



*"The Peace Negotiations between Julius Civilis and the Roman General Cerialis" by Otto van Veen*

*In 1613, the Dutch legislature, the States General, commissioned twelve paintings depicting the Batavian Revolt against the Roman Empire in 69-70 AD, including this depiction of the negotiations between Julius Civilis and the Roman General Cerialis. Even though they are negotiating to resolve the conflict, the image still shows that both sides are well armed so that their leaders can negotiate from positions of strength.*

*The painting is now part of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.*

# SHIELD AND SWORD: The Case for Military Deterrence

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Imagine walking through a dark wilderness. It teems with vicious animals; it throbs with uncounted dangers; it's buffeted by nature's fury. But you come prepared. You're equipped with a parka, flares, food and water, a rifle. Then you see something precious in the middle of all that danger: a baby. You would do anything you could—and use everything had—to protect this defenseless child from the dangers lurking in the wilderness. In fact, failing to do so would be criminal, even sinful.

Surely, the same principle applies in the realm of nations. Our world teems with violent regimes and vicious men. And something precious—our notion of peace, sovereignty, liberty, civilization itself—sits exposed to all that danger. In a world where might makes right, the only thing that keeps the peace, defends our sovereignty and liberty, and upholds civilization is the willingness to use our resources to keep the dangers at bay. Yet too many policymakers disregard the wisdom of military deterrence, and too many people of faith forget that the aim of deterrence is, by definition, to prevent wars, not start them.

Some people of faith oppose the threat of military force, let alone the use of military force, because of Christ's message of peace. This is understandable in the abstract, but we must keep in mind two truths.

First, governments are held to a different standard than individuals, and hence are expected to do certain things individuals aren't expected to do—and arguably shouldn't do certain things individuals should do. For example, a government that turned the other cheek when attacked would be conquered by its foes, leaving countless innocents defenseless. A government that put away the sword—that

neglected its defenses—would invite aggression, thus jeopardizing its people.

Second, all uses of force are not the same. The sheriff who uses force to apprehend a murderer is decidedly different from the criminal who uses force to commit a murder. The policemen posted outside a sporting event to deter violence are decidedly different from those who plot violence. Moral relativism is anything but a virtue.

Some lament the fact that we live in such a violent world, but that's precisely the point. Because we live in a violent world, governments must take steps to deter those who can be deterred—and neutralize those who cannot. In this regard, it pays to recall that Jesus had sterner words for scholars and scribes than He did for soldiers. In fact, when a centurion asked Jesus for help, He didn't admonish the military commander to put down his sword. Instead, He commended him for his faith.<sup>1</sup> "Even in the Gospels," soldier-scholar Ralph Peters reminds us, "it is assumed that soldiers are, however regrettably, necessary."<sup>2</sup> They are necessary not only for waging war but, preferably, for maintaining peace.

It's a paradoxical truth that military readiness can keep the peace. The Romans had a phrase for it: *Si vis pacem,*

*para bellum.* "If you wish for peace, prepare for war." President George Washington put it more genteelly: "There is nothing so likely to produce peace as to be well prepared to meet an enemy." Or, in the same way, "We infinitely desire peace," President Theodore Roosevelt declared. "And the surest way of obtaining it is to show that we are not afraid of war." After the West gambled civilization's very existence in the 1920s and 1930s on hopes that war could somehow be outlawed, the men who crafted the blueprint for waging the Cold War returned to peace through strength. Winston Churchill proposed "defense through deterrents." President Harry Truman called NATO "an integrated international force whose object is to maintain peace through strength...we devoutly pray that our present course of action will succeed and maintain peace without war."<sup>3</sup> President Dwight Eisenhower explained, "Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk its own destruction." President John Kennedy vowed to "strengthen our military power to the point where no aggressor will dare attack." And President Ronald Reagan steered the Cold War to a peaceful end by noting, "None of the four wars in my lifetime came about because

we were too strong.” Reagan also argued, “Our military strength is a prerequisite for peace.”<sup>4</sup>

Even so, arms alone aren’t enough to deter war. After all, the great powers were armed to the teeth in 1914. But since they weren’t clear about their intentions and treaty commitments, a small crisis on the fringes of Europe mushroomed into a global war. Neither is clarity alone enough to deter war. After all, President Woodrow Wilson’s admonitions to the Kaiser were clear, but America lacked the military strength at the onset of war to make those words matter and thus deter German aggression. In other words, America was unable to deter. “The purpose of a deterrence force is to create a set of conditions that would cause an adversary to conclude that the cost of any particular act against the United States of America or her allies is far higher than the potential benefit of that act,” explains Gen. Kevin Chilton, former commander of U.S. Strategic Command. It is a “cost-benefit calculus.”<sup>5</sup> So, given the anemic state of America’s military before 1917, the Kaiser calculated that the benefits of attacking U.S. ships and trying to lure Mexico into an alliance outweighed the costs. That proved to be a grave miscalculation.

In order for the adversary not to miscalculate, a few factors must hold.

First, consequences must be clear, which was not the case on the eve of World War I. Critics of deterrence often cite World War I to argue that arms races trigger wars. But if it were that simple, then a)

there wouldn’t have been a World War II, since the Allies allowed their arsenals to atrophy after 1918, and b) there would have been a World War III, since Washington and Moscow engaged in an unprecedented arms race. The reality is that miscalculation lit the fuse of World War I. The antidote, as alluded to above, is strength plus clarity.

A second important factor to avoid miscalculation: The adversary must be rational, which means it can grasp and fear consequences. Fear is an essential ingredient of deterrence. It pays to recall that deterrence comes from the Latin *dēterreō*: “to frighten off.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, as Churchill conceded, “The deterrent does not cover the case of lunatics.”<sup>7</sup> Mass-murderers masquerading as holy men and death-wish dictators may be immune from deterrence. (The secondary benefit of the peace-through-strength model is that it equips those who embrace it with the capacity to defeat these sorts of enemies rapidly and return to the status quo ante.)

Third, the consequences of military confrontation must be credible *and* tangible, which was the case during most of the Cold War. Not only did Washington and Moscow construct vast military arsenals to deter one another; they were clear about their treaty commitments and about the consequences of any threat to those commitments. Recall how Eisenhower answered Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s boast about the Red Army’s overwhelming conventional advantage in Germany: “If you attack us in Germany,” the steely American commander-in-chief fired back, “there will be nothing

conventional about our response.”<sup>8</sup> Eisenhower’s words were unambiguously clear, and unlike Wilson, he wielded the military strength to give them credibility.

Discussing military deterrence in the context of Christianity may seem incongruent to some readers. But for a pair of reasons it is not.

First, deterrence is not just a matter of GDPs and geopolitics. In fact, scripture often uses the language of deterrence and preparedness. For example, in the first chapter of Numbers the Lord directs Moses and Aaron to count “all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army.” This ancient selective-service system is a form of military readiness. Similarly, I Chronicles 27 provides detail about the Israelites’ massive standing army: twelve divisions of 24,000 men each. II Chronicles 17 explains the military preparations made by King Jehoshaphat of Judah, a king highly revered for his piety, who built forts, maintained armories in strategically located cities “with large supplies” and fielded an army of more than a million men “armed for battle.” Not surprisingly, “the fear of the Lord fell on all the kingdoms of the lands surrounding Judah, so that they did not go to war against Jehoshaphat.” In the New Testament, Paul writes in Romans 13 that “Rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong...Rulers do not bear the sword for no reason.” Again, this is the language of deterrence. Those who follow the law within a country and who respect codes of conduct between countries have nothing





to fear. Those who don't have much to fear. Likewise, to explain the importance of calculating the costs of following Him, Jesus asks in Luke 14, "What king would go to war against another king without first sitting down to consider whether his 10,000 soldiers could go up against the 20,000 coming against him? And if he didn't think he could win, he would send a representative to discuss terms of peace while his enemy was still a long way off." In a sense, both kings are wise—one because he recognizes that he's outnumbered; the other because he makes sure that he's not. Put another way, both kings subscribe to peace through strength. Again, as with the Centurion earlier, Jesus could have rebuked the martial character of these kings, but he did not. This is not just description but commendation. We ignore their example at our peril.

Secondly, it is not incongruent if we understand military deterrence as a means to prevent great-power war—the kind that kills by the millions, the kind humanity has not endured for seven decades. We know we will not experience the biblical notion of peace—of *shalom*, peace with harmony and justice—until Christ returns to make all things new. In the interim, in a broken world, the alternatives to peace through strength leave much to be desired: peace through hope, peace through violence, or peace through submission. But these options are inadequate.

The sheer destructiveness and totality of great-power war testify that crossing our fingers and hoping for peace is not a Christian option. Wishful thinking, romanticizing reality, is the surest way to invite what Churchill called "temptations to a trial of strength."

Moreover, the likelihood that the next great-power war would involve multiple nuclear-weapons states means that it could end civilization. Therefore, a posture that leaves peer adversaries doubting the West's capabilities and resolve—thus inviting miscalculation—is not only unsound, but immoral and inhumane — *unchristian*. "Deterrence of war is more humanitarian than anything," Gen. Park Yong Ok, a longtime South Korean military official, argues. "If we fail to deter war, a tremendous number of civilians will be killed."<sup>9</sup>

Peace through violence has been tried throughout history. Pharaoh, Caesar and Genghis Khan, Lenin, Hitler, Stalin and Mao, all attained a kind of peace by employing brutal forms of violence. However, this is not the kind of "peace" under which God's crowning creation can flourish; neither



would the world long tolerate such a scorched-earth “peace.” This option, too, the Christian rejects.

Finally, the civilized world could bring about peace simply by not resisting the enemies of civilization—by not blunting the Islamic State’s blitzkrieg of Iraq; by not defending the 38th Parallel; by not standing up to Beijing’s land-grab in the South China Sea or Moscow’s bullying of the Baltics or al-Qaeda’s death creed; by not having armies or, for that matter, police. As Reagan said, “There’s only one guaranteed way you can have peace—and you can have it in the next second—surrender.”<sup>10</sup>

The world has tried these alternatives to peace through strength, and the outcomes have been disastrous.

After World War I, Western powers disarmed and convinced themselves they had waged the war to end all wars. By 1938, as Churchill concluded after Munich, the Allies had been “reduced...from a

position of security so overwhelming and so unchallengeable that we never cared to think about it.”<sup>11</sup> Like predators in the wilderness, the Axis powers sensed weakness and attacked.

In October 1945—not three months after the *Missouri* steamed into Tokyo Bay—Gen. George Marshall decried the “disintegration not only of the Armed Forces, but apparently...all conception of world responsibility,” warily asking, “Are we already, at this early date, inviting that same international disrespect that prevailed before this war?”<sup>12</sup> Stalin answered Marshall’s question by gobbling up half of Europe, blockading Berlin, and arming Kim Il-Sung in patient preparation for the invasion of South Korea.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. military had taken up positions in Korea in 1945, but withdrew all combat forces in 1949.<sup>14</sup> Then, in 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson announced that Japan, Alaska and the Philippines fell within America’s “defensive perimeter.”<sup>15</sup> Korea didn’t. Stalin

noticed. Without a U.S. deterrent in place, Stalin gave Kim a green light to invade. Washington then reversed course and rushed American forces back into Korea, and the Korean peninsula plunged into one of the most ferocious wars in history. The cost of miscalculation in Washington and Moscow: 38,000 Americans, 103,250 South Korean troops, 316,000 North Korean troops, 422,000 Chinese troops and 2 million civilian casualties.<sup>16</sup> The North Korean tyranny—now under command of Kim’s grandson—still dreams of conquering South Korea. The difference between 2015 and 1950 is that tens of thousands of battle-ready U.S. and ROK troops are stationed on the border. They’ve been there every day since 1953.

The lesson of history is that *waging* war is far more costly than maintaining a military capable of *detering* war. As Washington observed, “Timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it.” Just compare



military allocations, as a percentage of GDP, during times of war and times of peace:

In the eight years before entering World War I, the United States devoted an average of 0.7 percent of GDP to defense; during the war, U.S. defense spending spiked to 16.1 percent of GDP.

In the decade before entering World War II, the United States spent an average of 1.1 percent of GDP on defense; during the war, the U.S. diverted an average of 27 percent of GDP to the military annually.

During the Cold War, Washington spent an average of 7 percent of GDP on defense to deter Moscow; it worked.

Yet it seems we have forgotten those hard-learned lessons. In

his book *The World America Made*, Robert Kagan explains how “America’s most important role has been to dampen and deter the normal tendencies of other great powers to compete and jostle with one another in ways that historically have led to war.” This role has depended on America’s military might. “There is no better recipe for great-power peace,” Kagan concludes, “than certainty about who holds the upper hand.”<sup>17</sup>

Regrettably, America is dealing away that upper hand, thanks to the bipartisan gamble known as sequestration. The U.S. defense budget has fallen from 4.7 percent of GDP in 2009 to 3.2 percent today—headed for just 2.8 percent by 2018-19.<sup>18</sup> The last time America invested so little in defense was, ominously,

1940. These cuts might make sense if peace were breaking out around the world, but we know the very opposite to be true.

The result of the cuts slicing through the U.S. military—civilization’s first-responder and last line of defense—will be the smallest Army since 1940, smallest Navy since 1915 and smallest Air Force in its history.<sup>19</sup> This makes deterrence less credible—and miscalculation more likely. ■

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