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The Democratic-Peace Fraud

by James Bovard

The doctrine of “democratic peace” now provides vital camouflage for the American war machine. Michael Novak, a theologian with the pro-war American Enterprise Institute, observed, “Democracy is the new name for peace.” The idea that democracies never fight wars against each other has become axiomatic for many scholars. Prof. Jack Levy commented in 1989 that the democratic-peace doctrine is “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.”

This doctrine has long proven handy for presidents seeking the moral high ground for U.S. artillery. When Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany on April 2, 1917, he proclaimed, “The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.” He said nothing about making democracy safe for the world.

Wilson assured America,

A steadfast concern for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations.

No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants.

Wilson promised that there would be no secret deals among the allies to seize territory or carve up their conquests. Later in 1917, after the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, they published an array of secret agreements that the Allied powers had made shortly after the war began to plunder German, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian possessions.

Faith in this democratic-peace doctrine has revived in recent decades. Ronald Reagan declared that “the surest guarantee we have of peace is national freedom and democratic government.” Bill Clinton also embraced the doctrine and used it to sanctify his foreign policy time and again.

But no president has been half as liberal in invoking the doctrine as George W. Bush. In his 2005 State of the Union address, he declared, “Because democracies respect their own people and their neighbors, the advance of freedom will lead to peace.”

The only way that history supports this doctrine is to exclude all the cases of wars between democracies. This theory can survive only as long as people look at history in a way that is so contorted that it makes the typical political campaign speech appear honest. Some of the advocates of the democratic-peace doctrine are slippery regarding categories, as if the fact that a nation starts a war proves that it is not a democracy.

Democracy versus democracy

There are plenty of cases to refute the democratic-peace claims. As professors Thomas Schwartz and Kiron Skinner noted, Britain, the mother of parliaments, “fought the United States in 1776 and 1812 and revolutionary France in its comparatively democratic years of 1793 and 1795. In 1848 the United States fought Mexico, not a perfect democracy but a good one for the times.”

The American Civil War was the biggest clash in the Western world between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. Both the United States and the Confederacy were representative governments with presidents supposedly bound by constitutions.

Britain’s Boer War, 1899–1902, involved the brutal crushing by one democratic government of another democratic government, as well as the pioneering of concentration camps and other methods of suppression that would become far more widespread in the 20th century.

The First World War was by far the bloodiest conflict in human history up to that time. Schwartz and Skinner noted, “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 system of social democracy.” Germany was far more democratic than either the British or French empire.

Professor Joanne Gowa, author of *Ballots and Bullets*, examined “pairs of states between 1815 and 1981” and found “no statistically significant relationship between democracy and peace before 1946.” After World War II, democracies rarely fought each other because most of them were allied against a Soviet threat that was far more perilous than quibbles over trade flows or fishing rights. However, the fact that New Zealand and Switzerland have never fought each other is not sufficient basis for an iron law of international relations.

The democratic-peace theory implies that there is latent wisdom in majorities — or some deep-seated love of peace that will triumph after a majority takes control of government policy. Or perhaps once people are permitted to vote, they suddenly become immune to bloodlust. But Columbia University professors Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder, in a 1995 study titled

“Democratization and War” published in *Foreign Affairs*, stressed that democratization can spur wars:

Formerly authoritarian states where democratic participation is on the rise are more likely to fight wars than are stable democracies or autocracies. States that make the biggest leap, from total autocracy to extensive mass democracy — like contemporary Russia — are about twice as likely to fight wars in the decade after democratization as are states that remain autocracies.

Mansfield and Snyder analyzed data from 1811 to 1980 on wars and regimes classified as democratic, autocratic, or mixed, and viewed “democratization as a gradual process.” They concluded that “an increase in the openness of the selection process for the chief executive doubled the likelihood of war.... States changing from a mixed regime to democracy were on average about 50 percent more likely to become engaged in war (and about two-thirds more likely to go to war with another nation-state) than states that remained mixed regimes.” They warned,

This concoction of nationalism and incipient democratization has been an intoxicating brew, leading in case after case to ill-conceived wars of expansion.

Another key to the myth of “democratic peace” is to disregard the long record of democracies attacking nondemocracies. Bush, defending U.S. military action in Iraq, declared, “Free societies are peaceful nations. What we’re doing for the long term, we’re promoting freedom.” However, since World War II, the United States either attacked or invaded the following nations:

Korea, 1950–53

Lebanon, 1958

Vietnam, 1961–73

Laos, 1964–73

Dominican Republic, 1965–66

Cambodia, 1969–70

Lebanon, 1982–84

Grenada, 1983

Libya, 1986

Panama, 1989

Iraq, 1991–2005

Somalia, 1992–94

Croatia, 1994

Haiti, 1994
Bosnia, 1995
Sudan, 1998
Afghanistan, 1998
Yugoslavia, 1999
Afghanistan, 2001–05

Other democracies also lack pacifist resumes. Britain, which was a constitutional republic that became increasingly democratic as the 20th century wore on, attacked many nations to expand or defend its empire. Since the government of Israel was established in 1947/48, it has attacked Egypt (1956), Egypt and Syria (1967), and Lebanon (1982–2006), as well as engaging in more than 35 years of armed struggle against the Palestinians living in the occupied territories seized by Israel in the 1967 war. It also engaged in a defensive war in 1973 against Egypt and Syria.

Unless we assume that it is morally irrelevant when democratic governments kill people in nondemocratic countries, the bellicose record of democratic governments must be considered. The fact that democracies have been rare in history cannot whitewash democracies per se. The fact is that democracies attack.

Of course, the records of the worst authoritarian and totalitarian governments — Hitler’s Germany, Soviet Russia, Red China, as well as other communist regimes — are far worse than those of Western democracies. But “not as bad as Stalin” is not the standard that democratic-peace advocates invoke to deify their preferred form of government.

Voters and war

Some democratic-peace theorists sound as if the simple act of popular voting somehow makes government nonaggressive. And regardless of how much the government deceives people about the likely costs of a war, citizens will still demand peace. Randolph Bourne noted one reason that popular preferences could not rein in bellicose governments:

In the freest of republics as well as in the most tyrannical of empires, all foreign policy, the diplomatic negotiations which produce or forestall war, are equally the private property of the Executive part of the Government, and are equally exposed to no check whatever from popular bodies, or the people voting as a mass themselves.

The democratic-peace theory presumes that people have a leash on the government, rather than vice versa. But there is nothing inherent in democracies to make people immune to the manipulation of war parties.

The notion that democracy will end all mass killings implies that there is some nobility latent within the masses that merely requires a change in the process of selecting a nation's rulers to blossom. That would hold true if the only reason people sought blood was that they had not picked their own chiefs. The history of mobs does not indicate that popular selection of leaders ensures nonviolence.

The democratic-peace doctrine also assumes some level of soundness or comprehension on the part of the typical citizen. Yet citizens on average are far more ignorant of foreign affairs than they are of domestic events. The greater the ignorance, the more easily politicians can fan hatred and fear.

The democratic-peace theory presumes that citizens are keenly aware of the potential costs, in blood and treasure, of their nation's plunging into conflicts. However, nowadays, most Americans' primary experience of war is as something to alleviate the boredom during the off-season of their favorite sport. War is now free moral glory, a no-cost way to be a part of Bush's effort to save the world. As long as people attach a "Support Our Troops" sticker to their SUVs, their sacrifice is sufficient. Thanks to massive deficit financing, no American has paid an extra dime in taxes to cover the \$400+ billion the U.S. government has already spent in Iraq. The cost of Bush's war simply does not exist in the minds of most Americans.

The theory of democratic peace provides a pretext for war. When he was asked on April 4, 2005, why the United States should continue suffering most of the casualties and paying most of the costs in Iraq, Bush replied, "The action is worth it to make sure that democracy exists, and because democracies will yield peace, and that's what we want." In a late 2004 press conference, he declared, "The only way to achieve peace is for there to be democracies living side by side. Democracies don't fight each other."

Supposedly, any government that is not a democracy is now simply a war waiting to happen. Because democracies never attack other democracies, they are entitled to launch unprovoked attacks on nondemocracies to force them to become democracies — and thereby ensure peace. Because democracy is the same as peace, warring to spread democracy is the same as working for peace. The Bush administration is apparently confident that few Americans remember Orwell's "war is peace" slogan from *1984*.

And after all enemies and potential enemies of democracy have been exterminated (or incarcerated for life without trial), bliss and tranquility will reign forever and ever. There will be no more wars after "democracy" conquers the world. But the notion that there will be lasting, transcendent benefits from the next war(s) is a common canard of politicians and warmongers. The result is "perpetual war for perpetual peace," in historian Charles Beard's apt phrase.

The popularity of the doctrine that democracies do not attack each other is another tribute to the historical illiteracy of both politicians and prominent commentators. The doctrine that democracies never fight each other should have been laughed out of existence after its first

promenade. Yet, as long as Clinton, and later Bush, recited the democratic-peace dogma, all contrary evidence vanished from the scales of respectable judgment. The theory serves the interests of the government — the ultimate test of truth in Washington. The primary effect of the doctrine of democratic peace has been to lower Americans' resistance to U.S. government foreign aggression.

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