

The Myth of Democratic Pacifism

By Thomas Schwartz and Kiron Skinner. *Wall Street Journal* [New York, N.Y.] 07 Jan 1999: A10.

Would a democracy wage war against another democracy? A "no" answer is unassailable dogma in the halls of academe. It is dogma too in the corridors of power, where it drives the Clinton Doctrine of peace and security through a crusade for democracy. "The best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace," the president has said, "is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other."

The idea, "democratic pacifism," is not new. It dates at least to a 200-year-old essay, "Perpetual Peace," by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Enthusiasm grew in the 1980s, partly from some brilliant Kant-revival pieces by geopolitical theorist Michael Doyle, even more from the worldwide outbreak of democracy.

Criticism of democratic pacifism is not new either. In Federalist 6, Kant's contemporary, Alexander Hamilton, attacked "the paradox of perpetual peace" as wrong and dangerous -- wrong because it is naive about popular passions, dangerous because quack nostrums steal attention from real remedies. In a "republic," Kant thought, a majority would refuse to bear the cost of aggressive war. Hamilton saw, on the contrary, that majorities can be as belligerent as monarchs, clamoring for war not forced by foes.

Majorities did just that in 1812 and 1848. In the latter case, President James Knox Polk, who wanted to fight Mexico, had to resist popular pressure to fight Britain too, over the U.S.-Canada boundary. In 1898 President William McKinley gave in to popular pressure for war with Spain. In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson easily ignited mass belligerency after campaigning against war the year before.

Another Kantian argument is that democratic decision-making faces procedural hurdles and the need to enlist popular support, delaying decisions on both sides when democracies are in conflict and leaving time for peaceful resolution. But sometimes popular support is there already; sometimes the problem facing leaders is not to enlist it but to resist it; and often enough they have manufactured it with remarkable alacrity. Besides, democracies today have semimobilized standing forces with executive authority to use them.

A newer argument, the current favorite, is that states project internal norms outward: Because the democratic norm is that of peaceful conflict resolution, democrats follow it in conflicts with foreign democrats. But since when are norms projected outward? Hockey teams have "norms" for peacefully settling internal conflicts, but externally they compete as ruthlessly as possible. So do corporations and armies. How are states different? All durable states enforce internal peace, but the democratic ones foster competition for power. Isn't that the democratic "norm"?

What do the facts show? Assuming lax enough tests of democracy, exceptions to democratic pacifism abound. With limited suffrage but the mother of Parliaments, Britain fought the U.S. in

1776 and 1812 and revolutionary France in its comparatively democratic years of 1793 and 1795. In 1848 the U.S. fought Mexico, not a perfect democracy but a good one for the times; Mexico's elected Congress chose and deposed President Santa Anna and ratified the terms of peace. In the American Civil War, North and South shared a democratic history of four score and several years. True, one side had slaves, but so did the other, and if they were not democracies there were none.

After the Civil War, the hardest cases for democratic pacifism were the Boer and Spanish-American Wars and especially World War I. Woodrow Wilson proclaimed a war for democracy against "Prussian dictatorship," but that was propaganda. Germany had civil rights, an elected parliament, competing parties, universal male suffrage and an unparalleled measure of social democracy. Though appointed by the Kaiser, ministries typically fell when their programs lost parliamentary votes. The Kaiser was commander-in-chief, but so was the king of the Belgians, and so today is the king of Spain, lauded for using that power to defend democracy.

On the other side, Britain and France ruled most of their subjects with bullets, not ballots. Britain still had a potent House of Lords, and unlike Germany, the U.S. disfranchised a large minority of adult male citizens: Their color was wrong. Our point is not that Germany was a perfect democracy or the U.S. no democracy at all, only that democratic pacifists who microscopically examine Germany for nondemocratic bacteria do not subject the Allies to similar scrutiny. Either World War I was between democracies or there were none.

We can exclude those and other cases (the U.S.-French Naval War in 1797, Roman Republic vs. France in 1849, Franco-Prussian War in 1870, War of the Pacific in 1879, Israel vs. Lebanon in 1948 and 1967, U.S. vs. Guatemala in 1954, Ecuador vs. Peru in 1981 and 1995, Armenia vs. Azerbaijan in 1992, recent Balkan wars, and so on) with tougher tests of democracy, including constitutional longevity. That pretty much shrinks the democratic category to the Cold War democracies -- to those states that have continuously enjoyed high-class democratic regimes since soon after World War II. Indeed there has been no wars between them.

But that has better explanations than mutual democracy. Pick two states and a year at random and most likely they did not fight then. More important, most of the Cold War democracies formed a North Atlantic cluster riven by no deep disputes but menaced by the Soviet empire, which did nothing to lure any away. That made them do two things: aim their weapons eastward, and pool their forces in a security organization -- one strong enough to enforce peace between them if need be. Of the high-class democracies outside NATO, some (Sweden, Finland, Austria, Switzerland) were neutrally clamped between NATO and the Soviet empire, others (Costa Rica, India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand) lay far from sister democracies, and the remaining few (maybe Ireland, San Marino) were tabbies nestled next to tigers.

In their heroic defense of democratic pacifism, political scientists Zeev Maoz and Bruce Russett use statistical methods to argue that these explanations are not enough: Mutual democracy still has some effect on mutual peace when one controls for "alliance" and other factors. But alliances are a dime a dozen. No mere alliance, NATO was an armed and integrated organization. To control for "alliance" and find that NATO and our other factors do not fully explain peace

between the Cold War democracies is like controlling for "passage of laws" and finding that the Social Security Act does not fully explain why retirees received checks after 1935 but not before.

Democratic pacifism is not the first doctrine to come into vogue among intellectuals though logic and history point away. Its initial appeal is understandable: If true, it reconciles principle and prudence, gratifying the soft of heart and hard of head in one fell swoop. But true it is not.

Why, then, has it survived scrutiny by scholars and statesmen who should know better? The answer is the dual use Americans make of the word democracy. It has a descriptive use, marking off states that prize liberty and have popular elections to choose and change governments. But it is also a term of praise, used to distinguish good guys (like us) from bad guys. Since aggressors cannot be democracies ("good guy" use), democracies (descriptive use) cannot be aggressors, can they?

That brings us back to Woodrow Wilson and Alexander Hamilton. The one invested prodigiously in war propaganda that incidentally but indelibly imprinted "democracy" in the American geopolitical lexicon as the highest term of praise. The other found preposterous the idea that there is something peculiarly pacific about popular majorities. Grievous exceptions may be rare -- but then war is rare.

Democracy is still a good thing, but like most good things, it does not create peace between states that have it. Like most good things, therefore, it is a dangerous thing to rely on for that purpose. Praise democracy -- but preserve the ammunition.

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