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## **Machiavelli and U.S. Politics**

### **Part 4: War**

**by Lawrence M. Ludlow**

On the subject of war, Machiavelli offers simple advice (chapter 14):

Thus a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but that of war and its orders and discipline; for that is the only art which is of concern to one who commands.

Again it is important to remember that Machiavelli's chief concern is not the freedom or well-being of citizens. His sole interest is a ruler's ability to acquire and maintain power. In contrast, James Madison, fourth president of the United States and author of the U.S. Constitution, enumerated the many evils caused by war:

Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people.... [There are also an] inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and ... degeneracy of manners and of morals.... No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare....

In taking this stance, Madison echoed the sentiments of John Quincy Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and George Washington. Moreover, at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Madison warned us against the dangers of a standing army:

A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defense against foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved the people.

When uniformed armies are not used to enslave people directly, politicians use other techniques to control them. They invent enemies that appear to threaten the nation. In his book *Crisis and Leviathan*, Robert Higgs showed how wars and economic crises help to expand the power of government and diminish individual liberties. In one example, he showed how the Wilson administration overcame the opposition of Americans to involvement in World War I by hiding its true costs. Instead of relying on free-market purchases to acquire needed resources (and reveal all costs), the government resorted to command-and-control measures and propaganda to head off opposition:

In early 1917, when the government committed the nation to waging full-scale warfare, it became obvious that raising taxes enough to cover the full market costs of the resources the administration proposed to employ for war purposes would generate immense resistance. For the mobilization to proceed and the government to remain in power the costs had to be at least partially concealed. Accordingly the Wilson administration, with the cooperation of Congress and the Supreme Court, undertook conscription of soldiers, establishment of priorities for the use of transportation, fuel, and manufacturing facilities, price fixing, extensive commandeering, and even outright nationalization of entire industries. To divert attention from the real costs of these actions the government mounted an enormous propaganda campaign to stir up patriotic emotion and encourage citizens to act as monitors and enforcers to suppress those who dared to object or resist. To divide and conquer at the grass-roots level proved an effective tactic to diffuse resistance and insulate the highest authorities from public opposition: witness the thousands of local draft boards, the legion of volunteer food administrators, and the far-flung corps of fuel authorities.

Wartime measures also served as springboards to reduce other liberties. In one example, Higgs outlined an argument used during World War II to justify centralized economic controls:

If the military draft provided the crucial link in the creation of the legislative and administrative chain that the government wrapped around individual rights during the war, it served an even more fundamental purpose in giving legitimacy to the suppression of economic liberties. Virtually everyone who considered the matter, from influential economists, bureaucrats, and congressmen right up to Supreme Court justices and the President himself, used and accepted the validity of the moral argument: if *A* is all right, then *X* is certainly all right; where *A* was military conscription and *X* was

any governmental suppression of individual rights whatsoever, especially any denial of private property rights.... Most astonishing is the almost universal acceptance of the argument's premise that military conscription, a transparent example of involuntary servitude, is morally untarnished.

Higgs then summarized the 20th-century trend of crisis-based government growth:

After the ideological transformation that took place during the Progressive Era, each genuine crisis has been the occasion for another ratchet toward Bigger Government. The Progressive ideological imperative that government must "do something," must take responsibility for resolving any perceived crisis, insures new actions. The actions have unavoidable costs, which governments have an incentive to conceal by substituting coercive command-and-control devices for pecuniary fiscal-and-market means of carrying out their chosen policies. Military conscription, wage-price controls, assignment of official priorities and physical allocation of selected commodities, countless economic and social regulations, import quotas and export controls — all confirm the hypothesis. Knowing how much a crisis facilitates Bigger Government, special interests always use such propitious occasions to seek whatever governmental assistance they think will promote their own ends. Once undertaken, governmental programs are hard to terminate. Interests become vested, bureaucracies entrenched, constituencies solidified. More fundamentally, each time the government expands its effective authority over economic decision-making, it sets in motion a variety of economic, institutional, and ideological adjustments whose common denominator is a diminished resistance to Bigger Government. Among the most significant of such adjustments is the Supreme Court's consistent refusal to protect individual rights from invasion by governmental officials during national emergencies. Precedents established during extraordinary times tilt the constitutional balance even during ensuing normal times.

Finally, Higgs, who published *Crisis and Leviathan* in 1987, issued the following warning to his readers:

We do know something about the future. We know that other great crises will come. Whether they will be occasioned by foreign wars, economic collapse, or rampant terrorism, no one can predict with assurance. Yet in one form or another, great crises will surely come again, as they have from time to time throughout all human history. When they do, governments almost certainly will gain new powers over economic and social affairs.

With these words in mind, let us trace some of the effects of the U.S. policy of interventionism and the so-called war on terror.

*Petroleum markets.* Just as wartime measures concealed the true cost of U.S. involvement in World War I and II, the current interventionist foreign policy conceals the true cost of petroleum-based products. U.S. soldiers, for example, currently are posted in 135 countries around the world — many in or near oil-producing countries. Consequently, the price consumers pay for heating oil, gasoline, and other petroleum-based products does not reflect the high cost of maintaining this military presence or of sending foreign aid to the leaders of these nations. In other words, the true cost of petroleum products is unknown because U.S. taxpayers subsidize their supply — distorting energy markets and other sectors that rely on petroleum.

*Economic and social regulations.* The next time you send money to your favorite charity, make sure that the U.S. government has not placed it on the hit-list of charities that are suspected of assisting terrorists. Of course, the U.S. government determines the definition of “terrorism” as well as what constitutes a friendly rather than an enemy nation — which can change from moment to moment.

*Nationalization of industries.* In many ways, the travel industry has been nationalized to accommodate our interventionist foreign policy. Using the phrase “nationalized industry,” however, would tend to undercut the freedom that our administration claims to hold dear to its heart. Nonetheless, airport searches, pat-downs, long lines, and the seizure of “threatening” objects such as nail clippers are not typical of free-market transactions. Similarly, the taxpayer-subsidized TSA employees loitering in huge, but easily duped numbers have been imposed by the government. Finally, the taxpayer bailouts of failing airlines and their bloated pension plans are the most obvious example of airline nationalization.

*War-time profiteering.* Many companies that hold contracts to “reconstruct” Iraq (they will do this several times by the look of things) have been criticized for failing to document invoices and for bidding on noncompetitive contracts. Furthermore, the market for “security experts” and “security technologies” has mushroomed. Consequently, resources are being drained from other areas of the economy into this new growth industry.

*Propaganda.* From the pages of the *New York Times* to the broadcasts of the Fox news channel, the drumbeat for war was incessant in the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom [sic]. Americans have been told by government officials “to watch what we say” and that “if you’re not with us, you’re with the terrorists.” Fearing criticism from the administration’s true believers, one company withdrew advertising from a late-night talk show because the host simply pointed out that the 9/11 hijackers could not honestly be called cowards. Furthermore, we are constantly reminded that the terrorists “hate us for our freedom and values.” With no consistent commitment to liberty, much of the press remains uncritical of constitutional violations. Instead, their chief concern is being cut off from inside sources of political gossip in retaliation for covering news stories that are critical of the administration. The specter of being frozen out of the loop is as frightening as having the government shut them down or arrest them, as Lincoln did to

hundreds of newspapers and thousands of editors, legislators, and businessmen who disagreed with his policies. Then again, has anyone seen an al-Jazeera broadcast from Iraq lately? The U.S. military blew up its Baghdad office and killed a reporter there despite repeated reminders about its exact location. In addition, the U.S.-backed provisional government shut down al-Jazeera's offices in August 2004 "for one month," citing national-security concerns. The offices have remained closed.

*Gullibility.* Even more important than the willingness of the press to play "follow the leader," the uncritical populace — "educated" in government-controlled schools — eats up a steady stream of propaganda. The willingness to believe lies (even after they have been exploded) and to trust government authorities is a testimony to the true product of government-controlled schooling: blind obedience.

Once again we can trace the pattern of lie, hypocrisy, and half-truth. We've already addressed the administration's 237 lies about WMDs and links to terrorism (see [part 2](#) of this series). When it turned out that there were no WMDs and no links between Iraq and the attack on the World Trade Center, the deception was exposed for all to see. Even Bush could not bear the charge of being called a liar — not to mention a hypocrite — since he frequently voiced his faith in God and warned of evil-doers lurking in every nook and cranny. Consequently, the president concocted a plausible half-truth to cover his tracks. He claimed he had been misinformed by intelligence experts. The half-truth, of course, is that U.S. intelligence agencies *are* notoriously inaccurate, and the president knew it. After all, his father was director of the CIA from 1976 to 1977 — so he likely had a closer look than most of us. Among other examples, the CIA is infamous for vastly overestimating Soviet strength just before the USSR fell to pieces all by itself in 1991. More recently, the CIA was part of a massive government failure to prevent the September 11 attacks. Still, the president knew that "incompetence in government" would provide a safe harbor in which he could wait out the storm of limp criticism once the war against Iraq was exposed for what it was — another government-sponsored tragedy that will haunt us for decades by generating anti-U.S. terrorism. Even worse, the writings of Karen Kwiatkowski and the contents of the Downing Street memo (see [part 2](#) of this series) already demonstrated that the Bush administration orchestrated the flow of misinformation that was used to build a false case for war.

Unfortunately, this Bush administration — much as the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, the first Bush, and Clinton administrations — failed to take into account the resentment generated when invaders embark on wars of aggression in the homelands of other people. The writer Gore Vidal, however, has made up for this oversight. In his book *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* Vidal lists 201 U.S. military operations that took place between the victory over Japan in 1945 and the attacks of September 11. The list was compiled by the Federation of American Scientists. Think of it: 201 conflicts since 1945. This is what generated the blowback that Americans still

refuse to acknowledge — preferring instead to repeat nonsense such as “they hate us for our freedom.”

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