



Enlightenment: What Are We Fighting For?

In 1965 Country Joe McDonald [sacrilegiously inquired](#), “What are we fighting for?” That question is highly relevant in the realm of politics today. What is *worth* fighting for? Freedom? Equality? Security? To uphold our biases, of which [there are many](#)? A related question is whether fighting is an *enlightened, utilitarian* way to achieve our objectives. Should we be fighting for any reason at all?

The question is of contemporary significance not only due to increasing political polarization but, even more importantly, violence occurring around the world. [According to U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres](#), the number of countries engaged in violent conflicts has risen to its highest level in three decades, with the number of deaths increasing tenfold since 2005. “Prevention,” he said, “is more necessary than ever.” It seems like political discourse might be a good place to begin to tone down the passion.

It has often been asserted that “[freedom is not free](#)” since all that’s required for evil to prevail is for good people to do nothing. Does it follow that equality is not equal? While that may seem to be a nonsensical non sequitur, let’s take a moment to consider whether it may contain a grain of truth, bearing in mind two thoughts:

First, freedom encompasses the freedom to be wrong – in ways that don't adversely impact others. Can the same be said of equality? Or does it assume that inequality is morally indefensible and thus a self-justifying cause for limiting liberty, including through violence?

Second, in terms of enlightenment and science, truth cannot ultimately be known but *untruths* can be [falsified](#). In other words, can the merit of fighting be disproven by evidence and logic, at least for some, if not necessarily all purposes, e.g., to achieve freedom, equality, or security?

As an example of the notion that freedom is not free, the [American Revolution](#) is considered by many to be a [shining example](#). It was rooted in unique circumstances that allowed the English noblemen to divest and decentralize power away from the king, while the rest of the world remained mired in debilitating states of autocracy. American patriots simply fought to give the English elite a stronger, trans-Atlantic dose of their own medicine.

By contrast, examples of fights for equality, via centralization of power, include:

- Bolshevik Revolution and particularly the [October Revolution](#), led by Vladimir Lenin, resulting in [5 to 9 million deaths](#).
- Chairman Mao's [Cultural Revolution](#), during which [36 million people were persecuted and a million and a half or more were killed](#).
- Hugo Chávez's [Bolivarian Revolution](#), which has transformed [Venezuela's economy from the richest in South America to a basket case](#).
- [Rhodesian Bush War](#), eventually won at the ballot box by [Robert Mugabe](#), who led his nation into ironically [expensive poverty](#)

None of those worked out so well. However, in *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Steven Pinker notes why some may not view such well-intentioned revolutions as unmitigated disasters:

Despotism has persisted through history not just because being a despot is nice work if you get it, but because from the people's standpoint the alternative was often worse. (p. 199)

Perhaps preventing even more death and destruction may be worth a lethal fight, particularly if those to be deprived of their liberty, if not also their lives, have more material wealth than we do. In the logic of revolutionary Russia, for example, [Stalin said](#) he'd stop killing his own people when it was no longer necessary. The ultimate cost of the Russian Revolution was in the range of five to nine million human lives cut short. More recently, an argument for crushing the [Tiananmen Square uprising](#) has been that, given the history of China, millions may have otherwise died. Of the eight most lethal [wars in "modern" times](#), China accounted for six, resulting in death to around 90 million human beings. In view of such history, it may not be surprising if people value the right to life – supported by security and stability – more highly than liberty and the pursuit of happiness, much less material wealth.

While the circumstance and outcomes of the [French Revolution](#) were a bit murky, the [American Civil War](#) – despite great loss of life – is commonly viewed as a relatively successful fight for equality, albeit

one which remains a work in progress. It [has been suggested](#) that slavery in the United States could have been ended nearly a century earlier without bloodshed. Moreover, in *Wealth, Poverty and Politics*, [Thomas Sowell](#) has [argued](#) that African American progress flatlined and, in some ways, regressed with enactment of Lyndon Johnson's [Great Society](#) programs. (pp. 273 - 305) Rachel Sheffield and Robert Rector have [concluded](#) that in the 50 years since Johnson declared unconditional [war on poverty](#):

... U.S. taxpayers have spent over \$22 trillion on anti-poverty programs. Adjusted for inflation, this spending (which does not include Social Security or Medicare) is three times the cost of all U.S. military wars since the American Revolution. Yet progress against poverty, as measured by the U.S. Census Bureau, has been minimal, and in terms of President Johnson's main goal of reducing the "causes" rather than the mere "consequences" of poverty, the War on Poverty has failed completely. In fact, a significant portion of the population is now less capable of self-sufficiency than it was when the War on Poverty began.

Regardless of the truth of those arguments, evidence of wars leading to both increasing equality as well as greater wellbeing seems slim. While major wars often level income, Pinker points out they are only one of the catastrophic circumstances that tend to increase equality. Others include lethal pandemics and state collapse, the latter of which seems to be an implicit goal of those on both extremes of the political spectrum, whose most rabid partisans believe the "system" has been "rigged" against them. (pp. 106 & 107) Those on the left in particular should take care to heed Walter Scheidel's caution, "All of us who prize greater economic equality would do well to remember that with the rarest of exceptions it was only ever brought forth in sorrow."

By contrast, instances of the contrary result – greater wellbeing arising from greater freedom – are both plentiful and clear. Unlike communism, which is designed to limit freedom and enforce equality among the non-elite members of the [proletariat](#), Pinker observes (p. 90):

[The economic benefits of capitalism] are so obvious that they don't need to be shown with numbers. They can literally be seen from space. A satellite photograph of Korea showing the capitalist South aglow in light and the Communist North a pit of darkness vividly illustrates the contrast in the wealth-generating capability between the two economic systems ...

Pinker suggests one way to think of *democracy* is as "a form of government that threads the needle, exerting just enough force to prevent people from preying on each other without preying on the people itself." (p. 199) On the other hand, he observes the word "democracy ... has developed such an aura of goodness as to have become almost meaningless." (p. 201) Indeed, he asserts there never has been and probably never will be a government that lives up to the "civics-class idealization of democracy in which an informed populace deliberates about the common good and carefully selects leaders who carry out their preference." (p. 204)

Pinker cites philosopher Karl Popper's argument that democracy is "a solution to the problem of how to dismiss bad leadership without bloodshed" as well as political scientist John Mueller's suggestion that its essence is to give people the freedom to complain. (p. 205) By the latter measure, majoritarianism seems to be working quite well – at least for those on the left, who don't seem as likely to be shouted

down and physically assaulted on college campuses, for example. However, in the cyberage the question is not so much how to get rid of bad leaders but whether we should divest so much power and authority to any so-called leaders in the first place, regardless of how “good” our political tribe might perceive them to be. (See the [Fundamental Attribution Error](#) and consider the [limitations of expertise](#) as well. James Surowieki [has suggested](#) that it is “spectacularly narrow.”)

With reference to the traditional, non-market means of wresting power and resources from others, Pinker opines:

... war may be just another obstacle an enlightened species learns to overcome, like pestilence, hunger, poverty. Though conquest may be tempting over the short term, it’s ultimately better to figure out how to get what you want without the cost of destructive conflict and the inherent hazards of living by the sword, namely that if you are a menace to others you have given them an incentive to destroy you first. (p. 166)

He also argues the assertion we are in a “post-truth era ... is corrosive, because it implies that we should resign ourselves to propaganda and lies and just *fight back* with more of our own.” (p. 375, italics added) Might the same not also be true of “democratic” conquest at the ballot box? Might it not be better to figure out how to get what we want without fighting? If we fail to do so, don’t we risk [mutually assured destruction](#) (MAD) by tacitly and ignorantly agreeing to pursue the struggle to its logical end?

In [a previous article](#), I posited that politics is the problem, not the solution. More explicitly speaking, in the age of enlightenment it is the *concentration of power* that is the problem. Indeed, in the cyberage, it leads inevitably not only to increasing political polarization but also to [overwhelming public debt](#). In previous times, when the masses were less educated, people may not have minded granting dictatorial power to elitists so long as the aristocracy ensured their equally ignorant [commoner](#) neighbors weren’t permitted to have more of their societies’ meager wealth than they did.

Does that imply equality might be taken as a valid cause for coercive, dictatorial behavior yet today? Or might that notion be an artifact of the [Dark Ages](#), predating the [Age of Enlightenment](#), whose ever-increasing economic and social benefits Pinker so clearly documents? (See also [Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think](#), by Hans Rosling.)

Punishing cheaters [seems to be in our DNA](#). However, we should be sensitive (enlightened) to circumstances in which our inbred instincts may lead us astray. In modern society the concept seems to have evolved *away* from requiring everyone to work to overcome *scarcity* and *toward* penalizing those perceived to have benefited disproportionately from *abundance*. In other words, punishment may no longer be so much about inducing slackers to work to ensure the clan has enough to survive as it is about reining in those perceived to have too much. As the [Japanese saying](#) goes, the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.

In a scene from the movie [Me, Myself & Irene](#) Jim Carey, who has a split personality, becomes outraged when a strapping, young man drives up in a flashy convertible, pulls into clearly marked handicapped parking space, hops out and hustles into a shop. Carey, outraged at such an egregious violation of societal norms, grabs a baseball bat, jumps into the car and, while standing in the front seat, proceeds to

demolish the windshield and wreak as much damage to the vehicle as possible ... until the young man emerges from the shop gently assisting an elderly, infirm woman whom he has obviously come to pick up.

While the scene is hilarious, unfortunately, it is an apt metaphor for what seems to be taking place in much of our political discourse these days. Some of those on the misguided, extreme left seem intent on destroying the vehicle standing ready to take the less fortunate where they need to go, namely, thriving market-based economies.

Since hunger has essentially been banished from the earth – with the exception of war-torn nations in Africa – and we no longer need to fight to survive, might it not be time to consider ceasing our efforts to dominate, restrain, and take from others? Is fighting not an outmoded concept? Are freedom and equality of *opportunity* not one and the same? Conversely, is coerced equality not functionally equivalent to *intolerance of differences*?

In any event, in the spirit of tolerance and compassion, it would be good if we could help each other recognize our unconstructive biases and kindly relieve each other of our unfounded and disproportionate fears, with the aim of working more cooperatively and productively together. I fear politics, political parties, and politicians may be constitutionally incapable of doing so. Is my fear irrational? Can you help disabuse me of it? May I help relieve your fear of freedom and personal responsibility?

If so, I invite you to see also [Consciously Connected Communities](#).