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War and the Common Good

by Anthony Gregory

The following is based on a talk delivered on Saturday, June 7, 2008, at the Future of Freedom Foundation's conference, Restoring the Republic: Foreign Policy and Civil Liberties, in Reston, Virginia.

We are used to hearing discussion of political issues boiled down to a conflict between the individual and the greater good. Nearly anyone's pet project for government can be sold as a way to promote the common, or general interest — a mission so compelling that the interests of mere individuals must be sacrificed.

Before relating this to war, it is important to consider what it means to take the individual's side on such questions. It is not to be atomistic, to believe humans do not need to cooperate with one another and form groups, social organizations and institutions of law. Far from it. Those who favor individual rights simply believe that out of a respect for the dignity and rights of the individual come community, business, society, religious groups and all the other crucial organizations of social life. We thrive on social cooperation and indeed individualists are its great defenders. We see compulsion against the individual as a great threat to civil society. We believe that when coercion replaces voluntarism, the very basis of civilization is in jeopardy. Thus do we favor the market and community and family — it is only that we see these groups as being at their best when they respect the dignity of the individual. While we understand that, in terms of human progress, the group is indeed, in a sense, more than the sum of the parts, losing sight of the freedom of each individual involved undermines the strength and humanity of such groups. We see no conflict between individual rights and the common good; rather they are inextricably intertwined.

Furthermore, we argue that private, individual selfishness, whether benign or destructive, can never be abolished by the public sector. The state only elevates flawed, selfish human beings to a position of unchecked, lawless authority over others.

And indeed, the focus on individual dignity and rights has been a focus of our culture, of America, of the West, going back many centuries. It pervades our relatively liberal culture and is seen on both the right and left. Prolifers focus on the dignity of the individual life of the unborn. Prochoicers stress the importance of the personal right to choose of the individual woman. Whether the issue is guns, drugs, taxes, or the freedom to worship, most Americans are somewhat receptive idea that the individual is the premier unit in society, on whose freedom rests the greater good of society as a whole.

At the same time, the conservatives who defend individual freedom as it concerns economics attack the left for being carried away with the personal liberty of individuals in the social context. They see calls for social tolerance as always an excuse for selfish, libertine behavior. Leftists respond that conservatives are shilling for greedy and rich CEOs, who care more about their own pocketbooks than the good of humanity. It is not so much that either group is devoid of an individualistic impulse; they only apply the principle that the individual good leads to the social good in different contexts, and inconsistently.

But there exists a strong streak throughout our society of believing in individual rights. There exists a resistance to the extreme forms of coerced collectivism that have plagued totalitarian nations, and much the rest of the world. And while much of the last century was a story of violently competing forms of collectivism, there is certainly a form of civil individualism that has survived, even improved in ways, and to this we owe the blessings of our civilization.

As it concerns the issues of empire, of national defense, of the military state, however, there appears to be a double standard. Those who most loudly condemn collectivism as it relates to domestic policy are often among the loudest in support of war collectivism. Consider many of the outspoken followers of Ayn Rand. Rand did some crucial work in battling the modernist, collectivist zeitgeist of her time. She was certainly no blind follower of the idea that the greater good trumps the rights of the individual. And yet she was not immune to a severe blindspot as it regarded war. In her famous novella *Anthem*, the first-person protagonist, living in a collectivist dystopia, comes upon an ethical and philosophical epiphany when she discovers the word, "I." She and her society had been conditioned to only use the word "we" — by discovering the word "I," she discovered the idea of the individual. This is a powerful book in imparting the lesson that the very conception of individual rights is itself largely a cultural phenomenon.

And yet, how did Rand discuss matters on questions of foreign policy? Often in terms of "we." Even when she criticized the Vietnam war, it was mainly from a vantage point of lamenting the fact that "we" must sacrifice our treasure and blood to liberate and socially reform "them" — "them," who were not deserving of our individualist culture. At her worst, she said that the oil under Arab land was properly "ours" and that "they" had stolen it.

Many of her followers have taken this much further. They saw 9/11 as an attack of "them" against "us." And so "we" must retaliate — not just against the individual attackers, many of

whom, incidentally, died in the suicide mission. No, “we” must remake the whole Middle East in “our” image. Americans become indistinguishable from one another and from their government. So do Arabs and Muslims. The act of living in an oppressive nation alone means you have to sacrifice your rights to the great crusade for democracy. And total democracy, which many individualists have taken up as a sort of end in itself, is, in reality, of course not the same as ethical individualism.

Belligerent nationalism has for centuries been a particularly odious and destructive form of collectivism. It ranks up there with communism in its capacity to create human misery by dispensing with the lives of mere individuals. In fact, even communism benefited greatly from nationalist impulses throughout the world. And surely, not only the egoistical individualists like Rand’s worst followers are currently enthralled by it. Much of the conservative movement, and certainly the Republican establishment, have signed on to the imperialist cause, willing to throw the individual under the collectivist warfare state bus. Much of the Christian Right has forgotten about the central tenets of their faith concerning the dignity of the individual; for them, the American nation state is what most deserves defending. The left, too, when it talks about the war often sees it not in terms of individual rights so much as in terms of national priorities, a tragedy for the country, underfinanced collectivist projects at home and disrespect for the American nation-state from the international community. They sometimes attack the idea that corporate fat cats profit off the war more than the war itself.

But what is lost in the fog of war is the dignity and freedom of the individual, something of such importance that, as the conservatives understood it when we were talking about communism, its absence means the breakdown and collapse of civilization, of the common good, of the well-being of society at large. Let us look at what the empire means for the individual, for only then can we even grasp what it means for the greater good.

Let’s start with the beleaguered taxpayer. The empire and war on terror are costing each American taxpayer thousands of dollars a year. Before going further, we must reflect on just this cost. To varying degrees, classical liberals, libertarians and conservatives have long stood up for the rights of the individual not to be taxed for governmental social services. By what right can a bureaucrat seize someone’s hard-earned income, even for a good cause? This is crucial, because even if liberating foreigners is a good cause that can be done by the government, so would be the feeding of foreigners, or the feeding and housing of the domestic poor. But the free marketers have for years shown that, in practice, an agency that confiscates wealth with the threat of imprisonment cannot properly be termed an agency of compassion. In practice, because of its institutional nature, the welfare state does not succeed in eliminating poverty. And yet how can an agency that takes wealth from people who earn it, and threatens them with time in a cage if they resist, be any more an agency for liberation, for rights protection, than it is for compassion? It

would seem that the same practical and ethical arguments against seizing a man's income for welfare would apply to warfare as well.

Some libertarians will defend warfare state taxation. Ayn Rand certainly did. But let us remember that the American Revolutionaries who seceded from the British were not rebelling against Social Security taxes, or taxes that went to the welfare state. They were protesting relatively low taxes to fund empire, some of which was being sold as being in their best interest.

Of course, much of the taxation is indirect. It comes in the form of credit expansion, inflation and thus a weakened dollar, leading to higher prices. The corporate state is empowered, the little guy's priorities are pushed to the side. This process, incidentally, also leads to malinvestment and the business cycle, which are horrific for the economy and the greater good.

The beleaguered taxpayer is forgotten in the midst of war. For some reason it is considered trivial to mention this. It is wrong to focus on what a taxpayer would have chosen to spend his money on if it weren't taken away, even as the left dreams about what the government could have spent it on if not on war.

Consider what the taxpayer could have done with that money if it were not taken at all. He could help secure his retirement, send his kids to a better school, spend more time with the family, start or strengthen a business, give to charity, or do a hundred things that bolster civil society and the productive economy, rather than feed the military-industrial complex and finance mass killing abroad. If it were really in his interest to finance national defense, he would do so freely on his own. When the choice is stripped from him, we should not be surprised that the loot lines the pockets of corporate interests and fails to bring about international peace.

The warfare state is, on net, a huge drain on the economy. It has not made us richer. We live in a comparatively rich nation because of the relatively free market, to which the warfare state is always and everywhere a premier threat. Indeed, the Progressive Era, New Deal and Great Society never did nearly the violence to the free market, ushering in central planning, than the great wars in American history. The New Deal itself was simply a domestic version of Wilson's World War I economic policies, with many of the same institutions resurrected under different names and many of the same personalities, as Robert Higgs has shown.

The loss in hard-earned wealth is only the beginning. The warfare-security state endangers individual liberty like no other threat. It destroys the privacy of the individual. It supplants the free economy with central planning. Sometimes it brings on rationing and a fullblown command economy. Dissent is no longer a protected right. The freedom of an individual to travel, to speak his mind, to work and live in private liberty is thrown aside completely in the march of war.

Those accused of threatening the security of the collective have virtually no rights at all. He can be detained indefinitely in a dungeon on the outskirts of the empire. He can be cruelly interrogated. His guilt is presumed.

Habeas corpus emerged in medieval England, largely as a tool of some courts to assert jurisdiction over others. The individualist principle that one could not be detained without cause, and that all imprisoned subjects had at a minimum access to a judge was born in the midst of competing and overlapping jurisdictional conflicts. Eventually, the writ of habeas corpus — which originated in the King's own royal courts — were turned against the King himself. The American revolutionaries demanded it as a constitutional safeguard, at which point it took on a modern, individualist character. After hundreds of years of struggle, a crucial mechanism for protecting the individual against unjust imprisonment was claimed.

And this is vital in every way. Committing a crime against the state, or society, or an individual has been taken to be very serious. But what about the crime of the state in detaining an innocent person? Think of what it would be like to be detained indefinitely, knowing you're innocent. This was the case for many in Guantanamo, many of whom have finally been freed. I can't imagine it. But as true individualists, we must respect the dignity of every peaceful person held inside a cage. To paraphrase Augustine, a greater good that rests upon unjust imprisonment is no greater good at all.

This principle has been turned back on its head. Once again, habeas corpus is the executive's prerogative. Alberto Gonzales claimed there was no right to it in the Constitution. People have been rounded up, detained, shipped around the globe, shoved in tortuous cells in Guantanamo and elsewhere — all in the name of collective security, in the name of the greater good. Many detainees have been tortured. The idea in vogue is that sometimes you have to completely strip an individual of his humanity in order to save humanity. This is the path toward barbarism and savagery. It is the road to the same mentality that allowed the Stalinists and Nazis to have their way.

But this compromise of individual rights has yielded no successes for the nation as whole. It has only eroded our culture's commitment to the rights of the individual. It has led to the demonization of the "other" — the other who lives outside our collective. It also helped bring about the fantastically disastrous Iraq war, as some of the key pre-war intelligence — if we are to call it that — came out of torture. If you forget about the individual dignity, the intrinsic humanity of the prisoner you have before you, you have already failed to see the forest, and the trees, and they will all burn down in the heat of war collectivism.

The very idea of weighing individual liberty against national security is an egregious collectivist notion we must reject. There is no national security, no collective worth preserving, where we are not safe against unjust detention and oppression by the state.

As bad as all this is, the worst attacks on the individual come with war itself. Nation-building, occupying foreign countries to instill American values and institutions — all this is utopian central planning on the scale of the 20th century socialists and modernists. And the conservatives, of course, have near infinite faith in it. But a new modern man cannot be created

through command and control at home. A whole nation cannot be built abroad with curfews, bombs and razor wire.

Bombing has got to be among the most barbaric practices in modern life. "This is war," we are told. And so people must die. Individuals do not count, they are only aggregates, only numbers, and the Pentagon doesn't even care about the statistical side of the equation. Lost completely is any sense that these are human beings being destroyed.

When a bomb hits a neighborhood, civilians are killed. This happened even when the domestic police in Philadelphia bombed an apartment complex back in 1985, and we can go on and on about how militarism has displaced any sense of individualism in domestic policing. But in foreign affairs, mass killing is a matter of policy.

In the 20th century, the century of gulags, concentration camps, mass conscription and centrally planned workers paradises, America emerged as the most bomb-happy regime in world history. While, at least intellectually, the crimes of fascism and communism have imparted some lessons, there is no comparable understanding of the significance of 20th century strategic bombing. In Japan, 60 cities were destroyed. In Germany, the number was more than 100. In the Korean war, Truman pinpointed civilian dams and devastated the country with thousands of tons of ordnance and millions of gallons of napalm. In Vietnam, between one and three million individuals were killed by US bombing campaigns. That's about as many people as Pol Pot killed in Cambodia. For much of the post-World War II 20th century, the US built up its nuclear weapons cache, the mere existence of which should dispel any myths that ours is a government overly concerned with the rights of the individual.

These were individuals who were slaughtered by a program of systematic civilian-killing. They had families, and lives, and passions. They had their favorite music, they had their faith, they had their dreams and futures. They, just like the victims of Communism and fascism, were victims of mechanized, modernist mass murder. I do think one day people will look back at the 20th century as, in part, the era when the US government murdered millions of people from the air.

In today's world, there is less support for strategic bombing as a matter of policy. There were barbaric calls after 9/11 for nuking the Middle East. Conservatives did say that the way to save face in Iraq was to pull out, but not before killing many thousands with a nuclear blast in the Sunni triangle. This murderous policy prescription must be seen in the full moral light in deserves, or else we will not evolve much as a species.

But there has been some change. I don't think Americans would be too happy if Bush nuked Iraq or Iran like Truman did Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is all to the good.

However, the underlying premise that killing innocents abroad is acceptable has persisted. The trade sanctions against Iraq claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. In our society, killing one child is seen as an unforgiveable act. A child is the most precious thing in this

world. And of course women and men have the right not to be killed, too. But the 1990s sanctions are seen as, at most, a sort of error in policy planning. They didn't work, we sometimes hear. Unfortunately, they worked all too well at the only murderous purpose they could possibly serve in the real world. They worked in killing hundreds of thousands of innocent children, each one as precious as an American child.

Shock and Awe made me sick to my stomach. Baghdad was a city with a culture, with civil life, with some degree of liberalism even. Of course, most important, there were human beings there. The best thing Michael Moore has ever done was to show footage of Baghdad before and after bombing. Rightwingers hated this scene, because it forced Americans to confront the faces of some of the people their political leaders killed. It's ironic that these same conservatives stress all the supposed good things happening in Iraq that the media won't cover, while they seem completely unwilling to discuss the many good things happening in Iraq before Shock and Awe. Many of those good things happened to people who are not alive today.

And while Shock and Awe was in some ways a more precision bombing than Dresden, it was still mass murder. It was still totally immoral in every respect. Had Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, had he even been best friends with Osama, had he been involved in 9/11 it would still not excuse the dispensing of the individual lives of men, women and children — none of them in any way the enemy — who just happened to live in Saddam's neighborhood.

If bombing a neighborhood in retaliation could be excused, so too can terrorism in countless forms. The terrorism of September 11, insofar as it was a response to US aggression in the Middle East — and, as we know, there was plenty of it for decades — would be considered legitimate by the logic of the defenders of bombings. Surely, Iraq has been more a victim of the US than vice versa — does this mean Iraqis are allowed to do to American civilians what the US did in Afghanistan and Iraq? Of course not. American individuals had a right not to be murdered on 9/11, despite the evils of their government. This principle must be universal. Dropping bombs in a way that predictably leads to innocent deaths is nothing short of deliberate homicide, no matter what your home address.

This brings me to a particularly ghastly collectivist concept, the idea of "collateral damage." The idea is that the innocent people killed in a bombing are not the target, and so the bombing can be an act of self-defense. But this principle surely does not hold in civil life. If a neighbor of yours has trespassed on your property, even caused violence against you and your family, you have no right to kill his kids, no right to attack his neighbor, no right to lift a finger against anyone but the aggressor. The right to self-defense is fundamental, but is grounded in property rights. Practicing it, just like practicing any other right, does not absolve you in your violations of the rights of third parties. Being threatened does not give you a blank check on other people's life and liberty. "Collateral damage" is simply a euphemism for mass murder.

There are some theorists who posit that it is sometimes acceptable to kill the innocent in bombings because of the so-called human shield analogy. If an aggressor is about to kill you, and he has taken a hostage, and the only way to shoot him first is to kill the hostage, do you not have a right to do it? The warmongers say without the right to inflict collateral damage, we would be overtaken by an enemy with tanks covered with babies.

Now, this is quite an irony. Our individual ethic against killing civilians is unrealistic, they say, because in the real world you are always confronted with a human shield, or a ticking timebomb, or an invading army with babies strapped to their tanks. Of course, the real world is nothing like that. And surely invaders and aggressors will still hesitate to embrace such a strategy regardless of our lifeboat ethics, because they know people, when pressed, will even violate their principles to save their lives.

In principle, I believe the human shield retains the right not to be shot. But even if not, this question is divorced from reality. They try to personalize the question of bombing civilians by bringing it down to the individual level. But we are not talking about the odd incident when an individual is confronted with a choice between violating his principles or death. Many of us might cave to survive. We might lie, steal, even kill, if forced into the lawless environment of a Hobbesian world. And, generally speaking, people are more forgiving, even of those who trespass against them, when there are very extreme circumstances.

The human shield analogy is really a way to obscure the real issue. We are not talking about an individual fighting back for dear life, and accidentally or incidentally killing an innocent person. We are talking about the warfare state, about aggressive invasions, about airmen far above cities and dropping flaming death upon little babies, not out of immediate self-defense in any sense at all. The attempt to apply emergency individual ethics to the military, a socialist institution, should raise flags for the true individualist. For the individual is accountable to his victims and their heirs, as well as to public opinion. The state, by definition, is not. It is above the law. It is its own judge so long as it garners public legitimacy and blind loyalty. Insofar as it is successful at this, the state is a lawless machine. If an individual violates someone's property rights in an emergency, there is some recourse, some real chance for making amends and getting forgiveness. The warfare state is a totally different animal.

And, in practical terms, if we want to avoid these Hobbesian cruelties of the battlefield, we should stay the hell out of war.

Sometimes even opponents of war forget about the methodological individualist analysis. In a sense, the true individualist is also the most empathetic to the individual soldier. Yes, he is morally responsible for all of his actions, and yet he too has an individual human dignity that must not be forgotten. Even in a terrible war, some soldiers do defensible, even heroic things. They serve as medics. They defend individual rights in isolated instances. And many of them don't even want to be there, but they are being forced to finish their term of service. The warfare

state is, by the way, the one enterprise where the rights of the individual worker are completely thrown aside. He has no right to quit. We have indentured servitude in the military. The philosophy of individual, inalienable rights is the only one that truly stands up for the soldier who, in good conscience, wants to walk away from the horrors in which he finds himself. And so, if we respect the individual soldier, we should champion his right to quit his job.

The individualist ethic has been twisted to defend the warfare state and modern American imperialism. It is, however, to be delivered through collectivist means. This is the giveaway. This is how we know it's a bankrupt argument. Liberating individuals cannot be justly done at the expense of violating the rights of others.

For a while, individualism helped to curb the empire. A desire not to be taxed for the benefit of foreigners constrained the warfare state.

Conservatives and objectivists, among others, were well versed in the America First argument against global intervention.

But with 9/11 we saw the limits of this ethic. Individualists felt threatened and became collectivists at once. They ironically saw the American state as the collective most protective of individualism, and so favored an expansion of that collectivism to protect themselves.

But a purely egoistical ethic, much like a nationalist orientation in non-intervention, is perhaps not enough. We need to move beyond it to respect individuals abroad. The individual slaughtered in Iraq is no less an individual, no less entitled to his rights, than an individual in America taxed or regulated out of business, or thrown in jail for consuming illegal drugs. The sacrifice of foreign lives to an American imperial agenda, along with the sacrifice of American lives, freedoms and wealth, is a practice and program wholly at odds with the natural law ethic of individual liberty and dignity on which Western Civilization, and indeed all of human society, so precariously rests.

Thus do I urge us to take all the arguments we would make against communism, fascism and domestic coercive collectivism in all its forms, and apply them with equal vigor and moral courage to the issues of war and peace. It is true that we do, indeed, believe in a greater good, in public vibrancy, in civil society and in community. We are not individualists at the expense of society, but indeed see a good society itself as a function of respecting the individuals who compose it. Our arguments on economics demonstrate we are not blind to the social good that emanates from our individualist ethic. Without some sense of goodness for the individual, in fact, it is hard even to determine what a good society is. And this ethic, if it is being trampled anywhere, it is in the realm of foreign policy and the warfare state.

Communism failed because it broke too many eggs and never made an omelette. The worker's paradise constituted the total destruction of the worker as individual, the total negation of his dignity, the total trashing of his individual rights. Thus did the whole plan fail, and thank goodness.

We are seeing a similar crumbling of American society, a degeneration of civil life and cultural mores, a lowering of moral standards. We are seeing decay and cultural corruption, and while I never badmouth the market, there is a sense in which materialism has threatened to overtake cultural reflection. The greatest traditions in law and individualism itself are under attack.

We are seeing our economy stagnate and our personal freedoms lost day by day. The partisans of empire are struggling to keep alive global American hegemony, but they are on the losing side of history.

But we do want things to go as painlessly and peacefully as possible. We do not want Americans to have to suffer a shock or global markets to be tossed into disarray.

I believe the key is to reclaim, refine and always strengthen our understanding of what it is that has led to the success story of Western civilization, the Industrial Revolution and the American experience: It is respect for the dignity and humanity and rights of each individual. Insofar as this country has wavered, it has been disastrous and oppressive. Insofar as it championed these principles, humanity, culture and all we take for granted have flourished.

The warfare state is the greatest of all threats to the individual in our time. It is a threat materially, philosophically, spiritually, culturally and intellectually. It displaces all the voluntary, civil associations we champion — the family, community, church and honest business. It is the total negation of the dignity of the individual, the rights of all men and women to live their lives in liberty. It is a mixture of cold, anti-libertarian modernism and barbarism, the worst remnants of the Middle Ages combined with a new callousness and technocratic fervor. It is the most persistent form of American collectivism. It is an unparalleled threat to world peace. It is the greatest enemy of humanity and individual liberty in our midst.

One day the modern warfare state will be looked upon the way we look upon the failed socialist experiments of a past time, the way we look upon chattel slavery, the way we look upon the gravest and most universally reviled episodes of the individual being dispensed with to make way for the march of collectivism and institutional inertia.

The first step is similar to the step Ayn Rand described in *Anthem*, although I don't think she applied it consistently. It is to understand that the individual is the principal component of human society, and that all individuals, wherever they live, have by their nature certain rights that no government is permitted to violate. It is to realize that dispensing with this principle is to dispense with our chance at having a greater good whatsoever. It is to understand that with war come bombings, standing armies, conscription, surveillance, inflation, censorship and taxation — any of which is an affront to the dignity of the individual.

It is to understand that the warfare state, like totalitarianism, is incompatible with the individualist ethic on which society depends. Such an understanding helped prevent communism from taking root in this nation, sparing Americans the suffering so many others

endured to learn the lessons of fullblown economic central planning. The American empire cannot last forever in its current state. But only by championing the rights of the individual and opposing the warfare state out of principle can we hope to see the empire crumble with as little pain as possible for those caught underneath. Only by embracing the principle of individualism — the principle that truly guards the common good and is the most damning of all indictments of the militaristic warfare state — can we hope to see the empire die and never return.

Thank you.

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This article was originally published in June 2008.