



**'The Changing Face of War'  
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**COMMENTARY**

by

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This is a commentary on the following article:

["The Democratic Peace Myth: From Hiroshima to Baghdad"](#)

Andrew Fiala

Andrew Fiala who has written a book on *The Just War Myth* writes in his article about "The Democratic Peace Myth," seeking to critique the wars fought to bring about the ideal of democratic peace. He argues that this Kantian ideal never permitted the use of force to actualize the ideal, but those who shared Kant's goal of democratic peace have been seduced by the dark side of the Enlightenment to justify aggressive interventionism and numerous atrocities that violated just war principles, as exemplified both in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the invasion of Iraq.

I quote my title from Robert McNamara's reflections on nuclear brinkmanship during the Cuban Missile Crisis in *The Fog of War*.<sup>1</sup> Both the ideals of just war and democratic peace reflect the belief that a more rational approach to human affairs would produce morally better results. Is such faith in rationality misplaced? In endorsing Kant's end but not the utilitarian means to achieve it, I think Fiala still buys into this belief despite his criticisms of how the two ideals have played out in practice.

What is the goal of a just war? In the history of the tradition, thinkers have repeatedly argued that a war could only be just if it is aimed at securing peace. In modern times, as seen mostly recently in the Bush doctrine, Western nations have asserted as a just cause the use of military force to overthrow repressive regimes and replace them with democratic forms of government regardless of the political traditions of the people who live there. This is done not only for the sake of these people who "deserve to be free" but for the sake of a more peaceful world. Thus, the democratic peace myth was born.

Should the ideal of democratic peace be rejected or should we hold onto the ideal but reject utilitarian means of using war to achieve peace? Fiala's preference is for the latter and he blames utilitarian thinking for perverting the ideal. In addition, racism and cultural imperialism led to Mill's argument quoted by

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<sup>1</sup> *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, a documentary film produced & directed by Errol Morris (Columbia Pictures, 2004). McNamara was U.S. Defense Secretary during the escalation of the Vietnam War under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Fiala, that “interventions among barbarians are essential in order to establish conditions that would eventually make peaceful nonintervention possible.” Fiala calls for a return to the Kantian ideal that “we cannot use violent means to spread democracy.”<sup>2</sup>

Fiala has done excellent work previously to show that no actual war could be just by the standards of just war theory. The hope that war could be „sanitized“ by agreeing on rules about when and how to fight wars leads to attempts to introduce morality into the savage business of war by appealing to human reason. When the rules are followed, we can still fight but in a morally justified way. But what’s morally justifiable about butchery on a massive scale? Isn’t it about time we see war for what it actually is – a great evil that has plagued humankind throughout history? What those who actually have been involved in war, from General Sherman to U.S. Defense Secretary McNamara, tell us is that war never stays within the limits of the principles of just war. In war, reason does not tell us to fight less savagely or to take losses or to sacrifice a potential victory, and if it does, it is quickly silenced.

Utopian ideals are created when one cannot see any hope of doing better in the actual world. Kant’s ideal of a democratic peace is for a world where people are flawlessly rational. Actual democracy is messy and the empirical evidence is that real world democracies from Ancient Athens to the United States have fought many wars of choice. The danger of zealots betraying the ideal by fighting wars in the name of democracy is one that Fiala has exposed very well. I think we should go further to critique the ideal itself.

Kant, as Fiala shows, draws on just war theory while recognizing that actual wars violated just war principles: “Encouraging states to sincerely adhere to just war constraints is a preliminary step toward actualizing this ideal.”<sup>3</sup> Kant probably saw no other way in his deontological ethics to bring morality into war. I would ask whether it would be better to give up on the paradigm of just war altogether. Instead of trying to repair the rules of just war because of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and the need for humanitarian intervention, let us recognize that the rules do not and cannot work. The ideal of a democratic peace is the utopian view of a world without war. To bring war within the limits of what is morally acceptable will come close to outlawing war.

Pacifists have always had a problem explaining how the pacifist ideal could be realized. Rousseau was perceptive in seeing that force would have to be used to bring utopian peace about, given that politics was not governed by reason. This is why believers in democratic peace cannot resist the appeal of using war as a means. Fiala blames the believers for their choice of means. But should not those who promote the ideal without a realistic path to get there that is consistent with the ideal also share in the blame? Kant’s ideal is the product of a great intellect, and there is every reason in the world why we should want the world to be this way. But at the end of the day, the only difference this ideal of reason has done for us is to give us another reason to go to war. 4

Fiala’s article is thought-provoking and insightful. It is also highly relevant. In 2011, the U.S. struggled with the question of intervention in Libya. Is it justified to bomb Libya to nudge it towards democracy? Is it Western imperialism? What would that do for peace in the Middle East? Whatever high-minded reasoning took place among politicians and scholars, what difference did it make to the Libyans who died in NATO bombings? At the end of the day, it was the business of war as usual whether the American President was Truman, Bush or Obama.

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<sup>2</sup> Fiala, “The Democratic Peace Myth: From Hiroshima to Baghdad,” p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Fiala, p. 81.

Is there a future then for the ethics of war? Just war theory has made little difference after two thousand years, pacifism is paradoxical in being too idealistic to be realized without using force, and rationality cannot save us. I would suggest that we recognize that wisdom is more than the ability to reason well. We need leaders who can make judgments about war that are tragic in nature. The ones who are best equipped to do so are those who not only reason clearly but respond with appropriate feelings for the lives at stake in their decision. Above all, they need experience to develop these sensibilities. In his waning years, McNamara seemed finally to have the wisdom to recognize what the Americans did wrong in Vietnam. The sad thing about it is that it came too late for over 50,000 American servicemen and the millions of Vietnamese who died in that war to make a country safe for democracy.