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The politics and economics of global interventionism

A Review Essay of *Opposing the Crusader State*, Robert Higgs and Carl P. Close (eds.)

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1 Introduction

The editors of *Opposing the Crusader State* indicate that the volume is intended to contribute to a more peaceful and prosperous world by reconsidering "current approaches to international security and economic development" (ix). The fourteen chapters (not including the Introduction authored by the editors) critically examine U.S. foreign policy with a particular emphasis on the relevance of nonintervention-ism as an alternative to current policy. This book is not intended to be a specific contribution to Austrian economics. That said, Austrian economists will find this volume intriguing because they have long engaged in the economic and historical analysis of foreign policy and global interventionism. In light of the United States' long history of global interventionism, the insights of this volume and the writings of Austrian economists on these issues are of the utmost contemporary importance.

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, I aim to provide the reader with an overview of the main contents of *Opposing the Crusader State*. Second, I discuss some of the central themes in the writings of Ludwig von Mises, F.A. Hayek and Murray Rothbard on the topics of U.S. foreign policy, global interventionism, and the alternative of noninterventionism. In doing so, I hope to show how elements of the insights of the authors in *Opposing the Crusader State* can be found in the work of these scholars. Although not explicitly intended to be a contribution to Austrian economics, many of the papers in the volume under review complement and expand on the earlier writings of Austrian economists.

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2 The old right and American foreign policy

In *The Betrayal of the American Right*, Murray Rothbard (2007) traces the historical roots of the 'Old Right.'[1] The Old Right refers to American Conservatives, mostly Republicans although some Democrats as well, who opposed Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program and also held a non-interventionist position regarding U.S. entry into World War II. Rothbard's historical analysis covers the period 1910 through 1970.

Rothbard traces the roots of the Old Right thinking grounded in the works of 'individualists' such as Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and William Lloyd Garrison. He also highlights the political opposition to World War I including Senator Robert LaFollette, Senator William Borah and Senator James Reed. Finally, Rothbard emphasizes the important role played by journalists including Albert Jay Nock and H.L. Mencken. Both were able to reach large numbers of readers with their message regarding the significant benefits of individualism and liberty. Today, most discussions of the history of the American conservative movement highlight thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, and William F. Buckley.[2] One the important insights of Rothbard's analysis is that the history of the conservative movement is much broader than most modern treatments recognize. Moreover, Rothbard highlights just how different the modern day American conservative movement is from its early origins.

After laying the foundations of the Old Right, Rothbard moves on to discuss how the actual movement emerged and the impact that it had on American politics. The Old Right came into its own with the rise of Roosevelt's welfare–warfare state. Led by Senator Robert Taft, Congressman Howard Buffett, Congressman George Bender, and Congressman H. R. Gross, the Old Right was skeptical of the massive government programs under the New Deal and of increased U.S. global intervention leading up to World War II. This opposition remained in place after the war and was sharply critical of the Marshall Plan, as well as NATO and other attempts to manipulate global politics.

In tracing the fall of the Old Right, Rothbard identifies a variety of forces that conspired to erode the influence of the movement in American politics. For example, he details how many conservatives were willing to forgo the message of the Old Right for the duration of the ongoing battle against communism. Once surrendered, most aspects of the Old Right were never recovered.

The first part of *Opposing the Crusader State* nicely complements *The Betrayal of the American Right*. It contains several chapters focusing on the historical foreign policy of the United States with specific focus on the tradition of nonintervention-ism. Like Rothbard, Sheldon Richman focuses on the Old Right and its opposition to Roosevelt's New Deal. Richman highlights how the array of participants in the Old Right—academics, politicians, journalists, etc.—emphasized the follies of govern-ment interventionism both domestically and internationally.

[1] Rothbard originally wrote the manuscript in the 1970s. It was updated in the 1990s before his death, but it did not appear in print until 2007.

[2] One important exception is Kauffman (2008).

Joseph Stromberg traces the tradition of noninterventionism to America's earliest days and emphasizes that this position "...is *the* essential American perspective on foreign affairs" (2007: 3, italics original). Due to factors such as geographic isolation from the rest of the world, as well as a focus on inward expansion, nonintervention was America's dominant foreign policy. Stromberg argues that early foreign interventions—the Spanish−American War and World War I—generated a strong backlash from the American public and many leaders. According to Stromberg, it was America's involvement in World War II that led to an increase in global interventions.

Michael Hayes traces the foreign policy vision of Robert Taft. Taft fully realized the costs—both the monetary costs, as well as the costs in terms of the erosion of American economic, political and social institutions—of war. Given these costs, Taft held that the sole purpose of American foreign policy was to protect American institutions and the liberty and peace that they created.

Unfortunately, most American citizens and politicians are either unaware of the Old Right, or have forgotten its central message of noninterventionism in the realm of foreign affairs. The few who do emphasize the potential benefits of non-interventionism are typically dismissed as 'isolationists.' However, as Hayes points out in his chapter on Taft, "Labeling opponents of administrative policies as 'isolationists' implied that they were naïve, like ostriches with their heads buried in the sand, nostalgic for an earlier era in which the United States could hide behind the safety of two oceans and avoid involvement in international affairs" (2007: 106). Not only does the label of 'isolationist' dismiss the potential benefits of noninterventionism out of hand, but it also mischaracterizes the position. Instead of isolating America from others, the policy of global nonintervention calls for economic and social interaction with individuals from around the world. As discussed below in more detail, advocates of global noninterventionism recognize the importance of international trade for not only economic development, but also for global peace.

From this standpoint, the debate about American foreign policy is not a matter of isolationism versus noninterventionism, but rather a debate about the means—i.e., the type of engagement with others—for achieving the desired ends. Those adopting a default position of global noninterventionism emphasize the potential economic and cultural benefits of offering the possibility of exchange with others around the globe. On the flipside, those advocating active global interventionism emphasize the potential benefits of 'hard power' entailing the use of force—military force, monetary payments, and conditionality—to achieve the desired ends. Which is a more effective means is an empirical issue.

3 Reconstruction and nation building

Given the shift in U.S. foreign policy toward increased global interventionism, a central question is whether these interventions can be successful in achieving their desired end. Whether truthful or not, most foreign interventions are at least partially justified by politicians and policymakers on the grounds of spreading liberal values (see Meernik 1996). It makes sense that those advocating foreign interventions

would employ this justification—who would not want to spread democracy, capitalism and the values of peace, liberty, and freedom? However, simply wishing something to be so does not make it so. What is needed is a thorough review of the ability of policymakers to achieve the desired ends. To the extent that policymakers speak the truth when they state that the goal of foreign interventions is to spread liberal institutions and values, they should be judged by success or failure against that benchmark. To the extent that policymakers lie about their motives and desired ends, citizens should be even more skeptical of any proposed global intervention because their leaders are actively distorting the truth regarding their motives and goals.

Assuming that policymakers actually want to achieve the stated goal of spreading liberal values and institutions, how have they performed historically? This is the question asked by James Payne in his chapter "Does Nation Building Work?" Payne compiles a list of U.S. and British occupations where at least one of the primary goals was a "deliberate effort to establish a democracy" (2007: 141). After establishing his sample of cases, Payne reviews the histories of each country following the occupation to see whether durable democratic institutions were established. The results are not promising. He finds that efforts to establish lasting democratic institutions were successful 27% of the time. This indicates that for every success there were three failures.

Why have efforts to export democracy failed so dismally? Payne offers some insight into this question in two other chapters. In considering the social and cultural conditions necessary for lasting liberal democracy, Payne emphasizes that the central minimum requirement is "a restraint in the use of violence in domestic political affairs" (2007: 128). On the face of it, this seems straightforward. Where various political groups are willing to use force to overthrow other groups, democracy cannot sustain and continued conflict will be the norm. According to Payne, it is not violence in general that is the problem, but rather "...some leaders' deliberate use of these acts of violence as tools in their struggle against others" (2007: 129).

After discussing the conditions for sustainable democracy, Payne provides a case study of the U.S. occupation of Germany following World War II. In doing so, he analyzes whether the United States 'created' democracy in Germany. The answer is a resounding 'No.' Payne details how many U.S. policies actually slowed the reconstruction of Germany. For example, economic controls on production and exchange stifled economic recovery.[3] Likewise, efforts to centrally plan political arrangements "harassed and delayed the formation of political parties" (2007: 163). Making the connection with his earlier chapter, Payne concludes that Germany, long before World War II, possessed mechanisms of nonviolent politics. The period of Nazi rule was a shock to the existing arrangement, but it not destroy the mechanisms of peaceful coordination. Following the collapse of Hitler's regime, the country reverted to its peaceful past. Given this, the impact of occupiers was marginal at best.

Given the many failures of foreign occupiers to 'export democracy,' what can be done to reconstruct countries following conflict? In a series of essays written in the 1940s, Ludwig von Mises provides insight into this question. Following his arrival

[3] For a related analysis of the pitfalls of the Marshall Plan, see Horwitz 1994.

in the United States in 1940, Mises (2000a, b, c, d) wrote several papers on the problem of reconstruction—both domestic and international—following World War II.

At the domestic level, Mises emphasized the role of the entrepreneur in reconstructing war-torn countries. Mises argued that the central planning of domestic or international governments would not reconstruct these countries. Instead, he emphasized that success in reconstruction would result from the adoption of institutions that encouraged productive entrepreneurship. Writing on the reconstruction of Europe, Mises notes that, "This reconstruction cannot be undertaken from without, it must come from within. It is not simply a matter of economic technique, still less of engineering;…It can succeed only on the basis of a return to capitalism..." (2000b: 29). He goes on to note that, "The entrepreneurs will have to rebuild what the governments and the politicians have destroyed" (2000b: 30). Central to this process was the abolition of all controls on capital markets, property, prices, and the flow of goods and labor. Mises emphasized that entrepreneurs must be free to reallocate resources, which would ultimately result in increased productivity. Mises warned that Europe was too poor—due to the destruction and exhaustion of resources utilized in the war effort—to afford the continued misallocation of resources. The entrepreneur was the main mechanism to ensure that this misallocation was corrected.

At the international level, Mises emphasized the importance of abandoning the notion of 'economic nationalism.' One method for achieving lasting peace, according to Mises, "...is the maintenance of free trade, the abolition of government interference with business, the abandonment of economic nationalism..." (2000a: 17). Mises recognized that a central means of sustaining peace was through economic ties. However, when a country's policies were guided by economic nationalism, it typically resulted in privileges and favors for a distinct few at the expense of citizens. As Mises notes, "Nationalism is a policy of discrimination against foreigners. It is the corollary of a domestic policy of government interference with business" (2000a: 19). This is because political favoritism is typically negative or zero sum in that someone gains at someone else's expense, while economic dealings are typically positive sum, in that both parties to the transaction gain. It was Mises' contention that under a system of international free trade, it would be extremely difficult for a small minority to politically manipulate the system in their favor.

Mises' policy recommendations are still as relevant today as they were when they were first written. At the domestic level, Coyne (2008) highlights how reconstruction efforts are typically grounded in broad central plans focusing on controllable variables—troop levels, elections, monetary aid, etc. This neglects not only the uncontrollable variables—culture, history, organizational forms, etc.—but the more fundamental fact that the very economic, political and social institutions underpinning what Hayek (1991) called "the extended order" cannot be centrally planned.

In *Nation State, and Economy* (1919: 7–80) and *Liberalism* (1927: 105–154), Mises addresses the issues of 'nationality' and 'nationalism' in detail. Specifically, he develops the 'liberal nationality principle,' grounded in the right of self-determination. According to Mises, "No people and no part of a people shall be held against its will in a political association that it does not want" (1919: 27). For Mises, the liberal nationality principle demanded self-determination and autonomy. It also was inherently peaceful because it forbids foreign and domestic control against the

will of individuals. Moreover, the liberal nationality principle would lead to cosmopolitan unity through voluntary ties grounded in social and economic interaction (Mises 1919: 29). However, as Mises notes (1927: 109), the nationality principle has been distorted to imply 'national self-determination' leading to a perverse form of nationalism. This distortion of the nationality principle has actually increased tensions and conflicts because it assumes that individuals in the same ethno-linguistic groups should be forced to belong to the same nation-state even if this is not what they desire.

Unfortunately, the insights of Mises and the contributors to *Opposing the Crusader State* fail to be appreciated and incorporated into U.S. foreign policy. Consider, for example, the ongoing U.S. efforts to reconstruct Afghanistan and Iraq. In both cases, emphasis is placed on rebuilding the nation-state in a top-down manner instead of focusing on the desires and wants of individuals. This has been the main source of inter-group conflict as various ethnic and religious group seek control. Of course, many of the problems in these countries today exist because of previous foreign interventions that forced political, social, and economic institutions on unwilling participants (see for example Rubin 2002).

4 Liberal democracy

What is the connection between liberal democracy and peace? This remains a central question for scholars across the social sciences (see Owen 2005). Politicians often appeal to the 'democratic peace theory' to justify the use of foreign intervention with the claim that the spread of democracy will lead to peace. The third section of *Opposing the Crusader State* consists of several chapters covering both sides of the ongoing debate over the idea that democracies do not go to war with each other. The main contributors are Ted Galen Carpenter, who is critical of the democratic peace theory, and R.J. Rummel, a supporter of the theory.

Carpenter is critical of the book by Rummel (1997), *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence*, which provides a systematic defense of the democratic peace theory. Specifically, Carpenter argues that Rummel fails to consider factors other than democracy that may contribute to peace. For example, Carpenter cites research by Layne (1994) examining the 'near collisions' between democracy. These conflicts were avoided, according to Layne, because of strategic considerations that had nothing to do with the notion of fighting another democracy. Carpenter also takes Rummel to task for ignoring 'hard cases' resulting in "...embarrassing overstatements clearly at odds with the evidence" (2007: 191).

A subsequent chapter by Rummel addresses several of the critiques raised by Carpenter. In his response, Rummel contends that his analysis addresses several 'hard cases' and that several of Carpenter's counter examples are irrelevant because the conflicting polities were not actually democracies. In his rejoinder to Rummel, Carpenter argues that Rummel's lack of a clear definition of democracy allows him to explain away potential cases that run counter to the democratic peace theory. Further, Carpenter contends that the fact that Rummel does not include covert operations and proxy wars carried out by democracies against other democracies ignores an important aspect of conflict.

In a chapter that complements the debate between Carpenter and Rummel, Stephen Carson offers a 'property-rights theory of mass murder.' In addition to arguing that democracies do not go to war with other democracies, a central argument in Rummel (1997) is that democracy is the best means of preventing democide—mass murder of citizens by their government. In contrast to Rummel's focus on regime type, Carson's model places emphasize on property rights. He predicts that democide is more likely and intense where property rights are weaker. The underlying logic is that as property rights become increasingly weaker, citizens lack resources to defend themselves against government violence. Carson concludes that the solution to democide is the strengthening of property rights and not necessarily the spread of democracy. As Carson indicates, in many cases democracy can actually undermine property rights making democide *more* likely.

Mises (1919, 1927) makes the argument that liberal democracy is the best political system for maintaining peace because it serves as an effective check on elected officials. Specifically, he notes that "...a country can enjoy domestic peace only when a democratic constitution provides the guarantee that the adjustment of the government to the will of the citizens can take place without friction" (1927: 108). Mises insight highlights an important, but overlooked point: what matters is not democracy, but *liberal* democracy. Political institutions must be designed so that citizens have the ability to register their preferences through voting. Further, those preferences must be respected by those currently in power even if it means they lose their privileged position.

More recently, Huntington (1992) and Zakaria (2004) emphasize that democracy by itself does not guarantee 'good' outcomes. Democratically elected governments can be, and often are, corrupt and illiberal. What is important is liberal democracy, which entails credible constraints on individuals elected through the democratic process. Recent empirical research by Mansfield and Snyder (2005) indicates that while it is true that 'mature' democracies are less likely to engage in conflict, 'immature' democracies are *more* likely to engage in conflict when compared to autocracies. The reasoning behind this logic is as follows: individuals vying for political positions in democratizing countries tend to appeal to hard-line nationalism in order to gain support, while separating themselves from both competitors within the country and foreigners as well. In the absence of fully developed checks to prevent conflict, war is a likely outcome. This finding supports the aforementioned analysis by Stephen Carson, which emphasizes that democracy, absent other protections of property, does not guarantee good outcomes.

In sum, there are two overarching issues involved in foreign interventions attempting to 'export democracy.' First is the desirability of democracy as a system of political organization. The debate over the democratic peace is fundamentally a debate over one potential benefit of democracy. The second issue deals with the ability of foreign occupiers and policymakers to effectively export the foundations of liberal democracy where they are either weak or nonexistent. Assuming that democracy is a desirable end, we need to understand whether governments possess the means to achieve that end. As the discussion in the previous section indicated, success in this regard has been elusive.

Coyne (2008) argues that while we know 'what' a liberal democracy looks like, we know much less about 'how' to get such institutions where they do not already

exist. Hayek (1979: 108) captured the essence of this point when he highlighted the importance of traditions and experiences, "which in more fortunate countries have made constitutions work which did not explicitly state all that they presupposed, or which did not even exist in written form." Hayek's point is that liberal democratic institutions presuppose a tacit understanding of certain core principles. Where these principles already exist, the job of foreign occupiers will be minimal, as in the case of Germany (see the Payne essay discussed in the previous section). However, where these principles are absent, occupiers will have to start from scratch. It is critical to realize that our knowledge of how to exogenously build the very foundations of a liberal society is severely limited, if not completely nonexistent.

5 The importance of free trade for peace

The final part of *Opposing the Crusader State* offers an alternative to global intervention for achieving sustainable global peace. The authors focus on the role of free trade as a mechanism of interaction, integration and institutional change.

Edward Stringham provides an overview of the thought of the nineteenth-century British parliamentarian Richard Cobden. The standard view during Cobden's time, a view still very popular today, was that a strong military was necessary for trade. This line of reasoning held that an active military was necessary not only to protect international traders, but also to create new trading opportunities abroad. In contrast to the view that markets and military spending were complements, Cobden argued that they were substitutes. Cobden realized that spending on military opened the possibility of mercantilism—a system of corporate welfare and protections in the name of nationalism. He believed that specific industries would lobby and attempt to manipulate the political system to utilize military power to protect their vested interests at the expense of international trade and integration. The view that markets and the military are complements neglects the possibility that the latter can be used to stifle the former. Cobden concluded that a policy emphasizing free trade, and not increased military spending, would limit the possibility of political manipulation while also yielding significant economic benefits to citizens.

In addition to the economic benefits of free trade, Cobden also emphasized that trade was a means of spreading ideas, values and institutional changes for the better. According to Cobden (quoted in Stringham 2007: 234–5):

> England...has...united for ever two remote hemispheres in the bonds of peace, by placing Europe and America in absolute and inextricable dependence on each other; England's industrious classes...are at the moment influencing the civilization of the whole world, by stimulating the labour, exciting the curiosity, and promoting the taste for refinement of barbarous communities, and, above all, by acquiring the teachings to surrounding nations the beneficent attachment to peace."

The cultural benefits of trade have been emphasized more recently by Cowen (2002), Friedman (2005), and McCloskey (2006). Like Cobden, these authors emphasize how free trade and economic interaction can yield significant non-

economic benefits including an increased menu of cultural choices, virtue, respect, and diversity.

The emphasis on the economic and non-economic benefits of free trade is further developed in the contribution by Erich Weede. Weede's thesis is straightforward yet powerful— "Capitalism and economic freedom promote peace" (2007: 237). He identifies several potential mechanisms which contribute to this desirable outcome. First, conflict between trading partners is costly in terms of foregone economic benefits through repeated dealings. This tends to provide a strong disincentive for war. Second, as previously mentioned, trade may cultivate certain values—respect, diversity, trust, reciprocation, etc.—underpinning peace and cooperation. Finally, trade promotes prosperity, which fosters democracy resulting in the democratic peace theory. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and may operate simultaneously. Weede advocates adopting policies that open domestic and international markets (e.g., removing price controls, tariffs, etc.), secure property rights, enhance the enforcement of contracts, and ensure the existence of the rule of law.

The contributions by Stringham and Weede clearly align with Mises' vision of foreign policy (see Mises 1927: 130–136). Mises' argument for free trade was not an ideological one. Instead, it was grounded in economic theory, and specifically in the notion of comparative advantage. Mises (1927: 132) notes that "In the absence of interference on the part of governments, the international division of labor will, of itself, result in every country's finding its place in the world economy, no matter how its conditions of production compare with those of other countries." In line with Weede's capitalist peace theory, Mises contends that the result of international free trade will be integration and a lasting global peace.

In practice, free trade is the exception while protectionism and barriers to international trade are the norm. Protectionist trade policies, largely driven by special interests, remain in place despite the fact that they are still a major barrier to helping the poorest people in the world improve their lot. For example, Cline (2004) estimates that worldwide free trade could help five hundred million people escape poverty while simultaneously injecting $200 billion annually into developing nations. Many developed countries signal a commitment to free trade through a willingness to negotiate free trade agreements. In theory, these agreements reduce the trade barriers between countries. However, Bhagwati (2008) highlights how free trade agreements are often subject to discriminatory practices and manipulation by special interest groups resulting in the agreements actually undermining free trade.

In many cases, the US, and other developed nations, utilize sanctions and other trade policies to attempt to 'punish' the governments of certain target countries. The evidence regarding the effectiveness of sanctions is mixed (see Hufbauer et al. 1990; Pape 1997). One issue that must be considered is that, in many cases, sanctions punish ordinary citizens by limiting the exchange of goods. These costs are magnified by the fact that these citizens tend to live under illiberal governments, hence the need for sanctions in the first place.

In response to these issues, Coyne (2008) argues in favor of unilateral free trade on the part of the United States. By unilaterally reducing barriers, many of the problems associated with free trade agreements would be solved. Further, this would offer some of the world's poorest citizens, access to developed U.S. markets that

exist in the United States. Finally, such a policy on the part of the United States would signal a true commitment to global peace and self-determination along the lines of Mises's nationality principle.

6 Concluding remarks

Opposing the Crusader State is an important volume. It provides numerous insights regarding the history of U.S. foreign policy, as well as the limitations on what foreign policy can achieve. The volume also offers bold alternatives to the current policy of global interventionism. Scholars and policymakers from a variety of disciplines will find the contributions of value. Austrian economists will find the volume of interest, especially when considered in the context of earlier writings by Mises, Rothbard, and Hayek.

Much research remains to be done on U.S. foreign policy and global interventions. For example, what is the best strategy toward weak and failed states? What policies should developed countries adopt to deal with 'the bottom billion' (see Collier 2007)? A growing literature calls for the United States to adopt its role as a global empire (see Lal 2004; Ferguson 2005). What are the costs and benefits of an American empire? A related literature calls for developed countries to provide 'global public goods' (see Kaul et al. 1999, 2003). What are the costs and potential 'global bads' associated with these interventions? These are just some of the open issues in the realm of international relations and development. This volume provides an excellent starting point for addressing these and other related issues.

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