

Democracy and War: Reply

— ◆ —

R. J. RUMMEL

I write here in response to Ted Galen Carpenter's negative review (*The Independent Review* 2 [Winter 1998]) of my book *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1997).

In that book I bring to bear all the published systematic quantitative and historical evidence I could find and have generated on five propositions about the inverse relationship between democracy and collective violence. The propositions are that democracies (1) don't make war on each other, (2) limit bilateral violence, (3) are least warlike, (4) are most internally peaceful, and (5) don't murder their own citizens. These overwhelmingly supported propositions led me to a concluding and summary proposition: democracy is a method of nonviolence.

But empirical findings, no matter how sophisticated, are insufficient unless supported by a consistent theory. Therefore, I devoted about half the book to presenting alternative theories for explaining the nonviolent nature of democracy, concluding that the best way of understanding it is in relation to the spontaneous society that freedom (liberal democracy) creates. This idea is similar to F. A. Hayek's notion of a spontaneous order, described in his three-volume work *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, 1976, 1979) and is well known to libertarians. It is a free market writ large: of the economy, society, and politics within an overarching legal framework of civil liberties and political rights. A spontaneous society creates cross-pressures and an exchange culture in which negotiation, compromise, and tolerance reduce the tendency toward violence found in more hierarchically organized societies. Moreover, the natural bonds and linkages that develop between such societies (e.g., trade, social, and cultural exchanges, treaties), and the perception

R. J. Rummel, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Hawaii, was a finalist for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996. His web site is <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~rummel/>.

The Independent Review, v.III, n.I, Summer 1998, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 1998, pp. 103–108

that the other society is like one's own, favoring negotiation and compromise, reduces the possibility of violence between them.

Now for Carpenter's review.

1. *Rummel's "core thesis" is that democracies do not make war on each other* (p. 437). No, the core thesis, as indicated by the title of the book, is that power kills. This thesis sums up all five of the book's propositions, whereas Carpenter mistakenly focused his review on only one of them.

I'm perplexed that he completely ignores the most important propositions and evidence of the book, which show that democracies are most internally peaceful and don't murder their own citizens. If the importance of each proposition is understood in terms of the number of people killed in the indicated violence (and the resulting or correlative misery), then it is critical that far more people are killed in domestic collective violence than in international wars. For example, millions more people were killed in the Teiping Rebellion in China alone than died in battle in World War I and World War II. In our century, governments have murdered about four times the number killed in combat in all the domestic and foreign wars. Stalin alone is responsible for the murder of millions more than the combat deaths of both world wars together. Therefore, even if *Power Kills* dealt only with domestic violence and democide (genocide and mass murder), the findings would be an incredible testament for freedom, because they show that promoting democratic freedom will eliminate or reduce to a minimum by far the largest category of deaths from collective violence.

2. *Overall, Rummel "fails to provide the necessary evidence"* (p. 437). I don't understand what Carpenter means by evidence. To me evidence for a general hypothesis, such as "A does not do B," comprises all, or an appropriate sample of, the cases in which A does or does not do B over the relevant time period, the significance (possible randomness) of the cases, the historical context and understanding of the cases, and the findings on the same or similar hypotheses by other researchers and scholars. These are the sorts of evidence I brought to bear on the five hypotheses (propositions). The data I drew on, mine and those of others, cover all wars, going back to the ancient Greeks, in which democracies may have been involved; and for democide in this century, all democide and regimes. Moreover, my colleagues and I have subjected these data to both traditional and quantitative analyses. The overall result is that different investigators with different data collected under different definitions of democide, violence, war, and democracy and applying different methodologies verified the five propositions.

Perhaps Carpenter means the kind of evidence that would satisfy a historian. But I did review such evidence elsewhere and referenced a number of historical and qualitative studies, as listed for criticism 6 considered below. I also referenced the historical analyses of others, such as that of the historian Spencer Weart (*Never at War* [New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming]), who scoured written ancient and modern

historical records to find a case in which democracies clearly made war on each other, including those proposed by Carpenter, and found none.

In sum, no other general propositions of international relations and foreign policy have been so widely tested and thoroughly supported by empirical analysis. Indeed, as a result, some are now asserting that the lack of war between democracies is an iron law of international relations, so well established that further research should focus on democratization. In fact, one publisher's reader recommended that my book not be published because it contained nothing new.

3. *Rummel fails to consider alternative explanations or factors.* Neither do I understand this criticism. Consider some of the alternative explanations and factors that I or those I cited tested for with respect to one or another of the five propositions: geographic distance or size, small number of democracies, economic development, culture, power parity or lack thereof, ideology or religion in general and specific ideologies and religions in particular (e.g., communism, Islam, Christianity), war or revolution (possibly accounting for democide), population density, resources, education, and technology (a factor Carpenter believes important), among others. I think that my colleagues and I have covered the most popular alternative explanations and factors, even those that most analysts consider only remotely possible.

I have also considered alternative theories, including those that account for sociopolitical violence by social distances, in-group perception, cross-pressures, economic forces, and concomitant values as well as those that emphasize the natural peacefulness of people, political bonds and interests, and the role of power. Yet Carpenter writes that I am "oblivious to or casually dismissive of alternative explanations" (p. 437).

4. *Rummel fails to consider cases of war between democracies.* Those mentioned are the American Civil War, the Boer War, and World War I. These and other possible cases have been carefully considered and dismissed by my colleagues, such as Bruce Russett in *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), James Lee Ray in *Democracy and International Conflict* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), and the aforementioned Spencer Weart. Space does not allow a consideration of all these possible exceptions, but let me focus on the war between Germany and the democracies that Carpenter writes "tends to give democratic-peace theorists intellectual indigestion" (p. 439). In my view, this possible counterexample is easily disposed of. Consider: the Chancellor of Germany served at the whim of the Kaiser, by whom he was appointed and dismissed. Moreover, the Kaiser had considerable power over foreign affairs, and the army was effectively independent from control by the democratically elected Reichstag. For all practical purposes, in foreign policy Germany was autocratic, without a democratic leash, and thus World War I hardly contradicts the proposition that democracies don't war on each other.

5. *Rummel does not consider cases where democracies almost went to war.* Carpenter mentions several such cases and focuses on the 1898 Fashoda Incident, a war scare between France and Great Britain over control of the Nile River. But note that negotiation between both sides was respectful and straightforward, neither side seeking to end up dominant; and both sides thought they could count on the other side to be reasonable. Indeed, in his book (chap. 13) Weart quotes a French diplomat as saying that France assumed “England would never initiate hostilities.” Rather than raising questions about the proposition that democracies don’t make war on each other, this crisis supports it by illustrating why war crises do not escalate to war among democracies.

6. *Rummel robotically invokes statistical data* (p. 438). What? Should I not throw a wide net for statistical evidence? Or organize such evidence by proposition, dates, and methods? This criticism is a strange one for a libertarian, because so many libertarian policy recommendations are based on economic statistical evidence. In any event, the “robotically” presented systematic evidence shows that power kills.

The context for this criticism is Carpenter’s discussion of incidents such as Fashoda and the claim that I should have engaged these cases. But a book can cover in depth only so much; gaps must be filled by reference to other work. Carpenter ignores that on the most important democide proposition I also did extensive historical and qualitative analyses. In *Death By Government* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1994), I wrote case studies of each of fourteen cases in which a regime murdered at least one million people. I also wrote separate histories of the Soviet democide (*Lethal Politics* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1990]), Chinese democides (*China’s Bloody Century* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1991]), and that by Nazi Germany (*Democide* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993]). Moreover, I presented all the democide estimates, their sources and qualifications, and the qualitative considerations underlying them in my *Statistics of Democide* (Charlottesville: Center of National Security Law, Law School, University of Virginia, 1997). On the war propositions, I wrote five volumes of *Understanding Conflict and War* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1975–1981). In sum, far from robotically invoking statistical data, I have immersed myself deeply in historical and qualitative analyses before coming to my conclusions.

7. *Rummel assumes that correlation means causation* (pp. 438–39). This invocation of Statistics 101 misses the essence of the results. Fundamentally, the theory, described earlier, led to hypotheses that were then tested and retested, and the results were replicated by others. The theory dominates, the five hypotheses (propositions) flow from it, and the hypotheses have been extensively tested empirically, qualitatively, and historically.

8. *Rummel gives a “vague and slippery treatment” of democracy* (p. 440). This criticism is yet another I do not understand. I have tried to define democracy carefully,

for without a precise definition I could not collect data on democracy or understand the results of my analysis. Moreover, in chapter 8 ("What Is to Be Explained") I extensively detail the meaning and nature of democracy, carefully delineating it from authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and placing the three types of regimes within the space of a political triangle that encompasses the variation among them. Moreover, as noted in the book, this analysis is informed by several factor analyses of political variables I carried out in *Statistics of Democide* and elsewhere.

Carpenter is most concerned about my applying a contemporary definition of democracy to previous centuries. The problem here is the historical limitation on equal rights and the franchise, for instance, before women achieved equal rights or slavery was eliminated. For previous centuries the definition of democracy was loosened to include the criterion of at least two-thirds of the males having equal rights (as long as the lower classes were not excluded) while the other requirements were maintained, such as open competitive elections. Consider, first, that democracies so defined in previous centuries, such as the United States in 1800 and democratic classical Athens, saw themselves as democratic, called themselves democratic, and were perceived by other nations as democratic. Second, even with this looser definition, well-established democracies so defined still did not make war on each other. "Well established" means that a regime had been democratic long enough to have become stable and for democratic practices to have become established.

The fundamental question about any definition is: does it work? Does it define something in reality that systematically predicts something else? If we have defined an x such that its value regularly predicts the value of y , and our theory explains this relationship, then that definition of x is a useful and important one. Both my definition of contemporary democracies and the limited definition of earlier democracies allow a prediction of continuous peace (nonwar) between the nations so defined. If one does not agree that these nations are democracies, fine. Call them x -cracies. We then can say that x -cracies do not make war on each other. And by universalizing x -cracies we can expect an end to war.

9. Rummel ignores conflicting evidence, such as that the United States carried out covert action against other nations, even democracies (p. 440). Covert action is not war (military action) and is therefore irrelevant to the propositions. But Carpenter did catch me in a misstatement about a world of democracies eliminating the need for secret services. I had in mind covert violence against hostile nations, but my statement does not come through that way. There would be a place for spies in a democratic world, just as there is a place for corporate spies in a free market. But in such a world hostile enemies would be absent, the expectation of war gone, and thus a secret war unnecessary.

But what about past American covert action? This occurred during the Cold War as part of the largely successful policy to contain communism, particularly Soviet power.

Mistakes were made, actions were taken that in hindsight embarrass democrats. Even then, however, there was no military action between democracies.

Still, a deeper explanation may be advanced. Democracies are not monolithic; they comprise many agencies, some of which operate in secrecy and are really totalitarian subsystems connected only at the top to democratic processes. The military, especially in wartime, and the secret services, such as the CIA, are examples. These nearly isolated islands of power operate as democratic theory would lead us to expect. Outside of the democratic sunshine and processes, they take actions that, were they subject to democratic scrutiny, would be forbidden. The solution to this problem is more sunshine and greater democratic control.

10. *Rummel ignores that the peace among democracies since World War II may be due to a "powerful totalitarian threat"* (p. 441). The data are not limited to the post-war period. As mentioned, other tests have been done for different years, including 1816 through 1960. It may be true that the Cold War has accounted for the particular lack of war between democracies since World War II, but what about the other periods? Further, set aside the statistics and consider Europe, the historical cauldron of war, and what has happened there since the end of the Cold War. Unity, not hostility, has continued to grow. And, incredibly, those old enemies, France and Germany, have even considered forming a common army. Moreover, having become democratic, the former enemy states of Eastern Europe have sought integration into a united Europe.

11. And finally Carpenter's conclusion: *"Rummel makes an array of extraordinary claims, but he ultimately fails to prove his case"* (p. 441). But Carpenter ignores most of the book and concentrates on the proposition that democracies do not make war on each other. The title of his review, "Democracy and War," should have been "Power Kills." Moreover, even with respect to the one proposition on which he focused, his criticisms do not make sense, are incorrect, or are irrelevant, as I have shown here.

I would have thought that Carpenter, a vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, would be overjoyed by what I have shown about freedom. Not only does freedom promote greater economic and social welfare and happiness, as libertarians believe, but it also promotes life and security. To the best of our knowledge, its universalization would end war and virtually eliminate other forms of collective violence, particularly the most pervasive and greatest cause of violent death—democide. Wielders of unchecked political power have killed people by the hundreds of millions. Freedom would have saved nearly all of them and averted the attendant suffering and misery.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



"The Independent Review does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value."

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper's*

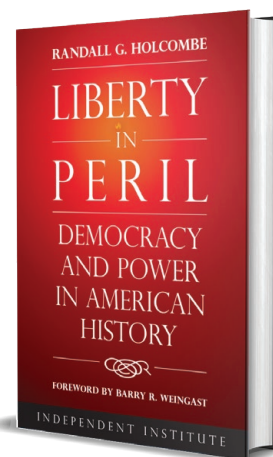
"The Independent Review is excellent."

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [*The Independent Review*](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [*The Independent Review*](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today's most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

