

Jacks of No Trade, Masters of War

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JOSEPH R. STROMBERG

You will probably never see Ralph Raico, professor emeritus of history at Buffalo State College, holding forth on the History Channel surrounded by wide-eyed naïfs eager to improve their mastery of American Establishment gospel. His new book, *Great Wars and Great Leaders: A Libertarian Rebuttal* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010) shows why. Yet Raico has a well-earned reputation as a classical-liberal historian who has made important contributions to the history of German liberalism, translated Ludwig von Mises's *Liberalism*, broadened our knowledge of liberal class-conflict theory, and accomplished much more. There is more to a historian's achievement than superficial public acclaim.

In a typical Raico essay, the reader finds solid research, detailed knowledge of relevant sources, deft deployment of quotations, and careful interpretation, complemented by wit, devastating understatement, and an occasional outburst that might seem intemperate had he not just written several pages that render the point both inevitable and obvious. The materials in his new book have been published previously, but the first three chapters have been greatly expanded to good effect. Because they amount to 60 percent of the book, I deal mainly with them in this review. Each of these three chapters provides an excellent overview of the main issues of the period under consideration as well as a good introduction to essential historical sources.

Wars, Wars, and Rumors of Wars

With superb moral clarity, Raico states in his introduction that the task of history is essentially one of “revisionism” and especially the undermining of “excuses for war”

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(p. vii). He notes the declension of Europe's nineteenth-century liberal parties into "machines for the exploitation of society by the now victorious predatory middle classes" (p. ix, a point also made in the foreword by Robert Higgs). From then to now, it has fallen to consistent and critical liberals such as Richard Cobden, John Bright, William Graham Sumner, Gustave de Molinari, Albert Jay Nock, H. L. Mencken, Frank Chodorov, Murray Rothbard, Leonard Liggio, and others to expose the motives of apparently "liberal" wars.

The First European Suicide Attempt, 1914–1918

Raico's first chapter, "World War I: The Turning Point," sees the war of 1914–18 as the Great Disaster that set the tone and course of the dreadful twentieth century. Given the mass slaughter, ideological extremism, and sheer state building that accompanied the war, this characterization is no exaggeration. Raico is of course concerned to sketch the war's impact on American politics and life—none of it good. Here his mastery of the relevant literature and his immunity to encrusted wartime myths, old and new alike, serve us well.

Raico does not shortchange the reader on essential background: the emerging alliance system that pitted Allied Powers against Central Powers, Serbian ambitions, Balkan Wars, Pan-Slavism, and the dangers of mobilization. Neither does he overlook the commitments made to France (and therefore to Russia) by a minority of the British cabinet—a secret (and undemocratic) undertaking that plays hell with the fashionable "democratic peace" theory (p. 6).

Once the European war began in August 1914, the outwardly "neutral" United States found its shipping at the mercy of the warring powers. (Americans had been here before, a century earlier.) Raico spares no details, especially regarding the international law of the case. Britain undertook a hunger blockade (pp. 44–45) to starve the Germans. (Chapter 9, "Starving a People into Submission," pursues this topic further.) Certain consequences followed, chief among them being German resort to submarine warfare. The U.S. ruling elite could never manage to connect these two things (p. 28, citing Edwin M. Borchard and William P. Lage). They knew much and understood little.

Worse luck for the Americans, between 1914 and 1917 the United States had two war parties and no peace party (p. 27), a condition that by now seems entirely normal. Northeastern Anglophile intellectuals, clergymen, politicians, and big business took England's side from the start and saw their chief problem as maneuvering the rest of the country into war on the Allied side. Raico accordingly makes acid comments on the U.S. ambassador to Britain, Walter Hines Page, who practically served as a member of the British cabinet, and more particularly on Robert Lansing, William Jennings Bryan's successor as U.S. secretary of state (Bryan had taken the administration's "peace" rhetoric entirely too seriously). Raico highlights passages in Lansing's *War Memoirs* (1935) that admit that all of his diplomatic notes complaining

about British naval practices were meaningless charades that “ensured the continuance of the controversy and left the questions unsettled, which was necessary in order to leave this country free to act and even act illegally when it entered the war” (qtd. on p. 30).

Raico draws the rather straightforward conclusion that such postwar revelations “[explain] the passion of the anti-war movement before the Second World War much better than the imaginary ‘Nazi sympathies’ or ‘anti-Semitism’ nowadays invoked by ignorant interventionist writers” (p. 30 n.).

Villains abound in this chapter, but the Villain in Chief is surely Thomas Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States from 1913 to 1921—and rightly so, as Raico soon demonstrates. Despite his constant Jeffersonian rhetoric (in which he was even less sincere than Jefferson), Professor Wilson was an ambitious Hamiltonian state builder, “fascinated by the power of the Presidency and how it could be augmented by meddling in foreign affairs and dominating overseas territories” (p. 18). As for Wilson’s “idealism,” Raico concludes that it masked a well-developed need for power.

The Wilson administration’s conduct on the home front (1917–19) established once and for all “the right of a government legitimized by formal democratic processes to dispose at will of the lives, liberty, and property of its subjects” (p. 38), idle talk about democracy and its global prospects notwithstanding. Among the precedents thus established is that ancient blunderbuss the Espionage Act of 1917, with which certain present-day politicians—bipartisan as ever—hope to solve their problems with freedom of the press and Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. (Yes, the damned thing is still on the books.) Only a very *exceptional* nation could have lived through World War I at home and, having forgotten the whole thing, still regard itself as some sort of world emporium of freedom.

A Cousin Too Far: Winston Churchill

Chapter 2, “Rethinking Churchill,” is a wonderful essay that undermines the chief foundations of the Churchill legend brick by brick. The idea that Churchill was unusually farsighted in regard to Hitler falls by the wayside, along with Churchill’s wartime statesmanship, his strategic genius, his humanity, and his “conservatism.” What remain when Raico is finished are Churchill’s opportunism, his contributions to the welfare state, and his lifelong need to be in a war (any war)—in short, his active life as “a Man of the State” (p. 53). Raico naturally notices those to whom Churchill’s reputation is of great service: an international interventionist class that has adopted Churchill as a “perfect symbol and an inexhaustible vein of high-toned blather” (p. 54). This view may seem rather shocking, but there is no shortage of concrete evidence for Raico’s seemingly unkind evaluation, and adult readers can weigh it for themselves.

Old Rightists, in whose tradition Raico works, did not trust or admire Winston Churchill, nor did they write lightweight spy novels about the derring-do of MI-6 or Office of Strategic Services agents, as did a famous New Right luminary. In

“statesmen” such as Churchill, as in the organs of state security, they saw a pattern of empire, militarism, and inevitable reactions on domestic life, which they prayed the United States would avoid.

The Buck Stopped There, but Not Soon Enough

Harry Truman, a state-building New Deal Democrat from Missouri, inherited Franklin D. Roosevelt’s wars and made the most of them. He even found a way to make wartime powers accrue to the state permanently through the invention of a “cold war”—neither war nor peace (though not quite in the way the Bolsheviks used the phrase at Brest Litovsk). Truman was scarcely alone in this venture; the whole U.S. wartime establishment had an interest in the new model of permanent semimobilization. Here, too, Raico provides ample context, sequence, and consequences in what amounts to a minihistory of Cold War origins.

With the U.S. government circumnavigating the world these days, moralizing about nuclear weapons, it is nice to see Raico reopen the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He concludes that there simply was no “need” to drop the so-called weapons under any credible definition of such words as *military* or *necessity*. Yet Truman did drop them and thought little of doing so. Once more Raico provides sources and reasons.

As the chill of Cold War set in, the beleaguered Republican (and nearly “Old Right”) Congress, elected in 1946 on hopes of returning to normalcy, gradually yielded to a series of Cold War liberal initiatives: aid to Greece and (unthreatened) Turkey in 1947, the Marshall Plan to rebuild western Europe (1948), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (1949)—an entangling alliance with a big future currently before it, albeit one with no basis in the text of the treaty itself. (Reviewer’s aside: Robert Taft warned us that NATO might turn out badly.) Administration planners, unsatisfied, poured their boundless ambitions into One Ring, or at least into National Security Council Memo No. 68 (June 1950). Even they doubted they could get Congress to pay for what they wanted, but then “thank God Korea came along” (Truman adviser, qtd. on p. 117). There is more, of course, and Raico’s account of the *conduct* of the Korean War on the American side is worth the price of admission. (Short version: bombs, bombs, bombs, and more bombs—all to no avail.)

At home, acting on his steroid-enhanced presidential war powers (whatever they may be), Truman seized American steel plants in April 1952 to avert a looming strike. Senator Robert Taft (R–Ohio) joined left liberals in condemnation. The U.S. Supreme Court performed a daring balancing act and reasoned that Truman had overstepped, but without achieving any great juridical clarity (my two cents). Raico calls attention to Old Right Congressman George Bender (R–Ohio), who called for Truman’s impeachment over the steel seizure. Bender doubted the American people could tolerate such a precedent (April 19, 1952). Raico adds: “Of course the American people could and did tolerate such a precedent. What is still uncertain is whether there is still any limit

whatever to their tolerance of acts of oppression by the government” (p. 127 n.). One can see why Truman’s record inspires contemporary unitary-executive theorists and various aspirants to the mighty Office. (*Side note:* Conservatives inclined to join the current fad for the thought of Carl Schmitt might wish to reconsider it carefully after reviewing Raico’s account of Harry S. Truman’s style of decisionism.)

Other Essays and Reviews

Chapter 6, “Trotsky: The Ignorance and the Evil,” takes that historical figure down a peg or two, adding Trotsky’s remains to the critique of Marxism already undertaken in chapter 4, “Marxist Dreams and Soviet Realities.” Chapters 8 and 12 return to World War I, and Chapter 10 deals with Old Right journalist John T. Flynn, a great critic of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s primitive accumulation of power. Chapter 11, reviewing Justus D. Doenecke’s *Storm on the Horizon* (2000), discusses the character of a forgotten and much-hated yet authentically American antiwar movement, the America First Committee.

Last Words

As telegraphed by the book’s subtitle, Raico is no respecter of great presidents but instead judges them by the standards of the libertarian Old Right. Unhappily for all of us, the story these chapters tell is one of decline. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Americans had a set of rights, whether grounded in natural law, public law, or mere practice; these rights were not always honored in practice, but they were nonetheless honored *far more* than they are today. This hard fall seems to go unnoticed. The chief culprit (there are others) has been the central state’s ability to find itself a series of overseas adventures even unto empire—precisely the connection Wilson affirmed and the Old Right deplored. The Bush–Obama idea of the presidency entails the American executive’s right to arrest, torture, and bomb the world and anyone in it. Those who doubt this claim will find these powers asserted in official public documents and in the works of whole battalions of approving scholars, whose views run from tidy-minded liberal imperialism to neoconservative theorems on perpetual war. (He who laughs has not yet read Yoo, Posner, Vermeule, Bybee, Koh, Lederman, Barron, and many others.)

If Raico were of my generation, he might refer, with Dave Davies, to “[t]he wonderful world of technology—Napalm, hydrogen bombs, biological warfare” and complain of having been “born in a welfare state ruled by bureaucracy, controlled by civil servants and people dressed in grey” (The Kinks, “20th Century Man,” on *Muswell Hillbillies* [1971]). In fact, Raico tackles that very military-industrial-intellectual complex and can actually remember an America in which there was considerably less of it. Better yet, he backs his complaints with impressive historical materials, focused scholarship, and an honest passion for truth.

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