



A Memorial Day Exercise by Mark Lause

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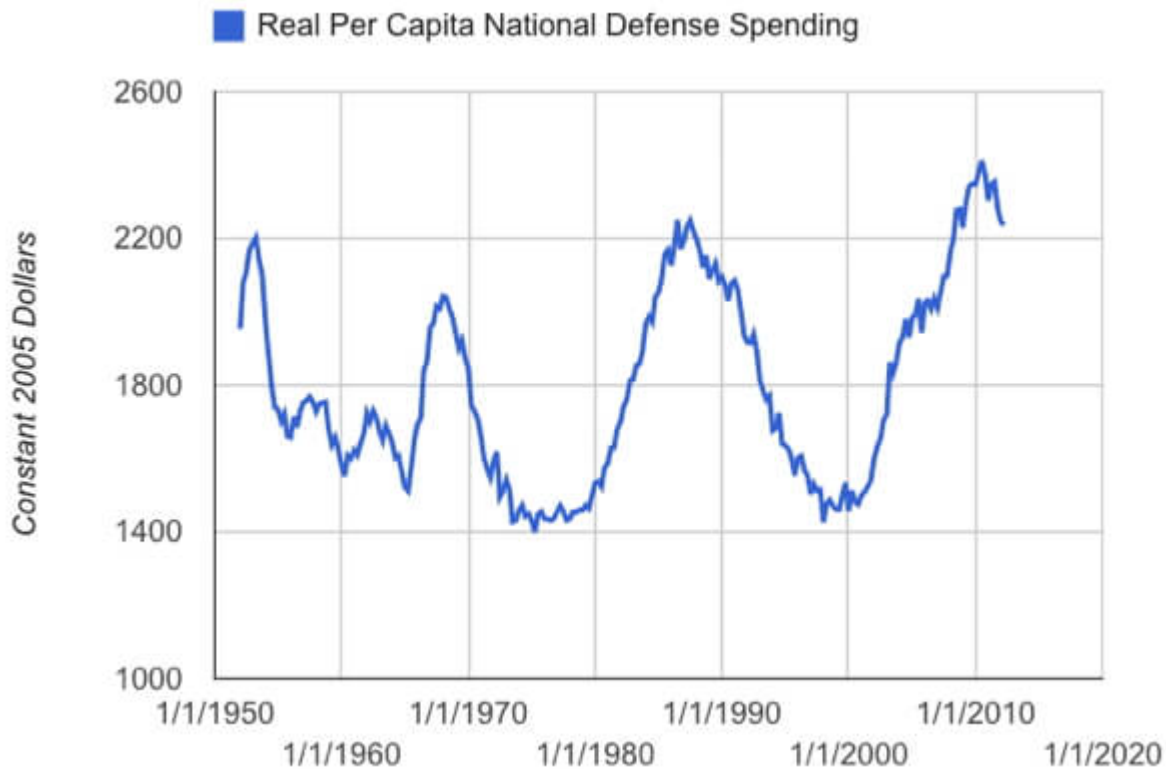
A few years back, I got to visit the grave of an uncle buried overseas. He had been happily married to a wonderful wife and had two great little kids when he got his draft notice and reluctantly left to wind up in France in 1944. He was killed and is buried with tens of thousands of other depressingly young men who never had a chance to get any older in only one of many such American cemeteries over there. My father, who landed on D-Day earlier that year, used to say that the reason that generation went to war was so that later generations wouldn't have to do so. In the belief as in the marching, they followed in the footsteps of others who had fought and won a war to end all wars, a result you'd not know from looking at the century since that conflict.

Through my life, the powers-that-be have found ways to shape the country's economy and narrow its vision as if we were in such a life-or-death global struggle, though we have not been. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute the military spending of the U.S. in 2012, the last year reported, ran into the neighborhood of 700 billion. Our corporate masters hire the finest experts money can buy to explain to us how the country would spiral into a depression if we ever stopped fracking or letting oil companies to poke in the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico without the minimum due diligence

to prevent a disaster. Media hype notwithstanding, Obamacare provides us nothing like a decent system of socialized medicine because, they say, we couldn't afford it. We can't afford a livable minimum wage, either, or school that aren't profit-making factories of social despair. And, of course, if we had such things, fewer young people would be desperate enough to join the military.

Any talk of the war budget is carefully framed by the insistence that the world is a dangerous place due to the various axes of evils who are engaged in similar spending. The fact is that none of the other big military spenders—China, Russia, the UK, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, India, Germany, Italy, and Brazil—come nowhere near the U.S. And, in fact, you can total what they all spend and it doesn't total the U.S. war budget. If we were discussing any other military power that much bigger than all the rest combined we would not hesitate to call it the greatest threat to world peace.

Worse, the government further assists its private sector collaborators in all this to sell its wares globally, meaning that the much of what makes the world as dangerous as it is are policies and products made in the U.S.A. passed on, often with a hefty taxpayer subsidy to our "friends." It is interesting that, since the fall of the U.S.S.R., almost every one of the vilified villains who became the subject of American military action had been, at one point or another, one of those "friends."



Evan Soltas' chart uses measures of GDP per capita to measure military spending

If you invest that heavily in anything you will not let that investment go idle. No notion has engaged in as many acts of war as the U.S. since World War II. This result of the war budget is then used as an excuse for it. Frequently, though, these absolutely essential wars between good against evil become winless, endless quagmires. At that point, we get remarkably little chance to hear independent experts on the area and people attacked. We might get a few new faces in the parade of media spokesmodels leading their insightful abstractions.

One of my favorite has always been the doctrine of "just war." This usually amounts to the same thing as hearing five-year old in a sandbox complaining about who hit who first. But with advanced degrees, glasses and a TV camera. Many years ago, a veteran explained to me the reality from his very concrete experience. If there were justice in it, one side or another would actually win, but there is never a winner. One side just gets to lose less of its young people or less of its limited resources than their rival.

Certainly, the greatest abstraction involves the claim that the U.S. faces deadly enemies so secret and conspiratorial you can't expect real evidence. This has deep roots that surfaced after World War II in the patriotic war on subversive ideas in which the FBI kept track of who's checking Karl Marx out of the Toledo Public Library. Eventually such institutionalized

paranoia finds an enemy or alleged enemy supposedly a big enough threat to go to war. Like the revolutions in Southeast Asia where, if the U.S. didn't fight, we'd lose the beaches in Hawaii. (We could not have designed a better test of that argument than losing the war and seeing what happened.)

Indeed, we now have a bipartisan agreement that government shouldn't have to prove anything it asserts. Certainly, one of the most depressing thing I've ever witnessed was the extent to which we have embraced detention camps, torture, summary executions by executive order of anyone it designates, including American citizens, anywhere in the world-with the suspension of constitutional guarantees of a fair trial with evidence. Perhaps all this followed naturally once you resurrect the Hitlerite doctrine of preemptively attacking countries that haven't attacked us.

The rather narrow circles that make these decisions of war and peace rarely earn that kind of perspective. In my generation, the Young Republicans worried about the security of their surfing in Hawaii rarely joined the military effort in southeast Asia. Those who do the fighting are disproportionately those who have no options. The military sweetens the bargain by promising all sorts of medical support, if needed, and money for education. And, over recent decades, the ritual chant of "thank you for your service." Not much. And even that often doesn't pan out.



"War makes jobs for gravediggers, literally and figuratively. But it might not be out of line to question whether we could do other things that might actually be better jobs."

But the biggest argument aimed at workers in general has always been that war makes jobs, which we presumably can't have by other means. The last time I was listening to a particularly high-brow version of this on NPR, I had just finished pulling together notes on a

book manuscript that had brought me back to all those graves in France. For a few days in August 1864, the Richmond Daily Dispatch deigned to acknowledge that lack of enthusiasm among those who owed their jobs more directly to the war. The predominantly Irish gravediggers at Hollywood Cemetery in the Confederate capital earned \$7 a day, but couldn't make ends meet and went on strike. The bosses refused to give them a raise and hired blacks to dig the graves instead. Employers then brought in "a force of negroes from the penitentiary."

Yes, war makes jobs for gravediggers, literally and figuratively. But it might not be out of line to question whether we could do other things that might actually be better jobs. Anything that militarizes the economy, the process of production and working conditions ultimately never pan out to benefit workers.

Most dramatically, it regiments us with a particular finality in a military cemetery.

Don't go cocooned by large groups, uniforms and flags that are there to dedicate and concentrate the day with the hollow words spewed for generations. Don't delude yourself into thinking that you're doing anything for them. That time is sadly past.

Go for yourself and visit the graves of those who died because they hoped it would bring peace, who fought war in hope of ending war. And remember, the best words ever spoken in such a place, "that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain . . ."

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