

**A Handful of Bullets: How  
the Murder of Archduke  
Franz Ferdinand Still  
Menaces the Peace**

By Harlan K. Ullman  
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**REVIEWED BY HANS BINNENDIJK**

**T**here is a small plaque on a street corner in Sarajevo that commemorates the spot where Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his pregnant wife Sophie were assassinated a century ago. It is surprisingly small given the world shaking events sparked there. The villain was Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip whose handful of bullets empowered him and fundamentally changed the course of history. Harlan Ullman's

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book just touches on the chain of events that led from a wrong turn taken by Franz Ferdinand's driver to the First World War. Interpretations of that chain of events range from entangling alliances to German war plans driven by railroad timetables to officials in various European capitals miscalculating risk and sleeping walking their way into conflict.

If you want to better understand why the First World War started, read Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* or Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. But if you want to understand these events in a much broader historical and global context, read Ullman's volume. After digesting Ullman's book, that street corner plaque seems even smaller than before.

*A Handful of Bullets* ranges over two centuries and multiple disciplines to lay out keen perspectives on a vast number of past incidents and current issues. One reviewer opined that if presidential candidates for 2016 had but one book to read, "it is this one." The book's thought provoking analysis and recommendations are presented by a Fletcher School PhD and Vietnam veteran who has spent a half century serving the nation, accumulating wisdom, and advising a bipartisan list of top American policy-makers such as Colin Powell, John Kerry, John McCain and Chuck Hagel. So his assessments are worth heeding.

Ullman is able to hold together the broad scope of material that he covers by adopting two useful constructs. First, he argues that the assassination a century ago was the key inflection point in two centuries of history. And second, he argues that it triggered a process that has led to what he calls the Four New Horsemen of the Apocalypse, an updated version of the biblical four horsemen (conquest,

warfare, pestilence, and death; each flowing from the former).

The Congress of Vienna reordered the world after Napoleon's defeat and reinforced the state-based international system established in 1648 by the Peace of Westphalia. It also strengthened the hold of hereditary rulers and stabilized European affairs until Princes struck. Several European wars did take place between 1815 and 1914, but they were not World Wars. During the first half of this century-long period until the Crimean War, stability rested on Britain as a balancer of power. During the second half, it rested on a flexible alliance system established by Bismarck. That system became more rigid and dangerous after Bismarck retired. Ullman argues convincingly that Princes' handful of bullets destroyed the increasingly fragile stability of the Congress of Vienna system and weakened the state-centric Westphalian system.

The Four New Horsemen according to Ullman are: failed governments, economic disparity and disruption, ideological and religious extremism, and environmental calamity. He argues that these four sets of fundamental problems also build one upon another, and that if left unchecked they will cause massive disruption around the globe. Ullman might have spent more time connecting these Four New Horsemen back to the events of June 1914. But he clearly demonstrates that a degree of globalization existed in 1914 and that the dangers inherent in these four new horsemen have accelerated as globalization has intensified during the past few decades. Those dangers were also exacerbated by the most recent inflection point, the 9/11 attacks and America's subsequent Global War on Terrorism. He notes that the 9/11 attackers had much in common with Princes. They were armed with box cutters

rather than a handful of bullets, but the reaction or over-reaction to their evil deeds fundamentally changed stability in the international system.

Failed or failing government ranks at the top of the list of dangerous horsemen. While Ullman addresses failing government around the globe, he concentrates on the United States and the Middle East. Noting the presence of failed government in the United States before, notably the Civil War, he concludes that the Vietnam War “began the disintegration of American politics and the dissolution of public belief in the credibility and honesty of government.” As this disintegration spread, he argues that right and left wings increasingly came to dominate the two political parties, and middle of the roaders are increasingly vulnerable to being “primary’ed.” He makes several fairly radical but perhaps needed recommendations to deal with failed government in the United States, including mandatory universal voting to assure that the political center votes, abolishing the two-term limit for Presidents, and a four year term for Congressmen. With regard to America’s overseas activity, he concludes that using military force to offset failing government “mandates the toughest scrutiny.”

Ullman’s second horseman is economic despair, disparity, and disruption. He uses the example of the Tunisian fruit vendor whose self-immolation triggered the Arab Spring as a portent of a potential new Malthusian age. In grappling with what he calls economic ticking time bombs, Ullman dissects the buildup and impact the 2007-2008 American financial crisis in a clear and concise manner. Buy the book just to read Chapter 5 on this topic. His most interesting recommendation to deal with this cluster of economic problems is the creation

of a national infrastructure bank in the United States, where the report card gives the world’s largest economy a grade of D.

Ideological and religious extremism tends to flow from economic despair. Historically, Ullman recalls the crusades and Nazism as precursors to the Sunni and Shia extremism of today. But in this biting analysis, he does not spare extremism in the United States with its debates over “guns, gays, God, and gestation periods.” Ullman argues that in dealing with religious fanaticism in the Middle East, the United States has mistakenly focused on symptoms not causes. He urges an offensive communications strategy designed to discredit and impeach religious extremism and hopes for an Islamic Martin Luther to reform that faith.

Rounding out this dangerous quartet, Ullman reviews a staggering list of natural and manmade disasters and demonstrates the devastating impact that they can have on global society. He concentrates on global warming as potentially the most devastating and suggests a series of U.S. bilateral executive agreements with major polluters to deal with environmental issues. The Obama administration seems to already have taken his advice with regard to China.

Interspersed with these four underlying trends, Ullman also assesses regional ticking time bombs, wildcards, the state of America’s military establishment and American grand strategy. In his regional round-up, Ullman views a potential military attack on Iran’s nuclear weapons capacity as potentially “catastrophic.” He believes that another military coup in Pakistan is “not out of the question.” And he assesses that China has far too many internal problems to solve and is not a state bent on hegemonic ambitions.

Appendix one of the book contains a public letter to the Secretary of Defense that Ashton Carter might want to read. Ullman lists the Defense Department's three crisis areas as people, strategy and money. He provides advice on all three in turn. He would cut spending on personnel benefits, reinstitute a partial draft, modify the Army's force structure, reduce the Navy's dependency on nuclear propulsion and reform the Unified Command Plan. He offers a more analytical approach to grand strategy which he calls a "brains based approach." And he suggests an array of ways in which America's European Allies might enhance their defense capabilities and share a greater portion of America's global defense burden.

*A Handful of Bullets* is sweeping and allows the author to comment on the major issues of our time. His critique is often withering and his recommendations call for fundamental change that will be difficult to implement. But if Ullman is right about the cumulative impact of his Four New Horsemen of the Apocalypse, such fundamental reforms may be needed.

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