

Rip van Winkle and the Age of Complacency

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Setting the Scene

If a modern-day Rip van Winkle were to awaken on a mountainside having slept for a long period of time, he could not be blamed for the shock, and horror, with which he might view the world in mid-2022. The original Rip van Winkle fell asleep in a Colonial America before the War of Independence and awoke to discover that the world, as he knew it, had changed dramatically; so, it is, for our modern-day hero.

Let us suggest that he or she fell asleep in the early years of the millennium, the Y2K bug well behind us and the belief that the new Century would bring peace and prosperity across the five continents with nations abiding by the international order set up in the wake of the Second World War and accepted by all nations at the end of the Cold War. An air of optimism imbued the world and democracy, with all its obvious faults, was accepted as the optimal means of governance.

Awaking in 2022 to the tail end of a pandemic that has, conservatively, killed 6.4 million so far throughout the world and whose effects are still with us, especially in continued 'Long Covid' as well as in the stalled growth in the world's economies and significant adverse impact upon the international globalisation of trade. Coupled with a major war in Europe, the first since 1945, the effects of Climate Change brought wildfires breaking out across the globe, with drought and famine stalking the world.

One of the first questions our hero might posit once they had managed to get their head around these dramatic changes is how the world had got itself into such a calamitous state. I am not sure that we really understand why we are here, how we might have avoided such



an impasse and, perhaps more importantly, how we extricate ourselves from these critical dilemmas.

The biggest mistake made over the decade of the 1990s was the assumption by the West that the Western democratic model would bring peace, prosperity, and a common alignment of interests between all nations. This naïve and simplistic view ignored history but fitted the complacent view of the West that their systems could not be wrong. In Europe, as the former Soviet Union collapsed, nations emerged determined to escape their Soviet past and to adopt Western mores. The West supported the Federal Republic of Germany in its reunification with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1990 and coaxed Russia into accepting the status quo. Former Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe saw NATO and the EU as powerful institutions to keep their new nations safe – especially from Russia. When Vladimir Putin became President of Russia, he had a long-term vision of Russian renewal and restoring its power and influence, particularly in those countries newly independent from the Soviet yoke.

The Age of Complacency

When our Rip van Winkle fell asleep some 22 years' ago the world had already relaxed from the Cold War, China was emerging from its "Century of Humiliation", the European Union was looking to consolidate further, and NATO was seeking a new role. Nuclear weapons were being subjected to greater international control. Political parties in the West were still looking to garner further "Peace Dividends" and attention was slowly shifting to other priorities, not least, Climate Change. It was a time of hope and aspiration.

It was Winston Churchill who, on 11 November 1947, said in the British House of Commons:

*Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, **it has been said** that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....*

One of the faults of democracy is the short-term nature of decision making; the electoral cycle is short, between two and seven years and governments are always focused on re-election. This means that priority is given to those issues which are within this time frame and longer-term issues are left until they become more urgent. Two such issues, identified in the early years of the Millennium, were the rise of highly autocratic regimes in China and Russia and the malign influence of misinformation in an increasingly dense atmosphere of social media. Russia and China, members of the UN Security Council, wield considerable influence in the wider world, and were believed to be emerging as active participants of the international legal framework developed after the Second World War. Disputes would be put to the appropriate international body for resolution and potential areas of dispute resolved peacefully. Western nations believed that everything would work out well; we even looked at a doctrine of regime change to show how our system worked better than any other! We were utterly complacent. Western nations saw the world in simplistic terms; political parties veered either to the right or to the left to satisfy the short-term aspects of democracy.

Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the West invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. These campaigns were unsuccessful primarily because the West had no exit strategy and little coherence. The West struggled to make any reasonable outcome in the region and, when the time came to pull out of Afghanistan, the chaos and panic reminded the world of the American's failure in Vietnam 50 years' earlier. Russia and China looked on with a degree of schadenfreude.



Towards the end of the first decade of the Millennium, the West became much more introspective and less interested in other countries. The US elected Donald Trump and the UK demanded BREXIT. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and nations began to turn their backs on globalisation.

As our Rip van Winkle has now discovered, it hasn't worked out well; China has moved to a strict autocracy under President Xi, Hong Kong no longer has the rights and privileges guaranteed under the 1997 Sino-British agreement and criticism of the State has been stifled. The Russian Bear, similarly, has silenced all opposition within Russia and invaded another European country, contrary to all established norms and international law. The West has managed to develop a common cause in the immediate aftermath of the Ukrainian invasion, but Russia holds both the energy and nuclear weapons cards and may yet persuade European nations, facing a cold, bleak winter, to lessen sanctions and permit Vladimir Putin to gain a ceasefire that gives him a substantial chunk of Ukrainian territory and allows him to claim a victory and, more importantly, consolidate his forces before his next push.

The strategies developed by both Russia and China have long historical provenance: Tsar Ivan the Terrible and Catherine the Great would have recognised Putin's strategy as their own and Xi's attitude towards the South China Sea and all the islands, including Taiwan is a direct descendent from the powerful Emperors of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Their planning cycles are measured in decades or even centuries and their day-to-day activities are dedicated to their strategic goals.

In the years prior to our hero falling asleep, the author of this paper wrote a dissertation on cyberwarfare and misinformation, raising the spectre of enemy action in the future. "Oh, but we would never do such a thing," opined a very senior Civil Servant in Whitehall. We have seen, today, how such things have progressed. Democratic societies have some regulation of such capabilities, but many countries do not. Both Russia and China are quite content to have in-house hacking capability which they will blithely deny. It is interesting that, at the height of the anti-fracking debate in Germany in 2008, there were a lot of posts discussing how fracking causes radiation, birth defects, hormone imbalances, the release of immense volumes of methane and toxic waste and the poisoning of fish stocks. Even Mr Putin declared at an international conference, that fracking makes black goop spew out of kitchen taps. And the result Germany moved its energy requirement to Russian gas!¹ In this case the false reports were being fed to a very receptive audience, the German Green Party, who accepted their veracity with little or no verification. There are reports that similar tactics were used by both Russia and China to engineer the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016. Whether or not this is the case, autocratic countries will happily answer to no-one in pursuit of their strategic goals.

The Next Twenty

To the future. Many of the established norms for the post-World War II generation have now been broken. There will be increasing demand to end the war in Ukraine by agreeing that Russia can keep some of Ukraine's territory in return for an end to the hostilities; all this will do is allow Russia to rebuild its military machine and attack Ukraine anew in 5 to 10 years. In Taiwan, the Chinese are hoping that the nuclear threat will deter the US from assisting the Taiwanese people when the Chinese attack. The United Nations is almost powerless in that two of the five permanent members are autocrats and do not believe in the concept of the Rule of Law and the rights of people.

¹ Economist report: July 23, 2022



Climate change is now accepted by most nations: wildfires, tsunamis, hurricanes, and very high temperatures serve to remind us that we are living on the edge but big polluters like the US, India and China will not knuckle down to reduce global temperatures. As a result, immigration to the more habitable parts of the world will grow, putting greater pressure on their existing populations. This will be a fertile ground for the growth of nationalistic populism with all the tensions and anger that such movements produce. Statesmen the world over are going to have a tough time and need level heads.

Good Luck.

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