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## War and Existence: A Philosophic Inquiry

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# BOOK REVIEWS

*A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.*

*Admiral H.G. Rickover*

## “The Nature of War and Warfare in Our Times”

Gelven, Michael. *War and Existence: A Philosophic Inquiry*. University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 1994. 272pp. \$16.95

**M**ICHAEL GELVEN'S *WAR AND EXISTENCE* is not the kind of book military officers would normally pick up and browse through. It is neither a detailed historical account of a major naval battle nor an engrossing personal war narrative. As indicated by its subtitle, it is that oddest of books, a philosophic inquiry. As such, one might expect it to be difficult to read and understand; fortunately, it is not. It is a clearly written and lucid philosophic exploration of the nature of war and warfare in our times.

Gelven, a professor of philosophy at Northern Illinois University, is concerned with understanding one thing—what is the truth about war. His search for that truth causes this book to be an inquiry rather than a treatise. His corresponding methodology is simple and questioning. He wants to go from darkness to light, from vagueness to refinement, from the phenomenon itself to what explains it.

In doing so, Gelven discovers that war is existential—something real and tangible—more than conceptual; it has significance and meaning. While this may seem obvious to those who serve in the military, it is not so obvious to academics in general and philosophers in particular.

Existential war is also paradoxical. We, as human beings, are attracted to peace and yet often find ourselves engaged in its opposite—fighting, killing, and destroying. This paradox is marked by nine characteristics: war is vast, organized,

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communal, historical, sacrificial, violent, horrific, heroic, and a game. For these Gelven offers detailed descriptions.

At the heart of the author's discussion is the we-they principle. He thinks that the best way to make sense of war is to understand it as a result of our desire to esteem the "we" (or whatever we see as constituting our group) and denigrate the "they" (those who do not belong to our group). There is no other coherent way to understand war, to include the often-given reasons of morality or nihilism.

Later in the book, Gelven goes so far as to argue that we can never find a case where one nation went to war against another nation for either purely moral reasons or merely for personal gain. And therefore it makes no sense to talk about war in these terms.

It is at this point that I note one of the two weaknesses in Gelven's work, the one that I take to be the more significant. He does not recognize that war can *only* be understood as a moral phenomenon and that it achieves its meaning through that context. As Michael Walzer points out in his classic work, *Just and Unjust Wars*, war is discussed in only two ways—in the languages of strategy and morality. The first language is descriptive, while the second is prescriptive. We cannot make sense of it any other way.

I argue that Gelven fails to understand as much. When we go to war, we do so only when we decide that the value of going to war is worth more than the value of not going. We recognize that war entails the loss of lives and the destruction of property and therefore should not be taken lightly. However, we also know that other actions, such as one country violating another country's territorial integrity or causing its loss of political sovereignty, require active responses, which are often expressed in the form of war. These determinations, these judgments to make war, can only be understood as the result of moral valuations, nothing else.

Admittedly, it is true that we do not go to war for purely moral reasons. Often our motives are mixed ones at best, as in the Persian Gulf War. In that case we went to war both to secure our sources of oil and to reestablish the nation of Kuwait. But because motives are mixed does not mean that they are *de facto* bad. We often feel strongly about things for various, and sometimes apparently contradictory, reasons, like when our teenagers start driving cars or leave home to go out into the big world. While we may fear accidents or their failure, it is still better that they do those things than not do them. Likewise in the case of our motives for war.

The book's other weakness is minor in comparison. Gelven has not put together a strong final chapter that draws together his overall argument. He does such a nice job in his introduction that the lack of a conclusion is conspicuous.

Nonetheless, *War and Existence: A Philosophic Inquiry* is certainly a worthy addition to the libraries of our military colleges and academies. It is a clear and lucid investigation into the nature of war and offers an interesting description of the phenomenon itself.

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Weinberger, Caspar, and Peter Schweizer. *The Next War*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1996. 404pp. \$27.50

Former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Hoover Institution scholar Peter Schweizer have written an intriguing book. *The Next War* presents five "literary war games," hypothetical future scenarios in which warfare erupts between states. None was based upon any specific current indicators; indeed, Weinberger and Schweizer constructed each scenario so that their "postwar analysis" argues for the authors' current national security policy objectives. Although Weinberger and Schweizer do not explicitly state this as their goal, their preface provides an extensive discussion of perceived weaknesses in current U.S. military force structure, operational readiness, intelligence collection and analysis, and especially nationwide ballistic missile defense. Consequently, the authors designed their scenarios to illustrate these perceived weaknesses.

Each of the five scenarios is concise and well written, and each offers sufficient detail to allow the reader to follow the protagonists' strategic and operational options and intentions without descending

into tactical detail. For example, one scenario postulates a nuclear-armed Iran first undermining, then assuming, the government of Bahrain. From this position, Iran is able to blackmail both the United States into withdrawing from the Arabian Gulf and the Saudi kingdom into following Iranian policy on oil exports. By setting aside tactical details, Weinberger and Schweizer are able to focus on U.S. decision-makers' options regarding force employment and how perceived military weaknesses limit or deny options to the national leadership.

While there exists in each of these scenarios some degree of plausibility, none struck me as a likely next war. Each involves conflict between nation-states; four of the five assume the use of nuclear or biological weapons at the operational level of war; there is little or no involvement of allied powers; enemies achieve strategic surprise against the United States; and each ignores or minimizes U.S. core military strengths in command and control, aerospace dominance, naval flexibility, operational maneuver, and rapid force mobilization and buildup. By focusing only on the highest level of war, namely large-scale conflict between states,