

Hubris as the Evil Force in History

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Global Research, June 12, 2012

paulcraigroberts.org 12 June 2012

Region: [USA](#)

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I have always been intrigued by the Battle of Bull Run, the opening battle of the US Civil War, known to southerners as the War of Northern Aggression. Extreme hubris characterized both sides, the North before the battle and the South afterwards.

Republican politicians and their ladies in their finery rode out to Manassas, the Virginia town through which the stream, Bull Run, flowed, in carriages to watch the Union Army end the "Southern Rebellion" in one fell swoop. What they witnessed instead was the Union Army fleeing back to Washington with its tail between its legs. The flight of the northern troops promoted some southern wags to name the battle, the Battle of Yankee Run.

The outcome of the battle, left the South infected with the hubris that had so abruptly departed the North. The southerners concluded that they had nothing to fear from cowards who ran away from a fight. "We have nothing to worry about from them," decided the South. It was precisely at this point that hubris defeated the South.

Historians report that the flight back to Washington left the Union Army and the US capital in a state of disorganization for three weeks, during which time even a small army could have taken the capital. Historians inclined not to see the battle as a victory for the South claim that the southerners were exhausted by the effort it took to put the yankees to flight and simply hadn't the energy to pursue them, take Washington, hang the traitor Lincoln and all the Republicans, and end the war.

Exhausted troops or not, if Napoleon had been the southern general, the still organized southern army would have been in Washington as fast as the disorganized Union one. Possibly the southerners would have engaged in ethnic cleansing by enslaving the yankees and selling them to Africans, thus ejecting from the country the greed-driven northern imperialists who, in the southern view, did not know how to behave either in private or in public.

It was not southern exhaustion that saved the day for the North. It was southern hubris. The Battle of Bull Run convinced the South that the civilized northerners simply could not fight and were not a military threat.

Perhaps the South was right about the North. However, the Irish immigrants, who were met at the docks and sent straight to the front, could fight. The South was dramatically outnumbered and had no supply of immigrants to fill the ranks vacated by casualties. Moreover, the South had no industry and no navy. And, of course, the South was demonized because of slavery, although the slaves never revolted even when all southern men were at the front. When the South failed to take advantage of its victory at Bull Run and occupy Washington, the South lost the war.

An examination of hubris casts a great deal of light on wars, their causes and outcomes. Napoleon undid himself, as Hitler was to do later, by marching off into Russia. British hubris caused both world wars. The second world war began when the British, incomprehensibly gave a “guarantee” to the Polish colonels, who were on the verge of returning that part of Germany that Poland had acquired from the Versailles Treaty. The colonels, not understanding that the British had no way of making the guarantee good, gave Hitler the finger, an act of defiance that was too much for Hitler who had declared Germans to be the exceptional people.

Hitler smacked Poland, and the British and French declared war.

Hitler made short work of the French and British armies. But the British in their hubris, hiding behind the English channel, wouldn't surrender or even agree to a favorable peace settlement. Hitler concluded that the British were counting on Russia to enter the war on their side. Hitler decided that if he knocked off Russia, the British hope would evaporate and they would come to peace terms. So Hitler turned on his Russian partner with whom he had just dismembered Poland. Stalin, in his own hubris, had recently purged almost every officer in the Red Army, thus making Hitler's decision easy.

The outcome of all this hubris was the rise of the US military/security complex and more than four decades of cold war and the threat of nuclear destruction, a period that lasted from the end of world war two until Reagan and Gorbachev, two leaders not consumed by hubris, agreed to end the cold war.

Alas, hubris returned to America with the neoconservative ascendancy. Americans have become “the indispensable people.” Like the Jacobins of the French Revolution who intended to impose “liberty, equality, fraternity” upon all of Europe, Washington asserts the superiority of the American way and the right to impose it on the rest of the world. Hubris is in full flower despite its defeats. The “three week” Iraq war lasted eight years, and after 11 years the Taliban control more of Afghanistan than the “world's only superpower.”

Sooner or later American hubris is going to run up against Russia and China, neither of which will give way. Either the US, like Napoleon and Hitler, will have its Russian (or Chinese) moment, or the world will go up in thermonuclear smoke.

The only solution for humanity is to immediately impeach and imprison warmongers when first sighted before their hubris leads us yet again into the death and destruction of war.

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