

# History 30 Final Exam Reading Material

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## The End of History

When the Soviet Union broke up unexpectedly in 1991 the United States was left as the world's sole superpower. This gave America an unprecedented opportunity to influence world affairs and help support the growth of democracy worldwide (Brzezinski, *Second Chance*, pg. 80). The mood was an optimistic one as some American political theorists, like Francis Fukuyama, argued the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War meant "history had ended." Fukuyama's observation was obviously absurd. For instance, following the break-up of the Soviet Union the Americans had to worry about nuclear weapons, etc. falling in to the wrong hands, e.g. former Soviet republics Kazakhstan and the Ukraine both became nuclear superpowers overnight. Also, the Middle East long beset by political and economic tension continued to struggle. In 1991 America's ally Iraq invaded Kuwait. The Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, actually informed the Americans he planned on attacking Kuwait for its refusal to quit slant drilling (Brzezinski, *Second Chance*, pg. 68). The Americans said nothing and Hussein took America's silence as permission to invade. The invasion of Kuwait subsequently touched off a regional conflict called the First Gulf War with implications for the region for the next two decades. This conflict definitely influenced Muslim extremists to find ways to strike out at its Western enemies through acts of terrorism, i.e. if they could not defeat the West in a conventional war fought between armies the self-appointed defenders of the Muslim world could strike at Westerners in their own countries, e.g. the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks on America and England respectively.

In addition to war, the countries of the world continue to struggle adapting to the new realities imposed on them by an ongoing environmental crisis. Historically speaking, the countries which typically are worst effected by such change are developing ones in either Asia or Africa. The poor always suffer more than the rich. However, given the global nature of climate change even people living in First World countries like Australia, France, Canada, etc. are feeling the direct effects of climate change. Ultimately climate change, and not terrorism, is the greater threat to global peace, security and stability. The situation was made even worse by the near collapse of the global financial system in 2008 (Varafoufakis, *The Global Minotaur*, pg. 146). One does not have to go far to find an example of the instability created by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, an economic meltdown, terrorism, and an ongoing environmental crisis.

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Enter the Arab Spring. The causes of the Arab Spring are complex; however, the economic collapse in 2008 definitely pushed people over the edge in North Africa. For instance, the average person in Egypt lived on just one dollar a day and unemployment was high even before 2008. Further still, the people of Egypt lived under a dictatorship where they did not enjoy basic freedoms. In 2008 when the world's economy went in to the gutter what jobs the Egyptians had disappeared. With nothing to lose—the Egyptians had no rights, no jobs, no food—people took to the streets to demand Dictator Hosni Mubarak's removal from power. The demonstrations in Egypt were actually influenced by events which took place a month before in Tunisia. Tunisia was likewise a dictatorship. Tunisian police brutally assaulted a young man protesting government corruption killing him. Stories and videos of the young man began to circulate on Facebook and Twitter. The people of Tunisia rose up and overthrew their government. The people of Egypt, Yemen, Libya, etc. likewise rose up in an effort to end dictatorship in their own countries. People in the Arab World were tired of living under oppressive regimes—many of which were backed by the Americans—and wanted to pursue their right to self-determination. The bloodiest of the conflicts which began during the Arab Spring in 2010 was Syria. The Syrian people continue to fight to remove dictator Bashar al-Assad as of January, 2014.

The only way human history would end is if humans disappeared altogether. The end of the Cold War did not result in either the end of history or the establishment of world peace. On the contrary, terrorism replaced the Soviet threat in the eyes of many political theorists, politicians and businessmen. There had always been terrorists. Terrorists were assassinating presidents in the 1800s and blowing up airplanes in the 1970s and 80s. Yet, some people argued there was something different about the “new” terrorists who belonged to groups like *al Qaeda*. These terrorists appeared to be more dangerous, more committed, more organized and fanatical compared to those who came before. Politicians, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, used the fear people had of terrorism to justify passing laws giving governments' exceptional powers to spy and imprison citizens, e.g. *Patriot Act* or *Bill C-47*. Moreover, politicians used the perceived threat of terrorism to justify maintaining huge defense budgets in peace time and eventually to go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The problem with fighting a war on terrorism though is you never really know who the enemy is (sometimes the enemy is someone you're actually attempting to help or even a citizen of your own country). At least with the Cold War, you knew the enemy was clearly the Russians; and winning the Cold War was at least possible because the winning objective was relatively clear and simple: you won if you simply kept communism contained and prevented the Russians from influencing non-Russian countries. In the case of the so-

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called War on Terror, the point was not to win the conflict but to maintain a state of perpetual and unceasing war, i.e. governments then could justify spending billions of dollars on defense thereby enriching corporations who controlled them (Greider, *Who Will Tell the People*, pg. 24).

In terms of winning a war on terror, there really is no clear objective; the only sure way to prevent terrorist attack is to stop doing that which causes terrorists to be created in the first place (Chomsky, *What We Say Goes*, pg. 157). Specifically, you cannot fight a war on terror like you would fight a conventional war, e.g. guns, bombs, ships, airplanes, frontlines, etc. You need to change attitudes. You need to change the perception that your country is an enemy. Western nations need to quit interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries, e.g. through the 1960s and 70s America helped keep a very unpopular Shah in power in Iran; this Shah was eventually overthrown during a revolution in 1978 which ultimately led the Americans to encourage neighboring Iraq to attack Iran. Also, the Americans helped keep Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in power for forty years by providing him with money, intelligence, etc. In exchange for American support Mubarak agreed to suppress Islamic movements or Islamic political parties from exerting any significant influence in Egypt. Again, to win a war on terrorism you need to remove the excuse for being a terrorist: victory will come when countries like Canada, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, etc. treat developing countries and those in the Arab world more fairly. Terrorists are created by and through terror—when their cities are bombed, when their leaders are assassinated, when they are not allowed the right to self-determination—people emerge out of the affected countries willing to kill those they perceive to be outsiders to end the unwanted influence.

### **Conclusion**

The world had problems prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union (1991)—two world wars are obvious evidence of that. However, it appears the year 1991 brought with it a series of changes and challenges. Some of the changes were predictable. For instance, people in Arab countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, etc. have become more vocal in their desires to break the influence of Western governments on their countries. Some of the changes could not be predicted, e.g. in 1991 the Internet existed but there was no such thing as Facebook or Twitter. The wide sweeping changes that took place in the Middle East in the past ten years are not only a result of regional wars (Afghanistan, Iraq) but also the impact of social media, e.g. news and images of a young man killed by police for protesting government corruption spread rapidly through social media. Within days the people of Tunisia rose up, organized, and

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overthrew their government. In Egypt people followed the events in Tunisia closely. Egyptian protestors then decided to use social media to organize mass demonstrations in their own country. The Egyptian government led by dictator Hosni Mubarak reacted by restricting access to the Internet. Egyptians responded by daisy chaining their smart phones to cell towers outside of Egypt. In this way, the people continued to have access to information, images, videos, etc. which enabled them to continue placing organized pressure on the Egyptian Government. After approximately a month of protests the forty year dictatorship of Mubarak was brought to an end with relatively few fatalities.

There were protest movements prior to the existence of the Internet. In 1960s America, the Civil Rights Movement used peaceful protests and demonstrations to usher in change. The success of this particular movement was arguably historically inevitable; however, in the short term the success of the Civil Rights Movement was due to the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. When he was assassinated in 1968 people—both black and white—refused to go back to how things were or tolerate the *status-quo* any longer. You can murder a man but you cannot kill an *idea*. With that said, more often than not governments successfully ignore calls for reform by using a tactic of simply “out waiting” the protesters. The idea is that after a few weeks or months of protest the average person grows tired and returns to life as it was prior to the protests. They just accept the situation and go on living their lives. Yet, protest movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have something going for them that those in the 20<sup>th</sup> did not—the Internet. Knowledge is power and the Internet has changed everything. People no longer rely solely on corporate owned newspapers to get their information. Instead, literally anyone with access to the Web can post a story, picture or video online for others to view, e.g. *Wikileaks* has embarrassed the governments of countries like the United States and Canada, etc. by revealing illegal spying activities.

This means the average person—regardless of what country they live in—has a historically unparalleled power to influence the thinking of others or shape events. The implication is clear: governments are now accountable to people for their performance and the decisions they make. Governments certainly continue to oppress people by using the police and army; nonetheless, they can no longer use terror, intimidation and oppression to hide the reasons *why* they are oppressing the people. You can beat me down but now I have a fuller awareness of the government’s corruption and ineptitude. For this reason countries like Iran and China severely restrict what content can or cannot be viewed in their countries. In the West, protest movements like Occupy and Idle-No-More are products of popular discontent with governments, financial institutions and corporations. Both Occupy and Idle-No-More used Facebook,

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etc. to organize protests and keep their membership informed. In a word the Internet is a game changer: for bad or for good there's no going back to how things were before 1991.