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Conservatives and American Empire

by Tim Kelly

October 21, 2011

American conservatives who claim to value liberty and limited government but continue to take pride in the country's bloated military establishment would do well to remember Randolph Bourne's pithy declaration "war is the health of the state."

Conservatives will argue that the basic function of the state is to defend the country against foreign invasion or attack; therefore, allowing the government to make provisions for such exigent circumstances is necessary in a hostile world.

The problem with this argument is that not since the [War of 1812](#) has the U.S. military been deployed to defend the country from foreign attack. The U.S. military, rather than being an instrument of national defense, has been used as an offensive weapon in an imperial project that goes back more than a century.

Now, many conservatives will dismiss the charge that the United States is an empire as left-wing rhetoric, but they must contend with the fact that many within their own ranks have openly boasted of the American Empire.

Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer said in 2002, "People are coming out of the closet on the word 'empire.'" Krauthammer even boasted that America is "no mere international citizen. It is the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome." Robert Kagan has written of "The Benevolent Empire." Dinesh D'Souza, after writing in 2002 that

“America has become an empire,” approvingly added that it is “the most magnanimous imperial power ever.”

Andrew Bacevich is one conservative who takes a skeptical view of America’s global predominance. He ridicules the idea “that the promotion of peace, democracy, and human rights and the punishment of evil-doers, not the pursuit of self-interest, has defined the essence of American diplomacy.” Bacevich believes the goal of the U.S. military has been “to achieve something approaching omnipotence,” and he mocks the idea that such power in the hands of American officials “is by definition benign.”

Many conservatives will counter such criticism by declaring “American exceptionalism.” This is the notion that the United States is a uniquely virtuous nation, one committed to human rights, liberty, and peace; and therefore her government can pursue global hegemony without becoming a menace.

But a cursory look at history belies the claims of American benignity and moral superiority.

The truth is the United States has been one of the most expansionist and militaristic powers in history. It started out as thirteen states along North America’s eastern seaboard and expanded across the continent in an orgy of ruthless conquest.

The U.S. government has also waged numerous wars since the close of the 19th century, none of which could be considered genuinely defensive.

Spain did not pose a threat to America in 1898, and yet she was attacked by the U.S. military and stripped of her empire. And the hundreds of thousands of Filipinos who perished resisting American rule in the “liberated” Philippines certainly did not threaten the peace and security of the United States.

Germany did not pose a threat to the United States in 1917. Indeed, Berlin was far more conciliatory than London in matters regarding sea travel and made strenuous efforts to maintain peaceful relations with the United States. But Woodrow Wilson’s administration was openly Anglophile, and its declaration of neutrality in 1914 was a farce. Moreover, the country’s financial elite were anxious for the U.S. to enter the war in order to socialize their exposure to the Triple Entente’s wartime debts.

People can be forgiven for believing that America’s direct participation in the Second World War was defensive, because it was a response to Japan’s raid on Pearl Harbor and Nazi Germany’s declaration of war. That, indeed, was the objective of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s machinations in the run-up to America’s entry. The fact is that neither Japan nor Germany wanted war with the United States in 1940 and 1941.

Hitler’s government displayed remarkable forbearance in the face of repeated provocation by American warships in the North Atlantic. Japan was anxious to reach a modus vivendi with the United States in Asia, but President Roosevelt, viewing a confrontation with Japan as a way to gain entry into the war in Europe, imposed a series of trade embargoes designed to strangle her

economy and thereby provoke an attack. As Henry Stimson, FDR's Secretary of War, wrote in his diary only a few days before the Pearl Harbor raid, "the question was how we should maneuver them [Japan] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves."

During the Cold War the U.S. government launched offensives against North Korea and North Vietnam, but neither of those countries threatened the lives, liberties, or property of the American people. In more recent years, Panama, Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have been subjected to aerial bombardment and invasions courtesy of the U.S. military, but none of those pigmy states threatened the American colossus.

U.S. officials justify America's globe-girdling hegemony as a necessary condition for the preservation of world peace and stability. Like the Roman Empire of the first century or the British Empire of the nineteenth, the United States is the "indispensable nation," standing taller and seeing further than all others. But even a superficial examination of the facts exposes such claims as delusional self-aggrandizement. The U.S. government is merely a group of very fallible people who have proven incapable of managing even domestic affairs, let alone the world. Far from giving Americans protection, the U.S. government's imperial foreign policy has been creating enemies in every corner of the world while debauching the currency, draining the treasury, and burdening future generations with crushing debt.

Perhaps the enthusiasm so many conservatives show for American militarism and adventurism abroad can be explained by their misunderstanding of the fundamental nature of the state.

As Murray Rothbard said, "the State is nothing more nor less than a bandit gang writ large." It is naïve to expect a bunch of politicians and bureaucrats, largely shielded from public accountability, to provide something as ambiguous and vast as "national security" without turning the entire project into a giant pork-barrel scheme and making a general mess of things. But Rothbard was purged from the Right for his heresy of rejecting the Cold War consensus, and his libertarian insights were largely ignored by the postwar conservative movement.