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RECENSION

*La guerra. Teoría para comprender los conflictos del siglo XXI
(war: theory for understanding 21st century conflicts)*

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Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos is an excellent military man, an experienced analyst of the historical and current complexities of geopolitics and a profound thinker on questions of violence, the phenomenon of war and the ethics of combatants. Federico is all of this and much more. For those who are acquainted with him and have had the good fortune to work alongside him, the military man, the analyst and the thinker meld into the figure of a wise communicator, with whom one is never bored but always comes away better informed after a conversation with him.

A prolific author who has published several monographs and dozens of articles at the *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, as well as in other prestigious journals, in this book *War: theory for understanding 21st century conflicts*, a complete compendium of his thoughts and erudition on the subject of war, not in terms of data and names of battles, generals or years, but in terms of its intrinsically human essence and the multiple perspectives on it that have existed since the world came into being; arising from technological change, towards greater lethality, but also discussing its religious implications, above all, the moral and political justifications as posited by man to explain destruction and war. “Glory is fleeting, but darkness is eternal”, is one of the maxims attributed to Napoleon about the battlefield. In this monumental book (600 pages), based on dozens of sources and a profound reflection, Federico Aznar deals not so much with glory —if there by any in war— rather, he seeks to offer us a light amidst its darkness.

The book is an authentic manual for reflecting on war as a political activity, there is no other definition because it is not a compendium of strategies, tactics or means of warfare throughout history, but rather how the battlefield is a reflection of political motivation. For this reason, and like war itself, the book is timeless, as it offers us an analysis with references from authors belonging to different eras, including our own where everything is more complex but almost nothing has been invented: hybrid warfare, the grey zone, disinformation, post-truth, manipulation of the narrative and technology. It is the latter, applied to the realm of warfare, that has truly made warfare more sophisticated with its advances, but in essence, it is a soldier and his rifle that symbolise victory or defeat. We see this, for example, in Ukraine.

The work begins with an introduction, *Apología de la imperfección (An apologia for imperfection)*, essential reading if we are to understand the rest of the narrative. In it, the author justifies his approach and reveals his aspect of humanist military man in its fullness, vindicating imperfection as liberating and closer to the truth than bureaucratically impeccable poses that are bereft of actual intellectual content. Similar to Edward Thorndike on the theory of war, for Federico Aznar, learning by trial and error defines not only combat, but is also the way to approach any subject from a scientific perspective. More specifically, one sees the polemicist who, like Gaston Bouthoul decades ago, perceives war as a phenomenon that may be analysed and shaped as another terrible but no less true means, of resolving disputes and conflicts.

The ten chapters that make up the work do not follow a specific structure, although they are ordered chronologically. They are presented according to the different themes that Federico Aznar explores in relation to war. The first is a reflection on the

philosophy of war, from its vision in the narrative and mythology of classical Greece to the formation of Polemology at the end of the 20th century, all of this in order to determine the author's definition of the phenomenon of war. An honest and clear definition: war is a social activity whose modes vary over time, but whose limits are highly imprecise, within a confrontation between different powers, which are not usually asymmetrical, on the other hand.

How a war starts and evolves is also the subject of Federico Aznar's analysis. It goes back to what is undoubtedly the greatest work on war, at least in the West, Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, perhaps the first history and polemological handbook of a war, thought in the 5th century BCE to be global. "War [...] brings most men's passions to the same level as their circumstances", Thucydides wrote, in a definition that could be applied to any era. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, which evokes the brutal Allied bombing of Dresden during World War II and which the author himself survived as a German POW, Kurt Vonnegut has a character state something very similar to Thucydides, but in an updated form: "You can't say anything intelligent about a massacre".

The author also immerses us in the debate about the humanity or inhumanity of war: what is its limit?, the number of victims?, their helplessness?, the fairness or unfairness of the arguments for making war, and can other phenomena such as the genocide of non-combatant civilian populations be considered war? Much of this also has to do with how acts of war are portrayed to the public and the ability of power to convince the public of the appropriateness of war not for the outside world, but for their own societies. The use of language, for example, talking about conflict rather than war or the terms crisis and resilience show that mastery of the message can lead to mastery of the story, but not of reality: "conceal the plans you have in mind", wrote Sun Tzu in his famous *Art of War*.

The third section is dedicated to the vision of war from the two very different cultural approaches of the West and the East, each with its own intrahistory and historical trajectory. Nor are there two monolithic definitions, but different nuances marked by the passage of time and political events. In Europe, Romantic idealism and later pragmatic realism regarding the fact of war is countered by a certain ambiguity in its evaluation by Islam, linking the warlike with the religious around the Jihad and its different perceptions, plus Eastern cultural perspectives, especially Chinese and Japanese, where war becomes the disturbing element of a celestial order transferred to the social order with the ruler at its head. Sun Tzu has his own epigraph, for Federico Aznar he is essential for his thoughts on multiple matters, not solely on war.

But if war is a unique phenomenon of the confrontation of powers throughout history, what types of war are detectable over time? Beyond his classifications according to causes, reasons or technologies specific to each era, Federico Aznar offers us a compendium based on the studies of William Lind (1989) and his four generations of wars—we are in the last stage, that of globalisation—the three waves of Alvin and Heidi Toffler (1993), as well as the work of Lt. Col. Andrés González Martín, an important specialist and, like the author, an analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

Ultimately, the typology of warfare is closely related to its expansion throughout society from an earlier time when the battlefield was reserved for a specialised minority of combatants. Today, society as a whole is both an aggressor and a victim of war, a phenomenon that may be traced back to the revolutionary wars of the late 18th century. When we speak of total war as characterising the two world conflicts of the 20th century, we should not forget that the concept of total war emerged in the debates of the French Convention of 1793 on the external war of the monarchies against the young republic and the internal war between the latter and its traditionalist opponents in the Vendée, alongside the concept of nation in arms.

As previously stated, today we are facing fourth-generation wars and Federico Aznar dedicates his 5th chapter to them. Since the 1990s, rather than national, wars have tended to be local and popular, spurred on by tremendous technological advances and, in the West at least, the emergence of new social values that influence the phenomenon of war. This confusion is compounded by the plurality of actors involved. No longer just states, they involve transnational and non-state armed groups that bring violence in a way that is as surprising as it is terrifying into the hearts of our supposedly safe societies, and even to countries officially declared non-combatant.

The phenomenon of terrorism is the subject of chapter 6, recalling that its concept emerged during the French revolutionary process under the ascendancy of Robespierre, when his great friend Saint-Just placed terror on the agenda of the National Assembly. However, more than two hundred years later, there is no unanimous and accepted definition and terrorism has sometimes been confused with asymmetric and insurgent warfare, for example, with certain forms of struggle against the French invaders in Spain during the Peninsular War, i.e., the famed guerrillas. The section concludes with interesting analyses and case studies of jihadism and the lone wolf phenomenon that have recently hit Western societies so hard.

Chapter 7 introduces us to the relationship between geopolitics and war, which are complementary from a historical point of view, yet highly perceptible in the current situation marked by globalisation as the keystone. Federico Aznar highlights some intrinsic factors of current geopolitics, such as the perception of disorder common to processes of transition and crisis, which tends to degenerate into insecurity; the participation of multiple actors beyond the state; the confusion between internal and external violence; and, above all, the involvement of society as a whole, whether wanted or not, but which is no longer oblivious to geopolitical ups and downs, although it may seem otherwise. A society today is increasingly permeated by a warmongering hysteria, as Edgar Morin rightly points out in his work *De guerre en guerre*.

On the other hand, to speak of contemporary geopolitics is to explain certain concepts associated with it. This is what Federico Aznar does when he explains the origins and meanings of terms such as hard power, soft power, smart power, the grey zone and hybrid warfare, which, although its definition was consolidated in 2005, owes much to the groundbreaking work *Unrestricted Warfare* by Chinese colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui (1999), which had already highlighted the importance of narrative, propaganda and fake news, factors that jointly pose a serious problem

for the credibility of messages in global geopolitical dialectics. The author closes the section with a case study of the current war in Ukraine.

The eighth section is the most voluminous and is devoted to the relationship between war and technology, which has become the key to conflicts, from the development of the bow and arrow and cavalry in ancient times to nuclear weapons and cybernetics today. Technology brings great disruptive value to warfare, often tipping the balance one way or the other, and even today, great powers aspire to win a conflict without actually engaging in combat, minimising risks through technological difference. For the author, outer space has become, in connection with cyberspace, the new framework of technological competition for warfare, as any event will have enormous economic, social and security consequences.

The penultimate chapter, chapter 9, harks back to the beginning of the book: is war another way to achieve peace? Although it may seem a dialectical contradiction, this is the case, a harmful path possibly, but one with a theoretical ultimate goal, which would be to reach a pre-war starting point marked by peace. Nevertheless, Benjamin Franklin is credited as having declared that a bad peace is always preferable to a good war.

Federico Aznar analyses other questions regarding the consequences of an imperfect peace, and depending on the nature of the peace, the loser's narrative, which is largely explained by the arrogant attitude of the winner. It is the image of the injustice of a peace imposed by the former. The clearest example may be the German desire for revenge after World War I against the Versailles Diktat. This narrative influences future conflicts. In his *Stellar Moments of Humankind*, Stefan Zweig devotes a chapter to US President Woodrow Wilson's unsuccessful attempts to get the French and British to temper their hatred of the Germans in the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The section concludes by analysing peace operations, a contemporary phenomenon that also brings its contradictions as well as serious consequences for both countries: the one providing troops and the one receiving them in the guise of international aid. It includes a case study on peace processes in Colombia.

Lastly, chapter 10 offers us the author's conclusions and final reflections on the phenomenon of war as a political fact but one that has indelible social and cultural factors without which it would not be understood. Thus, war is a means of settling, through violence, a conflict between powers:

“War is first and foremost a clash of powers, a clash in all its dimensions. And it is neither ethical, nor just, nor economic, nor medical (it may be defined in such terms as an epidemic of polytrauma)... nor even military. It is a political act, an act of power management, so that any analysis made without taking this fact into account, that is, referring solely to one of the levels, is incomplete, and therefore false and profoundly erroneous. War is a function, an instrument of politic”.

The book includes a glossary of terms and an extensive bibliography, which are particularly interesting and enriching. The glossary offers clear and concise definitions

of the key terms used throughout the text, facilitating the understanding of concepts, while the bibliography is exhaustive and demonstrates the extensive documentation and references with which Federico Aznar delves into all the topics addressed with his usual rigour and erudition. He is to be congratulated on this extensive and indispensable work.

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