

The Real Aggressor

[Murray N. Rothbard](#)

A sign of our time is the split-personality of the conservatives. Many to the right of center are off on a schizophrenic pursuit of both liberty and collectivism.

In domestic affairs this regrettable condition is gradually being recognized for what it is. But the time is nigh for conservative foreign policy, as well, to be psychoanalyzed in hope of a cure!

Conservatives call for free trade and free enterprise, yet also clamor for absolute embargoes on trade with Communist nations. Have they forgotten that both parties to free exchange benefit from trade? For our government or any others to prohibit trade is a vicious example of socialistic policy; it injures the Communist countries to be sure; it also injures us.

Another example: conservatives are calling for lower taxes and less government control, while on the other hand they are calling for a virtual holy war against Russia and China, with all the costliness, death, and statism that such a war would necessarily entail. Such a holy war would be immoral, inexpedient, and ill-conceived at best — in this day of weapons for mass murder, such a call is near insanity.

Yet while conservatives once preferred peace and "isolationism," in our day they appeal in vague terms for liberation of foreign nations and hint that "We've been at war with Communism for years, so let's get it over with." They bitterly denounce European "allies" for being neutralistic and therefore "unreliable," while they praise Chiang, Rhee, and Franco for being anti-Communist and therefore "reliable friends of the United States." They denounce our having entered the Korean War; yet denounce the Korean Truce and call for programs to carry war ever upward and onward.

The notion — very widespread — that we should not have entered the Korean War, but once in it should have launched a total war against China, flouts rules of logic. The best preventive of war is to

refrain from warring — period. If we had agreed to a cease-fire when the Commies suggested it, or had pulled out of Korea altogether (even better), we would have saved thousands of American and Korean lives.

A "Blunt" Point

Here I think one point should be made and made bluntly. Some people may prefer death to Communism; and this is perfectly legitimate for them — although death may not often be a solution to any problem. But suppose they also try to impose their will on other people who might prefer life under Communism to death in a "free world" cemetery. Is not forcing them into mortal combat a pure and simple case of murder? And is not anti-Communist murder as evil as murder committed by Communists?

Many "isolationists," in concerning themselves with the liberation or security of foreign nations, have in truth become outright internationalists. Instead of praising European neutralism — the equivalent of real American isolationism — they now demand collective-security organizations such as NATO.

Yet faith in international collectivism has already dragged us into one disastrous war after another during the present century. And now it is a faith in world government, supposedly restricted to the enforcement of so-called world law. This is a fantasy in which the various world states are seen as resembling a family of policemen taking it upon themselves to enforce a preservation of the status quo.

The result of this international-collectivistic approach is that the United States is rapidly going down the classic warpath. And the path has all the signposts so unerringly pointed out by isolationist writers in the 1930s concerning the First World War, and in the 1940s concerning the Second World War: militarism, propaganda of hate, press distortions, atrocity stories about the enemy (and silence about our own atrocities), chauvinistic vainglory such as pride that "America has won all its wars" (but with the help of strong allies badly outnumbering the enemy), and in general, the "emotional complex of fear and vaunting" noted by Garet Garrett, which [Harry Elmer Barnes calls the "1984 pattern."](#)

The tragic part of the whole situation is that it is the erstwhile isolationists, the ones who above all others should know better, who are leading the war parade.

Sinking ever deeper into a war psychosis, these conservatives have failed to perceive that our whole problem today, broadly speaking, is ideological rather than military! If we carefully examine the facts we will find that the most commonly feared threat to peace — the Communist bloc — has been fairly scrupulous about not committing military aggression. All the Communist successes since the end of World War II have been through internal Communist rebellions. Korea itself was a civil war, and there is even there considerable evidence that it was begun by the South. Russia did not intervene directly in that war, and China intervened not only after the United States did, but only when our troops reached her borders.

Patience, plus sponsoring of Communist parties and philosophy abroad, seems to be the Soviet plan. In brief, the Russian military menace is for the most part a bogey; the Commies are probably truthful in their assertion that their arming is meant in defense. The statement of Defense Secretary Wilson recently that Russian air production has been concentrated on *defensive* jets rather than offensive heavy bombers (such as we are building) would tend to bear out this point.

As a long-term threat as well, we should have no fear of military conquest by the Russians, or by the

Chinese either. They began as backward countries and, since we know Communism to be a relatively inefficient economic system, we need not worry about their offensive military might — provided we let our own industries grow without the hamperings of a garrison state.

What we really have to combat is all *statism*, and not just the Communist brand. To take up arms against one set of socialists is not the way to stop socialism — indeed it is bound to increase socialism as all modern wars have done.

The Realm of Battle

The battle can only be waged in the realm of ideas and reason. Man shall only tighten his chains — and those holding other men — if he takes up arms simply against one foreign statist faction. Even if Russia and China both were to be wiped out tomorrow, Communism would continue to exist (just as it did before 1917) so long as people continue to give credence to its collectivist tenets. To attempt to stamp out heresy by force is the method of vindictive children, rather than the method of rational human beings.

But some conservatives are failing to recognize that the enemy is statism, rather than simply Communism. And the fundamental reason, obviously, is that there is still an inadequate understanding of the very nature of the State.

It is a fundamental libertarian proposition that the State only has the right to use force to *defend* the person and property of individuals *against* force.

Actually, among libertarians and conservatives, there is agreement on that proposition; but most conservatives usually commit the fatal error of stopping there. Considering the analysis of the State closed, they conclude, "Therefore the State should be limited to what is necessary for defense purposes." Ponder the grave consequences of that reasoning:

Peter is a peaceful citizen, devoted to productive work and minding his own affairs. By what right does any person or set of persons, in a group called the State, come to Peter and force him to give up money for the purpose of protecting him against possible future invasions of his person and property? The ethical answer can only be, no right whatsoever.

Surely we have all heard of and ridiculed the racketeering "protective syndicates," which force merchants to purchase "protection" at an exorbitant fee. Yet the State syndicate manages to impose its own "protection," and to collect from Peter, with nary a single eyebrow being raised against it.

Not a Self-Respecting Racketeer

What is worse, the State gang does not even leave the scene of crime after collecting, as any self-respecting racketeer would do. Instead it hangs around to harass Peter and his kind, insisting on continually higher sums of money in tribute, pressing the Peters into the State army when competing robber bands attack, coercing the Peters to salute the State battle flag, to acknowledge the State as their sovereign, to regard the decrees of State as valid laws to be obeyed by all righteous persons. What would we think of the State gang, and what would we think of people who allowed themselves to be duped by the rulers' propaganda to believe that this is all well and good, natural, and necessary?

Yet, being duped by State officials is precisely what mankind has been putting up with for thousands of years.

Some might say that all this has been put to a stop in those nations which have turned to democracy. But libertarians are

"What we really have to combat is all statism,

surely not so enamored of the voting process that they fail to perceive the flaws in the democracy argument. What democracy has done is simply to increase the number of State groups. The question becomes: Are we much better off now, having several groups (or "parties") of would-be plunderers, each desiring the control of a good thing? I think the answer must be No.

The only advantage of a democracy is that it provides scope (strictly limited) for peaceful change of State rulers via ballot boxes, instead of requiring bloody revolutions, coup d'etats, etc. Instead of having bloody civil wars over the spoils of State, the robber gangs have their subjects vote every few years as to which gang will rule them. Never, however, do they so much as hint that the people may have a choice as to whether they wish to retain the State system itself.

Caught on the Horns

Thus, conservatives who say that the State should be limited to what is necessary for defense purposes, are caught from the start on the horns of a great dilemma. For the State has been conceived in original sin. Any State, even the best intentioned, subsists by means of coercion. If Henry Thoreau says: I don't want your protection, so will pay no more taxes; he goes to jail — sent there by his "representatives." If he attempts to argue by saying: I wish to pay for my defense through *privately* financed police and judiciary companies, which I believe will be cheaper and far better than your coercive monopoly — the same punishment is meted out to him, or worse.

In a libertarian society though, it is the individual, not the State, which has the primary choice as to whether and how his defenses shall be maintained. As an individual he has the right to fight in his own or another's defense; or, if he adjudges it foolhardy or disbelieves in fighting altogether, he has the right not to fight at all. And similarly, he has the right to subscribe voluntarily to police forces and courts which offer defense, but also the right not to subscribe. No one has the right to force him to fight or to pay others to fight for him. If the State forces him to pay tax moneys for State-conceived defense purposes, the State thereby deprives him of his individual rights.

To sum up: every State oppresses its subjects and pillages them; every State functions — as A.J. Nock put it — as if having a "monopoly (or attempted monopoly) of crime" in its territory, asserting its sovereignty over a certain land area, and exacting compulsory levies on the inhabitants.

Instead of having a group of policemen, we have in actuality a group of gangster States aggressing against their subject-citizens; forming alliances, and from time to time fighting to increase their share of the spoils collected from the various inhabitants of the earth. War is an attack by one robber band against another.

Surely under these prevailing conditions, the supposed morality of every State's leaping to the defense of an alleged victim State becomes highly dubious indeed.

Yet no matter how evil States are, we must accept the fact that they do exist, and that there is no likely prospect of their imminent disappearance. In a world of States and statism, then, what should the libertarian conservatives' attitude be with regard to international discord?

Municipal police have one rather appealing principle: they look the other way during a gang war. If one set of gangsters "aggresses" against another set, the police do not participate. Why waste the taxpayers' money protecting one gangster against another?

The Status Quo Might Not Be Moral

It is a version of that principle, I think, that ought to be applied to foreign affairs. For if any world police force were to be set up to punish "aggressors," the only result would be increased bloodshed and real aggression all over the world in an attempt to freeze the existing status quo, which might be a status quo no more moral, and perhaps less just, than any other possible one.

We could hardly blame those States that came late into the struggle for territorial influence, if they turned a jaundiced eye on the hypocritical moralizing of the entrenched aggressor States who would invoke world law to forestall new depredations. States have always gained their territories by force, and any given land area has probably been fought over and changed hands many times. In almost every case of "aggression" each party to the dispute, and often many parties, have some sort of historical claim to the disputed territory. New territorial wars are no more "aggressive" than the present continuation of old conquests.

What is more, there always arises the difficulty of spotting the "real aggressor" in any particular war. When both sides are armed camps, when there are many provocations, secret treaties, deals and frontier incidents, the question of unraveling the actual starter of war, let alone who is the more morally wrong, becomes a matter for the careful research of future historians.

Sad are the few facts which do not remain for historians to reveal. These facts are that the people who end up conquered are subjected to the exactions and tyrannies of the master State; while the original subjects of the conquering State are forced not only to fight the wars but also to foot the bills. The wider a State attempts to extend its sphere of influence, indeed, the greater becomes its coercion against all concerned.

Once we clearly understand the ever-coercive nature of States, and the ever-recurrent warfare between them, we will no longer want to offer ourselves up unthinkingly before the international-collectivist altar inscribed, "Necessary for Defense." Instead we will keep these three facts in mind: that each State's jurisdiction is limited, at any given time, to a certain geographical area over which it has *assumed* the power and responsibility of defense; that within this area the State builds its defensive power by means of compulsory levies; and that these levies involve immorality of conduct, because the act of forcing people to pay taxes for military defense usurps each individual's right to choose *how* and *whether* he will want it.

The basic aim of our foreign policy then will become the greatest possible reduction of the amount of immorality; in other words, reduction and limitation of the State's area of assumed defense. Upon our escutcheon will be inscribed these words: "Let there be peace. Let not the State interfere in the affairs of other States."

If the people of Korea are being oppressed, we will recognize that the oppressor State is vicious; but we will at the same time recognize that it would be immoral for the United States government as such to interfere in any way. For in so interfering, the American State would commit those of its citizens who have no wish to be committed, to battle for Korean citizens.

Interference, moreover, would in no way insure that the foreign people thus "liberated" would be any the better off for it. Had the North won a quick victory in the recent Korean War, the Koreans might well have been left *less* unhappy and even economically better off under Communism than they are now under Rhee. Millions have been slaughtered by the weapons of both sides, and those remaining have been left to contemplate the utter destruction of their property.

If some Americans wish to liberate the people of China or Poland, let them raise a private

expeditionary force and private finances to go over and attempt liberation — but let them not try to commit the United States, and as a result, myself, to any such scheme. For a second wrong simply will not make a right; we should not add to oppression at home in a hope to effect some sort of "liberation" elsewhere.

Hold Down the State

The moral policy for libertarians is to see that the scope of war is kept as localized as possible. The State must be held to its responsibility to enter no foreign war — and to provoke no war via rash and irresponsible statements, official condemnations of other governments, or inordinate armament buildups.

Even if our nation is directly attacked by another, justice for those who look askance upon war efforts and levies still requires that the scope of State action be kept within responsible limits. The goal of all State action at such times must be a negotiated peace, so that the burden of destruction and taxes will cease. The State should do its best to put limits and rules on the war, and to outlaw as many weapons of destruction as possible — starting with the worst. Furthermore, so long as the emergency endures, all efforts should be kept voluntary — without conscription, economic controls, or inflation.

No purpose can be served when additional people are caused to lose their lives anywhere because of war. The fact is, the quarrel in modern large-scale war is not actually between the subject people, but between their States. The interest of the subjects is always in peace — since it is only in peace that full freedom for self-development can be attained. War decidedly increases the dangers of losing further individual freedom — to the "domestic" enemy, if not to the "foreign" enemy.

In short, the individual subject will want the State to limit its objectives, to defend the country's territory rather than to attack, to abstain from a drive to victory and unconditional surrender, and to negotiate peace at the earliest possible moment. Moreover, if full terms of peace cannot be immediately decided upon, the most important thing becomes negotiation of a truce to stop the mutual slaughter.

If Men Are To Forge Fences

Not arms but public opinion must be the basic weapon if men are to forge fences between themselves and the master States. By force of public opinion men must resist conscription; must insist on absolute nonintervention in foreign wars; and, where warfare is in progress, must call for immediate negotiations and an end to the bloodletting. And most important, there must be a re-establishment of those once-revered rules of war that prevented innocent civilians from being harmed.

As a corollary, there must be a re-establishment of the old-fashioned, pre-1914 type of international law, as distinguished from the sort of world law the present-day internationalists would attempt to impose. The old-time international law, as I understand it, set up rules by means of custom (and not by force) which carefully defined the difference between neutrality and intervention, and which declared sharply defined areas of neutrals' rights and belligerents' rights. Old-fashioned international law facilitated the maintenance of neutrality and served the important purpose of greatly limiting the scope of any wars that arose.

Public opinion could then be educated to impose this type of international law to limit the scope of

State action, just as Americans once used the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

The United Nations, unfortunately, does not afford a good breeding ground for such constructive principles of international law and order. For it is the seedling of a *world* State, a master imperialistic power that would dominate the citizens of the entire subject world. Furthermore, the UN is basically committed to collective-security warfare against "aggression" and is therefore a warmongering organization in its very essence.

The Reds Are Sane

Somebody has rightly said that the choice now is: coexistence or nonexistence. Any sane person prefers coexistence, and I am sure that the Reds are sane. The issue facing the world, therefore, has to do with nurturing a will and a way to talk things over — to negotiate — and to find lines of fruitful negotiation. Almost anything that would ease present tensions and provocations would be welcome.

But we must negotiate honestly and sincerely, with our foremost aim being an agreement for a jointly planned disarmament. There must be no more secret deals with a Yalta-Potsdam odor, which would arbitrarily hand over territory and peoples of other countries to Russia. And there must be no idea of simply bolstering our "allies" by making a mere *show* of negotiation. On many issues, such as Korea, Germany, etc., it would be better to just retire completely from the fray.

Yet the nurturing of a new era — of negotiation, of return to the pre-1914 type of international law, and of public opinion against statism — will all take time. Meanwhile, along what lines should our American government take immediate action?

To begin, the United States should pull out of the United Nations, and also out of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance.

Secondly, our government should repudiate all other foreign commitments and agreements and foreign aid or "security" endeavors, while withdrawing the military from foreign bases.

As good a place to start as any is at Trieste. American and British troops have absolutely no business there. They are the original meddlers and interlopers. Beginning with the mulcting of American and Triestino citizens alike of funds for occupational expenses, these troops have proceeded to the shooting down of inhabitants. Clearly the withdrawal of our foreign-based troops is one of the primary orders of business, leaving interested parties to settle things for themselves.

Thirdly, the United States government should "recognize" Red China — on the basis of the old-fashioned international law principles of recognition. Prior to the interventionism of Woodrow Wilson, it was always understood that recognition — especially by a neutralist state — does not imply moral approval. The doctrine that it does has already been responsible for too many wars and bloodshed (vide the Stimson policy toward Japan). Recognition simply means recognizing the physical existence of a state — it is an act of sanity, not an act of praise. Whether we like it or not, Chiang is now ruler of Formosa alone — and no mere recognition or nonrecognition will alter that fact.

Unfetter World Trade

Fourthly, there should be reestablishment of free and unhampered trade with the Communist countries, by our own nation and by all other nations. Free world trade would not only help break down the iron curtain, but would benefit anti-Communist nations as well as Communist. Nothing could be more inane than the present program of "helping other nations to help themselves" while at the same time coercively restricting their opportunities to engage in profitable commerce.

Above all, our foreign policy must not be self-defeating; it must be *consistent*; it must pursue *peace* instead of war; and it must advance individual American freedom.