Americans, it is often said, are in general ignorant of history, both their own and that of other countries around the world. This lack of historical knowledge and understanding means that too many Americans cannot appreciate the context of many of the political events in other parts of the globe.

For example, the political conflicts and violent atrocities that have occurred for more than a decade in the former Yugoslavia are the legacies of the peace treaties that followed the end of World War I. Prewar Serbia was expanded to include large parts of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, areas that contained Slovenians, Croats, Bosnians, as well as those populated by Macedonians, Albanians, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, and Hungarians. The Serbs dominated the government of this artificially created “Yugoslavia” in the years between the two world wars. After World War II, the country was kept together under the grip of a communist regime.

As the Cold War was ending and communism was losing its hold over Eastern Europe, the national, religious, and linguistic groups in Yugoslavia split apart. The wars and brutalities witnessed in this region of the Balkans since the early 1990s is a continuation of conflicts that predate World War I, when these groups were fighting both against the Turks, who had controlled much of this territory into the twentieth century, and among themselves for independence from and domination over each other. The settling of “old scores” between feuding groups, and the determination of political boundaries between these national, religious, and linguistic groups that were not allowed to be sorted out after 1918, have been playing themselves out before our eyes.

Another example of the legacy of World War I on contemporary global politics is Iraq. Before the war, what is now called Iraq was part of the Turkish Empire and was known as Mesopotamia—the ancient Biblical land of Babylon. During the war, the British, French, Italian, and Russian governments had signed a secret agreement to divide up most of the Turkish Empire among themselves. In the postwar period, some of this planned partition came to fruition as part of the peace treaties. France gained control of what is now known as Syria and Lebanon. The British acquired control of what became known as Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq, as “mandates” under the auspices of the League of Nations. (In 1899 the British had already established a “protectorate” over what is now called Kuwait.)

The story behind the creation of Iraq is told by Christopher Catherwood in his book *Churchill’s Folly: How Winston Churchill Created Modern Iraq*. During World War I, the British had invaded this part of the Turkish Empire and occupied Basra and Baghdad. At the end of the war they marched up to Mosul in the north. Prominent figures in the British military already sensed the importance of the country’s oil potential, though exploration had not fully shown the degree to which reserves were under the sand.

In early 1921, Winston Churchill was appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies as well as head of a Middle East Department responsible for Palestine and Iraq in the British government of Prime Minister David Lloyd George. He viewed his tasks as: (a) reducing British military expenditures in the colonial areas as much as possible to relieve pressure on the government’s budget; and (b) assuring that stable governments were established in Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq to guarantee British political and economic interests in this region of the world, including security for the shipping and air routes to the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire: India.
Churchill was determined to cut spending by reducing British ground forces to a minimum, yet at the same time maintain British control over these areas. He was persuaded that air power could replace ground troops, through the use of a bombing strategy to keep under control any restive “natives” who might attempt to revolt against British authority or those whom the British put into local power. Several times in the early 1920s, when various tribal groups in Iraq rose up in opposition to the British, the air force was put into action, bombing not only military targets but civilian areas as well. Killing and wounding women and children were considered a way of intimidating the “natives” into submission. This included the use of mustard and other poison gases.

In May 1920 Churchill was a vocal advocate of implementing this bombing strategy, telling a Cabinet meeting that poison gas “should be definitely accepted as a weapon of war.” On another occasion in 1919, he said, “I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. ... I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against the uncivilized tribes.” And one other time Churchill argued that “Gas is a more merciful weapon than high explosives and compels an enemy to accept a decision with less loss of life than any other agency of war. The moral effect is also very great. There can be no conceivable reason why it should not be resorted to.”

Securing British control and influence over these areas of the Middle East required the establishment of “friendly” governments under British sponsorship. While there have long been references to “the Arabs” and pan-Arab nationalism, in fact, the Arabs have been splintered into different branches of the Islamic faith (mostly concerning who was legitimate heir to Muhammad’s role as leader of the faithful) and tribal factions in various parts of Arabia.

The family of Saud under the leadership of Ibn Saud came out of the First World War as a British-sponsored political power in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula. Along the Red Sea coast, the newly created Kingdom of Hijaz that contained the holy cities of Mecca and Medina was under the rule of King Hussein, head of the Hashemite branch of Muhammad’s clan, the Quraishi. But in 1924, Ibn Saud’s forces conquered the Hijaz and deposed Hussein.

The British established King Hussein’s son, Abdullah, on the throne of “Trans-Jordan,” that part of Palestine east of the Jordan River, since Palestine west of the Jordan had been promised as a Jewish homeland under the wartime Balfour Declaration. A descendant of Abdullah still reigns today in Amman, Jordan.

Hussein’s other son, Faisal, had attempted to establish himself as ruler in Syria, but was kicked out by the French. But he was to have another chance through the assistance of Winston Churchill. Artificially carving out the boundaries of Iraq, and with little thought or interest to the divergent groups now locked within the same borders, the British proceeded to set up a “native” government through which they could rule the country under the terms of the League of Nations’ mandate.

With the approval of the British Cabinet, Churchill intrigued to establish Faisal as the king of Iraq. A limited and manipulated election process was set in motion, and Faisal assumed the role of ruler of Iraq in 1922. One additional problem in this process was that Faisal was a Sunni, the minority branch of Islam within the territory of Iraq. Thus, Sunni political control over the Shiite majority long predated the more recent dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and was the product of British diplomatic intrigue.

But Churchill and the British government soon found out that political puppets often resent and resist their role as marionettes at the end of strings held by someone else. Within months of taking power, Faisal attempted to gain more autonomy and power for himself, while expecting the British to pay for the military, political, and economic costs of running of the country. Churchill was frustrated and angry at Faisal’s behavior, declaring in exasperation that “while we have to pay the piper we must be effectively consulted as to the tune.” The British were caught in a bind, because
while they threatened to withdraw from Iraq and leave Faisal to his own devices, they were fearful that the country might fall to the aggressive Turks to the north, or almost as bad to the French, who would have liked to get their hands on the oil fields in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. So they had no alternative but to stay on, and pay a good part of Faisal’s bills.

At the end of 1922, Lloyd George’s government fell from power, and with it Churchill’s position in the Cabinet; in the new election he lost his in seat in Parliament as well. But the consequences of the British creation of Iraq are still with us. 

A History of Force: Exploring the Worldwide Movement Against Habits of Coercion, Bloodshed, and Mayhem

by James L. Payne

Lytton Publishing Co. • 2004 • 265 pages • $23.95 paperback

Reviewed by Sheldon Richman

Contributing editor James L. Payne has written a book that deserves the attention of every advocate of liberty. The nemesis of freedom is the initiation of physical force. Force, or the threat of its use, interferes with the mutually advantageous exchanges people seek. It is the enemy of natural rights, the free market, and the rule of law.

Champions of liberty often lament the extent to which aggressive force stains social life, even in relatively free societies. It should concern everyone. But that should not keep us from being grateful to Payne for bringing a good measure of perspective to the discussion. As he well documents, the world, especially the West, is not nearly as violent as it used to be.

Skepticism will understandably greet Payne’s thesis. Fresh from the bloody twentieth century, complete with two horribly violent world wars and large-scale totalitarianism, how can anyone suggest our era is more placid than times past? He has a good answer: our view is biased. This is called “presentism,” and Payne has several explanations for it. For example, we are more interested in the present than the past because we’re living it. Although we can’t do anything about then, we can do something about now. But to do something—and to get others to help us—we have to point out the problems. “There is but a small degree of difference between emphasizing a wrong and exaggerating it,” Payne writes. Both militarists and peace activists share an interest in portraying the present as unprecedentedly perilous.

Payne also shows that the mass media create a sampling bias: “In an earlier age, cities, countries, and even civilizations could be swallowed up in bloodshed without other parts of the world even knowing about it. Today, tragedies in the farthest corner of the globe are comprehensively reported”—24/7 at the speed of light. Finally, some of the most grisly forms of violence have gone extinct. As Payne notes, “Certain coercive customs and practices [such as human sacrifice] disappeared so long ago in our culture that we don’t register them as changes.”

Payne documents the declining use of force in several areas: human sacrifice, genocide, military conquest, political murder, revolution, criminal punishment, violence in the streets, slavery and debt bondage, taxation (“robbery”), and freedom of expression. The reader will be astounded at how cruel and common both official and freelance violence was until the fairly recent past—and thus how good our own time looks in comparison.

Why has violence fallen from favor? Because, Payne writes, people’s attitude toward the value of life slowly and fitfully has changed. This strikes me as more a tautology than an explanation. Surely the rise of liberal individualism had much to do with the change. But why did this philosophy spread? I’m inclined to think Ludwig von Mises tells a more complete story: people’s appreciation for human life grew as they realized the benefits of exchange in a division of labor.
Payne does not overlook terrorism, which has diminished in some forms while surging in others. “Islam and Global Terrorism” is his most controversial chapter. Payne’s attribution of Islamic terrorism to Mohammed’s being a “warlord” and to the perception of the West as a threatening carrier of modernity should spark much debate. In my estimation, Payne gives too little attention to the impositions on the Muslim world by Western governments since World War I.

Payne believes that the progress toward a force-free world will continue, and he urges those he calls “voluntarists” to help history along where possible. But he warns that if many people want some peaceful behavior suppressed, simply having the government cease suppressing it won’t accomplish the voluntarists’ ends. Often, Payne says, governments have restricted liberty in order to placate a population that would put down the “offending” conduct in a more extreme manner. I take Payne here to be saying what FEE has long maintained: the future of liberty depends on changing people’s minds, not just current government policy.

I should point out two sources of dissatisfaction with this impressive book. First, the diminution of assertive force may in part be explained by people’s becoming habituated to government decrees. It is often noted that the American people put up with regulations and taxes that would have incited violence in their revolutionary ancestors. Have we just gotten used to taking orders?

Second, I was disappointed to see no mention of the coercive state-mental-health system’s role in controlling deviant but law-abiding behavior. This entails assertive force—preventive confinement, forced drugging, electroshock—against some two million unwilling people each year. No full accounting of violence in our society can neglect what Thomas Szasz calls the Therapeutic State.

Sheldon Richman is the editor of The Freeman.
To put the public even further over a barrel, teacher unions are exceedingly adept at politics. Brimelow points out that it is common for the unions to field their own candidates in school-board elections. The support the unions give their candidates through in-kind services, such free phone banks, often leads to victory. The voters, taken in with all the rhetoric about the union candidate’s “deep concern for the education of our children,” don’t realize that their pockets are going to be picked.

“Shameless” is the best word to describe the union tactics in their ceaseless attempts to squeeze more money out of the public. Brimelow provides lots of examples. In Jefferson County, Colorado, for instance, the union had its members call parents to lobby for a school-tax increase, using emergency phone numbers given by the students. In Albuquerque, after being subjected in class to “discussions” about the inadequacy of teacher pay, students walked out of school to stage a rally for an increase. Their signs were made from materials taken from the school’s media center. The “protest” got out of hand, and some 200 students went on a disruptive rampage in the city.

Teacher unions, Brimelow notes, are also great supporters of educational fads. One of their favorites is class-size reduction, which appeals to people’s natural desire for the best educational environment for children. Fewer students mean more individual attention, so the kids will learn better! Sadly, that assumption and the belief that students need more individual attention are almost never challenged. So unions usually win on the issue. But Brimelow shows that the consequences are not beneficial. Costs for the extra teachers and additional classrooms rise, while the average quality of teachers is diluted, as more rookies and people who would not formerly have been considered are hired.

Brimelow also shows that the teacher unions have helped along the dumbing down of American schools by pushing for weak books and programs that are easy for their not-too-bright members to use. This is one area where the book might have gone further and explored the unholy alliance between teacher unions and our “education schools,” where future teachers are taught lots of fuzzy, “progressive” notions, such as that self-esteem is much more important than learning “mere facts.”

*The Worm in the Apple* does a good job of setting forth the problem. What does Brimelow think should be done? He realizes that the Gordian knot-cutting solution is to get government out of the education business. He wants to see “the creation of a free market in education, rather than the current socialist government system.” To get there, we will need to defang the teacher unions, and toward that end he suggests 24 sensible steps.

Brimelow has done his homework. His readable, often witty book shows why we will never have a respectable education system as long as the teacher unions dominate the government’s near-monopoly on K-12 education.

George Leef is the book review editor of *The Freeman.*