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100 YEARS ON: ARE WE TIRED OF WINNING?

— Rosa Brooks

A hundred years have passed since the end of the Great War, and it's been a hundred years of winning.

A hundred years ago, we – we, the People; we, the great democracies; we, the triumphant spirit of the mythical West – defeated the lethal nationalism that brought gunfire to the streets of Sarajevo, ravaged Europe, and left ten million dead in the mud of the trenches.

The next war wracked the world, from Paris, Warsaw, and El Alamein to Pearl Harbor, Manila, and Tokyo, but we won that war too, defeating emperors and Nazis, monarchists and nationalists, communists and fascists, sheiks and pashas. Our armies clashed and tangled, sometimes with one another, but we always won. We were adept at the art of the deal, and what a deal it was! We carved up Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East and chunks of Asia, then let the severed pieces fall carelessly to the ground.

All that winning! We imposed our will on the world, but we did so with such good will. And we learned our lessons. We declared an end to war, and we meant it this time. We built a new world order on the rubble of the old. We hanged war criminals, proclaimed our commitment to universal human rights, and outlawed genocide and torture. Justice and law, we promised, would replace force as the defining principle of international relations. As Hiroshima smoldered and the bones and ash of the concentration camps filtered down into the soil, there was nothing we wouldn't promise one another: dignity, self-determination, free trade, free speech, arms control, an end to racism and sexism, courts and due process to replace the Hobbesian order that had for so long prevailed.

We kept right on winning. We set the colonized free to buy our commodities, and scolded new nations that wouldn't meet our lofty standards. We created an expansive new vocabulary of power: we spoke of the GATT and the IMF and WTO, the UNGA and the ICJ, the UNHCR and the WHO, the EC and the EU, NAFTA and NATO, the CTBT and the NPT. We prospered.

There were occasional setbacks, to be sure: messy and inconclusive conflicts in places far away; dictators, revolutions, famines and the occasional almost-nuclear war. But these were hiccups, and progress continued to march forward. The Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union faded away with hardly a whimper, and China's communists embraced capitalism. We won the Cold War without firing a shot. Democracy was breaking out all over, and the rising tide of globalization lifted all boats. McDonalds franchises opened in Riyadh, Hanoi, Guatemala City and Bucharest. The world became flat, and history came to an end.

So much winning!

It came as a shock, then, to learn that all this winning had not been evenly distributed – that the world was not flat, as we had thought, but was pierced through by sharp spikes, and many boats had foundered on the rising tide.

We should have known better. A dictionary could have told us that every win was someone else's loss. Worse, the nations and peoples who lost weren't inclined to be sporting about it. From the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda to Afghanistan and the Middle East, we saw protests, instability, insurgency, terrorism and a resurgence of the ethno-religious conflicts humanity was supposed to have left behind.

History, it turned out, had only been taking a catnap. Around the globe, the desperate fought over globalization's scraps, and they fought us, too, though we had only their best interests at heart. It wasn't fair. They were street fighters, brawlers, criminals, terrorists. They wouldn't play by the rules, though we explained the rules over and over. After a time, we found it expedient to bend the rules ourselves.

No need to be ashamed. They're our rules. It's our game. We always win.

Nevertheless, the vaunted liberal international order gradually began to look less liberal, less international, and a good deal less orderly.

That's all right.

Things will self-correct, we say. This is the genius of democracy, the genius of the West. Of course we will have our darker moments! We're only

human. Naturally, we will invade the wrong country from time to time, or elect the wrong leaders, but we always self-correct. The moral arc of the universe bends towards Steven Pinker, even if it sometimes has to pass through a few Trump Towers along the way.

Or maybe not. Maybe we won't self-correct.

Our poets told us that nothing lasts forever, and not every story has a happy ending, but we stopped reading poetry. We forgot the fate of Icarus, the sack of Troy, the fall of Rome, Ozymandias and his "vast and trunkless legs of stone." We forgot it all.

But we're getting so tired of winning.

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