Murray Rothbard on War and Foreign Policy

CHRISTOPHER J. COYNE AND YULIYA YATSYSHINA

For Murray Rothbard, matters of war and foreign policy are central to a free society of equal people. These issues are important because they influence the existence, or absence, of individual autonomy and peaceful social cooperation, both domestically and internationally. Rothbard recognized the importance of protecting people and their property from internal and external threats. At the same time, he appreciated the fundamental tension in granting governments the power to serve this protective function—a state strong enough to protect property in principle is also strong enough to pose a threat to those very things by engaging in aggression against private people at home and abroad. Because of the industrial organization of the state apparatus, Rothbard believed we should expect governments to routinely overstep their bounds, moving beyond protection to predation. This is clear in Rothbard's description of U.S. foreign policy in *For a New Liberty* (1996, first published in 1973):

> In the name of "national self-determination" and "collective security" against aggression, the American government has consistently pursued a goal and a policy of world domination and of the forcible suppression of any rebellion against the status quo anywhere in the world. In the name of combatting "aggression" everywhere—of being the world's "policeman"—it has itself become a great and continuing aggressor. (271)

Christopher J. Coyne is a professor of economics in the Department of Economics at George Mason University and co-editor of *The Independent Review*. **Yuliya Yatsyshina** is an associate program director for Academic and Student Programs at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University.

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In Rothbard's telling, the U.S. government's efforts to bring order, stability, and security to the world, couched in liberal rhetoric, had resulted in its becoming an aggressor—the very thing it sought to protect against.

In this paper we review some of Rothbard's key insights on war and foreign policy. We draw mainly from the chapter in *For a New Liberty* dedicated to these issues. We supplement our discussion with passages from Rothbard's essay "War, Peace, and the State" (2003), which was originally published in 1963, a decade prior to *For a New Liberty*. The main themes discussed by Rothbard include American foreign policy as imperialism, war as the health of the state, practical and ethical issues posed by nuclear weapons, the importance of nuclear disarmament, and the strategic use of smears and propaganda by government actors to both undermine antiwar views and to generate public support for the state's interventionist foreign policies. In each case we discuss the contemporary relevance of these issues. We conclude with some open areas for future exploration.

U.S. Foreign Policy as Imperialism

Rothbard argues that U.S. foreign policy became increasingly imperialistic from the late nineteenth century onward. As he writes, "Americans are not accustomed to applying the term 'imperialism' to the actions of the U.S. government, but the word is a particularly apt one. In its broadest sense, imperialism may be defined as the aggression of State A against the people of country B" (1996, 273). Importantly, Rothbard notes that imperialism doesn't necessarily involve direct rule over others but can involve indirect forms of control—what Rothbard calls "neoimperialism" (274)—whereby one government exerts its influence over others through indirect economic, military, and political means. Examples might include aid aimed at creating client states or the funding or arming, whether directly or indirectly, of certain groups with the goal of either supporting or undermining the current power elite.

Rothbard's central point is that military imperialism had become the core component of U.S. foreign policy despite rhetoric to the contrary. This includes the belief that military force is central to global order and stability, and the assumption that the U.S. government is capable of deploying force in the desired manner to achieve the ends intended by the political elite. Rothbard's insight is important for two reasons.

First, it highlights the tension between the *illiberal* means adopted by the U.S. government in the name of achieving *liberal* ends. At least rhetorically, U.S. government leaders justify their actions abroad on the grounds that they promote liberal values associated with individual freedom, free markets, democracy, and self-determination. But the imperialistic means adopted are often at odds with those very values. In discussing the post–World War II U.S.-led international order, Patrick Porter concludes that "even America's most glorious achievements—with liberal 'ends'—were not clean pluses on a balance sheet, made by liberal 'means.' They relied

on a preponderance of power, a preponderance that has brutal foundations. America's most beneficial achievements were partly wrought by illiberal means, through dark deals, harsh coercion and wars gone wrong that killed millions" (2020, 6).

Second, it directs our focus to the institutional and organizational arrangements necessary to operationalize a proactive, militaristic foreign policy. Government planning and control requires extensive bureaucratic organizations with discretionary power concentrated in the hands of a small group of people. This discretion is necessary to handle unforeseen consequences, which are inevitable in complex systems such as human societies. The need for unconstrained centralized political power has been discussed in matters of domestic government economic planning (Hayek 1944; Lavoie 1985). It is likely to be even more extensive in international affairs given the scope of planning and control required to police and control the world. In addition, constitutional constraints that operate at home to limit political opportunism are absent internationally, with international law serving as an ineffective check on the U.S. government (see Coyne and Hall 2018, 53–70).

Success also requires an extensive set of tools and skills, as well as people comfortable with employing them against other human beings, to implement plans and ensure compliance by those subject to the plan. "Examples of social control by the U.S. government in foreign interventions are many, and include massive use of military force, troop presence ('boots on the ground'), surveillance, curfews, segregation, bribery, censorship, suppression, imprisonment, and torture of local populations" (Coyne 2022, 32). At its core, the "empire state of mind" is antithetical to liberal values (Coyne and Hall Blanco 2016), with the activities associated with this mindset having real effects on the well-being of both domestic and foreign people. Interventions certainly can make certain people better off, but they can also impose a wide range of "bads" on entire populations, whether the intended target or not (Coyne and Davies 2007; Coyne 2022). Operationalizing a proactive militaristic foreign policy necessarily influences the overall size and makeup of the U.S. government, which is a second theme in Rothbard's treatment of war and foreign policy.

War as the Health of the State

Reflecting on the consequences of war, Rothbard invokes Randolph Bourne's notion that "war is the health of the state" (1964, 65), emphasizing that "war has always been the occasion of great—and usually permanent—acceleration and intensification of State power over society. . . . It is in war that the State really comes into its own: swelling in power, in number, in pride, in absolute domination over the economy and the society" (Rothbard 1996, 278). War can contribute to government growth in terms of the scope (range) of activities undertaken, as well as the scale (size) of the government, as emphasized later by Higgs (1987) in his analysis of the impact of crises on the makeup of government.

To explain the growth of government, Higgs offers a ratchet effect model including two mechanisms to explain why expansions in government growth in response to a crisis, which includes war, does not retrench postcrisis. The first is that the government response to a crisis leads to new government spending, agencies, and initiatives that persist after the crisis due to government inertia and vested interests. The second concerns ideology related to the expectations of private and public actors regarding the citizen-state relationship. People's expectations often shift in the wake of expanded government power, normalizing the "extraordinary" measures taken to address the crisis.

For example, those born around or after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States have never experienced what airport security entailed prior to the government's response as part of its "war on terror." The post-9/11 status quo is, for them, normalized as the way airport security has always been. Moreover, even among those who do remember what security was like prior to the war on terror, many have come to accept the new security measures as normal operating procedure and part of being a law-abiding citizen who does not question state authority.

This extends beyond airport security, as illustrated by Higgs (2005), Mueller (2006), Coyne and Yatsyshina (2021), and Bradley et al. (2023), who discuss other expansions in the U.S. government's power over the lives of Americans as part of the war on terror. This scholarship illustrates Rothbard's point that the "domestic tyranny" is "the inevitable accompaniment of war" (Rothbard 2000, 131). In a similar vein, Coyne and Hall (2014; 2018) argue that preparing for, and engaging in, foreign military interventions creates an environment conducive to government's developing and honing tools and skills of social control over foreign populations. Under certain conditions—a process they call the "boomerang effect"—these new tools and methods of control can return home and be used against the domestic population. The boomerang effect can be immediate or long and variable.

An example of the former is "Stingrays," or cell-site simulators. This technology allows law enforcement agents to acquire cellphone data from everyone in a given area (not just a single target) without a warrant. This technology, which was developed for use abroad as part of the U.S. government's war on terror, has returned home and is now used by domestic U.S. enforcement agencies (see Zetter 2020). Examples of the long and variable aspects of the boomerang effect are the evolution of the U.S. surveillance state, whose origins can be traced back to the Philippine-American War of the late nineteenth century, and the militarization of domestic policing, which can be traced back to importing skills and tactics developed and honed during historical military interventions abroad (see Coyne and Hall 2014; 2018).

War making—both preparation and engagement—also affects the domestic economy with the military-industrial complex (MIC) being perhaps the clearest illustration. In order to operate the military sector, the government must secure resources from the private sector. It must then use these resources to produce

military-related outputs, often involving entanglements between private firms and government bureaus, which is what defines the MIC. Rothbard emphasizes that the MIC was "entirely a creature of the federal government" because it is "only through *government* that the mechanism for this privilege [gained by private firms], and this wasteful misallocation of resources, can possibly exist" (1996, 74–75, emphasis in the original).

The operation of the MIC has several important economic effects. In the immediate term it redirects scarce resources from private uses to government-determined uses. This redirection includes physical resources, but also entrepreneurial alertness as government becomes a new potential source of profit. In addition, the existence of government-provided profit incentivizes rent seeking by private actors who compete with others to secure resources. Related, government decision-makers who maintain a property right over the distribution of resources can extract resources (known as "rent extraction") from private actors who seek to avoid disfavor with political gatekeepers.

The long-term effects include the entrenchment of political capitalism, which threatens the dynamism and sustainability of the market system. Mancur Olson (1982) emphasized that special interests engaged in economically unproductive activities can contribute to widespread economic decline. Given the nature of the military sector—public-private entanglements that influence almost all aspects of economic activity—there is reason to believe that Olson's insights are particularly relevant in military-related activities (see Melman 1970, 1985; Coyne and Hall 2019; Coyne 2022). As Rothbard makes clear, the realities of war and foreign policy cannot be separated from domestic life, and there is the real threat that the associated government policies will undermine economic and private freedoms while being justified on the grounds that they are protecting those very things.

Nuclear Weapons

One of the reasons that Rothbard elevates peace and foreign policy as a central issue for libertarians is the possibility of mass destruction associated with nuclear weapons. In *For a New Liberty* he writes:

> To all the long-standing reasons, moral and economic, against an interventionist foreign policy has now been added the imminent, ever-present threat of world destruction. If the world should be destroyed, all the other problems and all the other isms—socialism, capitalism, liberalism, or libertarianism—would be of no importance whatsoever. Hence the prime importance of a peaceful foreign policy and of ending the nuclear threat. (1996, 277)

In other words, no matter the ideological or seemingly irreconcilable differences among nations, disarmament is preferable to annihilation. A nuclear war, even

if survived, would produce such long-term climatic consequences, devastation of social and economic systems, mass starvation, and nearly unendurable conditions due to massive amounts of radiation that political differences would cease to matter (Sagan 1983; Ellsberg 2017).

For this reason, Rothbard argues that the use of nuclear weapons "is a sin and a crime against humanity for which there can be no justification" (2000, 120). Against this backdrop he views nuclear disarmament as a top foreign policy priority. Disarmament, he argues, "is not only a good, but the highest political good that we can pursue in the modern world" if there is an honest concern for safety and security of a nation's, and the world's welfare (120).

The standard arguments in favor of nuclear weapons are twofold. First, the U.S. experience with Japan in World War II demonstrated that, under certain circumstances, nuclear weapons could end war more efficiently than conventional weapons and ground troops could. Second, the presence of nuclear weapons deters governments from engaging in overly risky and harmful behaviors because of the potential costs, which are significant. The theoretical foundations of this position can be found in the work of Thomas Schelling (1966), who noted that deterrence theory requires one party finding ways to convince another party to refrain from engaging in certain actions. The threat of nuclear weapons—either in first-strike use or in terms of mutually assured destruction—is viewed as a powerful means to deter undesirable behaviors. As evidence of the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence people often point to the peace (often called "the long peace") following World War II, where no major power engaged in direct warfare with another major power.

Rothbard points out that the introduction of nuclear weapons transformed the nature of warfare and, in doing so, undermined the idea that states were providing "defense." The nature of warfare had changed because the introduction of more advanced technologies, such as nuclear weapons, made it more difficult to target specific people, meaning that it was more likely that innocent people would be harmed. Moreover, "there is no defense against nuclear weapons (the only current 'defense' is the threat of mutual annihilation) and, therefore, the State cannot fulfill any sort of defense function so long as these weapons exist" (Rothbard 2000, 126). "Defense" now means the threat of offense with weapons that are capable of annihilating significant numbers of innocent human beings.

The existence of the nuclear weapons creates a security dilemma that threatens both innocent foreigners and members of the domestic populace whose government possesses these weapons. This dilemma exists because as one party obtains weapons, others feel less safe and are incentivized to accumulate more weapons for their own protection, the result being an arms race. The threat to the safety of innocent people is compounded by a number of factors, including the instability needed to make deterrence work as a threat, human error, and imperfections in the command and control of nuclear weapons (see Coyne and Hall 2023 for an overview of these arguments). There is also unclear causation between the possession of nuclear weapons

and peace, meaning that there are other potential explanations for the post–World War II "long peace" that do not rely on the threats posed by nuclear weapons (see Wilson 2008; 2014, 91–94).

Because of these issues and the threats that nuclear weapons pose to humankind, Rothbard prioritizes nuclear disarmament. He saw the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) between the United States and the Soviet Union as an important first step in this process and would likely have seen subsequent efforts—e.g., Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) of the 2000s in a similar light. At the same time, he saw the SALT agreements as a "hesitant beginning" (1996, 292) and urged libertarians to be steadfast advocates for complete disarmament rather than settling for piecemeal changes that maintained the status quo.

Smears and Propaganda

Part of what makes resisting a militaristic foreign policy so difficult, Rothbard notes, is the use of smears to belittle critics. "'Isolationism' was coined as a smear term to apply to opponents of American entry into World War II" (263). This was part of a concerted effort to discredit critics of America's involvement in the war by labeling them as unpatriotic and sympathizers of Nazis.

This points to a broader theme emphasized by Rothbard—war making requires centralization with the political elite who seek, if not demand, uniformity among the populace in order to implement their plan without dissent. "War is the great excuse for mobilizing all the energies and resources of the nation, in the name of patriotic rhetoric, under the aegis and dictation of the State apparatus. . . . Society becomes a herd, seeking to kill its alleged enemies, rooting out and suppressing all dissent from the official war effort, happily betraying truth for the supposed public interest" (278).

Central to this process is government-produced propaganda that is meant to coordinate citizens around the common goals of the political elite while creating a clear "us versus them" dichotomy, with the former referring to those who support "the country" and the latter including those who oppose or question the actions and goals of the political elite (see Coyne and Hall 2021, 10–11). As Rothbard notes, with a perhaps counterintuitive insight about democratic versus dictatorial political systems,

> while public opinion has to be gauged in either case, the only real difference between a democracy and a dictatorship on making war is that in the former *more* propaganda must be beamed at one's subjects to engineer their approval. Intensive propaganda is necessary in any case—as we can see by the zealous opinion-moulding behavior of all modern warring States. But the democratic State must work harder and faster. And also the democratic State must be more hypocritical in using rhetoric designed to appeal to the values of the masses: justice, freedom, national interest, patriotism, world peace, etc. (1996, 290, emphasis in the original)

These dynamics are certainly evident in American history, where the government has engaged in systematic deception and propaganda during wartime to ensure support while squashing dissent. The operation of the Committee on Public Information (1917–1919) during World War I and the activities of the U.S. Office of War Information (1942–1945) during World War II serve as two well-known historical examples. Systematic lying to the American populace has also been common, as revealed by the Pentagon Papers (1971), which revealed government deception regarding the Vietnam War and, more recently, the Afghanistan Papers (Whitlock 2022).

State-produced propaganda and smears threaten a free and self-governing society by inverting the citizen-state relationship (Coyne and Hall 2021). Citizens are no longer viewed as the source of power, but rather as annoying barriers standing in the way of the political elite achieving their goals. From this perspective, lying is justified on the grounds that the political elite know better than the citizenry what is in their interests and what they should want. As this view becomes normalized, so too does a comfort with active deception by the political elite as long as they deem it necessary for the "common good."

Conclusion

In *For a New Liberty*, Murray Rothbard offers a cosmopolitan vision of peaceful international relations between people who are viewed as equals with common rights. As he notes, "Until the smear campaign of the late 1930s, opponents of war were considered the true 'internationalists,' men who opposed the aggrandizement of the nation-state and favored peace, free trade, free migration and peaceful cultural exchanges among peoples of all nations" (1996, 264). Rothbard's writings on war and foreign policy offer numerous opportunities for further study. We will briefly mention two.

One is the study of disarmament. Rothbard views nuclear disarmament as central to a free and safe world. The role of nuclear arms in generating security or insecurity remains a contested issue deserving further exploration. Beyond that there is the issue of understanding *how* disarmament can effectively occur. Clearly it is a political process since governments possess nuclear weapons. At the same time, bottom-up pressure from ordinary private citizens has a crucial role to play, as demonstrated by Lawrence Wittner's (2009) history of the global nuclear disarmament movement, which involved, and continues to involve, a wide range of nonstate actors (scientists, activists, and ordinary citizens).

A second issue relates to alternatives to state-provided defense. For the pathologies of the state to be reduced or altogether avoided, an alternative means of providing security and defense is required. Indeed, the standard argument in favor of the state-provision of security is that it will be underprovided by private people due to collective action problems (costs of coordination and free riding). Although

Rothbard talks about the importance of limiting government in *For a New Liberty*, he does not offer a concrete alternative to the state-provision of defense. In *Power and Market*, which was published prior to *For a New Liberty*, Rothbard begins with a discussion of "defense services on the free market" (1970, 1–9). But this is a high-level theoretical treatment, and much work remains to be done identifying the relevant conceptual mechanisms at work and historical examples of people successfully providing security absent a coercive state.

Fifty years after its publication, *For a New Liberty* offers an inspiring vision of a free society. Rothbard does not deny that conflict will exist in a free society, for conflicts are a regular part of life. Instead, he believes that people, left to their own devices, can find creative ways to peacefully navigate conflict without resorting to widespread violence. Moreover, he believes that state-provided "defense" not only makes the world less safe by elevating violence as a primary means of social interaction, but also that it atrophies the self-governing capabilities of private people. The implication is that state-provided defense can produce outcomes that stand at odds with the cosmopolitan liberal vision, a vision that *For a New Liberty* reminds us is well worth fighting for.

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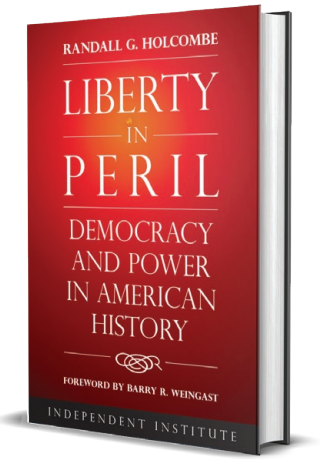

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