

A Skeptical View of World War II

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To understand history we must first unlearn it. Or, more accurately, we must unlearn canonized history. That is certainly the case if we are to understand U.S. entry into World War II—the last “good war” the United States fought; perhaps the only war not yet subjected fully to the revision of opinion that has been the lot of other contemporary wars. Bruce Russett’s *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of the U.S. Entry Into World War II* takes us a long way in examining critically whether U.S. entry into that war was justified, yet it received much less attention than it deserved when it appeared in 1972.

Russett’s answer to the question of whether U.S. participation was justified deserves one full quotation:

American participation in World War II had very little effect on the essential *structure* of international politics thereafter, and probably did little either to advance the material welfare of most Americans or to make the nation secure from foreign military threats. . . . In fact, most Americans probably would have been no worse off, and possibly a little better, if the United States had never become a belligerent. Russia replaced Germany as the great threat to European security, and Japan, despite its territorial losses, is once more a major power. The war was not clearly a mistake as most of us now consider the Vietnam war to have been. Yet it may well have been an unnecessary war that did little for us and that we need not have fought.

Russett’s argument requires that we accept the notion that formal entry into war is not the first but the last act. Entry into war is not a discrete event

but the end product of a process of escalation that led to it. So perceived, the events of December, 1941, lose the sharpness with which they are usually endowed. Had the United States not taken steps X, Y, and Z, the events of that fateful month might not have occurred. Russett’s argument thus requires retrospective speculation, but of an informed and sensible sort.

According to Russett U.S. entry into the war in Europe was unnecessary because the German offensive had been so slowed by the end of 1941 that the prospects of a German victory were distant. Hitler had lost the Battle of Britain and, unlike Napoleon, failed to capture Moscow before winter. Thus a likely outcome of the war—to take the fullest advantage of hindsight, of course—was a stalemate, after years of mutual exhaustion. Russett does note that this stalemate, this standoff among the British, German, and Soviet empires would probably have been an unstable one and conducive to additional war-making.

The alternative Russett proposes to U.S. entry into the war in Europe is one of pro-Allied nonbelligerency—pro-Allied to prevent a German victory in Europe and to insure the continuation of the British war effort. It would have taken the form of U.S. military rearmament, a Selective Service Act, Lend Lease, etc. Such acts would have been politically possible too, Russett asserts, because the public opinion polls of the time showed broad support for aid to Britain.

U.S. entry into the war in Asia? Unnecessary as well, says Russett. For one thing, the wars in Europe and Asia were not inextricably linked. Asia’s war had begun sooner and proceeded separately from Europe’s. The Tripartite Pact was loosening in the second half of 1941, a fact known to Allied decision-makers. Russett, building on the arguments of others, states that the Japanese attack on Southeast Asia—and even on Pearl Harbor—is proof neither of an

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unlimited expansionist goal nor of an unlimited capability on Japan's part: It derived from Japan's China ambitions. Moreover, U.S. demands on Japan were as aggressive, if not more so, than U.S. demands on Germany in 1941, escalating from a halt in Japan's advance into China to a withdrawal from all conquered Chinese territory.

A likely outcome of the war in Asia? Another stalemate, according to Russett, because the Chinese had been resisting Japanese encroachments for a long time and the war was going badly for Japan in 1941. The alternative? Once again, pro-Allied non-belligerency, which sought to insure continuation of the Chinese war effort.

I will try to argue that U.S. entry into the war in Europe was justified at the end of 1941, but I will also acknowledge that I am less certain about U.S. entry into the war in Asia. It is a measure of Russett's talent, and the subdued and modest tone of his little book, that my own response has been tempered since reading it. As I see it there is no need here for a massive dig, an archaeological expedition into the origins of the war. My answers will be framed as a response to Russett's arguments, and I will also try to extend the discussion to bear on some contemporary issues.

First, a definition of terms. A state's fundamental international interest is survival, and survival is predicated on preventing the concentration of considerable power in other hands, whatever the goals, ideology, or morality of those who may wield that power. Self-interest is one justification for military intervention and war when another state seeks, by conquest, additional concentration of power. Righteousness is another justification for military intervention and war in an instance where there is extreme oppression of one people by another—genocide, for example. The aggressor state is the one which takes those decisive steps which make war likely and may or may not be the state which first formally declared war.

I choose words which are often employed as pejorative—aggressive, self-interest, righteousness—instead of the more sanitized words for the same thing—national defense and morality—in an attempt to tear off the mask worn by warring governments which seek to transform their aggressions into “defensive wars.” And I want to stiffen the reader's willingness to reject war, even those I myself seek to justify. The terms used here are close to the horror of war.

Now to Russett. The thesis of European stalemate in *No Clear and Present Danger* becomes a viable one



only if we consider the period after the Battle of Stalingrad—many months after December 7, 1941. For the events of '41 are not only open to the inference that a stalemate in Europe was possible but also that a German victory was possible. Germany's early campaigns were impressive certainly, and while the invasion of Britain had been delayed, the Axis had not yet met disaster on the Russian front. So in the second half of 1941 there was room for some uncertainty, but the prospects of German victory were of paramount concern, German domination of all Europe, a conquered Britain and Soviet Union—all were intolerable to any conception of America's "national interest." In the real pre-Stalingrad world of the second half of 1941, one could argue plausibly, prudent U.S. statesmen would, on the grounds of interest, find sufficient cause to take the country into war in Europe.

The justification from righteousness is the clincher, though. Despite the fact that direct knowledge, incontrovertible proof, of German genocidal programs was not yet fully available in 1941, there was certainly sufficient evidence of extreme oppression of people under German rule in Europe. It was a plausible inference that a program of genocide was under way. Thus two justifications for U.S. entry into the war in Europe presented themselves simultaneously—interest and righteousness.

Then there is the matter of the aggressive posture of the United States. Surely Germany believed that the U.S. expected war, and it became almost a matter of chance who would declare war first. (Though, it is true, it was to Germany's advantage to keep the U.S. out of war for as long as possible and so a rational German calculation would be further restraint—but one acknowledges that Hitler was not always known for restraint.) Added to all the other steps taken by the U.S. to support Britain, acts such as the Congressional vote of November, 1941, removing nearly all remaining restrictions of the Neutrality Act (at Roosevelt's request) and permitting American vessels to carry supplies all the way to Britain, were not the acts of a nonbelligerent. Moreover, Germany was aware of President Roosevelt's deliberate deception of the people of the United States in order to build support for his policies. Why would the President lie on matters of peace and war if he did not intend war? So the U.S. posture was aggressive, and the President's deception damnable (in retrospect, a terrible precedent-setter too), but the posture of aggression was justified as deliberate and necessary preparation for a war called for by both interest and righteousness.

Russett's pro-Allied nonbelligerency is not, finally, credible. It is unlikely that Germany would have calmly accepted all the pro-Allied acts that Russett feels were necessary to insure Germany's defeat in Europe. Nor is it as likely as Russett claims that these acts would have been politically possible in

the States. In the period 1939-40 the percentage of the gross national product accounted for by U.S. military expenses was less than a third of the cold war average—the level Russett thinks would have been required for an effective pro-Allied nonbelligerency. Without war, military rearmament and mobilization of this magnitude would not have been possible.

And *pace* Russett, the war *did* much to change international politics; its effects *were* more than limited. The U.S. emerged as the preeminent world power. Peace did come to Europe, an impossibility under the stalemated outcome scenario. Large parts of the world were opened to both trade and investment, not only because of the Axis defeat but also because of the weakened condition of America's colonialist allies. Our own economy was rescued finally from the Depression of the 1930's. So changes there were in politics, and in economics (Russett says little about this), and a far different international system, one more beneficial to the United States than Russett's alternative, did indeed emerge.

(Of course, U.S. hegemony over much of the world has had terrible costs—*vide* Vietnam—for both the world and the United States. But this gets us into another kind of argument, and it is for others, less Americanized than I, to decide whether a U.S. defeat in World War II would have been better for all parties in the longer run.)

The U.S. spent lives and wealth and natural resources in the war, but these were far less than the costs incurred by others, and probably no less than would have been incurred if the United States had entered into war with Germany at some other time. These costs cannot be brushed aside, but they seem to be outweighed by the benefits of preventing German destruction of the country's political system.

War with Asia was a different matter. Here Russett's argument about Japanese intentions and capabilities and the separation of the war from the European war makes a persuasive case. There was nothing inevitable about America's unwillingness to recognize in the early 1940's that the Japanese aggression against China had limited objectives, for there was evidence to support that view, evidence that was rejected. In the 1950's the U.S. did recognize that the Chinese occupation of Tibet, for example, had limited objectives; and in 1962 the U.S. recognized that the Chinese aggression against India had limited objectives too. Two correct assessments in Asia in these two later cases, a possibly mistaken and inaccurate decision in the early 1940's.

While stalemate in Europe appears an imprudent prediction for 1941, stalemate in Asia appears a perfectly conceivable outcome for that year: The Chinese had, in fact, been resisting effectively; nonbelligerency was a feasible policy for the U.S. in Asia and would not have precluded sending massive

aid to China. The "righteousness" justification for entry could not be invoked in the Japanese case in a way comparable to the European case—neither in retrospect nor in 1941. The "bad" kind of righteousness was probably invoked here, though, and possibly far more than in the European case: as holy war against un-Christian "darker" people, "fanatical and sinful."

But the argument against entry into the war in Asia is not clear-cut. There was no guarantee of a stalemate, nor would the U.S. have found moral satisfaction in abetting incessant war. Japanese victory was possible and would have turned a militaristic Japan into a powerful world force. If today's Japan included all of China, that concentration of power, not to mention the possibility of its extension through further conquests, would be a considerable threat to United States interests.

In sum, then, the case for U.S. entry into the war in Asia cannot be solidly made on grounds either of interest or of righteousness, and interest here includes the lives and wealth lost in that field of war.

But there was sufficient ambiguity for an argument for U.S. entry into the war in Asia to retain some plausibility. By defeating Japan the U.S. did increase its hegemony in Asia and prevented the consolidation of a single China-Japan superpower. Not a likely outcome in 1941, but a possible one. The justifiability of U.S. entry into the Asian war remains, to my mind, unsettled.

I have argued briefly that one can come to different judgments concerning U.S. entry into World War II in Europe and in Asia. I have suggested that the U.S. posture toward both Germany and Japan, but especially the latter, can be termed aggressive; that interest and righteousness were joined to justify U.S. entry into the war in Europe; and that the justification of U.S. entry into war in Asia on grounds of interest and righteousness is more problematical, although one can still argue plausibly that it was in the American interest.

My argument can be generalized to suggest that engagement in an aggressive war (U.S. entry into the war in Europe) can be justified if, *but only if*, interest and righteousness are joined. This is a concept not currently accepted by either the United Nations Charter or most ethical thinking on war and peace. The generalized argument I have made does not result, however, in an endlessly hawkish outcome. The criteria I have sketched—the simul-

taneous presence of interest and righteousness—are difficult criteria to meet. By these standards U.S. military intervention in Nigeria/Biafra, Rwanda, Burundi, or South Africa would not have been justified, for the case for U.S. interest is weak. Even if one accepts virtually all cold war assumptions of what defines national interest, the military interventions in the Dominican Republic and in Lebanon were not justified, for here the case for righteousness was weak. (To my mind, the case for interest was weak too.) There would have been no Vietnam.

A justifiable war is rare, and so it ought to be. An aggressive war, even a justified aggressive war, ought to be scrutinized with great care. But when such wars are conducted they do serve to stop the commission of terrible crimes and to further the national interest; we, and the rest of the world, have most often been the better for them. The United Nations Charter, the churches, and many other groupings have made proper and necessary efforts to curtail war, but all have crusaded against aggressive war as a peculiarly indefensible type of war. The only visible result has been the spread of hypocrisy, the condition in which every war is called "defensive," even when it plainly is not. These efforts have turned analysis and criticism—yes, and outrage—away from the core of the problem: whether a particular war was or was not justified.

My remarks here are limited to the nonnuclear case, for nuclear war of any sort raises a far more difficult and complex set of questions. But the wars the world has experienced, with one tragic exception, do fit the terms of the argument. Moreover, I have said nothing about the conduct of war. In the case of U.S. conduct in World War II, and in other wars, it can well be argued that much injustice was committed. The U.S. behaved more reprehensively in Asia than in Europe, and for this reason too one may—with hindsight—strengthen the case against participation in the war in Asia. Thus a complete argument is not yet at hand, but some of it is. The kernel of the question is whether some wars, specifically World War II, can be justified. I have tried to give a discriminating answer to the issue of U.S. entry into that war, and I have also tried to generalize these propositions to justify other wars that under prevailing international norms would stand condemned. I have tried, in sum, to do two things at once: to save war for justice, and to limit war further.