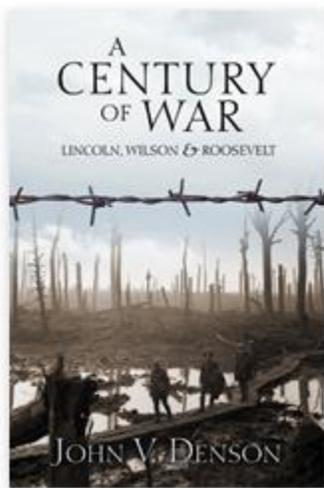


The Mises Review: A Century of War: Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt by John V. Denson

John V. Denson

[A Century of War: Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt. By John V. Denson. Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2006. 207 pages.]



Judge Denson has, in this excellent book, expertly solved a difficult problem. Wars are a principal means for the state to increase its power. The classic work on this theme by Robert Higgs, [Crisis and Leviathan](#), will be well known to most readers of this journal; but Denson also calls attention in this connection to the important study of Bruce Porter, [War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics](#) (New York, 1994).

Given this fact, one can readily understand why unscrupulous political leaders actively seek war: they wish to increase their own power. But of course war, with all its appalling massacres and horrors, is very much against the interests of the great majority of the population. Here our problem arises: how do the political leaders manage to enlist the general population behind their murderous crusades?

Denson finds the answer by appealing to a well-known fact. Most people, despite their aversion for war, are not pacifists. If they have been attacked, they will fight back; and, once battle is joined, matters usually get out of hand. This gives the political leaders their opportunity. They have only to provoke an enemy into an attack. By doing so, they will be able to rally their nation to "defend" against an assault they have themselves instigated. In one prime example of this tactic, Secretary of War Henry Stimson noted in his diary for November 25, 1941, "The question was how we should maneuver them [the Japanese] into the position of firing the first shot without allowing too much danger to ourselves" (p. 101). Denson discusses in detail two instances of this phenomenon: Abraham Lincoln's attempt, knowing that this would induce an attack, to provision Fort Sumter, and Franklin Roosevelt's aggressive policy toward Japan, which led to the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor. Denson also considers in less detail Woodrow Wilson's similar tactics toward Germany in World War I.

The key to Lincoln's policy toward the states that had seceded may be found in a passage of his First Inaugural, delivered on March 4, 1861. Here he said that he would not initiate force against the departed states, even though in his view they had acted illegally in seceding. His seemingly conciliatory policy was belied by a qualification. He said that he would not use force, except to the extent necessary to collect the duties and imposts.

The power confided in me [Lincoln] will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imposts; but beyond what may be necessary for these

objects, there will be no invasion, no using of force against or among the people anywhere. (p. 47, emphasis omitted)

The government of the United States depended at that time for its revenue principally on tariffs. These operated to the disadvantage of the South, a largely agricultural area, which had to pay high prices for imports. Tariffs redistributed wealth from the South to the North.

Another development which began to divide the North and South was that the political power of the North allowed it to keep a vast majority of the tariff revenue and use it for "internal improvements," such as building harbors and canals, which was, in effect, a corporate welfare program. (p. 38)

Northern interests added to Southern misery by using the tariff explicitly for industrial protection, culminating in the Morrill Tariff, passed by the Senate in February 1861, after a number of states had already seceded, and avidly promoted by Lincoln. (For an outstanding account of the crucial role of tariffs in secession, in addition to the sources cited by Denson, see Mark Thornton and Robert B. Ekelund, Jr., [*Tariffs, Blockades, and Inflation: The Economics of the Civil War*](#) [2004]).

By seceding, the South threatened this entire system. By instituting a free-trade zone — or at least by drastically undercutting Northern tariffs — the South could divert the bulk of international trade to Southern ports; Northern business would be struck a severe blow and the federal government compelled to seek an alternative system of revenue. Lincoln, a firm believer in tariffs, was determined to prevent this from happening. Hence his insistence that the duties and imposts would be collected.

The message was not lost on the South. They at once recognized Lincoln's aggressive intentions in the Inaugural. Additionally, he refused to receive the Confederate commissioners sent to negotiate such matters as the sale of federal property in the states that had seceded. With this background, it is small wonder that both the South Carolina Governor and Confederate President Jefferson Davis demanded that Fort Sumter be surrendered. The only plausible purpose for the federal government to retain the fort would be to ensure that federal tariffs were collected on goods entering the port of Charleston, and this the Confederacy could on no account allow if its independence were to be preserved.

Precisely this state of affairs gave Lincoln his opportunity. He, along with most members of his Cabinet, at first contemplated surrender of the fort, as its defense was militarily next to impossible. Further reflection led Lincoln to change his mind. Secretary of State Seward had led the Southern authorities to believe that Lincoln would surrender the fort, but the president now prevaricated. He now said that he would send provisions to the fort, not arms.

Why did he do so? Denson follows a famous article by Charles W. Ramsdell, "Lincoln and Fort Sumter," *Journal of Southern History* (1937) (pp. 47, 60). Lincoln, in this view, deliberately used his knowledge that the South could not tolerate a federal fort on a permanent basis to induce the South to attack it. If the fort were attacked when Lincoln was ostensibly only supplying it with provisions, Northern opinion could be swayed to support an all-out attack on the "disloyal" states. They would be guilty of an assault on federal property: was it not then justifiable to repel those who had dared to fire on the American flag? In fact, provisions had been shut off only because the Confederate authorities got wind of Lincoln's devious intentions. Had Lincoln seriously wished a peaceful resolution, the matter could have been readily resolved.

The thesis may at first strike one as extreme, but substantial evidence exists to support it. By no means does the case rest on mere inference about Lincoln's intentions. His onetime Illinois colleague, Senator Orville Browning, said that Lincoln explicitly told him that he intended to provoke an incident over Fort Sumter. Browning met with Lincoln on the evening of July 3, 1861, and his diary for that date contains this entry:

He himself [Lincoln] conceived the idea, and proposed sending supplies, without an attempt to reinforce, giving notice of the fact to Governor Pickens of S.C. [South Carolina]. The plan succeeded. They attacked Sumter — it fell, and thus, did more service than it otherwise could. (p. 83, emphasis omitted)

Denson's argument, and that of other Lincoln revisionists such as [Thomas DiLorenzo](#), should not be misunderstood. He does not contend that the policy of Jefferson Davis was beyond reproach. Perhaps Davis ought not to have fallen into Lincoln's trap: on this issue Denson does not commit himself. The point, rather, is that Lincoln set a trap. Neither does Denson deny that the Southern states, in seceding, were in part motivated by fear that Lincoln would interfere with slavery. The question that interests him is rather why Lincoln would not let the South depart in peace, and here the answer lies in the tariff, not slavery. It is, by the way, ironic that such self-styled defenders of freedom as Harry Jaffa and his acolyte Timothy Sandefur, who attack "neo-Confederate" views of the sort that Denson here ably advocates, themselves think that slavery was a more efficient economic system than the free market. They hold that, once entrenched, only Lincoln's bellicose policy could have eradicated it. The "neo-Confederates," with greater confidence in freedom, think that free labor would have overcome competition from slaves and that, accordingly, emancipation could have been secured without the horrors of civil war, as it was elsewhere in the world. Sandefur has presumed to "correct" Mises on the efficiency of slave labor: one imagines that the great work of J.E. Cairnes, [The Slave Power](#) (New York, 1862), with its cogent argument for the deleterious effects of slavery on economic growth, would likewise meet with his disapproval.

Denson, a prominent Alabama attorney, is a master of the "admission against interest," a tactic in which statements from the opposition are used to build one's case. Denson supports his libertarian criticism of Lincoln's use of war to promote centralization and governmental power by appeal to historians of impeccably "establishment" views. He quotes Carl Degler, a well-known Stanford historian, on the parallels between Lincoln's use of war and the policy of the Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, in his three wars of German unification. Again, on Lincoln's rampant violation of civil liberties in pursuit of his ruthless political goals, he cites none other than Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Woodrow Wilson's insistence on American entry into World War I needlessly prolonged an already immensely costly war, and the evils of Nazism and Communism stem directly from the collapse of the traditional European order that the war brought about. Denson devotes some attention to Wilson's use of Lincoln-like tactics in exploiting the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. The ship had been built to carry arms and was in fact carrying munitions when the Germans sank it. Wilson was fully aware of this yet refused to issue a warning to American passengers to avoid the ship. Wilson treated the sinking as an unprovoked attack on a civilian liner and used grief over the loss of American lives to incite anti-German sentiment. The inveterate Anglophile president had to wait until 1917 before he was able to bring America into the war. Once more, Denson's argument should be viewed on its own terms. He is not defending the German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare but rather indicting Wilson's efforts to manipulate that policy for his own bellicose ends.

Denson considers in much greater detail the efforts of Franklin Roosevelt to bring America into World War II through the "back door" of a Japanese attack. Roosevelt wished to bring the United States into Britain's war against Nazi Germany. Here, following Murray Rothbard, Denson stresses the financial interests of the Morgan and Rockefeller groups in a British victory. Roosevelt, though he was later to turn on the British Empire, was in the period 1939–41 anxious to help the British cause. "World War II might therefore be considered, from one point of view, as a coalition war: the Morgans got their war in Europe, the Rockefellers theirs in Asia" (p. 167, [quoting Rothbard](#)). Owing to the reluctance of the American public to enter the war, Roosevelt could not pursue his aim directly.

Instead, he sought to provoke a Japanese attack. He knew that Germany, as Japan's Axis Pact ally, would enter the war on Japan's side if he were successful in his scheme. Roosevelt accordingly adopted an intransigent policy toward the Japanese; when they would not meet his terms, he cut off oil exports to Japan and eventually froze Japanese assets in the United States. Denson quotes several sources, including the statement by Secretary

Stimson mentioned previously, that indicate that Roosevelt hoped to induce the Japanese to fire first in a contrived incident.

Denson's argument so far parallels that of the UCLA political scientist and historian Marc Trachtenberg, in his [*The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method*](#) (Princeton, 2006)[\[1\]](#) ; but our author goes further. Like such earlier revisionists as George Morgenstern, Harry Elmer Barnes, and Charles Beard, Denson holds that the Roosevelt Administration deliberately withheld information from the military commanders at Pearl Harbor indicating that a Japanese attack was imminent. By doing so, they thereby assured American entry into the war.

This is a daring thesis, but doubters must confront a massive amount of evidence. Against the advice of the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral James O. Richardson, Roosevelt insisted that the fleet be moved to Pearl Harbor. Richardson warned that this would endanger the fleet and be viewed by the Japanese as a provocation; for his efforts, Roosevelt removed him from command.

Readers interested in the details of the last few days before the December 7 attack will find them discussed in abundance. One item that I found particularly telling is that the chief of naval operations, Admiral Harold Stark, at first picked up the telephone on the morning of December 7 to call Admiral Kimmel, the commander at Pearl Harbor, after receiving the decoded fourteen-part Japanese telegram that indicated an attack was about to take place. He then put down the telephone and did not make the call. Likewise, General George Marshall, the army chief of staff, did not telephone the army commander. Instead, he sent a telegram without priority; as Harry Elmer Barnes once put it, he sent it "like he might send a birthday telegram to his grandmother."

But must not this theory answer a serious objection? Roosevelt may have wanted to enter the war; but surely he did not want the Japanese to defeat America. Why then would he put the American fleet at risk? Should we not take Stimson's comment as referring to some very much smaller encounter?

Denson responds effectively. Admiral Kimmel received an order before the attack to send to sea all the most modern naval vessels in the fleet. Only relatively outdated ships were in port when the Japanese attacked. "On orders from Washington, Kimmel left his oldest vessels inside Pearl Harbor and sent twenty-one modern warships, including his two aircraft carriers, west toward Wake and Midway" (p. 157, quoting Robert B. Stinnett, [*Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor*](#) [New York, 2000]; Denson has been much influenced by this book). Roosevelt, avid for war, undertook a desperate gamble.

Readers of [*A Century of War*](#) will gain an indispensable tool for understanding American foreign policy. Skepticism about claims of injured innocence from Washington is the beginning of political wisdom.

Note

[\[1\]](#) See [my review](#) in *The Mises Review* Summer 2006 for a more detailed account of Roosevelt's policy toward Japan.