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# Libertarians and Foreign Policy

## *The Individual, the State, and War*



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**H**uman liberty is the foundation of a good and just society. Men and women flourish when they are able to live, work, and play where they desire. People live better, more fulfilling lives when they are free to associate with the people they choose and how they choose. The presumption of liberty and against the use of force to coerce or compel a person to behave in a particular way is the defining feature of libertarianism.

The presumption of individual liberty goes hand in hand with that of nonintervention. Libertarians believe that legitimate governments possess limited and enumerated powers to protect their citizens' basic rights. They should provide a system for adjudicating disputes and impose sanctions or punishment for those who would willingly transgress the rights of others. The state should otherwise interfere as little as possible with an individual's ability to earn an honest living and to enjoy the fruits of his or her labor. Libertarians believe, therefore, that in domestic affairs the best governments are small governments.

The same principle of limited and enumerated powers applies when government turns its attention beyond its borders. Libertarians believe that people should be free to buy and sell goods and services, study and travel, and otherwise interact with peoples from other lands and places as well as be generally unencumbered by the

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intrusions of government. Ideally, a government will pursue policies that allow its citizens maximum freedom.

For example, governments often choose to have formal relationships with other governments and peoples. They engage in diplomacy and exchange ambassadors. These agents, acting on behalf of a government and representing the interests of that government's constituents, may negotiate treaties of friendship or establish rules governing trade between them. Such activities are wise and just to the extent that they facilitate their citizens' ability to live freely around the world and not merely in the country of their birth or the place where they reside or work.

Libertarians are skeptical, however, of government actions that depart from a narrow and well-defined mandate to facilitate maximum space for individual liberty. Take, for example, the case of foreign aid. Many libertarians object to the idea that citizens can be compelled by force (i.e., taxed) to pay for the construction of schools, roads, and bridges in their own communities, let alone in a distant state. And yet few would object to nongovernmental entities performing a similar service based on voluntary contributions of time and resources. After all, the ability of individuals to interact freely—from mutually beneficial trade to private charity—is a basic human right. This point reminds us that foreign policy is about much more than what a government does or does not do.

But although the facilitation of trade and other forms of voluntary engagement between individuals is an essential function of government, war remains the state's single most consequential foreign policy. Providing defense against threats, foreign and domestic, is one of the main reasons why governments came into existence in the first place. So although a country's foreign policy should not be defined solely by the wars that it does or does not fight, it is obvious that such decisions are the most far-reaching and thus deserving of the most scrutiny. And libertarians have traditionally been most skeptical of war because of the unique threat that wars pose to liberty.

This article explores the roots of these libertarian attitudes, with a particular focus on how they were manifest in the United States. It concludes with observations on the recent past and of how libertarian attitudes toward the use of force—and toward foreign policy generally—can appeal to a wider audience than merely the 13 to 15 percent of Americans who can reliably be called libertarians (Boaz, Kirby, and Ekins 2012).

## **Libertarians and War**

Though few libertarians are doctrinaire pacifists, libertarians have traditionally favored peace over war and have done so more consistently than progressives and conservatives. They have done so not merely because of the threat that war poses to life and liberty but also because of war's tendency to grow the power of the state.

Wars impede the free movement of goods, capital, and labor that is essential to economic prosperity; restrictions on such exchanges constitute an assault on fundamental individual rights. A government at war confiscates resources, undermining

and circumventing market forces and instituting a measure of regimentation and central planning that would never be tolerated in peacetime. Indeed, progressives and conservatives have on occasion found it easier to institute such restrictions during times of war and sometimes have even championed war for precisely these reasons.

Libertarians are wise to these schemes but rarely able to thwart them. War is the largest and most far-reaching of all government-run enterprises, and citizens' views of the state's legitimate authority subtly but perceptibly shift during wartime. "Individualism . . . flourishes during peacetime," wrote the late Ronald Hamowy for *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*, "but clashes with the collectivism, regimentation and herd mentality that war fosters" (2008, 374). Citizens who would typically demand to be shown an explicit reason for a particular government action grow quiescent during times of war. Those in uniform are bound by honor and law to obey the state's orders, as conveyed by the chain of command. Those who do not are often severely punished. Deserters face execution. Civilians on the home front, meanwhile, are reluctant to go against civilian authorities, too. Dissenters often face the threat of violence. The safer course is to go along. And the social stigma of opposing wartime measures is also very great. Such opposition can appear greedy or self-interested when one's fellow citizens are making heroic sacrifices. It might seem particularly petty, for example, to complain of your own privations—from higher taxes to the unavailability of certain foods or consumer goods—when a neighbor has lost a husband or son in combat.

In his sweeping survey *War and the Rise of the State* (1994), Bruce Porter summarizes the problem eloquently: "a government at war is a juggernaut of centralization determined to crush any internal opposition that impedes the mobilization of militarily vital resources. This centralizing tendency of war has made the rise of the state throughout much of history a disaster for human liberty and rights" (xv).

Classical liberals consistently opposed war. Adam Smith taught that "peace, easy taxes and a tolerable administration of justice" are the essential ingredients of good government. Other classical liberals, from Richard Cobden and John Stuart Mill to Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek, excoriated war as inconsistent with prosperity and social progress, and all saw its potential for growing the state at the expense of the individual. A classical liberal, explained Ludwig von Mises, "is convinced that victorious war is an evil even for the victor, that peace is always better than war" (qtd. in Hamowy 2008, 374).

Such ideas inform modern libertarians' attitudes. About a year before his death in 2006, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman warned that progress in his goal of rolling back the role of government was "being greatly threatened, unfortunately, by this notion that the U.S. has a mission to promote democracy around the world." Friedman told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "War is a friend of the state." It is always expensive, requiring higher taxes, and, "[i]n time of war, government will take powers and do things that it would not ordinarily do" (qtd. in Lochhead 2005).

The historical evidence bears out this assessment. The expansion of state power has occurred in almost every war or major crisis and at the expense of individual

liberty. And the state rarely surrenders these powers when the crisis abates (Higgs 1987; Porter 1994).

Some instances of this relationship between war and the state's expansion are small but have far-reaching consequences: the first income tax in the United States was imposed during the Civil War; the first estate tax was collected to pay for the Spanish-American War; and the government instituted federal income tax withholding during World War II, dramatically expanding the government's ability to raise revenue and effectively obscuring the true cost of government for many workers.

Other seemingly innocuous taxes or regulations have lingered long after their stated purpose and with no good effect. It took more than 108 years to roll back the federal excise tax on long-distance telephone calls, a tax ostensibly enacted to pay for the Spanish-American War, which lasted less than six months. New York City rent controls, enacted in 1943 out of fear of war-related housing shortages, continue to burden both landlords and tenants (Block 2008). Or consider the question more holistically. As Porter notes, “[T]he *nonmilitary* sectors of the federal government actually grew at a faster rate during World War II than under the impetus of the New Deal!” (1994, 280, emphasis in original). All aspects of state power expand during times of war, including those that have nothing to do with actually fighting and winning battles on land or sea (Higgs 1987). The litany of government abuses and usurpations that originated during wartime and that persist to this day include the following: federal regulation of marriages, public housing, wage-and-price controls, the Internal Revenue Service, distortion of the health-care market, inflation, bank bailouts, and morality crusades against alcohol and prostitution (Eland 2013).

## Changing Views of War and Warfare in the United States

Though America's Founders never could have anticipated all of these ills, they were well aware of war's capacity for creating them. Few among them could be called libertarians by twenty-first-century standards, but nearly all, like modern libertarians, possessed a skepticism of a strong central state and worried that war would be counterproductive to their efforts to limit the new federal government's power. James Madison conceived of warfare as the root cause of the expansion of state power at the expense of the individual. “Of all enemies of public liberty,” he wrote in 1795, “war is perhaps the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other.” “No nation,” Madison continued, “could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare” ([1795] 1865, 491).

But this philosophy came up against a bitter truth. On the one hand, Madison and the other Founders realized that their ability to prevail militarily against the British during the revolution had been instrumental to securing their independence. On the other hand, the presence of British troops in their midst was among the list of particulars that Thomas Jefferson cited in the Declaration of Independence for wanting to be free of the mother country in the first place. The taxes that helped spark the

American Revolution were levied to pay off debt from another war that had unquestionably improved the physical security of the British colonies in North America—though at the expense of the French and especially of the Native American tribes who had allied with the French.

The Founders attempted to resolve this tension by embracing their relative good fortune, avoiding foreign entanglements, and constraining the state's capacity for waging war. "Separated as we are by a world of water from other Nations," George Washington explained in a letter to a friend in France, "if we are wise we shall surely *avoid* being drawn into the labyrinth of their politics, and involved in their destructive wars" (qtd. in Boaz 1997, 412).

He expanded on this theme in his Farewell Address: "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our *commercial* relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible" (1796).

Washington and others in the founding generation harbored a deeply ambivalent view of military power and war. They believed that standing armies and endangerment of liberty went hand in hand. Washington advised his countrymen to "avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty" (1796).

In *War and the Rise of the State*, Porter explains that "[t]he vast majority of America's landowning aristocracy had an almost congenital distrust of standing armies, which their ancestors for generations had identified with despotism." "They glorified instead the yeoman militiamen, linked to the land and closely tied to local interests" (1994, 250).

The Founders' deep skepticism toward foreign wars and standing armies manifested itself in the Constitution, which granted Congress the power "to *provide and maintain* a Navy" (Art. I, sec. 8, emphasis added) but stipulated that armies would be *raised* and *supported* as needed, essentially implying that there would be *no* standing army.<sup>1</sup> This was not so radical a provision at the time. Most countries in the late eighteenth century chose to rely on a small number of professional soldiers, including mercenaries for hire, that would then be augmented by private citizens—militias—as conditions required.

Critical to avoiding the need for such "overgrown military establishments" was the Constitution's provision that Congress, not the executive, would have the authority to declare war. Madison explained the rationale in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: "The constitution supposes, what the History of all Governments demonstrates, that the Executive branch is the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it. It has accordingly with studied care vested the question of war in the Legislature" (1900, 131–32).

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1. The Constitution also stipulated that appropriations for the army would not be for more than two years; no similar restrictions applied to the navy.

“This system will not hurry us to war; it is calculated to guard against it,” explained James Wilson to the Pennsylvania Ratifying Convention. “It will not be in the power of a single man, or a single body of men, to involve us in such distress” (Wilson 1888, 417).

Madison saw this provision as perhaps the most important one of the entire document. “In no part of the constitution is more wisdom to be found than in the clause which confides the question of war or peace to the legislature, and not to the executive department” (2004).

Such sentiments strike many today as unnecessarily unwieldy and based on a naive view of the international system. The world is simply too dangerous, they say; the president of the United States or any other leader of a modern nation-state must have the power to initiate wars at a moment’s notice, unencumbered by the doubts of the public who will actually fight and pay for them. On reflection, however, the advocates for a stronger state and a more interventionist foreign policy had a better argument in the eighteenth century than their intellectual successors do today.

There were some during the founding era, especially those advocates for a much stronger federal government and a stronger executive than actually emerged from the Constitutional Convention of 1787, who believed that the U.S. government was too detached from distant disputes and too slow to go to war. Some of the most bitter debates in the early federal period revolved around interpretations of the proper role of the executive and Congress with respect to war and peace, treaties and alliances. Though the Congress was much smaller then, the politics were just as nasty. Gridlock was the rule. Meanwhile, the dangers facing the disunited states were far greater than those we confront today. Spain was lodged in Florida. Great Britain retained garrisons of troops in Canada to the North. The British navy plied the seas, as did France. And every tiny village along the frontier lived in fear of attack by the many Native American tribes who were anxious to halt the Europeans’ encroachment.

Despite these many dangers, for much of the first 150 or so years of the nation’s history, Americans followed Washington’s advice and the Constitution. We were rather successful at staying out of unnecessary wars and therefore had little need for a large military. The good fortune for the United States was that the young nation developed during a peculiar period in human history and that it had a few wise leaders who had the sense to take advantage of this “splendid isolation” to build an exceptional nation-state with relatively little power, especially as compared to the states of Europe.

To be sure, nearly every generation in U.S. history had some experience with war. But when each war ended, Americans generally returned to the philosophy espoused by the Founders—that free nations possess small professional militaries and strive to avoid foreign entanglements—and were happy to profit from foreign trade and to otherwise serve as an example to the world.

This model persisted even as the United States became involved in far larger wars in far-distant lands in the first half of the twentieth century. Attitudes toward a standing military began to change, however, in the years after World War II, and a new model took root that has endured to this day.

## The Enduring National Security State

The new model began with a subtle change to the meaning of the phrase “common defence” as expressed in the U.S. Constitution. During the early days of the Cold War, Europe and East Asia were broken and broke. Positioning U.S. troops to deter an attack by our common enemies—the Soviet Union and later the People’s Republic of China—and working with our allies to defeat a Communist advance if deterrence failed were generally consistent with even a fairly narrow conception of U.S. national interests and self-defense.

Despite the consistency, this shift away from the Founders’ warnings against standing militaries and permanent armaments industry nonetheless brought forth similarly permanent political constituencies that objected to cuts in the military or at least to cuts in the particular part of the military that happened to affect them directly. Whereas Americans had once armed for war and then returned to peaceful pursuits when the wars ended, they now armed for the sake of arming. Every weapon system had its defenders in Congress. Every community could come up with a dozen reasons why *their* base shouldn’t be cut. Policy makers in Washington, meanwhile, in possession of this great power and therefore no longer dependent on public support to raise the assets necessary for such missions, looked around for places to use U.S. military power.

Following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States adopted an *expanded* version of “the common defence” under the rubric of unipolarity, in Charles Krauthammer’s (1990–91) telling, or what William Kristol and Robert Kagan (1996) later dubbed “benevolent global hegemony.” The U.S. government pledged to defend not merely the vital economic and population centers of western Europe and East Asia but also a host of emerging countries and regions, including eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Southwest Asia (a.k.a. the Persian Gulf). The object was to discourage countries from taking steps to defend themselves, in part because such steps might lead to destabilizing arms races and in part because some feared the creation of independent centers of power that might someday challenge U.S. dominance and ultimately threaten U.S. security.

Many libertarians supported these Cold War–era policies in principle, though they often quarreled with their implementation in practice. But a truly libertarian foreign policy would have revisited the rationales put forward for collective defense in the post–Cold War period and would do so even more emphatically today as the true costs of the unipolar project have become clear to Americans and non-Americans alike (Preble 2009).

## War and Liberty in the Modern Era

It is demonstrably true that the state’s power grows during wartime and that war always has the potential to undermine individual liberty, especially in the near term. But it is also true that some wars have produced liberty for some people, although



often at enormous cost. Would anything short of war have ended slavery in the American South in the mid-nineteenth century? And what about the unspeakable horrors committed by Hitler's Germany in occupied Europe or Imperial Japan's brutality in China and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific during World War II? Was war the last best hope for the Dutch and the Koreans? The answer depended on who did the liberating. The Poles traded one foreign occupier for another. The contrast between liberty and tyranny, prosperity and destitution, could not be starker than to the north and south of the Demilitarized Zone on the Korean Peninsula. We cannot say that war *never* creates the conditions for liberty to flourish; we can say that when it does, the costs, including the costs to liberty, are great while war is being waged.

It may also be true, meanwhile, that preparing for war in order to deter war or waging a war now in order to prevent a worse one later may, on balance, serve the cause of liberty and human rights.

But it is always difficult and may be impossible to ascertain ahead of time that war is the last best hope for preserving liberty. One country's preventive action may merely look like aggression to a disinterested third party. Who can say what would have happened if country X had not attacked country Y? That is why the German statesman Otto von Bismarck is reported to have likened preventive war to "committing suicide for fear of death." In his memoirs, Bismarck pondered whether it might ever be "desirable, as regards a war which we should have to face sooner or later, to bring it on *anticipando* before the adversary could improve his preparations." Bismarck concluded that, generally speaking, it was not. "Even victorious wars cannot be justified unless they are forced upon" the statesman because he or she "cannot see the cards of Providence far enough ahead" to know that preventive action was justified (1899, 101–2). The better course, he concluded, was to wait.

Nevertheless, the impulse to act is strong, especially when a nation possesses the capacity to do so. And U.S. capabilities throughout much of the late twentieth century and well into the present day can sometimes appear nearly limitless.

But the ability to act does not imply the ability to succeed. Mindful as we are that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, we must assess our actions by the tangible results delivered. And we should also attempt to ascertain whether comparable results might have been achieved at less cost in blood and treasure. If a war were truly intended to advance the cause of human rights but results in millions of deaths, can we judge it a noble enterprise? Only if we can be certain—and we rarely can be—that the alternative, inaction or some action *other* than war, would have produced far worse results.

This bias against intervention and preventive action is consistent with classical liberal and libertarian ideas about the state's propensity to fail. It is difficult enough for a government to manage its own economy or deliver happiness to its own citizens. It is harder still for it to manage someone else's economy or please someone else's people. And these concerns should be magnified several times over when the government project hinges on coercive violence.



These doubts are informed by F. A. Hayek's observations on the "fatal conceit": the erroneous belief that "man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes" (1988, 27). Hayek was particularly concerned about the problem of imperfect knowledge. He convincingly argued that government is incapable over the long term of regulating the economy or efficiently producing many public goods. Planning always falls short of expectations because human beings do not know and cannot reliably predict the course of future events. Although Hayek said relatively little about foreign policy in his prolific career, Christopher Coyne and Rachel Mathers (2010) have applied Hayek's theory to foreign interventions and have concluded that they, too, will tend to fail.

The knowledge problem contributes to unintended consequences. These consequences can be quite serious in the domestic context. They are more serious still in foreign policy. This is obvious when one recalls the rather banal point that wars kill people and break things. Even well-intentioned wars—those, for example, that are designed to remove a tyrant from power and liberate an oppressed people—unleash chaos and violence that cannot be limited solely to those deserving of punishment. Repression and the stifling of human rights and individual liberty also often occur in the aftermath of even successful wars.

For all of these reasons—the expansion of state power, the problem of imperfect knowledge, the law of unintended consequences—libertarians treat war for what it is: a necessary evil. "War cannot be avoided at all costs, but it should be avoided wherever possible," writes David Boaz in *The Libertarian Mind*. "Proposals to involve the United States—or any government—in foreign conflict should be treated with great skepticism" (2015, 326). The obviously good end of securing and advancing human liberty should, whenever possible, be achieved by peaceful means.

## Promised Land or Crusader State?

What might those means be? And can liberty survive and thrive in the absence of a dominant liberal power such as the United States waging war against illiberal regimes and movements?

Many people, including some libertarians, are skeptical that it can survive. Liberty needs a champion, they say, and the United States is that champion. Peace, they fear, is inadequate. People living under a tyrant's heel must be liberated. The power of the U.S. military might convince the petty despot to step down; failing that, the sharp end of American military power might deliver him to a prison or the gallows.

There may have been some sympathy for the United States performing this role, even before it had the power to do so. Both George Washington in his Farewell Address and Jefferson in his First Inaugural admonished their countrymen to steer clear of the internal affairs of foreign powers, and both were anxious for the United States to avoid unnecessary wars. But that did not imply a lack of concern for what happened beyond the new nation's borders. They and others in the founding generation hoped

that the United States would form a more perfect union and become a shining example of freedom that others would wish to emulate.

But creating and maintaining this liberal order would be difficult and was always threatened by the prospect of foreign wars and especially by war's tendency to grow the power of the state. Efforts to spread liberty abroad could just as easily destroy it at home. These sentiments were perhaps best expressed not by a Founder but rather by a Founder's son. On July 4, 1821, John Quincy Adams addressed an audience in Washington, D.C., reading aloud the Declaration of Independence and explaining its history and its legacy. America since its founding, Adams explained, had "proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature." She (as Adams referred to America) had "held forth . . . the hand of honest friendship, of equal freedom, of generous reciprocity" and had spoken "the language of equal liberty, equal justice, and equal rights." But while she spoke these words, she had also "without a single exception, respected the independence of other nations" (1821).

The difference between showing sympathy for a noble cause and fighting on its behalf is significant, Adams argued: "She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. . . . She might become the dictatress of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit." That is why, he explained, "[America] goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own" (1821).

Such sentiments may strike many Americans as horribly antiquated. A few others might call them dangerously naive. Of course the United States has been a champion for liberty, they say, and not merely here at home. Just look at the nations liberated from fascism and communism in the twentieth century. What would have happened if the United States had heeded Adams's warning and refrained from "going abroad" in the world wars? How would the "freedom and independence" of western Europe have fared if the United States had not slayed the Soviet monster during the Cold War?

We cannot know, but it is reasonable to surmise that the world wars would have ended differently were it not for U.S. involvement, and the result might well have been a setback for liberty. Meanwhile, the very different experiences to the east and west of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War suggest what might have happened had more of Europe come under Moscow's sway. It seems clear that the presence of U.S. troops in western Europe—not to mention the threat of nuclear annihilation—helped to keep the peace and facilitated the eventual spread of liberalism eastward when the Red Army retreated and the Soviet Union collapsed.

But other entities fought for freedom, too. While the U.S. military deterred overt Soviet aggression, American culture helped pry open societies that the Soviets and their cronies tried desperately to keep shut. Some of this cultural exchange was

sponsored by the U.S. government, but much of it was not. Radio Free Europe played Elvis Presley and the Beatles in the 1960s and 1970s, but Uncle Sam didn't sell Levis; he didn't produce rock-and-roll records. And while arms-control treaties managed and constrained Soviet military might and American weapons deterred Soviet actions, the non-binding Helsinki Accords, adopted by thirty-five countries in 1975 to reduce tensions and improve communication between East and West, may have done more to break Moscow's control over the Warsaw Pact countries than Pershing missiles or the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Today, the Soviet Union is relegated to the ash-heap of history, and former Soviet client states are often at the forefront of political and economic change in eastern Europe. Indeed, we can see that freedom has many champions. They include countless libertarian and classical liberal nongovernmental organizations and foundations that promote basic concepts of liberty but don't rely on American taxpayers' money to fund their operations. They do not act at the behest of the U.S. government or take orders from the Pentagon and its several combatant commanders. Indeed, it is an insult to suggest that these organizations can succeed and their ideas survive only under the covering fire of American armaments.

The real question, therefore, isn't *whether* we should wish to see freedom spread worldwide but rather *how* it will do so. We should discuss openly the best ways to achieve this noble end. Calls for more wars of liberation, be they in Iran or Libya or North Korea or Syria, too often dismiss the harmful effects that wars have had on the very people that we were ostensibly attempting to free. Meanwhile, they ignore or denigrate the enormous gains that freedom has made during the past half-century and that were achieved by entirely peaceful means. Those people who are generally skeptical of the U.S. government's ability to do anything at all here at home—from delivering the mail to clothing the naked or feeding the hungry—should be even more skeptical of that same government's ability to deliver democracy and good governance everywhere else.

We should be thankful that it doesn't have to. Many people around the world now work to spread the gospel of liberty, and those who are most successful do their work voluntarily and promote their ideas without the threat of force. A wise and just foreign policy, dedicated to advancing the freedom and dignity of the individual, would do nothing to get in their way.

## Conclusion

Harvard scholar Steven Pinker (2011) has documented the dramatic decline in all forms of violence committed by humans against other humans and even other creatures. We as a species are generally reluctant to go to war, more so now than four hundred years ago or even seventy years ago. Libertarians, who have always been skeptical of war and warfare and who reject coercion and violence as bedrock principles, can only welcome this turn of events.

But this greater reluctance to wage war doesn't mean that wars and violence have disappeared or ever will. A basic survival instinct compels us to believe in self-defense. And individuals sometimes initiate violence when they sense that a proximate danger will become more urgent in the future. It is unreasonable to ask a man to suffer the first blow in a fist fight or to wait until *after* his family is killed before he acts against an enemy or murderer.

Governments, too, sometimes initiate wars. But it is irresponsible to do so except in those rare instances when all other options have been exhausted. Wars—all wars—are costly and risky enterprises. We should strive to understand those costs and risks beforehand and be prepared for the possibility of failure. We should not assume that intervention will inevitably turn a suboptimal but manageable situation into something far better; our actions oftentimes make things worse.

The experiences of the past decade, including the responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have reaffirmed these truths and have taught us—all of us, not just libertarians—some important lessons. We have learned that the costs of waging wars, although they may be manageable, are rarely offset by the benefits that we derive from them. We have been reminded that the hard work of winning the peace is obtained long after the “Mission Accomplished” banner is unfurled. And we have a greater appreciation for the unintended consequences that flow from even the most well-intentioned efforts to spread liberty by force.

That does not mean that military intervention is never warranted. It does mean that we need to more clearly define those infrequent situations in which war is the last best course of action, and we should otherwise seek to expand the domain of liberty by peaceful means.

If such sentiments are informed by libertarians' traditional skepticism toward war and state power, so be it—but it is a message that should appeal to nonlibertarians as well.

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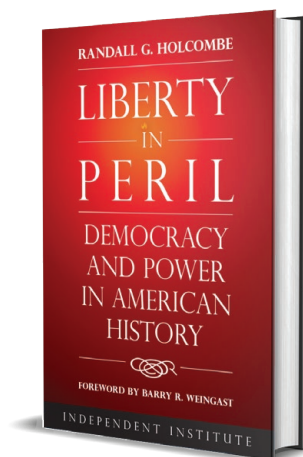
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