ahl al-Bayt,* along with chronic tribal secessions that were only partly moderated by the spiritual and material rewards of `Umar's great victories and vast conquests, for the prospect of loot both unites in battle and divides in victory, when it must be shared out. However great the spoils, there are always unsatisfied victors who would rebel till suppressed. In the end it was not a tribal or a partisan of Ali who killed `Umar, but rather a resentful Persian, the former Sassanian soldier Pīrūz Nahāvandi, captured in the epic defeat of al-Qādisiyyah.

The third caliph, 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (644–656), under whose authority the written text of the *Qur'an* was redacted, faced unending riots and rebellions, until he was finally lynched by victorious rebels in his own house in Medina.

The fourth caliph—and Muhammad's son-in-law—Ali ibn Abi Tālib (656–661), was outmaneuvered by Mu'āwīyah ibn Abī Sufyān, war leader in Syria and founder of the Umayyad dynasty, though it was an extremist of the Kharijite sect who assassinated Ali. That was an early example of the ideological violence that compounded tribal secessionism. Like their modern counterparts of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State, the Kharijites demanded unending war against all non-Muslims, denounced all who disagreed as apostates, and fiercely opposed all dynastic rulers.

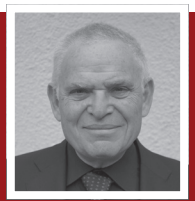
In that at least they were faithfully echoing the *Qur'an,* which promotes the equality of all believers, and is thus implicitly inimical to hereditary succession; indeed the *Qur'an* is explicitly hostile to pharaohs and kings. Yet within thirty years

POLL: How should the U.S. deal with ISIS/Islamic State?

- ☐ Sooner or later the U.S. will have to reinsert ground troops back into Iraq.
- ☐ The U.S. can manage the problem with military aid, a few advisors, and drones.
- ☐ The U.S. should partner with the Iraqi government, Iran, and concerned neighbors to contain ISIS.
- ☐ The U.S. should support trisection of Iraq, support the Kurds, and keep out of a civil war.
- ☐ The U.S. should avoid the entire mess.

of Muhammad's death, the fifth caliph, Mu'āwīyah ibn Abī Sufyān (661–680), arranged the succession of his son Yazid I, thereby starting what would become the Umayyad dynasty, condemned by many Sunni jurists and all Shi'a, but far more constructively stable than the rule of the *Rashidun,* for all their sensational victories.

In that too, there is an exact contemporary parallel: as of this writing, the benighted dynasts who rule the Emirates of the Gulf, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are still firmly in power, while the modernizing rulers of Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia were all swept away by the mass action of the "Arab Spring." It therefore seems that if Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi wants to make his new caliphate stick, he will need to appoint a crown prince who can succeed him—thereby no doubt evoking the emergence of that more extreme competitor.



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The Rise and Inevitable Fall of the ISIS Caliphate

Peter R. Mansoor

The recent seizure by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) of much of northern and western Iraq, along with its ongoing control of large swaths of eastern Syria, has reignited the question of the long-term goals of Islamist extremists. Since its creation in the Hindu Kush during the Soviet-Afghan conflict in the 1980s, al-Qaeda (and later, like-minded organizations) have pursued an ambitious, four-phase strategy: 1) attack the "far enemy"—the United States—to force its withdrawal from the affairs of the Islamic world, 2) destabilize or co-opt the "near enemy"—the Arab/Islamic states of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, 3) destroy Israel, and 4) recreate the caliphate that ruled the Islamic world during its heyday a millennium ago. On 9/11/2001 al-Qaeda launched attacks on the United States to fulfill the first part of this strategy, and although the near-term response was not what that organization expected, the longer term outcome may be more in its favor as Americans tire of seemingly endless conflict. The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with the more recent unrests of the Arab spring, have seriously weakened a number of states in the Islamic world, making inroads towards the goals of the second phase of the strategy. And although the destruction of Israel does not seem to be in the offing, the creation of a jihadist proto-state in Mesopotamia and the Levant is now an emerging and disquieting reality.

Now that Islamist militants have succeeded in taking and holding ground, the question is whether they can create lasting institutions of government capable of administering the territory and providing essential services to the inhabitants. For a brief period in 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq seized control of al-Anbar province in western Iraq, but its manifest inability to govern and its reign of terror alienated the population and sparked a tribal backlash that succeeded (with American support) in ejecting the jihadists from the province. Whether the leaders of ISIS (many of whom originated from al-Qaeda in Iraq) have learned their lessons is uncertain. Reports from occupied Mosul are mixed. ISIS has instituted its usual draconian version of Shari'a law and has ordered Christians and Yazidis to convert to Islam on penalty of death. Residents,

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initially grateful for delivering the city from the grip of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's security forces, are becoming disenchanted as their economic circumstances deteriorate. Electricity generation, never robust even before the takeover, is down to just a few hours a day due to lack of fuel to run the generators. Although ISIS has seized a couple of small oil fields, it lacks a robust capacity to refine the oil into usable fuel (thus the emphasis on seizing Iraq's main oil refinery at Baiji). On the other hand, ISIS has moved to establish medical clinics, institute a system of taxation, operate Shari'a courts, and provide food to needy residents. ISIS also has significant financial wherewithal (from a variety of sources, including several hundred million dollars seized from Mosul's central bank) to govern its proto-state, at least for the time being.

No doubt the jihadists' strong suit is their ability to use terror and intimidation to keep populations under their control. Targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and public executions are designed to keep people subdued. Although the ability of ISIS to govern territory effectively over the long run is highly problematic, especially given the resource scarcity in the area under ISIS control, the longer the jihadists are in control of an area, the harder they will be to dislodge from it. But an inability to govern in a classical sense hardly means ISIS is bound to dissolve. More likely is the degeneration of the ISIS caliphate into competing fiefdoms as various armed groups within ISIS or affiliated with it struggle for a shrinking pool of resources.

This potential collapse of parts of Mesopotamia and the Levant into something that resembles the anarchy of Somalia is a grave cause for concern. The United States and its allies cannot wish away this ugly situation. Rather, the president must take action to ensure that when the ISIS caliphate collapses, it does so on terms acceptable to the United States. Of foremost importance is helping the Iraqis create a government with greater legitimacy. With this development as a foundational step, the United States can then apply military power in the form of advisers, special operations forces, intelligence capabilities, and airpower to assist tribal forces in resisting ISIS and to rebuild the Iraqi Army into an organization capable of defeating the jihadists in conventional combat. Although the ISIS caliphate will inevitably collapse due to its own dysfunction, it is best that the United States and its allies take action now to give it a robust push into the abyss.

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Overambitious Reach Undermines Islamic State's Prospects of Creating a Caliphate

Mark Moyar

By declaring the Islamic State a global caliphate, Iraqi cleric Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has tapped into the universalist and utopian aspirations of Sunni extremists around the world. The Islamic State's military successes, moreover, have offered hope to those who are desperate for a winner after defeats in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mali, Somalia, and Yemen. Its victories have also endowed the aspiring caliphate with material riches, including oil and American military equipment.

While self-designation as a caliphate has distinguished the Islamic State from other Islamist utopian projects, the nature of the undertaking and its challenges have several recent precedents. In the past two decades, the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliates in Somalia, Yemen, and Mali have occupied territory and established local governments. In each case, they have been undone by a combination of draconian governance and strategic overreach. The Islamic State is at risk of sinking for the same reasons.

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In each of the prior failures, the Islamist utopians alienated locals by imposing severe punishments for relatively minor violations of Islamic law, while failing to provide positive inducements such as effective governmental services. Consequently, they limited their bases of support and made enemies who subsequently helped foreign powers overthrow them. The Islamic State has learned from these experiences. In both Syria and Iraq, it has cut back on cruel punishments, shifting emphasis to educating the people on Islamic law. It has allocated funding and manpower to electricity, trash collection, and other services. Accusations of overzealousness in meting out punishment have, however, continued, and therefore the problem is likely to persist to some degree.

In most of the recent cases, foreign powers did not take action against the Islamist utopians when they first gained control over territory. Only when the movements attempted to wield power beyond their central strongholds did foreigners intervene. In the case of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's organization of the 9/11 attacks on Afghan territory caused the United States to drive out the Taliban. In Somalia, the Islamic Courts Union invited an Ethiopian invasion in 2006 when it tried to move beyond its initial conquests to overrun the Ethiopian-backed exile government. Four

years later, after al-Shabaab had taken control over much of Somalia, al-Shabaab's bombings of civilian targets in Kampala provoked a Ugandan intervention. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb established control over northern Mali in 2012, but then lost it the next year when its offensive into southern Mali precipitated French military intervention.

Ideology and the expectations of admirers predispose the Islamic State to pursue territorial expansion. It has already attempted to move beyond its initial Sunni Arab strongholds in Iraq to the country's predominantly Shiite and Kurdish areas. The United States, Turkey, Iran, and other powers have helped the Shiites and Kurds to the extent required to avert total defeat, but have not yet gone on the offensive against the Islamic State. If the Islamic State is able to overrun the Shiites and Kurds, however, one or more foreign powers might well organize a large counter-offensive.

Hence, the Islamic State will be most likely to survive if it limits its ambitions in the near team. Given its modification of governance in response to past failures, chances are good that it is also mindful of repeating the error of overreach. Even a restrained approach, though, carries risks that foreign powers will enable Iraqi or Syrian security forces to vanquish the Islamic State.

The Islamic State's prospects for gaining broad acceptance across the Sunni Muslim world are low. Since the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, repeated efforts to resuscitate the institution have foundered on tribal, ethnic, national, and ideological schisms. Mainstream Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and political leaders have denounced Baghdadi and his brand of Salafist Islam as heretical, and so have some from other extremist organizations, including al-Qaeda.

Conceivably, the respect that the Islamic State amasses through military victories and sheer survival could, in combination with concerted efforts to include non-Salafist Muslims, attract individuals of high repute within Sunni Islam. Given ethnic and national divisions, however, it is doubtful that such individuals would enjoy wide popularity beyond Syria and Iraq. Whatever political and cultural influence the Islamic State wields in the future, therefore, will most probably be limited to the sections of Syria and Iraq where its gunmen hold sway.

Whatever its limitations, the Islamic State could serve as an enduring platform for international terrorism. Its territory offers enormous opportunities for organizing terrorist actions and training foreigners whose passports give them easy access to the West. With the United States having slashed its military and forsworn stability operations, the Islamic State's sponsorship or facilitation of terrorist attacks would not necessarily lead to its demise.

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Related Commentary

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Max Boot

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Sect and Power in Syria and Iraq

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Related Commentary (cont.)

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Airstrikes, Sure; but What About a Strategy in Iraq?

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http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/08/07/a-return-to-the-fight-in-iraq/airstrikes-sure-but-what-about-a-strategy-in-iraq

How to Defeat ISIL

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http://www.nationalreview.com/article/385369/how-defeat-isil-bing-west

Discussion Questions

Can ISIS/Islamic State create a viable caliphate?

1. Is a caliphate a dynamic idea and compatible with the 21st Century?

2. Will the 20th-century boundaries of the Middle East survive?

3. How likely will the Syria-Iraq chaos spread to the Gulf States?

4. Does ISIS/Islamic State pose an existential threat to or stategic opportunity for Iran?

In the Next Issue:

Is there a military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of "War, Revolution, and Peace." Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: "The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man's endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life." From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the "Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict" has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution's dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

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Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.

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