

The American Way of War

The most striking fact about the United States of America is not its supposed founding principles — more often lauded than observed — but how often “the greatest country on earth” has waged war. If we count wars against internal “enemies” (i.e., the Indians), covert foreign wars, and aid to other states’ aggressive external and internal wars, we can see the United States has been at war almost continuously since it broke free from Britain.

By one estimate this nation has been at war 214 out of the 228 years since the Constitution took effect — that’s 94 percent of the time — and there were wars during the Articles of Confederation period too. Contrary to popular misconception, the war state did not begin in 1945. From the start, war was an acceptable means to national policy ends, whether to open markets or to install friendly regimes.

It’s a gross understatement to call this record shameful. It’s criminal when you calculate the predictable butcher’s bill — including the killing of noncombatants, deliberately targeted and so-called collateral damage — not to mention the destruction of scarce resources that would have made all people better off.

Do Americans have any clue? The information is readily available, but you have to want to look for it. Most do not. They don’t want to know the truth. They’d rather laud “the troops” for their heroism and hear pundits describe America as a “force for good in the world.” It’s a state-worshipping worldview that resembles religion from which the ruling elite profits politically and financially.

Of course, that word — *America* — is intentionally ambiguous. It includes American inventors, entrepreneurs, workers, traders, and all kinds of artists, who have benefited the world. But it also includes self-serving politicians and military bureaucrats, their chests ostentatiously adorned with ribbons, who could not do a tiny fraction of the damage they do if they did not have the state’s machinery of violence at their disposal. How many voluntary contributions could they have raised to finance their wars and domestic oppression? If that isn’t an indictment of the state in itself, I don’t know what is. It also takes some of the gloss off “limited government,” seeing as how it would be “limited” to the military, the police, and the jailers. Libertarians have long argued over whether they should “hate the state,” but how can you not hate it once you have seen its destructive essence?

Some of America’s many wars eventually lost favor with the public — Vietnam is a case in point, though not until two million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans had perished — but the harshest thing that you can say about such wars in polite company is that they were well-meant mistakes committed in “noble causes.” Call the wars criminal and you will be struck from the invitation list. You certainly won’t be published in the respectable U.S.-

based media. If you're a famous investigative reporter with a long track record of documenting American war crimes, you'll be banished to the *London Review of Books* or Germany's *Die Welt*.

But let's be fair about this. War does have its uses besides making a few folks rich and powerful. It's good for distracting the people, who may otherwise get fed up with the obvious scam we call government. Shakespeare understood this, as he showed when he had Henry IV tell his son, "Therefore, my Harry, be it thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out, may waste the memory of the former days" (*Henry IV* Pt. 2). Trump, the alleged Great Disrupter, may not read, but he has demonstrated that he understands Henry's advice. Trump's attacks on Syrian and allied forces have won him plaudits even from avowed political enemies. That those enemies have quickly gone back to hating him probably only taught him that he needs to do more of the same. His latest warning to Bashar al-Assad seems to indicate this. So does his statement about Qatar, which stands accused — can you imagine it? — of aiding terrorists by Trump's new friends in Saudia Arabia. His cynical campaign against Iran is another indication of where he's heading. And then there's Ukraine. And North Korea.

What's more likely to distract Americans from their problems, tweaking the health-insurance rules or a venturing into another splendid war? There are no Purple Hearts for fixing the infrastructure.

If we step back we might appreciate the big picture. What kind of country spends so much time and money making, facilitating, provoking, and underwriting war? Certainly not a progressive — in the everyday sense — or liberal — in the original Adam Smith sense — country. (The original liberals despised everything connected with war.) We Americans thankfully do not live in a totalitarian state. There is still a line the politicians not to cross. But that line has been moving — and not in favor of liberty. Where were the crowds of protesters when the news broke that the government was spying on Americans en masse in the "war on terror" — something we learned, thanks to Edward Snowden, just after the director of national intelligence, James Clapper, swore it was not happening? Not only were there no protests, Clapper today routinely appears on the news networks as a credible source on how Russia is waging cyber war on America. That speaks volumes. Lying under oath if you believe it's for national security is just fine. We'll believe whatever you tell us next as if it never happened.

Afghanistan has replaced Vietnam as the site of America's longest war, but Americans have long stopped paying attention. The war party knows what this means: keep American casualties low, call the troops "advisers," and a war can continue indefinitely — even occasional surges will be acceptable. Thanks to special ops and drones, wars can be extended to or intensified in other countries with impunity: Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and who knows where else. The casualties and hardships inflicted on

indigenous populations don't count. They are only foreigners, brown-skinned Muslims. Besides, didn't we get attacked on 9/11 while minding our own business? Just keep saying that.

Members of Congress either approve of wholesale American state violence or are too cowardly to stop it. Occasionally one of them wants a new authorization for the use military force in Syria because the post-9/11 authorization has been stretched beyond recognition. But it never gets far. I hear the Constitution says something about Congress having the power to declare war, but that's long been a dead letter. Presidents are free to make war anywhere anytime. (John Quincy Adams, who famously orated that America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy," thought those who conducted the coup d'état in Philadelphia had erred in not lodging the war power in the executive branch so that American presidents would have the same power as European kings. He needn't have worried.)

At any rate, for constitutional sticklers, an authorization for the use of military force is not a declaration of war. Rather, it is a *delegation* of the war power to declare to a president. Forgive my quaint notions.

I see no signs this is going to change anytime soon, which should concern libertarians because the U.S. empire (that is, American super-sovereignty), militarism, and war profiteering jeopardize liberty like nothing else.