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*Etceteras . . .*

To Fight or Not to Fight  
*War's Payoffs to U.S. Leaders and to the  
American People*

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**F**ourteen years ago in a brief commentary (Higgs 1997), I called attention to the close association between war and the U.S. presidents ranked as “great” or “near great” in polls of historians. My essay has gained a fair amount of attention over the years. Even the quintessential establishment historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. saw fit to cite it with apparent agreement in a 1997 article in the *Political Science Quarterly*. After the Ludwig von Mises Institute distributed my essay again on Presidents’ Day in 2007, it was linked and reposted widely and provoked a considerable amount of comment on the Web.

Although one can hardly quarrel with the close association between the presidents’ intimate involvement in war and their presidential-greatness ranking, one can take issue—and over the years many writers have taken issue—with my conclusion that “[t]he lesson seems obvious. Any president who craves a high place in the annals of history should hasten to thrust the American people into an orgy of death and destruction. It does not matter how ill-conceived the war may be” (1997, 1–2). For the most part, the disagreement pertains, first, to my general argument that many, if not all, of the wars from which the most highly ranked presidents gained their reputed greatness were clearly unnecessary and, second, to my specific indictment of Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Lyndon B. Johnson for “their supremely catastrophic war policies” (2).

**Table 1**  
**Wars and Their Payoffs**

U.S. Leaders Choose	Threat to the American People	
	Existential	Lesser or Spurious
Initiate War	American people lose. U.S. leaders lose.	American people lose. U.S. leaders win.
Avoid War	American people win. U.S. leaders ???.	American people win. U.S. leaders ???.

Although we cannot expect to resolve a Great Historical Debate by means of a simple, cut-and-dried approach, we can perhaps clarify our thinking about this matter with the aid of a more systematic representation of the relevant issues. I propose that we organize our thoughts along the lines laid out in the accompanying analytical array (table 1), whose content I will explain. The array displays a slightly complicated, two-by-two cross-classification.

At the top, the array shows whether the threat to the American people at large (as distinct from, say, the threat to the government itself or the threat to certain domestic or foreign special-interest groups) is “existential” or “lesser or spurious.” Of course, dividing all perceived threats into only these two discrete classes is a crude way to differentiate them, and dividing them into more than two classes or ordering them along a continuum is conceivable, but for my present purposes such additional complications are unnecessary.

By an “existential threat,” I mean one that poses a danger to national survival. During World War II, Americans often described the conflict as a “life and death struggle” or a “war for national survival,” but I do not believe that it actually was such. None of the enemies of the United States in that war, whether acting alone or in concert with all of the others, had the economic and technological capacity to destroy the American nation, “take over the country,” “destroy our way of life,” or inflict a comparable amount of harm. Those who dispute my belief should bear the burden of showing, with cogent evidence and argument, that the Axis powers had the capacity to carry out such a takeover or utter destruction. Simply repeating the mantra that Hitler “wanted to take over the world” is not an argument, but an excuse for not making one. An existential threat can arise, however, and indeed one prevailed for decades during the Cold War. An all-out nuclear exchange between the United States and the USSR, an apocalypse into which each side was all too prepared to enter at a moment’s notice, would have wreaked such horrifying devastation that the survivors probably would have envied the dead, and economic life would have become, at best, extremely primitive and incapable of sustaining a large population.

In contrast, a threat to the American people may be “lesser or spurious”—in other words, not be a risk to national survival or even to national flourishing and perhaps

not be a real threat at all. Most wars in U.S. history clearly belong in this category, which undoubtedly comprises the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, the Philippine-American War, World War I, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, both wars against Iraq, and the U.S. war in Afghanistan that has been under way for the past decade, not to mention the many minor U.S. military actions throughout the world, from the attacks on the Barbary Coast more than two centuries ago to the attacks on Serbia twelve years ago.

Although the secession of the Southern states in 1861 threatened the continuation of the existing political union, it need not have caused anyone's death, and the War Between the States became the terribly devastating affair that it was only because Lincoln and those who rallied to his leadership refused to accept the secession peacefully.

Like Bruce Russett (1972), I believe that the Germans and their allies did not constitute a "clear and present danger" to the American people at large prior to U.S. entry into World War II, and hence the Roosevelt administration had no compelling public-interest reason to provoke the Japanese Empire with a protracted series of economic sanctions, threats, and demands in order to open a "back door" for entry into the war in Europe.<sup>1</sup> As Garet Garrett wrote in May 1941, when Roosevelt had already made the country a *de facto* belligerent in countless ways, "The alternative had been to create here on this hemisphere the impregnable asylum of freedom and let tyranny in Europe destroy itself, as tyranny always has done and is bound to do again" ([1939–42] 2002, 165). I need hardly add that very few Americans, either scholars or laypersons, now agree with me in regard to the imprudence of U.S. entry into World War II, but this question ought properly to be decided by historical evidence and theoretically informed judgment, not by majority vote. We might well recall that before the attack on Pearl Harbor an overwhelming majority of the Americans surveyed by public-opinion pollsters said that they did not want the United States to enter the war (Higgs 1987, 199).

Along the left side of the array in table 1, the distinction is between whether U.S. leaders choose to initiate war or to avoid war. This variable reminds us that "the people" do not make such decisions; only the president and his coterie do so. In earlier times, Congress was deeply involved as well, but even then issues of war and peace usually could be effectively decided prior to any formal congressional involvement by means of presidential allegations and by the creation of certain *faits accomplis* or incidents—alleged Mexican incursions into U.S.-claimed territory (1846), alleged

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1. All comprehensive accounts of the lead-up to the attack on Pearl Harbor discuss the U.S. sanctions and diplomatic maneuvers. For brief accounts, see Neumann 1953, 260–64, and Higgs 2006a. For more detailed accounts, see Morgenstern 1953, 317–48, and Victor 2007, 187–261. For a highly detailed and deeply researched recent account of U.S. economic warfare, in particular, see Miller 2007. On the critical matter of U.S. code breaking and interception of encrypted Japanese radio transmissions, see the path-breaking research reported in Stinnett 2000. For unusually clear-eyed accounts by a commentator who wrote about these events as they occurred and who displayed remarkable prescience about where they ultimately would lead the country, see Garrett [1939–42] 2002.

Spanish sinking of the battleship USS *Maine* (1898), alleged German plots to help the Mexicans recover territory lost in the Mexican-American War (1917), alleged unprovoked German attacks on U.S. warships in the North Atlantic (1941), alleged unprovoked North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin (1964), alleged Iranian provision of munitions used to kill U.S. soldiers in Iraq (2007), and so forth. Only an extraordinarily dull presidential clique lacks the imagination to concoct an appealing *casus belli*.

In the analytical array, the focus on the leaders' decision may also suggest (correctly) that they make their decision in the service of their own interests—and, of course, those of their crucial supporting coalition of power brokers and special-interest groups—not in pursuit of the people's general interest. Of course, they invariably declare that all of their actions reflect nothing but their unsullied attempt to serve the general public interest. Anyone who believes this sort of nursery tale is sorely in need of deeper immersion in the facts of history, not to mention in the discipline of public choice.

Among the many history books one might recommend to those suffering from naïveté about how our glorious leaders make foreign-policy decisions, some of my favorites are Harry Elmer Barnes's classic edited volume *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (1953); Walter Karp's *The Politics of War: The Story of Two Wars Which Altered Forever the Political Life of the American Republic (1890–1920)* (1979); John V. Denson's outstanding collection *The Costs of War: America's Pyrrhic Victories* (1997); Thomas Fleming's *The New Dealers' War: F.D.R. and the War within World War II* (2002) and *The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I* (2003); James Bamford's *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (2004); and Nicholson Baker's priceless work *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization* (2008). I also heartily recommend that transcripts of the Nixon Whitehouse tapes be read early and often.

It is unsettling to find oneself in complete agreement with Hermann Göring, but the Nazi bigwig was certainly correct when, during an evening conversation in his cell at Nuremberg, he told Gustave Gilbert, a German-speaking U.S. intelligence officer and psychologist:

[O]f course, the *people* don't want war. Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece. Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the *leaders* of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship. . . . [V]oice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the

pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country. (qtd. in Gilbert [1947] 1995, 278–79)

Given that the people at large and their interests are essentially irrelevant to the decisions the national leaders make, we are well advised to focus on how those leaders believe war or avoidance of war will serve their own interests.

Therefore, in the interior of my analytical array, I indicate roughly the expected outcome of each choice in response to the two types of threat. Each cell indicates the outcome for the American people in general and the outcome for U.S. government leaders.

Consider the outcome of the situation when an existential threat has arisen and the leaders choose to initiate war. I conjecture that the expected outcome is uninviting for both affected parties because in a war against such a truly grave threat, the likely outcome will be horrible for everybody, notwithstanding that the danger the government is attempting to preempt is a great and genuine one. The only existential threat the American people ever faced was from Soviet nuclear weapons, and, fortunately for everyone, those weapons were never used against us, as they would have been in retaliation if U.S. leaders had initiated war against the USSR, as General Curtis LeMay and General Thomas Power, among others in the power elite, wished to do (Kaplan 1983; Record 2004, 14–15; Higgs 2006b, 155–56).

The beauty of the Cold War, if one may speak of such a thing, is that the threat of Soviet retaliation served to discipline U.S. leaders, who understood that they might be killed in a nuclear war and that even if they survived, they would no longer preside over a pleasant, prosperous country, but over a radiation-poisoned wasteland populated by desperate, sick, and starving survivors—a situation apt to take all the fun out of preeminence in the ruling class. Thus, the northwest cell in the array testifies to the incentives that made the strategic doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) work. Unfortunately, because of the substantial potential for accidental missile launches, warning-signal malfunctions, and command-and-control failures, MAD itself was fraught with terrifying risks, as any system based on launch-ready, nuclear-armed missiles must be.

Dropping down to the southwest cell of the array, we see the likely outcome if an existential threat exists and the leaders avoid war. The people at large clearly benefit greatly; they are able to continue their normal lives and do not have to endure the mass deaths and other grave harms that war against an existential threat would probably bring them. The leaders' outcome, however, is somewhat less obvious. Although they benefit from continued normal life, as the general public does, they gain none of the special acclaim and greatly enhanced power that might attend their "winning" a war against an existential threat, assuming that such winning is conceivable.

It was conceivable not only to General "Buck" Turgidson in the classic Cold War film *Dr. Strangelove*, but also to several generations of the U.S. government's actual nuclear strategists after whom Turgidson and *Strangelove's* General Jack D. Ripper

and Dr. Strangelove himself were modeled. As John Newhouse writes in *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, “Over the years, the brotherhood of specialists, mostly civilians, who have made a calling of nuclear strategy has grown. They review all of the unknowns—unknowables really—that underlie the deployment of nuclear weapons and any conceivable use of them. They devise scenarios for protracted nuclear war and for limited nuclear war.” Newhouse refers to “the glib manner in which the civilian priesthood discussed plans for using nuclear weapons in combat situations” (1989, 298–99). As president, Ronald Reagan “came to have little patience for Strangelovian defense intellectuals who argued that a nuclear war could be won and that disarmament was a mirage. As he later wrote in his memoirs, Reagan was appalled by those advisers who ‘claimed nuclear war was “inevitable” and we had to prepare for this reality. They tossed around macabre jargon about “throw weights” and “kill ratios” as if they were talking about baseball scores”’ (qtd. in McCarthy 2007). Much of this more or less insane strategizing originated at the RAND Corporation, a think tank the U.S. Air Force created in 1946 to serve the needs of its mad bombers. Besides playing a reference role in *Strangelove* as “the Bland Corporation,” RAND inspired Malvina Reynolds’s blackly humorous lyrics for “The Rand Hymn” (1961), which begins:

Oh, the Rand Corporation’s the boon of the world,  
They think all day long for a fee.  
They sit and play games about going up in flames;  
For counters they use you and me, honey bee,  
For counters they use you and me.

I suppose that relatively few top U.S. leaders have thought they would personally come out ahead by initiating a nuclear war, but some leaders undoubtedly have enjoyed initiating wars against threats they falsely claimed might be existential ones, as Bush administration officials insinuated by their “mushroom cloud” allusions to Saddam Hussein’s alleged “weapons of mass destruction.” This fraudulent pretext for unprovoked aggression fooled the bulk of the electorate, made Bush and company heroes for a season (till the chickens undeniably came home to roost during the protracted U.S. occupation of Iraq), and pushed Bush and Dick Cheney to reelection in 2004. Note in contrast, however, the Bush administration’s patient resort to diplomacy in dealing with North Korea, a country whose regime it feared might *actually* possess or soon acquire a few nuclear weapons and some crude delivery vehicles. In recent years, U.S. leaders, knowing that the Iranian regime cannot effectively retaliate directly against them, have been seriously contemplating the use of nuclear weapons against targets in Iran—a scheme that appears to reflect complete detachment from geopolitical and economic reality and human decency, not to mention the possibility that the tail in Jerusalem is wagging the dog in Washington, D.C.

Moving to the southeast cell of the array, we see again that the people win if their leaders refrain from launching a war even against a lesser or spurious threat. Such wars may still cost a great deal of money, devour many thousands of lives, and entail repression of civil and economic liberties. Moreover, because they allay little or no actual threat to the people, they have no genuine value except to the extent that the leadership's propaganda can bamboozle the people into imagining a benefit—for example, that the war in Vietnam kept the Communist dominoes from falling across all of Southeast Asia; that the war in Iraq kept Saddam Hussein from “destabilizing” the entire Middle East; blah, blah, blah.

Again, however, the outcome for the leaders is not clear. If they avoid wars against less-than-existential threats, they get little or no credit for doing so, and they sacrifice the enhanced powers, public acclaim, and historians' credit for greatness that victory in such a war may bring. Worse, their political opponents may *blame* them for not going to war. Lyndon Johnson, for example, worried that the conservatives would accuse him of being “soft on communism” unless he escalated the U.S. military engagement in Vietnam in a visible attempt to “win the war” there (Matusow 1984, 149–50; Conkin 1986, 257).

Presidents may profit greatly by initiating war against less-than-existential or completely spurious threats. Knocking down a third-rate power and stealing a big chunk of its land in the Mexican-American War left James K. Polk ensconced among the historians' “near greats.” Having helped to instigate the war with Spain, Theodore Roosevelt rode to the vice presidency and thence, after William McKinley's assassination, to the presidency itself on the strength of his harebrained romp among the corpses strewn across the Cuban hills (Morris 1979, 654–61). Many Americans love him to this day, undisturbed that he was an ambition-addled protofascist whose insatiable craving for power over his fellow men expired only when he took his last breath. Thus, any threat less than a manifestly existential and personally dangerous one may present an irresistible temptation to U.S. leaders itching for “greatness.”

Surrender to this temptation finds its place in the northeast cell of my array, where the indication is that the leaders win by initiating war, although, again, the people at large lose. In all actual U.S. wars, the people have been net losers; in each instance, they would have been better off if the war had not been fought. Most Americans will vigorously dispute this claim, of course, proclaiming above all that World War II was not only just but necessary—nay, unavoidable. As I have already observed, I think they are wrong, but I cannot make a compelling case for my conclusion here, and, in any event, others, including Russett and several of the contributor's to Barnes's collection *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, have already done so better than I can. Even if I were to concede the orthodox opinion of World War II, however, the rest of the U.S. wars would nevertheless remain strong evidence in support of my claim.

In no event will I concede the necessity or desirability of the U.S. government's going to war against the Confederate States of America in 1861. The usual argument

that it did so to destroy slavery does not hold water: as Abraham Lincoln himself made crystal clear in his famous August 22, 1862, letter to Horace Greeley, his only reason for fighting was to preserve the union, with or without slavery. Although the war did result in slavery's destruction as a by-product—the only good to come out of the war—it was not initiated or continued for that purpose. Moreover, even that splendid result might not have been worth its cost if, as some serious scholars have argued (most notably Jeffrey Rogers Hummel [1996]), slavery in North America would soon have ended anyhow, without violence, as it did in all of the other countries of the New World (except Haiti), despite its having been institutionalized there for centuries.

Except during the Cold War, when although top U.S. leaders exposed the country to grave risks, they strove to avoid direct, open warfare with the Soviet Union, the American people have lived for more than two hundred years in the southeast and, all too often, the northeast cells of my analytical array. Because of the country's fortunate location, protected on the east and the west by broad oceans and bordered on the north and the south by militarily weak states, the American people did not have to face existential threats prior to the nuclear age. Nonetheless, their leaders again and again have given in to their personal ambitions for fame and power and have initiated wars in which the people at large have suffered great losses of economic resources, lives, and liberties—all for benefits that, for the masses, have fallen grossly short of the sacrifices borne.

Perhaps we ought to admit that many Americans have gained and continue to gain great psychic benefit from the U.S. government's dishing out death and destruction to the foreign devils du jour. Adding that benefit to the calculus, we might have to alter our analysis accordingly in recognition of this red-white-and-blue savagery. Or we might alternatively insist that despite certain vicious strains in the national character and despite the undeniable presence of a perennially bloodthirsty element in the population, most Americans have simply been misled by their leaders (Higgs [2002] 2005; Gordon 2007), who sought not the people's benefit, but gains for themselves and for their supporting coalition of special-interest groups. Although the national character may be a topic for endless debate, relatively little doubt attaches to the claim that the leaders time and again have sought to attain their own goals by taking the nation to war, however much their doing so might require great sacrifices of the people's lives, liberties, and property.

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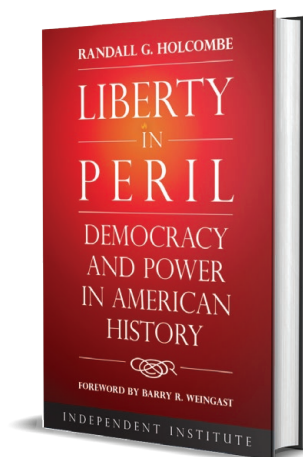
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