

Crusades and You

Every five years or so, the United States has a major societal-wide crusade. Sometimes there's a shocking event. Other times, there's an ongoing evil. Either way, all Americans are supposed to join forces and take decisive action to win the crusade. And even if you can't personally do anything, you're supposed to get very angry.

You're supposed to be very angry about the problem.

You're supposed to be very angry about anyone who stands between us and victory.

You're supposed to angrily support our crusaders.

And you're supposed to be very angry about people who aren't very angry.

Here is a list of all the full-blown crusades I personally recall, in chronological order. Yes, there's a line-drawing problem, so if you think I've missed one, please share in the comments.

1. Islamist Iran. When Iranian students took American embassy workers hostage, even kids under ten were angry. Something had to be done! When the hostage rescue mission failed, my parents broke their "no TV at dinner rule" because they *needed* to know what had happened. A popular t-shirt actually read, "Vote Yes for Lake Iran."

2. The War on Drugs. Beginning in the 70s and throughout the 80s, my schools were covered in anti-drug propaganda. So were billboards all over LA. Everyone was supposed to be vigilantly searching for drug dealers offering free samples of hard drugs in suburban elementary schools. My high school hired Dave Toma to preside over an apocalyptic anti-drug revival meeting for the whole school.

3. Free Kuwait. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, American society flipped out again. Back then, I doubt most Americans even knew the difference between Iraq and Iran, but they were still enraged. If you opposed action, the knee-jerk question was, "Well, what do *you* propose to do?!" Even most anti-war activists would glumly respond, "Give sanctions time to work." When I stopped by my old high school, my history teacher had a "Free Kuwait" bumper sticker on his podium.

4. The War on Terror. The aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia never attained crusade status, though the Kosovo War came close. (How many times did I hear contemporary media use the phrase "ethnic Albanian Kosovars"?) 9/11, however, launched the biggest crusade of my lifetime. Flags and stickers and bloodthirsty opinions were everywhere. My dad was visiting me when the U.S. started bombing Afghanistan. My

mom phoned him to let him know the U.S. attack had begun – and he gushed, “It’s about time!”

5. The Iraq War. Almost everyone vocally supported the destruction of the Taliban. The crusade to unseat Saddam Hussein, in contrast, sparked mild domestic resistance – and massive domestic counter-resistance. The Congressional war authorization vote won by more than 2:1. The Dixie Chicks got “cancelled” before being cancelled was a thing.

6. The 2008 Financial Crisis. TARP was controversial, but primarily because so many people wanted to bail out “Main Street *as well as* Wall Street.” Other than Scott Sumner, almost no one wanted to hear about simple technocratic fixes like nominal GDP targeting.

7. COVID. I don’t count opposition to Trump or Brexit as a crusade, because public opinion was always sharply divided. The COVID crusade, in contrast, went from a minor issue in late February 2020 to the end of the world by April. And while it may seem like there’s been “debate,” it is the hysterical consensus that stands out. All 50 states declared a “state of emergency.” And even today, “I’m vaccinated, so I should be exempt from these rules.” remains a heretical position. (Not to be confused with the mainstream position that, “The CDC now says vaccinated people are allowed to do X”).

8. Black Lives Matter. Until George Floyd, this was just one popular issue out of many. Now, almost a year later, I continue to encounter heavy-handed “anti-racist” propaganda and bizarre expiation attempts. The police publicly murder an innocent man, so all of the black characters on *The Simpsons* have to be voiced by black voice actors? “In Derek’s fall, we sinned all.”

When I classify X as a “crusade,” this obviously doesn’t mean that the events that sparked the crusade didn’t happen. Nor does it mean that the events weren’t bad. What it means, rather, is that the public reaction was highly emotional, and hence deeply unreliable. Once a crusade is underway, you can no longer comfortably ask pertinent questions like, “How bad is this event on a 0-10 scale, where 10 is the extinction of humanity?” or “What are the odds that our efforts will make things worse?” or “Are we mistreating bystanders?” And a fundamental principle of Effective Altruism is that you should always ask such questions.

Now I wish I could say that I’ve opposed every single one of these crusades, but that’s not true. Alas, I was an earnest drug warrior as a child. Indeed, I favored summary execution for even the smallest drug offense, which freaked out even some of the adults in my life. (Though I never freaked out an adult enough to make them admit, “Well, drugs are bad, but they’re not summary execution bad.”)

Still, I saw the error of my ways before turning 18. I realized I was dead wrong about the War on Drugs. And I’ve had the sense to spurn each and every subsequent crusade.

Verily, you will not stampede me.

How popular are these crusades really? On reflection, most Americans probably support *all* the crusades unleashed during their adult lives. After the fervor dies down, they may feel occasional regret, but selective amnesia is far more prevalent. And it's hard not to look down on such sheeple. Yet shouldn't we be equally critical of folks like me who oppose every crusade that comes along? You might even quote *Inherit the Wind*, which ends by hinting that cynics are even worse than fanatics:

DRUMMOND [evenly]: I'm getting damned tired of you, Hornbeck.

HORNBECK: Why?

DRUMMOND: You never pushed a noun against a verb except to blow up something.

HORNBECK: That's a typical lawyer's trick: accusing the accuser.

DRUMMOND: What am I accused of?

HORNBECK: I charge you with contempt of conscience! Self-perjury.

Kindness aforethought. Sentimentality in the first degree.

DRUMMOND: Why? Because I refuse to erase a man's lifetime? I tell you Brady had the same right as Cates: the right to be wrong!

My answer: In a world where opinion leaders take Effective Altruism to heart, we should indeed look down on those who stubbornly refuse to support well-vetted, self-aware causes. But since the real world is ruled by hysteria and herding, there is a strong built-in presumption that any crusade popular enough to get off the ground is unworthy of your support. And since most of us (thankfully) only live through a dozen or so crusades per lifetime, you shouldn't be surprised if exactly zero of them surmount that presumption.