

**Bobbitt, Philip. The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.**

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## Book Reviews

**Bobbitt, Philip.** *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

How many books claim the best of all possible worlds is one in which the normal pre-occupation of states and strategists is low-intensity warfare? That alone makes *Shield of Achilles* a good read for subscribers to this journal. Its nuanced and complicated arguments will provide much grist for any mill.

The central irony Philip Bobbitt presents is that the overwhelming success of liberal democratic nation-states in the twentieth century was such that "a state structure is no longer necessary in order to organize violence on a scale that is devastating to society." Now, the post-nation-state state has its hands full remedying its new vulnerabilities in the 9/11 world: a world where scientific method has brought mankind to its highest levels of material achievement but in which a handful of obscure, narrowly educated men demand unquestioning belief in their obscure, messianic theology; a world of internet access that binds researchers of all ages, and also allows every peculiar characteristic and opinion in the human race to find its match; a world in which economic stability depends on international capital markets for investment and profit, and where private individuals fund magazines, universities, medical research, poverty relief - and, when they choose, fundamentalist *madrasah* and terrorist camps.

In probing the impact of nation-states on the international system and vice versa in his 900-page tome, Bobbitt recognizes what many activists and their audiences have forgotten: wars are not temporary aberrations, nor merely the result of misperceptions of passing statesmen. They are reflections of real differences in conceptions of what is just and, at times, of societal needs. And what both democratic and authoritarian leaders often only dimly comprehend is that wars have consequences far beyond what humans can predict.

Consider the bloodiest century in human history so far - the one in which the author, the reviewer, and the reader have spent most of their lives. It began and ended with assassination, anarchist movements, theocratic throwbacks, gas attacks, and terror. And, rather than being a long night of episodic wars, it was, as Bobbitt proposes, one long, epochal war - a Hundred Years War - which centuries from now school boys and girls will have heard of but know nothing about. It was an epochal war spawned in the disintegration of the European empires and defined by a mighty struggle over which new systems would replace the old: fascism, communism, or liberal democracy. The first was defeated by mid-century. The second lasted to *fin de siècle*. The last, the winner, created a new system of law and legitimacy which now in turn requires new constitutional processes; for the legal and societal norms of the triumphant liberal international system have made it possible for small groups of well-financed men to cloak themselves in

secrecy, communicate with one another around the globe, conspire, speak to a vast audience, and wreak havoc.

Bobbitt argues that it is this same interaction between domestic legal norms and the international system that brought down the Soviet Union. Gorbachev and his colleagues in the Politburo found themselves and their peculiar system of legitimacy swamped not only by their archrival in North America but also by an international system which worked less and less to the Soviets' advantage as the century progressed. Sensing their legitimacy slipping away, Soviet leaders attempted innovations which consciously mimicked attributes of the West that seemed so strategically successful, innovations meant to make the Soviet Union a stronger competitor to the United States and a more influential force in the international system. Such innovations were meant to give the Soviet Union strategic flexibility, and power beyond its arsenal of thermonuclear weapons and its formidable array of conventional armies and fleets. But in so grasping for strategic change, in so preparing for that change by altering their own de facto constitution, the over-eager competitors in the Politburo changed the international system itself. They emboldened opposition in their satellite countries, lost command of their command economy, quit the Cold War, and embraced the key legitimizing mechanism of the West - opposition parties.

But the West, too, was changed by its own strategy and that of the Soviets. Bobbitt proposes that the United States, in order to win the Great Epochal War of 1914-90, eventually transformed itself, and was transformed by its environment, from a classic "nation-state" to a new constitutional entity: a market state, according to Bobbitt, for which the legitimizing principle is not merely the social security of its citizens through full employment and redistribution, but the expansion of opportunity for individuals.

The new paradigm does not mean that the classic concerns of nation-states are behind us yet, admits Bobbitt. The old threats will persist for some time in this transitional age from nation-state to market-state. Classic nation-state quarrels like those between China and Taiwan over territory and sovereignty will continue. Russia might experience an ethno-nationalist backlash that returns an authoritarian and chauvinistic regime to the Kremlin. But the market-state is the way of the present in a good deal of the world, says Bobbitt, and is the state of its future. Hence, the United States, for example, will not be operating under its twentieth-century Wilsonian paradigm of "making the world safe for democracy," but instead will be in the business of "making the world available," of "creating new worlds of choice and protecting the autonomy of persons to choose."

If that sounds like good news, Bobbitt thinks there are any number of infelicitous war scenarios awaiting the liberal market-states in this time of transition. But he opines that if the West recognizes its strategic predicaments, chooses wisely, and gets a bit lucky, then it might look forward to a world in which low-intensity conflict is the normal preoccupation of the state and its strategists - that is to say, a world not stained by massed nuclear, chemical, or biological attacks between states.

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