War and the Rise of the State by Bruce Porter.

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War and the Rise of the State provides an interesting and insightful description of the interaction between war and the modern state. It traces the rise of the modern state, linking each increase in centralized power to war or the threat of war. Almost without exception, books that in-
vestigate the relationship between war and the state focus on how the structure of the state affects war. Porter takes a different approach: he examines how war affects the state, specifically, how war has facilitated the rise of the modern state.

Porter divides the effects of war on the state into three categories: (1) organizing or formative effects, (2) disintegrative effects, and (3) reformative effects. Currently civil wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, and ethnic or religious conflicts in many third world countries amply demonstrate the disintegrative effects of war on the state. War and the Rise of the State, however, provides examples of the formative and reformative effects of war. Germany and Italy, for example, became unified states through warfare. Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismark deliberately led Prussia into three wars to unify Germany. Those examples should be well known to both students and historians. Few, however, have recognized war as the source of reform movements. For example, women gained the right to vote in many countries as a direct result of their involvement in World War I (178). Eisenhower even justified his proposal for an interstate highway system as an essential element in improving America’s defense capabilities (293).

Porter’s book is replete with additional examples which illustrate a fascinating paradox of war: on the one hand, war is the most destructive of all human activities, and yet, on the other hand, it is the most organized. Wartime mobilization provides examples of the greatest cooperation of human effort. Modern wars in particular require the complete mobilization of society in support of the war effort. This type of unified effort can only be organized from the top down. Central governments manipulate patriotism and nationalism to garner support for military activity. In such circumstances, power inevitably accrues to the central government. Typically, states emerge after a war with much greater centralized power than before. Furthermore, what Porter describes as the “ratchet effect” ensures that the state will remain stronger. Governments invariably increase taxes and create new agencies to support the war effort. After the war, however, governments rarely rush to lower taxes or to dismantle new agencies. While some demobilization occurs, the government remains more powerful and more centralized.

Porter notes that wars often provide a potent stimulus for social welfare reform. During and between both World Wars, the British government radically increased social welfare spending. When women went to work in factories, the government felt obliged to provide government-sponsored child care and to create stricter work place safety laws. The government also implemented extensive programs for both veterans and the general public, arguing that a generation who had suffered so much deserved to be repaid for its sacrifices. Porter observes similar patterns in the United States. This observation has disturbing implications for both contemporary conservatives and liberals. Few liberals will be pleased to learn that most of the significant welfare and social reforms of this century arose not out of Roosevelt’s New Deal or Johnson’s Great Society programs, but directly out of U.S. involvement in both World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. Conversely, conservatives might be disturbed to discover that military spending has historically opened the floodgates for domestic spending as well. Porter records that all but five cabinet departments and the majority of smaller federal agencies came into being during war-related eras (292).

Professor Porter’s writing style is clear and concise. Readers may occasionally encounter a little known historical reference, for example, the Kronstadt Revolt (224). Porter does not explain such references. The presentation, however, is clear enough that readers can easily grasp the basic concepts without understanding every reference. Porter often spices up his conclusions with literary references or language that borders on poetic: “The killing fields of the twentieth century bear witness to the pernicious possibilities of the modern state and the brutality latent in human hearts” (241).

On the whole War and the Rise of the State in an interesting and informative work, carefully researched, clearly written, and highly recommended to anyone interested in the study of war, the modern state, or how states gain centralized power.

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