

Bumping Towards War

by Ken Bargewell

World War One began, so I learned as a young boy, because Gavril Princip shot the 'hair' to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Sarajevo. Austria invaded Serbia. Then, because of the 'Duel' Entente and the Triple Alliance, everyone started fighting and they had a big war. Our side, of course, beat everyone!

My ability to spell correctly has improved since that time and I've also learnt the meaning of the word 'Entente'. However, sixty years of historical research and hindsight does not seem to have invalidated the schoolboy analysis above or suggest that it is less accurate than any other version of the origins of World War One.

It would be more comforting to think that the 'Great War' came about because of great upheavals in intellectual thought or because of enormous and unstoppable forces of economics and technological change. Even competing nationalism provides more solace as an excuse for war. Princip's Serbian nationalism is offered, along with much else, to support this thesis.

It simply disturbs us that a few shots here or a little bomb there can propel great nations and vast armies into conflict. There will always be governments eager for military solutions and individuals, like Princip, willing to make their point by putting holes in other people's heads.

It disturbs because we know that the scenario that existed pre-World War One bears considerable similarity to today's geopolitical realities. We have replaced the Dual Entente and the Triple Alliance with NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The competition to build 'Dreadnoughts' has been replaced by the competition to build nuclear weapons which may leave 'nought' to dread.

But, let's relax. War won't start by accident these days. We're much more sophisticated. Just look at how much razor blades have changed since 1914! Sophisticated nations don't start wars by accident. This is comforting thought until we read almost any newspaper on almost any day of the year.

Recently, for example, the press carried reports concerning American and Russian warships in the Black Sea. Many reports referred to Russian frigates 'bumping' the USS. Yorkton rather like a Chev fenderbender by a Lada. The incident has already become a footnote in history probably not even worthy of mention in the next edition of Trivial Pursuit.

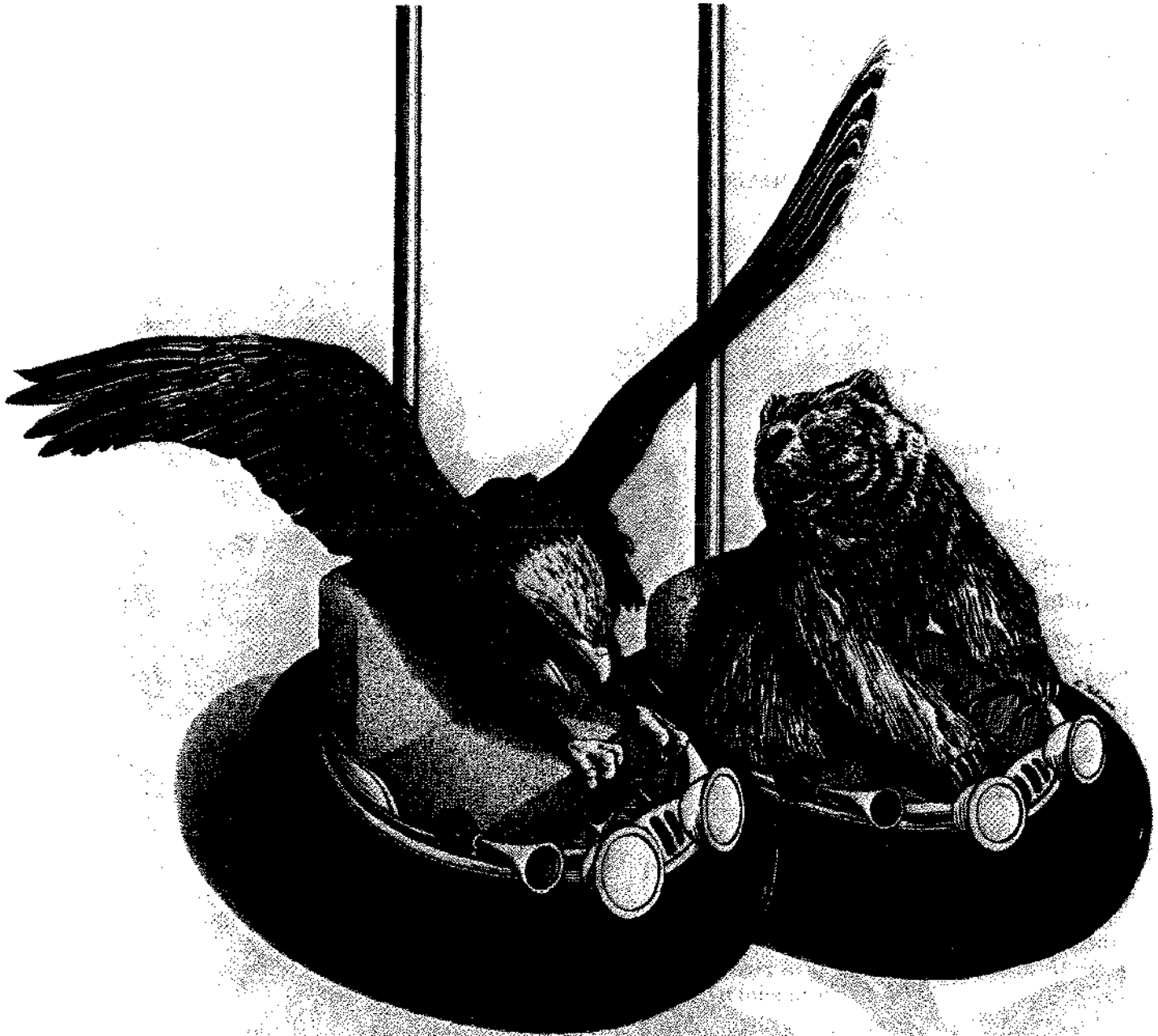
However, I was raised close to the sea and know that when two ships hit each other it is certainly no fenderbender. There is a roar of thousands of tons of steel grinding against steel. There is the inertia of great objects whose course, like nations, is not quickly changed. It is a dangerous situation for the sailors and for us all. The USS. Yorkton, it should be noted, is not like those bathtubs that race in B.C. It is one of the most advanced warships in the U.S. navy.

There have been many such incidents of the armed forces of great powers playing contact sports. Aircraft intruding on others' airspace, border clashes, tests of marine territorial limits. These incidents fade away because they did not ignite a general conflagration.

Bump! This time it is the USS. Wharton playing water games with Russian ships.

Duck! U.S. helicopters 'avoid' Iranian gunfire in the Persian Gulf.

The incidents continue daily, perhaps to be augmented *in* the future with Canadian nuclear



Illustration; Elise Johnson

submarines rubbing noses with Russian submarines under the Arctic ice.

Sixty years hence a schoolboy is sitting at his word processor. He is trying to rehash his teacher's explanation of the origins of World War Three. He doesn't worry about spelling, the computer raises care of that. He assembles the words "In 199- World War Three began when—"

The name of the place means little to him, the individuals even less. It is important, however, that he know these facts. How else can he score well on his test?

Incidentally, "Which country is Serbia now part of?" is in Trivial Pursuit. Ponder the answer carefully. The original resolution of the question cost millions of lives.