

## John Steele Gordon: WHAT WE LOST IN THE GREAT WAR (1992)

**Source:** Gordon, John Steele. "What We Lost in the Great War". *American Heritage*. July/August 1992. pp80-91.

**Instructions:** As you read, highlight and make marginal notes relevant to the following prompts. Also, write a page (typed-double spaced) response.

According to Gordon:

- (1) How would the world have been different if World War I (known then as the Great War) had not happened? What do you think of this assertion?
  - (2) How did WWI start? How does his assessment compare with your understanding?
  - (3) How had war changed by WWI?
  - (4) What was lost in the Great War? What was the psychological cost of the war?
  - (5) What tool led to Europe's transcendent power around 1700?
  - (6) Were the poor better off as a result of the industrial changes and great wealth of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century? List and analyze the evidence used to support that position.
  - (7) How has power and economic opportunity been spread in Western countries?
  - (8) Gordon writes, "The faith of the Western world in the soundness of its civilization died in the trenches of the western front." What has been the result? To what extent is that a good/bad thing?
  - (9) What idea is the core of Western thought? How did this concept develop in England?
  - (10) How did the ideas of Marx contradict those of Western thought? How and why did those ideas fail in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?
  - (11) Why is it that the ideals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—individualism, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and capitalism—are superior to the ideals of Marxism?
  - (12) What are the four lessons of the Great War? To what extent did the world really learn those lessons?
  - (13) What do you think would have happened if World War I had not been fought when it was?
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*Many ingenious lovely things are gone  
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude...  
—W. B. Yeats*

A few years ago I wrote a book called *The Scarlet Woman of Wall Street* about a place and a people that flourished in the nineteenth century: the New York City of the 1860s and 1870s. We might call it Edith Wharton's New York. Mrs. Wharton herself wrote late in her life, in the 1930s, that the metropolis of her youth had been destined to become "as much a vanished city as Atlantis or the lowest level of Schliemann's Troy." To those of us who know the modern metropolis—what we might call Tom Wolfe's New York—that city of only a century ago seems today as far away and nearly as exotic as Marco Polo's Cathay.

What happened to Edith Wharton's world? Why does the society our grandparents and great-grandparents lived in seem so very much a foreign country to us today?

To be sure, Edith Wharton's New York was a still-provincial city of horses and gas lamps, Knickerbockers and Irishmen, brownstones and church steeples. Its population was characterized by a few people in top hats and a great many people in rags, for in the 1860s grinding poverty was still thought the fate of the majority of the human race.

In contrast, Tom Wolfe's New York—far and away the most cosmopolitan place on earth—is a city of subways and neon, Korean grocers and Pakistani news dealers, apartments and skyscrapers. If poverty has hardly been expunged, the percentage of the city's population living in want has greatly diminished even while society's idea of what constitutes the basic minimums of a decent life has greatly expanded.

It was constant, incremental change that brought about these differences, a phenomenon found in most societies and all industrial ones. Indeed, one of the pleasures of growing old in such a society, perhaps, is that we come to remember personally—just as Edith Wharton did—a world that has slipped out of existence.

But this sort of change comes slowly and is recognized only in retrospect. As the novelist Andrew Holleran explained, "No one grows old in a single day." Rather, something far more profound than incremental change separates us from Edith Wharton's world, and we look at that world now across what a mathematician might call a discontinuity in the stream of time.

Only rarely in the course of history does such a discontinuity occur and turn a world upside down overnight. When it does happen, it is usually as the result of some unforeseeable cataclysm, such as the volcanic explosion that destroyed Minoan

civilization on the island of Crete about 1500 B.C., or the sudden arrival of the conquistadors in the New World three thousand years later.

Edith Wharton's world suffered just such a calamity. The diplomat and historian George Kennan called it "the seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century": the First World War.

Certainly that war's influence on subsequent world events could hardly have been more pervasive. Had there been no First World War, there would, of course, have been no Second, and that is not just playing with numbers, for in geopolitical terms the two wars were really one with a twenty-year truce in the middle.

But for the First World War, the sun might still shine brightly on the British Empire. But for the war, there would have been no Bolshevik coup and thus no Soviet state. But for the war, there would have been no Nazis and thus no genocide of the Jews. And, of course, most of us never would have been born.

Far more important, however, than its effect upon the fate of great nations, and on our own individual existence, was the First World War's influence on the way that we heirs of Edith Wharton came to question, and for a while even to dismiss, many of the basic values of the culture she lived in. Because of the war, the word *Victorian* became a term of opprobrium that extended far beyond the ebb and flow of fashion.

The reason for this is simply that the First World War, more than any other in history, was psychologically debilitating, both for the vanquished and for the victors. Indeed, there really was no victory. No premeditated policy of conquest or revenge brought the war about—although both those aims had clouded the politics of Europe for years. Therefore, no aims, beyond national survival, were achieved.

Indeed, relations among the Great Powers of Europe were better in the early summer of 1914 than they had been for some time. The British and Germans had recently agreed about the Berlin to Baghdad railway and a future division between them of Portugal's colonies. Even the French, still bitter over their ignominious defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871, were moving to improve relations with Germany, a move that Germany welcomed.

Rather, the war came about because a lunatic murdered a man of feathers and uniforms who had no real importance whatsoever. The politicians, seeking to take advantage of circumstances—as politicians are paid to do—had then miscalculated in their blustering and posturing.

The mobilization of an army when railroads were the only means of mass transportation was a very complex undertaking, one that had to be planned in advance down to the smallest detail. Once a mobilization plan was implemented, it could not be stopped without throwing a country's military into chaos, rendering it largely defenseless. Russia, seeking only to threaten Austria and thus prevent its using the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand to stir up trouble in the Balkans, discovered that it could not move just against Austria. It was general mobilization or nothing. Russia chose to mobilize.

*...walked eye-deep in hell  
believing in old men's lies...  
—Ezra Pound*

At that point the statesmen realized that the war they had threatened so freely—but which no one, in fact, had wanted at all—had now, suddenly, become inescapable. A fearful, inexorable logic had taken decisions out of human hands.

Once it began, the generals found they had no tactical concepts to deal with the new military realities that confronted them. It had been forty-three years since Great Powers had fought each other in Europe. In those four decades the instruments of war had undergone an unparalleled evolution, and their destructive power had increased by several orders of magnitude.

Railroads, machine guns, and barbed wire made an entrenched defense invulnerable. Stalemate—bloody, endless, gloryless stalemate—resulted. For lack of any better ideas, the generals flung greater and greater numbers of men into the mouths of these machine guns and gained at best mere yards of territory thereby.

In the first day—day!—of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, Great Britain suffered twenty thousand men killed. That was the bloodiest day in the British army's long history. Altogether there were more than a million casualties in this one battle alone. An entire generation was lost in the slaughter of the Somme and other similar battles.

This almost unimaginable destruction of human life, to no purpose whatsoever, struck at the very vitals of Western society. For this reason alone, among the casualties of the First World War were not only the millions of soldiers who had died for nothing, most of the royalty of Europe, and treasure beyond reckoning but nearly all the fundamental philosophical and cultural assumptions of the civilization that had suffered this self-induced catastrophe.

For there was one thing that was immediately clear to all about the Great War—as the generation who fought it called it—and that was that this awful tragedy was a human and wholly local phenomenon. There was no volcano, no wrathful God, no horde of barbarians out of the East. Western culture had done this to itself. Because of the war, it seemed to many a matter of inescapable logic that Western culture must be deeply, inherently flawed.

In four years of blood and smoke and flame, the world of Edith Wharton became the world of W. H. Auden; the Age of Innocence, the Age of Anxiety.

For us, who can see the tragedy that was looming up in what was for them the future, and thus, for them, impenetrable, many of the cultural assumptions of Edith Wharton's world smack of the hubris that is the inevitable progenitor of tragedy. But hubris, like the winner in a horse race, can be much more easily discerned in retrospect. And people cannot live—or, for that matter, bet on horses—in retrospect.

Given their vantage point in history, the inhabitants of Edith Wharton's world had every good reason for their attitudes. Their civilization had, after all, entirely remade the world in the preceding two hundred years.

Consider the facts:

In the year 1700 there had been little to distinguish European culture in terms of power, wealth, and creativity from the other great civilizations on earth. The Ottoman Turks had conquered most of the Muslim world and much of Europe itself in the previous two centuries. The Turkish army had besieged Vienna as recently as 1683.

The Mogul emperor of India, whose father had built the incomparable Taj Mahal, sat on the Peacock Throne, ruling over an empire of a million square miles, and lived in a splendor unmatched even by the Versailles of Louis XIV.

*“...Must you march forever from France and the last, blind war?”*

*“Fool! From the next!” they said.*

*—Stephen Vincent Benét*

The Chinese Empire was the largest and perhaps the most cultured on earth. It was also the most industrially advanced, running a strong trade surplus with Europe.

But by the year 1700 Europe had already invented a cultural tool of transcendent power called the scientific method. In the eighteenth century this tool was applied to an ever-widening area of inquiry with beneficial results in fields as diverse as agriculture, cloth manufacture, and metalworking. By the close of that century, Europe was clearly the dominant power center of the world and was projecting that power commercially, militarily, and politically over a wider and wider area.

And in 1782 James Watt perfected the rotary steam engine. The Industrial Revolution was under way.

A hundred years later still, at the end of the nineteenth century, any comparison between the West and other cultures bordered on the meaningless, so great had the gap in power and wealth grown. Westerners had projected that power over the entire globe and created the modern world, a world they utterly dominated. The Western people of that world took for granted what seemed to them the manifest superiority of Western technology, governance, and even religion over all others.

To better understand the predominant attitudes of the West before the First World War, consider what it accomplished in the nineteenth century as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Quite simply, the quality of life was miraculously transformed. Indoor plumbing, central heating, brilliant interior lighting, abundant clothing, and myriad inexpensive industrial products from wallpaper to iceboxes gave the middle and upper classes a standard of living undreamed of a century earlier by even the richest members of society.

In 1800 it had required a month to cross the Atlantic in a damp, crowded, and pitching ship. In 1900 vast and luxurious liners made the crossing in a week. Information that once had been limited to the speed of human travel could now circle the entire globe in minutes by telephone, telegraph, and undersea cable.

In the 1830s the lights and shadows of an instant were captured by photography. In the 1870s Edison's phonograph imprisoned sound. To the Victorians it was as though time itself had been tamed.

Newspapers, books, and magazines proliferated by the thousands so that information and entertainment could be quickly and cheaply obtained. Free public libraries spread to nearly every city in the Western world. Andrew Carnegie alone paid for nearly five thousand of them in the United States and Britain.

Physics, chemistry, geology, and biology penetrated farther into the fathomless heart of nature than anyone had thought possible a hundred years earlier. Even the mighty Newton's model of the universe was found to be less than wholly universal when Einstein published his Special Theory of Relativity in 1905.

As the new century began engineers showed the world with the Crystal Palace in London how to enclose vast spaces, with the Brooklyn Bridge in New York how to span great distances, with the Eiffel Tower in Paris how to scale great heights. The automobile, the airplane, the movies, and wireless communication promised still more wonders.

Ever more important than the technological and scientific advances of the age, however, were the economic and political ones.

The nineteenth century is usually perceived as one in which great industrial and commercial fortunes were created in the midst—even because of—the grinding poverty of the masses. This is largely a misperception. To be sure, the absolute number of people living in poverty in the Western world greatly increased in the nineteenth century, but only because the population as a whole greatly increased. Moreover, the movement of workers from agriculture to industry concentrated the poor in highly visible urban areas. But their forebears had been no less poor. The ancestors of those who lived in the unspeakable urban hovels of Dickens's England had inhabited the equally unspeakable rural hovels of Fielding's England. Meanwhile, the percentage of the population living in poverty declined.

In 1800 perhaps 85 percent of the population of Britain—then the richest and most advanced of Western nations—lived in or very near poverty, where 85 percent of the human population had always lived. These people had to work as hard as they could just to get enough to eat and obtain shelter and clothes. They stored up a little in good years, perhaps, in order to survive the bad ones. But luxuries, and even a formal education for their children, were out of the question. For millions, only rum, gin, and other spirits in staggering quantities—often quite literally in staggering quantities—made life endurable.

But by 1900 less than 30 percent of the British population was still at that economic level, and most of the children were receiving at least the rudiments of an education and therefore the hope of a better life. Meanwhile, the per capita consumption of alcohol had fallen sharply. While no one in 1900 thought that 30 percent of the population living in poverty was acceptable, parents and grandparents were there to tell them how far they had come.

In 1800 less than five percent of the British population was allowed to vote for those who represented them in Parliament, and real political power resided in fewer than two thousand families. By 1900 universal male suffrage was taken for granted and women were on the march for equal rights. Democracy, beginning to develop only in the new United States in 1800, was by 1900 the birthright of millions in both the old and new worlds.

In two hundred years Western civilization had made itself rich and powerful and learned while the rest of mankind remained poor, and therefore weak and ignorant. Political and economic power in the West had ceased to be the exclusive possession of a narrow upper class and had spread widely to other levels of society, promoting social stability by giving everyone both a stake in society's institutions and the power to affect those institutions.

It was this dispersal of economic and political power that guaranteed that no one person or segment of society could become too powerful and threaten the rights or the prosperity of others. When heavy industry, in pursuit of economies of scale, conglomerated in the late nineteenth century into huge concerns of unprecedented financial and economic power, many Americans believed they threatened a plutocracy. So society moved to check the potential abuse of power with antimonopoly legislation, such as the Sherman Antitrust Act, and to channel that power into productive, not hegemonic, purposes. This may have been a violent and wrenching process; nevertheless, it happened.

Who can blame the people who accomplished all this for feeling good about themselves? Would we, or anyone, have been any wiser or more humble?

Because of this fantastic record of progress, the people of Edith Wharton's world believed in the inevitability of further progress and the certainty that science would triumph. They believed in the ever-widening spread of democracy and the rule of law. They believed in the adequacy of the present and the bright promise of the future. To be sure, they fought ferociously over the details of how to proceed, but they had no doubt whatever that the basic principles that guided their society were correct.

Then, all at once, the shots rang out in Sarajevo, the politicians bungled, the armies marched, the poppies began to blow between the crosses row on row. The faith of the Western world in the soundness of its civilization died in the trenches of the western front.

Seventy-five years later, richer, more powerful, more learned than ever, the West still struggles to pick up the psychological pieces, to regain its poise, to find again the self-confidence that in the nineteenth century it took entirely for granted.

If the Great War was the result not of deliberate policy but of ghastly accident, we now know it was an accident waiting to happen. Still, like most accidents, it resulted from the concatenation of separate chances, each unlikely. Indeed, it can be reasonably argued that the calamity might well never have come to pass at all if only the imperial throne of Germany had been occupied by someone other than that supreme jerk Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Although highly intelligent, he had been burdened from the start with a withered left arm caused by a difficult and medically mishandled birth. Far worse, Wilhelm had been largely raised by pedantic tutors and sycophantic military aides, for his mother was more interested in Prussian politics than in her children's upbringing.

The result was that an undisciplined, impulsive, deeply insecure neurotic inherited the throne of the greatest military power in Europe. Worse, the constitution of the German Empire gave him a very large measure of control over foreign and military policy.

The consequence was disaster for Germany and the world. And in complex societies, just as in simple ones, when disaster strikes, "the king must die." And not just Wilhelm (who spent the last twenty years of his life in exile). The entire pre-war establishment was everywhere blamed for this purposeless, victorless war. The mainstream politicians who had failed to prevent it, the businessmen who had profited from it, the scientists and engineers who had created its lethal technology—all those, in fact, who had constituted the nexus of power in Edith Wharton's world suffered a grievous loss of prestige.

Those who had been only on the margins of power and influence in the nineteenth century—the Cassandras who are present in all societies, the philosophers, the artists (in short, the intellectuals)—saw their opportunities and seized them. To use Theodore Roosevelt's famous metaphor, power began to move from the players in the arena to the observers in the seats.

In the relatively peaceful 1880s, Gilbert and Sullivan in *The Mikado* had put on the Lord High Executioner's little list of social expendables "the idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone./All centuries but this, and every country but his own." After the First World War people listened eagerly to just such philosophers, many of whom thought that only a radical restructuring of Western society and its economic system could prevent a recurrence of the calamity. Not surprisingly, the philosophers had no lack of prescriptions for how to accomplish this and no doubt whatever as to just who should be put in charge of the project. Although many of these ideas turned out to be in Winston Churchill's phrase, "so stupid that only an intellectual could have conceived" them, people were ready to give them a try.

We must now look, briefly, at the philosophical baby that so many intellectuals were ready to toss out with the bath water of war.

At the core of Western thought lies the concept of the importance of the individual human being. It is a uniquely Western idea, with its origins in ancient Israel and Greece (a civilization where the gods themselves were made of all-too-human clay). Later the concept was continued and elaborated on by such Christian philosophers as Augustine, Jerome, and Thomas Aquinas.

In medieval England, safe from foreign invasion behind its watery walls, the emphasis on the importance of the individual resulted in the flowering of the concept of liberty, both political and economic. Individuals, thought the English, were born with rights no one, not even kings, could take away, for the king, like his subjects, was bound by the law. This idea—that the majesty of the law was separate and distinct from the king's own majesty—is today encapsulated in the phrase *the rule of law*. It is one of the most important of Western concepts, for without it the Western achievements of the nineteenth century would not have been possible.

The American Revolution and the economic dominance of Britain in the nineteenth century caused liberty's children—capitalism and democracy—to spread widely through the Western world. The increasing acceptance during the nineteenth century of the individual's right, within an ordered society, to pursue his own concept of happiness—in other words, his self-interest—had, to be sure, many consequences, some of them unpleasant. The Victorians, however, were prepared to accept these consequences. They reasoned that because human beings are social creatures, the betterment of society was, in fact, in almost everyone's self-interest. The people of Edith Wharton's world likewise believed that most of the attributes of their society resulted from the interaction of history with human nature, and that human nature, with all its faults, was a given.

The Victorians certainly thought that mankind could get ever better and ever wiser, and in support of this idea they pointed to their own century as Exhibit A. But they equally believed that the perfection of mankind could come only with the arrival of what Christians call the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Until then, they thought, they would just have to make do with what they had.

But Karl Marx reversed this equation. He maintained that human nature was only a result of the society in which people lived. Change society, thought Marx, and you change human nature. Perfect society, and you perfect mankind. To Marx and the "social engineers" who followed him, the intellectual, not the grace of God, would be the redeemer of the human race.

Marx was the quintessential intellectual, remarkably detached from the real world. Although he dedicated his formidable mind to the betterment of the new industrial working class, he knew of that class only what he read in the library of the British Museum. Not once in his life did Marx ever set foot in a factory. Consequently, at the time of his death, in 1883, his grand vision stood no more chance of adoption by the real world than had Sir Thomas More's Utopia three hundred and fifty years earlier.

Further, Marx, deeply influenced by Thomas Malthus's and David Ricardo's gloomy (and erroneous) ideas, made a classic intellectual mistake. He looked at the social and economic universe around him—the early stages of the Industrial Revolution—and assumed that the conditions he saw were permanent and the trends of that era would continue indefinitely. But, of course, trends hardly ever continue indefinitely.

In fact they were rapidly evolving, as they continue to do today. But the followers of Marx regarded his theories about society and economics as the equal of Newton's theory in physics: the universal explainer of all observed phenomena.

And while Marx was only an intellectual, his greatest intellectual successor, Lenin, was much more. Lenin was a political genius. Thanks to the opportunities arising out of the First World War, he was able to seize control of a great nation and proclaim a Marxist dawn for mankind. It was to be a new day in which the perfection of society was the only goal and in which the individual pursuit of happiness, or even the right to hold a contrary opinion, had no place whatever. In the first two years of Lenin's rule, fifty thousand of his political opponents were executed.

In shattered Germany, meanwhile, an already neurotic society slid toward psychosis. United only in 1871, Germany had been a latecomer to the world of Great Power politics and was "born encircled" by the other Great Powers. Lacking a vast colonial empire and a long national history, Germany depended on its economic and military might for its prestige, until its one unquestioned superiority—its incomparable army—was nonetheless defeated.

*...And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate...*  
—W. H. Auden

The draconian, score-settling peace imposed on Germany at the Versailles Conference worsened matters considerably. So did the hyperinflation of the early 1920s, which wiped out whatever economic security middle-class Germans had managed to hang on to. In their humiliation the German people felt a desperate need for scapegoats, and Hitler stood ready to supply Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, and others to fill that need—in exchange, of course, for total power. Many other countries, including Spain and Italy, also adopted fascism, as these disparate movements were collectively called. Even countries with firm democratic foundations felt the effects of this intellectual assault upon the nineteenth-century world view. Britain and France elected their first socialist governments in 1924, and both had active fascist movements.

The Second World War destroyed fascism as a political doctrine but greatly strengthened the Soviet Union, which sought to export its system to areas occupied by the Red Army and to countries in the so-called Third World. Meanwhile, the democratic left, especially in Western Europe and Britain, but increasingly in the United States as well, sought to replace the old economic and social order with systems of their devising that they genuinely believed would be fairer and more peaceful and more prosperous. In pursuit of these worthy goals, these systems tended to concentrate power, rather than disperse it as the nineteenth century had done. And democratically elected leaders—just like their totalitarian counterparts—often assumed that human nature was only clay to be molded in a noble cause.

But human nature has proved recalcitrant. The nineteenth century, it turns out, had it right to start with. The evidence has been piling up through most of the twentieth century, and it is now overwhelming that people act not as Karl Marx and Lenin thought they would but as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill predicted.

People pursue their self-interests, perceiving those interests to be bound up with themselves, their families—especially their children—and their society as a whole. Class divisions within a society, by which Marxists seek to explain the human universe, are an intellectual construct, with no real-world analogue. Many of the programs advocated by the social engineers, therefore, failed altogether or had vast, wicked, and entirely unanticipated consequences.

Of all the inventions of the nineteenth century, capitalism and representative democracy turned out to be the greatest. To be sure, they are intellectually untidy—often very untidy indeed: just ask Charles Keating, the Reverend Al Sharpton, or the latest congressman under indictment. Nonetheless, they work, for they are consonant with human nature. As Churchill explained, "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." He could have made the same point about capitalism.

Capitalism made the West rich in the nineteenth century, and that wealth was spread ever more widely through society as the century went on. All the alternatives pursued in the twentieth have led only to poverty.

Democracy increasingly empowered the ordinary people in the nineteenth century as literacy, newspapers, and the franchise spread to every level. All the modern alternatives have resulted only in tyrannies far worse than any known to the world of Edith Wharton.

After decades of experiments brought on by the First World War, it is clear that what maximizes human happiness is ordered liberty—the idea that individuals should be free to pursue their political and economic selfinterests under the rule of law and within the limits set by a democratic society. During the last decade, as the promises of systems that concentrated power rather than dispersed it collapsed, country after country has moved toward economic and political liberty. Today even the citadel of totalitarianism, the Kremlin itself, has fallen to the essential force of these nineteenth-century ideas.

The nineteenth century even knew the reason why these ideas were so forceful, and indeed, one of the century's greatest political philosophers expressed it as dictum. "Power tends to corrupt," Lord Acton wrote in 1887, "and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Perhaps the cruelest legacy of the First World War is that we have required seventy-five years and untold human pain to learn this truth all over again.

All this is not to say that there was nothing to be learned from the First World War and its terrible consequences, that it was all just a ghastly aberration. I think that we heirs of Edith Wharton have learned at least four vital lessons from the catastrophe.

Before the war Westerners believed not only in the superiority of Western culture but in the innate superiority of the white race over what many, twisting Kipling's meaning, referred to as those "lesser breeds without the Law." Today no one but the hopeless bigot believes that those who could inflict the Battle of Verdun upon themselves are a special creation or the sole repository of human genius. The Great War taught us that all human beings are equally human: equally frail and equally sublime.

The second lesson of the First World War was to hammer home over and over the truth first uttered by William Tecumseh Sherman thirty-five years earlier. "I am tired and sick of war," the great general said in 1879. "Its glory is all moonshine.... War is hell." At 11:00 A.M., on November 11, 1918, as the guns fell silent after fifty-one months and 8,538,315 military deaths, there was hardly a soul on earth who would have disagreed with him. Nor are there many today. If wars have been fought since, they have been fought by people who suffered few illusions about war's glory.

The third lesson is that in a technological age, war between the Great Powers cannot be won in anything but a Pyrrhic sense. In the stark phraseology of the accountant, war is no longer even remotely cost-effective.

*There has been joy. There will be joy again.*  
—Alfred Bester

The final lesson is that it is very easy in a technological age for war to become inevitable. The speed with which war is fought has increased manyfold since the Industrial Revolution began. In 1914 the Austrians, the Russians, and the German kaiser rattled one too many sabers, and suddenly, much to their surprise, the lights began to go out all over Europe. This all too vividly demonstrated fact has induced considerable caution in the world's statesmen ever since—if not, alas, in its madmen.

Bearing this in mind, there is one aspect of the First World War for which we might be grateful: If it had to be fought, it was well that it was fought when it was. We learned the lessons of total war in a technological age less than forty years before we developed the capacity to destroy ourselves utterly with this technology. Had the political situation that led to the Great War coincided with the technological possibilities that produced the hydrogen bomb, it is improbable that there would have been a Tom Wolfe's New York—or even any New Yorkers to look back and wonder what happened to Edith Wharton's.

Rather, the great metropolis, a city humming with human life and human genius, would instead be but one more pile of rubble on a vast and desolate plain, poisoned for centuries. If we have truly learned this final lesson, and we must pray that we have, then those millions who lie today in Flanders fields did not die in vain.