

What Happens Next – Sunday May 9, 2021

Stupidity of War, Inflation, Brooklyn, Cultivating Influence, & Bottle Service

John Mueller QA

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go back to a couple of the points that you made, the first one related to stealing bits of land by one country versus another. In 1991, Saddam Hussein invaded the independent country of Kuwait, took the oil fields, and it required the United States along with a number of its allies to push Iraq out of Kuwait. Do you view that as just an exception? What made Kuwait so important that it required a global action? Do we have to make examples of other nations when they behave this way to show that the upside/downside of this kind of behavior needs to be reversed? How do you think of the first war of Iraq as preconditioned for setting the stage for violating the stealing a little bit of territory?

Yeah, that's the very good point. It's very much an aberration. In fact, when Saddam Hussein took over Kuwait, one prominent historian referred to it as an anachronism, we just don't do stuff like that. For this whole 75 years, that's been the only case, only time, when one United Nations country tried to take over another United Nations country and then incorporate it into its territory. In the olden days, before World War I for example, it was a standard thing that happened in wars. It was unique in that sense and it was very surprising. Most of the Arab states, for example, thought he was just bluffing and wouldn't actually do it.

In the book, I argue that he probably could have been forced out without a war. He had overextended himself, he showed himself to be fairly pragmatic in a lot of ways. With negotiations with George H. W. Bush, totally refused to even consider war it was necessary. The result of that war was several tens of thousands of people probably being killed both in Iraq and in Kuwait, and that quite possibly could have been avoided. But it is very much a unique kind of situation.

When George H. W. Bush did it, he argued this had set a precedent for the future, but instead it was dealing with an aberration. I mean even if he'd been able to keep Kuwait, there weren't a whole bunch of other countries who were going to try to do something similar in a different place.

Larry Bernstein:

Just continuing on that first Iraq War for a second. You mentioned that Hussein seemed to be very pragmatic and understood that he had gone too far. I remember in the days that followed the initial invasion of Kuwait, we sent diplomats over to discuss it with him and I forgot the fellow's name who was Iraq's secretary of state, but it seemed like the discussions were nonsense. It seemed like the guy was being completely impractical. Why do you now think that negotiations probably would have worked, both in Iraq War I and Iraq War II, where it seemed like Hussein could have found a solution, but we were unable to? I mean, the length of time that we used forces seeking those weapons of mass destruction was forever, and he knew he

didn't have those weapons. If he was so pragmatic, why did he behave this way he did and that ended up both resulting in the destruction of his country and his own death?

John Mueller:

In the first case, Bush 41 simply would not engage in negotiations. You would have had to give him something. He had some legitimate and grievances with Kuwait, and I think the Kuwaitis, to get their country back, probably would have acquiesced. Instead, George H. W. Bush was determined to humiliate him. I think that was a very bad strategy. Anyway, it should have been tried. I don't know if it would have worked or not, maybe it would have taken force.

In the case of the second Iraq war, the one in 2003, it is really weird, I must say. I certainly didn't think of it, but he was being coy about having chemical weapons because he felt that if he was shown to be weak, the Iranians would attack him again. He was using that as sort of a crypto-deterrent, even though he didn't have any weapons to deter Iran from doing it. As far as I can see, nobody thought of that, including me, I have to admit, including other people in the intelligence and so forth. That may be why he was being coy, because he's worried about Iran, with whom he had just fought probably the worst international war since World War II that lasted most of the '80s. That was why he was doing that.

Essentially, the argument for going into that war was if he got nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction, he would somehow dominate the Middle East. This strikes me as being that argument was bizarre, in many respects. He had an incredibly incompetent army, that was demonstrated in both of those two wars, and the idea that he could use that or his weaponry to cause other people to fall in line seems daft. In the first Iraq war, he took over Kuwait and the result of that was not everybody said, "Oh, how impressive you are and how great you are," but instead they made an alliance of convenience, which included the United States, the Soviet Union, and Israel, against him. If he were to do something similar later, that would be the most likely response. Consequently, as Colin Powell put it at that time, he was in his box. He was fully capable, even if he did get weapons of mass destruction, of being detoured and contained, it seems to me.

Larry Bernstein:

I think you're right, that since World War II, Europe has been remarkably quiet, but there's been other areas of the Middle East which have been quite volatile. You just discussed the Iran-Iraq war, but there's also warfare going on between Israel and its neighbors. Israel had hot wars in '48, '56, '67 and '73, and then Israel was also involved in a number of other military engagements since then. How do you think about the fact that there are certain areas where violent developments happen and war activity is more common, in particular, we'll call it Israel and its neighbors?

John Mueller:

The dates you gave are exactly right, namely the end of the last war between Israel and the Arab state was in 1973, which is a very long time ago. After that, there have been sub-state

groups which have been supported by Arab states, which have caused problems. How you mentioned it, but those are not wars, those are not the things that cause a thousand battle deaths per year between states. They are very irritating and they are costly. The supporting of terrorism, the supporting of undermining other governments, the United States has tried covert regime change something like 70 times since World War II, most of the time an abject failure, but at least they tried, and the economic sanctions and other things like that are simply not war and they have not escalated it to really full-out wars between states.

You can say the same thing, by the way, not only about Israel and the Arab states, but India and Pakistan. They had three or four wars up until 1971, but they've had no wars of that sort since that time, real international wars. There's been border conflicts, there's been kerfuffle's, and there's been some loss of life, but compared to the old days, this is much milder.

I'm not saying that everything is hearts and flowers, quite the reverse. There's still plenty of skullduggery going around the edges, but it's basically been short of international war. The argument basically is that countries may use some of these methods to try to deal with their differences, the cyber-attacks and things like that, but they simply aren't wars. They aren't international wars, as would have been the case in the past. That's what the change is.

Essentially, countries have pretty much come to the point of saying we're not going to use old-fashioned international war, which is of course the standard of war forever. Europe, for example, used to be the most warlike continent in the world, by far. There are periods of time in which whole centuries went by and there'd be maybe two years in which there wasn't an international war going on somewhere in Europe. We're reaching a point where somebody don't use excessive military force, but we still have plenty of problems.

An analogy might be with dueling. Young men of that social class that used to duel all the time still have plenty of testosterone, they have plenty of disagreements, they have plenty of ways of undermining the other guy, but it doesn't even occur to them to use the direct attack, which would be a duel to solve the problem. That would be somewhat similar. Everything is not peaceful, everything is not perfect by any means, it's not cherubs and cooing doves, but it's a lot better than in the olden times, it seems to me.

Kay Hymowitz:

I want to ask a question. John, what happened after World War I that changed people's attitudes? Was it just the horror of that war? But many wars have been pretty horrible, I wonder if there was something in the modern sensibility that made people look at it differently.

John Mueller:

Yeah, that's a really good question and I would like to have a really great answer for it, but I can try. But you're absolutely right. There's been a lot of horrible wars, the Greek and Trojan war, for example, talk about stupid, was fought over an errant wife, lasted 10 years and ended up with the total annihilation of one of the combatants, namely, the city of Troy. All the men were killed, the women sold, raped and sold into slavery or killed, and the place was burned to the

ground. They couldn't even find out where it was for about two millennia. In the 30 Years War, in the 17th century, the general assumption was that about 80 or 90% of all Germans had been killed in that war. There'd been plenty of wars like that in the past, both equally stupid and equally destructive in terms of the overall population.

The way I explained it, and I obviously can't prove it because you can't do an experiment and run history over again, is that beginning in 1889, for the first time in history, there was organized anti-war protest. There's been plenty of people who thought war was a damned and dumb idea, but there's the philosophy of sitting on rocks and there's the Quakers and so forth, but it wasn't until about 1889, about 25 years before the war, that there was an anti-war movement. It was gently derided as being effeminate and cowardly and trivial and so forth by the war people, but it was there and it was gathering a certain amount of momentum. Some major industrialists were joining in, such as Andrew Carnegie, who founded the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Alfred Nobel, who founded the Nobel Peace Prize. They're holding society meetings, they were trying to get some governments online, but they're basically derided, successfully, as basically a sort of a bizarre trivial gadfly movement.

I think what happened was when World War I came along and it reminded people that war, really continental or horrible war, could be again. Even if it wasn't the worst war in history, it was enough to certainly cause people to think hard about it. Essentially, it seems to me that after World War I, the leadership and the electorate were now more receptive to the ideas from the peace movement that was articulated before the war. What the peace movement did was at least get these ideas on the table, even if they were derided by people, which they were, the majority certainly, and seemed to be sort of flaky fringe group, after the war, their ideas were embraced. It was an idea whose time had come. I sort of see the two things, the horrible, destructive war, plus having an alternative on the ground, on the table, which people were embracing.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to bring in one of your previous books as well, called *The Atomic Obsession*. In that book, you argue that nuclear proliferation isn't that bad. There are some scholars who believe that the lack of European war for the previous 75 years may reflect the fact that we had two nuclear powers pointing their weapons at each other and making the cost of war too high. Therefore, we couldn't wage it, so it wasn't fought. We did see some smaller wars, regional wars, where we fought through proxies. Think of the Vietnam War, the Korean War, where the two superpowers wouldn't fight each other but would get involved in any case. How do you think about the role of nuclear weapons as the means and cause for the lack of developed world engaging in warfare?

John Mueller:

I think mostly they're irrelevant. I've been arguing this for a long time and we'll have to see here and get some more people on my bandwagon, but the intent, and I talk about this in *The Stupidity of War* book, there's tons of evidence now that the Soviet Union never in a million years wanted to do anything like World War II again, much less obviously World War II plus

nuclear weapons. The country had been massively destroyed in that war and every family had lost a family member. The war was an end, and furthermore, they subscribed to an ideology, communism, international communism, Leninism, Marxism, which basically said we're going to take over the world, but it was not by force, but it was not by international war, but through revolution, subversion and various kinds of pressure.

I don't think it was ever really remotely in the cards, both sides simply did not want to repeat an international war. The fact that there were nuclear weapons only embellished that. It was like if you jumped from a fifth-story window, it's probably a lot less horrible to think about than jumping from a 50th-story window, but if you enjoy life, you don't do either one. Then also, the issue about nuclear proliferation, a remarkably small number of countries have actually gotten them, nine. There were predictions it'd be 20, 30, 40 in various times, like from John Kennedy in the 1960s. I think the main reason is that they aren't helpful.

A major problem from my standpoint, I'm sort of complacent about that problem. That is countries get nuclear weapons, they're just wasting their time and money. If Iran gets them, it's a waste of time and money. North Koreans, they're a waste of time and money, they don't really need it, but they won't use them overall. Since World War II, there of course have been zero people killed by nuclear explosions, but there've been hundreds of thousands of people killed by efforts to stop proliferation, most dramatically in Iraq, where stopping proliferation, i.e., preventing getting the weapons, was the major motivation for the war. The number of people who have died as a result of the American invasion in Iraq is about a hundred times higher than the total number of people killed in 9/11, two or 300,000 people or more.

It seems to me that proliferation is not a very good idea. If we encourage people from not doing it, we'll be doing them a favor because they'd be wasting their money and time and effort and scientific expertise, but it's not a monumental problem. It's not a severe security problem, certainly not one worth killing hundreds of thousands of people over.

Larry Bernstein:
John, thank you.