



What to Get a Skeptic this Holiday Season

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As a public service for those of you who have some hard-to-buy-for people on your shopping list, I've assembled some books that would make good gifts. The common theme is . . . skepticism. Of U.S. grand strategy, of democracy's marketplace of ideas and of global threats, generally, and the terrorist threat, specifically.

Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World, Ian Bremmer (Portfolio, 2015)

I liked this book so much that I assigned it in my U.S. foreign policy class at the University of California, Washington Center (UCDC), and volunteered to review it for the *American Conservative*. Ian Bremmer ably outlines the basic elements of U.S. foreign policy in the early twenty-first century, and his three distinct approaches to U.S. foreign policy provide a useful framework for readers.

Indispensable Americans believe that the United States can and must play the role of world policeman, for now and forever. Moneyballers agree that America must lead, but worry that forever is a long time. They'd prefer that Washington prioritize among competing national security interests, and focus on achieving the maximum bang for a manageable amount of bucks. The last of the three types, Independent Americans, want to focus their attention on nation-building at home. When we seem incapable of managing our own affairs, we cast doubt on our ability to solve other people's. Our track record in recent years has only deepened these misgivings.

Bremmer's willingness to take seriously the Independent Americans' views reveals a welcome skepticism of the elite foreign policy consensus that is heavily biased towards intervention.

Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy, John M. Schuessler (Cornell, 2015)

That elite establishment, mindful of public sentiment, has another tool at its disposal if the truth is insufficiently convincing to support their case for global activism. They can lie.

John Schuessler's new book reveals three cases—America's entry into World War II, the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the Iraq invasion of 2003—in which U.S. presidents misled the public about the nature of the threat in order to mobilize support for military action. We featured the book at a Cato event earlier this month, and my colleague Ben Friedman provided a useful overview on our blog.

Schuessler doesn't claim that all such deception is unwarranted or illegitimate—FDR's "was necessary to facilitate U.S. entry into World War II"—but it carried costs. Meanwhile, the book does challenge the notion that democracies are less prone to engage in unnecessary wars because the marketplace of ideas sorts out the good ideas from the bad. It is equally dubious that a democracy's foreign policies accurately reflects the public's wishes. We should therefore be skeptical of facile assertions that primacy's persistence proves its wisdom.

The Global Village Myth: Distance, War, and the Limits of Power, Patrick Porter (Georgetown, 2015)

Washington elites are quite adept at hyping threats, and not merely those that lead to costly wars. One of the tools that they employ to convince the American people that threats are dire and proximate is what the University of Exeter's Patrick Porter calls "the global village myth."

Porter, who presented his ideas at Cato in May, doubts that technology has eliminated distance as a relevant factor in assessing risk. Geography, he explains, still matters. What's more, many of the ideas associated with the mistaken belief in our supposed vulnerability—from falling dominoes to the wisdom of preventive wars—have led to disaster.

The United States remains in a particularly advantageous position vis-à-vis threats, and we'd all be better off if we were more skeptical of the war hawks' and fear-mongers' claims.

Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism, John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart (Oxford, 2015)

Lastly, my colleague John Mueller and his frequent collaborator Mark Stewart focus their book on terrorism. They do not claim that terrorists don't exist, but rather that the enormous effort expended in finding them might not outweigh the benefits.

The San Bernardino shootings on December 2 don't change this calculus. Or shouldn't. According to one reliable assessment, terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists have claimed forty-five American lives in the United States since 9/11. That's forty-five too many, but, by way of comparison, an average of two hundred people are killed every year by their furniture. Meanwhile, the vast counterterrorism apparatus created after 9/11 has generated over ten million leads to supposed would-be terrorists, at a cost of over one trillion dollars—not including the money spent, and the lives lost, in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—and yet the public remains more fearful of terrorism than ever before.

We should always be willing to scrutinize the cost-effectiveness of various policies. That is standard whenever government proposes to deal with other risks to human life – from cancer to car accidents – but it hasn't typically been done with respect to terrorism. We may be spending too much on one unlikely type of threat, and too little on more likely ones.

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