

# Democracy and War: Rejoinder

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TED GALEN CARPENTER

**P**rofessor Rummel continues his tradition of creative historical revisionism. Given the amount of space he devoted to the peaceful-democracies thesis in his book, it is misleading—at the very least—for him now to argue that that was merely one of five propositions. It is by far the most prominent theme of his book; unfortunately, it is also the weakest.

Rummel's other objections are no more compelling. He invokes the work of yet another historian to "prove" that democracies never make war on each other. That invocation does little to remedy one of the more intractable problems with the democratic-peace theory: so much of the thesis depends on arbitrary coding decisions by the analysts involved. Whenever such scholars do not ignore the hard cases—as Rummel did repeatedly in *Power Kills*—they massage the evidence until it supports the conclusion that at least one of the parties to a conflict was not a real democracy. It is a safe bet that if war ever erupts between Greece and Turkey, Rummel and his colleagues will discover that one or both regimes failed to meet their purity test for being "well-established" democracies—a vacuous standard that can mean anything the writers want it to mean.

Nowhere is the arbitrary quality of coding decisions more evident than in Rummel's latest comments about Wilhelmine Germany. He notes that 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."

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**Ted Galen Carpenter** is Vice President, Defense and Foreign Policy Studies, at the Cato Institute.

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That observation is revealing in several respects. First, Rummel appears to be conceding that in domestic policy Germany *was* democratic—which raises the interesting question of why such democratic values and institutions did not carry over into the arena of foreign policy. Second, “for all practical purposes” the British and French governments also conducted foreign affairs as a policy fiefdom virtually immune from parliamentary input, much less control. Indeed, that situation elicited a complaint voiced frequently and loudly by members of parliament in both countries. One also wonders what Rummel would say about President Harry Truman’s decision to send U.S. troops to wage the Korean War without even making the pretense of seeking congressional authorization. Where was the “democratic leash” in that case? Or perhaps the United States wasn’t a “well-established” democracy in 1950.

The weakest portion of Rummel’s reply, however, is his attempt to deal with the embarrassing point that during the Cold War the United States government overthrew democratic regimes in other countries. Rummel attaches great importance to the idea that covert action is not war—something that will come as a tremendous comfort to the people of Iran, Guatemala, and other countries that were saddled with thuggish dictatorships courtesy of Washington’s foreign policy. The point that Rummel studiously ignores is that U.S. policy exhibited extreme hostility to democratic regimes that were not deemed “friendly” to the United States. Indeed, the hostility was sufficient to sustain the objective of extinguishing such regimes. Rummel’s flaccid, Clintonesque apologia (“mistakes were made”) does not erase that sizable blemish on his portrait of democratic solidarity.

It would be wonderful if Rummel were correct that universal democracy would bring universal peace. There is too much evidence, however, that democratic states can act—and in many instances have acted—in a violently aggressive manner. It is a sobering reality, for example, that Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century were simultaneously democratic and aggressively expansionist. Rummel’s vision of a world of peaceful democracies is enticing, but like all utopian visions it exists only in the realm of fantasy.

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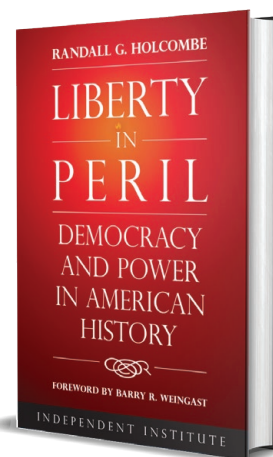
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