

# New England Journal of Public Policy

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Volume 36  
Issue 1 *The Changing Character of War and  
Peacemaking*

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Article 3

6-16-2024

## Introduction to the Special Issue

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### Recommended Citation

Lord Alderdice, John, (2024) "Introduction to the Special Issue," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol36/iss1/3>

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## **Introduction to the Special Issue**

### **John, Lord Alderdice**

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After the two terrible global wars of the first half of the twentieth century, the last millennium seemed, to Western observers at least, to end well. There had not been a war in Western Europe for some decades and it was assumed that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War would result in a world that was less deeply divided and with a much-reduced risk of catastrophic nuclear war. Despite its difficulties, the United Nations system had survived, and the prospect of a relatively peaceful world governed under a liberal, international, rules-based order appeared to be within reach. The development of the global internet and the resultant extraordinary expansion of communication worldwide as well as the establishment of the World Trade Organization to administer the growing body of multilateral trade agreements added to the conviction that globalization was rapid, irreversible, and bound to result in greater global cooperation and peaceful relations. It was widely and confidently believed that the liberalizing of trade, travel, and communication would lead to a more liberal and tolerant politics across the world.

While the devastating Al Qaeda attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, challenged the view that we were moving inexorably toward a more tolerant and less violent world, the illusion was sustained by a view, shared by many world leaders from East and West, North and South, that the problem was now ‘terrorism.’ There was, it was reasoned, no prospect of wars between major states, and the ‘new wars,’ which seemed to consist of intrastate conflicts involving non-governmental terrorist actors, could surely be addressed by international collaboration on a ‘war on terrorism,’ though how one could mount a war against a tactic was never clear.

Unfortunately, it did not take long for old differences to reemerge. The World Federation of Scientists (WFS), which had previously been able to maintain a degree of unity in shared efforts at nuclear de-escalation, found after 9/11 that on the question of terrorism, Western scientists wanted to use their knowledge to mitigate the growing problem, while scientists from the East thought it more important to try to understand the motivations of people who engage in terrorism and jeopardize their own welfare as individuals and communities. Debates around these questions led to the establishment of two WFS Permanent Monitoring Panels—one on the Mitigation of Terrorism and the other on the Motivations for Terrorism. Out of this collaboration emerged the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict (CRIC), bringing together scholars from different countries and disciplines including psychology, anthropology, and political science to explore the causes of intractable violent political conflict and how it could be addressed. A detailed account of the genesis of CRIC was given in a previous issue of this journal.<sup>1</sup>

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One of the most important initiatives taken by CRIC was the creation of an annual conference held each September in Harris Manchester College at the University of Oxford. The first conference was held in 2014 and ten years later it has become something of an institution. The attendees at the annual invitation-only events come from across the globe and many now collaborate throughout the year in research work, writing, and consulting in the field. As a result, the conference has taken on a life of its own. It is currently hosted by The Concord Foundation, a newly established independent not-for-profit company ([theconcordfoundation.org](http://theconcordfoundation.org)).

The tenth anniversary Conference on the Resolution of Intractable Conflict was held in September 2023 in collaboration with the Changing Character of War Centre at Pembroke College, University of Oxford ([www.ccw.ox.ac.uk](http://www.ccw.ox.ac.uk)) and the Global Humanity for Peace Institute at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David ([ghfp.institute](http://ghfp.institute)). It offered an excellent opportunity for colleagues to explore both the changing character of war and the changing character of peacebuilding. The *nature* of war, and of peacebuilding, do not change. War always involves one community attempting to force another community, by physical force, to bend to its will, and when this is resisted by physical means, war is the result. Building peace always involves communities that have different perspectives finding ways of conducting their differences without the use of physical force. However, while the nature of war and peacebuilding do not change, their character does change, and understanding and responding to the rapid and profound changes of recent years is a challenge.

At the time of our first conference in 2014 there was still a considerable degree of structure and stability in international relations. Notable progress had been made in resolving the long-standing conflicts in Northern Ireland and South Africa and these peace processes had benefited from the international collaboration facilitated by the end of the Cold War and the development of initiatives by the United Nations and the European Union. While the challenges were clear, there was optimism among CRIC participants that with creativity and commitment we could deepen our understanding of why some conflicts become intractable, and find ways to reframe them and make progress in resolving them. The annual conferences that followed facilitated this work and substantial progress was indeed made, but persuading governments to implement policies based on this knowledge was very difficult, especially when the policy proposals challenged power structures and traditional perspectives. Public and private warnings were made to Western governments about the dangers to global stability if there was not a change of course, but it soon became clear that the trajectory toward global conflict would be difficult to arrest.<sup>2</sup>

The work and the annual conferences continue, and our understanding of the nature, causes, and character of violent political conflict has widened and deepened. We also came to appreciate that some of the developments that had been expected to mitigate conflict—globalization, the internet, and rapid mobile communications—were actually exacerbating the division and advancement of technology was being used at least as much for war as for peace.

Now the post-war international political structures that had shown so much promise seem to be dissolving. The United Nations had provided a table around which states could negotiate about their differences and collaborate to address international social, economic, environmental, and political problems, and provide a system of international law. But states are increasingly signing up to conventions that they have no intention of observing and are disregarding the requirements of international law. Even the five permanent members of the UN Security Council cannot be depended upon to support the rule of law if it does not seem to be in their own selfish short-term interests. The internet was expected to provide a new way of communicating that would democratize knowledge and ensure that malign forces could not hide their activities behind

physical borders. However, paradoxically, people are more likely to restrict their viewing to that which fits with their prejudices and false information has spread much more rapidly than the truth. In the meantime those engaged in organized crime, sexual exploitation, especially of women and children, terrorists, and other malign state and non-state actors, have been much more successful than expected in using the new opportunities of cyberspace, resulting in a massive growth in illegal activity online.

It would be easy to lose faith that a better world is possible, as some have done. Others seem to bolster their hopes with shallow and unrealistic optimism. In our CRIC collaboration we have seen the situation differently. We are fully conscious of the dangers of climate catastrophe and nuclear holocaust, but we have also concluded that it is in times of such existential crisis that the human family is motivated to find new ways of thinking. By continuing to investigate scientifically and reflect philosophically on the challenges, we have begun to see ways to turn conflict into cooperation through our investigations of the new paradigms of complexity science and a more relational psychology.<sup>3</sup>

This Special Issue makes available articles based on many of the presentations at CRIC 2023 and you can view the presentations on the CRIC YouTube channel at [www.youtube.com/@cric-oxford](http://www.youtube.com/@cric-oxford). We hope that you will be encouraged in your own thinking and research on war and peace and we invite you to follow up with us, as individual researchers, or through CRIC or The Concord Foundation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> John, Lord Alderdice, “Why We Have the Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict in Oxford,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29, no. 1 (2017): Article 3, <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol29/iss1/3>.

<sup>2</sup> John, Lord Alderdice, “...The Lamps Are Going Out Again...” August 15, 2016, <https://lordalderdice.com/index.php/2016/08/15/the-lamps-are-going-out-again/>.

<sup>3</sup> John, Lord Alderdice, “Conflict, Complexity, and Cooperation,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 33, no. 1 (2021): Article 9, <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol33/iss1/9>.