

Tragedy Yet Again

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We are witnessing yet another in the ongoing and seemingly endless series of tragedies fomented by humans through geopolitics, empire, and the military-industrial complex.

I'm speaking, of course, about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That sad event has been brewing for a long time, simmering away just beneath the surface. Now that this longstanding conflict has finally boiled over into front-page rather than back burner warfare, facile, over simplistic, or outright false narratives have taken over on just about all sides and every media platform. This near-complete collapse into misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda is a built-in feature of every war — through jingoism, war fever, and cheerleading for "our side" (whichever side that is...).

A significant and not-very-subtle difference between earlier times in history and now is that this phenomenon of lies and innuendo from people who claim to be "authoritative sources" now permeates not just war, but every sector of our culture. This past week, however, the garbage in all those other activities and arenas of society paled in comparison to the original (and still ultimate) source of bullshit — war.

First, let me opine a little once again about lies. (I'll get to war in just a bit...) A well-known quote attributed to many different sources (among them that famous English pit-bull Winston Churchill) is that *"A lie makes it halfway around the world before truth has a chance to put its pants on."* I'm not sure that poetic assertion applies any more, because these days it seems that truth never even gets out of bed.

Not only are we caught in a Tower of Babel, but we fight over every opinion. All narratives purport to be "the truth" — even obvious sarcasm and screamingly over-the-top exaggeration often take their place under that heading. And every narrative has its supporters and detractors, its true believers and hard-core deniers. With the rise of social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik-Tok, Substack, etc.) detractors of every stripe — from the most sane and reasonable to the most outrageously bellicose nutjobs — can and do post online texts and videos calling out whichever narrative they hate, and (more to the point) excoriating the character and intentions of the despised narrative's author.

If you're looking at your YouTube feed — which is, of course, algorithmically-determined by whatever subjects you've clicked on recently — and you see a particular video offering information that represents a certain perspective, three or four rows down you might find another video presenting exactly the opposite viewpoint. While the freedom to express one's opinion on such platforms is arguably a good thing, the cognitive dissonance of mutually-exclusive positions both posturing as "truth" can be downright nauseating. At that level, it's no wonder that we retreat into our tribal silos of cherry-picked, biased, or even purely fictional information.

Does this mean that there's more lying going on now in civilization than earlier in history? My guess is probably not. The difference now is that we are being bombarded with an onslaught of visible and very public pro and con. Some of both may be thoughtful, nuanced, and worth consideration, but much of what we see is extreme, dogmatic, and one-sided. And that exposure is very hard on our nervous systems and our sanity — too much conflict, with whipsawing back and forth, and with no reliable way to verify the accuracy of whatever rhyme or reason is claimed.

All that said, this whole nasty business going on in Ukraine is very unsettling. No matter who's right and who's wrong about what's happening, no matter who's innocent or who's to blame, the whole sorry spectacle is a major tragedy. (Many other ongoing tragedies fail to get coverage. At least one factor making Ukraine newsworthy, unlike the continuing violence in Syria or Yemen, is that this conflict is white people fighting white people. However crude that seems, I fear it may be accurate or have at least some relevance.)

I've lived my entire life of 72 years with the continual and unceasing threat of nuclear annihilation dangling over all our heads. I was personally subjected to those ludicrous "duck and cover" drills in elementary school during the 1950s. Oh yeah, as if cowering under a wooden desk would provide a shield from the heat and shock wave of a nuclear blast. I witnessed (from a distance, of course, via television) our dancing on the precipice during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when we were a hair's breadth away from global nuclear war. No doubt we've dodged other suicidal bullets about which I knew nothing at the time because they were kept under wraps and unreported. The Cold War strategy of MAD — mutually-assured destruction — which America still employs today, is all well and good, until it fails.

The current events in Ukraine — whatever their causes — have resurrected our modern fears of a cataclysmic World War 3. Is that presumed linkage merely an exaggeration? I don't know. Being forced to trust the forbearance and sanity of those in power whose fingers (not actually theirs, but their dutiful minions in the military) are poised to press the ICBM launch buttons fills me with dread. The fact that there's a "nuclear football" that accompanies the President everywhere with all the daily launch codes and authorizations to fire is creepy

as hell and is thrilling only in dystopian fiction. In reality, it's the stuff of nightmares and provides me with zero peace of mind.

This particular exercise in violent, deadly brinksmanship seems to be motivated at least in part by the changing pecking order of a unipolar versus multipolar "world order." For my entire lifetime, America has been the King of the Hill, the 800-lb. gorilla of the global power hierarchy. We called the shots. All the cheerleaders for the American Empire have told us over and over that, in balance, this has been a good thing. Whether or not it really was is open to debate. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America had a chance to remake the world order.

Time and again, however, the U.S. rejected the "peace dividend" of disarmament in favor of continuing our dominance. For all the wrong reasons, we clung to NATO, looking to increase rather than dismantle our combative war footing. For decades, we have hedged on our lukewarm assurances not to threaten Russia by inviting Ukraine to join NATO. This refusal to yield or cooperate has not served us well. So, is America to blame for the predicament in Ukraine? Well, yes and no. Not solely — there's more than enough blame to go around on all sides — but the U.S. is far from innocent, and our self-annointed halo as "the good guys" is badly tarnished.

Now, like an aging alpha male gorilla, the American Empire is failing, or at least waning in strength, and competitors, such as China and Russia, are challenging American hegemony. Unlike the 40-year Cold War, the conflict occurring today in Ukraine isn't a staged heavyweight title bout to determine who's the champion. Russia has neither the means nor the intention to rule the world, and China — despite an inherent belief in its own superiority — is not so foolish as to want that dubious crown in any crude or obvious fashion. Both, however, are part of a rising contingent that wants to see an end to American dominance and its replacement by a new multipolar power alignment.

But who is all this posturing and violence for? Who benefits from this fight over power, resources, control, and domination? Certainly not "the people," no matter where they happen to reside, whether in Ukraine, Russia, the U.S., or anywhere else. The masses are irrelevant, mere cannon fodder, little more than sacrificial lambs. That's been painfully obvious throughout all the international conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries, as it was in most every war throughout history. Conquest is a game waged by power-driven rulers. Although "the people" are too often invoked as proxies by the monsters in charge, we aren't the ones clamoring for war.

Sure, a small percentage of ordinary people are always gung ho to fight and kill "them" (whoever "they" happen to be), but most of us would rather not. At least not until the propaganda machinery gins up ordinary "we're No. 1" patriotism to the fever pitch of violent jingoism. This happened in America after 9-11, and look what that got us.

There was a time when the monsters in charge actually led troops into battle. No more. Now the monsters sit in palaces or air-conditioned bunkers and get their minions in the military to do all the killing (and dying) for them. They may be at risk for eventual ouster or even assassination should they lose the wars, but they almost never die in actual battle. That sacrifice falls to us, and we don't get a vote in deciding our fate.

And yet, we are not blameless. In America, the military-industrial complex has incredible clout. For the corporate Merchants of Death, war means profits. In their minds, though, it's just business. And so they beat the drums of war like crazy. Greed does not balk at the prospect of causing harm, nor shrink back from dealing death. Life doesn't matter; money does.

Congress is no help at all. The recent bills approving the *\$768 billion* annual budget for the Pentagon were passed with overwhelming support — the vote in favor was 89 to 10 in the Senate, and 363 to 70 in the House. If you think, as millions of Americans do, that spending all that money on "defense" will somehow prevent war, then I've got a bridge in Brooklyn you might like to buy.

To be fair, Putin has seriously overstepped, and — one way or another — may end up paying dearly for his mistake. We're not through this crisis, however, and the disturbing possibility exists that we all might end up paying for it.

All this sucks, of course — Big Time. But here we are, billions of us, little more than pawns in an insane game of deadly global chess being played by monsters and their minions. We have never known how to keep the monsters at bay. And one day they just might kill us all.

I'm not naïve about war. I don't think that peace and tranquility are around the corner. As a species, we're not far enough along for that to be possible. Whether personally or collectively, limiting our tendency toward extreme violence remains an unfulfilled dream. Still, I am supremely tired of this bullshit. Life is hard enough without the underlying shadow of ultimate existential anxiety. No other species that I know of threatens to disrupt and perhaps even exterminate the life force on this Goldilocks garden planet the way humans do. If we are, as is so often claimed (arrogantly, I think), the pinnacle of evolution on this planet, then something has gone terribly wrong along the way. Our murderousness knows no bounds. Thank God it's only a single planet that's at risk from our suicidal derangement.

I wish it weren't so.