

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE *CRISIS AND LEVIATHAN** FREE!



"*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value."

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper's*

"*The Independent Review* is excellent."

—**GARY BECKER**, Noble Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [*The Independent Review*](#) and receive a free book of your choice* such as the 25th Anniversary Edition of *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*, by Founding Editor Robert Higgs. This quarterly journal, guided by co-editors Christopher J. Coyne, and Michael C. Munger, and Robert M. Whaples offers leading-edge insights on today's most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Thought-provoking and educational, [*The Independent Review*](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate!

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



*Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

Perfect for students or anyone on the go! *The Independent Review* is available on mobile devices or tablets: iOS devices, Amazon Kindle Fire, or Android through Magzter.



Etceteras . . .

War Is Horrible, but . . .

ROBERT HIGGS

Anyone who has done even a little reading about the theory and practice of war—whether in political theory, international relations, theology, history, or common journalistic commentary—has encountered a sentence of the form “War is horrible, but . . .” In this construction, the phrase that follows the conjunction explains why a certain war was (or now is or someday will be) an action that ought to have been (or still ought to be) undertaken, notwithstanding its admitted horrors. The frequent, virtually formulaic use of this expression attests that nobody cares to argue, say, that war is a beautiful, humane, uplifting, or altogether splendid course of action and therefore the more often people fight, the better.

Some time ago—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example—one might have encountered a writer such as Theodore Roosevelt who forthrightly affirmed that war is manly and invigorating for the nation and the soldiers who engage in it: war keeps a nation from “getting soft” (Morris 1979). Although this opinion is no longer expressed openly with great frequency, something akin to it may yet survive, as Chris Hedges has argued in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002). Nowadays, however, even those who find meaning for their lives by involvement in war, perhaps even only marginal or symbolic involvement, do not often extol war as such.

They are likely instead to justify a nation’s engagement in war by calling attention to alternative and even more horrible outcomes that, retrospectively, would have occurred if the nation had not gone to war or, prospectively, will occur if it does not go to war. This seemingly reasonable “balancing” form of argument often sounds stronger than it really is, especially when it is made more or less in passing. People may easily be swayed by a weak argument, however, if they fail to appreciate the defects of the typically expressed “horrible, but” apology for war.

Rather than plow through various sources on my bookshelves to compile examples, I have availed myself of modern technology. A Google search for the exact phrase “war is horrible but” on May 21, 2012, identified 58,100 instances of it. Rest assured that this number is smaller than the entire universe of such usage—some instances most likely have yet to be captured electronically. Among the examples I drew from the World Wide Web are the following fourteen statements. I identify the person who made the statement only when he is well known.

1. “War is horrible. But no one wants to see a world in which a regime with no regard whatsoever for international law—for the welfare of its own people—or for the will of the United Nations—has weapons of mass destruction.” (U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage [2003])

This statement was part of a speech Richard Armitage gave on January 21, 2003, shortly before the U.S. government unleashed its armed forces to inflict “shock and awe” on the nearly defenseless people of Iraq. The speech repeated the Bush administration’s standard prewar litany of accusations, including several claims later revealed to be false, so it cannot be viewed as anything but bellicose propaganda. Yet it does not differ much from what many others were saying at the time.

On its own terms, the statement scarcely serves to justify a war. The conditions outlined—a regime’s disregard of international law, its own people’s well-being, and the will of the United Nations, combined with possession of weapons of mass destruction—apply to several nations. They no more justified a military attack on Iraq than they justified an attack on Pakistan, France, India, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, Israel, or the United States itself.

2. “War is terrible, war is horrible, but war is also at times necessary and the only means of stopping evil.”

The *only* means of stopping evil? How can such singularity exist? Has evil conduct never been stopped except by war? For example, has shunning—exclusion from commerce, financial systems, communications, transportation systems, and other means of international cooperation—never served to discipline an evil nation-state? Might it do so if seriously tried? (If these questions give the impression that I am suggesting the possibility of resort to embargo or blockade, that perception is not exactly correct. Although I support various forms of voluntary, peaceful withdrawal of cooperation with evil-doing states, I do not endorse state-enforced—that is, violent or potentially violent—embargoes and blockades.) Why must we leap to the conclusion that only war will serve, when other measures have scarcely even been considered, much less seriously attempted? If war is really as horrible as everyone says, it would seem that we have a moral obligation to try very hard to achieve the desired suppression of evil doing by means other than resort to warfare, which is itself always a manifest evil, even when it is seemingly the lesser one.

3. “No news shows [during World War II] were showing German civilians getting fried and saying how sad it was. It was war against butchers and war is horrible, but it’s war, and to defend human decency, sometimes war is necessary.” (Ben Stein [2006])

Ben Stein is a knowledgeable man. He surely knows that the U.S. government imposed draconian censorship of war news during World War II. Perhaps the censors had their reasons for keeping scenes of incinerated German civilians away from the U.S. public. After all, even if Americans in general had extraordinarily cruel and callous attitudes toward German civilians during the war, many of them had relatives and friends in Germany.

Stein appears to lump *all* Germans into the class of “butchers” against whom he claims the war was being waged. He certainly must understand, however, that many persons in Germany—children, for example—were not butchers and bore absolutely no responsibility for the actions of the government officials who were. Yet these innocents, too, suffered the dire effects of, among other things, the terror bombing that the U.S. and British air forces inflicted on many German cities (“Strategic Bombing” n.d.).

To say, as Stein and many others have said, that “war is war” gets us nowhere; in a moral sense, this tautology warrants nothing. Many people, however, evidently consider all moral questions about the conduct of war to have been settled simply by their having labeled or by their having accepted someone else’s labeling of certain actions as “war.” Having chanted this exculpatory incantation over the state’s organized violence, they believe that all transgressions associated with that violence are automatically absolved—as the saying goes, “all’s fair in love and war.” It does not help matters that regimes treat some of the most egregious transgressors as heroes.

Finally, Stein’s claim that “to defend human decency, sometimes war is necessary” is at best paradoxical because it says in effect that human indecency, which war itself surely exemplifies, is sometimes necessary to defend human decency. Perhaps he had in mind the backfires that firefighters sometimes set to help them extinguish fires. This metaphor, however, seems farfetched in connection with war. It is difficult to think of anything that consists of as many different forms of indecency as war does. Not only is war’s essence the large-scale wreaking of death and destruction, but its side effects and its consequences in the aftermath run a wide range of evils as well. Whatever else war may be, it surely qualifies as the most indecent type of action people can take: it reduces them to the level of the most ferocious beasts and often accomplishes little more than setting the stage for the next, reactive round of such savagery. In any event, considered strictly as a way of sustaining human decency, it gets a failing grade every time because it invariably magnifies the malignity that it purports to resist.

4. “War is horrible, but slavery is worse.” (Winston Churchill as quoted in Dear and Foote 1995, xv)

Maybe slavery is worse, but maybe it’s not; it depends on the conditions of the war and the conditions of the slavery. Moreover, if one seeks to justify a war on the

strength of this statement, one had best be completely certain that but for war, slavery will be the outcome. In many wars, however, slavery was never a possibility because neither side sought to enslave its enemy. Many wars have been fought for limited objectives, if only because more ambitious objectives appeared unattainable or not worth their cost. No war in U.S. history may be accurately described as having been waged to prevent the enslavement of the American people. Some people talk that way about World War II or the Cold War, if it be counted as a war, but such talk has no firm foundation in facts.

Some may object that the War Between the States was fought to prevent the ongoing slavery of the blacks then held in thrall. But however deeply this view may be embedded in American mythology, it is contrary to fact. As Abraham Lincoln made crystal clear in his letter of August 22, 1862, to *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, he had not mobilized the armed forces to free the slaves, but only to prevent the seceding states from leaving the union: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.”¹ When Lincoln brought forth the Emancipation Proclamation—a document carefully drawn so that at the time of its promulgation it freed not a single slave—he issued it only because at that time it seemed to be a useful means for the attainment of his “paramount object,” preserving the union. The slaves, including those in states that had not seceded, were ultimately freed for good by ratification (at gunpoint in the former Confederate states) of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, which is to say as a ramification of the war, which itself had not been undertaken in 1861 in pursuit of this then-unforeseen outcome.

5. “You may think that the Iraq War is horrible, but there may be some times when you can justify [going to war].”

Perhaps war *can* be justified at “some times,” but this statement itself in no way shows that the Iraq War can be justified, and it seems all too obvious that it cannot be. If it could have been justified, the government that launched it would not have had to resort to a succession of weak excuses for waging it, each such excuse being manifestly inadequate or simply false. The obvious insufficiency of any of the reasons put forward explains why so many of us put so much time and effort into trying to divine exactly what *did* impel the Bush administration’s rush to war.

6. “War is horrible, but sometimes we need to fight.”

Need to fight for what? The objective dictates whether war is a necessary means for its attainment. If the objective was to preserve Americans’ freedoms and “way of

1. Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, available at <http://www.civilwarhome.com/lincolngreeley.htm>.

life,” the U.S. government certainly did not need to fight most of the enemies against whom it waged war historically. Oddly enough, the only time the enemy actually posed such a threat, during the Cold War, the United States did *not* go to war against that enemy directly, although it did fight (unnecessarily) the enemy’s less-menacing allies—North Korea, China, and North Vietnam. In the other wars the United States has fought, it might well have remained at peace had U.S. leaders been sincerely interested in peace rather than committed to warfare.

7. “Of course war is horrible, but it will always exist, and I’m sick of these pacifist [expletive deleted] ruining any shred of political decency that they can manage.”

Many people have observed that wars have recurred for thousands of years and therefore will probably continue to occur from time to time. The unstated insinuation seems to be that in view of war’s long-running recurrence, nothing can be done about it, so we should all grow up and admit that war is as natural and hence as unalterable as the sun’s rising in the east each morning. Warfare is an inescapable aspect of “how the world works.”

This outlook contains at least two difficulties. First, many other conditions also have had long-running histories: for example, reliance on astrologers as experts in foretelling the future; affliction with cancers; submission to rulers who claim to dominate their subjects by virtue of divine descent or appointment; and many others. People eventually overcame or continue to work to overcome each of these long-established conditions. Science revealed that astrology is nothing more than an elaborate body of superstition; scientists and doctors have discovered how to control or cure certain forms of cancer and are attempting to do the same for other forms; and citizens learned to laugh at the pretensions of rulers who claim divine descent or appointment (at least, they *had* learned to do so until George W. Bush successfully revived this doctrine among the benighted rubes who form the Republican base). Because wars spring in large part from people’s stupidity, ignorance, and gullibility, it is conceivable that alleviation of these conditions might have the effect of diminishing the frequency of warfare, if not of eliminating it altogether.

Second, even if nothing *can* be done to stop the periodic outbreak of war, it does not follow that we ought to shut up and accept every war without complaint. No serious person expects, say, that evil can be eliminated from the human condition, yet we condemn it and struggle against its realization in human affairs. We strive to divert potential evildoers from their malevolent course of action. Scientists and doctors continue to seek cures for cancers that have afflicted humanity for millennia. Even conditions that cannot be wholly eliminated can sometimes be mitigated, but only if someone tries to mitigate them. War should belong to this class of events.

Finally, whatever else might be said about the pacifists, one may surely assert that if everyone were a pacifist, no wars would occur. Pacifism may be criticized on various grounds, as it always has been and still is, but to say that pacifists “lack any shred of

political decency” seems itself to be an indecent description. Remember: war is horrible, as everybody now concedes but many immediately put out of mind.

8. “Every war is horrible, but freedom and justice cannot be allowed to be defeated by tyranny and injustice. As hideous as war is, it is not as hideous as the things it can stop and prevent.”

This statement assumes that war amounts to a contest between freedom and justice on one side and tyranny and injustice on the other. One scarcely commits the dreaded sin of moral equivalence, however, by observing that few wars present such a stark contrast, in which only the children of God fight on one side and only the children of Satan fight on the other. One reason why war is so horrible is that it invariably drags into its charnel house many—again, the children are the most undeniable examples—who must be held blameless for any actions or threats that might have incited the war.

Even if we set aside such clear-cut innocents and consider only persons in the upper echelons of the conflicting sides, it is rare to find only angels on one side and only demons on the other. In World War II, for example, the Allied states were led by such angels as Winston Churchill, who relished the horrific terror bombing of German cities; Josef Stalin, one of the greatest mass murderers of all time; Franklin D. Roosevelt, of whose moral uprightness the less said the better; and Harry S Truman, who took pleasure in annihilating hundreds of thousands of defenseless Japanese noncombatants first with incendiary bombs and last with nuclear weapons. Yes, the other side had Adolf Hitler, whose fiendishness I have no desire to deny or minimize, but the point is that the overall character of the leadership on both sides sufficiently attests that there was enough evil to go around. As for the ordinary soldiers, of course, everyone who knows anything about actual combat appreciates that the men on both sides quickly become brutalized and routinely commit atrocities of every imaginable size and shape.

So it is far from clear that war is always or even typically “not as hideous as the things it can stop and prevent.” On many occasions, refusal to resort to war, even in the face of undeniable evils, may still be the better course. When World War II ended, leaving more than 62 million dead, most of them civilians, and hundreds of millions displaced, homeless, wounded, sick, or impoverished, the survivors might well have doubted whether conditions would have been even more terrible if the war had not taken place. (The dead were unavailable for comment.) To make matters worse, owing to the war the monster Stalin gained control of an enormous area stretching from Czechoslovakia to Korea; and because of the defeat of the Japanese Empire, the monster Mao Zedong would soon take complete control of China and impose a murderous reign of terror on the world’s most populous country that cost the lives of perhaps another 60 million persons (as many as 73 million, according to one plausible estimate).²

2. See the new estimates of the casualties of Mao’s reign compiled by R. J. Rummel at <http://democraticpeace.wordpress.com/2008/11/24/reevaluating-chinas-democide-to-73000000>.

It is difficult to believe that the situation in China would have been so awful even if the Japanese had succeeded in incorporating China into the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

9. “I grant you the war is horrible, but it is a war, after all. You have to compare apples to apples, and when I do that, I see this war is going well.”

This statement about the U.S. war in Iraq exemplifies what some call the “not as bad as Hamburg-Dresden-Tokyo-Hiroshima-Nagasaki” defense of brutal warfare. If we make such pinnacles of savagery our standard, then, sure enough, everything else pales by comparison. But why should anyone adopt such a grotesque standard? To do so is to concede that anything less horrible than the very worst cases is “not so bad.” In truth, warfare’s effects are sufficiently hideous at every level. What the Israelis did in Lebanon a few years ago bears no comparison with the February 1945 Allied attack on Dresden, of course, but the sight of even one little Lebanese child dead, her bloody body gruesomely mangled by an explosion, ought to be enough to give pause to any proponent of resort to war. Try putting yourself in the place of that child’s mother.

10. “[Certain writers] all agreed that war is horrible but said the Bible gives government the authority to wage war to save innocent lives.”

For almost two thousand years, biblical scholars have been disputing what Christians may and may not do in regard to war. The dispute continues today, so the matter is certainly not resolved among devout Christians. Even if Christians may go to war to save innocent lives, however, a big question remains: Is the government going to war for this purpose or for one of the countless other purposes that lead governments to make war? Saving the innocent makes an appealing excuse, but it is often, if not always, only a pretext. “Just war” writers from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Grotius to the latest contributors have agonized over the ready availability of such pretexts and warned against the wickedness of advancing them when the real motives are less justifiable or even plainly immoral.³

For centuries, European combatants on all sides invoked God’s blessing for their wars against one another. As recently as World War II, the Germans claimed to have “Gott mit Uns,” a declaration that adorned the belt buckles of Wehrmacht soldiers in *both* world wars. Strange to say, in 1917 and 1918 Christian ministers of the gospel in pulpits across the United States were assuring their congregations that *their* nation-state was engaged in a “war for righteousness” (the title of Richard M. Gamble’s [2003] splendid book about this repellent episode). So the invocation of biblical authority really doesn’t get us very far: the enemy may be invoking the same authority.

Nowadays, of course, one side invokes the Jewish and Christian God, whereas the other calls on the blessing of Allah. Whether this bifurcated manner of gaining

3. For an excellent assessment of the most recent scholarship in the “just war” tradition, see Calhoun 2011.

divine sanction for the commission of mass murder and mayhem among the sons of Abraham represents progress or not, I leave to the learned theologians.

11. “War is horrible, but thank God we have men and women who are willing and able to protect our people and our freedom.”

These men and women may be willing and able to supply such protection, but do they? Our leaders constantly proclaim that their wars are aimed at protecting us and our freedoms—“We go forward,” declared George W. Bush, “to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world” (Bush 2001)—but one has to wonder about the truth of that proclamation, considering that in the entire history of warfare, each major U.S. war (with the possible exception of the War for Independence) left the general run of the American people with fewer freedoms after the war than they had enjoyed before the war.

In my book *Crisis and Leviathan* (1987, 123–58, 196–236), I document this ratchet effect in detail for the two world wars. After World War I, the government not only kept taxes far above their prewar levels but also retained newly court-sanctioned powers to conscript men for foreign wars, to interfere with virtually any private transaction in international trade and finance (Trading with the Enemy Act of 1917), and to suppress free speech in a draconian manner (Sedition Act of 1918). After World War II, the government again kept taxes much higher they had been before the war, retained for the first time a large peacetime military apparatus, created the CIA as a sort of personal presidential intelligence and quasi-military group, continued to draft men for military service even during peacetime, and engaged much more pervasively in central management and manipulation of the private economy. The people, for their part, gained the privilege of living with the very real threat of nuclear holocaust hovering over them for four decades while the U.S. government kept the Cold War pot boiling.

The so-called war on terror has struck deeply into Americans’ rights to privacy by vastly enhancing the government’s surveillance activities and virtually gutting the Fourth Amendment’s protection against warrantless searches and seizures. It has also led the government to create an agency now empowered to commit acts in U.S. airports that if committed by others would be prosecuted as sexual assault and battery and as criminal molestation of children. This “war” has also served to justify one of the greatest military-spending run-ups in U.S. history, leaving U.S. military-related spending—if correctly measured—greater than the comparable spending of all other nations combined. Nevertheless, Americans are no safer because of these sweeping infringements of their liberties, many of which have been de facto pork barrel projects and others of which have been nothing more than security theater. War, whether real or make-believe, serves to justify huge increases in government spending, taxing, borrowing, and exertion of power over private affairs, and such government surges attract opportunists galore while doing little or nothing to improve people’s real security or to protect their freedom. Indeed, in the war on terror, the government

has added fuel to the fire of Muslim rage against Americans in the Middle East but achieved nothing positive to compensate for this heightened threat.⁴

Every time the rulers set out to protect the village, they decide that the best way to do so is to destroy it in the process. Call me a cynic, but I can't help wondering whether protection of the people and their freedoms was really the state's objective, and after fifty years of thinking about the matter, I have come up with some pretty attractive alternative hypotheses. One of them is that, as Marine General Smedley Butler famously expressed it, "war is a racket," but I have other alternative hypotheses, too.

12. "War is horrible but some economic good came out of World War II. It brought the United States out of one of the greatest slumps in history, the Great Depression."

This venerable broken-window fallacy refuses to die, no matter how many times a stake is driven through its heart. Most Americans believe it. Worse, because less excusable, nearly all historians and even a large majority of economists do so as well. I have been whacking at this nonsense for several decades, but, so far as I can tell, I have scarcely made a dent in it. Should anyone care to see a complete counterargument, I recommend the first five chapters of my 2006 book *Depression, War, and Cold War*.

In brief, the government did not—indeed, could not—create wealth simply by spending vast amounts of money (much of it newly created as a result of cooperative Federal Reserve policies) on soldiers and weapons. The government did wipe out unemployment during the war, but only by putting millions of men in the armed forces. During World War II, these forces absorbed, primarily by conscription, 16 million persons at one time or another (about three times the number of persons officially counted as unemployed in 1941), while causing a similar number of people to be employed in military-supply industries. The economy looked prosperous because everybody was working and (except those in the armed forces) earning seemingly good wages and salaries. Yet the supply of civilian goods and services actually shrank, and many ordinary goods were not available at all (for example, new cars) or were available only in limited, rationed amounts (for example, meats, sugar, canned foods, gasoline, and tires). Private investment also dropped sharply as the government took over the allocation of capital, directing it into arms-related projects. So the apparent "wartime prosperity" was spurious. Only when the war ended and the military machine was largely dismantled did genuine prosperity return, for the first time since 1929.

13. "War is horrible, but whining about it is worse. Either put up or shut up."

Some people always reject the denunciation of any familiar social institution or conduct unless the denouncer offers a "constructive criticism"—that is, unless he puts forward a promising plan to eliminate the evil he denounces. I admit at once that

4. On the war on terror, see my books published in 2005 and 2007 and, for more recent years, my continuing posts at the Independent Institute's group blog *The Beacon*, which is available at <http://www.independent.org/blog/index.php>.

I have not discovered a cure for the human tendency to resort to war when much more intelligent and humane alternatives are available. I am trying to convince people that on nearly all such occasions they are allowing their rulers to bamboozle them and turn them into cannon fodder for purposes that serve the rulers' interests, not the people's. I am getting nowhere in this effort, but I am going to keep trying.

14. "Of course, war is horrible, but at present it's still the only guarantee to maintain peace."

This statement as it stands is self-contradictory because it affirms that the only way to make sure that we will have peace is by going to war. Perhaps, if we are feeling generous, we may interpret the statement as the time-honored exhortation that to maintain the peace, we should *prepare* for war, hoping that by dissuading aggressors from moving against us, our preparation will preserve the peace. Although this reworded policy is not self-contradictory, it is dangerous because the preparation we make for war may itself move us toward actually going to war. For example, preparation for war may entail increasing the number of military officers and allowing the top brass to exert greater influence in making foreign policy. Those officers may believe that without war their careers will go nowhere, and so they may tilt their advice to civilian authorities toward risking or actually making war even when peace might easily be preserved. Likewise, military suppliers may use their political influence to foster international suspicions and fears that otherwise might be allayed. Wars are not good for business in general, but they are good for the munitions contractors. Certain legislators may develop an interest in militarism; perhaps it helps them to attract campaign contributions from arms contractors, veterans' groups, and members of the national guard and military reserve organizations. Pretty soon we may find ourselves dealing, as President Dwight D. Eisenhower did, with a military-industrial-congressional complex, and we may find that it packs a great deal of political punch and acts in a way that, all things considered, diminishes the chance of keeping the country at peace.⁵

From the foregoing commentary, a recurrent theme may be extracted: those who argue that "war is horrible, but . . ." nearly always use this rhetorical construction not to frame a genuinely serious and honest balancing of reasons for and against war, but only to acknowledge what cannot be hidden—that war is horrible—and then to pass on immediately to an affirmation that notwithstanding the horrors, whose actual forms and dimensions they neither specify nor examine in detail, a certain war ought to be fought.

The reasons given to justify a war's being fought, however, generally amount to claims that cannot support a strong case. They often are not even bona fide reasons, but mere propaganda, especially when they emanate from official sources. They sometimes

5. On the military-industrial complex, see Higgs 1990 and Ledbetter 2011.

rest on historical errors, such as the claim that the armed forces in past wars have somehow kept foreigners from depriving us of our liberties. And the case for war usually rests on ill-founded speculation about what will happen if we do not go to war.

People need to recognize, however, that government officials and their running dogs in the media, among others, are not soothsayers. None of us knows the future, but these interested parties lack a disinterested motive for making a careful, well-informed forecast. They have, as the saying goes, an agenda of their own. “The best and the brightest” of our leaders and their kept experts generally amount to little more than what C. Wright Mills called “crackpot realists,” and on occasion, specifically since September 11, 2001, they do not meet even that standard (see Leebaert 2011). Hence, these geniuses, equipped with all of that secret information they constantly emphasize their critics do not possess, have recently put forward forecasts of a “cake walk” through Iraq, a “slam dunk” on finding lots of weapons of mass destruction there, and liberal-democratic dominoes falling across the Middle East—forecasts that fit more comfortably in a lunatic asylum than in a discussion among rational, well-informed people.

The government generally relies on marshalling patriotic emotion and reflexive loyalty rather than on making a sensible case for going to war. Much of the discussion that does take place is a sham because the government officials who pretend to listen to other opinions, as U.S. leaders did most recently during 2002 and early 2003, have already decided what they are going to do, no matter what other people may say. The rulers know that once the war starts, nearly everybody will fall into line and “support the troops.”

If someone demands that the skeptic about war offer constructive criticism, here is my proposal: always insist that the *burden of proof* rests heavily on the warmonger. This protocol, which is now anything but standard operating procedure, is eminently judicious precisely because, as we all recognize, war is horrible. Given its horrors, which in reality are much greater than most people appreciate, it only makes sense that those who propose to enter into those horrors make a very, very strong case for doing so. If they cannot—and I submit that they almost never can—then people will serve their interests best by declining an invitation to war. As a rule, the most rational, humane, and auspicious course of action is indeed to give peace a chance.

References

- Armitage, Richard. 2003. Speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace. January 21. Available at: <http://www.acronym.org.uk/docs/0301/doc12.htm>.
- Bush, George W. 2001. 9/11 Address to the Nation. Available at: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/9/11_Address_to_the_Nation.
- Calhoun, Laurie. 2011. Political Philosophers on War: Arguments inside the “Just War” Box. *The Independent Review* 15, no. 3 (Winter): 447–61.

- Dear, I. C. B., and M. R. D. Foot, eds. 1995. *Oxford Companion to World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gamble, Richard M. 2003. *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books.
- Hedges, Chris. 2002. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: Random House.
- Higgs, Robert. 1987. *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . ed. 1990. *Arms, Politics, and the Economy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Holmes and Meier.
- . 2005. *Resurgence of the Warfare State: The Crisis since 9/11*. Oakland, Calif.: The Independent Institute.
- . 2006. *Depression, War, and Cold War: Studies in Political Economy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. *Neither Liberty nor Safety: Fear, Ideology, and the Growth of Government*. Oakland, Calif.: The Independent Institute.
- Ledbetter, James. 2011. *Unwarranted Influence: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Leebaert, Derek. 2011. *Magic and Mayhem: The Delusions of American Foreign Policy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Morris, Edmund. 1979. *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. New York: Ballantine.
- Stein, Ben. 2006. Out of Disproportion. *American Spectator*, July 21. Available at: <http://spectator.org/archives/2006/07/21/out-of-disproportion>.
- Strategic Bombing during World War II. n.d. *Wikipedia*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_bombing_during_World_War_II.