

Why Is War Such a Seductive Illusion?

Today the US appears to stand on the brink of launching yet another major war, ostensibly out of moral outrage at what is happening in Syria, and allegedly for the sake of human rights, conducted with a completely unjustified sense of certainty that war will produce a better result than diplomacy, trade, and caution.

Today is also the date, 100 years ago, that the US entered the Great War, the war to end all wars, a war for freedom, self-determination, justice, morality, truth, democracy, and against monarchy, tyranny, and absolutism. It must have seemed so sensible to the holders of power in those days. Let's just cobble together massive military might, show we mean business and watch the purveyors of evil cower in fear. President Woodrow Wilson believed it, so much so that he gladly tormented and jailed people who disagreed with him.

Yet the progress of freedom in those years ended on that day. The war sealed it. Within that period of a few short years, the US had already put an income tax in place, along with structural interventions in labor law, welfare provision, family law, business regulation, antitrust, and much more. Most significantly, there was now a Fed. It is not likely that the US would have even considered it but for the founding of the Federal Reserve, which provided a new guarantee for the security of government bonds.

It was a new regime for new times, with a new machinery in place for controlling the population and commanding certain policy outcomes. That generation of elites had become openly disdainful of the Constitution, of market economics, of liberalism generally. The new times called for science and greatness to be wedded to policy and power. War became the

test of the new way of thinking.

The results were catastrophic, not just for this generation but all future generations. It is staggering to consider the sweeping consequences. More than 17 million people were dead, most from disease. Europe's beautiful peace was shattered and would not be put together again for a long time.

Michael Kaziz [explains](#) the astonishing results:

How would the war have ended if America had not intervened? The carnage might have continued for another year or two until citizens in the warring nations, who were already protesting the endless sacrifices required, forced their leaders to reach a settlement. If the Allies, led by France and Britain, had not won a total victory, there would have been no punitive peace treaty like that completed at Versailles, no stab-in-the-back allegations by resentful Germans, and thus no rise, much less triumph, of Hitler and the Nazis. The next world war, with its 50 million deaths, would probably not have occurred.

The war also destroyed old moral systems and replaced them with new ones in which states need not comply with any normal sense of right and wrong. Governments care nothing for human life or property; why should anyone else? After this period, it would make sense that you would see a rising sense of despair appear in the art, music, and architecture. The lights of civilization were not entirely out, but they had been greatly dimmed.

It's easy to offer slogans: "down with war, down with imperialism, down with the killing of innocents abroad!" And these are beautiful sentiments. But the real world of foreign conflicts rarely offer a clean choice between peace and war. It is more often the case of whether intervention in an existing war will reduce or intensify a problem that already exists.

The US often claims to go to war to prevent a worse war or to punish an aggressor to prevent a future war. And here is where matters get morally confusing. It was to support the "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan and free the country from Soviet oppression that the US intervened in the 1980s, only to find that later the groups the US supported gradually became the Taliban, then Al Qaeda, and finally ISIS. It is horrifying to consider how much of the arms used today by terrorists were originally provided by US taxpayers.

It was to "punish aggression" that the US first attacked Iraq fully a quarter century ago. And it was to find non-existent weapons of mass destruction that the US attacked Iraq again in 2003 with catastrophic results for America and the entire region of the Middle East. It eventually set off a refugee crisis in Europe that is emboldening authoritarian forces in political life. And in the case of Libya, the US intervened with airstrikes to overthrow a terrible dictator but instead of unleashing freedom, the results unleashed a terror army that continues to spread violence and death throughout Africa and around the world.

And now we find ourselves facing the intractable issue of Syria, where suffering grows by the day. It seems close to impossible to map the politics of the players, much less know for sure which among them should triumph in order to bring about the best hope for peace. We surely know by now that it is not enough merely to bomb a government or regime into disgrace, resignation, or obliteration. It is grossly irresponsible not to ask the question: what comes after?

This much we know from history over the last 100 years. US intervention is more likely to do harm than bring about a lasting peace. The great exception is of course the allied intervention to stop the Nazi war machine, but even that exception has provisos. Why did the US shut its borders to Jewish immigration after 1924, and how many lives might have been saved through merely permitting the US to be a sanctuary

for those fleeing foreign wars in the 1930s? And why, at the end of the war, did the US acquiesce to imposing a new Soviet tyranny on the newly liberated countries?

These are poignant questions to ask of even the most successful war efforts. But if we are really to learn from the whole history of the last 100 years, we should burn it into our brains: government cannot control the results of its military interventions. And yet we pursue them in any case, hoping against hope for some improved result.

Today we look back at the Great War and ask: what were they thinking? How could they have been so short-sighted about the effects of total war? Why were they not more thoughtful about the prospects for unleashing an uncontrolled hell? At the very least, we ought to ask the same questions about any proposed intervention in Syria today, where the politics are ghastly complex, the lies more prevalent than truth, and the prospects for an unanticipated blowback all-but guaranteed.

Good intentions are never enough to justify government intervention in anything. This is especially true in war, the meanest, deadliest, and most destructive government program ever conceived. And yet we keep doing it, putting our faith that bombs, mass destruction, legal violence, and shock and awe can somehow work, despite all evidence. We think we see a way to do good through war but it might just be another alluring illusion, just as it was 100 years ago.

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