

Fatal Folly



by Lee Duigon

June 29, 2023

Are the people who govern us really all that wise? That belly-laugh in the background is from History.

In 1856-57 there arose a prophetess among the Xhosa nation of South Africa. She told them that if they slaughtered all their cattle and burned all their crops, the gods would run the European settlers out of Africa.

Most of the people believed her and did as she advised. The result was a famine that reduced the Xhosa population from 105,000 to 27,000 (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nongqawuse>). If not for a small minority who refused to go along with the plan—for which they were denounced as “the stingy ones”—the entire nation would have perished.

But the Europeans themselves committed equally disastrous follies.

The assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian imperial throne, by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, is widely viewed as the spark that ignited World War I—until the Second World War, the most ruinous and deadly war in human history. Austria issued an ultimatum, to which the Serbs, at the last possible minute, acceded.

When that news was delivered to Kaiser Wilhelm II, emperor of Germany, he rejoiced. “But this is wonderful!” he cried. “We will have peace!”

The chief of his general staff, Von Moltke, quickly put a damper on the celebrations. It was too late to draw back from war, he said: the timetables of the troop trains were already carved in stone. We do not know who died and left him Kaiser. The real Kaiser, Wilhelm, who had the authority to stop the war, let Von Moltke talk him out of it. With results too well-known to require description here.

Folly. The Kaiser could have stopped it and he didn't.

In 1905 Russia went to war with Japan. The Russians had no Pacific Ocean fleet, so their Baltic Sea fleet would have to sail around the world to get there. When the Russian fleet entered the North Sea, the admiral mistook British fishing boats for Japanese naval vessels and opened fire. The fact that they sank so few of these unarmed ships didn't register. The British retaliated by closing to the Russians all the coaling bases they would need to visit on their way to Japan.

No problem! The Russian ships would simply carry all the coal they needed. To make room for it, they left much of their ammunition behind.

When they finally arrived at Tsushima Strait, the Japanese Navy annihilated them.

What are we to make of such gross incompetence? You don't get to be a prophetess, a Kaiser, or an admiral by being well-known as an idiot. Is it possible these leaders become idiots once they reach a high enough level of authority to do real damage?

No nation is immune to folly. Let's not forget how Athens lost the Peloponnesian War, which they were winning at the time. Against all good advice, they widened the war by invading Sicily and losing their army and their fleet in a vain and totally unnecessary attempt to capture Syracuse. That was almost 2,500 years ago. You'd think an example like that would make world leaders just a bit more cautious.

Knowing history as they did, our country's founders devised a government of checks and balances: no single branch of government would have the power to drag the whole country into self-destructive policies. Even with that in place, America blundered into the Civil War... and if you think we've learned that lesson, remember Afghanistan. And while we're at it, the current insanity between Ukraine and Russia.

We need to shore up our checks and balances, don't we?

I have discussed these and other topics throughout the week on my blog, <http://leeduigon.com/> . Click the link and enjoy a visit. My articles can also be found at www.chalcedon.edu/ .

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E-Mail Lee Duigon: leeduigon@verizon.net