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War, Civil Liberties, and Libertarianism

by Anthony Gregory

For more than 12 years, since I was a high-school freshman, I have counted the champions of freedom as my greatest heroes. I have long admired those who, throughout history as well in the present, have spoken truth to power and stood up against tyranny, especially when it mattered most, and especially when it was most difficult.

It was around the time of the Kosovo war, when I was about selective-service-registration age and my interest in foreign affairs began to grow, that I came to recognize the profound significance of war and the warfare state and also the hostility opponents of war often faced.

Those who opposed Clinton's NATO war were attacked, their motives questioned. I saw leftist critics of the war being called communists, accused of sympathizing with Milosevic's his communist background. I saw conservative critics criticized for not caring about human rights. As a libertarian opponent of the war, I was told that if I objected to the war, it must mean I wouldn't care if foreigners perished in genocidal atrocities.

The mainstream Left and the Democratic Party supported Clinton's foreign policy, just as the mainstream Right and the Republicans have been loyal to Bush's war on terror. In reality, however, the foreign policy in this country has for a long time been bipartisan and its defenders have spanned the spectrum — those who differ on domestic policy will agree that America's military bases, its foreign interventions, its enormous standing army, its gigantic weapons systems and the huge budgets to finance them all, are, on balance, good for or even absolutely essential to the well-being of America and international peace.

Then there are those who disagree. Libertarians, classical liberals, and others who oppose unlimited government have long been among the most vocal and staunch critics of the warfare state, which we have identified as the greatest engine of government growth and violations of liberty in the modern era. But we have not been alone in our critiques. There are those on the Right and Left who have focused their energy on protesting America's militarism, imperialism, and belligerence. All around America, from all walks of life, there are people who recognize the superlative threat that U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. Empire pose to our security in life, liberty, and property.

FFF's June 1–4 conference

Given how much I admire those who speak trenchantly on behalf of liberty and peace, and given how crucial an issue I consider the warfare state to be, it would be impossible for me to overstate how excited I am to be a small part of The Future of Freedom Foundation's upcoming conference, June 1 through 4, in Reston, Virginia, "Restoring the Republic: Foreign Policy and Civil Liberties."

The Future of Freedom Foundation has for years been one of my favorite libertarian organizations. I used its materials in my self-education in libertarian theory, history, and ethics back in high school. In college at U.C. Berkeley, I became particularly interested in FFF's treatment of U.S. foreign policy. I saw a couple articles by Jacob Hornberger hung on the wall at Top Dog, a wonderful Berkeley sausage eatery owned by a libertarian. One of the articles was "The White Rose: A Lesson in Dissent," the inspiring story of Hans and Sophie Scholl, two young Germans who stood up against Hitler, though it cost them their lives. The other was an article about World War II in which Hornberger argued that its ultimate consequence was not the liberated world it was supposed to bring — rather, many of the people freed from Nazi rule had ended up under Soviet rule.

A radical critique of war and its less-appreciated consequences, I thought, and I began reading more FFF materials on foreign policy, in particular the articles in FFF's book [*The Failure of America's Foreign Wars*](#).

I came to admire FFF especially for being willing to speak up on the failures of imperialism and the ravages of total war. While it is unpopular to say such things, while it is even considered impolite to criticize the U.S. government's wars, we in America at least have the freedom to do so. And, as it became clear to me, if Hans and Sophie Scholl were willing to speak up, despite the threat of death, then we should be willing to speak up when our own government goes too far. The necessity of peace and freedom requires it. And though this may seem to be an inappropriate comparison seeing that it's not yet nearly as bad here as it was in Nazi Germany, we should not wait until it gets worse before we speak up. We do have more freedom than some, which means we have a lot to lose. There's no reason to wait until dissent is banned before we practice it.

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When 9/11 came, FFF was one of the rare principled voices for reason, restraint, and reflection in the midst of an endless sea of calls for more government security, more war, more police powers for the central state, more bombings, more border guards, more gun control, and more of all the rest that helped bring about the tragedy in the first place. Especially on civil liberties, on torture, and on detentions without trial, FFF has brilliantly shined in the last half decade.

As one show of their dedication, the good folks at FFF are hosting what is shaping up to be one of the greatest conferences in the history of libertarianism and peace advocacy in this country. Although I certainly do not consider myself enough of an authority for my praise of these participants to carry much weight on its own, I can't help but say that the lineup of speakers is just out of this world.

Hornberger, for one, is one of the most impassioned and compelling speakers in the movement. I could voice as sincere words of excitement about hearing the other speakers but it would take too much space.

Ah, what the heck.

I have never heard Sheldon Richman speak, but I have long loved his radical and powerfully written defenses of liberty. The same goes for Richard Ebeling, whom I can hardly wait to meet. Since high school, the indispensable Jim Bovard has been among my favorite authors — I have read all his books since then and regard him as one of the best researchers and journalists of government abuses and shams around. And I can't wait to hear what Bart Frazier, a principled voice for freedom at FFF (who should also write more!), has to say.

As a libertarian student of history, I am very much looking forward to the talks by Ralph Raico, a treasure to the movement; Thomas DiLorenzo, who has done great work exposing the Lincoln myth; and Joseph Stromberg, who has helped keep the flame of revisionism alive. With three articles a week, Justin Raimondo's tireless work at Antiwar.com has just been amazing, and he's a wonderfully lively speaker too. Ted Galen Carpenter has done some of the best realistic analysis of foreign policy I've seen. And Lew Rockwell at LewRockwell.com and the Mises Institute has simply been one the best writers and publishers of principled writing for peace and liberty in our time.

The Independent Institute, where I am very fortunate to be working, will be represented by Ivan Eland, whose informed defense policy analysis I enjoyed well before I got to work for him, and by Robert Higgs, whose masterly scholarship on the military-industrial complex should be read by everyone.

Since 9/11, the Left has been arguably better than the Right at opposing wartime tyranny. I've admired Robert Scheer's journalism since I saw him speak at U.C. Berkeley. I am much looking forward to the presentations of Joanne Mariner, as I am inspired by the work Human Rights Watch does to expose atrocity everywhere, and Joseph Margulies, whose work on Guantanamo and detentions has been most important.

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Not all of the Right has been bad, however, and it's important to expose the divide between supposed conservative principles of small government and the big-government and civil-liberties encroachments we see most conservatives defend at wartime. Bob Barr has shown unusual integrity in reaching across the political spectrum, breaking with conservative allies when it comes to privacy. Andrew Napolitano is that rare voice for the rule of law in a mainstream media otherwise ideologically attached at the hip to the federal government. Laurence Vance, a libertarian and devout conservative Christian, has helped show many people the disconnect between their professed faith in the Prince of Peace and their devotion to the god of war.

It doesn't end even there. Daniel Ellsberg is a real-life hero who risked it all to tell the truth about Vietnam, and thanks to him, the truth won. Karen Kwiatkowski has reminded us through the grueling war in Iraq that truth-tellers and whistle-blowers still exist, and I expect her talk to be damning. Then there's Richard Vague, a CEO who has seen the counterproductive effects of the war on terror and has

put his money where his mouth is trying to show others in the business world the folly of the current approach.

As for Ron Paul, he is very likely the best congressman in American history, and that wouldn't even be his most impressive quality. I am so thrilled to be involved with this event. I would be thrilled to go even if I weren't a speaker, as it features so many of the great proponents of civil liberties and peace that I have come to admire in the last several years. With any half of the speakers, it would still rank as a conference I would hate to miss.

The best speakers, the most important issues — did I mention, by the way, that I was born in Fairfax, the county in which this conference is happening? This event is a dream come true for me, and if you are reading this and are as moved by peace and liberty and as troubled by endless war and unlimited government as I am, I do hope to see you there.

This article was originally published in March 2007.