

## Democratic Peace

Immediately following the Cold War, a “peace dividend” was expected. The absence of great power conflict was somehow equated to a period of peace. But the periods between great power conflicts are not peaceful.

Throughout the period, presidents would be unable to discipline themselves in the use of force, and Congress would be unwilling to discipline presidents. The belief in democratic peace—that democracies tend not to war, or that democracies tend not to war against each other—was used to justify the use of force around the world to spread democracy or to make the world safe for democracy. The overwhelming evidence is that stable democracies and stable autocracies are equally prone to war; but they are much less prone to war than are states transitioning between the two forms of government.<sup>1</sup> Stable governments are less prone to war than unstable governments in transition. Given this evidence, one should easily have anticipated a period of widespread hostility after communist regimes and regimes artificially propped up by the Soviet Union collapsed; few did.

The framers chose a republican democracy. The notion that republican democracies could form a pacific union—e.g., as articulated by Immanuel Kant—was well known to the framers. The framers put theory into practice in the new Constitution. Democracy demanded that sovereignty lay in the people, not in the monarchy or aristocracy. And republicanism demanded a separation of power between those who would decide the direction of the country and those administrators who would execute those decisions—the wisdom of the many was superior to the wisdom of the one.

The framers believed that the power to declare war should be in the people’s branch of government because the people bear the burden of war and would be much less likely than the executive to go to war. Today, only a small percentage of the population bears the burden of fighting, and wars are paid for with deficit spending sparing present day taxpayers from the financial burden.

The framers further put the preponderance of military force in the hands of state governments because of the belief that a king with a standing army would be more inclined to use it. Congress, the people’s branch, would have to raise an army for war and then return it. The president is now accustomed to having a standing army. And, as predicted, he is inclined to use it.

Calling up the reserves and militia was once accompanied by a great deal of hand wringing and forethought. Lyndon Johnson consciously and explicitly did not call up the National Guard because the act would weaken public support for the war and for his social programs. Support for the war unraveled nonetheless. In the post-Cold War era, calling up the reserves has become commonplace. Once a strategic reserve to be called up once in a generation to defend vital interests, today’s reservists are an operational reserve mobilized repeatedly with little or no fanfare.

The practice of conscription was a further check on the government’s use of force. Government officials would have to maintain a popular consensus to war because conscription, when fairly implemented, draws a representative sample of the young male population. The all-volunteer force, by definition self-selected, is not representative of the population at large.

Historians chronicled President Roosevelt’s assumption of the position of commander in chief as the Second World War loomed. But the Cold War had a standing army, and each sitting president was a standing commander in chief. The Cold War ended, but the president refused to return the reins of power to Congress, and Congress lacked the wisdom and fortitude to take back the reins.<sup>2</sup>

All of these checks, the things that put the democratic peace theory into practice, have been subverted. Still, the democratic peace theory is used to justify war, regime change, and the spread of democracy to assure peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (summer 1995): 5-38.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy D. Rosner, *The New Tug of War: Congress, the Executive Branch, and National Security* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1995).