

Limits of Liberal War Opposition

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Robert Reich's [website](#) is full of proposals for how to oppose plutocracy, raise the minimum wage, reverse the trend toward greater inequality of wealth, etc. His focus on domestic economic policy is done in the traditional bizarre manner of U.S. liberals in which virtually no mention is ever made of the 54% of the federal discretionary budget that gets dumped into militarism.

When such a commentator notices the problem of war, it's worth paying attention to exactly how far they're willing to go. Of course, they'll object to the financial cost of a potential war, while continuing to ignore the ten-times-greater cost of routine military spending. But where else does their rare war opposition fall short?

Well, here, to begin with: Reich's new [post](#) begins thus: "We appear to be moving ever closer toward a world war against the Islamic State." That helpless fatalism doesn't show up in his other commentary. We're not doomed to plutocracy, poverty, or corporate trade. But we're doomed to war. It's coming upon us like the weather, and we'll need to handle it as well as we can. And it will be a "world" affair even if it's principally the 4% of humanity in the United States with a military engaged in it.

"No sane person welcomes war," says Reich. "Yet if we do go to war against ISIS we must keep a watchful eye on 5 things." Nobody, including Reich as far as I know, ever says this about plutocracy, fascism, slavery, child abuse, rape, de-unionization. Imagine reading this: "No sane person welcomes massive gun violence and school shootings, yet if we're going to let all these children die for the gun makers' profits we must keep a watchful eye on 5 things." Who would say that? What could the 5 things possibly be? The only people who talk this way about climate destruction are those who believe it's already past the point of no return, beyond any possible human control. Why do U.S. liberals "oppose" war by pretending it's inevitable and then keeping an eye on certain aspects of its damage?

Reich must be aware that most of Europe is very reluctant to engage in another U.S. war, that proxies in the Middle East are almost impossible to come by, and that President Obama still insists on a limited war slowly worsening the situation. But I suspect that Reich, like many people, has seen so much "election" coverage that he thinks the United States is about to have a new president, and that it will be either a war-mad Republican or a war-mad Hillary Clinton. Yet, such a development is over a year away, making Reich's fatalism all the more outrageous.

Let's look at the five things we're suppose to keep an eye on.

"1. The burden of fighting the war must be widely shared among Americans. America's current 'all-volunteer' army is comprised largely of lower-income

men and women for whom army pay is the best option. 'We're staring at the painful story of young people with fewer options bearing the greatest burden,' says Greg Speeter, executive director of the National Priorities Project, whose [study](#) found low- and middle-income families supply far more Army recruits than families with incomes greater than \$60,000 a year. That's not fair. Moreover, when the vast majority of Americans depend on a small number of people to fight wars for us, the public stops feeling the toll such wars take. From World War II until the final days of the Vietnam War, in July 1973, nearly every young man in America faced the prospect of being drafted into the Army. Sure, many children of the rich found means to stay out of harm's way. But the draft at least spread responsibility and heightened the public's sensitivity to the human costs of war. If we go into a ground war against ISIS, we should seriously consider reinstating the draft."

This is madness. As a bank shot aimed at indirectly preventing war it's incredibly risky and uncertain. As a means of ameliorating war by making it more "fair," it grotesquely ignores the vast majority of victims, who will of course be the people living in the areas where the war is fought.

"2. We must not sacrifice our civil liberties. U.S. spy agencies no longer have authority they had in the post-9/11 USA Patriot Act to collect Americans' phone and other records. The NSA must now gain court approval for such access. But in light of the Paris attacks, the FBI director and other leading U.S. law enforcement officials now [say](#) they need access to encrypted information on smartphones, personal and business records of suspected terrorists, and 'roving wiretaps' of suspects using multiple disposable cell phones. War can also lead to internment of suspects and suspensions of constitutional rights, as we've painfully witnessed. Donald Trump [says](#) he'd require American Muslims to register in a federal data base, and he refuses to rule out requiring all Muslims to carry special religious identification. "We're going to have to do things that we never did before....we're going to have to do certain things that were frankly unthinkable a year ago," he [adds](#). We must be vigilant that we maintain the freedoms we are fighting for."

This is delusional. The FBI needs to break through encryption but is kindly refraining from spying on anything unencrypted? The wars strip away civil liberties but are fought "for" them? There has not in fact been a war fought that did not remove liberties, and it seems highly unlikely that there could be. This has been clearly and accurately understood for centuries now.

"3. We must minimize the deaths of innocent civilians abroad. The bombing raids have already claimed a terrible civilian toll, contributing to a mass exodus of refugees. Last month the independent monitoring group Airwars said at least [459 civilians](#) have died from coalition airstrikes in Syria over the past year. Other monitoring groups, including the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, also claim significant civilian deaths. Some civilian casualties are unavoidable. But we must ensure they are minimized - and not just out of humanitarian concern. Every civilian death creates more enemies. And we must do our part to take in a fair portion of Syrian refugees."

Minimize inevitable murders? Assist inevitably displaced families turned into refugees by the destruction of their homes? This is kinder gentler imperialism.

“4. We must not tolerate anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States. Already, leading Republican candidates are fanning the flames. Ben Carson [says](#) no Muslim should be president. Trump [says](#) ‘thousands’ of Arab-Americans cheered when the Twin Towers went down on 9/11 – a boldface [lie](#). Ted Cruz [wants](#) to accept Christians refugees from Syrian [sic] but not Muslims. Jeb Bush [says](#) American assistance for refugees should focus on Christians. Marco Rubio [wants](#) to close down ‘any place where radicals are being inspired,’ including American mosques. It’s outrageous that leading Republican candidates for president of the United States are fueling such hate. Such bigotry is not only morally odious. It also plays into the hands of ISIS.”

Hmm. Can you name the last war that did not include the promotion of bigotry or xenophobia? By now xenophobia is so engrained that no U.S. columnist would propose a project that would kill U.S. citizens while “minimizing” such deaths, yet proposing such a fate for foreigners is deemed liberal and progressive.

“5. The war must be paid for with higher taxes on the rich. A week before the terrorist attacks in Paris, the Senate passed a [\\$607 billion](#) defense spending bill, with 93 senators in favor and 3 opposed (including Bernie Sanders). The House has already passed it, 370 to 58. Obama has said he’ll sign it. That defense appropriation is larded with pork for military contractors – including Lockheed Martin’s F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the most expensive weapons system in history. Now Republicans are pushing for even more military spending. We cannot let them use the war as a pretext to cut Social Security and Medicare, or programs for the poor. The war should be paid for the way we used to pay for wars – with higher taxes, especially on the wealthy. As we move toward war against ISIS, we must be vigilant – to fairly allocate the burdens of who’s called on to fight the war, to protect civil liberties, to protect innocent civilians abroad, to avoid hate and bigotry, and to fairly distribute the cost of paying for war. These aren’t just worthy aims. They are also the foundations of our nation’s strength.”

Of course the wealthy should pay more taxes and everyone else less. That’s true for taxes for parks or taxes for schools. It would also be true for taxes to pay for a project of blowing up coral reefs or a new initiative to drown kittens, but who would justify such things by properly funding them?

War, in fact, is worse than virtually anything else imaginable, including many things we absolutely reject in moral horror. War is mass murder, it brings with it brutality and a total degradation of morality, it is our top destroyer of the environment including the climate, it endangers rather than protecting — just as bigotry plays into ISIS’s hands, so does bombing ISIS. War — and much more so, routine military spending — kills primarily through the diversion of resources. A fraction of what is wasted could end starvation. I mean 3% of U.S. military spending could end starvation worldwide. Diseases could be wiped out. Energy systems could be made sustainable. The resources are that massive. Housing, education, and other rights could be guaranteed, in the United States and abroad.

Sure it’s good for liberal commentators to point out some of war’s downsides. But depicting them as acceptable and inevitable doesn’t help.

So what should be done? Do I love ISIS, then? Is it my wish for us to all die? Et cetera.

I’ve been [blogging](#) my answers to that question for many months. I just asked Johan Galtung

for his answer, and you can [listen to him here](#).

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