

The Human Aversion to “Doing the Right Thing”

Does Anyone Want to Make the World a Better Place?

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Does anyone want to make the world a better place? Do you know anyone who does? Have you known of anyone who has? Think carefully about these questions, because things are not always as they seem.

In 1863, President [Abraham Lincoln](#) issued an Executive Order as a wartime measure freeing the slaves in the ten states that were in rebellion. It freed about three quarters of the four million slaves in the United States at the time. The remainder were not freed until the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1865. The order did not outlaw slavery and did not confer citizenship on those freed. It was merely a strategic measure, not a humanitarian gesture. Nevertheless, Lincoln has become known in American history as the Great Emancipator.

The war during which the order was issued resulted in the deaths of approximately three quarters of a million people, and the freedmen, as the former slaves were called, were left to fend for themselves. Many joined the army and after the war were sent West to fulfill America’s Manifest Destiny by killing Indians. What a magnificent event the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation was. Men were freed from slavery so they could become Indian slayers. What a great contribution to the improvement of the human condition that was!



Yet in 1861, two years before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Tsar Alexander II, a brutal Russian Autocrat, abolished serfdom in Russia by merely signing a document. Lincoln’s order freed about three million slaves; the Tsar’s edict freed 23 million without firing a single shot, without killing a single person or causing a single person to have to fend for himself. How dastardly! What a barbarian! You would think that he could have killed at least half a million. After all, he was the Tsar! He was a brutal Russian, not a benevolent American!

Really? Who was the greater humanitarian? The Great Emancipator or the Tsar? Did either make the world a better place? Were people any better off after the edicts were issued than before? Did being freed sate any person's hunger?

Lincoln was elected president of "a house divided." He went to war to preserve the house, to preserve the union. He succeeded marvelously. The house has been divided ever since! Was the world made any better by the war? Was the world any better after the war than it was before? Judge for yourselves. Were America's Blacks any better off? Are they better off today? These questions are not easy to answer.

In 1889, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany enacted the world's first old-age social insurance program which was designed by Germany's arch-conservative Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. In a letter to the German Reichstag, Wilhelm wrote: ". . . those who are disabled from work by age and invalidity have a well-grounded claim to care from the state." How reactionary! Imagine a Kaiser caring about the well-being of workers? What in the world can we make of that?

A short time later—well, quite a bit later in 1935—Franklin Delano Roosevelt basically copied the German program and induced the Congress to enact it. Roosevelt may have been a man of the people, although he was not quick to come to that position, but he was no original thinker. Yet he has an endearing place in the hearts of Americans. German Kaisers do not! Humanitarianism just oozes out of the hearts of America's political leaders, doesn't it? Did Roosevelt make the world a better place? If so, did the autocratic Kaiser make it a better place too?

Between 1939 and 1941 New Zealand created the first universal health care system. Other nations soon followed: The United Kingdom in 1948, Sweden in 1955, Iceland and Norway in 1956, Denmark in 1961, Finland in 1964, Japan in 1961, Canada between 1968 and 1972, the Soviet Union in 1969, Australia in 1974 and 1984, Italy in 1978, Portugal in 1979, Greece in 1983, Spain in 1986, South Korea in 1989, Taiwan in 1995, Israel in 1995, the Netherlands in 1986 and 2006, and Switzerland in 1996. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Western European countries of Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Luxembourg expanded their social health insurance systems to provide universal coverage. The United States of America? Well, not yet. Maybe someday. Perhaps never. Obama believes his reform of private health insurance has rendered universal healthcare unnecessary. America's leading from behind—way behind—does not extend to improving the human condition, and America does not boast of belonging to this international community.

These examples provide evidence for the assertion often inaccurately attributed to Winston Churchill that "Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing after they have exhausted all other possibilities." But things are really much worse than that. When Americans do set out to do the right thing, they often do it so badly and so ineffectively that the pathos of the human condition is hardly improved at all. Healthcare in America is so poorly distributed that many people lack access to it under any conditions and every physical ailment is not covered by medical insurance. Many communities lack even one primary care physician; others boast of scores, and vision, hearing, and dental problems are not covered by most medical insurance plans, not even Medicare! But of course not! Why do people, especially the elderly, need to see, hear, or chew? Making the world a better place is not an American forte. Nor is it a forte in many other countries.

In trying to judge the value of something, the Romans often asked, "*Cui bono?*" Who benefits? is an important question. So is the question, Who suffers? For instance, when an elderly person whose hearing is impaired is denied a hearing aid, who benefits? Anyone at all? When an unemployed person is denied unemployment compensation, who benefits? Anyone? When a family with little or no income is denied nutritional assistance, who benefits? When an ill person is denied medical care, who benefits? And who benefits when a homeless family is denied a domicile? Who benefits when a school child is denied a lunch? Does anyone benefit? Yet who suffers is obvious, isn't it? Helping no one and making many suffer is merely cruel, and being cruel is a moral fault. America and many other nations are not people-countries; they do not exist for the welfare of people. Making the world a better place is not something human beings do easily.

When people are denied these benefits, the deniers are engaged in simple cruelty. No, gratuitous cruelty inflicted gratuitously! The Earth is awash in it, and most of it is inflicted by human beings, many of whom are content to do nothing in the face of it. The American Congress has traditionally been known as a "do nothing" institution. And Edmund Burke, a very conservative political philosopher said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." When the American Congress or any political institution anywhere is content to do nothing to alleviate human suffering, it follows that the institution is aiding and abetting "the triumph of evil." But something else follows as well. Those who do nothing are not good people! That, above all, needs to be made obvious. Bad people do nothing and aid and abet the triumph of evil in the world. So much for making the world a better place!

I asked above whether the American Civil War made the world a better place. Now the world is in a continuous war. The Western world is at war with most of the nations in the Middle East, North Africa, and is promoting war in Ukraine. The Sunnis are now even being encouraged to kill other Sunnis. How can it possibly end well? When the Kurds, who are being encouraged to kill Sunnis too and who live in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, want to form a nation of their own, Kurdistan, and Turkey objects, who is the West going to support? The Kurds or a NATO partner?

Will there be no end to this killing? Is any human being's life anywhere made better by all this killing? Was the life of any American bettered when Osama bin Laden was assassinated? Did that assassination sate any child's hunger? Did the American economy suddenly awaken from the doldrums? Can't you just see how much better off everyone is because of the killing frenzy? Apparently no one but the world's leaders can.

Abba Eban, an Israeli diplomat, said in June 1967 at the United Nations that "The question is whether there is any reason to believe that . . . a new era may yet come to pass. If I am sanguine on this point, it is because of a conviction that men and nations do behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives. Surely the other alternatives of war and belligerency have now been exhausted."

How "hope springs eternal" even in the hearts of those who blankly stare into the abyss. The West, following America's lead has proven that the alternatives of war and belligerency have not yet been exhausted. So let peoples everywhere be warned: if you are willing to follow America to the gates of Hell, be prepared to enter it. Those gates swing in only one direction!

The world will not become a better place until human beings want it to. Those who deny

benefits to needy people and promote orgies of killing do not want it to. They want to protect the *status quo*. But denying benefits to the needy and promoting continuous war define the *status quo*. At least since Alexander the Great, war has been the instrument of what is now called foreign policy. They also comprise domestic policy in most nations. States can just as easily wage war against their own citizens as foreigners. Is this cruelty the essence of human nature? Will it ever be different?

Not until the questions, "Who benefits?" and "Who doesn't?" are being answered, "The needy!" and "Nobody!". The goal of human endeavor must become the welfare of human beings. Nothing good comes of doing otherwise.

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