

THE APPEAL TO HONOUR AND THE DECISION FOR WAR

Robin Archer^{*†}

Abstract The outbreak of the First World War is one of the great formative events of modern times. Yet during its centenary, there was surprisingly little attention to how uncertain entry into the war was in the English-speaking world or how finely balanced the forces for and against intervention were. This article examines the role of appeals to honour in the decision for war. It begins by exploring the role of these appeals in convincing radical liberals to accept British intervention – something they had been successfully blocking just days earlier – before examining parallel appeals in the United States and Australia. It then considers why the language of honour was effective, and whether it still plays a role a century later, before concluding with some possible centennial lessons.

At just the moment when the Great War started, another war was lost – the ‘war against war’ – the struggle to prevent such a conflict from taking place. Recent centennial commemorations have followed a long standing pattern. We must remember the war, we are told, so that we can ‘learn the lessons’. But, in truth, lessons are rarely drawn. Indeed the war is frequently portrayed not as the outcome of human decision making, but as something like a natural disaster – a bushfire or a deluge – what your home insurance might still call an ‘Act of God’. And we are then asked to remember how people, especially soldiers, coped with the disaster that engulfed them.

But the war was not a natural catastrophe. It was a product of human decisions. In this article I want to return to those decisions. And in particular, I want to examine how those

* Robin Archer is Associate Professor (Reader) in Political Sociology at the London School of Economics. His works include *Economic Democracy* (Oxford), *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton) and *The Conscription Conflict and the Great War* (Monash).

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who supported entry into the war managed to prevail over their opponents, even in Britain and elsewhere in the English-speaking world where opposition was strongest.

My starting point is the observation that, on the eve of the First World War, the speeches and writing of key decision makers are replete with the language of honour. A number of social scientists and historians have drawn attention to this and seen it as central to understanding the decision for war. Avner Offer (1995), in particular, has developed a rich and stimulating analysis, which builds on the earlier work of Joll (1968) and has been extended and generalized by Mann (2012).

Offer (1995, 217-28) shows how a European honour code helps to explain decisions taken in Germany, Austria-Hungary and even France, especially in the context of the high politics of Courts, Cabinets, Chancelleries, and High Commands. Given the enduring influence of feudal and military values on political institutions and culture in much of continental Europe and especially in Wilhelminian Germany and the Habsburg Empire, where a strong element of personal rule remained, this essentially Weberian account has an obvious plausibility. But what about the historically liberal English-speaking countries? Does honour help to explain the decision for war there? That is the question I want to address.¹ After setting out the main characteristics of the honour code, I will begin by looking at the critical case of Britain, before turning to other parts of the English-speaking world.

Three main characteristics of the European honour code can be distilled from previous work (Offer, 1995, 215-17). First, questions of honour arise when an individual (or by analogy, a state) is threatened with a loss of social reputation and hence of status and respect (the reputation requirement). The honour code presumes a dread of the ensuing shame. Second, in the face of such a threat, an individual (or state) must demonstrate a willingness to engage in physical confrontation that risks major personal loss up to and including death (the physical confrontation requirement). The paradigm expression of this is the willingness to engage in a duel. Third, in so acting, the individual (or state) must eschew calculations of costs and benefits or the balance of reasons (the non-calculating

requirement). Honourable behaviour is thus averse and sharply juxtaposed to prudential behaviour. It is emotionally-driven. Indeed, in some versions, the honour code tends to eschew thought, and to value instead spontaneous and even reckless actions. Taking these points together, the essence of the honour code lies in the willingness to engage in uncalculating confrontation in order to avert a loss of reputation.

It is worth noting a number of related points about this characterization of honour. First, honour is a highly gendered concept. The code applies principally to men. While women can damage their honour – typically by failing to comply with dominant sexual mores – they are not themselves entitled to uphold it against threats, and must rely on men to do so (Frevert, 2011). Second, the honour code has aristocratic origins. Questions of honour paradigmatically involve the reputation of high status individuals. But by the early twentieth century, in some societies more than others, egalitarian pressures had given it wider traction. And third, and most important for the present argument, an analogous honour was thought to inhere in nations or states (Frevert, 2011). Here too it is paradigmatically a privilege of high status states. Hence its particular importance for actual or aspiring ‘Great Powers’.

British Honour

With its ruling Liberal party and its strong tradition of anti-militarism, Britain was the most equivocal of the European great powers and the slowest to commit to entering the war. Liberal Prime Minister Asquith and Foreign Secretary Grey desisted from forcing a showdown and pushing the Cabinet to make a clear commitment until the eleventh hour. Asquith feared that his Cabinet could split over the issue.² More than half of the Cabinet appeared sympathetic to the radical liberal demand that Britain remain neutral and on 1st August the Cabinet actually decided that it would not send an expeditionary force to France, while otherwise continuing to decide not to decide (Morris, 1972, 394, 399, Wilson, 1975, 150, Clark, 2012, 542). In parliament, it seemed that a majority of Liberal MPs along with some conservatives did not favour intervention (Morris, 1972, 397 n3,

403-4, Wilson, 1975, 149). And as late as 2nd August, Asquith feared that three quarters of Liberal Party members were opposed to war (Strachan, 2004, 119).

Only on 2nd August did the Cabinet decide that a violation of Belgian neutrality would compel Britain to intervene (Morris, 1972, 399-401, Wilson, 1975, 150 & passim), though the Cabinet had decided just a few days earlier (on 29th July) to reject the argument that they were bound by a treaty obligation to do this (Wilson, 1995, 188-89). The next day, when Grey rose to speak in parliament, the language of honour loomed large. This was the key speech setting out the government's decision for war. Grey built his argument around three considerations: "British interests, British honour and British obligations".³ Grey's argument is interlaced with observations about interests: strategic, imperial, trade and other economic interests are all mentioned. But it is questions of honour and obligation that provide the red thread that runs throughout the speech. These questions of honour and obligation are not treated separately. Indeed the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, as 'obligations' in one sentence become 'obligations of honour' in the next.⁴

At the beginning of his speech (addressing himself principally to Radical claims that his secret diplomacy had already committed Britain) Grey is at pains to establish that there are *no* such obligations, only to go on to argue that, in at least two respects, there *are*. With respect to France, he suggests somewhat coyly that "every man look into his own heart ... to construe the extent of the obligation," before informing the House that the government had already, just the previous day, bound itself to offer naval support to France should the German navy threaten her. With respect to Belgium, he ends by asserting without equivocation that "it is quite clear that there is an obligation on this country" and that it is one of honour, even though he seeks to bolster his case with a quote from Gladstone that suggests that treaty obligations sometimes need to be weighed against other considerations.⁵

Grey draws these arguments together and concludes his speech by appealing to a classic statement of the honour code in order to reject a policy of neutrality. "If, in a crisis like

this, we run away ... I doubt whether, whatever material force we might have at the end, it would be of very much value in the face of the respect that we should have lost.” Britain would, he said, lose “all respect” and sacrifice its “good name and reputation.”⁶ So if Britain ran away it would lose its reputation. And that reputation was more important than any consideration of material advantage. That, according to Grey, was the nub of the matter. His speech was met with sustained applause.

Prime Minister Asquith’s speech in parliament three days later confirmed and reinforced the centrality of honour in the justification for war. “I can only say,” he declared, “if we had dallied or temporised, we, as a Government, should have covered ourselves with dishonour.”⁷ Like Grey, Asquith also spoke of material interests, but insisted that quite apart from these, the situation raised questions of honour from which they could not shrink. Obligations, honour, infamy, provocation, disgrace, the good name of the country, and respect: these were the terms in which Asquith made his case. “What are we fighting for?” he asked. The answer was first and foremost, “to fulfil ... an obligation not only of law but of honour, which no self-respecting man could possibly have repudiated”.⁸ The *Times* agreed that this was the central thrust of “the PM’s eloquent speech.” Its report was headlined “The Honour of the People.”⁹

Similar language was used by the Government’s traditional opponents in parliament and the press. The Conservative leader, Andrew Bonar Law, had sent a letter to the cabinet on the day of its critical 2nd August meeting claiming that “it would be fatal to the honour and security of the United Kingdom to hesitate in supporting France and Russia” (Morris, 1972, 397, Wilson, 1975, 148, 151). He reiterated this in parliament.¹⁰ And after Britain had formally declared war, the *Times* leader echoed the government’s position.¹¹

Even the arguments of the enduring opponents of intervention confirmed the centrality of honour to the decision for war. The response of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, Ramsay MacDonald, to Grey’s 3 August speech is an early and typical example. “If the nation’s honour were in danger we would be with him,” insisted MacDonald. But, he continued, “there has been no crime committed by statesmen of this

character without those statesmen appealing to the nation's honour. We fought the Crimean war because of our honour. We rushed to South Africa because of our honour. The right hon. Gentleman is appealing to us today because of our honour ... whatever attacks may be made upon us ... we will say that this country ought to have remained neutral ... and that that alone was consistent with the honour of the country."¹² The veteran Labour MP and party founder, Keir Hardie, made a similar point. Honour "is always the excuse," he said. "We shall look back in wonder ... at the flimsy reasoning."¹³

This surge in talk of honour, like the importance attached to Belgian neutrality, emerged quite late in the decision-making process, and only following the Cabinet's initial rejection of Grey's moves towards intervention at its meetings on 29 and 31 July and 1 August. Top officials at the Foreign Office began to press the argument from honour on Grey.¹⁴ And he in turn opted to press it on his Cabinet colleagues on 2 August, and then again in his speech to Parliament on 3 August (Wilson, 1995, 199). However, Grey's support for alliances with Russia and France went back many years (Searle, 2004, 521 & 486). And it seems likely that he had made a personal decision for war about a week earlier, based on a mix of imperial, strategic and economic concerns.¹⁵ The increased use of arguments from honour seems to have been adopted by Grey as a way – alongside threats of resignation and appeals to party loyalty – of trying to outmaneuver a recalcitrant cabinet majority that had been blocking his earlier efforts.¹⁶

Radicalism and Honour

Grey's appeal to honour was primarily directed neither at the enduring feudal inflections of the Tory mind nor at the liberal imperialists of his own ilk, but at the radicals and advanced liberals in and around his party who had long been the chief obstacle to his foreign policy and were now the chief obstacle to his proposed intervention (Strachan, 2004, 120-21). And the striking thing is that it worked.

Radicals and liberals were partial to a crusade, and couching their argument in the language of honour, Grey and his supporters consciously appealed to this. The Belgian

issue, he noted on 31 July, might help to alter attitudes.¹⁷ It was, Lloyd George later thought, “a heaven-sent excuse” (Morris, 1972, 391). Indeed, according to another member of the Cabinet, it provided a “highway to France” and the best grounds on which the decision to go to war “should be advertised” (Wilson, 1975, 156-58). One after another, erstwhile anti-militarists and advocates of neutrality set aside their opposition to participation in the war.

Not all erstwhile opponents embraced the argument from honour. Colonial Secretary Harcourt, the leading Cabinet opponent of Grey’s foreign policy for the two years prior to the war, explicitly denied that he had accepted the case for war because of “any obligation ... of national honour”.¹⁸ But with remarkable frequency, liberals and radicals, labour politicians and trade unionists, feminists and even pacifists embraced the demands of honour and had a change of heart.

One formerly anti-war Liberal judged that Grey’s speech in the Commons had convinced all but a handful of MPs “that we were compelled to participate” (Clark, 2011, 545). In the Cabinet, Lloyd George was the potential opponent whom Asquith and Grey feared most, and he waited until the last minute to declare his hand. But by September he could be found declaring that fate had reminded Britons of “the great peaks of honour we had forgotten”. His speech was entitled ‘Honour and Dishonour’.¹⁹

The move to war caught many unions and trades councils by surprise. A number of them had passed resolutions or organized protests against British involvement. And the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC – in effect its executive – said nothing before or immediately after the outbreak of war. But in October, in response to an enquiry from Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor, its secretary wrote that in his view Britain was “fighting to maintain its honour and its pledges to preserve the independence [of Belgium].” And shortly afterwards the position was formalized in a manifesto that declared that the Labour Party believed Britain “was bound in honour, as well as by treaty, to resist by arms the aggression of Germany” and that it had thus agreed to take an active part in recruiting.²⁰

In perhaps the most extraordinary *volte face*, the militant wing of the women's suffrage movement, the Women's Social and Political Union, rallied to the Government.

Emmeline Pankhurst began to address rallies calling on every man "to go to battle like the knight of old ... with absolute honour to his nation." And women were encouraged to hand out white feathers to those who did not enlist (Hochschild, 2011, 98-99, 105-8).

Anguished reassessment brought an end to many longstanding peace organizations and led to the formation of new bodies (Ceadel, 2000, 187ff). The Quaker president of the venerable Peace Society, J.A. Pease, was the only pacifist in the Cabinet. Yet he did not join the handful of ministers who resigned, arguing that to repudiate our undertaking to preserve Belgium's neutrality would be "dishonourable and discreditable" (Morris, 1972, 480 & 401). Likewise, on 4 August, the International Arbitration League decided it could no longer oppose British involvement in the war. Its president felt that "we could not have avoided it with honour" (Laity, 2001, 223-24).

Some liberal public intellectuals played a particularly important role both because of their intellectual authority in opinion-forming circles and because their arguments provided a template for others and underwrote frequently repeated claims. Gilbert Murray, the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University, is a prime example. Murray was a prominent public intellectual – so prominent indeed that he was the model for George Bernard Shaw's peace campaigner in *Major Barbara* (Holroyd, 1989, 106-14). He had long been active in radical liberal circles and peace campaigns, and had been actively campaigning for Britain to remain neutral on the very eve of the war.²¹ Days before the outbreak of war he joined Graham Wallas, J.A. Hobson and other anti-war intellectuals to form a Neutrality Committee whose last ditch efforts to keep Britain out of the war appeared in the press on 3 August.²² Yet he abandoned this position after watching Grey's speech in parliament (Bruneau, 2007, 207, Ceadel, 2000, 188 and Clark, 1978, 166) and soon adopted a very similar position. This conversion from radical to Asquithian liberal transformed Murray "into the leading Liberal apologist for British intervention in the First World War" (Ceadel, 2007, 219). Murray's new argument – for

the war – was set out most fully in a contribution entitled *How Can War Ever Be Right?* for the widely circulated Oxford Pamphlets series.

Murray began by reminding readers of his pacifist credentials, and his argument took pacifist objections seriously, although only to reject them (Murray, 1914, 3 and 1915, 9-11). Like Grey, he put forward both honour-based and interest-based arguments. And like Grey, it was the former that lay at the heart of his argument. If anything, as behoves an intellectual, he was even more explicit about this. While the interest-based argument required a complicated and uncertain balancing of potential consequences, the honour-based argument was, he claimed, clear and decisive (Murray, 1914, 15 & 21).

Murray's argument from honour features all the characteristics of the European honour code. In discussing what gives rise to conflicts over honour, there is occasionally some confusion about the first characteristic of the code. On two occasions Murray (1914, 20 & 24) suggests that duty is the main motive.²³ But the examples – both individual and national – that he uses to illustrate his argument make it clear that, as in the European honour code, it is threats to reputation and the attendant shame that are really the principal motives. The examples refer to “shame”, “pride” and “the consideration due to nations” as well as to countries and governments feeling “humiliated”, “proud”, “ashamed” or “disgraced” (Murray, 1914, 7, 10, 11, 12, 23).

His appeal to the second and third characteristics of the honour code could hardly be clearer. His whole emphasis is on the rejection of cost-benefit calculations and the preparedness to risk death in physical confrontation. The argument for peace fails, he says, because it judges “the war as a profit-and-loss account” and “leaves out of sight the cardinal fact that in some causes it is better to fight and be broken than to yield peacefully; that sometimes the mere act of resisting to the death is in itself a victory” (Murray, 1914, 6). When these questions arise there is “no counting of costs, no balancing of good and evil”. This is “the very essence of ... honour” (Murray, 1914, 9-10).²⁴

Ironically, then, although his argument is couched in more temperate language, this liberal erstwhile peace advocate claimed for Britain many of the characteristics that prominent German intellectuals – especially those who became early cheerleaders for their country’s war effort – claimed as distinctive virtues of German culture. Consider the leading sociologist Werner Sombart (1915). His *Handler und Helden* – Traders and Heroes – maintained that, at root, the war was an ideological conflict between the warrior culture of great deeds and transcendent struggles that was predominant in Germany and the merchant culture of hedonistic pleasure and self-interested calculation that was predominant in Britain.²⁵

Murray (1914, 24-27) even ends his argument by finding some virtue in war: the “oases of extraordinary good”, the “daily doing [of] nobler things”, the “strange deep gladness” of the battlefield, the “self-sacrifice”, the “self-respect” and above all the ubiquitous heroism – what he calls the “common necessary heroism” that war calls forth in “ordinary men”. The *handler*, too, were *helden*.

The New World

Honour-based arguments were also prevalent in the English-speaking New World. In the United States, Woodrow Wilson had just been reelected on a ‘he kept us out of the war’ platform, and as in Britain, his administration carried the hopes of anti-war liberals. In his address to Congress on 2 April 1917, in which he asked for a declaration of war, Wilson famously argued that the United States must enter the war to make the world “safe for democracy”. The German government’s refusal to halt its renewed campaign of submarine attacks on American commercial shipping also loomed large. But these arguments from ideals and interests were combined with an appeal to honour. Indeed, Wilson treated Germany’s behaviour as an insult, and the “vindication of [America’s] neutral rights was equated with the nation’s honor and prestige” (Tucker, 2007, 1).²⁶

That many were already pre-disposed to think about questions of war and peace in terms of honour can be seen from the Democratic and Republican platforms for the 1916

Presidential elections, each of which invoked concepts of ‘honor’, ‘dignity’, and ‘humiliation’ to encapsulate their stance on foreign policy.²⁷ That honour-based arguments might be potent rallying cries and that they might appeal to liberals and progressives is confirmed by the anxious efforts of leading socialists to pre-empt them. These anxieties were apparent the moment war broke out. “What is it all about?” asked Allan Benson in 1914. “Be careful, now. Don’t answer too quickly. Don’t say ‘the flag’ has been insulted. Don’t say ‘the national honor’ has been impugned. These are old reasons, but ... We socialists are prepared to stake everything on the statement that they are not true reasons.”²⁸ Benson had come to prominence through his anti-war writings, and in 1916 he was chosen to run as the Socialist party’s presidential candidate. The *Appeal to Reason* displayed similar anxieties during the 1916 elections. With a paid circulation of over 760,000 in 1913, it was the most widely read left-wing newspaper in the United States (Graham, 1990, 1-15). The *Appeal* highlighted the gap between Wilson’s professions that he would keep the United States out of the war and his statements that nothing was more important than honour. “You may count upon my heart and resolution to keep you out of the war” he had said in early 1916. “But you must be ready if it is necessary that I should maintain your honor. This is the only thing that a real man loves about himself ... the real man believes that his honor is dearer than his life ... and the nation’s honor is dearer than the nation’s comfort and the nation’s peace and the nation’s life itself.”²⁹

It soon became clear that these anxieties were well-founded. In the wake of Wilson’s address to Congress, supportive authorities reached for the language of honour. State legislatures invoked honour to urge Congressional approval of the declaration of war, the Supreme Court invoked it to uphold the draft, the military invoked it to seek support for recruitment, and University Presidents invoked it to ban anti-war speeches.³⁰ Even some pro-war socialists came close to invoking it when they spoke of the “sacrifice ... of public and private self-respect” being “too high a price to pay for [peace].”³¹ Although small in number, the departing pro-war socialists included many of the party’s leading intellectuals. Randolph Bourne pinpointed just this element of their argument in his oft-cited critique of the pro-war intellectuals, when he wrote (in a soon to be suppressed

journal) that their behaviour could only be explained by looking to their emotions. They had become, he said, like the British with their war “to save international honour” and were following the “same process that so shocked us abroad ... the war threw us back ... into an emotional bath of these old ideals.”³²

Many of the most powerful voices that urged the United States to remain neutral also embraced the language of honour, disputing not the appeal to honour itself but where it lay. William Jennings Bryan – three times presidential candidate and Wilson’s erstwhile Secretary of State – was probably the second most influential Democrat in the country. At a large rally at Madison Square Gardens in New York (on 2 February 1917) he called on the administration to hold a referendum on joining the war. “By doing so,” he declared, “the United States would forever obtain honor in the eyes of the world.”³³ Likewise, Robert La Follette, a leading opponent of the declaration of war in the Senate, did “not believe that our national honor is served by such a course.”³⁴

Nowhere is the force and ubiquity of honour language clearer than in the Congressional debate on 4 April 1917 about whether to declare war. The resolution to declare war was carried by 373 to 50 in the House and 82 to 6 in the Senate. Consider the debate in the Senate. As Keith (2004, 33-41) has pointed out, some Southern Senators made classic appeals to the honour code. But it was far from just a Southern preoccupation. The language of honour was pervasive. In all, 25 Senators contributed to the debate.³⁵ There were 2 Northerners, 6 Southerners, 11 from the Midwest, and 6 from the West. Of these, no less than 21 invoked the concept of honour.³⁶

Whereas responses to Grey’s speech tended to combine honour with interests, responses to Wilson’s tended to combine honour with high humanitarian idealism. This was reflected in many contributions. Senator Hitchcock, who introduced the resolution, set the tone. War was now necessary, he said, “for the protection of humanity and the vindication of national honour.” Despite his earlier opposition, Senator Kenyon now agreed that “this is a struggle to help save the democracy of the world or to maintain the honour of the United States.” “Peace is a passion with me,” he said, however “some things are worse

than war – dishonor infinitely so.” So there was a combination of reasons for war. But as this and other contributions made clear, honour alone was reason enough.³⁷

A small sample should give a flavour of this, though one could easily choose many others. Senator Swanson made the second speech in the debate. He argued that to advocate peace now would bring “shame” on the nation. War was “the only wise, manly and honorable course.” Like the founding fathers, he said, they should feel “that public honor is private honor, that public disgrace is private disgrace.” Senator Myers argued that peace was no longer consistent with “the preservation of our honour” and vowed to support the President “in his stand for the honor and integrity of our dearly beloved country.” Senator Williams, launched a vicious attack on La Follette, whose speech, he said, was not just “pro-German” but “pretty nearly pro-Goth and pro-Vandal”. To the claim of “some female farmer out in the Dakotas” that “I did not raise my boy to be a soldier”, he responded that “If you raised your boy right, you raised him to do whatever he had to do for his own honor or for his country’s honor ... there are things worse than death ...” And in another classic statement of the honour code, Senator Hardwick argued that Americans “want peace, but not peace at the price of having our national honor sullied ... permitting the very name American to become a term of derision and reproach, of scorn and contempt among men.”³⁸

As in Britain, honour-based arguments provided a rationale for a number of Senators to shift their stance. Six contributors continued to express doubts or referred to earlier opposition to American participation during the debate but nevertheless voted in favour of the declaration of war. Five of these invoked honour. Indeed four of the five contributors who voted *against* the declaration invoked honour.³⁹ And some of them went on to argue that, once war was declared, honour would require them to offer their full support and “to shrink not to enter ... into the very mouth of hell.”⁴⁰

Honour-based arguments were also prominent in Australia. Australia entered the war in the middle of a federal election campaign. So there was no comparable parliamentary

debate to that in Britain or the United States. Nevertheless, honour-based arguments were raised by leading politicians to explain why Australia should be involved.

In his first comment on the prospect of war on 31 July 1914, the leader of the Opposition Labor Party – soon-to-be Prime Minister Andrew Fisher – offered, as every Australian school child knows, to stand by “the mother country” to “our last man and our last shilling”. But read the sentence in full. What Fisher said was that “I sincerely hope that international arbitration will avail ... and pray that a disastrous war may be averted. But should the worst happen *after everything has been done that honour will permit*, Australians will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling.”⁴¹ On 3 August 1914, he repeated “that our last man and our last shilling will be offered and supplied to the mother country in maintaining her honour and our honour” (Scott, 1936, 22). Here is a classic example of the preparedness for uncalculating confrontation called for by the honour code, and of how honour-based arguments enabled radicals to embrace support for the war. Everything should be done to maintain peace, said Fisher, and he said so with some feeling. But once honour is a stake, we must make no calculation of the costs in either lives or resources.

Similar language was sometimes found in the labour press. The radical Queensland *Worker*, for example, argued that for Australia to evade the war “would be altogether unworthy of us.” And the Socialist influenced *Labor Call* in Melbourne, farewelled the first contingent of recruits with the observation that “Labor ... abhors war as an abominable relic of barbarism, an unspeakable anachronism for which it can find no sympathy ... At the same time the Labor party is as human as any other body of men, and it recognizes that there is something even worse than war, and that is dishonor and degradation.”⁴²

Honour-based arguments continued to be deployed, more extensively but less effectively, by William Morris Hughes, after he replaced Fisher as Labor Party leader and Prime Minister in late 1915: first in his ‘Call to Arms’ recruitment drive that Christmas, and

then in the extraordinary conflicts over his effort to introduce conscription, which wracked the country and the Labor Party in 1916 and 1917.⁴³

Hughes' efforts illustrate some of the limits to the effectiveness of honour-based arguments. Those who invoked the honour code drew a direct analogy between individual and national honour. But the invocation of honour during the conflict over conscription highlighted a potential gap between them. The Prime Minister argued that national honour required conscription. But his opponents responded that by removing the capacity to exercise individual choice, conscription undermined individual honour. Confronted with a threat to his honour, there is only one choice that an honourable man can make. But he must be left free to willingly embrace this choice on his own, if he is to be able to demonstrate his honour (Offer, 1995, 214, 215, 233). Conscription precludes this. Perhaps this is one reason why rulers – from revolutionary France to Asquith and Wilson – are so often at pains to pretend that conscripts are really volunteers.

The Honour Effect

Why were the arguments from honour effective? An obvious starting point is the pervasiveness of this kind of language in Edwardian culture. This was especially true of Britain.

Public schools sought to inculcate honour and related values throughout the British elite. And the preeminence of their old boys reinforced these values in the high bureaucracy and the diplomatic service as well as the military (Parker, 1987, 31-40 & 53-68).⁴⁴ But these values also spread downwards to other social classes – first to the would-be gentlemen of the aspiring middle class and then more broadly – through popular organisations and literature. By 1914, the boy scouts and other similar youth organisations had attracted the membership of perhaps two-fifths of adolescent boys (Strachan, 2004, 186-87). “On my honour ...” began the oft chanted ‘scout promise’.

Boy's Own style magazines, some of which had a huge circulation among all classes, carried a similar message (Parker, 1987, 125-37). And these were further reinforced by

popular books on the lives of model individuals whom youths were urged to emulate. After his death in Khartoum, General Gordon became a paradigm of this kind of model (Berenson, 2011, 83-121). He was included prominently in *The Roll Call of Honour: A New Book of Golden Deeds* – a widely read children’s book first published in 1911. Its author, Arthur Quiller-Crouch, like a number of Gordon’s admirers, was a liberal (Johnson, 2013, 29, 34). In a sure sign of its pervasive influence, the language of honour seeped into the play of children. Evelyn Waugh recalled how in 1909 he and his friends set up a redoubt on a suburban block in London and defended it against all comers: “We were priggishly high-minded,” he said. “‘Honour’ was a word often on our lips.” (Parker, 1987, 137).

This explanation places the whole phenomenon reassuringly in the past – a last terrible trumpet blast from the long nineteenth century. For Edwardian culture was destined to rapidly decline, in part because of the very processes unleashed by the war.

But appeals to honour were also pervasive in New World countries like the United States and Australia, despite the fact that they were far more thoroughly democratic and egalitarian societies in which the status hierarchies of Edwardian Britain (at least between white men) were substantially weaker and less legitimate. To understand more fully the impact of the honour code in these countries, we need to examine the paradoxical consequences of the interaction between democracy (in its broad Tocquevillean sense) and honour.

An analogous paradox might help to illustrate the kind of effects I have in mind. During the American revolution, the democratisation of the monarchy, while certainly radical in many respects, also served to entrench a new form of monarch – a kind of elected monarch, the President – by sloughing off the hereditary and aristocratic encumbrances of the original institution (Archer, 2012, 5-7).

In a similar way, the democratization of honour gave it a new lease of life. By making honour available in principle to all white men, it removed a major potential source of

antagonism, by delinking it, at least officially, from the class indignities of a feudal social order. At the same time, like any high status good made newly available, association with the honour code had a strong underlying appeal as a marker of high social status. By repudiating the original class character of the honour code, countries like the United States and Australia enabled other aspects of it to be re-entrenched on a far wider social base.

But whether in Edwardian Britain or the more egalitarian New World, arguments from honour were also effective because of their underlying conceptual structure. Honour is a nebulous concept, even by the standards of nebulous concepts. Leo Perla (1918) for example, alarmed by both the importance of the concept in justifying the war and the capacious and elastic way in which it was invoked, identified no less than 136 different (and at times contradictory) usages of the term ‘national honour’. But what *is* clear is that, once it is accepted that honour is at stake, action is required, irrespective of any other considerations. In effect, the invocation of honour sets aside questions about what, if anything, should be done and replaces them with an emotionally powerful rallying cry. Its effectiveness rests on this ability to shift an argument to a meta level that claims to trump all the other considerations that would normally play a role in deciding what to do.

Honour-based arguments sweep away complexity and set aside the need to reach a conclusion on the balance of reasons. Murray is helpfully explicit about this. The argument from honour, he says, avoids the need to reach a conclusion on the “difficult ground” of a “careful balancing of evidence and consequences” (Murray, 1914, 21). Indeed, he says, it is not just “all material considerations” but even those of “good and evil” that must be set aside. And, the commitment that ensues “admits of no bargaining” (Murray, 1914, 8). When honour is invoked it claims a position beyond interests and strategy, beyond politics, beyond ideology, indeed beyond morality. When Grey invoked honour on 3rd August, this was the main message that many liberals – both opponents and supporters – took away from his speech. As one opponent, Charles Trevelyan, commented afterwards: “I was prepared for bad news, but in no way for the bare-faced appeal to passion. He gave not a single argument ... but appealed to ... honour” (Morris,

415-17). Before long, as the issue of conscription hove into view, the liberal *Westminster Gazette* was prepared to assert that in a struggle where honour is at stake “we place no limits on the claims of the State”.⁴⁵ Even for a venerable liberal organ, honour overrode all its normal basic commitments.

In short, the invocation of honour acts as a meta-argument that trumps all other reasons. In this respect honour is similar to authority. Like authority, it requires a “surrender of judgment” and provides “content-independent reasons for action”.⁴⁶ The invocation of honour terminates the argument about what to do and leaves only the question of whether it will be done. Just as when a police officer invokes the authority of the state in requiring something to be done, once honour is invoked, the normal process of reasoning is brought to an end and the only question becomes whether the nation (or the individual) will act in the required way.

In Our Time

The word ‘honour’ is now out of favour. But these kinds of trumping arguments and the honour code’s concern with national reputation and respect are still very much with us. Two examples help illustrate this.

Some authors have noted similarities between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the attacks of September 11th, 2001 (Clark, 2012, xxv-xxvi). Both involved acts of dramatic terrorist violence, and in each case the great power concerned responded to a crime with a war. The response to the attacks of September 11th 2001 also provides evidence of the continuing hold of the concept of honour among wide swaths of the US population. A particularly striking example was the popular embrace of the slogan: “These Colors Don’t Run”. The slogan soon began to appear everywhere – on cars, houses, building sites, shops, windows, and commercial and private vehicles of all sorts. It was typically accompanied by illustrations of a proudly flying stars and stripes and a swooping eagle.

Although formally jocular, in that it took the form of a pun on the meaning of the words ‘colors’ and ‘run’, the central meaning of the slogan invoked key elements of the honour code. With or without an eagle, it was an expression of a willingness to engage in physical confrontation in defence of national respect. “These colours”, of course, symbolise the nation, and as so often with references to “the flag” in the United States, they are heavily freighted with the presumption of a demand for respect. “Don’t run” signals the willingness to fight, the disavowal of fear, and the determination not to concede ground to those who would challenge the nation’s standing and respect. Indeed, the absolute and unqualified nature of the claim – implicitly “these colors don’t run (no matter what)” – suggests a preparedness to engage in physical confrontation irrespective of the cost. Here then are all the ingredients of the honour code (albeit without the use of the term itself) – the willingness to engage in uncalculating confrontation in order to avert a loss of reputation and respect.

The ability to tap into these sentiments and to satisfy the desire for a respect-affirming act of hostility goes some way to explaining why the Bush Administration was able to win support for a war against Iraq, despite all the evidence that it had nothing to do with the attacks and was ruled by a regime with entrenched ideological hostility towards the forces that had carried them out. Honour, after all, as Murray (1914, 7, 12-13, 15) repeatedly emphasized, is about feelings not evidence.

“If ... we run away” Grey told MPs on 3rd August 1914, nothing would outweigh “the respect that we should have lost”.⁴⁷ Nearly a century later, thousands of bumper stickers blared back: “These Colors Don’t Run”.

There are also a number of similarities between Britain’s decision to participate in the Great War in 1914 and its decision to participate in the war in Iraq in 2003. Like Grey, Prime Minister Blair faced significant opposition, especially from within his own party. Seeking approval for the war, his speech to the House of Commons on 18th March 2003 ranged across various questions of security and national interests, the structure of

international relations and international law, and morality. But a central claim was that Britain had to act to meet a “test”: was it prepared to act to preserve its reputation.

Blair returned to this honour-like point repeatedly in his speech and he reiterated it at the end. What would other states think of Britain if it were to “retreat now”, to “falter”, to “turn away at the point of reckoning,” he asked. “They will take it that the will confronting them is decaying and feeble,” he responded. “To debate but never to act ... is the worst course imaginable.” It would, he later said, have left Britain and its allies “humiliated”. The official opposition concurred.⁴⁸

Blair combined these honour-like arguments with a different kind of trumping-argument that appealed to the language of conscience. Indeed, as time went on, this latter appeal became increasingly central to his argument. An appeal to conscience is, of course, more usually made by individuals seeking to resist the claim of a state to involve them in war. Note, however, that conscience shares with honour the same quality of being difficult to pin down yet somehow unassailable (Thomas, 2011, 109). And note, in particular, that like an appeal to honour, an appeal to conscience takes the form of a meta-argument that claims to trump all other considerations. Whatever the consequences, says the conscientious objector, my conscience will not allow me to participate.

However, unlike a conscientious objector who appeals to conscience to justify his or her decision to abstain from war-making, Blair appealed to it to justify his decision to commit a country to war. Confronted with repeated questions about whether his decision was right, he responded by insisting that critics should accept that he *believed* that it was, that he had a “clear conscience” and had acted in good faith, and that they should stop “continually attacking [his] integrity”.⁴⁹ These responses implied that the relevant issue was the relationship between his beliefs and the decision rather than an assessment of the substance of the decision itself. By turning the question into one about what he really believed, Blair sought to trump any negative assessment of his reasons for war with an appeal to his conscience.

This appeal to conscience was not wholly without precedent. Grey had made a related appeal to MPs in August 1914. How should MPs determine whether Britain should go to war to support France? The answer, he said, was to “let every man look into his own heart, and his own feelings”.⁵⁰ He then made it clear how he felt. Unlike Blair, however, he did not suggest that the authenticity of his feelings should be a touchstone for others in deciding what to do.

Blair behaved as if the relevant issue was whether his personal status was being properly recognized. It was as if there were an analogy between the individual who truly and deeply objects to his personal participation in war, and the Prime Minister who truly and deeply insists on his country’s participation. As with an individual before a Conscientious Objection board, his primary task is not to assess the reasons for the war but to establish his *bona fides*. And just as we should respond to the Conscientious Objector by agreeing that he will not have to fight, so, by implication, we should respond to Blair by agreeing that we will have to. In short, Blair made his case by claiming the status of a ‘Conscientious Insister’.

What lessons emerge from these conclusions about the impact of honour and its modern correlates, for those seeking to avoid catastrophic conflicts like the First World War? According to Mann (2012, 166), the principal lesson is that “we should never allow the militaristic culture of [early twentieth century European] civilization to be made legitimate again.” There is much to agree to in that.⁵¹ But perhaps there is a deeper lesson as well. In Britain, and more generally in the English-speaking world, it was anti-militarist liberals and radicals who had to be convinced to enable intervention in the war to take place. It was they who occupied the veto point. But it seems unlikely that a culture of militarism can explain the change of heart of committed anti-militarists. Rather, as I have tried to suggest here, it was the continuing hold of the honour code that helped to do that. So how should we respond to the ongoing role which arguments based on something like the honour code continue to play in unleashing catastrophic wars?

One response would be to accept an ongoing role for honour-based arguments but to encourage the development of a different conception of honour. There is some evidence of opponents seeking to do this in Britain at the outset of the First World War. Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald (1915, 14) argued that “the ordinary intelligent workman citizen” had a higher and wider conception of “his country, her traditions, her honour and the way to maintain them” than “the average diplomatist”. And a *Guardian* leader on 1 August 1914 argued that “for honour’s sake we must keep the peace.” Intervention in the war would “violate dozens of promises made to our own people. If those promises are broken, then England’s honour will be tarnished.”⁵²

Moreover, those who later resisted conscription could also claim to be meeting the honour code’s requirement that they be willing to engage in confrontation that risked major personal loss. Indeed, as some conscientious objectors could testify, they had to be willing to face the risk of death (Hochschild, 2011, 191-3 & 200-3). The fundamental point that distinguished the resisters from the recruits was not their preparedness to face death but their preparedness to inflict it.

There is little evidence that efforts to reinterpret honour in this way – around a dissident rather than a warrior conception honour – met with success during the Great War itself. A century later, however, we can draw on other more successful examples – like those of Gandhi and King, and, in a somewhat different way, Havel – each of which has provided enduring, powerful and widely celebrated models of dissenting confrontation (Roberts and Garton Ash, 2009, Scalmer, 2011). These models have their limits. But they have given a powerful boost to efforts to reinterpret honour in the course of the twentieth century.

A different response would be to reject an ongoing role for honour-based arguments altogether. One way to do this would be to reject the honour code’s requirement that individuals (and states) eschew the assessment of consequences and embrace uncalculating confrontation. Instead, this response would insist on the fundamental

importance of reason and prudence and would repudiate any attempt to trump these with appeals to meta-arguments like those based on honour.

This may seem counter-intuitive at a time when some scholarship – both social scientific and historical – is increasingly prone to deprecate the role of reason – something that was also apparent in avant-garde thought prior to the Great War.⁵³ But we should not be afraid to mount a stout defence of the value of reason in human affairs and to resist the frequent tendency to make it the butt of knee-jerk criticism. Here perhaps we intellectuals have our own small role to play – and our own small responsibility to acknowledge – given the recent propensity of some amongst us to adopt a hostile, dismissive, everything-is-power attitude towards human reason.

During the First World War the popular and official resonance of the language of honour can be seen everywhere. It can be seen on the ‘Dead Man’s Penny’ which was sent to the family of each British soldier who died. He had died, said the inscription, ‘For Freedom and Honour’. And it can be seen on private grave stones and official memorials throughout Britain and across the English-speaking world. One memorial stone in Salisbury Cathedral reads: “He gave his earthly life to such matter as he set great store by: the honour of his country and his home.” Like countless others, his parents reached for the language of honour to make sense of what had happened to their 19 year old boy. “Honour has come back, as a king, to earth.” wrote Rupert Brooke, the doyen of the young British war poets. Perhaps its reign should end.

ENDNOTES

¹ Offer is largely concerned with the impact of the European honour code on Continental (especially, German) decision-makers. He does have a shorter discussion of English-speaking countries, but it is focused on enlistment (Offer, 1995, 230-4) and he touches on the decision for war in these countries only very briefly (Offer, 1995, 228).

² For the conflict between ‘liberal imperialists’ and ‘liberal radicals’ see Wilson (1995) and Newton (2014).

³ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol LXV, 3 August 1914, cc 1809-32. For the extraordinary atmosphere in the Commons and the influence of the speech, see Newton (2014, 214-16).

⁴ Hansard, *op cit*, cc 1809-27.

⁵ *Ibid*, cc 1809-27.

⁶ *Ibid*, cc 1823 & 1825.

⁷ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol LXXV, 6 August 1914, cc2073ff.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Times*, 7 August 1914, 7.

¹⁰ Hansard, 3 August 1914, cc 1827-28.

¹¹ *Times*, 5 August 1914.

¹² Hansard, 3 August 1914, cc 1830-31.

¹³ Hansard, 3 August 1914, c 1841. Two days later most Labour MPs abandoned their opposition to the war. MacDonald, however, stuck to their original position and resigned as leader (Howard, 1977, 881-2). Hardie stuck to his position too, only to be howled down by his own constituents in the mining valleys of Wales (Hochschild, 2011, 95).

¹⁴ On the efforts of his Permanent Under-Secretary, Arthur Nicolson, on 1 August see Wilson (1995, 197-8). For another example see *British Documents*, No. 369, Crowe to Grey, 31 July 1914 in Gooch and Temperley (1926, 228-29).

¹⁵ Wilson (1995, 184-8, esp 186 & 201), Strachan (2004, 116-18) and Clark (2011, 200-4 & 545-6). On the defence of India as the “dominant impulse” of British Foreign policy, see Nicolson quoted in Wilson (1995, 205 n56).

¹⁶ See Wilson (1995, 188, 191-2) and Clark (2011, 494). For arguments based on the importance of retaining office and party loyalty, see Wilson (1977, 154-55, 157-58) and Beauchamp to Morley, 4 August 1914 in John Morley Papers, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng.d.3585, folios 90-91.

¹⁷ *British Documents*, No 367, Grey to Bertie 31 July 1914 in Gooch and Temperley (1926, 226-27).

¹⁸ Harcourt to Morley, 6 August 1914, in John Morley papers, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng.d.3585, folios 122-3. See also Harcourt to Thomas 5 August 1914 in Morris (1972, 402).

¹⁹ Lloyd George (1914) and *Times*, 21 September 1914. On conversions in the liberal press see Marwick (1965, 32).

²⁰ *British Labour and the War* (1914), Marwick (1965, 49) and Marquand (1977, 176).

²¹ For his role in the circle of early twentieth century radical liberals and Fabian socialists see Clark (1978).

²² See Swartz (1974, 254-58), Ceadel (2000, 185) and Laity (2001, 219-26).

²³ Compare with Offer (1995, 233-4).

²⁴ Murray (1914, 7) also agrees that questions of honour are driven not by reason but by emotional feelings and deep instincts. However, like Asquith, he does not endorse spontaneous or reckless action. “Over haste or lack of patience” are presented as potential criticisms. See Murray (1914, 15) and Asquith in Hansard, 6 August 1914.

²⁵ In two earlier works in 1911 and 1913 Sombart had argued that the ‘merchant spirit’ was closely related to the ‘Jewish spirit’, a thesis which he later developed into a full blown apologia for National Socialism

(Herf, 1984, 135-44). For other German intellectuals see Kramer (2007, 159-64) and Strachan (2004, 209-40).

²⁶ See also Kennedy (2004, 10) and Zieger (2000, 52).

²⁷ *Socialist Handbook, Campaign 1916*, The Socialist Party, Chicago (1916, 15 & 29).

²⁸ Allan L. Benson, "Socialism the Lone Foe of War" in *The Truth About War*, 1914 in Tamiment Library, TAM PE.030, Printed Ephemera Collection for Individuals, Box 1, Allan L. Benson folder.

²⁹ See "What is this Honor, anyhow?" in "The Real Woodrow Wilson", *Appeal to Reason*, 28 October 1916, p4.

³⁰ See, the Nebraska legislature's resolution in *Congressional Record*, 1917, 258-59; the Supreme Court's ruling in O'Sullivan and Meckler (1974, 149); the military's approach to the leading socialist Eugene V. Debs (!) in the Papers of Eugene V. Debs, Correspondence, TAM R-7107, Reel 2, Major General Barnett to Debs, 29 May 1917; and the ban by the President of Princeton (on the former President of Stanford) in Thomas (2011, 140).

³¹ J.G. Phelps Stokes *et al*, "The Question of War", *New York Call*, 25 March 1917, 6. However, honour language rarely appeared in the initial response of the AFL or the *American Federationist*. Labour, under Samuel Gompers, adopted a more hard-nosed, realist approach, effectively offering to give support in return for a voice in the machinery of government, keeping the military out of industrial disputes, and the protection of working conditions. See the AFL Executive Council statement "American Labor's Position in Peace or in War" statement on 12 March 1917 in *Coast Seamen's Journal*, 21 March 1917, 1-2.

³² Randolph Bourne, "War and the Intellectuals", *Seven Arts*, II, June 1917, 133-46. For rueful confirmation of the role of emotions in converting one prominent progressive intellectual from pacifism see Darrow (1932, 210-17).

³³ See "Bryan Opposes War" in the *New York Call*, 3 February 1917. Bryan dropped his opposition once war was declared (Kazin, 2007, 254).

³⁴ *Congressional Record*, vol 55, pt 1, 4 April 1917, 234. See also Senators Vardamen and Gonna. *Ibid*, 209 & 220.

³⁵ 24 made speeches and 1 (Jones) read a letter to his constituents into the record.

³⁶ 19 used the term explicitly and another 2 - Lodge and Tillman – invoked the concept while not using the term itself. Of these 21, 2 were Northerners, 5 Southerners, 9 from the Midwest, and 5 from the West.

³⁷ The Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Sen Stone, was opposed to the resolution, so it was introduced by Hitchcock as the next ranking Democrat on the Committee. For Hitchcock see *Congressional Record*, vol 55, pt 1, 4 April 1917, 201. For Kenyon see *ibid*, 219.

³⁸ For Swanson see *ibid*, 202 & 207; for Myers see *ibid*, 222; for Williams see *ibid*, 235 & 237; and for Hardwick see *ibid*, 249.

³⁹ The sixth vote came from Senator Lane who staggered into the chamber against his doctor's orders. He collapsed soon afterwards and died the following month.

⁴⁰ Senators Stone and Gronna in *Congressional Record*, vol 55, pt I, 210, 219.

⁴¹ Melbourne *Argus*, 1 August 1914. Italics added.

⁴² See Queensland *Worker*, 6 August 1914 and “Godspeed, Australians!” *Labor Call*, 17 September 1914.

⁴³ On the ‘Call to Arms’ see Scott (1936, 313). On pro-conscription arguments see Beaumont (1995, 49), Main (1970, 67) and Scott (1936, 342, 348, 393). Anti-conscriptionists also claimed to stand for national honour. See ‘The Honour of Australia’, *Australian Worker*, 19 October 1916, 14. These honour-based arguments were only one element of the conscription conflict. For a full discussion of the conflict see Archer *et al* (2016) and Archer (2018).

⁴⁴ Between 1908 and 1913 two thirds of all foreign office attaché-ships were given to old Etonians alone.

⁴⁵ Freedon, (1986, 20).

⁴⁶ See Friedman (1973, 129) and compare with Green (1988, 38-42) and Raz (1986, 35-37 & 46).

⁴⁷ Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol LXV, 3 August 1914, c1823.

⁴⁸ Quotations from *ibid*, Vol 401, 18 March 2003, cc 760-93 and BBC Newsnight interview, 20th April 2005. See also Blair (2010, 436-8).

⁴⁹ BBC Newsnight interview, 20th April 2005.

⁵⁰ Hansard, *ibid*, Vol LXV, 3 August 1914, c1815.

⁵¹ Mann notes that “neither the statesmen nor the generals were on the firing line ... In modern warfare, elites fight for their own honor with the lives of others; spectator-sport militarism is easy to do.” In an era of drones and remote controlled missiles this may become increasingly true not just of elites but of all citizens.

⁵² See Morris (1972, 407).

⁵³ See, for example, the humanist and rationalist response of Jean Jaures, the great socialist tribune of peace, to the vitalism and intuitionism that influenced pre-war youth and especially students in France (Goldberg, 1962, 443-4). For other countries see Wohl (1979).

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