

Still No Sides to History



by Theodore Dalrymple

As if there were not enough armed conflicts, or potential armed conflicts, in the world already, the President of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, has raised the spectre of yet another: between his own country and Guyana, formerly British Guiana, to two-thirds of whose territory he, in the name of Venezuela, lays claim.

He has certainly chosen his moment well, with political cunning. He knows that the easily distracted world has its attention elsewhere. Unless the United States or Brazil were to intervene, any war between his country and Guyana would be a short one, given the relative sizes of the two countries; and intervention by either of those two countries would soon turn him, domestically, into a brave defender of Venezuela's supposed historic rights.

He needs a good nationalist cause to divert attention from the fact that something like 20 percent of the population of

Venezuela has fled his disastrous rule. Venezuelans across its political spectrum, however, do not accept the validity of the arbitration in 1899 that awarded Essequibo, recently discovered to be rich in natural resources including oil, to Britain, and therefore to the successor state of Guyana. Venezuelans might rally around the flag in the event of a conflict, thus helping to preserve Maduro's power and give him legitimacy, at least for a time. And what more can an unpopular leader with a taste for costumes of almost Colonel-Gaddafian proportions hope for than survival?

President Maduro recently held a referendum to ask the Venezuelan population whether it agreed that Essequibo should be annexed to Venezuela. This seems an odd way of proceeding. If the claim were just and legally sound, then a referendum could add nothing to it; if, on the other hand, it were not, or were even merely disputable, a referendum held by only one of the parties to the dispute would also add nothing. But, of course, Venezuela wants to be judge and jury in its own case, as most countries do when they think they are in a position of power vis-à-vis an opponent.

The foreign minister of Guyana said that Venezuela and Maduro were not only wrong legally, but also "on the wrong side of history." It was the phrase "the wrong side of history" that caught my attention. I hope I shall not be mistaken for a sympathiser with Maduro in any degree whatsoever when I say that this phrase is a most unfortunate one.

It implies a teleology in history, a pre-established end to which history is necessarily moving. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama famously announced, or appeared to announce, the end of history in its teleological sense. There might still be events, of course, but what Mankind had been evolving to, once and for all, was Western-style liberal democracies, after which there would be no more history, or History.

This movement to liberal democracy, presumably, was the right

side of history to which the Guyanese foreign minister implicitly referred. Certainly, his country is a good deal freer and more democratic than Venezuela, which is perhaps not a high and difficult hurdle to leap.

But history has no sides and evaluates nothing. We often hear of the "verdict of history," but it is humans, not history, that bring in verdicts, and the verdicts that they bring in often change with time. The plus becomes a minus and then a plus again. As Chou En-Lai famously said in 1972 when asked about the effect of the French Revolution, "It is too early to tell." It is not merely that moral evaluations change; so do evaluations of what actually happened and the causes of what actually happened. We do not expect a final agreement over the cause or causes of the First World War. That does not mean that no rational discussion of the subject is possible—but *finality* on it is impossible.

It is true that there are trends in history, but they do not reach inexorable logical conclusions. Projections are not predictions, and success in war, for example, is no proof that the victor is on the side of history and was therefore predestined to be victorious: nor can the victor be certain that his victory brings with it all that he desired or expected.

Our predictions may turn out to be mistaken. If we make enough predictions that are not absurd, some of them are bound to be vindicated by what happens, but we should not take this as evidence that our historical insight or reasoning must have been correct. The irresistible triumph of Islam in the seventh century is no proof of the truth of its doctrines. We are apt, moreover, to forget our mistaken predictions and dwell on those that proved correct.

I made a successful political prediction in my early twenties. As a young doctor, I worked in what was then still called Rhodesia, formerly Southern Rhodesia (Northern Rhodesia had by

then been renamed Zambia). I predicted that the government of Ian Smith, the Prime Minister, could not long survive, as indeed it did not, collapsing about three years later. This had nothing to do with whether it should survive, or whether what followed it would be any better: I took it as a fact.

My accurate prediction was no miracle of foresight by a very young man: Rhodesia was not fully supported even by its friendliest foreign power, South Africa; its white population was tiny, being in total no more than that of a smallish provincial city and only 3 percent of the population of the country as a whole; and it faced a guerrilla war conducted by enemies who were well supplied from the hostile countries with which it had long borders, as well as many other hostile countries beyond. It required no appeal to any side of history, right or wrong, to predict the likely outcome of all this.

History is not some *deus ex machina*, or what the philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, called the ghost in the machine; it is not a supra-human force, a kind of supervisory demi-urge acting upon humans as international law is supposed to act upon nations. It was tempting for me all those years ago to consider the government of Ian Smith on the wrong side of history and his enemies on the right side of it, merely because there had been a tendency, that his government was the last but one to resist, for black Africans to take power in states in Africa. But this was the consequence of ideas in the minds of men that fired their actions, just as colonialism itself had once been. Are we now to say that authoritarianism is on the right side of history, as recently liberal democracy was only thirty years ago, because so much of the world is ruled by it?

Does it matter if we ascribe right and wrong sides to history? I think it could—I cannot be more categorical than that. On the one hand, it might make us complacent, liable to sit back and wait for History to do our work for us. Perhaps more importantly, History might excuse our worst actions,

justifying grossly unethical behaviour as if we were acting as only automaton midwives of a foreordained denouement. But if history is a seamless robe, no denouement is final.

In short, we should cease using expressions such as “the judgment of history,” or “the wrong side of history.” They are, after all, on the wrong side of history.

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