

Reason Watch

di Murray N. Rothbard

The July issue of *Reason* has a new format, which improves the layout of the publication. But what about the content? Unfortunately, on that ground, the new *Reason* seems to be worse than the old.

Let us examine some of the articles in *Reason's* July issue to see what they are all about. First, one John Kizer attacks Thomas Szasz's libertarian denunciation of involuntary mental hospitalization. Kizer analogizes that just as the unconscious victim of an auto wreck can be justifiably "involuntarily" treated by a doctor, a treatment that will be *really* voluntary after the patient wakes up, so too can the schizophrenic or paranoiac be involuntarily — "really" voluntarily — treated.

Except that the schizophrenic and paranoiac are awake and conscious, thank you, and are clearly not assenting! And, should an opponent of medical therapy wake up from his accident and demand out, his demand, however odd, must be granted. But what of the similar demand of the mental patient? At any rate, whether sound or unsound, the point is that Mr. Kizer's article is explicitly antilibertarian.

Then there is the crazed article from Canada, by one A. Michael Keerma, which Red-baits to an extent that would not even be tolerated by *National Review* or *Human Events*. First, there is the ludicrous charge that the *Parti Québécois* and Québec Premier René Lévesque are Communists run by the Soviet KGB. There is not even a coming to grips in the Keerman article with the libertarian view that secession is a per se libertarian act, being the dismantling of a State into constituent parts. But just when I thought that Keerma would be calling for an all-out defense of the Canadian nation-state against the Québec separatists, I find that the author's Red-baiting has boxed him into a peculiar corner. For, according to Keerma, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau is *himself* a Communist and KGB tool.

It is incredible that this sort of drivel can appear in a responsible magazine. The truth is that neither Trudeau nor Lévesque is a Communist or a Soviet agent; they are simply, like nearly every other politician in the "free world," moderate socialists, which is bad enough, but hardly a call for the United States to become embattled, in Keerma's words, in "a war to determine the fate of the free world." Or are we to nuke Britain, run by moderate-socialist Callaghan?

But we have not yet come to the heart of this issue of *Reason*, which is supposed to present both sides of the interventionism-noninterventionism debate. At first sight, this aim seems a legitimate, even a noble one, suitably democratic and free-inquiry-ish. But, on second thought, what gives here? Why are there no debates in *Reason* presenting both sides of the issue on abolishing OSHA, price controls, the draft, and whatnot? Why is there no article praising Communism? After all, *Reason* is not supposed to be a debate magazine, but a journal devoted to liberty, that is, a journal committed to a certain world outlook. Would it publish a debate on the merits and demerits of mass murder? But then, of course, it has now done *just that*, with more space and passion devoted to the pro-mass murder side.[\[1\]](#)

Earl Ravenal's proisolationist article, "Non-Intervention: A Libertarian Approach to Defense," is brilliant and persuasive, but it is an account that gets neither into the historical background and current nature of the Cold War nor into the philosophic principles involved.

To counter Ravenal, there are not one but *two* articles. R.J. Rummel's "Wishful Thinking is No Defense: A Political Scientist Challenges Libertarian Foreign Policy Myths," is a hopped-up, ranting, boobish replay of the most absurd myths of the Cold War. The second, "Permissible Defense," by philosopher Eric Mack, is a lengthy, confused, rambling article that, in the manner of all-too-many libertarian philosophers, discourses on important empirical problems, though armed with no facts whatsoever. One conclusion emerges from the Mack morass — that isolationism is not, must not, cannot be, a principle of libertarianism.

Eric Mack uses a device employed by all too many libertarians — of holding the ideal free-market anarchist system or a limited government as virtually equivalent to the current State-ridden system. Thus, he points out quite correctly that isolationism makes no sense as a principle for a free-market protective agency; he leaps from there to the conclusion that, at least for an anarchist, it cannot be a binding principle for the State either. But for an anarchist, the existing State is not a benign if a bit overly cumbersome surrogate for a free-market protection agency. The State is organized crime, murder, theft, and enslavement incarnate. And even for laissez-faire liberals the *existing* State should be tarred with the same dire labels.

Isolationism is not a principle for free-market defense agencies because there would be no nation-state and therefore no foreign policy for anyone to worry about. But we live, unfortunately, in a world of nation-states, in which each State has arrogated to itself a monopoly of the use of violence over its assumed territorial area. Therefore, to limit the aggressive use of the State, to limit State violence over innocent people as much as possible, the libertarian, be he an anarchist or a laissez-faire liberal, necessarily arrives at the view that at least each State should confine its operations to that area where it has a monopoly of violence, so that no interstate clashes, or, more importantly, injuries wreaked by State A on the population of State B, will be able to occur. The latter point is particularly important in the days of modern technology when it is virtually impossible for State A to fight State B without gravely injuring or murdering large numbers of civilian innocents on both sides.

Therefore, "isolationism" — the confinement of State violence to its own territory — is an important libertarian precept, whether for an anarchist or not. Limiting government to its own territory is the foreign-policy analogue of the domestic injunction of the laissez-faire liberal that the State not interfere with the lives of its own subjects. And isolationism becomes all the more important in our modern age of advanced technological weaponry.

There is an important philosophical error that Mack makes about free-market defense agencies that is quite relevant to our concerns. He maintains that if A uses B as an innocent shield to aggress against C, it is perfectly legitimate for C to shoot B. The problem here is that Mack forgets about the rights of B. Suppose, after all, that B has hired his own defense agency sworn to defend his life and property, and that, for some empirical reason, the agency can't get to A; would it not then be perfectly legitimate for B or his agent to shoot C in self-defense? The answer, of course, is yes. The

error committed by Mack is to concentrate on one person, C, and to worry about what C's moral course of action may be, while forgetting about B. On a deeper level, Mack's error — also engaged in by many others, of course — is to confuse morality and rights, that is, to be concerned about what actions of C may or may not be moral while ignoring what the rights are of the various parties in the given situation. To put it succinctly, it may well be that in the shield situation, it is moral for C to shoot B in order to save his own life; but even though moral, it is also murder, and a violation of B's rights. This error stems from Mack's unfortunate view that rights as such all disappear in emergency, "lifeboat" situations.

Thus, the political philosopher should not be concerned with morality per se; he should be concerned with that subset of morality dealing with rights.

More specifically, in pondering various situations, real or hypothetical, the political philosopher should be solely concerned with the question, Where is it legitimate to use force, and by whom? Or, *which* use of force is a criminal invasion of rights, and which a legitimate defense of rights? The political philosopher is, or should be, a sort of "Lone Ranger," or a surrogate for a Universal Defense Agency, called upon by X and Y to enter into each of their defenses in a violent or nonviolent dispute. The Political Philosopher/Universal Defense Agency must ponder, who is using aggressive force, and who is defending himself, in this situation? Or rather, whom must I defend against whom? In the above situation, he determines that A is an aggressor violating the rights of B and C, but that if C decides to shoot B, then the Political Philosopher/Universal Defense Agent is duty-bound to defend B against C's aggression, even if C's action may be considered moral on another level.

It should be noted that no local police force acts on Mackian premises; no police agency not considered monstrous, for example, sprays an innocent crowd with a machine gun in order to shoot a criminal, or bombs an entire block where it knows a criminal is hiding. But, at any rate, even if Mack were right on this point, it would not be relevant to our foreign-policy theme, since one of the major points of an isolationist policy is precisely that it is the only one to minimize and avoid injury to innocent civilians.

We turn from confusion to rant, and dangerous rant at that. In the name of "realism," R.J. Rummel pulls one fantastic blooper after another. There are so many it is difficult to know where to begin. There is the spectacle of an alleged foreign-policy expert claiming that East Germany had a developed economy before 1945, or that North Vietnam was less economically developed than the South. There is the usual statistical baloney of claiming that Soviet military expenditures are higher than ours by using dollar rather than ruble comparisons. There is the unusual baloney of claiming that the American nuclear arsenal, which can kill most of the population of the Soviet Union in a second strike, could only kill four percent of that population. There is the breathtakingly casual dismissal of historical causation, Rummel claiming that it *doesn't matter* if the United States were largely responsible for launching the Cold War, since we are now threatened by Russia. But if US actions were responsible in the first place, then perhaps our actions can end this alleged threat.

Worst of all is Rummel's equivocal and misleading *use* of language, which for an alleged libertarian is unforgivable. Bear in mind that if libertarians understand anything, it is the conceptual distinction between an initiation of aggressive violence, and the use of propaganda or persuasion. Then let us turn to R.J. Rummel:

Clearly were we attacked by Soviet military forces our government would have to be given more power to counter this threat and defend the freedoms we do have. We could not wait for private initiatives: adequate defense would require our accepting more centralized State government command and control.

We are precisely in this situation. We are under attack, although by all means short of nuclear war. And we *are* losing.

Now what in the world does this mean? Under attack, by all means short of nuclear war, eh? Have you heard of conventional bombers dropping bombs recently on San Francisco, Chicago, or New York? Have our ships been attacked by Russian planes or battleships? What *is* this drivel?

Later in his piece, Rummel, perhaps explaining this alleged "war" situation, states that the "Soviet elite constantly reiterate their goal of defeating capitalism everywhere (which goal they call peaceful coexistence.)" Rummel apparently has no inkling of the meaning of the rather charming term "peaceful coexistence." It means that the Soviets will refrain from military aggression across borders, relying on the supposedly inevitable internal shift to Marxist regimes within each of the other countries — i.e., relying on propaganda rather than interstate military clashes. In short, there is no "war," in any sense that the libertarian, indeed, that any rational person, would find meaningful.

Let us dwell a bit further on Rummel's obscene willingness to hand over still more power to the American state. In addition to the above quotes, he writes, "In the short term, we may need to increase the state's power in some areas to preserve our ability to move eventually toward the libertarian goal. This is seen no better than in foreign policy." Since Rummel likes to dwell on Reds under the bed, I might point out that this gibberish was precisely Stalin's rationale for maximizing State power in Russia while supposedly on the road to the state's "withering away." This is the imbecile dialectic: Yes, of course, we want the State to wither away, but that's only in the long run (very long); in the meantime, in order to achieve that goal, we have to increase State power sharply. Rummel, meet Stalin.

"Libertarianism is not somewhere near conservatism, but its polar opposite and mortal foe."

There is more, much more, in Rummel. There is the standard Wilsonian nonsense that dictatorships are always aggressive in foreign affairs while democracies, or freer countries, are not — simply not true either way, and an example of *a priori* history at its worst. There is Rummel's horror at the idea of the "gradual Finlandization" of the world, which, characteristically, he equates with satellization or absorption into the Soviet Union. But what's wrong with being a Finland? Indeed, Rummel could profitably study the Finnish case, if he should ever come to think that modern history is important. For the Russians occupied Finland after it joined Germany in attacking Russia, just as the Soviets occupied the rest of Eastern Europe after World War II for the same reason. Yet how is it that Russia pulled out of Finland, and left it be, while the rest of Eastern Europe became Sovietized? Did the Soviet Devil nod when considering Finland? Did diabolism sleep? The actual answer is that, in contrast to the other Eastern European countries, Finland, under the direction of Julio Paasikivi, was willing to renounce anti-Soviet foreign adventurism loud and clear. Given that commitment, the Soviets didn't really care about the domestic systems of the various countries. Unfortunately, there was no equivalent statesman in Poland, Hungary, et al., to give a similar commitment.

Also, Rummel, a supposed libertarian, comes out not only against Western governmental aid to Russia, but also against trade — presumably he is in favor of outlawing such trade, again not realizing that trade benefits *both* parties to an exchange.

And in claiming a total power for terror tactics, in asserting that majority support is no longer needed for a state, Rummel fails to explain why it is that Batista terror, why South Vietnamese terror, backed up by the murder of over a million Vietnamese peasants by American bombers, why that terror failed to work. Anyone who understands the principles and history of guerrilla warfare knows that the essential condition for guerrilla victory is support by the mass of the population; lacking that support, the population informs on the guerrillas, and, as in the case of Che Guevara in Bolivia, the battle is swiftly over.

The central error in this farrago by Rummel is his repeated assertion that statism equals Communism, and that therefore the central confrontation of our time is between liberty and Communism. In fact, however, the single most important enemy of liberty is mass murder.

Communist governments murder their citizens, but nuclear warfare would murder far, far more, indeed the entire human race itself. And so the greatest enemy of liberty in our time, our *realistic* enemy, if you please, is nuclear war, by whichever State launches it. And, empirically, every consideration — from the continuing refusal of the United States to abjure first use of nuclear weapons, to our refusal to agree to our own proposal for mutual general and complete disarmament (with inspection) after Russia accepted it in 1955, to the chilling fact that the United States and *only* the United States is developing precise nuclear missiles that could be used for a first nuclear strike — leads to regarding the US state, rather than the Soviet Union, as the major nuclear threat to the life and liberty of the world's population.

There are two essential policies, therefore, for libertarians to push upon the American state: a policy of "isolationism," of nonintervention into the territory of other states; and to pressure it into genuine negotiations, at long last, for mutual nuclear disarmament with inspection. The fact that Soviet Russia butchers many of its own citizens is monstrous and important *but is irrelevant to the question of foreign policy* and to the threats to human liberty that lie in such policies.

For it is not the function of any state, including the United States, to right the sins of the Decalogue, to spread fire and devastation in order to bring freedom around the globe — as we murdered countless Vietnamese in the name of their "freedom." And, above all, we must realize that nuclear war is a far bigger threat to liberty than Communism. How's *that* for libertarian "realism"?

In short, libertarians must realize that just as, for them, liberty must be the highest *political* end, in the same way, peace and the avoidance of mass murder must be the *highest end of foreign policy*.

We may hope that this issue of *Reason* does not prove a harbinger of its future course. *Reason* has long had an unfortunate tendency to define the scope of libertarianism so broadly and so fuzzily as to leave it drifting in a zone somewhere between libertarianism and conservatism. Yet, as the case of foreign policy demonstrates so well, in issue after vital issue, libertarianism is not somewhere near conservatism, but its polar opposite and mortal foe. It is high time for libertarians to sharpen their knowledge of the critical gulf between themselves and conservatism.