

Thomas More's *Utopia* bears a striking resemblance to the United States in many ways—all of them bad

On Utopian Foreign Policy

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The most distinctive fact about our politics is the theoretical abolition of war. This is the surest sign of modernity: the belief that existential wars are impossible. Neither the American people nor the press and politicians fear a coming war, so we do not conduct our politics in expectation of and preparation for it. War was previously assumed to be inevitable, a question of when, not if, and therefore a very important political concern, but we now believe only in very attenuated wars—and assume we ourselves would never be in danger. This is true not just in America but nearly everywhere in the liberal West.

The world is at peace, so far as we're concerned, but the American military seems to be ever at war: principally in various Middle East countries, in the past two decades, but also in several African countries. The public ignores these conflicts. We now seem to believe even the war in Afghanistan is over, although we still have troops there, involved in killing and dying in the name of America—that is, at war. We the people are

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at peace, as though our wars were someone else's problems, without consequences for ourselves. Instead of war, our foreign policy is primarily peace management, from foreign aid to trade policy, all the way to international organizations that attempt to reduce conflicts between sovereign regimes to mutually agreeable policies of an administrative character.

We are uniquely beset by the contradictions of warring pacifism, so it would be useful to compare our situation to an intellectual rather than to a historical example. Behold Thomas More's *Utopia*, the very picture of an egalitarian society ruled administratively by experts whose claim to legitimacy is their wisdom—that looks strikingly like America in 2019, doesn't it? *Utopia*, too, is incredibly wealthy and isolated from other regimes by a sea. But more striking still is Utopian foreign policy, based on the same contradiction we see in ourselves: an aversion to having any Utopian citizen die in war mixed with a compulsion to go to war and to intervene in the affairs of just about every neighboring regime pretty much at all times.

Utopia, like America, is incredibly wealthy through commerce. The Utopians are productive beyond their own needs. Of their superabundance, one seventh is devoted to foreign aid for the poor of other countries, which is the first way they make themselves needed. They also leave the money they make in foreign countries there, as a bank to be used by the locals. Perhaps the IMF, WTO, and World Bank, or the Marshall Plan after World War II, are our equivalents of such practices, which aim to make allies of foreigners by supplying their needs. It is an open question whether this makes foreign regimes less needy in the long term, but the Utopians have many friends among them because of the political and economic help they offer, just as we do. Thus, they have achieved peace.

The Utopians' pacifism is derived from

their religion, an egalitarian hedonism defended with moral arguments: if we are supposed to love our neighbors like ourselves, surely we have to love ourselves first; and before helping others, we have to be ourselves happy. The Utopians think the pleasant life natural, and their orderly wealth means they can all enjoy it. Together with this natural theology—call it the Prosperity Gospel—they have a civil theology: they believe they have immortal souls and that there's a judgment after death, but they do not have other religious doctrines, for these suffice to ground justice. People thus avoid a life of crime but do not care to save their souls or start sectarian conflicts.

More teaches that very bad consequences can flow from this pacifism. After the virtue and happiness of the Utopians are discussed, slaves are mentioned, and they do all the dirty work. The poor and criminals of other countries seek to escape to a better fate by becoming Utopian slaves, which of course puts a different color on Emma Lazarus's famous sonnet. But the children of slaves are free, being held blameless for their parents' transgressions, as in America. Utopian citizens may themselves be enslaved if they break laws, and they are treated the worst in slavery because they are judged to have thrown away a great opportunity. Here, too, we see some similarity—for many of our many millions of felons have it worse than immigrants. Consequently, we do not include everyone in our hedonistic peace.

Nevertheless, insistence on the pleasures of peaceful prosperity would not seem to justify war making or allow for a deep state that concerns itself with all the dark arts of politics. But a people so dedicated to self-interest rightly understood might come to understand themselves in an apolitical way, and a deep state would then be necessary to maintain popular tranquility and, More suggests, would be even more necessary for the few Utopians who have unquenchable

ambitions and want to rule. Popular indifference to politics and the eagerness of a few to rule combine to create a government uniquely suited to secrecy in foreign policy, whose power goes unquestioned, being mostly invisible.

To understand how pacifists might turn to war, consider the Utopian idea of medicine. This is a science they hold in high esteem, although they typically enjoy good health and take great care of the sick. Yet those who suffer from chronic pain and incurable diseases are encouraged by everyone to commit suicide, both to put an end to the suffering and because they are a burden to Utopia. No one is compelled, however. This is plausible, if not prophetic, for we do something similar in parts of America, too. Utopian pacifism is ruthless to those who don't fit in its picture of the sweet life.

Utopians are almost entirely unable to deal with people unlike themselves, so they foster a politics that seeks to destroy any threat that might arise from difference. More learned this lesson from Plato, whose *Republic* supplies the model and the wisdom for *Utopia*. In that dialogue, Socrates explains how a perfect city could dispose of any enemy by exploiting its internal divisions rooted in inequality between the few and the many. To avoid dangerous wars and to preserve the tranquility of the perfect city, the rulers would have to cause civil wars in other cities and favor factions according to their own interests.

Utopian women and men train together for war, just like in Plato's *Republic*, which, again, prophesied American practice. But in his discussion of military discipline, More suggests there is a considerable difference between Utopian pacifism, which would primarily justify defensive wars, and the reality of Utopian foreign policy, which includes wars of regime change to rid the world of tyrannies; also gunboat diplomacy—wars

fought for commerce—and also wars fought for the defense of other countries, if the cause seems just. And then there are even offensive wars on behalf of allies, waged “whether it was right or wrong.”

This, too, resembles American policy since the Progressive era. Utopian equality makes for a strong regime but does nothing to teach or require Utopians to mind their own business. More leaves little doubt that the ultimate consequence of commercial power and a meddling foreign policy is worldwide empire: wherever commerce attaches its interests and attracts some of its more enterprising citizens, inevitably a quarrel will give Utopians an opportunity to exercise their typical combination of self-righteousness and self-interest, and in More's story, they are uncannily successful in every enterprise. Thus, an unjust war waged on behalf of allies served the Utopians only too conveniently in the destruction of a powerful neighbor.

The causes for which Utopians go to war show their self-righteous self-interest, too, for they include the death of any Utopian citizen in a foreign land if the perpetrators are not extradited. Further, Utopians will wage war to obtain something that a foreign regime refuses to give peacefully (like said perpetrators) or otherwise to teach a lesson by terrifying reprisals. Hedonistic pacifism, combined with enough self-regard and contempt for weaker regimes, turns out to be fully capable of bloody slaughters, even though the Utopian way of war emphasizes the use of cunning stratagems to win wars without bloodshed. Then again, the love of cunning and contempt for honor themselves make war more intemperate, for they make it impossible to respect one's enemies.

The Utopians' chief stratagem is to offer rewards for the assassination or apprehension of enemy rulers, something they consider philanthropy—it wins wars while sparing the subjects of an enemy regime. They also encourage faction among enemy

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ruling classes and offer neighboring rulers exorbitant sums of money to fight their enemies. They advertise these rewards as soon as war starts, which implies, of course, that Utopians conduct espionage in and around any place they might wage war, even beyond engaging in the diplomatic work needed to make such quick and decisive action possible.

It is illegal for the American government to commission such assassinations, but at least in the past it is rumored to have happened. The more important similarity is the espionage, which now seems to dominate American warfare to an unprecedented extent, while unelected CIA directors are relied on to legitimize reasons for going to war to the American public. Of course, it is only after America changed significantly in the direction of more war that we have come to see how big the deep state that fosters domestic tranquility is. The transformation of national security bureaucracies to include domestic surveillance on a scale that is hard even to guess at would not have been possible without the previous bloating of the role of intelligence in war, usurping political deliberation and public opinion.

As in America, in Utopia the army sent off to fight in foreign countries is small and strictly voluntary. Utopians make far more use of mercenaries, however. Another similarity is the use of war technology, which, given scientific progress, would inevitably become as important for them as it is for us, again empowering the state relative to the society. Indeed, it is worth considering whether drones and mercenaries are

the future of American warfare, for that would separate the people from war-making decisions—rendering them administrative acts—just like they are now separated from the fighting of wars.

In More's book, everything is exaggerated—for clarity, but also to suggest the consequences of hedonistic pacifism. Domestic tranquility dispels belief in the tragic character of political affairs, makes people blindly arrogant, and encourages rulers to use their power extravagantly in wars where abstract principle overrules considerations of prudence, necessity, and the wisdom of minding one's own business.

For all our Utopian foreign policy, we have neither the wealth nor the domestic political unity of Utopia. We badly need a theoretical chastisement, after almost two decades of war, because the practical chastisement of elections (or the national trauma of Vietnam) has not taught us to be mindful of our own weaknesses. Instead, we presume invincibility, or at least invulnerability, and adventure across the globe. Even if we cannot see ourselves through our enemies' eyes, for we concede them no worth or even serious acknowledgement of their existence—we must at least see ourselves through the eyes of friendly critics. Let's learn from More and prepare for the possibility that progress toward Utopia is limited, for if the tragic world returns, where war ruins even prosperous and decent peoples, great prudence will be called for in the future. 📖