

America's War Culture

For most of the opinion-making class in America today, war is the default position. Representatives of establishment newspapers and TV news operations are not likely to grill someone who favors U.S. military intervention somewhere — anywhere. He or she will have no burden of proof to sustain. But those who oppose a new war or call for an end to an existing one are sure to be treated like oddballs if not traitors. They'd better have an extraordinarily strong defense of their position because the burden of proof will be squarely on them; even a strong defense, however, won't get the heat turned down.

Need I point out that a presumption in favor of war is toxic to a society that fancies itself free and humane? Continuing wars and readiness to intervene anywhere in the world costs money and, worse, lives. A war state cannot long coexist with strict limitations on government power and spending. Moreover, it impedes people without influence from prospering because military spending diverts resources from consumer investment and production to weapons and other things irrelevant to consumer welfare.

Let's face it, empire is bloody expensive.

So why the presumption in favor of war? (The general population is split, but opinion seems driven by partisanship and therefore is subject to opportunistic shifts, Glenn Greenwald writes.) Part of the answer simply is Trump Derangement Syndrome. Trump has occasionally talked peace since his presidential campaign began, and therefore his opponents apparently feel they have to favor war. Whatever Trump wants, they want the opposite, even if it is something they once may have favored.

While he has pushed obscenely large increases in Pentagon spending — increases that dwarf Russia's entire military budget — rattled his saber at Iran, and made aggressive moves in Russia's direction (arms for Ukraine's government, withdrawal from the INF treaty, sanctions, etc.), he has also made some welcome overtures toward retrenchment, most notably with North Korea, now Syria, and to a lesser extent Afghanistan. (What's the point of cutting the U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan merely in half?)

Alas, any overture toward peace has prompted most of the pundit class and most politicians to unload on Trump. He has been accused of being a traitor or Russian agent just for talking about exiting a senseless war. His decision to get out of Syria — although many times he said would get out — was described as sudden and erratic, not to mention as a payoff to Russian President Vladimir Putin. (Russia scholar Stephen F. Cohen says Putin wants the small and uninvited U.S. force to stay in Syria as a partner in the battle against terrorism.)

Of course, we can't be confident that Trump will follow through on Syria or other pro-peace initiatives — he can't help equivocating — but we surely ought to be encouraging him to do so. The pundits and politicians, in contrast, apparently see their role in *discouraging* him by portraying him as disloyal, loopy, or both whenever he talks peace. The lethal attack on Americans in Syria the other day was immediately used to pressure Trump into changing his mind about withdrawing. It hasn't occurred to the war class that the troops would not have been killed had they been removed.

When a news interviewer gets push-back from a guest who supports a Trump peace move, the interviewer typically switches gears: "But do you approve of *how* Trump is going about it?" No word on behalf of scaling back the war state is allowed go unchallenged. If a mainstream media representative can't score a point against a proposal to get out of a war, he'll go after the "process." Overlooked is the fact that Barack Obama intervened in Syria in defiance of both Congress and the American public. When has that process been challenged by the intelligentsia?

Speaking of process, the media delight in going after Trump for not meekly deferring to allies and generals, apparently forgetting that the U.S. government is supposed to be run by elected civilians, with the military strictly subordinate. The pundits cheer whenever a war-mongering military officer or national security appointee publicly undercuts Trump's declared intention to withdraw from or avoid a war.

The media also delight in impugning the sanity, character, or "loyalty" of the rare public figure who favors a Trump peace overture. Opponents of intervention are routinely smeared as sympathizers of whoever rules the country in question, as though it followed that if you don't like a country's ruler, you logically ought to favor obliterating his country. In this video, Glenn Greenwald reminds us that those who objected to the U.S. wars in Iraq and Libya were accused of being soft on Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi.

To see the presumption of war in action, watch this recent exchange (beginning at 1:12) between CNN's Jake Tapper and Sen. Rand Paul, who has applauded Trump's announcement about Syria.

Tapper says: "I do want to ask you one philosophical point and I don't want you to think I'm being rude here, but I'm just wondering, in the last 20 years is there any act of U.S. intervention with military force abroad that you support?" The implication here is that unless Paul has supported at least one war, his support for an end to U.S. intervention in Syria is suspect.

I wish Paul had turned the question around and said, "Jake, let me ask you this: is there any U.S. war in the last 20 years that you opposed?"

Instead, Paul told Tapper he supported the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, though he was

not in Congress at the time. That's too bad of course, but to his credit, Paul reminded Tapper that subsequent interventions have no authority under the resolution passed by Congress with respect to Afghanistan. He also added that he opposed nation-building in Afghanistan: "I would have declared victory and come home long ago." He also schooled Tapper on the fact that as long as the U.S. military is present in Muslim hands, terrorism will be a risk.

Finally, Paul pointed out that withdrawal from Syria would not reduce the U.S. government's ability to intervene one iota because it has military forces ready to pounce everywhere.

True, but that's part of the problem.

Advocates of peace and liberty have no nobler mission than to overturn the presumption in favor of war.