

I **Smart Idealism and the Peace Formula**

Introduction

If we don't end war, war will end us.

H. G. Wells

The fight had already been going on for what seemed an eternity when a series of blows caused his opponent to stumble and ultimately fall to the floor. Blood, sweat and tears flowed and the surrounding crowd of 60,000 spectators started to cheer. The scene also captivated over a billion spectators in front of their TVs at home, making it one of the biggest TV events to date. Shortly thereafter, Muhammad Ali was declared winner by knock-out over George Foreman in the "Rumble in the Jungle" – one of the most famous matches in boxing history, which took place in 1974 in Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC). While the nominal winner and loser of this epic fight were, respectively, Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, it may well be argued that its greatest beneficiary was Zaire's ruthless dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, and the biggest loss was at the expense of the Congolese population, whose plundered wealth was used to pay part of the bill for this mega-event.

Less than a decade after gaining power in a coup in 1965, Mobutu was relishing his international reputation and prestige. He essentially prided himself on being a darling of various major powers, each competing for his attention. From its very beginning, Mobutu's presidency was characterized by public executions of rival politicians (drawing live audiences greater than that for the Rumble in the Jungle), bloody suppression of demonstrators (with the aid of foreign mercenaries), gruesome torture of dissidents, kleptocracy on a breathtaking scale (he amassed a personal fortune worth several billion US dollars), and an appalling lack of democracy and

development. This, however, did not prevent Western leaders from generously supporting their ally against the Soviets. Mobutu was a regular guest at the White House, having had warm relations with Presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior. Even under the somewhat more distant Jimmy Carter, Zaire received nearly half of the US foreign aid allocated to sub-Saharan Africa. This financial help was not put to good use – to put it mildly – as the country still suffers from alarming levels of political violence today, is democratic in name only, and is ranked 226th (out of 229 countries) in terms of real gross domestic product per capita.¹ No matter what ranking of governance, human development, human rights protection, or socioeconomic development is used, the country is consistently close to the bottom.

How could such a tragedy occur in a country blessed with abundant natural resources and great potential? It is almost a textbook example of what can go wrong in the presence of several (sadly common) misperceptions. In short, similar to many other cases, Western governments favored short-term stability and the strategic upside of supporting an anticommunist dictator over the promotion of actual democracy. Beyond this cynical Cold War realpolitik, many well-intentioned policymakers endorsed the shady peace deals mastered by Mobutu (who had the habit of offering “*plata o plomo*” (silver or lead), that is, either buying off or killing detractors). Their underlying assumption was that bargaining and cutting deals between the dictator and the current opposition could promote peace. Since the independence of the DRC from Belgium in 1960, time and again Western powers supported (and sometimes saved) Mobutu and other cronies financially and militarily and brokered peace talks and ceasefires, which invariably proved short-lived and failed to deliver lasting peace. As shown in this book, the logical fallacy of such an almost exclusive focus on short-term bargaining is that whenever one given rebel leader has been bought off at the negotiation table, other aspiring warlords are already in the starting blocks. As in the ancient Greek Hydra myth, for each rebel removed,

two new challengers arise. When the breeding ground for political unrest persists (poverty, bad institutions, natural resource rents to grab, low productivity and public insecurity), there will always be armed movements ready to capitalize.

Another misconception of Mobutu's Western allies was that they hoped to "buy" peace through cash transfers that were largely embezzled by a kleptocratic regime. In contrast, productive "investments" in human capital did not receive much consideration (e.g., the DRC's schools are infamously underfunded, and security risks and violence have been major obstacles to schooling in the past decades). Finally, the need to, first and foremost, establish public security as a basis for any policy hoping to bring positive change has been widely underestimated – and lack of public safety has indeed been a major factor jeopardizing any promising reforms or policy measures, an example being the fight against the 2018–2019 Ebola epidemic. In a nutshell, poverty and lack of democracy, as well as insecurity, have been the root causes for renewed political violence in the DRC over the last six decades. As shown in this book, key elements of a formula for peace – both for the DRC and around the world – include policies that provide a *voice*, *work* and *warranties*.

BEYOND THE DRC: A DIRE STATE OF AFFAIRS

Sadly, the tragedy in the DRC is not a unique case. We live in dangerous times. When switching on the TV and watching the news, on an average day one may hear about several dozen civil conflicts worldwide. The more mediatized of them include the civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, or the fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, the DRC and Somalia. The subjective perception of an escalation in such political violence is confirmed by cold-hearted statistics: The fifty-six distinct instances of ongoing wars and conflicts in 2022 correspond to a record number since 1946.²

At the forefront of the news are also drug-related massacres and organized crime, for example, in Mexico, Colombia or Honduras, in addition to mounting international tensions, most

prominently between the current superpower, the United States, and its rising rival, China, as well as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and tension between Russia and neighboring countries, such as Georgia. Even Western democracies are not spared. Populism is on the rise across rich countries and democracy is on the decline. Again, this subjective perception is consistent with statistics from Freedom House, suggesting a decline in worldwide average democracy/freedom scores for the seventeenth consecutive year.³ There are also mounting social tensions in several countries, most notably in the United States, with waves of protest by the Black Lives Matter movement after recent incidences of police violence against black citizens.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated various forms of social and political violence.⁴ As discussed in this book, poverty and lack of human capital are crucial root causes fueling the threat of conflict and violence. The pandemic has led to spiking levels of unemployment and poverty (especially among the most unfortunate, who work in the informal sector and do not have access to formal insurance mechanisms). Access to schooling is also under severe stress – among others for sanitary reasons. This may well constitute a fertile breeding ground for further violence to come. Furthermore, the imperative of fighting the virus has provided a formidable pretext for populists and autocrats to limit freedom of assembly and expression, and to step up surveillance. Last but not least, a pandemic tends to reduce international trade and business relations. Declining interdependence between countries thereby reduces the economic cost of international wars (and hence makes them potentially more likely, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 3).

Does this affect us directly or is it just some depressing intermezzo we watch on the TV news before turning on the next Netflix series or feel-good movie? Well, it turns out that we are in this together. Nobody is an island and violence – like a virus – does not stop at country borders. Mischief travels not only across space but also through time, as wars today sow the seeds of future poverty and

discord, through a series of vicious cycles. Throw in global warming, pandemics, grand economic transformations and demographic transitions, and you have an explosive concoction threatening global stability and well-being. Just as the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 in Sarajevo triggered World War I and fighting around the globe, the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933 led to a chain of events resulting in millions of people dying not just in Germany but thousands of miles away up to a dozen years later. Hence, even if some of our lives appear on the surface like a long, winding river flowing down the same valley since eternity, in reality, conflict and war can exert a global grip on society, with each one affecting us directly – like a worldwide pandemic.

Thus, the time has come to take the bull by the horns and act at once to ensure a prosperous and peaceful future for generations to come. Just as for the *torero* at the *corrida*, inaction is fatal and will be punished by history. To tackle threats to peace, we first need to understand why people fight and how to prevent it. As it turns out, economic forces play a major role in the outbreak and perpetuation of violence, but they may also hold the key for positive change. In particular, having *work* and a *voice* provide the nutrients and sunlight required for the seeds of future prosperity and peace to blossom.

Sadly, too often the economic root causes for turmoil are ignored in favor of peace plans focusing on cutting deals with the powerful, leaving the real underlying reasons for conflict unaddressed. There has been an alphabet soup of naive or cynical top-down policies, cooked up by powerful international leaders and policymakers. The ingredients in this indigestible brew include ill-prepared mediation, biased military assistance and untargeted food aid. As detailed in this book, such measures can fail spectacularly and ignite the social tensions and civil unrest which ravage our time.

This book will argue that, instead, bottom-up policies are required to align economic incentives for peace, achieved through a well-designed blend of peace-promoting institutions, state capacity building and health, education and labor market policies. There is

also a crucial role for the international community (and ordinary citizens) in regulating and monitoring international firms, migration policies and funding the right initiatives. In a nutshell, while this book explains how well-intended yet naive policies backfire, often with disastrous consequences, it also sketches a path forward. Drawing on decades of careful academic research on conflict, it makes the case for “smart idealism,” that is, a set of policies shown to foster incentives for sustained peace.

INFLUENTIAL – YET FATAL – MISCONCEPTIONS

In what follows, we shall first revisit some common misconceptions – already encountered in the example of the DRC – that have given birth to failed peace policies for decades, before outlining promising ingredients for successful peacebuilding and revisiting some successful transitions to democracy, peace and prosperity.

Misconception 1: “He Is an A-Hole, But He Is Our A-Hole” (Alias “Better the Devil You Know”)

This logic has been invoked to prop up autocrats around the world for decades, even centuries. During the Cold War, for example, being anticommunist may have been enough to warrant support from Western powers – independent of how dismal a nation’s democratic and human rights track-record was – whereas swearing alliance to Marxism, similarly, was enough to get the USSR on board. A good illustration is provided by Nicaragua’s fight in the 1980s between the Sandinista (supported by the Kremlin) and the Contras (supported by the Ronald Reagan administration). While neither the United States nor the USSR were convinced by the moral, political or economic appeal of their protégé group, they actively supported their ally in the goal of preventing their own zone of influence from shrinking. Similar cynical calculations are made today in the Yemen war and when it comes to backing particular fighting groups in Libya (linked to particular gas pipeline projects). As argued in this book, backing bad regimes and despots in exchange for short-run influence and

(seemingly) lucrative deals is not just morally wrong but may also backfire politically and economically.

Take the case of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Coming to power in a coup in 1969, Gaddafi consolidated a tight grip on power and became *persona non grata* in many Western democracies in the 1990s owing to his financing of various terrorist and extremist groups globally, and following Libya's role in the Lockerbie bombing of Pan AM flight 103, which killed 270 innocent people in 1988. Some years later, after Gaddafi turned in the alleged perpetrators of the Lockerbie bombing and paid financial compensation and stopped his unconventional weapons program, all was forgiven and forgotten. Once more, Western diplomats were busy rolling out the red carpet for an autocratic ruler. The race to please Tripoli's despot was so frantic that any human rights abuses by the Libyan regime were duly ignored by Gaddafi's new-found Western friends, who acclaimed him with the highest honors during state visits. In 2008, Gaddafi's son Hannibal was accused of beating up his servants and arrested by Swiss police in Geneva. During the subsequent diplomatic turmoil between Switzerland and Libya, one of Switzerland's oldest allies, France, refused to take sides between the Swiss insistence on equality of the law versus Gaddafi's thirst for vendetta (which culminated in the arrest of two high-level Swiss businessmen in Tripoli for alleged visa irregularities, and Gaddafi calling for jihad against Switzerland). In 2010, the then French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner famously talked about a "dispute between their Swiss friends and their Libyan friends" in which France did not want to take sides and "distribute responsibilities and errors."⁵ Little did it matter that one of the French "friends" was one of the continent's oldest democracies, which in this affair could be accused of nothing else than applying the rule of law and respecting the judiciary's independence, while the other (new-found) French "friend" was a dictator with a decade-long track record of human rights abuses, supporting terrorism and violently repressing opposition at home.

Sadly, realpolitik and ignorance of human rights abuses of “useful” dictators is often the rule rather than the exception. The problem is that – besides being morally wrong – it does not work. As discussed in this book, there is ample recent academic research showing that the price to pay for short-run stability and attractive deals is mounting anti-Western sentiment in the long-run. The population in destitute countries finds it hard to understand why champions of democracy at home help to prop up corrupt regimes abroad. This hypocrisy results in rejection and hate of the West and its values – which are perceived as phony. For example, a systematic study of international terrorism shows that US military aid to doubtful regimes in the last few decades has resulted in *more, not fewer*, terror attacks from beneficiary countries against the United States, prompting the authors to wonder in the title why the United States were willing to be “Paying them to hate US?”⁶ Another study, examining US military aid to Colombia, found that – if anything – it strengthened illicit armed groups to the detriment of weakened domestic political institutions.⁷

As argued in this book, rather than cutting shady deals with despots and distributing, without scrutiny, vast sums of military aid, rich and stable Western countries should endeavor to foster peace by helping to lay the groundwork for a peaceful society. Having work, a voice and security warranties ensures citizens do not have incentives to engage in political violence – an investment more beneficial and durable than supporting autocrats.

Misconception 2: Sending Enough Cash Can Curb Conflict

Another widespread misconception is that fostering peace is directly linked to the amount of money spent for this purpose. As argued in this book, “buying” peace by simply disbursing cash does not work – yet “investing in” peace by strengthening human capital and productive capacities does. The core pervasive misconception is that any amount of financial means put at the disposal of a given country will lead to similar effects, no matter the modalities, as typically money

will be put to best use. Unfortunately, this logic is as watertight as a teabag. The problem is that the presence of large, accessible resources naturally triggers the incentive to appropriate them – a phenomenon occurring in rich and poor countries and in democracies and autocracies alike. When something is “up for grabs” there will typically always be people trying to get their hands on it. While the thirst for rent-seeking may not differ between rich democracies and countries torn by civil war, what prevents the worst excesses in democratic states is that strong state capacity and a powerful legal apparatus keep people’s behavior in check. However, in unstable countries with a weak state, having a sudden inflow of rents to grab can be disastrous – as can be easily illustrated by oil holdings. As discussed in Chapter 4, recent studies have found that while oil reserves can have positive effects in strong, stable states such as Norway, for less stable countries such as Venezuela, Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Angola and so on oil money is often a critical source of instability and turmoil. The “resource curse” of in-fighting for rents has been a key reason why, despite impressive oil and mineral revenues, many oil- and mineral-producing states have not achieved the level of prosperity one may have expected. Incidentally, as argued in this book, a “smart” green transition yields the double dividend of tackling climate change and at the same time reduces the scope for toxic petropolitics, which, in turn, fosters the prospectives for peace.

The trouble is that sending cash or goods can have – in some cases – remarkably similar effects to having oil in the ground. For example, a recent study has found that US food aid on average – if anything – *increases rather than reduces* the risk of fighting in the beneficiary regions.⁸ In the presence of political instability and a weak state, it is not surprising that various armed groups would typically try to appropriate food aid and sell it – which can fuel further fighting.

Does this mean that Western democracies should resign and renounce any aid to unstable regions? No: Thankfully there exist ways to provide aid that do not suffer from the “resource curse”

logic. As discussed in this book, there is a place for *smart idealism*, and, in particular, *investments* in human capital which drive a series of virtuous effects. First of all, better education and better health will improve the chances of attaining attractive employment, causing both the motives and time available for engaging in violence to decrease. Second, and even more crucially, *physical* capital can be stolen, while *human* capital cannot. Turning cash into education and better health not only boosts productive capacities and the opportunity cost of fighting but also reduces the financial resources that are up for grabs. As discussed later, it has been found, unsurprisingly, that resource-rich countries fare better when investing money from natural resources in schools rather than elsewhere. Vast schooling programs (such as the INPRES program in Indonesia) have experienced spectacular success in curbing violence.⁹

Misconception 3: Winning Over Hearts and Minds First; Security Second

A third dangerous misconception is that a “charm offensive” is a great first step to winning over local support, which will then (almost automatically) lead to reduced grievances and tensions, thereby curbing conflict. According to this logic, communication efforts are stepped up and amenities are provided to win over the hearts and minds of the local population. While theoretically this may be appealing, the trouble with such a strategy is that in practice it has rarely worked. The reason is simple: When security is so scarce that your family faces severe risks every day, you naturally won’t care much about amenities and politics. As shown in a series of studies discussed in this book, there is a pyramid of needs, and the most basic one is security and basic state capacity and infrastructure (water, electricity). Hence, for any other policy to be successful, at the very beginning it needs to be ensured that the most basic functions of the state (security, infrastructure) are put in place (either by the country in question or by an international peacekeeping force). Once these basic needs are satisfied, people are more receptive in a “war of ideas” to think

about the virtues of having a democratic society and equal civil rights for all societal groups. As discussed in more detail later, in Iraq, for example, the provision of services did, in a first phase, nothing to curb violence, and only helped later when some minimum level of basic safety had been established.¹⁰

To get armed rebel groups to the negotiating table, security warranties are fundamental. Picture yourself as a rebel leader: You may not be willing to hand over the AK-47 if you have a justified fear of being massacred afterwards. Therefore, providing security guarantees for all groups is a key role that the international community can play: The willingness to invest considerable resources during postconflict reconstruction renders a revival of the conflict all but impossible, with postwar reconstruction even succeeding in very hostile environments. Think of the Bosnia-Herzegovina power-sharing agreement brokered in Dayton, Ohio in 1995. While it has yet to lead to an integrated melting pot society, it ended a brutal three-year war and has prevented the renewal of large-scale violence ever since. International peacekeepers have been instrumental in this success. By the same token, the occupation of Nazi Germany and the maintenance of a large contingent of US troops has, in the long run, favored the transformation of Germany from a fascist murder state to a stable democracy today.

SUCCESS STORIES: THE ROLE OF WORK, VOICE AND WARRANTIES

In fact, the *denazification of Germany* is almost a textbook example of how to transform a fascist rogue state into a peaceful and prosperous democracy. It contains many ingredients of the *peace formula* advocated in the current book. First of all, the Allies wisely did not engage in deal-making with the Nazi's worst offenders. Instead, they investigated abuses in the Nuremberg trials and built the modern Bundesrepublik (BRD) on the solid foundation of a new generation of politicians, of which the highest representatives had not been entangled with the most ruthless *Sonderkommandos* of the Third Reich.

Admittedly, various Nazi supporters did go under the radar of the denazification process and “recycle” themselves in the new BRD administration – but at least at the highest level, the denazification achieved a *tabula rasa* and the Allies insisted on Germany becoming a real democracy, where each and every citizen has a *voice*.

At the same time, the Marshall Plan was put in place and resulted in an unprecedented boom in economic investments, supporting the rebuilding of infrastructure and boost of human capital. The German *Wirtschaftswunder* provided *work* and economic prospects to the citizens of the newly created BRD. This was a vital puzzle piece for lasting peace and prosperity. Crucially, from the beginning, the Marshall Plan had the intention of not simply disbursing poverty relief funds, but also investing in an economically productive Europe, with a clear goal of cutting red tape, reducing barriers to trade and rebuilding industry. This boost in productivity made it more attractive to seek a career in business rather than going back to the old ways of bad politics.

Last but not least, one needs to remember that the United States wisely helped to restore the basic state administration and infrastructure in record time and kept postreconstruction Germany on a short leash militarily. A large number of US troops were charged with guaranteeing security and a smooth transition to democracy. Even if some old Nazi nostalgics had the bad idea of staging a coup against the nascent BRD, he would not have gotten far. The restored state capacity and security guarantee proved determinant in preventing backlashes and resurgences of antidemocratic politics.

Japan's post-World War II recovery shares many characteristics with Germany's. The United States also played a fundamental role between 1945 and 1952, under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur. As with the denazification in Germany, the Allies removed the old elite who engaged in massacres and organized trials to punish war crimes committed by Japanese individuals. The US occupiers also imposed a new democratic constitution in 1947, limiting the political role of the emperor and giving a *voice*

to all Japanese citizens. At the same time, a large US army contingent occupied Japan, *warranting* security and preventing relapses during the transition to democracy. Concurrently, the Marshall plan logic was applied to Japan's recovery with massive infrastructure and human capital investments, which provided *work* and fueled the Japanese economic miracle. As for Germany, the result was spectacular: In a few years Japan was transformed from a terrifying war machine spreading fear throughout Asia into a stable and prosperous democracy with a pacifist constitution that has been a force for good ever since.

One may counter these examples as, in most other cases, democracy imposed from abroad backfired. This point is well taken: As shown in this book, the conditions under which radical democratization driven from the outside can succeed are restrictive, and hence I will not naively advocate for wild interventionism. What made Allied post-conflict reconstruction work in Germany and Japan was, first of all, that these countries were, after losing World War II, in a desolate position and morally, financially, politically and militarily bankrupt. This was indeed a fertile terrain for making a *tabula rasa* and planting the seeds of democracy, despite once being a hostile territory of widespread fascist and militarist ideology. Besides these preconditions, what crucially contributed to success was the consequent and massive application of key ingredients of what I call "the peace formula": unprecedented investments in creating *work*, insisting without compromise on a democratic *voice* for everybody and providing massive and long-lasting security *warranties*. So, no, it is not by chance that such interventions worked for Germany and Japan but often backfired elsewhere, where either the preconditions for intervention were less favorable or – more often – the principles of the peace formula were discarded for the benefit of shady deals.

In what follows, we shall turn to examples where much of the heavy lifting of democratization was domestic, with the international community in the role of a supporting actor. *South*

Africa is an example of such a “home-grown” democratic transition crowned with success. After turning a blind eye to the inhuman apartheid state of South Africa for decades, at the end of the 1980s international pressure on the rogue regime of Pretoria finally mounted and international economic sanctions and boycotts took their toll. Olaf Palme nailed it in 1986 at an anti-apartheid rally one week before his murder: “Apartheid cannot be reformed; it needs to be eliminated.”¹¹

Once international support and shady deals with the South African *Unrechtsstaat* were history and when the leader of the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela, insisted on “one person, one vote” rather than the semidemocracy proposed by the old elite, South Africa set sail for a better future. Insisting on full democracy and fully removing past despots from power has proven crucial for a successful transition to the rule of law. While the “Rainbow Nation” achieved the difficult task of transitioning to democracy and giving every citizen a *voice*, its track record is more dismal when it comes to investing in productive *work*, building up state capacity and *warranting* security. While South Africa boasts one of Africa’s strongest economies, the education sector still faces important challenges and homicide rates are still high.

In these three tales of success, the international community played a substantial role in helping the transition toward democracy – as a leading actor in Germany and Japan, and as a supporting actor in South Africa. However, there also exists a multitude of cases where a country’s move toward democracy was largely home-grown and achieved through domestic pressure from the street. The involvement of the international community was limited to maintaining international pressure and “nudging” the domestic political cast toward democratic reforms.

After having discussed these examples from Europe, Asia and Africa, let us now turn to Latin America. Stories of transformation are abundant: Uruguay finally escaped the grip of the military *junta* led by Gregorio Alvarez in 1985, Chile got rid of the authoritarian

dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet in 1990 and Peru's dictator Alberto Fujimori finally resigned in 2000. In each case pressure from civil society played a key role. What surely helped was that the Cold War had already started to fade away amid Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost in the mid-1980s and concluded after 1989. This robbed right-wing dictators of the Western support they may have enjoyed decades earlier and that may have helped them to cling to power. Removing the former bad regimes of strongmen did not lead to chaos – as some cold warriors may have feared earlier – but led all three countries away from being conflicted and repressive autocracies with blood on their hands toward stable democracy, peace and prosperity. In all three cases, a mix of rule of law and civil rights (*voice*), reasonable economic performance (*work*) and considerable state capacity and security enforcement (*warranties*) were instrumental in fostering peace.

When we refer to the *peace formula*, we often highlight these three key ingredients, *voice*, *work* and *warranties*. Still, it is important to keep in mind that beyond these fundamental pillars (or cornerstones) of the edifice of peace, various specific policies play important roles as well, holding the basic structures together as if with mortar and reinforcing them. It is a bit like with homemade pizza dough. While there are three key ingredients (flour, water and yeast), the taste also depends on plenty of further components that you add in small quantities (salt, olive oil, maybe sugar), as well as contextual factors that matter (how long you let the dough rest, the type of oven, etc.). You get the point. Well, as highlighted in the book, in addition to *voice*, *work* and *warranties*, a series of policies that foster trust and reconciliation are of paramount importance. Further, we will stress that a battery of programs and policies requiring international coordination make a big difference, ranging from a well-designed green transition, transparency initiatives in resource extraction, commercial practices and monitoring of multinational firms to a generous and well-coordinated refugee admission policy.

WHY IS THE PEACE FORMULA NOT APPLIED MORE OFTEN?

The aforementioned examples of success should be complemented by many more, but unfortunately the list of failed states and aborted democratization processes is equally long. Why is our peace formula not universally applied? It is not rocket science after all. Well, the problem with *smart idealism* is twofold: Concerning the *smart*, several of the scientific results underlying the arguments of this book are recent. Only cutting-edge empirical studies have clearly shown that supporting bad regimes is not only morally wrong but also unsuccessful. Similarly, it is also novel evidence that shows that human capital investments are key, that handing out cash can backfire and that winning hearts and minds does not work when safety is absent.

Now, beyond the fact that these are new insights, the second problem with *smart idealism* is the *idealism*. Fostering peace is a long-run endeavor and requires massive investments. After World War II, the Allies managed to turn Germany, Japan and Italy from fascist mass murder states to functioning democracies, but this came with a steep price tag. Preventing World War III was a powerful enough imperative to rally political support for pumping billions into former adversaries and committing to a massive army presence for years. A US president asking Congress to spend similar sums and efforts on fostering peace and prosperity in, say, Somalia, would face an uphill battle with tainted reelection perspectives. Moreover, and maybe even more importantly, a politician's term is limited to around four years in most countries; hence the incentives are geared toward short- and medium-run projects rather than massive, long-run investments that yield fruit to be collected by the successor government. And, sadly, in the very short run there may be political benefits for Western leaders to engage in shady deals with despots that prove counterproductive in the long run.

This brings us to a key point of the current book: We cannot comfort ourselves with simply trusting our elected politicians

to do the “right thing.” Instead, popular pressure from civic society to uphold democratic ideals and foster education around the world is key for championing democratic change. It was ordinary citizens who fueled the economic boycotts and sanctions of the South African apartheid state and thereby supported the ANC-led resistance movement. Similarly, domestic prodemocracy activists persisted in fighting the rogue regimes of Alvarez, Pinochet, Fujimori and their cronies – despite often paying a very steep personal price (think of the hundreds of *desaparecidos* throughout Latin America). Global solidarity helped their cause by applying and maintaining international pressure. One cannot overstate the role of ordinary citizens in championing positive political change. In the words of Jim Valvano, “In every single day, in every walk of life, ordinary people do extraordinary things.”¹²

Are sound policies that promote peace and prosperity worth fighting for? After all, during the last decade – if anything – haven’t more countries receded in terms of democracy, coupled with a record level of ongoing civil wars around the world? Yes: Despite these setbacks it is crucial to fight for democracy and for evidence-based policies for the greater good, as they have persistent effects. Democracies that slide down the slippery slope toward authoritarianism may remain nondemocratic for a while, but are likely to eventually bounce back, drawing resources from the remnants of a “democratic capital” of a bygone era (as illustrated by Argentina’s democratic comebacks). Or in the words of Abraham Lincoln, in 1863 in a letter to Stephen Hurlburt, “Those who shall have tasted actual freedom I believe can never be slaves, or quasi slaves again.”¹³