

A Different War-Is-Good-for-Us Argument

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Global Research, October 17, 2014

[World Beyond War](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

It seems like we just got through [dealing with the argument](#) that war is good for us because it brings peace. And along comes a very different twist, combined with some interesting insights. Here's a [blog post](#) by Joshua Holland on Bill Moyers' website.

“War has long been seen as an endeavor urged on by the elites who stood the most to gain from conflict – whether to protect overseas assets, create more favorable conditions for international trade or by selling materiel for the conflict – and paid for with the blood of the poor, the cannon fodder who serve their country but have little direct stake in the outcome.

“. . . MIT political scientist Jonathan Caverley, author of [Democratic Militarism Voting, Wealth, and War](#), and himself a US Navy veteran, argues that increasingly high-tech militaries, with all-volunteer armies that sustain fewer casualties in smaller conflicts, combine with rising economic inequality to create perverse incentives that turn the conventional view of war on its head. . .

“Joshua Holland: Your research leads to a somewhat counterintuitive conclusion. Can you give me your thesis in a nutshell?”

“Jonathan Caverley: My argument is that in a heavily industrialized democracy like the United States, we have developed a very capital intensive form of warfare. We no longer send millions of combat troops overseas – or see massive numbers of casualties coming home. Once you start going to war with lots of airplanes, satellites, communications – and a few very highly trained special operations forces – going to war becomes a check writing exercise rather than a social mobilization. And once you turn war into a check writing exercise, the incentives for and against going to war change.

“You can think of it as a redistribution exercise, where people who have less income generally pay a smaller share of the cost of war. This is especially important at the federal level. In the United States, the federal government tends to be funded largely from the top 20 percent. Most of the federal government, I'd say 60 percent, maybe even 65 percent, is financed by the wealthy.

“For most people, war now costs very little in terms of both blood and treasure. And it has a redistributive effect.

“So my methodology is pretty simple. If you think that your contribution to conflict will be minimal, and see potential benefits, then you should see an increased demand for defense spending and increased hawkishness in your foreign policy views, based on your income. And my study of Israeli public opinion found that the less wealthy a person was, the more aggressive they were in using the military.”

Presumably Caverley would acknowledge that U.S. wars tend to be one-sided slaughters of people living in poor nations, and that some fraction of people in the United States are aware of that fact and oppose wars because of it. Presumably he is also aware that U.S. troops still die in U.S. wars and are still drawn disproportionately from the poor. Presumably he is also aware (and presumably he makes all of this clear in his book, which I have not read) that war remains extremely profitable for an extremely elite group at the top of the U.S. economy. Weapons stocks are at record heights right now. A financial advisor on NPR yesterday was recommending investing in weapons. War spending, in fact, takes public money and spends it in a way that very disproportionately benefits the extremely wealthy. And while public dollars are progressively raised, they are far less progressively raised than in the past. War-preparations spending is in fact part of what drives the inequality that Caverley says drives low-income support for wars. What Caverley means by his claim that war is (downwardly) redistributive is made a bit clearer further on in the interview:

“Holland: In the study you point out that most social scientists don’t see military spending as having a redistributive effect. I didn’t understand that. What some call “military Keynesianism” is a concept that’s been around for a long time. We located a ton of military investments in the Southern states, not only for defense purposes, but also as a means of regional economic development. Why don’t people see this as a massive redistribution program?”

“Caverley: Well, I agree with that construction. If you watch any congressional campaign or you look at any representative’s communication with his or her constituents, you will see that they talk about getting their fair share of defense spending.

“But the larger point is that even if you don’t think about defense spending as a redistributive process, it is a classic example of the kind of public goods that a state provides. Everyone benefits from defense of the state – it’s not just rich people. And so national defense is probably one of the places you’re most likely to see redistributive politics, because if you’re not paying too much for it, you’re going to ask for more of it.”

So, at least part of the idea seems to be that wealth is being moved from wealthy geographical sections of the United States to poorer ones. There is some truth to that. But the [economics](#) is quite clear that, as a whole, military spending produces fewer jobs and worse paying jobs, and has less overall economic benefit, than education spending, infrastructure spending, or various other types of public spending, or even tax cuts for working people — which are by definition downwardly redistributive as well. Now, military spending can drain an economy and be perceived as boosting an economy, and the perception is what determines support for militarism. Similarly, routine “normal” military spending can carry on at a pace of over 10-times specific war spending, and the general perception on all sides of U.S. politics can be that it is the wars that cost large amounts of money. But we should acknowledge the reality even when discussing the impacts of the perception.

And then there’s the notion that militarism benefits everyone, which conflicts with the reality that war [endangers](#) the nations that wage it, that “defense” through wars is in fact counter-productive. This, too, should be acknowledged. And perhaps — though I doubt it — that acknowledgement is made in the book.

Polls show generally diminishing support for wars except in particular moments of intense propaganda. If in those moments it can be shown that low-income U.S.ians are carrying a larger load of war support, that should indeed be examined — but without assuming that war supporters have good reason for giving their support. Indeed, Caverley offers some additional reasons why they might be misguided:

“Holland: Let me ask you about a rival explanation for why poor people might be more supportive of military action. In the paper, you mention the idea that less wealthy citizens may be more prone to buy into what you call the “myths of empire.” Can you unpack that?

“Caverley: In order for us to go to war, we have to demonize the other side. It’s not a trivial thing for one group of people to advocate killing another group of people, no matter how callous you think humanity might be. So there is typically a lot of threat inflation and threat construction, and that just goes with the territory of war.

“So in my business, some people think that the problem is that elites get together and, for selfish reasons, they want to go to war. That’s true whether it’s to preserve their banana plantations in Central America or sell weapons or what have you.

“And they create these myths of empire — these inflated threats, these paper tigers, whatever you want to call it — and try to mobilize the rest of the country to fight a conflict that may not necessarily be in their interest.

“If they were right, then you would actually see that people’s foreign policy views - their idea of how great a threat is — would correlate with income. But once you control for education, I didn’t find that these views differed according to what your wealth or income is.”

This seems a little off to me. There is no question that Raytheon executives and the elected officials they fund will see more sense in arming both sides of a war than the average person of any income or education level will tend to see. But those executives and politicians are not a statistically significant group when talking broadly about the rich and poor in the United States. Most war profiteers, moreover, are likely to believe their own myths, at least when speaking with pollsters. That low-income Americans are misguided is no reason to imagine that upper-income Americans are not misguided too. Caverley also says:

“What was interesting to me is that one of the best predictors of your desire to spend money on defense was your desire to spend money on education, your desire to spend money on healthcare, your desire to spend money on roads. I was really shocked by the fact that there is not much of a ‘guns and butter’ tradeoff in the minds of most respondents in these public opinion polls.”

This seems exactly right. No large number of Americans has managed in recent years to make the connection between Germany spending 4% of U.S. levels on its military and offering free college, between the U.S. spending as much as the rest of the world combined on war preparations and leading the wealthy world in homelessness, food-insecurity, unemployment, imprisonment, and so on. This is in part, I think, because the two big political parties favor massive military spending, while one opposes and the other supports

various smaller spending projects; so a debate develops between those for and against spending in general, without anyone ever asking “Spending on what?”

Speaking of myths, here’s another one that keeps the bipartisan support for militarism rolling:

“Holland: The bumper sticker finding here is that your model predicts that as inequality increases, average citizens will be more supportive of military adventurism, and ultimately in democracies, this may lead to more aggressive foreign policies. How does this jibe with what’s known as “democratic peace theory” — the idea that democracies have a lower tolerance for conflict and are less likely to go to war than more authoritarian systems?”

“Caverley: Well, it depends on what you think is driving democratic peace. If you think it’s a cost-avoidance mechanism, then this doesn’t bode well for the democratic peace. I’d say most people I talk to in my business, we’re pretty sure democracies like to fight lots of wars. They just tend not to fight with each other. And probably the better explanations for that are more normative. The public is just not willing to support a war against another public, so to speak.

“To put it more simply, when a democracy has the choice between diplomacy and violence to solve its foreign policy problems, if the cost of one of these goes down, it’s going to put more of that thing in its portfolio.”

This is truly a lovely myth, but it collapses when put into contact with reality, at least if one treats nations like the United States as being “democracies.” The United States has a long history of overthrowing democracies and engineering military coups, from 1953 Iran up through present day Honduras, Venezuela, Ukraine, etc. The idea that so-called democracies don’t attack other democracies is often expanded, even further from reality, by imagining that this is because other democracies can be dealt with rationally, whereas the nations that ours attacks only understand the so-called language of violence. The United States government has too many dictators and kings as close allies for that to hold up. In fact it is resource-rich but economically poor countries that tend to be attacked whether or not they are democratic and whether or not the people back home are in favor of it. If any wealthy Americans are turning against this type of foreign policy, I urge them to fund [advocacy](#) that will replace it with a more effective and less murderous set of tools.

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