

# The Folly of Empire and the Science of Peace

Christopher J. Coyne\*

George Mason University  
United States of America

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## Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the public goods justification for national defense and empire. Social scientists have made a serious error in taking the public goods approach because they have drained economics from the exercise. Liberals who have embraced the Samuelsonian logic as the premise for liberal empire have likewise made a serious error because this approach overemphasizes the goods generated by empire while neglecting the significant bads. Further, in presenting the state as *the* source of domestic and international order through its military might, liberals have given up the game in terms of offering strong arguments against imperialism and militarism. This contributes to the persistence of the myth that imperialism and militarism are natural outgrowths of liberalism and capitalism. I present five challenges to the widely accepted view of government-provided defense and empire. I then discuss how we can constructively advance liberalism and peace.

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## I. Introduction

The intellectual foundation for empire is often grounded in the logic of Samuelsonian public goods. In the 1950s, Paul Samuelson laid the groundwork for contemporary public goods theory. He noted that goods that were nonexcludable and nonrivalrous would fail to be supplied in efficient quantities and qualities by private people left to their own devices. In his words, there was an “impossibility of a decentralized spontaneous solution” (Samuelson 1954, 388). Samuelson (1955) also provided national defense as an example of a public good: “A public consumption good, like an outdoor circus or national defense, which is provided for each person to enjoy or not,

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according to his tastes” (350). To this day, the Samuelsonian theory of public goods maintains a vise grip on how economists, and many other social scientists, think about national defense and the enormous scope of state activities that fall under its purview.

Some, including some of the liberal persuasion, have extended this logic to the international space, to what they call global public goods. It is not hard to see why. If you subscribe to the logic of Samuelsonian public goods within a nation’s borders, it is not a big leap to extend that same logic beyond a nation’s borders. From this perspective, national defense collapses into global defense operationalized through global empire, which serves as the world provider of public goods.

Deepak Lal’s (2004) book *In Praise of Empires* offers one example of this logic. He argues that a liberal empire is necessary to bring about liberal international order based on the logic of public goods: “The definition of order is congenial to an economist, for it deals with the provision of the pure public goods of defense and law, the primary function and duty of every state . . . The goal of an international order is to preserve the peace. This is an international public good” (xxii).

My argument is threefold. First, social scientists have made a serious error in taking this approach because they have drained economics from the exercise. The state provides efficient defense, peace, and order by assumption. And the state is necessary in the first place because private people fail to effectively provide the good in question, again by assumption.

Second, liberals who have embraced the Samuelsonian logic as the premise for liberal empire have likewise made a serious error. The reason is that this approach overemphasizes the goods generated by empire while neglecting the significant bads, which include the erosion and rejection of liberal principles.

Third, in presenting the state as *the* source of domestic and international order through its military might, liberals have given up the game in terms of offering strong arguments against imperialism and militarism. This contributes to the persistence of the myth that imperialism and militarism are natural outgrowths of liberalism and capitalism. The prevalence of this belief, the foundations of which can be found in Hobson (1902) and Lenin (1948), was evident in a recent symposium that appeared in *Harper’s* magazine titled “Is Liberalism Worth Saving?” Cornel West, a participant in the forum, argued, among other things, that blindness to militarism and imperialism is part of what he calls the “dark side of liberalism” (Deneen et al. 2023, 25–26).

In what follows, I present five challenges to the widely accepted view of government-provided defense and empire. Then I move on to discuss how we can constructively advance liberalism and peace.

## II. Five Challenges to Empire

### *A. The Economic Calculation Problem*

The military sector is grounded in noncomprehensive planning (see Coyne and Hall 2019). There is private ownership of the means of production, but the sector is not a private competitive market in the normal sense of the term. The reason is that production results from entanglements between a large-scale government bureaucracy and private firms governed by bureaucratic rules. Decisions and outputs do not reflect the vision and preferences of private citizens but rather those of bureaucrats.

The result is an economic system that Robert Higgs (2007) calls “military-economic fascism.” “The essence of fascism,” Higgs (1987) writes, “is nationalistic collectivism, the affirmation that the ‘national interest’ should take precedence over the rights of individuals” (241). He goes on to note that “fascism recognizes people’s desire to possess private property and admires the strength of the profit motive” (241). However, voluntary exchanges are allowed to operate only “insofar as they do not conflict with the national interest as formulated by fascism’s political authorities” (Twight 1975, 14). So, while private ownership of the means of production exists in this system, the administrative state dictates and shapes economic activity in the name of the common good. This is collectivism, not liberalism.

Because military contracting relies on a bureaucratic process in which final outputs are not sold in competitive markets, there is no market price for these products. The economic knowledge that would exist in a competitive market is absent in this mixed economy. This knowledge regarding consumer valuations and the opportunity costs of scarce resources—knowledge that emerges through the market process—is absent in government-controlled markets. This is an issue because government planners still need to discover the highest-valued use of scarce resources, and there is no given and fixed production function for national defense, let alone for the operations of a global empire.

This means there is no way for government planners to gauge the opportunity cost of scarce resources used in military matters. This is not an issue of comparing one military-related output to another;

instead, the issue is the inability of planners to compare military-related outputs to *all* other possible uses for the scarce resources employed.

The operation of the military sector also has broader effects on the very nature of the economic system itself. In replacing the market process with the political process, government planners extend the techniques and organizational forms of the military and war economy—top-down command and control, regimentation, and bureaucratic mandates—to the domestic economy. This has real negative effects on the operation of private markets in the present while also influencing the functioning, structure, and sustainability of free markets through time.

### *B. The Public Choice Challenge*

The members of the military-empire and administrative state must have discretionary power to intervene to address circumstances, both at home and abroad, that cannot be known in advance. The core aspects of the military sector—parasitic extraction from the private economy, production tied to public-private partnerships, and discretion on the part of government planners—mean that the state involves itself in economic and social life, creating significant space for *political capitalism*, which refers to institutionalized entanglements between private and public interests (Holcombe 2013, 2018).

All of public choice's main analytical challenges apply in spades to the military sector and to empire (Coyne 2022, 53–66). Private firms and interest groups engage in rent-seeking. The legislative gatekeepers of the military purse possess a property right over the distribution of resources, incentivizing rent extraction. The revolving door spins fast and furious. The bureaucratic apparatus is so extensive and dense that its true size is unknown (Priest and Arkin 2011). Its members are unable to follow established processes to meet the most basic of accounting standards yet are continually rewarded with bigger budgets.

The military-empire apparatus is also characterized by information asymmetries on steroids because of the aforementioned bureaucratic labyrinth and the overclassification of information, under the guise of national security, which is strategically engaged in to limit oversight and accountability (see Coyne, Goodman, and Hall 2019; Coyne and Hall 2021).

In a liberal democracy, the actions of public officials are supposed to represent and advance the interests of the members of the polity. However, the pathologies of democratic politics mean that there is often a wedge between the actions of the political elite and those whose

interests they purport to represent. There is good reason to believe that these pathologies are magnified in the context of the national-security state, given the industrial organization of the sector, and in the context of empire, given the required scope and scale of government for its operation.

The public goods justification of the state provision of defense and empire is that there is a significant collective action problem that cannot be overcome by private actors. The issue is that if private actors cannot overcome this problem, it is unclear how they can overcome the collective action problem of monitoring and disciplining the expansive powers of a Leviathan strong enough to control the world and to bring the belligerent actors and nations of the world to heel (Coyne 2022, 141).

### *C. The Meta-institutional Challenge*

Proponents of foreign intervention treat perceived problems as technical, engineering problems that can be solved with the right expertise and resources. The result is an unconstrained vision premised on the steadfast belief that the world can be designed and controlled according to the superior reason of high-IQ people.

One issue with the unconstrained vision is that it overlooks the knowledge constraint on the institutions of society. Appreciating this limitation has two important implications. First, we cannot fully grasp the complexities of our own society, let alone in other societies around the globe. Second, we do not know how to go about designing a liberal society, let alone a world, from scratch even under the best-case scenario (Coyne 2008, 2022).

Policy makers typically attempt to circumvent these implications by playing democracy and by playing economic development. They do so by producing observable outputs—elections, ceremonies of pomp and circumstance, and grandiose investment projects—as quickly as possible.

Because foreign interventions are necessarily simplistic relative to the complex systems they seek to shape, negative consequences are unavoidable. And because of the political incentives that policy makers face, there is a tendency to neglect the potential long-term, unseen consequences and, instead, focus narrowly on the short-term, visible aspects of foreign interventions.

Numerous government failures are well known as they pertain to domestic issues. A question to consider is whether one should expect these same government failures to be more or less relevant and severe

in matters of foreign policy. If there is reason to believe these failures are relevant and are likely to be more severe in foreign affairs, then that should give us pause in advocating empire.

And if there is something unique about foreign affairs that allows it to transcend epistemic and incentive constraints, then that too is valuable in highlighting the weakness, if not outright irrelevance, of the insights associated with the Austrian, Virginia, and Bloomington schools of thought. After all, this means that large-scale government economic and social planning can work quite well, at least in matters of foreign affairs; that politics is indeed romantic, at least in matters of national security and empire; and that all this talk of polycentricity and self-governance may perhaps apply to local matters, such as bake sales and trash collection, but not to truly serious matters, which require a monocentric state to rule over us for our own good.

#### *D. The Paternalistic-Authoritarian Challenge*

The idea of liberal empire requires that a group of political elites hold firmly to the belief that they can control billions of people globally to produce order. But who will rise to positions of power to operate this expansive apparatus of control backstopped by force?

Discussing the industrial organization of economic planning, Frank Knight (1938) notes that planning authorities would have to “exercise their power ruthlessly to keep the machinery of organized production and distribution running” and that “they would have to enforce orders ruthlessly and suppress all disputation and argument against policies” (868–69). He concludes that “the probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an extremely tender-hearted person would get the job of whipping-master on a slave plantation” (869).

Hayek (1944) makes a similar argument. Planning requires discretionary control not only over physical resources but also over people. Who, Hayek wonders, is most likely to flourish in such a system? He concludes that “the unscrupulous and uninhibited are likely to be more successful” (135).

Note that this is not a simple and naive bad-person argument but instead a nuanced appreciation of the incentives created by a large-scale planning apparatus that seeks to control other people. The incentives created by top-down planning and control will either initially attract the type of people who behave as Knight and Hayek predict or will reward people for adjusting their behavior to align with what is

required of the imperial apparatus. Those uncomfortable with acting in a paternalistic-authoritarian manner either will not seek leadership positions in the first place or will be replaced by the more ambitious and able.

In foreign affairs, those with the paternalistic-authoritarian mindset have some mix of the following six characteristics identified by Coyne and Hall (2016, 2018) and Coyne (2022). First, they are overconfident in the ability of government interveners to solve complex problems on a global scale. Second, they possess a sense of superiority regarding the relevant knowledge and preferences. Third, they have limited compassion and sympathy toward foreigners or those who dissent from their global blueprint. Fourth, they are comfortable with a wide range of often-repugnant means to impose their ends on others. Fifth, they lack self-awareness in the face of dissent and failure. Finally, they hold fast to the belief that order is defined by state imposition and control.

This mindset is at odds with foundational liberal principles. These principles include the primacy of individual freedom, a deep respect for human dignity and intellectual humility, an appreciation for voluntary choice and association, freedom of expression, economic freedom, toleration, pluralism, cosmopolitanism, spontaneous orders, and a commitment to peaceful solutions to interpersonal conflict (Mises 1996; McCloskey 2019; Boettke 2021). Perhaps liberal empires are not very liberal in practice.

### *E. The Constitutional Challenge*

Protection of the rights and liberties of citizens is seen as a main function of the nightwatchman state and is typically considered as justifying the state's national-security activities. The issue is that in carrying out these activities, the state often violates the rights and freedoms it claims to uphold. The expansion of state powers is especially likely during emergencies as noted by Hayek (1979), who writes that "'emergencies' have always been the pretext on which the safeguards of individual liberty have been eroded—and once they are suspended it is not difficult for anyone who has assumed such emergency powers to see to it that the emergency will persist" (124).

It is often argued that governments need discretion to act efficiently in top-down planning for the common good and to address domestic and global emergencies. As Hayek warns, and as detailed by Higgs (1987) in his work on the ratchet effect, this can lead to permanent increases in state power as governments take on

authoritarian, police-state characteristics to address the emergency. It is for this reason that war is the greatest threat to limits on state power. As Higgs (2015) puts it, the state's power to engage in national-security policy making is a "master key" because it "opens all doors, including the doors that might otherwise obstruct the government's invasion of our most cherished rights to life, liberty, and property" (276).

Expansions in state power, even if benevolent, are not a switch that can be turned on and off as desired. Instead, increases in the scale and scope of government have long-lasting and often-perverse effects on the fabric of societies—both domestic and foreign—that cannot be easily reversed.

### **III. Two Images of Empire and of Ordinary People**

Where do these challenges leave us? Two competing images will aid us in taking stock. On the one hand we have the liberal-empire view grounded in Samuelsonian logic. Munger (2014) invokes the image of a unicorn to capture the often-implicit assumption that government will do exactly what its proponents want it to do. In the context of state-provided military—whether domestic or global through empire—we can extend this logic to a unicorn we might call Rambo-corn.

Rambo-corn effortlessly maximizes global social welfare while spreading liberal values through his rainbow-powered weaponry. Something akin to Rambo-corn seems to be the image many people have in their mind when discussing the necessity of the state provision of defense and empire or dismissing those who question this supposed necessity as being naive and ideological (Coyne 2015). The implicit belief is that government will do what the proponent wants it to do and that alternatives are not worthy of consideration because, in the Samuelsonian perspective, provision via decentralized emergent forces is assumed away from the start.

The five challenges I discussed suggest that this might not be an accurate image of real-world governments. A contrasting image is offered by Francisco Goya in his early nineteenth-century painting "Saturn Devouring His Son." Goya's painting shows a large, hideous creature savagely devouring a smaller human. For my purposes, this image represents an awesome Leviathan that brings order to the world through the exercise of top-down brute force; improvements in social welfare are judged based on whether observed outcomes, which are imposed on others, comport with the preferences of Leviathan. And in the process of imposing order, Leviathan devours liberalism in the name of advancing liberal principles.

Goya's painting captures the point made by Kenneth Boulding (1984), who argues that

there is only one conflict that makes any difference to the future. This is the conflict between the human race itself and its national defense organizations which threaten to destroy it. Under these circumstances an economic approach to national defense (a little more of this, a little less of that—some concentration of defensive weaponry, arms control—a little balance here, a little imbalance there) can only be described as trash. It is wholly irrelevant to the future of the human race. Any realistic appraisal of the world situation would come to the conclusion that the national state, no matter what it is or how virtuous it is, should not be defended, because its defense can only lead to the destruction of us all. (107)

Boulding's argument is that we are now in a world where nation-states provide defense in name only. Defense now means offense that imposes significant costs on innocent human beings at home and abroad. Moreover, numerous governments possess weapons of mass destruction that threaten the very existence of the people they purport to protect. As Boulding notes, escaping this situation is not a matter of making marginal changes to the status quo—somewhat fewer bombs or a bit less military spending—but making wholesale changes to the way we conceptualize and operationalize peace and security.

Even if you find Boulding's sentiment overly strong, he offers us an invitation to consider an alternative view of peace that moves away from the dominant nation-state-centric, peace-through-military-strength view. This alternative view finds its grounding in the science of peace. The importance of a science of peace can be found in Adam Smith, who, in an often-quoted passage from his lectures, notes that "little else is required to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice; all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things" (quoted in Cannan 1976, xl).

Here Smith notes that peace is central to social cooperation and prosperity. Many people read this quote as showing Smith delineating the foundational roles of the state in society. In my view, this reading of Smith is too narrow and state-centric. To understand why, let me offer a sixth challenge to the dominant view of state-provided defense and empire, what I call the individual-creativity challenge. To understand this challenge, consider the following quotes.

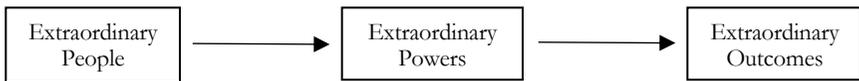
F. A. Hayek (1960) highlights the importance of the "creative powers of a free society" (22): "Most of the advantages of social life,

especially in its more advanced forms which we call ‘civilization,’ rest on the fact that the individual benefits from more knowledge than he is aware of” (22). James Buchanan and Viktor Vanberg (1991) note that “the emphasis on choice as an originating force, the notion of creativeness of the human mind, and the outlook on history as an open-ended, evolving process are intimately interconnected aspects” (172) are the foundation of markets and human society. Julian Simon (2002) reminds us that “day after day I comfortably trust my life to people who get low scores on IQ tests . . . On the other hand, I note how much destruction, confusion, and bad policy has been wrought by people with high IQs” (340). Finally, Elinor Ostrom (2005) emphasizes “the immense creativity of individuals coming from all stations of life living in all parts of the world. Their creativity and entrepreneurship are frequently unrecognized” (223).

What each of these scholars points out is that ordinary people possess the ability to exercise their creativity to improve both their own situation and society. This simple point is foundational to the science of peace. Next, consider two views of society and the people in it.

The first illustrates the standard view (see figure 1).

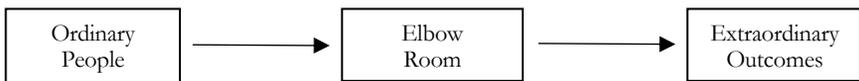
**Figure 1. The standard view**



From this perspective, extraordinary outcomes require extraordinary people—enlightened experts—who are given extraordinary power to rule over ordinary people. This framing is one of vertical relationships, in which the elite rule over the ordinary people because the latter are ordinary and inferior relative to the superior members of society.

The second represents an alternative view that captures the spirit of the four quotes (see figure 2).

**Figure 2. An alternative view**



This framing is one of horizontal relationships. From this perspective ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things, including peaceful navigation of conflict situations, if given the space to flex their creative muscles.

The first view, the standard view associated with national defense and empire, is top-down and authoritarian-paternalistic. It is faux, jackboot liberalism. It bastardizes the language and spirit of liberalism by privileging and elevating monocentric state force masked in the rhetoric of individual liberty, freedom, and self-determination. It is the embodiment of “cryptoimperialism,” which “is a theory for creating cryptoempires, hidden empires in which the control apparatus is concealed by a veil of secrecy behind rhetoric about ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’” (Ostrom 1999, 167). Moreover, it is unscientific in that it rules out an entire class of phenomena by assumption—the possibility of ordinary people figuring out how to engage in peaceful cooperation and provide security, both domestically and internationally, without state oversight and control.

The alternative framing is bottom up and appreciates the core tenets of liberalism. It also introduces symmetry into the analysis. Rather than assuming, a priori, that ordinary people are incapable, it subjects a full range of possibilities to intellectual inquiry. *This* is the science of peace. It is the systematic study of the ability of people to peacefully navigate complex social challenges, including situations of conflict, under different institutional arrangements.

The alternative view recognizes that conflict and potential coercion are parts of life. And while the answer to coercion may be Leviathan, the alternative view does not treat that outcome as a *fait accompli* as in the standard view. The alternative view appreciates that sharpening the teeth of the state in the name of combating coercion may do just the opposite, by elevating coercion to the primary means of human relations. Moreover, it is open to the possibility that the answer to coercion may be found in private people and in their communities. In this regard it fully appreciates Elinor Ostrom’s (1998) insight that “what the research on social dilemmas demonstrates is a world of *possibility* not *necessity*” (16; italics in original).

#### **IV. The Science of Peace**

Peace entails not the absence of conflict but instead the ability of parties to find nonviolent ways to resolve conflict. The science of peace is defined by the following five features.

First, peace is possible between ordinary individuals. Kenneth Boulding (1978) proposes Boulding’s First Law, which holds that “anything that exists must be possible” (93). We observe peace between private individuals, both within and across societies, without state involvement. Peace is therefore possible. This is important

because many associate peace with top-down state control per the standard view (see figure 1).

The second feature of the science of peace is methodological individualism. The science of peace does not deny the existence of nation-states, but it also does not privilege them as the end-all and be-all. For instance, talking about conflict and peace between “the US” and “China” in aggregated nation-state terms ignores the approximately 1.7 billion individual people who live in these geographic spaces and how they are part of a diverse set of overlapping peace systems that operate domestically and internationally.

Third, peace is not a single, homogenous state of affairs. Instead, there are many diverse cultures of peace that include heterogeneous components for navigating conflict situations. From this perspective it is accurate to think of cultures of peace that appreciate the embeddedness of people in a variety of contexts, organizational forms, and relationships with others (Boulding 2000).

Fourth, cultures of peace are not given and static but are part of an ongoing discovery process. Creative and imperfect people engage in ongoing experimentation with and learning of what works and what does not work. There will be failures, and in some instances violence will occur. But breakdowns in peace offer an opportunity for discovering new and better ways of living together.

Finally, the ideas people hold and the institutions they act within influence the type of peace that is possible and the type of peace that emerges. This includes what behaviors are considered acceptable or unacceptable in our interactions with other people. It also includes beliefs about what is possible.

For example, if it is widely believed that ordinary people cannot generate peaceful order without the state, and if people are raised to believe this, then that possibility will be viewed as infeasible from the start. People will be “afraid to be free,” as James Buchanan (2005) puts it, because their frame of reference will be that they are incapable of living freely and must bow to their state masters, who are responsible for their life, liberty, and well-being. Rather than envisioning peace as a result of moral perfection or central command and control, the science of peace studies how ideas and institutions shape how real, imperfect, fallible human beings can, and do, navigate a wide variety of conflict situations to cooperate peacefully with one another.

## V. Conclusion: Visions of Peace

In “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” Hayek (1949) discusses the need for a radical liberal vision, which might be utopian today but which serves as a goal to work toward: “What we lack is a liberal Utopia . . . a truly liberal radicalism . . . which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible. We need intellectual leaders who are willing to work for an ideal, however small may be the prospects of its early realization. Free trade and freedom of opportunity are ideals which still may arouse the imaginations of large numbers, but a mere ‘reasonable freedom of trade’ or a mere ‘relaxation of controls’ is neither intellectually respectable nor likely to inspire any enthusiasm” (432).

Visions of the world matter as Joseph Schumpeter (1997) argues in *History of Economic Analysis*. For Schumpeter, a *vision* refers to a pre-analytic cognitive act that provides the raw material on which one engages in scientific analysis (41–42). Our vision influences the questions we ask and can be a source of creativity in our intellectual endeavors including scholarship and teaching. We then subject these questions to careful study and analysis using the tools of our respective disciplines.

The challenge Hayek (1949) poses is a big one: the liberal project requires committed intellectual leaders who are willing to work for an ideal that seems unattainable. Further magnifying the challenge is the vision held by many people that presumes that nation-states and empires are the only arrangements compatible with large-scale, complex social and economic orders. What is required, then, is a broadening of our vision to include the possibility of other possible forms of organization and to work for the ideal, as Hayek puts it.

This is not easy, because many people see empire and militarism as a more legitimate and serious response to the challenges of the world, a response they perceive as offering certainty in contrast to nonviolent, nonstate options, which are viewed as naive, soft, and wishful. In practice, however, militarism and empire come with absolutely no guarantee of beneficial and certain outcomes. In fact, we have reason to believe just the opposite for the reasons I discussed above.

In discussing the possibility of peace, Kenneth Boulding (1978) notes that hope rests on our ability to imagine futures previously unimagined and to engage in a learning process of exploring and studying these possibilities. Imagining alternatives to empire offers a path to a potential stable peace that is not reliant on top-down coercion. These alternatives do not offer the certainty of peace, but

they do offer the possibility of a stable peace grounded in liberal values. This stands in sharp contrast to the false hope of liberal empire, which necessarily discards liberal values from the start in the name of protecting and advancing those very values.

Taking seriously the possibility that we can achieve a world where people can find ways to engage in peaceful social cooperation absent top-down control and violence is a vision that I believe is worthy of deep and careful study. If we are unwilling to push the boundaries of the liberal project to consider alternatives to nation-states, empires, and militarism, we are missing an enormous opportunity in our shared pursuit of human liberation, freedom, and flourishing.

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