

Stained Glass Windows: The End of History

My kids frequently say they're hungry but when it comes right down to it they have zero experience with actual hunger as defined. Children aren't the only ones who like to make use of over-statement: following the most recent Canadian election a number of people I know expressed a concern that the Liberal Party's majority, with its promise of massive deficit spending, would destroy Canada. Yet, when it comes right down to it my sons will survive until their next meal and I suspect even Canada will survive Justin Trudeau.

There are times, however, when overstatement reflects the situation as it really stands. For example, when the Soviet Union collapsed unexpectedly in 1991 it was no exaggeration to say the Americans were not only caught off-guard but also became the world's sole superpower; additionally, this situation presented the United States with an unprecedented opportunity to build democracy worldwide without any interference from those pesky Russians.

A couple years after the Soviet Union's collapse I took a political studies class on the USSR from Professor Bohdan Kordan. Kordan was an expert on Soviet studies. He was invited by the Kremlin sometime in the 90s to help the new Russia establish its fledgling democratic institutions. Initially, the most interesting thing about the disappearance of the USSR was how fast it happened; it seems the USSR's economy, thought by most experts as relatively robust, collapsed due to unsustainable military spending during the arms race. To put it simply the Americans essentially won the Cold War by outspending Russia; and with that a global order five decades in the making with its nuclear arms race, various crises, hysteria, propaganda, alliances, and proxy wars, simply evaporated and a new balance of power evolved virtually overnight; and in this context the new Russia quickly reverted to the trusted and tried tendencies of the old Russia—having no meaningful previous experience with democracy Russians succumbed to the allure of following strong leaders like Vladimir Putin as opposed to building consensus based institutions through representative government.

Kordan's passion for ideas was formative for me both as a student and an educator: he always gave me the impression he was witnessing firsthand the events of history unfold as he lectured while looking out of one of the classroom's windows. Another formative lecturer for me was the historian of ideas, Dr. Robert Grogin. Grogin observed the Soviet Union's collapse was not only fast but also attended by a sense of optimism in the West. In particular, the Cold War's end should have meant not only an end to a decades long suicidal arms race as well as an end to the proxy wars fought over the tired ideologies of the 20th century.

Speaking of ideologies.

Professor Grogin predicted that if nationalism was the most influential ideology of the 20th century, then fascism would be the 21st century's most defining intellectual force. To Grogin's credit he made this prediction with respect to fascism's influence in the mid-90s well before:

- The rapid growth of radical jihadism or the appearance of ISIS.
- The increased power and influence of corporations over democratically elected governments through globalization.
- The contraction of socialism along with a declining influence of labor unions (a socialism which had helped build the middle class as we know it in the 20th century).
- The consolidation and media in fewer and fewer corporate hands (and the tendency of media to act as hand-maiden, rather than critic, of power).
- The rise of the modern surveillance state (although vestiges of it already existed in the 1970s).
- The unqualified promotion of neo-liberalism as embodied by the Chicago School of Economics and the contraction of the welfare state (particularly in the United States).
- And the rise of right-wing populism as personified by personalities like Donald Trump (United States) or politicians like Marine le Pens (France).

I recall Dr. Grogin as a lecturer for another reason: during one class he quoted (skeptically, I might add) the American political theorist Francis Fukuyama on the significance of the Cold War's end. Specifically, Fukuyama said the collapse of the Soviet Union meant “the end of history.” Whether Fukuyama was just being metaphorical or not is immaterial because in the end, to borrow a phrase, he did not apparently anticipate that the good guys, if left unchecked by either law or by principle, can be just as “bad” as any “red,” “jihadi,” or “terrorist.”

Looking Through Windows

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, America was justifiably concerned about nuclear weapons falling in to the wrong hands: the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan and Ukraine both became nuclear superpowers overnight. Russian oversight of sites where plutonium was stored in the former republics has been completely inadequate (see *Countdown to Zero* for more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8g25uzB3rc>).

In concrete terms, this means fissile material was left at various times essentially unsupervised or unguarded for almost 18 years. For example, in 2009 two Ukrainian businessmen acquired and then tried selling 3.5 kg of enriched plutonium. Scarier still is the sheer number of smuggling incidents (mainly involving former Soviet republics) where, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), governments uncovered and prevented 827 attempts involving the illegal sale of plutonium. Were all attempts at smuggling prevented? Unlikely.

Given the current geo-political situation in the Middle East, Western governments (and I'll lump Russia in to that camp) certainly have the most to be concerned about when it comes to growing demand for plutonium in the Middle East: Western aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq (and even Pakistan) has not only de-stabilized and contributed to the radicalization of people in these specific areas but has also reminded the Arab World generally of the history of Western imperialism in the region. This reminder, if you will, is one of the most significant factors contributing to the radicalization of Muslims who either go on to join ISIS or are inspired to act as so-called "lone wolves" taking matters in to their own hands as was the case with the the two attacks in Canada in October (2014).

Closing the Window

History will end only with the disappearance of human beings. The end of the Cold War certainly 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 Westerners; yet, terrorism is nothing new; the current rash of attacks is simply the most recent wave or manifestation, e.g. Read European or North American-based newspapers from the late 1800s and early 1900s and you'll encounter week after week stories describing bomb blasts, attacks and assassinations of public figures, diplomats, kings, presidents, and arch dukes, etc. by anarchists and other ideologues. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s I watched the news and learned at a young age the consequences of airplanes being blown up by Sikh radicals and jihadists alike.

Some theorists argue there is something different about the current wave of terrorists belonging to movements like al Qaeda, Boko Haram and ISIS. This new generation appears to be more dangerous, committed, more organized, and fanatical compared to their predecessors. I used to doubt this claim attributing it more to over-statement and less to a measured appraisal of the situation; however, in lieu of recent events in Paris there might be something to this claim when one considers the scale and organization of ISIS and, in particular, ISIS's decision to target so-called "soft targets" like malls, schools, restaurants, stadiums, etc.

The West has been fighting a so-called war on terrorism since 9/11. The problem, one of many to be sure, with fighting such a war is it's never entirely clear who the enemy is or how it can be won: for this reason such wars can potentially turn in to a sort of Orwellian perpetual conflict justifying the feeding of dollar after dollar after dollar to the military industrial complex. The end of the Cold War could have meant an end to such military spending (America currently spends half of its GDP on the military); however, the disappearance of the Soviet Union did not lead to an end to government moneys or contracts given to the military industrial complex (also known as the military industrial-*congressional* complex). A significant proportion of America's economy continues to be—as was the case even before 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—dependent upon the manufacture, sale and most importantly *use* of war materiel in a sort of macabre business cycle. To be honest this “new” terrorism could not have come at a more opportune time; governments are presently justified spending billions of dollars on defense and domestic surveillance thereby enriching the corporations who control the political decision-making process (William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People*, pg. 24).

One way to prevent terrorism is to stop doing what creates terrorists in the first place. In the case of the multiple Paris attacks of 2015, the violence is actually a reflection of several decades of marginalization experienced by Muslims in France (people profiled by French employers and discouraged from participating in public life or the civil service). The riots engulfing Paris and several other cities in 2005, involving North Africans identifying with Islam, erupted for this very reason (and in hindsight the riots appear to be a harbinger for the terrible violence of 2015). With that said, I'm not justifying the attacks; I'm trying to understand the attacks by looking at the context. Canada, in particular, should take note, i.e. with the recent influx of refugees from Syria Canadians can take a lesson from French history and see what happens when a minority becomes desperate and radicalized due to marginalization.

Marginalization doesn't necessarily lead to terrorism; nonetheless, it certainly feeds in to the cycle of desperation making radical Islam so attractive to vulnerable segments of society (Noam Chomsky, *What We Say Goes*, pg. 157).

You cannot fight a war on terror like you would a conventional war, e.g. dropping bombs on the “bad guys,” etc. You need to change attitudes (both at home and in the “target” country). You need to change the perception your country is an enemy. In particular, Western nations need to quit interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries, e.g. through the 1960s and 70s America propped up an unpopular

Shah in Iran; the Shah was overthrown during a popular revolution in 1978 ultimately leading the Americans to ally with Iraq encouraging its dictator (one Saddam Hussein) to attack neighboring Iran.

The American tendency to support dictators like Hussein forms part of what I like to call the O.S.O.B. Doctrine. I'll explain. When President Harry S. Truman was questioned about the wisdom or ethics of supporting China's Chiang Kai-Shek, an ambitious and self-aggrandized power seeker, Truman responded, "He might be a son of a bitch but he's *our son of a bitch*." America has made use of and supported such leaders for decades by propping up for self-interested reasons dictators in Central America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Rightly or wrongly, this has made America a target and the poster-child for oppressor among peoples living on these continents.

Rather than present an exhaustive list here of dictatorships propped up by the various American administrations over time (which in some cases actually undermined genuinely democratic movements in the affected countries), you can access the list by visiting the following Wiki: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_authoritarian_regimes_supported_by_the_United_States. I'll go grab some coffee while you take a glance at this list...

Again, to win a war against terror you need to remove the excuse for being a terrorist in the first place: victory will come when Western countries like Canada, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, etc. treat developing countries and those in the Arab World more equitably. I don't see this happening but something like it needs to happen if tensions are going to lessen. Terrorists are created by and through terror—when their cities are bombed, when their religious and secular leaders are assassinated by our spy agencies or through covert ops violating international law. Terrorists are also created when states are not allowed the right to self-determination. People emerge out of the affected countries angry and willing to do whatever they need to do to end unwanted outside interference.

Breaking the Window

The world had problems prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union (1991)—two world wars and host of other conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries is obvious evidence of that. However, it appears 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 desire to break the influence of Western governments on their countries (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt formed for this very purpose in the late 19th century). Some of the changes could not be predicted, e.g. in 1991 the

Internet existed but no one saw the advent of social media or how truly revolutionary both Facebook and Twitter would become.

Social media directly contributed to regime change in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (during the Arab Spring). Egyptian protesters used Facebook/Twitter to organize mass demonstrations against Egypt's dictator Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian government reacted by restricting access to the Internet. Protesters overcame the attempted suppression by literally daisy chaining smart phones from one to the next in a series of links connecting protesters to cell towers outside of the country. After approximately a month of protest the Mubarak's regime was brought down with relatively few casualties.

There were protest movements prior to the existence of the Internet. In 1960s America, the Civil Rights Movement utilized peaceful protests and demonstrations to usher in change. Yet, protest movements in the 21st century have something going for them that those in the 20th did not—the Internet. Knowledge is power and the Internet has changed everything (by implication even encouraging the growth of the modern surveillance state it would seem). Individuals have the power to communicate information to an unprecedented number of people in record time (they can write blogs for instance); literally anyone with access to the Web can post a story, picture or video online for others to view. Wikileaks, for example, has succeeded in embarrassing the governments of the United States and Canada, etc. by revealing illegal spying activities, e.g. Canada's spy agency was using its capabilities to spy on Brazilian mining interests for the benefit of Canadian corporations while the United States got Canada to assist in spying on Angela Merkel (Germany's chancellor). Again, the average person—regardless of what country they live in—potentially has the power to influence the thinking of others and shape events.

The implication is clear: an increased ability to expose government corruption or ineptitude should result in real change. Not so, at least not yet. Be patient. Information leads to awareness which means change isn't far behind. I'm curious though: Dr. Grogin, back in the 1990s, banged on his rostrum while observing fascism would be the most powerful ideology shaping the future. With the expansion of the surveillance state, corporations skirting laws or out-right buying the political decision making process, and the gradual rise in popularity of right wing movements in countries like Germany, France, Belgium and even the United States, etc. I'm starting to think Dr. Grogin was prescient. What do these developments mean for the future of democracy? Historical precedents suggest a collapse in the global economy, which is not altogether impossible given China's growing debt crisis and the interdependence

of the world's economies, would not lead to a strengthening of democracy or the expansion of liberty; it is likely a contraction on liberty would follow fast on the heels of austerity.

Governments certainly continue oppressing people through the use of militias, secret police, police and armies; yet, governments—led by S.O.B.s or otherwise—can no longer count on acting in secrecy to effectively terrorize citizens in to submission. For example, in the 1970s Argentina's dictator Jorge Rafael Videla's regime made upwards of 30,000 critics "disappear" (disappear being a euphemism for flying people miles out over the Atlantic Ocean and then pushing them out the door in to the waters below). Given the current ubiquity of cameras and social media usage it is all but unthinkable any regime—no matter how zealous—would be able to sustain a practice like this for an extended period. (For this reason countries like Iran and China severely restrict what content can or cannot be viewed online in their countries.) In the West, protest movements like Occupy and Idle No More are direct products of popular discontent with governments, financial institutions and corporations. Both Occupy and Idle No More utilize Facebook and Twitter to organize protests and keep their membership informed/engaged. In a sense the Internet is really a game changer: there's really no going back to how things were before 1991.

Conclusion

If anything history hasn't ended so much as sped up due to a confluence of factors ranging from a climate crisis increasingly affecting/de-stabilizing First and Third world countries alike; the vigorous expression of an age-old Western imperialism in the Middle East accompanied by an unprecedented defiance from Africa, Asia and the Middle East (which is really just a continuation of existing anti-colonial movements traceable to the 1960s); the advent of the Internet and the potential for using social media (and social movements like Idle No More and Occupy) to return power back to the people by re-introducing accountability in to representative systems increasingly dominated by a self-interested neo-liberal political and economic elite; terrorism and the subsequent expansion of the surveillance state and the justification of military spending akin to what was practiced during the Cold War (while simultaneously social programs are being cut for the sake of austerity and balancing budgets); and the withering away of the sovereignty of the nation state due to their complicity with corporations in the creation of international trade agreements like the Trans Pacific Partnership.

History hasn't ended or even weakened...if anything, it's on steroids.