The greatest impetus for world peace -- and performe of nuclear peace -- is the spread of democracy. In a famous article, and subsequent book, Francis Fukuyama argued that democracy's extension was leading to "the end of history." By this he meant the conclusion of man's quest for the right social order, but he also meant the "diminution of the likelihood of large-scale conflict between states." 1 Fukuyama's phrase was intentionally provocative, even tongue-in-cheek, but he was pointing to two down-to-earth historical observations: that democracies are more peaceful than other kinds of government and that the world is growing more democratic. Neither point has gone unchallenged.

Only a few decades ago, as distinguished an observer of international relations as George Kennan made a claim quite contrary to the first of these assertions. Democracies, he said, were slow to anger, but once aroused "a democracy ... fights in anger ... to the bitter end."2 Kennan's view was strongly influenced by the policy of "unconditional surrender" pursued in World War II. But subsequent experience, such as the negotiated settlements America sought in Korea and Vietnam proved him wrong. Democracies are not only slow to anger but also quick to compromise. And to forgive. Notwithstanding the insistence on unconditional surrender, America treated Japan and that part of Germany that it occupied with extraordinary generosity.

In recent years a burgeoning literature has discussed the peacefulness of democracies. Indeed the proposition that democracies do not go to war with one another has been described by one political scientist as being "as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations."3 Some of those who find enthusiasm for democracy off-putting have challenged this proposition, but their challenges have only served as empirical tests that have confirmed its robustness. For example, the academic Paul Gottfried and the columnist-turned-politician Patrick J. Buchanan have both instanced democratic England's declaration of war against democratic Finland during World War II.4 In fact, after much procrastination, England did accede to the pressure of its Soviet ally to declare war against Finland which was allied with Germany. But the declaration was purely formal: no fighting ensued between England and Finland. Surely this is an exception that proves the rule.

The strongest exception I can think of is the war between the nascent state of Israel and the Arabs in 1948. Israel was an embryonic democracy and Lebanon, one of the Arab belligerents, was also democratic within the confines of its peculiar confessional division of power. Lebanon, however, was a reluctant party to the fight. Within the councils of the Arab League, it opposed the war but went along with its larger confreres when they opted to attack. Even so, Lebanon did little fighting and soon sued for peace. Thus, in the case of Lebanon against Israel, as in the case of England against Finland, democracies nominally went to war against democracies when they were dragged into conflicts by authoritarian allies.

The political scientist Bruce Russett offers a different challenge to the notion that democracies are more peaceful. "That democracies are in general, in dealing with all kinds of states, more peaceful than are authoritarian or other non-democratically constituted states ... is a much more controversial proposition than 'merely' that democracies are peaceful in their dealings with each other, and one for which there is little systematic evidence," he says.5 Russett cites his own and other statistical explorations which show that while democracies rarely fight one another they often fight against others.

The trouble with such studies, however, is that they rarely examine the question of who started or caused a war. To reduce the data to a form that is quantitatively measurable, it is easier to determine whether a conflict has occurred between two states than whose fault it was. But the latter question is all important. Democracies may often go to war against dictatorships because the dictators see them as prey or underestimate their resolve. Indeed, such examples abound. Germany might have behaved more cautiously in the summer of 1914 had it realized that England would fight to vindicate Belgian neutrality and to support France. Later, Hitler was emboldened by his notorious contempt for the flabbiness of the democracies. North Korea almost surely discounted the likelihood of an American military response to its
invasion of the South after Secretary of State Dean Acheson publicly defined America's defense perimeter to exclude the Korean peninsula (a declaration which merely confirmed existing U.S. policy). In 1990, Saddam Hussein's decision to swallow Kuwait was probably encouraged by the inference he must have taken from the statements and actions of American officials that Washington would offer no forceful resistance.

Russett says that those who claim democracies are in general more peaceful "would have us believe that the United States was regularly on the defensive, rarely on the offensive, during the Cold War." But that is not quite right: the word "regularly" distorts the issue. A victim can sometimes turn the tables on an aggressor, but that does not make the victim equally bellicose. None would dispute that Napoleon was responsible for the Napoleonic wars or Hitler for World War II in Europe, but after a time their victims seized the offensive. So in the Cold War, the United States may have initiated some skirmishes (although in fact it rarely did), but the struggle as a whole was driven one-sidedly. The Soviet policy was "class warfare"; the American policy was "containment." The so-called revisionist historians argued that America bore an equal or larger share of responsibility for the conflict. But Mikhail Gorbachev made nonsense of their theories when, in the name of glasnost and perestroika, he turned the Soviet Union away from its historic course. The Cold War ended almost instantly--as he no doubt knew it would. "We would have been able to avoid many ... difficulties if the democratic process had developed normally in our country," he wrote.7

To render judgment about the relative peacefulness of states or systems, we must ask not only who started a war but why. In particular we should consider what in Catholic Just War doctrine is called "right intention," which means roughly: what did they hope to get out of it? In the few cases in recent times in which wars were initiated by democracies, there were often motives other than aggrandizement, for example, when America invaded Grenada. To be sure, Washington was impelled by self-interest more than altruism, primarily its concern for the well-being of American nationals and its desire to remove a chip, however tiny, from the Soviet game board. But America had no designs upon Grenada, and the invaders were greeted with joy by the Grenadan citizenry. After organizing an election, America pulled out. In other cases, democracies have turned to war in the face of provocation, such as Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to root out an enemy sworn to its destruction or Turkey's invasion of Cyprus to rebuff a power-grab by Greek nationalists. In contrast, the wars launched by dictators, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, North Korea's of South Korea, the Soviet Union's of Hungary and Afghanistan, often have aimed at conquest or subjugation.

The big exception to this rule is colonialism. The European powers conquered most of Africa and Asia, and continued to hold their prizes as Europe democratized. No doubt many of the instances of democracies at war that enter into the statistical calculations of researchers like Russett stem from the colonial era. But colonialism was a legacy of Europe's pre-democratic times, and it was abandoned after World War II. Since then, I know of no case where a democracy has initiated warfare without significant provocation or for reasons of sheer aggrandizement, but there are several cases where dictators have done so.

One interesting piece of Russett's research should help to point him away from his doubts that democracies are more peaceful in general. He aimed to explain why democracies are more peaceful toward each other. Immanuel Kant was the first to observe, or rather to forecast, the pacific inclination of democracies. He reasoned that "citizens ... will have a great hesitation in ... calling down on themselves all the miseries of war." But this valid insight is incomplete. There is a deeper explanation. Democracy is not just a mechanism; it entails a spirit of compromise and self-restraint. At bottom, democracy is the willingness to resolve civil disputes without recourse to violence. Nations that embrace this ethos in the conduct of their domestic affairs are naturally more predisposed to embrace it in their dealings with other nations.

Russett aimed to explain why democracies are more peaceful toward one another. To do this, he constructed two models. One hypothesized that the cause lay in the mechanics of democratic decision-making (the "structural/institutional model"), the other that it lay in the democratic ethos (the "cultural/normative model"). His statistical assessments led him to conclude that: "almost always the cultural/normative model shows a consistent effect on conflict occurrence and war. The structural/institutional model sometimes provides a significant relationship but often does not."9

If it is the ethos that makes democratic states more peaceful toward each other, would not that ethos also make them more peaceful in general? Russett implies that the answer is no, because to his mind a critical element in the peaceful behavior of democracies toward other democracies is their anticipation of a conciliatory attitude by their counterpart. But this is too pat. The attitude of live-and-let-live cannot be turned on and off like a spigot. The citizens and officials of democracies recognize that other states, however governed, have legitimate interests, and they are disposed to try to accommodate those interests except when the other party's behavior seems threatening or outrageous.

A different kind of challenge to the thesis that democracies are more peaceful has been posed by the political scientists Edward G. Mansfield and Jack Snyder. They claim statistical support for the proposition that while fully fledged
democracies may be pacific, in the transitional phase of democratization, countries become more aggressive and war-prone, not less. However, like others, they measure a state’s likelihood of becoming involved in a war but do not report attempting to determine the cause or fault. Moreover, they acknowledge that their research revealed not only an increased likelihood for a state to become involved in a war when it was growing more democratic, but an almost equal increase for states growing less democratic. This raises the possibility that the effects they were observing were caused simply by political change per se, rather than by democratization.

Finally, they implicitly acknowledge that the relationship of democratization and peacefulness may change over historical periods. There is no reason to suppose that any such relationship is governed by an immutable law. Since their empirical base reaches back to 1811, any effect they report, even if accurately interpreted, may not hold in the contemporary world. They note that “in [some] recent cases, in contrast to some of our historical results, the rule seems to be: go fully democratic, or don’t go at all.” But according to Freedom House, some 62.5 percent of extant governments were chosen in legitimate elections. (This is a much larger proportion than are adjudged by Freedom House to be “free states,” a more demanding criterion, and it includes many weakly democratic states.) Of the remaining 37.5 percent, a large number are experiencing some degree of democratization or heavy pressure in that direction. So the choice “don’t go at all” is rarely realistic in the contemporary world.

These statistics also contain the answer to those who doubt the second proposition behind Fukuyama’s forecast, namely, that the world is growing more democratic. Skeptics have drawn upon Samuel Huntington’s fine book, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century. Huntington says that the democratization trend that began in the mid-1970s in Portugal, Greece and Spain is the third such episode. The first “wave” of democratization began with the American Revolution and lasted through the aftermath of World War I, coming to an end in the interwar years when much of Europe regressed back to fascist or military dictatorship. The second wave, in this telling, followed World War II when wholesale decolonization gave rise to a raft of new democracies. Most of these, notably in Africa, collapsed into dictatorship by the 1960s, bringing the second wave to its end. Those who follow Huntington’s argument may take the failure of democracy in several of the former Soviet republics and some other instances of backsliding since 1989 to signal the end of the third wave.

Such an impression, however, would be misleading. One unsatisfying thing about Huntington’s “waves” is their unevenness. The first lasted about 150 years, the second about 20. How long should we expect the third to endure? If it is like the second, it will ebb any day now, but if it is like the first, it will run until the around the year 2125. And by then—who knows?—perhaps mankind will have incinerated itself, moved to another planet, or even devised a better political system.

Further, Huntington’s metaphor implies a lack of overall progress or direction. Waves rise and fall. But each of the reverses that followed Huntington’s two waves was brief, and each new wave raised the number of democracies higher than before. Huntington does, however, present a statistic that seems to weigh heavily against any unidirectional interpretation of democratic progress. The proportion of states that were democratic in 1990 (45%), he says, was identical to the proportion in 1922. But there are two answers to this. In 1922 there were only 64 states; in 1990 there were 165. But the number of peoples had not grown appreciably. The difference was that in 1922 most peoples lived in colonies, and they were not counted as states. The 64 states of that time were mostly the advanced countries. Of those, two thirds had become democratic by 1990, which was a significant gain. The additional 101 states counted in 1990 were mostly former colonies. Only a minority, albeit a substantial one, were democratic in 1990, but since virtually none of those were democratic in 1922, that was also a significant gain. In short, there was progress all around, but this was obscured by asking what percentage of states were democratic. Asking the question this way means that a people who were subjected to a domestic dictator counted as a non-democracy, but a people who were subjected to a foreign dictator did not count at all.

Moreover, while the criteria for judging a state democratic vary, the statistic that 45 percent of states were democratic in 1990 corresponds with Freedom House’s count of “democratic” polities (as opposed to its smaller count of “free” countries, a more demanding criterion). But by this same count, Freedom House now says that the proportion of democracies has grown to 62.5 percent. In other words, the “third wave” has not abated.

The fall of Communism not only ended the Cold War; it also ended the only universalist ideological challenge to democracy. Radical Islam may still offer an alternative to democracy in parts of the world, but it appeals by definition only to Moslems and has not even won the assent of a majority of these. And Iranian President Khatami’s second landslide election victory in 2001 suggests that even in the cradle of radical Islam the yearning for democracy is waxing.

That Freedom House could count 120 freely elected governments by early 2001 (out of a total of 192 independent states) bespeaks a vast transformation in human governance within the span of 225 years. In 1775, the number of democracies was zero. In 1776, the birth of the United States of America brought the total up to one. Since then, democracy has
spread at an accelerating pace, most of the growth having occurred within the twentieth century, with greatest momentum since 1974.

That this momentum has slackened somewhat since its pinnacle in 1989, destined to be remembered as one of the most revolutionary years in all history, was inevitable. So many peoples were swept up in the democratic tide that there was certain to be some backsliding. Most countries’ democratic evolution has included some fits and starts rather than a smooth progression. So it must be for the world as a whole. Nonetheless, the overall trend remains powerful and clear. Despite the backsliding, the number and proportion of democracies stands higher today than ever before.

This progress offers a source of hope for enduring nuclear peace. The danger of nuclear war was radically reduced almost overnight when Russia abandoned Communism and turned to democracy. For other ominous corners of the world, we may be in a kind of race between the emergence or growth of nuclear arsenals and the advent of democratization. If this is so, the greatest cause for worry may rest with the Moslem Middle East where nuclear arsenals do not yet exist but where the prospects for democracy may be still more remote.

END NOTES


8 Cited in Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 4, p. 1160.


11 Ibid., p. 95.


SUGGESTED READINGS


Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989).

Samuel Huntington, "No Exit-The Errors of Endism," *National Interest* 17 (Fall 1989).


