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America's Anti-Militarist Heritage

By George C. Leef

Ain't My America: The Long, Noble History of Antiwar Conservatism and Middle-American Anti-Imperialism by Bill Kauffman (Metropolitan Books, 2008); 284 pages, \$25.

Americans don't have much historical memory anymore. That isn't just because of the dumbing down of the educational system and the fact that most young people read very little on their own. It's because most of what little they do hear about our history is colored by statist theology.

But if you talk to some older Americans – people in their 70s and 80s – you will encounter a few who know some important things. First, they know that there was widespread opposition to the wars the United States fought in the 20th century; and second, they know that most of the opposition to war came from the “Right.” That is, “liberals” were the ones champing at the bit to send American forces into combat and “conservatives” were the ones saying, “Let's just mind our own business.”

Bill Kauffman's book *Ain't My America* is intended to drive that point home. His subtitle lets the reader know where he's going – *the long, noble history of anti-war conservatism and middle-American anti-imperialism*. This isn't just a dry and pedantic bit of historiography, though. Kauffman writes with an angry edge because he's sick and tired of the politicians – left, right, and center

– who just can't resist the calls for sending American troops into combat all around the globe. He wants to kindle the embers of an old fire – the deep conviction among Americans on the political Right that keeping America's national nose out of foreign wars is morally and politically the intelligent policy. Americans shouldn't start wars. They shouldn't participate in those already begun. *They should just mind their own business!* That should be the stance of the "Right" even more than of the "Left."

When Americans read about their history, they learn the results of the numerous wars they've been in, but almost never is any space devoted to the decisions to get into them. Wars don't just break out spontaneously. Government officials have to act, but what of those, in and out of government, who didn't want to get involved? Only if you look deeply will you find anything about the people who opposed America's wars. Kauffman has done exactly that. In *Ain't My America*, he shows that there was opposition to every one of America's foreign wars, mostly from small-town, freedom-loving folks whose chief demand of the government was that it respect their rights.

The War of 1812

Although I daresay that I know a good deal more about American history than most people, I was surprised by many of the facts Kauffman presents. I had not known that Daniel Webster was an opponent of the War of 1812. The great orator said at the time,

Who will show me any Constitutional injunction which makes it the duty of the American people to surrender everything valuable in life, and even life itself, not when the safety of their country and its liberties may demand the sacrifice, but whenever the purposes of an ambitious and mischievous government may require it?

Ah – an early understanding of the truth that politicians

usually seek war for their own advantage.

The Mexican War

The Mexican War of 1846–48 was sought by President James K. Polk, who fabricated a border incident to serve as the justification of hostilities – just as Hitler did with the Poles in 1939. Many Americans, however, saw right through his deception and bellicose rhetoric. A little-known member of Congress named Abraham Lincoln was one. Another was Rep. Alexander Stephens of Georgia (later the vice president of the Confederacy), who said, “Fields of blood and carnage may make men brave and heroic, but seldom tend to make nations either good, virtuous, or great.” Lincoln, Stephens, and many others saw the Mexican War as simple aggression by the United States and wanted no part of it.

After the bloodbath of the Civil War, the United States stayed out of foreign conflicts until late in the 19th century. Hawaii was annexed in 1898. While the takeover was bloodless, former president Grover Cleveland said that he was “ashamed of the whole affair.”

The Spanish-American War

Far worse was the Spanish-American War. Whatever might have caused the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana’s harbor, the McKinley administration instantly seized on it as a *casus belli* and the country was at war before any opposition could form. After the end of the hostilities, a group of capitalists who wanted peace rather than an empire formed the Anti-Imperialist League. One of them, George Boutwell, criticized U.S. involvement in the Philippines, where American troops were fighting nationalist guerillas:

Is it wise and just for us, as a nation, to make war for the seizure and governance of distant lands, occupied by millions of

inhabitants who are alien to us in every aspect of life except that we are together members of the same human family?

A great amount of death and suffering would have been avoided if the United States had stayed out of the Philippines, but the expansionists were firmly in charge in Washington. The Anti-Imperialist League was drowned out with jingoistic slogans.

At this point, we meet one of Kauffman's heroes, Sen. George F. Hoar of Massachusetts, a crusty Republican who wanted to keep out of foreign military adventures. Writing in 1902 about America's Philippine involvement, Hoar said bitterly,

We crushed the only republic in Asia. We made war on the only Christian people in the East. We vulgarized the American flag. We inflicted torture on unarmed men to extort confessions. We put children to death. We established reconcentration camps. We baffled the aspirations of a people for liberty.

World War I

World War I was a replay of the Spanish-American War, but on a gigantic scale. It was the big-thinking nationalists who insisted on preparing for and eventually entering the war by sending American troops to France. While it is often said that the business class – usually vilified as “merchants of death” – were instrumental in pushing the nation into a war that had no bearing on Americans at all, Kauffman shows that many businessmen were against President Wilson's determination to participate in the carnage in Europe. They foresaw that war would bring not only death and destruction, but also regimentation and high taxes.

Henry Ford was one voice for peace and sanity. Prior to Wilson's victory over the pacifists with the April 1917 declaration of war, he wrote,

For months, the people of the United States have had fear pounded into their brains by magazines, newspapers and motion

pictures. No enemy has been pointed out. All the wild cry for the spending of billions, the piling up of armaments and the saddling of the country with a military caste has been based on nothing but fiction.

America's foremost capitalist wasn't alone in wanting peace. Millions of people who liked their government small and saw no glory in war wanted to stay out of "Wilson's War." (See my review of [*Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight*](#), by Jeanette Keith, in the June 2005 *Freedom Daily*. The book details the opposition to the war in the South.) Of the 50 House members who voted against war, 33 were Republicans. Only 16 Democrats went against their messianic president.

Wilson got his war. Americans who spoke out against it were imprisoned. Kauffman quotes one South Dakota farmer who got a five-year prison sentence for saying, "It was all foolishness to send our boys over there to get killed by the thousands, all for the sake of Wall Street." Not all Wall Streeters wanted the war, but most of small town and rural America was opposed. The war was entirely the doing of the nation's political elite, which looked down its collective nose at the rubes who couldn't see that America *had to fight to save the world*.

World War II

In the late 1930s, with the storm clouds of war again building up over Europe and Asia, the same drama was replayed. Conservative, small-town America could see that there would be another war and tried to keep the United States out of it. Kauffman concentrates especially on the America First Committee. "It was not in any way pro-fascist or pro-Nazi, though of course anyone who opposes a war in modern America gets tagged as an enemy symp," he writes. The America Firsters believed in the libertarian position that the country should be sufficiently armed to repel any attack on it, but stay out of the war unless attacked. Public polling in 1940 showed that about 80 percent of the people agreed.

Kauffman doesn't go into Roosevelt's machinations to goad the Japanese into attacking, but once the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, war was inevitable. Once again, the "just leave us alone" instincts of most Americans were trampled upon.

The Cold War

When World War II was finally over, the big-government internationalists couldn't allow the power they had worked to amass to wither away, so they conjured up the Cold War. By that time, much of the American Right had been lured into the camp of the bellicose, but a few remained to argue against the Truman/Eisenhower policies of confrontation. One was old Herbert Hoover, who opposed committing U.S. troops to NATO and declared that Truman had violated the Constitution by involving the country in the Korean War without a declaration of war by Congress.

Another was Sen. Robert Taft (R-Ohio), who said in a Senate speech in January 1951, "The principal purpose of the foreign policy of the U.S. is to maintain the liberty of our people." Unfortunately, liberty was far from the minds of most of his colleagues.

Less well known than Hoover and Taft is another Kauffman hero, Howard Buffett, father of the billionaire investor. Howard Buffett was a member of the House from Nebraska in the 1940s and 1950s. He was fervently opposed to militarism, foreign aid of all kinds, and anything that went beyond his vision of a government that just protected life, liberty, and property. Buffett was adamantly opposed to the military draft, which to him was no different from slavery.

With the passing decades, the Right has largely become the pro-war side of the political spectrum and the Left now contains most of the anti-war crowd. There are some exceptions, of course. Republican congressmen Ron Paul (R-Tex.) and John Duncan (R-

Tenn.) opposed the Iraq War from the beginning, but most Republicans have fallen into the neocon orbit and believe that the solution to just about anything the United States doesn't like around the world is to send in American troops. Opposition to military escapades comes mostly from "liberals" but not with much effect. (I wish that Kauffman had pointed out that the problem with leftist opposition to war is that it's unprincipled. People who favor massive government taxation and control of nearly every other aspect of life are not on firm ground when they say, "Let's not use military force for anything but self-defense.")

What Kauffman hopes to see is a revival of anti-war sentiment among those who should be its strongest natural proponents – Americans who want their government small, their taxes low, and no soldiers in body bags. Despite all the propaganda that wanting to avoid war is cowardly, he is optimistic:

It may not be too late for the American Right – for Main Street America in all its conservative neighborliness, its homely yet life-giving blend of the communal and the libertarian – to rediscover the wisdom of its ancestors, who understood that empire is the enemy of the small and war is the enemy of the home.

Bill Kauffman has hit the nail right on the head. It shouldn't be just the far Left that says "No" to war. There is a strong history of anti-militarism on the Right and it's time to bring it back to life.

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