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Introduction

Symposium on Foreign Intervention

CHRISTOPHER J. COYNE

What is the appropriate role of the state in matters of national security and defense? When, if ever, is it appropriate for government to use military force to intervene in other societies? What are the benefits, costs, and limitations of foreign interventions? These and related issues have always been contentious among libertarians and classical liberals. This was abundantly evident in the run-up to and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq following the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. Some were staunchly against both interventions, whereas others were strongly in favor. Still others supported intervention in Afghanistan but not in Iraq. And even among those who considered themselves supporters of the invasion by the U.S. government, there was disagreement over the appropriate scope and scale of the military effort.

These disagreements did not end with Afghanistan and Iraq. Today there is a lack of consensus among libertarians and classical liberals over a range of foreign-policy issues, including but not limited to the appropriate role of the national security state at home and abroad, humanitarian intervention, nuclear agreements, and the U.S. government's drone program. The five papers in this symposium engage various aspects of foreign intervention and illustrate some of the tensions and open issues associated with libertarian and classical liberal perspectives on foreign policy.

Christopher Preble begins the symposium with an exploration of the roots of libertarian attitudes toward foreign policy in the United States. He discusses how America's Founders recognized the threats to domestic liberty posed by a standing

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military and therefore created a series of checks in the hopes of minimizing these risks. Attitudes regarding a standing army shifted after World War II, a shift that was coupled with a broader interpretation of what constituted the “common defense” as expressed in the U.S. Constitution. Preble closes with a discussion of the tensions and limits of an activist foreign policy and why a skepticism toward this policy is relevant today.

Fernando Tesón makes a moral argument for armed intervention in order to combat and destroy the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). He argues that a war against ISIS, undertaken by an international military coalition, is just on the grounds of national self-defense, collective self-defense, and humanitarian intervention. Following the defeat of ISIS, he argues, there should be an occupation and reconstruction of Iraq’s political and economic institutions as well as a loosening of international immigration policies to allow for increased freedom of movement.

David Henderson provides an economist’s case for a noninterventionist foreign policy. He discusses how war is a driving force behind the growth of government power at home, with numerous examples from the two world wars. He then draws on some core economic concepts—information problems, incentives, and unintended consequences—to reinterpret U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and to argue for a foreign policy of nonintervention.

Ivan Eland explores the military force that would be needed for a more humble foreign policy of “independent internationalism,” which emphasizes that the U.S. government should refrain from entering permanent and entangling alliances. Eland explores the military force requirements for three different scenarios under a policy of independent internationalism. Each is significantly smaller than the hegemonic strategy adopted by the U.S. government in the post-World War II period.

Finally, Abigail Hall Blanco and I explore the interventionist mindset required for success under the U.S. government’s foreign-policy strategy of liberal hegemony. We argue that this approach to foreign policy contains an inherent tension. Its supporters claim a commitment to liberal values, but successfully implementing the strategy requires, attracts, and reinforces a mentality fundamentally at odds with those values. We discuss the defining characteristics of the interventionist mindset and how the adoption of this mentality is incentivized by government bureaus that reward those who successfully implement the government’s foreign-policy strategy. Those who rise to the top will tend to be those who are most comfortable with and willing to engage in illiberal behaviors toward foreign populations.

Although the papers in this symposium engage many aspects of foreign policy, there are many open issues that they do not address. My hope is that the topics they do cover will encourage discussion, debate, and further research on a range of foreign-policy issues that are central to the maintenance of a free and prosperous society.