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The Left-Right Conference on War

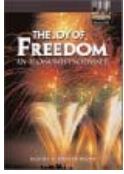
In which the author finds hope in a left/right antiwar movement

by [David R. Henderson](#), March 05, 2010

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Introduction

On Friday, February 19, I went to the opening dinner of a Washington, D.C. event billed as "Across the Political Spectrum Against War and Militarism." That's not my favorite title because it sounds as if the participants are presumed to be against all war. I'm not. I've just been against every war the United States has been in since 1783, with the possible exception of World War II. (And even on WWII, there's a plausible case to be made against U.S. participation.)



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The list of participants was impressive: conservatives, libertarians, and people who could probably be called variously liberals, leftists, and progressives. Although I had heard of many of them, I knew only one: Doug Bandow of the libertarian Cato Institute, a long-time friend whom I worked with (unsuccessfully) in the early 1980s to try to repeal draft registration. I had lined Doug up in the mid-1990s to give a great talk in front of about 1,500 military officers at the Naval Postgraduate School about why the U.S. government should get out of South Korea. He had charmed the audience, making fun of himself for being a lawyer and then sneaking up on them with a passionate yet fact-filled case for getting out.

Some of the others I knew only by reputation, and most of the others I knew nothing about. Which, of course, meant that I had a big question mark about the event. Well, two big question marks actually. The first: How antiwar will they be, given that some are conservatives and some are leftists who might like Obama? And the even more important question that I have whenever I enter a room full of strangers — the Sally Field question: Will they like me?

I was pleased on both counts. All but two (OK, maybe three) seemed to like me. And everyone seemed to want to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I emerged with more hope for the antiwar movement than I've had in a while.

We were told at the beginning of Saturday's session that the conversation was off the record unless we got explicit permission from the person we wanted to quote. So most of what I tell will be about my participation and that of the six or seven from whom I've received permission.

When a group of people get together, all of whom have strongly-held, well-defined views and many of whom disagree with each other, there's a natural tendency for people to strut their stuff and not try to seek agreement, especially at first. So I promised myself not to talk about my views at first and, instead, to draw others out. It wasn't hard. Across the table from me at dinner was Murray Polner, whom I knew nothing about. He hadn't heard of me either. Somehow, the topic turned to Ron Paul, and Murray said, "I like Ron Paul because in the Republican presidential debates, he took apart the Republican I dislike most." "[Rudy Giuliani!](#)" I yelled across the table. "Right," he said, with a big grin. As we talked more, I found out that we agreed about another important thing. Murray asked the people around the table who they thought had had the biggest effect in ending the draft. Many of my libertarian friends would have said Milton Friedman, for his important role on the President's Commission on the All-Volunteer Force (the Gates Commission), a role [I've written about elsewhere](#). But my answer was [Martin Anderson](#), now a colleague of mine at Hoover. That was Murray's answer, too, because without the Gates Commission, Milton wouldn't have had the great forum he had for airing his views. And the man who was most responsible for getting Nixon to pledge, during the 1968 presidential campaign, to end the draft, and then for getting him to follow through by forming the Gates Commission was Marty Anderson.

The Morning Session

To hasten the bonding process with other attendees, I did two things: I signed up to be the first speaker in the first session and planned my five-minute talk accordingly, and I took a page from the playbook of the late [Charlie Kreiner](#): Murray and I led the group in the camaraderie-building song, "[Vive la Compagnie](#)." It's a great song because you can participate even if all you know is the very easy-to-learn chorus:

Vive la, vive la,

Vive l'amour.

Vive la, vive la,

Vive l'amour.

Vive l'amour, vive l'amour,

Vive la compagnie!

(I'm not sure why it's "la compagnie," rather than "le compagnie," but it doesn't matter much.)

Then I led off my five-minute talk with my favorite antiwar poem, "[Hate](#)," by James Stephens. The poem bears repeating:

My enemy came nigh,

And I

Stared fiercely in his face.

My lips went writhing back in a grimace,

And stern I watched him with a narrow eye.

Then, as I turned away, my enemy,

That bitter heart and savage, said to me:

"Some day, when this is past,

When all the arrows that we have are cast,

We may ask one another why we hate,

And fail to find a story to relate.

It may seem then to us a mystery

That we should hate each other."

Thus said he,

And did not turn away,

Waiting to hear what I might have to say,

But I fled quickly, fearing had I stayed

I might have kissed him as I would a maid.

The poem fit in two ways. First, it questions whether war between two people who have nothing against each other makes sense. Second, given that some of the people in the room have been on opposite sides of many issues, it was a statement that maybe we should ask ourselves whether we should be going after each other or whether there is a bigger issue on which we should unite.

In the rest of my five minutes, I pointed out that as awful as things are now on the civil liberties front, they are so much better than they were in World War I. I noted that Woodrow Wilson had thrown his political rival, socialist Eugene Debs, in prison for speaking out against the draft and the war and had done so after the war had ended. It was Republican president Warren Harding, I noted, who had freed Debs on Christmas Day, 1921. I thought this was a good story to emphasize the intersection of left (Debs) and right (Harding), the kind of thing we were trying to achieve.

Some Agreements

What became clear very quickly as the others — libertarians, conservatives, and liberal/leftists — spoke was how united we were against the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. I didn't hear anyone speak in favor of those wars — and everyone spoke. Interesting, also, was that most of the people who mentioned Antiwar.com were left and they all mentioned it favorably. Ditto mentions of Antiwar.com's heavy hitter Justin Raimondo.

Moreover, to the extent that anyone discussed Congress's role — and Ralph Nader, as [I've written about earlier](#), discussed it extensively in his luncheon speech — they favored Congress taking back its power to declare war. Also, [Sam Smith](#), editor of *The Progressive Review* and a really sweet man, suggested returning to governors their control of the National Guard. Looking around the room, I sensed a lot of agreement, and no one expressed disagreement. What's striking about both of these proposals is that both are ways of cutting down

centralized power — in the first case, of the President, whomever he may be, and in the second case, of the federal government.

One of our discussions was about the words we should use in pushing for peace. Conservative William Lind, one of the originators of Fourth Generation War theory, said that the words “peace,” “anti-militarism,” and “anti-Imperialism” are anathema to conservatives, some of whom might be persuaded to oppose military intervention in other countries’ affairs. When [Paul Buhle](#), an historian and, in the 1960s, the editor of [Radical America](#), the magazine of Students for a Democratic Society, proposed that anti-Imperialism be replaced with anti-Empire, Lind agreed vigorously. (Buhle, incidentally, noted in his opening remarks that there had been an attempt around 1970 to form a left-right coalition against the Vietnam war and that this attempt had included [Leonard Liggio](#).)

Also impressive were the antiwar sentiments of the conservative attendees — specifically Dan McCarthy and Kara Hopkins, senior editor and executive editor, respectively, of [The American Conservative](#); the very sensible Scott McConnell, co-founder of [The American Conservative](#); Allan Carlson, President of The Howard Center for Family, Religion, & Society; and George D. O’Neill, Jr., one of the organizers.

The four senior libertarians were the earlier-mentioned Doug Bandow; Jesse Walker, the managing editor of [Reason](#); Bill Kauffman, author of the powerful book [Ain’t My America: The Long Noble History of Antiwar Conservatism and Middle American Anti-Imperialism](#); and I. Also attending were three members of Young Americans for Liberty — Matt Cockerill, Nicke Leavens, and Shaun Bowen.

Also in the discussion were Glen Ford of [BlackAgendaReport.com](#); Michael T. McPhearson, then executive director of Veterans for Peace; Linda Schade, the founding executive director of Voters for Peace; and Mike Ferner, national president of Veterans for Peace. In his short bio for the event, Ferner noted that he had been arrested for “disturbing the war.”

On the left, besides the aforementioned Murray Polner and Ralph Nader, were organizer Kevin Zeese, formerly active against the drug war and now executive director of Veterans for Peace; peace activist John V. Walsh, M.D., a professor of physiology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School; and *The Nation*’s Robert Dreyfuss (contributing editor), Katrina vanden Heuvel, (editor and publisher), and William Greider (national affairs correspondent.) Hard to categorize was Jeff Taylor, an assistant professor of political science at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, who describes his ideology as “a mix of moralism, libertarianism, and populism.”

George C. Wilson, the former long-time defense correspondent for the *Washington Post*, attended the afternoon session.

Some Disagreements

Things weren’t all sweetness and light. There were serious disagreements, but they were mainly about strategy for opposing the war and, as might be expected, about domestic economic policy and the state and future of the domestic economy. Also, there was a fundamental disagreement about one participant’s statement that the Tea Party is, at its core, racist. Voices were sometimes raised and passions aired, but no one got nasty and no one belittled anyone else.

The main disagreement that I think could get in the way of an effective coalition was over the draft. George Wilson argued that the All-Volunteer Force does not represent a cross-section of America and that, therefore, we should return to the draft. If we did, he argued, the rich and powerful would start paying more attention to the huge human cost of war because their children would be more likely to be in the military. I pointed out to him that the [best demographic study](#) I know of, done by economist Tim Kane, then at the Heritage Foundation, found that the All-Volunteer Force is fairly similar to the U.S. society. The exception, noted Kane, was that “wartime U.S. military enlistees are better educated, wealthier, and more rural, on average, than their civilian peers.” I should have also noted that during the Vietnam-era draft, the rich and powerful by and large found ways of keeping their male children out of harm’s way. Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss showed this in their excellent book, [Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation](#). But Ralph Nader added to Wilson’s argument, advocating that if the United States goes to war, the sons and daughters of Congressmen be drafted. I didn’t get a chance to comment on this at the event, but Nader is proposing that sons and daughters be made temporary property of the state simply because of their parents’ actions.

Coda

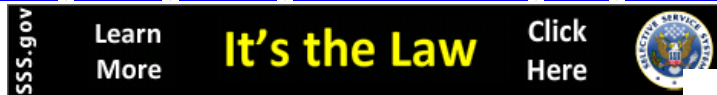
In 1977, sent my late friend, [Roy A. Chikds, Jr.](#), a copy of a letter in which I had dismissed the Cato Institute’s attempt to reach out to the left with its new magazine, *Inquiry*. Roy responded with a long letter in which he chided me for not being open to that attempt. He pointed out that because of my free-market views, I had much too easily fallen in with other economists who had nothing critical to say about the U.S. government’s sometimes-ruthless attacks on people in other countries. That letter changed my life. I started being less dismissive of the left

and starting judging them — both negatively and positively. I also started informing myself about American foreign policy and gradually changed from being a Cold War hawk to being a non-interventionist. One of the things Roy said in the letter was that, whether or not it succeeded, *Inquiry* was trying to get people on left and right talking to each other even though left and right had not done so since World War I. One of Roy's dreams was to get left and right talking to each other about war. On February 20, we did.

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[Making Great Decisions in Business and Life](#) (Chicago Park Press). His latest book is [The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics](#) (Liberty Fund, 2008).

He has appeared on *The O'Reilly Factor*, the *Jim Lehrer Newshour*, CNN, and C-SPAN. He has had over 100 articles published in *Fortune*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Red Herring*, *Barron's*, *National Review*, *Reason*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. He has also testified before the House Ways and Means Committee, the Senate Armed Services Committee, and the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources. [Visit his Web site.](#)



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