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A Bogus Libertarian Defense of War **by Sheldon Richman**

Some people think that government can fight wars such as the ones going on in Iraq and Afghanistan while remaining limited and unintrusive at home. Conservatives dubiously insist that a robustly interventionist foreign policy can coexist with a free-market domestic policy. But what's really surprising is that a prominent libertarian legal theorist takes the same position.

In the [*Wall Street Journal*](#) recently, Randy E. Barnett, a law professor at Georgetown University, wrote that a libertarian can support the invasion and occupation of Iraq. His aim was to show that Rep. Ron Paul, the only anti-war Republican and libertarian in the presidential race, doesn't speak for all libertarians on the war.

There are two problems with Barnett's thesis: (1) historically, war and preparation for it have been the biggest stimuli to the growth of government, which libertarians philosophically oppose; and (2) the Iraq war is an aggressive war, which libertarians also oppose.

Barnett writes, "While all libertarians accept the principle of self-defense, and most accept the role of the U.S. government in defending U.S. territory, libertarian first principles of individual rights and the rule of law tell us little about what constitutes appropriate and effective self-defense after an attack. Devising a military defense strategy is a matter of judgment or prudence about which reasonable libertarians may differ greatly."

That is true as far as it goes. The problem is that it doesn't go very far, and what it leaves out is crucial. To be sure, libertarian principles do not prescribe a military strategy or tell us "what constitutes appropriate and effective self-defense after an attack." But that doesn't mean libertarian principles are silent on these matters; they do tell us what is *inappropriate*. They tell us that government should not *provoke* attacks by brutally intervening in other people's affairs, as the [U.S. government has done consistently](#) in the Middle East for more than 50 years. Anyone who accepts, as Barnett puts it, "the role of the U.S. government in defending U.S. territory" should insist that the government not endanger the American people by making foreign enemies. A *provoked* attack would not call for a counterattack, but rather a change in the interventionist policy that created the threat in the first place.

Moreover, libertarian principles tell us that any response to a truly unprovoked attack must respect the rights of innocents. Actions that can be expected to harm people not involved in the original attack should be avoided. War must not be an occasion for dispensing with normal moral prohibitions. Those who disagree lose their standing to object to the murder of innocents on 9/11.

Barnett acknowledges that libertarians are skeptical that government can do anything constructive on the world stage: “To a libertarian, any effort at ‘nation building’ seems to be just another form of central planning which, however well-motivated, is fraught with unintended consequences and the danger of blowback. And, like most everyone, libertarians oppose any war of aggression.”

He’s right. But the prohibition on wars of aggression rules out the war in Iraq, which never threatened the American people. Barnett disagrees. He says the war can be justified as part of the defense against Islamic jihadis. But as noted already, the anti-American jihad grew out of decades of oppressive intervention in Arab and Muslim countries. It’s the blowback Barnett refers to. Moreover, conquering a secular westernized Arab country seems a peculiar way to defend against jihad. It’s far more likely to create new mortal enemies.

Barnett’s “libertarian” defense of the war turns out to be nothing of the kind. This is reinforced by the fact that he neglects the libertarian insight that war fortifies everything libertarians abhor: taxes, debt, jobbery, and violations of civil liberties such as privacy. No one has put it better than the anti-World War I writer Randolph Bourne: “War is the health of the state.” How can any libertarian defend it?

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