



Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace

By Christopher J. Fettweis
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Reviewed by
FRANCIS P. SEMPA

Forget Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Machiavelli. Put aside Mackinder, Mahan, and Spykman. Close the military academies and war colleges. Shut our overseas bases. Bring our troops home. Make dramatic cuts in the defense budget. The end of major war, and perhaps the end of war itself, is near, according to Tulane assistant professor Christopher Fettweis in his recent book, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace*.

Fettweis is not the first intellectual, nor will he be the last, to proclaim the onset of perpetual peace. He is squarely in the tradition of Immanuel Kant, Herbert Spencer, and Norman Angell, to name just three. Indeed, in the book's introduction, Fettweis attempts to rehabilitate Angell's reputation for prophecy, which suffered a devastating blow when the Great War falsified his claim in *The Great Illusion* that economic interdependence had rendered great power war obsolete. Angell, Fettweis writes, was the first "prominent constructivist thinker of the twentieth century,"

and was not wrong—just ahead of his time (p. 5).

Fettweis bases his theory or vision of the obsolescence of major war on the supposed linear progress of human nature, a major tenet of 20th-century liberalism that is rooted in the rationalist theories of the Enlightenment. "History," according to Fettweis, "seems to be unfolding as a line extending into the future—a halting, incomplete, inconsistent line perhaps, one with frequent temporary reversals, but a line nonetheless." The world is growing "more liberal and more reliant upon reason, logic, and science" (p. 217).

We have heard this all before. Human nature can be perfected. Statesmen and leaders will be guided by reason and science. Such thinking influenced the visionaries of the French Revolution and produced 25 years of war among the great powers of Europe. Similar ideas influenced President Woodrow Wilson and his intellectual supporters who endeavored at Versailles to transform the horrors of World War I into a peace that would make that conflict "the war to end all wars." What followed were disarmament conferences, an international agreement to outlaw war, the rise of expansionist powers, appeasement by the democracies, and the most destructive war in human history. Ideas, which Fettweis claims will bring about the proliferation of peace, transformed Russia, Germany, and Japan into expansionist, totalitarian powers. Those same ideas led to the Gulag, the Holocaust, and the Rape of Nanking. So much for human progress.

Fettweis knows all of this, but claims that since the end of the Cold War, the leaders and peoples of the major powers, except the United States, have accepted the idea that major war is unthinkable. His proof is that there has been no major war

among the great powers for 20 years—a historical period that coincides with the American "unipolar" moment. This is very thin empirical evidence upon which to base a predictive theory of international relations.

Fettweis criticizes the realist and neorealist schools of thought, claiming that their adherents focus too narrowly on the past behavior of states in the international system. In his view, realists place too great an emphasis on power. Ideas and norms instead of power, he claims, provide structure to the international system. Classical geopolitical theorists such as Halford Mackinder, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Nicholas Spykman, and Colin Gray are dismissed by Fettweis in less than two pages, despite the fact that their analyses of great power politics and conflict have long been considered sound and frequently prescient.

Realists and classical geopoliticians have more than 2,000 years of empirical evidence to support their theories of how states and empires behave and how the international system works. Ideas are important, but power is the governing force in international politics, and geography is the most permanent factor in the analysis of power.

Fettweis makes much of the fact that the countries of Western and Central Europe, which waged war against each other repeatedly for nearly 400 years, are at peace, and claims that there is little likelihood that they will ever again wage war against each other. Even if the latter assertion turns out to be true, that does not mean that the end of major war is in sight. Throughout history, some peoples and empires that previously waged war for one reason or another became pacific without producing worldwide perpetual peace: the Mongols, Saracens, Ottomans, Dutch, Venetians, and the Spanish Empire come

immediately to mind. A Europe at peace does not translate to an Asia, Africa, and Middle East at peace.

In a world in which major wars are obsolete, Fettweis believes the United States needs to adjust its grand strategy from vigorous internationalism to strategic restraint. His specific recommendations include the removal of all U.S. military forces from Europe; an end to our bilateral security guarantees to Japan and South Korea; an end to our alliance with Israel; an indifference to the balance of power on the Eurasian landmass; a law enforcement approach to terrorism; a drastic cut in military spending; a much smaller Navy; and the abolition of regional combatant commands.

What Fettweis is proposing is effectively an end to what Walter Russell Mead calls "the maritime world order" that was established by Great Britain and maintained first by the British Empire and then by the United States. It is a world order that has defeated repeated challenges by potential hegemonic powers and resulted in an unprecedented spread of prosperity and freedom. But all of that, we are assured, is in the past. China poses no threat. The United States can safely withdraw from Eurasia. The power vacuum will remain unfilled.

Fettweis needs a dose of humility. Sir Halford Mackinder, the greatest of all geopoliticians, was referring to visionaries and liberal idealists like Fettweis when he cautioned, "He would be a sanguine man . . . who would trust the future peace of the world to a change in the mentality of any nation." Most profoundly, General Douglas MacArthur, who knew a little bit more about war and international conflict than Fettweis, reminded the cadets at West Point in 1962 that "only the dead have seen the end of war." **JFQ**