

May 4, 2021

**THE STUPIDITY OF WAR:  
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE CASE FOR COMPLACENCY**

**JOHN MUELLER**

Ohio State University and the Cato Institute

New York: Cambridge University Press, March 2021, 342 pages

It could be said that American foreign policy since 1945 has been one long miscue; most international threats—including during the Cold War—have been substantially exaggerated. The result has been agony and bloviation, unnecessary and costly military interventions that have mostly failed. A policy of complacency and appeasement likely would have worked better.

In this highly readable book, John Mueller argues with wisdom and wit rather than ideology and hyperbole that aversion to international war has had considerable consequences. There has seldom been significant danger of major war. Nuclear weapons, international institutions, and America's role as a super power have been substantially irrelevant; post-Cold War policy has been animated more by vast proclamation and half-vast execution than by the appeals of liberal hegemony; and post-9/11 concerns about international terrorism and nuclear proliferation have been overwrought and often destructive. Meanwhile, threats from Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, or from cyber technology are limited and manageable.

Unlikely to charm Washington, Mueller explains how, when international war is in decline, complacency and appeasement become viable diplomatic devices and a large military is scarcely required.

John Mueller is a political scientist at Ohio State University, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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War is mankind's most tragic and stupid folly.

--General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commencement speech at the United States Military Academy, West Point, June 3, 1947. Quoted by President Barack Obama at the same venue, May 28, 2014.

War is a profanity because, let's face it, you've got two opposing sides trying to settle their differences by killing as many of each other as they can.

--General Norman Schwarzkopf, 1991.

## Prepublication Endorsements

John Mueller is unfailingly incisive, witty, original, prescient, and constructively contrarian. True to form, this case for complacency will shake you out of your complacency on American military policy.

--Steven Pinker, Johnstone Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and the author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*

*The Stupidity of War* is smart, provocative, and clearly argued. It gives competing arguments a real run for their money and charts a path forward that is important for theory, policy, and how we as citizens should think about our world.

--Robert Jervis, Columbia University

John Mueller is incapable of writing a boring sentence. Once again he has produced a thought-provoking, brilliant, funny and iconoclastic work, one that deserves to be discussed in classrooms and staterooms for decades to come. It would be very difficult for even the most hardened foreign policy professionals to read it and come away with their basic assumptions intact.

--Christopher Fettweis, Tulane University

John Mueller once again unsheathes his pen to puncture the Washington threat consensus. Interstate war? Anachronistic. Nuclear weapons? Irrelevant. International terrorism? Overblown. Mueller's deft critiques of the US' national security obsessions take on even greater urgency at a time when over 200,000 Americans have died from a global pandemic that all our guns, bombs, and metal detectors were powerless to prevent.

--Jacques E.C. Hymans, University of Southern California

Monetary inflation has virtually disappeared in America, but John Mueller documents that threat inflation is as virulent as ever. Despite our vast military budget and dominance of our hemisphere, our leaders repeatedly insist on seeing us as perpetually vulnerable. He makes a convincing case that our rivals are far less formidable than we imagine – and that, in fact, the 21st century has brought a worldwide understanding of the folly of war that should reshape how governments and citizens think about national security.

--Stephen Chapman, Chicago Tribune

Once again, Mueller challenges and dazzles with his acute vision and acid assessment of conventional national security wisdom. He argues that attitudes toward war have changed, “roughly following the pattern by which the ancient and once-formidable formal institution of slavery became discredited and then obsolete.” This is not a new argument for him, but he brings new evidence to bear. Along the way, Mueller also documents a history of US post-world War II threat inflation, gives US wars a failing grade, and questions most authority. All the while weaving in movie, musical, and literary references.

--Neta C. Crawford, Boston University

John Mueller has launched a characteristically bold and sweeping assault on the key tenets of American national security policy: deterrence and containment. He makes a spirited case for complacency in the face of an essential absence of substantial security threats, due in part to aversion to international war on the part of developed states. Even readers who do not agree will be challenged by a well-crafted and thoroughly documented argument.

--Martha Crenshaw, Stanford University & Wesleyan University

In this book, John Mueller makes the bold argument that a culture of peace - not institutions, democracy, or American leadership - is the source of peace since World War II. He goes on to recite and refute historical examples of alarmist rhetoric about potential threats that proved to be exaggerated.

--Deborah Welch Larson, University of California, Los Angeles

Mueller's account of a rising aversion to international war since 1945 provides a timely rejoinder to ominous predictions of war.

--Etel Solingen, University of California Irvine

## Related materials

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Related article: John Mueller, "'Pax Americana' is a Myth: Aversion to War Drives Peace and Order," *The Washington Quarterly*, 43:3, Fall 2020, 115-36: [pdf](#)

Related article: John Mueller, "A Determined Man: World War I, Hitler, and the Unlikely March to World War II," warontherocks.com, November 11, 2018: [html1](#) [html2](#) [pdf](#)

Review, Jonathan Tepperman, "A World Without War: A new book argues that America's massive military is predicated on imaginary threats—and we'd all be better off without it," *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2021: [pdf](#)

Review, Daniel Larison, "Why John Mueller thinks 'appeasement' might be a better policy," *Responsible Statecraft*, March 15, 2021: [pdf](#)

Interview with video with T.V. Paul, Conversations on Peaceful Change, a series of interviews initiated by the Global Research Network on Peaceful Change (GRENPEC) on *The Stupidity of War*, youtube, June 2020, 37 minutes: [html](#)

Cato Power Problems Podcast, Interview with John Glaser, recorded February 23, 2021, posted March 9, 2021, 40 minutes: [html](#)

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Interview with video on Skeptic: The Michael Shermer Show, recorded March 29, 2021, 109 minutes: [html1](#) [html2](#)

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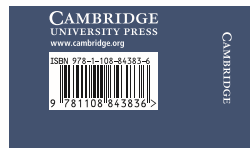
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