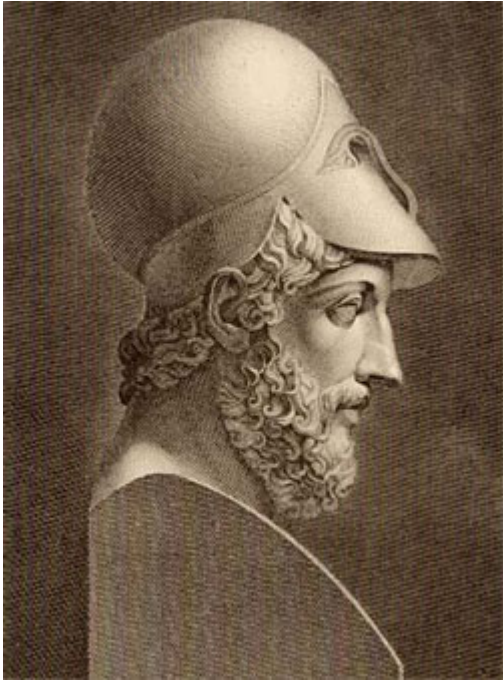


BODY POLITIC AND AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY



— some comments on the origins of war

The BBC is airing some views about the causes of war and policy in the Middle East.
UK | Magazine | Do democracies fight each other?

When outlining his vision for peace in the Middle East, President George Bush said “democracies don’t go to war with each other”. Is it true?

The president’s comments echoed those made in the 1994 State of the Union address by his predecessor Bill Clinton.

They share a belief that the solution to ending war is

the spread of democracy.

But does history support them?

Rudolf Rummel was interviewed for Peace Magazine in 1999 [\[Link\]](#). He is a political scientist who has done a great deal of comparative and statistical analysis into war and institutional violence – his book *Power kills: democracy as a method of nonviolence* (1997) argues this point that democracies don't fight each other.

Now, some statistics. If one defines an international war as any military engagements in which 1,000 or more were killed, then 353 pairs of nations (e.g., Germany vs. USSR) engaged in such wars between 1816-1991. None were between two democracies, 155 pairs involved a democracy and a nondemocracy, and 198 involved two nondemocracies fighting each other. The average length of war between states was 35 months, average battle deaths was 15,069.

For the years 1946-1986, when there were the most democracies and thus the hardest test of the proposition that democracies do not make war on each other, there were over this period 45 states that had a democratic regime; 109 that did not. There were thus 6,876 state dyads (e.g., Bolivia-Chile), of which 990 were democratic-democratic dyads, none of which fought each other. Thirty-two nondemocratic dyads engaged in

war. Thus the probability of any dyad engaging in war between 1946 and 1986 was $32/6876 = .0047$; of not engaging in war is .9953. Now, what is the probability of the 990 dyads not engaging in war during this period? Using the binomial theorem, it is .9953 to the 990th power = .0099, or rounded off .01. This is highly significant. The odds of this lack of war between democracies being by chance is virtually 100 to 1.



From — America, Pakistan, and the limits of militarism Steve Coll Asma Jahangir — openDemocracy

Thomas Schwartz and Kiron Skinner of Stanford's Hoover Institution begged to differ in an article in the Hoover Digest [Link]

It is dogma too in the corridors of power, where it drives the Clinton Doctrine of peace and security through a crusade for democracy. "The best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace," the president has said, "is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other."

The idea, “democratic pacifism”, is not new. Its academic champions venerate a two-hundred-year-old essay, “Perpetual Peace”, by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Enthusiasm grew in the 1980s, in part from some brilliant Kant-revival pieces by geopolitical theorist Michael Doyle, more from the worldwide outbreak of democracy.

Criticism of democratic pacifism is not new either. In Federalist 6, Alexander Hamilton attacked “the paradox of perpetual peace” as wrong and dangerous – wrong because it is naive about popular passions, dangerous because quack nostrums steal attention from real remedies. In a “republic”, Kant thought, a majority would refuse to bear the cost of aggressive war. Hamilton saw, on the contrary, that majorities can be as belligerent as monarchs, clamoring for war not forced by foes.

I agree.

War, the body politic and democracy featured in my latest lecture in the Origins series tonight. I am spending 10 evenings this term tracing the genealogy of modernity back through the last 45,000 years.

[This is what I have to offer on the origins of war.](#)

War arrives in the late third millennium in the Near East and then in Europe when a

new and gendered Bronze Age class ideology of the warrior (brilliantly dealt with in Kristian Kristiansen and Thomas Larsson's forthcoming book "The Long Journey: Symbolic Transmission and Social Transformation in Bronze Age Europe") is combined with monarchic sovereignty, and the administrative and management technologies of Mumford's megamachine (a key factor also in Michael Mann's historical sociology of power).

It became quite clear to me when I was researching the early Greek city states – they could not be explained by some historical quirk of ancient Greek genius that managed to invent western urbanism and civilization. What I found happening in the likes of the precocious state of Corinth was a reconfiguration of the experiences and pleasures of different male subcultures in new architectures and urban spaces, new lifestyles – displays of new material wealth and political extension out from the local polity (traded goods and connection abroad). The invention of the ancient Greek body politic (and later democracy) was about the way different groups of men defined themselves through the way they ate, walked down the street, fought together on a field outside the city on a summer afternoon, talked in political assembly. And yes, this was about class, property, law, sovereignty – and war.



Pericles of Athens – champion of democracy in the Athenian Empire of the 5th Century BCE

Back then to democracy. It is, as ever, a matter of definitions and categories.

What constitutes a democracy? It is a form of the body politic deeply indebted to the bronze age legacy of the warrior elite. Athenian democracy of the fifth century has so often been held up as a paradigm of direct and egalitarian democracy – direct rule of the demos, the people. But, of course, the demos were only a minority of male adult citizens, a propertied citizen militia, an extended oligarchy. The Athenian Empire, extension of a league of independent city states opposed to an eastern Persian threat, instituted democracy wherever it could, with brutal efficacy, not hesitating to apply ruthless rationality in justifying the massacre of whole populations for the sake of the democratic state. They also used the profit of imperial democracy to build the Acropolis and invent western culture – a heroic cultural achievement.

Genealogically war and the democratic body politic have the same origins. Which is not to say that it always has to be so. We do, after all, learn from history – nothing has to continue to happen as it always has. Why? Precisely because it has already happened before.

This is the irony of counterfactual history. [\[Link\]](#).