

Society and Intensive Conflict

By David Richardson

On a well-known Internet auction site, it is quite easy to find the commemorative medals that Great Britain and the United States issued to veterans of the Great War. Both nations used the identical phrase on the reverse of the medal—*The Great War for Civilisation*. However odd such an inscription might seem a century later, it clearly had a contemporary resonance. Moving to the next war, the resonance continues. In his thoughtful account of the closing days of World War II, Max Hastings argues that the character of the conflict in Western Europe was determined by the character of the Western democracies themselves. The armies of Great Britain, the United States, and their associates, he suggests, may have lacked the ruthless military prowess and determination of the German and Soviet forces, but they “fought as bravely and well as any democracy could ask, if the values of civilization were to be retained in their ranks.”¹ When Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt invoked “Christian civilization” in public pronouncements as the grand cause worthy of sacrifice, they were not so much making a religious statement as appealing to a shared sense of identity, one that they expected their listeners to understand and relate to.² Eighty years later, it is by no means obvious that this shared identity still holds.

As peace returned to the shattered remains of Europe in 1945, there were still reasons for hope. West of the Oder, at least, liberal democracy

seemed to strike deeper roots than ever before. This went hand in hand with a prosperity that for once seemed to be following a solid upward trajectory. From across the Atlantic Ocean, the United States abandoned isolationism and committed itself to be both the guardian and bankroller of freedom. Although the Cold War waxed and waned for decades, Marxism-Leninism was essentially seen off the stage after 1990. It seemed as if the unstoppable liberal democratic steamroller would flatten a global path for economic and personal freedom. However, all was not quite as it seemed.

Before we look at how the course of history unraveled after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is useful to lay out—with a broad brush—some of the suppositions that had driven Western society up to this point. From the fall of Rome until the Enlightenment, the world was essentially bound by religious horizons, symbolized most powerfully by the Holy Roman Emperor kneeling in the snow at Canossa. Architecture, art, and music all reflected this human concern about relating to the divine. Come the Enlightenment, the focus changed to working out what kind of world humans could create for themselves, relying on their own unfettered reason and empirical discoveries. This was the age of science and developing democracy, which held out a dream of unending human progress. The waves of devastation that swept across Europe twice in the first half of the 20th century cruelly mocked any such hopes. But at least we can say that the last spasms of Enlightenment optimism gave birth to the liberal democratic project—perhaps the sacrifices of two world wars really were worth it in the end.

But the liberal democratic project rested on increasingly shaky foundations. Premodern people could find their certainties in religious truth. Enthusiasts for the Enlightenment could base their philosophy on a confidence that the truth was out there for any rational person to discover. Although the views were divergent in almost every respect, they had this in common—a belief in a transcendent universe that provided a framework for understanding the place of human beings in the world. As James Davison Hunter expresses it, people had a common grammar that applied to human feelings and morality—and public good had a connection to private

interests.³ To put it another way, the individual was part of something universal. Immanuel Kant and John Calvin may have profoundly disagreed, but they would at least have understood one another. This is precisely the kind of transcendent worldview assumed by Churchill and Roosevelt in 1945. But one of the tragic ironies of recent history is that just as the liberal democratic project appeared to triumph, its inner coherence began to dissolve.

To put it crudely, liberal democracy split into liberal and democratic elements. In terms of liberalism, this was not the classic liberalism that Adam Smith and William Gladstone would recognize. Rather it is something new—literally, *neoliberalism*. The basic assumption behind this concept is that the market is sovereign—and not simply over economic issues. Based on the theory of Friedrich Hayek, nothing has a given and immutable value, even those aspects of human significance and meaning that previous generations would have treated as givens. Objective truth is no longer “out there” to be revealed or reasoned out, but is determined by what the market will bear. As Stephen Metcalf points out, the old political processes of public reason—debate and thoughtful argument—are at odds with this process, as in market terms they are simply opinions. What happens instead is that the public square “ceases to be a space for deliberation, and becomes a market in clicks, likes, and retweets.”⁴ There is no longer a transcendent cultural backdrop to human existence but a green screen. Virtues have transformed into values—one can individually hold and formulate them—but they can be of no binding significance.

In terms of the democracy, the individual now has an unprecedented status and ability to choose. Once seen in relation to a divinity or wider society, human beings are now increasingly regarded as sovereign agents. As the public sphere has been emptied of a shared cultural story, the individual is now free to decide his or her path through life. Or so the theory goes. Jackson Lears expresses it like this: people are “redefined as human capital, each person becomes a little firm with assets, debts, and a credit score anxiously scrutinized for signs of success or failure.”⁵ He is not so much a citizen, then, as an entrepreneur.⁶ The individual may be more

free to choose than ever before, but he also carries an increasingly heavy burden for his own destiny. If the individual does not have safeguards of a benevolent Providence—or a paternalistic society—he must shift for himself. The mantra that every schoolchild knows so well—*follow your dreams and you can achieve whatever you want*—has a darker side that few if any primary school assemblies ever spell out. Failure to achieve those dreams or ambitions will be your responsibility alone. In such a culture, the individual faces an unrelenting pressure to boost his own image and perception. An intriguing textual analysis of Norway’s main national newspaper between 1984 and 2005 revealed that as the occurrence of words such as *I* and *my* increased, references to concepts such as *duty* and *obligation* declined.⁷

What, if anything, does all this have to do with intensive warfare in the 21st century? Going back to where we began, the armies that liberated Western Europe in 1945 did so against a broadly shared cultural outlook. Britannia, Marianne, and Columbia are hardly identical sisters, but they bequeathed a remarkably similar legacy of shared understanding to their descendants. It is not being too romantic to say that the freedoms for which the dead of World War II gave their lives had a transcendent quality. This situation, it may be argued, no longer obtains. We have lost the sense of belonging to something bigger. Evidence for this can be seen in a wide variety of forms, from Allan Bloom’s analysis of education to Robert Putnam’s influential work on the decline of social cohesion in late 20th-century America.⁸ As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor observes, “The individual has been taken out of a rich community life and now enters instead into a series of mobile, changing, revocable associations.”⁹ With his small stock of human capital, each person makes his way through life via a series of short-term contracts, running the gamut of human existence from car insurance to employment. What matters most is the utilitarian and the instrumental. In this kind of world, traditional concepts such as humility, duty, and sacrifice seem anachronistic and pointless. Could this be the polar night of icy darkness that Max Weber anticipated, where there is no faith, no morality, and no heroism—nothing outside the market?¹⁰

One of the founding principles of modern democracy is that the individual citizen surrenders certain freedoms and benefits to the state in exchange for protection and stability. This relationship is perhaps seen in its starkest form when a nation sends its citizens to war. That, arguably, is really what the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is about—not so much the right to bear arms but the responsibility to do so.¹¹ The freedoms of democracy must be guarded by its citizens. In post-2001 operations, when the legitimacy of the campaigns was subject to intense public scrutiny, this affected the commemoration of those citizens who had given their lives. As one academic study observed, British repatriation ceremonies became “deeply political acts” protesting against military action, where those who died were remembered as victims of government policy.¹² Anthony King, in his analysis of the obituaries of British service personnel, comments that the death of soldiers was not seen so much as an act of service for the nation as “the meaningful expression of a man who defined himself by his profession.”¹³ This brings us back to an earlier point. If the individual is indeed a small firm with a limited stock of human capital, a strong relationship of trust between citizen and society is vital should the citizen be required to sacrifice that capital for a bigger purpose. Because if our small stock of human capital really is all we have, why should we give it up?

One of the most insightful commentaries on these issues was published just after World War II: Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*. There is a particularly intriguing passage where Weaver talks about the “ancient solidarity” between the priest and the soldier.¹⁴ What does he mean by that? Essentially, that both callings have an interest in the transcendent. As he argues, any undertaking that entails sacrifice of life has implications of transcendence. If we do not have transcendence, sacrifice is ultimately pointless. In our culture of commemoration, we make much of service and sacrifice, and rightly so. We will pause much in the coming months as the reminders of 1918 roll around. But in the 21st-century value system, is it not all rather pointless if there is ultimately nothing beyond the individual consumer?

And this is the nub of the argument. As Alexis de Tocqueville clearly saw some two centuries ago, a society that favors atomism and instrumentalism actually undermines the very freedoms that it claims to cherish.¹⁵ Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the freedoms that the Western world enjoys have largely been sustained without significant periods of intensive conflict—and the associated heavy demands of blood and treasure. Future military operations may not follow this pattern, and free nations may have to pay a large price for such nebulous terms as liberty and democracy. If we furnish our worldview from the moral stockroom of utilitarian instrumentalism, we will find little strength in such circumstances. To quote Taylor again, “High standards need strong sources”—a stripped-down public square does not provide the wherewithal to sustain a deep understanding of human meaning and purpose.¹⁶ Churchill and Roosevelt clearly saw the battle that they were engaged in as something more than a struggle over resources and the possession of territory. Or, in other words, they understood the need for spiritual resilience—an awareness that human existence cannot be reduced to a profit-and-loss transaction. The free society that values the individual did not arise from a utilitarian worldview—indeed, Larry Siedentop has recently published a fascinating volume that traces the development of modern liberal equality right back to Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages and even back to the Apostle Paul.¹⁷

One does not need to share the faith of these ancient scholars to appreciate their insights. Perhaps it is time to pause in our pursuit of relentless individualism to consider the bigger truths of the world to which we belong. James Davison Hunter remarks that our current cultural trajectory is likely set to bend us away from the very concepts of justice, freedom, and tolerance that we treasure.¹⁸ Before we are called on to defend these convictions in intensive conflict, it is surely worth reflecting on why they are worth defending in the first place. Those of us who approach this question from a religious perspective have something unique to offer here.



Notes

¹ Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944–1945* (London: Macmillan, 2004), 588.

² See, for instance, “His Speeches: How Churchill Did It,” International Churchill Society, available at <<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/speeches-about-winston-churchill/his-speeches-how-churchill-did-it/>>.

³ James Davison Hunter, “Liberal Democracy and the Unravelling of the Enlightenment Project,” *The Hedgehog Review* 19, no. 3 (2017), available at <https://iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2017_Fall_Hunter.php>.

⁴ Stephen Metcalf, “Neoliberalism: The Idea that Swallowed the World,” *The Guardian*, August 18, 2017, available at <www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world>.

⁵ Jackson Lears, “The Long Con of Neoliberalism,” *The Hedgehog Review* 19, no. 3 (2017), available at <https://iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2017_Fall_Lears.php>.

⁶ Wendy Brown, “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory and Event* 7, no. 1 (2003), 44.

⁷ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 264.

⁸ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 502.

¹⁰ Brown, “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” 45.

¹¹ Elaine Scarry, “Constitutional Narratives—War and the Social Contract: The Right to Bear Arms,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 2, no. 1 (January 1990), 121, available at <<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol2/iss1/9>>.

¹² Sandra Walklate, Gabe Mythen, and Ross McGarry, “Witnessing Wootton Bassett: An Exploration in Cultural Victimology,” *Crime, Media and Culture* 7, no. 2 (August 2011), 149–165; K. Neil Jenkins et al., “Wootton Bassett and the Political Spaces of Remembrance and Mourning,” *Area* 44, no. 3 (2012), 356–363, available at <www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/nick.megoran/pdf/megoran_wb.pdf>.

¹³ Anthony King, “The Afghan War and ‘Postmodern’ Memory: Commemoration and the Dead of Helmand,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 1 (March 2010), 1–25.

¹⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 30.

¹⁵ Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 502.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 516.

¹⁷ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Hunter, “Liberal Democracy and the Unravelling of the Enlightenment Project.”