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Nothing is so firmly believed as what is least known.

— *Michel Eyquem de Montaigne*

FUTURE OF FREEDOM

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The Worst Mistake in U.S. History

by Jacob G. Hornberger



The worst mistake in U.S. history was the conversion after World War II of the U.S. government from a constitutional, limited-government republic to a national-security state. Nothing has done more to warp and distort the conscience, principles, and values of the American people, including those who serve in the U.S. military.

A good example of how the national-security state has adversely affected the thinking of U.S. soldiers was reflected in an op-ed entitled “What We’re Fighting For” that appeared in the February 10, 2017, issue of the *New York Times*. Authored by an Iraq War veteran named Phil Klay, the article demonstrates perfectly what the national-security state has done to soldiers and others and why it is so imperative for the

American people to restore a constitutional republic to our land.

Klay begins his op-ed by extolling the exploits of another U.S. Marine, First Lt. Brian Chontosh, who, displaying great bravery, succeeded in killing approximately two dozen Iraqis in a fierce firefight during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Klay writes,

When I was a new Marine, just entering the Corps, this story from the Iraq invasion defined heroism for me. It’s a perfect image of war for inspiring new officer candidates, right in line with youthful notions of what war is and what kind of courage it takes — physical courage, full stop.

Klay then proceeds to tell a story about an event he witnessed when he was deployed to Iraq in 2007. After doctors failed to save the life of a Marine who had been shot by an Iraqi sniper, those same doctors proceeded to treat and save the life of the sniper, who himself had been shot by U.S. troops. Klay used the story to point out the virtuous manner in which U.S. forces carried out their military mission in Iraq.

Well, except perhaps, Klay observes, for Abu Ghraib, the Iraqi

prison in which Saddam Hussein's government had tortured and abused countless Iraqis and which the U.S. military turned into its own torture and abuse center for Iraqis captured during the 2003 U.S. invasion of the country. Klay tells the story of a defense contractor named Eric Fair, who tortured an Iraqi prisoner into divulging information about a car-bomb factory. Encouraged by that successful use of torture, Fair proceeded to employ it against many other Iraqis, none of whom had any incriminating evidence to provide.

Klay points out that both Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay were major turning points in the Iraq War because prisoner abuse at both camps became a driving force for Iraqis to join the insurgency in Iraq. Thus, while Fair may have saved lives through his successful use of torture, he and other U.S. personnel who tortured and abused people at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay may well have cost the lives of many more U.S. soldiers in the long term.

Klay, however, suggests that none of that was really Fair's fault. While he might have crossed some moral lines, everything he did, Klay suggests, was in accordance with legal rules and regulations. Klay writes,

And Eric did what our nation asked of him, used techniques that were vetted and approved and passed down to intelligence operatives and contractors like himself. Lawyers at the highest levels of government had been consulted, asked to bring us to the furthest edge of what the law might allow. To do what it takes, regardless of whether such actions will secure the "attachment of all good men," or live up to that oath we swear to support and defend the Constitution.

Prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay became a driving force for Iraqis to join the insurgency in Iraq.

Klay refers to the oath that U.S. soldiers take to support and defend the Constitution. Clearly patting himself and other members of the U.S. military on the back, he says U.S. soldiers fight with honor to defend a "set of principles" that are reflected in the Constitution and that define America.

It would be difficult to find a better example of a life of the lie than that of Phil Klay. He provides

an absolutely perfect demonstration of what a national-security state does to soldiers' minds and why the Founding Fathers were so opposed to that type of governmental structure.

The rights of invaders

Notice one big omission from Klay's self-aggrandizing article: Iraq never attacked the United States or even threatened to do so. Instead, it was the U.S. government, operating through its troops, that was the aggressor nation in the Iraq War. Wars of aggression — i.e., attacking, invading, and occupying other countries — were among the crimes of which the defendants at Nuremberg were convicted.

It is absolutely fascinating that that critically important point seems to escape Klay so completely. It's as if it just doesn't exist or just doesn't count. His mindset simply begins with the fact that U.S. troops are engaged in war and then it proceeds from there to focus on the courage and humanity of the troops, how their bravery in battle inspired him, and how they treated the enemy humanely. It never occurs to him to ask the vital question: Did U.S. troops have any legal or moral right to be in Iraq and to kill anyone there, including Iraqi

soldiers, insurgents, civilians, and civil servants working for the Iraqi government?

Many years ago, I posed a question about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq to a libertarian friend of mine who was a Catholic priest. I asked him, If a U.S. soldier is placed in Iraq in a kill-or-be-killed situation, does he have a right to fire back at an Iraqi who is shooting at him?

The U.S. government, operating through its troops, was the aggressor nation in the Iraq War.

My friend's answer was unequivocal: Absolutely not, he responded. Since he has no legitimate right to be in Iraq, given that he is part of the aggressor force that initiated the war, under God's laws he cannot kill anyone, not even by convincing himself that he is only acting in "self-defense."

I responded, "Are you saying that his only choice is to run away or permit himself to be killed"? He responded, "That is precisely what I am saying. Under the laws of God, he cannot kill anyone in Iraq because he has no right to be there."

Suppose a burglar enters a person's home in the dead of night. The homeowner wakes up, discovers

the intruder, and begins firing at him. The burglar fires back and kills the homeowner.

The burglar appears in court and explains that he never had any intention of killing the homeowner and that he was simply firing back in self-defense. He might even explain to the judge how bravely he reacted under fire and detail the clever manner in which he outmaneuvered and shot the homeowner.

The judge, however, would reject any claim of self-defense on the part of the burglar. Why? Because the burglar had no right to be in the homeowner's house. Like the U.S. soldier in Iraq, when the homeowner began firing the burglar had only two legal and moral options: run away or be killed.

That's what my Catholic priest friend was pointing out about U.S. soldiers in Iraq. They had no right to be there. They invaded a poor, Third World country whose government had never attacked the United States and they were killing, torturing, and abusing people whom they had no right to kill, torture, or abuse.

That's what Klay as well as most other members of the U.S. military and, for that matter, many Americans still don't get: that the Iraqi people were the ones who wielded

the right of self-defense against an illegal invasion by a foreign power and that U.S. forces, as the aggressor power in the war, had no legal or moral right to kill any Iraqi, not even in "self-defense."

Klay waxes eloquent about the U.S. Constitution and the oath that soldiers take to support and defend it, but it's really just another perfect demonstration of the life of the lie that he and so many other U.S. soldiers live. The reality is that when U.S. soldiers vow to support and defend the Constitution, as a practical matter they are vowing to loyally obey the orders and commands of the president, who is their military commander in chief.

The Iraqi people were the ones who wielded the right of self-defense against an illegal invasion by a foreign power.

There is no better example of this phenomenon than what happened in Iraq. The U.S. Constitution is clear: The president is prohibited from waging war without a declaration of war from Congress. No declaration, no war. Every U.S. soldier ordered to invade Iraq knew that or should have known that.

Everyone, including the troops, also knew that Congress had not

declared war on Iraq. Yet, not a single soldier supported or defended the Constitution by refusing George Bush's order to attack and invade Iraq. Every one of them loyally obeyed his order to attack and invade, knowing full well that it would mean killing people in Iraq — killing people who had never attacked the United States. And they all convinced themselves that by following the president's orders to invade Iraq and kill Iraqis, they were supporting and defending the Constitution.

How do U.S. soldiers reconcile that? They convince themselves that they are supporting and defending the Constitution by obeying the orders of the president, who has been democratically elected by the citizenry. It's not their job, they tell themselves, to determine what is constitutional and what isn't. Their job, they believe, is simply to do what the president, operating through his subordinates, orders them to do. In their minds, they are supporting and defending the Constitution whenever they loyally and obediently carry out the orders of the president.

That means, then, that the standing army is nothing more than the president's private army. As a practical matter, soldiers are

going to do whatever they are ordered to do. If they don't, they are quickly shot or simply replaced, which provides a good incentive for others to do as they are told. That's why soldiers invaded Iraq, which had never attacked the United States, and killed people who were defending their country against an unlawful invasion. That's also why soldiers and defense contractors tortured and abused people at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and elsewhere. They all believed they were carrying out the orders of their superiors, from the president on down, and that they were supporting and defending the Constitution in the process.

A standing army is the means by which a tyrant imposes and enforces his will on the citizenry.

As people throughout history have learned, that is also why a standing army constitutes such a grave threat to the freedom and well-being of the citizenry. It is the means by which a tyrant imposes and enforces his will on the citizenry. Just ask the people of Chile, where the troops of a military regime installed into power by the U.S. national-security establishment rounded up tens of thousands

of innocent people and incarcerated, tortured, raped, abused, or executed them, all without due process of law and with the support of the U.S. government.

Many people forget that throughout the 1990s the U.S. government was hell-bent on regime change in Iraq.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, I read that some Catholic soldiers were deeply troubled by the prospect of killing people in a war that the U.S. government was initiating. I was stunned to read that a U.S. military chaplain told them that they had the right under God's laws to obey the president's order to invade Iraq and kill Iraqis. God would not hold it against them, he said, if they killed people in the process of following orders.

Really? Are God's laws really nullified by the orders of a government's military commander? If that were the case, don't you think God's commandment would have read: "Thou shalt not kill, unless your ruler orders you to do so in a war of aggression against another nation"?

To this day, there are those who claim that George W. Bush simply made an honest mistake in claiming that Saddam Hussein, Iraq's dic-

tator, was maintaining weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that U.S. soldiers were justified in trusting him by loyally obeying his orders to invade and occupy Iraq to "disarm Saddam."

They ignore three important points: it was a distinct possibility that Bush and his people were simply lying. It certainly wouldn't be the first time that a president had lied in order to garner support for a war. Lyndon Johnson's lies regarding a supposed North Vietnamese attack on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam come to mind. Two, Bush didn't secure the constitutionally required congressional declaration of war, most likely because he knew that congressional hearings on the issue would expose his WMD scare for the lie it was. And three, only the UN, not the U.S. government, was entitled to enforce its resolutions regarding Iraq's WMDs.

Moreover, the circumstantial evidence establishes that Bush was lying and that the WMD scare was entirely bogus. Many people forget that throughout the 1990s the U.S. government was hell-bent on regime change in Iraq. That's what the brutal sanctions were all about, which contributed to the deaths of half a million Iraqi children. When

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright was asked on *Sixty Minutes* whether the deaths of half a million Iraqi children from the sanctions were “worth it,” she responded that such deaths were “worth it.” By “it,” she was referring to regime change.

That desire for regime change in Iraq grew with each passing year in the 1990s, both among liberals and conservatives. Demands were ever growing to get rid of Saddam. Therefore, when Bush started coming up with his WMD scare after the 9/11 attacks, everyone should have been wary because it had all the earmarks of an excuse to invade Iraq after more than 10 years of sanctions had failed to achieve the job.

The best circumstantial evidence that Bush lied about the WMD scare appeared after it was determined that there were no WMDs in Iraq. At that point, if Bush had been telling the truth, he could have said, “I’m very sorry. I have made a grave mistake and my army has killed multitudes of people as a consequence of my mistake. I am hereby ordering all U.S. troops home and I hereby announce my resignation as president.”

Bush didn’t do that. In fact, he expressed not one iota of remorse

or regret over the loss of life for what supposedly had been the result of a mistake. He knew that he had achieved what the U.S. national-security state had been trying to achieve for more than a decade with its brutal sanctions — regime change in Iraq — and he had used the bogus WMD scare to garner support for his invasion. And significantly, the troops were kept occupying Iraq for several more years, during which they killed more tens of thousands of Iraqis.

By the time Phil Klay arrived in Iraq in 2007, he knew full well that there had been no WMDs in Iraq.

One thing is for sure: By the time Phil Klay arrived in Iraq in 2007, he knew full well that there had been no WMDs in Iraq. He also knew that Iraq had never attacked the United States. By that time, he knew full well that the U.S. government had invaded a country under false or, at the very least, mistaken pretenses. He knew there had been no congressional declaration of war. He knew that there was no legal or moral foundation for a military occupation that was continuing to kill people in an impoverished Third World country whose worst

“crime” was simply trying to rid their country of an illegal occupier.

Yet, reinforced by people who were thanking them for “their service in Iraq,” Klay, like other U.S. troops, convinced himself that their “service” in Iraq was a grand and glorious sacrifice for his nation, that they were defending Americans’ rights and freedoms, and that they were keeping us safe. It was a classic life of the lie because our nation, our rights and freedoms, and our safety were never threatened by anyone in Iraq, including the millions of Iraqis who were killed, maimed, injured, tortured, abused, or exiled, or whose homes, businesses, or infrastructure were destroyed by bombs, missiles, bullets, and tanks.

In fact, the entity that actually threatened the rights and freedoms of the American people was the U.S. government, given the totalitarian-like powers that it assumed as part of its effort to keep us safe from the enemies its interventionist policies were producing. Coming to mind are the totalitarian-like power to assassinate Americans, secret mass surveillance, and the incarceration and torture of American citizens as suspected terrorists — all without due process of law and without trial by jury.

This is what a national-security state does to people — it warps, damages, or destroys their conscience, principles, and values; induces them to subscribe to false bromides; and nurtures all sorts of mental contortions to enable people to avoid confronting reality.

Many years after Brian Chontosh’s exploits in Iraq, Phil Klay was surprised to learn that Chontosh was experiencing some ambivalence about what he had done. “It’s ugly, it’s violent, it’s disgusting. I wish it wasn’t part of what we had to do,” Chontosh later wrote.

Perhaps that’s because conscience was beginning to stir within him. That’s a good sign. Maybe it will begin to stir in Phil Klay too. And other members of the military as well.

Jacob Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.

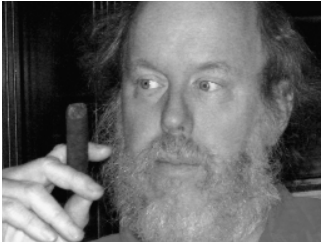
NEXT MONTH:
“Separating Economy
and State”
by Jacob G. Hornberger

Of all tyrannies a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. They may be more likely to go to Heaven yet at the same time likelier to make a Hell of earth. Their very kindness stings with intolerable insult. To be "cured" against one's will and cured of states which we may not regard as disease is to be put on a level of those who have not yet reached the age of reason or those who never will; to be classed with infants, imbeciles, and domestic animals. But to be punished, however severely, because we have deserved it, because we "ought to have known better," is to be treated as a human person made in God's image.

— C.S. Lewis

Janet Reno: Saint or Tyrant?

by James Bovard



When former Attorney General Janet Reno died last November, the media heaped praise on her as if she had been justice incarnate. Reno had long enjoyed sainthood inside the Beltway; the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia even created a Janet Reno Torchbearer Award. But Reno's record of deceit, brutality, and power grabs should not be forgotten by any American who cares about freedom.

Shortly after Reno became attorney general in 1993, she approved the FBI final assault on the Branch Davidians holed up in a rickety building outside of Waco, Texas. She went on *Nightline* the evening after 80 people died in a conflagration and announced, "I made the decision. I'm accountable.

The buck stops with me." Reno then asserted that the fiery end was all somebody else's fault: "I don't think anybody has ever dealt with a David Koresh, who would purposely set people afire in that number." *Nightline* host Ted Koppel asked Reno why the feds used "tanks to ram the compound down." Reno replied, "I think that what we were trying to do was to give everybody an opportunity to come out in the most unobtrusive way possible, not with a frontal assault."

Reno masterminded a cover-up of the federal role at Waco. Americans did not learn until 1999 that the FBI had fired pyrotechnic grenades into the Davidians' home, which could have started the fire that left 80 people dead. She also muzzled federal officials who had been involved at Waco. When she traveled to Oklahoma to hype Clinton's crime bill in a speech in April 1994, FBI agent Bob Ricks, who had been the agency's daily spokesman during the 51-day siege, told Reno that many people were still agitated by Waco and asked that the gag order be lifted on himself and other officials. Reno replied, "I don't think the American people care about Waco anymore."

The Oklahoma City bombing the following April showed other-

wise. In a speech a few weeks later, Reno told federal law-enforcement agents, “There is much to be angry about when we talk about Waco — and the government’s conduct is not the reason. David Koresh is the reason.” She also revealed that the “first and foremost” reason for the tank and gas assault was that “law-enforcement agents on the ground concluded that the perimeter had become unstable and posed a risk both to them and to the surrounding homes and farms. Individuals sympathetic to Koresh were threatening to take matters into their own hands to end the stalemate, were at various times reportedly on the way.” This new “first and foremost” reason was a convenient *ex post facto* rationale after the Oklahoma City bombing. There was no evidence that FBI agents faced real threats from an uprising during the Waco siege. Previously, Reno had justified the final assault because she heard children were being abused.

That terrorist attack helped propel congressional hearings on Waco — the first time that Congress had seriously examined the carnage (thanks to the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1994 elections). Reno testified on August 1, 1995. In response to a specific question

about why the FBI tanks began destroying the building before the fire, Reno responded, “I share your frustration when you have such a tragedy as this, and you try to figure out what to do in the future to avoid the recurrence of it, not in an experiment, but in a thoughtful way.”

There was no evidence that FBI agents faced real threats from an uprising during the Waco siege.

The confidential FBI report that Reno received before approving the attack stated that the impact of the CS gas on “infants and children cannot be ignored because gas masks are not available for infants and younger children.” When Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) presented Reno with a gas mask to illustrate the point that it could not have fit children, Reno casually tossed the gas mask onto the floor and announced that “it’s not very helpful, in terms of trying to understand what happened there, to just show gas masks. We’ve got to show the people what went into the process.” And Reno continued ensuring that damning information did not come out.

The highlight of Reno’s testimony was her revelation that the 54-ton tanks that smashed through the Davidian ramshackle home

should not be considered as military vehicles — instead, they were “like a good rent-a-car.” When she was challenged on this, she added, “These tanks were not armed. They were not military weapons. And I think it is important, Mr. Chairman, as you deal with this issue, not to make statements like that that can cause the confusion.” Reno later added that it would be wrong to focus on the “menacing quality” of the tanks, since “those tanks had been around. People [inside] knew about the tanks. I think they were very accustomed to the tanks, at that point.” But the Davidians were not accused to the tanks’ flattening their home.

Trashing free speech and privacy

In October 1993, Reno, upholding a long tradition of attorney generals in the forefront of sabotaging the Constitution, called for government censorship of television violence. In Senate testimony, she warned, “If immediate voluntary steps are not taken [by television producers] and deadlines established, government should respond and respond immediately. We must move forward to set a schedule for compliance with proper standards, or government should set those standards.” Reno did not say when

she would be sending in the SWAT teams to take down *Beavis and Butthead*. But her intimidation tactics ensured her a tidal wave of positive press as a person who truly cared about children.

Reno called for government censorship of television violence.

In 1996 Congress passed and Bill Clinton signed the Communications Decency Act. The measure would have effectively curtailed all sexual expression on the Internet, imposing a two-year prison sentence and a \$250,000 fine for anyone who engaged in speech that was “indecent” or “patently offensive” on the Internet if his words might somehow be viewed by children. A three-judge panel found the law “profoundly repugnant” to the First Amendment. Despite the setback, Reno defended the law. She declared in early 1997,

But one of the points we have to remember is, if you have an absolutely incredible technology that ... provides new and incredible opportunities for learning, for communication, and for understanding, it also has incredible opportunities to put stuff on there that can

be damaging, harmful, and hurtful, particularly to children. We have seen the problem that exists in this country of children who are unsupervised for many hours of the day.... We have got to design a system that can ensure the availability of this marvelous tool without damaging the children that will have access. And I think that there are ways and effective means, and I think that this will be the basis of the argument.

Reno was the chief law-enforcement officer who vastly expanded illegal government spying on private citizens.

Reno was referring to the argument that Justice Department lawyers made before the Supreme Court to defend the law's draconian penalties. NewsBytes summarized the government's argument before the Supreme Court: "In the brief, the government asserts that a fear of encountering 'indecency' online could deter potential users from exercising their First Amendment interest in accessing the new medium." An ACLU lawyer commented, "It is supremely ironic that the gov-

ernment now says it is protecting the First Amendment rights of Americans by threatening people with jail for engaging in constitutionally protected speech." The Supreme Court trounced the Justice Department, ruling the law unconstitutional.

Reno was the chief law-enforcement officer of an administration that vastly expanded illegal government spying on private citizens. In 2000, controversy erupted over "Carnivore," the FBI's email wiretap software that allowed the agency to vacuum up vast amounts of private email — regardless of whether the feds had a search warrant. FBI officials "explained" the program's ominous name by stressing that they never thought the public would learn of the program's existence. Janet Reno took charge by announcing she would require the FBI to change Carnivore's name.

Nonviolent machine guns

The highlight of Reno's final year in power was an immigration raid by 130 federal agents in Miami's Little Havana section on April 22. The raid went pretty much as planned — the agents seized six-year-old Elián Gonzalez and left shattered doors, a broken bed, roughed-up Cuban-Americans, and

two NBC cameramen writhing in pain from stomach kicks or rifle-butts to the head. The only problem: Associated Press stringer Alan Diaz snapped a photo of a Border Patrol agent pointing his submachine gun towards the terrified boy being held by the fisherman who initially rescued the boy out of the Atlantic Ocean.

Alan Diaz snapped a photo of a Border Patrol agent pointing his submachine gun towards the terrified boy.

Reno called a press conference a few hours after the raid and, when asked about the photo, replied, “One of the beauties of television is that it shows exactly what the facts are. And as I understand it, if you look at it carefully, it shows that the gun was pointed to the side, and that the finger was not on the trigger.” Yet, the photo clearly shows a gun pointed towards the fisherman; admittedly, the muzzle of the gun was not in the boy’s mouth. The Heckler and Koch MP-5 submachine gun sprays 800 rounds a minute — and a finger a half-inch away from the trigger means nothing. The agent did not even have both hands on the machine gun: if the weapon had fired, he would have

had no control over where the bullets sprayed. Two days later, during a puff-piece interview on *NBC Today*, Reno declared, “One of the things that is so very important is that the force was not used. It was a show of force that prevented people from getting hurt.” That would be news to the NBC cameraman who was hospitalized after the raid after being smashed in the head with a rifle-butt.

The reaction to the raid epitomized the media’s coverage of Reno’s term as Attorney General. The *Washington Post* ran a laudatory article on how Reno had supposedly personally ensured that not all journalists would be beaten during the raid. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, in an article headlined, “Reno for President,” declared that the machine-gun photo “warmed my heart” and that it should be put “up in every visa line in every U.S. consulate around the world, with a caption that reads: ‘America is a country where the rule of law rules. This picture illustrates what happens to those who defy the rule of law and how far our government and people will go to preserve it.’” But the feds’ mandate to seize Elián and send him back to Cuba was legally shaky and they pretty much ignored the “knock and

announce” rule for carrying out a search warrant.

Justice incarnate

For Reno, government was always the good guy. In a 1996 speech to government prosecutors, she declared, “All of you public lawyers are but little lower than the angels, and I salute you.” Reno showed her belief in angels in 1994 when she decreed that federal prosecutors would no longer be bound by the ethics guidelines issued by state bar associations prohibiting lawyers from contacting adverse parties directly without their lawyers’ being present. Reno’s power grab for federal prosecutors was unanimously condemned by the Conference of Chief Justices, representing all the state supreme courts.

Reno’s greatest achievement was to teach Americans that “Justice Department” is an oxymoron. She proved that the federal government cannot be trusted to police itself. Unfortunately, that seems to be the same lesson that every attorney general teaches — and the media and most Americans ignore.

James Bovard serves as policy advisor to The Future of Freedom Foundation and is the author of an ebook memoir, Public Policy Hooligan, as well as Attention Deficit Democracy and eight other books.

NEXT MONTH:
**“How World War One
Still Haunts America”**
by James Bovard

If ye would go up high, then use your own legs! Do not get yourselves carried aloft; do not seat yourselves on other people’s backs and heads!

— Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

An America First Foreign Policy

by Laurence M. Vance



In his inaugural address, Donald Trump stated, “From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first, America first.” Trump apparently first used his catchphrase in a March 2016 interview with the *New York Times* in the context of foreign policy. The interviewer suggested that Trump was taking something of an “America First” kind of approach, a mistrust of many foreigners, both our adversaries and some of our allies, a sense that they’ve been freeloading off of us for many years.” Trump replied, “Not isolationist, I’m not isolationist, but I am ‘America First.’ So I like the expression. I’m ‘America First.’” Trump’s catchphrase actually has a long history.

Historic America First

The America First Committee was organized in 1940 to keep America out of another European war. It was formed to keep the United States from repeating the terrible mistake of intervening in World War I. The organization’s 800,000 members included Robert Wood of Sears-Roebuck, Robert McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune*, future presidents John Kennedy and Gerald Ford, future Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver, future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, American Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, and progressives Charles Beard, John Dewey, Bernard Baruch, and Robert La Follette. Perhaps the America First Committee’s most notable member was aviator Charles Lindbergh, who, in a speech in 1941 after the Lend-Lease Act was passed, explained that the America First policy

is based upon the belief that the security of a nation lies in the strength and character of its own people. It recommends the maintenance of armed forces sufficient to defend this hemisphere from attack by any combination of foreign powers. It demands faith in an independent American destiny.

This is the policy of the America First Committee today. It is a policy not of isolation, but of independence; not of defeat, but of courage. It is a policy that led this nation to success during the most trying years of our history, and it is a policy that will lead us to success again. We have weakened ourselves for many months, and still worse, we have divided our own people by this dabbling in Europe's wars. While we should have been concentrating on American defense we have been forced to argue over foreign quarrels. We must turn our eyes and our faith back to our own country before it is too late.

The America First Committee disbanded after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

The Anti-Imperialist League was formed in 1898 in the midst of the Spanish-American War.

America First sentiments predate the America First Committee. After World War I, the U.S. Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and membership in the League of Nations. The America First slogan was

used in the 1920 Republican presidential election campaign. One candidate, progressive Sen. Hiram Johnson, had said in 1919, "Bring home American soldiers. Rescue our own democracy. Restore its free expression. Get American business into normal channels. Let American life, social and economic, be American again." The Anti-Imperialist League was formed in 1898 in the midst of the Spanish-American War in response to what was perceived as U.S. imperialism and colonial ambition. It included among its members former president Grover Cleveland, industrialist Andrew Carnegie, labor leader Samuel Gompers, and author Mark Twain.

Trump's America First

In his interview with the *New York Times*, Trump went on to explain his vision of America First: "We're going to be friendly with everybody, but we're not going to be taken advantage of by anybody. We won't be isolationists — I don't want to go there because I don't believe in that. I think we'll be very worldview, but we're not going to be ripped off anymore by all of these countries."

On the White House website under "Issues," there is a section titled "America First Foreign Policy" that begins well: "The Trump Ad-

ministration is committed to a foreign policy focused on American interests and American national security. Peace through strength will be at the center of that foreign policy. This principle will make possible a stable, more peaceful world with less conflict and more common ground.” But then we see that Trump’s idea of an “America First Foreign Policy” includes a large military buildup with foreign military actions:

Defeating ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups will be our highest priority. To defeat and destroy these groups, we will pursue aggressive joint and coalition military operations when necessary. In addition, the Trump Administration will work with international partners to cut off funding for terrorist groups, to expand intelligence sharing, and to engage in cyberwarfare to disrupt and disable propaganda and recruiting.

Next, we will rebuild the American military. Our Navy has shrunk from more than 500 ships in 1991 to 275 in 2016. Our Air Force is roughly one-third smaller than in 1991. President Trump is

committed to reversing this trend, because he knows that our military dominance must be unquestioned.

What started on a good note ends on a good note as well: “Finally, in pursuing a foreign policy based on American interests, we will embrace diplomacy. The world must know that we do not go abroad in search of enemies, that we are always happy when old enemies become friends, and when old friends become allies.”

Trump’s idea of an “America First Foreign Policy” includes a large military buildup.

This concept of America First was a major theme of Trump’s presidential campaign. In a major address on foreign policy delivered on the campaign trail at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., he stated,

My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else.

America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration.

Trump talked about the need to “rebuild our military,” “deploy military force,” modernize and renew the U.S. nuclear-weapons arsenal, contain “the spread of radical Islam,” and prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. But he also included some good things in his vision of U.S. foreign policy:

We’re getting out of the nation-building business and instead focusing on creating stability in the world.

Our goal is peace and prosperity, not war and destruction. The best way to achieve those goals is through a disciplined, deliberate, and consistent foreign policy.

Under my administration, we will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs.

I will seek a foreign policy that all Americans, whatever their party, can support — so important — and which our friends and allies will respect and totally welcome.

Trump’s foreign-policy vision is random, unpredictable, and contradictory. Under the Trump administration, American foreign

policy is not returning to the “isolationism” of the historical America First movement. His actions thus far show him to be a militarist. According to U.S. Central Command, on the first three days of his presidency, he authorized drone strikes in central Yemen and conducted air strikes on targets in Syria and Iraq.

Although he claims to be a free-trader, for him free trade is good only when it is “fair.”

A cornerstone of Trump’s America First foreign policy is trade. Although he claims to be a free-trader, for him free trade is good only when it is “fair.” His vision of free trade is for the U.S. government to “negotiate fair trade deals that create American jobs, increase American wages, and reduce America’s trade deficit.” “We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries’ making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs,” said the president in his inaugural address.

An America First foreign policy

If Trump has a flawed, inconsistent, and incomplete America First foreign policy, then the question that must naturally be asked is this: What would a real America First

foreign policy look like? What follows is a number of issues related to American foreign policy along with a brief description of what they would look like under a real America First foreign policy; that is, a foreign policy that benefits Americans as a whole, not just those individuals and businesses who benefit from government policies, have some grievance with the government or the people of another country, want the government to protect them from competition, receive government contracts, or depend on the government in some way.

An America First foreign policy would not send other countries foreign aid. Foreign assistance can take the form of cash transfers, food commodities, weapons systems, military assistance, equipment such as generators or computers, infrastructure projects, school and health-clinic construction, loan-guarantee programs, or technical assistance. Aid is provided almost exclusively on a grant basis. But foreign aid is simply the forced looting of American taxpayers. If any American objects to his money's being taken from him and given to foreigners, there is nothing he can do about it. But not only is it not the proper role of government in one country to take money from its citizens and give it to

governments and organizations in other countries, it certainly doesn't make sense for the U.S. government to send taxpayer money overseas to alleviate poverty, help the unemployed, and invest in education and infrastructure, when those things are problems here in America. If it is not a proper function of the U.S. government to dispense welfare to its own citizens, then it is certainly inappropriate to bestow welfare on foreigners. All foreign aid should be individual, private, and voluntary. Doling out foreign aid does not put America first.

**An America First foreign policy
would not send other countries
foreign aid.**

An America First foreign policy would not restrict Americans' freedom to travel abroad. Right now there are travel categories that Americans must fit into before they are allowed to travel to certain countries. And then there are travel restrictions and spending limits that must be followed if they want to visit those countries. In a free society, any American would have the right to travel to any country that would take him by any means for any reason for any period of time, spend any amount of his money

while he is there, and bring back any number of goods without having to pay for the privilege. The type of government some country has, or what the policies of that government are, are irrelevant. Restricting Americans' freedom to travel abroad does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would not provide relief in other countries.

An America First foreign policy would have free trade. Real free trade, not “fair” trade or managed trade, and certainly not protectionism. A country that deprives itself of foreign goods because of protective tariffs is voluntarily impoverishing itself. Reducing or eliminating foreign commerce is exactly what countries attempt to do to each other during times of war. Trade always makes both buyer and seller better off or else they wouldn't bother to trade in the first place. More choices and cheaper goods always benefit American consumers. In his classic work *Socialism*, Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises noted how protectionist policies benefit select individuals at the expense of society: “A system which protects the immediate interests of particular groups limits productiv-

ity in general and, in the end, injures everybody — even those whom it began by favoring.... The greater protection afforded to particular interests, the greater the damage to the community as a whole, and to that extent the smaller the probability that single individuals gain thereby more than they lose.” Protectionism does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would not provide relief in other countries. That is true whether it is food during famines, HIV/AIDS initiatives, humanitarian aid, medicine during epidemics, or disaster relief. Americans regularly donate millions of dollars to charitable organizations to provide relief in foreign countries whenever there is some humanitarian crisis or natural disaster. The world doesn't need U.S. government largesse. Government relief crowds out private relief efforts. And it is simply not the proper role of government to provide relief. No American should be forced to “contribute” to relief efforts. The decision to do so — like the decision to help one's family, friends, neighbors, or community — should be entirely voluntary. If it is not the proper role of the U.S. government to provide relief to its own citizens, then no country

should receive relief from the U.S. government in any amount, at any time, for any reason. Providing relief in other countries does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would be noninterventionist.

An America First foreign policy would be noninterventionist. Current U.S. foreign policy is aggressive, reckless, belligerent, and meddling. The history of U.S. foreign policy is the history of hegemony, nation building, bribes, regime change, imperialism, and jingoism. With its empire of troops and bases around the world, the United States acts as the self-appointed policeman of the world. That only benefits the military/industrial complex. All foreign bases should be closed, all U.S. troops should come home, and the U.S. military should be strictly limited to defense. But a noninterventionist foreign policy would not be isolationist. No advocate of nonintervention in foreign affairs wants to build a fence around the United States and retreat behind it. Having a noninterventionist foreign policy doesn't mean that the United States should refuse to participate in the Olympics, make treaties, issue visas, trade, allow foreign investment, ex-

tradite criminals, exchange diplomats, allow cultural exchanges, allow travel abroad, or refuse to allow immigration. A noninterventionist foreign policy simply means no more invasions, threats, bombs, bullets, maiming, killing, widows, orphans, sanctions, embargoes, spies, meddling, bullying, policing the world, military advisors, troops and bases on foreign soil, nation building, peacekeeping operations, spreading democracy at the point of a gun, regime changes, covert actions, forcibly opening markets, enforcing UN resolutions, liberations, preemptive strikes, or foreign wars. Intervening in other countries does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would be one of neutrality. The United States regularly takes sides in civil wars, territorial disputes, and controversies in other nations, in addition to picking winners and losers. It should instead remain neutral. Neutrality guarantees a noninterventionist foreign policy. It checks presidential power, it prevents hatred of America and Americans, it doesn't create enemies and terrorists, it respects the sovereignty of other nations, it keeps U.S. soldiers from dying unnecessarily, it doesn't cost anything, and it ensures that the military is not misused.

Not remaining neutral does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would not have entangling alliances. The United States has committed itself to coming to the defense of scores of countries. These commitments are the epitome of the entangling alliances the Founding Fathers warned against making. The U.S. military should be used only for the defense of the United States. Each country should provide for its own defense. No agreements to defend other countries are in the interests of the American people as a whole and they should all therefore be rescinded. Making entangling alliances does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would not fight the drug war in other countries. The U.S. government takes tens of millions of dollars a year from American citizens to do so. It is bad enough that the U.S. government wages war against drugs in America, but even if it were proper for the U.S. government to stamp out vice and keep people from harming themselves in America, it is absurd to think that it should be doing those things in other countries. And, of course, since there is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that authorizes the federal government to declare war on drugs

or even to fight crime, there is certainly nothing in that document that authorizes the federal government to help any other country do them. Even Americans who fully support drug prohibition laws in the United States should have a problem with that. Fighting the drug war in other countries does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would not have an Export-Import Bank.

An America First foreign policy would not have an Export-Import Bank. The Export-Import Bank is the official export credit agency of the United States. Its mission is “to assist in financing the export of U.S. goods and services to international markets” by providing “working capital guarantees (pre-export financing); export credit insurance; and loan guarantees and direct loans (buyer financing).” It “assumes credit and country risks that the private sector is unable or unwilling to accept” and matches “the financing that other governments provide to their exporters.” In the words of the Club for Growth, a conservative free-enterprise advocacy group, the Export-Import Bank is a “corporate welfare slush

fund.” The Export-Import Bank is an unconstitutional and illegitimate function of the federal government that breeds crony capitalism. Having an Export-Import Bank does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would reject membership in NATO. The main purpose of NATO was to deter Soviet expansionism. But since the Soviet Union has collapsed, the communist governments of Eastern Europe have been deposed, the Berlin Wall has been taken down, and the Warsaw Pact has been disbanded, NATO is obsolete. Membership in NATO is an unnecessary expense. NATO is the quintessential entangling alliance warned against by George Washington in his Farewell Address. NATO does not exist for the defense of the United States. A NATO military action could needlessly cost American lives. Membership in NATO does not put America first.

An America First foreign policy would reject membership in NATO.

An America First foreign policy would not preclude individual Americans from refusing to buy products not made in America, refusing to buy products made in certain countries, supporting foreign

disaster-relief efforts, refusing to do business in certain countries, being apathetic toward Third World poverty, giving aid to foreign governments, not hiring immigrants, refusing to travel to certain countries, refusing to vacation in certain countries, working in other countries, not working in other countries, joining foreign armies, rooting for one side in a country’s civil war, being unconcerned about the plight of refugees, criticizing a foreign government’s human-rights record, seeking to improve the living conditions of people in other countries, volunteering in organizations working in other countries, supporting NGOs operating in other countries, being indifferent to oppressed groups in other countries, or wishing ill-will upon the leaders or the people of another country. But such Americans would have to do those things as individuals or as voluntary organizations without relying on the force of the U.S. government or money taken from other Americans who don’t share their opinions.

An America First foreign policy also means that Americans who travel, work in, or live in other countries, or engage in commerce with governments or entities in other countries, are responsible for themselves. They cannot expect the

U.S. government to send in the Marines should they be kidnapped, defrauded, or assaulted, or otherwise get themselves in trouble. American businesses that wish to sell their products in overseas markets should bear all the risks of doing so, not American taxpayers.

A neutral foreign policy would greatly reduce hatred toward America and Americans.

If the U.S. government had a neutral, nonthreatening, noninterventionist foreign policy, it would greatly reduce hatred toward America and Americans and the threats they might face when traveling, living, or doing business abroad.

The America First pattern

The pattern for an America First foreign policy goes back before the Anti-Imperialist League. It was set by our nation's first secretary of State, second vice president, and third president, Thomas Jefferson — the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. In his first inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1801, Jefferson announced what he deemed “the essential principles of our government.” As concerning foreign policy, he called for “peace, commerce, and honest

friendship with all nations — entangling alliances with none.” He echoed these sentiments throughout his life:

“The state of peace is that which most improves the manners and morals, the prosperity and happiness of mankind.”

“Instead of embarrassing commerce under piles of regulating laws, duties and prohibitions, could it be relieved from all its shackles in all parts of the world, could every country be employed in producing that which nature has best fitted it to produce, and each be free to exchange with others mutual surpluses for mutual wants, the greatest mass possible would then be produced of those things which contribute to human life and human happiness; the numbers of mankind would be increased and their condition bettered.”

“I am for free commerce with all nations, political connection with none, and little or no diplomatic establishment.”

“We wish to cultivate peace and friendship with all nations, believing that course most conducive to the welfare of our own.”

Jefferson often advocated the concept of neutrality:

“I have used my best endeavors to keep our country uncommitted in the troubles which afflict Europe, and which assail us on every side.”

“Since this happy separation, our nation has wisely avoided entangling itself in the system of European interests, has taken no side between its rival powers, attached itself to none of its ever-changing confederacies.”

“We ask for peace and justice from all nations; and we will remain uprightly neutral in fact.”

“We have produced proofs, from the most enlightened and approved writers on the subject, that a neutral nation must, in all things relating to the war, observe an exact impartiality towards the parties.”

Jefferson also recognized America’s unique geographical situation:

“At such a distance from Europe and with such an ocean between us, we hope to meddle little in its quarrels or combinations. Its peace and its commerce are what we shall court.”

“The insulated state in which nature has placed the American continent should so far avail it that no spark of war kindled in the other quarters of the globe should be wafted across the wide oceans which separate us from them.”

An America First foreign policy is simply a Jeffersonian foreign policy. A real America First foreign policy would look nothing like the pseudo–America First foreign policy articulated by Donald Trump.

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NEXT MONTH:
“How Not to Cut Welfare Spending”
by Laurence M. Vance

Smears and Hyperbole: Neo-McCarthyism Run Amok on Russia Policy

by Ted Galen Carpenter



Donald Trump's comments during the 2016 presidential campaign that he wanted the United States to have more-cooperative relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia have triggered a mixture of hysteria and viciousness among his political adversaries. Hawks conduct a concerted campaign to demonize Russia and portray it as a dire threat not only to the security of the West, but as a specific threat to America's political system. Claims that Russian intelligence operatives hacked the Democratic National Committee and

meddled in the 2016 election have intensified that campaign.

The result is a toxic ideological environment in which advocates of a hardline policy toward Moscow routinely impugn both the patriotism and ethics of their opponents. Already in October 2016, Hillary Clinton stated that her opponent would be "Putin's puppet." Although Trump and his current or former advisors have been the principal targets of such vilification, they are by no means the only ones. Even scholars and journalists who previously enjoyed impeccable credentials are now the victims of character assassination.

Debasing the media and public dialogue in that fashion is bad enough, but it also has real-world policy consequences. The overwrought campaign that Sen. Joseph McCarthy and some of his colleagues conducted during the 1950s to ferret out alleged communist agents had a long-lasting deleterious impact. Modern-day defenders of McCarthy note that when the Kremlin archives were opened following the demise of the Soviet Union, documents confirmed that some of his targets, such as Treasury official Harry Dexter White, were in fact Soviet agents. But McCarthy and his supporters hardly confined their ac-

cusations to the handful of real traitors. Unfounded accusations of communist sympathies destroyed the reputations and careers of numerous innocent parties.

Unfounded accusations threaten to have a corrosive effect on policy toward Russia.

McCarthy's "loyalty" crusade also intimidated critics of Washington's existing foreign policy and chilled debate, preventing consideration of worthwhile alternatives. One consequence of that rigidity and the absence of meaningful public scrutiny was the simplistic equation of North Vietnam's behavior with Nazi Germany's aggression in the late 1930s. U.S. leaders then erroneously concluded that the United States had to intervene in Vietnam's civil war. More than 58,000 Americans and more than a million Vietnamese paid with their lives for that blunder.

The current bout of neo-McCarthyism threatens to have a similar corrosive effect on policy toward Russia and even on modest modifications to the U.S. commitment to NATO. Outspoken Democrats vie with each other to heap abuse on Russia and any American official who questions the stereotype of that

country as supreme planetary villain. Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) insisted that Russia's alleged election meddling was "an act of war." Her California colleague, Rep. Eric Swalwell, echoed that assertion. "We were attacked by Russia," he charged, and the electronic assault "was ordered by Vladimir Putin." Such accusations were relatively restrained, though, compared to Washington congressman Denny Heck's comparison of Russia's actions to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Worries about Russia, he insisted, had nothing to do with politics. Instead, "this is about patriotism ... this is about country, and the very heart of what this country is built on, which is open, free, trusted elections."

Ad hominem attacks

A corollary to the effort to demonize Russia is the allegation that the motive for Moscow's actions was to help Trump win the election because Russian leaders considered him either a willing agent of influence or a dupe. That narrative has now become pervasive. Media allies of the Democrats, especially the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, MSNBC, Salon, and the *Huffington Post*, feature both official editorials and opinion columns, as

well as editorials masquerading as news stories, either explicitly or implicitly making that case. The propaganda barrage has persisted even though the actual evidence ranges from thin to nonexistent.

It has become politically hazardous even for people not associated with the Trump administration to advocate a strategy of realism and restraint toward Moscow. The innuendoes — and sometimes outright accusations — against Trump and his associates are mushrooming. And it appears to be having an impact on policy. Observers note that Trump seems to be backing away from adopting a conciliatory policy toward Moscow regarding Crimea and other issues. Widespread speculation that he would move promptly to soften or even lift the economic sanctions that the Obama administration imposed on Russia has yet to be borne out. Moreover, the president's rhetoric regarding Russia has clearly hardened. One reason may well be a fear that if he does not ostentatiously display a "tough" line on Russia, the accusations of being Putin's tool will grow even worse, and more Americans will believe them.

The orchestrated anti-Russia sentiment has already reached alarming levels. Scarcely a day goes

by without House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Rep. Adam Schiff (ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee), Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, or other prominent Democrats contending, at the very least, that there is "circumstantial evidence" that members of the Trump campaign colluded with Russian intelligence agents during the 2016 election cycle.

Democratic Party leadership exhibited convenient amnesia that prominent Democrats met with the same Russian diplomats.

Merely having meetings with Russia's ambassador to the United States or other Russian diplomats is deemed to be strong evidence of such collusion. Yet oddly enough almost no one makes allegations of that sort when similar contacts are made with Chinese officials, Israeli diplomats, or representatives of numerous other countries. Both the Democratic Party leadership and their media allies also exhibited convenient amnesia that several prominent Democrats met with the same Russian diplomats that the Trump people did. The reality is that political figures in both parties, as well as journalists and think tank scholars, who deal with foreign pol-

icy issues find that they need to meet with, well, foreigners.

To imply that such contacts constitute a treasonous collusion is either irrational or terribly cynical. But that is the spin that critics put on those activities. Unfortunately, contradictory statements by National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and Attorney General Jeff Sessions enhanced the credibility of such allegations. The carefully cultivated political and media frenzy about the activities of Trump associates with respect to Russia has even led to an FBI investigation and congressional hearings.

**McCain's outburst was triggered
by a pending vote to admit
Montenegro to NATO.**

The new McCarthyism is not purely a partisan campaign, however. Prominent neo-conservative Republicans have enthusiastically joined in the assault. In fact, they sometimes are even more strident than liberal Democrats. That point, as well as just how ugly the crusade has become, was evident when Arizona Sen. John McCain launched a vicious verbal assault on fellow GOP Sen. Rand Paul in mid March.

The issue that triggered McCain's outburst was a pending Sen-

ate vote on admitting Montenegro to NATO. McCain noted Paul's previous opposition, but instead of countering his arguments, the Arizona senator resorted to slurs and accusations. If one opposed the measure promoting Montenegro's membership, he insisted, "You are achieving the objectives of Vladimir Putin ... trying to dismember this small country which has already been the subject of an attempted coup." McCain continued: "If they object, they are now carrying out the desires and ambitions of Vladimir Putin, and I do not say that lightly." He then asked for unanimous consent for an immediate voice vote to rush the measure through. Paul invoked his senatorial privilege to object and insist on a floor debate and a roll call vote.

McCain's infamous temper then erupted. "The only conclusion you can draw," he thundered, "is he has no justification for his objection to having a small nation be part of NATO that is under assault from the Russians. So I repeat again, the senator from Kentucky is now working for Vladimir Putin."

Such an outrageous smear might have made even Joe McCarthy blush. Paul's objections to Montenegro's NATO membership were logical and straightforward. "Cur-

rently, the United States has troops in dozens of countries and is actively fighting in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen (with the occasional drone strike in Pakistan),” he said in an interview with the *Daily Beast*. “In addition, the United States is pledged to defend 28 countries in NATO. It is unwise to expand the monetary and military obligations of the United States given the burden of our \$20 trillion debt.” Whether one agreed with his points or not, they were perfectly legitimate, and they had nothing whatever to do with promoting the interests of Vladimir Putin. Indeed, respected scholars had argued that adding a small, corrupt, militarily insignificant member such as Montenegro provided no benefit either to NATO or to the United States. It merely added to America’s already worrisome alliance burdens and strategic overextension.

Daniel Larison, a columnist for *The American Conservative*, rebuked McCain for his ad hominem attack on Paul. Larison also identified a broader, unsavory motive for resorting to such tactics. “McCain’s accusation is obnoxious, but it also shows how weak the case for bringing Montenegro into NATO is. If there were a strong argument in favor of adding a new member, Mc-

Cain wouldn’t have to stoop to attacking Paul as a Russian pawn, but there isn’t and even he knows that.” *Reason* magazine editor Matt Welch was even more repulsed than Larison at McCain’s conduct. Noting that he had defended the Arizona senator in the past, Welch stated, “To see him go rhetorically McCarthyite against a fellow American for having the temerity to disagree with his often questionable foreign-policy judgment is one of the most disgraceful moments of his long career.”

Trump loyalists and Rand Paul are far from being the only targets of the latest bout of McCarthyism.

Trump loyalists and Rand Paul are far from being the only targets of the latest bout of McCarthyism. The motives of Princeton University professor Stephen F. Cohen, a longtime distinguished scholar regarding the Soviet Union and Russia, have been impugned and his reputation sullied because he dares to advocate a conciliatory policy toward Russia. Such terms as “Putin’s American apologist” and “Putin’s pal” are routine features of the vitriol directed against Cohen.

He is not a rare victim. Anyone who argues that NATO’s expansion eastward to Russia’s border need-

lessly provoked Moscow, or that Russia's actions in Ukraine were largely a response to the West's role in helping demonstrators overthrow the elected, pro-Russian government in Kiev, usually receives the same treatment. Targets have included Jeffrey Taylor, columnist for the *Atlantic*, University of Chicago professor (and dean of the realist school among U.S. international relations scholars) John Mearsheimer, conservative writer and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, and an assortment of journalists with a wide range of ideological orientations, such as Larison, Glenn Greenwald, Justin Raimondo, and Stephen Kinzer. Epithets such as "apologists," "stooges," "Russian trolls," and "useful idiots" appear frequently in hawkish attacks on those maverick foreign-policy critics.

Vested interests

Such tactics poison the debate atmosphere, making meaningful dialogue and the consideration of intelligent policy alternatives nearly impossible. There are multiple causes of the new McCarthyism. Liberal Democrats, still smarting from their party's unexpected defeat in the 2016 presidential election, seem to be seeking a scapegoat to explain the shocking outcome.

Believing that it was all the result of a Russian plot in conjunction with the venal Donald Trump is a lot more comforting than admitting that the party offered an uninspiring candidate and had an arrogant, wildly overconfident campaign organization. There may also be some sentiment to engage in payback for the grief (and more than a few smears) that Republicans inflicted upon Barack Obama. If they have to resort to Russia baiting and McCarthyite tactics to accomplish their goals, many Democratic partisans seem perfectly willing to do so.

There are multiple causes of the new McCarthyism.

For more-hawkish Democrats, as well as for McCain, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), and other neo-conservative Republicans who have signed on to the witch-hunt, there also appears to be a deeper policy motive. Trump's critical comments about NATO and Washington's other alliances indicated a policy shift that menaced the status and careers of influential figures who are wedded to the foreign-policy status quo. If he meant those comments seriously (although there are some doubts about that), the United States would very likely embrace a sub-

stantially more restrained foreign policy. So-called humanitarian interventions and regime-change wars would not be part of an “America First” strategy. Washington’s relations with longtime military allies would be less extensive — and some relations might even be jettisoned. There also would be a less confrontational posture toward Russia, the nation that ardent interventionists have designated as the Great Menace to America’s security.

Even the mere possibility that the Trump administration might transform U.S. foreign policy in that fashion poses a threat to a multitude of vested interests. They have struck back in an attempt to preserve a paradigm that has dominated Washington’s approach to global affairs since 1945 and preserve their own important roles. Unfortunately, they have chosen a political and ideological strategy that is intrinsically odious and has destructive policy implications.

It is never healthy to attempt to stifle public debate by demonizing dissenting views. Both the McCarthy period and the acrimonious delegitimizing of dissent surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq should have confirmed that lesson. In the latter case, critics who dared oppose the rush to war were denounced in

the ugliest terms. Neoconservative author David Frum’s infamous *National Review* article, “Unpatriotic Conservatives,” was typical. Frum linked a wide array of conservative and libertarian critics of the war to a few writers he said were anti-Semites, tarring all of them with that brush. He also accused skeptics of “having made common cause with left-wing and Islamist anti-war movements in this country and in Europe. They deny and excuse terror.” Even worse, “some of them explicitly yearn for the victory of their nation’s enemies.”

The habit of smearing advocates of a restrained foreign policy has resurfaced. Previous bouts produced tragic results, both in terms of the nation’s domestic political health and the ability to make constructive, sometimes imperative, changes in foreign policy. The latest manifestation of McCarthyism threatens to do the same, and it needs to be strangled in its cradle.

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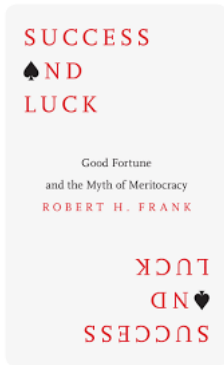
Why do booms, historically, continue for several years? What delays the reversion process? The answer is that as the boom begins to peter out from an injection of credit expansion, the banks inject a further dose. In short, the only way to avert the onset of the depression-adjustment process is to continue inflating money and credit. For only continual doses of new money on the credit market will keep the boom going and the new stages profitable. Furthermore, only ever increasing doses can step up the boom, can lower interest rates further, and expand the production structure, for as the prices rise, more and more money will be needed to perform the same amount of work. Once the credit expansion stops, the market ratios are reestablished, and the seemingly glorious new investments turn out to be malinvestments, built on a foundation of sand. [It] is clear that prolonging the boom by ever larger doses of credit expansion will have only one result: to make the inevitably ensuing depression longer and more grueling.... The way to prevent a depression, then, is simple: avoid starting a boom.

— Murray Rothbard

Misguided Attacks on the Rich

by George Leef

Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy by Robert H. Frank (Princeton University Press, 2016; 208 pages)



In 2002, I reviewed an atrocious book for this publication — *The Myth of Ownership*, by Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel. It argued that we don’t really deserve to own anything because society makes everything possible. Therefore, whatever amount of income or wealth the state deigns to let us keep is morally fine. It’s wrong to view taxation as theft under their view; rather, the lack of taxation is generosity.

That kind of argument appeals to statists who will advance almost

any excuse for a bigger and more powerful government. The Murphy/Nagle claim has been taken out of mothballs in the last few years by Barack Obama and Elizabeth Warren, both of whom got cheers for telling supporters that any success Americans have is not really their own. As Obama said about entrepreneurs, “You didn’t build that.”

Now there is a new book advancing a similar argument — *Success and Luck*, by Robert Frank. He approvingly cites Murphy and Nagel, but bases his case on the claim that rich people were almost always lucky to have succeeded as they did, and therefore shouldn’t object to more taxation.

Frank is an economist who has spent decades thinking about the role of luck in our society. More than twenty years ago, he co-authored the book *The Winner-Take-All Society*, arguing that we have moved into an economy characterized by “winner-take-all” markets in which one person or company rakes in almost all the rewards of success, with little left for the rest of the field. In his latest book, *Success and Luck*, he returns to that theme and explains why he finds it problematic.

“In recent years,” Frank writes, “social scientists have discovered

that chance events play a much larger role in important life outcomes than most people once imagined.” Despite the American belief in meritocracy, Frank says that success and failure “often hinge decisively on events completely beyond any individual’s control.” The actor Bryan Cranston, for example, is now enjoying a booming career, his high demand a result of his starring role as Walter White in the TV series *Breaking Bad*. Frank points out that Cranston was offered that role only after John Cusack and Matthew Broderick had turned it down. Yes, Cranston was good, but without a lucky break, he would have remained in relative obscurity.

Frank says that success and failure “often hinge decisively on events completely beyond any individual’s control.”

The business world, Frank contends, is full of such good-luck stories. In the market for tax-preparation software, for instance, numerous programs that were perfectly capable once competed. But owing to some favorable reviews, Intuit’s Turbo Tax eventually came to dominate the field. “Its developers profited enormously, even as those whose programs were almost

as good were being forced out of business,” Frank laments.

It has always been true that a few lucky ones manage to reap great rewards even though they were little if any better than their rivals, but Frank maintains that the march of technology is magnifying the gap between the winners and the losers in law, medicine, sports, journalism, retailing, and even academia. In a revealingly egalitarian passage, he says, “It’s one thing to say that someone who works 1 percent harder than others or is 1 percent more talented deserves 1 percent more income. But the importance of chance looms much larger when such small performance differences translate into thousand-fold differences in earnings.”

Channeling Galbraith

But is the “winner-takes-all” trend really becoming more pronounced? For all of his anecdotes, Frank’s claim that it is, rests on nothing more than his *ipse dixit*. The same technological change that allows some to get exceptionally wealthy is also making markets open to far more people than ever before — publishing, for example. It also allows competitors to erode the positions of the lucky winners more rapidly than ever. This part of

Frank's case, I would say, is very doubtful. Let's assume for the sake of argument that he's right, however.

The key questions remaining are why this trend (assuming it exists) is harmful and what the author proposes to do about it.

Even when people don't achieve their dreams, they usually gain from their efforts in ways that make future success more likely.

One reason the trend is harmful, according to Frank, is that the quest for great success "may encourage people to compete where they have no realistic prospects." True enough, but hasn't that always been so? For the last century, vast numbers of young Americans have, for example, devoted a great deal of time and energy to perfecting their jump-shots, fastballs, and tackling even though the chance of making it into one of the major leagues (now with a multi-million dollar contract) is vanishingly small. Many others have tried to "make it big" in music or acting, even though the odds of success are similarly microscopic. And still more, lured by the possibility of gigantic profits, have tried to invent things and market them, but, like the rivals to Turbo Tax, failed. Frank focuses only

on the wasted effort, but even when people don't achieve their dreams, they usually gain from their efforts in ways that make future success more likely. As Thomas Edison said of his many unsuccessful experiments, "I didn't fail, but learned what didn't work."

But there is a far bigger problem according to Frank, namely that the few plutocratic winners damage the nation with their prodigious spending on mansions, hyper-expensive cars, and over-the-top weddings. All of that conspicuous consumption doesn't really make them happier: "Wealthy Americans have been building bigger mansions simply because they've received most of the country's recent income gains. Yet there's no evidence that, beyond a certain point, bigger houses make people any happier. Once houses reach a certain size, further increases in square-footage merely shift the frame of reference that defines adequate."

While the rich are engaged in a sort of arms race to out-do each other, public investment suffers, Frank avers. Channeling John Kenneth Galbraith's complaints in *The Affluent Society* (1958), Frank sees an America in which the wealthy are living it up at the expense of a starving public sector. He employs

this analogy to make his point — we are like a driver who has a \$300,000 Ferrari that bumps along on pothole-ridden roads when we could instead have a \$150,000 Porsche that we drive on perfectly smooth roads.

We suffer from a huge infrastructure deficit of some \$3.6 trillion but, Frank argues, the rich fail to understand that they were just lucky and therefore oppose paying the higher taxes that would lead to better roads for all, better education for everyone's children, and so on. In short, we'd all be better off — even the rich — if they paid more in taxes and stopped their wasteful spending.

Wishful thinking

Several glaring problems beset Frank's argument.

First, all of that needless (to Frank) spending by the rich provides the income for large numbers of people who are not rich. Consider the outlandish Manhattan weddings that now cost on average \$76,000. Frank sees wasteful one-up-manship, but to the companies employed and their workers, that's the money that pays the bills. The de-escalation of the arms race on weddings, houses, cars, boats, et cetera that Frank wants would inflict

serious pain on many Americans whose livelihoods depend on rich people spending money on their lifestyles.

It isn't true that the super-rich have dug in their heels to oppose any and all tax increases on them.

Second, it isn't true that the super-rich have dug in their heels to oppose any and all tax increases on them. Frank points to one who has (Stephen Schwartzman), but a great many of America's billionaires are supporters of leftist politicians who have pledged to make the rich pay much higher taxes. Something other than insatiable greed of the One Percenters is necessary to explain why the tax code lets them keep so much of the money they've been lucky enough to acquire.

Third, Frank's proposed tax transfer of much of the wealth of the lucky few to the government would not produce the social benefits he envisions. That is because he assumes that if the federal treasury had trillions more, the politicians and bureaucrats would spend it wisely to give us smooth roads, strong bridges, efficient passenger rail, and above all, good schools for everyone. That is to say, Frank exhibits the standard liberal wishful

thinking that we can solve our problems by just spending enough on them. Could this eminent economist be unfamiliar with the Public Choice critique of government spending? Is he unaware that many of the school districts that spend the most per student have consistently poor results? Apparently so.

Frank's proposed solution to the alleged problem that the lucky are receiving too much of "society's" income and squandering it is not to ramp up the highest income-tax brackets. Rather, he wants to replace the progressive income tax with a progressive consumption tax. That change would, he contends, reduce wasteful consumption spending while encouraging savings and investment.

Whatever might be said about the benefit of shifting away from the income tax and into a consumption tax, the case for doing so doesn't have anything to do with luck or the "expenditure cascades" of the rich. Doctor Frank is prescribing a medicine on the basis of an erroneous diagnosis of the patient's condition.

Success and Luck is not without its useful insights. Foremost among

them is Frank's statement that the "college earnings premium" that many educators cite as proof that we need to put more young people through college is a mirage. That "premium" exists, he notes, only because a small number of college graduates have enjoyed spectacular earnings. For most college grads, earnings are modest and haven't grown much. Coming from a college professor, that's quite a rebuke to the crowd calling for the United States to regain the world's top spot with regard to the percentage of the populace with college degrees.

Nevertheless, the book's big point is one that gives aid and comfort to redistributionists who will use almost any argument to justify expansion of the state. "You just got lucky" works just as well for them as another recent claim: "You didn't build that." At a time when the need to scale back the size, scope, and expense of government is the national imperative, Frank's book diverts our attention and leads us astray.

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