

Against Militarism*

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1. Introduction

The theme of this panel is “The Security of the Free Society.” In the United States, security has become synonymous with militarism and an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy. As General Shoup, who was awarded the Medal of Honor in World War II, noted, in the wake of the world wars, “[t]he American people have become more and more accustomed to militarism, to uniforms, to the cult of the gun, and to the violence of combat.”¹ More recently, Andrew Bacevich suggests that “mainstream politicians today take as given that American military supremacy is an unqualified good, evidence of a larger American superiority.” He goes on to indicate that “[o]ne result of that consensus over the past quarter century has been to militarize U.S. policy and to encourage tendencies suggesting that American society itself is increasingly enamored with its self-image as the military power nonpareil.”²

* I thank Bryan Cutsinger for useful comments and feedback.

¹ General David M. Shoup. 1969. “The New American Militarism,” *The Atlantic* 223(4), p. 53.

² Andrew Bacevich. 2005. *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 15.

Issues of national security and intervention have always been a source of tension and disagreement among classical liberals and libertarians. This was evident in the post-9/11, U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq.³ It is also evident in ongoing debates about the best means of dealing with ISIS and a variety of other foreign policy issues.

My argument is that those who call themselves classical liberals and libertarians must proactively engage and combat the dominant militaristic ideology that underpins U.S. foreign policy. My reason is straightforward: militarism is the main channel through which the most dangerous and obnoxious aspects of Leviathan emerge, expand, and infect all areas of domestic life.⁴ In doing so, militarism undermines, if not outright destroys, the very institutions and values that classical liberals and libertarians purport to cherish. Those who support a proactive, interventionist foreign policy are granting significant power to the greatest domestic threat to liberty and freedom—the State—in the name of combatting *potential* external threats. They are also, thereby, making heroic assumptions about the motivations and capabilities of those who hold positions of political power.

Let me provide four reasons for skepticism regarding an aggressive, militaristic foreign policy. Each is based not on first principles, but rather on a careful consideration of the nature of government and how it operates.

³ See, for example, the recent articles by Richard A. Epstein, “The Pax Americana is Dead” (<http://www.hoover.org/research/pax-americana-dead>) and “Rand Paul’s Fatal Pacifism” (<http://www.hoover.org/research/rand-pauls-fatal-pacifism>).

⁴ See Robert Higgs. 1987. *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*. New York: Oxford University Press. Michael Linfield. 1990. *Freedom Under Fire: U.S. Civil Liberties in Times of War*. Boston, MA: South End Press. Bruce D. Porter. 1994. *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics*. New York: The Free Press. Robert Higgs 2004. *Against Leviathan: Government Power and a Free Society*. California: Independent Institute. Robert Higgs. 2007. *Neither Liberty nor Safety: Fear, Ideology, and the Growth of Government*. California: Independent Institute. Christopher J. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall. 2014. “Perfecting Tyranny: Foreign Intervention and the Loss of Liberty at Home,” *The Independent Review* 19(2): 165-189.

2. Against A Militaristic Foreign Policy

2.1 Foreign military interventions increase the fiscal scale of the domestic state

The U.S. government spends a significant amount of resources on military-related activities. Proponents of maintaining the status quo, or even increasing military spending, like to point out that as a percentage of GDP, military spending is in the 4-5% range. This makes it seem as if military spending is relatively small compared to overall economic activity. However, consider an alternative perspective.

Fiscal Year 2015 expenditures on defense-related activities by the U.S. government exceeded \$1 trillion.⁵ Some argue that the U.S. government needs to maintain, or even increase, military spending due to looming threats from China and/or Russia. However, there is little reason to fret when one considers that in 2014 military expenditures by the U.S. government accounted for 34% of the total world military expenditures. To provide context, consider that the government of China, which is second to the U.S. government in military spending, accounted for 12% of the world's military expenditures. The share of military spending by other governments—Russia (4.8%), Saudi Arabia (4.5%), France (3.5%), and the U.K. (3.4%)—is

⁵ This includes (in billions): Department of Defense (DoD) base budget (\$569.3), Overseas Contingency Operations (\$62.4), Department of Energy nuclear programs (\$19.2), “defense-related activities” (\$8.3), additional military retirement costs (\$18.1), DoD Retiree Health Care Fund Costs (\$-4.3), Veterans Benefits and Services (\$160.6), International Affairs (\$62.7), Homeland Security (\$53.3), and the defense-related share of interest on federal debt (\$71.7). Sources: Office of Management and Budget. 2016. *Budget Authority Outlays by Function, Category, and Program*. Washington, DC: Office of Management and Budget. Office of Management and Budget. 2016. *Federal Budget by Agency and Account*. Washington, DC: Office of Management and Budget. Office of Management and Budget. 2016. *Homeland Security Mission Funding by Agency and Budget Account*. Washington, DC: Office of Management and Budget.

minimal compared to the spending by the U.S. government.⁶ Indeed, if the U.S. government cut military spending in *half*, it would still be greater (\$310bn) than that spent by the governments of China and Russia combined (\$300.5bn). The U.S. government spends \$2.82 for every dollar the Chinese government spends on defense and \$7.21 for every dollar spent by the Russian government on defense.

What about the cost of specific interventions? It turns out they are quite costly. According to Linda Bilmes at Harvard University's Kennedy School, "The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, taken together, will be the most expensive wars in US history – totaling somewhere between \$4 and \$6 trillion. This includes long-term medical care and disability compensation for service members, veterans and families, military replenishment and social and economic costs."⁷ She goes on to note that a significant portion of this bill remains outstanding since it entails, among other things, servicing the debt and future medical costs. The Cost of War Project at Brown University places the total cost of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars at \$4.4 trillion for the 2001-2014 period.⁸ There can be no doubt that this will negatively affect the fiscal situation of the United States for decades to come.⁹ Note also that this does not include the current and future operations in Iraq to combat ISIS and future insurgent groups that will surely emerge.

⁶ Source of all figures on global military expenditures: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Trends in world military expenditure, 2014. <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1504.pdf>

⁷ http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/centers-programs/centers/mrcbg/publications/fwp/MRCBG_fwp_2013-01_Bilmes_financial_legacy.pdf

⁸ See Neta C. Crawford. 2014. "U.S. Cost of Wars Through 2014: \$4.4 trillion and Counting," <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/figures/2014/Costs%20of%20War%20Summary%20Crawford%20June%202014.pdf>

⁹ See Kathy Ruffing and Joel Friedman. 2013. "Economic Downturn and Legacy of Bush Policies Continue to Drive Large Deficits," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3849>

An active foreign policy encourages a large military, which, in turn, requires spending, which contributes to increases in the scale of government.¹⁰ War financing can take place through taxation, the issuing of debt, or printing money. None of these options are desirable for those concerned with limited and stable government. Once in place, wartime taxes tend to persist even after the intervention ends.¹¹ Debt simply shifts the cost of present interventions off to future generations who must service the debt. Printing money to finance foreign interventions devalues the currency.

Classical liberals and libertarians who claim to be for small government are often comfortable critiquing government expenditures and involvement in healthcare, education, and other areas of domestic life. Yet many of these same critics are also proponents of an active, militaristic foreign policy that consumes significantly more resources and contributes to the growth of government on a variety of margins that these same individuals pretend to find undesirable.¹²

2.2 The military-industrial base threatens the dynamism of domestic markets

The provision of military defense by government to protect the person and property of citizens is often viewed as a productive activity because it creates an environment conducive to positive-sum activities by private citizens. This assumes, however, that all military-related activities are productive, value added, and neutral with respect to private economic activity. They are not.

¹⁰ See Jeffrey Hummel. 2012. *War is the Health of the State: The Impact of Military Defense on the History of the United States*, Unpublished monograph. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2151041

¹¹ See Ivan Eland. 2013. "Warfare State to Welfare State: Conflict Causes Government To Expand at Home," *The Independent Review: A Journal of Political Economy* 18(2): 189-218.

¹² See David R. Henderson. 2011. "War is a Government Program," Foundation for Economic Education, http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/war-is-a-government-program

Like all other government services, military production requires the transfer of resources—money, capital, labor—from the private market to the military sector. Private citizens cannot simultaneously use resources used by the military-industrial base. This is not simply a matter of one-to-one crowding out. Private markets are dynamic because participants can rely on competitive market prices and profit and loss to gauge the opportunity costs of alternative courses of action. In political settings, by contrast, the ability to rely on economic calculation is absent. Political decision makers can increase military-related outputs by investing more money in certain lines of production, but there is no mechanism to inform them if they are allocating scarce resources to their highest-valued uses. In other words, there is no way for policymakers to know if they are providing the right quantities and qualities of military outputs. Moreover, given the incentives in politics, which I will discuss in a moment, there is a tendency for overreach and overproduction.

The funding of military activities does more than simply transfer resources from the private to the military sector. Government expenditures create new, and often undesirable, opportunities for profit. Like any other government program, military expenditures create vested interests who not only benefit from immediate government expenditures, but who also seek to influence and manipulate future political decisions for their own narrow benefits. The existence of what President Eisenhower termed the “military-industrial complex” is well known, but the implications are often neglected: much of the government spending on what is categorized as “defense” is really corporate welfare in disguise.

An entire industry of defense-related companies has emerged and grown due to military expenditures by the state over the preceding decades. Many of these companies are dependent on government-provided defense contracts for their survival. To provide one illustration of this,

consider Table 1 that shows the 2014 revenues (defense and total) for the top 5 U.S.-based defense contractors:

	2014 Defense Revenue (in billions)	2014 Total Revenue (in billions)	% of Revenue From Defense
Lockheed Martin	40.1	45.6	88.0%
Boeing	29.0	90.7	32.0%
Raytheon	22.2	22.8	97.4%
General Dynamics	18.5	30.8	60.2%
Northrop Grumman	18.4	24.0	76.7%

Table 1: Top 5 U.S.-based Defense Contractors, 2014 Revenues¹³

Three of the five companies rely on government expenditures on defense for more than three-fourths of their annual revenue. And this is just a small sample. There is a massive network of dedicated companies and subcontractors that have emerged to participate in, and perpetuate, the permanent war economy that began following World War II. The resources employed in this flourishing war economy are not only monetary, but also human, in the form of ingenuity and effort. One of the main overlooked costs of the war economy is the redirection of entrepreneurial alertness from satisfying private consumers to, instead, satisfying government officials who award lucrative defense contracts.

One result of the military-corporate welfare system is that equipment and hardware that the army says it does not need, or cannot use, continues to be produced because politicians want to claim that they are creating and maintaining jobs for their constituents. For example, members of Congress have voted to continue spending taxpayer money on building and refurbishing tanks even though military leaders say they cannot use them in actual combat situations due to geography and strategic constraints in locations where current military operations are taking

¹³ Source of data: Defense News, “Top 100 for 2015,” <http://people.defensenews.com/top-100/>

place.¹⁴ This, and similar cases which permeate the military-industrial base, are pure make-work waste, which provide little to no value in terms of defense and security to U.S. citizens.

Waste, fraud, and cronyism are defining, systematic features of the military sector. Decades ago, A. Earnest Fitzgerald heroically exposed this massive waste and fraud despite efforts by the U.S. government to silence him and ruin his career.¹⁵ More recently, the efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been plagued by significant waste and fraud.¹⁶ One illustration of the rampant cronyism is the “revolving door” phenomena whereby those in former government positions move to the private sector.¹⁷ This allows private companies to more easily contact key people and navigate the labyrinth of bureaucracy necessary to secure lucrative military-related contracts. One report by *The Boston Globe* found that, between 2004 and 2008, 80% of retired three- and four-star officers relocated to the private defense industry in either consultant or executive roles.¹⁸ Another report by *USA Today* identified 158 retired generals and admirals who served as consultants to the military in their post-retirement as “senior mentors.” The report found that 126 had financial ties to defense companies and that 29 were full-time executives at defense companies.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Marjorie Censer. 2014. “The end of the tank? The Army says it doesn’t need it, but industry wants to keep building it.” *The Washington Post*, January 31. Available online: http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/the-end-of-the-tank-the-army-says-it-doesnt-need-it-but-industry-wants-to-keep-building-it/2014/01/31/c11e5ee0-60f0-11e3-94ad-004fe61ee6_story.html

¹⁵ See A. Earnest Fitzgerald. 1972. *The High Priests of Waste*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company and A. Earnest Fitzgerald. 1989. *The Pentagonists*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

¹⁶ See Christopher J. Coyne, Courtney Michaluk, and Rachel Reese. 2016. “Unproductive Entrepreneurship in U.S. Military Contracting,” *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ See Thomas K. Duncan and Christopher J. Coyne. 2015. “The Revolving Door and the Entrenchment of the Permanent War Economy,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science, and Public Policy* 21(3): 391-413.

¹⁸ Bryan Bender. 2010. “From Pentagon to the Private Sector,” *The Boston Globe*, December 26. Available online:

http://www.boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2010/12/26/defense_firms_lure_retired_generals/

¹⁹ Tom Vanden Brook, Ken Dilanian, and Ray Locker. 2009. “Retire military officers cash in as well-paid consultants,” *USA Today*, November 18. Available online:

http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/military/2009-11-17-military-mentors_N.htm

In general, government programs and interventions create vested interests and promote cronyism. The military is no different. And given the significant expenditures on military-related activities, it should be no surprise that these perverse dynamics are rampant. Many classical liberals and libertarians often claim to be strongly opposed to corporate welfare. Yet when it comes to the military, they somehow act as if these issues are irrelevant or of little importance. Given the size and reach of the military sector, this is a major mistake given the deleterious effects of these factors on a market economy.

2.3 Foreign military intervention is severely limited in what it can achieve

One might argue that the significant amount of resources spent on the military, including the waste, is worth it if military activities can yield significant benefits through foreign interventions. Indeed, we hear politicians make grandiose promises all the time about spreading peace, liberty, and freedom as if there are no constraints to achieving their stated ends. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton illustrated this “unconstrained vision” in a 2010 talk to the Council on Foreign Relations stating that “Americans have always risen to the challenges we have faced. That is who we are. It is in our DNA. We do believe there are no limits on what is possible or what can be achieved.”²⁰ The reality, however, is that the foreign interventions are very limited in what they can accomplish due to the complexities of the world and limits on human reason.

Economic, political, legal, and social systems are all complex systems with individual elements interconnected in a manner that generates an outcome that is beyond the grasp of human reason. Or, to use a term often associated with F.A. Hayek, they are spontaneous orders that are the result of purposeful human action, but not of human design. Proponents of foreign

²⁰ Source of quote: <http://www.cfr.org/diplomacy-and-statecraft/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton/p22896>

intervention tend to discard this reality and, instead, treat perceived problems as technical, engineering problems that can be solved with the right amount of expertise and resources. If you have ever heard a politician say, “we sent a man to the moon, therefore we can do [insert grandiose vision here],” you understand this point. Sending a man to the moon is an engineering problem. Nation building is not.

The problem with the “unconstrained vision” is that it overlooks the realities facing political decision makers. One set of constraints are knowledge constraints, or limits on human reason, which has two, related, implications. First, we cannot fully grasp the complexities of the world in our own society, let alone in other societies. Second, we don’t know how to go about designing a liberal society from scratch even under the best-case scenario. Policymakers typically attempt to circumvent these implications either by ignoring them or by attempting to mimic activities and outcomes in their own country—e.g., holding elections—so they can pretend they are spreading freedom and liberty by producing an observable output.

Those who hold the “unconstrained vision” seem to be completely unaware that it is the limits on their own reason that contribute to continued failures in foreign interventions. In the face of this total lack of self-awareness, they confidently promise citizens “this time will be different.” Never do they consider that they lack the means to accomplish the desired ends. Moreover, objections that attempt to highlight potential constraints are dismissed as being “un-patriotic” and “un-American.”

Because foreign interventions are necessarily simplistic relative to the complex system they seek to shape, negative consequences are unavoidable.²¹ Due to the incentives they face,

²¹ For a list of some of these negative consequences, see Christopher J. Coyne and Steve Davies. 2007. “Nineteen Public Bads of Empire, Nation Building, and the Like,” *The Independent Review: A Journal of Political Economy* 12(1): 129-132. Available online: http://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_12_01_08_coyne.pdf. See also David R. Henderson. 2014. “Richard Epstein’s Faulty Case for Intervention,” *Antiwar.com*,

policymakers continually neglect the potential long-term unforeseen consequences and, instead, focus narrowly on the short-term visible aspects of foreign interventions. They overlook the crucial question – “And then what?” They simplify the problem situation in a black and white manner—“good” and “bad”—and set out to destroy those in the bad category without asking what happens even if they are successful.

These dynamics were evident in Libya where the Obama administration and proponents of limited humanitarian interventions initially declared the enforcement of the no-fly zone to be a major victory. A 2011 *The New York Times* headline, which read, “U.S. Tactics in Libya May Be a Model for Other Efforts,” captured this sentiment. However, this premature celebration neglected the subsequent power vacuum and civil war that emerged, which has imposed significant costs on both citizens of Libya and the broader region. In 2015, four years after the previous headline, *The New York Times* ran a subsequent headline that read, “ISIS’ Grip on Libyan City Gives it a Fallback Option.”

In addition to these knowledge constraints, foreign interventions suffer from massive incentive problems. We have all stood in line at the DMV, U.S. Post Office, or an equivalent government agency. There is a reason these organizations operate so inefficiently relative to private organizations. They are large-scale government monopolies not subject to market-based profit and loss. State-provided defense and security is no different. It consists of multiple agencies with the same organizational form as the DMV or postal service, but with a much larger budget and with high-tech weapons. The results are the same—waste, persistent resource misallocation, and inertia in policies and daily operations. Further, given the number of government agencies involved in military activities, petty infighting is common as bureaus

attempt to demonstrate their importance in order to secure greater budgets in the future.²² The incentives inherent in the industrial organization of government bureaus are problematic when intervening abroad given the rapid changing circumstances on the ground relative to the lethargy of bureaucracy.

There are other fundamental issues with the democratic political system through which policies regarding foreign interventions are designed and implemented. For example, voters tend to be rationally ignorant of the specifics of foreign interventions. One recent poll indicated that U.S. voters have difficulty keeping track of the various locations that the U.S. government is currently bombing.²³ To the extent that elected officials respond to the desires of voters, they may pursue policies that are at odds with the idealistic visions of those who design the initial intervention.

Many critics of President Obama are currently taking issue with his withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, claiming that this move was responsible for the current situation with ISIS. Putting aside the simplicity of this narrative, it overlooks the fact that a majority of American voters supported troop withdrawal. For example, one Gallop poll asked, “do you approve or disapprove of President Obama’s decision to withdrawal nearly all U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of the year?” Polling during October 29-30, 2011, indicated that 75% of respondents “approved” while 21% “disapproved.” When asked the same question in June 20-21, 2014, 61% of respondents “approved” while 34% “disapproved”.²⁴

²² For a first-hand account of these dynamics in Iraq, see Peter Van Buren. 2011. *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*. New York: Metropolitan Press. For another first-hand account of bureaucratic inertia and infighting, see Robert M. Gates. 2014. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. New York: Knopf.

²³ See Ariel Edwards-Levy. “American’s Are Not Totally Sure Which Countries We’re Bombing,” Huffington Post, September 5, 2014. Available online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/05/americans-airstrikes_n_5772860.html?cps=gravity

²⁴ Source of polling data: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/iraq.aspx>. Assessed on September 15, 2014.

Policy is not designed in a vacuum. Just because policymakers know what they want to achieve abroad doesn't mean that they know how to go about doing it. Further, policies are implemented through a political process that entails bureaucratic inertia, vested interests that seek to influence policy for their own narrow gains, and rationally ignorant voters who often demand policies that are at odds with the grand visions of "experts." Classical liberals and libertarians are very familiar with these same exact issues as they apply to a range of domestic policies, such as education, health care, social security, and many other areas of domestic life. It is surprising, therefore, that many of them are repeatedly shocked when these same factors adversely affect foreign policy and feel quite comfortable advocating for expansions in government-controlled resources and foreign policy with the false belief that things will be different the next time.

2.4 Foreign interventions expand the scope of domestic state power

I have already discussed how foreign interventions contribute to increases in the fiscal scale of the state. But that is not all that they do. They also contribute to expansions in the scope of State power.²⁵ While scale refers to the size of government, scope refers to the range of activities the government undertakes. Baldy Harper was well aware of the potential for increases in the scope of government activities during times of war. In 1951 he wrote, "[b]y some strange twist of reasoning, fear of losing liberty drives persons to enslave themselves and surrender their liberty in the hope of keeping it. It is argued that this is necessary 'to protect the people'."²⁶ Today, this same logic is used to justify continuous expansions in government power. U.S. citizens now

²⁵ See Robert Higgs. 1987. *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁶ F.A. Harper. 1951. "In Search of Peace," Foundation for Economic Education, Irvington-on Hudson, N.Y. Available online: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/orig6/harper2.html>

tolerate, and even accept, a variety of violations of their person, property, and privacy all in the name of protecting us from potential threats.

Driving this expansion in the scope of state power is the fact that foreign interventions contribute to movement toward a centralized managerial state. Centralizing tendencies are a logical outcome of foreign interventions precisely because the federal government, and its agencies, are responsible for designing, implementing, and overseeing foreign operations. As the federal government increases its power, the political periphery loses power, which weakens the checks created by individual autonomy and dispersed political decision-making. Perhaps the most eloquent characterization of this process was provided by Randolph Bourne who noted that:

The State is the organization of the herd to act offensively or defensively against another herd similarly organized. The more terrifying the occasion for defense, the closer will become the organization and the more coercive the influence upon each member of the herd. War sends the current of purpose and activity flowing down to the lowest level of the herd, and to its most remote branches. All the activities of society are linked together as fast as possible to this central purpose...and the State becomes what in peacetimes it has vainly struggled to become—the inexorable arbiter and determinant of men’s business and attitudes and opinions.²⁷

This result of the dynamics identified by Bourne has been evident during times of war throughout U.S. history.²⁸ Since 9/11, debates have been raging regarding the extent of the government’s surveillance state and, most recently, the militarization of domestic policing. Often

²⁷ Randolph S. Bourne. 1964. “The State.” In, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*. New York, Harper & Row, pp. 65-106.

²⁸ See Robert Higgs. 1987. *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*. New York: Oxford University Press; Michael Linfield. 1990. *Freedom Under Fire: U.S. Civil Liberties in Times of War*. Boston, MA: South End Press; William H. Rehnquist. 1998. *All the Laws but One: Civil Liberties in Wartime*. New York: Vintage Books.

overlooked in these discussions is that these phenomena have deep-seeded histories in earlier U.S. foreign interventions.²⁹

Many argue that the tradeoff between liberty and security is necessary and assure us that it will be short lived.³⁰ According to this view, the government benevolently increases security during times of crisis and returns to its previous path either on its own accord or through judicial review. However, there is reason to believe that this will not be the case, as the incentives facing politicians during times of war are to overreach and to target those minority groups that have the least protection. It is not that expansions in government power are always permanent. However, expansions are likely to be sticky and last for long periods of time due to a variety of factors including: vested interests, bureaucratic inertia, and changes in ideology whereby expansions in the scope of government power become normalized in the lives of average citizens leading to fundamental changes in the state-citizens relationship.

Proponents of foreign interventions assume that these actions will strengthen domestic life by providing security and protection to American citizens. While this is possible, it is crucial to remember, however, that a proactive, militaristic foreign policy can, and does, undermine the freedoms and liberties of citizens at home. Quantifying the costs of lost liberties and freedoms is extremely difficult, but this is ever the more reason to be cognizant of this overlooked cost of foreign interventions. Once liberties are lost, they are often difficult, if not impossible, to regain.

3. Concluding Thoughts

²⁹ See Christopher J. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall. 2014. "Perfecting Tyranny: Foreign Intervention as Experimentation in Social Control," *The Independent Review: A Journal of Political Economy* 19(2): 1-25.

³⁰ See Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule. 2007. *Terror in the Balance: Security, Liberty, and the Courts*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The basis of my skepticism regarding the effectiveness of an aggressive foreign policy is a careful study of the constraints and incentives facing those in government, as well as an appreciation of the negative consequences that are associated with war. Foreign military intervention leads to the growth of Leviathan, and the erosion of liberty, on numerous margins.

As James Madison eloquently put it:

Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people ... No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.³¹

Some may characterize my position as being naïvely isolationist. This criticism suggests that I, and others who hold a similar position, are content to sit by the sidelines as the world crumbles around us. If “isolationist” implies that I prefer that the U.S. government not intervene in international affairs where there is a lack of clear evidence that it can achieve the desired end, then I am guilty as charged. I do, however, reject the charge that a deep suspicion of foreign interventions implies naivety regarding global affairs and the realities of the world.

I am fully cognizant of the fact that, as far as policy issues go, foreign policy is particularly messy and difficult. The consequences of military action are far reaching; they affect the target country, neighboring countries, and the country carrying out the intervention. Our understanding of the specific manifestations of these consequences is often limited *ex ante*. Further, each and every occasion is highly unique, so there is no bright-line rule of when to intervene or to refrain from doing so. Given the complexities of the world, social scientists are

³¹ James Madison. 1865. “Political Observations, April 20, 1795,” In: *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, vol. 4. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Co. p. 485-505.

unable to make specific point predictions about what will happen with particular foreign interventions. Instead, we are limited to making broad pattern predictions given the particular institutional arrangements and constraints involved.

Precisely because of the sheer complexities involved, I am predisposed against foreign military interventions. Just as the work of Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek, James Buchanan, Gordon Tullock, and others leads me to be skeptical about the ability of government to achieve grandiose initiatives domestically, so too am I skeptical that government can do so internationally where the complexities are often far greater. I do not deny that government can succeed or generate benefits abroad in specific instances, just like it can at home. However, for the reasons discussed above, I lack confidence that foreign interventions can generate net benefits systematically across cases of foreign intervention.

Where does this leave us? Let me suggest that a good starting point is to discuss the realities of security in a free society. This entails a serious consideration of the incentives and epistemic constraints facing state actors with specific focus on whether the state is actually able to deliver on the desired end in a manner that maintains, rather than undermines, a free and prosperous society. Some guiding questions to frame this discussion are:

1. What are the institutional arrangements within which state-related security decisions are made and implemented?
2. What incentives do these institutions create and do they lead you to believe that government can actually provide security to citizens?
3. What is the fiscal cost of a militaristic foreign policy? Do incentives exist for political decision-makers to consider these costs?

4. Do institutional arrangements create the appropriate incentives so that when the worst members of society rise to positions of political power they act in the public interest?
5. What knowledge is required to achieve the ends stated by proponents of an aggressive foreign policy? Do political institutions generate this knowledge?
6. What perverse unintended consequences—both short-term and long-term—are likely to emerge from a proactive foreign policy? What mechanisms, if any, are in place to mitigate these negative effects?
7. What is different about security, relative to other government activities, that provides many classical liberals and libertarians with such great confidence in the state's ability to act efficiently and effectively?
8. Is the supposed security-liberty trade off an accurate reflection of the choice facing citizens? That is, must citizens give up liberties to the state in order to be more secure?
9. To what extent is state-provided security conducive to freedom? Is a free society one in which the government insulates citizens from all potential threats?
10. What does the historical record indicate regarding militarism and the size and scope of the state? What are the implications for the security of a free society?

In closing, let me say that I realize that it is important to be aware of potential external threats to our liberties and freedoms. At the same time, it is crucial that we remember that there is a significant internal threat to those same liberties and freedoms that we must battle on a daily basis—the State. Never forgetting this fundamental point is at the foundation of the security of the free society.