

Heroes, History, and Head-On Intervention

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Camden Conference Seminar

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May 13th, 2022

433 N Dexter Rd Parkman, ME 04443

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In 6th century Scandinavia, a seemingly irrational monster, Grendel, spent 12 years terrorizing innocent Heorotians and devouring warriors. Then, Beowulf, a neighboring prince, killed the monster and ended the Heorotian peoples' suffering. Beowulf's mythical story exemplifies the violent, yet often necessary nature of military force. However, it also emphasizes the need to foster strong relationships between neighboring peoples. Contemporarily, the story of Beowulf, as well as real historical themes must be applied to best understand the current war between Russia and Ukraine. In this case, Putin, a seemingly irrational world leader, spent eight years invading a sovereign nation-state and wreaking havoc among its inhabitants. However, Beowulf cannot be the Ukrainian people's hero—the world's "superpower" nation must be. Ergo, the United States must take direct intervention in the war in Ukraine to end the conflict, save future lives, and preserve the integrity of international laws and norms.

Reading about Beowulf's violent encounters with Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the fire Drake, one can recognize the brutal nature of war. However, each fight that Beowulf took part in was in reaction to the slaughter of multiple innocent people. Similarly, there are horrific war stories about WWI and WWII including the air raids, dropping of the atomic bombs, and use of poison gas on soldiers. But ultimately, the United States fought these wars over the innocent people who were being impacted. If one examines the historical themes in joining these wars, it becomes apparent that the United States has joined wars late, focusing on an isolationist approach until varying catalysts make war inevitable. For example, in WWI, former President Wilson held firm isolationist ideologies, until the catalysts—the Zimmerman telegram and renewed attacks on American shipping—made joining the war an easier decision (Cronin, n.d.). So ultimately, even when the end of the war was not in sight, as it is currently in Ukraine, the United States chose to isolate themselves.

How or when the war in Ukraine will end is entirely up for speculation. According to the *Washington Post*, most experts have not made specific predictions regarding the end of the war but do “foresee a protracted, bitter conflict” (Tharoor, 2022). This is largely because Ukrainians have vowed to fight indefinitely for their sovereignty while Russia has vowed to continue its efforts unless Ukraine concedes to various ultimatums. For this reason, the Ukrainian government and people have been urging for greater military support from the West (Tharoor, 2022). Despite this, the United States is currently taking an isolation and containment-based approach, just as it did in WWI and WWII. But, as we learned in those wars, having additional military assistance from the world's superpower has accelerated the war and brought it to a faster halt (Tousignant, 2017).

After joining WWII multiple years later than its allies, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The government justified this action as they estimated that if the war continued, the war would last another year and a half and there would be millions more casualties (Hopkins, 2020). With this rationale, the United States ended the war sooner and saved the lives of civilians and soldiers alike. Therefore, it could be reasonable to conclude that by taking direct action, the United States could achieve the same outcome in Ukraine, this time, without the use of atomic weapons. Per the United States Task Force report, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy*, the United States will “use all available tools to prevent the use and further acquisition of nuclear weapons” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2009).

Conversely, proponents of contemporary isolationism and containment cite instances such as the atomic bomb droppings and the Cuban Missile Crisis as precise reasoning for their given ideologies. This is because the thought of a war involving the United States and Russia on

opposing sides often ends with mutually assured destruction (MAD). This is a legitimate concern, especially considering the seemingly irrational nature of the current conflict in Ukraine. But, considering that deterrence is a critical aspect of MAD and mutual annihilation is not something that Russia or any other actor would want, it seems unlikely that full-scale nuclear war would unfold. Hence, to better understand this perspective, one may look back to the teachings of Beowulf. When speaking about his decision to not use a weapon when in battle with Grendel, a weaponless opponent, Beowulf proclaimed, “No, we two in dark of night shall forego the sword, if he dares to seek war without weapon, and then may wise God, the holy Lord, judge which side will succeed, which one will win glory, as to him seems right”: Beowulf made this decision because he wanted to do what was honorable and to have a fair fight. In the case of war between the United States and Russia, a similar sentiment could ensue as neither party would want the other to use nuclear force, so they would not use it, to begin with.

Without direct support from the United States or the rest of the West, it is reasonable to assume that there will be an even more “protracted, bitter conflict” in Ukraine, than otherwise (Tharoor, 2022). John Herbst, former United States Ambassador to Ukraine and Uzbekistan, corroborated this viewpoint saying that “they [Russia] will be coming back for a much bigger bite” (Star Tribune Editorial Board, 2022). This means that Russia will continue to invade Ukraine until it achieves full subjugation and autonomy over the nation— a goal that will come with great devastation and loss of human life. So far in Ukraine, the death count has remained in the low thousands and an estimated 12 million people have fled to other nations (BBC, 2022). Additionally, there have been several hardships among Russian citizens who are struggling with sanctions, unemployment, and supply chain problems for food, medicines, and other goods (Al Jazeera, 2022). The death toll in Ukraine seems low when compared to other wars, however, it is

important to remember that the war is not over—and that Russia has no intent to stop fighting. Above all else, it is agreed upon that innocent lives should not be lost, that the lives of war-torn Ukrainians, helpless Russian civilians, and brave soldiers should not be lost. Therefore, to prevent the death toll from rising, we must directly intervene before the crisis escalates further—when there is still a chance for Ukraine, its peoples, and the future of sovereignty.

First noted in the Peace of Westphalia, sovereignty is a nation state's right to govern its territories without external interference. Historically, there have been repeated attacks on sovereignty, including the British rule of the Americas leading up to the American Revolution, and the United States' annexation of Hawaii in 1898. Currently, Russia is claiming that because of historical ownership, it has current sovereignty over what the United States and most of the world considers to be Ukrainian soil. Vladislav Surkov, a former colleague of Putin from the Russian Presidential Administration, blatantly stated that "Ukraine is not even a state" (Düben, 2020). This presumption is widely believed in Putin's Kremlin. However, according to Ukraine, the United States, and nearly every other nation-state, Ukraine has full sovereignty over its territory. Sovereignty is particularly important in the current war, but it is also an essential part of every modern nation-state; therefore, we must protect sovereignty as well as other international laws and norms now, so that they can be upheld in the future.

International laws and norms are legal rules and standards that apply between all nation-states and sometimes non-state actors. With globalization, they are particularly important to maintain world order as they "promote peace, justice, common interests, and trade" (Audsley, 2019). However, presently, the world is not in a rules-based order as the rules themselves are not being followed nor upheld. Such abrogation of international laws is particularly troubling because of its long-term implications. For instance, maritime law must dictate who has rights in

the South China Sea and the Arctic Ocean; nation-state sovereignty will determine the future of Taiwan; multinational agreements will determine how effectively the world fights against climate change. But, for these things to happen, a precedent for upholding international laws must be maintained.

Overall, we must look to historical themes from past wars, agreements, and crises to determine how to address the current issues—including the war in Ukraine—that the world is facing. After doing so, it becomes apparent that the United States must take direct action in Ukraine to bring the war to a swift end, save lives, and uphold the integrity of international laws and norms. In this paradigm, the crisis will be addressed and future crises such as climate change, territorial rights, and the longevity of Taiwan may be averted. However, to best understand the importance of taking direct intervention in Ukraine, one can once again look back to Beowulf's story. After Beowulf's victory, he displayed Grendel's severed arm and head for all people to see. Then, under Beowulf's rule, Geatland experienced five decades of peace. When the period of tranquility ends due to a citizen breaking laws, Beowulf was able to end the conflict with the help of his allies and bring peace back to Geatland. Contemporarily, when applied to the war in Ukraine, Beowulf's story has continuity and merit. If the United States and the West are able to “sever” Russia's attempt to control Ukraine, the precedent for upholding laws and norms will be set. Furthermore, when another actor breaks a law in the future, the world will be prepared for a swift and collaborative response.

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