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Benefits and Costs of the U.S. Government's War Making

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ROBERT HIGGS

In 1795, James Madison observed that “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. . . . No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare” (qtd. in Porter 1994, 10). Experience during the past two centuries has confirmed the continuing validity of Madison’s observation. Apart from all the sacrifices of life, liberty, and treasure that wars have entailed directly, wars have also served as the prime occasions for the growth of the central state, and hence in the United States they have fostered the long-term diminution of civil and economic liberties and the ongoing subversion of civil society.

Every government recognizes that force alone is an inefficient means of propping up its position. At the margin, bamboozlement can be effectively substituted for the use of force, especially in so-called democratic systems, where many ordinary people have embraced the fable that they themselves “are” the government because they cast a ballot every few years. Hence, every government seeks to ease its retention of power by persuading people that it acts only in their interest. A government that goes to war promises its subjects that it is doing so only in defense of their security and freedom. “Yet,” as Bruce D. Porter has noted, “having borne the burden of the state for five hundred years, we find that it has rarely fulfilled its twin promises of security and freedom” (1994, 21).

Indeed, the government's alluring claim is almost always false. In matters of war making, as elsewhere in its wielding of power, a government acts in the interest of its own leaders, with as many concessions as necessary to retain the support of the coalition of special-interest groups that keeps those leaders in power. In Randolph Bourne's now-hackneyed phrase, "war is the health of the state." This claim is not simply a wild-eyed ideological pronouncement; it is as well established as any historical regularity can be. Entire books, such as Porter's *War and the Rise of the State* (1994) and my own *Crisis and Leviathan* (1987) and *Against Leviathan* (2004), have documented it in excruciating detail.

Aware of this reality, some of us steadfastly resist any claim that war will promote either liberty or security; we do not expect that notwithstanding what has almost always happened previously, nature will change its course on this particular occasion. Although many people can be persuaded that the risks war poses to their own life, liberty, and property rights are justified—in other words, that these risks are necessary and only temporary sacrifices in the service of their own long-term security and liberty—the realistic and well informed among us understand that those who embrace this faith are taking a gamble against very long odds.

In the United States, the government has been at war, more or less, since 1940, which is to say, in Madison's phrase, engaged in "continual warfare" or in massive preparation for warfare. Can anyone seriously maintain that we Americans are now freer or more secure than we were *before* the sainted Franklin D. Roosevelt and his spiritual descendants took command of the ship of state and steered it into the storm of perpetual war? The U.S. government, which once confined its foreign adventures to ad hoc interventions, most of them in small Caribbean and Central American countries, has presided over a globe-girdling empire ever since World War II, projecting U.S. military and political power here, there, and everywhere with reckless unconcern for a reasonable connection between overall cost and benefit (Eland 2004, Johnson 2004). But why *should* the rulers act prudently, you may ask, when they themselves—and, as usual, their supporting cronies—reap whatever benefit is produced, whereas the costs of the interventions take the form of other people's sacrifices of life, liberty, and property rights?

Not least among these sacrifices has been that of the old constitutional structure—the government of checks and balances that once helped to restrain the rulers from launching foreign engagements and suppressing domestic liberties willy-nilly (Higgs 2004, 201–17). Owing to the series of hot and cold military emergencies since 1940, the president has become, for all practical purposes, a Caesar. He now goes to war entirely at his own discretion. After all, as his spokesmen tirelessly reiterate, he is the commander in chief of the armed forces (as if this fact simply wiped out the rest of the Constitution).

Congress has become so pusillanimous that it provides no check whatever on the president's war making. In "authorizing" the president to attack Iraq or not, entirely as he pleased, Congress recently not only abrogated its clear constitutional duty, but

did so with grotesquely cavalier disregard for the gravity of the matter at stake. It did not even bother to debate the issue, but simply handed over its power to the executive and returned to the workaday plundering that is its only remaining *raison d'être*. The president and his subordinate chieftains keep telling us that “we are at war,” but this statement is just a turn of phrase serving public-relations purposes inasmuch as the clear constitutional requirement of a congressional declaration of war has gone unfulfilled. The government’s action provokes no great public outcry, however, so conditioned have the people become to this form of executive usurpation.

To the injury of all past attenuations of our rights under the Constitution, the government has now added the insult of shredding the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments.¹ Our rulers declare that by nothing more substantial than the emperor’s say-so, any person may be arrested and held incommunicado, without trial, and then punished, even put to death. Say good-bye to the writ of habeas corpus, the very bedrock of limited government. Speedy trial? Forget about it. The government has to but whisper those two magic words, *unlawful combatant*, and you may be rendered as much a *desaparecido* as any unfortunate victim of Argentine tyranny. Surely this sort of “defense of our freedom” falls under the rubric of destroying the village in order to save it. As for due process of law, it’s obsolete. Your right to be secure “against unreasonable searches and seizures”? That’s ancient history, too, outmoded since September 11, 2001, when, the government insists, “everything changed,” including your right to be free of warrantless searches of your premises, Carnivore sweeps of your e-mail, and taps of your telephone calls.

A few things definitely did *not* change after 9/11, however, and chief among them is the government’s lust for greater power and control over every single person in the country—nay, over everyone on the entire earth. Do I fear that the USA PATRIOT Act will be abused? No. I *know* that it has been already and will continue to be abused because its elastic language allows unscrupulous prosecutors to scratch a variety of itches completely unrelated to terrorism (Eggen 2003, Lichtblau 2003). Apart from these egregious and wholly predictable prosecutorial shenanigans, freedom-loving people ought to recognize that—to borrow a phrase from Edmund Burke—the thing itself is an abuse because it sweeps away fundamental due-process protections of our rights that required centuries to be put in place.

In the face of all this and of too much else even to mention, some people, even some self-described libertarians, persist in arguing that the price we are paying is worthwhile and that we can trust the government to act responsibly and effectively in wielding its new powers. Neither element of that argument will bear scrutiny.

1. We should scarcely need any special sources to understand these matters, but the government and its handmaidens in the news media have worked hard to obscure them and to persuade us that black is white. The Bill of Rights Defense Committee has prepared an annotated list of “recommended resources,” however, available at <http://www.bordc.org/recom-resources.htm>. In particular, see Bovard 2003 and Hentoff 2003.

As for trusting the government, the fact—well established in history and in contemporary reality—is that, contrary to what all conservatives seem to believe, the government can be trusted to do the right thing and to do it well even *less* in foreign and defense policy than it can be trusted in matters of domestic policy (Higgs 1994, 298–307). Because national-security matters lie outside the immediate experience of the great bulk of the citizens, the government can get away with waste, fraud, brutality, and idiocy far more easily in foreign affairs than it can when prescribing student exams, building houses for poor people, or relieving Grandma’s aches and pains. The history of U.S. foreign and defense policy in the past sixty-five years is an unrelieved tale of mendacity, corruption, and criminal blundering (Kwitney 1984; Higgs 1987, 1990, 2004; Leebaert 2002). If the government can’t fix the potholes in Washington, D.C., it certainly can’t build a viable liberal democratic state in Iraq. No one of sound mind can suppose that it will even try, much less that it will succeed. This adventure, like so much else that the government undertakes, is a gigantic hoax, and all too much of it verges on racketeering of the sort described by the legendary Marine general Smedley Butler.²

But if the government *were* able and willing to carry out an effective global “war on terrorism” by means of its present policy of empire building and naked aggression (politely called “preventive war”), would the benefits of that policy justify the costs being borne? Not for a moment. The costs are real and huge—hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of dead and wounded so far just for the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention again the grave injuries to civil and economic liberties here at home. The benefits, to the extent that any exist at all, accrue almost entirely to a small coterie of political leaders and their supporters among the power elite—for the most part their cronies in the military-industrial, financial, and petroleum sectors. Ideological zealots dedicated to serving the interests of Israel’s Likud Party and members of certain Christian sects thrilled by the prospect of apocalyptic mayhem in the Holy Land go along for the sheer intoxication of the spree, the former serving as high-level conspirators and disinformation specialists and the latter forming a legion of useful idiots, a sort of ten-million-strong Karl Rove Brigade on election day.³ Can anyone who values the preservation of a free society react except with disgust to any aspect of this criminally lethal and massively destructive government fiasco?

2. For Butler’s testimony, see the material at <http://lexrex.com/enlightened/articles/warisaracket.htm>.

3. The most authoritative source on the neoconservative (neocon) zealots who have operated at the highest levels of the Pentagon hierarchy is Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, who “from May 2002 until February 2003 . . . observed firsthand the formation of the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans and watched the latter stages of the neoconservative capture of the policy-intelligence nexus in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq” (Kwiatkowski 2004). Kwiatkowski, now retired from the Air Force, has written many articles that are accessible on the World Wide Web. Among many other informative sources on the neocon schemers, see especially Lobe 2003a, 2003b, and 2004.

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