

Why We Can't Make the World Safe for Democracy
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When we believe that human beings are motivated most by economic self-interest, we are unfailingly wrong. The late 19th century was a time of incredible optimism. The economies of the world were increasingly linked, inventions were providing benefits only dreamed of in the past, and we enjoyed a half-century of peace that looked permanent. It seemed impossible for the sophisticated nation-states of Europe to ever go to war again.

How wrong they were. By 1914, almost all major European countries had monarchies linked by descent from one grandmother (Queen Victoria), yet nothing deterred them from a little war that morphed into unprecedented carnage by 1918.

Undeterred by the obvious failure of the economically-linked European countries to maintain the peace, President Woodrow Wilson once more dreamed the impossible dream. He wanted a global economic system to support a new global world order, the League of Nations. He expected this organization to make the world safe for democracy.

Instead, young democracies were falling to fascism throughout the world.

We never seem to learn. The establishment of the United Nations at the end of World War II has had many successes in supporting certain global norms, but it did not make, or keep, peace. What people think as their enlightened self-interest is more often trumped by hysteria, poisonous nationalism, religion, and at its worst, tribal identities. If economics ruled, Mr. Putin would not have been willing to pay what the seizure of the Crimea will cost him. He doesn't care what it will cost.

It has been 100 years since World War I broke out, and scholars are engaged in seeing what we can learn from this. John Keegan's The First World War offers some valuable insights. He writes about the Russian army, the size of which alarmed the Germans. However, their officer class was aristocratic and promotion was not by merit whereas the ordinary soldiers were by and large illiterate and were easily disheartened by setbacks, particularly in the face of superior artillery and literate enemies. The trinity of Tsar, Church, country still had power to evoke unthinking courage; but defeat, and drink, could rapidly rot devotion to the regiment's colours and icons. History repeats itself.

His description of that army (which soon revolted against their government) matches what we can see today in the lesser-developed world. Even Iraq's terrifying dictator (Saddam Hussein) and the mother of all armies lost in just 100 hours to the army of the United States.

The death toll of World War I included: British Empire one million dead; French: 1,700,000; Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1,500,000. Germans: 460,000; Turks: nobody counted. Europe lost one-third of its young males in that war. The British and French wanted no more war; the Germans wanted revenge.

We can also learn from history about human decisions with horrific consequences. The Germans were the first to use tear-gas-filled shells against the Russians, which had no effect because the gas froze instead of vaporizing. They shortly replaced the tear gas with chlorine, a vesicant, which caused death by stimulating over-production of fluid in the lungs. I.G. Farben made it, a technology used again in the Final Solution in the World War II death camps.

Iraq used mustard gas against Iran and Sarin gas against the Kurds. Iran would have too, had the wind direction not been contrary. Syria also joined the gas club until we stopped them. What happened to never again?

Democracy is not enough to promote wise popular behavior. David Brooks, (\ NY Times), notes: The primary problem of politics is not creating growth. It's creating order. Until that is largely achieved, life can be nasty, brutish and short.

While we focus on poverty as the main issue for human misery, Brooks shows that fear and insecurity are far more important. This profound truth should be governing our policy decisions, domestic and global. America has provided what global order there is; should we abandon that task, there will be no more global order. Imagine the Pacific without the US Navy patrolling it.

678 words

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