

The Civilian and the Military

A History of the American Antimilitarist Tradition

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With a New Foreword by Ralph Raico



Foreword

Ralph Raico

IN 1783 a treaty ending hostilities between Great Britain and its rebellious colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America was signed in Paris. For their part the English proclaimed that, “His Britannic Majesty acknowledges the said United States, viz., New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations . . .”—there followed the rest of the thirteen colonies—“to be free sovereign and independent states,” with the British Crown relinquishing all claims to “the same and every part thereof.”

Amazingly, a collection of artisans, merchants, and mostly farmers had defied one of the great military machines of Europe, and the greatest empire, and won. It was a triumph that gladdened the hearts of lovers of liberty and republican government the world over.

Today, this United States, now definitively in the singular, is itself the world’s greatest military machine and sole imperial power. How did this happen? In *The Civilian and the Military*, Arthur Ekirch traces this portentous transformation, at least to 1972.

Murray Rothbard, American libertarian economist and author, called Ekirch’s work “brilliant,” and praised it as an example of a revisionist outlook on all three great wars of the twentieth century.” Robert Higgs, economist, historian, and author, in his fore-

word to the Independent Institute's new edition of Ekirch's *The Decline of American Liberalism*, provides a summary of the life and productive academic career of Arthur Ekirch. He notes that Ekirch registered as a conscientious objector in World War II but was nonetheless sentenced to work without pay as a logger, and later in a school for the mentally retarded, experiences that did not endear the American state to the feisty scholar.

Militarism can be defined as the permeation of civil society by military institutions, influences, and values.

The heritage of explicit antimilitarism began to be formed in seventeenth-century England, especially with the Levellers, who were pamphleteers and political agitators, and the widespread resistance to a standing army. This tradition continued among the British settlers of what became the United States. It is evident in the attitudes of the leaders of the American Revolution. James Madison, for instance, stated:

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.

The connection between antimilitarism and non-intervention in the affairs of foreign nations—what its crafty opponents have succeeded in labeling “isolationism”—was often marked among the rebellious colonials. Ekirch points out that: “An important argument for independence had been that it would free the American people from involvement in the wars of Europe and from the necessity of helping to support a British army.” The radical republican position was put boldly by Jefferson: “I am for free commerce with all nations; political connection with none; and little or no diplomatic establishment.”

But as presidents, Jefferson and especially Madison, reneged on their non-interventionist and antiwar position. The War Hawks in their party clamored for confrontation with England, hoping to acquire Canada. Though this proved impossible, Madison's War of 1812 was considered a success. A military spirit was awakened,

shown in the popular adulation of war heroes and military displays at Fourth of July parades.

As war with Mexico drew near, Daniel Webster criticized the maneuvers of President James Polk. His words were to be the key to America's future wars, from the provisioning of Fort Sumter on: "What is the value of this constitutional provision [granting Congress the sole authority to declare war] if the President on his own authority may make such military movements as must bring on war?" Easy victory over Mexico, however, further fueled the military spirit.

If the Jeffersonians can be accused of surrendering their principles, what are we to say of some of the celebrated anti-statists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Henry David Thoreau, whose conscience rebelled at the U.S. war against Mexico, became an enthusiast for the "just war" against the slave states. He revered John Brown, the controversial abolitionist who was hung for treason, referring to him as a Christ upon the Cross when Brown tried to raise a servile rebellion among the millions of slaves of the South, a move "credited" with helping start the Civil War. That awful bloodletting cost 620,000 lives.

Charles Sumner, famous classical liberal and free trader, and later abolitionist senator from Massachusetts, wrote in his 1845 work, *The True Grandeur of Nations*, "Can there be in our age any peace that is not honorable, any war that is not dishonorable?" But he also found an honorable war in the attack on the South.

Later, Benjamin Tucker, individualist anarchist, indefatigable author and agitator, became a cheerleader for the Entente's—Allies of WWI—war with Germany. For his part, the exiled Peter Kropotkin, the most famous anarchist of his time in the world, urged his native Russia on to war with the Central Powers in 1914. Poor Kropotkin was bewildered by how it turned out, a Bolshevik tyranny worse than anything ever experienced before. The war itself cost many millions of lives, the worst bloodbath in European history to that time.

The point is that these individualists were not a Frederic Bastiat, French political economist, or a Herbert Spencer, English philosopher and classical liberal political theorist. None could resist

the pull of a just war. None understood the insight of Randolph Bourne, the pro-peace progressive intellectual, whom Ekirch calls one of the few who “stood firm,” that “war is the health of the state.”

During the Civil War the United States “was placed under what, for all practical purposes, amounted to a military dictatorship.” Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus, shut down newspapers critical of his policies, and held thousands as political prisoners. Conscription led to draft riots, particularly in New York City, but a precedent had been set.

Union veterans formed the Grand Army of the Republic, demanding pensions and preference in government jobs. The Army continued to justify their jobs by their taxpayer-funded backing of the railroad barons in the West and their campaigns to exterminate the Plains Indians. Military training and “education” proliferated in schools and colleges.

In the 1880s and 90s, navalism surged ahead, with U.S. industry, steel above all, promoting their own vested interest. The tradition of a navy solely for the coastal defense of the country—as old as the Republic—was abandoned.

There were critics of the new militarism, E. L. Godkin of *The Nation* and William Graham Sumner, whose essay *The Conquest of the United States by Spain* (1898), against the war on the Philippines, has inspired anti-imperialists ever since.

But they could not prevail against the powerful cabal of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and Theodore Roosevelt, which represented a turning point on the road to empire.

Mahan was not much of a naval commander (his ships tended to collide), but he was a superb propagandist for navalism. His work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*, was seized on by navalists in Germany, Japan, France, and elsewhere. It fueled the arms race that led to World War I, proving to be no great blessing to mankind.

In the Senate, Lodge pushed for war with Spain, the takeover of the Philippines, later for war with Germany, and following the war, for a vindictive peace treaty that would keep the Germans down for the foreseeable future. Throughout, Lodge pressed for a navy

second to none, demanded by America's new empire. The Navy League, funded by big business, helped the cause.

Heaven only knows what Theodore Roosevelt is doing on that endlessly reproduced iconic monument on Mount Rushmore, right alongside Jefferson. He despised Jefferson as a weakling, and Jefferson would have despised him as a warmonger. The great Charles Beard, revisionist historian of America's Founders, truly wrote of Roosevelt that he was probably the only major figure in American history "who thought that war in itself was a good thing."

Included in the cabal was Elihu Root, secretary of war and then of state, who advocated "the creation of a military spirit among the youth of the country."

The acquisition of the Philippines cast the United States into the arena of contending imperialisms in the Far East, including especially Japan's. Antiwar congressmen exposed the links between the drive for a great ocean-going navy and the munitions industry, to no avail.

Ekirch is perhaps too lenient on President Woodrow Wilson. Already, Wilson's note to Germany following the sinking of the *Lusitania*, in which he reiterated that Germany would be held to a "strict accountability" for the deaths of any Americans at sea from U-boats, even when traveling on armed belligerent merchant ships carrying military munitions through war zones, set the United States on a collision course for war. Here Walter Karp's *The Politics of War* presents a more reliable account.

During the war, the Espionage and Sedition Acts were used to curb dissent. The Creel Committee on Public Information propagandized for war to a hitherto unprecedented extent. The mass media incited public opinion against the demonized enemy as would become standard to our own day.

Historical revisionism flourished as the archives of major powers were opened up, forced by the Bolsheviks' unlocking of the Russian archives. True accounts of the machinations by which the European powers and then the United States entered the war led to the brief flourishing of antiwar sentiment after 1918.

In 1933 Franklin Roosevelt was sworn in as president. This genial master of deception was not only a fanatic for naval expansion but also harbored grandiose plans for reordering the world. The

geopolitical situation of the 1930s in Europe and the Far East gave Roosevelt ample opportunity for overseas meddling. The opposition party in 1940 nominated for president Wendell Willkie, who was as much of an interventionist as FDR.

Though denied a choice in the election, the people remained bitterly disillusioned by the results of Woodrow Wilson's earlier crusade. The greatest antiwar movement in history was formed, the America First Committee, boasting 800,000 members. Its backers ranged from the Socialist leader Norman Thomas to the conservative publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Robert R. McCormick. Among its many supporters were novelist Sinclair Lewis, famed entrepreneur Walt Disney, and renowned aviator Charles Lindbergh. Members of the America First Committee's youth division were President Gerald Ford, Justice Potter Stewart, and culture critic and novelist Gore Vidal. The Committee quickly folded when Roosevelt got the war he needed and wanted, at Pearl Harbor.

During World War II America embraced militarism wholeheartedly. It has never looked back.

The worst violation of civil liberties was the rounding up and imprisonment of some 80,000 Japanese Americans and 40,000 aliens (not eligible for citizenship). Emblematic of the hysteria generated by this most just of just wars, the Supreme Court upheld their incarceration. Renowned liberal justices Hugo Black, Felix Frankfurter, and William Douglas joined the majority. California Attorney-General Earl Warren, soon to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was a passionate champion of internment.

Following the war, "the atmosphere of perpetual crisis and war hysteria" engendered by Washington never let up. Harry Truman initiated what Ekirch rightly calls "the aggressive American foreign policy of the Cold War." Scores of entangling alliances were formed, committing the nation to defending the existing international order against those who would subvert it. A new enemy intent on world conquest was conjured up in the form of the Soviet Union and international communism. This conflict included two "hot wars" and entailed vast continuing military budgets, now including nuclear weapons. It lasted over forty years and cost civil society trillions of dollars.

As Ekirch presciently foresaw, even a peaceful resolution of the Cold War was not “sufficient to release the American people from the power of the Pentagon and its corporate allies.” Incursions of the armed forces occurred in Yugoslavia, the Philippines, Somalia, and elsewhere.

Now the United States is involved in wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, soon perhaps also in Iran.

Today there is no conscription, which caused too many problems for the militarists in the Vietnam years. Yet the American empire bestrides the globe. The United States has over 700 military bases overseas, plus some dozen naval task forces patrolling the oceans, with a multitude of space satellites feeding information to the forces below. Every year its “defense” (military) budget is nearly equal to those of all other countries combined. Does anyone doubt that for America there are more wars, many more wars, in the offing?

As Joseph Schumpeter, European economist and political scientist, wrote of the military in imperialist states:

“Created by the wars that required it, the machine now created the wars it required.”