Critical Dialogue

The Stupidity of War: American Foreign Policy and the Case for Complacency. By John Mueller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 332p. $27.95 cloth.
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In *The Stupidity of War*, John Mueller engagingly and persuasively argues that the United States' frequent use of force is unnecessary and frequently fails to achieve American aims (pp. 24–25). He reaches this conclusion largely through cases studies of US uses of force since World War II. Unlike advocates of retrenchment, however, Mueller supports continued US involvement in international institutions and alliances. Although he does argue for substantial cuts to US military spending, he believes the United States should remain diplomatically active in international affairs and open to occasional, small-scale uses of force. Thus, the argument is neither isolationist nor pacifistic in nature but instead is a compelling case against large-scale military adventures (pp. 193–96). Unsurprisingly given the overlap between his book and my own, I very much agree with his central conclusions.

Mueller bases these conclusions on three subarguments. First, he notes the steep decline in interstate war, which he attributes to global ideational shifts in beliefs about its utility (pp. 1–25). He argues that this decline undermines international relations theories, such as realism, which are based on an assumption of significant international security threats.

Second, Mueller soundly argues that this lower threat environment means states have time to respond to threats. They do not need to keep large militaries under arms and can often respond to the actions of rival states with complacency and even appeasement. Essentially, Mueller argues for a policy of careful patience in which force is rarely used (p. 16). Further, he argues that a smaller US military would help tame American military adventurism, because the United States could not engage in foolish wars if it lacked the ability to readily do so (pp. 197–99).

Last, despite the decline in interstate war and the concomitant increase in states' safety, Mueller argues that the United States consistently inflates the level of threat it faces —both from other states, such as Russia, China, and Iran, and from armed nonstate groups like al-Qaeda. This is an argument he has long made, especially concerning terrorist threats. He argues that US policy makers focus on worst-case scenarios, base threat assessments on opponents' intentions regardless of their capabilities, and indulge in overly heated rhetoric, thereby increasing the American public's perception of danger (pp. 38–39, 121, 141). Moreover, he claims that minor powers, like Iran, cannot dominate regions such as the Middle East even if they acquire nuclear weapons, because great powers with vast nuclear arsenals have repeatedly failed at the same task (p. 109). Likewise, he asserts that aggressive moves by China in the South China Sea and by Russia in Ukraine, rather than strengthening those states, have simply pushed their neighbors toward the US diplomatic camp (p. 146–56). He defends these conclusions with compelling logic and evidence. In sum, Mueller's arguments make a powerful case that the United States would be wise to use force far less often.

There are, however, two less convincing elements of Mueller's argument: his dismissal of the historical importance of deterrence and of the United States' role in maintaining the liberal international order. First, Mueller argues that the importance of deterrence in the post–World War II era has been vastly overstated and that it was not central to winning the Cold War. Specifically, Mueller claims the Soviet Union never intended to invade Western Europe and that the Marshall Plan was not needed to strengthen Western Europe against communist threats—internal or external (pp. 289). He rightly points out the Soviets were as concerned and cautious about initiating a general military conflict as the West was and were not planning to imminently invade Western Europe. Although accurate, these observations illustrate only that immediate deterrence was not needed and say nothing about the importance of general deterrence. The knowledge that NATO was sufficiently armed, both conventionally and with nuclear weapons, to defend against a Soviet assault or at least make such an attack prohibitively costly must have factored into the Soviets' reluctance to contemplate such a war. Soviet intentions did not exist in a vacuum but were, in part, a function of Western capabilities.

In contrast, Mueller observes that the Soviets' lack of a desire to attack could have resulted from communist

ideology, which implied that historical processes would bring about revolution in capitalist states (p. 211). The Soviets, therefore, could afford to be patient. Even so, they undoubtedly desired to hasten the day of revolution. Soviet actions prior to 1948 support such a conclusion, and after World War II, the Red Army set up communist governments in the states it had occupied, as Mueller acknowledges. Further, the Soviets had previously used force to occupy eastern Poland, the Baltic states, and portions of Finland and Romania. The Red Army also intervened in the Mongolian Revolution in the 1920s. Finally, during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–20, a period like 1945 of extreme war weariness (resulting from World War I and the Russian Civil War), the Soviets contemplated sending troops into Germany to foment revolution there. This plan was abandoned only after the Soviets were defeated outside of Warsaw (Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*, 1972). Thus, the Soviets were aggressive when conditions were favorable, suggesting deterrence was important for curbing Soviet ambitions during the Cold War.

This does not, however, undermine Mueller's argument about American threat inflation during the Cold War. It is entirely possible for the Soviets to have posed a real threat and for the United States to have both overestimated the magnitude of that threat and falsely imagined that weak communist states in the developing world posed threats when they absolutely did not. One can face real dangers while simultaneously inflating their magnitude and conjuring additional, imaginary fears.

Second, Mueller underplays the importance of the United States in creating and maintaining the post–World War II liberal international order. His downplaying of the American role stems from his correct observation that US policy makers overemphasize American importance—for example, by calling the United States "indispensable." He rightly argues that many other states—especially Western European states and Japan—share the American preference for a liberal order (pp. 213–14); those states played and continue to play vital roles in creating and maintaining that order. Similarly, Mueller is correct that nightmare scenarios, in which the global order *totally* collapses in the absence of US efforts, are fantastical despite being common in some policy circles (pp. 207–8). From these observations, Mueller concludes American actions were not *necessary* to the creation of this order. Strictly speaking this is accurate, because few social outcomes have truly necessary causes. Most outcomes are multicausal with many contributing factors, none of which is absolutely required. Certainly, one can envision other, less probable paths that the creation of the liberal international order could have followed.

However, US economic and security actions after World War II were, in practice, central to setting up the liberal order and have remained important in maintaining that order. Most notably, as Zacher argues, the territorial integrity norm—a key element of the international order in bringing about the decline of interstate war—was created and sustained in large part by US efforts (Mark Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm," *International Organization*, 55 [2], 2001). In addition, the United States would be a serious threat to the order if it sought to undermine it. Therefore, even if US actions are not necessary to the order's existence, they still significantly increase the odds of its existence. Thus, Mueller's useful corrective, that the United States is not in fact indispensable, goes too far and discounts the real American contributions to the current global order. Much as with deterrence, however, this does not undercut Mueller's central point about the failures of American military force or that US foreign policy could benefit from greater complacency.

The US foreign policy implications of these two disagreements between Mueller's call for a more peaceful foreign policy and my own are fairly small. On the main point we agree entirely: the need for an internationalist foreign policy focused on nonmilitary tools. We both favor the United States maintaining its alliances, behaving in ways consistent with the liberal international order, and abstaining from most active uses of force. The biggest policy difference is on military spending. Mueller advocates deep cuts, whereas I envision a reduced but important role for the US military in deterring attacks on US allies. Were that the main foreign policy debate in Washington, the United States would be in substantially different policy space than at present.

In short, Mueller has written a compelling and provocative book that challenges deeply held beliefs of many US policy makers and international relations theorists. Although Mueller's arguments will not persuade everyone, they cannot easily be dismissed. They are well crafted and have significant implications for foreign policy and international relations theory. His book should be widely read by scholars and practitioners alike.

Response to Zachary C. Shirkey's Review of *The Stupidity of War: American Foreign Policy and the Case for Complacency*

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— John Mueller

Zachary Shirkey and I both stress the failures of military force. However, I am inclined to suggest that this record, combined with the absence of threats requiring a large standing military, justifies a much larger reduction in defense spending than he does. He suggests two other differences between our views, though we are actually fairly close on these, I think.

Concerning a potential Soviet attack on Western Europe, he argues that the fact that NATO could "defend against a

Soviet attack or at least make the attack prohibitively expensive, must have factored into the Soviets' reluctance to contemplate such a war." I certainly agree, but it seems to me that such Soviet reluctance was already fully in place. Although the Soviets were prepared to defend themselves if attacked, there seems to be no evidence that they ever contemplated or were willing to risk a substantial military incursion to the west—or anything else that might in their wildest imagination come even slightly to resemble the catastrophe they had just suffered through. Even if the United States had withdrawn, NATO had not been created, and nuclear weapons had never been invented, the Soviets faced the prospect of a massive and costly quagmire to which the United States, even if unallied with the attacked, might join as it had twice done earlier in the century. The Soviets were, in that sense, fully deterred.

In addition, the Soviets presided over an extensive empire in Europe's East that, except for the dismemberment of Germany, even Hitler would have found satisfying. They had a lot to lose. And, of course, they subscribed to an ideology that primarily stressed class and revolutionary warfare, not direct military confrontation with the capitalist world. They were not averse, as Shirkey correctly points out, to military tinkering around the edges. But Lenin's experience with that, noted by Shirkey, had been largely unsuccessful, and the Soviets were careful, as my book points out, to distance themselves from the North Korean attack on the south in 1950 even as they approved it.

Shirkey's other concern is about the degree to which the United States was responsible for the post–World War II "liberal international order." Although I am not always sure how "liberal" that order often is, I do contend that states, beginning with those in the developed world, have increasing come to regard international war as a stupid method for resolving their differences. I agree with Shirkey that the United States has contributed importantly to this order—particularly from an economic perspective—but I also concur with his observation that the United States was, strictly speaking, not necessary to the creation of the order. For example, to the degree that a norm about territorial integrity (first proposed in the wake of World War I) has taken hold, I think it is more nearly the consequence of an aversion to international war than its cause.

American Dove: US Foreign Policy and the Failure of Force. By Zachary C. Shirkey. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. 212p. $70.00 cloth.
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In this agile and well-argued book, Zachary Shirkey advocates for what he calls a "dovish" foreign policy for the United States in which the country would continue to be actively engaged in the world while seeking to avoid "the active use of military force." It would rely instead on "peaceful means" that include deterrence, sanctions, moral authority, economic aid, and the application of international institutions, international law, soft power, and diplomacy while using intelligence gathering and police work to deal with terrorism (pp. 4, 7, 127–28).

Shirkey may have picked an appropriate time for such advocacy because the country seems to be ready for a reassessment after the exhausting and costly military ventures (or adventures) in Iraq and Afghanistan that have so thoroughly failed over two decades to deliver satisfactory results at an acceptable cost. He may also be in tune with a broader American tradition. With one glaring and highly consequential period of aberration stemming from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the country has pursued a foreign policy for at least the last half-century that was not all that much different from the one Shirkey proposes. And it seems ready now to resume that tradition.

In the wake of the Vietnam War in 1975, the United States fell into something that is frequently called the "Vietnam Syndrome." Although still pursuing the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it avoided the active use of US military force to do so, relying instead on deterrence, sanctions, diplomacy, soft power, and support to anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan.

More broadly, it applied US military force rather sparingly during the entire last quarter of the twentieth century. It did take out offending regimes in tiny Grenada and Panama, and in 1991 it led an international coalition to reverse aggression by Iraq. But the opponents in these cases were scarcely formidable. Although the Iraqi Army may have looked impressive on paper, it lacked strategy, tactics, defenses, leadership, and morale, and it mostly responded by fleeing or surrendering.

Other military ventures were even more limited and were carried out mostly for humanitarian purposes. US troops were sent to Lebanon in 1983 to help police a ceasefire there but were abruptly pulled out when hundreds were killed by a terrorist bomb. Troops helped stabilize a famine induced by a civil war in Somalia in 1992 but were withdrawn later when a couple dozen of them were killed in a chaotic firefight. There were great concerns about civil warfare in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, but the US role was mostly one of handwringing, supplying some military aid and advice, and, toward the end, some focused bombing. Policing troops were sent in only after the fighting was over. And the United States led a bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 in support of a secessionist movement, but in the process, it did not lose a single combatant or get closer than 10,000 feet to any ground fighting.

Some of these "active uses of force" might be a bit too much for Shirkey's position. But overall, they do not give

evidence of an America looking for a fight or questing after monsters to destroy. And for the most part they are consistent with his observation that "small, short run actions to preserve lives" may sometimes be "appropriate" (p. 6). At any rate, in the 2000 presidential election campaign, there seems to have been little opposition to George W. Bush's support for a "humble" foreign policy. To a considerable degree, dovishness was ascendant.

That all changed with the big aberration: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In its wake, Bush abruptly abandoned humility to proclaim, rather preposterously, that the country's "responsibility to history" was now "to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil"—rather immodestly proposing to outdo God who had tried and failed to rid the world of evil with that flood of His some time ago.

The peculiar consequences of 9/11, it seems to me, could be more fully appreciated by Shirkey, because they account for the overwhelming amount of military action by the United States over the last 50 years, including, of course, the "forever wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq. That is, without 9/11, the comparative dovishness of the last quarter of the twentieth century would likely have continued.

The 9/11 attacks did not prove to be a harbinger—no terrorist attack before or after, in a war zone or out of one, has inflicted even one-tenth as much total destruction. Nonetheless, the reaction has been massive. Impelled by an overwhelming desire to get the bastards who carried out the attacks, military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were launched to topple regimes there that had nothing to do with 9/11. Initially successful at that task, these wars of aggression soon devolved into extended counterinsurgency (or counteroccupation) operations that have resulted in the deaths of at least 100 times as many people as perished on 9/11.

Shirkey is rightly dismayed at these destructive exercises in hawkishness. But it seems to me that the massive failures of military force in the Middle East have generated a gradual shift back to Bush's 2000 dovishness. Shirkey may now be preaching to the choir.

For example, Shirkey argues that counterinsurgency is "exceedingly difficult" because "foreign military forces are usually resented" and because "insurgents usually have the superior will" (p. 111). The US military now seems to be on much the same page. In its defense priority statement of January 2012, the Defense Department firmly emphasized (that is, rendered in italics) an insistence that "U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct largescale, prolonged stability operations."

The public has gotten the message as well. In 2013, there was bipartisan support in Congress for the punitive bombing of Syria after a gas attack in the civil war there. But out of concern that it would lead to further involvement in the conflict, the public was strongly opposed to that action as members of Congress of both parties discovered when they went home. Shirkey worries about the seduction of force, but it certainly was not operative in this episode. The United States seems, then, to have embraced an Iraq Syndrome in which the central slogan is "let's not do that anymore."

Given the "failure of force" noted in Shirkey's subtitle, it is amazing that the military is still held in such high esteem and continues to command such a high budget. Shirkey joins the adulation, calling "the US military one of the most, if not the most, revered institutions in American society today" (p. 73), and he writes that servicemen and women "have repeatedly done all that is asked of them and have done it well" (p. 6). In that mood, he blames the monumental failures of the 9/11–induced uses of military force on just about everybody but the military, specifically citing "US-elected officials and, ultimately, the Americans who choose those officials" (p. 6). That is, anyone who voted for Bush, Obama, or Trump.

However, the military itself is more critical of its failings. This is implicit in its italicized refusal of 2012 to ever again engage in large stability operations, suggesting that the military and its leaders have come to the conclusion that they simply do not know how to conduct them. If they had come to that recognition a decade earlier, hundreds of thousands of lives would not have been wasted as a result of their efforts. The military surely deserves some blame for the failure of force in these costly wars: it has not "done it well."

Shirkey stresses that the world is "full of dangers" and "a dangerous place" (pp. 2, 5). However, he supplies little detailed assessment of what those dangers are, and he points out that the United States is in a "highly favorable strategic position" and lacks "immediate security threats" (pp. 33). Indeed, the reaction to the rise of China, which many do see as the primary danger out there, suggests that Shirkey has a great deal of support because policies advocated even by alarmists to deal with the problem presented by China pretty much fit his "dovish" perspective. The most forceful of these is to rearrange the military in a (potentially quixotic) effort to deter the Chinese by "balancing" against it. Other proposals are even more congruent with his general position. They advocate, for example, working with allies and with other countries in Asia, strengthening the capacity to understand China, applying diplomatic pressure, bargaining carefully, compromising, avoiding effectively collaborating with China's repressive policies, countering China's efforts potentially to control communication networks, encouraging transparency, maximizing positive interactions with the Chinese people and with the Chinese diaspora, maintaining competitiveness and our values, abandoning domestic discord, and cooperating on common interests such as pollution, climate change, and North Korea.

Shirkey begins the book by expressing "the need for a more peaceful foreign policy" (p. 1). After the 9/11 aberration, it looks like he is going to get it. Maybe he should be taking a victory lap.

Response to John Mueller's Review of *American Dove: US Foreign Policy and the Failure of Force*

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— Zachary C. Shirkey

I would like to thank John Mueller for his review and appreciate the opportunity to engage with him in this dialogue. I share Mueller's optimism that the American public is currently receptive to dovish arguments. I worry, however, that much as with Vietnam Syndrome—in which public opinion opposed large-scale US uses of force in the wake of the Vietnam War—this current reluctance to use force will not last. Nor do I believe that the Vietnam Syndrome was only broken by the horrific events of 9/11, though clearly that event greatly increased Americans' appetite for force. Rather, the US public's resistance to the use of force eroded roughly a decade earlier. From 1989 to 2001 the United States used force in Panama, Kuwait, Iraq, Haiti, the Balkans, Sudan, Somalia, and Afghanistan. Although most of these actions were small, the pitfalls of the uses of force are as likely to bedevil small deployments as large ones, as illustrated by the recent US military misadventure in Libya. This frequent use of force in the 1990s suggests that hangovers from military debacles are temporary. It also implies that the public's current reluctance to use force in the aftermath of the Iraq War may not last.

Because resistance to the use of force is prone to wearing off, dovish arguments, such as Mueller's and mine, are needed to ward off the temptation to use force. Such arguments must be made in ways consistent with American values, or they will not resonate with the public (pp. 23–25). Indeed, Mueller raises this same point in his book to help explain why opposition to the Vietnam War was initially unsuccessful (p. 55). Further, I argue that dovish arguments are most successful when they focus on effectiveness rather than costs or trade-offs (pp. 14–19). In other words, doves are at their most persuasive when they show that nonmilitary tools do a better job at advancing US interests and values than does force. Doves lose policy debates when they focus solely on costs or impugn American motives.

Regarding the culpability of the US military in American uses of force and its failures, Mueller is correct that I am hesitant to criticize enlisted personnel. They are not the ones making the crucial decisions. The higher levels of the military, however, very much do influence whether and how the United States uses force. As such, I agree with Mueller that it is more than fair to criticize US military leadership. Indeed, I cite the military's failure to link tactical operations to political goals as a major reason why force fails (pp. 58–59). Further, I argue that military leaders are just as susceptible as civilian leaders to cognitive biases, such as the illusion of control, which push decision makers toward the use of force (p. 67). Last, I also criticize the Defense Department's tendency to assume control of nonmilitary projects, such as redevelopment initiatives and local diplomatic efforts, which would best be left in civilian hands (p. 79–80). The US military has convinced Americans that it is always the most capable agency for tackling problems, when in fact many other agencies, such as USAID and the State Department, are better suited to carry out noncombat foreign policy tasks. Defense budgets clearly benefit from this tendency to use the military to perform nonmilitary tasks. This expansion of the Defense Department at the expense of other agencies increases the likelihood that force will be used because it reduces the capacity and influence of nonmilitary agencies, leaving the military as the most obvious, although not the best, tool available (pp. 131–32).

The key points—on which Mueller and I agree—are that the United States would benefit from using force less often and that this can be done without retreating into isolationism. There is no need for the United States to actively engage in frequent combat operations, because they often do more harm than good. An internationalist foreign policy far less reliant on force would benefit the United States and is better suited for defending the existing liberal international order.