



## LIBERTY MATTERS

### WHY HISTORY MATTERS FOR 21ST CENTURY LIBERTY

*We invited John Hulsman to write this month's Liberty Matters essay, "Why History Matters for 21st Century Liberty" because we had been following [his coverage of the war in Ukraine](#). The coverage was insightful and accurate, but we were particularly drawn to it because it was always deeply seated in historical context. Whether it drew from the specific military and political histories of Russia and Ukraine, or the context of military history writ large, Hulsman's Ukraine coverage struck us as--all on its own--an important defense of the necessity of studying the past in order to understand the present. Inviting him to respond to the question of why history matters for liberty in the 21st century, then, seemed like a natural next step. The three case studies he provides to Liberty Matters readers this month are thought-provoking and challenging. They pull no punches. They demand that we read more, study harder, and do better. And they make an inspiring argument for believing that history matters, now and always.*

### WHY HISTORY MATTERS FOR 21ST CENTURY LIBERTY

by John C. Hulsman

"Not to know what happened before one was born is to be always a child."

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

#### ***Introduction: Ideas are a very practical thing***

Too often in the modern world we separate ideas from the realm of everyday living, as if the things we were forced to learn in school have little bearing on life as it is actually lived.

In the course of running a global political risk firm over the past 16 years, I can tell you that nothing is further from the truth. In fact, the success of our work is conditioned on one very important idea, which we put into practice every single day: History informs the world we live in, explaining where we are, and—equally importantly—where we are going. [Cicero](#) was right. To not understand history is to remain forever a child, unaware of how the world and human beings genuinely work.

If history is necessary to make sense of human beings as they have actually lived, then to defend human liberty—perhaps the greatest gift that lived history has endowed us with—can only be accomplished if one can navigate the many perils of the world. Liberty must be protected from international authoritarian forces without, from domestic forces within, and—perhaps most dangerously of all—from the ignorance our current educational

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system has abetted, whereby whole generations of our future citizens have next to no knowledge about the history of the world that came before them. Consider this essay for the Liberty Fund—fighting the good fight on this crucial front—my modest contribution to winning this battle of battles.

***Case Study Number One: The Russian invasion of Ukraine***

As a leading thinker of the realist school of thought in international relations, I can attest to the fact that one of realism's greatest strengths is its admonition that it is absolutely necessary to 'understand' America's enemies, using knowledge of their history to analyze, assess, and then best them. The question for realists is not 'What would I do if I were in Castro's shoes?' but rather, 'Given Castro's history, what would Castro do?'

Over the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine my firm—almost uniquely—predicted the invasion would actually happen, 'calling' it in November to take place in February. The reason we got this right in political risk terms is not due to some mystical powers (though it can be argued that the Pythia of Delphi in Ancient Greece were the first risk analysts). Rather, it is our focus on history providing the magic elixir of analytical context that gives us our primary edge.

One must take one's authoritarian enemies seriously, understanding their biography in an effort to best them. In the case of Russian President Vladimir Putin, he largely means what he says and says what he means. While his intellectual touchstones are far from my own, by really understanding his biography his actions can be assessed in real time, which is precisely what we did.



***Vladimir Putin***

Since surprisingly coming to power in Russia in 1999, Putin has often bemoaned the collapse of the Soviet Union, saying it amounts to the greatest political tragedy of the 20th century. When one considers the historical context of that blood-soaked comment—with tens of millions dying at the hands of monsters such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao—to single out the demise of the USSR as a greater tragedy than say, World War II, is striking at best, and very odd at worst. Nonetheless, this is how Putin feels.

For the Russian dictator, the self-immolation of the Soviet Union left Russia humiliated, bereft, and an international laughingstock. Gone were the comforting, comprehensible days of Putin's rise as an able KGB man in East Germany, when the USSR had been feared, respected, and treated as a superpower. Instead, in the blink of an historical eye, Putin's comforting world vanished.

Everything he has done since is an effort 'To Make Russia Great Again.' Like his hero, Peter the Great, the present Russian Tsar wants to restore Russian prestige by resurrecting a very old, organic geo-political concept that has protected 'Mother Russia' for centuries, that of strategic depth.

When Russia has been successful it has arrayed a series of satellite countries in front of it, providing itself with strategic depth as invaders have come on. In traversing the vast distances from their homelands through the satellites and then at last entering the vast Russian steppes, invaders have been swallowed up in the immensity of the country itself.

Indeed, the defenders have three times (against Charles XII of Sweden in the 18th century, [Napoleon](#) in the 19th century, and Hitler in the 20th century) traded land for time, and then let the Russian winter do its fearful work. It is not odd or anachronistic of Putin to wish to re-establish either Russia's great power status, or the strategic depth paradigm that underwrites it.



*Napoleon Bonaparte*

Again, looking historically, the invasion of Ukraine is not an isolated event. Instead, Putin has been setting about this plan for the entirety of his time in power. He has restored traditional Russian influence in the Balkans. In saving the dictator Alexander Lukashenko from his people last year, he has made Belarus a firm satrapy of Moscow. Following his invasion of Georgia in 2008 and after successfully brokering an end to the Armenia-Azerbaijan war of last year, the Kremlin is back as the dominant force in the Caucasus region.

Even the old naval base at Tartus has been reclaimed, following Russia's successful intervention in the bloody Syrian Civil War. But the final piece of the puzzle, the jewel in the crown of any strategic depth strategy, must leave Moscow with a pliant Ukrainian client state next door, rather than the pro-western regime which presently exists there.

As a convinced Jeffersonian, I certainly do not subscribe to Vladimir Putin's Tsarist views; but as a political risk analyst informed by history, I do understand them. Better still, in understanding what Putin is trying to do America can best its authoritarian opponents around the world, by knowing and understanding them better than they know and understand us. But we can do none of this without history. Nor can liberty be defended from its many enemies unless we historically can come to know them.

### *Case Study Number Two: The Covid-19 crisis*

During the past twenty years, I have lived all over the world; during this time, I have called Washington, England, Holland, Berlin, and Bavaria my home. But nowhere I have resided has been more delightful than Milan, where I presently spend my time. The cliches about Italy are true; there is a joy of life, a love of culture, history, food and style that makes it unique in the world, and a place for which I retain the greatest fondness.

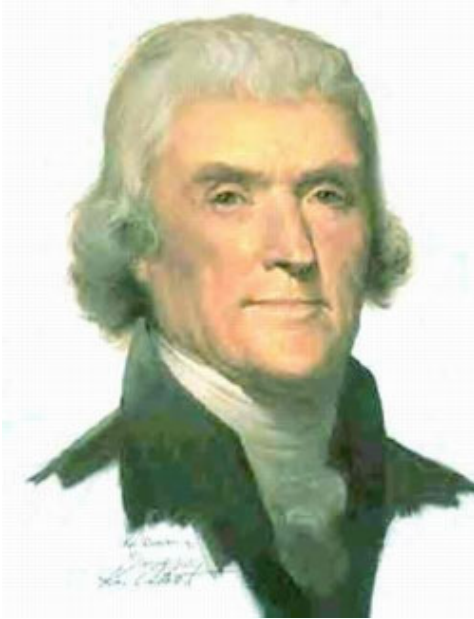
But there is a dark underbelly to life here, as there is to much of the Western Europe I know so well. Bluntly put, our Western European friends do not value individual liberty in the same way that we do. While certainly qualifying as democratic, Western Europeans are undeniably more statist, more bureaucratic, and more technocratic than any American Jeffersonian can countenance. Again, knowing history provides the key to understanding this domestic danger, and providing a rationale for combatting it.

The Covid-19 pandemic struck Italy early and hard. Its response, like most western states, was that of questionable lockdowns, obligatory mask wearing, and an alarming—and not much discussed—increase in the power of the government at the expense of the individual. Even in those early days, I quoted [Dr. Franklin](#)'s wise admonition that those who were content to trade their liberty for security deserve neither.

But then the unelected Prime Minister of Italy (he serves at the head of a unity government), Mario Draghi, went a step further. His government promulgated the use of a green pass, without which one is not allowed to do the most basic things, like ride the metro, go to work, enter a restaurant, or have access to most of modern life. This pass was only bestowed upon a citizen if it did what the government told it to do; that is, be vaccinated multiple times for Covid-19. While I personally have chosen to be vaccinated, that is really beside the point; the Italian government set about de facto making it obligatory for its citizens to do what they wanted without de jure voting to do so. Armed with my historical understanding of the American founders, I came to see this as technocratic tyranny.



So instead of using parliamentary open debate to discuss making vaccinations mandatory, the Italian government went around the democratic process, imposing the green pass by decree, a pass that is still (after all this time) necessary.



***Thomas Jefferson***

This gets [John Locke](#) back to front. Locke, the great English political philosopher lying behind [Jefferson's](#) grand declaration, made it clear that belief in natural law means rights come from nature or God, and are inalienable to every human being. Particularly, the rights to life, liberty, and property ("the pursuit of happiness") are sacrosanct. Individuals, living in a common society, allow a common government to preside (based on popular rule), but do not cede the essence of their individual liberties to it. Rights, then, come from the people and are lent to government, not the other way around.

Due to this, in Italy and much of Europe, the Green Pass ought to make free people everywhere very nervous. In essence, good technocrat that Draghi is (he used to run the European Central Bank), he is saying, 'I know better than you about Covid-19 (a fact very much in dispute, given western governments' doleful record during the pandemic); if you do what I say, and behave well, I will restore your liberty, as those rights come from the all-

knowing government.' Frankly, this is an abomination to any lover of liberty.

But to know what is wrong with European technocracy, a knowledge of natural law theory is necessary, and to know this, knowledge of the specific history of John Locke is required. To think and to argue against such egregious domestic incursions against liberty, history is our mighty sword.

### ***Case Study Number Three: My interns and Cicero***

The names have been changed here to protect the guilty. I have had the pleasure of working with many hundreds of interns at my political risk firm. In most cases the latent teacher in me (in a previous life I taught courses at St. Andrews University in Scotland and Johns Hopkins SAIS in Washington) emerges and I have greatly enjoyed the intellectual stimulation they have provided, just as I have hoped to start them on their way in their careers. But for all the pleasure, a nagging thought has increasingly come to disrupt my contact with them; bluntly put, many of the interns I have worked with have been shortchanged in attaining their education (despite the fact that most went to universities of great repute) and simply don't know much of anything.

This soul-destroying trend has gotten worse as the years have progressed. Finally, a while ago, after working intensely with three quite bright interns I was getting on with, on a whim, I asked them in a conference call if they could name five American secretaries of state. To my horror, none of them could. Silence ensued for at least a minute as I tried to think of what to say without howling at the moon.

Finally, I managed to stammer out that if you were a chemist, you needed to know what a carbon atom was to be any good at chemistry. To be good at political risk, international relations, or foreign affairs—in precisely the same way—you had to know the basic history of the United States and many other countries, otherwise all you are doing is bluffing your superiors and fooling yourselves. Without censure (though I surely felt angry) I immediately demanded they go back and start reading the

basics of the history of the West, before moving on to the rest of the world.



*Cicero*

Do not feel better by thinking this is an isolated case. Many years before in a high-level American foreign policy class at St. Andrews, precisely the same thing happened. Idealistic graduate student that I was, I agreed to teach a ‘Basics of 20th century American history course’ to these fourth years for free, merely because I couldn’t stand having discussions about foreign policy that were grounded in....well, nothing.

More than Vladimir Putin, more than power-hungry governments (and all governments want to accrue power, just as Jefferson said) it is the acceptance of this ignorance of history that is the greatest danger facing the continued flourishing of freedom in the world. For if the next generation is unaware of how freedom came to be, what it has cost, the many threats to it, and how liberty can be safeguarded, then—as Cicero put it—they are doomed to remain children.

We must stop giving students good grades when we are aware in our heart of hearts they know precious little; all we are doing is dooming our society to decay. For another abject lesson of history—as I wrote in, [To Dare More Boldly: The Audacious Story of Political Risk](#)—is that most dangers to societies come from within, that

countries and liberty fade and fall because of decadence, accepting the unacceptable, tolerating the intolerable.

For freedom does depend on knowing history. The greatest danger is to simply not teach the young the crucial context of why we are here, that the value of our rights is beyond rubies. In doing so, we tolerate them becoming barbarians, children who have no thought as to why the world is the way it is. It is up to us to do better. For my part, I am going to try.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

For the past fifteen years, [Dr. John C. Hulsman](#) has been the President and Managing Partner of John C. Hulsman Enterprises, a prominent global political risk consulting firm. Literally, the sun never sets on John’s political risk analysis: He is Senior Columnist for City AM, the newspaper of the city of London, while also writing regular columns on geopolitics, macroeconomics, and politics for Arab News in Riyadh, The Hill newspaper in Washington, Aspen in Rome, and various outlets in New Delhi.

Prior to this, Hulsman served as Fellow in European Policy Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Senior Research Fellow in Geopolitics and Foreign Policy at the Heritage Foundation for seven years, the largest think tank in the world. A Washington insider, he is a Life Member of the US Council on Foreign Relations, the pre-eminent US foreign policy institution. Hulsman is the author of all or part of 14 books, has given over 1560 interviews, written over 1110 articles, prepared over 1360 briefings, and delivered more than 620 speeches on global political risk and foreign policy for blue chip corporations and governments around the world.

Hulsman has made a name for himself as the pre-eminent predictor of global geopolitical risk in our new multipolar era, uniquely calling the Brexit referendum result, the 2020 US election perfectly (Presidency, House and Senate), the coming of the Sino-American Cold War, the tragic US failures at nation-building in Iraq and

Afghanistan, and the rise of endemic inflation, as well as correctly calling 18 of his firm's past 20 major political risk predictions. His most recent work, the best-selling, *To Dare More Boldly: The Audacious Story of Political Risk*, was published by Princeton University Press in April 2018 and is available for order on amazon. To keep up with all of John's work during please subscribe at: [johnhulsman.substack.com](http://johnhulsman.substack.com).

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