

Upfront

“Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” This famous quote is attributed to Spanish-born, Harvard-educated philosopher and writer George Santayana (1863-1952).

I’m writing this on Tuesday, March 8. World news is being created at lightning speed. Maybe the following material will be irrelevant or proven fallacious between the time I type it and you read it. But I recognize a certain familiarity to the current moment...

In the 1930s, an ambitious – ultimately ruthless – ruler rose to power over a nation hyper-conscious of its own decline. The 5’ 8 ½” Adolf Hitler believed in a version of manifest destiny for “his” people. In *Mein Kampf*, he addressed the need for “Lebensraum” (living space): Germany should take over lands to the east that were occupied by “inferior” Slavic peoples – including Austria, the Sudetenland (then-Czechoslovakia), Poland and Russia. Translation: I’m coming for you, Eastern/Central Europe.

In 1999, an ambitious – ultimately ruthless – ascendant leader was nominated for the position of Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. In his speech to the state’s Duma (think: Congress) upon the occasion, Vladimir Putin said, “Russia has been a great power for centuries and remains so. It has always had and still has legitimate zones of interest...We should not drop our guard in this respect, neither should we allow our opinion to be ignored.” Translation: I’m coming for you, Eastern Europe (and, maybe, beyond).

Academic literature analyzing the sources and reasons for conflict is plentiful (an understatement). Reviewing much of this material, I notice a conspicuous lack of consensus. So, I’ll offer my own logic. Humans have needs. They also have wants. Conflict is one perceived path to satisfying these needs and wants. Envy and avarice are widespread – if not universal – and enduring character defects. They drive more of our decisions than we’d like to admit. When someone has a lot of desirable stuff (often, but not limited to, material accumulation) and other someones don’t, some of the someones will reckon that taking is their only mechanism for replicating the original fortunate someone’s abundance.

Just prior to World War II, the U.S. accounted for less than 5 percent of the measured world’s population. Meanwhile, it generated roughly 20 percent of its economic output. Germany and Japan, despite long, rich imperial histories, combined to bake only 7 percent of the world’s pie. How about today? The US and EU, taken together, comprise 10-ish percent of the planet’s people, while generating (and benefiting directly from) 45 percent of its Gross World Product (I made up the data name). Russia has about one-third as many people as the US/EU complex and accounts for only 3 percent of the GWP. China,

in 2020, claimed 18 percent of GWP, but is also home to 18 percent of the human species. You can overlay a smorgasbord of geo-philosophical reasons on why guys like Hitler or Putin do the things they do; but, it might simply distill to, “I want what he has and I deserve it because I say so.”

This is going to read as incredibly crass...It is also completely honest: I like my/our allocation of global output. I am not prepared for the ratios to change dramatically to our detriment. Which is an unsustainable equilibrium absent the forces of power. The most altruistic preservation tool vis-à-vis relative stasis is to maximize our collective good fortune and expand GWP to engineer increased relative prosperity for all. The more brutish approach: Build more and better guns than the other guys and be prepared to use them.

Which leads us to Ukraine.

“In no case can there be any appeasement at the cost of honor. Real appeasement is to shed all fear and do what is right at any cost.”

Who said it? Some NeoCon in search of a war. A desperate Democrat hoping to avoid a rout in November? Nope. Mahatma Ghandi, perhaps history’s most celebrated “pacifist.”

Winston Churchill (before the UK entered WWII) made his own version of Ghandi’s argument: “Never give in, never give in, never; never; never; never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.”

Churchill said other pithy things, too, including, “An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile and hope it eats him last.”

The Bible ascribes virtue to “turning the other cheek.” And civilized men and women aim to live by this basic principle. Also, who wants to get his hands dirty if he doesn’t have to? So, we (the 45 percent-ers) seem to be of a single mind: This is sad, but it isn’t our fight.

“Our forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict. Our forces are not going to Europe to fight in Ukraine but to defend our NATO allies and reassure those allies in the east. Let me be clear: These are totally defensive moves on our part. We have no intention of fighting Russia.” J. Biden, February 24, 2022

He’s not alone:

“I think there’s broad support for the president in what he’s doing now. (a combination of economic sanctions and humanitarian aid, and a professed disinterest in direct military intervention)...Yes, we’re all together behind the Ukrainian people. We’re thrilled at the changes that have occurred within NATO, and I think I’ve seen our country pretty unified. As a matter of fact, the whole world seems to be unified.” M. McConnell, US Senate Republican Leader, March 1, 2022

Because we know where this might lead, and our magical thinking compels us to believe we decide if we eventually go there:

“They (Pentagon officials) know that they had limited options going into this because Russia is a nuclear power, and NATO and the US are not going to go to war with Russia over Ukraine, their goal is to contain this and keep this from spilling over into an Article 5 (NATO member) nation.” J. Griffin, Fox News National Security Correspondent

This stuff is complicated. In the run up to 1941, FDR was conflicted:

“This nation will remain a neutral nation, but I cannot ask that every American remain neutral in thought as well...Even a neutral cannot be asked to close his mind or his conscience.”

Per one historian, “The President had to contend with deep-seated American fears about involvement in the war. He also had to manage a growing crisis in the Pacific, where Japan was expanding its empire into China and threatening Southeast Asia.” Does this scenario ring a bell?

What does Putin think about America and its stomach today? It might sound something like this direct quote from Hitler in 1942: “I don’t see much future for the Americans...it’s a decayed country. They have their racial problem and the problem of social inequities. How can we expect a State like that to hold together?” Putin might say, “They’re too busy arguing about non-binary swimmers to screw with this bear.”

Ready for the apex of naïve understatement? “The Russian contribution to peace in the Ukraine is not sufficient.” A. Merkel (German Chancellor), 2014

As Churchill said in 1938, “Do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigor, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden time.”

Roosevelt’s thinking evolved: “It is easy for you and for me to shrug our shoulders and to say that conflicts taking place thousands of miles from the U.S. do not seriously affect the Americas – and that all we have to do is to ignore them...Passionately though we may desire detachment, we are forced to realize that every battle that is fought, does affect the American future.”

And then the Japanese flew in.

I’m not advocating for a particular course of action. But I do recognize this old axiom at work: When you have an aspirationally expansive Asian juggernaut in league with a megalomaniacal European dogma-gogue, it’s bad.

In two generations, have we purged ourselves of our collective Zelensky-ism, for better or worse? As he said, “The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride.”

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