

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

<https://www.e-ir.info/2010/04/23/operation-iraqi-freedom-and-the-obsolescence-of-war/>

XAVIER MATHIEU, APR 23 2010

“Why is John Mueller Always Right? Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War”

One of the last major books about war in international relations is paradoxically a book forecasting the end of the object it analyses. *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War* was released in 1989 and has become a classic reading for students of war and peace. The author, John Mueller, shows some novelty in this book, since his theory is considered to be “against the tide of dominant theories of international relations because it voluntarily excludes determinist and positivist explanations of war”[1]. With this publication, he certainly became one of the most influential authors on the topic of war.

But of course, to explain the end of war – war being a major field of study in International Relations – is always more difficult than to account for its permanence. Since its release, Mueller’s book has been analysed carefully by sceptical readers. Most criticisms come from the over-reliance of the theory on a general belief in order to explain the obsolescence of major wars. Indeed, as will be discussed in section 1, Mueller relies partly on the postulate of a widespread weariness regarding warfare to account for the obsolescence of war. Other criticisms were centred on the analogies used in the book – e.g. the comparison between duelling and major war, in order to explain that the same process of obsolescence applies to both cases – and the approximations they engender. As far as our study is concerned, we will not address on those issues except in the presentation of Mueller’s thesis.

Why, then, not to focus on those points of debate? Because the criticisms developed against Mueller often remains piecemeal or do tackle the entire theory but only on its ontological side, i.e. the belief in war weariness. Authors develop a wide range of arguments showing Mueller’s postulate proves wrong, which in turn invalidate the entire theory. Our work will adopt another, more epistemic, perspective. Indeed, it is possible to study the general coherence of Mueller’s theory without focusing on the ontological assumptions used by the author. In order to do so, confronting the obsolescence of major war theory to a recent case of conflict will help us to evaluate Mueller’s thesis. Throughout this work, arguments will be taken from *Retreat from Doomsday* in order to judge the author’s ideas themselves, without external theories related to war and peace. Once again, what interests us in this analysis is the internal consistency of Mueller’s argumentation. This article will proceed as follows: first, we will present the theory of the obsolescence of major war and its assumptions regarding the irrationality of war (I). Then, we will be able to confront the theory to our chosen example: Operation Iraqi Freedom, a war that started in 2003 in Iraq (II). Of course, this is not a random choice: as shown in section 2, this war seems to contradict Mueller’s assertions. But despite this apparent contradiction between the theory and a concrete example, we need to go further in the analysis and to study why Mueller’s argumentation cannot be contradicted, thus rendering the theory non-scientific (III).

The findings, thus, are surprising: Mueller is right, but for the wrong reason. Indeed, his theory cannot be invalidated by reality – and as such is relevant to understand the world – but this very lack of possible refutation is problematic. As discussed in conclusion, Mueller’s claims might be too ambitious when compared to his achievements in *Retreat from Doomsday*.

1/ Why is war becoming obsolete? A presentation of Mueller’s theory

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

An assessment of the theory of John Mueller must begin by a general presentation of the theory in itself. The first ambition of Mueller is to explain what he calls the “greatest non-event in human history”[2]: the period of peace since the end of World War II. Indeed, even in the context of rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, no major war occurred since 1945 (“despite this enormous mutual hostility, they have never gone to war with each other”[3]). This observation is not isolated as a specific trait of the Cold War. It is not linked either to nuclear weapons and their deterrence effect on the behaviour of states as other commentators have argued. On the contrary – and here lies the originality of Mueller –, this unexpectedly long period of peace is linked to a process that started during the 19th century and that renders war sub-rationally unthinkable.

The general idea developed in the book is that major wars – defined as “war among developed countries”[4] – are becoming obsolete, that is to say that war is in a process of not being in use[5]. The theory of John Mueller contains two arguments explaining the obsolescence of major wars: “war (...) is both abhorrent – repulsive, immoral, and uncivilized – and methodologically ineffective – futile”[6]. On one side, war is becoming obsolescent because of the development of a pacifist movement and a change in the attitudes of states. Thus major war is unfashionable in today’s world. This process is called “Hollandization” (as the image of Holland and Sweden is used to describe nations that have “opted out of the war system”[7]). These two countries abandoned the institution of war, followed by others. The idea is that a “changing social evaluation of war”[8] occurred. But if the process started during the 19th century, how can we explain the two major wars of the 20th century? For Mueller, the idea that war should be abandoned was not accepted everywhere in the first half of the last century. But ‘thanks to’ the two World Wars, developed countries became “hollandized”. That is why “the world wars can be seen (...) as horrific learning experiences”[9]. These conflicts served as confirmation of “the repulsiveness, immorality and futility of war, and of its uncivilized nature”[10].

Besides this process of repulsion, Mueller mentions another aspect which accounts for the obsolescence of major wars. Indeed, war comes to be seen as an ineffective method to settle conflicts. The costs and the risks of a war are too high when compared to the potential benefits. War becomes considered as irrational since it is inadequate in the pursuit of the defined goals of states. These two ideas combined can explain why war is becoming obsolete.

The second argument introduced above – war is not rational, hence it becomes obsolete – will be analysed in depth in this study. Indeed, the first one relates to a general feeling spread among the population and decision-makers. As such, it can have important consequences when it comes to the perception of war among developed countries; but its very nature renders it difficult to grasp and analyse. Besides, it can switch rapidly as Mueller acknowledges in his book. We will thus concentrate on the second part of the assertion: war is ineffective, and as such becomes irrational and obsolete.

Mueller’s argument is easy to summarise: war is not a rational means for a country to get what it wants. First, according to Mueller, the priority for states and individuals alike is to obtain prosperity. Indeed, the American scholar argues that “prosperity has become something of an overriding goal”[11]. In other words, the quest for economic prosperity is the central aim today. It has not always been the case, and Mueller analyses this domination of economic considerations as “an important shift of values”[12]. The real aim in today’s world is the quest for prosperity. For Mueller, this importance of prosperity is explained by the fact that prosperity and economic growth are at the basis of status in international politics. For a country to be powerful, it needs to attain a high level of economic might[13]. If we consider with Mueller that countries seek power, the link is easy to make with the obsolescence of war: “whatever value war might conceivably still have for obtaining some goals, it is particularly counterproductive in the quest for prosperity”[14] and, we can add, in the quest for power. Consequently, it becomes obsolete.

Thus, Mueller claims that war is today widely perceived as a wrong instrument to obtain the desired situation of prosperity: “prosperity and economic growth should be central national goals and (...) war is a particularly counterproductive device for achieving these goals”[15]. War is always fought for some purposes, but economic motivations are decreasing in the reasons why states fight against each other. Moreover, as states seek prosperity, it seems risky for them to use war. Mueller considers that war is not a good way to achieve economic gains: “From a purely economic standpoint, war is a singularly dubious enterprise”[16]. And this idea is shared at least among developed countries:

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

“The notion that war, particularly in the developed world, is economically counterproductive has been widely, perhaps universally, accepted”[17].

This quote is worth mentioning because, first, it is a reassertion of Mueller central idea about the ineffectiveness of war to gain economic prosperity. Secondly, the use of the adverb ‘particularly’ can let us think that this belief in the disutility of war is not only present in the developed world but also among the rest of the countries. Then, the implications of this statement are important.

It logically follows from the previous arguments that war is not a rational means to obtain what every state wants. As a consequence, it becomes obsolete: “The prospects for major war will diminish to the degree that countries pursue prosperity above all”[18]. And as decision-makers are considered rational by Mueller, they will not risk a war as they know it is not a safe and reliable way to achieve their goals (i.e. economic prosperity): “substantial war in the developed world is highly unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future”[19].

Hence, if we follow Mueller’s argument, major war is obsolete. This view is appealing: how cannot one regard the possibility of a future of unlimited peace as an attractive idea? But to assess the validity of such a theory, we need to confront it with reality. An example of a recent war among developed countries[20] is thus necessary to evaluate whether the theory can be corroborated or not. We will confront Operation Iraqi Freedom of 2003 to Mueller’s theory, since this war involves at least one developed country – the United States – and presents aspects that can seem at odds with Mueller’s argument. We will not provide here a comprehensive account of the war and its outcomes; instead, the focus will be on the reasons to go to war. As denoted by the plural form, these reasons are numerous. What interests us here is to see whether economic considerations can be taken as a reason *among others* of this war. If so, this would mean that the United States went to war for economic purposes, which is a categorical contradiction of Mueller’s theory.

2/ Is Operation Iraqi Freedom a refutation of Mueller’s argument?

In order to see if the United States went to war partly for economic purposes, we need to understand why such a decision could have been taken. Indeed, with its status of great power and its military might, the United States seems to be above the rest of the countries. But despite this widespread image of hegemony, different weaknesses need to be addressed by the American government. One of them – arguably one of the most threatening – is the energy dependency experienced by the United States. The country owns its own oil reserves, but since the 1940s, it needs to import part of its consumption. The percentages are particularly telling here. In the 1950s, the United States imported 10% of its oil consumption; in 1976, this figure rose to 40%. In 2000, oil imports represented 53% of total consumption. Maybe even more significant: the dependency will increase in the coming years, reaching two-third of the total consumption of oil and gas[21].

In addition, the Bush administration was characterized by its links to the oil private sector. According to Katty Kay: “What makes the Bush administration different from previous wealthy cabinets is that so many of the officials have links to the same industry – oil”[22]. The different actors linked to the oil industry are well-known and their influence on the decisions of the Bush administration established. Consequently, the “close dialogue held between the administration and big firms”[23] during the Bush mandates is regularly cited as one major cause of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Indeed, it seems that this war has been “an imperialist war because it was in all likelihood launched by certain specific private interests close to the Bush administration”[24]. Thus, the combination of America’s oil dependency and of the close relationships between oil companies and the Bush administration supports the idea that a war linked to the oil issue can have been launched by the United States.

But how can we understand the connection between this situation and the intervention in Iraq of 2003? First, Iraq owns a huge amount of oil. According to *BP Energy Review*, Iraq possessed 9,1% of the oil proved reserves of the world at the end of 2008[25]. Iraq is thus a perfect target for a country seeking to diminish its dependence on oil imports. A second (and maybe more crucial) link can be established between, on the one hand, the American dependency and the administration ties with the oil companies and, on the other hand, Iraq’s oil fields: some commentators acknowledged that the control of Iraq’s oil reserves would help the economy of the United States. As

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

stated by Alan Greenspan (the former Chairman of the Federal Reserve), the intervention in Iraq is an extraordinary opportunity for the United States to improve its economic situation. When asked if the war was about oil, Greenspan answered: "I'm just saying that if somebody asked me, 'Are we fortunate in taking out Saddam?' I would say it was essential"[26]. Economic prosperity – and here we come back to Mueller's argument – is then seen as intrinsically linked to Operation Iraqi Freedom:

"From an economic standpoint, America's control of Iraq will supposedly permit the US to guarantee free access to oil resources *indispensable* to the growth of the US economy and to wealth and stability of the world economy"[27].

The official reasons put forward by the Bush administration – the link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – are today widely acknowledged as invalid. There was indeed no proof of such allegations. On the contrary, the oil issue became predominant when analysing the aims of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the same interview, Greenspan declared: "I'm saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: The Iraq war is largely about oil"[28]. This supposed aim of the Bush administration was later mentioned by one of the countries participating in the intervention: the Australian Defence Minister admitted in 2007 that "securing oil supplies was a key factor behind the presence of Australian troops in Iraq"[29].

Hence, if the United States went to war against Iraq in 2003, the reason can be found – at least in part – in the search for economic prosperity. The question is not whether this prosperity was sought for the American population or for the private interests of a minority linked to the oil industry. Besides, the variety of goals cannot be denied in this war. What matters is that the economic factor is unquestionable when analysing Operation Iraqi Freedom: "the US has abandoned the soft-power option, hoping that resorting to hard power will help maintain US primacy by postponing its relative decline, both in economic matters – the control of the Middle East oil resources that are vital to global economic prosperity – and on political issues"[30].

Operation Iraqi Freedom, then, has been regarded by the Bush administration as a rational means to obtain economic prosperity, whatever other goals might have been pursued as well. Economic considerations have played an important part in the decision to go to war. Here lies an apparent refutation of Mueller's theory: a developed country – the United States – uses war as a rational means to gain economic prosperity by asserting its control over Iraq's oil reserves. Central to Mueller's argument is the idea that war is not a rational instrument to get economic prosperity. Indeed, as mentioned above: "From a purely economic standpoint, war is a singularly dubious enterprise"[31]. As such, the war in Iraq of 2003 cannot be explained from Mueller's standpoint[32]. The American leaders apparently considered war as a good means to obtain (among other things) economic gains, thus contradicting Mueller's approach. For him, no economic gain can be made out of war. It is essential here to distinguish Mueller's analysis and conclusion. Indeed, we can consider that Mueller may be right in the analysis – war is not profitable – but what matters is that he is wrong in his conclusions: this point of view is not shared by the (rational) leaders of the developed world. Besides, as argued by Mueller, "economic motivations [for war] have become increasingly rare, particularly in the developed world"[33]. Here once again the reality seems to invalidate Mueller's theory. Thus, as shown by the analysis of Operation Iraqi Freedom, we can conclude that his theory of the obsolescence of major war is not valid.

3/ Why is John Mueller always right? Inconsistencies in the theory

As shown in section 2, Operation Iraqi Freedom offers an apparent refutation of Mueller's argument. Yet, the contradiction is only apparent: as we will see, the author can explain the war of 2003 within the framework of his theory. Indeed, we are able to find (in the theory of the obsolescence of major war) a way to explain Operation Iraqi Freedom. But by doing so, we also shed light on the internal inconsistencies of Mueller's theory.

When confronting Operation Iraqi Freedom to Mueller's argument, we discovered that a concrete example of war – of major war – could go against the analysis provided by the American scholar. Indeed, a war waged for economic reasons is not in accordance with the conclusion that war is not profitable. Besides, all rational leaders of the developed world do not seem to share this belief in the inefficacy of war. But Mueller anticipates this possible flaw of

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

his theory. The conclusion that war is not economically rational, and thus will disappear, is not definitive and permanent. First, Mueller recognizes that wars can still occur, for instance by accident, because of the preventive war doctrine, or because of a shift in values among states:

“major war is not inconceivable – that is to say, impossible. Given current values and perspectives, major wars may be highly improbable, but *it could still occur* if decision makers become confused or demented and act irrationally or if they undergo a change in values and perspectives so that war once again becomes a seemingly sensible procedure”[34].

As such, the possibility of a major war still exists for Mueller. After all, obsolescence is not disappearance: “There is no reason to assume that the major developed countries have forgotten how to get into a war with each other”[35].

In this context of potentiality of major wars, Mueller insists particularly on one reason why war can still occur: a shift in values. Indeed, such a change would greatly affect the likelihood of the breakout of war: “A major war is most likely to come about (...) because countries change their views either about what they most want in the world or about how best to achieve their goals”[36]. This sentence summarizes the two ways employed by Mueller in order to mitigate the outcomes of his theory. On one hand, decision-makers can start looking for something else than economic prosperity. Other values can emerge and justify the use of war – for instance: human rights. The pursuit of these new values can take the lead over the search for wealth. In this context, major wars can become rational again in the pursuit of these new goals, even if it remains irrational from a purely economic standpoint. On the other hand, Mueller goes further by arguing that war can once again be seen as economically rational. In that case, the question is not whether countries have changed their aims, but rather that they might as well have changed their appraisal of the utility of war.

Consequently, major wars involving economic considerations can occur without contradicting Mueller’s argument. As a matter of fact, Mueller does not write that values have changed, or that the attitude of states regarding war as economically profitable is observable today; he predicts that both changes are possible, which does not mean that they have already occurred. This carefulness in assessing his argument makes the idea valid despite our analysis of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Indeed, the war of 2003 is an example of the second type of changes anticipated by Mueller: the United States evaluated that war was rational in order to gain economic prosperity. This is in accordance with the description given by Mueller of a potential transformation in the way war is evaluated. Thus, Mueller provides us with an adaptable theory of war that can integrate changes and be modified following changes in the international context.

To recognize that Mueller is not wrong when we confront his theory to the war in Iraq supports the idea of the obsolescence of major wars. But as will be shown in the last part of our work, a contradiction does appear in the theory. The main reproach is linked to the existence of contradictory assertions that cast doubts about the entire relevance of the argument. Undeniably, providing an *ad hoc* theory[37] of war leads Mueller to so many nuances that the force of the argument is weakened.

So far, we have seen that Mueller maintains that war is irrational – and as such is not used by (rational) decision-makers – because of its inefficiency in bringing economic benefits. And as prosperity is regarded by states as the primary goal, war is likely not to be used anymore. Of course, as shown above, Mueller recognises that changes can occur. These changes can explain the operation in Iraq of 2003: war becomes once again a rational means to gain prosperity. But the logic seems to be contradicted by another assertion raising scepticism about what Mueller argues. Indeed, when analysing carefully the argument, the reader notices one sentence that might invalidate the entire thesis:

“Prosperity may be nice, but it is not always an overriding goal *even now*”[38].

This sentence is the first of a part of the book dedicated to the analysis of what can bring back major wars in the international game. The quoted sentence opens a paragraph about Canada, where some people today think that to defend identity might be a better goal than to seek prosperity. This example is striking because Canada does not

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

belong to the non-developed world, and as such it should be included in the list of countries that recognize the obsolescence of major wars. Mueller remains uncertain about what conclusions to draw from this example: "others [responsible officials] could eventually be led once again to yearn for values that, it might seem, can be furthered by violence and war"[39]. The problem here does not lie in the fact Mueller anticipates a potential return of major wars if values or the efficiency of war are re-evaluated. Rather, the issue is that Mueller does not seem so convinced after all that economic prosperity is the overriding goal *today*. He cites different well-known causes of war: the defence of identity (as in the case of Canada), territorial issues, religious fervour, or even disgust with the situation of prosperity and a desire to a "return of war romanticism"[40]. The author does not conclude that his assertion about prosperity as the only goal for states in today's world is incorrect. There remains a doubt whether Mueller considers the trends described above as affecting a large part of the population (and the decision-makers alike) or if he considers that these changes observed by the time the book was published only affect a minority. In the absence of a clear-cut conclusion about whether prosperity is or not the primary goal today, the whole argument is weakened. Indeed, the blurred picture that emerges from Mueller's argumentation renders the entire theory shaky: if we do not believe that the quest for prosperity is the essential goal for states today, then there is no reason to believe that major war is obsolete.

In fact, we are confronted here to a problem raised by Karl Popper about scientific theories. According to him: "A theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event is non-scientific"[41]. If a theory cannot be refuted, then it cannot explain the world as it should. Indeed, the criterion to name a theory 'scientific' is that of prohibition: "Every 'good' scientific theory is a prohibition: it forbids certain things to happen. The more a theory forbids, the better it is"[42]. In the case of Mueller's argument, the vagueness of the analysis needs to be stressed: the author constantly reminds to his readers the potentiality of the return of major wars and of the "possibility that war might still be useful under some circumstances"[43]. He is very cautious never to exclude the restoration of war: "major war *may* have gradually moved toward final discredit"[44]. Furthermore, in one part of the book, Mueller is inclined to name an impressive number of potential reasons for states to go to war – be it territorial gains or the promotion of an ideology to name just a few. He concludes this list by an ambiguous sentence: "Developed countries continue to subscribe to some of those goals"[45]. Thus, the fragility of Mueller's argument rests in the fact that the author remains vague about his conclusions[46], in part because he relies on general feelings about what priority should be established among the various potential reasons to go to war. As a consequence, "the analysis of the book would undoubtedly be more satisfying to some readers if there were a theoretical explanation for the absence of war that did not rest so heavily on the claim that people's tastes have changed"[47]. As acknowledged by the author himself, these feelings can switch and thus contradict the entire theory. Besides, Mueller is too precautious never to exclude any single reason for war, making his fundamental assertion – economic prosperity is the overriding goal – difficult to believe.

Conclusion:

This analysis, thus, is emblematic of the criticisms that can be made against Mueller's theory (without considering the ontological side of the argument[48]). As a consequence, we can adhere only partially to Kaysen's comment regarding Mueller's work:

"These, however, are superficial flaws that do not detract from the force of Mueller's larger thesis, even is they weaken reader's confidence in the care with which he marshals evidence and advances argument"[49].

Indeed, if the aforementioned inconsistencies do weaken readers' confidence, they also seem to weaken Mueller's entire thesis. As such, the fact that Operation Iraqi Freedom can find a justification in Mueller's book might not be a good sign. The author of *Retreat from Doomsday* foresees so many potential developments that he seems himself not very confident in his theory's strength. It must be acknowledged that theories of war are always incomplete, and that Mueller's book is an illustration of this limitation. Nevertheless, defending one side while recognizing that the other side might be right tomorrow (and even today) is of little help in the process of understanding a phenomenon. Here, to understand the future of war, Mueller defends both an obsolescence of major wars today and a potential shift in values, the latter occurring at the time he is writing or in a near future. Thus, we can only share Linda B. Miller's view that Mueller's ambitions with his theory of the obsolescence of major wars exceed his achievements[50].

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

How to account for the impact of this theory in the field of war and peace studies then? One aspect needs to be recognized: Mueller introduces with his book a very original argument. He goes against the majority of (realist) thinkers and forecasts a disappearance of major wars in international politics. By doing so, he forces others to react and to specify their own ideas, thus contributing to our understanding of the phenomenon of war.

Bibliography:

ALLEN (Joanne), "Greenspan clarifies Iraq war, oil link", *Reuters*, 17 September 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1627504220070917> (last access: 15/01/2010).

"Australia 'has oil interests'", *BBC News*, 5 July 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6272168.stm> (last access: 15/01/2010).

BATTISTELLA (Dario), *The Return of the State of War*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2008.

FORTMANN (Michel), GOMAND (Jérémie), « L'obsolescence des guerres interétatiques ? Une relecture de John Mueller », *Raisons politiques*, n° 13, février 2004, p. 79-96.

FRECHERO (Jorge Ignacio), "La administración Bush, los intereses petroleros y la guerra de Irak", *Ágora*, no. 5, <http://www.colmex.mx/agora/pdfs/Agora5.pdf> (last access: 15/01/2010).

HODGSON (Godfrey), "Oil and American Politics", *OpenDemocracy*, 2 October 2005, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/oil_2887.jsp (last access: 15/01/2010).

KAY (Katty); "Analysis: Oil and the Bush Cabinet", *BBC News*, 29 December 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1138009.stm> (last access: 15/01/2010).

KAYSEN (Carl), "Is War Obsolete?: A Review Essay", *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring, 1990), pp. 42-64.

MEARSHEIMER (John), "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer, 1990), pp. 5-56.

MILLER (Linda B.), "Review: Retreat from Doomsday by John Mueller", *International Affairs*, Vol. 66, no. 4 (October 1990), pp. 792-793.

MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989.

POPPER (Karl), *Conjectures and Refutations. The growth of scientific knowledge*, fifth edition, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 (first published in 1963).

SIVERSON (Randolph M.), "Review: Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War by John Mueller", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 1062-1063.

[1] FORTMANN (Michel), GOMAND (Jérémie), « L'obsolescence des guerres interétatiques ? Une relecture de John Mueller », *Raisons politiques*, n° 13, février 2004, p. 82 (the translation is ours).

[2] MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p 3.

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

[3] Ibid., p 3.

[4] MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p 4.

[5] The ambiguity of the words “obsolescence” and “obsolete” needs to be stressed; indeed, the sentence “major wars are obsolete” does not mean they have already disappeared. ‘Obsolescence’ is a process, not a status. This ambiguity will be used by Mueller to mitigate his conclusion (see section 3).

[6] MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p. 217.

[7] KAYSEN (Carl), “Is War Obsolete?: A Review Essay”, *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring, 1990), p. 44.

[8] Ibid., p 44.

[9] MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p. 218.

[10] Ibid., p 55.

[11] Ibid., p. 227. Mueller recognizes as well the importance of “life and security” (p. 221) as basic needs for the developed countries, but he seems to take for granted that these states have already achieved these goals and are searching for something more, i.e. prosperity.

[12] Ibid., p. 221.

[13] This relation between prosperity and status is summarized in one sentence by Mueller: “prosperity is power is status”. Ibid., p. 225. The idea then is not to fight in order to gain power, but rather to stay in peace in order to accumulate economic prosperity (which provides both power and status).

[14] Ibid., p. 222.

[15] Ibid., p. 219.

[16] Ibid., p. 222.

[17] Ibid., p. 223.

[18] Ibid., p. 223.

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 227.

[20] In the absence of a more precise definition by Mueller, we assume that the expression 'among developed countries' signifies 'involving at least one developed country'. According to the Oxford Dictionary, 'among' can signify 'surrounded by' (an equivalent of 'between') or 'in or concerning a particular group of people or things'. This second meaning corresponds to the idea that if one developed state is involved, then a war becomes a 'major war'.

[21] All figures are from HODGSON (Godfrey), "Oil and American Politics", *OpenDemocracy*, 2 October 2005, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-americanpower/oil_2887.jsp (last access: 15/01/2010).

[22] KAY (Katty); "Analysis: Oil and the Bush Cabinet", *BBC News*, 29 December 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1138009.stm> (last access: 15/01/2010).

[23] FRECHERO (Jorge Ignacio), "La administración Bush, los intereses petroleros y la guerra de Irak", *Ágora*, n°5, <http://www.colmex.mx/agora/pdfs/Agora5.pdf> (last access: 15/01/2010), p. 28.

[24] BATTISTELLA (Dario), *The Return of the State of War*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2008, p. 156.

[25] See BP Energy review, and more specifically: http://www.bp.com/liveassets/bp_internet/globalbp/globalbp_uk_english/reports_and_publications/statistical_energy_review_2008/STAGING/local_assets/2009_downloads/oil_table_proved_oil_reserves_2009.pdf

[26] ALLEN (Joanne), "Greenspan clarifies Iraq war, oil link", *Reuters*, 17 September 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1627504220070917> (last access: 15/01/2010).

[27] BATTISTELLA (Dario), *The Return of the State of War*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2008, p. 178 (emphasis added).

[28] ALLEN (Joanne), "Greenspan clarifies Iraq war, oil link", *Reuters*, 17 September 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1627504220070917> (last access: 15/01/2010).

[29] "Australia 'has oil interests'", *BBC News*, 5 July 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6272168.stm> (last access: 15/01/2010).

[30] BATTISTELLA (Dario), *The Return of the State of War*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2008, p. 170.

[31] MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p. 222.

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

[32] It could be argued here that economic considerations were only minor reasons to go to war when compared to other reasons. But Mueller does not differentiate between central reasons and secondary reasons to go to war, and in the case of *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, economic motives might not be so secondary.

[33] Ibid., p. 222.

[34] Ibid., p. 227 (emphasis added).

[35] Ibid., p. 219.

[36] Ibid., p. 233.

[37] See POPPER (Karl), *Conjectures and Refutations. The growth of scientific knowledge*, fifth edition, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 (first published in 1963), p. 37. I am indebted to Dario Battistella for bringing Karl Popper's epistemology to my attention, as well as for his attentive reading of this paper. Of course, all remaining errors are of the responsibility of the author.

[38] Ibid., p. 234 (emphasis added).

[39] Ibid., p. 234.

[40] Ibid., p. 234.

[41] POPPER (Karl), *Conjectures and Refutations. The growth of scientific knowledge*, fifth edition, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 (first published in 1963), p. 36.

[42] Ibid., p. 36.

[43] MUELLER (John), *Retreat from Doomsday: the Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p. 232.

[44] Ibid., p. 6 (emphasis added). It is revealing here to see that Mueller does not claim that 'major war has gradually moved toward final discredit'.

[45] Ibid., p. 221.

[46] As such, Mueller strikingly corresponds to Popper's analysis about the vagueness of non-scientific theories: "to predict things so vaguely that the predictions can hardly fail". See POPPER (Karl), *Conjectures and Refutations. The growth of scientific knowledge*, fifth edition, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 (first published in 1963), p. 37.

[47] SIVERSON (Randolph M.), "Review: Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Obsolescence of War

Written by Xavier Mathieu

War by John Mueller”, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), p. 1063.

[48] One major ontological criticism was made by Mearsheimer who considers the theory to be invalid because Mueller does not take into account the fact that states live in a state of anarchy, rendering the goal of economic prosperity only secondary – the desire to survive being the overriding goal and thus leading to (major) wars. See MEARSHEIMER (John), “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War”, *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), p. 44.

[49] KAYSEN (Carl), “Is War Obsolete?: A Review Essay”, *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring, 1990), p. 47.

[50] MILLER (Linda B.), “Review: Retreat from Doomsday by John Mueller”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 66, no. 4 (October 1990), p. 793.

—

Written by: **MATHIEU Xavier**
Written at: **Sciences Po Bordeaux**
Written for: **Dario Battistella**
Date written: **January 2010**

About the author:

Xavier Mathieu is a PhD student in the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. His thesis explores the normative character of the concept of sovereignty and its link to Western civilisation through a historical study of French early colonialism in Canada. His research is concerned with the concept of sovereignty, hierarchy and ‘other-ness’ at the international level, intervention and state-building as well as performativity as a theoretical tool for the study of international politics. He recently published (with Nicolas Lemay-Hébert) an article exploring the OECD’s discourse on ‘fragile’ states.