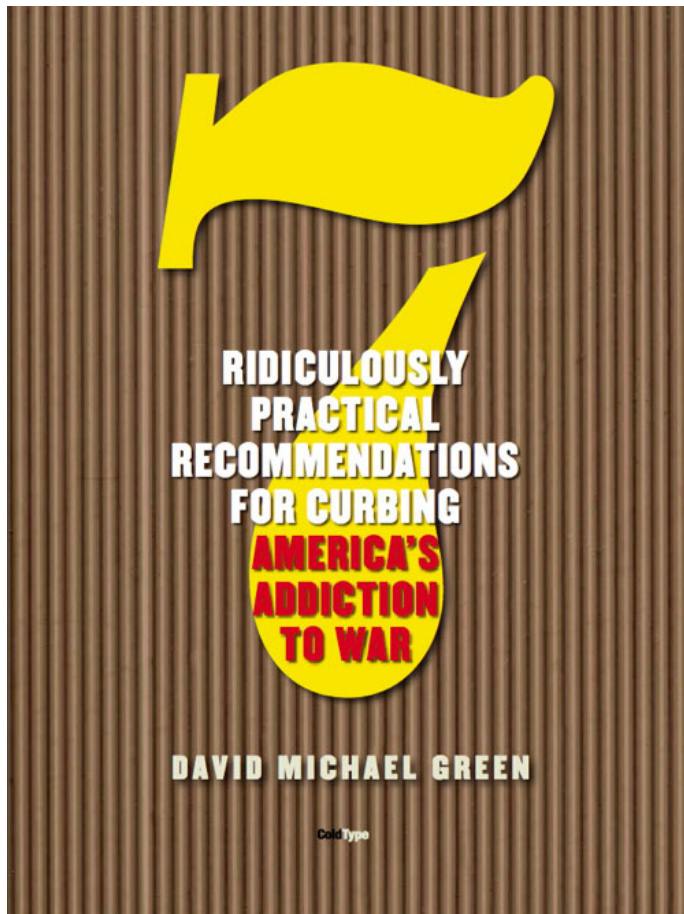


**RIDICULOUSLY
PRACTICAL
RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR CURBING
AMERICA'S
ADDICTION
TO WAR**

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ColdType



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Seeing John McCain and David Petraeus talking about the Iraq debacle in early April is a frightening reminder of how easily we Americans are able to slip into war. And how frequently we do. And how hard it is to get out once we're in. Assuming, of course, we even want to get out.

Recently, I catalogued the unfortunately ample, and the amply unfortunate, evidence that America has a serious jones for war. It would be nice if this were not so. Then again, it would be nice if George W. Bush was not sitting in the White House right now, too. But sometimes you just have to face difficult truths, no matter how unpleasant they are, and both of these are, verdad, muy mal.

But the unfortunate fact of the American appetite for destruction leaves still unanswered the question of whether there's anything to be done about it. In fact, there is. Indeed, I see seven ridiculously practical recommendations that, if adopted, would dramatically reduce American proclivities toward institutionalized violence, which is a fancy way of saying that they would cut or eliminate entirely the number of our wars. I'm not saying these would be easy adjustments to make. In fact, they would not be, especially where mass cultural change or constitutional amendments are concerned. But they are also philosophical and moral slam-dunks. And that will help get over the pragmatic obstacles, when we're ready.

So let's roll up our sleeves and get busy. Here are seven fundamental changes we could make in order to end virtually all American war-fighting except that which is absolutely necessitated by the most dire and otherwise insoluble external conditions.

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ONE: Imagine there was this guy, and he was a Republican and a much-admired two-term US president. Imagine that he had graduated from West Point and then had one of the most celebrated military careers in American history, including serving as commander of NATO and being one of the few Americans to ever wear five stars on his shoulder. Now imagine that this fellow made it his business upon ending a long and distinguished career in public life to give a farewell speech warning of the dangers of a growing military-industrial complex that would distort American values and priorities in pursuit of profits and power. Are you with me so far?

Guess what? You don't have to imagine any of that. The guy's name was Dwight David Eisenhower, and he did all of these things. It wasn't some long-haired Berkeley professor of French Literature with bad teeth and the overpowering odor of pipe smoke who said this, wearing the same hounds-tooth coat he bought at a thrift shop in 1972 for the one interview of his entire life. No, it was Dwight-freakin'-GOP-freakin'-Cold-War-president-freakin'-D-Day-Eisenhower himself, man! I mean, what does it take? Ignoring this advice is like rejecting Babe Ruth's tips on hitting homers because the source is insufficiently authoritative. It would be like saying that George Bush doesn't have the proper credentials to write the Wikipedia entry on errant progeny. C'mon!

But, in fact, Eisenhower's warning was ignored, and war has become the biggest of big businesses in America. Can you say 'Halliburton', for instance? 'Raytheon'? 'Lockheed'? 'No-bid contracts'? 'Military-industrial complex'? Of course you can.

Now let me ask you a question. Would you like the judges who hear criminal justice cases to get paid according to how many folks they put in jail? Do you think that might corrupt the system a bit? Should Social Security Agency workers be compensated by the number of claims they deny? Should we privatize Congress and pay them on a piece-work basis, for the number of laws they pass? I don't think so.

We don't even pay our soldiers by the number of enemy soldiers they kill, so why is it that the task of arming them is a major profit-making enterprise? Why is it that people are getting very rich off of national security?

It's way past time for that to end, and a simple law passed by Congress could end it forever. Better yet, a constitutional amendment. Either way, we need only make it the law of the land that no profits shall ever be made on war. Period, full-stop. Sure, the government can hire out private contractors when it really needs to (which would be a whole lot less than it does now), and these folks can be paid a fair, market-value wage for their labors. Loyal patriots that they are, I'm sure they'll find that compensation entirely satisfying, and will be happy to contribute to America's

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national security by foregoing profits from war. Indeed, they'll recognize that by taking the profits out of the equation, America can massively increase the amount of weaponry it buys to therefore more effectively protect the homeland. And, of course, I'm quite sure these great patriots are already anxious to forego their astonishingly lucrative profits from defense contracts because of the shame they feel knowing that base pay for an Army private is now a whopping \$15,282. ("Course, I should mention that the Army will also pay for your funeral when you get killed in action, so the contrast isn't quite as bad as it seems at first glance.)

Sure, it would require some effort and thought to fill in the lines and determine what is allowed and what isn't. But this is hardly the first time we've ever had to take a fundamental constitutional principle from broad idea to specific implementation. Anyone ever heard of "Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech"? Pretty general statement, isn't it? So let's just get it out there, plain and simple: No profits for war. Something tells me that this alone would seriously cut down on our tendency to go fight in conflicts which we have no reason to engage.

TWO: It's obscene that the people who make wars don't fight them, and that's never been more true than since the GOP chickenhawks came squawking into town. How 'bout that macho Bushie Boy in his flight suit and helmet, eh? Too bad he was AWOL on top of his AWOL during the Vietnam era. Or Cheney with his five draft deferments, or Ashcroft with his seven? Or Rumsfeld, or Wolfowitz, or Perle, or Feith, or... Starting adding up all these tough guys whose toughness only seemed to kick in after their draft eligibility kicked out, and pretty soon you'd have enough to outfit another division or two. Hey, maybe we could have won in Vietnam after all with a little help from these guys. I guess they had "better things to do", as Cheney has actually said. Like perhaps making plans to send other less heavily engaged kids off to fight another war for them a couple of decades later.

Screw that. From now on, anytime there's a war there's a draft. No exceptions, and no favoritism in assignments either, on penalty of treason. Maybe Ol' George might have decided differently if his own partytime twins were in jeopardy of getting whacked in Iraq, eh? Maybe Laura would have put her foot down and denied him his war like she once took away his bottle. I don't know, but I bet it woulda helped. Again, the details would need to be worked out, but the principle is sound. Kill the free ride of the wealthy and powerful and you'll kill the wars.

THREE: No more wars without congressional approval either. Not that these wimpy punks in Congress can be particularly trusted to protect people from bogus

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adventures, either, but they'll be better at it than power-hungry presidents operating on their own. The Founders screwed-up when they gave the power to declare war to Congress in order to check against president ambitions. Nobody bothers to declare war anymore, so it's about as useful nowadays as having the exclusive license to manufacture powdered wigs.

Congress realized this after Vietnam and passed the War Powers Resolution, but every president since has rejected it on principle, and the relevant part of the law has never been tested in the courts. Maybe a better bet would be to amend the Constitution, giving Congress the sole power to authorize war, not just declare it, with some provision (as in the War Powers Act) for allowing the commander-in-chief limited latitude without congressional approval only for very short and very small-scale emergency deployments.

FOUR: War should never happen except when absolutely necessary. Once again, this principle is already legally enshrined, though you'd never know it. The United States is a party to the United Nations Charter treaty, which is emphatic on this question. According to the Charter, aggression is only permitted in cases of self-defense or as part of a UN-sanctioned multilateral collective security force responding to someone else's aggression against someone else. And since the United States Constitution makes treaties the highest law of the land, these provisions absolute apply to the United States government.

You'd hardly notice though, would you? Perhaps another constitutional amendment is in order here, incorporating exactly such language in the Constitution, declaring that the United States may never go to war except under one of those two circumstances. Of course, constitutional language can be bent or broken, just as the Bush administration has done with nearly every single provision in the document. But it makes it harder to do and more obvious when it's happening if you have it set down in black and white in our core governing contract.

FIVE: Anyone who violates these provisions should be punished. Once again, as in so many of the cases above, the remedy for this problem already exists. It's called the International Criminal Court, and it's been in existence since 2002. Meanwhile, for just as long, the United States government under the Bush administration has been at great pains to undermine the Court in every way possible, with the effort initially spearheaded by that beacon of international justice, the lovely John Bolton.

Given that to the rest of the world there's little distinction between Bush's invasion

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of Iraq and, say, Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, it isn't real hard to figure out why the administration has worked so assiduously to destroy the Court, including by un-signing American participation in the treaty and by arm-twisting every other country in the world to sign bilateral agreements exempting Americans from the Court's jurisdiction.

One way to end needless American wars is to give those who make such policies a very personal reason for some serious and sober second thought. The next president should re-sign us up to the ICC, push for Senate ratification, and rip up all the bilateral exemption agreements. Then it might be time for an arrest or six to be made. What did you say is George Bush's address in Crawford?

SIX: Americans have a reputation for being the most blinkered nation in the developed world, and we got that the old-fashioned way: We earned it! We've tried hard not to study history and geography, and damned if we aren't ignorant as hell as a result. And proud if it!

The darned thing is, though, it turns out that ignorance is expensive. I know, I know – who'd-a-thunk-it? But it's true. When you're dumb as a tree (and my apologies to all those trees out there – I know you have feelings too!), your government can do lots of things to you, like turn you into cannon fodder, steal your money through taxes for the purpose of killing people you're not even angry at, or ruin your reputation among billions of people you've never met.

Painful as the whole notion of education might be, it turns out to be a lot less painful than the alternative. I know it's a radical idea, but these are desperate times. Anyhow, what if we actually taught our children a little history, a little geography, and a little truth? Might we not avoid a war or two in the future?

It was good to see MSNBC dump that little bow-tied twit, Tucker Carlson, off the airwaves not long ago. If seeking a better educated American public is our goal, getting disinformation-wielding, Rove-programmed, little weenies like this guy off the air represents a small but promising start. Please, sir, may I have some more?

SEVEN: God help us if there actually is a god. What an amazingly twisted little culture we are, eh? If judgement day ever does come I hope I'm not the one called upon to explain American (would-be) morality to the really pissed-off dude with the long white beard. I don't even know how I could. Something tells me that he would be a lot less concerned about who's been diddling whom, Mr. Falwell, than about our unfortunate tendency to countenance the murder of millions in bogus wars fought in our name.

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Yeah, I'm afraid the ugly truth is that we think nothing of bombing the snot out of third-world countries, with all the "collateral damage" that entails, but can't seem to stop obsessing about which sexual organ happens to go into which orifice while people seek a little pleasure in the privacy of our own homes. If our moral priorities were any more twisted they would look like the entrails of a million dead Iraqi civil... Oh, never mind.

I don't know how we get from here to there, but somehow we have to learn the lesson that war is almost never the right answer. We have to follow the path of the Europeans who, at enormous first-hand cost, have figured this one out and have by-and-large adopted a more thoughtful and just position on this question. We, as a society, need a morality befitting the twenty-first century, not the first (and not even the twentieth).

Altogether these seven ideas for curbing the American propensity for militarism are not the entire solution to the problem. Even so, neither would they be easy to implement. Some of them would require constitutional amendments. Some of them would require a sea change in American political culture. I'm not sure which of these would be more daunting to accomplish.

But accomplished they must be, and America's addiction to war must be curbed somehow, and soon. The costs of continuing on the current path are enormous, which is also why they are so carefully hidden from us at... well, all costs.

It certainly takes courage to go to war. A lot more than it does to camp out in the Situation Room and order other peoples' kids to go. But given the culture we live in today, it may take nearly as much courage to make war prohibitively difficult. Standing up for peace and sanity in an asylum of militarism has never exactly been an easy ride, either.

This country fancies itself as the home of the brave, but I wonder if it's ready for as scary a challenge as making itself peaceful.



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