



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on September 30, 2012

Bismarck's Blood and Iron Speech 150 Years Later

One hundred and fifty years ago, on September 30, 1862, Otto von Bismarck gave his famous "Blut und Eisen" ("Blood and Iron") speech before the Landtag, the Prussian legislature. In his speech, Bismarck claimed that the international policy of a modern state is built upon the willingness to fight — "Blut" (blood) — and the willingness to spend vast amounts of public treasure in creating giant armies — "Eisen" (iron).



"The great questions of the time will not be resolved by speeches and majority decisions ... but by iron and blood," the minister president of the Kingdom of Prussia said. Nine years later — after the expenditure of plenty of blood and iron — Bismarck became the first chancellor of the new German Empire.

Less than two years after the speech, in 1864, Bismarck maneuvered Prussia and Austria into fighting an aggressive war against Denmark. The war was quickly won by the two larger nations, both of which gained additional territory.

In 1866 Bismarck instigated an aggressive war by Prussia against its erstwhile ally Austria, which was defeated in a mere seven weeks. Bismarck's terms drove Austrian influence out of northern Germany, leaving Prussia with effective hegemony.

In 1871 Bismarck tricked France into a war against Prussia that resulted in a crushing Prussian victory and the addition of all the smaller German states around the Rhine into the new German Empire. This empire included a large number of smaller German states that had been quite happy to remain independent but that felt pressured and helpless after the collapse of France.

The series of wars did not happen by accident. They were part of Bismarck's calculated plan of power politics, aggression, and annexation. The *realpolitik* Bismarck defined in his famous "Blood and Iron" nine years earlier had given birth to the German Empire.

What Bismarck successfully advocated in Prussia was the opposite of what Americans wanted from their government. George Washington had counseled against "entangling alliance" and the early U.S. Congresses were loath to appropriate more than was clearly essential for America's defense.

A state policy of huge armies and an aggressive attitude toward neighbors threatens liberty and morality in different ways. First, of course, a nation engaged in an arms race like Bismarck's Prussia can not only plot wars but can also stumble into wars, as was the case in the First World War.

Second, arms races dramatically increase national government spending, so after 1871, the German Empire, France and Britain all increased military spending (reducing the amount of their wealth that taxpayers could keep). It is impossible to have a vast, sprawling military without also having a vast, sprawling government.

Third, reliance upon force rather than consent — upon military power rather than treaties, trade and legal immigration — is no path to long term peace, prosperity, or moral government. Our nation was founded upon the theme that we would be on friendly and peaceful terms with any nation that would be



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on friendly and peaceful terms with us.

When we stray from that path, when we embrace the Machiavellian cynicism of Europe and imagine that empire can create peace and wealth, then we will find that we have neither peace nor prosperity.

Interestingly, about the time of Bismarck's speech and his later planned wars, Americans had discovered in our American Civil War just how ghastly modern war could be. Nothing has changed in the last 150 years.



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