

## 15 | Epilogue: does democracy have a violent heart?

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The subject of war and democracy has recently been brought to life by the fact that virtually all democracies are today caught in the sticky threads of a permanent war against 'terror'. In the name of 'democracy protection' and 'democracy promotion' armies have been gathered and sent to foreign countries, while more than a few democratic institutions have been militarised, as if the unending war for democracy has necessitated the trimming of their power-sharing, representative mechanisms. Civilians are subjected to new forms of surveillance and routine 'security' checks, police powers have been expanded, the dark arts of surveillance are flourishing and torture of the enemy has been justified publicly. All citizens have meanwhile been warned to be on guard, at all times, to conduct themselves as if their daily lives are a permanent battlefield. Electorates have even heard loud calls by politicians and intellectuals to protect governments, at home and abroad, by taking 'pre-emptive military actions against grave threats to their survival or to their civilian population'.<sup>1</sup>

It is unsurprising that more than a few observers, pressured by these trends, have recently drawn the conclusion that democracies have violent proclivities. Democracy is said to have a 'dark side' that sups with the devils of political violence or it is claimed that democracy 'kills'.<sup>2</sup> One scholar has drawn the colourful conclusion that 'the origin and heart of democracy is essentially violent'.<sup>3</sup> Violence, defined loosely as 'action forceful enough to produce an effect', is not just the result of contingent policies of particular democratically elected governments. It is inherent in every effort to establish or maintain democracy, if by that is meant 'any political system grounded in the idea that sovereignty lies with the people'. The principle of popular sovereignty can never be established democratically, or so it is argued. Democracy is but a strange impossibility. It always and everywhere rests upon foundational acts of violence: 'the massacre of indigenous populations, or the crushing of those who oppose a new foundation of the

<sup>1</sup> Dershowitz 2006: 239.

<sup>2</sup> Collier 2009; Hawksley 2009; Mann 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ross 2005: especially 1–13, from which the following quotations are drawn.

people's sovereignty' as well as 'the ongoing history of forgetting this original violence, not out of spite or indifference, but because the violence at the origin of democracy threatens democracy itself'.

## 1. The democratisation of violence

The conjecture that democracy and bellicosity are terrible twins is a healthy corrective to evolutionist views of democracy, such as those of Francis Fukuyama,<sup>4</sup> that see only its benign freedom-loving qualities, or prefer to emphasise its 'world-historical' tendency to spread secular, science-induced economic growth across the whole earth, as if democracy is the fulfilment of our destiny. To insist that democracy has a violent heart is correctly to draw attention to the entanglement of democratic institutions and ideals in the facts and fantasies of war, but the protest it launches against democracy as an engine of war paradoxically feeds upon a deep-seated historical tendency for democracies to denature war and other forms of violence. Like the rebellious teenager whose hot-tempered behaviour owes much to careful parental nurturing in the arts of resisting deference, so the thesis that democracy has a violent heart is symptomatic of the unusual sensitivity of actually existing democracies to war, and to other forms of violence. Contemporary democracies enable the so-called democratisation of violence. By this unfamiliar phrase I do not mean that they encourage a macabre reversal of the 'ballots, not bullets' principle, the arming of all citizens and their engagement in acts of violence of their choice. To speak of the democratisation of violence is rather to say that democracies as we have come to know them unleash a process of denaturing violence in policy fields as different as the treatment of children and women in household settings through to efforts to rein in political leaders and military personnel who show no respect for others' dignity and instead practise cruelty as a way of life. Violence is no longer seen exclusively as willed by gods or a God or determined by historical fate or by dastardly 'human nature'. Non-violent methods of publicly checking and regulating institutions of violence take root; they seek to ensure that police forces, armies, secret intelligence bodies, private security companies neither perpetrate surplus violence nor become permanently 'owned' by any particular power group, including the government of the day. The democratisation of war and other types of violence is a process that has the effect of rendering institutions and acts of

<sup>4</sup> See the new afterword of Fukuyama 2006.

violence publicly accountable and therefore contingent: as acts of destructive power that are alterable and preventable through human will and effort. This process of 'democratisation' even affects the semantics of words like 'war' and 'violence'. The scope of application of these descriptors broadens; their meaning comes to be seen as heavily context-dependent and, hence, as variable in time and space; in consequence of which the terms 'war' and 'violence' and their legitimacy come to be contested in such fields as criminal law, journalism, government policy and (as is evident in recent controversies about torture) even within the ranks of armies whose ultimate job brief is to kill other human beings.

The historical roots of the denaturing of violence run deep and are complicated. Their causes and causers include changing modes of warfare and bad experiences with the cruelty of both anti-democratic and democratic regimes doing things in the name of 'the people'. They also include the invention of political mechanisms unknown to the world of Athenian *dēmokratia*: inventions such as parliaments and multi-party systems, the birth of civil societies and the growth of constitutional government.<sup>5</sup> These and other mechanisms breathe life into citizens' efforts to organise themselves and to speak about power and its abuse, as is evident especially during transitions from dictatorship to democracy, when public suspicion of men and institutions of violence is expressed with a sudden vengeance, like a geological upheaval: the *ancien régime* is accused of rape and murder, searches begin for those who have been disappeared, clandestine mass graves are exhumed and citizens are urged to tell their stories of cruelty and suffering. Literature, painting and music circulated under democratic conditions or with democratic aspirations have also contributed powerfully to the critical representation of war and violence. These art forms have the effect of sensitising their audiences to the contingency or non-necessity of violence: think of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* and *De Profundis* by Shostakovich, music set to the words of lament written by Lorca for loved ones murdered by Franco's troops or the satires of war and warmongers that flowed from the typewriters of Robert Graves and other English war poets or the novels and short stories of writers otherwise as different as Nabokov, Céline and Kafka.

Democracies also suffer a normative problem with the cruelty and death that war brings. If democracy, to put it simply, is a set of institutions and a whole way of life structured by non-violent means of equally apportioning and publicly monitoring power within and among overlapping

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of these trends and their consequences, see Keane 2004; 2009.

communities of people who live according to a wide variety of morals, then war and violence, which involves the unwanted interference with the bodies and personality of subjects, are anathema to its substance and spirit. Killing others violates the principle of the equality of people. It also mutilates survivors' capacity for self-organisation, frustrates their ability to make short-term decisions and long-term plans and saps trust in themselves and others around them. But there is something about democracy that runs deeper than ethics. This quality of democracy is usually given insufficient attention by observers but was captured powerfully in one of the greatest odes to the democratisation of 'spirit' that democracies encourage and require, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Über Gewissheit* (1959). It is this: the institutional dynamics and everyday culture of democratic institutions require for their operation shared perceptions of the complexity and contingency of things, of the non-necessity of what is given, an understanding that reality is not 'real', that claims to veracity can be doubted because they inevitably depend upon the acknowledgement of others, that in principle the extant power relations in any context can be named, re-described, challenged and altered.

## 2. Empire and democracy: the example of ancient Athens

The contemporary democratisation of war and violence is merely a trend, with no historical guarantees of success, yet it implies and demands greater sensitivity to time-space variations of the vexed relationship between war and democracy. Essentialist propositions such as 'democracy is inherently bellicose' or 'violence is at the heart of democracy' should be doubted. They must be set aside in favour of efforts to think more deeply about their historically contingent relationship, beginning but not ending with the case of the *dēmokratia* of Athens.

The evidence assembled in this volume convincingly shows that the Athenian experiment with power-sharing and power-constraining democratic institutions was thoroughly entangled in contingent circumstances of city-state rivalry, empire-building, war and rumours of war. In the first sixty years after its revolutionary beginning, the Athenian democracy was constantly at war against its immediate neighbours and the Persian empire. After checking the second attempt of the Persians to incorporate mainland Greece into their empire in 479 BCE, the Athenians founded the so-called Delian League, whose few hundred members vowed 'to have the same friends and enemies' and whose military aim was the liberation from Persian control of the Greek states of the Aegean Islands, the Dardanelles

and the coast of what is today modern Turkey. But in the subsequent decades of campaigns Athens turned this voluntary alliance, step by step, state by state, into an *arkhē* or empire. During the fifth century Athens found itself at war on average in two out of every three years; never once did it enjoy more than a decade of peace. Especially with the introduction of pay for military service in the 450s war came to dominate the everyday lives of Athenians, their visual arts and the proceedings of their assembly. Citizenship and military service grew to be indistinguishable: the spirit and institutions of democracy felt deeply 'martial'. A tradition of public identification with military service and war took root among citizens. Under the democracy Athenian men were willing in large numbers to vote for war, to engage in pitched battles with enemies and to die for their city.

David Pritchard introduces this volume by emphasising that Athenian democracy was defined by extraordinary levels of engagement and participation among its male citizens. Active citizenship undoubtedly democratised many features of daily life in Athens, above all the power to decide who received what, when and how. Yet despite the profusion of opportunities for citizens to become involved in politics and to interrogate traditional practices, there were limited signs of the profound democratisation of violence and war which has occurred in many contemporary democracies. Imperial democracy in its Athenian form developed a reputation at home and abroad for military hyperactivity and adventurism (e.g. *Eur. Supp.* 572–6; *Thuc.* 1.70–1; 2.62–3; 2.36.2), while its growing power struck fear in the hearts of others and, thus, precipitated violent reactions. Several chapters in this volume analyse very well the marked culture of militarism whose development the Athenian *dēmos* supported. Sophie Mills and David Konstan show how tragedy and old comedy, which have long thought to have denatured war in Athenian public discourse, did the exact opposite: they confirmed bravery and soldiering as norms, represented Athenian war-making as free of war crimes and helped to dehumanise those Greeks and 'barbarians' against whom the democracy was regularly at war. Among the most shocking examples of this militarism were the frequent funeral speeches delivered for the city's war dead. Far from reflecting on war's human costs, these orations normally reduced Athenian history to an almost unbroken series of military triumphs and praised only those features of the democracy which promoted the bravery of citizens on the field of battle (e.g. *Dem.* 60.25–6; *Thuc.* 2.37.2, 39.1, 40.2–3).<sup>6</sup> Even more shocking is that the word

<sup>6</sup> See especially Loraux 1986 and the chapters by Josiah Ober, Peter Hunt and Sumio Yoshitake in this volume.

*dēmokratia*, a compound word consisting of *dēmos* ('people') and *kratos* ('rule' or 'conquest'), was itself infected by the spirit of war.<sup>7</sup>

Judged in terms of the principle of the democratisation of violence, the Athenian experiment with democracy started badly. To see why requires a closer examination of the connection between empire and democracy – a connection insufficiently researched in the literature on war and democracy.<sup>8</sup> Around twenty-five times larger than the average Greek *polis*, the Athenian democracy quickly grew to be an imperial polity: a dominant power whose rulers were prone to measure their strength against all their rivals combined.<sup>9</sup> Pericles put the point succinctly: the power of democratic Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War lay in her possession of naval forces more numerous and efficient than those of the rest of Greece (Thuc. 1.143.1). So did Alcibiades, who doubted the possibility that Athens could exercise a 'careful stewardship' of its empire, exactly because those powers that do not 'hold empire over other peoples' themselves risk succumbing to 'the empire of others' (6.18.3). It was from this standpoint that during the fifth century democracy in Athens became synonymous with the armed struggle for freedom and power over others.

Democracy was joined in a long-term devil's pact with empire and war. Fighting against enemies not only made men feel that they were *khrestoi politai* or worthwhile citizens. War blessed life with unshakeable meaning. It made everyone equal in the struggle to escape the clutches of death. War encouraged painful toil that produced honour. It confirmed men's sense of manly excellence (*aretē*). War and especially the empire which it secured also brought wealth to the democracy, partly to pay for its machinery of government and to employ vast numbers of ordinary Athenian males as soldiers. Save for a small number of states that chose to keep their nominal independence by providing ships that sailed in the Athenian fleets, all cities of the empire were required to pay an annual tribute, while their shipowners and traders were required as well to fork out duties on exports and imports that passed through the hub port of the Piraeus. The extent to which the wealth generated by empire was vital for the survival of democracy remains disputed, but without doubt among the most potent effects of empire was to increase the status of soldiering and the relative importance of the armed forces in the day-to-day functioning of the polity.<sup>10</sup> The

<sup>7</sup> See Keane 2009: 55–62.

<sup>8</sup> Among the long-neglected works on democracy and empire are Giddings 1900; Hobson 1902; Veitch 1913.

<sup>9</sup> For these measurements, see Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 70–3.

<sup>10</sup> Meiggs 1972: chapter 23; Raaflaub 1994.

contributors to this volume detail these effects: tragedy, comedy, conceptions of gallantry, funeral orations and public monuments all became subject to the logic of democratic war. More money from the public budget was spent on war and preparations for war than on all other public activities combined.<sup>11</sup> The revenues generated by empire were used to revolutionise the methods of war. The Athenians experimented with siege warfare and tactical retreat. They trained their naval crews for weeks and sometimes months and developed the art of using their ships as high-speed, offensive weapons. Huge numbers of ships and fighters were moved around the whole of the eastern Mediterranean for campaigns that sometimes lasted months or, when sieges were used, up to a few years.

The dalliance of democracy and armed force had wider, geopolitical implications. The democracy obviously carried within it the seeds of expansion by bellicose, anti-democratic means. At first, it is true, the impulse of Athens to expand was restrained; and the spread of Athenian power usually went hand in hand with the creation and nurturing of democratic ways of life: new architectural forms, public space, a form of government run by citizens for citizens and a legal system that followed the rules that nobody was to be above the laws and that laws must apply equally to everybody. These inventions undoubtedly proved attractive to others; in various parts of the burgeoning empire there were times when citizens downtrodden by their local nobility or suffering from *stasis* openly welcomed Athenian intervention and influence in their local affairs (e.g. [Xen.] *Ath. pol.* 3.10).<sup>12</sup> The trouble was that democracy did not spring naturally from the depths of the Aegean, the region's soil or from the deities or souls of its peoples. The democratic law-givers sometimes found their subjects to be less than law-abiding. Democratic laws therefore had to be imposed, perhaps by cunning or, if necessary, by means of violence, or so they concluded. Athens then came face to face with an ugly possibility: in the name of democracy and for the sake of holding or expanding its own position, it was sometimes forced (as in 416/15 during the expedition launched by Athens against the Aegean island of Melos) to set up garrison colonies, to plunder whole cities, even to heap cruelty on those who tried to stand in its way.

### 3. Other greek democracies

The countless military adventures of Athens showed not only that a domestically peaceful democracy could inflict violence upon its neighbours. They

<sup>11</sup> See now Pritchard 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Brock 2009; de Sainte Croix 1954.

also implied that violence was a double-edged sword for the Athenian democracy. It could become subject to the charge of double standards – and to acts of military reprisal. The heroic survival of the Athenian democracy against its Persian and Spartan enemies had a flip side: by arming to protect itself, by acting as if it had been born into the world to give no rest to either itself or to others, it encouraged its rivals to seek and to win the ultimate prize of drowning Athens in its own blood. The bellicose dynamic within the ancient Greek world has understandably fed recent worries among scholars of democracy who wrestle with the possible conclusion that democracy is essentially a violent form of polity.<sup>13</sup> But before handing down this essentialist verdict and any strategic or normative conclusions that might flow from it we need to pause in order to ask whether the variable forms of ancient, assembly-based democracy in the wider Greek world might make a difference to our understanding of the subject of violence and war.

The traces of evidence of scores of democracies in the Hellenic world, some of them much older than that of Athens, should make us think twice about drawing easy conclusions, simply because we do not know a great deal about what the democrats of these other democracies actually thought about war and how they practised or resisted it. The usual caveats about sources apply with a vengeance to these old political communities: time has ravaged the evidence and few of the jumbled fragments that remain have been blessed with the kind of intensive restoration that their Athenian equivalents have enjoyed. We can nevertheless be sure that the art of self-government by assemblies of people was not an invention of the Athenians.<sup>14</sup> The ancient Greek world knew no single type of assembly-based democracy; outside of Athens there flourished a whole range of different democracies. Often standing in tension with Athens, these democracies showed that the formula that democracy is a unique type of polity in which the *dēmos* is *kyrios* ('master') could be applied differently and in different contexts with different sets of institutions and – most probably – different understandings of what democracy was all about. In the Greek world assembly-based democracy was not a single or fixed form: it was more like an odyssey in which different theoretical imaginings and various practical experiments were the norm.

<sup>13</sup> See the tentative remarks of Russett 2009 on 'the failure to observe much democratic peace in the different conditions of ancient Greece' (22); compare Schuller 1979.

<sup>14</sup> See Robinson 1997 and the half-sympathetic review of Hansen 1999, where it is conceded that evidence now demonstrates 'beyond any doubt that the Greeks themselves believed that *demokratia* had existed for at least a century before Kleisthenes, and that it was a fairly common and widespread form of constitution'; cf. Keane 2009: especially 78–107; O'Neil 1995.



There were altogether around one thousand Greek *poleis* scattered throughout the Mediterranean and a significant minority of these may have had a taste of democracy at one time or another, some of them well before Athens claimed to be democratic.<sup>15</sup> The details of these early *dēmokratiai* may initially seem tedious, but their cumulative effect on our understanding of the subject of war and democracy is potentially strong and important to absorb. The fragmentary evidence from democracies like Ambracia, Chios, Cyrene and Heraclea Pontica is not always good news for democrats. Sometimes it describes in painful detail the destruction of democratic institutions, either by military conquest, by violent conspiracies of the rich or by demagogues or single-minded tyrants or by all four in some sequence. In each case there is an important reminder of the utter contingency of democracy – of the ease with which it can be blown away by violence, like a leaf in autumn winds. There is an equally important reminder that these democracies were constantly bedevilled by war and rumours of war. It is conventionally thought that within the Greek world the great clash between Athens and Syracuse from 415 to 413 is the only or most important recorded case of war between democratic city-states.<sup>16</sup> That is untrue. The works of Xenophon, Thucydides and others are peppered with numerous reports of popular assemblies voting for war throughout the Greek world. To mention some examples, in the mid-fifth century democratic Tarentum set up a dedication at Olympia for a victory over Thurii (ML 57), whose democratic constitution had probably been written by Protagoras.<sup>17</sup> In 424 Athens appears to have campaigned against the democracy of Heraclea Pontica (Thuc. 4.75–6).<sup>18</sup> In 373 democratic Thebes destroyed the neighbouring democracy of Plataea, causing its citizens to take refuge in Athens once more (Xen. *Hell.* 6.3.1). Finally, in the 360s Athens strove obsessively to regain control of Amphipolis (Aeschin. 2.27), which was probably a democracy at the time.<sup>19</sup>

The experience of war within and among the Greek democracies that operated at a distance from Athens raises vital questions about their political compatibility with democracy in imperial form. These other democracies are of special interest, and not just because they highlight the sobering

<sup>15</sup> Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 53–4, 84–5.

<sup>16</sup> See Russett 1993: 43–71, especially p. 54: ‘The wars of Athens and allies against Syracuse ... represent the glaring exception to any generalization that democracies rarely fight each other’; and the important critique of Robinson 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Hansen 2005: 58; Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 85, 306.

<sup>18</sup> Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 956.

<sup>19</sup> Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 85, 819; Heskell 1997.

point that ancient assembly democracies were rarely established democratically and that even when they were born of *resistance* to military interventions and violent power-grabbing, they often came into being through the exercise of arbitrary power, backed by threatened or actual violence. These other democracies underscore another point: that in matters of democracy war is a wild horse. It is true, paradoxically, that the whole trend towards democratisation in the Greek world was deepened by such events as the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. On the coasts and islands of the Aegean many members of the vast military coalition under the command of Athens were already or soon became governed by democratic rules. That was the deliberate policy of the Athenians, who for the sake of empire-building lent a hand to democratic factions wherever they could, in contrast to the Spartan taste for well-ordered oligarchies (Thuc. 3.82). The final victory of Sparta in the Peloponnesian War resulted in a brief period of oligarchy at Athens and the overthrow of democracy among many of Athens' former allies. The return of tyranny in Syracuse around the same time threatened an end to the experiment in democratic government throughout the whole region (Diod. Sic. 13.95.1).

War seemed bad for democracy. But thanks to the willingness of the Athenian *dēmos* to fight for the restoration of their ancestral constitution and the shocking lawlessness of the so-called Thirty Tyrants, Athens managed to shake off oligarchy and renew its democracy (Xen. *Hell.* 2.4). The Athenian resistance proved not to be exceptional. Threatened with the possibility of externally supported oligarchies, many states in the Aegean nonetheless clung on to their democracies. On the mainland the Argives followed the pattern; so did Sicyon, Phleious and Thebes. The Arcadian confederation did so as well, at least for some years. During the 360s it even tried something never before attempted: to form a confederacy structured by the rules of democratic negotiation and compromise. Among the key institutions that the Arcadians invented was a confederal assembly called the *myrioi*.<sup>20</sup> Open to all citizens of the region, it was the first-ever experiment in cross-border or regional democracy. The experiment rested on a working principle that remains as rock-solid today as it was then: in order to survive and flourish, democracies must tame the military and political pressures on their borders.

We might even speak of an Arcadian Law: the viability of any democracy is inversely proportional to the quantity of outside ('geopolitical') threats to its existence. That Arcadian Law implied that peace, in the simple sense of

<sup>20</sup> Schaefer 1961; Roy 2000.

the absence of war, is a vital precondition of democracy. It also contained a gloomy corollary: a warning that democracy could be misused to kill off democracy. The Arcadian initiative in cross-border democracy showed not merely that things took place in the Greek world of city-states that were not covered by, or were directly at odds with, the Athenian model of democracy. The case of Arcadia suggests that this model had worrying implications for the plurality of democracies of the region: the Athenian empire was capable of gobbling up democracies in the name of democracy so that these same democracies had a strong self-interest in banding together, peacefully, to ensure their political survival, to prevent their massacre through rivalry, expansion and armed conflict. Put differently: many citizens within these democracies seem to have grasped just how easily their polities could succumb to events triggered by plots, violent disturbances and military catastrophes. They knew that democracies were constantly vulnerable to what contemporaries called *stasis*, a very broad term used to describe the factional squabbling, outright sedition, open civil war, bloodshed and mass exile that was endemic in a geopolitical system of independent city-states that lacked any coordinating centre and, hence, constantly violated their geographical isolation and political autonomy by sucking them into a vortex of permanent rivalries.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Representative democracy

There are vital lessons to be learned from the other Greek experiments with democracy, including the lesson that in matters of war the tight grip of Athens on our democratic imagination needs to be loosened, if only because the logic of induction forbids any simple-minded conclusions about democracy and bellicosity. The appeal here for greater open-mindedness and sensitivity to context when analysing the relationship between democracy and war is strengthened by turning our attention to more modern times, to the invention of a new historical form of democracy no longer centred on the open-air assembly of sovereign male citizens.

From around the tenth century CE democracy entered a second historical phase whose centre of gravity was Europe. Shaped by forces as varied as the rebirth of towns, the rise (in northern Spain) of the first parliaments and the conflicts unleashed by self-governing councils and religious dissent within the Christian Church, democracy came to be understood as

<sup>21</sup> For the meaning of *stasis*, see Gehrke 1985: esp. part 1; Morgan 2003; Octen 1967.

*representative democracy*. This, at least, was the term that began to be used in the Low Countries, France, England and the new American republic during the eighteenth century by, for instance, constitution-makers and influential political writers when referring to a new type of government with its roots in popular consent. Representative democracy was a novel way of thinking about democracy; it was unintelligible by the standards of Athenian citizens, who even lacked an equivalent word for 'representative' or 'representation'. Other observers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were to denounce the whole idea as oxymoronic, but in practice representative democracy grew in popularity and influence to become a new form of government in which people, understood as voters faced with a genuine choice between at least two alternatives, are free to elect others who then act in defence of their interests, that is, *represent* them by deciding matters on their behalf.

Much ink and blood was to be spilled in defining what exactly representation meant, who was entitled to represent whom and what had to be done when representatives disregarded those whom they were supposed to represent.<sup>22</sup> But common to the second historical phase of democracy was the belief that good government was government by representatives. Often contrasted with monarchy, representative democracy was praised as a way of governing better by openly and *non-violently* airing differences of opinion not only among the represented themselves, but also between representatives and those whom they were supposed to represent. Representative government was also hailed for encouraging the rotation of leadership guided by merit. It was said to introduce competition for power that in turn enabled elected representatives to test out their political competence before others. Some observers were to say that representative democracy would rid politics of fools and knaves, even that it would promote peace among nations. The earliest champions of representative democracy also offered a more pragmatic justification of representation. It was seen as the practical expression of a simple reality: that it was not feasible for all of the people to be involved all of the time, even if they were so inclined, in the business of government. Given that reality, the people must delegate the task of government to representatives who are chosen at regular elections. The job of these representatives is to monitor the spending of public money. Representatives make representations on behalf of their constituents to the government and its bureaucracy. Representatives debate issues and make laws. They decide who will govern and how – on behalf and in the name of the people.

<sup>22</sup> See Alonso, Merkel and Keane 2010; Keane 2010.

As a way of imagining and handling power representative democracy was an unusual political form. Compared with the previous assembly-based form of the Greek world, it greatly extended the geographic scale of institutions of self-government. As time passed, and despite its localised origins in towns, rural districts and large-scale imperial settings, representative democracy came to be housed mainly within territorial states protected by standing armies and equipped with powers to make and enforce laws and to extract taxes from their subject populations. The new historical form of democracy altered the architecture of politics. Territorially defined governments fed by their control of resources like taxation, law, administration and the means of violence began to wield enormous power over their subjects. These 'Mortall Gods', as Thomas Hobbes called them, began to shape and reshape the lives of their subjects. It turned them into taxpayers, objects of law and civil administration, and soldiers and victims of war among states. In modern Europe representative democracy resembled a plant that grew in the hothouse of these territorial states, which were typically much bigger and more populous than the *poleis* of ancient democracy, most of which were smaller than 200 square kilometres.<sup>23</sup>

Representative democracy was equally unusual in that it rested upon written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws that guaranteed procedures that still play vital roles in the democracies of today: inventions like *habeas corpus* (prohibitions upon imprisonment and torture), periodic election of candidates to legislatures, limited-term holding of political offices, voting by secret ballot, referendum and recall, electoral colleges, competitive political parties, ombudsmen, civil society and civil liberties such as the right to assemble in public and liberty of the press.

The novel system of representative democracy in territorial state form was widely praised as an improvement upon ancient Greek democracy, but the truth is that representative democracy was permanently vulnerable to violent conflict and war fuelled by struggles for national self-determination. Their long-term, self-destructive effects were missed in the famous account of democracy and war presented by the French writer and politician, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859). Looking at the case of the young American republic and peering into the future, Tocqueville imagined – with one qualification – that peace would come to be a general principle of modern democratic life. 'Fortune, which has conferred so many peculiar benefits upon the inhabitants of the United States, has placed them in the midst of a wilderness, where they have', he wrote, 'no neighbours; a

<sup>23</sup> Hansen and Nielsen 2004: 70–3.

few thousand soldiers are sufficient for their wants.<sup>24</sup> Tocqueville warned that democracies should be permanently watchful of armies, whose officers and other ranks (unlike the armies once led by aristocrats) are gripped by material ambition and therefore tend to be dissatisfied with their lot. They come to see that war is in their self-interest, even though wars and rumours of war eat like acid at the structures and habits of democratic life. Fortunately, Tocqueville observed, most American citizens understood that war whips up animosity towards others, concentrates the means of administration in a few hands and destroys material infrastructure and wealth. Privileged by geography and committed to the principle of equality, the American democracy thus tended to pacifism. 'The ever increasing numbers of men of property who are lovers of peace, the growth of personal wealth which war so rapidly consumes, the mildness of manners, the gentleness of heart, those tendencies to pity which are produced by the equality of conditions, all these causes concur to quench the military spirit.'

The assessment proved to be wildly inaccurate. Leaving aside the shameful near-annihilation of indigenous Americans, a vicious civil war driven by two conflicting understandings of American democracy and the subsequent rise of a global American empire, Tocqueville failed to see that the invention and deployment, during the eighteenth century, of the doctrine of the sovereignty of nations proved to be a curse for democracy. The formula was unknown to Greek democrats. It seemed to be simple enough and thoroughly consonant with the ideal of representative democracy: each nation living within a given territory was to be entitled to govern itself through its own governmental institutions. There were manifold troubles with this doctrine. Not all people defined themselves primarily or exclusively as members of a 'nation'; the doctrine implied that they should be encouraged or forced to do so. Nations in any case did not release their passions or procreate or live separately from others, in discrete territorial frameworks; lust, pregnancy and childbirth were great scramblers of national identities and state boundaries. The call for 'national self-determination' thus implied the compulsory demarcation and 'cleansing' of nations from lands where they were said not to belong. This further implied, as a last resort, murder and violence. And since self-determining nations living in territorial states resembled atoms without a gravitational force to hold them together, jostling and elbowing and outright fisticuffs were by implication permanent probabilities.

<sup>24</sup> De Tocqueville 1969: 279 (volume 2, chapter XXII).

The 'democratic' doctrine of national self-determination implied not just bickering, diplomacy and negotiation. Something worse was implied: sabre-rattling, demagoguery and brinkmanship leading to declarations of war. On the eve of World War I, Prince von Bülow, who had directed German policy as Imperial Chancellor from 1900 to 1909, put the point chillingly: 'If it were possible for members of different nationalities, with different language and customs, and an intellectual life of a different kind, to live side by side in one and the same state, without succumbing to the temptation of each trying to force his own nationality on the other, things on earth would look a good deal more peaceful', he commented. He added: 'But it is a law of life and development in history that where two national civilisations meet they fight for ascendancy. In the struggle between nationalities one nation is the hammer and the other the anvil; one is the victor and the other the vanquished.'<sup>25</sup>

## 5. French events

The new democratic formula of national self-determination was undoubtedly revolutionary. It had incendiary effects in the form of major disturbances in the Low Countries, as well as in other hot spots of Europe, such as in Switzerland and Ireland. But the formula had its greatest triumph in the French Revolution. The spectacular events of 1789 proved to be an earthquake that sent shock waves throughout Europe and far beyond, for instance, throughout Spanish America. The Revolution introduced Europeans and the rest of the world to the idea of representative democracy that government could be 'for the people' and 'by the nation'. Four years into the Revolution, Robespierre's five-minute speech on virtue and terror in the Convention on 5 February 1794 registered the pulse of events and the link between representative democracy and nation states. 'Democracy', he thundered, 'is a state in which the people, as sovereign guided by laws of its own making, does for itself all that it can do well, and by its delegates what it cannot ... Democracy is the only form of state which all the individuals composing it can truly call their country.'<sup>26</sup> Robespierre went on to make a prediction: one that proved as inaccurate as it was supercilious. 'The French are the first people in the world to establish a true democracy, by calling all men to enjoy equality and the fullness of civil rights; and that, in

<sup>25</sup> Von Bülow 1914: 245–6.

<sup>26</sup> Robespierre 1965: 213–15.

my opinion is the real reason why all the tyrants allied against the Republic will be defeated.'

Robespierre's boast played to the high drama of the moment, but it was to be spoiled and in some circles discredited by its association with the practice of terror and war. With one leg in the Convention and the other firmly planted in the revolutionary clubs and cells of Paris, Robespierre clambered to the summit of power by presenting himself as the great reconciler of direct and representative democracy. He was 'the people.'<sup>27</sup> Robespierre turned out to be the first democratic dictator of modern times. Partly through luck, but partly through his own calculations and tactical prowess, he positioned himself to play the role of master within a political void. The symbol and stage director of the Jacobin rule that culminated, from 2 June 1793, in the expulsion of the Girondins from the Convention, a purge soon magnified into the Terror, Robespierre saw himself as the great champion of modern democratic progress. He sealed an alliance between the popular *sans culotte* movement and the most radical segments of the middle class, and moved quickly to root out all dissent. He was obsessed with unanimity, which he considered a prime revolutionary virtue. He thought and acted like a fanatic, an obsessive who believed that the leading role of 'the people' and the 'general will' necessitated not only the provision of radically new policies like public education, poor relief and the universal suffrage, but also the rooting out of 'faction' and 'particular interest', through force of arms whenever necessary.

It was partly because of the bellicosity of the Revolution that great excitement in favour of democracy quickly spread through parts of Europe. The extent of foreign support for its ideals has often been exaggerated; great care needs to be taken when trying to assess the impact of the Revolution on democratic ideals and institutions. Contemporaries who were sympathetic to the Revolution, especially intellectuals, typically thought of it as an epochal moment, as a clean break with the corrupted past, as a giant leap upwards, into the air, onto a higher historical plane. That reaction was especially strong within the German lands, where philosophers, like Immanuel Kant, thought of the Revolution in rather cosmopolitan but ethereal terms as something like a metaphysical fact of relevance for the whole world. The revolutionaries' own denunciations of despotism added to the headiness. People living under oppressive regimes anywhere in Europe or in the rest of the world were in effect invited to take matters into their own hands. Kings and clerics were warned. Insurrection for the sake of democratic liberty was

<sup>27</sup> Furet 1986: 86.



no longer a crime: the right of all peoples to regenerate themselves was a universal right.

In retrospect, it is unclear exactly who were supposed to be or in fact were the addressees of such heady principles. In 1789 illiterate peasants still comprised the big majority of Europe's population. In the central-eastern half of the continent there were few cities, limited trade and commerce, and a weakly developed educated middle class. Besides, those who ruled Europe's populations through states and empires, including so-called 'enlightened despots', had little interest in allowing the spirit of democratic liberty to flourish, as it had done in France and Britain and the Low Countries, through the subterranean development of printing presses, reading circles, clubs and *salles de lecture*. Crackdowns flourished, as in Russia, where Catherine the Great (1729–1796) revealed her true reactionary instincts by spying on, arresting and imprisoning her democratic opponents.

The combined effect of these barriers to the spread of revolutionary ideals was to increase the temptations of the French authorities to resort to military force in the name of representative democracy. So history repeated itself – the imperial democracy of Athens versus its smaller and weaker neighbours – this time on a continental scale.<sup>28</sup> Democratic liberty was not negotiable. Its lofty ideals quickly gave way to talk of *pays ennemis* and *pays conquis*. Democracy went on the march, in uniform, caught up in the practical imperatives of conquest and occupation. Annexation in the name of democratic ideals was either carried out through the signing of a treaty (as happened in the Rhineland) or territory was simply annexed and subdivided into arbitrarily defined, French-style departments, without consultation, as took place in Belgium in 1795 and Piedmont in 1802. It is true that there were places, like the Batavian Republic and the Helvetic Republic, where the Napoleonic armies claimed that the birth of a sister republic was the work of its most 'advanced' patriots. But in every case French control over territory, resources and people was the primary imperative. National self-determination by citizens was arranged on French terms. Democratic constitutions designed to bring order and guarantee certain basic freedoms – subject to strong executive authority and a limited property franchise *à la française* – were imposed. Administrative systems based on departments and districts, cantons and communes were put in place. A local press sympathetic to French orthodoxy was cultivated. Property-systems based on

<sup>28</sup> The following section draws upon Blanning 1983; Droz 1949; Rufer 1974; Schama 1977; Tassier 1934; Woolf 1979; 1968. For the long-term impact of the rise and fall of the French democratic empire, see also Keane 2009: 455–581.

seigneurialism were broken up. Every effort was made to dissolve the power of the Catholic faith.

Whatever locals thought of these reforms was largely irrelevant, for the fundamental point was that all the democratic reforms were imposed by conquest, not formulated or accepted through public consent. Especially after 1793, when the French expanded their military campaign and found themselves at war with most of monarchical Europe, the logic of brute conquest prevailed. In practice the revolutionary slogan '*guerre aux châteaux, paix aux chaumières*' ('war on castles, peace to cottages') meant what the Committee of Public Safety meant when, on 18 September 1793, it instructed the commanders of French armies to live off the land and its people, to 'procure as far as possible from enemy territory the supplies necessary to provision the army as well as arms, clothing, equipment, and transport'. *Commissaires militaires* were charged with extracting taxes and supplies on the spot. Huge sums were expected and without delay. It was not long before the search for military resources became the prime purpose of occupation, as when the revolutionaries marched through northern Italy for the purpose of providing a new granary for the French armies and new funding to help pay off the costs of war. Civilians were seen as fair game and officers, knowing the unreliability of food convoys, turned a blind eye to the bad behaviour of their troops, despite the grave risks of military indiscipline. The people's army bit into the flesh of the peoples whom they occupied. In the name of ballots, they billeted themselves using bullets. Horses and cattle were rounded up and fields were stripped to feed starving battalions. Troops smashed their way into homes, where they helped themselves to money, bedding, clothing, wine, food and kitchen utensils. There was drunken abuse, wanton vandalism and beating and rape of those who stood in their way.

Few troops were ever brought to justice and little gratitude ever flowed from the conquered. Countless Italians, Belgians, Spanish and Rhinelanders understandably saw the conquest with the eyes of conquered people: they saw equality bathed in misery, fear and poverty, but no liberty or fraternity. The sheer size of the French armies, plus their youth and hunger and military inexperience, spread fear and stirred up national resentments among the local communities through which they passed. The French effort to sow the seeds of democratic revolution by military force and influence faltered. It certainly altered boundaries and changed institutions. But it largely failed to win minds, let alone hearts. It bred resentment and resistance and the consequence, not surprisingly, was that the whole trend towards democratisation (a neologism of this period) stalled. It was as if history had taken

a strong dislike to representative democracy. War in its name promoted petty tyranny or authoritarianism as well as clampdowns on press freedom, public assembly and other civil freedoms. War gave democracy a bad name, as can be seen in almost all satirical cartoons of the period. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, in 1815, not one government in the whole of Europe could be described as democratic – if by that we mean, as was meant at the time, a civilian government of representatives subject to openly contested elections and voting by adult males.

## 6. Overkill weapons

The French events revealed how representative democracy could degenerate into violently ‘democratic’ despotisms that proved menacing to more than just their subjects at home. As with democracy in the ancient Greek world, modern representative government had both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ dimensions, which implied that political manipulation at home could be enhanced by dalliances and skulduggery abroad. So the neighbouring citizens of states were potential victims of outside manipulation, fear and outbreaks of war. This was not simply a French problem. From the time of the French Revolution all representative governments found themselves in the devil’s company of geopolitics. The question confronting these democracies was whether elected government that paid lip service to ‘the people’ could be combined with a system of armed territorial states which acted as if they were ‘sovereign’ powers and whose leaders knew well that just as nature abhors a vacuum so state politics moves to fill gaps and to take advantage of opportunities. During the course of the nineteenth century the combination produced unhappy results that resulted eventually in the first-ever global war. In the absence of the European Union and other viable cross-border mechanisms for making peace, such as those which were later to be built on the ruins of representative democracy, European experience during the age of representative government confirmed that a system of squabbling, nominally sovereign states bristling with arms was prone constantly to war and to rumours of war. It proved as well that war was the crucible within which unaccountable rulers muster intrigue and machination to embark upon military adventures by mobilising ‘the people’ in order better to pulverise them.

It is important to remember that the geopolitical instability in which representative democracies were born coincided with major transformations of the mode and means of warfare. Those transformations, like the military

innovations of Athenian democracy examined in this volume by David Pritchard, Iain Spence, Matthew Trundle and others, suggest a more general rule: each major historical phase of democracy has been linked with a radical transformation of the mode and means of fighting war. The imperial democracy of Athens concided with the extension of military participation to every stratum of the citizen body, enormous public investment in the capital of war and the expansion of the scale of war to a different order of magnitude.<sup>29</sup> The struggle for representative democracy – symbolised by Cromwell's Ironsides and the people's armies of the Napoleonic era – coincided with the organisation of machine-like mass armies equipped with swords and muskets and great killing power, together with cannon-firing warships bent on total destruction of opponents and their equipment on the high seas. The widespread implosion of representative democracies in the first decades of the twentieth century coincided with the 'perfection' of these military trends, their mutation into something that had never before happened: the invention of systems of 'overkill' weapons capable of exterminating the entire human species.

All weapons of violence tend towards overkill, of course. From the beginning, the weapons invented by humans, such as the rock, spear, javelin, dart and arrow, bestowed a form of power to produce effects out of all proportion to the means employed. That power transformed hominids into humans by enabling them to become the first sizeable creatures on earth to effect change by committing acts of violence at a distance and so surviving and exploiting even the largest land animals. Humans became what they threw. The arts of manipulating fire and the later means of killing at a distance – the crossbow, the trebuchet, Greek fire – greatly added to the stock of human powers of violence. The Chinese invention of gunpowder, at the end of the first millennium CE, facilitated the rise of the so-called gunpowder empires, such as those of the Ottomans, Russians and Mughals.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent harnessing of gunpowder for far more destructive ends – the development of weapons with a potentially global reach – brought human beings into contact, for the first time, with the possibility of *total war* that turned any point on the planet into a cauldron of large-scale death. Mechanised total war was a European invention of the late eighteenth century, but it only reached perfection – and the height of self-contradiction – during the long twentieth century of violence, in exactly the same period

<sup>29</sup> Changes in military participation, however, can no longer be interpreted as the cause of constitutional change in ancient Greece; see section 7 of the chapter by David Pritchard in this volume.

<sup>30</sup> An excellent short survey of the history of weaponry is Crosby 2002.

that the species of representative democracy tottered on the edge of extinction at all four corners of the earth.

The frightening development of techniques of *overkill* – the military capacity to overwhelm *all* institutions of government and civil society and to reduce to zero their power of securing their subjects' lives against the ravages of violence – was compounded by the invention and use of means of war such as chemical weapons, motorised tanks, land mines and concentration camps. These are now well-known, ugly facts of contemporary life, but less well understood are four key military developments unique to the last half-century that arguably changed everything in matters of war and democracy: American B-29s, in 1945, unloading comprehensive destruction from the unprecedented height of 20,000 feet; the counter-detonation by the Russians of their first atomic bomb in 1949; the Americans' deployment, in 1956, of B-52 intercontinental bombers capable of flying round trips to Moscow; and the development, by the early 1960s, of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching their far-flung targets within half an hour. The net effect of these and other potentially barbarous military inventions has been to ensure that the military security of actually existing democracies now depends in part upon a 'bad conscience' about past wars of total destruction by weapons whose overkill capacity is being strengthened by the present-day growth of a global 'triangle of violence' fuelled by uncivil wars, nuclear anarchy and acts of apocalyptic terrorism.<sup>31</sup>

## 7. A democratic peace?

The fact that overkill is today an *ultimate* problem not just for democracies grappling with the task of democratising violence but for the whole of the planet stems from the widespread realisation that the new technologies of warfare have the potential to annihilate many millions of people, perhaps even to exterminate *homo sapiens* itself. We have been catapulted, say, from the early-nineteenth-century world of representative democracy and Colonel Shrapnel testing his deadly new fragmenting shell on the wildlife of Foulness Island into a world in which weapons of war potentially render major wars obsolete, simply because human beings could no longer survive their devastating effects.

It is against the backdrop of this contradictory development that democracy, as understood by our grandparents, is undergoing profound changes.

<sup>31</sup> I explain this point at length in Keane 2004.

Reshaped from all sides by new institutions, civic initiatives and political pressures, democracy has entered a third historical era. The emerging era of 'monitory democracy', which dates roughly from the mid-twentieth century, was born of the experience of overkill and total war, including the crushing military defeat of German and Japanese fascism, the beginnings of de-colonisation and the post-war reconstruction of Europe and Japan.<sup>32</sup> The global experience of total war and of military victory and military defeat helped push the language and institutions and 'spirit' of democracy into a new epoch, in which while democracy continues to mean (as in Athens) nothing less than a form of self-government based (as in the era of representative democracy) on free and fair elections, it also means something much more: the continuous public scrutiny or monitoring of power by extra-parliamentary mechanisms that target both governmental and non-governmental organisations, at home and abroad. Once seen as given by the grace of a deity, or as supposedly grounded in First Principles, such as the Nation or God, democracy comes to be viewed much more pragmatically as a vital weapon for use against dangerous concentrations of unaccountable power, wherever they exist. In the era of monitory democracy the word democracy means the non-violent public accountability and public control of decision-makers, whether they operate in the field of state or interstate institutions or within so-called non-governmental or civil-society organisations, such as businesses, trade unions, sports associations, human rights networks and charities.

The age of monitory democracy is uniquely sensitive to outbreaks of war and violence. Most of today's democracies have a declining appetite for bellicosity. Their citizens often feel horror and disgust at the psychic traumas, damaged tissues of sociability, loss of life and ecological and infrastructural damage inflicted by the senseless sanctification of cruelty and violence. Decisions by governments to go to war, for instance, are typically met with doubt, anguish and public disturbance, as can be seen whenever democratically elected governments are confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to intervene to put a stop to cruelty and killing in uncivil war zones. If democratic governments stand back and do nothing (as happened initially in Timor Leste) then they are accused of contradicting their own standards of self-government without violence; but if they intervene militarily to put a stop to wanton violence (as when Indian troops entered Bangladesh) then they are accused of exactly the same contradiction. Efforts to resolve the dilemma typically

<sup>32</sup> The rise of monitory democracy is examined at length in Keane 2009: 585–836.

fuel public controversy, as do all other types of military intervention and operation.

Why is there a hypersensitivity to war and other forms of violence in the age of monitory democracy? When compared with the Greek model of assembly democracy and the modern European age of representative democracy, why does violence become a sizeable fishbone in the throat of many democrats? One answer is that life within monitory democracies is shaped by the advent of many new violence-scrutinising mechanisms. Examples include the growth of peace movements rooted in civil society, disarmament initiatives, global summits and war crimes tribunals; the list also includes truth and reconciliation commissions, campaigns against torture, outcries against violence targeted at women and children, human rights networks and experiments, such as the European Union and its Copenhagen criteria, in crafting power-sharing institutions that criss-cross and complicate the borders of states and their 'sovereign' military powers. All these monitory inventions remind citizens and representatives of the contingency of power relations within and across state borders and of the real possibility of *reducing* the incidence of war and violence through deliberate acts of disarmament and conflict resolution. These monitory inventions also remind citizens and their representatives of the frightful things that are happening around them. The reminders underscore the dilemmas and deadly threats posed by 'overkill' weapons, war and violence for the ideals and institutions of publicly accountable, power-sharing ways of life.

The sensed discomfort with war and its toxic effects is amplified by stories and images and sounds circulated by a globally interdependent system of communication media. But the discomfort is equally reinforced by the return of an old problem that has twice before haunted democracy: the temporary ascendancy of a democratic empire, this time in the form of the United States, the world's first-ever democracy to operate (potentially) as a bellicose dominant power in global form. Its post-1945 commitment to securing 'global order' in the name of 'democracy' as a way of life suited to all peoples of the earth is arguably proving a mixed blessing for democracy, as can be seen by carefully scrutinising a favourite recent conjecture of American presidents, government officials, journalists and academics: the credo that democracies like the United States are reliable lovers of peace. 'During the Cold War', stated President Bill Clinton, shortly after the final collapse of the Soviet Union, 'we fought to contain a threat to the survival of free institutions. Now we seek to enlarge the circle of nations that live under those free institutions, for our dream is that of a day when the opinions and energies of every person in the world will be given full expression in a world

of thriving democracies that cooperate with each other and live in peace.<sup>33</sup> The conjecture was soon turned by academics into what can be called a Law of Democratic Peace. ‘Democracies never go to war’ was the boldest version. ‘Well-established democracies almost never go to war with each other’ was the more modest rendition of the same proposition.<sup>34</sup>

The conjecture has proven faulty for a string of reasons. The destructive assault of Israel on Lebanon in the so-called July War of 2006 showed yet again that under circumstances of regional or global tension highly armed democracies can readily work themselves into a fearful frenzy and so project their anxieties onto their neighbours, by force of arms, with hugely destructive effects on the lives of citizens, infrastructure and the surrounding ecosystem.<sup>35</sup> There is also the sobering point – often documented using questionable definitions and methods – that representative and monitory democracies, despite the more general trend towards the democratisation of violence, have left more than a few victims in their wake, because they regularly pick fights and start wars, often in disputed circumstances, using trumped up charges and claims that many voters may swallow, at least for a time.<sup>36</sup>

The champions of the Law of Democratic Peace have overstated the case for the democratisation of violence thesis; in effect, they have turned it into an awkward and implausible dogma. They have meanwhile found to their embarrassment that their overstated ‘scientific’ propositions were easily used against them, as in the build-up to the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. If it is true that democracies love peace, some elected political leaders reasoned, then that is more than enough justification for launching war on designated

<sup>33</sup> President Bill Clinton on 27 September 1993, cited in T. Smith 1994: 311. The same point was repeated in President Clinton’s 1994 State of the Union address ([www.pub.whitehouse.gov/urires/12R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/1994/1/26/1.text.1](http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/urires/12R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/1994/1/26/1.text.1)): ‘Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other, they make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy.’

<sup>34</sup> The quantity of literature produced by such claims is vast, but notably includes Chernoff 2004; Doyle 1983; Russett 2005; Weart 1998.

<sup>35</sup> See Khalaf 2006, which calls seriously into doubt the blanket claim of Russett and others that representative democracies ‘especially avoid starting a war with another democracy’ because their elected leaders know that ‘other democracies, if attacked, can motivate their populations for long and effective resistance’ (Russett 2009: 21).

<sup>36</sup> Compare Small and Singer 1976, where it is claimed that 58 per cent of interstate wars were provoked by democracies between 1816 and 1965. The claim is unconvincing, if only because democracies are defined (poorly) as regimes in which just 10 per cent of the population are enfranchised. Compare H. Müller 2004, where ‘pacifist democracies’ willing to cooperate with dictatorships are contrasted with ‘militant democracies’ that are fundamentally hostile to such regimes.



enemies, so as to transform them into democracies that would in turn shore up democratic peace with their neighbours.<sup>37</sup> The Law of Democratic Peace suddenly found itself confronted by much more than the demand (famously made in 1917 by President Woodrow Wilson) to make the world safe for democracy.<sup>38</sup> The Law of Democratic Peace instead won acceptance in a topsy-turvy world in which the blind worship of electoral democracy passes for democracy, and democracy itself comes dressed in military uniform, toughened by the claim that only war can make the world safe for democracy. In these circumstances even the ancillary claim that ‘democracies win wars’ has struggled to stay afloat. ‘Since 1815,’ write two prominent champions of this view, ‘democracies have won more than three quarters of the wars in which they have participated.’ They added: ‘This is cause for cheer among democrats. It would appear that democratic nations not only might enjoy the good life of peace, prosperity, and freedom; they can also defend themselves against outside threats from tyrants and despots.’<sup>39</sup>

The proposition that democracies are good at winning wars needs to be handled with great care. Universalist renditions of the same proposition, particularly those which ignore the case of Athens and other Greek democracies, need to be rejected. This volume certainly tables plenty of supporting evidence for the view of Herodotus, Thucydides and other contemporaries that because of its democracy Athens did well in fierce and sustained military competition with its opponents. Much of consequence can indeed be learned by studying democratic Athens, including the political and military advantages that flow from institutional practices that enable citizens to question and reject hair-brained military adventures driven by criteria of ‘success’ which are deeply controversial and subject constantly to the power of unintended consequences. Yet crudely generalised versions of the claim that democracies usually win wars are suspect. Not only (most obviously) did imperial Athens eventually lose its struggle against enemies upon whom it had earlier inflicted great violence. Careful examination of subsequent historical forms of democracy suggests that the wars that they fight are typically subject to unexpected outcomes that drag them into crises that do not end with the withdrawal of their troops or with the treaties they sign.

<sup>37</sup> See the confession of Bruce Russett (2005: 396): ‘Many advocates of the democratic peace may now feel rather like many atomic scientists did in 1945. They had created something intended to prevent conquest by Nazi Germany, but only after Germany was defeated was the bomb tested and then used – against Japanese civilians whose government was already near defeat. Our creation too has been perverted.’

<sup>38</sup> Woodrow Wilson, ‘A World League for Peace’, address to the Senate of the United States on 22 January 1917.

<sup>39</sup> Reiter and Stam 2002: 198.

Democracies do not 'in general' or 'always' succeed in winning wars, even according to the (variable and controversial) criteria of success that they set for themselves. Consider again the claim that representative and monitory democracies win more than three-quarters of the wars they fight. Even by this reckoning, these same democracies draw or lose up to a quarter of the wars they fight, which proves in our times to be cold comfort, especially in those bungled military conflicts – Vietnam and Iraq and Afghanistan are examples – where not only the global reputation of the United States has been put on trial, but democracy itself has been forced to suffer a measure of disgrace.

The probability of democratic disgrace has been bolstered by the vulnerability of American-style methods of fighting to so-called 'asymmetric' wars.<sup>40</sup> In plain speech: destructive precision-guided weapons dropped from the skies or fired from armoured vehicles are usually no match for the methods practised by rag-tag guerrillas and tightly disciplined, carefully decentralised armies enjoying strong local support nurtured by local feelings that American-style military interventions are shameful. The disproportion between the limited casualties suffered by the military invaders and the terrifying violence heaped upon civilian victims is staggering; so high are the levels of self-protection of the invading armies that their violence is felt by observers and victims alike to have a 'terrorist' quality about it. With their unusually high sensitivity to casualties monitory democracies have found it increasingly hard to 'win' asymmetric conflicts. True, there are plenty of occasions when democracies make better choices of military strategy; and it is often true (this was not what Tocqueville thought) that 'democratic soldiers fight with better leadership and greater initiative'.<sup>41</sup> But it is equally the case that monitory democracies are under constant domestic pressure to make wars short. Publics are understandably intolerant of their own casualties; monitory democracies show signs of 'democratising' violence, minimally by meting out electoral punishment to governments who become embroiled in foolhardy or risky or prolonged wars.<sup>42</sup> Doubting the necessity or wisdom of taking and destroying life, many citizens do not suffer fools gladly and are therefore prone to express

<sup>40</sup> The discussion of forms of warfare in which the weaker combatant uses unconventional strategies and weapons to offset the advantages of the stronger combatant owes much to the seminal essay by Andrew Mack (1975).

<sup>41</sup> Reiter and Stam 2002: 198; cf. Alexis de Tocqueville's remark that 'in the control of society's foreign affairs democratic governments do appear decidedly inferior to others' (de Tocqueville 1969: 228).

<sup>42</sup> Keane 2004.

impatience with their representatives when results are not forthcoming. That is another reason why the imperial American democracy is more and more forced to settle for draws or to suffer humiliating losses dressed up as victories.

The reputations of both the American empire and its democratic ideals have not been helped by wars carried out in the name of promoting democracy. Most such 'fight them, beat them, teach them to be less autocratic, perhaps even democratic' wars have proven to be fraught or, in about 85 per cent of cases, outright failures, according to one report that examined ninety American military interventions from 1898 to 1992.<sup>43</sup> Another study, covering 228 United States military operations stretching from forcible interventions to peacekeeping, border control and military training, showed that just 28 per cent of countries affected became more democratic.<sup>44</sup> The earliest military interventions in the former Spanish empire set the trend towards self-contradiction, which, in our times, shows no signs of abating.<sup>45</sup>

The poor record of success of democracy at the point of bayonets and under the flight paths of drone bombers by no means proves that democracy is suited only to a few lucky peoples, so that the building of democracy remains an impossibly daunting 'leap in the dark,' as Lord Derby famously claimed to Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in the 1860s. The mixed record of success rather highlights the point that successful 'democracy promotion' is always and everywhere subject to the most stringent conditions. Self-government requires the creation or preservation of a functioning government – not necessarily a territorial state, but minimally a set of political institutions capable of exercising authority over a territory, making and executing policies, extracting and distributing revenue, producing public goods and, of course, protecting its citizens by wielding an effective monopoly over the means of violence. The contradiction between the promise of self-government and the reality of forcible occupation by an invading democratic power, such as the United States, has to be handled sensitively; the military power to force others into submission does not translate spontaneously into the power of the conquered survivors to form stable democratic governments and law-enforced civil societies. Self-government minimally requires, for instance, a form of 'trusteeship' or 'shared sovereignty' managed by multilateral

<sup>43</sup> Peceny 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Tures 2005.

<sup>45</sup> See the path-breaking study by Tony Smith (1994).

institutions that help produce a viable, wider regional settlement. The contradiction can be resolved or dampened by following a clear timetable for withdrawal, cultivated wherever possible by the institutions of a civil society, including functioning markets, and – as if the list of pre-conditions is not already long enough – real efforts to cultivate local trust, not only through respect for local traditions and political aspirations, but especially by enabling the occupied population to organise and speak out against the occupiers, to subject them to the mechanisms of monitory democracy.<sup>46</sup>

## 8. Lessons from Athens

Whether or not monitory democracies, including the United States, can sustain the process of democratising violence in the face of such complexities or more generally survive territorial state rivalries and the unprecedented forms of ‘overkill’ and ‘asymmetric’ violence remains an open question. Things will very much depend upon the ability of citizens and their representatives to handle wisely problems of war and violence for which there are no precedents and no easy solutions. In attempting to defuse and wind down such threats can we learn anything about the subject of war and democracy by revisiting the case of Athenian democracy? Most certainly there is much of importance to be absorbed, but with several vital qualifications.

The case of Athens underscores the overall importance of widening our research horizons by injecting a strong sense of historicity into the analysis of democracy and war. The immediate consequence of widening horizons is that simple and straightforward generalisations divined from present-day examples become questionable, as do worn-out platitudes, including Tocqueville’s oft-cited proposition that democracies are prone to bellicosity because their professional armies lack the prudence nurtured by aristocratic virtue.

The thought-provoking case of Athens is important for other reasons. In the absence of civil society, political parties, periodic elections and monitory bodies in the contemporary sense, the Athenians nevertheless experimented with many different ways of publicly checking and balancing exercises of

<sup>46</sup> Among the more important research in this area are Chesterman 2004; Deutsch 1957; Gleditsch 2002; Ikenberry 2001; and the revealing summary of the early debacles that resulted from the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, an account written by a former advisor to the administration of George W. Bush, Larry Diamond (Diamond 2006).

power, including the blind worship of military power (*dunamis*), war and other forms of violence.<sup>47</sup> Public officials were subject to scrutiny (*dokimasia*) before taking up office, for instance. They had to lodge regular reports on their activities; under pain of prosecution, their conduct was subject to review; and, in sessions of the assembly, citizens were entitled to lodge complaints (*probolai*) against public officials for their wilful manipulation of people, their failure to deliver their promises or their misbehaviour at public festivals. The *stratēgoi* or generals of the city also sought to follow as closely as possible the orders which they had received from the *dēmos* out of fear of prosecution on the capital charges of treason or bribery.<sup>48</sup> This ongoing scrutiny of public officials, from generals to petty administrators, dissuaded them from committing hubris against fellow citizens, overreaching their delegated authority or enriching themselves at public expense. In addition, Ryan Balot, Iain Spence and others in this volume emphasise how in the assembly a politician's proposal for war was normally opposed by a rival on pragmatic grounds or occasionally for the sake of justice in international relations.

Admittedly these restrictions on the blind worship of military power were poorly developed in comparison to our times, above all because the Athenian *dēmos* had so many cultural, economic and geopolitical incentives for starting discretionary wars, which they did with such appalling regularity. But these restrictions on blind exercises of power practices, as modest as they were, remain clear examples of how assembly-based democracy had begun to denature violence and war. The Athenians bequeathed to the democratic tradition the principle that open scrutiny or public accountability mechanisms enable actors, citizens and elected leaders alike, to handle intelligently and prudently apply the means of violence, for instance, in self-defence or in opposition to rampant cruelty directed against others. But in matters of war, the case of Athens implies, democracy is potentially much more than the art of knowledge gathering, 'good counsel' (*euboulia*), tactical agility and prudence – in a word, pragmatism. Its self-questioning dynamics nurture what no other type of polity can achieve: a process that I have called the denaturing or democratisation of war and other forms of organised violence, which become publicly questionable and potentially eradicable means of making gains and resolving disputes.

<sup>47</sup> Keane 2009: 3–54.

<sup>48</sup> See section 5 of the chapter by David Pritchard in this volume.

So, at a minimum, what can be learned from the case of Athens is that democracy is not 'naturally' bellicose. Its heart is not necessarily violent. In matters of war, democracy can make a difference, above all by questioning so-called military imperatives and the alleged necessity or inevitability of war. Yet less positive things are to be learned from the case of Athens. Careful examination of its democracy casts serious doubt on the recently fashionable proposition that democracies are 'naturally' or probably peaceful. The example of Athens shows that popular assemblies could be impulsive and warlike: early assembly democracy undoubtedly fuelled the transformation and intensification of war. There were even signs that war and rumours of war put a spring into the steps of the *dēmos*, as Aristophanes pointed out forcefully when joking that his fellow citizens would launch a fleet of three hundred warships if their Spartan enemies dared to steal even a puppy (e.g. *Ach.* 540–54). The example of Athens also shows that transitions to democracy are risky, if only because they sometimes feed and are fed by war and rumours of war and that in extreme cases, for a variety of overlapping causes, democratic polities can morph into empires, that is, dominant and dominating powers that prove dangerous for the ideals and institutional legitimacy and effectiveness of democracy.

Concern with Athens necessarily triggers renewed concern for the long-neglected subject of the interrelationship of democracy and empire. The whole effect of this volume is to remind us that when democracies – Athens, revolutionary France and the United States of America are the three known historical cases – transform themselves into big powers bent on expansion they risk more than just the hubris that comes with the militarisation of their daily life and domestic politics. When they become mixed up with interstate rivalries and cavort with the devils of war, as they are prone to do, imperial democracies breed and encourage enemies, who typically are forced to protect themselves against the double standards of a democracy that by its actions contradicts the language of equality and peaceful self-determination of citizens. The fate of the democratic empires of Athens and revolutionary France suggests not only that their instincts for political survival within a world bristling with arms make them highly prone to military adventurism and violent conflict. Insofar as they trigger the desire for revenge and outright opposition, their demise and ultimate downfall becomes a near certainty, in accordance with a simple but sobering rule: dominant democratic powers that live principally by their own swords eventually die by the swords of their opponents.

In the age of overkill weapons, asymmetric warfare and imperial democracy the double realisation that democracies are uniquely capable of calling into question so-called military and security imperatives just as much as they can stir up geopolitical trouble and stoke the fearful fires of war that trigger their demise is surely an invaluable Greek gift to all thinking students of democracy.