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Preventing Opposition to War **by Sheldon Richman**

The idea, [discussed by me](#) and others, that it is good that most Americans are not directly touched by the President Bush's wars is of course not the whole story.

Our rulers could have forced us to be more involved. They could have passed a special war tax, launched a high-profile "Buy War Bonds" campaign, and found other ways to demand "sacrifice" in the name of patriotism and victory. They could have staged more events featuring "our brave heroes who risk everything to preserve your way of life." They even could have started conscription if only for symbolic reasons.

But our misleaders have not done any of this. Why not?

To understand, we need to think about the nature of war as a political instrument — for at its core, that is what it is.

In a lecture last year Prof. Joseph Salerno of Pace University pointed out that war is a device by which a ruling class not only expands its power and access to wealth, but also distracts the domestic population from the exploitation perpetrated by its government. The welfare-warfare state does not exist primarily to serve and protect "its" people. It does those things to some extent, of course, but only for the same reason the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk" fed the goose that laid the golden eggs: to sustain the exploitation as long as possible.

No, in its primary role the welfare-warfare state is a grand scheme to enable a ruling class, through its complex bureaucracy and ideological smokescreens, to transfer wealth from the industrious classes to itself. This system deceives and compels the taxpaying producers to support a tax-consuming aristocracy, which includes the bureaucracy and corporations that exist on government contracts.

War can be highly useful to this cause because in time the taxpayers may begin to catch on to the scam that drains their wealth. If they can be made to fear that an external enemy threatens their safety, they will happily trust their rulers with more power and money and ignore the occasional overt corruption. Nothing better serves this purpose than a foreign war. First, of course, the war makers must persuade the people that a threat really exists. This can be pulled off all

sorts of ways. Phantom weapons of mass destruction served quite nicely in 2003. Foreign intervention that provokes murderous retaliation (terrorist “blowback”) also does the trick.

But this method of keeping the domestic population alarmed is not foolproof. Rulers can overplay their hand. Under some circumstances, asking too much sacrifice of too many people may cause them to call the whole scheme into question, risking the aristocracy’s hold on power.

That could be why the Bush administration has asked so little directly of most people. It spends \$7 billion a month on war but has cut, not raised, taxes. How can that be? Government borrowing lets the war makers spend now and tax (young and unborn generations) later. But there is no free lunch even in the present, because the borrowing shifts wealth from fulfilling the purposes of consumers to fulfilling the purposes of the war makers. As a result most of us are poorer.

Thus, in one respect it’s good that most of American society has avoided the ugliness and spiritual rot that war wreaks. But in another respect, it has permitted the war party to continue its imperialist policy of occupation and murder largely unmolested, while milking the people in covert ways.

Paradoxically, there might be more war opposition if the empire imposed on the home population more heavily.

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