

 **Review ESSAY**

**Thérèse Delpech.** *Savage Century: Back to Barbarism.* Trans. George Holoch. 232 pages. \$27.95. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2007. ISBN: 978-0-87003-233-2.

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**A**t the beginning of the twentieth century, some Pollyannas forecast a bright future for humanity. This sunny optimism was inspired by the comforting assumption that the interconnectedness of the world created by revolutionary innovations in transportation and communication such as the railroad, the steamship, and the telegraph, together with the tightly integrated international monetary and trading system centered in London, would consign interstate violence and human aggression to the dustbin of history. Global military conflict would be superseded by global economic competition, which would yield bounteous benefits to all the countries of the world. International economic interdependence would breed cooperation and reduce tensions between nations. Exporters, importers, creditors, and borrowers would oppose belligerent actions of their governments because global war would rip apart the fabric of global economic interchange from which everyone profited.

The slaughter of nine million people during the Great War of 1914-1918 dealt a devastating blow to the illusion of what I have called elsewhere the theory of “the capitalist peace.” But that shattered illusion was immediately succeeded by another. Woodrow Wilson and his supporters rekindled the fond hopes of the prewar optimists by popularizing what political scientists would later label the theory of “the democratic peace:” Since dictatorships are inherently bellicose and democracies inherently pacific, the replacement of autocracies by democracies would usher in an era of peace and stability across the globe.<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War and the Holocaust, the nuclear arms race during the Cold War that threatened the entire planet with annihilation, hot wars in Korea and Vietnam that killed millions of people, and the genocide that slaughtered a third of the Cambodian population in a few years, should have administered the coup de grâce to this resilient faith in human progress. But the end of the Cold War sparked a third wave of optimism that combined the underlying assumptions of the previous two: With the nuclear sword of Damocles that had hung over the world for forty years safely back in its scabbard, the combination of market-driven economic interdependence (globalization) and the spread of democracy would

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<sup>1</sup> As was the case with his advocacy of self-determination, Wilson’s support for democratic political institutions as a panacea for international conflict was restricted to the subject nationalities of the former Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires in Europe. But his rhetoric about democracy and self-determination had powerful repercussions in the non-Western world as well. See Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism.* (2007).

bring peace and prosperity to a world weary of the type of apocalyptic ideological struggles that had caused so much death and destruction in the twentieth century. Then the new century brought with it the ominous threat of nuclear proliferation and the lethal reality of Islamist terrorism, reviving the old anxieties about the future that had temporarily been calmed during the brief interlude between the fall of the Berlin Wall to the fall of the Twin Towers.

Thérèse Delpech's *Savage Century* recounts this sorry state of affairs with brutal honesty and a willingness to delve into the darkest corners of the last century's tragic history.<sup>2</sup> In this no-holds-barred analysis she ruthlessly punctures all of the illusions about human behavior that have inspired so much commentary on international affairs in the Western world. Director of Strategic Affairs at the French Atomic Energy Commission and member of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission, Delpech has had first-hand experience observing the turbulent state of the international order in recent years. A Senior Research Fellow at the Center for International Studies at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques in Paris, she has systematically probed the historical roots of the current challenges we face and has pondered ways of meeting them in light of the disturbing historical precedents she examines. The combination of this practical experience and historical study has yielded in the form of this slim volume a provocative assessment of the evolving international order over the past hundred years, the current state of the world, and various possible scenarios for the future.

She organizes this essay on past, present, and future around three years: 1905, 2005,<sup>3</sup> and 2025. In the first year, harbingers of momentous things to come were everywhere: The Russo-Japanese War lasted much longer and resulted in many more casualties than anyone had anticipated, introduced machine guns and trench warfare, sparked a revolution in Russia and pogroms against Jews, and marked Japan's ascent to the ranks of the great powers. The Kaiser's provocative unveiling of Germany's *Weltpolitik* during the first Moroccan crisis put the world on notice of that country's soaring global aspirations. Theodore Roosevelt's impulsive and effective intervention at the Portsmouth Conference broke the European powers' oligopoly in international diplomacy and revealed America's intention to play an important role in the world. The drafting of what John Keegan has called "the most important official document written in the first decade of the twentieth century and perhaps even in the last hundred years"<sup>4</sup>—the Schlieffen Plan—codified Germany's military strategy to achieve hegemony over the continent, which failed in 1914 but succeeded, *mutatis mutandis*, in 1940. With their heads in the sand, few Europeans "understood the extent to which the events of 1905 followed one another like warnings of the great tragedies to come" (61).

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<sup>2</sup> The twentieth century, and particularly Europe's role in it, has come in for some rough handling by historians in recent years, from Mark Mazower's *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (1998) to Niall Ferguson's *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> The publication date of the original French version of this book.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Delpech, p. 60.

Delpech sees the First World War as the beginning not only of industrial warfare but also of the kind of large-scale killing that would become the hallmark of the twentieth century. She traces a direct line from the relentless slaughter at Verdun, “where mud and men became indistinguishable” (75), to the siege of Leningrad, the battle of Kursk, and the campaign of cannibalism that ravaged the Chinese province of Guanxi during the Cultural Revolution. “The First World War produced, like the second act of an unfinished play, the war of 1939-45 and all that followed” (76). She underscores the cruel paradox, often noted by historians of the Great War, that this unprecedented orgy of violence and destruction occurred in the very region that had set the standard for scientific, technological, industrial, and cultural advances in the modern world.

After this somber assessment of the failure of the generation of 1905 to imagine the terrible future that was soon in store for it, she executes a vast chronological leap to the year 2025 in a daring exercise of prognostication that lays out a set of chilling possibilities of what may lie in store for us now. “The difficulty, when we consider the future,” she warns, “is to discern the major lines of force in present events and not be blinded by the events themselves” (80). This determination to concentrate on the forest rather than the trees prompts her to identify what she regards as those “major lines of force” that, if permitted to continue unchecked, will produce a very unpleasant future for us all. Central to her analysis is the omnipresent curse of unintended consequences, which requires us to scrutinize past precedents and current trends in order to imagine possible repercussions that are not evident at first glance. Conceding the difficulty of prediction in light of the extraordinary speed and scope of historical developments in the modern world, she cautiously hazards “Three Bets for the Future:” The first is that international terrorism will persist for many years to come. The second is that weapons of mass destruction will continue to proliferate, especially in unstable regions. The third is that China’s expanding role in world affairs will pose a formidable challenge to global security.

International terrorism will prove resilient in the face of efforts to combat it because of three fundamental features of this phenomenon. The first is the extraordinary patience of the terrorist leaders, who require years to train their operatives and who are willing to bide their time because they are convinced that time is on their side. This frame of mind contrasts sharply with the tendency in the West to seek a quick fix, to win the war and be done with it. The second is the decentralized character of the terrorist networks, which allows them to survive intact and resume their activities even if the top leadership is killed or captured and which renders any kind of deterrence totally ineffective. The third, and most important of all, is the large and expanding supply of angry, alienated young Muslim men who are driven by a fanatical hatred of the values and power of the West. Delpech warns that the failure of European countries to integrate recent immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, compared to the relative success of the United States in absorbing its Latin American immigrants, runs the risk of confronting the old continent with a large contingent of enemies within. Her own country, which had a North African population of 100,000 at the end of World War II, now has 6 million people of North African descent (10% of the population) but has not yet figured out how to make them feel comfortable with and proud of their French citizenship.

The inevitable nuclear proliferation in the twenty-first century, in Delpech's view, will usher in an international order that by 2025 will be much more unstable and dangerous than had been the case with the bi-polar balance of terror during the Cold War. In a world with a nuclearized Middle East (Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) and East Asia (Japan, the two Koreas, Indonesia, and Malaysia), the strategy of mutual deterrence that helped to prevent a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers during the Cold War will no longer apply because of the large number of nuclear weapons states pursuing their particular interests. Moreover, the increasingly sophisticated methods of concealment will make it much more difficult to identify clandestine nuclear weapons programs. The overestimation of Iraq's nuclear capabilities before the U.S. invasion of 2003 has had the unintended consequence of breeding widespread skepticism about nuclear intelligence, which, Delpech fears, may lead to underestimating developments in Iran, North Korea, and even Syria and Egypt (89). The result will be a nuclear free-for-all that will loosen the set of restraints that had been imposed on the nuclear arms race during the Cold War.

In addition to terrorism and nuclear proliferation, Delpech regards the rise of China to the status of global power as a good bet, but one that should cause the rest of the world to shudder. Once that country has completed its ambitious program of military modernization, she believes, it may well be emboldened to browbeat Taiwan into accepting reunification on the assumption that the island's long-time protector in Washington will not be willing to sacrifice Los Angeles for Taipei. A future American president would probably be impelled to treat the forcible annexation of China's "renegade province" as an internal affair, as it had the Russian intervention in Chechnya. But Taiwan is not the only country that lies in the path of an expanding and potentially domineering China. Japan, acutely dependent on external markets and sources of raw materials for its prosperity and on United States military protection for its security, has already experienced the sting of anti-Japanese sentiment from the mainland (up to now related to historical grievances stemming from the Second World War but capable of being redirected to more contemporary issues). In addition to intimidating Taiwan and Japan, China will eventually be capable of exerting a commanding influence over the entire Asia-Pacific region once the completion of its campaign to develop a blue-water navy permits the projection of power beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The key question about China, in Delpech's judgment, is whether the ruling elite in Beijing will be able to complete its military and naval buildup without being obliged to loosen the Communist party's stranglehold on the country's political life. Its success in doing so would prevent the emergence of a civil society that might restrain the global ambitions of the ruling political-military caste. The combination of a one-party dictatorship freed from domestic political constraints and a booming economy requiring foreign supplies of energy and raw materials causes Delpech to see in her crystal ball nothing but danger from China in the twenty-first century. Even bad news for China is bad news for us all: If the burgeoning Chinese economy suffers a slowdown, the resulting social unrest could well prompt the governing elite to "embark on dangerous initiatives abroad" in order to distract attention from internal difficulties (137). In the end, Delpech has no hesitation invoking

historical precedent to buttress her argument, announcing that “China’s ambition now is the same as Japan’s was at the beginning of the last century” (143).

In addition to identifying these three main threats to international security and stability in twenty years, Delpech draws up a list of other time bombs that could explode to make life in 2025 all the more unpleasant. One is a new generation of space-based weapons that could destroy communications satellites, causing social disorder and economic chaos in advanced societies that have become dependent on space for many critical civilian functions. An even more worrisome danger could result from advances in biotechnology which, in the hands of bio-terrorists, could destroy the human immune systems of targeted population centers and lead to deadly epidemics of infectious diseases.

If there is a villain in this dispiriting catalogue of past disasters, present problems, and future dangers it is Europe, whose complacent citizens “do not believe strongly enough in our values to teach them, let alone to defend them” (86). The remarkable achievement of European unity after so many centuries of internecine bloodshed has not led to the dynamism the founders of the European movement had hoped. “No one claims to belong to Europe anymore,” Delpech laments. “Politicians no longer have a European message for their electorates. And although the European idea still exists, it lacks strength within its own borders. In these circumstances, we should not be surprised that the voice of Europe has to struggle to make itself heard in the world” (112, 116). The Continent has in effect opted out of history, eschewing its global responsibilities in order to cultivate its own garden with an illusory, inward-looking sense of peace, security, and prosperity: “The current U.S. policy of intervening in world affairs to shape the world resembles Europe’s past policy—while Europe’s current policy resembles that of a bygone America—stay home and develop a model” (163). As America has overextended its power in the world, Europe has failed to exert the global influence appropriate to its economic might. Its political leaders have abandoned even the pretense of honoring the humanistic principles of the Enlightenment, refusing to make their voices heard on behalf of suffering or threatened populations in areas where Europe’s security interests are not directly engaged (Rwanda, Chechnya, Darfur, Taiwan). She believes that Europe should take the drastic step of holding China responsible not only for its past atrocities (the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen massacre) but also for its present policies (such as its attempt to engulf the thriving little democracy across the Taiwan Strait). Nor should Europeans shrink from taking Russia to task for its cruelty in Chechnya, its dangerous and destabilizing arms sales to Iran, and the rise of a ruling clique of financial oligarchs and high intelligence and military officials that has created a “gangster state” of “totalitarian capitalism” (129).

These and other harsh judgments reveal that Thérèse Delpech is a moralist at heart. At times she sounds like a Gallic version of the neo-Wilsonians in the United States who have framed the global challenges of the recent past and present as a conflict between the forces of good and evil. “[E]thics must be rescued from the paralysis that has incapacitated it,” she plaintively asserts, and proceeds to allow a slight hint of optimism to break through her pessimistic prose by approvingly quoting Diderot: “It seems in truth that all things, good as well as evil, have their time of maturity. When good reaches its point of perfection, it

begins to turn to evil; when evil is complete, it raises itself toward the good” (179). In the Manichean struggle that she is certain will dominate the world from now to 2025, she apparently believes that the best hope, probably the only hope, for a tolerable outcome is close cooperation between the Europe and the United States. The Europeans must disabuse themselves of the erroneous assumption that the loss of empire and the focus on economic and political integration will protect the Continent from the dangers lurking across the globe that are identified in this book. The Americans must relinquish their unilateralist assumption that their country can successfully address those dangers by itself and must do their part in reestablishing “The Unity of the Western Camp” that has vanished with the end of the Cold War (159). Only by embracing the humanistic traditions that originally inspired the civilizations that emerged on the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean, this reluctant Cassandra seems to believe, will the world be able to avoid succumbing to “the fatal combination of advanced technology and acute nihilism that is now humanity’s lot” (181).

If Europe’s past, present, and future role in the international order is the main focus of this work, the position of the United States receives only cursory attention. To what degree have Washington’s policy of unilateralism and its national security doctrine of preemption contributed to many of the present and future global challenges that Delpech identifies?<sup>5</sup> Are international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and China’s great-power aspirations in part a response to the emergence at the end of the Cold War of a single superpower with no apparent rivals and overwhelming global military superiority? What function should the United States fulfill in coping with the challenges posed by these three developments? It is perhaps unfair to ask such questions of a book that seems to be addressed primarily to a European audience and is full of admonitions to European readers. But it must be evident to such a perceptive observer of the world scene as Thérèse Delpech that the grim story that she recounts in this stimulating study is much more likely to have a happy ending, or at least a non-tragic ending, if the United States is able to devise a foreign and security policy that will enhance the prospects of international peace, stability, and security in the coming decades.

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<sup>5</sup> This topic has recently been addressed in Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (2006), Tony Smith, *A Pact With The Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (2007) and Matthew J. Flynn, *First Strike: Preemptive War in Modern History* (forthcoming in 2008).