

March 15, 2010

**Doug Bandow**[This is the print preview: Back to normal view »](#)

Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

Posted: March 15, 2010 12:33 AM

Battling the Bipartisan Consensus for War

The U.S. is rarely at peace. It doesn't matter which party or which politician is in power: American military forces will be on the move, invading a Third World nation here and threatening an emerging power there.

In January 2009 Republican George W. Bush yielded to Democrat Barack Obama, and the U.S. government increased military spending and expanded the war in Afghanistan. If a Republican is elected in 2012, recent history suggests that defense outlays will grow further, as Washington attacks another nation or two.

Enthusiasm for war crosses party lines -- Robert Kagan recently wrote approvingly of the militaristic alliance between "liberal interventionist Democrats" and "hawkish internationalist Republicans" -- both groups which have never met a war they didn't want to fight. However, support for peace also is transpartisan. Such sentiments are perhaps strongest on the Democratic left, which increasingly feels disenfranchised by President Obama. A smaller contingent of libertarians, traditional conservatives, and paleo-conservatives has resisted the conservative movement's adoption of war-mongering intervention as a basic tenet.

Right and Left recently came together for a day-long conference in Washington. Participants included this writer, editors from the *Nation*, *Progressive Review* online, *American Conservative*, *Reason*, and other publications; leftish anti-war activists reaching back to the Vietnam era and a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School; Ralph Nader; a supporter of Patrick Buchanan's 1992 presidential bid; a former campaign aide to internet sensation Rep. Ron Paul (R-Tex.) and three members of the Paul-inspired group Young Americans for Liberty; representatives of several activist organizations, including Voters for Peace and Veterans for Peace; and writers, think tankers, academics, and organizers from across the political spectrum.

The moment economics, domestic policy, or election law came up, participants disagreed. But on the central issue of war and peace the group united. While war might sometimes be unavoidable -- pacifism was not on the agenda, though some of the participants might have been pacifists -- it should be a last resort, a tragic necessity to protect a free American society. While war sometimes brings out the finest and most sublime human values such as courage and honor, more

often it looses the basest passions and destroys what we most hold dear. Despite today's constant celebration of all things military, Americans are best served by peace, allowing them to enjoy the pleasures and surmount the challenges of daily life.

Yet today the U.S. is one of the world's most militarized states, accounting for nearly half of the globe's military outlays. The U.S. government maintains hundreds of military installations and hundreds of thousands of troops abroad. No other country, democratic or authoritarian, comes close to matching America's aggressive military record in recent decades: nations and territories invaded or bombed include Iraq (twice), Serbia, Bosnian Serbs, Afghanistan, Haiti, Somalia, Panama, and Grenada. Threats have come fast and furious against North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and most recently Yemen.

It is bad enough that Washington policymakers see war as a first resort, a convenient tool for conducting social engineering abroad. They seem to treat the resulting death and destruction as incidental and unimportant, especially if concentrated on others.

Even worse, many U.S. policymakers appear to enjoy wielding military force safely out of harm's way from their Washington offices. Rather than feel reluctant at loosing the dogs of war, some American leaders, almost always ones who have never put on a military uniform let alone served in combat, joyously add new targets. "Real men go to Tehran," ran the neoconservative mantra in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, when otherwise sober analysts were filled with hubris at America's ability to remake the world at will. Never mind those who would be killed along the way.

It is this world which brought representatives from Right to Left together. Participants discussed rhetoric: criticizing "imperialism," for instance, resonates far better with the Left than the Right. But there was broad agreement on policy. Washington today has a strategy of "empire." The U.S. isn't the same as the Roman or British empires, to be sure. But American foreign and military policy could hardly be further from those one would expect from a constitutional republic with a government of limited powers intended to concentrate on protecting the safety and liberty of its citizens.

Thus, Americans need real change, not the faux variety offered by the Obama administration. The military should be configured to defend America, not client states around the globe. U.S. taxpayers should not be fleeced to subsidize wealthy allies. Washington should not use patriotic 18-year-olds to occupy Third World states, treating them like American satrapies, governed by U.S. ambassadors. Uncle Sam should stop trying to micro-manage the globe, treating every conflict or controversy as America's own, exaggerating foreign threats and inflating Washington's abilities.

The price of today's policy of empire is high. Far from being the costless adventure imagined by members of Washington's ubiquitous sofa samurai, war is the ultimate big government program, a threat to Americans' life, prosperity, and liberty.

So far the Iraqi "cakewalk" has resulted in the death of roughly 4400 Americans and 300 other coalition soldiers. Then there are tens of thousands of maimed and injured Americans, others suffering from PTSD, and numerous broken families and communities. At least 100,000 and probably many more Iraqis have died. Some estimates run up to a million, a truly astonishing number. America's ivory tower warriors seem particularly unconcerned about dead foreigners. However many Iraqis died, it is treated as a small price to pay for the privilege of being liberated by Washington.

Another cost is financial. Direct military outlays this year will run over \$700 billion. Iraq is ultimately likely cost \$2 or \$3 trillion. Washington spends more on "defense," adjusted for inflation, today than at any point during the Cold War, Korean War, and Vietnam War. The U.S. accounts for nearly half of the globe's military expenditures.

American taxpayers pay to defend prosperous and populous European states. Japan devotes about a fourth as much of its economic strength to the military as does the U.S. The NATO member which makes the most military effort is crisis-prone Greece -- in response to nominal ally Turkey. For years American taxpayers spent as much as South Koreans to defend the Republic of Korea.

Such generosity might have made sense in the aftermath of World War II, when so many Asian and European states had been ruined by war and faced Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China. No longer, however. Especially with the U.S. budget deficit expected to run nearly \$1.6 trillion this year alone. Over the next decade Uncle Sam likely will rack up another \$10 trillion in red ink. In effect, Washington is borrowing every penny which it is spending to defend other nations.

Liberty also suffers from a policy of empire. "War is the health of the state," intoned Randolph Bourne, and it certainly is the health of the national security state. The constitutional deformations of the Bush years were legendary, yet President Barack Obama has done little to rein in his predecessor's lawless conduct. Executive aggrandizement, government secrecy, privacy violations, military arrests and trials, and constitutional violations. The U.S. is in danger of losing its republican soul.

Of course, one could imagine a truly necessary war which would have to be fought almost irrespective of cost--World War II, perhaps. However, while jihadist terrorists are ugly and murderous, they are a poor substitute for Adolf Hitler with armored divisions and Joseph Stalin with nuclear weapons. We aren't fighting World War III. We aren't fighting anything close to World War III.

And if we were in such a conflict, a policy of empire, of meddling around the globe, of engaging in international social engineering, would be about the most foolish strategy possible. Most of what the U.S. military does has nothing to do with American security: protecting European states threatened by no one, aiding a South Korea which vastly out ranges its northern antagonist, attempting to turn decrepit Third World states into liberal democracies and Western allies.

The problem of terrorism is real, but is best met by sophisticated, targeted countermeasures rather than promiscuous blunt-force intervention. The war in Iraq has enhanced Iran's strategic position, weakened America's reputation, stretched U.S. military forces, spurred terrorist recruitment, and confirmed the radical terrorist narrative. A lengthy occupation of Afghanistan and overflow combat into Pakistan risk doing much the same--potentially for years. Expanded American intervention in Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere would have a similar effect.

Militaristic sloganeering, patriotic preening, and demagogic ranting are no substitute for making a realistic assessment both of threats and capabilities. Meeting participants agreed that pro-peace activists must seize back the patriotic mantle. Patriotism should no longer be the last refuge of the scoundrel, used to shield from scrutiny policies drafted by those personally unwilling to serve which have wreaked death and destruction abroad and increased debt and insecurity at home. And any antiwar movement should welcome those who have worn the nation's uniforms, whose courage has been misused by self-serving politicians.

This is not the first time that people from across the political spectrum have joined in an attempt to stop imperialist adventures. Various groups opposed the Spanish-American War and especially the brutal occupation of the Philippines. Woodrow Wilson's bloody crusade for democracy was resisted by conservatives and progressives; socialist Eugene Debs went to prison for criticizing that conflict. Left and Right even opposed Franklin Delano Roosevelt's surreptitious push for war, though the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and German declaration of war ultimately made involvement inevitable.

Indeed, mainstream American concern about international adventurism goes back to George Washington's famed farewell address warning against "foreign entanglements" and consequent

"overgrown military establishments." Secretary of State John Quincy Adams warned against going abroad "in search of monsters to destroy." Future Civil War generals Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee expressed disquiet at America's rapacious war with Mexico even while serving their nation in that very conflict. "The commercial interests" angered war-hawk Teddy Roosevelt for opposing his campaign for war against Spain. Middle America resisted demands that the U.S. join both great European wars of the 20th century. President Dwight D. Eisenhower left office warning about the military-industrial complex.

Unfortunately, politicians have proved extraordinarily adept at rousing, at least temporarily, public support for foreign military adventures. Resisting the ivory tower warmongers will be no easier today. But those who believe in peace have no choice but to try, and try again.

Peace should be America's natural condition. Unfortunately, it will not be so as long as today's unnatural alliance of liberal and neoconservative hawks runs U.S. foreign policy. And only the American people can take back control. The future of the American people and republic is at stake.

(Cross-posted from Campaign for Liberty.)

Books & More From Doug Bandow

Join HuffPost Social News and connect with your friends on Facebook

