Episode 1,135: Domestic Consequences of U.S. Militarism

Guest: Christopher Coyne

WOODS: Very interesting and important book, particularly because it's one of these topics that we kind of know must be true but yet might be hard-pressed to give examples of: war is the health of the state. And you're not even necessarily talking about the way bureaucracies grow, although there is some of that, but rather the ways that militarism more directly and obviously has a domestic analogue. So it's interesting to see this actually documented.

So let's start off for skeptics who might say: look, all we're trying to do is spread democracy around the world — and here you don't question the motives of U.S. foreign policy. That's not your point. Maybe you're trying to do all kinds of good things around the world. Why should we be worried that that can't be compartmentalized? Shouldn't it in principle be able to be compartmentalized and then domestic affairs are domestic affairs?

COYNE: That's right. So the way that most people think about these issues is that foreign policy is distinct from domestic policy, and so foreign policy takes place abroad and when the U.S. government engages in these foreign interventions, in does so to protect domestic life. And what my coauthor, Abigail Hall, and I argue in our book is that when a society, in this case the United States, adopts the values of an aggressive empire, it runs the real risk of adopting those characteristics at home. And the reason why is that preparing for intervention and engaging in intervention reduces freedoms in domestic life.

And in order to explain this, we developed this idea of what we call the boomerang effect, and so you can think of the intervening the country, the U.S. government is throwing a boomerang abroad in order to accomplish some foreign intervention, which might be very noble or benevolent. We don't make judgment of that for the purpose of our analysis. But oftentimes, it comes home and undermines liberty domestically.

WOODS: You have a quotation in here from Douglas MacArthur that I'd never heard before that's quite chilling, and it goes as follows. It's from 1957: "Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear, kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil to gobble us up if we would not blindly rally behind it by furnishing the exuberant funds demanded, yet in retrospect, these disasters seem never to have happened, seem never to have been quite real."

Well, we could apply that 50, 60 years later, it seems, to hold. Now, there of course you are making something of a value judgment about the merits of American foreign policy because you're suggesting that some of it might be based on exaggeration.

COYNE: Certainly, certainly. And so that's a very powerful quote, we think, because of course MacArthur was no softie when it came to foreign military intervention and the use of military power, and he fully recognized how this often unfolds. And so one of the things we make the argument about in the book is that fear is one of kind of the foundational conditions for the boomerang effect to operate, for foreign interventions to come back and affect domestic life. And that fear can be legitimate. There can be legitimate existential threats, but as MacArthur points out, that doesn't need to be the case. The incentives within government and within those connected to the security state is often to exaggerate those threats as well, and when that happens, it opens the door, if you will, to expansions in the scope of government power over domestic life.

WOODS: I would say the aspect of all this that the general public has caught onto the most would be the militarization of the police. We've seen an awful lot of writing on that. We've seen whole books written on it. So you do treat it here in this book. Is this just a matter of the grade of weapons that police are being supplied with, or is it also a matter of tactics and attitude?

COYNE: It's a much broader, comprehensive problem. So the equipment and hardware is certainly one thing, but as you point out, it's the tactics and attitude that matters as well. And of course, in order to understand this, one has to go back several decades and look at the first SWAT team, which of course was founded in Los Angeles in the late '60s and into the '70s. And the very idea behind the first SWAT team was to import military tactics domestically. Of course at the time that this was done, it was supposed to only be used in very extreme situations. This of course was coming on the heels of the race riots, and it was only supposed to be limited to a very small number of potential cases.

But of course there's been a major expansion in the use of SWAT teams, and two of the things we highlight in the book are the expansiveness of the U.S. battlefield, the U.S. government's battlefield, which literally covers the entire earth, including the United States. Of course the war on terror and the war on drugs are two open-ended wars that don't have a clear battlefield. Everything's a potential battlefield, and when you open the home front up to being a battlefield, of course those attitudes, those tactics, as well as that hardware is going to be utilized, and that's what we observe both with the war on drugs and war on terror, the militarization of police, but also domestic surveillance and the use of drones as well.

WOODS: On the militarization of the police thing, one of the things that helps propel this is that so many of us have been imbued with a law-and-order mentality, with the idea being that if you don't support, frankly, whatever it is the local police demand, then you must be "soft on crime." Like, everything has to be reduced to a dumb-guy bumper sticker, you know? You must be soft on crime, you're coddling criminals. And we can't have a good, rational discussion that says something like the following, that of course in a free society policing will be an important function, but that doesn't mean we just give carte blanche to the police. And it's especially rich to hear this coming from people who are supposed to favor small government — what, except for people who wear the state's uniform and carry out the most violent aspect of state work? There we're just supposed to stand up and salute? It's very hard to crack through that.

COYNE: Oh, it's extremely hard to crack through it, of course, because this idea is perpetuated from the time people are young and it permeates all areas of life. It's the police, but of course the military in general. it's the same kind of idea that if somehow you are at

odds with the U.S. government's foreign policy, that somehow you're anti-American or you're anti-"the troops." And as you correctly point out, one can be a strong, ardent defender of the fundamental principles of America but despise the activities of the government that are undertaken in the name of those principles and values, and it's I would argue extremely crucial for people who consider themselves patriotic to recognize that there is a fundamental tension between many of the activities of the U.S. government when it comes to foreign policy or domestic policy and the values that many people hold to underpin what America is all about.

WOODS: Yeah, it really is ideology among the public helps to make possible what the government can get away with. Now, I know you've got specific examples in here. We said a little something about police militarization, but there's stuff in here about surveillance and torture, etc., and we'll get to that. But is there something you could say to somebody who says: I look around the Western world and I see very, very large bureaucratic structures everywhere I look, no matter whether that government has been engaged in war or not. If the state wants to enlarge, it'll use whatever pretext it needs to enlarge, so could we be exaggerating the effect that war and militarism have when Canada too has a big, intrusive bureaucracy, and so does Sweden, and so do a lot of other countries that haven't been as involved militarily as the U.S. has?

COYNE: One of the things we try to point out very early on in the book is that we are not trying to provide a monocausal explanation for growth in government in general, a single explanation. And of course, any treatment of government operations historically or in the present, including the growth of government, is going to be a complex issue with very many aspects to it and nuances that one has to appreciate and study. Nonetheless, we think that militarism and a proactive foreign policy is one of many aspects, but a crucial aspect, and the reason why is that when you think about war-making and foreign policy in general, it really is a kind of skeleton key that opens up all the doors to all areas of life. It affects economic life; it affects civil liberties; it affects monetary and fiscal aspects of life and many others. And so while there are numerous factors that influence the growth of government and many of those are non-war-related, these factors that we consider are of crucial import for understanding the growth of government.

WOODS: Let me read something I read on page 37 of your book, and then I want you to apply it to your thesis.

You say: "In some cases, the careers of specialists in state-produced social control span both the public and private aspects of this sector. To illustrate this overlap, consider the finding of one recent report that, of the 108 three- and four-star generals and admirals who retired between 2009 and 2011, 70%" — that's 7-0 — "70% accepted jobs with private defense contractors or consultants. This is one illustration of the revolving door, the back-and-forth movement of personnel between the government and private sectors based on an intricate network of overlapping relationships and influence."

And then into the next paragraph you say: "Those who develop a comparative advantage in innovating and implementing state-produced social control via foreign intervention will benefit through better career prospects and higher wages by employing their unique human capital domestically."

All right, what exactly is that connection?

COYNE: Certainly. And so at the core of our thesis is this idea that when you prepare for foreign intervention — that is, the people engaged in that preparation — or intervene abroad, you're going to develop certain skills, what economists call human capital, which is the collection of experiences and skills that a person collects and possesses. And when they are no longer involved in that foreign intervention, those skills and experiences, that human capital doesn't simply — the human capital that a person accumulates when they are involved in preparing for or engaging in foreign intervention does not simply go away after that intervention ends. Instead, those people reallocate their efforts to other areas of life, and oftentimes that involves reallocating them to domestic life. Just like people in private markets earn a relatively high wage when they pursue their comparative advantage, so too do those in the national security state.

And so as that passage that you read illustrates, one manifestation of this is what we call the revolving door, the movement between the public sector and private sector. And the idea is simply that people that work in the national security state in government accumulate certain skills, and when they're looking for a new path, a new opportunity, oftentimes that is going to present itself in the private sector. And of course, that causes a whole host of issues because not only are those individuals better able to engage in lobbying and rent-seeking type behavior on the behalf of private firms, but they also carry the military mindset that they have gained through their government experience in the national security state into private, domestic life, and that influences how firms are structured, how they operate, the policies and initiatives they undertake and that they push government to undertake, and so on. And so there's kind of this cumulative effect, whereby these foreign interventions through a long chain of consequences really change and can perversely affect the social fabric of domestic life.

WOODS: There was a guy named Seymour Melman at Columbia University. I don't remember when he died, but certainly he was alive until maybe the early 2000s. And he did some interesting work on trying to figure out, even though I don't think he had read Frederic Bastiat, he was interested, even though he was on the left, in a kind of what-is-seen-and-what-is-not-seen analysis about the military. And so he was talking about another way that domestic life was affected by it.

He would say, for example, think of all the people who are siphoned off into research and development for the military. Now, he says it's not like research-and-development people are so abundant or that they're super-abundant and that as soon as we take some for the military, new ones pop up in their place. We have a very, very limited number of people who are smart enough to engage in this kind of research. And so there's an incalculable loss to civil society. In other words, all the different innovations that could have occurred on the domestic side did not occur because the talent, the brain power was siphoned off into the military for often quite dubious purposes.

And he had some estimates as to what percentage of these people we're talking about, and then you could try to spin out some kind of estimate of economic growth that's lost as a result of that or opportunities that are foregone. I mean, you've got some discreet and specific examples of the way militarism has affected our domestic life, but really, it's quite compendiously broad in its scope, let's say.

COYNE: Certainly, and Seymour Melman, he was great on these issues. He has a wonderful book called *The Permanent War Economy* and another called I believe *Pentagon Capitalism*.

WOODS: I love *Pentagon Capitalism*. That's such a great title.

COYNE: It's a wonderful title, yeah. You know, one of my former students — Thomas Duncan is his name — and I worked on several papers where we tried to update some of Melman's ideas. We call it the overlooked costs of the permanent-war economy and it's this —

WOODS: Oh, wow. I didn't know about — I wrote a paper on Melman years ago. When did you start doing your stuff?

COYNE: More recently, so this would have been about five or six years ago.

WOODS: Oh, yeah, not long enough ago for me to have benefited from it.

COYNE: No, no. But anyway, his point is a crucial one. As you point out, it goes back to Bastiat, to Hazlitt, this idea of tracing out the consequences of an initial intervention, which many people think is just benign if not value-added because you're producing this public good or supposed public good of defense, but it really has this long chain of consequences which really erode a whole array of aspects of life. Melman was highlighting the economic aspects of that, but there are a host of other aspects as well.

WOODS: Let's talk about a couple more of those aspects before I let you go. Let's talk just a little bit about surveillance. I've done episodes on surveillance. Couldn't it be said that we would have some kind of surveillance state whether or not we were involved in a global war on terror because the bad guys want to get us whether we're over there or not, is the reigning ideology, and therefore we need to listen in on your calls and read your messages and stuff?

COYNE: Certainly. Look, surveillance has existed as long as the state has existed, not just the United States, but everywhere. So it's always been inherent in state activities. But the specific trajectory and evolution of the U.S. security state is heavily influenced by foreign intervention, and one of the things that was very surprising to us when we started researching this is that the current U.S. surveillance state is typically attributed to or associated with, I should say, with the NSA, which was founded in 1952.

But really, it goes all the way to the U.S. occupation of the Philippines in the late 1890s, and that was really the first instance where a person named Ralph Van Deman set up what at the time was a state-of-the-art surveillance state to complement the brute force that was used by the U.S. government to try to put down the insurgency — the insurgency from the perspective of the United States, of course. From the perspectives of the insurgents, they were combatting U.S. imperialism, unwelcome occupiers. Van Deman came back to the United States in the early 1900s and lobbied for the next decade and a half to establish a similar apparatus at home, and he was eventually successful in 1917.

And so World War I created an opening for him to establish what was at the time the Military Intelligence Section, which was the first iteration of what today is the NSA. And through a series of changes and reforms that expanded over time, as bureaucracies tend to do, that resulted in the NSA in 1952, and of course the revelations by Seymour Hersh about the abuses of that power. Then of course you have the Church Committee, which investigated these abuses and passed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, which was intended to put checks on the surveillance state through the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. But

again, thanks to the revelations by Edward Snowden in 2013, we know that those barriers are basically nonexistent, or to the extent they do exist are very weak checks on government power.

So the point we try to emphasize in the book is that these threats to our civil liberties today — surveillance, militarization of police, drones, torture — they all have a very long history, which can be traced back to past foreign interventions. And many people neglect this. Going back to our earlier point about the overlooked cost, they tend to focus on the costs that are seen and in the here and now. But one of the overlooked costs of a proactive military, of militaristic foreign policy is that it creates institutional possibilities that don't come to light for decades if not longer into the future. And that's a real and genuine threat regarding government power.

WOODS: Let's finish up with some reference to torture. How is that related to domestic policy when it looks like the episodes involving torture we've heard about are all of foreign combatants?

COYNE: Certainly. So this one is out of the ones we've discussed kind of the trickiest, if you will, because the connection's not the clearest in terms of, as you're pointing out, we don't walk around and see widespread torture. Nonetheless, we do see torture in the United States, and again, torture a lot of people attribute of course the Abu Ghraib scandal, and they'll say, "Ah, a few bad apples. It's a one-off type situation where people got caught up in the moment and that's not the policy of the U.S. government."

Of course nothing could be further from the truth, for those who care to study the issue carefully. The U.S. government through the CIA and through other agencies has for decades invested significant amounts of resources in developing technologies and techniques to torture people, including proactive efforts to develop what's called clean torture. Clean torture is torture that doesn't leave physical markings. And the reason of course that this is beneficial from the government's perspective is because it makes accountability and observation of those torture techniques extremely difficult.

And the U.S. government, as I mentioned, has invested significant efforts. Project Phoenix, which of course was the institutionalized torture effort during Vietnam, was just one of many examples of this, but of course, as you point out, that took place abroad. So how does that affect domestic life? Well, as we've talked about, the people involved in these, in this case, torture initiatives don't simply just disappear after their time abroad is done. They come back to the United States and they influence domestic life.

Perhaps the starkest example of this over the past decade or two decades is someone named John Burge, who was a police officer in the Chicago Police Department. He had been in Vietnam. There is reason to believe that he had been involved in torturing people in Vietnam as part of the Vietnam War, and in Chicago prisons, he was convicted of torturing numerous people to get convictions out of them and to employing techniques that are known as "the Vietnam special," making a direct connection back to his time in Vietnam, and that included things like shock treatment, stress positions, psychological torture, and so on in order to get people to confess to crimes that they ended up not committing or hadn’t committed.

WOODS: Wow. I had not known about that episode at all.

COYNE: Yeah, and it made some of the news headlines when it came out. He was released from prison in 2015. He could have been convicted of 40+ years. He only was convicted of unfortunately 4 years. Oftentimes, as you know, police are not charged if they are at all or convicted when they engage in crimes. The city of Chicago I believe gave about $5.5 million in reparations to his victims. But we have on record 110 African Americans who were tortured under Burge and his kind of cronies leading to wrongful convictions and false confessions, and so this is shocking to most Americans, but this happens. And this is one of the few documented cases we have. We can only imagine how many undocumented cases have occurred.

WOODS: You know, there's also just in private life a dimension of this that would be hard to capture in a social science study. Just think about all the individuals who come home who are never quite right again and their family lives are not quite right, and the family breaks apart and they degenerate into addictions and self-destructive behavior. Surely, this describes the fate of a great many people whose names we never hear, who are never in the newspapers, but who are likewise victims of militarism.

COYNE: Certainly, certainly. And so that's another unforeseen consequence, which we don't talk about directly in the book, one that gets more play than it has in the past but still is severely underestimated, which is that war and warfare has a life-changing effect on those involved. And it doesn't just affect their life, but also their families, their communities, and so on. And you know, many people think again: well, look, this isn't the way it is anymore. Back in World War II, people were sent into these terrible combat situations and so we can see why they'd be affected, but that's not the case anymore. Deployments are relatively low compared to World War II. Technology like drones is much more involved. But I think that neglects some important aspects. For instance, there's been some recent studies about the psychological effects on drone operators and how they too suffer from post-traumatic disorder that can affect their life, and so technology when it comes to warfare doesn't overcome kind of these unforeseen consequences.

WOODS: Well, it's a very, very good and important book, *Tyranny Comes Home: The Domestic Fate of U.S. Militarism*. And how wonderful for you and your coauthor, Abigail Hall, that the book is published by Stanford University Press. Absolutely tremendous. Well, congratulations. I'm going to link to it of course on the show notes page. This is Episode 1,135, so TomWoods.com/1135 is where you can find the link to grab this book. And again, congratulations and thanks so much.

COYNE: Thank you, Tom. I appreciate the opportunity.