



# Security Means Liberty: Why You Cannot Trade One for the Other

*Don't Buy the Phony Promises: Government Delivers Insecurity*

By David E. Shellenberger on Monday, March 31, 2014

Security means being free from danger, threat, or harm. It is a state that cannot fully exist, and one that would make our lives sterile if it did exist. Helen Keller [cautioned](#),

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.

We do, however, strive to achieve a degree of security, each of us seeking protection from risks that concern us. Looking to the state for security, however, entails the loss of liberty. Benjamin Franklin famously [warned](#), “They who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” [Roderick T. Long notes](#) that the “balance” commonly sought is a trap: “You can’t trade off freedom against security because *they’re exactly the same thing.*”

The state is the most dangerous provider of security, since it [exacts](#) liberty in exchange for its promises. Since the state imposes itself through violence and the threat of violence, and acts as a monopolist, it is also the worst provider of any service, including security. When the state promises security, it delivers insecurity.

Classical liberals — and most of their modern descendants, libertarians — support limited government. They envision the state protecting life, liberty, and property through ensuring national security and domestic safety. The faith is misplaced.

First, consider national security, with the dramatic example of the United States. As [Christopher A. Preble](#) of the [Cato Institute discusses](#), in urging a policy of restraint, the country has “unique advantages.” These include “wide oceans to the east and west, friendly neighbors to the north and south, a dearth of powerful enemies globally, and the wealth to adapt to dangers as they

arise.” These circumstances mean that the US government could provide any necessary defense at minimal cost.

Instead, the government has created an empire and a [permanent war economy](#). It maintains military bases around the world, subsidizes the defense of wealthy nations, aids and protects dictators, maintains alliances that are of no benefit to the people of the United States, and endlessly engages in unnecessary wars. The mission is not really defense, but rather the expansion of power and the growth of the military-industrial complex.

The result is the weakening of security, through the waste of resources, creation of enemies, and enhancement of the risk of war. In addition, as [Robert Higgs](#) has extensively studied, [war comes at the expense of liberty](#).

There is an alternative to looking to the state for defense. This is to [rely on the market](#).

Second, consider domestic safety. Government police, as armed agents of the state, too often are abusive, brutal, and corrupt. See the horror stories on the Cato Institute’s National Police Misconduct Reporting Project [website](#) and in Radley Balko’s [columns](#).

The state also creates crime, particularly through drug prohibition. The war on drugs serves politicians, bureaucrats, the military, the police, and the prison industry, while giving the state an excuse to steal more liberty.

Government police are a threat to safety, and become more dangerous as they [militarize](#). They also do not bring security, as many [violate their own laws](#) and [partner with organized crime](#). Many places in the world are plagued with crime — despite a police presence — including parts of the United States and Canada and much of Latin America.

As [Edward Stringham argues](#), government should get out of policing:

*Wherever we see government it’s not helpful, it’s bureaucratic, it’s not serving its customers and I would say that especially applies in the area of police. Because police are so important, I think that we should abandon the idea that government needs to provide it.*

The state is not content to limit its security role to defense and safety. It also purports to address other types of “security,” with predictable results.

In the realm of retirement security, the US Social Security program, for instance, [deprives](#) participants of the investment returns available through the market. As a [Ponzi scheme](#), the program will become even worse, and younger workers “will be forced to pay more and get less.”

Governments often develop policies for “energy security.” In the United States, this takes the form of promoting energy independence, a [fallacious](#) but widely accepted concept. Some governments, encouraged by the [United Nations](#), also promote “food security.” The interventions

in food and energy markets create disruption, not security. What is needed is simply economic freedom, particularly [free trade](#).

Government promises security, but delivers insecurity. Security means liberty.

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