SPINNING WORLD HISTORY
SECOND EDITION
THE TRAILS, TRADITIONS AND TURNING POINTS OF WORLD HISTORY AND THE REGIONAL CHALLENGES OF TODAY
ALSO BY ERIC BURNETT

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To Beth, Becca and Jack
Part I

The Tales, Traditions and Turning Points of our Past
Europe Reopens Its Eyes

Europe - Renaissance, Exploration and Reformation - 1400 > 1700

In less than one hundred years, the face of the globe changed, and the countenance of Western Europe would never be the same again. Though the world of 1550 might have looked pretty similar to the world of 1450, the choices made and the feats accomplished set the wheels of progress turning in directions that would totally alter how humans interacted.

Feudalism took its last breaths, making way for the formation of the nations of Spain, France and England. The two continents previously unbeknownst to the civilized world appeared from out of nowhere when an Italian sailor accidentally bumped into some islands off the coast of Florida. European art and culture blossomed into an era of creativity and expression not seen since the days of Pericles' Athens. And the Catholic Church faced a violent and unrelenting challenge from Protestants that would leave a fractured Christendom unable to ever again unite.

It all started in 1492, the year Columbus sailed the ocean blue. That was the year the Spanish monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand once and for all kicked the Muslims out of the Iberian Peninsula (that little square chunk of land that juts out from the bottom of Europe). Ten years later, Leonardo da Vinci painted the most famous face in the world – the Mona Lisa. In 1507, Michelangelo laid on his back and finished the ceiling of the
Sistine Chapel. In 1517, a priest named Martin Luther nailed an essay on the door of a church in Germany, condemning Christianity for being home to a bunch of hypocrites. And in 1522, Ferdinand Magellan’s crew returned from man’s first circumnavigation of the planet. In just thirty years, European persistence had inspired its first nation, its greatest works of art, the custody of two landmasses that would feed Europe’s wealth for centuries to come and a religious revolution that forever altered the power structure of the continent. These three decades were just the crowning triumphs of the eras historians later dubbed the Dawn of Absolutism, the Age of Exploration, the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Yet to deal with each separately almost misses the point. These five movements – one dealing with political reform, one with exploration, one with artistic inspiration, one with feats of navigation and one with religious reform – though seemingly disconnected, all erupted from the same umbrella of thought percolating through the greatest intellectual, artistic and political minds of Western Europe. This fresh philosophy, this “humanism,” directly challenged the Catholic Church – a secular response to the superstitions that kept Europe under a veil of ignorance for the thousand years of the Middle Ages. Even without a degree in etymology, you could probably figure out that humanism is the belief in...well...humans. In the 15th and 16th centuries, humanism was the feeling that humans had so much more to offer than the blind acceptance of religious rituals. Man’s imagination had been ignored. His mind had been wasted. But no longer. No longer would the Church be the sole source of wisdom. No longer would people merely survive this mortal world, clinging to the hope that their immortal existence might make up for a squandered life. Humanism offered an alternative to faith in an invisible god. It offered another source of inspiration. Man himself. Over the next hundred years man would experiment in ways he never would have before considered. And he had no one to thank but himself.

But these revolutions took time. In fact, like in most artistic and philosophical golden ages, the masses probably never got the memo that their lives were supposed to be golden. Initially, these breakthroughs were only felt in the bustling ports, thriving merchant city-states and sheltered palaces of the elite, but for the next few centuries, the world would look back at this era as when the rise of Europe (and the relative enslavement of Africa
and the Americas) truly began. Not since Greek antiquity, when the ideas of a relatively small faction of learned men had been shared by Alexander across the known world, had so many peoples been forever altered by so few inspired visionaries.

None of these movements would have been possible had feudalism continued to keep a continent locked in seclusion. So what happened in Western and Southern Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries that made such a huge change possible? First, the rise of merchants and the growing prosperity in towns threatened to undermine the unquestioned power of regional lords. No longer did people have to live near the protection and the resources of a baron, a duke, a count or an earl. Instead of meeting at fairs once or twice a year, merchants set up permanent markets, and towns became centers of power. Next, traders needed money to take their goods afar, and early banks appeared, granting loans and extending credit. At first, it was only the Jews who could lend money (since the Bible forbade usury – the loaning of money with interest), giving this persecuted group a head start in an industry that would become a necessity when European economies commercialized. As the Church reduced its restrictions on money lending, more Christians entered the field and money started flowing through the hands of new classes of people, not merely through the palms of the provincial lords.

With all of this newfound wealth to be made from trade and banking, it wasn’t long before monarchs wanted more for themselves. Throughout the Middle Ages, kings might have been seen as the chief monarchs of emerging nations, but the nobles all stood between them and absolute, unquestioned power. The nobles had first dibs on peasant taxes, they controlled the warrior knights and their landholdings and prominent voices meant they had to be consulted should a monarch want to extend the nation's boundaries.

Kings weren’t exactly fond of this arrangement. They wanted absolute power and the idea of having to consult with lords was more than a bit annoying. So when gunpowder finally entered Europe, they had their chance to tilt the power even more in their favor. Before, in the Middle Ages, nobles could barricade themselves inside their impenetrable castle walls or send out their trained knights to foil any royal power play. A king could try all he wanted, but a fortified lord behind stone walls was a tough nut to crack. But within one generation, gunpowder made castles and knights obsolete. What match could a stone wall be for a well-
placed cannonball? Could a mounted knight with a lifetime of training survive a well-aimed musket? And when you combined the two—a gunpowder-fed artillery with a musket-yielding army—medieval warfare had no chance of survival. The age of knights had ended. One by one the nobles lost their kingdoms, with each loss only increasing the power of the monarchs.

But kings still needed money. Money made the whole system work. More money meant more weapons. More money meant more armies. More money meant more ships. They needed money, so they taxed. They borrowed. They encouraged trade. They promoted local manufacturing. They even gave money to crazy seamen who believed they could find shortcuts to Asia (we'll talk about Chris and Ferdinand in a minute). And the investments paid off. The risks proved worth it. Money started rolling in from all corners of the planet, and with each new revenue stream, more land could be taken over and more profit-producing enterprises could be financed.

By 1600, four new nations appeared, each demanding unquestioned loyalty from their countrymen. Portugal, Spain, France and England shared the traits of this new era of absolutism, this age of national dynasties. They forced everyone to speak the same language. They made everyone use the same money and made everyone use the same units to measure goods. They created one set of laws enforced by a network of bureaucracies. They constructed absurdly lavish palaces and established elaborate ceremonies, each maintained to showcase their godlike supremacy. And as for the nobles, their voices were relegated to the newly formed parliaments and national assemblies, governing bodies whose power varied based on the whims of each subsequent monarch.

But above all else, they expanded. The more land they gobbled, the more power they yielded. Expansion triggered their ascendancy, and only with expansion could they maintain their power. And as the resources of the European continent increasingly fell into the hands of fewer and fewer monarchs, the kings of western and southern Europe looked to distant shores for new sources of wealth.

Although the days of England, France and the Netherlands ruling the seas would one day come, in the 15th century, the only countries with a true sea presence were Portugal and Spain. If the world was going to be mapped, it would be by a navigator sailing under the flag of one of these two nations on the tip of the Iberian
Peninsula. Long excluded by the Italians from the Mediterranean trading networks, the Portuguese and Spanish rulers realized if they wanted to secure a share of the mountains of wealth promised by the Asian manufacturers, they would need to find a new course to the Indies. At the end of the 15th century, the Indies had become the general term for any of the desired trading posts in Asia, be it India, China, Japan, Malaya or Java (Indonesia today). Any semi-intelligent merchant knew that the key to wealth was the Indies, with its spices, its silks, its unrivaled pottery and its luxury goods. A successful expedition guaranteed a 1000% return on their investment, and every emerging nation knew what greatness could be purchased with this money, but more important, what risks existed should their neighboring country find the unknown path first. The race was on.

By the end of the 15th century, a convergence of factors materialized that set in motion an unprecedented Age of Discovery by Portugal and Spain. In 1453, when the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople, destroying the Byzantine Empire once and for all, the trans-Eurasian Silk Road, that had for centuries brought goods from Asia, was now cut off. For a couple hundred years, the Mongols had protected the salesmen of the Silk Road. But no longer. With an unpredictable Muslim power replacing the Mongol-enforced peace, European merchants were at the mercy of these Muslims. Yet with so many goods just waiting to be imported, traders realized if they couldn’t go through the Islamic world, they’d just have to find a way of going around it.

Ironically, it was the Muslims who made Europe’s Age of Exploration possible. It was the Muslims that brought the nautical technology from the East that allowed Europeans to sail out of sight of land and start heading into open waters. They passed on the compass, a triangular sail that could catch the wind and the astrolabe for reading the stars. Navigators could finally use the sun, the stars and the earth’s own magnetism to guide their ships across the open seas. Ships were then built stronger, faster, with three masts and a bigger, more accurate rudder. Sailors could catch the prevailing winds and sail away to far-off lands. And with their newfound gunpowder-fed cannons, no pirate dared threaten these imposing beasts.

And why were Portugal and Spain the first out of the gate? With their geographic proximity to northwestern Africa and the Atlantic Ocean, their independently powerful and moneied monarchs and their direct link to the navigational knowledge of
the Muslim world, Portugal and Spain were the most likely contenders to find a water route to Asia. For decades, Portugal had flirted with the western coast of Africa, hearing stories of endless supplies of gold and even of a mythical Christian leader named Prester John (a long lost monk who many Europeans believed had established a Christian empire in Africa). If Prester John could be found (or so the story went), his empire could be united with the European forces of God to encircle the Muslim forces. This mythical reunion was nothing more than a wild fantasy. But the gold was real.

The first to actively explore Africa was Prince Henry of Portugal. The world has had Alexander the Great, Richard the Lionhearted, Attila the Hun and even Vlad the Impaler. But when it comes to a really cool nickname that will impress the ladies at the local pub, look no further than Prince Henry the Navigator. Prince Henry rose to power on the heels of his military victories that pushed the remaining Muslims out of Portugal. In one of the last Muslim strongholds, the city of Ceuta, Henry not only found the indispensable libraries representing the sum total of Muslim learning, but he also came across a vast storehouse of spices, including most notably pepper and cinnamon. Henry could have merely sold these luxuries on the open market, fetched a handsome profit and our story would have ended there, but Henry had a bit more foresight. He knew that the man who could monopolize this spice trade would be the man who could enrich his kingdom. Prince Henry then, in the southern city of Sagres, established a school of navigation to improve the maritime technology available to Europeans, but also answer questions such as “Why does the North Star, a navigator’s most reliable landmark in the sky, disappear when sailors venture further south?” These astronomers, navigators, biologists and chemists began dispelling the major myths of the day – that the ocean boils when you head south, that the sun touches the ocean, that the earth was flat. Many learned Europeans had already deduced these realities, but at Henry’s school, his scientists fueled the captains with the confidence to head further and further south along the west coast of Africa. With each expedition, the Portuguese explorers leapfrogged each other, heading a few more miles south, mapping the terrain, making contact with locals and potentially heading inland to look for gold and Prester John. But to actually make it to the southern tip (a distance of about 5000 miles), someone would have to be willing to leave Europe for what could be years and refuse to return
until the destination was reached. That man would be Bartolomeu Dias.

Dias set sail in August 1487, and seven months later, he had finally reached the southern tip. Going around Africa scared the bejeebers out of Dias’s crew, as the waters beneath the tips of continents aren’t known for being especially friendly. When you have two great oceans colliding, the storm patterns make for deadly waves with violently unpredictable winds.

But he made it around the tip. Once on the eastern side of Africa, Dias wanted to continue toward Asia, but his crew felt they shouldn’t push their luck any further and should instead get back to Europe while they still had their lives. Dias agreed and returned to Portugal in December of 1488, and his Christmas present to the king was the knowledge that the Portuguese had been further south than any other European. As he recounted his treacherous trip around what Dias named the Cape of Storms, the Portuguese monarch King John II thought it might be prudent to rename the route something a bit more positive to encourage future navigators, thus the southernmost point of Africa became known to the world as the “Cape of Good Hope.”

Now that the southern route around Africa was proven passable, Portugal’s Vasco de Gama set out in 1497 to finish what Dias never could – reaching Asia by sea. Instead of hugging the coastline for the entire route, when de Gama reached the southern tip of North Africa (where the continent shoots eastward for a thousand miles), he chose the shortest direction between two points and headed diagonally down to the cape. Although Columbus would receive a ton of praise for his fearlessness in heading across uncharted oceans, it was de Gama who spent the longest time on the open ocean without sight of land. Columbus was gone for five weeks, de Gama for thirteen. When he finally hit the Cape of Good Hope, he headed up the east coast and met some Indian traders who showed him how to catch the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean. On May 20, 1498, about a month shy of one year, de Gama reached Calicut, India, becoming the first European to reach Asia by sea. No European would ever have to trade across the treacherous, costly Levant and Silk Road again. Within a decade, the Portuguese had set up ports all around Africa and South Asia, even reaching as far as modern day Malaysia at a trading town called Malacca. The Portuguese had succeeded in opening up the Indies, and over the next century, spices, tea,
ceramics, textiles and even slaves flowed freely from East to West, while European gold ended in the hands of the East.

With the southern route securely in the hands of the Portuguese, the Spanish could only go one other direction - west. However, nobody really wanted to head west. Nobody except for a persistent Italian sailor from Genoa, Italy. Christopher Columbus (or Cristoforo Colombo to his mom and dad) spent his adulthood on the seas. He made up for his lack of schooling by learning from everyone he encountered. He learned the latest navigation techniques from the Portuguese. He listened to tales of a “new found land” from the Viking descendants he met in England. He read of Marco Polo’s adventures and Ptolemy’s theories of the earth’s spherical shape. He took all of this knowledge and came up with the theory that right on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean rested the Indies, ripe for the taking. He took his theories and his calculations to the thrones of Europe. Somebody had to be willing to finance his dream. But the Italians, the French, the Portuguese and even the Spanish refused to accept his proposal.

But he persisted. After seven years of patiently pleading his case, he finally convinced Queen Isabella of Spain that the potential rewards far outweighed the negligible risks. With a few ships – the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria – he promised he could radically cut the distance to the Indies, allowing Spain to monopolize sea trade.

Columbus set sail in 1492 on a trip to Japan that he thought would be about 2,500 miles. He was just a bit off. Japan is actually about 10,000 miles away from Spain, and had Columbus and his crew not bumped into these little chunks of land known today as the Americas, his crew would have starved to death and his ships would have ended up at the bottom of the sea.

But Columbus did hit land, a small island called Guanahani inhabited by the Tainos. Columbus insisted these people were from the Indies, and erroneously named them Indians. His first account of these people didn’t bode well for how they’d be treated in the coming century:

They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane...They would make fine servants...With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.
Ahhh, what a lovely sentiment? Columbus wasn’t exactly the poster child for humanitarianism. But racial equality was the least of his concerns. He wanted Asia.

And Columbus truly believed he had, in fact, found an island off the coast of Japan. Until his dying day, he insisted this land was Asia. He took several more trips back and forth across the ocean, each time finding more islands in the Caribbean. Though he proved a capable navigator (if maybe off course by a continent or two), he was less impressive as a governor, and his legacy of rule was seen as nothing more than a period of chaos, murder and plunder for gold. After initially being seen as a hero, he spent some time in jail for his bungling of these newfound lands and died not knowing the true import of his discovery. Portuguese explorer Amerigo Vespucci eventually set foot in Uruguay, and when in 1502 German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller created a map with Amerigo’s name next to the Nuevo Mundo (new world), the Americas had their namesake.

Although Columbus received little initial credit for his discoveries, even losing out to Amerigo for the naming rights to these new lands, his efforts set in motion centuries of exploration and discovery that would wipe out civilizations that had prospered for millennia, transport civilizations to unknown lands and unite the globe in trade networks that moved not only peoples, but goods and ideas. Some of these exchanges were conducted peacefully, but for the most part violence and death followed each new discovery. Historians have since debated whether Columbus was a hero or a villain, but regardless of the ethical judgments surrounding his discoveries, his findings allowed humans to expand further than ever thought possible.

While the Spanish and Portuguese were expanding their boundaries, back home in Europe, a group of artists and thinkers began expanding the possibilities of human creativity. In the flourishing city-states of Italy, the humanistic trend toward self-discovery meant that artists could again begin testing the limits of imagination. Whereas throughout the Middle Ages, art remained two-dimensional and centered on the depictions of saints and Biblical stories, during this artistic revolution known as the Renaissance, man again became the muse and those possessing the skills of perspective and realism became the most prized craftsmen (sort of like in the Golden Age of Athens). Although the Renaissance would eventually spread across Western Europe to include a literary transformation, the first (and most famous) pieces
came from Florence and Rome and revolved around achievements in painting, sculpture and architecture.

Before looking at the works of da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael and Donatello, we must first ask the questions: Why 1500? Why Italy?

Was it because the Italian peninsula was home to thousands of Roman sculptures and monolithic ruins left over from the Pax Romana, constantly reminding the locals of a past far more glorious than their current state? Was it because so many Muslim recordings of antiquity began flowing into Italy, spawning a revived interest in Greece and Rome? Or was it because immeasurable wealth rested in the hands of opulent patrons, more than willing to throw a few coins at the artistic community?

Yes, yes and yes.

Whether it was the merchant Medicis of Florence or the pampered Popes of Rome, there was money to be spent, and what better way to distribute wealth than to hire artists to decorate their homes, palaces, churches and tombs?

Regardless the reasons, from 1475 to 1525, the greatest works of the last thousand years streamed from Italian hands. Venetian Leonardo da Vinci used his knowledge of the human body gained through his examination of cadavers to sketch hundreds of images of the lifecycle of man, from the womb to the grave (most notably the Vitruvian Man...that sketch with circles and a standing man with arms outstretched). He masterfully painted The Last Supper and the Mona Lisa, the most recognizable piece of art in the world (yet don’t be surprised if you’re a bit underwhelmed by its size when you visit it in the Louvre). And in his spare time, he invented the helicopter, the parachute and the submarine (though worried his ideas might be used for war, he encoded all of his ideas in backwards text). Da Vinci became the world’s first Renaissance Man, a man at the top of his game in so many fields.

If da Vinci was the number one symbol of the Renaissance, Michelangelo was a close second. Commissioned almost exclusively by religious leaders to bring the Bible to life, Michelangelo still found a way to throw in his humanistic touch. He was asked to sculpt the boy underdog from the Biblical battle of David versus Goliath. He returned with a fifteen-foot tall naked man whose private parts have shocked citizens and visitors to Florence for generations. When asked to recreate the stories of
the New Testament on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo returned to Pope Julius II a fresco with women that look like bodybuilders with breasts and a central image of God giving life to Adam, a reclining figure depicted as more dominant than even the likeness of God. The ceiling was not exactly what Julius had ordered.

Although da Vinci and Michelangelo are the most renowned, the patronage of the merchant families and the Catholic Church created a network of artists who filled Italian homes, city squares and places of worship with frescoes, statues, fountains, paintings, ceilings and entryways. Donatello mastered the art of bronze statuary. Raphael created the School of Athens and the Sistine Madonna (that painting with the two adorable little cherubs gazing into the sky).

Once the artistic revolution was underway in Italy, it wasn’t long before the rest of Europe joined the movement. With the printing press able to spread the works and the philosophies of the Renaissance into the libraries of the wealthy and the pious, with the rising frequency of travellers and with the myriad of wars that brought peoples into contact with these new forms of creativity, the Renaissance spread into France, the Netherlands and then England. These 16th century pieces continued to have a religious undertone, but the focus on the beauty, and sometimes the ugliness, of the human form increasingly dominated. When the imagination and creativity of the visual arts spread to the written arts, a new age emerged where with a pen and a wicked wit, artists could bring down even the most prominent member of society.

In England, by the end of the 16th century, William Shakespeare was spinning out dozens of plays and poems that explored the greatest moments in European history, while also dealing with themes of the fallibility of the human spirit. His cutting comedies and bitter tragedies gained an audience with the lowest classes, and his plays performed at the Globe Theater gained a cult following. Ironically, today the original works of the bard are seen almost as too highbrow for us mortals, but his themes and characters continue to be seen in films such as Ten Things I Hate About You, O, She’s the Man and the inevitable Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet recreation that surfaces once every generation (think West Side Story and The Lion King). And who couldn’t recognize a good Shakespeare quote – “to be or not to be,” “it’s all Greek to me,” “all the world’s a stage,” “eaten me out of house and home” or “to thine own self be true?” Shakespeare might not have
created the English language, but he could be seen as the one who advanced it the furthest, himself adding what some etymologists believe to be some 3000 new words to the English lexicon.

By 1600, the Renaissance had transformed the world of creativity, and Europe would never again return to the days of artistic stagnancy. Though initially funded by the Catholic Church, with each piece chronicling the mind, body and soul of man, the Renaissance and its shift away from spirituality steadily tore cracks in the unquestioned foundation of the Church. These cracks would eventually become irreparable fissures when one man chose to publicly challenge Christendom, unintentionally spawning the creation of dozens of new faiths, all rivaling the supremacy of Europe’s first Church.

As the Middle Ages trudged along, the Church steadily lost its monopoly on the minds of Europeans. After Europe’s less-than-impressive oh-for-nine won/loss record against the Muslims in the Crusades, it was a bit tough to swallow that God only had one chosen people. When the Church failed to quell the suffering of the Black Plague, some questioned the value of a faith that couldn’t even keep people alive. But even with these challenges, few dared publicly confront their religious superiors for fear of torture, both in this life and the hereafter.

Yet by the 1500s, the centuries of clerical abuses had started to become too much for even the most pious followers. Priests weren’t exactly the immaculate models of godliness. Some married. Some had mistresses. Some even had children. Some cared more about securing their garish lifestyles than protecting the souls of their parishioners. Some fought in wars. Some didn’t even show up to their parish, and when they did, their illiteracy prevented them from accurately reading the Bible. And for some reason, the priests’ interpretation of the Bible always ended up in an appeal for more coins in the offering plate. Some priests started money lending and others even sold vacated religious positions to the highest bidder. Even merchant families (like the Medicis) could become Popes. Of course, not all the clerics were wicked or incompetent, but like the Catholic Church of today, a few guilty clergy can spoil the reputation of the entire faith.

The above transgressions were annoyances, but not enough to bring down the Church. In 1517, caught up in the artistry of the Renaissance, Pope Leo X commissioned the restoration of St. Peter’s Cathedral, and to raise the money, he conveniently redefined the centuries old tradition of “indulgences.” Pope Leo X
promised that for a few coins, you could free your ancestors from purgatory and put them on the fast track to heaven. These “Get Out of Hell Free” cards followed a price index based on your status in life. A king might pay twenty gulden, whereas a farmer might pay only one. With this payment, no matter your uncle’s, your father’s or your brother’s crime, any one of their souls could be freed.

This little scheme posed a few problems. If you could merely buy yourself out of Hell, why follow the commandments when on earth? If the Pope really had the power to free your soul from Hell, why didn’t he just do it out of the kindness of his heart? And what of faith? Did you even need to believe in God? Wasn’t that little, fairly significant nugget a criterion for Christian salvation?

In Germany, the indulgences had become quite common, and with salesman such as John Tetzel peddling salvation through his carnival-like performances, more than a few eyes started to turn. One man saw these indulgences for what they really were – a blatant scheme to rob the people. And this man had had enough. At the university at Wittenberg, this man, a professor of theology named Martin Luther (not that Martin Luther...this one’s last name isn’t King) couldn’t stand the corruption and hypocrisy any longer. So what did he do? How did this Martin Luther fight the power?

He wrote an essay. Not just any essay, but an essay with 95 subcategories - his 95 Theses. He took this outlined list of the Church’s indiscretions and nailed them to the door of the Wittenberg Church. At this point, he had no intention of bringing down the Church; he just wanted to start a conversation with his fellow theological brothers. However, his message went far beyond the inner circle of clerics in Germany. The printing press stepped onto the European stage and took what could have been a mere footnote to Church history, and created a movement. If you lived in a town in 1522, you’d have heard of the 95 Theses. Not everyone could read, but everyone could listen, and there was always someone in town willing to report Luther’s findings to an attentive audience. Luther wasn’t done. He followed up his formal complaints with a series of pamphlets and sermons, each challenging the legitimacy of Church doctrine.
Should priests marry? Should priests be literate? Were priests even needed? Or could a man simply believe in God and that be enough? Did he have to go to a building on Sunday to go to heaven? Or merely trust that Jesus died for our sins? Should the Church advertise relics (the bones or sacred belongings of the saints) to expand their audience, or should the words of the Bible be the sole spiritual commercial?

The Pope was less than pleased. He ordered Martin Luther to renounce his teachings, but Luther continued. The Church faced a tough decision. Punish Luther, he becomes a martyr. Ignore Luther, his message continues to spread. The solution – put Luther on trial. Luther was brought before the Diet of Worms (not an uncouth menu selection, but a meeting of the princes of the Holy Roman Empire at a city called Worms). The Holy Roman Emperor gave Luther a choice – recant or die. But Luther could not recant. He could not deny his beliefs when he knew he was right. Nothing in the Bible contradicted his teachings. He knew he was on the right side of the truth.

The Church was stuck. They couldn’t kill him, but they couldn’t just let him directly challenge the Church and go free. His punishment was ostracism. They let him go free and vowed to punish any man who gave him aid. And should a defender of the Church kill the rebel, oh well, it was out of their hands. The assailant would not be punished. They essentially dared a Christian follower to assassinate Martin Luther. Luther was released.

But Luther was never killed. He was never again arrested. Instead, Prince Frederick III of Germany outwitted the Church by “kidnapping” Luther and hiding him in Wartburg Castle for a few months. Luther spent his days of banishment rewriting the Bible in a language his German brethren could actually understand. But in 1522, there was no singular German language, simply dozens of provincial languages like Bavarian, Saxon, Low German and High German. If Luther was to translate the Bible from Latin to German, he would have to invent the German language. In 1534, he finally finished his magnum opus, writing the first of what would become dozens of Bibles written in dozens of languages. These new versions completely flipped the power structure of the Christian faith. No longer would the writings of the followers of Christ reside solely in the hands of those that spoke Latin. Now, anyone could read the Bible. Now, anyone could interpret the Bible. Dozens of new faiths emerged, and each of these “protesting” faiths offered an alternative to the Church. Each of
these new sects became part of what is today known as the Protestant Reformation.

But the Church wasn’t going to take these challenges sitting down. The Church responded by declaring they were the one, true, “universal” faith. And the Latin word for “universal” was “catholic,” – thus the Church was renamed the Catholic Church. But a simple renaming wasn’t the only alteration the Pope made from Rome. The church leaders then mounted their own Counter-Reformation, becoming even stricter, more dogmatic. They had no intention of giving in to the Protestant challenge. You were either with the Church or you were against it. And if that meant war, the Catholic Church was more than willing to take up arms. Princes, lords and kings took to the sword, killing each other to prove what was the one true faith. The continent fell into an age of chaos, as soldiers of God waged war for the hearts and minds of Europe. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, from England to Germany to Norway to Spain, would perish.

Martin Luther’s publishing of his Bible, and this ensuing century of warfare, nailed the final stake in the coffin of the Middle Ages. Europe’s epoch of mediocrity began to fade, and a new Europe emerged. This new Europe would be stronger, mobile and empowered by both a revolutionary zeal and a newfound faith in humanity that would take them across the globe. For the select few merchants, artists, explorers, patrons, patriarchs and politicos who ushered in this rebirth, Western Europe felt like it was living through a new golden age.

Yet like all golden ages, this one too came to a premature end, but what emerged from this prosperity of the human spirit surprised even the most disheartened cynic. What did Europeans think would happen when the institutions that stabilized the continent for a thousand years were completely uprooted? What did Europeans think would happen when previously isolated civilizations came face to face with a people bent on stealing their wealth at any cost?

What happened? Europe and the lands its explorers and settlers touched entered into a century of violence and upheaval that forever restructured the power of peoples and regions.

But that is for another chapter.
The Century of Death

Europe - Revolutionary Impact - 1500-1650

In a perfect world, revolutions would make life better for people. In our world, this never happens. At least not initially. The French Revolution flirted with equality before putting its citizens through the guillotine and a bitterly fruitless series of continental wars. The Industrial Revolution forced its participants to survive decades of urban squalor before reaping the benefits of an advanced economy. And the Russian Revolution...well...let’s just say the twenty million people that perished probably would have preferred life just the way it was.

But what about Europe’s little 16th century foray into the world of change? What could possibly go wrong when people started meeting new neighbors and asking questions about their God?

What could go wrong?

Well, where would you like me to begin?

When Prince Henry and his Portuguese fleets first set out down the African coast, ushering in an era of exploration, the goal was spices. Cheap, plentiful, little savory morsels of Eastern pleasure. But when an eastern sea route was finally established and a couple continents were inadvertently discovered, what the world got was so much more cataclysmic than merely the exchange of
some items that would end up in the spice cabinets of European nobility.

In the Americas, life as the natives knew it ceased to exist. Depending on which historian you ask, in 1500, when Columbus first arrived, the Americas were home to anywhere between 40 million and 100 million people. Two centuries later, they were at five million. Though the Black Plague was truly devastating and the Holocaust marked an era of unrestrained horror, the plight of the American indigenous populations has no equal. Some call this loss of life a genocide, but that moniker seems to fit better when premeditated slaughter accompanies the carnage. With the Americas, almost all of the death came from the silent killers of disease.

The American continents, insulated from the germs that had bounced around Eurasia for millennia, were no match for the invasion of smallpox, measles and the flu. Within a few decades of the first Spanish arrival, entire Caribbean island populations disappeared. Those that survived were too weak to even put up resistance to the technologically superior Europeans who then stepped ashore. Going back the other direction, syphilis infected the continent of Europe. Although this disease took decades, not weeks, to destroy the bodies and minds of the infected, it did kill millions and eventually forced Europe to adopt strictly conservative (aka “monogamous”) sexual practices to limit its spread.

The exchange between the Old and the New World of not only these diseases, but of goods, ideas and people, has become known as the Columbian Exchange or the Transatlantic Trade Route, and this route forever altered the civilizations on three continents. Each region was the recipient and the donor of a host of gifts, oftentimes swapped without unanimous consent.

Whereas the disease-swap led to nothing but calamity, the introduction of varying crops across the Atlantic unmistakably improved the overall diets of everyone touched. For the Americans, the arrival of cows, sheep, goats and pigs meant the addition of entirely new protein sources. The Europeans brought back tomatoes, potatoes, corn, avocados, chilis, chocolate and vanilla from the Americas. These items provided the color, the flavor and the vitamins sadly lacking on the European menu (most Medieval Europeans had for centuries survived on beef, bacon and bread). These American imports put the sauce on Italian pasta, the chocolate in French pastries and the chilis in Spanish tapas.
Though not exactly edible, and with rather dubious effects, tobacco also made its way to Europe, becoming for many regions the number one cash crop for all would-be settlers. These items made their way throughout the Mediterranean and across continents, even altering the eating habits of Sub-Saharan Africa. With diets more balanced and stomachs more full, all recipients began living longer, better able to survive the inevitable periods of famine and illness.

But people became the most recognizable import and export. Some left by choice. Some left by coercion. Some were kidnapped and sent across the Atlantic. When the Portuguese first arrived in West Africa, they were quick to involve themselves in the slave trade already made profitable by African and Muslim merchants. When the indigenous American populations proved unable to meet the labor demands of the European settlers, Africa became the most obvious source of cheap labor. More than twenty million people were taken from West Africa, with only ten to twelve million actually ever surviving the trip. The majority of these slaves went to the Caribbean and South America (most notably Brazil), but because in the early years of the slave trade little thought was given to the lifespan or viability of forced servitude, more and more slaves were brought over to replace those that died under the brutal conditions. Why create conditions for slaves to live longer when it was easier to just replace the dead with a new batch fresh off the boat? And the bulk of these slaves sent to the South were men who rarely lived more than a few years before perishing under the misery of bondage. In North America, males and females were imported in relatively equal numbers, allowing for marriage and reproduction. Although the Southern United States imported relatively few slaves, its policies of directed slave marriages and legal enslavement of all slave offspring meant that the populations would not only increase, but would remain intensely segregated from the privileges of the white community. In South America, blacks and whites weren’t as segregated and the resulting intermarriage between the races led to a more vibrant cultural exchange than what was found up north.

The types of Europeans who emigrated west also differed across the New World. Along the eastern coast of North America, the British sent over entire families and towns to become permanent colonists. These colonists (think Pilgrims) oftentimes came from newly Protestant backgrounds, intensely independent
with a work ethic that scorned the shirking of labor. These pious immigrants, believing they were God’s newly chosen people, wanted to create a “city on a hill” for all others to emulate. This independence, bordering on arrogance, became the foundation for what would be a people unwilling to remain under the rule of their English mother country.

In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies to the south, a different dynamic emerged as the young male victims of primogeniture left their European homes in search of land and prosperity. Upon arrival, the encomienda system granted each white man the services of all natives living on any land taken or bequeathed. These products of old nobility hated the idea of getting their fingers dirty, instead forcing the indigenous populations to take up all menial tasks. For those Native Americans hardened by living under the rule of the Aztecs or the Incas, this was merely the exchange of one oppressive ruler for another, but for the hundreds of independent tribes unaccustomed to forced servitude, this condition proved unbearable, leading many to choose suicide or, at the very least, infanticide. Although clearly a hierarchical relationship, the European-Indian interaction in the south provided for far more intermarriage than in the north where European-Indian unions were almost nonexistent (at least after the early years when Pocahontas-John Rolfe unions were more common). Because Southern European men often arrived without a woman in tow, they were more willing to hook up with the locals. The resulting mestizo population of mixed heritage parents also contributed to the cultural exchange throughout what would become Latin America. Because of this vast mestizo population, although European descendants would hold governmental and religious positions of power for centuries to come, Latin American society wasn’t simply a recreation of Old Europe, but instead a world where indigenous values and traditions blended with those of the West.

The impact of the Europeans on the Americas has no parallel. Where else, on such a grand scale, were a people able to completely destroy one civilization, replacing it with another? Although in North America this process took far longer, the results were the same. Within three centuries, the two continents once inhabited by hundreds of unique, independent peoples became regions almost exclusively inhabited and controlled by Europeans. These Europeans imported and mandated their Christian faith, their governmental systems and their technologies,
all of which kept the indigenous populations subservient, or at the least, irrelevant.

This ability to completely subjugate populations was not possible in the Asian areas discovered by European explorers. Though by the 19th century the story would be different, in the 1600s the Europeans were no match for the advanced civilizations of India and China. India initially laughed at the European attempts to trade, and the Chinese likewise saw no value in the European goods brought to market. Because time and again Europeans met Asian peoples relatively immune to European illnesses while also able to assemble formidable military forces, the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch contented themselves with merely securing trading rights in critically-located ports. Ironically, the Chinese would eventually find one product of value the Europeans could offer — silver.

The one item the Americas had in bulk, which the Chinese ceaselessly demanded, was bullion — gold and silver metal. The gold and silver deposits in the soil of the Americas became an unexpected boon to the Portuguese and Spanish. When the Spanish conquistador Pizarro first encountered the Incas in 1534, he kidnapped their king Atahualpa, demanding a gold ransom that would fill a room vault bigger than a McMansion family room (22 feet by 17 feet by 8 feet high). They got the ransom, but they killed Atahualpa anyway. Pizarro and his men then amassed eleven tons of gold and twenty-five tons of silver. Pizarro alone walked away with a fairly impressive stash that today would be valued at over $400 million. Pizarro’s haul led to the first of what would be many American mineral rushes with Spanish silver mines popping up all over Mexico and South America. By 1600, South America provided 80% of the world’s silver, with almost all of it going to China. Spain purchased the luxury goods from China, while China used the silver to turn their economy from one of paper currency to one of a more durable material. Unfortunately for the Spanish, they failed to use this gold and silver rush to develop a permanent, diversified economy, instead just sending it to Northern Europe to buy the luxury goods coming out of England, France and the Netherlands. This fatal decision to bypass economic improvement meant that when the mines inevitably dried up (pay attention oil-rich Saudi Arabia), the Spanish economy fell into disarray, and in 1588, when the Spanish fleet (its Armada) was defeated by the British, the age of Spanish maritime dominance came to a crushing end.
This clash on the seas was not the only military conflict facing Europe in the century following the humanistic revolutions of the 16th century. While the Americas and Asia adjusted to the new European explorers, traders and settlers, Europe plunged into a series of “wars of religion,” each making it all too clear that Europe would never be a united land again.

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, he had no intention of starting a revolution, but a revolution was what he would get. Within a few years of publishing the 95 Theses, peasants across the land seized this moment to demand more rights. They destroyed monasteries, plundered castles and left towns utterly devastated. Luther made his opinion on this peasant revolt relatively clear when he wrote the oh-so-subtle pamphlet titled “Against the Murdering, Thieving Hordes of Peasants.” Eventually Luther threw his full support behind the princes who employed all their military capabilities to put down these insurrections.

But the wars were nowhere near being resolved. The princes of Western Europe realized this was the perfect time to expand their influence by snatching Catholic lands. In 1500, the wealthiest landholder in all of Europe was not a prince, not a merchant, not a banking family, but the Catholic Church. Over the course of the Middle Ages, millions and millions of acres were bequeathed to the Church, sometimes because the haves wanted to help the have-nots, but more often, it was the soon-to-be-dead that wanted to increase their chances of spending an eternity north of Hell. So when Luther made it acceptable to formally challenge the Church, the priests took this opportunity and ran with it. Newly-Protestant princes began attacking neighboring Catholic parishes, and with the religious zeal of pent-up peasant armies at their disposal, they readily dispatched their weaker foe, taking control of all lands and taxations. In this manner, realms expanded and the Catholic Church mounted a formidable defense. After this back and forth maneuvering for power, in 1555, German princes agreed to the Peace of Augsburg where individual princes decided the one accepted faith for their kingdom. Because princes could change their mind to suit their economic and political agendas, some regions found themselves switching their allegiance between the Protestant and Catholic faiths with every subsequent transfer of power. A noble father might be Protestant, yet his son might choose to be Catholic. And whatever their lord of the moment chose, the people had to follow. Europe became a forever
changing patchwork of Christian denominations. The one institution that had united Europe had fallen and instead of one unrivaled Christianity, the continent was forever replaced with competing Christianities.

In addition to meeting violence with violence, the Catholic Church responded to the calls for reform by instituting the Counter Reformation. At the 1545 Council of Trent discussions, the Church reversed its policies on indulgences and agreed to strictly monitor the behavior of all clerics, but instead of moving forward and evolving to meet the perceived changing needs of Europeans, the Church actually became more conservative, explicitly establishing the rules, behaviors and teachings followed by the priests, defining once and for all, and only, way that the Bible could be interpreted. Any other perspectives would be deemed heresy, subject to punishments that could include a painful death. The decades of European humanism where individuals had started believing they could challenge the Church were over. In one of the most comical interpretations of the Council of Trent, Pope Paul IV mandated fig leaves be sculpted, painted, sketched or planted on the genitalia of all Renaissance pieces depicting nude subjects. And the Renaissance was over.

Though the covering of men’s private parts with vegetation might appear odd by today’s standards, the edict that had more drastic consequences was Pope Paul IV’s absurdly-titled “Cum nimis absurdum” that established ghettos for Jews, preventing them from living amongst the Christians. This precedent of religious intolerance gained speed as the century passed, leading to the expulsion of Jews, Muslims and non-believers from all Christian towns. One group drawing far too much unwanted attention were unmarried older women who were a burden on a town’s resources and a blight on society. These spinster women (who God forbid made it to thirty without finding a husband) oftentimes lived on the outskirts of towns or in broken down shacks deep in the forest, and drew the ire of mainstream Europe. These “witches” were then blamed for every possible calamity that could befall a community – miscarriages, famines, accidents or freaks of nature – and the punishments imagined by their accusers frequently surpassed the sadistic. Instead of merely killing the accused, Europeans experimented with ovens, thumbscrews and a myriad of other devices that caused excruciating pain, like the Pear, the Judas Cradle and the Iron Maiden, but I shall entrust you with a Google search should you require the R-rated details.
As witches were being persecuted, groups were being banished and individuals were being burned alive for heresy, wars started up again across the continent, these being even more brutal than the earlier princely rivalries. Armies that fought for a Catholic prince, might end up fighting for a Protestant prince and then surrendering to a Calvinist prince. Save for personal advancement, few could predict what would motivate a prince to take his people to war. For 30 years between 1618 and 1648 (a conflict known cleverly as the Thirty Years War), all of Europe fell into a continental bloodbath, not the last time independent European nations would test their arms against neighbors. Victors were unclear, motives were vague, but the one thing that was consistent was the carnage inflicted on the peasants. Towns vanished, crops were destroyed and famines and plagues wiped out populations. Within one generation nearly one third of Germany’s population perished, with the only one result being that Europe proved it could never unite again.

What started out as a century of promise for the possibility of human achievement ended with the fracturing and destruction of civilizations. For the first time, the world truly had a global trade network. With European ships connecting the Americas to Europe to Africa and to Asia, the supremacy of the Muslim empires and the nomads from the steppe came to an end. Europeans could merely bypass these land empires, leaving central Asia to fall into an era of stagnancy. For the first time, the civilizations of the American continents completely fell to foreign invaders from across the ocean. For the first time, Europe failed to handle a challenge to its religious superiority, and instead fragmented into dozens of nations all warring for supremacy.

But again, man, unwilling to see the march of progress stopped too soon, would demonstrate his resiliency and challenge the backwards steps taken during the 16th and 17th centuries.

But that is for another chapter.
Remember how the Europeans all of a sudden decided they might want to try out their new boats and see if they could find a shortcut to the East?

Refresh my memory — why did they do that again? It wasn’t that Europeans finally learned how to sail or that they discovered some magical floating wood in a forest far, far away. No. The main reason the Atlantic countries of Portugal, Spain, France, England and Holland went exploring was because their access to all the fineries of Asia had been cut off. They wanted the spices, the jewels, the fancy plates, the carpets, the silks and cottons of the East, and just when their thirst was being whetted, the Muslims started getting other ideas.

You see, the West was late to the world of trade. Sure, the Romans and Greeks had controlled the Mediterranean Sea for great portions of the world’s history, but when it comes to truly global trade, Europeans were the new kid on the block, and starting to be a bit annoying. By 1492, the Muslims, the Mongols, the Indians and the Chinese had already been sailing across the oceans for centuries and had established relationships so that goods flowed freely from empire to empire with little interference from outside powers. But then the Europeans decided they might want to wake up from their self-induced technological slumber and
start seeing what the world had to offer, and what they saw didn’t exactly assuage their inferiority complex.

Between China and Europe sat three empires – the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal – who each alone possessed a technological advancement, a cultural refinement and a military dominance that made the Europeans reconsider their place in the world’s hierarchy. These three Muslim empires, these Gunpowder Empires, controlled the lands from Austria in the west, to Mecca in the south, to the far reaches of India in the east. They worshipped at the most magnificent house of God in the world (the Hagia Sophia), they constructed the most beautiful building on the planet (the Taj Mahal) and they amassed a larger percentage of the world’s economy than even the Americans today. The Ottomans controlled what we today call the Middle East, the Safavid Dynasties ruled over modern day Iran and the Mughals united the land today known as India.

Each of these empires took advantage of the power vacuum left behind when the Mongols receded into the steppe, and for over three centuries they held on to vast land empires that ensured global power politics would still have to go through the heart of Asia. However, even though their weapons and their religious zeal created three of the most formidable empires of the last millennium, their decadence and their obsessive resistance to Western innovations meant that when they did meet face to face with European might in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were lagging far behind in most areas of economic, social and military achievement.

But in 1400, you’d be hard-pressed to find any intellectual who would claim the Europeans were anything more than merely the annoying younger sibling to the much more mature eastern empires of the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals.

First, the Ottomans. Directly to the east of Europe, these were the people who most immediately threatened Christian Europe. The Church’s track record against the Muslim warriors wasn’t exactly impressive. After their first victory in the Crusades, the West suffered loss after loss after loss to the Muslims and by 1300, it appeared Europe’s claim to the Holy Land would never again be anything more than just a hollow threat. And when bands of nomadic Turks came out of the steppe in the 14th century, the delicate balance that had existed since the Crusades was shattered. This new antagonist sought nothing less than the conquest of all of Europe.
Like the Seljuk Turks centuries before, this new group of Turks were master horse people like their steppe brothers, and they also fought with the religious passion shared by their nomadic Muslim forefathers. Known as ghazis, or warriors of faith, each of these small tribes survived by raiding the agricultural enclaves across the Levant and then retreating back into the security of their homeland. But one of these groups of Turks chose to not retreat to the steppe. Instead they decided once and for all that they would conquer the sedentary peoples of the eastern Mediterranean, destroy their walled cities and then unite an empire under their rule. The leader of these horsemen was Osman, but to the Europeans suffering from perhaps a subtle speech impediment, he was Othman, and his followers — Ottomans.

Osman led his ghazis on a series of raids and military skirmishes on the eastern fringe of the Byzantine Empire, and in 1302 his horse forces captured parts of Anatolia (the region we today call Turkey). Some of these raids were fought for the will of Allah, others for power and prestige, still others for booty. But unlike his predecessors, Osman’s Turks didn’t retreat. They settled in previously Byzantine towns like Nicaea (where the Church decided in 381 they’d worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and then in Bursa (a useful little town right across the water from Constantinople).

Osman would die before stretching deeper into Byzantine lands, but he put the Ottoman foot in the door, allowing successors to push the crack open a bit further over the next hundred years. And with Muhammad II’s ascension to the throne in 1444, the European gates were thoroughly blown wide open. Muhammad II (aka Mehmed II) made his number one priority the seizure of Constantinople, the last symbol of the Roman Empire, and the final piece of the Ottoman Middle Eastern puzzle.

By 1453, the Byzantine Empire was a sad little shadow of its former glory. Its population had peaked centuries earlier at over a million people, but when Mehmed II came pounding on its walls, it was at a mere 50,000. Its control over the Mediterranean region that once stretched across three continents and even down into Italy, had been reduced to a sliver of Christendom, entirely surrounded by the empire of the Ottomans. Like the Roman Empire that saw its 1000-year reign end when the inauspiciously-named Romulus Augustus relinquished authority to the barbarian nomadic hordes, the Eastern Roman Empire likewise saw their
1000-year reign end with the empire’s namesake at the throne – Constantine XI.

In one of the most important turning points in world history, the choices made by Constantine XI and Mehmed II flipped the directions of two civilizations – the West and the Kingdom of Islam. Secure in his castle, Constantine XI had no reason to fear this latest challenge to his empire. Sure, Mehmed had over a hundred thousand troops, and Constantine had just seven thousand. Sure, Mehmed had set up a fort on the other side of the Bosphorus Sea where he could launch his final attack. And sure, Mehmed had 125 ships stationed at the ready, while Constantine only had 26. But what did Constantine have to fear? Constantinople had survived for a thousand years, and the walled behemoth hadn’t been conquered yet, so why would these former horse people from the east pose any more of a threat?

Well, this time it would be different because Mehmed had gunpowder, and the hundred-foot-tall, thirty-foot-wide protective walls that surrounded the city would be no match for the iron balls of destruction under Mehmed’s employ. Ironically, the cannons and their requisite technology had been offered to Constantine months before the battle by the most decorated metallurgist in all of Europe – Orban of Hungary. Orban’s offer of assistance fell on Constantine’s deaf ears, so like the free agent weapons manufacturer he was, Orban went across the Bosphorous and entertained a meeting with Mehmed. Mehmed wouldn’t refuse, and at his disposal came 50 cannons and one super cannon named Basilica – a 27-foot-long beast, the largest in the world. Had Constantine initially agreed to this offer, history might have played out a bit differently, but the moment he declined this gift of military hardware, his fate was sealed.

Constantine tried one last defense. He extended a massive chained fence across the water so that no boats could enter the sea to attack Constantinople from the north. Mehmed scoffed at this feeble obstacle, simply ordering his men to cut down a bunch of trees, slaughter hundreds of sheep and oxen and then use their boiled fat to grease up the logs so his men could drag 70 of his ships over land. Imagine the faces of the defenders of Constantinople as they gazed across the straits only to see a parade of boats being yanked across the hillside on greased planks. When Mehmed’s men dropped their ships back in the sea, the siege began, and after one month of firing everything he had at the last
bastion of Christendom in the Middle East, the walls were breached, Constantine was slain and the city finally fell.

For Europe, this meant that the Muslims were now in full control of the eastern European passage to Asia. They could tax any goods entering or exiting, and they showed no signs of stopping at Constantinople. The European nations knew at this point that if they were to fully pull themselves out of the Middle Ages and continue to benefit from their trade with the East, they’d need to find some other routes, thus launching the European Age of Exploration.

But for the Ottomans, exploration was last on their “To Do” list. First they would need to secure their winnings, then they would commission glorious public works projects to symbolize their unmatched superiority and their spiritual pre-eminence and then they would see how tough it would be to conquer the rest of Europe.

This task first fell to the hands of Mehmed II and his successors, but it was with Suleiman the Magnificent that the Ottoman Empire reached its true golden age. Suleiman inherited an empire already rich in power and in artistic inspiration. When Mehmed II conquered Constantinople, he transformed the largest church in all of Christendom into a mosque. Take down a few icons of some saints, destroy a bunch of mosaics, throw up some minarets, remove the crosses decorating the halls and…presto – you’ve got yourself the biggest mosque in the world – the Hagia Sophia.

Suleiman would not merely rest on the achievements of Mehmed II. He embarked on a series of building projects that perched the Ottoman Empire above all rivals. From his childhood, Suleiman was destined for greatness. He was born almost exactly a thousand years after the prophet Muhammad and he was the tenth sultan of the Osman family. He was named after Solomon, the Biblical creator of the first temple of Jerusalem and possibly the greatest political leader in Jewish history. With a pedigree of such import, the expectations for this boy leader were immense.

Yet by the time of his death, Suleiman had surpassed every one of these boyhood expectations, leaving a legacy few could have ever imagined. While in the 16th century, the West was still admiring the works of Michelangelo and da Vinci, the Ottoman Empire claimed a man whose brilliance quite possibly trumped anything the European Renaissance offered.
Suleiman was a philosopher, a warrior, a poet, a patron of the arts, an engineer, a goldsmith and a leader without equal. To his people, he was Suleiman the Lawgiver, but his achievements spread far beyond merely bringing peace to a region known for its instability. His own people praised Suleiman for his ability to be both a ferocious warrior and a restrained politician. Suleiman let his regional ministers rule as they saw fit, as long as criminal laws were stringently enforced, merchants conducted all transactions ethically and the taxes continued to stream into the capital without indiscriminate corruption or exploitation. To the diplomats who made their way to the streets of Constantinople, or by chance found themselves at the foot of the great Suleiman, the Ottoman Empire stood unrivaled. His aqueducts surpassed the engineering of the Romans, his humbly named Mosque of Suleiman almost equalled the Hagia Sophia in design and opulence (while simultaneously housing the Muhammad-mandated libraries, schools and hospitals) and as he walked amongst his people he demanded total silence. For a religion and a people who preached there is no god but Allah, Suleiman came closer than any other Muslim leader to attaining a status as a god on earth.

And he also had a fairly impressive collection of lady friends, in what became a staple of the Muslim Gunpowder Empires – the harem. A harem is a collection of women – girlfriends, entertainers and servants – who must attend to the sultan’s every wish. The Ottoman version of the harem might not have been as naughty as the European stereotypical depiction that has played out time and again in Hollywood flicks dealing with what happened on those lonely Arabian Nights. Nor was it as well-staffed as the harems of their Mughal neighbors (Akbar the Great settled down with 5000 concubines and 26 wives). Yet Suleiman’s private residence was still stocked with numerous options for his personal amusement. Most of these female companions were chosen for political reasons by either his advisors or his mother (a Gunpowder sultan wasn’t exactly able to tell his mother that the latest offering wasn’t his type). Because Muslim law allowed four wives and as many concubines as could be properly supported, there were more than a few male offspring vying for the throne when dear old dad finally kicked the bucket. This led to countless behind-the-scene dramas (oftentimes orchestrated by power-hungry moms) and even the occasional assassination attempt on elder brothers or even dad (Suleiman had his own son executed after a foiled assassination attempt). These hereditary fights would
make any dad paranoid. But daddy-mommy-concubine tiffs were the least of the Ottomans’ worries. For just outside the empire’s boundaries, any number of nomadic Muslim tribes sat waiting for the opportunity to jump in and wrest the crown of the Muslim world away from the House of Osman.

These incessant internal and external risks meant that the Ottoman emperors had to establish a secret military force whose honor and allegiance would never come into question.

Enter the janissaries. Since no Muslim could be trusted to protect the sultan, the Ottoman armies crafted the perfect plan—kidnap Christian boys at a young age, bring them back to the palace and then use the rest of their adolescence to teach them to not only be elite fighters, but be the most educated, reliable men of society. This wasn’t the first, and wouldn’t be the last, time autocrats appreciated the advantages of having an elite corps of devotees ready to obey any command without complaint. Adolph Hitler tried this out with his Boy Scout-esque Hitler Youth program in the 1930s and Pol Pot perverted the idea even more in Cambodia in the 1970s (no, I’m not saying Boy Scouts follow Hitler...read the sentence again). Both men took the minds and the bodies of the nation’s youth and molded them into fanatical protectors of the throne, praising the leader above all. For Mehmed II, Suleiman and every subsequent Ottoman sultan, these janissaries were the empire’s elite corps—the best-trained military force, the most trusted political advisors and oftentimes even the highest ranked government leaders. They maintained order throughout the kingdoms and spread the Ottoman reach deep into Europe and far into the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia.

But past Mesopotamia, the Ottomans could go no further. They would have to share the Muslim realm with their adversaries to the East—the Safavid Empire. Although also a member of the Gunpowder Empire club, the Safavids were no friend of the Ottomans. Yes, to an outsider, they might look like interchangeable parts, but these same people might erroneously think Iranians and Iraqis see each other today as inseparable brothers-for-life. Admittedly, both fought for Allah, both used their unique fusion of cannons and nomadic confidence to blow their enemies off the battlefield and both, once settled, created worlds where some of the most stunning works of art could be produced. Both even lacked trust in their fellow Muslims and looked outside their realm (mostly in Russia) to find young boys to kidnap and then convert to obedient defenders of the empire.
But to be honest, they hated each other. Some art historians might claim it was because the Safavids chose architecture that was far less bold, ostentatious and massive as their neighbors to the west. Nowhere in the Safavid kingdom was there a piece of architecture that came close to rivaling the Mosque of Suleiman. Instead these successors to the Persian realm chose to create what could be the most beautiful city in the world, a city I'll bet you $47.32 you've never heard of before – Isfahan. Recently deemed a World Heritage Site, this stunning city boasts bridges you could never imagine, mosques more colorful than any in the Muslim world and, because it was the heart of rug manufacturing, a collection of the most intricately crafted Persian carpets you will ever see. Today, it is these carpets that are the most enduring international legacy of the Safavid Dynasty. Today, few will ever get their passports stamped in Iran on their way to visiting Isfahan, but 30% of the world’s carpets come from Persia (today known as Iran), and over one million Iranians continue to hand weave these masteries of detail and color. The Safavids had built an oasis in the desert to showcase their creative passion.

But let’s be honest. They didn’t hate each other because one’s art was a bit fancier than the others. They hated each other because a religious rift dating back to Muhammad could never be reconciled. The Ottomans were Sunni. The Safavids were Shi’a. At the heart of this conflict was who had the right to succeed Muhammad as heir to the kingdom of Islam. Should it be the one who claimed blood relation to Muhammad? Or the one seen as the most fit for the title? The Shi’a believed you must be a descendant of Muhammad. The Sunni didn’t. But like the Protestant-Catholic division that evolved over the centuries into so much more than mere ideological quirks, the Sunnis and the Shi’as saw themselves as diametrically opposed sects. In 680, the Shi’a believed only Hussein, the son of Ali (who was the son-in-law of Muhammad...the closest Islam could find to a true relative to the Prophet), should have first dibs on the caliphate and so they met the Sunni on the battlefield. When Hussein was eventually defeated and beheaded, the Shi’a had their martyr, and ever since, the Shi’a faithful have seen themselves as oppressed and the Sunnis as the oppressors. Today, 90% of the world is Sunni, and because it is the Sunni who control most of the leadership roles politically and economically, many Shiites today still see themselves as historical victims.
Another difference between the two Muslim empires was how they dealt with nonbelievers – the jizya. Unlike the Ottomans who practiced religious tolerance, allowing all Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians to continue their practices as long as they continued to pay taxes, the Safavids mandated everyone convert to the Shi’a faith or face exile or even death.

So when the Safavids stopped the Ottoman eastern advance at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, the Ottomans’ desire for an empire stretching through to India was squashed. But the Ottomans refused to retreat and after 150 years of war, the Ottomans took over Mesopotamia (today’s Iraq), while their hated enemy resided next door in what today we call Iran. And the Iranians (the Persians of the day) never forgave the Sunnis for stealing their land. In fact, one reason America was so hesitant to pull their troops out of Iraq after the 2002 war was their fear of what Iran would do next. Would they immediately throw their full support behind the Shiite minority, and try to wrestle away the portion of the Middle East the Safavids believed they earned 500 years ago? We’re still waiting to see the answer to that question.

But the Safavids and the Ottomans weren’t the only Muslim empires laying claim to the Near East. The Mughal Empire ruled the Indian peninsula for three centuries until the British arrived and pushed them out so they could take their turn controlling one of the wealthiest regions in the world.

In 1500, India held close to 150 million people, and its economy made up one-fourth of the world’s wealth (by comparison America’s GDP today is about 22%). They had the only diamond mines in the world, and their spices, jewels and textiles were such the envy of the West, that Europe sent men in boats in every direction just to be the first to control access to the subcontinent. All roads might have led to Rome, but all wallets led to India.

So when the nomadic Muslim prince Babur realized he was never going to recapture his native homeland of Afghanistan, he decided to instead try his hand at the little jungle paradise to the east. Claiming relation to Genghis Khan himself, Babur came from a warrior pedigree and by the time he was in his twenties, he’d already fought in a couple dozen wars and knew how to employ some of the most intimidating military strategies of the era. He taught his 1000 war elephants to use their trunks and feet to rip apart soldiers on the battlefield, he built hundreds of cannons that could launch projectiles over a thousand feet and he ruled over an army of archers who employed a composite bow more powerful.
than the English longbow that ended the reign of knights in Europe.

At his death in 1530, Babur had expanded his empire across the regions we today call Pakistan and northern India. His successors built upon his military legacy, but then focused on constructing a series of dynamic structures, each coming to define the Indo-Muslim style. Like the Ottomans and the Safavids, the Mughal shahs first wanted to create paradises on earth. The steppe was a harsh, dry, unforgiving ecosystem, and water was always a commodity in short supply. The Quran spoke of heaven being a paradise with rivers flowing from four directions, so because of the geographic realities of the region and the glorious stories of paradise established by their holiest scriptures, the Mughals set out to redefine architecture and synthesize nature and art like no one before.

When the grandson of Babur, Akbar the Great, rose to power, he first set out to create a palace where he could keep his enemies close. This palace was Fatehpur Sikri. Like France’s King Louis XVI who later secluded and pampered all the regional lords in the gloriously gluttonous palace at Versailles, Babur built a complex where he could display his supremacy, while keeping close any would-be challengers to the throne. Fatehpur Sikri had all the engineering wonders of a Roman bath, while keeping the cultural intricacies of his Mongol heritage. Because Fatehpur Sikri was in the middle of a desolate, arid region miles from any reliable water source, Akbar’s engineers and army of laborers had to first dam water to create a manmade lake, and then construct waterwheels that continuously raised the water to the elevated hillside structures. This water then circulated through a series of baths, fountains and aqueducts to keep the buildings essentially air-conditioned in a climate where the sizzling summer temperatures could frequently surpass 110 degrees.

With an eye to his past, Akbar laid out the structures in a configuration that mimicked the nomadic tent patterns of his forefathers, actually encasing the very wood from nomadic tents inside the stone pillars. However, despite its engineering innovations and its reverence to the past, Fatehpur Sikri could not survive the elements, and the harsh climate forced it to be abandoned less than 50 years after its founding (though it still exists today as it did four hundred years ago, just a short drive away from the Taj Mahal).
Fatehpur Sikri’s place on the world’s stage might have only been a blip, but for those few decades, it was a place to behold. Like Suleiman to the west, Akbar was a man of the ages, and he treasured the art and the philosophy of those in his presence. His unquenchable desire for knowledge brought thousands of spiritual, philosophical and cultural leaders to his doorstep. Weekly he met with Christian, Muslim and Hindu envoys, debating the intricacies of each sect’s dogma. Though illiterate himself, he was an astute listener and even attempted to design a new religion which fused the major tenets of Islam and Hinduism - Din-e-Ilahi. This religion wasn’t exactly popular – only a couple dozen ever converted and even his kids ignored him and his attempt at spiritual harmony. When it comes to religion, Akbar also conveniently re-interpreted the Quran’s edict that no man shall have more than four wives. In his harem of over 6000 women, each protected by her own personal eunuch, he maintained relations with a couple hundred wives and countless other lady friends.

As Akbar continued to expand his realm through war, his wealth continued to surpass even the gaudiest of heights. By the time Shah Jahan took the throne, the Mughal Emperors had made the Indian population their ticket to opulence. And speaking of thrones, Shah Jahan set his artisans to making a royal chair like nothing the world had ever seen – the Peacock Throne. The Ottomans might have started the idea of making a fancy throne adorned with every gem they could get their hands on, but Shah Jahan went just a bit over the top. At over six feet long and four feet wide, it used over 2500 pounds of gold, over 500 pounds of emeralds and rubies and a 186-carat diamond. Considering the average wedding ring has a diamond that is less than a carat in size, this Koh-i-Noor diamond was fairly impressive. If the throne was around today, it’d fetch over a billion dollars on the open market (and who knows how much the folks at Ebay would splurge). But alas, the Persians claimed it as booty from the Mughals in the 1700s, and since then, it’s been stripped down into pieces and sold off across who knows where.

But Shah Jahan didn’t stop there. Considering his name actually means “king of the world,” it’s fair to say this man didn’t do anything on a small scale. The Peacock Throne was an impressive piece of furniture, but Shah Jahan truly outdid himself when it came to architecture. For it was Shah Jahan who designed and orchestrated the construction of what many believe is the
most striking, most recognizable (sorry Eiffel Tower) building in the world – the Taj Mahal. Taking 22 years and 20,000 expert artisans from across Europe and Asia, his masterpiece cost over 32 million rupees (about $1.1 billion dollars in today’s US money). Its minarets, domed ceiling and marble walls were adorned with countless precious stones, mosaics and careful brushwork. Unlike the European works of the Renaissance that showcased the splendor of the human form, Muslims weren’t allowed to paint or sculpt any type of mammal – be it human or otherwise. It would have been an affront to Allah.

So the Taj Mahal, like other Muslim works, showcased the skill of its artisans through ornate lettering of sacred texts, elaborate geometric patterns and meticulous carvings. According to legend, Shah Jahan didn’t ever want another ruler to build a temple better than the Taj, so he cut off the hands of every artist and architect who worked on the memorial (not exactly the severance package they were expecting).

Unfortunately for the average Indian, these grandiose projects meant a continual tax burden and perpetual need for expansion through military conflict, leaving the masses forced to live in a state of permanent starvation at the mercy of the whims of regional lords. These pricey pet projects also meant that the Mughal shahs were ill-prepared for the growing power of the Europeans. And when the British finally arrived in the 1700s, they were met with a civilization facing collapse. Famine, constant civil wars, natural disasters and disease all weakened the subcontinent’s ability to fend off the advances of a persistent and well-armed foe. The age of India being ruled by foreigners had only just begun, but this time, instead of the invading forces coming from the steppe, they arrived by boat from the far off British Isles.

But that is for another chapter.
Chinese Expansion and Withdrawal

China - The Ming Dynasty – 1400 > 1600

While the Near East and India were adjusting to the rule of the Muslim nomads, Europe was pulling itself into a new age of exploration and self-discovery, and the Americas were surviving the onslaught of the trans-Atlantic forces, over in the East, the civilizations of Japan and China were trying to maintain their traditional roots while surviving internal disorder and threats from beyond the horizon.

Like the rest of Eurasia, the prospect of Chinese autonomy ended when the Mongol hordes took control, spreading their empire from the Pacific Ocean to the borders of central Europe. During their nearly century-long reign, the Mongols upended society by devaluing the age-old superiority of the Mandarin bureaucrats, replacing Confucian order with arbitrary violence and inconsistent law enforcement. The Mongol lords then connected China to a transcontinental trade network that left the previously isolated peoples open to the wandering eyes of traders and missionaries from the West.

As the Mongol control over their vast empire dissipated, chaos and famine ruled in the countryside. For one young boy, Hongwu, the despair of the later Mongol years hit just a little too close to home. His parents were homeless, they sold his siblings just to survive and just when Hongwu reached adolescence and
thought life couldn’t get any worse, his parents died, leaving him to roam the countryside looking for scraps. And where did a young boy with no hope turn in times of misery? The monastery. He joined a Buddhist monastery, but even they lacked the resources to feed and shelter him, so he again went on the road, living off the hit and miss kindness of strangers. Exhausted by the futility of this existence, Hongwu finally joined the army. Here he showed a knack for killing people and leading others in battle. Hongwu turned his little band of brothers against the Mongol invaders, conquering village after village, eventually gaining enough strength to kick out the last of the Mongol rulers. It wasn’t that hard to gain support for his little venture, as year after year the mounting droughts, famines and floods intimated the Mandate of Heaven was lost and another dynasty needed to fall.

With the barbarian invaders finally expelled, Hongwu established the Ming Dynasty and vowed to fix every ill that vexed his childhood, bringing back the romanticized order from dynasties past.

Task #1 – Help out the poor. China had millions of acres of unfarmed land, so Hongwu declared that whoever cultivated these new fields wouldn’t have to pay taxes. He helped bring water to these vast, arid regions by ordering the construction of dams, dikes and levees. These choices seemed noble at the time, but with a few decades, most of these lands were merely snatched up by rich landlords, not the poor for which they were intended. Hongwu believed he could reduce taxes if he cut off a chunk of money normally used to house, feed and arm the military. Instead, he would give every soldier a parcel of land. These soldiers would hypothetically use this land to feed their families, purchase their needed weapons and pay for the training necessary to perform in combat. This idea worked in theory, but few soldiers could ever earn enough profit from their harvests to make ends meet. So did Hongwu succeed at his first task? Not really. Yes, more food was produced every year and the government’s balance sheet wasn’t in such dire straits, but for the most part, the poor stayed poor and the rich kept getting richer. So Hongwu went back to the drawing board.

Task #2 – Bring back the scholars. Hongwu wasn’t exactly a fan of the scholar-gentry, the masters of the civil service exam. In his childhood, these were the smug elites who scoffed at his illiteracy. The Mongols, under their rule, had rid themselves of the scholar class and Hongwu was inclined to keep them out of
government. But tradition and their track record forced him to reconsider. In 1383, he decided he would bring back the civil service exam to determine which men truly were the most qualified in the land. But this time, the test would be even more demanding than the previous editions. Each year, tens of thousands of would-be government bureaucrats locked themselves in rows of testing chambers (think outhouses) and spent days filling out the exam booklets. Questions like “Unscramble the following words and analyze their relevance: Beginning, good, mutually, nature, basically, practice, far, near, men’s” or “Write an eight-legged essay (kind of like the five paragraph ones we all grew up on) on the following: Scrupulous in his own conduct and lenient only in his dealings with the people.” The Ming leaders expanded the passage rates by creating tiers based on scores, assigning subordinate degrees for those who didn’t shine the brightest. Even with this extended opportunity, the tests were still killers. Many a potential scholar killed himself once he realized his chances of passing the dreaded test were slim to none. Some even resorted to trying to bribe test moderators or creating “cheat shirts,” elaborate cheat sheets with thousands of miniscule characters scribbled on their underwear. Even with the crushing pressure and potential for immorality, under the Ming emperors, thousands more Confucian scholars earned the elite status that was their ticket to lifelong employment and immediate respect. If only they would fulfill their job requirements honestly.

Which leads us to his Task #3 – Ensure loyalty and eradicate corruption. Like many men who come from humble beginnings and then achieved absolute power (think Hitler and Stalin), Hongwu became a bit paranoid once he sat in the emperor’s chair. He killed or expelled anyone who dared disagree with him, and those who used the public coffers also found their lives shortened. A fairly grotesque man, with pot-marked scars covering his face and a jawline resembling a warthog, Hongwu wasn’t exactly respected for his rugged good looks. He was feared for his violent temper and ruthless retribution. He had no problem beheading foes, but he much preferred public humiliation. He’d drag any man caught in a scandal into the public square, spread the offender’s legs and then whip his bare butt until the flesh drained blood onto the street below. This punishment is still sometimes used in Chinese-influenced societies today. One such incident in Singapore in the 1990s involved an American high school kid named Michael Fay who stole a few road signs and scratched up
some cars. When he was finally arrested, President Bill Clinton pleaded for leniency, but the boy was taken out and whipped with a four foot long rattan cane. Students in the Ming Dynasty were likewise kept in order, but their punishments were just a tad bit more severe. One student who vocally criticized his teacher was beheaded and his head was put on a pole in front of the school. Remarkably, student attention levels improved significantly.

Not exactly a trusting boss, Hongwu did find one group he could depend on, a group of men whose loyalty was unparalleled. Men who would never lead a violent revolution, who would never be caught bedding one of the royal concubines and who would answer his every call. These men were eunuchs. Kidnapped at an early age, these young boys had their testicles cut off, thus weakening some of the mammalian desires that tend to get men into trouble in imperial courts. Hongwu and later Ming emperors could trusted their corps of 70,000 eunuchs to not only protect the throne, but to faithfully execute court wishes.

The most famous eunuch of the Ming Dynasty was a Chinese Muslim boy, stolen at the age of eleven and brought to the imperial court to serve the emperor. This boy would become known to history as Zheng He, and his sovereign master was not the violent, obsessive, hyper-protective Hongwu, but the third Ming monarch, a man far more open to the splendors of the outside world. His name – Yongle. Yongle wasn’t a slave to the past, but an innovator and a visionary. He had his scribes acquire all the knowledge of the land, creating an 11,000-volume encyclopedia. He moved the capital to Beijing in the north where his army of engineers constructed what would become known as the Forbidden City. He expanded and repaired the Great Wall so his forces could ignore the northern border and focus on the wealth waiting for them across the seas.

Yongle and his most trusted aide Zheng He then created an armada greater than anything the world had ever known. In the early 1400s, when Europe was still a century away from their famed Age of Exploration, the Chinese were already embarking on their own tour of the continents. Near the Yangtze River, Zheng He erected dozens of dry docks, some three times the size of football fields, to build some of the largest ships ever imagined. After tens of thousands of craftsmen worked night and day for years to finish the fleet, the river was flooded and the ships headed out to sea. And these ships were not your fairly standard European variety. No, these beasts of the sea were something to behold. Let’s put it
Spinning World History

into context. Columbus’s adorable little Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria that “discovered” America were about 60 feet long. Zheng He’s were close to 400 feet long. Basically, you could put five of Columbus’s ships in the hull of one of Zheng He’s and still have room for an army of elephants to roam the deck.

Once completed, Yongle sent his fleet across Asia, to Africa (and some even believe to the New World) to gain trading partners, secure alliances, but also to just flaunt the majesty of the Ming Dynasty. This navy of 300 ships, manned by 28,000 sailors, dwarfed the combined forces of all the European nations during the Age of Exploration. When this army of ships entered any harbor, the foreign leaders could do nothing more than to bow down to the superiority of the Chinese. Zheng He’s Muslim background and his father’s own experience on his pilgrimages to Mecca, meant that Zheng He was welcomed in ports throughout the Muslim world. By the end of his seven voyages and his nearly two decades on the seas, Zheng He added over 50 tributary states to the Chinese empire. Although many of these states only paid lip service to the firepower of Zheng He’s navy, immediately reverting back to the status quo once the ships were out of sight, no one could argue that China didn’t spread its influence from Southeast Asia to the coastal kingdoms of India and even to the southern coast of Africa. In his book 1421: The Year China Discovered America, author Gavin Menzies even claimed Zheng He made it to the Americas, stating that the discovery of Chinese anchors, traditions and even DNA in indigenous peoples prove the Chinese made it to the shores of California a century before the Atlantic explorers.

Regardless of whether he made it across the Pacific, Zheng He’s voyages cannot be overstated. By 1430, China could have become a global superpower, firmly positioning its forces in the dozens of tributary states dotting Asia and Africa, possibly even colonizing the Americas before Europe even thought to head out across the Atlantic. But alas, in one of the most critical turning points in world history, the Chinese totally and abruptly abandoned their navy. When Yongle and Zheng He died, so did China’s forays on the seas. All ships were burned. All records destroyed. All maps thrown into the dustbin of history. China stood at the edge of establishing a global influence which would have surpassed even the Mongols, but they inexplicably pulled back. Whether it was for fear of the influence of outsiders, or the need to spend government funds on protecting the northern
border, or the frustration that merchants were gaining too much power in society or because the trips were too expensive, China ceased its overseas expeditions, opening the door for the Europeans to begin their assault on the world’s resources.

Who knows what would have happened had China followed Zheng He’s exploration with European-style colonization and trade. Would Portugal have ever been able to reach India, or would the Chinese have stopped them before they even made it around the Cape of Good Hope? Would the Dutch, the Spanish, the British, the French and the Portuguese have landed merchants and missionaries across Asia, or would the Chinese have been so firmly entrenched that no European power would ever dare attempt come ashore on one of their skimpy ships? Regardless of what could have happened, it never did. The Ming emperors withdrew to their Forbidden City and focused on the internal happenings of their people. It wouldn’t be the last time China would enter prominently into world affairs, but it would take another 500 years before it could again call itself a world superpower.

When the Europeans arrived in the 1500s, Chinese civilization by most definitions still surpassed that of the Europeans – but the gap was closing. The first Portuguese and Dutch merchants knew there was still an unquenchable thirst back home for Chinese silks and porcelain. The Chinese kilns at Jingdezhen produced enough porcelain to fill the demand of all the world’s markets. They had created a Henry Ford-esque assembly line process where the superheated kilns spewed out thousands of pieces of pottery a day. During this era, traditional designs of nature and harmony continued, but the Chinese began taking special orders, reproducing the worlds of their European and Asian customers.

At first, the Chinese wanted little do with the Europeans. For the previous few centuries, trade was almost always one-sided. The Chinese just didn’t want anything the Europeans offered. In fact, the first Europeans were expected to kowtow (lay their bodies to the ground in symbolic submission and then crawl forward) to the imperial leaders, not exactly a demand the Europeans were accustomed to fulfilling. However, unlike in previous dynasties, these new Europeans offered a good China desperately wanted – silver.

The Yuan Dynasty under the Mongols had issued paper currency as the primary method of trade, but the Ming refused to
continue that tradition, instead wanting the more durable silver. Yet as the Chinese economy expanded, requiring more silver pieces, Chinese authorities couldn’t keep up with the demand. Enter the Europeans. The Spanish and Portuguese silver mines in the Americas were yielding a seemingly inexhaustible supply of silver (and gold), and most of this silver ended up filling the coffers of the Chinese government. Because of this need for Western silver, the imperial guard reluctantly opened their ports to trade, under the condition that the government controlled all transactions and the only ports open to international trade would be at Macao, Canton and Peking. As China became increasingly involved in these newly created global trade networks, their society gradually began to change in ways repellent to Chinese traditionalists. The lowly merchant classes were becoming wealthy off this new exchange (though much of their income was taxed and ended up in the throne’s coffers), and the missionaries that arrived with the traders were becoming more of a nuisance. If the Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries gained momentum converting locals to a religion valuing an invisible god, might they totally sabotage a society rooted on strict secular gender and age relationships? Fortunately for the Chinese bureaucrats, because the Chinese lacked a tradition of monotheism, few converted to this Christianity. These missionaries continued to impress the imperial court with the accuracy of their clocks, calendars and weapons, but they never converted any large number of people to this foreign faith.

Although the Church would never crack the Confucian grip on the masses, the influx of silver did thoroughly embed itself in daily life. Subsequently, when the flow of silver dried up in the mid-1600s, the Ming were doomed. The Ming could no longer deal with the natural disasters that once again decimated the countryside. The age of the Ming ended, replaced this time with barbarians not from the steppe but from northeastern Manchuria. These Manchus would establish the Qing Dynasty, and from their perch in the Forbidden City of Beijing, they too would begin the challenge of finding the balance between territorial expansion, infrastructure improvement and peasant appeasement. However, as the Europeans continued to push their trade deeper into the interior, the Qing Dynasty progressively found themselves ruling over an empire no longer holding a position of global supremacy. The era of China’s dominance was over.

But that is for another chapter.
Over the course of its existence, its unique geography right off the tip of eastern Asia allowed it to always determine the extent to which it wanted to be touched by the civilizations of others. In the book *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington speaks of eight civilizations – Sinic, Hindi, Islamic, Western, Orthodox, Latin American, African and Japanese. Seven of these civilizations span multiple continents. Only one is a country in and of itself. Only one has been able to remain separate from the world, choosing on its own terms when it wanted to open its doors to outsiders, and to what extent they wanted to keep their doors open. Only one has been able to choose its path.

Japan.

Japan had run-ins with the Koreans, the Chinese and the Mongols. Each was repelled. In the 16th century, when European powers spanned the globe looking for willing (oftentimes reluctant) trading partners, Japan at first warily welcomed the hygienically-challenged, red-haired devils. Yet within a century, these strangers were banished, and the island nation returned to isolation, taking what it wanted from European culture and forbidding all that might contaminate Japanese society. In the next three hundred years, as Europe gradually put one country after another under its
sphere of influence, Japan remained inaccessible, immune to the progress of the known world.

But it still was progressing. Just on its own timetable.

First, Japan had to escape its own Middle Ages. In Europe for a thousand years, the Middle Ages meant thousands of independent lords ruled over their fiefdoms, demanding allegiance and wheat from their peasants in exchange for protection secured by well-trained knights. Japan’s feudal world looked fairly similar. In Japan, the lords weren’t barons or dukes or counts, but daimyos, and the peasants’ grain of exchange was rice. These daimyos employed sword-wielding samurai to protect the peasants and to ensure the timely payment of rice tributes. Both of these feudal worlds would come to an end. For Europe, the continent would need a plague, a Renaissance, an Age of Exploration and gunpowder to exit the Middle Ages.

For Japan, the 6,852 islands would need three men. The Three Unifiers.


These three men all came from relatively humble origins. They weren’t the wealthiest or the most powerful daimyos. In fact one, Hideyoshi, was simply a lowly peasant. But the three together ended the centuries of chaos, violence and regional warfare, uniting Japan in a 250-year period of peace. Though at times allies and at other times foes, these three men each played a vital role in creating modern Japan. Even today, Japanese schoolchildren memorize the poem of the great unifiers, a tale that shows how each man distinctively approached the challenge of unification. In this poetic allegory, the three men sit in a room watching a cuckoo bird that refuses to sing. They responded:

*If the cuckoo doesn’t sing, kill it!* – Oda Nobunaga

*If the cuckoo doesn’t sing, let’s make it to!* – Toyotomi Hideyoshi

*If the cuckoo doesn’t sing, let’s wait until it sings!* – Tokugawa Ieyasu

Nobunaga was the warrior, Hideyoshi the immovable force and Ieyasu the patient planner. Although at one time or another each man could be violent, forceful or patient, these three approaches also represented the different periods of Japan’s evolution.

In the 1540s, Oda Nobunaga, although only the heir to a small domain, used his military prowess to defeat rival daimyos and set up base in Kyoto. Willing to use guerrilla warfare and
Portuguese gunpowder, but also free of rival daimyo in his region, Nobunaga was able to gradually strengthen his forces, adding province by province to his holdings. By 1580, he had either annihilated or forced 1/3 of the country to submit to his authority. He was the most powerful ruler in the land. He improved the economy by creating castle towns, and he linked them all by constructing a network of roads to aid in both commerce and the movement of troops. But along the way he made enemies. Known for treating his subordinates like trash, teasing them for their weight or their hairline or their feminine behaviors, Nobunaga wasn’t exactly well-liked. In 1582, one of his generals, Akechi Mitsuhide surrounded Nobunaga’s unarmed castle and burnt it to the ground. Whether Nobunaga died in the fire, at the sword of an assailant, or by committing suicide, no one knew for sure. But regardless, Mitsuhide was to blame.

Enter Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi’s story was a rags-to-riches tale. He was noticed by Nobunaga, both for his skill in castle-building, but also for his less than intimidating presence (Nobunaga liked to call him “the bald rat”). He was taken under the general’s wing and made a foot soldier. Hideyoshi rose through the military ranks, becoming first an officer and then one of Nobunaga’s most trusted generals. When Nobunaga was struck down, the first of his generals to seize the opportunity and avenge his death would earn honor, wealth and the keys to Nobunaga’s kingdom. Hideyoshi outmaneuvered the other heirs to the throne, hunting down and killing Mitsuhide eleven days after the initial castle burning and then presenting his head to the grave of Nobunaga as a symbol of retribution.

Hideyoshi then became the supreme ruler of central Japan.

But he knew this was a precarious position. Dozens of daimyos wanted him dead, so Hideyoshi gathered allies who would help him sweep across the countryside, putting down any would-be competitors for the throne. By the 1590s, all of Japan had surrendered, so Hideyoshi then made sure the allegiances he had won on the battlefield would remain for generations. He sent out his surveyors across the land to register all rice crops and measure all domains. He then repositioned all the daimyos, uprooting them from their familial fiefdoms and depositing them in new locales, ensuring they would keep their wealth but lose their regional support. Hideyoshi then mandated all peasants stay on their land, never taking up arms. He forbade samurai from ever returning to farming. He formally split society in two, ensuring the path from
poverty he had taken to the throne could never be replicated. He created a warrior class all swearing allegiance to one man—himself.

As with most warriors, Hideyoshi was not content to merely enjoy the fruits of his years of conflict. Once a warrior, always a warrior. Hideyoshi next turned to conquering Korea. For a people so used to remaining isolated from the barbarians to the west, this military expedition marked a turning point in Japan’s history. Not only had it recently accepted Christian missionaries and merchants into its boundaries, Japan was now actively seeking out contacts and territory outside its protected sphere. Hideyoshi eventually paid the ultimate price for this foray into international domination, losing both the battle for Korea and his life...which opened the door for...

Tokugawa Ieyasu. When Hideyoshi started passing out new lands to his daimyo, he granted one of his most trusted allies—Ieyasu—a chunk of land near a meaningless filling village called Edo (a fishing village that today goes by the more familiar name—Tokyo). While his mentor Hideyoshi was centralizing his authority and taking the war to Korea, Ieyasu was back in Edo increasing his wealth and strengthening his military for the moment when he would step onto Japan’s stage. In 1598, Hideyoshi’s own son was merely an infant and Ieyasu’s decades of allegiance to first Nobunaga and then Hideyoshi proved to the rival daimyos that he was a rightful heir. But rival clans still resisted his ascension, and at the Battle of Sekigahara, Ieyasu and his alliance of 90,000 troops faced off for one final battle for Japan. With a superior strategy on the battlefield (and also a few well-placed bribes to get his foes to change sides mid-battle), Ieyasu obliterated the last of the resistance, leaving himself as the sole ruler of all domains. Standing on the shoulders of the men who came before him, Ieyasu then returned to his home in Edo, launching the Tokugawa Dynasty that flourished uninterrupted for the next 250 years.

Each of the three unifiers had played a critical role, but it was Tokugawa Ieyasu who survived to the dynastic finish line. To this day, Japan still recognizes the work of each man, proclaiming, “Nobunaga pounds the national rice cake, Hideyoshi kneads it, and in the end Ieyasu sits down and eats it.”

However, in order to eat the metaphoric cake, Ieyasu first guaranteed no other could ever steal it from his shelf. Sekigahara was a decisive battle, but any wise leader knows that defeated men produce vengeful sons, and the Tokugawa reign was anything but
assured when he declared himself shogun (supreme leader of Japan) in 1603, inventing a family tree that linked him back to the emperor’s family.

Ieyasu then tried his own spin on the age-old advice, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” Taking a page from his predecessor, he again uprooted the daimyos, this time depositing them in a protective circle around Edo. Friends and family held the lands closest to Edo. Those who proved their allegiance in battle made up the next ring. And for the daimyos he couldn’t trust, these men were banished to the outskirts of Japan, still in a position of power, but hardly able to ever again mount a credible threat to the throne. Ieyasu then “invited” daimyos to make biannual trips to Edo where they would reside under the watchful eye of his court. This requirement not only prevented the daimyos from ever being home long enough to organize a intimidating military force, but also completely sacked the daimyos of their wealth. No self-respecting daimyo would parade to Edo without decking out his travelling entourage in the most elaborate clothing, jewels and transportation, so the trip alone could completely drain a daimyo’s treasury (especially those outcast daimyos that had to journey from the northern and southern extremities).

Ieyasu also looked to his own past for additional ways to ensure allegiance. As a boy, Ieyasu was ceremonially kidnapped from his home (like the other sons of powerful lords) and forced to live with his father’s rival daimyo. No respected daimyo would risk his honor or the life of his heir in a staged rescue, so these little abductions proved quite effective. Under the Tokugawa Shogunate, Ieyasu modified this program so that each daimyo could either bring his entire entourage to Edo (which could number as many as 300 advisors, porters and support staff), or he could merely leave his eldest son as a special guest (aka “hostage”) of the shogun. Either way, the daimyos were stuck. The Tokugawa shoguns made it clear who were the powerful and who were the powerless. The daimyos’ wings had been clipped.

Once Ieyasu had geographically carved up society, he then looked to China for strategies for organizing the rest of the masses. China had maintained order in the largest civilization on the planet through the defined classes and relationships outlined under Confucianism. At the top of Chinese society were the scholar-bureaucrats, next were the farmers, next the artisans and at the bottom were the merchants. Scholars earned their place as the
ruling hierarchy through a lifetime of study, farmers provided the food needed for survival, artisans created the goods fundamental to everyday life and merchants (who created nothing) lived like parasites off the labor of others.

In the Confucian world, the businessman was the lowest of the low. Compare this system to modern day America where if the younger generation asked what they’d want to be when they grow up, few would want to be lifetime scholars and even fewer would tick off farming as their career of choice. Yet from the Zhou Dynasty nearly 3000 years ago, China has valued the education of the elite and the labor of the peasantry above all else. Conversely, America, since its founding at Plymouth Rock and its early settlements at Jamestown, was a nation of merchants and religious zealots, who each hoped to prosper in this new world. But in China, the merchant was a cancer and the religious fundamentalist the outcast.

Japan chose the Chinese model.

Japan had merchants, it had artisans and of course it had farmers, but they lacked the scholars. Where would Ieyasu turn for this class? Who would be the most obvious candidates for an educated ruling elite? Of course, there was only one option - the samurai. Only the samurai would receive access to the finest education, only they would sit for the civil service exam and only they would administer the mundane day-to-day necessities of a centralized government. They could keep their honor and their connection to their past by being the only ones who could carry a sword, but with the peace of Tokugawa, the need for a warrior elite vanished. Over the course of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the once feared, battle-hardened military elite slowly evolved (or devolved depending on your point of view) into paper-pushing bureaucrats more likely to be seen behind a desk than on a battlefield.

The mounting prominence of the merchant class was another challenge to the prestige of the samurai. As more and more daimyo moved to the city centers and as increasing crop yields enabled more farmers to move to urban areas, the populations of Japan’s largest cities exploded (the adorable little fishing town of Edo housed over a million people) leaving Japan primed for a commercial revolution. Merchants always benefit when their clients are rich, and with the state-mandated requirement of biannual court attendance for all daimyos, entirely new services and goods were crafted to cater to this endless cycle of visiting nobility. Appearance and reputation meant everything
to the Japanese aristocracy. Make something fancy, they’d buy it. The daimyo estates were losing up to 25% of their income on the trips to Edo, and even more than that keeping up with the latest Edo fashion trends. The wealthy found themselves surprisingly penniless, and this was where the merchants lent a helping hand. The merchants offered the daimyo, and their samurai, loans to keep them living the good life. But through this relationship, power slowly flipped, and it was the samurai who ended up serving the merchants. By the mid-19th century, of the 1.7 million samurai, nearly all had either settled into lives of sedentary labor or had grown indebted to the merchant class. The Confucian hierarchy that valued the samurai bureaucrats had become a mere shadow of its earlier intent. Merchants might have technically sat below the samurai, but for anyone who walked the streets of Edo, there was no doubt where power truly resided.

And anyone who walked the streets of Edo also started seeing some forms of entertainment that were a paradise to the senses. Edo, Kyoto and Osaka each had their own special districts where the night arts entranced the wealthiest of clients. These “floating worlds” provided art, theater, sport and even a few probably-shouldn’t-be-mentioned amusements. One of the first crafts that awed the eyes of the Europeans arriving in the 17th and 18th centuries was the vibrant woodblock printing that produced Japan’s own cultural postcards. Initially merely black and white prints created centuries earlier to illustrate Buddhist teachings, by the Edo period, these wood-carved, multi-colored recreations provided an insider’s view of the nightlife of these urban Tokugawa socialites. These stamped prints revealed glimpses of the flamboyant kabuki performances, the masterful sumo wrestlers and the forbidden arts of the geishas and courtesans.

In the area of live entertainment, the kabuki theater became the answer to the classical noh theater that failed to appeal to the increasingly hard-to-please urban customer. Noh productions were eight hour long bore fests of screeching instruments and recycled stories of historical figures from time long ago. Going to one of these performances felt more like work than relaxation. The kabuki theater was different. It was colorful, emotional and built on the element of surprise. Men played all the on-stage roles - both male and female. Their decorative, excessive makeup is the most recognizable component of kabuki theater, with exaggerated colored expressions juxtaposed against a white powder foundation, making it seem as if the actors were wearing
masks. Unlike their noh compatriots who only rehashed historical tales, the kabuki performances oftentimes focused on doomed romances (where both lovers end up committing suicide) or clever critiques of the nobility and government authorities. The kabuki shows also promised climatic twists, using both a rotating stage and hyper-dramatized behavior of the actors. But still, these endurance fests were not for the faint of heart, clocking in at a hefty five hours in length - clearly shorter than the noh performances, but not exactly the 22 minute sitcoms that nowadays service attention-span-challenged Westerners.

For those Japanese customers without five hours to kill, there emerged a bit more violent option – sumo wrestling. Like block printing and theater, sumo had been around for centuries, but the stability of the Tokugawa Era turned the sport mainstream. In its early years, two fairly chunky men would gather in an open field, surrounded by an audience and try to knock the person down or toss him into the spectators. For those standing in the audience, this second outcome oftentimes caused a fair bit of discomfort. The sport changed forever when Oda Nobunaga (yes...the man who wanted to kill the shy cuckoo bird) staged a tournament at his castle, inviting the top sumotori from across the island. 1500 men answered the call, but in order to speed up the matches (and save a few spectator lives), Nobunaga put in a circular boundary that became a permanent fixture of the sport. Years later, these sumotori came from the growing rank of ronin, masterless samurai, who looked for some means of subsistence in a world where the daimyo hostage system and the transformation of samurai into scholar-bureaucrats left few job options for the warrior samurai needing a venue to showcase their burliness.

Still this wasn’t enough. What did the floating market offer to those wanting just a bit more from their evenings out on the town? For those not wanting to test their viewing endurance at a kabuki performance or watch portly dudes with awkwardly-positioned undergarments locked in a waddle to the death, there was a network of female companions available for their pleasure. In the urban worlds of Edo, Osaka and Nagasaki, government officials set up districts where men could employ the services of geisha, courtesans or even prostitutes. Set up in part to prevent the political dramas that almost always surface under dynastic rule (where women spar behind the scenes for power and influence), these carefully-regulated districts clearly defined the differences between each of the pleasure women. Geishas were the
sophisticated, accomplished entertainers, skilled in the arts of the tea ceremony, classical dance, musical performance and poetry. Taken from their families at an early age and sold to geisha houses, these girls became the property of their house mother, hoping if they perfected the talents of satisfying male companions, they might one day catch the eye of a wealthy male patron, becoming his sole mistress. Courtesans and prostitutes were the last of the “women of pleasure,” with courtesans also offering entertainment, whereas prostitutes...well...prostitutes had basically one purpose. Because these women all operated out of the same general geographic region, and because some geisha and courtesans achieved a revered status, an entire sex trade emerged where families might unwittingly sell their daughters into prostitution, thinking they had set their daughters up for a life of luxury and safety in one of the prestigious geisha houses. Although geishas lost prominence during World War II when American soldiers referred to any pleasure worker as a “geisha,” these talented women still survive today. Segments of Japanese male society (like they did centuries ago) continue to demand their wives remain demure, reserved and modest, but aren’t timid about going out and looking for something less wholesome on the side.

While the urban performing and visual arts expanded and the merchant class prospered to the detriment of the samurai, the central government also had to deal with the ever-present threat of European expansion. In the 16th century, when some rough winds knocked a Portuguese ship off course, washing it up on the beaches of Japan, the land of the rising sun could no longer ignore the bearded barbarians. Initially the Portuguese weapons and Christian missionaries were welcomed by the daimyos and merchants. Oda Nobunaga’s military victories stemmed in large part from his willingness to employ the European firepower, and unlike the Chinese masses whose Confucian values deemed Christianity an absurd practice, the Buddhist adherents were far more accepting of the premises of Christianity. For a people who followed an Eightfold Path promoting right speech, right action and right intention, Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount teachings of “turn the other cheek,” “judge not, lest ye be judged” and “whatever you want men to do, do also to them” melded fairly easily with their previous moral standards. By the early 1600s, missionaries had converted over 300,000 souls. This started to cause the Tokugawa shoguns a bit of concern. Was the ultimate authority for the converts the shogun? Or was it the Pope in
Rome? And when would the missionaries stop? Were they happy with 300,000 converts, or would they persist until everyone turned from the traditional Japanese belief systems?

And then they heard from across the sea that in the Philippines, the Christians had revolted, taking over the country, leaving the Filipinos merely the servants of their European lords. The Japanese had seen enough, and forced all Christian Japanese to revert back to their old beliefs. Some Christian converts remained resolute. In 1638, the forces of Christianity rebelled against the forces of the Tokugawa regime. Granted, most of these peasants fought not because they cared so much about losing Christianity, but because they were starving to death due to high taxes. But the shogun’s 135,000 troops needed little incentive to cut down these so-called, God-fearing farmers. 38,000 Christians died in this Shimabara Rebellion, representing the end of the Christian influence over Japan’s peasantry. Within a few decades, no one dared admit to believing in God. Christianity had been wiped out.

At the same time Christianity was being extinguished and the missionaries were being expelled, the western merchants were also being denied entry to Japan’s shores. Though initially Japanese daimyos welcomed the goods these merchants brought from both Europe and from their trading posts across Asia, the shoguns knew that to maintain absolute power, no outside influences could be tolerated. All ocean-going Japanese vessels were burnt, no Japanese could leave the islands, any that had already left could never return and trading with Europeans was outlawed – except for at one place.

The shogunate didn’t want to completely cut themselves off from European trinkets and expertise (who knew what little inventions the Europeans might discover next), so at a tiny island in the harbor of Nagasaki, only Dutch traders could bring their wares to market. Why the Dutch? Well, the Protestant Dutch had made special friends with the central powers when they lent them weapons and gunpowder during the Shimabara Rebellion to wipe out their Catholic enemies. In this way, the Protestant/Catholic tensions that had plagued Europe ever since Luther’s Protestant Reformation now made their appearance on the other side of the world. And because the Dutch had proven their allegiance (and they didn’t have that pesky little figure known as the Pope commanding obedience from Rome), they were granted limited trading rights at the man-made island of Deshima. Although tolerated, the Dutch were never welcomed. If they ever
doubted Japan’s true feelings, they need only look at the shoreline, adorned with the hanging skulls of Europeans who tried to go ashore, a morbid warning to not sway from the shogun’s authority. When they arrived at port, they were essentially quarantined, unable to interact with any but the crown’s chosen intermediaries. Even on occasions when they lost men at sea, they could not bring the deceased ashore for a proper burial. It was a tenuous relationship, but it enabled the shogun to keep a cautious eye on the happenings of the West.

So when the Europeans finally returned in force (this time in 1853 when it would be an American armada that would enter Japanese waters), the nation was alarmed by this Western display of power, but not wholly unprepared. Their economic system had evolved to where the merchant class had amassed a high degree of wealth, the credit and banking system had subsequently matured and the city dwellers had grown accustomed to obediently following the mandates of their now urbanized samurai. The necessary factors were in place for Japan to accomplish their own industrial revolution in just a few short decades, a task that took their Western counterparts almost a century to direct.

Japan might have taken a different approach than the rest of the civilized world, but when the Tokugawa Shogunate finally ran its course, the resilient, insular, obedient populace would have no problem catching up and even surpassing its international rivals.

But that is for another chapter.
Looking through our hindsight glasses, it would appear that by 1600, Europe had everything it needed to rise to the top of the sociological food chain, finally competing with the superior civilizations of the East. After the waning days of the Romans, the Europeans slipped into a deep sleep of ineptitude, seemingly oblivious to the intellectual evolutions of the Muslim, Indian and Chinese empires. But by 1600, wasn’t Europe ready to eclipse the rest of the world, and for the first time since the Greeks, establish that they were the center of all learning and innovation?

Not yet.

Had they started to learn how to farm efficiently? Check. Had people started moving to cities where the process of change could occur more quickly? Check. Had universities begun springing up throughout these budding towns so learning could be freely dispensed? Check. Had the legitimacy of the Church been challenged by the Crusade failures, its impotence to stop the Black Plague and the Protestant Reformation? Check. Had the printing press been invented so knowledge could be shared efficiently across the continent? Check. Had the Europeans explored beyond their borders, bringing back not only the wisdom of other peoples, but the wisdom of their own ancestors? Check. And had the
artists and great thinkers of the time started looking more to themselves and humanity for inspiration? Check.

But still, Europeans were a bunch of knuckleheads. It’s not that these pale-faced humans weren’t smart (intelligence doesn’t just get lost for a thousand years), but they were illogical. And they were scared. Brilliant men did exist, but in a sea of absurdity and persecution, who would have the courage to actually stand up to reveal that the emperor’s new clothes weren’t exactly attractive? All around Europe, it appeared the intellectual gains of the Renaissance, the Age of Exploration and the Reformation were only mere blips in the development of the European noggin, because the irrationality of society kept returning. In 1600, people still hunted down and tortured witches, blaming them for unexplainable acts of nature. Women were still treated as inferior members of the species, to be protected and confined to the domestic sphere. Children were to be seen and not heard, to be beaten not praised. The ill were still vulnerable to the whacked out theories of pseudo-doctors, where even the most important individual in society might die from being bled to relieve a headache.

The world was still a scary, unexplainable place where humans’ only chance at survival was appealing to God to help protect them from the danger and the devil that lurked around every corner. The masses passively accepted their authority figures, merely wandering through the darkness, unable to get out of the cave of misunderstanding to finally see the light. To paraphrase the prophetic words of famed Matrix mentor Morpheus, the “world had been pulled over their eyes to blind them from the truth.”

What would it take to finally push Europeans over the edge, pulling them for the last time out of the abyss, opening their eyes to the light of understanding? What would it take? Well...two more revolutions of the mind – first the Scientific Revolution and then the Age of Enlightenment.

It’s hard to pinpoint exactly when the Renaissance, the Age of Exploration and the Reformation ended and when the Scientific Revolution began. The scientists, engineers, doctors and mathematicians who cultivated the discoveries that defined this era inherited the knowledge of those that came before. Navigators had already begun tinkering with devices to aid navigation and Renaissance artists (Leonardo da Vinci included) were already
dissecting cadavers and considering focal points and perspective to better capture the natural world on canvas.

Yet when Nicolaus Copernicus, a Polish monk, finally got up the nerve to send his theories on the universe to the Pope, a new age had begun. Copernicus argued that the planets, the stars and the heavens didn’t go around Earth, but instead, that the sun was the center of our solar system and Earth was nothing but an insignificant third rock from that star. This heliocentric theory directly contradicted the Church’s geocentric theory where God positioned mankind at the center of the universe. The Church was in no mood for another challenge from a mere mortal. Already defending itself against Martin Luther and his theological adherents who had plunged the continent into a century of skepticism and chaos, the Catholic Church was none too pleased to have yet another critic defy their sovereignty. In the decades after the Reformation, the Church had executed its own Counter-Reformation, reforming some of its less favorable behaviors, but amping up its persecution of non-believers. Just when they thought they were making headway in restoring faith in the Catholic Church, Copernicus had to go and knock a few more dents in the Church’s ecclesiastical armor. Ironically, the Church only had itself to blame for Copernicus’s research into the structure of the universe, as it was the Church that hired Copernicus to precisely date all the major religious holidays. While on this task, he noticed that the Church’s calendar didn’t work because the Earth’s actual orbit looked nothing like what had been accepted by the Church’s great minds for fifteen centuries. Copernicus died without ever seeing the fruits of his theories, but within a century, the Copernican Revolution was fully underway.

When the 17th century arrived and a new generation of tinkerers, hobbyists and part-time scientists started looking further into the heavens and through the natural world, they had in their toolbox all the instruments needed to catapult Europe into modernity. They had microscopes and telescopes forged from the lenses of the master glassmakers of Venice. They had the most accurate scales and clocks in existence. And they had Gutenberg’s printing press so all the findings of the great thinkers could be shared and scrutinized by the scientific community for centuries.

Around this same time, Lord Francis Bacon hogged the spotlight by finalizing a methodology for how all scientific inquiry should be conducted. Bacon believed all true experimentation required a hypothesis, meticulously recorded data, analysis of these
results and then the publication of conclusions for others to repeat, test, refute or validate. Even today, Bacon's scientific method determines how our nation's high school students dissect their frogs, sort their Mendel's peas and mix baking soda and vinegar for a fun little explosion. Bacon lived and died a scientist, actually perishing from the flu he caught while standing outside in the freezing cold, jamming snow up a chicken's rear end trying to ascertain the effects of refrigeration on flesh.

Across the West, scientists experimented, recorded and published, and because they documented their findings in their native tongue and not the antiquated Latin of their predecessors, any literate individual with a sense of inquisitiveness could become a member of the unofficial fraternity of European scientists.

By the mid-17th century, discoveries were popping out from all corners of the scientific community. In astronomy, Brahe, Kepler, Galileo and then Newton, each building on the work of the other, used the devices at their disposal to prove the nature of our solar system and the role of gravity in keeping all the celestial bodies in orbit. Tycho Brahe set up formal observatories to collect more information on the planets than any man before; Johannes Kepler took his mentor's notes and used his math skills to publish his theories on the motion of planets; Galileo Galilei improved upon the design of the telescope so it brought images 32 times closer to the human eye, eventually making it possible to prove that moons orbit Jupiter, that spots exist on the sun, and that the moon is made up of craters, mountains and dirt just like earth; and Sir Isaac Newton, standing firmly on the shoulders of these giants of astronomy, proved that the movement of these celestial bodies, and all of nature, is defined not only by the law of gravity, but also by laws of motion which govern how all objects interact. With Newton, the Copernican Revolution was complete. Though only a half dozen of the most learned men could even comprehend Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, the world of mysticism and faith would never be the same. Laws governed the behavior of objects, not the whims of an unseen god. Even to the average Joe who knew nothing of Newton's laws, he could still look to the skies and the infinite planets and stars and wonder - Where then is heaven? Are we not God's special creatures? Where even is God?

A century before, neither scientist or learned man would dare publicly admit to not believing in God. But by 1700, atheism was increasingly accepted, no longer a guaranteed death sentence.
Yet the discoveries were not reserved merely for the astronomers. In math, Pascal invented a mechanical calculator that could add, subtract, multiply and divide. In the physical sciences, Otto von Guericke created a machine that could generate electricity, and then Benjamin Franklin discovered with a key and a kite that electricity came from lightning. In the medical world, Ambroise Pare revolutionized surgery, Andreas Vesalius proved that hearts pump blood and Pierre Fauchard figured how to properly care for teeth and extract them when necessary. In the world of biology, Carl von Linne sorted all living creatures into the much-memorized categories of kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species.

The list goes on and on and on...and then on some more. Between 1600 and 1800, the world as they knew it became the world as we know it. This is where all the fathers came from – the father of dentistry, the father of surgery, the father of chemistry, the father of physiology, the father of anatomy, the father of mineralogy and the great grandfather of them all - Sir Isaac Newton. Each of these men adhered to the precepts of Bacon’s scientific method, turning the West for the first time into the center of all learning. Now, when the Europeans went to the shores of China, Japan, India or the Muslim empires, they wouldn't be merely discounted, but their books, their gadgets and their methods would be first respected and then coveted. Yet unlike the engineers and scientists of the East, the West operated under a model of pure science – where knowledge was the only goal and curiosity the leading motivator. In the classical ages of China, India and Islam, the discoveries were usually made with a purpose in mind – have a problem, solve a problem. This fixation on applied science restricted Eastern scientists to the world they needed to fix, whereas in the West, so much more was learned about the natural world as scientists were free to explore where no man had gone, purely for the sake of knowledge. Nothing more. Granted, if a fortune could be made from the discoveries, later Western entrepreneurs would prove more than willing to reap the benefits, but for this two-century period, science was pure and discoveries came in rapid succession.

With each discovery, the world became more and more under man's control, not the other way around. We no longer moved at the whims of nature, but it was we who could make nature bend to our will. In later generations, Western man would begin harnessing the gifts of nature like no civilization before,
turning the environment into the materials that would propel the West to global dominance.

But this is not to say that all of Europe jumped on the scientific bandwagon. The Church continued to fight the battle for universal truth, scientists were still persecuted and jailed for their findings (Galileo spent the rest of his life under house arrest after refusing to deny his research) and the mass of Europeans still believed witches lived among them and little store-bought talismans or passed-down rituals could be turned to for guidance and protection. But before we lambast the ignorance of these mental midgets, should we not also admit that many of the most learned of the West today continue to knock on wood, stay clear of black cats, walk around opened ladders, save their mother’s backs by avoiding cracks or believe that God created man, that Darwin’s evolution theories are preposterous, that Noah fit every species of every animal into a boat and that the Biblical Jonah lived in a whale for three days? The more and more our world seems governed by the laws of science, the more and more man continues to cling to the safety and faith of our past.

The true import of the Scientific Revolution was not what it did for the natural world, but what it did for how humans interact with their environment. We no longer had to wait for nature to have its way with us. Man could define, predict and even alter his existence. From here, man would not try to simply define the laws that governed the natural world, but find the truths that govern how man should interact with his fellow man. This was the last of the revolutions of the mind – the Age of Enlightenment.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were two of the first to delve into creating irrefutable laws of the invisible universe – where governments and nobles ruled, where everyman submitted and women and children suffered in a world of irrelevancy. Hobbes, a contemporary of Galileo, believed that like the planets that revolve around the sun in a predetermined manner, so did humans follow a predestined course. Men abide by one natural law – they are selfish to the core. When all the societal niceties and traditions are stripped away, man is revealed as a being in constant battle with others – for power, for wealth, for survival, leading to a life that is “nasty, brutish and short.” According to Hobbes, man then needs government to implement and enforce laws to control his naughty tendencies. Governments need men to abide by said laws. This give and take amounts to a “social contract” where each side plays a role to ensure society doesn’t revert to its natural state of anarchy.
Not exactly the most positive take on humanity. Enter John Locke, the Brit with a bit happier spin on the human species. To Locke, man is born with a clean slate with no predetermined path. Then, from his first breath, he begins to sense the world around him, and it is the product of these sights, sounds, touches, tastes and smells that mold man. No one has an advantage at birth and we are all by nature merely observers, taking in the evidence of our lives to determine our course. In the whole nurture vs. nature debate, let’s just say Locke is at the far end of the spectrum defending the nurture point of view. Locke then states that the role of government is not to ensure we fall back into a state of selfishness, but to instead protect the natural gifts we all inherit upon birth – life, liberty and property. To Locke, this was the social contract, and should ever government fail to protect this holy triad of personal freedoms, society had the right, no, the obligation to overthrow the government and demand protection.

In the century that followed, inspired by the findings of Hobbes and Locke, and benefitting from the structure of the scientific method, a series of thinkers, satirists, writers, poets, musicians, philosophers and historians emerged, each using logic and reason to help better understand the human condition. Although the famed works of these thinkers popped up in urban areas across Western Europe, it was in Paris that a new demographic stepped to the forefront of intellectual change. This group was made up of wealthy, literate, connected women who tried to outdo each other in their weekly get-togethers where the brightest minds of the days assembled to hash out answers to the questions – why do we behave the way we do and how should we behave? At these salons (think 18th century versions of today’s “book clubs”...albeit with a bit more impressive guest list than Cindy Housewife could assemble to discuss the merits of Fifty Shades of Grey), men such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Diderot gathered to finish conversations they couldn’t hold at the universities. The women were not merely passive hosts, but actively engaged in the discussions, oftentimes pushing the discourse to subjects previously considered untouchable.

For Voltaire, organized religion had to go. Raised a Catholic, he saw the Church as the great corrupter and suppressor of the human spirit. To him, God was merely a clockmaker, a being that created the world, all the plants, the animals, the intricacies of human behavior and then started the wheels of time turning, leaving us all to do with His world as we wish. This new
faith, this Deism, dismissed the notion that God actually cared about our daily lives. He was merely the great Creator. He started the ball of life rolling and then just let it all play out without his interference.

Voltaire saw no logical place for the Catholic Church in man’s daily life. He encouraged religious tolerance, believing that the acceptance of all faiths would free the world from war and allow man to truly reach his potential.

Montesquieu and Rousseau concerned themselves more with how to govern. Montesquieu saw that whenever all power to govern rested in the hands of one man, the fate of the state depended solely on the mental and ethical capabilities of this man. This totally centralized power was great if your king was an enlightened dictator, but more often than not, he was a gluttonous, egocentric, paranoid pig of a man. From generation to generation, a people’s standard of living could vary, not by any decision they made, but because of the unchecked whims of their leader. Montesquieu offered a solution. Check power. Balance power. Create three branches – a lawmaking branch (legislative), an enforcing branch (executive) and the branch of final judgment (judicial) – and the success of a nation would be determined more by the strength of their laws than by the minds of their leaders. Rousseau piggy-backed Locke, believing “all men are born free,” but then also adding that they are “everywhere in chains” - chained to their Church, to their lord, to their land. But to Rousseau, this was not always the way. Before humans walked down the paths of civilization, they were closer to their natural state. As noble savages, we lived in a world of equality and relative peace, and it wasn’t until we settled into societies that we went off course, creating a world of haves and have-nots - those few who enjoy the fruits of humanity’s labor and the masses who suffer at their exploitation. The only solution is to give every citizen a say in government by granting him the right to vote. He could then choose with the ballot who he desires in power, kicking out those who break the social contract.

Outside the sphere of government, two other men contributed significantly to the era – one dealt with how we punish our rulebreakers and the other with how we run our economies. Cesare Beccaria believed the criminal justice system was inherently flawed. We beat our children, torture our suspects and publicly humiliate and murder our guilty. A true civilization should not destroy those who’ve sinned, but should rehabilitate them so they
can re-enter society and contribute to their fullest. Should little Barack smoke some pot in high school, we shouldn’t cut off his hands and display them on a fence for all to see. No...we should have a talk with little Barack, show him the error of his ways so that he can one day be president. Beccaria’s ideas had a significant impact on how children and prisoners (odd putting those two together) were treated, contributing centuries later to a situation where Western youth today feel entitled and free to question authority without any real fear of cruel or unusual punishment. Some teachers and parents long for the good ol’ days.

Adam Smith cared little for prisoners. He concerned himself with man’s pocket book, with obtaining wealth and with how economies should be run. To Smith, only one entity truly knew what products and what services should be provided, and it wasn’t the government. It was the market. Entrepreneurs decide what to make and consumers decide what to buy, and if Thomas Hobbes was correct, since both parties are selfish at heart, they will eventually arrive at an equilibrium point where goods can be shared. If a man wants to invent some animal-shaped pottery that when watered grows into a plant (a la the famed “Chia Pet”) then all the more power to him. If there are consumers to buy the product at his established price then the product should exist. If no one buys the product, the entrepreneur then needs to either lower the price, improve the product or get out of the animal pottery growing business. In this manner, the invisible hand of the market pushes all parties to improve the quality and quantity of the goods and services provided. And we all benefit. This idea didn’t go over so well with the governments of Europe who preferred telling their colonists and their merchants where, how and what to buy and sell.

One of the crowning achievements of the Age of Enlightenment was Diderot’s creation of Europe’s first encyclopedia, not so ironically named The Encyclopedia. Diderot took the sum total of all man’s knowledge and started writing it all in one convenient location. He called on the greatest Enlightened philosophes of the age to contribute to the master work, and when it was all done, it numbered over 18,000 pages, with 72,000 articles, 3200 illustrations, all bound in 35 handy dandy, convenient volumes. However, not everyone had access to Diderot’s encyclopedia. Not only was its cost a bit prohibitive (only 4,000 were ever published), but its mere size wasn’t exactly something your everyday merchant could store on his bookshelf.
But the knowledge was out there, open to the world. As literacy rates increased and as universities began freely sharing the views of these Enlightened thinkers, ensuing generations grew up envisioning a world where the theories of their predecessors actually came to fruition.

Oddly enough, it wouldn’t be in Europe where these ideas would finally get their chance to prove their merit, but in one of England’s coastal colonies – a region on the east coast of the Americas, where the leaders of a collection of port towns and plantations saw to it to question the authority of Mother England, wondering if power need truly reside across the Atlantic Ocean. But could this upstart society of religious exiles and forgotten European sons ever truly break from a millennium-old civilization with one of the most powerful militaries on the planet, and then actually live by the mandates of Locke, Montesquieu, Beccaria, Smith and Rousseau?

Yes...I think they just might have a chance.

But that is for another chapter.
The Beast from the East

Russia – Kiev Rus to Catherine the Great – 1400 > 1800


So who am I missing? Let me take a look at a world map and see who was left out.

Ahh...there it is. Of course. How could I have missed it?

Mother Russia. The biggest country in the world by a long shot. How big is it? It stretches across two continents – making up 41% of Asia and 49% of Europe. It’s twice as wide as the United States. It spans nine different time zones. You could fit 160 of today’s nations within its borders and still have some room left over for some fields of corn.

Russia is huge. And unlike the vast empires of the Romans, the Mongols and the Ottomans, Russia is still around. The rest have all faded with the times and their holdings have long since become independent.
But not Russia. Russia’s still going strong, and after surviving more than a few hiccups after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, it’s back up to being among the world leaders. Number eleven in GDP. Number nine in population. Number three in military expenditures. And number one in nuclear warheads.

Throughout the 20th century, Russia stood as the West’s arch nemesis. Even though the Western nations formed tentative alliances with Russia during World War I and then World War II, the Russians were never really seen as “one of us” and as their population, their industry, their military might and their influence on the developing nations of the world peaked in the decades of the Cold War (1945-1989), many wondered if our world would come to an apocalyptic end at the hands of the Russians (with more than a little goading from the good ol’ United States of America).

But here we are. The planet survived. The Cold War might be behind us, but Russia still remains one of the most powerful, if least understood, nations on the planet.

But they weren’t always the beast from the east. The beginnings of Russia date back to the late 9th century when bands of Vikings (called Rus) ventured up and down the dozens of waterways branching off of the Black, Baltic and Caspian Seas, eventually establishing “the land of the Rus” – Kiev Rus. Each successive Grand Prince of Kiev (from Sviatopolk the Accursed, to Yuri the Long Arms, to Vsevolod the Big Nest, to Dmitry the Terrible Eyes) added to the feudal wealth of the Rus, making this region one of the wealthiest kingdoms of feudal Europe. The kingdoms of Kiev Rus expanded a lucrative trading relationship with the Byzantine Empire down south, but like every other civilization of Eurasia in the 12th century, they surrendered to the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan and his progeny.

For the next three centuries, the Mongol Khanate of the Golden Horde controlled the economy of Kiev Russia, but instead of living amongst the Russian people, the Mongols remained in the steppe, letting the Russians rule themselves and collect their own taxes. And as long as the taxes kept flowing from Russian to Mongol hands, they were more or less left alone. In this way, the Mongols and the Russians maintained a relatively uneasy truce – Mongols promised to stop massacring villagers if the villagers
promised to pay their taxes on time. This little arrangement seemed to work, but it still didn't stop the Mongols invading the southern borderlands every couple generations to remind the Russians who was really in charge.

Around the late 15th century, the tide started to change. The Mongols were still interested in Russian taxes, but less willing to be bothered by costly and brutal military campaigns. They'd gotten lazy. The noble princes around Moscow, who had been the Mongol's tax collectors for centuries, started to talk of a rebellion, and in 1462, under the leadership of Ivan the Great, they united the countryside and waged an all-out war on the Mongols. Seeing the power of religious fervor, Ivan sold this war to the people as a war for God, his people's one final chance at driving the infidel from their holy land. And it worked. In 1480, the final Mongol force surrendered and Russia was again free.

Russia then knew it needed to expand. Russia is one of the most vulnerable regions in all the world. To the south it has the indefensible steppe where for a thousand years horsemen had plagued agricultural communities trying to survive. To the west were the European dynasties that perennially wanted to expand their holdings for both narcissistic and economic ends. To the east were the vast Siberian plains, an inhospitable climate where only the strongest could survive. And to the north was...well...the North Pole (so at least they didn't have to worry about that frontier).

To make matters worse, Russia only had one water port, Arkhangelsk, and it was frozen for most of the year. Russia was landlocked and surrounded on all sides. Their leaders determined the best defense was a fierce offense. They needed to enlarge their empire, but instead of fighting the superiorly-armed Europeans, they pushed to the south and to the east, kicking out the last vestiges of Mongol control, each time settling Russians in the freshly-conquered lands.

In this way, the Russians looked a lot like the Western Europeans who settled the Americas after Columbus's voyages at the end of the 15th century. The Russians would send explorers, then soldiers, then settlers. It turned out they could find an explorer, a soldier and a settler all in the same person— a Cossack. Cossacks were the baddest men on the plain. Imagine a cross between an American cowboy, a European knight and a Hun. They could live on their horses, survive the harshest environments, destroy any army they faced and when all opponents were finally
vanquished, they could rest a bit, build a few communities and raise their families. They were independent warriors for hire to the highest bidder. They were feared by villagers and nobles alike, and they established settlements all across Russia. The merchant Stroganov family hired Cossacks to settle and build forts in Siberia so that they could open up trade routes to the Pacific Ocean. Eventually these warring, settling Cossacks made it across the Bering Strait to Alaska. From there, they set up forts and colonies all the way down the American west coast, with thousands creating settlements in the regions we today call Washington, Oregon and California. By 1800, Russia had established an empire that spanned three continents — only Spain could say it came anywhere close to controlling as much land.

As the territorial claims started piling up, Russian leaders had a choice — force all of their inhabitants to conform to one Russian culture, one Russian economy, one Russian political system, or learn from their Mongol conquerors who discovered the benefits of relinquishing just a bit of autonomy to your dependents. You could waste all of your money and resources trying to pound people into submission or you could just let them be. Russia compromised. Russian inhabitants of the far Siberia, Eastern Europe, the Americas and the far off steppe could wear what they wanted, believe what they wanted and practice all their old cultural traditions, but they had to submit to the total authority of Russian rule (which mostly meant ensure taxes go back to Moscow or St. Petersburg). And for the most part, the newly-conquered were OK with this arrangement, for it really wasn’t a new arrangement at all. Most kingdoms and villages across Eurasia had been paying taxes and following laws of distant conquerors for centuries. How much different would Russian rule really be?

They would soon find out. A succession of Russian rulers was growingly attracted to the ideas coming out of France, England and the Netherlands. These nobles tried to play the delicate game of embracing some of the innovations of Western Europe while simultaneously ensuring power continued to rest in the hands of one ruling family. After Ivan the Great (Ivan III) gave way to his son Ivan the Terrible (Ivan IV), Russia became the monolith it has remained until today. Ivan the Terrible saw himself as the creator of a new Roman Empire to the East, replacing the Byzantine Empire that had fallen to the Ottomans a century earlier. He created a new title of Czar (Caesar) and killed any noble that stood in his way. He made it clear from the beginning of his rule that he
would not be sharing authority with any parliament or band of nobility. He would stand at the unquestioned top of the political pyramid, with all answering to his every whim. He alone appointed regional officials to execute his business and he also created a secret police that kept all Russians on their toes at all times. No one ever knew who was watching, who was listening. Dissension was not tolerated under any circumstance. Freedom of speech was not even considered. The threat was clear — speak out against the Czar and die. Disobedient individuals could be stolen in the dead of night or hung up in the city square. Entire villages were wiped out with one order from the lips of Ivan.

Towards the end of Ivan’s life, after the death of his wife, he clearly lost his mind, thinking everyone was out to assassinate him. In one mad fit of rage he even beat up his daughter-in-law and killed his son, the heir to the throne. Years later, Ivan died, passing his throne to his feeble, cognitively-challenged, older son Feodor. At this point, Russia could have fallen back into an age of factionalism, but the nobles of Russia, the boyars, chose to look to Ivan’s wife’s family for leadership. Her family was the Romanovs, and they would rule for the next three hundred years until 1917 when they were overthrown during the Communist Revolution.

But in that time, the Romanovs built on the autocratic traditions of Ivan IV, while expanding the cultural refinements of the Russian people. The two most influential Romanov leaders of Russia’s history were Peter the Great and Catherine the Great who transformed Russia in the 18th century to make it an empire on par with the European dynasties to the west.

First, let’s look at Peter the Great. When Peter took over the throne in 1682, he quickly measured up his empire and recognized he had a huge problem — his Russia had fallen centuries behind its European peers and if he didn’t catch up quickly, it would only be a matter of time before the Western powers turned their imperialist tendencies east. So, he devised a pretty ingenious plan — he would dress up in disguise, travel all around Europe and learn everything he possibly could from European scientists, philosophers, artists, manufacturers and military officers. There was one problem — he was 6’8” — which is fairly huge by today’s standards, but back in the 17th century where the average male was just a bit over 5’2” tall, he was a freak of nature. But that didn’t stop him. He dressed in rags, got jobs building ships in Holland and even tried meeting with the French monarchs to see if they’d support him in his bid to defeat the Ottomans.
He wasn’t successful gaining any military allies, but his 18-month fact-finding mission proved a success. He returned to Russia full of ideas, and he spent the rest of his reign making sure they came to fruition. First, he needed a warm water port. Arkhangelsk was useful for a few months out of the year, but Peter knew that if he wanted to be a full partner in the trade game, he had to be able to get his ships out to sea. He used his knowledge of shipbuilding to design a navy that was then set to the task of capturing any port that would not freeze over during the fall, winter and spring. He sent his navy on campaign after campaign, but time and again, the Swedes, the Ottomans and even the Poles pushed him back. It would take him 22 years, but he eventually grabbed a port on the Baltic Sea and one on the Caspian Sea.

But that was only the start. There was more to Westernization than merely joining the world of sea trade. He also set to pull Russia out of its Middle Ages. Problem #1 was the nobles. They were trapped in the past, making money off of agriculture like they had for over five hundred years. They had become gluttonous and lazy and were a drain on the economy. They were useless to him. He started to surround himself not with noble advisors but with trained bureaucrats appointed based on merit, not on birthright. He established a universal law code and a uniform tax collecting system so that the entire empire followed one set of rules, not merely the whims of local lords. He replaced nobles who served no purpose with local magistrates that would answer only to Peter. And to symbolically demonstrate that the past was behind them, Peter forced all nobles to cut off their beards to better resemble the clean-shaven faces of Western European nobility.

If the nobles were annoyed with Peter’s attack on their facial hair, they were even less pleased with the rights he began extending to the female nobility. He forced upper class women to start wearing the latest fashions, to begin attending higher level schools and to leave the home and actually attend social events with their husbands (especially the soon-to-be world renowned ballet).

But these social changes impacted only a select few from the upper class. Peter’s most lasting changes involved his treatment of the remaining 99% of society. Seeing that the growing Middle Class in Europe posed a huge threat to the monarchies, Peter knew he had to control economic growth to
prevent what could become class warfare. Instead of creating an economy ripe for entrepreneurialism, Peter created a system where any manufacturing or commercial industry was totally controlled by the government. In countries like France, Holland and England, merchants were getting rich off the commercial opportunities from the global trade networks. In Western Europe, if you had an idea of how to make a buck, you could get a loan from the bank, start a firm and start spinning out wares. Western Europe was home to the new rich, a group of business builders known as entrepreneurs. But this private industry would never be tolerated in Russia. Peter controlled all enterprises, and he also controlled the workforce. Instead of advancing the rights of the lower class, providing an opportunity for their upward mobility, he actually reversed their freedoms, making them fundamentally slaves for life.

Peasants in Russia were called serfs, but they were treated less like the peasants of Medieval Europe and more like the African slaves of the plantation American South. They were born into serfdom and could not escape. They were slaves to the land and prevented from taking any other job. They lived by a different set of laws than their landholders and lived in a constant state of starvation. Over 50% of the population was made up of serfs, and this percentage would remain the same until the 20th century. Peter used this serf labor army to fill his newly created mining and iron-making industries, and he even used them to build his new capital—St. Petersburg (a task that killed over 100,000 serfs before it was completed). Every industry created was built not for the sole sake of profit, like in the West, but to benefit the empire and its ability to wage war. No superfluous industries were pursued. Few luxury goods were produced. Peter was content to merely import the finest luxuries from Western Europe, while trading away his nation’s iron, grain, timber and animal furs.

But that’s not what made Peter truly great. What made him great was that he was one of the more interesting political figures in history. This man had some unique hobbies. He had his conservative side that liked to build chairs and design pots. He had his physical side he used to impress his guests. He could sleep standing up, roll up a silver platter into a scroll with his bare hands and drink a shot of vodka every 15 minutes for an entire day and wake up the next morning and go hunting while his drinking buddies were passed out in the palace. He was also a collector. He liked to collect teeth (tens of thousands of teeth to be exact...many
from his enemies who made for unwilling dental patients). But his
greatest collections were housed in his “art chamber” – the
Kunstkamera – the world’s finest freak show.

Peter was annoyed by the superstitious and irrational
minds of his Russian people. He still heard stories of villagers
believing in monsters and devils and all sorts of mythical beasts.
He wanted to prove that there was a reason for all things strange,
so he set his museum curators on a continent-wide search for any
physical human abnormality. He wanted to collect and then
display his own “freak show.” He wanted to show that deformities
were just nature’s accidents, not the supernatural practices of
sorcerers.

He ordered all deformed, still-born babies to be sent to St.
Petersburg. He wanted the skulls and the bodies of any dwarf,
giant or human anomaly added to his collection. Three hundred
years later his collection is still intact, so if you ever want to see
two-faced babies, Siamese twins, human mermaids or any other
genetic mutation known to man, feel free to stop by the
Kunstkamera for a glimpse into the surreal.

When Peter II died, the world lost one of the most
charismatic, passionate and resolute leaders in history, but within a
decade Catherine II, Catherine the Great, would take over the
Romanov crown and take Russia even higher, to its true golden
age.

Catherine the Great assumed the throne of Russia after her
husband, Peter III, mysteriously died after being emperor for a
mere six months. Catherine was never proven guilty of plotting
the assassination, but she wasn’t exactly disappointed that she no
longer had to deal with a man she often described as the most
boring, dull man in any room. Once in power, Catherine had a bit
of a problem acting like a lady. She had no desire to play the role
of a submissive female noble. Instead she ruled over Russia with
an iron fist, striking down all enemies and never swaying from a
battle. She expanded Russia’s borders even further, to the Black
Sea in the south, clear to California across the Pacific Ocean to the
west. Nobody in Europe knew what to do with her. She worked
harder, longer hours than any monarch from the West, she toured
her country trying to talk to as many of her people as her energy
would allow, she wrote countless letters to the Enlightened
thinkers of France, England and the United States, and she even
had no problem parading a slew of “favored” men into her
bedroom, one after the other.
She tried to finish the Westernization her great-uncle-in-law, Peter the Great, had started a generation earlier. She gobbled up the greatest art pieces of Europe, depositing them in the Hermitage Museum. She forced her nobility to educate themselves in the writings of the Enlightenment. She built orphanages, schools and hospitals. She was even willing to risk her own life to prove her faith in Enlightened theories. She was a true believer in the power of science and she proved her convictions by being the first prominent Russian to inoculate her family against the smallpox vaccination. Smallpox was the scourge of Europe, killing millions and marking millions more with pox scars. The cure for smallpox existed, but no one was willing to take the inoculation, for fear that it might be the devil’s potion. Catherine scoffed at this nonsense. She took the needle and the vaccination, and her courage inspired countless millions of others to follow in her footsteps.

But oddly, she found nothing hypocritical about embracing the Enlightenment while keeping more than half of her population enslaved. She gave more power to regional lords, taking away any remaining freedoms from the serfs. Russia was one of the few places where as the state evolved, its people actually regressed. Her subjects might have held her in awe, but they also were sick and tired of barely clinging to life while royals sat hidden away in their palaces playing card games, using diamonds as gambling chips.

Towards the end of her rule, Catherine stared down several threats to her throne. In one instance, the Pugachev Rebellion of 1775, tens of thousands of serfs banded together demanding an end to serfdom, taxation, the military draft and landed nobles. This band of rebels fought a guerrilla war across the countryside, but Pugachev was finally captured and brought to Moscow in an iron cage. Catherine chopped off his head and had his body cut into four chunks to be hung in the four corners of the capital city as a warning of how rebels would be treated. A few years later, after seeing the deadly fruits of the French Revolution, she started censoring the same Enlightened writings she championed earlier in her rule, realizing maybe it wasn't the best idea to Westernize too much. By the time she died in 1796 (after suffering a stroke while sitting on the toilet), her empire was no longer seen as the inferior step-brother of the European monarchies.

Nope, by 1800, Russia was a force to be reckoned with. Its empire would last another century, even when one by one, the European nations succumbed to revolution. And when a tiny
general from France tried to invade Russia in his quest to conquer the world, it would be Russia that would swallow his ambitions, sending him home defeated with nary an army under his charge.

But that is for another chapter.
And now we get to a country you might have heard of before. I’ll give you some clues. It has the third most people and the fourth most land. It has the largest economy in the world. It has the largest military in the world. It’s home to the most desired universities, the greatest technological innovations of the 20th century and MTV. Its breakfast cereal aisles are legendary. Its fast food restaurants are global icons. It makes the movies everyone wants to see and the music everyone plugs into their ears. Its embassies around the world have the longest lines of any foreign country – those lining up to protest its foreign policy and those lining up just hoping for a chance to win the immigration lottery and possibly set foot in the nation where the streets are lined with gold and anyone can make it to the top.

It’s everywhere and its global reach touches everyone. You can go hiking in the most remote hills of the Himalayas, stop off in the islands of Papua New Guinea or get stranded on the coast of Antarctica, and you will see its footsteps. Love it or hate it, everyone has an opinion of it.

It is the United States of America.
Although its reach is incomparable today, its beginnings were less than intimidating. After Columbus touched ground in the Caribbean, the European powers of Spain, Portugal, France, England and Holland set off exploring and colonizing all across the two Americas. By the mid-1600s, the Americas were a patchwork of land claims, sparsely populated by the outcasts and the fortune seekers of Europe. Spain by far had the most territory, controlling almost all of South America, the entirety of Central America and all lands west of the Mississippi River. Portugal held the eastern portion of South America, what would one day become Brazil; France laid claim to the areas around the Mississippi; Holland briefly held some ports on the eastern coast (New Amsterdam - aka “New York” - was their most prominent); and England ruled over a series of thirteen colonies huddled closely against the Atlantic Ocean.

Throughout the 17th century, these northern English colonies weren’t even the most desired holdings in the Americas. The Caribbean islands produced the sugar that fetched a hefty sum on the world markets and the silver and gold mines of South America dug out the bullion that made the world exchange possible. The British thirteen colonies were a mere afterthought.

Yet when the mines dried up and the market for sugar became saturated, the more diverse economies of North America forced Europe to take notice. For the first half of the 17th century, although technically ruled by Britain, the colonists survived relatively autonomously. England was embroiled in one of its seemingly endless string of wars with continental Europe, leaving the port cities of the Americas to trade their wares relatively unencumbered and leaving the southern plantations to grow wealthy off of rice, indigo and the conveniently addictive crop known as tobacco.

By 1750, the inhabitants of these British colonies had arguably the highest standard of living on the planet. Their Protestant work ethic had them working hard all day to secure their place in heaven, their natural resources on the vast continent seemed inexhaustible and their location made them able to readily enter the world markets with minimal transportation difficulties.

But in 1756, everything changed. Britain and France started dueling in yet another war. This one would last for seven years (named oddly “The Seven Years War”) and would involve British and French holdings across the globe. The British colonists became mere pawns in this global game, but as they combined
their forces with those of the feared British redcoats, the French forces were subdued, opening up British territory all the way from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. After this French and Indian War (as it was called in the colonies), life started to change for the citizens of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

Out of fear the crown would have to protect the colonists against the unpredictable Indians, Britain forbade the colonists from settling on the freshly-acquired territory to the west. This constraint frustrated the colonists. Why the heck did they just finish fighting the French? Weren’t they owed all this new land they secured? Plus, the British troops didn’t leave, and since there weren’t a lot of British bases set up for the soldiers to catch some sleep, they were often housed in the homes of the locals (not exactly a desirable situation for a farmer father with impressionable munchkins living under the same roof). And because England fell heavily into debt funding the little French and Indian War, they decided to start actually collecting the taxes they had been a little lax collecting over the previous century. This was where the colonists had enough. Unwanted house guests were one thing. Cutting into their pocketbooks would not be tolerated.

Imagine a young adult who graduates from high school, heads to college and has the best four years of his life. He has total freedom to make his own choices, he has more free time than he could ever imagine, his food supply is pretty consistent and there’s no one to tell him he needs to be home by 12:00. But then, due to unforeseen circumstances, he reluctantly returns home to his parents’ house at the ripe age of 22. Back under his parents’ roof, his mom nags him about the cleanliness of his room, his dad wonders why he gets home in the wee hours of the night and no matter where he walks, there’s always someone’s meddling eyes following his every move. This scenario rarely ends well. Once you get a taste of freedom, returning to the world of living under the thumb of another is just a bit disconcerting.

The colonists felt this discomfort. Well maybe not all the colonists. Mostly just the wealthiest merchants, traders, shipbuilders and landowners felt the sting of British meddling. Their profits dwindled as the British again wanted to determine what was produced, how it was produced, how it was shipped, where the goods ended up and how much off the top ended up in the hands of the British government. The decades of self-
The Documents Heard 'Round the World

governing were gone. The new age of taxation without representation had begun.

The wealthy 10% knew something had to change. What happened next appears in hindsight as a carefully orchestrated attempt by the wealthy and learned elite to manufacture conflict, to inspire the masses to rise up and to throw off the shackles of colonial servitude. In reality, the events that unfolded over the second half of the 18th century were probably more sporadic reactions to increasingly oppressive British policies, but because all of these revolts, protests and boycotts happened at the tail end of the Age of Enlightenment, what could have merely been a brief blip of dissension became a revolution that would change the world.

Two factions spurred the American revolutionary movement - the militant, prone to violence rabble-rousers led by Samuel Adams (yes, that guy on the beer bottle) and then the educated, classically trained thinkers who saw Western Civilization at a great crossroads. These thinkers were not merely passive readers of the European Enlightenment. They were active participants. Benjamin Franklin was well known in the salons of France, and the writings of Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry were followed with as much interest as were once the musings of Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire. But it was the job of the Sons of Liberty, a loosely-organized group of young men willing to step a bit outside the law, to bring the issues facing the men of the port cities (primarily those living in Boston) to every colonist on the Eastern seaboard. Tax collectors were stripped naked, tarred, feathered and mocked as they staggered through the streets with flesh on fire. British goods not subjected to the same strict tariffs as American goods were destroyed (a la the Boston Tea Party). Signs were made. Slogans repeated. Misunderstood acts of violence where errant snowballs led to accidental deaths were blown into catastrophic events (see “Boston Massacre”). Steadily, more and more started to entertain the thought of independence, but still, by the mid-1770s, John Adams admitted that 1/3 of the population were patriots wanting independence, 1/3 remained loyal to King George and 1/3 were apathetic and worried more about whether or not their corn was going to grow than if they had to pay taxes to some fancy-pants-wearing dudes across the Atlantic. These numbers shifted more toward the patriotic camp after the publishing of Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, a piece of American Enlightenment, written in the language of the common man,
succinctly outlining the economic, social and political reasons for breaking from British rule.

In 1776, representatives from the thirteen colonies gathered in Philadelphia to discuss how to best deal with the mounting tension. Like the population as a whole, these delegates struggled to come to grips with how to proceed. Eventually, after months of debate and after actual shots were fired by George Washington and his newly-formed Continental Army, the delegation entrusted lawyer John Adams, philosopher and tinkerer Benjamin Franklin and plantation aristocrat Thomas Jefferson with the responsibility of writing a Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson took the lead and what resulted was a masterful blend of Enlightened thought and scientific reasoning. The document begins with Locke’s take on natural rights, alludes to Voltaire’s depiction of a Creator God and then rounds off with Rousseau’s directive that a persecuted people have the right to rebel. It reads:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient Causes; and accordingly all Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security. Such has been the patient Sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the Necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

At this point, Jefferson had his audience’s attention. He was writing to the leaders of not just Britain, but the leaders of all Western nations. He was writing to an intelligentsia nourished on a steady diet of British and French philosophes. He was writing to prove the perilous path America was embarking on was, although without precedence, not without merit. The thinkers of Europe
had spent the last century talking about an ideal civilization. The American colonists were going to create it.

The Declaration was of course met by England as an act of war and over the next seven years, the colonies erupted in a war that stretched from Canada down to the southernmost colonies. Eventually, under the leadership of George Washington, who precariously maintained his band of farmer-soldiers and with the financial, military and naval assistance of the French, the British were defeated, leaving the colonists faced with the hardest part of a revolution...actually creating a new government.

Their first attempt was a fiasco, so much so that America doesn’t even recognize its first eight presidents (John Hanson was the first, George Washington actually the ninth). Wanting to prevent a return to monarchy, the 1776 Articles of Confederation loosely bound together the thirteen colonies under a series of laws doomed to fail. Each state, regardless of size, received one vote. Tiny little Rhode Island held as much power as mighty Virginia. The legislature needed 9 out of 13 votes to pass any new law, which was nearly impossible for a people who rightfully only cared about the prosperity of their colony. Taxes were optional, no navy existed to enforce the seas and every colony produced their own currency. America was a region in competition, not a region in cohesion.

Then, in 1787, America looked like it might be in for a civil war, but this time it would be the poor fighting the rich, not the Americans fighting the Brits. Unable to pay his taxes and feeling duped by a nation that promised him freedom if he fought, Daniel Shays led a band of Revolutionary War veterans across the farmlands of Massachusetts. With pitchforks and muskets in hand, they threw the countryside into chaos.

Enough was enough.

Again the Founding Fathers gathered in Philadelphia, but this time not to declare independence, but to create a Constitution that would keep their fledgling nation from falling into the abyss.

Facilitated by Constitutional Convention President George Washington, the convention delegates crafted a masterpiece of compromise that has stood the test of time, able to adjust to the changing needs of society and equally able to maintain order when the inevitable foibles of man could have easily brought the nation to its knees. Like the Declaration of Independence that preceded it, the Constitution was imbued with Enlightened thought.
Montesquieu’s separation of powers became America’s Congress, President and Supreme Court. Voltaire’s freedom of speech and religion became America’s First Amendment. Beccaria’s opinions on the fair treatment of prisoners became the Eighth Amendment. Smith’s notions of capitalism became the Congress’s charge to protect trade and intellectual property (copyrights and patents). Rousseau’s belief in direct democracy became America’s elections. But Hobbe’s lack of faith in humanity led to the electoral system where Americans semi-vote for the president, but a third group of elites actually makes the final call. By 1788, the United States of America had a functioning government, a truly revolutionary way of running a country.

It has become fashionable of late to criticize the American Revolution as being nothing more than a transfer of power from one group of wealthy white men to another group of wealthy white men. In his book *A People’s History of the United States*, author Howard Zinn speaks of “A Sort of Revolution” where the entire movement was crafted by an American elite intent on insuring their own prosperity by removing any external threats to their total control of society. To Zinn, how could historians call this a revolution when only 10% actually could participate in the democratic process (women, the property-less and slaves were excluded)? Or how revolutionary was it when the monarchical structure of Britain with its parliament and chief executive named King George was replaced with a Congress and a chief executive named…George (Washington)? Wasn’t this just the same old, same old?

No. This George voluntarily stepped down after eight years, allowing free elections to take place. This George allowed the Congress to create legislation without interference, vetoing only two pieces of legislation in his eight years of office. And this George established a court system that ensured the rights of the Constitution were enforced at all phases of governance, so that every man was equally able to pursue happiness.

But yes, America fell short in a number of areas. Slavery still existed. Women played a very insignificant role in the government for another century and property-less males wouldn’t have a full stake in government until the 1830s. However, it was a start, and from this revolution, over the next two centuries, one by one the nations of the world followed suit (115 true democracies and counting), creating their own constitutions that look
remarkably similar to the one created by the Founding Fathers long ago in the secluded meeting halls of Philadelphia.

Though America started the democracy ball rolling, the revolutionary momentum didn’t truly start moving until the European nation with the most obscene absolute monarchy faced its own challenge to the throne. For when this nation fell to the empowered masses, the rest of Europe couldn’t merely discount the shift as a bizarre anomaly from the uncivilized frontiers of the Americas. When revolution came to Europe, monarchy entered its dying days. Representative government was here to stay.

But that is for another chapter.
When the American colonies ripped themselves away from the grasp of the British Empire, it registered as merely a blip on the world’s radar. These newly created United States were no more than a baker’s dozen of frontier settlements clustered between the Atlantic Ocean and the vast unknown of the western territories. Sure, it was fairly impressive that this plucky little band of upstarts dared challenge the might of the British army, but at the time, few in Europe actually worried that this American model might in any way upset the social and political status quo of the continent. The American Revolution caused little concern.

But the French Revolution? That definitely made the monarchs of Europe sleep a little less soundly.

By the mid-18th century, France was the preeminent nation in Europe. It was the big boy on the block. It housed 28 million people, making it the third most populated country in the world behind China and India. Its colonial holdings spread across five continents, from the Mississippi basin in the Americas to the southeast coast of India. More important than territorial holdings was its cultural influence.

All eyes looked to France to see how to dance, how to dress, what to eat, what to watch, what to think. French was the
language of diplomacy. Any educated man spoke French. The
greatest literature and enlightened thought was written in French.
Their monarchy was the crown jewel of the Western kingdoms.
King Louis XVI’s palace at Versailles was the model all others
tried to imitate. France was the greatest nation of Europe. In
1785, revolution wasn’t on even the most subversive tongue. No
way. It could never happen. France was too big to fail.

But it did. In less than 25 years, the monarchy that had
ruled for close to a thousand years was overthrown and a new social
and political order completely reversed centuries of unchallenged
order. Like with the Industrial Revolution in England, looking
back, it seems the writing was on the wall; all the causes were right
there if someone would have just taken the time to look. But in
reality, the revolution never started with any radical changes in
mind, but gradually transformed into something out of anyone’s
control. Some might even argue that it wasn’t so much the
demands of the revolutionaries that plunged France into the abyss,
as it was more the exaggerated reactions of the counter-
revolutionaries that turned what could have merely been a
modification of a system of government and class control into a
wholesale bloodbath.

Although France appeared the model to every realm from
Belgium to Russia, beneath the glittering façade of Versailles and
the majesty of the nobility rested serious problems that needed to
be solved. The French class structure, the *ancien régime*, had
defined everyone’s role in society for over three hundred years.
Under the ancient regime, the nation was divided into three
classes, or estates – the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate
(the nobility) and the Third Estate (everybody else). The First
Estate numbered about 130,000, consisting of priests, bishops,
monks and nuns. Although the smallest in size, they were the
nation’s greatest landholders (over the years inheriting the vast
tracts of lands bequeathed to them by the soon-to-be dead hoping
for some preferential treatment in the afterlife). The Second
Estate numbered around 600,000 and was made up of both the
Nobles of the Sword (who could date their pedigree back hundreds
of years to the wars of the cross) and the Nobles of the Robe (who
had recently bought their way into nobility and who filled all major
government positions). The Third Estate was the rest (about 27
million) of the nation – the bakers, the farmers, the doctors, the
lawyers, the bankers, the merchants, the man in the factory and the
man walking the street. They were separated by wealth, region,
education and behavior. Some of the lowest members of the Third Estate lived in horrific squalor, barefoot in the countryside, using the medieval tools of their distant ancestors. Others resided in the glorious urban mansions of Paris, products of a fledgling Industrial Age (more to come in a couple chapters) that made millionaires out of entrepreneurs willing to risk their wealth. Yet, they were all united by one trait – the bitter reality that they were not members of the First or Second Estate. This distinction meant that they alone had to pay taxes and they alone were not privy to the privileges of the higher class – they couldn’t be officers in the military, they couldn’t hunt, they couldn’t wear a sword, and in a court of law, if they were arrested, they were tried and punished by a different set of standards. The Third Estate was below the Nobles and the Clergy, and no matter how much wealth they ever attained (and some even got richer than the members of the other two estates), they remained inferior.

Although this state of inequality caused frustration, it didn’t cause revolution. This was brought on by a financial crisis. France was in debt. France was on the verge of bankruptcy. After decades of war against England, including the most recent financing of the American Revolution, the federal coffers were nearly empty. This situation wasn’t aided by the existence of Versailles, the king’s palace. Built initially as a summer hunting retreat for the royal family, King Louis XIV eventually transformed it into a palatial residence of over 700 rooms, able to house close to 20,000 people at a time. King Louis liked to keep his enemies close, so from time to time, he would invite the nobles of the realm to stay as guests in his home – both to keep an eye on them, but also to make sure they realized who really had the power (the man who owned the 87 million square foot palace). The keepers of Versailles then not only had to pay to keep the bushes trimmed, the fountains flowing and the floors clean, but they also had to see to the every whim of the pampered royalty. This cost a fortune. In today’s dollars, you couldn’t even put a price tag on its construction and maintenance fees (probably somewhere around $2 billion), but in looking at the state budgets of the 18th century, the feeding, housing, caring for and pleasuring of all the residents could take anywhere from 5 to 15% of the nation’s annual expenditures.

The economic straits weren’t alone caused by the financing of some ill-advised wars (though the United States was pretty thankful for the help) and the bankrolling of the king’s swanky palace, the biggest issue was that the groups most able to pay, the
groups with the largest landholdings, these were the groups actually exempted from paying taxes. It's not that they paid less tax. They paid no tax. France could never hope to escape their financial dilemma if they didn't increase their revenue stream, and the Third Estate was all tapped out. You just can't get blood out of a turnip (with the Third Estate playing the role of the turnip in this extended metaphor). Every finance minister Louis XVI appointed came up with the same recommendation – tax the nobility and the clergy. These recommendations posed a couple problems. Not only did the upper estates vehemently resist any attempts to alter their status, but even more important was that the more the finance ministers publicized the predicament, the more the masses scrutinized the affairs of the state. In an age where scores of newspapers were launched every year, the spindrift ways of the royal family became fodder for the urban dailies. Whereas for a century, a rare few might have whispered about the happenings at the Chateaux de Versailles, now hundreds of thousands openly questioned the expenditures of the royal family.

When in 1788 the First and Second Estate were once again strongly advised that they would need to reluctantly embrace the need for universal taxation, the nobles and clergy made a choice they thought would settle the issue once and for all, but instead opened a Pandora's Box that could never be closed. They dug deep into their bag of tricks and suggested a reconvening of the Estates General, an archaic, seldomly-used assembly of the three estates that hadn't been called since 1614. The king acquiesced, setting the date for assembly for 1789. Both sides thought this meeting could only benefit their cause. Even though the Clergy brought 300 delegates and the Nobles brought 300 delegates and the Third Estate brought 600 delegates, because each estate only counted for one vote, the upper estates believed they would win any vote 2-1. And the king was equally cocky, thinking his presence alone would awe everyone into supporting any royal mandate. They all didn't account for one group – the Third Estate.

In the summer leading up to the Estates General, each region selected a representative to send to Versailles. As important as the delegates chosen (which were almost always lawyers or the most competent speakers in the towns) was the creation of a list of complaints. Any leader knows you rarely want to ask your minions if they see any problems. Chances are they do, but once you get the ball of complaints rolling, it's hard to stop the momentum. The delegates started recording all of these grievances
in what became known as the *cabiers de doleances*, and as each new topic was introduced and circulated, hope rose amongst the voiceless that change may be possible. When the doors to the Estates General opened on May 5, 1789, what entered wasn’t merely a group of awed members of the lower class excited to just be invited. What entered was a body of the oppressed, impatient to be heard.

Everyone entered, the King arrived and the minister of the proceedings jumped right to the topic of taxation. But the Third Estate didn’t flinch. They wanted to discuss the issue of representation, but more specifically, the issue of voting power. They didn’t want to meet separately (by “order”) with each group casting one vote. They wanted to meet together, each casting a vote by delegate (by number of “heads”). This suggestion posed a bit of a problem as the Third Estate alone had 600 heads, equal to the combined total of the Nobility and Clergy. As tensions rose and no resolution to this voting issue appeared possible, King Louis XVI terminated the meetings. Or so he thought. From a distant corner of the room, one man (the scandal-prone journalist Mirabeau) stood up and proclaimed he would “not leave except at the point of a bayonet.” The crowd was shocked. Didn’t this mere mortal get the memo? You’re not supposed to disagree with the King. He was God’s chosen one. But Mirabeau had spoken, and the gauntlet had been set. The King could cower and acquiesce yet again, or he could respond with force. He chose the latter.

In the next five months, France would implode. First, the Third Estate called itself the National Assembly and invited anyone from the First and Second Estate to join them. Seeing the writing on the wall, a few liberal clergy and enlightened nobles crossed party lines and joined this newly created governing body. Seeing the sides starting to unite, Louis panicked, locking them out of their meeting hall, to which the arriving delegates merely found the largest nearby meeting place (an indoor tennis court) and resolved they would not disband until they wrote a new constitution. Louis, seeing that this could turn violent quickly, ordered his army to protect Versailles from seemingly inevitable chaos. Meanwhile, 20 miles away in Paris, hearing of the rebellion of wills in the king’s palace, Parisians drew more frustrated over a condition closer to their hearts (well, actually, close to their stomachs). The recent bread harvest had been less than impressive, and the price of bread had skyrocketed to nearly 80% of a worker’s daily income. Just for bread. As the city rumbles
increased, so did Louis’ military force. Parisian mobs of mothers and laborers started fearing the worst, that Louis’ troops would descend on them, adding further oppression to their already miserable state. If a showdown was what the king wanted, they would need to arm themselves.

On July 14, 1789, a mob of close to a thousand Parisians stormed the Hotel des Invalides (once a military hospital, but also a storeroom of weapons), stealing cannons and muskets. They then headed to the Bastille, a medieval fortress that had over the centuries become a prison for anyone who dared oppose the king. After hours of back and forth cannon volleys, the governor of the Bastille agreed to discuss terms with the mob. Possibly not understanding what a truce meant, the mob promptly stormed through the gates, stole whatever gunpowder they could find, cut off the governor’s head with a pocketknife and paraded it around Paris. So what was the fruit of the mob’s little outburst? They freed seven prisoners (two of which would later be sent to an insane asylum, four of whom were in for petty crimes and the last who was sent to prison by his parents), they added a bit of ammunition to their stockpile and they killed a few of the king’s soldiers. But like the Boston Massacre that killed a grand total of five men, the Bastille’s magnitude couldn’t be truly judged until the papers spun the tale. Within a week, the stories circulated that the people had spoken and that the symbol of tyranny had been destroyed. The line had been crossed. The king’s faithful children no longer unconditionally loved their father. Shots had been fired. The revolution had started.

All across France, the story of the Bastille fed people’s imaginations. Everyone then wondered – what would the King do next? He must have his revenge. Mustn’t he? New rumors popped up that the King was assembling all the lords and clergy to put down the Third Estate. July and August became the months of the Great Fear, where peasants across the countryside wondered if they would soon pay the price for the actions of the Parisian mob. Deciding to not wait to be attacked first, many of these peasants seized the moment to ransack the property of the landed and the religious. The Great Fear became the great opportunity to randomly murder people who once slighted them and possibly burn down their houses along the way. Churches were destroyed, lords were pulled out of their homes in the middle of the night and mutilated, courthouses were raided and property claims were destroyed. All across France, the nobles and the clergy feared for
their lives. Some stayed, hoping to survive the chaos. Others got out as soon as possible. These émigrés fled to the safety of neighboring kingdoms, hoping to return once their world came to its senses. Many never returned.

Spurred on by the actions of the Parisian mob, the National Assembly sped into overdrive. Within two months, they passed laws that wholly transformed French society. Well, maybe not yet. In 1789, they were merely a series of well-intentioned ideas brainstormed by an assembly reared on Enlightenment ideals and infused with a self-assurance that they should take this extraordinary moment and see what they could pull off. In August, they penned the aptly named August Decrees that outlined 19 principles including the abolition of 1) feudalism, 2) a lord's right to administer trials, 3) the forced payment of tithes (10% taxes) to the church and 4) legal exemptions granted to nobility and clergy. They even dealt with some less momentous issues like the caging of pigeons during off-hunting season and the singing of patriotic songs while in church. A few weeks later they signed the Jefferson-inspired Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Declaration of Rights was more like the American Bill of Rights. It said you could say whatever you want, write whatever you want and practice whatever religion you want. No matter your birth or your status, your property would be protected and in the eyes of the courts you would be treated the same as others. And lastly, it said the power to rule didn’t come from God and it didn’t come from the royal family. The power to rule came from the people. Anyone who might climb to the top of the ruling hierarchy did so by the pleasure of the people. Should you anger these people, should you not protect their rights, you would no longer be needed. Louis’ grandfather King Louis XIV once allegedly (and arrogantly) said, “I am the state” — but a century later the people could finally proclaim, “No...actually, WE are the state.”

But still Louis XVI would have none of this. All the National Assembly’s posturing and proclamations were nothing but mere annoyances to him. Who was this National Assembly anyway? A bunch of people from the Third Estate coupled with a few noble and cleric traitors who decided to switch to the dark side? All this so-called National Assembly was doing was writing down a bunch of pie-in-the-sky ideas that no one would ever enforce. It’s one thing to write down a bunch of so-called laws or rules. It’s another thing to actually execute them, and as far as King Louis XVI was concerned, he was the only one with the
authority to enforce anything. And he had no intention of implementing any of these notions.

Until the women got angry. On the streets of Paris, women were getting ticked off. A series of poor harvests meant the price of bread reached ridiculous levels. Unlike the British across the channel, the French never embraced the New World foods like the potato. Their diet relied on bread, so when the price of bread almost doubled in just one year, the women found it impossible to feed their families. This was where the revolution went from merely being a set of ideas to being a movement with force and the backing of the masses. The Estates General was a meeting of the brightest minds of the Third Estate. The Storming of the Bastille was a mob that got caught up with the emotion of the moment. The bread shortage was truly the catalyst that pushed people out of their homes and onto the streets. Enough was enough.

A rumor started circulating that the royal family was hoarding all the grain in Versailles. Many found this rumor fairly believable as the reputation of the queen, the Austrian Marie Antoinette, wasn’t exactly glowing. The tabloids clamoring for the public’s attention filled the streets with stories of her naughty behavior. As a foreign princess, she was never totally accepted. Depending on who you asked, she was either a reckless gambler, a philanderer, a plump princess, an opera connoisseur with her own delusions of becoming an actress or merely an air-headed bimbo who cared for little more than putting on fancy clothes and wearing puffy head pieces. She was often referred to as the Autrichienne (“chienne” is a dog...try to figure out what they were calling her).

The media didn’t help her reputation. In his book *Confessions*, Enlightenment author Jean Jacques Rousseau mentioned a princess who was so indifferent to her people’s hunger that she said, “Let them eat cake!” (he actually wrote, “let them eat brioche,” but you get the idea). The people thought Rousseau was talking about the Austrian queen. But the truth was irrelevant. As anyone who has ever survived adolescence can attest, the origin of a rumor isn’t nearly as important as what it eventually becomes once the masses manipulate it to fit their needs. By October 1789, a Parisian mob of 7000 women believed that the arrogant chienne *did* have a ton of food stored in Versailles, that she *was* wasting the people’s money on her own pampering and that she must be so
clueless to the realities of life that she had the gall to suggest they should just find some cake to fill their tummies.

So they marched. For 20 miles they marched. Their ranks gradually swelled to include a few dozen men, and even the king’s own guards who followed close by, not knowing what exactly to do with a parade of women carrying garden and kitchen tools. The guards hadn’t really been trained to deal with such a sight. When they reached Versailles, ripe with venomous anger and howling stomachs, the women easily overthrew the king’s guards, cut off their heads and stuck them on a couple poles (this head-pole thing was starting to become routine) and then ransacked the palace searching for the little chienne. She eventually walked out onto the balcony and stared down the crowd, even though they had cannons and muskets sighted in on her painted muzzle. Their desire for blood turned into a desire to “protect the royal family.” The mob forced the king, the queen and their son to pack their things and head back to Paris, “escorted” by the female mob. The hungry women had left Paris wanting bread. They had returned with the royal family.

Not surprisingly, soon after, King Louis XVI recognized the National Assembly as the legitimate government body. It was kind of difficult to argue when you had a mob threatening to kill your spouse and run your own head on a pole. But though Louis might have sided publicly with this newly-founded assembly, he privately conspired to return life to the good ol’ days. His new home/prison was in the heart of Paris, at the Tuileries Palace (which has since been destroyed and today is basically the front yard to the Louvre Museum). The king wasn’t content to ride out the storm, granting a few concessions to the stirred up mobs. He entered into a series of private correspondences with the French émigrés and the nobility across Europe. They promised to help him regain the throne. Louis believed if he could just make it out of France, he could drum up enough support from the neighboring monarchies that he could put down this insurrection and resume his life of self-indulgence.

So, on the night of June 21, 1791, Louis, his family, some nannies, some servants and some friends hopped on a bright yellow carriage and tried to escape to a protected fortress in the border town of Montmedy. Pathetically, not understanding the gravity of the situation, the king kept ordering his escape party to stop and take breaks. He even had the audacity (let’s call it “stupidity”) to walk alongside the carriage enjoying the views. Eventually he was
recognized by a postmaster named Drouet (who allegedly recognized the king after comparing his profile to a noggin on a coin) when Louis asked to stay the night in Varennes. The next morning he woke up and was met by a mob of revolutionaries who volunteered to accompany the king back to Paris.

This was the tipping point. Any chance for reconciliation was gone. Though some wanted to maintain the position of the king (even actually giving him authority in the newly-created Constitution), others saw this latest episode as another example of how little the royal family could be trusted. On his road back to Paris, his carriage was spat on, and mobs of angry belligerents all wanted a piece of the traitor. The line had been drawn – you were either for the traitor and maintaining the royalty of old or you were for liberty and equality, for a new day, for revolution. In that National Assembly, everyone’s allegiance was clear – if you believe in conserving the royal family, you sat to the right, if you believed in transforming the power structure, you sat to the left. This designation eventually became the left wing/right wing, liberal/conservative political schism that has lasted till this day, but in the months following the royal family’s return, it became the divide that upped the level of violence. You were either with the revolution or against it.

When the revolution moved to Paris, the major playmakers no longer saw themselves as members of the First, Second or Third Estate. That ancient divide had been replaced by a new form of organization – the political club. Dozens of clubs popped up across Paris (and eventually across the country), each having their own idea for what life should look like in a new France. There were Jacobins and Girondins and Feuillants and Carabots. Robespierristes and Enrages and Dantonists and Republican Women. Before, the Third Estate was united in their frustration with the current regime, but once they saw change was actually possible, they began splintering across ideological lines. Some focused on enforcing the constitution of 1791; others said it didn’t go far enough. Some wanted to declare war against Austria; others wanted to maintain neutrality. Others focused on economic issues like controlling the price of goods. Some cared more about social issues like expanding the role of women or allowing gay marriage. These clubs fought with each other for power, and yet power was fleeting. Another rival always stood at the ready, eager to jump in and seize control of the government should any party fall out of favor.
And then France went to war. Partly wanting to return their nation’s daughter to the throne, but mostly needing to ensure this anti-monarchy absurdity spread no further, Austria declared war on France in April of 1792. Now the French could unite against a common enemy outside their borders. The political clubs started to raise the level of vitriol. Anyone not siding with the revolution could then be seen as not only a traitor to the cause, but as an enemy sympathizer. Who then became public enemies #1 and #2? The émigrés and the royal family. Why else would anyone willfully leave France other than a hidden desire to sabotage the revolution? This became the excuse needed to seize all the lands of the émigrés and pass them out to the masses in one of the greatest land redistribution schemes in European history. But what about the king? He couldn’t be trusted. With his loyalist supporters and his familial connections to the enemy, he had to be killed. In June 1793, he was stripped of his title, stripped of his honor and then stripped of his head. The guillotine had taken yet another life, but not just any life, the life of a king, a person once seen as God’s representative on earth. The European nations sat shocked at this turn of events, and even many Frenchmen thought the revolution had gone too far.

Enter the Reign of Terror.

Maximilian Robespierre and his Parisian faction known as the Jacobins took over the National Assembly, promising to ensure the spirit of the revolution of 1789 continued and that no one’s personal desires or greed stood in the way of the realization of both the August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The counterrevolutionaries who popped up after the death of the king had to be silenced. What better method than the guillotine? Initially implemented because it was seen as the most humane, efficient way of offing someone’s head, it later became the symbol of this most violent period of the French Revolution. So many thousands lost their lives to the guillotine that some began to openly question the humaneness of the practice. Onlookers spoke of decapitated heads biting at each other as they sat in a bag or the recently chopped blinking several times before finally expiring. Observing scientists concluded that after the guillotine did its dirty work, the brain actually did remain alive for a bit—thirteen seconds on average to be exact—undoubtedly the longest thirteen seconds of the victim’s life.

As soldiers died on the battlefields throughout Western Europe, within France, neighbor turned against neighbor and
brother against brother. These civil wars for control of the throne cost close to 40,000 lives, with both enemies and supporters of the revolution meeting a violent end. In Paris, Robespierre established the Committee of Public Safety (always be afraid when countries create groups to ensure safety...pretty good chance your safety will feel anything but protected), who presented weekly reports on how the war against Austria was progressing and who might be an enemy of the state. Trials were held, sentences were passed and executions were performed. At first, the Committee actually put on an air of legality to the proceedings, but within a year, the farce had become a witch hunt and anyone could send an enemy, political or otherwise, to the gallows. Some trials even involved entire groups of people tried simultaneously with no evidence presented, except for the knowledge that the defendants disagreed with how the government was run. Blood continued to flow and heads kept rolling, until the Convention had had enough. On July 27th, 1794, Robespierre rose to the podium yet again, spewed out another of his never-ending lists of enemies of the revolution, but this time the crowd didn't buy his argument. The crowd shouted, “Down with the tyrant!” This time it would be Robespierre that would be arrested. And the next day he was guillotined, which officially ended the revolution.

Now the pendulum swung the other direction. The French wanted a return to order. This period, known as the Thermidorian Reaction, saw an attempt by the conservatives to calm the entire pulse of the nation, bringing back a semblance of order. Instead of a king or an assembly, this phase of the revolution saw the rise of the Directory – five men who would jointly decide on how best to enforce the laws of the nation. This was a total failure. There’s a reason why countries don’t have five presidents, five kings or five dictators. It’s not exactly efficient. Inflation rates skyrocketed, the economy was in disarray and bread prices shot to levels even worse than those before Louis XVI’s ouster. The people had had enough. But where do you turn when you need true order imposed? Where do you turn when you need a man strong enough to battle the forces of the right and the left? Where do you turn in your time of need?

You turn to the man nicknamed “the little corporal” - Napoleon Bonaparte.

In 1799, the man seen centuries later as “short,” made one of the biggest power plays history had ever witnessed. This 5’6” hero from the former Italian island of Corsica, entered the
government building of the Directory in 1799 with his army of followers, formally ended the proceedings and announced he would assume power over the government until he could guarantee stability.

And it worked. After almost a decade of chaos, the French people were more than happy for a little coup d’etat. After all the starvation, terror and death of the revolutionary years, all the people really wanted was a little bit of peace - even if that meant handing over power to an enlightened dictator. Napoleon sensed the mood of the Parisians, and of France as a whole, so when word got out that he had held the legislature at gunpoint until they agreed to crown him “First Consul,” few batted an eye. The entire French Revolution had been fought to close the era of absolute rulers, to give power to the people. But when it turned out the people were crazy or power-hungry or short-sighted, the ideals of the revolution could be temporarily ignored if it meant a taste of stability.

Napoleon believed only he knew exactly what his people wanted. He also knew he would have to dance precariously between employing the dictatorial powers necessary to exact change, while continuing to appear as a son of the revolution. Napoleon had mastered the art of public relations during his military campaigns across southern Europe and into Egypt. He knew wars couldn’t be won without the seven P’s (Proper Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance), but he also knew morale and public perception kept his men inspired and kept the families back home loyal to the cause. As a battlefield commander, Napoleon made sure his every victory circulated through news pamphlets and socialite circles, and he ensured his every defeat never hit the public’s eyes. He was so successful at controlling his own public perception, that even after he was soundly defeated in Egypt and had to abandon his men on the battlefield, he still received a conquering hero’s welcome when he returned to the streets of Paris.

As first consul (aka “president”), he again pandered to the crowds. He rewrote the law books. The dreams of the early revolution were formalized by law. Feudal bonds were forever broken. All private property was protected. He created an official legislative branch to write laws and separate government departments (think Treasury Department, State Department and Agricultural Department) to execute the will of the state. He separated the church and the state, but also made sure the Catholic
Church was again protected. The French could worship freely and the clergy could apply for government jobs. Segregating Jews was forbidden. But above all else, classes were equal under the eyes of the law. You netted no special favors simply because of your parents’ status. All government jobs were open to all classes – merit trumped birth. He created a unified nation. He gave France a national bank, a national anthem, a standardized currency and a uniform decimal measuring system to expedite trade across the nation. These reforms all became part of what was called the Napoleonic Code, and as Europe watched France prosper, they too then realized the value of these modifications, many (like Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) even choosing to likewise enforce national codes and institutions.

But Napoleon also knew when nationalism, liberty and equality had to be disregarded. He cracked down on freedom of speech. He closed down newspapers critical of his throne. He sent his spies out looking for rivals. He imprisoned thousands, held them without trial and sentenced many to death. The days of taking your voice to the streets were gone. The people demanded order and Napoleon fulfilled their wishes, even if that meant forsaking the rights of man.

He also knew that the role of consul was beneath him. He wanted to recreate the Roman Empire. And he needed a title that fit. So on December 2, 1804, at the Notre Dame Cathedral, Pope Pius VII arrived from Rome and officially anointed Napoleon, Emperor of France. From that moment, nothing could stop his ascension.

He then took another page out of the Roman Empire’s Strategies for Keeping the Masses Happy handbook. Feed them and make them feel proud. And he could kill two birds with one stone. How do you feed millions of people and simultaneously make them love their country so much they forget about economic despair? War.

They’ll satisfy their anger with the blood of the enemy, and they’ll satisfy their stomachs with the spoils of battle.

Napoleon raised armies and took France’s revolution across Western Europe. It wasn’t hard to find a country to fight. The monarchies of the West all feared that one day the revolutionary ideals of France might spread across their borders. Napoleon knew he was surrounded, so instead of waiting for his foes to align, he took the war to them. From 1803 to 1815, France fought a series of
endless wars against everyone from the Russians, the Prussians, the Spanish and the British to the Persians, the Ottomans, the Swedes and the Swiss. In the first few years of his campaign, it looked like no one could stop Napoleon. He took his million troops, his application of every bit of military technology and strategy known to the West and his promise to give his soldiers honor, a daily meal and an enemy to focus their anger, and created an empire that by 1810 covered Spain, Naples and parts of Germany. Even at the Battle of Austerlitz where Napoleon was outnumbered by Russian and Austrian forces, Napoleon proved adept at pumping up his forces and splitting up the overconfident alliance from the east. A wise man would have been content with his victories, secured his borders and sat back and ruled over the largest European empire since the Romans.

Napoleon wasn’t this wise man. He was bombastic, egotistical and he had surrounded himself with “Yes Men” who were more apt to support his misguided schemes than call him on the error of his ways. So what did Napoleon do after he won his greatest battle against Russian and Austrian forces? He invaded Russia. He took 600,000 men and marched on Moscow. This was a mistake. There was no way he could keep that size of a force fed and healthy, so in the summer of 1812, across Eastern Europe, tens of thousands fell to starvation and disease. The only thing keeping his troops alive and Napoleon’s faith unchallenged was Moscow. If he could just get his army to Moscow, they could live off the land and the riches of the city. They could sleep in the beds of the Muscovites, drink from their water and recover from the thousand-mile journey.

Brilliant idea except for one problem.

Moscow burned itself to the ground. The French entered an abandoned city with no food, few homes and a destroyed infrastructure. Napoleon had a choice to make. Keep his men in Moscow and rebuild the city or head back to France. He returned back to France – in the winter. This choice signed his soldiers’ death warrants. There was no way they could survive the Russian winter. As they marched back home, they froze, they starved and one by one, they were picked off by Russian guerrilla fighters who never gave the soldiers a moment’s rest, attacking unexpectedly and then fleeing to the safety of the forests. By the time Napoleon re-entered Paris, only 30,000 men had survived – 5% of his original force. He had failed and the luster of his initial glory had darkened.
Napoleon could no longer hold onto power. His military campaigns had bankrupted his treasury. He even resorted to funding French pirates across the Atlantic and selling his French holdings in the Americas (the Louisiana Purchase) for some quick money. But it was not enough. His little trip to Russia weakened his control of his other territorial holdings. His states in Spain and Italy began to rise up, and even in Haiti, a band of slaves proved too much for Napoleon’s diluted forces. His own men were tired of fighting, and after a couple years of relative peace, the Russian, British and Austrian forces mustered an army of a few hundred thousand soldiers and surrounded Napoleon. This time he could not escape and he could not win. He surrendered and was forced into exile on a small little island called Elba off the coast of Italy. This exile was only temporary, as he escaped in 1814 and returned to Paris. He again tried to muster a force able to defeat the allied forces of Western Europe, but at the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815, he was routed for the final time. This time the allies exiled him to St. Helena, a tiny little island in the middle of the Atlantic. There was no way he could escape from this desolate island prison. Here, he lived out the rest of his days, dying six years later in 1821.

Yet Napoleon had left an imprint on Western Europe that would last until the 20th century. Seven million men lost their lives in the Napoleonic Wars, monarchs almost lost their thrones and an entire continent was confronted with France’s little experiment with liberty, equality and brotherhood. The European powers knew they had to make sure a Napoleon could never rise to power, and that the madness and turmoil of the French Revolution could never terrorize the region again. In France, the revolution continued on for another few decades. The nobles and the royal family would return and try to reverse many of the reforms of the revolutionary era. In 1848, it looked like France hadn’t learned a thing. The people were starving, the nobility looked to be living the good life and a new generation of the poor thought they could change their world again. There were marches, declarations, protests and bloodshed. One king stepped down. Another despot took his place. The rest of Europe was getting tired of this seesaw of French politics, feeling like “whenever Paris sneezed, the rest of Europe caught a cold.”

The European powers decided they would be wise to reform their governments voluntarily before their citizens forced the issue. One by one, the West abolished slavery, gave all men the right to vote, abolished the death penalty and improved the
workday by exacting a ten-hour day maximum and mandating safe working conditions. The European powers also met at the Congress of Vienna to redefine their borders so that no singular nation would dominate the rest. The boundaries of Germany expanded, but its 360 states merged into a 38-state German confederation. Some nations absorbed their neighbors. Others ceased to exist. Boundaries that had been fought over since the Middle Ages were established and ratified by all the signatories. Europe had caught a glimpse of what industrialized war could do to their continent. They wanted to make sure the Napoleonic Wars were never replicated.

And they did keep the peace for the rest of the 19th century.

But then the 20th century started, the horror stories of Napoleon had long since been forgotten and each European power falsely believed that if a war was to be fought again, it would be quick, effortless and relatively bloodless.

They couldn’t have been more wrong.

But that is for another chapter.
Latin America Stands Alone

South American Revolutions – 1800 > 1900

When looking at the major movements across history, we often try to see patterns or blueprints that could reassure us that life moves forward in some sort of a predictable manner. Karl Marx believed, “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce,” meaning if you think it was pretty pathetic having to watch humans destroy themselves the first time around, it’s pretty darn ridiculous when they don’t learn from their mistakes and go through the same motions again and again. In the 20th century, philosopher George Santayana penned a similar thought with “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” These philosophies, coupled with our human partiality to making oversimplified comparisons, have led a generation of wannabe historians (present company included) and media pundits down the path of hyper-generalization.

It’s gotten to such an extreme that in the weeks following the 2011 Middle East revolutions, when teachers unions in the American Midwest went to the streets to protest their salary cutbacks, commentators took to the airwaves crying, “America has become the new Tunisia” or “This is Egypt all over again.” No. It really wasn’t. But it doesn’t just stop there. In recent years, it has become almost a competition between political pundits to see who can out-analogize their enemy. Take the portrayal of Barack Obama. One minute, he’s Martin Luther King Jr. and the next,
he’s Lyndon B. Johnson. A couple months later he’s being compared to Joseph Stalin, only to be followed by the obligatory comparison to this century’s poster boy for villainy - Adolf Hitler. But is Barack Obama “just like” any of these men?

The truth is – no. As un-entertaining as this might sound - nobody is just like anybody else, and history doesn’t repeat itself.

But there are patterns.

So when we take a look at Latin America and their political revolutions of the 19th century that freed two continents from the grasp of European empires, we must be careful not to draw too many parallels to those experiments in the United States and France. It would be easy to merely assume the dominos of popular sovereignty merely fell down across the United States and France and then hopped back across the pond to South America. But be careful. The Latin America of 1800 had little in common with the United States of 1776 or the France of 1789, so although we might be able to find some parallels, it was their differences that pushed them down far rockier roads to independence, leaving the nations a jumbled mess and subservient to the Western world through to the 20th century.

In 1800, the Latin American colonies were ruled almost exclusively by Spain and Portugal. In the year following Columbus’ discovery of the Americas, the Pope facilitated an agreement (the Treaty of Tordesillas) where in the New World, Portugal could claim all lands east of Columbus’ discovery (Brazil), leaving Spain all lands to the west (pretty much everything else). This meant that by 1800, Spain ruled an empire that stretched from northern California, down through the west coast of Mexico and South America, all the way to the most southern tip of the Americas – Cape Horn. And Portugal got Brazil (this is why today the Brazilians speak Portuguese and everyone else south of the United States speaks Spanish).

Though separated by language and mother country, these regions shared a few similarities. They were Catholic, they were ruled by monarchies, they respected the power of the fist over the power of the pen and they were diverse. Their societies were intensely divided by race. At the top of the power pyramid were the peninsulares, composing 1% of the population. These were the Europeans born in Spain or Portugal who controlled the highest positions in government and owned the most profitable land and businesses. Below these European-born elite stood the creoles.
Making up 10-20% of the population, these sons and daughters of the peninsulares were born in Latin America and were also quite wealthy, but they still remained one rung below the peninsulares. The remaining populations were the mestizos, the Amerindians and the slaves. In the eyes of the law, slaves had about the same rights as a cow or a horse, the Amerindians existed outside of society and the mestizos were those of mixed ancestry who lived for decades in the awkward purgatory of not being fully Amerindians, but also not being wholly creole. Their class structure went like this: peninsulares (European born Europeans), creoles (American born Europeans), mestizos (half-European, half-Amerindians), Amerindians (the locals) and slaves (Africans kidnapped and brought to the new world). Basically, the handful of white people dominated the political and economic spheres, leaving the darker-skinned peoples void of any observed rights.

This clear inequity was increasingly challenged as the works of the Enlightenment were shared, and the feats of the French and American revolutions spread. But in Latin America, who would be the revolutionaries? Who would ruffle the feathers of the empowered while enraging the masses? Who would be their Thomas Jefferson? Their Robespierre? Their George Washington? Their Napoleon?

If revolution was to come, it would have to come from the creoles. But in 1800, very few of these educated creoles were willing to risk their privileged positions and challenge the status quo. Though they only needed to overthrow a mere 1% of the population, they also realized that to do so would mean riling up the lower classes, and once this pot or rebellion was heated up, who could predict if it could ever be cooled down again.

But the true catalyst to revolution was not the stories of the American and French revolutions, nor of the ambitious enlightened theories of the European philosophes. The Latin American revolutions sprung from the power vacuum created by Napoleon’s little forays across Europe. At the turn of the 19th century, the nations of the Iberian Peninsula (like the rest of continental Europe) focused all their attention on getting rid of the little corporal from France. In 1807, Napoleon invaded Portugal. In 1808, he invaded Spain. King John VI of Portugal saw the writing on the wall and fled the Old World for the safety of his Brazil where he could enact his own unique interpretation of liberty, equality and fraternity. Next door in Spain, King Ferdinand II wasn’t so lucky. He was forced to give up his throne
that was then filled by Napoleon’s habitually-inept brother, Joseph Bonaparte. With Ferdinand II out of the picture, the Spanish chain of command out in the Americas was a bit up for interpretation. Should the peninsulares follow the mandates of the ousted king or the new regime of Napoleon? In Brazil, this question would be postponed for a few decades as the mother country’s king now housed himself in the New World.

But in Mexico, Europe’s Napoleon-caused chaos signaled a chance for change, and unlike in the United States and France, the first spark came not from the propertied elite vying for unchallenged power, but from the voice of a priest from the small town of Dolores. In 1810, instead of delivering his standard Sunday sermon, Father Miguel Hidalgo issued what became known as the “Cry of Dolores,” inciting the 300 men sitting in attendance to rally behind their holy father and pull their country away from European oppression. From this moment, Father Miguel Hidalgo would no longer merely be the religious leader of his parish’s flock. He would become the father of the Mexican revolution.

At first, the creoles and land-owning mestizos favored this idea of revolution from below. In their eyes, once the peninsulares were gone, they’d be able to slip comfortably into their former leaders’ shoes. But unfortunately, the riotous thousands who first only targeted the offices and homes of the peninsulares, eventually pointed their shovels, knives and pistols at any member of the propertied elite. At this point, Hidalgo’s little revolution had to be put down. He was quickly arrested, sent to trial and less than eleven months after his first speech, his body was introduced to an array of bullets from a firing squad. Revolutionary hero #1 – dead.

But the revolutionary dam had been breached.

Next up, Jose Maria Morelos, also a preacher and a student of Miguel Hidalgo. He picked up where Hidalgo left off, proving himself a far more impressive military commander than his mentor. Morelos beat the Spanish in a few dozen battles before eventually taking the coastal Spanish stronghold (and modern day Spring Break destination) Acapulco. Not content with mere military victories, Morelos took a page from the US guide to revolutions, forming a national congress, writing a Constitution and even formally declaring independence. He too was quickly captured, tried and executed by firing squad. Revolutionary hero #2 – dead.

If Mexico was ever to break free from Spain, they’d have to enlist the support of the creoles. Enter General Agustin de
Iturbide. In the early years of the Mexican independence movements, Iturbide actually fought against the revolutionaries, but events in Spain made Iturbide and his reps from the creole class reconsider their loyalties. When it appeared King Ferdinand was losing power back in Spain, it wasn’t clear if he would take the path of Portuguese King John VI and retreat to Mexico to claim his American throne. And even if he didn’t flee the chaos of Europe, how long was it really going to be before the masses rose up in unison, flipped society and established a republic? Either way, the creoles stood to lose, so instead of waiting to see how this drama played out, they took the initiative, forged a tenuous alliance with the Church, the landed elite and the revolutionaries, and secured independence for Mexico in 1821. General Iturbide then promptly crowned himself emperor, trashing any liberal hopes of a more democratic republic. Many were none too pleased with this turn of events, and eventually a new military force under the leadership of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna moved into the capital city, toppling Iturbide, the recently crowned emperor. He was then arrested, tried and executed by...you guessed it...firing squad. Revolutionary hero #3 - dead.

When Santa Anna assumed power, a few Latin American revolutionary precedents had already been set. First, Mexicans don’t like their traitors. Go against the government, you will die. Second, you can be a hero one moment and dead the next. Third, constitutions are adorable ideas, but they don’t actually have to be followed. Fourth, and most importantly, military leaders, or caudillos, controlled Latin American politics. The key to gaining and maintaining power rested in the hands of the army leaders. Violence consistently trumped diplomacy.

Santa Anna, the great hero who overthrew the evil emperor, increased his popularity through the 1820s as Mexico survived constant coups. He watched from his estates as, one after another, “elected” presidents found themselves confronting a rival army at capital’s footsteps. This rapid succession of deposed leaders ceased for a bit when Santa Anna, the protector of Mexico, the conqueror of Spain, the “Napoleon of the West,” rose to the presidency in 1833, a title he maintained off and on for the next two decades. But in 1857, again the disenfranchised, suffering horde grew tired of a president who cared nothing for the little guy, instead simply making sure the rich could keep getting richer. The Amerindians sought a leader from their own ranks. Benito Juarez, a non-military “Indian of the original race of the country,” rose
from his peasant background to become an accomplished lawyer and a respected champion of equality. With the backing of the United States, Juarez financed a coup of his own, replacing Santa Anna and promising to finally bring true representative government to the struggling nation.

This promise would have to be put on hold as the Mexican nobility had different plans. The peninsulares and the creoles had no intention of handing over power to a commoner. Unable to defeat Juarez on their own soil, but also not willing to accept an inferior stake in society, members of the Mexican nobility sent out a plea to Europe for help. Napoleon III of France answered the call. This Napoleon saw Mexico as his chance to again hold a French empire in the New World, while also draining profits from Mexican silver mines. He dropped his French troops in Mexico, defeated Juarez and then looked back to Europe for a candidate to install in the throne. France had recently reconciled with their bitter enemy, Austria, so Napoleon III agreed to send Austrian emperor Franz Joseph's brother to rule Mexico. This actually worked for a few years in the 1860s, as Austrian Maximilian became the Emperor of Mexico (until of course Juarez formed a new army, overthrew Maximilian, and had him killed by...wait for it...firing squad).

France was out of the American empire business once and for all, and this turned out to be a victory much-needed by the Mexican people. A few years earlier, they had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the USA when a border skirmish in Texas (“Remember the Alamo”) devolved into US troops marching on Mexico City. Surrounded and outgunned, the Mexicans surrendered and accepted the United States’ fifteen million dollar offer to buy all northern territories from Mexico. This little land heist left a bitter taste in Mexico’s mouth, especially since one of the newly-acquired regions (a place called California) ended up being home to one of the greatest gold discoveries of the last five hundred years. Mexico had already lost their prestige to the Americans; they regained a bit of their self-respect by repelling the French so they could try their hand at democracy.

Down in South America, the Spanish and Portuguese holdings were having an equally messy time securing self-government. Instead of looking at how every one of the remaining nineteen nations gained independence, let’s just focus on the three biggies – Brazil, Gran Colombia and the United Provinces of the
Rio de la Plata. Now the first one you might recognize, especially if you've kicked a soccer ball, but there's a pretty good chance you'd be out of luck if you tried to book some airline tickets to one of the last two. That's because they no longer exist. But they did for a brief moment in the early 19th century. It actually looked like the world might create a United States of Latin America.

At the northern tip of South America, right where the continent turns into the Isthmus of Panama, a wealthy, educated planter named Simon Bolivar had a vision for a united nation he called Gran Colombia. Bolivar was something of a hybrid hero. He had the international diplomacy skills of a John Adams, the enlightened knowledge of a Thomas Jefferson, the military acumen of a George Washington and the toughness of a street fighter. Foreign dignitaries treated him as an equal. His troops trusted him as a man who would fight side by side with them to the end. He couldn't throw off imperial rule without a coalition of the not-so-willing. He crisscrossed the countryside, finally convincing the slave-owning plantation gentry, the cowboys of the interior valleys (the llaneros), the Amerindians living in the mountains and even the freed (and soon-to-be freed) slaves that they all could benefit from independence.

The Amerindians, the largest portion of Spain's American empire, were the hardest to convince. They rightfully had trust issues as they had survived centuries of brutal slaughter. Most recently, the European leaders viciously repressed Tupac Amaru's revolt in 1780. Tired of the rampant persecution that left his people penniless, exploited and demoralized, Tupac Amaru II (a mestizo with a familial claim to Incan royalty) staged a rebellion against Spain. It lasted a few months before he was captured and forced to watch the brutal murder of his family before he was tied to four horses. These horses tore his limbs from sockets, leaving his ripped appendages to be staked across the region as a reminder of Spanish superiority. This event didn't exactly solidify positive Amerindian-Spanish relations.

So even after Simon Bolivar convinced many of the Amerindian tribes to join his cause, they were rightfully cautious. Bolivar's precarious alliance gained one more critical supporter after he travelled to Jamaica. There, he secured the services of British mercenaries fresh off the Napoleonic battlefields and more than willing to lease their military gifts to the highest bidder. The Spanish proved no match for Bolivar's hodgepodge of mercenaries, slaves, Amerindians and nobles, all financed by England's war
chest. In 1824, Bolivar’s forces overpowered the Spanish army, securing independence for his Gran Colombia.

At the same time as Bolivar was weaving together a political and military alliance, Jose de San Martin was persuading cowboys, former slaves and some ranchers to fight for his noble cause. He too was able to defeat the Spanish, and in 1824, he established the Provinces of the Rio de la Plata. But both Martin’s and Bolivar’s experiments with a federation of united states ultimately failed. Whereas the thirteen US colonies all shared a common British background and were all nestled along the East Coast, the Latin American nations proved too divergent to forge any lasting union. The topography was insurmountable, no real network of roads existed, the diverse populations proved unwilling to compromise for a distant people they never met and the entire idea of democracy proved absurd to peoples who only knew hereditary monarchies. By 1831, Gran Colombia had splintered into Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The Provinces became Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. The dream of a United States of Latin America died.

To the east, in Portuguese Brazil, the path to sovereignty took a bizarre route that, although unorthodox, provided the new nation with the stability it would need to survive and prosper after independence. Unlike the Spanish colonies that saw a power vacuum when Napoleon toppled the crowns of the European powers, Brazil actually saw their monarch, King John VI, flee the peninsula, taking refuge in Río de Janeiro. He continued to rule Portugal while in exile, but when Napoleon was eventually defeated, he rushed back to the comfort of his palaces in Portugal to rule his people in person. The timing of his repatriation couldn’t have come at a more dangerous era in Latin American politics. If King John didn’t make some concessions to the people, he would soon find his American holdings going the way of the rest of South America. So he turned Brazil over to his son Pedro. Unlike his father, Pedro knew only Brazil (he had arrived when he was nine), and saw himself more as a son of the Americas than a son of royal Europe. He understood the frustration of the Brazilians, believing their plight a just and noble cause.

And this was where the Brazilian independence movement swayed from the creole-led military insurrection blueprint that had freed one nation after another. This revolution was led by one man – Emperor Pedro. In 1822, he declared independence, and his father did nothing (some might argue it was because a father didn’t
want to fight his son; others might say it was actually the father who came up with the whole idea to ensure Portugal would keep at least a little bit of influence. Pedro then set up a constitutional monarchy that pulled the creoles into an assembly while coincidentally keeping him as emperor.

This little arrangement kept the peace for a few more years, but Pedro increasingly made enemies with the wealthy landowners. First, he condemned slavery as the cancer of their society, but more importantly he ruled over a failing economy. Inflation was out of control and trade with Europe sunk to new lows. As tension mounted, Pedro felt he too would soon be overthrown, so he did what any other man would do in his position. He hopped on a boat for Portugal, leaving his son to run the country.

The problem was...his son, Pedro II, was only five years old. Now, even taking into account that kids might have matured faster in the 19th century, odds are this mini-man wasn’t able to fully administrate the economic and political needs of this vast nation. For the next ten years, a regency made choices for him until he reached the ripe old age of fifteen when he could officially be crowned Emperor of Brazil. He held this position for another 40 years, only being overthrown in 1889 by a military coup. In these forty years, he brought peace, stability, expanded personal freedoms and rapid economic growth to Brazil, making it the dominant nation in a region which struggled to gain its footing.

In the decades that followed these revolutions, Latin America labored to create governments and economic systems that would prove lasting and inclusive. One of the primary debilitating factors was the existence of caudillos, local warlords who always sat in the background threatening to rise up and overthrow whoever sat in the president’s seat. The elected officials could totally trust that their reign wasn’t in jeopardy, so they subsequently drained the government coffers creating personal militaries that could combat the inevitable coup. Another impediment to an enduring government was the complete lack of a political tradition. Unlike in the thirteen American colonies to the north where England allowed the individual counties and towns to run their own elections and create their own assemblies, no such pattern of representative government existed in the hierarchical Latin American nations. As products of the Iberian monarchical governments that limited personal freedoms and granted rights based on birth, the creoles, mestizos and Amerindians knew little
of how a Bill of Rights could actually function. Likewise, the Church stood in the way of a reorganization of society. The Founding Fathers of the United States of America were Protestants or Deists who wanted to ensure a separation of church and state. In Latin America, the Catholic Church had too much to lose. They were huge landowners in their own right, but they also controlled intellectual thought, maintaining a monopoly on the education system. Any constitution that might encroach on these rights would not be tolerated.

Lastly, the Latin American nations, all twenty of them, housed populations that proved too diverse to rule. On one end of the spectrum they had the remnants of European nobility, expecting to be treated with deference and obedience. At the other extreme, they had the vast Amerindian population who either existed in abject poverty or remained completely outside the sight of “civilized” society. They had a clergy who wanted to maintain order and control the minds and souls of the people through God’s will. They also had a growing liberal elite who wanted to see rights awarded to individuals in the model of the western European nations. There were city dwellers who toiled their days away in factories, miners who survived a life in the darkness of mountain tunnels and ranchers who lived in open plains. How could any one leader appease the needs of these groups? Every time a constitution was created to set the country on course, one of the disenfranchised groups would cry foul, claiming they were being ignored. An opportunistic leader would inevitably jump into the fray, promising to better equalize society. If this populist hero ever did take power, he would almost assuredly underwhelm his constituents, and the cycle of discouragement would start all over again.

Even when political rights eventually trickled down, for many, it was their economic despair that posed the larger problem. For three centuries, the Latin American economy was crippled by an economic system where Europeans stripped the region of its raw materials and kept its indigenous population illiterate and consigned to agricultural and mining labor. When the Latin American nations finally emerged and tried to enter the global marketplace, they were at an extreme disadvantage. A century behind England’s Industrial Revolution, the Latin American emerging manufacturing sector couldn’t compete with the cheap goods that continued to pour into their ports from across the pond. Not only did they have to make up for lost ground, but their
urban populations swelled at such rates that no amount of municipal planning could keep pace with the massive infrastructure nightmares. As more and more Church lands and small farms were picked up by corporate landholders, millions more displaced peasants migrated to their final option – the cities. That pattern of displacement and urbanization has continued into the 21st century, with Latin America today laying claim to three of the top twenty most populated cities in the world (Sao Paulo – 22 million, Mexico City – 21 million and Buenos Aires – 14 million).

As the Latin American nations strained to cope with the array of obstacles that emerged once they freed themselves from European rule, across the globe, nations had to deal with the new threat from the West. For in the late 19th century, European nations possessed a newfound voracious appetite for resources and markets to appease their industrial gods. They roamed the seas, equipped with naval forces armed like no other in the history of the world. Anyone in their paths faced one decision – trade or be conquered. How each nation answered that question would determine their fate into the next century.

But that is for another chapter.
And yes, once again we’re back to the land of revolutions. But this time the stakes are a bit higher. Sure, each of the preceding revolutions altered how we look at the world, but how much did they really change the lives of the average Joe? In 1500, the average European spent his days stuck on a farm, plowing the same land his family probably farmed for generations, hoping that, through God’s grace, the forces of nature would be kind enough to allow his family to survive just one more year. Three hundred years later, after all the so-called revolutions, how much had really changed?

Was this peasant suddenly a famed artiste peddling his wares to eager patrons across the continent? No. Did this peasant become a swashbuckling sailor braving the high seas to discover new lands? No again. How about when it came to his relationship with God? Did he now believe in Olaf, the great god of tree bark? Nope. His God was still the god of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. OK, he must have changed his perception of the world, constantly employing the scientific method to grasp unexplainable phenomena? Not exactly. Do you really think the average peasant cared that there were craters on the moon or that gravity makes fresh fruit fall to the ground? Pretty sure, neither of these thoughts kept him awake at night as he slept cuddled up to his portly pig in his one-room shack. Well, he must have felt more
Man and His Machines

enlightened, like he could stand up to the lords and ladies of the
shire and change the world solely through the power of his
convictions? Nope, he still fell prostrate to the man. So the
political revolutions of the United States and France must have
made his life better? Didn’t he now have a Constitution,
enumerated rights and even an all-powerful legislative branch that
constantly tried to devise ways to allow him to pursue his
happiness? No, in fact, he probably felt like the rich people who
used to rule him were merely replaced with new rich people
sporting slightly different accents.

The truth is that every one of the European revolutions of
the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries affected only a
small portion of the population. Looking back with our 21st
century goggles, we can see that these little revolutionary turning
points all put us on the path to where we stand today, that each
transformation took us one step further away from our Dark Age
past and toward our modern lives filled with joy, peace and online
shopping opportunities. But for the everyman, for that lowly
peasant who didn’t have access to the art, the ideas, the
experiences and the literature of the more affluent members of
society, for that man, the changes were anything but revolutionary.

Then came the Industrial Revolution. This one was the
biggie. In the history of mankind, this revolution ranks up there
with the discovery of fire, the wheel and his and her clothing
ensembles. Only one other revolution in human history comes
close to altering the lives of regular people to such a vast extent as
the Industrial Revolution – the Neolithic Revolution.

For the first 150,000-year reign of Homo sapiens, we spent
our lives roaming the countryside in constant pursuit of new
sources of food. Then came the Neolithic Revolution when we
settled into a more stable existence next to water sources where we
started growing crops, allowing a small percentage of our
civilization to use whatever free time was available to organize
governments, fashion an assortment of newly-needed goods and
define who and how we were to worship. Though it took on a
variety of forms from region to region, this agricultural existence
worked for the next 10,000 years.

Until 1750, when a series of tinkerers, entrepreneurs and
visionaries took the world in a direction that changed everything
about how we live our daily lives. Within a mere century, the
European peasant, who like his forefathers before who had lived as
slaves to the inescapable cycle of farming, finally found himself
living in a city, within walking distance of markets that sold every stuff and thing the human mind could concoct. And since these decades, one by one, the rest of the world has industrialized, continuing to take the global community further and further from our agricultural roots that were founded millennia ago on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

To “industrialize” means to change how goods are made. Before 1750, there were two ways to produce a good, market the good and move the good. You could either use manpower or animal power. Subsequently, there was always a limit to how much could be made. You could only go as fast as your two-legged or four-legged workers could take you, and because the speed of a human, a horse, a mule, an elephant or a camel hasn’t changed that much in a few thousand years, our productive efficiency really didn’t improve that much either. Industrialization meant, however, that goods would no longer be made by man and his pets. They would be made by machines. And this was what changed the world.

In retrospect, it looks obvious that by 1750, England had all ingredients needed to head down the path of industrialization. Their land was blessed with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of coal and iron ore. Because it’s an island, there was no point in England further than 100 miles from the sea – any good made could get out to the open seas with relative ease. It had a massive population of would-be workers. With the diet additions of the Transatlantic trade and the improved health due to sanitation and medical breakthroughs, more and more Englishmen were born and lived longer.

These workers were also “freed” from their land due to a series of recently passed laws that made it impossible to survive in the countryside if you weren’t a landowner. Prior to the 1750s, English towns almost always had an area known as “the commons,” where anyone was free to use the land as they pleased. These common areas (think National Park without the park ranger, the fragrant outhouses and Smokey the Bear) could be ten acres; they could be thousands of acres. Townspeople shared these lands for hunting, cutting down trees or even farming. A man who didn’t own land could survive for years on the commons (in fact Robin Hood made himself a hero hanging out in the Sherwood commons). However, as England’s population increased, would-be landowners pressured the English Parliament to make more land available for private ownership. Where did they look? The
commons. The Parliament eventually passed a series of Enclosure Acts that partitioned the commons into individual tracts of land. They then lined the lands with hedged fences and sold it to the people. Those with money now had their property. Those without were homeless, and these vagrants became the workforce England's cities would soon crave.

England also had three other fairly critical characteristics. They had the right amount of cash, the right government and the right mindset. By 1750, they had grown wealthy off their colonization, exploiting the natural resources and a percentage of the profits from their overseas kingdoms. During these ages of exploration and colonization, England had developed a banking system that not only extended credit to entrepreneurs, but also facilitated individual investment in shares of a corporation. People bought stocks. And unlike the other European nations, England enacted property laws that firmly protected this newly-minted wealth, providing the assurance needed for continued entrepreneurship. These property laws extended beyond owning chunks of dirt or a building. They included intellectual property. You owned what you envisioned. In England, if you invented a gadget, you'd be the one getting rich off that gadget. Lastly, England benefited from their knowledge of the ideals espoused during the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. A nation of men schooled on the scientific method and the belief that man had the power to manipulate nature saw the world differently than those who came before. These men saw the problems of production, energy, transportation and communication as merely obstacles to overcome, obstacles that with the right planning and investigation could be readily surmounted.

This was where the inventors entered the scene. England already had a successful textile industry. For two centuries, it had relied on the putting-out system (no giggling allowed), a system where a man with a wagon full of thread dropped off his materials at a woman's cottage and she then spent her nights and the cold winter days weaving the fabric into some sort of wearable piece of clothing. This system worked, just not fast enough. In 1764, a weaver named James Hargreaves invented the “Spinning Jenny” which could produce fabric eight times faster than before.

A few years later in 1768, Richard Arkwright invented the water frame, a device that used the energy of running water to weave thread. Though some claim Arkwright stole the idea from another man, it was Arkwright who took the idea and put it to
work on a massive scale. Today known as the father of industrialization, Arkwright eventually built a series of factories adjacent to the rivers of Derbyshire County, and then watched as his businesses exploded. Soon others wanted in on the Arkwright magic, and water-run factories started popping up across England. This was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Textiles were the goods, and the machines were the producers. Arkwright had revolutionized manufacturing and for his effort he received a knighthood from the king and millions of dollars from those wanting to use his patents to the water frame. He became the world’s first industrial capitalist. Before there was Gates, Jobs and Zuckerberg, there was Arkwright.

But he was only the beginning.

The next problem that needed to be solved was the placement of factories. Factories had relied on waterpower, which meant for your business to flourish, you had to stick your factory next to a river. But there was only so much river real estate available. To grow your industry, more energy was needed from a more mobile source. James Watt looked to the coal mines for inspiration. One of the difficulties in mining coal was the deeper the miners dug, the more their tunnels filled with water. Pumps were set up to extract the water in a never-ending series of bucket-liftings. This method was unfortunately inefficient as horses (and their horsepower) were the only energy sources available, so mine operators experimented with steam engine pumps. Using steam as a power source dates back to the Pax Romana, to a mathematician named Hero, but it could never be used at a sizeable scale, because so much time, energy and money was wasted in trying to cool the engine down so it wouldn’t overheat or explode. Watt figured out a way to cool the steam engine down (which I won’t even try to explain because it has to do with cylinders and indicators and other mechanical doodads and I frankly don’t get it myself), and he also figured out how to make the steam engine turn a rod in a circular motion, meaning it could now power any number of motors or wheels. And in honor of his contributions to power, we forever after have measured energy using a unit called Watts.

Within a decade, English tinkerers came up with another innovation that helped take the Industrial Revolution to the next level – puddling. Not exactly an intimidating word, “puddling” is the process of turning iron ore dug from the ground into actually usable iron or steel. For centuries, metallurgists had already figured out how to heat charcoal, melt iron and shape it as they saw
fit. But this took a long time. A master metallurgist might spend hours in front of a furnace and only pull out a cubic foot chunk of usable iron. Wood subsequently remained the most commonly used material for construction, and iron was only used sparingly (and usually for weapons). Puddling however ended the age of wood, and brought the West into the age of heavy industry, the age of iron. Puddling uses coal, a brilliant little gift of nature that has 300 million years of stored energy. Once upon a time, the rainforests covering the earth were slowly buried deep beneath the earth’s layers, but before they fell to the powers of the plates, they had stored up thousands of years of the sun’s energy. By the time the British dug up this precious little energy gem, it had become the world’s perfect alternative energy (until oil came around in the 20th century).

The puddling process could produce much higher temperatures than mere wood fires, and this heat, coupled with frequent stirring, made the iron more moldable. With this evolution in material production, England could produce iron eight times faster than before. England skies were filled night and day with the coal burning furnaces that churned out iron bars, rails and sheets at a record pace. This nation that produced 17,000 tons of steel in 1740 was producing over 3,000,000 tons of steel in 1840. England became the “workshop of the world” and one after another, investors and inventors jumped at the opportunity to make a financial killing.

The entrepreneurs were off and running. The steam engine could be hooked up to any factory machine and could power it almost indefinitely. All that was needed was a ready supply of coal to heat the machines. Canals were built to carry the coal from the mines, but still, a cheaper, more efficient transportation method needed to be created to move the coal from the distant mines to the heart of the factory district. Why not hook up a steam engine to one of those horse drawn carriages? The first steam engine car was attempted in 1769, but it wasn’t exactly efficient. It had three wheels, travelled at a staggering 2.5 miles an hour (just a pinch slower than how fast humans walk), and was linked precariously to a steam engine that jutted out from the vehicle (picture a freakishly huge tricycle attached to a huge barrel of boiling water). This awkward design, coupled with the fact that there were maybe only a few dozen paved roads in all of Europe, meant the mechanical car would have to wait a century until Daimler Benz came up with a better-looking four-wheeled version.
But was there another option? What about if someone combined the power of the steam engine with the durability of iron rails? Couldn’t someone just attach a steam engine to a carriage, link it to a bunch of other carriages and then slide it along miles of elevated, parallel rail tracks? Someone did. In 1804, engineer Richard Trevithick’s steam locomotive made the first trip in Wales, launching the start of the rail age. England and then the United States would spend the rest of the 19th century producing more iron than anyone in human history, criss-crossing their nations with steel rails, making trans-continental travel seamless and putting every citizen within days of sending their goods to the global market. By 1900, America had put down nearly 200,000 miles of railroad track, and, coupled with England, they accounted for 90% of the world's railways. The goods made in record time could then be brought to market almost instantly. Over the course of human history, man had never been able to transport goods over long distances at an average rate faster than five miles per hour. Trains could guarantee speeds of up to 40-50 miles per hour.

The steam engine didn’t only transform travel by land. No longer would transoceanic journeys sit vulnerable to the randomness of nature. Seasonal currents, unpredictable storms and fickle winds constantly threatened the success of the sailing ships that took to sea. Once the steam engine met the screw propeller, trips across the Atlantic could be made in half the time at 1/7 the cost. In 1607, the Mayflower travelled from England to the United States in 67 days. By 1800, sailing ships peaked at making the journey in about a month. Steam ships left these vessels in their wake. By 1850 the trip was made in eleven days, and by the end of the century a German vessel could cross the Atlantic in just over four days (today a United Airlines flight takes just about six hours).

As coal and iron continued to pour into the factories, and finished goods rapidly streamed out to the international market, factory managers had to increasingly modify how they organized their workforce and their physical resources. The most basic change was figuring out where goods should be produced. Under the domestic putting out system, raw materials were brought to the laborer. Now the laborer was brought to the raw materials. Factories proved to be the only buildings large enough to house the massive steam engine machines, as well as the huge labor pool needed to make the purchase of said machine worthwhile. Often, the factory owners even built nearby tenements (the mother of today’s apartment slums) so their workers could roll out of bed,
stagger to the factory and work from 6:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night. Slaves to a clock and rarely ever seeing the sun, these workers were then taught to follow a Monday through Saturday work week. The inclusion of Monday as a work day was a tough adjustment for many, as Monday had almost become a hangover day, where those who partook in a bit too much fermented ale the previous Sunday eve stayed at home to sleep off their drunken revelry. To take even more of the fun out of work, the factory managers divided labor so that each hand specialized in a task he would repeat thousands of times, day in and day out. This specialization of labor turned work into a mind-numbing, repetitive process, sucking the spirit out of their workforce. But worker happiness was the least of the new entrepreneurs’ concerns, for coupled with the new machines, these cogs could spew out products hundreds of times faster at one-hundredth the cost.

Just as all the features of the Industrial Revolution were coming together - improved energy sources, transportation networks and methods of organization - an agricultural tragedy produced an even larger pool of workers to feed the insatiable hunger of the factory beasts. A few of the creations of the industrial age were the mammoth farm tractors, seed drills and threshing machines that plowed the land, planted the seeds, watered and fertilized the fields and harvested the crops faster than any group of men ever could. Since the dawn of farming in Mesopotamia, the Indus River valley and the Yellow River in China, man had unfailingly tried to improve his tools, but inevitably he always remained handcuffed by the speed of animal or human power. The coming of the agricultural machines meant the death of the independent farmer. He couldn’t afford to buy the machines, and he couldn’t grow the crops at a rate that could ever compete with his more capital-rich neighbor. Hundreds of thousands of farmers found themselves unable to make ends meet on the farmlands their families had held for centuries, they too being forced to hopelessly relocate to the cities. In the 1840s, these displaced farmers were joined by the millions of Scottish and Irish who were fleeing the potato famine that had killed over 1.5 million of their brethren.

Unfortunately, the cities that met these millions of migrants were in no way ready for the pace and scope of the urban migration. Hundreds of families lived side by side in the squalor of a tenement, buildings that might only have a couple windows per floor, one bathroom to be shared by a dozen families and no
running water. Chamber pots of feces and urine were merely dumped out onto the street and hygiene hit all-time lows as many would not bathe for months, if not years. With thousands of strangers hacking phlegm on each other, living in each other’s filth and excrement and eating in the same bacteria-infested living quarters, diseases like cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis found the optimal environment to be fruitful and prosper. In the 1840s and 1850s, these three diseases accounted for over a third of all deaths in major cities, and until the governments could find a way to separate the drinking water from human waste, these numbers continued to climb.

Escaping the tenement brought little relief. The canals and rivers were filled with human sewage and the toxic run-off of factory waste. The air was filled with the smoke of the ceaseless coal fires that coated every wall, window and vehicle with black dust. This black dust and the other toxins introduced to man’s daily life meant a surge in the number of cancers and other maladies that first debilitated and then took the lives of their urban victims. Entering the factory or the mines presented yet another series of hazards that threatened to handicap, maim or even kill the insignificant human cogs in the machine. With no safety regulations, the exhausted men and women could readily lose a limb or even their lives.

For children, life was unbearable. At the age of eight, city kids were expected to bring home a wage, having to accept a mere \( \frac{1}{4} \) of the pay of their adult counterparts. These diminutive workers became the ideal candidates for plunging into the darkness of the coal mines or cleaning and repairing the factory machines. In the mines, the 16-hour days bent over in the darkness of the tunnels led to stunted growth, malnourishment and all the lung diseases afflicting their elders. In the factories, their fatigue and inconsistent attention spans led to a slew of industrial accidents that took their lives or forever cast them among the rising number of invalids roaming the streets.

The factory owners had no incentive to improve the working standards or provide health insurance. An army of the destitute waited outside their factory gates more than willing to step in to replace any fallen worker. A woman whose misplaced hair pulled her into the machine, ripping her skin from her skull, could expect to be replaced on the line within the hour. Mortality rates skyrocketed and life expectancy for these urban poor plunged to a mere 30 years of age.
It would be too easy to focus on the urban filth and despair facing these first generations of industrial laborers, but this requisite phase of misery was short-lived and the long-term benefits more than made up for these few decades of hopelessness. Remember, the Industrial Revolution marked the most radical shift in human history, and not merely because it made life pretty uncomfortable for the first few generations of workers. For the growing middle class of factory managers and entrepreneurs, an entire world of consumption became available. Before, only the landed aristocrats and nobles had access to the finer things in life, but now the man who started a company and made it profitable could expect to employ servants, adorn his house with prized art and furniture, clothe his family in the freshest fashions, enroll his children in the finest schools and find entertainment in one of the many growing entertainment venues that included theaters, museums and restaurants.

The existence of this growing managerial class, a group later labeled the bourgeoisie, always stood in stark contrast to the vast working class, the proletariat. Unlike the Western birthright class distinctions that appeared almost divinely chosen, these industrial distinctions were based solely on money. One group earned the money from the labor of another. But because this newly-wealthy class was always within sight of the laborers, their status always appeared just within grasp. If the father couldn't reach a life of comfort, maybe then could his son, or more probably, his grandson. Wealth determined class, not birth (though being born to an already established family still had its advantages).

But still, why was this revolution unlike the rest? To what extent was it truly transformative? First, it transformed family life. Before, moms and dads worked all day with daughters and sons. They worked together, they ate together, they worshipped together. Dad was the boss, mom stayed in the house and children only spoke when spoken to. Not after industrialization. As children entered the workforce and moms left the home to make a wage at a factory, family dynamics changed forever. Instead of going through life together, families merely caught up with each other at night with a “What did you do today?” The labor of fathers was “outsourced” to the much cheaper females and children. Role models stopped being family elders and started being the titans of industry. Wealth became the end-all, be-all...and it still is today. Ask any soon-to-be high school graduate
what they want to be when they grow up, and the answer they'll most likely come back with will be – RICH. Few will respond with “I just hope I have a strong balance between spirituality and community service, while maintaining a strong rapport with my parents through to their golden years.” Eventually though, these empowered women and children survived the despair of urban filth and horrific working conditions and gradually found their voice. By the 20th century, they were speaking out and demanding rights never thought possible in earlier eras. The lines of gender and age appropriateness had been severed.

Second, the West could unofficially start taking over the world. Save for a few golden centuries of the Greeks and Romans, for the whole of human history, by any yardstick, the West fell far behind the worlds of the Muslims, the Indians and the Chinese. Not anymore. With their mass-produced munitions that could put a gun in the hand of any able-bodied youngster, their steam-powered ships that could journey up rivers deep into the heart of an inland empire and their colossal supply of cheaply produced goods, no society was safe from the voracious touch of the Western industrialized powers. England took the early lead over Germany, the United States, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, but the rest of the West soon caught up. England's arsenal of steel weapons dwarfed the rest of the world, their ships accounted for ½ of the world's entire maritime supply and their population skyrocketed (London housed three million inhabitants in 1860, making it the largest city in the world). Over the course of the second half of the 19th century, the Western European powers subjugated almost the entire planet, placing close to 80% of the world's population under its economic or political sphere. This geopolitical shift completely flipped the power balance that had existed since the age of the Guptas, the Zhou Dynasty and the age of Muhammad. We have all inherited this world where the West dominates and only in the last decade have the perennial power players from the East returned to their perch as the dominators and not the dominated.

Third, people started being naughty. For centuries in the West, human behavior was under the constant watchful eye of village elders, the church hierarchy and their parents. Now they were on their own. The Ten Commandments became more recommendations than absolute laws. The symbolic shift in cities where factories stretched further to the heavens than church steeples meant city dwellers now worshipped the almighty dollar
over the teachings of Jesus and the mandates of God. After a fifteen-hour day at the factory, workers were more inclined to hit the pub than the pew. Alcoholism rates swelled and as more and more men found themselves unemployed, robbery, gambling, prostitution, assault and even murder became more common. The city governments fell far behind in their ability to regulate these mounting indiscretions. Regional and ethnic gangs filled the power void, offering “protection” to those trying to survive in a world of chaos and random acts of violence. Until the municipalities found a way to police the streets and provide jobs and social services to the disenfranchised vagrants, the values once dictating individuals’ daily choices were replaced with the most base survival instincts.

Fourth, the meaning of work forever changed. Man used to be self-sufficient. On the secluded farms of Europe, a farmer built his home, crafted his furniture, milked his cows, harvested his crops and taught his children. But the age of the family farm ended. By 1860, nearly 70% of Englanders lived in cities. Once farming went the way of the industrialized factory, a few men with some machines could produce far more than when the entire population worked the fields. For those who once spent a lifetime mastering a skill – the blacksmiths, weavers, metallurgists and craftsmen – the age of machines meant the end of their value. In a stroke of one generation, the skills that had for centuries been passed down from master to apprentice, became obsolete. A twelve-year-old in front of a spinning loom in Liverpool could produce more clothes than a skilled weaver in Delhi could ever imagine. The farmers and the artisans who built their world with their hands became interchangeable parts in the nation’s economy. Now, we can’t over-romanticize life on the farms (it was pretty darn boring hoeing a field or picking ripened fruit), but the sense of completion, the feeling that you were working toward a higher goal, vanished as man became slaves to the weekly pay stub. Some raged against the machine, forming a posse of the ticked off to enter the factories and destroy the challengers to their livelihood. The most famous group, the Luddites, demolished the automated looms and riled up the working class, scaring the bejeebers out of factory owners. Eventually, the British legislature made destroying a machine a capital offense, punishable by public execution. Even today, the term Luddite has come to represent anyone unwilling to embrace the latest technology – “Hey Tiffany, I can’t believe you haven’t bought the iPhone 27 yet. You’re such a Luddite.”
And lastly the relationship between employer and employee created tensions that would eventually explode into cries for change, or, in some cases, revolution. The workers of the world got tired of taking orders from the man, and once the powerless masses realized their strength in numbers (especially since they now all lived huddled together in tenements), they began pressuring the legislative branches and their bosses for the big three – fewer working hours, better working conditions and improved wages. Sometimes this pressure manifested in the creation of labor unions that collectively pushed for more rights, but other times more drastic measures were needed. By the end of the 19th century, men began considering the words of Karl Marx and his theories that the factory owners could be overthrown, launching humanity into its next and last stage of economic development – a world where all goods were shared equally amongst the community, a world not unlike life before the Neolithic Revolution.

But that is for another chapter.
By 1850, all of Western Europe was well on its way to full industrialization. The rewards were just too great, and the costs were reasonably easy to overlook. The innovative machines and techniques that launched England to the head of this production revolution were soon copied by France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. An island revolution became a continental revolution. Then it hopped over the pond and hit the United States.

It could have ended right there. The West could have maintained its monopoly on industrialization for probably a few more centuries, and the world would be none the wiser. The great civilizations of the world – India, China and Dar al Islam – weren’t exactly clamoring for all things Western (their previous experiences had proven the futility of trading with these backwards people), and the rest of the world was content to live regionally-isolated, independent lives of farming, herding, hunting and gathering.

But Europe wouldn’t have it. Partly out of the desire to help out the unenlightened of the world, but mostly to feed the unquenchable thirst of the factory beasts, the Western European nations spent the second half of the 19th century taking their tools and their knowledge to the furthest corners of the planet. By
1914, at the onset of World War I, close to 80% of the planet’s population was under the economic or political domination of a Western power. From the rainforests of Malaya to the harbors of China, from the coasts of Australia to the plains of inner Africa, and from the fields of Argentina to the mountains of India, the non-Western world became the producers of the raw materials needed to feed Western machines and they also became the sometimes reluctant consumers of the vast goods spat out by these machines. The factories might reside in the sprawling cities of London, New York, Paris, Berlin, Chicago and Vienna, but the raw materials came from the hands of villagers sometimes more than 10,000 miles away. In this era that would become known as the Age of New Imperialism, Europe had created a truly global economy, and we could never go back to being isolated again.

But why in 1850? How was this possible? Through the revolutions of the 16th to 18th centuries – the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the political revolutions – the West learned that they were not merely inhabitants of the earth, they were the masters of it. They no longer were subject to the superstitions and randomness that kept man trapped in ignorance. Man was the one who controlled his fate, and he could use the resources of the planet to make machines to make his life more productive and more efficient. Once man had the mindset, a confluence of events and ideologies made the second half of the 19th century the starting point for Western Europe’s march across the world.

Perhaps the greatest motivation for expansion was money. Money makes men move, and in the case of the Industrial Revolution, profit was king. But by the 1850s, profits were slowing down. The unprecedented growth rates achieved in the first phases of the manufacturing revolutions were unsustainable, and as more and more European nations borrowed the techniques of the industrialized, it appeared growth would soon flatline. Unemployment rates started climbing, the raw materials needed to make the goods started running out and the continental buyers able to gobble up the goods had already purchased everything they could afford. If the entrepreneurs were to survive, they’d have to look outside Europe and the United States to get past the invisible productivity barrier that threatened to undo the entire system. So they started looking elsewhere for the tin needed for their canning; the cotton needed for their textiles; the coal needed to fuel the machines; the rubber needed to finish their goods; the iron needed
to build the infrastructure; the copper needed to connect the
telegraph lines; the corn and wheat needed to feed their workers;
and the tobacco and coffee needed to keep the city dwellers
drugged up and ready to work another day. Once they found
which nations could best supply these raw materials, they could
then call on these same peoples to buy the goods once they rolled
off the factory floor.

Yet the Europeans weren’t solely motivated by the promise
of economic gain. They also thought it was their obligation to help
out the “little, unfortunate colored people” of the world. Today, to
make such a statement generates cries of racism, but in the 19th
century this arrogance had become the common perception
amongst Western elite. Basically, Europe was the first to
industrialize, create representative governments and see the planet
as something to be controlled, so it was obviously the home to the
most advanced peoples. Wasn’t it?

Literature was used to justify this belief. Charles Darwin’s
*The Origin of Species* was intended to show how species in the
natural world survived or perished based on their ability to adapt to
their environment. The species that had developed the most
useful adaptations had survived as the fittest, the rest suffered the
path of extinction. To some, this theory of evolution could be
likewise applied to the human race. In an odd bit of creative
analogy-making, the white man must then be the most dominant of
the human species because they had risen to the top of the
industrialized ladder. This belief in biological determinism, that
some races are just better than others, became en vogue amongst
the more educated classes, even leading to so-called scientific
experiments that attempted to quantitatively rank each race from
smartest to most dense. In one ridiculous experiment, scientists
actually gathered thousands of skulls, filled them with little silver
balls and then measured which skulls could actually hold the most
balls. More balls equals bigger head. Bigger head equals smarter
person. And guess what they found? Yep, in a stunning turn of
events, these European scientists found that Europeans were the
wisest on the planet, followed far behind by the peoples of the
Americas, Asia and Africa. For those of you who have friends with
big noggin, you probably already know that big heads quite
regularly have nothing to do with IQ, but you’re just not
interpreting the data through 19th century Western eyes.

In 1899, Rudyard Kipling actually mocked this justification
for Western imperialism (though many of the time thought he was
actually championing the need for Western help) in his poem *White Man's Burden*. It mocked the prevailing conviction that the less civilized of the world were waiting for the West to take over their nations, showing them how to properly live. Kipling sarcastically speaks of “sullen peoples” who were “half-devil and half-child.” He recounts the need to wage “savage wars of peace” to “fill full the mouth of Famine and bid the sickness cease.” The world’s peoples were waiting for a hero to save them from themselves.

Answering this call to help out the poor and uncivilized were an army of missionaries and philanthropists, a 19th century version of today’s Peace Corps, who accompanied the captains of industry to every country that felt the touch of industrialization. In the late 19th century, this chance to proselytize to peoples who had never heard of God was an opportunity that they felt had to be embraced. In bringing God’s message to the people, they could also bring them education and better health. One additional motivation was to hopefully end the seemingly vulgar, uncultured behaviors of the heathens. Westerners looked in disgust at the barbaric practices they encountered. They felt they had to act once they heard the stories of continued slavery, girls who had to marry at eight years old, men who married more than one wife, families who killed newborn daughters and communities that forced widows to commit suicide by fire upon the death of their husbands. These missionaries, nurses, teachers and humanitarians would help bring these people out of the darkness and into the light of proper behavior. They weren’t always welcomed with open arms.

Aside from the profit hunger and cultural arrogance, many of the reasons for colonizing the world concerned geopolitical issues that meant nothing to the people of distant lands. As each of the European nations evolved, they started to take deeper pride in their country’s history and their country’s place in the world. At about this same time, compulsory education was popping up all over Western Europe, meaning generations of children were raised hearing of their country’s heroes, their victories in battle, their famed artists and their unsurpassed customs and traditions. This growing sense of nationalism meant that citizens were more than willing to support their governments as they amped up their militaries and journeyed outwards to prove their superiority. Just as the high school boy pumps iron for hundreds of hours to hopefully look tough and intimidate some of the other wanna be
alpha males, Western Europe also started finding ways to puff up their holdings, as any territorial addition to one’s domain was one less for its Western neighbor. Another way to prove your status was to build huge armies. Napoleonic ideas of conscription, where able-bodied men were drafted into military service, meant Europe had massive standing armies that could be deployed at a moment’s notice. By 1914, Russia had an army of over 1.3 million, Germany and France had close to a million and even Austria had about 500,000 soldiers.

Even more impressive than the sure volume of the forces was the awesome firepower each man wielded. Two of the more noteworthy goods produced by the Industrial Revolution were the breechloading, repeating rifles and machine guns. In 1800, an expert rifleman might be able to load, reload and fire off maybe three rounds a minute. Less than a century later, a repeating rifle could shoot off over fifty rounds a minute. And the machine guns? In 1876, the Gatling Gun could fire 200 rounds per minute. No tribal or indigenous military could ever contend with this awesome force.

Once Europe had the motivation and the means, the actual conquest and domination part was the easy proposition. Here was the European Ten Step Guide to Imperialism: 1) ask politely if the people would like to trade, 2) if this fails, park a ship in one of their harbors, launch a few artillery balls, and then repeat step one, 3) if this still fails to win them over, rout the local government and rule from the capital city, 4) if the rebels in the outskirts still continue to resist, send in a land army to put down any rebellions, 5) once the final insurgent gives up, hire the locals to run the economy, making sure they report to the Europeans in charge, 6) invite expatriates from your home country to join you in the capital city where they can assume the swankiest jobs available, 7) make a ton of cash off the labor of the locals, 8) bring over your wife and hire servants to attend to your every need, 9) build summer home in nearby hills, 10) enjoy the fruits of globalization.

In this manner, one by one the world fell to Europe. By 1914, the world had been divided between the United States, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Austria and Italy. But the trophy for 19th century masters of the universe goes to the founders of the Industrial Revolution, the country that housed the largest city on the planet in 1900, the home of Shakespeare, John Locke and the Beatles...you guessed it...Great Britain. By 1914, “the sun never set on the British Empire,” but as
you can see, the new kid on the block, the United States of America, had learned a few lessons from their historical mother country and were hanging in there with the big boys.

However, the United States had discovered a far more cost effective way of controlling foreign economies that was low on risks and expense, but heavy on rewards. Throughout Latin America and the South Pacific, the United States rarely had to resort to all out war. Instead they would employ just enough economic incentives and military threats to ensure they could expand their sphere of influence across both Americas, but without the cost of daily administration. In Columbia, the United States “encouraged” the peoples of the isthmus of Panama to break free from Colombian rule. Within months of breaking free, Panama miraculously made a deal with the United States to build a canal across their country, dramatically reducing the transportation costs of shipping across the Atlantic and Pacific. In Hawaii, Dole sugar planters asked for protection from the military, eventually replacing the indigenous queen with democracy, setting the stage for Hawaii to shortly after “voluntarily” join the United States. In Argentina, US Steel built the railroads and US merchants controlled the trade that touched these rail lines. The United States established the precedent that they would economically favor those in power that allowed American businessmen free reign to expand their industry, and those governments who denied American interests might find themselves facing a well-financed local insurgency. Play ball with American business interests and get rich. Or fight the system and your home-grown government could expect a coup. Not exactly a choice. By 1900, Latin America might have gained their political independence, but their economic independence stood decades away from coming to fruition.

So what happens when one civilization subjugates all others? What occurs when essentially the entire world exists so that the West could make and sell cheap stuff? What does this kind of inequity and hierarchical interaction do to the psyche of the ruled? Of the rulers?

It has become almost expected in recent history to condemn Europeans for their undeniably negative influence on the world. According to these denouncers of all things Western, the world’s economies were destroyed, tens of millions died horrific deaths or lived in abject suffering, entire cultures became extinct
and racism grew to all-time highs making it impossible for people of different societies to ever interact on an equal footing.

Was this true? What was the Western impact on the globe during and after this age of New Imperialism?

Well, it depends. There was no one experience that all colonizers and colonized shared. Take for instance Malaya (the region we today call Malaysia and Singapore). If you were a local rubber merchant, you prospered; a local farmer, you lost your edible crops; a hunter-gatherer, you found you had to migrate deeper into the forest. If you were a local leader that worked with the Europeans, you were rewarded handsomely; if you objected, you were imprisoned or dealt with more harshly. If you were a Christian missionary, you might convert a few more souls to your cause. If you lived in the cities, you might attend a Western school and buy Western clothes. If you lived in the rural areas you might be able to move your goods even faster to market. And this was just in one British colony. What about all the other situations, all the other nuances of religion, government and local reaction that might have produced an entirely different story? The truth was...there was no singular narrative to reflect European impact on the colonies of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Yet some themes did develop. Everywhere Europeans went, they improved the infrastructure of the region. They built roads, railroads, dams, hospitals, bridges and schools. They laid plumbing, telegraph and electricity lines. They might have made these choices to improve their own living conditions or ensure the speedy movement of goods, but regardless the motive, when they eventually did leave, they left behind some fairly impressive systems of communication, transportation and public health. They encouraged education, at both the primary and university level, even oftentimes bringing the most elite students back to Europe. These students might then return, educated on the enlightened ideals of Locke, Rousseau and Montesquieu, and demand their own country’s independence (though Europe learned the potential risk of this policy, so by the time they took over the African nations, these learning abroad programs had faded out of favor).

They improved the overall health and lifestyle of every society they touched. How can you best gauge the health of the world? Look at the overall population rates. The world started eating better, taking care of their bodies better and living much longer lives. At the time of Christ, we had 300 million people on the planet. 1600 years later, we had only doubled to 600 million
people. In the next 300 years, we doubled again to 1.2 billion. But by 1900, once everyone had been touched by Western influence, population numbers exploded like never before. By the year 2000, we were at 6 billion. Europe shared their knowledge of diseases and medicine, as well as improving the overall diets of the indigenous people. They taught the locals how to farm more efficiently, and in cases like Egypt, they even built dams that could double or triple crop outputs. As for quality of life, look what the puritanical Europeans did for some arguably disgusting traditions that still existed in the world in the 19th century. In India, the British banned the practice of *sati* where widows were thrown onto the funeral fires of their husbands. They also banned the practice of marrying girls under the age of eight. They pushed to end slavery across the African continent, a practice that had existed long before the Spanish and Portuguese hijacked the market in the 16th century. Humans ate better, lived healthier and died later. Yes, people still suffered in the world, but they've always suffered. But once the fruits of the Western revolutions spread around the world, these outer nations suffered a heck of a lot less. And yes, many of these effects came not from a European desire to help out their common man, but more self-serving reasons, but when it comes to health, to life and death, doesn't the end sometimes justify the means?

Nevertheless, certain elements of Western contact were harmful, oftentimes appalling. On the battlefield, Western armies slaughtered indigenous armies. European soldiers only recently trained in how to pull a trigger could wipe out a civilization of well-trained warriors yielding only leather shields, bows and arrows. In the Sudan, in the 1898 Battle of Omdurman, a British force of a few thousand wiped out a Sudanese army numbering over 40,000 in a matter of hours. Death toll: Sudanese – 11,000. British – 48. Even outside the battlefield, the brutality often continued unabated. For those who refused to turn their land over to the European settlers or were unable to pay the oppressive taxes assigned, violence became the next logical step. In Tasmania, in an event known as the Black War, settlers were given the order to shoot on sight any aborigines who refused to vacate the land. Essentially, the British settlers lined up, walked across the island and killed everyone they passed. In the Congo, the Belgian oppressors punished local men who didn't meet their harvesting quota by cutting off their ears, kidnapping their families or just killing them as examples until the requisite labor requirement was met. For
others, death was a slower process. Pushed off their ancestral lands, the first few generations of locals exposed to European industrialization couldn’t adjust, and ended up starving to death, unable to find food in this new world they had inherited.

Economically, the colonized nations started down a path that would make it impossible for them to ever compete with the industrialized nations on an equal playing field. While Europe pushed the envelope of technology and manufacturing efficiency, almost the whole of Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia was forced into a state of merely delivering the raw materials to Europe. The manufacturing process, and therefore the ability to make a profit, resided solely in the hands of Westerners. They became the haves and the rest of the world became the have-nots. Although these peoples might have entered the global marketplace, they couldn’t compete. They could never produce goods at the rate or at the cost of their Western rivals, a crisis many developing nations (in what has recently been called the Third World) still face even today.

Culturally, the rest of the world was made to adjust to the values, traditions and ethics of the West. Imperialists pressured locals to adopt Western notions of proper clothing, appropriate behavior and gender roles. This pressure, coupled with the economic mandates that required peoples to only purchase from their European colonizers, meant regional cultures were oftentimes supplanted, or even replaced. Cultures died. Languages were lost. The world had 20,000+ languages before the Europeans started colonizing. There are only about 6,000 left (and we’ll probably lose 3,000 more in the next three decades).

To this day, the rest of the world continues to struggle with how to survive in a world where a steady stream of Western culture fills our every sense, placing a higher value on foreign ideas than on native traditions. In many instances, the rise today of extremist Muslims willing to martyr themselves is not as much a war of religion, as it is one of cultural preservation in a world where the Western way is becoming the only way.

A century later, as transportation and communication networks exponentially advance, seeming to only “flatten” our world even more, we have started to see the cultural exchange going both ways. An American living in Mississippi is as apt to dine at a sushi restaurant as a family in Nagoya might sit down for a McDonald’s Value Meal.
Yet, back in 1850, the West’s New Imperialism forced countries to evaluate their place in the world and the direction of their civilizations. In the case of two of the oldest civilizations on the planet – the Chinese and the Japanese – the manner in which they reacted to the arrival of the Europeans would forever alter their histories. One nation collapsed. The other prospered. Neither would ever be the same again.

But that is for another chapter.
At the start of the 19th century, the Chinese were in no way ready for what the next century had in store for them. Their profits from trade were greater than ever. They were farming more land than ever. They manufactured a third of the world’s goods. Their people were living longer and their population had quadrupled in less than 200 years. They weren’t just prospering. They were the kings of the world.

And the encroaching influence of the Western powers barely registered a hint of concern. Europeans were nothing more than inconsequential nuisances who from time to time sent emissaries to spread their Christianity or hawk some useless wares. But aside from the silver the Europeans brought in from the American mines, there still wasn’t anything of interest Westerners could produce. The Chinese also restricted these foreigners to conducting all of their business out of one port – Canton. In 1793, when the British tried to expand their influence, Emperor Qianlong didn’t mince words in outlining the Middle Kingdom’s perspective:
“The celestial empire abounds in all things and lacks nothing. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious and have no use for your country’s products...It behooves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country...Tremble and Obey!”

Not exactly the words of a man who saw the death of his domain on the horizon. To the Chinese, the fruits of the Industrial Revolution held no value whatsoever. But in the next few decades, Britain proved they weren’t willing to take “no” for an answer. The Brits had already established the largest empire in human history, stretching from Australia to Singapore to India to Africa to Canada. One arrogant, misguided little Emperor wasn’t going to stop their progress.

And Britain’s push to open up China came at exactly the time the local Chinese were starting to get fed up with the ruling family. The Qing Dynasty had become victims of their success. Sure, their population had quadrupled, but there was no new land to feed these new generations. They had outgrown their resources. When the inevitable drought or flood or heat wave hit the fields, famine was always just a season away. For those fleeing the starvation of the countryside for the promises of city life, the reality of urban employment illustrated the futility of their existence. The massive population surge meant wages stayed low. If an employee didn’t like what his boss was paying him, there were thousands more desperately waiting outside to accept any meager salary. Living standards dropped, families started killing their babies (girls especially) and many resorted to drugs to escape the misery of life. When the Chinese looked for someone to blame, their pointed fingers usually landed on foreigners.

It was the Manchus, barbarians from Manchuria, who earned the Mandate of Heaven by wrestling away power from the Ming Dynasty in 1644. These Manchus had built on the successes of the Ming, creating the Qing Dynasty that initially expanded the wealth and health of their citizenry. But after a century and a half, their successes could not outweigh their contradictory foreign ideals. Knowing the majority Han Chinese weren’t big fans of foreigners, the Manchus secluded themselves in the Forbidden City and reserved all top government positions and benefits for their own people from the north. Their court officials had become corrupt and the regional scholar-bureaucrats cared more about their own personal comfort than maintaining the roads, canals and
irrigation systems that made China’s economy thrive and kept floods from spoiling crops. The Manchus had also enacted some laws that, though not debilitating, were more than a bit annoying. They banned books, homosexuality and the study of Confucian texts by commoners. They expected all women to act exactly the same – they couldn’t talk or laugh in public, couldn’t walk and look around at the same time and couldn’t wear dresses that rustled in the wind.

But these weren’t the foreigners the Chinese should have been worrying about. By 1840, the Qing Dynasty had allowed the population to swell to over 400 million, ruled by a Manchu population that numbered less than six million. But these few million Manchus weren’t the ones that would bring down the empire, it would be the few thousand Europeans trading in Canton and living in Macau. These barbarians from the West would be the ones that would set in motion a series of events that for almost a century altered China’s place in the world economy.

The Brits were just not willing to tremble and obey the emperor. They weren’t willing to accept trading in just one port, cut off from hundreds of millions of would-be consumers. Great Britain wanted more.

The first step Britain took was introducing a product to the Chinese that they just couldn’t refuse – opium. To a people increasingly frustrated by their lot in life, opium provided the perfect escape. Opium activates dopamine in the brain, and seconds after being inhaled, it transports the user to another world, free of pain, stress and anxiety. This state of euphoria is in itself addictive, but opium also causes physiological dependence. After a few uses, the body must have it. If not, the user faces the aching limbs, diarrhea, vomiting and insomnia that come with withdrawal. Similar to the other narcotics from the opiate family – heroin and morphine – once a user, always a user.

So with opium, Britain had the ideal good to break into the Chinese market. It was highly addictive, it was easy to transport and it was produced right next door in India. Britain had been looking for a way to exploit Indian labor for decades. Britain was no longer attracted to India’s cheap manufacture of clothing (their own Industrial Revolution made Indian fabric almost obsolete), but if Britain could put Indian farmers to the task of growing poppies, they would have themselves a gold mine.
The Brits traded through Chinese middlemen who set up opium dens where those with silver would sit down, take a couple drags from the opium pipe and then lounge around stoned for the rest of the day. After a few decades, few classes were immune to its temptation. By 1840, twelve million Chinese were addicted to this midnight oil. Society was falling apart. Productivity levels dropped and the government was impotent to do anything about it. How could they? 30% of all court officials were likewise addicts. The emperor saw his kingdom crumbling and attempted to cut the trade from within. In 1839, the government passed laws, forbidding the sale and usage of opium. 2000 opium hawkers were imprisoned or executed, and at the port town of Canton, 20,000 chests of opium were destroyed (the Asian version of America’s little Tea Party outing).

Emperor Lin Zexu made one final plea to Queen Victoria, cautioning the Queen that if they didn’t stop selling opium, he’d have no choice but to enforce “decapitation or strangulation.” He warned:

Even though the barbarians may not necessarily intend to do us harm, yet in coveting profit to an extreme, they have no regard for injuring others. Let us ask, where is your conscience? I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country; that is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries... if there are still those who bring opium to China then they will plainly have committed a wilful violation and shall at once be executed according to law, with absolutely no clemency or pardon...The barbarian merchants of your country, if they wish to do business for a prolonged period, are required to obey our statues respectfully and to cut off permanently the source of opium.

The Brits were less than pleased. Opium made up nearly 1/6th of Britain’s total GDP, pulling in close to one billion dollars a year in revenue. There was no way the merchants and the government were going to sit back and watch their golden goose perish without a fight. Within a year, British warships pulled up alongside dozens of port towns scattered along the Chinese coast, taking out each, one by one. The Chinese might have had 26 times more men than the Brits, but they were outgunned ten to one, and the Brits had even lined their ships with Indian soldiers to help subdue their Chinese foes. The Opium Wars had begun.

After three painful years of fighting, the Qing emperor saw no hope for victory and surrendered with Queen Victoria’s forces
right on the doorsteps of the port of Nanking. Many court officials committed suicide rather than see their country cowed by the enemy. For all of history, the Chinese were the kowtowed not the kowtowers. The authorities agreed to the Treaty of Nanking. They ceded Hong Kong permanently (or at least until 1997) to the British and they agreed to open up five ports to trade with Western nations. They could no longer set the tariff rates for imported goods, and most insulting of all, they had to grant extraterritoriality rights to British expatriates roaming their towns. No matter what any Brit did in China, they could not be held liable to Chinese laws. Like ambassadors today who have diplomatic immunity, these extraterritorial privileges meant that Europeans could do anything they wanted, without fear of punishment. If the Han Chinese were disgusted by foreigners before the Opium Wars, their growing hatred of barbarians only intensified in the final half of the 19th century.

Adding injury to insult, the Chinese also had to come up with 21 million ounces of silver to pay for the Opium War. They didn’t have this money, so they had to call on their neighbors for loans. And their neighbors were more than willing to lend a hand. But in exchange for the loans, these neighbors wanted collateral, something of Chinese value that would make it worth their while to send over some cash. What these neighbors wanted most was railroad access, so one by one, the Russians, the British and then the Japanese seized control of China’s countryside, building railroads connecting inland areas to Pacific ports, with all connected lands becoming the property of the foreign country.

China was falling apart. It was being whittled away by industrialists from Europe and even from East Asia. Their people were starving or stoned. Their infrastructure was outdated and crumbling. Their technological superiority was proven a myth by their embarrassing defeats at the hands of the Europeans and then the Japanese. They were a broken nation.

Imperial officials tried to rectify the situation, but it was too little too late. They sent officials across Europe, looking for strategies to industrialize quickly. They hoped they could hold onto the past by melding Confucian ethics with Western science. Scholar Feng Guifen argued, “What we have to learn from the barbarians is only one thing, solid ships and effective guns” (that’s actually two things, Feng). The Manchus tried repairing their broken government by weeding out corrupt officials and creating government banks that would encourage entrepreneurialism.
But the people still starved and the foreigners kept gaining more influence. The peasants started to rise up, demanding not just reforms, but an end to the Qing Dynasty. First, there was the Taiping Rebellion. This war was started in the early 1850s by Hong Xiuquan, a peasant who saw himself as the younger brother of Jesus Christ (yes, you read that right). He felt he was sent by God to free his Chinese brethren from the tyrannical rule of foreign Manchus. This rebellion started with simply a few villages that refused to bow to Manchu authority. But Hong was in the right place at the right time. Many were drawn to his philosophies that promised to kick out the foreigners, redistribute land to the poor, end the private trade that was leading to enormous income disparities and abolish the horribly painful custom of foot binding. Most followers weren’t totally buying into his whole Christ-brother declaration, but they were willing to overlook this little bit of insanity for a chance at food and safety.

And it worked. Through guerrilla warfare and just pure numbers, by 1860, Hong’s forces had 40 million people under their control across south and central China. The Qing forces refused to cede power to Hong, even aligning with French and British forces to push back the movement. But it was too little too late. By the time the rebellion fell in 1864, after a decade of catastrophic civil war, nearly 30 million people had perished due to starvation, disease or force, making it the bloodiest conflict in the history of the world (until of course the 20th century where the two world wars would claim this shameful title). The war left towns abandoned, crops untended and roads reduced to rubble. Peasants liked the idea of robbing from the rich and giving to the poor, and the Communist Party would tap into this desire in the 20th century as it scoured the countryside looking for supporters.

But before the 20th century would arrive, several additional rebellions demonstrated that the Qing Dynasty’s hold on the Mandate of Heaven was in its waning days. To the north, the Nien Rebellion took the lives of a couple hundred thousand soldiers and civilians over two decades. To the west, the Dungan Revolt claimed another fifteen million lives. Coupled with the Taiping Rebellion, these costly civil wars disturbed the flow of food and goods through the economy, but also drained the Qing Dynasty’s ability to defend itself from external threats.

The greatest external threat came after the Qing’s failure to quell the disturbances of a secret society of unemployed men known as the Fists of Righteous Harmony (or “Boxers” as they
were known to Westerners impressed by their martial arts skills. These Boxers had one thing in common – their hatred of foreigners. They hated the fact that they brought opium into their country. They hated the fact that Christianity was spoiling their traditional values. They hated the fact that Europeans didn’t have to follow the laws of the land. And they hated the fact that their lives were shorter, their bellies were less full and their wages didn’t buy what they could, once upon a time. And who was to blame for all of society’s ills? Westerners. And which Westerners were most visible in the villages of rural China? Christian missionaries. It was this group of wandering proselytizers that was easiest to denounce, and in the late 1890s, the Boxers started attacking Christian residents, killing missionaries and burning churches. Only a few dozen missionaries ever saw any real danger, but the European powers were taking notice, just waiting for an excuse to deploy their forces and take an even greater chunk of China’s economy.

The Empress Dowager, the ruthless, self-absorbed, incompetent widow who took care of the Qing throne while her young children came of age, could have squashed this tension in a heartbeat. The Boxers were nothing compared to the forces unleashed in the Taiping and Dungan rebellions. They would have been no match for Qing forces. But instead of crushing the movement before it gained momentum, she decided to instead give it added support. She threw her official backing behind the Boxers, believing naively that this might be the impetus she needed to get rid of the Europeans.

She couldn’t have been more wrong. Once her support was given to the perceived killers of innocent Christian missionaries, the Europeans had the pretext they needed to launch an all-out offensive. In the 19th century, it was near impossible to get the Europeans to agree on anything, but when it came to fresh access to the markets of China, they’d have no problem putting their differences aside. In 1900, an Eight-Nation Alliance made up of Britain, Russia, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, the United States and Japan (now behaving a lot like the Europeans) joined the ruckus and easily squashed the Boxers. Because the Qing family had supported the Boxers, the peace treaty also went on to include yet another series of paralyzing treaties and humiliating reforms.

After the Boxer Rebellion, Russia saw its chance to move deeper into Manchuria. China was ordered to pay an additional $61 billion as reparations. The Qing Dynasty was allowed to stay in
power, but with a catch. They had to adopt Western reforms. The military was reorganized to resemble that of Germany and Japan. The examination system was terminated, replaced with a Western-styled college system. Scholar-bureaucrats were stripped of their powers and Western investors and merchants were encouraged to expand their businesses throughout China.

Any remaining loyalists to the throne had had enough. They were done with the Qing. They hadn’t protected the nation from foreigners. They hadn’t put food on their tables. They hadn’t earned the right to retain the Mandate of Heaven. And in fact, the situation was even getting worse.

The Qing were a lost dynasty, so when Sun Yat Sen returned from exile and organized his own populist movement that sought out the “Three Principles of the People” (get rid of Manchus, form an elected government and guarantee an equal economic status for all), he earned the support of not only tens of millions of peasants, but also the more influential bands of merchants, students and military. In 1911, his forces moved on the capital city and within months the Empress Dowager fled, and the Qing Dynasty knew their time was up.

The Qing emperors had been fighting foes, both internal and external, for almost a century. They were tired, inept and powerless to stop the inevitable change.

But China was a long way from sorting out who would rule after the Qing, for it would first have to survive five decades of civil war, as regional lords fought regional lords, and central governments faced an invasion of epic proportions from their centuries-old island nemesis to the west—Japan.

Life in China would get a lot worse before it would get better, and another 50 million civilians would lose their lives before China got back on the track to prosperity. However, they would get back.

But that is for another chapter.
An Island on Overdrive

Japan – The Meiji Restoration – 1850 > 1910

Throughout the near-three-century Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan had been fairly successful keeping itself just out of reach of Western influence. Their policy of only dealing with Dutch merchants out of the port of Nagasaki meant that they were able to stay relatively up to date on the innovations and excursions of Westerners, without having to deal with the economic and social consequences of allowing Westerners access to their world.

But as each decade passed, and as the British, French, Russian and US ships grew more bold in their trading habits, it became harder and harder to ignore their presence. U.S whalers were increasingly seen off shore and once in awhile the odd shipwrecked crew would make its way to the Japanese coast (only to be promptly jailed and expelled as soon as possible). Western envoys kept trying to convince the shogun to reconsider his stance, but time and again, these diplomats were sent off empty-handed. Japan wanted to be left alone.

But the West wouldn’t give up. Japan had to be opened. Its strategic location made it the perfect stop for repairs and supplies, and no one could ignore the advantages of being the first country granted the opportunity to tap that market. The United States of America stepped up to the plate first. Once the labyrinth
of railroads made the US a transcontinental behemoth, the Far East was finally within their grasp. The mountains of finished goods streaming continuously out of the factory gates of Illinois, New York and Pennsylvania could now make it to the ports of San Francisco and out to the sea in mere weeks. The factory beasts just needed more “willing” buyers. But in the mid-1800s, Japan wasn’t terribly attractive as a market. They remained more or less a feudal society with limited manufacturing capability and few inhabitants with enough money to make trade worthwhile. But they had potential. Even if they might not immediately be the ideal market for America’s manufacturing leftovers, Japan could fill in nicely as a strategic port at the gate to the East. Once China was opened, the need for some rest stops to break up the months-long trip became glaringly apparent. Hawaii and the Philippines would unenthusiastically assume that role at the end of the 19th century, but in 1852, the President of the United States (Millard Fillmore) wanted Japan. He called on Commodore Matthew C. Perry to lead a fleet of America’s finest ships to encourage Japan to possibly reconsider their stance on international trade.

In 1853, leading a force of four black-hulled ships, Perry arrived at Tokyo Bay and politely asked if he could drop off a letter with the emperor. He was denied. Perry then introduced the Japanese to his 65 cannons, not-so-subtly alluding to the destruction he could hastily rain down on defenseless Edo. He then courteously asked again if he could drop off a letter. This time, the Japanese agreed. Perry delivered the letter which started off “Great and good friend…I am desirous that our two countries should trade with each other, for the benefit both of Japan and the United States” and in case a whaling or fishing vessel should be wrecked “that our unfortunate people should be treated with kindness” and that it would be just lovely if “vessels should be allowed to stop in Japan and supply themselves with coal, provisions, and water.” Perry then left Japan, letting the Emperor know he’d be returning in about a year to preferably hear the emperor’s favorable reaction. And…oh by the way…did I already show you the guns on our ships?

Perry then sailed to Macao, China, picked up a few more ships and returned a year later. During this sojourn, Japan pondered their next move. Resist the Americans and become slaves. There was no way the Japanese could summon a force to rival the American fleet. Japan had purposefully weakened their navy to a few junks able only to make short trips within sight of the
islands. But if they acquiesced, gave in and played America’s game, not only would the purity of Japanese society be at risk, but who knows which European nation would next come knocking at their bay, parading the latest in military technology, wanting access to Japan’s ports. There wasn’t really a choice. Japan had seen what had happened to China after the Opium War, and knew the consequences of testing Western weapons. In China, their entire society was left in shambles and no economic decision could be made without consideration of European interests.

These “black ships” symbolically ended the Tokugawa Shogunate. Commodore Perry dropped off his gifts (a miniature train set, a barrel of whiskey, some rifles, a few farm tools and a picture book of American animals), secured the emperor’s signature, and headed back triumphant. He would return a hero to the United States, the man who “peacefully” opened up Japan. But in Japan, the devil’s ships signaled a wake-up call. Remain feudal and perish. Japan must somehow industrialize. They had to catch up to the West, and they had to do it fast. Europe took almost 400 years to transition from a feudal economy to an industrial economy, surviving revolutions, political and social upheaval, and a horrific initial drop in the standard of living for the common man before the fruits of industrialization finally started kicking in.

But Japan didn’t have four centuries. They had four decades.

For industrialization to occur, Japan couldn’t just trust the trial and error method employed with inconsistent success in the West. In England, entrepreneurs would invent; they would invest; they would improve transportation, communication and production practices; and then another series of inventions would pop up from the corners of the island, and they’d return to the drawing board and adjust their business models. Japan didn’t have time to wait for entrepreneurs to figure out what worked and what didn’t. They had no time for setbacks. This revolution wouldn’t come from capitalists, the wanna-be industrialists advancing for personal gain. Japan’s revolution would come down from above, carefully structured and implemented from a centrally-planned government calling all the shots, ensuring success at any cost.

The first step was reforming the government. The Tokugawa Shogunate had to go. The regional lords (daimyos) initially accepted the treaties with the United States, but because they granted privileged status to the Americans residing in Japan, and because nearly all profits fell back into the hands of the
Americans, after fifteen years, the daimyos had endured enough. The daimyos to the south, who had increasingly gained more independence in the years following America’s first contact, combined their forces, and in 1868, fairly easily overthrew the shogunate, restoring the power of the emperor, which at the time rested in the hands of sixteen-year-old Mutsuhito. Mutsuhito would take on the name Meiji – “the Enlightened One” – and as the figurehead to a government of focused and devoted advisors, he would shepherd in an era of massive social, political and economic transformation – the Meiji Restoration.

The Meiji Restoration had two goals – enrich the nation and strengthen the army – and Japan would do whatever it took to achieve these aims. They swallowed their pride and admitted the West’s dominance, and unlike their Chinese neighbors to the West, instead of running from this reality, they embraced it, borrowed from it and created a nation able to compete on a level playing field as their pale-skinned, hairy adversaries.

To enrich the nation, Japan had to educate their workforce, improve their ability to create and use technology and transform their method of producing goods. First, they had to figure out the secrets to the West’s dominance, so they assembled a contingent of Japan’s finest minds and sent them all over the world on a fact-finding mission. The plan was that these 19th century exchange students would enter as guests and then explore every hospital, school, factory, bank, government building, museum and cultural event at their disposal. In 1871, this Iwakura Mission departed Tokyo with dozens of advisors and officials, sixty students and a writer to record every finding. They were then strategically dropped across the globe. If all went as planned, these children would then be raised by Westerners, schooled by Westerners, only to then return to Japan in adulthood where they would one day lead the next generation of industrialization.

But Japan couldn’t sit back and wait for these students to come of age. They were running out of time. Across the Yellow Sea, China was falling apart under the weight of foreign domination. Japan would have to swallow their pride and invite back into their most sacred nation the one group they had forever detested – the “hairy barbarians.” One by one, the emperor’s top advisors pinpointed areas of weakness and then brought in the ideal Western experts to employ their talents. In addition to offering a handsome salary far beyond what the foreigners would have earned in their native countries, the Japanese government also
offered these yatoi, or “hired menials,” preferential treatment while in-country. They were put up in lavish houses, granted privileged status in business dealings and absolved from having to follow Japanese law. This favored position incensed the traditional Japanese, but they could do nothing about this gross inequity. Japan needed these foreigners. They brought in military experts from Germany, bankers from Switzerland, engineers from England, steel manufacturers from the United States, legal experts from France and artists from Italy. They were costly (oftentimes commanding up to 33% of the annual budget), but they were also temporary. In almost all cases, after three-year terms, they were sent back to their homes. Japan needed their knowledge. Japan didn’t need them.

Once they had the knowhow, they needed the financing. This was where the government stepped in. The West had such a head start that no individual-created corporation could ever hope to compete with the behemoths from the West. Could a textile manufacturer in Osaka ever expect to make shirts as efficiently and inexpensively as the garment factories streaming out goods from London? Could a steelmaker ever produce at a rate close to what Carnegie’s factories spewed out around the clock? Never. Unless these corporations received government assistance. Japan then systematically decided which individuals needed special loans, which corporations needed straight-out government assistance in the form of subsidies and which ones needed to just be government run. By the 1890s, most of the industries in Japan were either directly run or directly supported by the Japanese government. To fund this capital investment and the enormous financial burden of the yatoi, the peasants were taxed mercilessly. Though some moved to the cities and eventually reaped the benefits of industrialization, for the most part, the quality of life for the rice farmers of Japan, the lifeblood of the economy, actually fell during the Meiji Restoration. By 1900, farmers lived shorter, less healthy lives and overall survived a far more dismal existence than did their ancestors centuries earlier. But that was the price the nation had to pay to evolve.

To compete with the Western powers, Japan couldn’t continue indefinitely sponsoring Western experts and adapting their inventions. It was a short-term solution to a much larger problem. To continue in this vein meant Japan would always fall one step behind the West, waiting for the technological crumbs to fall off their overseas tables. If they were to sustain long-term
growth, their talent must be home-grown, which meant a complete overhaul of the class structure and the education system.

First, the government outlawed feudalism. The day of the daimyo was over. Initially, the emperor’s advisors worried the daimyos would resist change, resist the loss of their regional authority and all the associated perks. In what other civilization had a noble class voluntarily given up autonomy? In France? England? The United States? Not a chance. But in Japan, the daimyo realized they would perish if they remained isolated lords instead of formally aligning themselves with the emperor. This choice was made a heck of a lot easier when a few of the most prominent daimyo stepped forward and, in a formal ceremony, relinquished their authority over their fiefdoms, setting the precedent that the survival of the nation depended on the unchallenged authority of the emperor. The remaining daimyo quickly fell into line. Now, don’t be so naïve as to believe these gracious donations were all delivered selflessly. It definitely helped that the emperor decreed the state government would assume all daimyo debts. This unprecedented, bloodless exchange of power meant that by 1871, the wealth and power of the nation all rested in the hands of the imperial court, in the hands of the emperor.

Once the daimyo were removed, the next step was eliminating the samurai. In the two centuries of the Tokugawa Shogunate, the samurai had pretty much become irrelevant leeches, clinging to a heroic history while draining the public’s coffers. Their heyday had long since passed, and now they roamed the countryside and the city streets, living off the welfare of the government. They still carried their swords and demanded respect, but their warrior ethos appeared quaint during the Tokugawa Era when violence was essentially eradicated. For the most part, they’d become soft and of little tangible value, so few were surprised when the Meiji reformers mandated the dissolution of the samurai class. They could no longer carry their swords, they no longer had any more rights than a commoner and they could no longer cut off people’s heads if disrespected (many samurai were deeply saddened by the reality that they no longer held universal decapitation rights). Once they lost their funding and their privileges, they had to get jobs. Some joined the military, some joined the industrial workforce and still others returned to school to possibly fill some of the management positions that were surfacing with each new industry. A few tried one last gasp at preserving their honor, but alas, it was too late. The 1877 Satsuma Rebellion (check out Tom
Cruise’s *The Last Samurai* for Hollywood’s take on this bloody little episode ended once and for all the samurais as an elite warrior class. The imperial army of conscripts using Western techniques and weapons easily dispatched these relics of the past. The samurai were no more.

With all power in the hands of the emperor and his inner circle, they next set out to influence and mold the minds of the youth. School became compulsory—everyone had to attend. Even before the Meiji Reformation, Japan had some of the highest literacy rates in the world (45% of all men, 15% of all women), but with the reforms, they far surpassed any other Eastern civilization. They studied science and math from books translated from Western texts. But this reliance on all things Western came at a cost. After a few years, the government grew concerned that Japanese values were being supplanted by Western culture. One of the bi-products of encouraging adoption of Western technology was that many Japanese started likewise adopting Western dress, Western food and even the Western trappings of wealth. By the late 1800s, you could walk through the alleys of Tokyo and see Japanese men strolling in full suits, carrying canes and brandishing the latest pocket watch imported from Europe. Women began replacing their kimonos with the elaborately poofy dresses of Victorian England, and families even started eating beef for the first time. Some even partook in ballroom dancing (though even the most ardent Japanese Westophile had to admit this was a pretty ridiculous practice). With each Western adoption, Japan came one step closer to losing its own identity.

In 1878, the emperor saw what was happening to his people and he mandated a return to the Confucian teachings of filial piety and absolute respect for all leaders—especially the emperor. The schools adopted this new edict, and steadily the emperor again became a near-mythical being. Schools adorned their buildings with shrines to the emperor, often showcasing his portrait, scrolls bearing his words or even symbolic tokens of his absolute rule (if lunchboxes existed in Meiji Japan, he probably would have had his face on one of those as well). Each day, Japanese students swore their allegiance to the emperor, believing the highest honor was living and dying in his name. This blind allegiance would prove quite useful in future decades when the government not only needed faithful workers to turn out finished goods, but also impassioned warriors willing to sacrifice at the emperor’s request (see World War II).
And year after year, the Meiji reforms proved their worth. The newly adapted agricultural machines and techniques produced a 30% increase in yearly harvests, and the nation's silk production by 1900 made up 1/3 of the world's supply. New industries sprung up as the daimyo started investing their annual government stipends (awarded as a compensation for giving up feudal rights) in potential wealth-generating industries. By the end of the century, Japan made its own railway lines and steam locomotives, produced its own copper and coal for export and shipped textiles across Asia and even back to the West. Yet even as these industries began paying for themselves, the government was still dealing with mounting debt. The cost of industrialization from above exhausted the imperial reserves, and forced the government to look elsewhere for funding.

Enter the zaibatsu. The government chose a select group of families to take over the leading industries. These families - with names such as Nissan, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Kawasaki - entered into a scripted alliance with the government where they would provide the initial capital to purchase the company, while the government would ensure subsidies, tax breaks and guaranteed government contracts. Basically, they'd be granted monopolistic control over the major industries of Japan. The government alone no longer had to support industrialization. They shared this responsibility with a few carefully chosen capitalist families. By the start of World War II, fifteen zaibatsu families controlled 80% of the wealth of Japan. Unlike Europe, this was definitely not a revolution led by plucky entrepreneurs from the middling classes. This was a carefully orchestrated creation of wealth and industry from above.

Even with all their advancements, Japan continued to suffer under the unequal treaties instituted by the United States and the other Western states. By 1900, Japan no longer needed the foreign advisors to direct their operations and they certainly didn’t need any interference in their commercial trade. The empire first sent the Iwakura Mission to ask for a revision of the treaties. That failed. They then invited the Western countries to conferences in Japan. That failed. They then tried working one on one with nations to hopefully come to some agreement. That too failed. Finally, they thought maybe they could enter some sort of secret agreements with any Western nation who would step up to break this East-West stalemate. But still, the West wouldn’t budge.
Time for Plan B. If you can’t beat them, join them. If Japan couldn’t pull itself out of submission through diplomatic channels, maybe the West would listen a little better if they saw Japan’s freshly-created, industrialized military in action. Japan looked west to Korea, a nation that at different times had survived as a vassal state to both China and Japan. Japan didn’t want a shared Korea, but it also didn’t want an independent Korea. In 1894, when there was some confusion over who would ascend to the throne of Korea, Japan took the opportunity to jump in and claim it. Learning from its own experience with Western imperialists, Japan imposed an unequal treaty on Korea, forcing ports to open and granting extraterritoriality rights to Japanese merchants and diplomats on Korean soil. This displeased China who believed Korea was their puppet, and nobody else’s. China then sent in its army, and the Sino-Japanese War was underway. However, weakened by decades of civil war and European oppression, China was no match for the Japanese, losing both at land and at sea, eventually compelled to sign a treaty with Japan that not only ceded territorial influence over Taiwan and Korea, but also imposed a heavy fine on China’s already crippled economy.

And for the first time in history, there was a new king of the East. China had been the unquestioned leader of Asia since the first Qin Dynasty, but in just three short decades, they had been replaced. Japan had industrialized. China had refused. Japan sought Western assistance. China resisted the West to the bitter end and it paid the ultimate price. It was only a matter of time before China faded for a few decades into utter chaos.

And for Japan? Their imperialistic desires had only begun to be quenched. Next up – Russia. At the end of the 19th century, Russia too had caught the expansionist bug and wanted to expand deep into Manchuria, a region bordering both the recently acquired Korea and Northern China. Should Russia control this region, they would not only monopolize access to valuable raw materials, but also a direct line to trade with China. This would also place a Western power within striking distance of Japan, a risk the imperial government of Japan could not accept. So in 1904, Japan launched a sneak attack on Russian controlled Port Arthur (if this whole Japanese sneak attack on a naval base doesn’t sound familiar, check back in a few chapters when we hit the eve of World War II and you’ll see a connection). Tens of thousands of Japanese troops perished (a fact conveniently not mentioned by the Japanese press), but the Russians were caught off guard and
eventually forced to retreat. The ensuing Russo-Japanese War, like the conflict with China a decade before, proved the strength of Japan’s navy and the resiliency of their conscripted army. Over the next year and a half, close to 200,000 soldiers and civilians died, but the Japanese forces proved an insurmountable foe. Russia surrendered.

Japan had finally arrived. For the first time since the Middle Ages, a non-Western country had defeated a European power. This proved to the Asian community that industrialization and Westernization were not just possibilities, but necessities. In just 35 years, Japan had accomplished what it took the United States and Britain over a century. Japan had become an equal. In 1906, American sociologist Edmund Buckley confirmed that the Japanese had finally become “peers of western peoples.” So when the Japanese again requested a revisiting of the unequal treaties, amazingly the British and the Americans acquiesced and removed all of the demeaning components of their previous arrangements.

Japan’s remarkable ascent to the brotherhood of industrialized nations wouldn’t stop here however. Their next step was a free Asia, an Asia without any European influence whatsoever, a nation beholden to one nation only, an Asia where Japan alone sat at the center of all commerce and foreign relations. It took Japan 35 years to industrialize. In 35 more years they would take their war to the entire West, in what would become the bloodiest war in human history.

But that is for another chapter.
At the dawn of the 20th century, the West was truly the dominant region of the world. The ages of the Muslims, the Indians and the Chinese had passed with each of these once great civilizations forced to bow to the economic whims of European capitalists. All signs pointed to Europe as the preeminent society, able to bend the planet to its will.

Much of this dominance could be attributed to its military firepower. Starting with Napoleon a century earlier, the national budgets of Europe went almost exclusively to the research, the development and the mass production of firearms and the maintenance of massive conscripted armies. Nations spent between 40 and 80% of their entire budgets just on their militaries (compare that to the 5% spent by the US today). Because of this colossal build-up of arms, there wasn’t a nation on Earth in 1900 that could come close to rivaling Western force.

But it wasn’t just its military that dwarfed the rest of the world’s nations. Its industrialized economies spewed out goods at an unprecedented pace. Its banks financed 9/10ths of the global trade. Its steamships and trains crisscrossed oceans and continents, and its telegraph lines put the world within a few seconds of instant communication.
By any metric, the West was the most technologically advanced society in the history of mankind, but with all of its industrial successes, it still faced monumental challenges from within. Industrialization, global trade networks, bloated bureaucracies and the rising tide of urban population brought to the West all the material successes their nations could imagine, but with them came a laundry list of ailments that would need to be remedied or else risk perennial discord, if not outright revolution.

One by one, the nations of the West adjusted their societies to assuage the fear, pain and frustration that accompanied this newfound prosperity. And the rest of the world took notice of these reforms. This time around, the rest of the world wouldn’t ignore the transformations of the West. Their ignorance and overconfidence doomed them a century earlier. They couldn’t make the same mistake twice.

In the West, the most alarming threat stemmed from the rapid, intense growth of cities. From 1850 to 1914, Europe’s population shot up from 265 million to 468 million, and in America, total population numbers more than quadrupled. And almost all of these people were moving to the cities. Cities offered jobs, housing and a chance at a better life. By 1900, almost 70% of Europe’s population lived in cities, and these cities began gobbling up the surrounding towns, forming super-cities connected by mazes of subway and train lines.

But life in these cities was less than enjoyable. The local governments couldn’t build tenements or provide basic necessities like sanitation at a pace that could keep up with the swelling populations. Hundreds of thousands of families crammed into poorly ventilated, run-down shacks that lacked the toilets and fresh water necessary to support even a base level of human hygiene. Diseases spread like wildfire and life expectancy levels actually dropped. Going to work meant merely exchanging one nightmare for another. Wages and working conditions were kept at pitifully low levels due to the seemingly endless supply of cheap labor and the average urban laborer worked 16-18 hours a day.

As helpless as their plight appeared, it turned out the urban dwellers’ biggest handicap was also their greatest asset – their sheer numbers. If mankind has shown one truth over the millennia, it’s that an angry, densely populated, unemployed populace must be appeased. If they unite, they can cause economic disruption, social chaos and they can topple even the most secure regime.
In the 19th and early 20th centuries, workers formed labor unions to lobby for better working conditions, higher salaries and lower hours. Their main threat was always the strike, an across-the-board cessation of labor. If nobody went to work, their bosses would have to concede to their demands. One problem – there was always another starving laborer willing to cross the picket line and accept any job for a pittance. Labor unions realized their opponents weren’t merely their employers, but also any recent immigrant not willing to honor the union’s tactics. Union members not only yielded picket signs and fiery rhetoric, they also weren’t afraid to employ their guns, clubs and their fists to keep would-be workers away from the factories. As their influence swelled, unions forced companies to adjust their policies. But these improvements were inconsistent and oftentimes temporary. For real change to occur, it needed to happen at the national level.

Enter democratic politics. After the 1848 revolutions, the West gradually expanded suffrage so that by the end of the 19th century, almost every nation across Europe granted voting rights to all males. If politicians didn’t listen (or at least appear to listen) to the voices of their constituents, their futures in government would have relatively short shelf lives. This was where the labor unions started affecting change. As solid voting blocs willing to throw their support behind a candidate or a political party, the workers of the West exploited this power at the polls. Ineffective or corrupt politicians were increasingly voted out of office. Local governments then chose to spend their revenue on making life more enjoyable for their residents. They built parks, installed electricity, demanded effective police and fire companies and invested significantly in sanitation projects that markedly reduced the spread of waterborne diseases in congested cities (and it markedly reduced the mounds of human excrement on the curbside).

But it was the labor laws that altered human existence. Governments banned child labor and then mandated school attendance. Within a couple generations, a family’s future opportunities appeared boundless. Laws established ceilings on the amount of hours an adult could work in a week and enforced wage floors that employers must respect. They funded and trained inspectors to examine factory conditions to ensure the wellbeing of all employees.

The age of social welfare had begun. For generations, governments saw their sovereignty as ordained by the gods, that
they could rule by personal whim, that they were beholden to none. Democracy flipped the scales away from the governors to the governed. Power came from the people and it was the people that could retract their support should their leaders ignore their needs. Across the 20th century, Western powers redefined their priorities so that appeasing the masses became of utmost importance. The social contract once only required governments to protect property. The new West required governments to improve everyone’s standard of living, so that the years you did walk the earth were free of strife and struggle. By the end of the 20th century, Western laborers worked on average 41 hours per week and in some countries (like Greece, Spain and Italy), you could retire in your mid-50s and receive a full pension. The government would pay you not to work.

And while you weren’t working, you increasingly had far more leisure options to fill your days. Up until the 20th century, free time was a luxury for the wealthy. If people socialized at all, it was at church or while working. In 17th century New England, USA, the big highlights of the year were house building parties where neighbors would get together and “raise the roof” on a new home. After a few generations of the Industrial Revolution, city dwellers were so painfully bored by the monotony of their lives that they needed a bit more entertainment than a potluck dinner and a house erection.

The first entertainment choice of the working class was the neighborhood bar. Pubs popped up on every street corner, beer was cheap and a couple pints with some buddies had the amazing ability to deaden the senses and make the futility of life just a tad bit more bearable. Alcoholism hit epidemic levels, destroying families and robbing households of much-needed incomes. Men would pick up their salaries on a Friday and the money would be blown at the bar before they returned home to their starving families. Abuse and then divorce rates escalated, destroying the values and the social norms of the nuclear families. The entitled middle and upper classes watched as the desperate poor regressed into states of squalor, and instead of focusing their attention solely on improving the lot of the masses, they attempted to prevent their consumption of alcohol, not realizing that drunkenness is sometimes more of a symptom of misery than a cause. The resulting temperance movements attempted to ban alcohol, at first just on Sunday (the Holy Day), but in some nations (like the United States), it was prohibited on a national level. This prohibition did
little to reduce consumption rates, merely driving the production, delivery and purchase underground, creating a black market where rival gangs slaughtered each other over distribution rights.

As upper society tried their hand (and failed) at legislating social behavior, other forms of entertainment developed a mass following. At the turn of the century, spectator sports like boxing, soccer, horse racing and baseball (in the United States) brought together different classes, different races and different faiths under one roof, cheering on their patron sons while jeering the enemy. For those watching punches thrown, shots fired and balls slammed, where you came from was irrelevant. It was “us” against “them” in the sports stadiums of every major metropolitan area. Mix in a little alcohol with some gambling opportunities and sports again proved the perfect recipe for distracting disenchanted denizens of the urban jungle. Like the Romans of old who learned the value of bread and circuses (and maybe some gladiatorial eviscerations thrown in to keep life interesting), the Europeans found there was money to be made and unity to be harvested behind the banner of the local team. As local newspapers exploded and radio connected every household to the day to day feats of a town’s native hero, athletes became celebrities and entire generations rallied behind the famed jocks and jockettes of the day. In America, a fairly rotund chap named George Herman “Babe” Ruth grew to be the most recognizable face on the planet, becoming the first athlete to earn more money than his country’s head of state. When asked why he deserved to make more money than then president Herbert Hoover, the Babe replied, “I had a better year than” he did.

The celebrity culture wasn’t restricted to the rinks, the pitches, the fields and the stadiums of the major cities, the budding film industry produced stars and starlets of the silver screen. Phonographs recorded music on vinyl and then offered them across the country. For the first time, entire nations could all listen to the same music, watch the same films, support the same teams and worship the same personalities. Print news combined with live and recorded entertainment to foster a pop culture that has become a hallmark of Western society. Today, whether you’re paying for a carton of milk in Paris, Madrid, New York, London or Berlin, you’re bound to pass a magazine rack lined with the latest dirt on your favorite jock, singer, thespian or socialite. A hundred years ago, Western advertisers appreciated the value of pop culture and you can guarantee in another century we’ll still be straining our heads to find out the latest on the prepubescent boy band of the
Taking Stock of Our Progress

week, the female ingénue with a plunging neckline or the naughty athlete who just can’t seem to follow the rules of society.

Fortunately for mankind, and womankind, our successes went a little further than grasping the value of a pretty face. The early 20th century saw a radical shift in rights for 51% of the planet. Since the first time man threw seeds in the ground along the major rivers of Eurasia, women have been relegated to the home, restricted to taking care of the kids, keeping the home relatively hygienic and preparing some sort of edible meal from what was left in the cupboard. That was their sphere. And for the next seven thousand years, whether you were living in a hamlet in China or a palace in the Mughal Dynasty or a wooden shack in the American frontier, the rules were the same – men ruled the world and women took care of the home.

But the Industrial Revolution challenged these gender roles. Who made the money, who took care of the kids, who took care of the house – all these responsibilities became a bit murky when families moved to swarming slums, and mom and kids often found they could find more work than could dear ol’ dad. In most families, men preserved their patriarchal power, forcing women to continue to fulfill their domestic obligations after earning a paycheck during the daylight hours. This little arrangement was never going to last, and women gradually began demanding more rights – first in the house, but then in the larger society. First, at the turn of the century, the only women truly able to demand more freedoms were the upper and middle class women who were educated, but unemployable. They had the free time, the powerful connections and the brains to exact change. They pushed for temperance laws that would outlaw alcohol, reasonable divorce and inheritance laws that could allow a spouseless woman to survive, access to contraception that would allow women more control over their bodies, but most importantly, they pressed for the right to vote. These middle and upper class suffragettes petitioned, marched, lobbied, rallied and even died for the right to vote. One radical (or dedicated) proponent of women’s rights, a Miss Emily Davison, even jumped in front of King George V’s horse during a 1913 derby. The horse trampled and killed her, but her story spread and the tireless five-decade-long struggle for the female vote slowly started to pay off. Finland was the first to grant women the right to vote and when the United States finally ratified the 19th Amendment in 1920, almost every Western nation had embraced true universal suffrage. Many were still wary what women at the
ballot box would mean for republican governments, but this crucial step paved the way for epic breakthroughs in gender equality in the workplace, the political sphere and even the bedroom.

Change was coming at a faster rate than ever before thought possible. A man born in 1850 would have more in common with a man born in 1200 than he would with a man born in 1900. The home, the workplace and the public sphere looked nothing like they did before the Industrial Revolution. Civil authorities and local leaders tried to keep up with the times, but the pace of migration and the dissemination of information made their task almost always a losing battle.

For some, the social changes weren’t happening fast enough. For some, they demanded an outright toppling of the political and industrial leaders of the West, a situation where the workers of the world would unite and seize the resources of production and government. For others, these social changes meant the urban population was becoming increasingly easier to manipulate. If you could convince an entire city to chant for their beloved athlete, cry for their country’s most-cherished performer and die for their social welfare, could you not also convince them to live and die for their nation?

Could you not also convince them to partake in a clash of civilizations, where the winning nation would determine the future of humanity?

Was that possible? Could the attributes that empowered the West to progress so far as a civilization actually be used to blow itself up?

Yep. They could. And they did. Twice.

But that is for another chapter.
At the turn of the 20th century, the West was feeling pretty good about itself. It was on an unprecedented winning streak. In the span of five centuries, except for a few little bumps in the road, it appeared to be perpetually moving forward, with no one able to stop its progress. Nation after nation fell to its advances, so that by 1914, 80% of the world’s economy fell under the domain of one of the Western nations and over 60% of the planet was controlled by a Western power. Their industrial production was unparalleled and their military might was unquestioned. With each passing decade, more and more people entered the democratic process, creating governments and worlds in their own image. As food production exploded, living standards improved and the medical industry found more and more ways to keep us from dying, life expectancy rates soared. Free time and entertainment were no longer solely the birthright of a privileged few, as new forms of leisure became accessible to all segments of society. We lived longer, healthier, more enjoyable lives and it appeared nothing could stop the West’s continued ascension.

And then Europe blew itself up.

It wasn’t enough that the West conquered the rest of the world, they then proceeded to turn their sights on each other, and it was this cannibalistic clash of civilization which forced the West
to reevaluate their preconceived notions of superiority. Maybe their way wasn’t the best way. Maybe their way actually could lead to the destruction of all humanity.

World War I signaled the end of an era. It was at the time known as “the Great War” or the “war to end all wars,” but it would not be either. A greater war would follow within a couple decades, and, if anything, it became the war to start all wars, for the 20th century ended with the infamous claim to being the bloodiest century in human history.

But how did it all begin?

Well, there was no singular cause. Each nation had a different reason for joining; each nation sold its people on a different motivation to embrace the war effort. England was afraid Germany’s growing industrial economy would throw a kink in their global empire. Russia wanted a warm water port so they could readily bring supplies to their interior. Bosnia wanted to be free. Austria-Hungary didn’t want to let them. France wanted a chunk of land back that they’d lost a few decades earlier. Japan had their eyes on northern China. Italy didn’t know whose side it was on, but it liked the idea of making itself bigger. Argentina wanted to sell more beef. And the list goes on and on and on.

Each country grappled with a series of regional, ethnic, national and imperial questions, each threatening to injure their progress if not handled properly, but each promising to advance its status if approached prudently. Though the specifics might have differed, they each fell into one of a few types of tensions that pitted nation versus nation and people versus people. Each tension was the natural manifestation of European policies that directly led to their ability to achieve so much economic and geopolitical success in the previous century. In 1914, these tensions threatened to unravel all that had been achieved.

First, there was the issue of self-determination. Individual peoples wanted to determine their future. In the great land grab that was European imperialism, slews of diverse groups were thrown together in a mish-mash of empires. Regardless of language, religion, culture or historical background, added territories were expected to merely accept their fate and somehow unite under the nationalistic banner of their newfound mother country. Easier said than done. Oftentimes in the great boundary-making schemes of the European powers, they overlooked regional hostilities and desires, putting together groups still healing from
centuries of violence, or conversely dividing groups across arbitrarily chosen boundary lines. By 1914, instilled with the ideals of the Enlightenment and inspired by the triumphs of the American and French revolutions, these peoples sought to break free from the empirical hold, setting their own paths toward nationhood. Their imperial lords were less than enthusiastic.

But there was no way a European empire was going to let a minority ethnic group break away. Think of the precedent this would set? Look at the Austrian Empire of 1914. It was made up of Gypsies, Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks, Croats, Italians, Romanians, Czechs, Serbs, Slovenes, Ukrainians, Poles and Arabs. If just one of these groups was granted independence, the rest of the dominos would soon fall, and Austria would be left a skeleton of its former glory. So at the immediate moment these peoples wanted their freedom, their imperial lords had no intention of granting any concessions. But this wasn’t just true for Austria. All of Europe had expanded its colonial holdings, and inevitably the conquered wanted to break free from their conquerors.

Which leads to the next issue – imperialism. The European desire to conquer and maintain worldwide territories hit a snag in the early 20th century. All the good land had been passed out. Germany and Italy, the two new kids on the block, wanted their own territories to harvest resources, sell surplus goods and enlist cheap labor. But what was left? In Africa, there was Liberia and Ethiopia. In Asia, there was merely a spattering of hospitable lands still remaining (aside from Japan of course who no one wanted to touch after they so readily dispatched the Russians). Though late to the industrializing party, Germany and Italy still demanded the requisite features of capitalist economies – ready access to foreign markets – which put them directly in conflict with those established powers none-too-thrilled about losing their claims to a rival upstart. And Germany was intimidating. Its investment in research and access to huge deposits of iron ore meant that by 1900 only the United States produced more steel than Germany. Steel meant railroads, steel meant factories, and most worrisome to England, steel meant navies. England had the greatest force on the seas. They were in no mood to deal with any rivals to their throne.

Bringing us to tension #3 – militarism. In the first two decades of the 20th century, any threat to one nation’s military had to be challenged. England might have had the largest navy, but Germany had the greatest military training. Russia had access to
the most soldiers. France had the Napoleon-spawned superior military tradition. Each of these big four possessed one element of military aptitude that scared the bejeezus out of its neighbors, but each also had a weakness. England's land army was negligible, Germany could be attacked from all sides, Russia was painfully backwards in providing arms and transportation for its troops and France's military tradition was more impressive in the history books than on the most recent battlefield. To make up for these weaknesses, the European powers started off in an arms race, a quest to see who could build the baddest, most-feared, most destructive military machine imaginable, one so great that no one would ever dare declare war. This belief that advanced weaponry and huge armies could prevent warfare was known as militarism, and it was this homage to armaments that pushed the countries closer to war. Every technological advancement, every increase to the quantity of mobilized soldiers, every military parade made it harder for any real nation to back down. Like the bodybuilder donning a too-snug Under Armour T-shirt who wears a bullseye on his chest the moment he enters a pub, the nations who stockpiled weapons became targets for those other nations wanting to prove their metal.

Unfortunately, this military build-up that was supposedly to prevent war actually created a false sense of superiority that eventually made war seem like a not-so-bad proposition. The standing belief was that because of the extreme cost to produce the weapons and because of these weapons' perceived invincibility, any actual combat would be extremely short-lived. They seemed to ignore the horrific example of the American Civil War that left 600,000 dead in the first of the industrialized wars. They instead merely looked at the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, where France was defeated in a mere weeks. After four decades and a mountain of industrial improvements, wouldn't the next European standoff prove even shorter?

Umm. No. Not exactly. Added to this false sense of military superiority was an added sense of cultural supremacy. In the age of high literacy rates, uniform compulsory education, densely populated cities and the new visual media known as cinema, governments could spew a mountain of propaganda intended to heighten their citizens' love for country. From an early age, children were taught to revere their culture, while condemning that of their neighbors. Germany was home to the masters of sound - Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. England held the masters of
the pen - Chaucer, Shakespeare and Locke. France enlightened the West with Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire. Italy brought color to the world with da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. Each nation could claim to be the pillar of the West's development and each likewise believed their government, their economic system and their society surpassed all others. If only they could find a way to decide once and for all who was the best.

They had tried for decades to prove their superiority by expanding their colonial holdings. Their economic and political spheres of influence spread all across the globe. By 1900, there was pretty much nothing left. All of Africa save Liberia and Ethiopia were under European control. All of Asia but Siam (Thailand), Nepal, Bhutan and a few nations in Central Asia answered to the West. Most of the conflicts for sovereignty had been settled in the mid-19th century, but now with Germany and Italy wanting to get in on the colonial action, something had to give. Germany's first target was Morocco (controlled by Spain), and after battles in 1906 and 1911, Germany proved it had only just begun. By 1914, they had moved into East and West Africa, as well as establishing Pacific holdings in New Guinea and Samoa. With no signs of letting up, and with their industrialized economy threatening to eclipse England within a few years, it wouldn't be long before other European colonies felt the weight of the German Empire.

By 1914, the sources of tension were clear. All Europe needed was a fuse to light the fire. That fuse would start in a region that would become known to historians as the powder keg of Europe – the Balkan states. Located just north of Greece and just a bit west of Turkey, the Balkan states were a cornucopia of cultures all vying for independence. For centuries, provinces like Thessaly, Macedonia, Albania, Moldavia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia all pushed to free themselves from the rule of the Ottoman Empire. At the turn of the century, the Ottoman Empire was on its last legs, unable to control its territories on the periphery, mocked by the West as the “sick man of Europe.” By the early 1900s, many of these Balkan states freed themselves from the grasp of the Ottoman Turks. For little Bosnia, freedom from imperial rule was fleeting. In 1908, they were again gobbled up by a voracious empire, but this time it was the adjoining Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria-Hungary was already a hodgepodge of peoples, barely held together by Franz Joseph who had ruled over this fading empire for over fifty years. Bosnia joined an empire that also tried to unite Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks,
Poles, Ukrainians, Slovenes, Serbians, Croats, Romanians and Italians. Many of these peoples had no interest in being ruled by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, instead preferring to rejoin their brothers in neighboring nations. Remarkably, the Serbians in Bosnia wanted to rejoin this little place called Serbia.

In 1914, Franz Joseph sent his son Franz Ferdinand down to Bosnia to smooth things over with the local Serbians. Franz Ferdinand wanted to reassure these independent-minded Serbians that when his father eventually died and he took the throne, Bosnia would be granted more rights of self-government. Franz Ferdinand was a naïve heir to the throne, believing his appearance alone might calm the Serbian revolutionary movement. But he didn’t account for one group – the Black Hand - a terrorist band of young men focused solely on independence for their country, by any means available. When Franz Ferdinand arrived in Bosnia on June 28, 1914, the streets were already lined with assassins carrying knives, guns and even homemade grenades. As the royal prince and his wife made their way down the spectator-lined streets, one member of the Black Hand darted out from the crowd and threw a grenade at the royal car. It merely bounced off the trunk of the archduke's vehicle, exploding into the rear car following close behind. At this point, Franz Ferdinand's entourage raced away and finished his official duties with regional political figures, before heading back to his car. He wanted to go to the hospital, to hopefully visit the members of his court who had nearly had their heads blown off a few hours earlier. Unfortunately, the chauffeur made a wrong turn, probably the most tragic navigational error in the history of driving, for this dead end wound up triggering World War I.

Here’s where things speed up, so pay close attention. 19-year-old Black Hand terrorist Gavrilo Princip recognized the royal family, took out his gun and shot Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, killing them both. Franz Joseph wanted revenge. No one got to kill his son and get away with it. But who was he to blame? It must have been Serbia that trained these Black Hand terrorists. So Franz Joseph put in place plans to invade Serbia. Serbia called on their big brother Russia to defend them. Austria-Hungary called on Germany's protection. Germany declared war on Russia. Knowing Russia’s ally France would soon join in from the West, Germany pre-emptively declared war on France. Germany invaded neutral Belgium, trying to sweep around the north of France and into Paris. Britain came to Belgium's aid and declared war on
Germany. Austria-Hungary then declared war on Russia. Britain’s ally Japan then jumped in from across the world and declared war on Germany. And within six weeks of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the world was at war.

Many falsely believed the war would be over in a few months. Boys kissed their moms and girlfriends goodbye, hoping to jump into the festivities before it was too late. Teachers, politicians, priests and generals all thought the war would be over by Christmas. No one wanted to be left out of this great adventure.

But then reality set in. This tragedy would not be like any other war in European history. This wouldn’t be a series of pitched battles where men could return with stories of glory and victory.

Germany invaded Belgium, hoping to catch France off guard so they could quickly knock out Paris before Russia could mobilize their troops in the East. Russia might have had millions of possible soldiers, but it was still a backwards nation. Germany couldn’t imagine a scenario where the antiquated Russian infrastructure could quickly transport their armies to the front line. This brilliant idea to take out France first and then race across the German heartland to take out Russia was known as the Von Schlieffen Plan, and it would fail. After Franz Ferdinand was shot, Russia almost immediately began mobilizing its troops, so when Germany ultimately headed west into France, Russia could actually start invading Germany’s eastern border. This messed up the Schlieffen Plan. The German general sent 180,000 troops back across Germany to protect against the Russian invasion. At the same time, the Belgians proved a pesky foe. Germany expected to just march right through the Belgian countryside, but the locals fought back heroically, and the British soon joined in to slow the German invasion even more. Germany eventually did make it into France, pulling to within 60 miles of Paris. They were met by a pretty formidable French force, brought in large part to the front line by the 2000 Parisian taxi cabs who transported troops to the battlefield.

Paris wasn’t taken. The German forces were stopped. They then dug deep into the ground, set up trenches in the French countryside and refused to budge. This was where the bulk of World War I fighting would take place. Stretching 600 miles from the northern coast of Belgium to the Swiss border, the French and German forces set up a zigzagging network of trenches, and from 1914 to 1918 the conflict degenerated into a muddy,
bloody, lethal brawl where millions perished trying to claim a few miles of charred dirt. This stalemate became the Western Front. A similar patchwork of trenches emerged on the Eastern Front as Russian forces squared off against German, Austro-Hungarian and eventual Turkish forces.

For the soldiers dropped into these war zones, the fighting was anything but the romanticized adventure they sought months earlier. There was no place for glory, no place for heroic missions. In the age of Industrialized Warfare, millions of troops could be brought to the front in a few days, armed with the latest weapons, rifles and machine guns that rarely needed to be reloaded. Enthusiastic zeal and bravery meant something on the battlefield before industrialization. But these admirable traits meant nothing when a soldier faced a machine gun shooting close to 600 bullets a minute. The enemy could merely set up the machine gun, point it at waist level, and swivel the gun back and forth, mowing down thousands of troops like a hot knife slicing through butter.

Even though the weapons had changed, the strategies of the officers remained stuck in the Napoleonic Era. Time and time again, officers sitting miles away from the Front, would telegraph in orders. First, they would send a volley of artillery shells hoping to destroy some of the machine guns or bombard the trench-hidden enemy into submission. After a barrage of shells came down around the enemy, the men were then ordered to go “over the top,” emerging from their trench to make the deadly trip across no-man’s land, weaving between dead and mutilated bodies, mud-filled shell craters and endless miles of barbed wire. Inevitably, they would be forced to return to their trench, leaving another batch of comrades to suffer intolerably on the barren landscape. This cycle of bombardment, attack and retreat became the modus operandi for the first few years of the war, and it would take millions of casualties before officers and scientific advancements moved warfare into the next phase of military conflict.

At each phase of the war, it was not only the bullets and the shells that kept the men perpetually on edge. Trench rats that grew to the size of cats were a constant menace, stealing any remnants of food left unprotected and even sometimes burrowing into the eye sockets of fallen soldiers where they would nest for weeks until eventually the corpse collapsed from within. Lice filled every bodily crevice and clothing seam, only being extracted with doses of melted candle wax on all inflicted areas. Food rations were scarce at best, with many soldiers surviving on less than 1400
calories a day (an average adult male needs about 2500 calories a day). The lack of fresh water and hit and miss hygiene meant that water-borne diseases like dysentery spread across the fronts, leaving men incapacitated, doubled over in constant pain. Latrines filled with human excrement, and when the trenches flooded from the relentless rains, men would walk for weeks in waist-high pools of fecal matter. Feet that could never dry could swell to three times the normal size of a human foot, oftentimes needing to be amputated to prevent the spread of infection.

And those whose bodies didn’t succumb to the appalling conditions, often lost their minds. The unremitting shell fire destroyed the minds of the soldiers, leaving them in a seizure-filled daze known as shell shock. Some even resorted to shooting off their own extremities to hopefully earn the golden ticket back to civilization. For those soldiers who had lost all hope, they could merely lift their heads above the sandbagged trench walls, making themselves the perfect targets for enemy snipers concealed amongst the carnage of no man’s land.

Over the course of the war, nearly 6,000 men died every single day. Gradually, governments and officers employed a variety of techniques to try and break through the enemy’s defenses. Chlorine, phosgene and mustard gas canisters were shot across the battlefield, frequently with unexpected results. In late 1915, a British force launched a gas attack against German forces, only to have the wind change, bringing the fumes back to the friendly side killing or injuring dozens of men. When the gas attacks did work, men fell to the ground stricken with what would be a long, painful death as their eyes burned and their lungs gradually closed, causing death by asphyxiation. Until gas masks were readily deployed, many soldiers found that the best way to fend off the deadly effects of chlorine gas was to urinate in a cloth and then hold it over their mouth and nose with hope that the ammonia would counteract the chlorine. Aside from the inconsistently effective gas attacks, both sides experimented with tanks to carry men across no man’s land; tunneling to plant explosive devices under enemy trenches; and even airplanes to be used for reconnaissance and later air raids. In the skies, the Germans also used helium-filled zeppelins (like our modern day blimps) to record enemy troop movements or even drop explosives on city centers.

The leaders soon realized the war would not be won on the battlefield, but back home in the cities and towns where civilian morale would determine the fate of the nation. In a war where
civilian labor was crucial to supplying military forces, any lapse in productivity meant soldiers went to the battlefield unable to properly serve their country. Both sides resorted to blockading the seas, destroying all ships intending to feed, clothe or resupply enemy civilians. If they couldn’t beat them, they’d starve them. Britain’s navy stretched across the North Sea, effectively cutting off Germany from the world. Germany, in turn, went beneath the surface with its unterseeboots (U-boats). These submarines wreaked havoc on trans-Atlantic shipping, sinking over ten million tons of supplies meant for the allies.

World War I also dramatically altered the lives of the millions not enduring the horrors of the front. This was a total war – a war where victory would be secured only if the entire nation contributed to the war effort. In the age of industrialized warfare, the efficiency and capacity of domestic industries can have as much impact on battlefield success as the training and wherewithal of soldiers. From Berlin to London to Chicago, factories spun at full capacity 24 hours a day, churning out food, clothing, medical supplies and armaments faster than ever before. For the nations at war, the men on the front left a huge void back home. And who would step up to fill this void?

This labor vacuum was then filled by women, minorities and farmers leaving their lives in the country for the promise of work in the cities. For women and minorities, this meant an opportunity to prove their ability to contribute to society on par with the white males who previously dominated all levels of industrial life. In America, women were even able to lobby this newfound clout into the passage of suffrage and prohibition laws that granted them the right to vote and outlawed alcohol. Though in the years following the war, life for many reverted back to the stratified roles that defined industrialization, World War I demonstrated the extent to which civil liberties can be expanded for disenfranchised minorities during wartime.

However, for the most part, civil liberties were ignored during WWI. When at war, there is only one goal – victory. The democratic and capitalistic ideals that might have proved the foundations of a civilization during peacetime became nonessential nuisances during war. Governments chose to suspend or even ignore the rights guaranteeing freedom of speech, freedom of press and even habeas corpus (the belief that people can’t be arrested without a trial). Contributing to the war effort did not merely mean producing goods, it meant not engaging in public displays
that contradicted the nation’s higher goal. Labor union strikes were banned, newspapers carefully chose which information was eventually published, critics who spoke out against the war were jailed and even war letters were censored to ensure morale across society remained high. Nations who didn’t actively repress anti-war sentiment often saw hostilities rise to perilous levels.

During the first few years of the war, the Russian women’s cries for bread and peace went unanswered, eventually leading to the 1917 revolutions that ended imperial rule and pulled Russia out of the conflict. By 1917, Germany likewise witnessed growing pacifist sentiment, a condition which similarly contributed to Germany’s eventual decision to surrender. Unlike in the age of absolute monarchies where the people’s voice could merely be dismissed, the lessons of the French Revolution and the empowerment of the urban masses scared governments. If the civilians back home could not be controlled, the domestic impact could prove more dire than that on the front.

Governments also then played an even larger role in steering their economies. The goal of individual profit was replaced with the goal of national victory. Government-run war industry boards coordinated how natural resources were attained, who would receive the major production contracts, what goods were deemed necessary and even which goods could no longer be purchased. By the end of the war, the British government accounted for nearly 80% of all imports, leaving businesses at the mercy of governmental demands. Also, because both Germany and Britain engaged in unrestricted naval war on all supply ships heading across the Atlantic, countries began rationing foods, hoping to ensure the supply of civilian necessities. Some like the United States even ordered Meatless Mondays or Wheatless Wednesdays to reduce civilian consumption.

For those who played this new economic game, life wasn’t all that bad. Huge government contracts meant profits for a few well-positioned entrepreneurs. Yet individual salaries also grew, and with nothing of interest to buy during the war, savings accounts actually strengthened. Countries not directly in the war also benefited as they became suppliers to war-torn Europe. Argentinian beef became famous during World War I (known as “bully beef"), establishing the cattle ranches of Argentina as the dominant suppliers to the world for the rest of the 20th century. For the United States, who sold to both sides of the war during the first year, profits skyrocketed in a number of industries.
Compared to pre-war numbers, US Steel jumped from annual profits of $105 million to $240 million, Utah Copper went from $5 million to $21 million, and the Central Leather Company saw their profits soar over 1100%. War wasn’t hell for everyone.

But how would the government pay for this massive consumption of military goods? Governments started getting creative. Some started expanding taxation to include personal salaries. Other countries raised money by selling war bonds. Instead of investing in a company, individuals and firms invested in their country. Most of the return rates were in the 5-6% range. This was a pretty stable investment option during difficult times, a great way for the government to raise money quickly (Germany raised close to 100 billion deutschmarks), and it also had the fortunate side effect of increasing the population’s support for the war. When you believe your money is riding on the success of your country, you’re going to be far more helpful in ensuring your country wins.

And if all else failed? What if taxes and war bonds proved unable to keep up with the massive cost of maintaining the war (close to $185 billion in 1914 US currency...or about $4.2 trillion in today’s currency)? What then? Well, governments then resorted to the easiest, though not so fiscally sound, way of paying bills. Just print more money. Countries started printing and circulating more and more dollars, deutschmarks, lira, drachmas and pounds. This allowed them to find the money to pay their bills, but it also caused the price of all other goods to shoot up as well. This inflation meant that even though workers were making and saving more money, their money wasn’t going nearly as far as it used to.

By 1917, for all countries involved (save maybe the United States), the war had gone on long enough. Crippling inflation, mounting casualty lists and insecure governments forced military leaders to seek some miracle offensive that could bring this slaughter to an end. Attempts had already been made to try to break through the deadlock, but each one failed to shift the advantage conclusively to any one side. The alliances were just too evenly matched. The British tried setting up a third front in Turkey that would open up a southern water port to Russia, allowing supplies to flow freely to the Eastern Front. In early 1915, Britain called on its allies from Australia and New Zealand to launch a seaborne invasion of the Turkish coast of the Ottoman Empire. This campaign, known as Gallipoli, was doomed from the start, as Turkish forces had prepared for the onslaught, setting up
impenetrable trenches along the coast. The Turks survived the bombardment and the relentless attacks from ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) forces, eventually forcing the Allies to surrender.

On the Western Front, generals still tried to devise plans for one decisive attack that would end the war. Raised on the military victories of Alexander at Gaugamela or Caesar in Gaul or Napoleon at Austerlitz, the military high commands believed they too could break through, if they could just concentrate all of their military might on one critical spot. The Germans struck first when they attacked the small French town of Verdun, strategically a fairly useless little village, but symbolically a critical defensive fortress for centuries. Started in February 1916, Verdun would become the costliest, longest battle in world history. For a mere ten square kilometers of land, both sides staked their entire reputations. The Germans dropped 23 million shells on the French forces, but the French would not budge. General Robert Nivelle, channeling his inner *Lord of the Rings* Gandalf, declared that no matter how much firepower the Germans brought, “They shall not pass!” This unyielding resilience, coupled with Germany’s desperate need to breach the French line led to unprecedented casualties. Within a few months, the Battle of Verdun took 700,000 lives, making it the bloodiest battle ever.

Until the Battle of the Somme. Learning little from the futility of Verdun, the French and British forces launched their own offensive, the hopeful battle to end the war. Like in Verdun, the French and British ceaselessly bombarded their enemy’s trenches, hoping to somehow destroy both their machine guns’ capabilities and their enemy’s will to fight. Yet even though the bombings were so deafening that the explosions could be heard nearly 300 miles away in London, the German forces remained resolute. When the French and British soldiers finally went over the top, crossing what they thought would be their final no man’s land, they were met by an even more determined German force. The Allies even sent in their cavalry, falsely believing this charge would carry the day. But as the Germans responded with tanks, machine guns and their own artillery, the Somme battlefield became the latest example of how military strategy had failed to account for technological advancements – with appallingly tragic results.

Earlier in the year, Verdun took 700,000 lives. The Somme offensive claimed 1.2 million. And still the war waged on.
In 1917, in an attempt to gain the upper hand and hopefully only have to deal with a one front war, the Germans dug a bit deeper into their bag of tricks. In Russia, during the final weeks of February 1917, mounting food and labor strikes in Petrograd, coupled with the army's refusal to put down the unrest from the starving classes, forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate his throne, plunging the nation into a period of uncertainty. If only Germany could find a way of nudging this period of uncertainty into one of all-out anarchy, maybe Russia could then be convinced to pull out of the war, leaving Germany free to concentrate all of its troops on the Western Front. Hmm. What to do? What to do? If only there was a man who could be trusted to further weaken Russia's stability. But where could they find a man who had dedicated his life to destroying the economic and political foundations of Russian society? Did a man such as this exist in 1917?

Yes he did, and his name was Vladimir Lenin, and he had made his temporary home in Switzerland. Lenin had been politely asked to leave (aka “exiled”) after his brother had been tried and hung for the attempted assassination of the czar, and Lenin proved time and again he was more than willing to accept the torch of revolution. A staunch follower of Marxism, Lenin watched Russia's February Revolution with heightened interest, knowing that if he could only somehow get back into the country, the nation would be ripe for a communist coup.

Little did Lenin know that Germany happened to be in the market for just a disease to help contaminate Russia's feeble power structure. Members of the German high command, specifically state secretary Arthur Zimmerman (remember this name for a few minutes) communicated their desire to transport Lenin to Russia, and in April 1917, Lenin (along with 32 other revolutionaries and two million German-donated rubles to set up the propaganda newspaper Pravda) boarded a one-car train that was promptly locked up and sent across the German countryside. When this sealed train finally reached Petrograd, Lenin again took the reins of the communist Bolshevik party, and within six months his 50,000 followers took over the government, installing a communist regime. Running on a campaign of “bread and peace,” the Bolshevik Party quickly delivered on their promise to pull Russia out of the war. They agreed in March 1918 to the crippling Treaty of Brest Litovsk that turned over to Germany control of the Ukraine, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and Finland. In one broad swoop, Russia lost a quarter of its population, a vast chunk of its
western Russian empire and nearly a quarter of its industrial capacity. But the Russian people got what they wanted. Russia was out of the war.

For Germany, it became a race. Could they transport their eastern armies to the Western Front and conquer Paris before the Americans (finally) arrived? A year earlier, on February 3, 1917, US President Woodrow Wilson asked for and received a formal declaration of war against Germany. This announcement was years in the making. From the start of the war, Britain had been waging a massive propaganda campaign to encourage the Americans to enter on the side of the Allies, and once the German high command endorsed a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare on all Ally-bound supply ships, the United States moved closer to officially renouncing relations with Germany. The final straw came when a secret message from Germany’s state secretary Arthur Zimmerman (yep, same guy as earlier) was intercepted by British agents. This note promised its intended recipient, Mexico, the territories of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico if they agreed to enter the war on the side of Germany. Britain was none too hesitant to share this useful tidbit of information with US authorities, and the US was rightfully displeased knowing their neighbors to the south might have ambitions to take back the Southwest. The US declared war on Germany and the mobilization process began. Could the American troops be assembled, trained and then shipped off to the Western Front before the German reinforcements from the east arrived?

Germany got there first. They made one final offensive burst through the Allied lines, making it to within 37 miles of Paris. But this was not enough. By June of 1918, nearly 250,000 US troops entered Allied trenches, and at this point, the German military leaders admitted to the government back home that they could not win the war. Right around the time this admission came to light, Germany was facing a domestic crisis of its own. The four-year blockade of its ports meant food supplies were in high demand and inflationary prices were leaving millions hungry and pushing for concessions. Some even ironically started suggesting communism might be a solution to their current plight (bet the Germans didn’t see their little Lenin-sealed-train scheme coming back so soon to kick them in the tuchus). Trying to avoid a messy political revolution, German Kaiser Wilhelm II took a page from his cousin Czar Nicholas II’s abdication rule book and abandoned his throne. However unlike his cousin who remained in Russia
(only to be murdered along with his family), Wilhelm retired to Holland where he lived until 1941. Germany was turned over to the newly-formed Weimar Republic, who, in a bid to stave off a bubbling revolution while simultaneously saving their armed forces from continuing to fight an unwinnable war, surrendered to the Allied forces. So even though the German military was still in France and many falsely still believed it was Germany that was actually on the verge of winning, on November 11, 1918, at 11:11 in the morning, the final gun sounded and all was quiet on the Western Front.

The Great War was over. Total cost in lives – ten million killed on the battlefield. Another twenty million were blinded, maimed or severely injured. These men were Europe’s finest, and within four years an entire generation had been wiped out. This would be Europe’s lost generation. In the two years after the war another twenty million died of the Spanish Flu when the soldiers from the trenches returned back home and shared their lovely germs with their families and friends. In India alone, more were killed from the Spanish flu than all their battlefield injuries combined.

Every continent had sent men to fight (no, Antarctica didn’t send anyone...you’re a clever one you are), and every continent saw their economies or their societies impacted in some way. Europe’s 19th century imperialism meant that Europe’s 20th century conflicts would engross the entire world. World War I marked a turning point in the relative power structure of the planet’s civilizations. The European West had imploded and needed time to rebuild. The United States would from there assume the role as the preeminent Western power. The Arab world freed itself from Ottoman control, but their fate would take decades to unfold. Europe’s Asia holdings saw a crack in Western hegemony, and many started to dream of and even implement their own journeys toward independence. But before any of the world could move forward, the Allied powers had to first iron out the peace terms for all parties involved. They headed to France, to the Palace of Versailles. The building that was once the symbol of the age of unchallenged monarchies would become the site of the Paris Peace Conference and the creation of the document that would go down in history as the “peace to end all peace.”

The Paris Peace Conference began in January of 1919. Delegates from 27 nations arrived, each hoping to have a role in crafting the peace that would lead to a more equal world. Almost
more notable than the 27 nations present (countries that ranged from victorious France, Britain and the United States, to Allied supporters like Haiti, Siam, Uruguay and Belgium) were those who weren’t. Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were denied a seat at the table because they were, of course, the losers. Russia played no role because they had already pulled out a year earlier (though the lands they awarded to Germany would be fair game when it came to dividing up the fruits of victory). At first, the five major players – France, Britain, the United States, Italy and Japan – met to generate the terms of agreement. This large assembly proved unmanageable, so the Japanese were asked to leave (a treatment they would remember in the ensuing decades). Soon after, Italy was likewise excluded from the meetings of the major powers. This left the “Big Three” to essentially create the terms for Germany’s surrender.

The leaders of these Big Three – Georges Clemenceau of France, David Lloyd George of Britain and Woodrow Wilson of the United States – not only brought their nation’s needs to the table, but also their own personal ideologies for a post-war world. As the nation that bore the brunt of the conflict, both in the total number of casualties and as the main battlefield through the duration of the war, France wanted revenge. They suffered at the hands of the Germans in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, and after World War I, Clemenceau (the Tiger) and his contingency needed to know a conquered Germany could not again rise to threaten their homeland. David Lloyd George likewise shared in the suffering of the French, however British interests also considered how to punish Germany in a way that would leave their vanquished foe still strong enough to impede the spread of communism across the war-torn European frontier. From across the Atlantic and a late arrival to the war, Woodrow Wilson brought his idealistic personality and his dreams of a world where all nations met repeatedly to discuss and settle all international issues. Wilson was far less willing to punish Germany, more inclined to bring all nations to the table as equal partners.

So at the table was the French Tiger wanting revenge, the American idealist wanting international harmony and the British moderate straddling both sides of the fence. No one was going to get their way, but what resulted was a combination of both extremes, which in essence doomed the treaty from the start. The terms of the treaty dealt first with what to do with Germany. To Wilson’s displeasure, Germany was shattered. In the “war guilt
clause,” Germany was forced to accept sole responsibility for starting the war (which is odd because they remembered something about Austria and a Black Hand back in 1914). Subsequently, Germany then had to pay reparations for the entire war – all weapons, ammunition, clothing, food, soldier salaries... for both sides. Although later many of these reparations (eventually fixed in 1921 at $31.4 billion) would either be forgiven or paid off by foreign loans, the scope of the reparations was overwhelming, especially considering Germany’s primary ability to repay the debt was taken away. For fifteen years, they surrendered a region known as the Rhineland to the French, an industrial center producing a large chunk of Germany’s economic output. To make matters worse, Germany’s African and Asian colonies were divided up between Belgium, Britain, Japan and France. Their European territories were either given to other nations or made independent. Their military capability was also ruined. Their army was limited to a mere 100,000 troops, their navy was ordered to be destroyed off the coast of Scotland and they couldn’t build or import military weapons ever again. Germany was left a shell of its former self.

The Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires suffered equal treatment. Their holdings were divided amongst the victors or set free. For a few select countries deemed not quite ready to go it alone, the Versailles Treaty established the concept of mandates, where Britain and France would guide new nations (Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan to the British and Syria and Lebanon to France) toward the successful creation of their own democracies. Like in the Scramble for Africa, the boundaries drawn stemmed oftentimes more from the needs of the Europeans than from the regional realities of what would soon be called the Middle East. For example, the northern Kurdish population was split amongst multiple countries, one of which was Iraq. Added to Iraq were the warring Shiite and Sunni factions. With the Shiites controlling access to the Red Sea, the Sunnis governing the capital of Baghdad and the Kurds housing huge oil reserves, Britain essentially united three rivals in an attempt to freely extract and transport oil to the world market. To this day, tensions between Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis persist, threatening to unravel any democratic governments fostered under the recent United States’ “occupation” of Iraq. In the other mandates, similarly questionable boundaries tore apart peoples who had lived together for centuries and forced together groups who had been sworn enemies.
The most obvious case study concerns Britain-controlled Palestine. World War I marked the turning point in the Zionist Movement, as Jews from across the West started gaining more traction in their attempt to recreate a homeland for God’s chosen people – Israel. British post-WWI attempts to peacefully bring together the Palestinian Muslims and displaced Jews failed time and again, and a century later the world has realized that regional peace in this holy land remains unattainable. The Versailles Treaty clearly failed to bring peace to the Middle East.

One bright spot of Versailles should have been the League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson arrived with his Fourteen Points, an ambitious plan to ensure there would never be a World War II. Among these points was the promise of freedom of the seas, the banning of secret alliances and the full support of the notion of self-determination. Any nation or peoples wanting to free themselves from imperial rule should be allowed that opportunity. In his fourteenth point, Wilson envisioned a congress of all nations, a League of Nations, where international disputes would be resolved through diplomacy and compromise and the standard of living for all peoples would be elevated. He envisioned sharing with the world Western education, health practices and notions of meritocracy. The pragmatists Lloyd George and Clemenceau tepidly agreed to this auspicious proposal, and Wilson returned to the United States believing he had architected a system of international governance that would make war, strife and suffering a thing of the past.

But he forgot one thing. The United States was a democracy. Presidents don’t make laws. The Congress does. When he presented the League of Nations to the Senate, it was widely debated. Partly out of spite because no Republicans were invited to the Paris Peace Conference, but mostly because the League of Nations could potentially take away war-making powers from Congress, the Senate rejected the proposal. Wilson went from hero to zero. The man who presented the idea to the world couldn’t even convince his own people to support it. This rejection essentially doomed the League of Nations from the start. One of the most powerful nations in the world would not be enforcing any of the decisions, essentially making the League of Nations an impotent body unable to back right with might.

And this was just the start of the unraveling of the Versailles Treaty. Within two decades, the economic sanctions spun the world into a Great Depression, the territorial resolutions
spawned restlessness and the desire for revenge, and the naïve espousal of self-determination only created dozens of other regional hot spots where violence would become the only way to assure independence. The war to end all wars was resolved by the peace to end all peace.

During the 1920s, a brief economic boom made some believe quite erroneously that the world had been made a better place, but what they would soon discover was this brief respite only masked far deeper problems that eventually pulled the globe into the abyss.

But that is for another chapter.
Roaring into Chaos

*The Interwar Period – 1920 > 1940*

In 1900, Europe awed the world. Their military and economic dominance gave weight to the argument that it was *the* preeminent civilization on the planet. It made sense. If the richest, most technologically advanced, most feared countries all resided west of the Caucasus Mountains, the accepted belief was that their political and economic systems, their values and their culture were likewise superior.

But then they blew themselves up, and in the decades after Versailles, the nations of Europe not only had to rebuild their shattered infrastructures, but also the confidence of their people. The masses had trusted their leaders. Their politicians, their captains of industry and their spiritual guides had all promised that obedience to the state ensured peace and prosperity. World War I fractured that trust, opening all institutions and authority figures to criticism.

Millions recovered from the wounds of war, questioning if capitalist giants pushed war for their own profit, if democratic leaders truly spoke for the people, if the media was merely the puppet of authority figures, if there even was God.

The 1920s and 1930s became an era of experimentation and polarization. Democracy had failed. Was communism or fascism the solution? Capitalism had failed. Should industry then be turned over to the masses or to the government? God hadn’t answered prayers. Would science have the answer? Foreign alliances only exacerbated a regional conflict in the Balkans. Was isolationism and protectionism the path to peace?
Factions emerged promoting their agendas, and for every group that was pro-something, another would pop up that was anti-the same thing. These factions might debate ideologies, or they might take their disagreement to the streets. In many cases, these factions created outright movements, leading to philosophical revolutions at the highest level, where dictators could prescribe and enforce universal behavior, philosophy and even ethnicity.

For some, the 1920s meant unprecedented rights. When America passed their 19th Amendment, they became one of the final Western countries to grant voting rights to women. Over the next decade, these same women expanded their political independence into the social sphere. They started wearing more revealing clothing, smoking and drinking with the boys, going out with the girls unescorted and behaving a lot less “ladylike.” Women became celebrities on the Silver Screen Nickelodeons (guess how much it cost for a movie ticket?), their voices could be heard by radio across nations, and they started not just entering, but influencing, fields seen before as solely the domain of men. Women like Amelia Earhart completely ignored gender norms, pushing the limits of what society believed possible for a woman, setting and then breaking dozens of aviation records before finally meeting her end somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. Even in Turkey, a nation only recently escaping the social conservatism of the Ottoman Empire, female novelist Halide Edip became not only a spokeswoman for gender equality, but also a noted political figure campaigning for Turkish independence.

Edip was one of a growing number of “others” who began pushing for rights not honored under white rule. In the United States during World War I, southern blacks fled to northern cities, not only answering the call for replacement labor for the white soldiers, but also fleeing a Jim Crow South that had created painfully debilitating segregation laws that made life even more unbearable than that under slavery. For the colored billions living under European colonial rule, World War I became the tipping point where independence became a possibility. Whether in Vietnam or Nigeria or Indonesia or Malaya, the “tribes” and “natives” started to push for not merely reforms that would give them more political and economic opportunities, but for wholesale independence, free from external control. Many leaders of these campaigns were actually “natives” who had been Western educated (some even going to Europe for their studies), returning with the ideologies of Montesquieu, Locke, Rousseau and Jefferson.
Among these returning liberal-educated sons, India’s Mahatma Gandhi stood out as the foremost advocate for home rule. Employing a method of nonviolent protest where civil society organizations peacefully gathered to protest inequalities, hoping for either an alteration in policy or a violent government reprisal that could invoke widespread sympathy, Gandhi became the first to show that civil disobedience opens more eyes than do bullets.

But for every step forward towards racial equality, there was always a group pushing to maintain the status quo, and usually this group was made up of threatened white people. Borrowing from the Social Darwinism of the 19th Century that conveniently used science to justify the West’s industrial prominence, a generation of eugenicists pushed to ensure racial purity. Some organizations like the American Ku Klux Klan or the German Nazis resorted to public coercion and violence to keep colored people “in their place.” These groups hoped to keep undesirables out of everyday life, and unlike today where even those with racist tendencies try to keep their opinions to themselves, in the 1920s, publicly professing the inferiority of the others was socially acceptable. Today some try to discard the racism of the post-WWI era as being merely the extremist views of an isolated group of fringe thinkers. This argument doesn’t wash. At the height of their popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, the Ku Klux Klan hit six million members and the Nazi Party surpassed eight million. But these views weren’t solely shared by members of these admittedly extremist groups. Eugenicists like politician Winston Churchill, woman’s rights advocate Margaret Sanger, novelist H.G. Wells, president Theodore Roosevelt, inventor Alexander Graham Bell and entrepreneur Henry Ford all at one time lobbied for methods of ensuring racial purity. Whether it be by sterilizing undesirable groups like the disabled, the incarcerated or homosexuals, or promoting laws that prevented interracial marriages, these eugenicists actually believed many of society’s problems could be solved if we could just find a way to breed out “negative” human traits.

This tension over gender and racial equality was just one of the many paradoxes that tore at the fabric of the societies emerging from the despair of World War I. For every feminist pushing for fair treatment, there was another conservative mother pressuring to keep their nation’s daughters chaste and in the kitchen. For every advocate believing Africans and Asians could live in harmony with their European brothers, there was another
man working on the most efficient scientific method of ensuring people of different races didn’t reproduce. But the list of contradictions didn’t stop there. Some believed man should look to science (specifically the breakthroughs in physics and the medical industry) to determine how we should live. Others still believed God had all the answers. Some championed the values of the cities—their jazz music, neon lights and loose morals. Others still hoped society wouldn’t forget their rural roots, remaining pure, innocent and wholesome. Some believed you could legislate human behavior (even outlawing alcohol). Others wanted people to be free to choose their own paths. Some advocated for opening ourselves to the cultures and economies of all peoples. Others believed every nation should turn inward, shutting off trade with other countries and preventing immigration from “inferior” lands. Some thought war could be prevented by making larger, more destructive weapons. Others wanted to halt weapons production altogether, or even sign adorably naïve international agreements that outlawed war (the rarely-mentioned Kellogg-Briand Pact that hypothetically still determines the foreign policy of dozens of its original signatories...including the United States of America).

As the capitalist/democratic ideal lost a bit of its glimmer, other radically new governing ideologies emerged. With the Russian Revolution of 1917, Karl Marx’s 19th century theories finally came to fruition (or at least that’s the line Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks sold to the Russian people). The promises of communism faded in the 1920s as first Lenin and then Stalin maneuvered to position all power in the hands of an elite few. Karl Marx’s vision of a world where the workers of the world would unite, overthrow the capitalist exploiters and share power and profit equally was abruptly abandoned once Lenin and the Bolsheviks determined power could only be ensured if a few definitional idiosyncrasies could be reinterpreted. By 1930, Stalin had become the unquestioned dictator of Russia, and power was anything but shared. All economic, political and foreign policy decisions originated from the mouth of Stalin and any threats (either perceived or actual) to his authority were either exiled or killed. The inevitable cycle of revolution that had started with the abdication of the tyrant Czar Nicholas II had ended with the reign of the criminally tyrannical Stalin.

But this wasn’t how it all started.

Let’s go back a few decades. In March of 1917, Czar Nicholas II reluctantly signed his abdication papers in a railroad
car outside of Petrograd, ending decades of imperial decay where the Russian royal family proved incapable of meeting the needs of their people. Since the late 19th century, the throne of Russia had come under frequent attacks from a swelling population that continued to survive under medieval conditions. Nicholas, like his ancestors before, failed to adjust to the changing demands of a more mobile, more indignant population. In 1905, Nicholas attempted to appease the populace by consenting to the formation of the Duma, the Russian version of Congress or Parliament. But this representative body existed in name only, with power still residing in the hands of the distant, uninformed royal family and their advisors. By 1916, with the devastation of World War I disproportionately scarring both civilian life and soldiers on the front (many not armed with the latest weapons), the citizens of Petrograd lashed out, first just demanding bread, but eventually calling for the removal of the Czar. When the army refused to defend Nicholas and the Petrograd revolutionaries appeared inconsolable, Nicholas agreed to “voluntarily” step down.

In the ensuing months of the spring of 1917, Russians tasted the utopia they envisioned. The lands of the wealthy were stolen and redistributed. A parliament of the people was created. The Czar and his family were imprisoned. Hundreds of regional councils (soviets) sprung up around the nation, hoping to soon attend to the needs of the population. Russia began its new era of freedom. For a brief moment, Russia was the most equal nation in the world.

But by the summer, any hope of creating a society of equals had faded. Elected leaders jockeyed for power. Groups consolidated authority, creating and expanding political parties. The communist parties of the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks competed for the right to determine Russia’s future. The Mensheviks wanted to work with the middle class, creating a constitutional republic. Lenin’s Bolsheviks disagreed. In Lenin’s self-serving interpretation of Marx’s beliefs, a communist revolution would have to be guided by an elite group of intellectuals holding supreme authority (with Lenin not-so-surprisingly at the top).

Another revolution was needed. Lenin brought back exiled Leon Trotsky from New York City, plans were hatched, and on November 6, 1917, the Bolsheviks successfully, and relatively peacefully, took over the country. In a coordinated effort, they captured critical railroad stations, banks, communication lines and
power grids, and then marched into the assembly and merely set up a new government. Few knew what was happening. Even fewer shots were fired.

In the ensuing months, Lenin’s Bolsheviks would keep their promise of peace by pulling out of World War I, signing a peace accord that ceded the Ukraine and Belarus to the Germans. Peace was short-lived as a civil war erupted in Russia, pitting the Communist Red Army vs. the White Army made up of former military leaders, prominent members of the middle class and even a sprinkling of British and American troops. This bloody conflict lasted until 1922 when the Red Army emerged victorious. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was born with Lenin as the unquestioned leader, ruling with an iron fist, killing anyone who threatened his authority (the royal family was knocked off almost immediately – Nicholas, his wife and his children were hacked to shreds, their bodies turned unrecognizable in vats of acid before being deposited across the countryside).

Lenin’s authority was unquestioned, but his health failed him. In 1924 he died, but instead of power passing to his protégé Leon Trotsky, the general secretary of the party, Joseph Stalin – a man who had made numerous alliances during the civil war through his control of information and behind the scenes manipulation – elevated himself to party boss. The self-proclaimed “man of steel,” engineered not only the discrediting and eventual exile of Trotsky, but also the cunning intimidation of any other challenger who refused to yield to his authority. Once in power, Stalin revealed a pattern of rule that would oppress, but also advance, Russia for the next three decades.

Stalin was a paranoid man (and rightfully so). He had climbed to power through less than official means. Who was to stop a rival from pursuing the same course? Time and again, Stalin authorized purges that would jail, exile and oftentimes kill all would-be adversaries. By 1935, all connected to the Russian Revolution had been taken care of, many even removed from the history books (Stalin prided himself and his ministers of information for their ability to doctor pictures to put Stalin in critical moments in Soviet history, while deleting those actually in attendance). Even Leon Trotsky, the hero of the revolution, was found and assassinated. A member of Stalin’s secret police tracked him down in Mexico and stuck an ice pick in his skull.

Once Stalin’s power was unquestioned, he worked to advance Russia. He knew he needed to catch up to his Western
European rivals or the Russian borders would never be safe. He needed the nation to industrialize, and he needed it done in the shortest amount of time possible. This meant turning the entire state into a production machine. Factories were built, ores were mined and all available capital was put back into industrial production. In the countryside, all farms were “collectivized,” meaning they were combined into huge industrial farms where previously independent planters became slaves to the field. Any that disagreed were labeled “kulaks” and sent to prison camps in Siberia where they spent their final days mining or searching for food until they eventually froze to death. This collectivization not only turned over agricultural control to the government, but it eventually killed close to 30 million people through starvation, and forced another 20 million into the cities where they became the cogs in Stalin’s industrial machine.

Stalin’s plan was deadly, but it worked. Russia became the fastest growing economy in the world, and by the mid-1930s, when the rest of the world was suffering through the Great Depression, Russia claimed almost full employment, with their industrial output growing at a rate of over 10% a year. Just when the capitalist countries were falling apart, communist Russia looked like the poster child for progress. For nations around the world emerging from Western colonial control and the destruction of World War I, Stalin’s model looked a bit appealing. Sure, his methods might have been a bit intense, but few could argue with the results.

It was this growing attraction to Communism that spawned the second great governmental experiment of the Interwar Period — fascism. In the years following World War I, across Europe, communist parties gained steam. Promising power to the people and a redistribution of property, it wasn’t hard to convince a generation in despair of the advantages of Marx’s theories. Obviously this made the nations of Europe a bit uneasy. Robbing from the rich and giving to the poor sounds quaint when Robin Hood is the protagonist, but a wholesale redistribution of power and wealth is a bit less romantic. Communism became a viable option amongst all of the factional groups vying for power in the new democracies that materialized in post-war Europe. Oftentimes these communist groups and even the other political parties fought their “democratic” battles not merely with words but with armed forces of thugs. Many citizens grew tired of all this political jockeying for power. They longed for the good ol’ days
when one man called all the shots. They just wanted peace, order, stability and a return to the glory of an idealized yesteryear.

Enter the fascists. Benito Mussolini was the first to test this system of controlling the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of a country. The genius of fascism is its ability to recognize and take advantage of mankind’s weaknesses. Seeing that his Italian compatriots had grown tired of the endless bickering and ineptitude of the democratic process, but also recalling the lure of nationalism in the early stages of the Great War, Mussolini invented fascism. He took the symbol of Roman power – a fascio that had branches bound securely around an axe – to show how if Italians only cared about their individual wants and needs, Italy would surely fail. But united, they could not be defeated. He fashioned a political party that had all the pomp of a military unit. His party members wore black shirts (earning the nickname “the Black Shirts”). He offered medals and awards for party loyalty. He orchestrated massive political rallies complete with patriotic singing, ritualistic chanting and visual spectacles that attracted even his adversaries. For the young men and women looking for role models, something to do and a place where they could channel their aggression and frustration, Fascism was the answer. Mussolini’s party was more than just a vehicle championing an ideology of order, unity and loyalty, it was a paramilitary organization able to stomp any group that stood in their way. Many remained apathetic to the noise of the Fascists, worrying more about their day-to-day life than this new form of politics developing in the cities. And this played right into the hands of Mussolini. His followers adored him. His adversaries feared him. The rest of the nation stayed out of the way. When his Black Shirts marched on Rome in 1922, King Victor Emmanuel appointed Mussolini prime minister, believing he was the only one who could restore stability to the land. This was exactly the opening Mussolini needed. He used his role as prime minister to gradually eliminate democratic restrictions, and by 1925 he was the supreme ruler of Italy – Il Duce.

To the north, the leader of the National Socialist Party in Germany was paying close attention to the theatrics, the manipulations and the evolution of Mussolini. For this man also lived in a nation facing the uncertainty that stemmed from liberal attacks on traditional institutions. For this man also lived in a nation whose collective ego had been damaged by the losses of war. For this man, the Weimar Republic was a bumbling joke and it
held a precarious grip on German society, and if he too could create a political party ready to take advantage of a moment of chaos, he too could one day rise to become supreme leader. All this man, this Adolph Hitler, needed was a crisis of unparalleled proportions.

And it was delivered to him on a tarnished silver platter with the coming of the Great Depression.

The Great Depression slammed the United States first, but because by the 1920s most economies were entwined in a web of bank lending and trading partnerships, when one country went down, the entire system crumbled. The causes were many, some preventable, some merely a product of a global economy.

First, banks made risky loans. Usually it makes sense for banks to loan money to people, organizations (even countries) that can actually pay the money back. Not so during the 1920s. Money was easy, and whether you were a budding middle class consumer taking out some money to buy one of Ford’s Model-T’s or Germany pleading for the millions needed to pay back the reparations demanded by the Versailles Treaty, banks were far more willing to ignore huge credit risks. What could possibly go wrong if you lent money to people who couldn’t pay it back?

Second, banks and individuals took stock speculation to unprecedented levels. Investors were more than willing to throw cash at the new industries – automobiles, radio, chemicals and appliances – but even to companies with no proven track record. From 1924 to 1929, the US stock market rose 275%. People started to believe 30% annual returns on their investments was the norm, not the exception. And because the federal governments of the West (especially in the US) had’t yet created the regulatory bodies to keep people honest, some people even “started” fake companies, took in investor money and then ran before anyone realized there was never a product to begin with.

Third, the result of risky loans and stock speculation meant banks and average Joes were overleveraged – they owed way more than they could ever hope to pay back. As long as the economies were roaring, as long as radios, cars and refrigerators kept rolling off the assembly lines, and as long as people were acting out of pure irrational optimism, the ride would keep people flying. But financial bubbles always burst. Rational fear inevitably replaces optimism. People eventually want to actually see their money.
This was when the house of fiscal cards came tumbling down.

Investors got worried. Banks got nervous. They wanted their loans repaid and to cash in their stock certificates. In October 1929, a few started selling their stocks, then it was dozens, then hundreds, then everyone started to pull their money out. But this time, there were no buyers for these stocks. Prices on stocks sunk lower. Banks that had invested their depositors’ money needed cash. They demanded their borrowers pay back their loans immediately. But they couldn’t. So banks stopped lending money. People couldn’t invest any more using borrowed money. Corporations couldn’t put money into growing their businesses. Governments ran out of money to pay their debts.

And then the people caught wind of what was happening in the financial sector and ran to the banks to withdraw all their money. These “bank runs” happened all over the West, all at the same time, but there was no money to withdraw. The banks had run out of money. Banks closed. Life savings vanished.

With no money being lent, no money in people’s pocket books, people stopped buying goods and services. The demand for the luxury goods of the 1920s had already started to slow by the end of the decade – there are only so many refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and cars any one family actually needs. And by 1930, demand died. Companies produced less and fired unneeded employees. Unemployment rates soared to over 25% in America, and over 50% in Western Europe.

There was no money, no jobs, no hope.

Some were hit worse than others. For example, farmers lost everything. With the technological innovations in agricultural production that coincided with the increased demand for foodstuffs during the World War I years, farmers made a killing from 1915-1920. They produced more crops than ever before, bought more farm equipment than ever before and reaped more profits than ever before. But when the war ended and the troops returned, the supply of food soared even higher. What happens when you produce more than your customers need? The price drops. And by 1925, the demand for beef, corn, wheat and rice dropped to levels that made it unprofitable for the mom and pop farmers of the world to continue taking their yields to market. Whether you were a rice farmer in China or a cattle rancher in Latin America, you couldn’t financially make it anymore.
Hundreds of millions sold their lands to large corporations and moved to the cities, and what awaited them in the cities?

No jobs. No food. No support system. But having so many millions of economic casualties in one place meant that for the visionary manipulator with a solution and a scapegoat, a movement could be unleashed.

In Germany the conditions were worse than anywhere else in the industrialized world. Following World War I, the economy of Germany roared up and down like no other. The Versailles Treaty demanded Germany pay 132 billion deutschmarks (close to 500 billion US dollars today), but then took away their colonial holdings and their prime industrial region – the Rhineland. There was no way Germany could ever pay the money back. But France and England demanded their restitution. So, Germany came up with the ingenious idea to just print a bunch of money. You want billions of marks? We can give you billions of marks. But with billions of bills circulating through the economy in the early 1920s, their money lost all of its value. At one point, Germany was printing bank notes in 100 trillion deutschmark denominations and their currency was exchanging at the rate of 4.2 trillion marks to one US dollar. Stories circulated of Germans wallpapering their homes with the money, bringing wheelbarrows full of marks to buy a loaf of bread and even burning money during the winter months for warmth. France and England weren't too pleased with this ploy, and Germans had trouble making ends meet under this bizarre hyperinflation. American bankers stepped in with a solution. They would loan the money to Germany. Germany would use America's loaned money to pay back debts to France and England. France and England would then take this money and buy American goods. As this money cycled through the West, American bankers were essentially financing foreign imports. So when the banking crisis hit America and loans stopped heading east to Germany, the German economy (and soon after the other Western economies) plummeted.

To try to protect their home industries, government leaders then made the mistake of establishing protective tariffs so their citizens would only buy goods and services produced from their homeland. The logic went that if foreign goods cost far more than local goods, people would only buy the stuff produced locally. The American Congress passed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, taxing over 20,000 imported goods. America's trading partners then responded with reciprocal tariffs on American goods.
International trade came to a halt. If corporate sales were hurting in 1930, they were devastated in the ensuing years after these back and forth tariff wars slaughtered sales figures.

Capitalism had failed. Traditional government attempts to fix the system had likewise failed. Leaders had to try something new. Some governments adopted the Keynesian philosophy that encourages the state to prime the pump, willingly going into debt to put people back to work and circulate more money through the economy. American Franklin D. Roosevelt enforced his New Deal legislation, creating dozens of “alphabet agencies” that built roads, dams, bridges and national parks; establishing regulatory agencies that would prevent the stock market bubbles and irrational banking practices of the Roaring Twenties; and supporting mandatory state investment programs like Social Security and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (aka “welfare”) to help the elderly, the disabled, the unemployed and the fatherless. In Scandinavian Europe, the leaders likewise launched a support network of programs to provide for their people by subsidizing secondary and college education, enforcing labor laws favorable to workers and creating state-run healthcare programs for all citizens.

The West was clear—moving to the left. Some worried too far to the left—too far toward a communist state where powers would be taken from the wealthy and redistributed to the poor. Communist parties gained traction from Greece to Italy to France, and even across the Atlantic to America. In 1932, presidential hopeful Huey Long advocated his “Share Our Wealth” program, where every man could be a king, and where the fat cats of Wall Street would finally be held accountable for their market manipulations (a 1930s version of the Occupy Wall Street movement). His policies scared Americans raised on the values of hard work, meritocracy and the American Dream. Huey Long was assassinated.

In countries like Italy, Japan and Germany, violence of another sort broke out to prevent the evil of communism from spreading. Military and party leaders sparked the people’s passions through nationalism and pledges of a return to former glory. By 1932, the right-wing conservative Fascists controlled Italy, the imperialistic military controlled Japan and the Nazis controlled Germany.

The 1920s battles of new vs. old, liberal vs. conservative and modern vs. traditional had now reached global dimensions. Neither side would concede defeat. Neither side would allow the
other to spread their ideology. But unlike in the 1920s when these conflicts solved themselves in courts, in assemblies or on the streets, in the 1930s these clashes would take place in the bunkers, in the jungles and on the seas, for the final resolution would require an all-out global war – World War II.

But that is for another chapter.
The first Great War took on the moniker World War I, but truly the fighting was restricted to the European continent. Yes, some battles popped up in the European colonies in Africa and Asia, guerrilla warfare emerged across the Arabian Peninsula and Japan pushed for territorial claims in China. Yes, colonial holdings from across the globe sent their troops to the European theater in support of mother country. And yes, nations from Latin America to Sub-Saharan Africa to the Far East profited by supplying to Europe the critical resources required to sustain an industrialized war. But when you look at the actual fighting, the actual impact on civilians, soldiers, economies, governments and infrastructures, the burden was almost exclusively borne by the Western nations.

World War II was different. It was a true WORLD war.

Sure, in its first few months, it looked a lot like a replay of World War I. Once again, Germany was heading through Belgium on the way to take out France. Once again, France and Britain worked together to put the upstart Germans in their place. Yet quickly, the comparisons stopped and any passive observer could see that this war would end up like no other. Within six years,
major offensives would take the Japanese across the Far East, putting them on the doorsteps of Australia, India and the United States. German armies took over governments from Norway to North Africa to Iraq, and then pushed deep into the heart of the Soviet Union. The United States saw their own country attacked (albeit a remote Pacific island state 2000 miles off the coast of California) before sending their troops to three continents to end the Axis menace. Again Latin America stayed pretty much out of the actual fighting (save for Mexico and Brazil who sent in an air force and a 25,000 man army respectively), but again profiting as needed suppliers to the Allies and a welcome home to the millions of refugees fleeing their shattered former lives.

World War II was also different because it wasn’t too difficult to blame the instigators. Japan and Germany (and to some extent Italy) brought war to the world. Most nations in the 1930s hid behind policies of isolationism and pacifism, refusing to involve themselves in the affairs of other nations. If alliances were what brought the belligerents to conflict in World War I, it would be the fear of alliances that brought the world to its knees in the 1940s. By the end of the 1930s, militarist Japan and fascist Germany and Italy had embarked on a campaign of empire building, all right in front of the faces of the world’s powers, yet the onlookers did nothing. Each bold land grab by the aggressors went unchecked, emboldening even further moves. When the nations finally decided to awake from their pacifist slumber, they saw an East Asia and a Europe ruled by Germany and Japan, with all signs pointing to these two nations being far from finished. It would be up to Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union and 23 other allied nations to reverse this course, or within a few years they might all live under the realms of the Nazi Swastika or the Japanese Rising Sun.

During World War II, the accepted motivation as to why the Germans and Japanese plunged recklessly down the course of conquest was that their democratic governments had been hijacked by demented militarist leaders hell-bent on subjugating the inferior peoples of the world. Though evidence definitely exists to support this evil-leader hypothesis, there might be just a bit more to the tale, considering both nations were considered the most advanced, refined civilizations in their respective regions at the turn of the 20th century.

For Germany, Hitler’s promises of national pride, full employment and a return to the glory days of Bismarck were
welcomed by a population utterly destroyed by the Great Depression. With unemployment rates eclipsing 50% in some regions, Germans flocked to hear the passionate pledges of the uniquely-mustached orator. Although the decade after World War I had briefly teased Western Europe with promises of new wealth, new art and new consumer goods, when their economic worlds came crashing down in 1930, many looked for new answers to why a once-mighty people were again brought to their knees. Hitler offered explanations. Hitler offered scapegoats. It was the capitalists of Britain and France who corrupted the economy. It was the traitors of the Weimar Republic who pulled Germany out of a war they were winning and then signed the crippling Versailles Treaty. It was the communists whose lone desire was to pull down the affluence of all those who excelled. And lastly, it was the Jews, who, in Hitler's mind, were co-conspirators with the capitalists, the Weimar Republic and the communists. His growing crowds ignored the details of how the Jews, who numbered less than 1% of the entire German population, could have aligned themselves with groups spanning the political spectrum to such a degree that they could topple German society. All they saw was a reason for their plight.

Hitler didn't merely offer scapegoats; he also outlined how he would pull the nation out of despair. In his penned-in-prison autobiography Mein Kampf (My Struggle), Hitler spoke of lebensraum, living space for all German people. Hitler dreamed of a world where all Germans, regardless of current national boundary distinctions, would one day be reunited in a greater German empire. Hitler would then secure lebensraum for his people by conquering the Slavs to the east who had more land than they needed, more land than they deserved. The racially inferior Slavs (with the Russians being the largest group) would be crushed, and the breadbasket of Europe would fall into the hands of the “righteous Aryan race.” To meet these ends, Hitler would ignore the mandates of Versailles, instead putting Germany on a course of rearmament, where every man and woman wanting employment would be put to work. They would work again, they would be happy again, they would be proud again.

And Hitler delivered. By 1936, Adolf Hitler had achieved near 100% employment. Regardless of attempts made by their leaders, Britain and America couldn't pull out of their depressions. But there was no extended Great Depression in Germany. Hitler's government started subsidizing vacations for his citizens – paying
for trips to the Alps, the Mediterranean and nearby lake cottages. He dreamt of a world where everyone would have a car – wagons for his folks (Volkswagens). He built glorious autobahns for the lucrative auto industry, he created Hitler Youth programs that brought together children from all across the nation and he staged elaborate parades where hundreds of thousands trembled at the sight of their beloved Führer.

He gave the people what they wanted – both ideologically and materially – so that by 1939, he had the nation at his fingertips, willing and able to do his bidding (regardless of how demented, sadistic and ill-planned it would become).

In Japan, the nation already had a revered leader – Emperor Hirohito – the only royal figure in the world who could trace his lineage back to the birth of mankind. Like with Hitler, Hirohito had developed a cult of personality where children grew up pledging their lives to this god-like figure. However, unlike Hitler, Hirohito played a minimal role in determining public policy. This was left to the parliament. But by the 1930s, the parliament had essentially handed over power to the militarists, groups of ultra-right wing military leaders who believed capitalism and its evils – profit and individualism – were responsible for the gradual rotting of the Japanese soul. The militarists offered a new Japan, a Japan that once again revered the Emperor above all else, and who by force would secure Japan’s future for generations. After a few key assassinations (including Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi who naively sponsored the restrictive London Naval Treaty), no one in parliament dared cross the vision of the militarists.

Similar to how the Germans sought out lebensraum for their people, the Japanese equally wanted living space for their island nation. As a resource-scarce country, Japan depended on trade with East Asia and the United States, but in the 1930s, free trade had come to an end as nations cared more about protecting their domestic economies than with honoring trade agreements with the rest of the world. Japan was vulnerable. Should it be cut off from the global trade network, Japan’s industry would be paralyzed and its people would soon starve. The militarists refused to accept this position of dependence. They envisioned a “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” where European powers would be kicked out of East Asia and Japan would replace the West as the sole extractors of resources.

So by the mid-1930s, the course of Japan and Germany’s future had been set. Through hyper-nationalism, rapid
rearmament and aggressive foreign policies, these two nations emerged from the shadows of the United States and England to claim what they truly believed to be rightfully theirs.

Japan was the first to strike. Since the Sino-Japanese War of the late 19th century, Japan demanded free access to Chinese ports and manufacturing centers. By the early 1900s, they had secured rights to build and manage railroads across Manchuria, connecting Japan to both Chinese industry and Russian transportation networks. But Japan wanted more than just control of the railroads. They wanted Manchuria.

In an amazing bit of catalyst creation, on September 18, 1931, a section of the Japanese railway lines (on Chinese Manchurian soil) was blown up. To the Japanese army, this was clearly the work of Chinese dissidents, so within weeks, over a hundred thousand Japanese invaded Manchuria, under the pretext of protecting Japanese interests from the big, bad Chinese terrorists. Only one problem. It was Japanese soldiers that actually lit the fuse. The explosion was all just a carefully orchestrated con to justify military action. When the facts came out in this Mukden Incident, the League of Nations was appalled and sternly reprimanded (oh no...not a reprimand) the Japanese for their blatant disregard for sacred international relations. Japan was insulted at this lecture, so they left the League of Nations. But they stayed in China.

Hitler paid close attention to this event and the impotence of the League of Nations. If the League basically was powerless to stop the Japanese, who else could get away with international murder? The answer came when Italian leader Benito Mussolini sent his army out of Europe in an attempt to restore Italy to the glory days of the Roman Empire. His target – Ethiopia – the last of the African nations (save for Liberia) not controlled by a European power. Italian troops used machine guns, bombs and poisoned gas, and within a few months they had conquered the Ethiopians. The League of Nations was outraged. They politely asked Mussolini to pull out of Ethiopia or else risk losing access to all oil imports. Mussolini refused and pulled out of the League of Nations. The League did nothing. Again. Mussolini had his mini-Roman Empire, and Hitler saw his opening. It appeared nobody was in the mood to stop naked aggression.

But how would Germany rise to threaten Europe yet again, when it had hypothetically been dismantled by the Versailles Treaty? Adolph Hitler, obsessed with the inequity of the treaty,
made it his life’s mission to exact revenge on the signatories. First, he had to test the waters. What could he get away with before the so-called Allies checked his plans for regional domination? In 1933, he pulled Germany out of the League of Nations. The Allies did nothing. In 1935, he ordered universal conscription for all adult German males, defying Versailles by expanding his army from 100,000 troops to three million. Again, the Allies did nothing. He then started full rearmament, calling on his people’s best scientists to create the state-of-the-art weapons that could take the continent by surprise, eventually even creating the largest air force in the world – the Luftwaffe. The Allies still did nothing. Feeling even bolder, Hitler then sent his troops into the Rhineland, the chunk of territory on Germany’s western border that had been controlled by France since Versailles. Hitler promised England and France he had “no territorial claims,” and that he just wanted to restore Germany’s rightful boundaries, but he would never, ever take over any land again. The Allies trusted the humble Hitler and they did nothing.

Hitler then set his sights on his homeland – Austria. He wanted to reunite the once great German peoples – bringing back together the Austrian and German empires. Hitler contacted Austrian chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg and presented him with a bitter ultimatum – Germany would handpick the next chancellor and 2/3 of the Austrian parliament would be reserved for members of the Austrian Nazi Party...or else face invasion. Hitler brought his troops to the border of Austria just to help Schuschnigg make his decision. Without an option B, the chancellor acquiesced, and Austria was essentially annexed by Germany. Hitler justified this annexation, or Anschluss, by marching his 8th Army through the streets of Vienna (which were lined with hundreds of thousands of Nazi “supporters”), and then demanding the nation take a vote to see if the people truly loved their prodigal son. In an amazing vote that I’m sure was 99.75% legitimate, the German annexation of Austria was accepted by 99.75% of the population. For those of you familiar with The Sound of Music, that .25% must have included the Von Trapp Family who weren’t terribly fond of the Anschluss, and climbed every mountain to get out of Austria instead of living under the Nazi flag.

From there, Hitler made his boldest move to date. To his southeast lay Czechoslovakia, a nation created by Versailles, a nation that housed over three million Germans across its northern border in an area known as the Sudetenland. Hitler claimed these
three million helpless Germans were being persecuted by their Czech compatriots (even though in the Sudetenland they outnumbered Czechs ten to one) and, based on the premise of Woodrow Wilson’s own theories of self-determination, had the right to join the greater German empire. To his international audience, Hitler again spewed out his promise that he had no greater territorial claims. He just wanted to help out a little brother in need. To solve this problem, the major nations of Europe – Italy, France and England – agreed to join Hitler in Munich, Germany for a conference to decide the fate of Czechoslovakia. A key omission from the invite list was Czechoslovakia itself, who sat on the sidelines, believing erroneously that the French and English would protect Czech sovereignty. They didn’t. Hitler was granted the Sudetenland, under the premise that he promised to never, ever take over any territory again. Hitler shook hands on the deal, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned to England boasting that he had secured “peace in our time” and Czechoslovakia was left bewildered, pondering what just happened.

And within five months Hitler took over the rest of Czechoslovakia.

This Munich Conference came to symbolize the ineptness of the West’s policy of appeasement towards German aggression. At every step, the French, British and American efforts to merely “appease” Hitler only empowered the Führer to push further. Within three years, he had seized control of the Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia—all without firing a shot.

For Britain and France, the policy of appeasement meant avoiding another Great War, while hopefully buying much-needed time to rearm their own countries.

For the Americans, they wanted nothing to do with European infighting. The pervading American sentiment of the time was that involvement in European affairs inevitably led to pointless wars. World War I was supposed to be the war to end all wars, but even after the horrific suffering and the loss of an entire generation of the West’s greatest men, within a couple decades, Europe was at it again. In the late 1930s, the United States even attempted to pass a constitutional amendment outlawing war. The United States wanted to retreat back behind its protection of two oceans, hoping to remain pacifist and isolated from world affairs.
Yet as Japan and Germany continued to force their territorial claims, the United States (and especially their president Franklin D. Roosevelt) found it increasingly difficult to maintain a neutral stance. By mid-1937, Japan was not content with merely controlling Manchuria. They wanted full access to the trading centers of China, so in August, they launched their invasion at Shanghai. After months of brutal fighting, Japan finally proved victorious and began heading further inland for the capital city at Nanking. Instead of defending the capital with the most highly trained of the Chinese army, Chiang Kai-Shek ordered the retreat of all troops deep into the heart of China. His thinking was that if the Chinese army could live to fight another day, it could steadily mount a guerrilla war campaign against the invading Japanese forces. China could not defeat Japan head to head on the battlefield, but maybe they could win a war of attrition.

Left behind at the capital of Nanking were young, untrained soldiers - an “army” easily defeated by the battle-hardened Japanese forces. What ensued after this quick victory has gone down in history as one of the most barbaric atrocities ever committed during wartime – the Rape of Nanking. Desiring vengeance for their losses at the battle of Shanghai, fueled by notions of racial superiority and left to their own sadistic desires by an indifferent officer corps, the Japanese army unleashed a six week reign of terror that murdered and maimed close to 200,000 citizens. The casualty toll only tells part of the story, as it was the inhuman, grotesque method in which the cruelty was exacted that horrified the international community. Over 50,000 females – from infants to the elderly to even pregnant women - were taken from their homes and raped. Bodies were mutilated and displayed around the city. Soldiers used gathered civilians as target practice, boasting of their tallies as individual tallies on kill lists surpassed hundreds, then thousands. The degree of depravity will not be here mentioned any further, but as the Western diplomats began circulating the story to their home countries, sentiment grew amongst the leaders that something had to be done.

But the United States could not yet enter. Because the US Congress had passed a series of Neutrality Acts forbidding America from trading with belligerents at war, if the US hoped to extend any aid to the Chinese (and the surviving European governments in future years), they would have to deny that a war even existed. Throughout the final years of the decade, America worked with China’s neighboring countries to send in supplies and
provide whatever support was possible without openly declaring war with Japan. Through diplomatic channels, the US pleaded with Japan to withdraw its forces from China, and when this failed, they enforced an oil embargo that severely handicapped Japan's ability to wage war, setting the two nations down the inevitable path of confrontation.

Back in Europe, by 1939, the era of appeasement had run its course. The world was shocked when Hitler and Stalin announced their signing of a mutual Non-Aggression Pact, pledging that they would solve all future disputes cordially and they would never attack each other. Having these two sworn enemies sign any agreement was shocking. For two decades they had each pledged the utter destruction of the other. To Hitler, Soviet communism was the ultimate evil. To Stalin, German antagonism posed the greatest threat. So why then would they sign this agreement?

Hitler needed to know his eastern front was secure. The Von Schlieffen Plan of 1914 failed because Germany weakened its western line when it had to send millions of men back across Germany to help reinforce the east under assault from Russia. Hitler had no intentions of not invading the Soviet Union. He just didn't want to do it YET. He pretty clearly mapped out his opinion of Stalin in Mein Kampf. See if you can wade through the subtlety of his language:

Never forget that the rulers of present-day Russia are common blood-stained criminals; that they are the scum of humanity which, favored by circumstances, overran a great state in tragic hour, slaughtered and wiped out thousands of her leading intelligentsia in wild blood lust, and now for almost ten years have been carrying on the most cruel and tyrannical regime of all time...

Not exactly a promise of eternal friendship. Hitler would invade the Soviet Union, topple the inferior Slavic and Jewish people and seize his lebensraum, but not until after France fell to the West. For Stalin, he signed the deal mostly because he needed time. His military corps was void of competent, experienced officers (something Stalin should have thought about before he killed them all in his 1930s paranoid purges), and his troops hadn't exactly proven themselves in conflicts against the oh-so-lethal army of Finland. Plus, part of the pact divided up Poland, with Germany receiving the western half and the Soviet Union regaining the east. This meant that if (when) the Germans did invade, they'd be hindered by what would essentially become a Polish buffer zone.
With his eastern front secure, Hitler blitzkrieg-ed Poland. On the spectrum of military strategy, the German blitzkrieg, or “lightning war,” was pretty much the polar extreme of the trench warfare madness of World War I. In World War I, both sides dug themselves in on two sides of a front and then proceeded to blow themselves up for the next four years, all for the right to claim possession of a few precious feet of charred dirt. Blitzkrieg was different. It took the most daring offensives of military history and combined them with the speed and efficiency of mechanized warfare. German armies would coordinate their technologically advanced air force, artillery and army with the singular purpose of breaking through the front line. But unlike in previous wars where once through the line, generals would painstakingly protect their rear ends, in this revolutionary lightning war, the Germans broke through and then just kept going and going, until they finally reached the invaded nation’s capital. At this point, they’d point their tanks at the seat of power and politely encourage the elected officials to kindly turn over the keys to their nation.

This worked pretty darn well. Even with the inevitable hiccups of waging their first military campaign of the blitzkrieg era, Germany still conquered Poland in less than five weeks (and their record the following spring would look even better).

For Britain and France, the invasion of Poland was the final straw. Appeasement proved pointless. There was no appeasing Hitler. Two days after Hitler invaded Poland, on September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had begun. For the moment, unlike in World War I, it appeared the Soviet Union would stay out of the war, content to control its half of Poland and remain isolated in its communist cocoon.

But then the next six years unfolded. Hitler would capture the rest of continental Europe, plunge his forces deep into the heart of the Soviet Union and cover an empire more vast than anything seen since Genghis Khan. Across the planet, Japan soon made its fateful play for the Pacific, launching a surprise attack across the ocean, awakening the sleeping giant of American industry and turning the two regional conflicts into a global war to decide the fate of humanity.

But that is for another chapter.
With Poland carved in half, its carcass left to be devoured by the Germans to the west and the Soviets to the east, the world waited for Hitler’s next move. In a span of just over a year, Hitler had added three countries to his trophy case, and he clearly wasn’t going to stop there. He craved lebensraum. He created a four million man strong military. He rearmed Germany with the most state of the art weapons known to man. He could not be appeased. But as the world waited for his next attack, Hitler responded with...

Nothing. Poland fell in October 1939, but then the battlefield grew silent. The British and French mobilized their troops preparing for certain invasion. But nothing came. As the winter of 1939-1940 passed without any major German offensive, the international press started labeling this latest conflict the “phony war,” or, in a clever little turn of phrase, the “Sitzkrieg.” But this only told half the story. True, the German army might have been in a state of self-imposed hibernation, but the German navy was far from dormant. If they were to control Western Europe, they would have to first control the seas and the endless stream of goods flowing eastward from the United States. The Battle of the Atlantic erupted in 1939, and the cat and mouse nautical game of attack, defend, hide, counterattack didn’t cease until the final days of the war, but played a critical role in
determining who would have the materials necessary to keep their soldiers and cities supplied.

Meanwhile over in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union proved dissatisfied with merely controlling Poland. They next moved to Finland, an area lost due to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that released Russia from World War I. What they thought would take a few weeks ended up taking almost half a year. Masters of their terrain and expert cross country skiers, the Finns (even though at times outnumbered ten to one) bogged the superior Soviet forces down into a painful war against the elements. The Soviets not only had to fight against the Finns, they had to fight the long Scandinavian winter nights, surviving the bitter cold which at times fell under 40 degrees below freezing. If the cold didn’t stop the Soviets, the Finnish army’s ingenuity proved quite adept at foiling any Soviet offensive. Anyone who’s ever watched the Winter Olympics knows the Scandinavians dominate any event involving shooting and skiing, and when the Soviet army entered Finland with their motorized tanks and explosive artillery, the Finnish Army proved more than up to the task of defending their homeland. Like the diminutive Ewoks who survived the vastly superior Imperial Army (my apologies for the outdated Star Wars reference) with their improvised usage of the elements, the Finns crippled Soviet tanks with a few well-placed logs and homemade sticky bombs, while cleverly blending into the surroundings, knocking off Soviet soldiers one at a time. With an officer corps ripped apart by Stalin’s decade-long purge of over 30,000 of the Red Army’s finest officers, the Soviet forces repeatedly failed to adapt to the Nordic guerrilla warfare that continually outflanked, out pestered and outmaneuvered their much more dominant foe. It wasn’t until the spring of 1940 that the Soviets sent in additional troops and the million-strong Soviet Army proved too much for the Finns. In April, Finland finally surrendered, but the respect they had earned from the international community and the vulnerability they had exposed in the Soviet forces would live on far longer than the six long months of what came to be known as the Winter War.

Spring brought in a hollow victory for the Soviets, but for the Nazis and Hitler, spring signaled the beginning of the most successful two-month campaign in Western military history. On April 9, 1940, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway to prevent Britain from securing military bases and ports that could later be used to mount a deadly blockade across the North Sea. Two
months later, Denmark and Norway were defeated. The rest of Western Europe followed in kind. Luxembourg fell in three days. The Netherlands took five. Belgium eighteen. And as for France, the nation that at the turn of the 19th century housed the most feared military in all of Europe, for France, surrender came after a mere three weeks. How was this possible? How could the nation surrender that decades earlier had fought to the last man on the fields of the Western Front? What happened?

The answer rested in how France built its defenses during the Interwar Period. One of the greatest military blunders any army can make is preparing for future wars solely using the lessons learned from previous wars. Technology and strategies constantly evolve, and for the combatant who chooses to only refine the methods of the past, defeat is almost always guaranteed. France made this tragic mistake when they decided to invest the bulk of their defense budget on the creation of the Maginot Line — a series of seemingly impenetrable permanent trenches built on the southeastern border separating Germany from France. In theory, the Maginot Line seemed logical. Because so many men died in the waterlogged filth of World War I trench warfare, it seemed logical to instead build concrete, insulated, well-stocked, heavily armed barracks and artillery stations that no German army could penetrate. There were a couple flaws in the plan. First, the trenches stopped at the Ardennes Forest. The French couldn’t imagine a scenario where any army could make it through the dense foliage and steep topography of the forest. A poor assumption. Second, the trenches didn’t protect the Belgian border. Belgium didn’t like the idea of having a series of trenches running across its publicly declared neutral border.

Anyone with a memory of Germany’s Schlieffen Plan recognizes that Germans had little moral dilemma invading neutral countries to get through France. As for the Ardennes Forest? It wasn’t exactly impenetrable. Within a week, the German tank (Panzer) divisions had merely circumvented the Maginot Line, moving relatively freely through France’s unprotected eastern border. And what of the Maginot Line and all the French troops who patiently waited for the German onslaught? Those troops? Well, after the German army entered Paris and triumphantly paraded down the Champs Elysees, forcing the French surrender, Nazi forces merely headed east with their tank divisions and covered the ventilation systems with tons and tons of dirt. The Maginot Line became the encased coffins for thousands of French
troops, all who remained in the trenches, manning the massive east-facing guns, protecting their nation against a German army that never came (from the right direction anyway).

It wasn’t only the French who had suffered humiliation at the hand of Hitler. The British had sent close to 400,000 soldiers to the Belgian frontier to protect what remained of “free” continental Europe, but they too were surprised by the German plunge through the Ardennes Forest, trapping 338,000 British soldiers on the beaches of Dunkirk. The Germans could have sent in their Panzer tank divisions to finish off the Brits, but in what would become the first of many tactical errors, Hitler ordered his tanks to remain back to repair damages, allowing his prized air force, the Luftwaffe, the glory of finishing off Germany’s main rival to hegemony in Europe. This delay allowed the British Navy to launch Operation Dynamo, the rushed evacuation of all the troops remaining on the wrong shores of the English Channel. In the course of a week, nearly all of the troops were brought back to England on any floating device that could be mobilized. In addition to the British naval fleet, an armada of little ships owned by private individuals and corporations rushed to the aid of their desperate comrades. Over 800 fishing, sailing and recreation boats were sent across the channel to aid in any way possible. Although their actual contribution was fairly minimal, the government tried to make the most of a public relations nightmare, labeling this incident the “Miracle of Dunkirk,” a triumphant example of how personal sacrifice would be needed to save the nation.

If any Brit still believed this aquatic evacuation would be the last they’d hear from Hitler, they were soon proven quite naïve. Even though most of his commanders who had a lick of common sense argued against trying to invade England, Hitler proceeded regardless, putting into play Operation Sealion (yes...these operation names will steadily get more bizarrely clever). The first phase of the invasion was the destruction of the British Royal Air Force so that the German forces could presumably cross the English Channel unchallenged. The Luftwaffe soon learned the Royal Air Force would be just a bit harder to suppress than the challenges put forth thus far by the inferior air powers of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Belgium and Denmark. However, many of the pilots from these conquered nations actually fled to Britain and joined up with the RAF, to become, in many cases, the most decorated of all WWII pilots. Adding to the noble resistance of the RAF, the British had perfected the new
technology of radar, preventing the Luftwaffe from arriving unnoticed. Through the summer of 1940, the struggle for the skies continued, leading to the combined loss of nearly 3,500 fighter planes (with Germany bearing the brunt of the losses). By the end of the year, the German high command recognized the futility of continuing the campaign and ceased fighter operations. Freshly-elected British Prime Minister Winston Churchill praised the efforts of these pilots and radar operators, declaring that “never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

Churchill spoke a bit too soon, for the battle for the skies hadn’t ended - it had just changed form. Instead of the romanticized dogfights of the Luftwaffe and the RAF, the Germans turned to their bombers to take the war to the heart of civilian life, hoping to destroy the morale of Brits which would in turn hypothetically lead to the British government seeking a swift surrender. The precedent for these civilian bombings was in fact an accident. In the dead of night, German bombers mistook a London neighborhood for a nearby oil field, dropping their payloads on the unsuspecting civilians below. Once the gloves were off and civilians became legitimate targets, Britain sent 81 of its own bombers to Berlin, killing few, but thoroughly ticking off Adolph Hitler. Considering he had recently promised his people they would never be touched by Allied bombings, this attack on Berlin was a bit of a hit to his prestige. Hitler avenged this insult by ordering an all out attack on London. Londoners tried everything in their power to protect themselves from the devastation from above – erecting bomb shelters, blacking out all windows and extinguishing all lights (and even cigarettes), sleeping in subway tunnels, and even shipping off tens of thousands of children to the countryside to live with strangers until the worst of the war had passed (for those of you familiar with The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, this little event was what sent the feisty Pevensie family to live with the professor and his Narnia-cluttered closet). After seven months of non-stop bombings and no sign that the British were any closer to surrendering, Hitler stopped this “Blitz” and started looking east for where he would attack next. In these deadly seven months, Luftwaffe bombers destroyed over a million homes and killed nearly 50,000 civilians, but more importantly these months signaled a dramatic shift in the waging of 20th century war. The industrial tools of destruction would no longer be restricted to the battlefields of the open plains. Civilians
would suffer the brunt of the devastation, leading to casualty numbers of non-combatants that would eventually dwarf anything man had ever inflicted.

Unable to bring Britain to its knees, Hitler turned to his true target – the Soviet Union. Since the early 1920s, Hitler made no secret of his desire for the vast living space and natural resources of the Soviet Union. He also was disgusted by the Slavic people that inhabited the former Russian nation, as well as the feeble, corrupt communist leadership that kept its people in abject slavery. But wasn’t there that pesky little problem of the Non-Aggression Pact signed in 1939 by both Germany and the Soviet Union? Not a problem for Hitler. As the Blitz was losing steam in early 1941, Hitler and his officers began formulating a plan for the invasion of the Soviet Union – Operation Barbarossa (named after Frederick Barbarossa, the German Crusader who was stopped a bit short of reaching Jerusalem when he drowned crossing a river). If the bungle at Dunkirk and the botching of the Blitz were mere errors in judgment, Operation Barbarossa was the most colossal mistake Hitler could have made. Why invade Russia? Why fight a two-front war? Napoleon had taught the world that you might be able to fight your way into Russia, but the winter and the vastness of the territory will make it hard to get out alive. World War I taught Hitler that Germany couldn’t expect to survive a war where its troops were divided to fight two weighty foes.

But Hitler ignored history. Call it hubris. Call it blind hatred for other perceived inferior peoples. Call it false hope that Japan would enter the war on the east to hopefully divide Soviet forces. Whatever you want to call it, the choice was stupid. The moment Hitler’s troops stepped foot on Soviet soil in June 1941, Germany’s chances of a European empire died. Like in his other land assaults, initially the blitzkrieg proved unstoppable. During the summer of 1941, three million troops, stretched over a 2000 mile long front, pushed east deep into the heart of Russia, hoping to destroy Moscow, Leningrad and eventually Stalingrad. In what would become the largest military conflict in human history, with close to eight million Soviet troops pushing against four million German troops, Operation Barbarossa appeared to favor the German army until the most devastating force thus far known to man surfaced in December 1941...

A Russian winter. The whole success of Operation Barbarossa depended on the success of the initial blitzkrieg. Germany took thousands of miles of territory in the first few
months of the campaign, but they took too much, too fast. Their supply lines couldn't keep up, their officers couldn't adapt when their fortunes started to change and the devastating winter not only claimed hundreds of lives, but it also sapped the speed of the German mechanized forces. For some reason, man's machines just don't work so well when the temperature hits 40 degrees below freezing. Stopped short of conquering Moscow and with 3.5 million men spread over a near 2000 mile long front, the German high command revisited how next to proceed.

But first Germany and Hitler would have to watch and see how the events were unfolding in the Pacific. In 1938, Germany had hitched its fortune to the Japanese, promising in the Anti-Comintern Pact that if either of the two sides ever went to war with the Soviet Union, they would combine forces to put down the communist threat. But the Japanese military commanders weren't as naïve as Hitler. They had no intention of dividing their forces. By late 1941, Japan had restricted its operations to China and had refused to join in the battle for the Soviet Union. Yet still, the Germans held out hope that the Japanese would soon enter their formidable force into the equation, relieving German troops from the sole responsibility of opposing the seemingly limitless Soviet forces.

Japan disagreed.

In firm control of China, Japan set its sights on the rest of the Far East. If they could only kick out the Europeans, installing themselves as the imperial overlords, Japan could ensure the continued flow of goods into their resource-challenged nation. The rubber and tin of Malaya, the oil and scrap metal of Indonesia and the strategic port cities of the Pacific were all that was needed for Japan to secure and maintain a regional empire. Under the haughty auspices of creating a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (though I'm not sure how much the soon-to-be-conquered peoples “prospered”), Japan sought out to fulfill its goal of an “Asia for Asians.”

One roadblock stood in its way – the United States. The United States sustained a powerful military and economic presence in the Philippines, the island nation sitting right at the heart of Japan’s desired sphere of influence. Any attempt to wade into foreign politics or exert a military campaign would inescapably run into the meddling hands of the Americans. If only the Japanese could find a way of convincing the United States to stay out of Asian affairs, the East would be ripe for the picking. In the early
months of 1941, the highest military officials began planning Operation Z, the attack on the American naval base in Pearl Harbor that would hypothetically buy the Japanese the time they needed to seize the tactical advantage in Asia. In a perfect world, this attack might also wipe out America’s naval fleet, pushing back the American navy to the coast of California, a full 5000 miles away from the Japanese islands. Some even believed the attack would so shock the American psyche that the government leaders would plead for an immediate, peaceful resolution. Americans were seen as soft, gluttonous consumers, unwilling to muster the stomach needed for war. Any attack on their homeland (even if it was only a territory few could even pick out on a map, and one that wouldn’t become an official state until 1959) would almost certainly paralyze the American population.

The Japanese would pay the price for underestimating American resolve.

But in the closing months of 1941, few would have anticipated such a bold move so close to American soil. In Washington D.C., Japanese diplomats continued to lobby Americans to remove their oil embargo established in July 1941, after Japan’s invasion of French Indochina (modern-day Vietnam). Most also assumed any attack would most assuredly be in Asia – the Philippines, or Thailand, or Borneo or even Singapore. But not Hawaii. It was on nobody’s radar. Yet, when total contact with the Japanese naval fleet was lost in the last weeks of November, intelligence experts warned an attack was imminent.

After the war, it was these warnings that pointed some conspiracy theorists toward the assumption that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew of the attacks, but allowed them to take place, knowing they would rally the American people, becoming the catalyst needed to allow legal entry into World War II. As early as November 27th, army and naval officials warned that “an aggressive move by Japan [was] expected” and that “hostile action [was] possible at any moment.” Though these warnings might have reached Roosevelt’s desk, because Hawaii was never really considered a realistic target, no orders were sent to put the island on the highest alert.

This failure to respond left Pearl Harbor helpless to what would become one of the most daring, successful military operations ever attempted. On the morning of December 7th, 1941, Japan deployed six aircraft carriers, twenty-three submarines and 360 planes. On this Sunday morning, still sleeping off the previous
night’s frivolity, the American soldiers were completely unprepared for an attack. At 7:48, the first torpedoes hit the port and the first bombs dropped from the skies. With many of the soldiers ashore and much of the ammunition and weapons stored away in military lockers, when the bullets and bombs started flying, the dazed Americans were barely able to mount any viable resistance.

Within an hour, the American navy had suffered catastrophic damage. Four battleships had been sunk, over 300 airplanes had been damaged or destroyed and close to 2,500 Americans had lost their lives. When news of this attack reached the American shores, the population was indeed shocked, but scared into surrender? Not a chance. Instead, the worst possible scenario for the Japanese quickly materialized. On December 8th 1941, President Roosevelt condemned the “sudden and deliberate attack,” rallying his nation to avenge this “date which will live in infamy,” to protect the “very life and safety of our nation.” The American people answered this call to action, and within months, millions had enlisted to fight what had become a “just war.” Those who didn’t put on the uniform, rushed to the manufacturing plants across the nation, creating the American “arsenal of democracy” that would supply the Allies for the duration of the war. In a much-misquoted line attributed to General Yamamoto, the Japanese had awoken “a sleeping giant,” and because the United States, when fully mobilized, could produce ten times the industrial output of Japan, this wake-up call signaled the eventual death of the Japanese empire.

But first Germany wanted to get in on the action. Adding to his list of poorly-pondered decisions, three days after the United States declared war on Japan, Hitler foolishly declared war on the United States. Hitler didn’t have to fight the US. Sure, he had signed a military alliance with Japan, but by 1941, Hitler wasn’t exactly known in the international community for his credibility. So why then did he make the reckless decision to pull the US into the European theater? Was it because he was an illogical madman who actually thought he could defeat the largest economy in the world from across a fairly substantial ocean? Was it because he was sick and tired of the US acting like they were maintaining neutrality, all the while finding creative ways of gifting to London billions of dollars in goods, battleships and even much needed cash? Was it because he thought, after Britain, the US would be the only nation able to stop him on his road to world domination? Was it because he just assumed the US would declare war on
Germany first, and Hitler wanted to be seen as the aggressor not the victim?

Or was it because, by December 1941, Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa had ground to a halt on the icy terrain of the Soviet Union, and Hitler believed the only chance Germany had of eventually defeating the Soviets was if the Japanese started attacking from the east. In Hitler’s mind, if Germany appeared the trustworthy ally who supported Japan against the United States, then Japan would feel inclined to reciprocate and wage a full-scale war on the Soviet Union.

This assumption was a slight miscalculation. Japan had no intention of touching the Soviet Union. Their grand desire was ensuring the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Hitler could have the Soviet Union for his own lebensraum, but Japan had a clear focus and understood they could never hope to survive a war against Stalin’s forces when Japanese soldiers were already thinly stretched across the islands and peninsulas of Asia.

Nope. Germany would be on its own in the Soviet Union, and with the failure of Operation Barbarossa to secure Moscow, in the spring of 1942, Hitler resorted to Plan B – Operation Case Blue. Although a bit less catchy than its predecessor, it was equally ambitious. German forces would head south into the heart of the Russian frontier, capturing oil fields and crushing Stalingrad once and for all. But for some reason, the lessons learned from Operation Barbarossa were quickly forgotten. Hitler still believed he could take Russia.

He sent his German forces across the plains of the Soviet Union, bombing Stalingrad into oblivion. But Germany would find it far easier to destroy this city than to control it. When this latest fiasco finally ended, the tide of the war had officially changed. No more would Germany be on the offensive. They would instead spend the rest of the war searching for ways of slowing the Red Army’s revenge.

For it was at Stalingrad’s Volga River that Hitler would lose close to half a million of his finest soldiers, consequently losing any hope that his Third Reich would rule the world for a thousand years (it was having trouble surviving a decade).

Stalin declared the Soviet Union would make their final stand at Stalingrad. He was willing to transport every last soldier from across the nation, but he would not accept surrender. The choice was victory or death. He ordered, “Not one step
backward!” Any hesitant comrade who pulled away from the fighting was promptly shot by their own officers. So when in August 1942, the Luftwaffe bombed Stalingrad into rubble and the German army took over close to 90% of the city, they would find it impossible to take the last 10%. Once the bombs were dropped and the army had entered the city, the battle became days and months of building-to-building clashes where German forces might take control of a factory one day, only to have it recaptured when they moved on to the next neighborhood. Both Stalingrad civilians and the Red Army resorted to guerrilla tactics to steadily wear down the German invaders, attacking supply lines, deploying snipers to pick off stragglers, burning their own food supplies to prevent German pillaging and fighting to the death for every last chunk of bombed city rubble. This was anything but a blitzkrieg. Some even scoffed that this subhuman form of urban warfare was more a rattenkrieg, or “rat war.”

This was a battle Germany could never win, because for every Soviet soldier that died, three more crossed the Volga River to replace him.

One of the tactical blunders of the German field officers was refusing to advance forces across the Volga River in the early weeks of the battle, which would have severed the city from eastern supplies and men. Stalin was able to bring in 1.5 million new troops from across the fatherland, each crossing the Volga to defend the last remnants of the city. But like the previous year, it was the arrival of winter that again sealed the German’s fate. Without winter clothing, tents or sleeping bags, tens of thousands froze to death or lost their feet and hands to frostbite. Tanks and trucks proved useless as the gas turned to a spongy, useless syrup-like mixture. Guns couldn’t be loaded, let alone fired, and to top it off, the Luftwaffe stopped being able to fly in replacement supplies, leaving the troops to fend for their lives. Unable to defend themselves, the German 6th Army was completely surrounded and General Friedrich Paulus surrendered what remained of his force. Hitler was disgusted and shocked by such cowardice. He had expected Paulus to kill himself before surrendering, but Paulus chose to save the lives of his near-death soldiers. His noble intentions to save his men proved futile, as only 6,000 of the 108,000 that surrendered actually survived the even more horrifying conditions of the Soviet prisoner-of-war camps.

The Soviet victory at Stalingrad opened the Red Army offensive. Within two months, the Soviets had recaptured all the
land the Germans had seized in the previous year, and their sights were firmly set on Hitler and Berlin. They had always had the largest land army on the planet, but by 1943, they were also the best-supplied military force left in Europe. In the first months of Operation Barbarossa, Stalin had dismantled the munitions and armament factories, had his men carry them across the eastern forests and mountains and then had them rebuilt to the far east of the German assault. With their factories up and running and a steady stream of food, weapons and ammunition arriving from their newly-acquired ally (the United States), the Soviet Union was finally able to match their manpower and fervor with much-needed materiel.

Yet Stalin was still less than pleased with the arrangement he had made with his two new allies – the United States and England. In August of 1942, as the first bombs rained down on Stalingrad, Roosevelt and Churchill revealed they would not be able to directly attack Germany from the west. Not yet. Instead they would aim to take out Germany from the south – first by capturing Northern Africa and then heading up the Italian peninsula. That didn’t exactly help Stalin. While the Russian Red Army had to fight off 4.5 million German invaders, the British and Americans would be down in North Africa facing the far less formidable Italian army. With no real Option B available, Stalin accepted this attack from the south option, only with the promise of continued supplies and an invasion of France as soon as humanly possible. Every month that the Brits and Americans stayed out of continental Europe meant tens of thousands of Soviet deaths.

The British-American invasion of North Africa actually helped out Stalin’s cause far more than he could have hoped. Within a few months, the Italians fell to the Allied forces, compelling Hitler to deplete his eastern army and come to the aid of his Italian partner. These troops, including the famed German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, were pulled from Operation Barbarossa. They not only held the Axis line, but almost pushed the Allies completely out of Africa. However, unable to defend for too long against the superior Allied forces, the German and Italian armies in Africa surrendered in May of 1943. Once the Allies controlled Tunisia, they invaded Sicily, and by September, Allied forces were landing on the boot of Italy.

By the end of 1943, Germany was a shell of the empire it once held only two years earlier. Bombarded from the East by a Soviet army that eventually conscripted over 29 million men (and
eventually killed over 80% of Germany’s army), Hitler now had to worry about American and British forces heading up the boot of Italy. At this point, the Big Three – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin – met in Teheran, Iran to discuss the final defeat of both Germany and Japan. The Soviet Union agreed to turn its forces against Japan once Germany had surrendered, but only if Britain and the United States invaded France in the spring of 1944. They agreed, and from there, Churchill and Roosevelt ordered what would be the largest amphibious landing in the history of military warfare – Operation Overlord – otherwise known as...D-Day.

By the time Stalin had been informed of the scheduled invasion, Operation Overlord had already been in the planning stage for years, and weeks earlier General Dwight D. Eisenhower (later president of the United States) had been promoted to Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. One of the major priorities of the invasion of German-occupied France was avoiding the catastrophic losses suffered by other full frontal assaults of the World War I era. Churchill (the architect of the tragic Gallipoli campaign of World War I which failed to take the ground at the expense of 60% of all involved troops) was more than familiar with the dangers of deploying men on beaches heavily defended by entrenched men, and wanted to avoid a repeat of his most infamous failure.

Because the goal was to eventually create a suitable harbor where hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers could be deployed for the eventual invasion of Germany, initially many advisors recommended Allied powers take a port town to take advantage of the already existing docking infrastructure (specifically the town of Calais). Calais seemed the most logical spot not only because of its port, but because it was the closest landmass to the British island (just 26 miles away from Dover). Unfortunately for the Allies, Hitler could likewise read a map, and subsequently put the bulk of his forces at Calais to prevent the certain attack. The Allies decided to use this expectation to their advantage, actually creating an entire secret plan – Operation Bodyguard – to deceive Hitler into believing the entire Allied army would be hitting Calais in the summer of 1944. False messages were conveyed over the radio, German double-agents now working for the Allies shared false memos, famed US General George Patton was promoted to lead this pseudo-invasion force and even Hollywood set designers were employed to create wooden artillery equipment and inflatable tanks. No actual army ever existed. But that’s not what Hitler
thought. Even when D-Day, June 6, 1944, finally arrived and thousands of aircraft and naval vessels (to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of men) descended on the beaches of Normandy, Hitler defiantly prevented his Calais forces from defending Normandy, believing the real invasion was a few hundred miles to the north. Hitler military mistake number 3,741.

Because of the Calais ruse, the comprehensive, meticulous planning of Operation Overlord, the heroic valor of the first troops that landed and the overall scale of the Allied forces, any German resistance proved initially deadly, but ultimately futile. The 400,000 German troops spread across the coast of France were no match for the wave after wave of air bombings, naval bombardments and troop deployments. Within hours, Hitler’s Atlantic Wall (the series of trenches, barbed wired fences, pillboxes and hedgehogs protecting the French coast) had been breached, allowing over two million soldiers to enter the European theater at Normandy. Hitler now had to fight forces from all sides, but by no means did the Führer consider surrender. Even with the Soviets closing in from the east and the American and British forces moving in from the west and south, the German leader refused to capitulate. Everyone else saw that the D-Day invasion was the “beginning of the end,” but not Hitler. At this point even some of his officers tried to have him assassinated, but when these failed plots (seventeen attempts in total) were uncovered, all involved were quickly tried for treason and executed. And Hitler compelled his forces to carry on.

Within eight months of the landing, Allied forces crossed German borders, and Berlin was within striking distance. In the months since D-Day, as the Allied ground forces liberated nation after nation that had fallen to Nazi rule, from the skies, bombers wiped out German cities with what became almost 24-hour, incessant carpet bombing raids. Fleets of bombers dropped hundreds of thousands of tons of explosives on the cities below, caring little about any one specific target, simply leaving mountains of ruins for the coming Allied forces.

By the end of April 1945, Berlin had been breached. Soviet Red Army forces went door to door, wiping out everything in their path – even looting, torturing and raping civilians. British and American forces then closed in on the city. All that was needed was a sign from Hitler that the war was over. On April 30, 1945, he gave that sign.
Not wanting to endure a humiliating surrender and the inevitable international trial, believing the only honorable military option was to take his own life and not wanting to follow in the footsteps of his ally and mentor Benito (who was shot and then had his corpse spat upon, kicked and eventually hung on a meat hook), Hitler decided to commit suicide. At 3:30 in the afternoon, Adolph Hitler gave his wife Eva Braun (whom he had just married a couple days earlier) cyanide pills, and after those started to do their job, Hitler stuck his pistol to his head and pulled the trigger. To prevent the mutilation and desecration of his remains, within hours, his trusted officers took his body outside where it was covered with gasoline, burned and then buried. This attempt to conceal Hitler’s corpse proved unsuccessful, as months later, Stalin ordered SMERSH (his most trusted intelligence agency) to recover his enemy’s final resting place. When the bodies were eventually discovered in a bombed out crater (along with a couple puppy carcasses), they were brought back to Russia, where they remained until the 1970s. Eventually, the Soviet KGB (the equivalent of America’s CIA), fearing Neo-Nazis might one day want to use his Soviet burial site as some sort of perverted memorial, dug up the remains, crushed them into a fine powder and then dumped them in the Elbe River.

But in 1945, few were worried about a possible Neo-Nazi memorial in a few decades. They just wanted peace. On May 8, 1945, what remained of a German government surrendered, and the world rejoiced at what would become known as VE Day (Victory in Europe). Hitler’s dreams of a thousand-year Third Reich had come to an end (falling just a mere 988 years short of his goal).

The popped champagne bottles and ticker tape parades couldn’t last long as there was still one more Axis power to defeat – the Empire of Japan.

The fate of Japan was sealed the moment they invaded Pearl Harbor and unleashed the industrial might of the United States. From that moment on, it was only a matter of time before Japan fell to the superior foe. But the Japanese military brass must not have received the pessimistic memo of their fated demise, for the war waged on for four more years. In the month following Pearl Harbor, the Japanese controlled most of coastal China, the Philippines, Burma, Borneo, Malaya, Indonesia, Singapore, and were on their way to Australia. They appeared unstoppable. With every passing month, the world watched as the patchwork of the Pacific increasingly fell to the Empire of Japan. The final pie piece
in what was to be the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere was not just an island, but a continent itself – Australia. The final European holding in the Pacific, Australia symbolized the last of the European presence in the East. Once Australia was conquered, Japan could set its sights westward – to India.

But taking Australia would prove a bit more difficult than the previous island nations. Aside from its vast size, distant location and resilient military force (of over a million men who would see action in Asia, Africa and Europe), Australia also had the assistance of the Americans, who finally made a dent in the Japanese juggernaut when they successfully launched a surprise raid on the Japanese mainland on April 18, 1942.

Since the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the American public was looking for some clue that they might actually have a chance in this war. In the early winter months of 1942, the future of the United States was anything but secure. The German forces were wreaking havoc across three continents, and Japan was a matchless, almost alien force, that instilled terror in the hearts of most citizens, especially those on the west coast. For if the United States was to be invaded, it would come from the Pacific. The attack on Pearl Harbor signaled that anything was possible, and the age of America’s isolation due to two fairly large bodies of water had come to an end. America looked for something to turn their spirits, and the Doolittle Raid on Japan became just the propaganda coup the nation needed. The Doolittle Raid of April 1942 launched fifteen B-25 bombers off the decks of the aircraft carrier Hornet. Because of the distance of the carrier from Japan and due to the low levels of fuel carried on each plane, the mission was to be a one-way trip (the pilots that survived would ideally make it to the Ally-controlled safe zones of China). Like the bombings of Berlin in the midst of the Blitz, when the bombers dropped their payloads on the outskirts of Tokyo, the arrogance of the aggressor was knocked down a few pegs. The aura of Japanese invincibility had been shattered (though the actual losses – a few buildings destroyed and a couple dozen people killed - due to the Doolittle Raid were strategically irrelevant).

If the Doolittle Raid was merely a symbolic victory, in the next two months, the Battle at Coral Sea and the Battle at Midway would prove the strategic equivalents of Stalingrad and D-Day.

At the Battle at Coral Sea, off the northeast coast of Australia, Japanese and American aircraft carriers faced off in what was the first naval war where neither ship actually saw the other
(due to their long-range artillery and launched-off-the-deck fighter planes). Although the Japanese might have endured fewer casualties, this battle stopped their months of expansion and forced them to retreat to protecting the lands already conquered. Also, two of the Japanese navy’s aircraft carriers would have to be repaired, making them unable to assist in the Battle of Midway.

The Battle of Midway became the beginning of the end in the Pacific. Japan intended to once and for all kick the Americans out of the war, securing their perceived right to control East Asia. Midway Island – a fairly meaningless chunk of dirt midway between the US and Japan – was the sight chosen by the Japanese to launch one final all-out offensive. Unfortunately for the Japanese, the American codebreakers had intercepted and translated Japanese plans in advance of the Empire of the Rising Sun, which allowed the American navy to be waiting with all available ships sent to the region. What could have been a disaster for America, sending the remainder of its fleet back to San Diego, turned out to be a devastating blow to Japan’s Imperial Navy. Admiral Nagumo ordered his fighter pilots to return to their carriers for refueling and rearming, making them nothing more than sitting ducks to the Navy’s fighter planes. In less than a half hour, between 10:00 and 10:25 on June 4, 1942, the Japanese navy was permanently crippled.

Unlike the Battle at Stalingrad (the turning point battle for Europe) where millions perished over months of fighting, Midway meant the loss of only 3,000 seamen, but because four critical aircraft carriers (out of the ten Japan had at the start of the war) sunk to the bottom of the Pacific, Japan’s ability to wage an enduring war at sea became almost impossible.

Japan couldn’t even properly protect its supply lines. Going to and from the Japanese mainland, Japanese merchant vessels faced relentless raids from the American and Allied forces, who sunk 3,032 vessels – over 10.5 million tons of ships deposited at the bottom of the Pacific (many of which have become lovely dive sites for eager scuba divers).

From Midway Island on, Japan was perpetually on the retreat. The Allies in the Pacific established a two-pronged attack: 1) provide the needed support to local resistance fighters in Japanese-controlled areas, and 2) “island hop” toward Japan, setting the stage for the eventual invasion of the mainland. Island hopping was the strategy of avoiding the major Japanese forces located in the major population centers of East Asia, and instead just focusing
on capturing geographically significant chunks of land in the Pacific Ocean. Once occupied, each subsequent island provided the air force runways needed to take the next island. Although outnumbered in almost every case, the Japanese firmly entrenched themselves across each island, guaranteeing high casualty rates and some of the most intensely brutal fighting of the war. After Midway, the Allied forces took dozens of islands such as the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands, the Marianas, Iwo Jima and finally Okinawa. Few of these islands (except Okinawa) were inhabited by civilians, instead usually coral or volcanic atolls that, to the Allied invaders, looked like nothing more than glorified piles of rocks. After the Battle at Iwo Jima – the famed sight of the iconic flag raising photograph – American B-29 bombers were within striking distance of Japan, and from this point on, Japanese cities suffered through daily and nightly bombing raids whose incendiary bombs left the nation’s major cities in ashes.

When Okinawa was finally taken in June 1945 (within weeks of Germany’s surrender in Europe) the Allied forces began finalizing plans for an October invasion of Japan – Operation Downfall.

But the invasion was never to be, for on April 24, two weeks after the death of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, newly sworn-in President Harry S. Truman was briefed on a file that would not only bring World War II to an immediate end, but would change the face of war forever. After almost six years in utter secrecy, the massive research undertaking known as the Manhattan Project had succeeded in creating an atomic bomb.

On August 2, 1939, Einstein wrote a letter to then President Roosevelt, explaining to him that in recent months European physicists had taken the next step in splitting the nucleus of atoms, giving off a ton of energy. Man had actually created an energy source, that, in the words of Einstein, released “vast amounts of power,” enabling the construction of “extremely powerful bombs of a new type.” And the worst part was, the Germans were far ahead of the Americans in mastering this technology. If the United States didn’t jump into the atomic energy game, the Germans could create a super bomb that would allow them to effortlessly conquer the world.

Roosevelt acted on Einstein’s recommendation to create a department of atomic energy, thus was born the Manhattan Project. This project combined the knowledge of US, Canadian and British scientists and engineers, all working toward not only
developing a bomb, but creating the delivery device that could eventually be used to destroy enemy nations. Although research took place in dozens of universities across the US, the primary facility was created in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Fresh off his supervision of the building of the Pentagon, Colonel Leslie Groves was appointed to run the Los Alamos facility, sequestering 8,000 men and women in a remote laboratory (known as Site Y12), where they couldn’t communicate with the outside world. The deadly fruit of their labor emerged on July 16, 1945 when the first of the three bombs was detonated. This Trinity Test proved to the military brass that they had in their control a weapon of unparalleled destructive capability.

There was a bit of concern prior to the scientists igniting this little “gadget.” Some thought nothing at all would happen. Others thought once one atom was split, it would lead to a chain reaction that would blow up the entire planet. Both were wrong. Instead a mushroom cloud producing over 20,000 tons of TNT (compared with only seven tons of TNT from the most powerful non-atomic bombs available at the time) threw the world into the nuclear age, in an instant making the United States the most deadly force on the planet.

There were two more bombs left. But should the United States use them?

This question has become the great conundrum of the 20th century. On one side of the argument you have the lesser of two evils stance. The Japanese showed no signs of surrendering. Their warrior tradition, coupled with a mass propaganda campaign depicting Americans as barbarians who only wanted to torture and rape every civilian they captured, led both Japanese soldiers and civilians to believe that suicide was the only honorable way to die. In Okinawa, Japanese soldiers ordered the mass suicide of all civilians, even handing out grenades to help speed the process. Hundreds took their families and jumped off cliffs rather than surrender. The Imperial Navy convinced kamikaze pilots to fly their planes into enemy vessels. Of even greater significance was Emperor Hirohito’s call for all citizens to die defending the motherland. There would be no retreat, no surrender.

Based on their experiences in the previous amphibious landings and the mass suicides at Okinawa, the Allies projected that if they were to invade Japan, anywhere from five to ten million Japanese lives would be lost, in addition to the predicted million Allied casualties. This didn’t even account for what such a land
invasion would do to the psyches of the Allied soldiers, as the enemy would no longer be uniformed soldiers, but three-year-old children, pregnant mothers and elderly men, all fighting to save their emperor and their homes.

If anything, the Americans believed dropping the atomic bombs would actually save lives. Not just the lives of those that would inevitably die in an invasion, but the lives of those that would most certainly die if the US continued their bombing raids. For the previous year, American incendiary bombing raids had already taken the lives of over half a million Japanese civilians in 67 cities, leaving another five million as refugees. Japan was already being bombed off the map.

A few other reasons were introduced by Truman’s advisors. First, the United States needed to keep the Soviet Union out of Japan. Stalin had already proven in Germany he had no plans of leaving his conquered territory, and the last thing America wanted to do was to partition the Japanese islands. America needed to end the war before the Soviets entered. Second, on a similar note, America wanted to intimidate the Soviets. Stalin proved he liked the idea of expanding an empire, and this little show of force might make him think twice about pressing further east. Third, the military needed to justify the expense. Two billion dollars (over twenty billion in today’s money) was spent on the Manhattan Project. Those in power wanted to see some bang for their buck. And lastly, America was just tired of fighting. They had just defeated Hitler in Germany, and the idea of sending millions over to the Pacific for what would be a catastrophic, monumentally demoralizing offensive just couldn’t be justified. Truman had a way of ending the war immediately. He had to use it.

But his critics said otherwise. Why not merely drop the bomb on a nearby island to demonstrate its power? Was it because of racism? Had the military started to believe its own propaganda? Were the Japanese really inferior to the Americans? Weren’t atomic bombs far more horrific than conventional bombs? The radiation not only kills the current generation, but sentences future generations to a rash of genetic anomalies. And what about the precedent of using an atomic bomb? Wouldn’t this just lead to a global arms race to master the technology (and as the last few decades have played out, this was exactly what happened)?

Taking into consideration all sides, Truman made the fateful decision to drop the two bombs—nicknamed Fat Man and Little Boy (after Colonel Leslie Groves and scientist Robert
Oppenheimer) – on the military ports of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 6th Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima and on August 9th Fat Man was dropped on Nagasaki. The Americans then pledged to relentlessly drop this death-from-the-sky until the Japanese finally surrendered (which was a bit of a bluff since the US had already exploded the only three bombs it built).

Unable to use their courage, their willingness to sacrifice their lives and their conventional weaponry, Japan had no other choice but to surrender. On August 14th, Emperor Hirohito’s voice came over the radio for the first time to the nation, and he announced the surrender of Japan, on the grounds that “the enemy now possesses a new and terrible weapon with the power to destroy many innocent lives and do incalculable damage. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization.”

World War II ended.

The world’s reaction was a mixture of jubilation and mass mourning, for what had transpired the previous six years demonstrated the hideously appalling extent man went to direct his new technologies against humanity. When industrialized weapons of death were combined with hyper-nationalism and abject racism, the toll on human lives hit unparalleled levels. Historians like to point to the brutality of Attila the Hun, or Genghis Khan, or Julius Caesar or even the religious crusades of the Middle Ages, but to truly see barbarity, one needs to look no further than World War II.

The sheer numbers alone are staggering. Agreeing to any exact total is nearly impossible as so many regions were impacted and the battlefield deaths only reveal part of the story. Fifteen to twenty million soldiers were killed on the battlefield. Five million soldiers were killed as prisoners of war. This alone made the war one of the deadliest of all time (second only to China’s Taiping Rebellion), but it was the impact on civilians that took the carnage to unprecedented levels.

40-60 million civilians died in the course of the war. Some were incinerated in bombing firestorms that drove temperatures past 1500 degrees Celsius and asphyxiated hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. Some were targeted for scientific experiments where they became nothing more than tortured guinea pigs. Some were shipped to far off camps. Others were
merely shot on sight or raped to death. Food supplies were cut off, transportation networks were demolished and homes were turned to rubble. When the final shot was fired, tens of millions of those that survived wandered aimlessly across war torn landscapes, creating a refugee crisis that threatened to extend the suffering for decades.

When it came to treatment of civilians, no country was innocent. The United States, fearing an invasion on the West Coast, expelled 110,000 of its own Japanese-American citizens from the states of Washington, Oregon and California, internning them in camps centered deep in the heart of America. US bombing missions also targeted Japanese and German cities, killing millions of civilians. In Poland, the Soviets systematically pulled out the leaders of the nation – the lawyers, policeman, educators, businessmen – and had hundreds shot and mass buried in an incident now known as the Katyn Massacre. And then, upon entering German lands, these Soviet forces then shot civilians on sight and even tortured and raped tens of thousands of the innocent. Britain sent over 3000 planes over the city of Dresden, a German cultural center with minimal strategic importance, dropping almost 4000 tons of explosives on the homes and public meeting areas below. And those were just the Allies.

The Axis Powers took depravity to a new level. Aside from the Rape of Nanking, the Japanese military set up comfort houses, where local women across Southeast Asia were forced into sex slavery for the duration of the war. In Manchuria, the Japanese set up Unit 731, a biological experimentation center where tens of thousands of Chinese and Korean civilians were purposefully given infectious diseases and then their bodies were opened while still alive to observe the results of the disease.

As for the Germans, their barbarism knew no limits. The sum total of their atrocities has become known as the Holocaust – a period of mass exploitation, expulsion, torture, experimentation and murder. Over twelve million civilians were killed both to further the German war aims, but more specifically to ensure a world free of Nazi-perceived racial impurity. Starting with European notions of Social Darwinism and racial superiority, the century leading up to the Holocaust saw an increasingly prevalent view that reproduction between superior and inferior groups should be prevented at all costs – a philosophy known as eugenics. Although most equate the Holocaust with the senseless slaughter of the Jewish population, over half of the total number killed by
the Nazis were other “undesirables,” including blacks, Arabs, Gypsies, homosexuals, prisoners, mentally and physically handicapped, Slavs and those political opponents deemed a threat to Nazi superiority.

However, the Holocaust in its public perception deals primarily with the systematic, calculated extermination of the Jews. What started in the 1930s as an attempt to prevent interaction between Jews and non-Jews (restrictive marriage and commerce laws, identification bands, concentration in urban ghettos and even forced sterilization), eventually evolved into the “final solution to the Jewish problem.” In the early years of the war, German scientists, officers and businessmen exploited the Jews as slave labor. Eventually they were put into concentration camps where they were starved, beaten, worked to death or even used as human lab subjects in Nazi’s bizarre scientific experiments. Under the demented leadership of Joseph Mengele, infant twins were sewn together, men were frozen and then revived in boiling water, prisoners were exposed to malaria and poisoned gas, inmates were burned alive with incendiary bombs and countless other defenseless victims were subjected to torture and mutilation to satisfy the whims of German “scientists.”

The course of Jewish treatment shifted at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, when the leaders of the Nazi Party, along with critical military figures from across Europe, met to discuss the mass transportation and eventual execution of all Jews currently residing in German-occupied territories. From across the empire, Jews were crammed into train cars and sent to camps such as Auschwitz, Belzec and Treblinka, where they were stripped, exposed to lethal doses of cyanide and then cremated in gas-fed furnaces. Tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered daily and within a year nearly the entire Jewish population of Europe had been eradicated. In Warsaw, Poland alone, out of the 500,000 Jews alive at the start of the war, only 200 eventually survived to VE-Day (Victory Day in Europe). Though whisperings of Nazi atrocities had been heard throughout the war, it wasn’t until the Allied forces moved into German-occupied territories that the extent of the tragedy was fully revealed.

Across World War II, time after time, humans failed to live up to their humanity. We entered the 20th century believing we were the most civilized, advanced, cultured, enlightened people to ever walk the planet. We had learned more, built more and seen more than any previous generation, but in a few short years we
proved that under the guise of war and beholden to a set of extraordinary scientific tools, our insecurities and racist proclivities could still win out over logic and compassion.

World War II had been a total war. Everyone had been touched. Civilians had been for years pounded with propaganda dehumanizing the enemy, while encouraging every man, woman and child to join the war effort. In some nations, wartime production brought the people out of the Great Depression. In others, the factories, neighborhoods and public meeting areas became targets for enemy bombers, making survival, let alone production, nearly impossible. The United States witnessed a mass migration to the cities as minorities, women and rural dwellers filled in for the departed soldiers. Chinese suffered through not only a foreign invasion, but a savage civil war that continued between the communists and the national government. Territories changed hands dozens of times, and across Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, civilians tried to survive in a world where they were mere pawns in a global game of territorial acquisition.

For soldiers fighting in World War II, there was no singular experience. Whereas trench warfare came to define the first Great War, combat in World War II became almost indefinable. A soldier could fight behind a tank crossing the Tunisian desert. He could live for weeks underwater as his submarine crew struggled to sink merchant vessels attempting to supply enemy combatants. He could storm the beaches of Sicily, the coral atolls of the Pacific or the beaches of Normandy. He could just as likely freeze to death huddled in a hole in Bastogne in temperatures 40 degrees below zero, as he could die marching for miles through 110 degree temperatures on the Bataan Death March or die shot in the head by a sniper perched in the corner of a blown-out factory building in Stalingrad. And his tools of terror were like no other before. Sure, he still had his machine gun, his flamethrower, his knife and his grenade, but now he survived on ships as big as floating islands, fired V2 rockets that soared into the stratosphere and built bombs that required the splitting of atoms. It was in some ways like all the other wars fought before, but at a scale never before seen, using tools of destruction never before envisioned.

The world would need to rebuild from this near-apocalypse. It would need to take stock of what went wrong, punish the aggressors and ensure the world would not merely fall
again into chaos within a few short decades. The Paris Peace Conference of World War I proved an abject failure. The world could not survive another botched treaty. For now that man had atomic bombs, the next world conflict would mean the end of humankind.

But that is for another chapter.
Farewell to the Age of Empires
Decolonization and Independence Movements – 1920 > 1970

If ever there was the perfect opportunity for the age of empires to end, it was going to be the years following World War II.

In 1945, all the conditions looked ripe for decolonization, for outright independence, for the dawn of a new era where the peoples of the world were free to choose their own economic, cultural and political paths, free from the soft and hard influence of foreign powers bent on pursuing their own selfish goals.

The European continent sat in utter ruin. Surely, the major Western powers would prioritize getting their own people back to work and feeling safe before they’d ever again concern themselves with some far off, uncivilized colored peoples. Surely, the citizens of Western Europe would rather prevent revolutions in their own backyards before they would allow their politicians to funnel much-needed recovery funds to maintain colonies a continent away. And if Western indifference wasn’t enough of a deterrent to re-colonization, surely there was no way the Soviet Union or the United States would allow global power to return to Old Europe.

The two surviving superpowers had no intention of seeing the tremendous cost they bore during the war, both in lives (especially for the USSR) and in economic resources, go for naught. Their uneasy alliance existed almost exclusively to end the new
empirical designs of Japan and Germany – that didn’t mean they in any way approved of a return to the status quo of the early 20th century. The United Nations put in writing what the victors felt, declaring that empires would no longer be tolerated, that instead the world would strive "to develop self-government, to take due account of the political aspirations of the peoples and to assist them in the progressive development of their free political institutions."

As for the “them” in the previous sentence, the conquered peoples of the world, this appeared their moment in world history to declare and achieve independence. The nations of Africa, the Middle East and East Asia had been teased with independence since World War I, only to see their colonial masters renge on their promises when the probable outcomes appeared to be too expensive or too messy. But just because few nations broke free from their colonial oppressors in the 1920s and 1930s didn’t mean that the independence movements had been squashed.

And when the German and Japanese forces unveiled their own armies of imperialism, the global colonial holdings were again pulled into regional clashes. Resources were drained from local economies at a fraction of their value, citizens were drafted to fight in distant theaters and entire colonies were overrun by Axis belligerents. Not only did these invasions remove the European perception of invincibility (Britain surrendered a mere seven days after the Japanese invaded Singapore), but they also fueled nationalistic movements that united local forces to expel this new set of foreign invaders. When World War II ended, victorious colonial forces felt their pivotal role in defeating the Axis powers earned them the right to see the promises of self-determination finally come to fruition.

And at first, it looked like they were getting what they asked for. A ton more countries were actually put on the map. Two decades after Germany and Japan surrendered, four times as many nations existed on the earth than did before the war began. One by one, the nations of the developing world had earned their independence. By the 1960s, on paper, decolonization looked like it was well underway.

But there was no singular story of decolonization. How could there have been when there was no singular story of “colonization”? On one extreme, you had the settler colonies of Australia, New Zealand and the United States where native populations were subjugated, interned or even massacred,
essentially wiping out any hint of an indigenous presence. Then there was the political imperialism of India, East Asia and Africa where European authorities dictated their laws from the safety and insulation of their colonial mansions. And then, on the other extreme, there was the more hands-off approach of commercial imperialism where European traders made deals with locals, trading their Western finished goods for some much needed natural resources (but other than that not leaving any noticeable imprint on local culture).

So yes, in 1914, Europe might have economically or politically influenced 80% of the planet, but in no way were 1.53 billion individuals following the lead of one tiny little continent northeast of the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, for most of the people living in one of Europe’s holdings, from Indonesia to Burma to Zambia to Algeria, once you travelled a few miles from the region’s main port city, you’d quickly realize that native life was still ruled by the rhythms of nature and the needs of the family, not the whims of European oppressors.

Yet still, though the degree of domination might have differed, a few patterns of influence popped up regardless of how embedded European authority was in the other nations of the world. And not all Western influences were evil. Everywhere Europeans went, they brought improved communication and transportation networks. They built telegraph lines, paved roads, dredged canals and laid down railroad lines. They shared their technology, improving medical care, farming techniques and methods for extracting natural resources. Income levels rose, standards of living increased and overall health and life expectancy rates improved. They brought their education systems to these foreign worlds, and invited elite students back to Europe to study at the finest institutions. Europeans also set up the institutions that ironically later formed the foundations for the independence movements that eventually became their own undoing.

However, these contributions are almost always ignored as it is far easier to fixate on the numerous, and sometimes horrific, examples of exploitation and oppression. Locals were taxed, enslaved, mutilated and murdered. Europeans sat in their conference tables thousands of miles away, determining arbitrary borders that sometimes forced rival tribes to interact, while at other times dividing clans that had survived together for centuries. Natives were driven off their land, taken away from their families or forced to abandon their farms to cultivate commodities whose
value rose and fell based on international demand outside their control. When the demand for cotton or opium or sugar or tea dropped, millions found themselves without the money needed to purchase the necessities of life, and unlike before the implementation of these commodity crop economies, they couldn’t exactly eat their opium or cotton harvests to survive during the off years. Europeans further crippled these developing economies by establishing the precedent that their lone value in the global trading networks was the exporting of natural resources to the industrialized nations. They were never given the capacity to turn the cotton into cloth or the diamonds into jewelry. Their economies were trapped in their infancy.

By the mid-20th century, the time appeared ripe for the oppressed to free themselves from their oppressors. Western institutions had proved defective and vulnerable. The Great Depression revealed the weaknesses of capitalism. Conquered peoples were inspired and demanded liberation. And one by one they got their wish. The end of the 20th century paralleled the end of the age of European dominance, and not only created opportunities for some nations to thrive in the world community, but also left behind dangerous power vacuums that were filled with chaos and civil war.

For China, the stakes were the highest. For nearly four thousand years, China stood out as the preeminent civilization in the world, but the Opium War and the incursion of European traders in the mid-19th century triggered a brief blip in China’s story where their future no longer rested solely in the hands of their dynastic emperors. Like the periods following previous dynastic failures, the decades following the fall of the Qing Dynasty saw the countryside regress into civil war, but this time foreigners from Europe stood on the sidelines waiting to see if a new empire would earn the Mandate of Heaven or if the regional lords would keep the nation in chaos opening up new avenues for exploitation. It wasn’t clear in 1912 what direction China would adopt. Would it partner with European business interests to Westernize the economy? Would it expel all foreigners and isolate itself from the world? Would it revert to the traditional values of Confucianism or adopt the more liberal values pressing in from all sides? Would it look to its scholars for guidance or would the mantle of power be passed to the capitalist entrepreneurs looking to turn China into an industrial giant? And what form of government would it become? A democratic republic? An
autocratic dictatorship? Or what about that new form of
government being tested by their neighbor to the north - Russia?
What about communism?

Initially, the Chinese experimented with democracy. In
1912, they created a Senate, elected a president and then started to
write a constitution. But it didn’t last. Their first elected
president didn’t really understand the whole democracy thing.
Once in power, he charged his army with destroying all political
parties and ceasing any chatter about creating a republic. He ruled
as dictator until 1916 when he died and the nation regressed into
despair. Power reverted to the regional lords that controlled the
countryside. China’s future was in doubt. How long would this
latest era of crisis last before a new dynasty arose? Or would
Western democracy be given another chance?

The Europeans helped the Chinese answer these questions
by doing the one thing that has proven able to unite a people
locked in regional madness – create a common enemy. And in this
case the common enemy would again be the Europeans.

After the end of World War I, the European powers
gathered in Versailles to punish the Germans and divvy up the
spoils of war. In China, since 1897, the Germans had controlled
the eastern Shandong province, after the war, the Chinese only
assumed that control of the region would revert back into their
hands. They were wrong. The British, the Americans and the
French awarded control of Shandong to the Japanese, ignoring the
Chinese diplomats at Versailles who pleaded for autonomy.

For the Chinese, the writing was on the wall – the
Europeans cared little for Chinese interests. Europeans controlled
the game and they would make any rules that would benefit
Europeans. Even if that meant allying themselves with the
Japanese.

Enough was enough. European imperialism in China had
to end. But it wouldn’t be warlords or political leaders who
confronted the foreign foe. It would be university students. On
May 4, 1919, students from the thirteen universities across Beijing
gathered at Tiananmen Square (where 70 years later, students
would again protest before being sent home by tanks and armed
forces). They demanded a reversal of the Shandong agreement and
blasted Chinese officials for allowing the spread of the European
values of materialism and individualism. These students protested
for days and their message spread into the countryside. Their
initial goal of a free Shandong never materialized, but they did succeed in uniting China and igniting a sense of nationalism that had gone into hiding for a few generations. The Chinese were proud again to be Chinese, and they began to believe they could expel the barbarians. They also recognized that this revolution would not come from the elite of society. It would have to come from the masses. They would need to unite across the countryside to share the fruits of the economy. This conviction gave birth to the rise of communism.

And once there was the Communist Party, the death of European influence in China was just around the corner. Well, maybe not just around the corner. It still took thirty years, over forty million deaths and a civil war for the soul of China before the West was finally evicted. On one side of this war were the Communist forces of Mao Zedong who spent the 1920s and 1930s recruiting peasants to overthrow their feudal bonds and raise their standard of living. On the other side was the Nationalist Party of Chiang Kai Shek that promised to advance China’s interests by going the more Western route of supporting businesses, improving the nation’s infrastructure (roads, roads and communication networks) and bringing banking into the 20th century. Both sides wanted an independent China – the Communist Party wanted the Westerners out unconditionally, the Nationalist Party was more willing to work with Westerners to gradually reverse the unjust treaties of the previous century. The Communists fought guerrilla battles from the countryside. The Nationalists built up a strong national military with moneys they earned from imports and from loans secured from European banks. The Nationalists ran the government and the Communists relentlessly pestered their forces across the indefensible Chinese countryside. By the mid-1930s, it appeared the Nationalist Party had the advantage. Mao’s forces had retreated to the hills and appeared on their last legs.

Then the Japanese invaded and the tides of China’s future turned not on the actions of Mao or Chiang, but on the choices of a warlord from the north – Zhang Xueliang. Zhang’s family had controlled Manchuria for decades, but when the Japanese invaded in 1928 and planted a bomb that killed Zhang’s father, he flipped into revenge mode and vowed to expel the Japanese. But he had a problem. He couldn’t do it alone. He needed help from the Communists and the Nationalists. Divided, China had no chance. United, they might be able to defeat Japan, or at least keep them from pushing their forces inland. If he could just find a way to
convince the Communists and Nationalists to stop fighting each other and direct their venom against the more dangerous foreign forces. But how could he convince Chiang Kai Shek to sign a truce with his enemy Mao Zedong? How? He kidnapped Chiang, put a gun to his head and encouraged him to stop fighting the Communists.

It worked. The Communists and Nationalists agreed to not kill each other for a few years. They would just kill the Japanese. Mao’s Communists used this reprieve to scatter across the nation, securing more and more peasants attracted to the ideology of redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, but more drawn to the opportunity to attack Japanese forces. The Nationalists continued to fight the Japanese, tying themselves closer and closer to their Western allies who offered money and weapons to help slow down the Japanese onslaught. This uneasy truce flipped the tide of national support in the Communists’ favor, as time and again it appeared the Communists were the better fighters and the Nationalists were merely the soft allies of the West, unable to truly protect China’s interests. When the war ended and Japan was no longer the enemy that necessitated a truce, Mao and Chiang resumed their war, but by this time, the Nationalist’s credibility had been shot. Mao’s party skillfully exposed incidences of Nationalist corruption, highlighted the oppressive taxes of the Nationalist government and circulated stories of Nationalist soldiers dressing in peasant clothing to avoid protecting innocent women and children. If the Chinese people had to choose a horse, they were putting their money on Mao and the Communist Party.

In 1948, Mao used this support to dominate Chiang’s forces, eventually forcing him to retreat across the Taiwan Strait to an island called Formosa (present-day Taiwan) with two million of his Nationalist supporters, hoping to fortify their forces so they might one day return to the mainland and restore the Nationalist government to its rightful place.

They never returned. In 1949, Mao proclaimed the birth of a new nation – The People’s Republic of China – a nation that would be a republic in name only. Mao was the lone man calling the shots, and his often-misguided efforts lead to millions of deaths.

Both the European and American interests were left supporting a loser. They continued to throw money and weapons at Formosa/Taiwan (and even still do to this day), but it would be
another three decades before mainland China again reopened its doors to Western influence. But by then, China would have regained its national prestige and would never again deal with the West on foreign terms. China would control its destiny and if the West wanted to play along, they would have to adapt to the whims of the reborn Middle Kingdom.

For China, escaping European influence meant half a century of civil war while embracing a Communist doctrine of peasant revolution. Other countries would likewise feel the pull of capitalism and communism as they wrenched themselves away from colonial shackles, but unlike the violent path taken by China, their neighbor to the west offered another option—civil disobedience.

For India wasn’t anything like China. It wasn’t merely a nation where a few ports were controlled by Western authorities. India was a colonial holding of Great Britain, utterly subjugated by a foreign nation unwilling to relinquish its dominion. If India was to break free, they couldn’t afford a civil war. They had to find a way to unite their four hundred million people to pressure Great Britain to withdraw their forces. They could never match Britain on the battlefield, but maybe they could induce sympathy in the media. Maybe if they followed a man with a revolutionary idea of how to protest nonviolently (instead of a military leader or a political mastermind), maybe they could convince the British public that their independence was a natural right.

For this revolution, they would follow Mahatma Gandhi. A lawyer and a philosopher, Gandhi became the inspiration for a movement that had been decades in the making. Like so many times in history, he was the right man at the right time.

The Great Britain of the 1920s was not the Great Britain of the turn of the century. WWI proved the Brits were not an infallible force. Their century reign of pretty much uninterrupted military successes came to an end. Sure, they might have won World War I, but in 1919, their nation didn’t feel too victorious. It was plagued by debt, close to a million of their young men were slaughtered on the battlefields of France and their citizens were left to wonder if they truly were the most civilized people on the planet. Britain could have withdrawn from international affairs and focused on repairing the lives of their countrymen, but instead they attempted to merely pick up where they left off. India was their crown jewel in Asia and they had no intention of granting
them independence, no matter what they had promised their South Asian subjects to ensure full support during the war.

In 1919, India was not only further away from independence, it was actually feeling the even deeper sting of colonialism due to the war's carnage. 60,000 Indian men paid the ultimate price of supporting the crown, perishing in the trenches of East Africa and the Western front. To add insult to injury, the Indians were then charged exorbitant taxes to help pull Britain's economy out of turmoil. Like the American colonists 150 years earlier, the Indian colonists had a little trouble swallowing the fact that they not only were responsible for dying in a foreign power's war, but they also then had to illogically pay for this war. But also like the Americans, merely being frustrated wasn't enough to foment a revolution. The people had to be roused out of their passive acceptance of subordination, snapped out of their haze of merely accepting the leftover scraps of their British lords.

For the thirteen colonies of America, there was the "massacre" at Boston.

For India, it was the Amritsar Massacre.

But unlike the Boston Massacre where only a handful of Bostonians died, many of whom had spent the afternoon badgering the British redcoats, throwing out a series of slurs and pelting them with rocks and snowballs, this Indian tragedy was truly an example of innocents being butchered by seemingly sadistic bullies. On April 13, 1919, in the northern region of Amritsar, a few thousand men, women and children gathered at a public garden to protest their spiraling downward standard of living. Alarmed by recent riots in neighboring counties, the head of the British forces, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, ordered that fifty of his soldiers set up around the periphery of the square and mow down the gathering protesters. They obliged, and within minutes, hundreds of defenseless civilians lay murdered and another thousand were wounded. Word quickly spread of the tragedy and the Indian subjects looked to their hypothetically civilized authorities to right this wrong. Dyer was taken before a military tribunal and forced into an early retirement, but when he returned to Britain he was greeted as a hero.

How could this murderer be celebrated as a hero? Weren't the Brits the ones who championed themselves as enlightened elites, who spent the last few centuries admiring the works of 18th century philosophes who demanded the protesting of unjust
political systems and the protection of individual freedoms like assembly and speech? Or maybe in the world of Great Britain, human equality and freedom were rights only granted to Europeans.

Whatever moral authority Britain once held died that spring day. Indians would never be treated as equals as long as they were simply a source of labor and resources that Great Britain could tap into whenever its economy needed a boost.

Enter Gandhi. Gandhi returned to India in 1915 a hero. He had spent the previous two decades in South Africa, after earning his law degree in England. He had become a sort of celebrity in the decade before World War I for standing up to British authorities in South Africa, attempting to end the apartheid system that saw races separated and a caste system propped up where white people had access to the highest paying jobs, while the coloreds were relegated to whatever manual labor they could find. Gandhi himself was thrown off trains for sitting in the white section and refused entry to hotels and restaurants based on his color. It was in South Africa where we first saw the man’s methods. He would use the law, he would use the press and he would use the crowds to shine an unflattering light on the inequities of the British realm.

Once he returned to India, he was approached by the Indian National Congress, an organization of wealthy, educated, connected Indians who hypothetically represented Indian interests in colonial government. Yet many of these elite Congressmen had more in common with British authorities than they did with their own people. They had worked since 1885 to gain more privileges for Indians, but they did so within the law, hoping to work towards an amicable understanding with the respected British crown. Their movement never really gained traction, as it was never before a movement of the masses, but more a gathering of the upper class who talked of a better world. They were big on words but small on action. They had assured more power to local governments and expanded the voice of locals, but by the end of World War I, India was still not independent.

Yet when Gandhi arrived, the makeup of the Congress changed. It became less elitist and more welcoming to members of the other castes. It started listening to the grievances from the countryside. With the Amritsar Massacre, it was poised to take the protests to a higher level, and Gandhi would lead this movement.
Gandhi challenged the conventional Indian National Congress platform that supported an end-game where Brits running a British system were replaced with Indians running a British system. He saw how the American Revolution was a revolution in name only and he had no desire to simply replace one aristocratic ruling class with another aristocracy, even if this new one was from South Asia. He espoused the principles of home rule – where Indians would create a unique government system based on India’s vibrant past, its complex diversity and its geographic realities. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi introduces a new type of freedom, a freedom where the West is rejected, where Indians don’t see themselves as beneath the Europeans, but realize it was they who dominated a huge chunk of the planet for most of human history. He also wrote of how the one way to accomplish this true independence was through civil disobedience, by securing rights through suffering. Until Indians were willing to let their bodies, their minds and their pocketbooks suffer, the British would never leave.

So Gandhi started his campaign of nonviolent resistance, a strategy that has since been borrowed countless times by disenfranchised peoples around the globe. He convinced Indians to boycott British goods. He argued they should stop buying British clothes and instead make their own (thus the trademark white outfit Gandhi spun from his own portable spinning machine). He marched across the country, gathering thousands along the way as he protested the British ban on Indian salt, choosing instead to make salt from the sea. He lobbied persecuted employees to go on strike until their companies granted them a fair standard of living. He himself willingly paid the price for independence. He fasted, he was beaten, he was arrested and his life was constantly under threat. But all the while, he moved forward. And all the while, he ensured the full participation of another partner – the media. Without both the British press and Indian press, his movement would have fallen on deaf ears (if even heard at all). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, one by one, nations were falling to fascist governments that persecuted the helpless. So when stories continued out of India of scores of people beaten by royal officers or of a gaunt, smiling man in rags staggering across the country speaking of the power of free will, England had to take a dose of hypocrisy medicine. Back in England, the powers-that-be started to listen. They realized the falseness of their claim of
civilized, moral authority when reports kept rolling in of barbaric treatment of an oppressed people.

Not all approved of Gandhi’s tactics. Some wished he would use his influence to foment a communist revolution (a la Mao to the east). Some thought he was an egotistical self-promoter who relished the attention. Others thought he favored Hindus over Muslims. Others thought he was too nice to the Muslims. And back in Britain, parliamentarian Winston Churchill was just annoyed with his entire existence, calling him a “half naked fakir.”

Yet in a country of 390 million people, he was never going to get everyone on his side. He didn’t need to. But he did move tens of millions. At the start of World War II, Britain had a tenuous hold on India, but it still wouldn’t let it be free. When war broke out against Germany, Britain forced India to again support the cause, both with the lives of its young men and its resources needed at the front lines. Gandhi didn’t believe India should support British forces, and he chose the heart of the war to launch a more rigorous campaign – the Quit India movement. Tens of thousands marched, protested and boycotted, but Britain had little patience for this resistance when they were trying to manage a war. They threw Gandhi in jail for a few years and focused their efforts on keeping Hitler from taking over the world.

But when World War II ended, Britain realized enough was enough. Again, their economy was in turmoil, but this time their entire country lay in rubble. Britain had no idea how it was going to rebuild itself, let alone how it would finance India’s recovery. In 1947, they decided to pull out their troops and their officials. The British forces had no idea what to do about the Muslim vs. Hindu conflicts that were bound to blow up at any moment. Would they turn the country over to a percentage of Muslim officials or a percentage of Hindu officials? Or would they just walk away and let them fight it out for themselves? Instead, the British authorities just invented a new country – Pakistan, and on August 14th and 15th, 1947, India and Pakistan became independent nations.

Though the struggle for independence had ended, the civil war began. After the partitioning of South Asia into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India, over twelve million Indians packed up their lives and moved across the country, marking one of the largest migrations in human history. As homes were abandoned and villages were taken over by thousands of belligerent, hungry
refugees, there was bound to be conflict. Former allies turned against each other as Muslims fought Hindus for the spoils of independence. Anywhere from 500,000 to a million Indians perished in the beatings, shootings, burnings and famines that resulted from the mass migration. To this day, the legacy of this partition continues to fuel hostilities, as Pakistan and India refuse to accept that the partition and its arbitrary boundaries established by the British parliament should be respected as is.

Gandhi lived long enough to see his country free and then his people implode. A year after the partition, he was gunned down by a Hindu extremist who felt Gandhi was too soft on Pakistan. The leader of the independence movement was dead, the two nations were in turmoil and like every other nation that broke free from colonial rule, life would get a heck of a lot worse before it got better.

China and India took two completely different routes to independence, but certain patterns emerged in their stories that would reoccur time and again as scores of countries believe the time was ripe for revolution.

First, across the world, patriotic feelings of nationalism sprouted, as the possibility of rallying against a common foreign enemy stirred many to put their differences aside for the sake of the movement. These nationalistic uprisings were almost always rallied by passionate, inspirational figures who spouted vitriolic attacks at their colonial masters. Second, many of these newly-freed countries experimented with democracy. China dabbled with a republic after the fall of the Qing, India stuck with a republic that has since evolved into the largest democracy in the world, Israel was created by the United Nations as a beacon of republicanism in the midst of a desert of autocratic regimes and in Vietnam, America actually thought democracy could work, even though a man named Ho Chi Minh was less than thrilled with the notion. Nationalism and the promise of republican governments sparked the independence movements, but almost all decolonized regions soon learned inspiration and governance are two entirely different concepts. Keeping the country would be a lot harder than creating it.

Another pattern that emerged is that almost all decolonized regions immediately devolved into madness, civil war or political infighting. In regions where boundaries had been created haphazardly with no concern for ethnic rivalries (see map of Sub-Saharan Africa), this regression would be bloody and would
Farewell to the Age of Empires

cripple any chance of fostering stable societies. In nations where ethnicity wasn’t the dividing factor, political ideology would rule the day and peoples would decide if they could resolve their differences amicably in a house of parliament (a la India) or have to fight a civil war for the hearts and minds of the nation (Vietnam). For some nations, resolution was impossible and independent nations would have to be created (Korea, Vietnam). For other nations, the conflicts were stopped, not by negotiation, but by force— which leads us to the third pattern.

Autocrats had proven effective at stopping (even if only temporarily) the ethnic hatred that had no clear solution. Often these figures aren’t renowned today for their humanitarianism or their pacifist nature, but they did keep the peace in freed nations where rival groups wanted nothing less than total annihilation of their adversaries. Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Sukarno in Indonesia and Marshall Tito in Yugoslavia all stifled ethnic hostility through their ample usage of secret police and not-so-judicious judicial systems. But once these men died (either naturally or by the hands of people not so fond of their rule), tensions sprung again to the surface, meaning persecution and rising death tolls were soon to follow.

But the one pattern common to all of these decolonized societies was that their little foray into independence, free of outside influence, was always fleeting. Although the French, the British and the Dutch might have pulled back their colonial influence, two remaining superpowers would spend the rest of the 20th century pulling these fledgling nations under their own sphere of influence. For the five decades following World War II, Russia and the United States fashioned a new type of empire, a new way of controlling the economies and the governments of the world. They no longer would colonize. It was just too expensive. And also, the legacy of imperialism rightfully left a bad taste in the mouths of the freshly-freed.

These two new powers set out to carve up the world into a bipolar hegemony, where they each warned, “You’re either with us or against us.” This new era of imperialism would be known as the Cold War, and if nations thought their societies were shaped by foreign interests before, they hadn’t seen nothing yet.

But that is for another chapter.
Avoiding Armageddon

The Cold War – 1945 > 1989

Explaining a hot war isn’t too tough. One side wants something from another side. The other side would prefer to keep it. Tensions mount. Both sides prepare for conflict. Whether intentional or accidental, a catalyst erupts. One side attacks the other. The other defends itself. Civilians help out. Civilians are killed. One side conquers the other, or one side just gets tired of fighting and gives up. The war ends. A peace deal is set. Life goes on.

That’s how a hot war works.

But what about a cold war? How does one of those things start?

Within weeks of Germany’s surrender, the highest military brass warned that World War III was just around the corner.

Within months, the Soviet Union secured its borders and prepared for yet another invasion from the West. The Americans and Brits tried to slow the Soviets down, pushing their own forces as far east as peace would allow.

Within years, the world was again at war, but this time it wouldn’t be a conventional war. It would be something totally different. It would be the Cold War, a near five-decade struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States of America for mastery of the universe.
Their fight was as much for ideological supremacy as it was for geographic influence and self-preservation. From 1946 to 1989, the Soviets and Americans spied, schemed, built up armies, built up weapons, created alliances, prevented alliances, expanded their science, economies and spheres of influence, all with the hopes that when the great civilization day of judgment arrived, their nation would stand alone as the preeminent superpower on the planet (while hopefully preventing a nuclear holocaust that just might vaporize all living creatures).

But the roots of the war didn’t actually start in the weeks after Germany’s surrender. Like all conflicts, the roots oftentimes find themselves buried deep within a previous conflict. The way one war ends determines when and how the next war will be fought.

In the final stages of war, when victorious powers fail to prepare for the peace, they might as well prepare for another war. The failures at Versailles fueled the tension and rage that spawned World War II. And likewise, the missteps by the Allied powers in the final months of World War II started the world down an even more treacherous path where total annihilation would loom only moments away.

So yes, World War II created the Cold War.

The fragile alliance between America, Britain and the Soviet Union was never meant to last. It was formed to take out Hitler - nothing more, nothing less.

Churchill and Roosevelt never really trusted Stalin. Why would they? His domestic policies killed millions, his secret police and show trials persecuted, prosecuted and then discarded even his closest advisors (fourteen of the original fifteen leaders of the Bolshevik party were murdered or “died” under convenient circumstances) and even Stalin admitted, “I trust no one, not even myself.” It didn’t help the Allied circle of trust that just a few years earlier, Stalin had actually partnered with Hitler to carve up neutral Poland, before invading Finland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

So as World War II progressed and the Big Three came together to meet at first Tehran, then Yalta and finally at Potsdam (with Truman replacing the recently deceased Franklin D. Roosevelt), it became more than apparent that America and Britain were two peas from the same idealistic pod, whereas Russia was the obvious odd man out, appeased more out of necessity than out of a shared vision for the future. Tensions arose almost
immediately when Britain and America delayed launching a Western offensive, choosing to instead approach Europe from the African front, leaving Russia alone to bear the brunt of the German blitzkrieg.

But dissension over military tactics was the least of their worries. Of bigger concern was what to do with Germany, and the world, once the war was over. America and Britain wanted a world where all nations embraced free trade, free markets, free elections, free speech and free choice. Russia wanted to be safe. Sure, Stalin wouldn’t be upset if the rest of the world adopted his version of communism, but his number one priority was security. Russia lost a quarter of a million countrymen when Napoleon invaded in 1812, over three million in World War I and over 23 million in World War II. Their nation’s borders were seemingly limitless, and the West had frequently shown the propensity for invasion whenever someone got the idea to expand their empire.

But no more. Stalin was done with being vulnerable. He wanted to create a protected ring of satellite nations around Mother Russia, a buffer zone that would if not prevent, at least slow down any attempt to invade Soviet soil.

So in every discussion between the Big Three, it became quite apparent that Stalin had no intention of merely defeating Germany and withdrawing his forces to focus on domestic tranquility. At the Yalta Conference, Stalin was unwavering. He wanted a divided Germany. He wanted Berlin. And he also wanted control of Eastern Europe.

And Churchill and Roosevelt let him have it. They wanted Stalin’s consent to a United Nations and his promise to enter the war in the Pacific 90 days after Germany was defeated. The Yalta deal was made, and the fate of the world for the rest of the 20th century had been sealed. In the spring of 1945, General Eisenhower ordered the American troops entering Germany and Eastern Europe to slow down, leaving the Soviet Red Army free to occupy Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Romania. The Red Army then marched into Berlin, “liberating” the German people from Nazi rule, all the while sanctioning the murder and rape of millions of innocent civilians. Stalin even sanctioned this behavior, believing that people should “understand it if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometers through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle.”
As word of Soviet atrocities spread through the Allied High Command and it became glaringly obvious that Stalin would never adhere to his agreement to let all occupied territories hold free elections, Churchill even considered enlisting captured German soldiers and invading Russia once the Nazis had surrendered.

When the Big Three sat down at their final meeting at Potsdam, the groundwork for World War III was being sewn. Power was up for grabs and both the US and the USSR wanted each other to know who would be filling the vacuum. Germany was defeated. Japan was on its final legs. Roosevelt, the calming presence that mediated the tension between Stalin and Churchill, had died. Russia occupied the whole of Eastern Europe, with no intention of leaving. US president Truman knew he had a super-weapon, even subtly letting its existence slip during the talks. The eventual agreements of the Potsdam Conference offered glimpses into a bipolar world, where geopolitical relationships would be divided simplistically using “us against them” terminology.

At Potsdam, the four-way division of Germany and Austria was finalized. Next, the German industrial machines were to be disassembled and sent back to the Soviet Union as restitution. Stalin wanted his “war booty.” And finally, all the eastern European countries were to be liberated by the Soviet Union, occupied by the Red Army until they were stable and ready to rule themselves again independently. The Soviets agreed that they would allow liberated Eastern Europe to have free elections (of course they wouldn’t be disappointed if these nations happened to choose communism).

In fact, they wouldn’t be disappointed if all recovering nations chose to align themselves with Soviet communism. And in the post-WWII landscape, communism actually looked like a viable option.

When life is going well, communism isn’t attractive. People don’t just voluntarily exchange a life of prosperity for a life where everyone is equal. Communist equality takes the wealthy down a couple notches to bring up those at the bottom. If there are a ton of people who are prospering (or at least naively believe they have a shot at the good life), they aren’t too excited about giving up this promise by sharing their cash with those down below. Humans can be nice, but they’re not stupid. Think of it in the terms of academic grading. Who wants to trade in their A-life for a D-life?
But when life sucks, when your nation is destroyed, when a generation of your young men lie dead or wounded, when your factories have been turned to rubble, when your roads, railroads and ports can’t move goods, when your economy is in utter ruin and your people don’t know from where the next meal will come, when your life is in misery and your nation is teetering on anarchy, this is when communism is attractive. When your life is an F, a D-doesn’t look too bad.

And in 1946, Europe and East Asia were failing. The tyrants of the 1920s and 1930s had taken the world to war. The people wanted power restored to the masses. This was when Marxism had a chance. If ever the workers of the world were going to unite to overthrow the power elite, this was the moment.

It didn’t hurt the communist cause that Soviet tanks and soldiers remained stationed all across Eastern Europe. If the allure of communism in times of strife wasn’t enough to influence the ballot box, the hundreds of thousands of occupying Soviet troops definitely tipped the scales in the Soviets favor. Stalin had hoped each occupied nation would naturally choose communism, but he quickly learned that even though the conditions were ripe for a series of communist victories, the initial post-war ballot boxes chosen non-communist leaders. Stalin couldn’t tolerate this outcome, so he made sure “free elections” would be just a little bit less free. One by one, the nations of Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania and Yugoslavia) started to “choose” communist governments. But with the Soviet Red Army involved in all facets of the election process, Eastern Europe never really had a choice.

England and the United States were less than pleased. In 1946, on a trip to President Harry Truman’s hometown in Missouri, Winston Churchill delivered his famous “iron curtain” speech where he warned, “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent” and that the Communist parties “are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control.” To the east of the curtain stood the Soviet Bloc, the network of nations all answering to the mandates of Moscow. To the west was a weakened, vulnerable Europe. Communism had already taken hold of Eastern Europe, and it appeared only a matter of time before the suffering masses to the west likewise followed suit.

America couldn’t allow that to happen.
Europe needed money, and a lot of it. The only way America could ensure Soviet influence would never gain a foothold in Western Europe was if prosperity could be quickly restored, making the communist system look like a laughable alternative.

Enter US Secretary of State George Marshall. He proposed to just give Europe money. Not a loan, just a gift. And they would give Europe a lot of it—$12.5 billion from 1948 to 1952. This money was used to: rebuild roads, power plants and factories; to pay for millions of tons of food and clothing; to help restore Europe’s ability to rejoin the world as equal players. In one fell swoop, this European Recovery Program (known as the Marshall Plan) not only put Western Europe back on its feet, but more importantly “strengthen[ed] the area still outside Stalin’s grasp,” firmly locking Western Europe into America’s capitalist corner for the remainder of the Cold War.

But economic aid was only part of America’s plan to contain the communist menace. In Turkey and Greece, the communist parties grew more powerful, and because of their terrorist campaigns and socialist promises, it appeared only a matter of time before two more puppet nations fell under Stalin’s umbrella. Britain tried to fight the movement with covert aid, but the forces of democracy and capitalism needed help on a much grander scale, and on March 12, 1947, President Truman promised to Congress that America would not sit by passively as the Soviet Union supported communist takeovers. He recognized:

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms. I believe that it must be the policy of the United to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

Truman was “fully aware of the broad implications involved if the United States extended[ed] assistance to Greece” and eventually Turkey. America would essentially become the policemen of the world. Any façade of isolationism would never again be an option. Anytime a nation needed help, America would have to be there. Anytime a leader, whether the head of state or the leader of a
revolutionary force, professed the desire to fend off communism, America would have to be there.

The Truman Doctrine ushered in the era of Pax Americana, a world where 500,000 US troops were deployed to keep peace on every corner of the planet. Although by 1950, hundreds of thousands of US troops could be found everywhere from Okinawa to South Korea to the Indian Ocean to the depths of the Arctic Ocean, the bulk of all troops were stationed in West Germany, for it was in Germany where everyone believed World War III was going to start.

By 1948, Germany was still rebuilding from the rubble, and all signs pointed to a standoff between the Soviets and the rest of the allies. Split into four sections by the decrees made at Potsdam, Germany was theoretically to be ruled independently by the French, British, Americans and Soviets. But there was nothing independent about how the western half was rebuilding. The French, British and Americans (the capitalist democracies) made no secret of their partnership in rebuilding their German spheres, leaving the Soviets isolated and able to mold their chunk into yet another satellite communist nation. And all attempts to mask alliances were shattered in 1948, when the three western sections of Germany each adopted one currency, the Deutsche Mark, and agreed to exist as one united economy.

This was too much for Stalin. He couldn't believe Germany was being rebuilt into a regime entirely incompatible with his own desires. In fact, in 1946, he had optimistically assumed that it was only a matter of time before the Americans, French and Brits grew weary of occupation and pulled out of Western Germany altogether, leaving the Soviet Union to reunite all of Germany under the Soviet banner.

The Marshall Plan put a wrinkle in his scheme. The Deutsche Mark adoption went one step further. Unification couldn't be tolerated. If the three sections united under the same currency, it was only a matter of time before they became one nation. Stalin would have to make a stand, and he would do it in Berlin, the capital city of Germany. Like all of Germany, Berlin was also divided into four occupied sections, but Berlin's situation was dangerously unique. The city was located 100 miles inside the Soviet zone, which meant West Berlin was a little democratic, free-market nugget surrounded by communism. Stalin wanted that nugget for himself.
On June 24, 1948, Stalin cut off all trade to the French, British and American sections of Berlin. All roads, all canals, all railroad tracks were severed. Nothing could come in. Nothing could go out. Stalin would cut off the fuel and the food to West Berlin. He thought he could starve his former allies into capitulation. There’s no way they would help out the West Berliners. It would only be a matter of time before the French, British and American starving sections came crawling to the Soviets for survival. Stalin would be waiting with open arms.

The US and Britain had a few choices — do nothing and let Stalin win, send in military forces to open up the trade routes or ignore the blockade.

The first two options were unacceptable. The first would only empower Stalin to keep pushing his communist agenda. The second would lead to World War III.

So they chose option three. American and British governments ignored the blockade and instead coordinated an endless stream of supplies to be delivered over the heads of Soviet-occupied East Germany and into the destitute hands of the West Berliners. This Berlin Airlift became the Cold War's first “defense of freedom,” lasting close to eleven months, keeping three million Berliners alive through the winter of 1948. Coordinating the air forces of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and America, Operation Vittles dropped over two million tons of cargo — everything from blankets to medicine to food to clothing to coal.

And the Soviet Union didn’t retaliate. They didn’t shoot down the planes or mobilize their troops to stop the dispersal of supplies. And then Stalin gave up, admitting he’d been bested. He re-opened supply lines from Berlin to the West, and on May 12, the airlift ended. Berlin had survived without turning communist, but the battle lines were officially drawn. Two new nations were created. The Soviet section became the ironically named German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the remaining three sections became the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany).

America took the alliance that made the airlift possible and expanded it to become NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The fifteen founding members of NATO each vowed to come to each other’s aid should any ally be attacked. In response, the Soviet Union established its own military alliance — the Warsaw Pact. The European powers had chosen sides. You
were either with NATO, or you were with the Warsaw Pact. The Americans and Soviets then started pouring weapons, money and troops into their allies' borders, hoping this massive armament would maintain the status quo for years to come. And it worked. By 1950, the European alliances that had been established in the early days of the Cold War would remain until the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1989. The Soviet Union would have its network of satellite nations across Eastern Europe. And the United States of America had firmly ensconced itself in the future of Western Europe. No more nations would shift alliances after 1950. The expansion of communism had been contained.

But the Cold War was by no means over. It had merely shifted to Latin America, Africa and Asia.

And then to the skies.

One of the signature components of the Cold War was the ceaseless risk of nuclear war. When America dropped its two atomic bombs in 1945, they thought they would have a monopoly on the super weapon for at least a decade. Not exactly. By 1949, the Soviets had perfected their own atomic bomb. Then, in 1952, America regained its military prestige when it successfully tested the considerably more deadly hydrogen bomb (867 times deadlier than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs). But this time it only took a year before the Soviets caught up and detonated their own hydrogen bomb. American scientific supremacy was under assault. The American hyper-confidence of the post-war years was coming to an end, and on October 4, 1957, technologically superiority seemed like it had shifted once again.

America had symbolically fallen behind the Soviets. It was on this day that the Soviets successfully deposited Sputnik, a basketball-sized satellite with four seven-foot long antenna tales, into space. America was now not only confronted technologically, they were vulnerable. If the Soviets could put satellites into space, could they also hypothetically watch over all American activities, chart its military’s every movement and drop bombs out of the sky like a kid dropping water balloons off an apartment balcony?

The US couldn’t tolerate any notion of Soviet superiority.

The space race had begun. Whoever controlled the technology that could put satellites into space would also control the technology to deploy nuclear weapons. One man’s rocket is another man’s missile, and whoever could design a ship that could
propel man and machines into space could just as easily deliver nuclear bombs anywhere on the planet.

The US rushed to get the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) up and running. They had to get something into space. They had to prove that they were back in the competition. The first few years of America's space program weren't terribly reassuring. Some rockets exploded before even taking off. Others lifted a few feet off the ground and then crumpled back down to earth. And some made it a few miles into the sky, only to spin wildly out of control or burst into flames high above the anxious spectators. Every failure was public. Every failure made America wonder if the Soviets might now actually possess the better society. The Soviets were first with a satellite, the first with a man in space and the first to make it to the moon to take some pictures.

But America would catch up. Vowing in 1961 to put a man on the moon before the end of the decade, President John F. Kennedy put the full weight of the federal government behind the space program. It was a race America could not lose, and on July 20, 1969, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, taking “a few small steps” and making a “giant leap for mankind.” Since the dawn of the first hunter-gatherers hundreds of thousands of years ago, the moon always sat just beyond our world, bordering the heavens. But in 1969, because of Cold War posturing and the threat of scientific mediocrity, the wealthiest nation on the planet finally bridged the two worlds together, and yet again man had conquered nature.

After the initial landing, the hype surrounding the Soviet and American space programs died down, and funding was steadily withdrawn. But the money kept flowing toward the defense programs in record numbers. At its height in the 1960s, America spent 20% of its GDP on military expenditures, and the Soviets spent over 40%. Much of this went to the production of nuclear weapons as both sides stockpiled arsenals far in excess of what was needed to destroy their foe. At their peak, the Soviets had amassed over 45,000 warheads, the Americans over 32,000. Scientists argued over whether we had enough bombs to blow up the planet five times or fifty times. Tough to say since some bombs are duds, the earth does a pretty good job absorbing radiation and some pesky pieces of life are bound to just not succumb to the blasts. But that wasn’t the point of piling up bomb after bomb after bomb.
It was all part of a policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. This MAD scheme promised that whoever fired first would assuredly doom its own nation to nuclear annihilation. You kill me. I kill you. After the Soviet Union and the USA planted their missile silos all across their allies’ territories (and even in submarines scouring the depths of the oceans), there wasn’t a point on the planet that couldn’t be reached by a nuclear bomb within 30 minutes.

Neither side would be stupid enough to use these weapons. Some argue it was the threat of nuclear war that actually kept the peace throughout the Cold War. But “kept the peace” was a bit of an overstatement, considering that just because the two sides couldn’t attack each other directly, didn’t mean they resisted putting weapons and wars in the hands of developing nations and revolutionaries. No, there was no World War III, but twenty million people did lose their lives because of Cold War aggression, and it was in these proxy wars that tensions would burn hottest.

The world made the mistake of decolonizing at the exact moment the Cold War was heating up. Europe was giving up on its empires. They were too expensive and their people wanted their leaders to focus on domestic issues, not on taking care of some distant peoples on the other side of the world. Western Europe chose to instead use their tax base to fund health care, unemployment benefits, paternity care, college, public housing and pension plans. Though defense spending continued as part of any Western European budget, it no longer dominated discourse, and with the United States bearing the brunt of NATO weapons funding and troop deployment, Europe moved closer toward a welfare state.

And as Europe was focused on rebuilding their economies and protecting their people, the nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia pushed further away from colonial control. The world was soon divided into three types of countries – First World countries that followed America, Second World countries that followed the Soviet Union and Third World countries that were figuring out which way to turn. It was in the Third World that the two superpowers would yield their mighty influence. Every emerging nation would have to choose – trade with America or trade with the Soviet Union. For some the “choice” was never an option. In 1945, America occupied Western Germany, South Korea and Japan. The Soviet Union occupied Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania
and North Korea. For these satellite nations, their alliances were already set.

But for every other nation, the revolutionaries would have to choose. Some tried to stay neutral and play the Soviet Union against the United States. Friends with one country one day, the other the next. Some ended up getting caught in civil wars, as regional factions failed to decide unanimously on their ideological course. This was how the proxy wars started.

For America, the two most consequential proxy wars were in Korea and Vietnam. For the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was the quagmire that marked the beginning of the end.

Korea had been divided at the end of World War II. On August 10, 1945 a couple military officers pulled out a National Geographic magazine and decided on the 38th parallel for a division between a Soviet occupied zone and an American zone. The Soviets gained the manufacturing north and the Americans gained control of the capital and agrarian south. The North Koreans had no desire to live in a divided nation, and in 1950, with passive permission from Joseph Stalin to proceed, they crossed the 38th parallel, pushing South Korean forces down to the southern tip of the peninsula. The freshly formed United Nations had its first test of legitimacy. How could it claim to be a proprietor of peace if it allowed unprovoked aggression? But the problem was in the makeup of the war-making branch of the United Nations. The Security Council was made up of five permanent members – the USA, Britain, China, France and the Soviet Union – each with veto power. If any one nation vetoed a resolution, the United Nations could not legally take action. So of course, with the Soviets supporting North Korea’s offensive, they would inevitably veto any resolution condemning the North Korean invasion. But the Soviet Union made a mistake. They boycotted this meeting of the Security Council, never entered their vote and their absence meant instead of a 4-1 failed vote, the United Nations agreed 4-0 to launch their first “peacekeeping” mission.

The United States was way ahead of them. With hundreds of thousands of troops stationed in occupied Japan, the Americans were in Korea within weeks. General Douglas MacArthur, the hero of the WW2 Pacific Theater, swept in behind North Korean troops and eventually pushed them to the Chinese-Korean border. At this point, he pressured President Truman for permission to drop some nuclear bombs on China, who was obviously aiding the North Koreans.
Truman refused. He wasn’t going to use nukes again.

China took advantage of America’s reticence. Recently crowned Chinese premier Mao Tse Tung ordered 700,000 troops to the border, ultimately commanding them to cross into Korea on October 25, 1950. Over the next three years, the conflict devolved into a murky stalemate. Though both sides agreed to a ceasefire, they could never settle on a peace agreement. To this day, the Korean War has never officially ended and the 38th parallel remains the spot where tensions could one day end the 60-year “break.”

Like in Korea, the conflict in Vietnam stemmed from borders created by Westerners and a nationalistic desire to reunite the nation under one government. Following World War II, even under advisement from the United States, France refused to give up their holdings in French Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). The Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh was less than pleased, as he had fought to expel the Japanese in the 1940s and felt his proclamation that “all men are created equal” would rally American support for a free Vietnam. He was wrong. America had to have France’s support in Europe, and if that meant America had to hypocritically backtrack on their previous anti-imperialistic stance, they would. But Ho Chi Minh’s forces were too determined. They’d had enough of strangers in their land. These French soldiers and their American backers were just the latest in a string of foreign oppressors dating back five centuries. During the first few years of the 1950s, Ho’s forces slaughtered and embarrassed the French, bringing both sides to Geneva to talk peace treaty.

But in Geneva, the Western powers decided to create two new countries - North Vietnam and South Vietnam – until the region was stable enough to have a united government. General Ho was less than pleased. He believed he had earned the right to rule a united Vietnam.

America’s role in this story could have ended at the Geneva Convention of 1954 when the two Vietnams were created, but instead they made the choice to make Vietnam their Asian Berlin. They would not back down and give in to the spread of communism. They saw Ho Chi Minh not merely as a nationalist revolutionary, but as the Southeast Asian transmitter of communism. If America let him take over Vietnam, the dominos would topple one after another – first Laos, then Cambodia, then Thailand, then Malaysia, then the Philippines and then Indonesia.
If they didn’t hold the line in Vietnam, within a decade another half a billion souls (and consumers) would be lost to communism.

So America backed the wrong horse. To run South Vietnam, the Americans brought in Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic Vietnamese exile, educated in the United States, who was totally unfamiliar with the plight of his Vietnamese brethren. Once in power, he didn’t endear himself to the people, stealing from the government coffers, giving the prime government posts to his family and friends and persecuting Buddhists. Back in the United States, Americans started questioning their role in this Southeast Asian struggle, as on the nightly news Buddhist monks could be seen dousing themselves with gasoline and lighting themselves on fire to protest Diem’s policies.

Needing to go in a new direction, the CIA supported both the assassination of Diem and the election of a series of equally incompetent leaders. By the mid-1960s, Ho Chi Minh’s efforts in South Vietnam accelerated, forcing President Kennedy to increase the number of “advisors” in the region to 12,000. When you think “advisor,” you have to think of a soldier, a helicopter pilot, a medic or a military officer. These enlisted American men “advised” the South Vietnamese military on how to defend themselves, sometimes even leading them into battle. As Chinese and Soviet money continued to trickle into North Vietnam and southern Vietnamese communist guerrillas (the Vietcong) expanded their terrorist activities, the US had a choice – escalate or pull out. The ensuing president, Lyndon B. Johnson knew he would have to either “go in with great casualty lists or get out with disgrace.” He ended up assuring both.

By 1968, 580,000 Americans were serving in Vietnam, many of whom were forced into combat through a compulsory draft. As the death tolls mounted and the war goals were lost in a haze of rhetoric, an anti-war movement gained momentum. It first started in the quads of colleges across the country, but eventually spread to all classes of society. This was a war Americans no longer wanted to fight, and when they found out their military had expanded the conflict to include bombings of neighboring Laos and Cambodia, the anti-war protests hit an even higher fever pitch. Enough was enough. The government and military brass saw no clear path to victory. America conceded to “peace with honor,” pulling out troops in 1973.
With the American forces out of the picture, within two years, the communists took over the southern capital. Vietnam united under communist leadership and across the region...

Nothing happened.

No dominos fell. No other nation succumbed to what once was seen as an inevitability. Vietnam eventually entered into the global market and a generation of Americans was left wondering why they’d ever been sent to Southeast Asia.

The Vietnam War was the most glaring example of American intrusion in regional conflicts, but it was by no means the end of US interference in foreign affairs. The CIA would again prop up dubious figures. Government advisors would again believe the domino theory was a preordained certainty, not merely a cleverly worded geopolitical guess. American military forces would again be challenged by local populations yielding inferior weapons. And America again would be embarrassed on foreign soil. By 1980, a series of questionable involvements in Guatemala, the Congo, Cuba, Angola, Iran, Grenada, Nicaragua and El Salvador each diminished American prestige, gradually fostering an anti-American sentiment that still lingers today.

Vietnam forever damaged America’s international stature. The Soviet Union would have its own Vietnam. It would have Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union had secured its western borders by creating the Eastern Bloc, it set its sights on securing a buffer zone to the south by incorporating all the “stans” behind the Soviet shield. By the 1950s, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan all fell to Soviet influence, both for their geographic importance (as grain producers, as links to the Indian Ocean and for their proximity to the oil fields of the Middle East) and for their symbolic currency in the great battle for superpower bragging rights.

One nation held out for decades. Afghanistan. By playing both sides against each other, never formally granting their allegiance to either, Afghanistan benefited from trade with both the Soviet Union and the United States, using these contacts to improve their infrastructure and protect them from outside influences. This all changed in 1979 when the Soviet Union decided to invade and lend support to the local communist revolutionaries. America in turn, through the efforts of Senator Charlie Wilson and CIA operatives, coordinated the transfer of billions of dollars of money and arms (specifically surface to air
Avoiding Armageddon

missiles) to the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen were virulently anti-communist and were willing to protect the autonomy of their nation to the death (they also boasted the membership of one wealthy expatriate from Saudi Arabia who would later play a much different role in America’s story...this man was named Osama Bin Laden). The Mujahideen eventually taught the Soviets a lesson others have had to learn the hard way – you might be able to invade Afghanistan, but you're not going to be able to control Afghanistan. After a decade of futile fighting, like with America’s foray into Vietnam, close to two million civilians were killed, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to neighboring countries, tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers died and over $80 billion was needlessly lost in the mountains of Afghanistan. This failed assault not only damaged the Soviet image internationally, but it also caused great tension within the upper echelons of Soviet government as the course of the Soviet's future came under heightened scrutiny.

These destructive, exhaustive proxy wars weren’t the only hot spots in the Cold War. Several incidents not only soured Soviet-American relations, but pushed the world into a state of perpetual panic as the question of nuclear war became more one of when than if.

In 1951, Americans Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested and put on trial for sharing Army military weapons secrets with the Soviets. Their trial and eventual execution set off a wave of paranoia in the United States, as everyone might be a spy. The CIA strengthened their counterespionage efforts and the government, through the obsessive, paranoid leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy, went on a “witch hunt” to weed out potential conspirators.

In 1960, the US and the Soviets continually denounced each other's intelligence networks. The Soviets even accused the Americans of flying high-speed spy planes over Soviet soil, recording troop movements and missile construction sites. America fervently denied these accusations, but were soon internationally mocked when the Soviets put a captured Gary Powers, a U-2 pilot shot down over Soviet airspace, in front of a television camera. This American embarrassment was soon overshadowed in 1961 when the Soviets erected the Berlin Wall, a series of barbed wire and stone fences created to prevent East Germans from escaping into the capitalist, democratic mecca of West Berlin. America could do nothing, and for the duration of
the Cold War, the Berlin Wall would stand as the symbol of the conflict.

Although these incidents each amplified the mistrust and apprehension of the day, it was the Cuban Missile Crisis that brought the world within minutes of World War III. After World War II, Cuba, an island 90 miles off the coast of Florida, had become America’s Las Vegas of the Caribbean. The high rollers of America would head down to Havana to party, gamble and mingle with the locals. Cuba had become essentially America’s own satellite nation; even President Kennedy later commented how “United States companies owned about 40 percent of the Cuban sugar lands—almost all the cattle ranches—90 percent of the mines and mineral concessions—80 percent of the utilities—practically all the oil industry—and supplied two-thirds of Cuba’s imports.”

This all changed when Fidel Castro, aided by Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara, lead a small invasion force across the Gulf of Mexico, hid in the hills for months and gradually increased his influence through terrorism, guerrilla activities and very persuasive propaganda. Gaining support against the dictator Fulgencio Batista didn’t prove too difficult, as he had been for years living the life of a billionaire playboy, crafting crooked deals with American businesses and leaving his people to suffer below the poverty line. In 1958, Castro’s army overthrew Batista and within a few years he had nationalized American businesses, ensuring that profits from Cuban resources went into the hands of Cubans.

America couldn’t have this. They couldn’t have a Marxist demagogue less than 100 miles from the mainland and they couldn’t afford to set the precedent that overseas American businesses in Latin America could not be protected. The CIA devised possible coups to overthrow Castro, eventually settling on tacit support for the Bay of Pigs Invasion where Cuban exiles would be trained in Panama, given American ships and planes and then supported officially once they took the island and rallied the locals behind them. The “taking the island” part was a failure. No one rallied behind the counter-revolutionary forces and America was left trying to convince the world that the B-26 bombers flown by Cubans were somehow stolen from US Air Force bases.

With a bounty on his head, Fidel Castro looked to the East for allies, and the Soviets were more than willing to lend a hand.
They first bought all of Cuba’s sugar at above market prices and
later supplied farm equipment, fuel and nuclear missiles. When
American spy planes filmed the construction of missile silos,
President Kennedy was faced with a choice.

Allow the missiles or forbid the missiles. Allowing the
missiles so close to America’s border meant that Washington D.C.
could be destroyed within a few minutes and the entire eastern
seaboard could not be protected from nuclear attack. Forbidding
the missiles meant a global standoff with Premier Khruschev and
the Soviet Union, neither known for their willingness to
compromise. Kennedy settled on a blockade of Cuba, but cleverly
called it a “quarantine.” He declared that if the Soviets attempted
to break the quarantine, he would be forced to fire on Soviet ships,
effectively starting World War III. For thirteen days in October
1961, the world watched, hoping one side would concede.
Khruschev blinked first, returning his ships and promising to
remove the missiles. In exchange, the Americans promised to
never, ever invade Cuba again and even remove some of their
missiles from Turkey. The world was saved, but the two sides
grasped the severity of the situation, agreeing to put in a direct
phone line – the Red Phone – between the two leaders and to tone
down the public rhetoric. The world almost blew itself up over an
island with sugar plantations. This lethal face-off would never
again be repeated.

But by the 1980s, the Cold War didn’t appear any closer to
coming to an end. To an outsider, it even looked like the
hostilities were getting ramped up a bit. The Soviets continued to
stockpile nuclear weapons, and President Ronald Reagan vowed he
would end the “evil empire.” Taking another page from the script
of George Lucas, Reagan spoke of a Star Wars-esque Strategic
Defense Initiative program (SDI) where the American military
could shoot down any missile before it re-entered the atmosphere.
Though this project only existed in theory (and to this day has
never been successfully pulled off), the Soviet military brass felt
their hearts stop for a bit as they foresaw a future where they
housed 45,000 obsolete missiles. This became the beginning of
the end.

Reagan believed that if we can’t beat you, we’ll
economically bury you. There was no way the Soviet economy
could even consider spending more money on the military. They
were tapped out. For decades, the Soviet Union tried to mask the
weaknesses of their government-controlled economy. Unlike the
United States and other capitalist economies where consumers and the market determine what goods are made and what they should cost, in the Soviet Union, government officials determined what was made, who would make it, how much it would cost and who would buy it. This didn't work so well. Workers had no incentive to work harder. Planners either overestimated or underestimated production quotas. And too much money was spent on defense.

Though the Soviet scientific and military successes might have been the envy of the world, their economy was a joke. Consumers had little choice on what to purchase, and what they could purchase was never produced in enough quantity. Not knowing when the next batch of necessities would arrive in stores, shoppers resorted to hoarding any good they could get their hands on and then selling them later on the black market. Shortages got so bad that the Soviet Union even turned to America and Canada for help, frequently begging for billions of dollars in grain supplies when their harvests fell short of demand. For too long, the Soviets had focused on military expenditures, and by the 1980s, with the value of all those expenditures seemingly for naught, they had to revisit the Soviet model.

Enter Mikhail Gorbachev. Upon his election, Gorbachev inherited a country on the verge of collapse. Their consumer products were garbage, their environment was becoming an industrial cesspool, their farming had become completely ineffective and their recent string of premiers didn't inspire confidence (one would even frequently drool on himself while speaking publicly). With the improvements in communication and the spread of tourism, the Soviets could no longer keep the curtain closed on the advances of the Western world. The Soviet standard of living fell far below that of Western Europe, and their citizens were no longer appeased by stories of space and military victories. They wanted a higher quality of life. They wanted more freedom.

Gorbachev would deliver. Through his two buzzwords of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), Gorbachev promised to reform the system, but what he really did was set the groundwork for a dramatic shift to a capitalist, democratic republic. He invited a more free press, encouraged entrepreneurialism, lobbied for more candidates for all government posts, ended the war in Afghanistan and most importantly, eased up on control of the Soviet satellite nations. By 1989, the Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and even East Germany pushed for more autonomy, and Gorbachev did
little to stop these revolutionary movements. When on November 9th Communist Party spokesmen Gunter Schabowski misread a Soviet mandate and erroneously told a room full of newspaper reporters that the wall would be brought down “immediately, without delay,” the floodgates of revolution ripped open.

Thousands gathered at the wall, started knocking out chunks of concrete and then moving back and forth from East to West, daring the East Berlin soldiers to stop them. But the East German forces did nothing. The Soviet military did nothing. And one by one, the Eastern Bloc countries pulled away from Soviet control.

And still, nothing.

By 1991, the Soviet Union was in disarray, and on Christmas Day, the union was dissolved, leaving the fifteen republics to recreate themselves autonomously, and that included Russia.

The Cold War had finally come to an end. For over four decades, the competition between the USSR and the USA had overshadowed all other foreign policy concerns, oftentimes masking regional issues that would explode in the next two decades. Some erroneously believed that with the demise of the Soviet Union and only one superpower remaining, war would come to an end.

Not even close.

The decades of naively looking at the world’s problems through the lens of capitalism vs. communism meant that many immoral, flawed and dangerous regimes had endured. Ethnic minorities had been subjugated, and religious intolerance had been concealed. But with the cover of bipolar alliances ripped away, a new generation of political leaders demanded self-rule, a new generation of disenfranchised peoples demanded access to the fruits of the global market, a new generation of ignored nations pushed for their own nuclear warheads and a new generation of religious extremists demanded a return to the adherence of orthodox decrees that would combat the spread of liberal ideals.

The Cold War might have come to a close, but a Pandora’s Box of challenges had been opened. How the world would confront these challenges would determine the safety and prosperity of humanity.

But that is for another chapter.