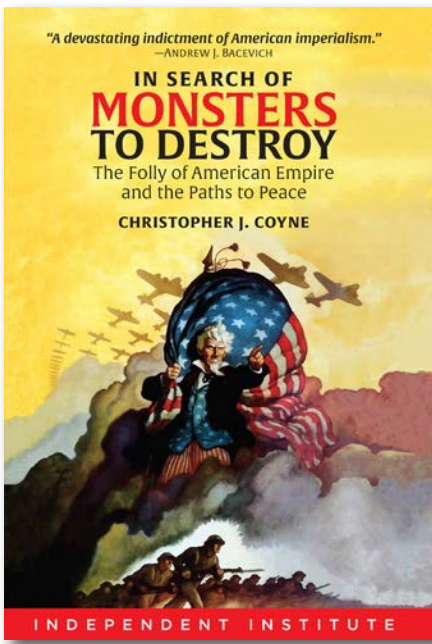


In Search of Monsters to Destroy

The Folly of American Empire and the Paths to Peace

BY CHRISTOPHER J. COYNE



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Book Highlights

- **The interventionism of American empire claims a commitment to liberal values, but its attempts to export those values around the world are inherently illiberal.** While the stated aims of US foreign interventions are draped in noble rhetoric—*end suffering, spread freedom and democracy, fix broken societies, nation-build, retaliate against perceived threats and enemies*, etc.—the tactics of coercion and brutality used to bring about these aims reveal a repugnant hypocrisy that should alarm Americans across the political spectrum. Christopher Coyne, economics professor at George Mason University and esteemed foreign policy scholar, traces the history of this hypocrisy and unveils its deadly consequences at home and abroad. In *In Search of Monsters to Destroy: The Folly of American Empire and the Paths to Peace*, Coyne charts a more peaceful, moral, and efficient course toward lasting security and peace.
- **Imperialist practices abroad lead to imperialist practices back home.** Coyne considers the revelations of the US surveillance state in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, as well as the subsequent “war on terror.” He explains how the erosion of liberties at home is a *feature*—not a failure—of imperialist regimes throughout history. Once the state understands itself as a nation-building, morality-spreading, empire-creating machine, its attitude toward civilians abroad *and at home* becomes paternalistic, severe, and tyrannical. Using emergency powers of war to erode constitutional constraints on militaristic power; centralizing state authority without regard for democratic processes; eagerly developing coercion-enabling skills and technologies: these actions erode the liberties of citizens (both at home and abroad) while state power, corruption, and cronyism flourish unchecked. Coyne illustrates how Republicans and Democrats alike benefit from lucrative contracts and salaries that maintain, operate, and expand America’s empire...all at the expense of the taxpayer’s blood, treasure, and civil liberty. This raises the question: who *really* benefits from empire?
- **Imperialism is bound to fail.** Why? Coyne answers: First, the imperialist’s personality often falls prey to a hubristic, “I-know-better” mentality that blinds him to real knowledge about the regimes he seeks to overturn and transform. These gaps in knowledge have disastrous consequences. Second, the lavish funding for imperial projects incentivizes bureaucracies, committees, special interest groups, and Pentagon officials to compete viciously over funding and relevance. This cutthroat arrangement, combined with the natural human vice of greed, means that state actors spend more time squabbling over funding, bragging about (likely exaggerated) achievements, and dreaming up expensive projects rather than working together to solve problems.
- **Real-life examples of the failures of liberal empire abound...both abroad *and* at home.** Coyne pulls back the curtain on the disastrous “war on drugs” in Afghanistan, which ironically led to record opium harvests, the cartelization of opium sales under Taliban control, the decimation of hundreds of thousands of jobs, and mass corruption. Furthermore, he reveals how imperialistic practices overseas corrupt domestic life. For example, using drones as mechanized terror weapons that maim and kill

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thousands of innocents in places like Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan—all in the name of “defending human rights”—has gravely diminished Americans’ belief in the moral authority of their leaders. The hypocrisy of using terror to fight terror has presented a moral and political charge too great for advocates of liberal imperialism to defend coherently.

- **We need a new path forward.** America’s attempts to usher a utopian liberal empire into existence have failed so consistently and so disastrously that all militaristic imperialistic practices should be severely attenuated, if not wholly nixed. But what of alternatives? What kind of foreign policy *should* thoughtful, peace-loving Americans support? Coyne advocates not for isolationism, but for American global engagement. That would be achieved, not through militaristic imperialism, but by a commitment to people, goods, and services across borders. Peace, not war, should be the guiding principle. He insists that self-governing civilians of all countries can—and must—be the ones to overturn the culture of militaristic imperialism and end the long, tragic history of failed liberal empires. With actionable steps, reasoned arguments, and a nonviolent vision of what a stable peace might look like for America and the world at large, Coyne offers a compelling vision of peace and hope for readers across the political spectrum.

Synopsis

The great failures of the US Government in Afghanistan present a unique opportunity. The curtain has been pulled back on American empire, offering us yet another chance to critically assess the features and realities of empire—and to chart a new course. Economist **Christopher Coyne**, Senior Fellow at the Independent Institute and esteemed foreign policy scholar, explores

the history, nature, and limits of military imperialism abroad, as well as the harmful effects of militarism at home. He also charts a much-needed path forward—one that prioritizes peace, global engagement, and human flourishing throughout the world.

History shows that empires not only fail to remake regimes in their image, but also erode the civil liberties and moral character of civilians back home. So why did Americans think that crafting a foreign policy of militarism and imperialism would be a success? Coyne offers a rigorous, historical presentation of how we arrived at this disastrous moment, and he describes—with brutal honesty—the powerful incentives, corruption, and cronyism within the DC elite that allow these policies to continue.

In *In Search of Monsters to Destroy: The Folly of American Empire and the Paths to Peace*, Coyne makes a compelling case for abandoning the failed practice of militaristic empire. The evidence for his argument is overwhelming. He cites America’s founding fathers, the studies of internationally-renowned economists (including Friedrich Hayek), and catastrophic real-life examples that conservatives, liberals, and libertarians can agree have been both humiliating for America and ruinous for the world. Most significantly, Coyne offers a vision of peace and hope to readers across the political spectrum, advocating for practicable, non-isolationist,

and most importantly, *peaceful* alternatives to empire.

John Quincy Adams’ Prophecy

Advocates of liberal imperialism laud the US government’s use of global power to promote Western liberal values. They claim America’s empire provides collective global goods, such as a stable world monetary order, protection against “rogue states,” and more robust, liberal democracies around the world.

Is this true? If so, *how* true? And what price must be paid for the upkeep of America’s liberal hegemony?

On July 4, 1821, John Quincy Adams addressed Congress on US foreign policy. He warned Americans of the price they would pay for such an empire. By involving herself in wars across the globe—including wars that “assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom”—America’s priority would change from liberty to force; her “ineffable splendor of freedom and independence” would be replaced by an “imperial diadem.” Worse still, in becoming the “dictatress of the world,” America would “no longer be the ruler of her own spirit.” In other words, by forcing “freedom” on others abroad, Adams predicted that Americans would inevitably lose their freedom at home.

Adams’ warning was quickly forgotten. By the time President Theodore Roosevelt

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added his Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine—announcing that the US government would serve as the Western Hemisphere’s police force—the military primacy of America had already begun. World War II further established the US as the entire world’s policeman. A rapid centralization of the state’s defense and security operations was thereby set in stone.

Adams’ prophecy has proven correct. Today, America’s national security state consistently acts outside the constitutional rules intended to limit abuses of power. It not only botches and corrupts the morals and customs of the foreign nations it claims to serve; it also erodes the civil liberties of American citizens. To make matters worse, most Americans have grown accustomed to a culture of militarism. Our permanent war complex ranks military institutions above civilian life, and our perpetual war economy shamelessly tangles political and private interests.

Just How “Liberal” Is Liberal Empire?

Liberal empire is not only illiberal in practice, but also threatens the very foundations of liberalism both at home and abroad. In the name of “freedom,” the US government has conducted countless foreign interventions with the use of massive military force, “boots on the ground” troop presence, mass surveillance, curfews, segregation, bribery, censorship, suppression, imprisonment, and torture. What kind of “freedom” can be achieved with these means? Because all imperialist regimes can and must employ illiberal means to achieve their goals, the idea of a “liberal empire” is an outright contradiction in terms.

Furthermore, the kinds of people who employ illiberal means with efficiency and without scruple are not people who are “pro-freedom.” Economist Frank Knight argued that “the probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an

extremely tender-hearted person would get the job of whipping-master on a slave plantation.” Thus, an efficient system of incentives and behaviors ensures the success of power-hungry personalities in American foreign policy.

Cronyism and Corruption

At the height of World War II in 1943, the Senate found \$15 billion in waste, fraud, and mismanaged contracts involving government and private contractors. In 2011 (almost seventy years later), a bipartisan Commission found that at least \$31 billion—and possibly as much as \$60 billion—was lost to contract waste and fraud in America’s Iraq and Afghanistan operations. How is it possible that so much American blood and treasure has been wasted in these wars? And why has nothing been done?

Coyne places the blame on persistent, systematic cronyism. Cronyism is characterized by profits earned by private companies through political influence (rather than ordinary economic means).

America’s two World Wars have permanently embedded private sector participation in service of the ongoing war economy. Private citizens have much to gain from this. Today, the US Department of Defense is the country’s largest employer, with 1.4 million men and women on active duty, 850,000 civilian employees, 836,000 Select Reserves, and 245,000 Individual Ready Reserve Forces. And this doesn’t include those who work to supply the military with goods and services—a number some estimate at over 1.5 million!

Since many Americans have so much at stake in the permanent war economy—financially, personally, and professionally—there is very little incentive to scale back its power and scope.

Does Liberal Imperialism Work?

After exploring the history, moral contradictions, and cronyism embedded in America’s liberal empire, Coyne raises the

most fundamental question of all: Does liberal empire *work*? Do policymakers possess the knowledge and incentives to spread liberal values abroad?

His answer: no. And he explains why.

First, the illiberal interventionist who rises to the top of America’s liberal hegemon is bound to have a hubristic personality. This lack of humility hinders the pursuit of knowledge and learning. It is highly unlikely that such a hubristic person will take the time needed to learn *how* to achieve lofty imperialistic goals. The truth is, there is no “one size fits all” plan to export liberal democracy to foreign countries. What works in the United States will not work in the Middle East; what worked in Japan and West Germany will not work in Libya or Syria. Without the knowledge of local customs, traditions, and practices, let alone the humility to seek out that knowledge in the first place, interventionist plans are bound to fail.

Second, there are significant political impediments to liberal empire. Political infighting about how and when to export liberal values at home leads to chaos abroad. With no clear commitment to any one course of action, citizens of foreign countries rightly distrust interveners. This leads to mass civil unrest and resistance. Furthermore, the line between political and nonpolitical goals—e.g., democratization and economic growth—is often blurred, leading to unintended and often disastrous consequences.

Third, there are the predictable matters of inefficient bureaucratic funding and the usual self-interestedness of glory-seeking politicians. These factors set up huge additional barriers to a successful imperialist project.

Examples of Failure

In recent times, two startling failures of US foreign policy stand out. The first is America’s war on drugs in Afghanistan, which led to record opium harvests and mass terror connected to drug trafficking. The second is the use of drones as

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mechanized terror in the so-called “war on terror.” Despite two decades of the US war on drugs in Afghanistan, the opium economy is stronger than ever before and more concentrated in Taliban hands than anytime before or during the invasion. How did this happen?

In short, flip-flopping US policy on drug trafficking led Afghan drug lords to take matters into their own hands. Opium farmers turned to violent, centralized cartels to protect their harvest, while the smaller opium producers were wiped out. Those left standing grew in power and scope. Today, the opium economy is the main source of income for many Afghan citizens, and even some government officials are in on the drug trade.

The second failure has been the institutionalization of drone strikes in the US military, which stands in stark contradiction to the liberal values supposedly held by the US government. How can one take seriously a promise to fight terror...with terror? Despite the rhetoric, the maiming and killing of innocents in multiple countries has been too obvious to go unnoticed and has been condemned by citizens both in the US and abroad.

Is There Another Way?

The policies of the American empire elevate violence, result in brutal and unintended disaster, and continue to erode liberty at home and abroad. But what alternatives to our security state can be found?

Workable and non-isolationist alternatives to imperialism, militarism, and empire exist. Coyne details action items and offers a vision of hope for peace-loving citizens throughout the world.

First, a cultural shift from military imperialism to peace must occur. Second, pulling back from America’s deployments around the world should be a top priority. Third, an understanding of “polycentric defense”—i.e., an understanding of security that redistributes responsibility and power from the centralized state to individuals and small communities—must be established. Most importantly, peaceful interactions between private, nonstate actors living in different geographic areas should be the new path forward.

About the Author



CHRISTOPHER J. COYNE is Senior Fellow at the Independent Institute and Co-Editor of *The Independent Review*, Professor of Economics at George Mason University, Co-Editor of the *Review of Austrian Economics*, and Book Review Editor for *Public Choice*. He received his PhD in economics from George Mason University. He has taught at West Virginia University and Hampden-Sydney College, and he has been the Hayek Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and Visiting Scholar at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green State University.



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