

Democracies Don't Start Wars. But U.S. Democrats Do.

By [Philip Giraldi](#)

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It may have been President Bill Clinton who once justified his wrecking of the Balkans by observing that liberal interventionism to bring about regime change is a good thing because "Democracies don't start wars with other democracies." Or it might have been George W. Bush talking about Iraq or even Barack Obama justifying his destruction of Libya or his interventions relating to Syria and Ukraine. The principle is the same when the world's only superpower decides to throw its weight around.

The idea that pluralistic democracies are somehow less inclined to go to war has in fact been around for a couple of hundred years and was first elaborated by Immanuel Kant in an essay entitled "Perpetual Peace" that was published in 1795. Kant may have been engaging in some tongue in cheek as the French relatively liberal republic, the "Directory," was at that time preparing to invade Italy to spread the revolution. The presumption that "democracies" are somehow more pacific than other forms of government is based on the principle that it is in theory more difficult to convince an entire nation of the desirability of initiating armed conflict compared to what happens in a monarchy where only one man or woman has to be persuaded.

The American Revolution, which preceded Kant, was clearly not fought on the principle that kings are prone to start wars while republics are not, and, indeed, the "republican" United States has nearly always been engaged in what most observers would consider to be wars throughout its history. And a review of the history of the European wars of the past two hundred years suggests that it is also overly simple to suggest that democracies eschew fighting each other. There are, after all, many different kinds of governments, most with constitutions, many of which are quite politically liberal even if they are headed by a monarch or oligarchy. They have found themselves on different sides in the conflicts that have troubled Europe since the time of Napoleon.

And wars are often popular, witness the lines of enthusiastic young men lining up to enlist when the Triple Entente took on the Germans and Austrians to begin the First World War. So, war might be less likely among established democracies, but it should be conceded that the same national interests that drive a dictatorship can equally impact on a more pluralistic form of government, particularly if the media "the territory of lies" is in on the game. One recalls how the Hearst newspaper chain created the false narrative that resulted in the U.S.'s first great overseas imperial venture, the Spanish-American War. More recently, the mainstream media in the United States has supported the disastrous invasion of Iraq, the destabilization of Syria, and the regime change in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Libya.

So now we Americans have the ultimate liberal democratic regime about to resume power, possibly with a majority in both houses of Congress to back up the presidency. But something is missing in that the campaigning Democrats never talked about a peace dividend, and now that they are returning the airwaves are notable for Senators like Mark Warner asking if the alleged Russian hacking of U.S. computers is an “act of war?” Senator Dick Durbin has no doubts on the issue, having declared it “virtually a declaration of war.” And Joe Biden appears to be on board, [considering punishment](#) for Moscow. Are we about to experience Russiagate all over? In fact, belligerency is not unique to Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo. War is in the air, and large majority of the Democratic Party recently voted for the pork-bloated National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), endorsing a policy of U.S. global military dominance for the foreseeable future. If you are an American who would like to see national health insurance, a large majority among Democrats, forget about it!

But more to the point, the Democrats have a worse track record than do the Republicans when it comes to starting unnecessary wars. Donald Trump made the point of denouncing “stupid wars” when he was running for office and has returned to that theme also in the past several weeks, though he did little enough to practice what he preached until it was too late and too little. Clinton notoriously intervened in the Balkans and bombed a pharmaceuticals factory in Sudan and a cluster of tents in Afghanistan to draw attention away from his affair with Monica Lewinsky. His secretary of State Madeleine Albright thought the death of 500,000 Iraqi children due to U.S. sanctions was “worth it.” Barack Obama tried to destroy Syria, interfered in Ukraine and succeeded in turning Libya into an ungovernable mess while compiling a “kill list” and assassinating U.S. citizens overseas using drones.

If you want to go back farther, Woodrow Wilson involved the U.S. in World War One while Franklin D. Roosevelt connived at America’s entry into the Second World War. FDR’s successor Harry Truman dropped two atomic bombs on civilian targets in Japan, killing as many as 200,000. Japan was preparing to surrender, which was known to the White House and Pentagon, making the first use of nuclear weapons completely unnecessary and one might call it a “war crime.” Truman also got involved in Korea and John F. Kennedy started the intervention in Vietnam, though there are indications that he was planning to withdraw from it when he was killed. The only Democratic president who failed to start one or more wars was the much-denigrated Jimmy Carter.

So, it is Joe Biden’s turn at the wheel. One has to question the philosophy of government that he brings with him as he has never found a war that he didn’t support and several of his cabinet choices are undeniably hardliners on what they refer to as national security. The lobbies are also putting pressure on Biden to do the “right thing,” which for them is to continue an interventionist foreign policy. The Israeli connected Foundation for the Defense Democracies (FDD) has not surprisingly issued a collection of essays that carries the title “Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad.” If one had to bet at this point “defending forward” will be what the Biden Administration is all about. And oh, by the way, as democracies don’t go to war with democracies, it will only be the designated bad guys who will be on the receiving end of America’s military might. Or at least that is how the tale will be told.

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Philip M. Giraldi, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Council for the National Interest, a 501(c)3 tax deductible educational foundation (Federal ID Number #52-1739023) that seeks a more interests-based U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Website is <https://councilforthenationalinterest.org> address is P.O. Box 2157, Purcellville VA 20134 and its email is inform@cnionline.org. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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