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Conservatives for Empire

| [More](#) ^[1]

| October 15, 2010

| [Doug Bandow](#) ^[2]



The U.S. government is effectively bankrupt. Angry citizens in the Tea Party movement are bypassing traditional politicians. Republican Party apparatchiks are scrambling to turn popular frustration to their advantage.

The conservative movement also is in flux. Some pundits identified with the Right, such as David Frum and Ross Douthat, have advocated that conservatives become “liberals lite,” abandoning their commitment to limited government and learning to live with the expensive, expansive and intrusive welfare state.

Most traditional conservative leaders have rejected this advice, choosing instead to support the conservative verities of fiscal responsibility and individual liberty. But many of the same people have joined Frum in advocating continuation of America's essentially imperial foreign policy. They would replace traditional conservative views of foreign policy and executive power with Wilsonian warmongering.

The most recent example of conservatives promoting an essentially liberal foreign policy is the *Weekly Standard's* William Kristol, American Enterprise Institute's Arthur Brooks, and Heritage Foundation's Edwin Feulner. They wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*: "It is unrealistic to imagine a return to long-term prosperity if we face instability around the globe because of a hollowed-out U.S. military lacking the size and strength to defend American interests around the world."

There is no more basic responsibility for the national government than defense. But when it speaks of "the common defense," the Constitution means America. The nation's founders never imagined their country as an international governess, subsidizing wealthy allies, hectoring presumed friends, bombing unfriendly critics, remaking failed societies and creating endless enemies.

Indeed, today the military does almost everything except defend the United States. On September 11, 2001, America's Department of "Defense" proved unable to safeguard Americans. As a result, Congress created the Department of Homeland Security.

There should be no doubt as to the cost of America's expansive foreign policy. First is the Pentagon budget—in essence, military spending is the price of our foreign policy. Kristol, Brooks and Feulner play a shell game by focusing on GDP percentages rather than actual outlays. In real terms, the GDP today is more than twelve times as large as in 1940 and seven times as large as in 1950. Thus, spending 1 percent of GDP on the military today means providing *twelve times as much money* as spending 1 percent in 1940, and *seven times as much money* as spending 1 percent in 1950. Military outlays should reflect the threats facing America, not America's economic wealth.

In fiscal year 2011 the U.S. will spend about \$740 billion on the military, more than \$550 billion on "normal" military expenditures. Although Defense Secretary Robert Gates is looking for economies in defense outlays, he still expects total military spending to rise in real terms. In constant dollars, military outlays have more than doubled over the last decade. Strip out war expenses, and real expenditures are still up 1.8 times. Yet the *Weekly Standard* complains that we are "skimping on our defense budgets" and signaling "weakness to friends and enemies alike."

Even more astonishing, current outlays are greater than Washington spent at any point during the Cold, Korean and Vietnam Wars. We are supposed to believe that America is at greater risk today than when aggressive, totalitarian communist dictatorships ruled the Soviet Union and China, America's allies were still recovering from devastating conflicts and proxy wars raged in the Third World.

Today, hegemonic communism has disappeared. Even supposedly resurgent Russia is a shadow of the former Soviet Union. Moscow's old allies have joined the European Union

and NATO. The European Union spends upwards of five times as much as Russia on the military, and has a more-than-ten-fold economic and three-fold population advantage.

Maoism has disappeared from China, which has much at stake in a stable economic order. Japan's economy is as large as that of China, and Tokyo, despite decades of anemic defense spending, nevertheless has created a potent, if limited, military. South Korea enjoys an economic advantage over the North as large as *forty to one*. Most of the other East Asian nations are growing and wary of Beijing's ambitions.

The United States is allied with every major industrialized power, save China and Russia. The U.S. Navy is as large as the next thirteen navies combined, eleven of which are from allied states. America retains its geographic advantage of peaceful neighbors to the north and south, and oceans to the east and west. In contrast, the People's Republic of China, Russia and India all face far harsher security environments.

In this world against what must the United States defend itself?

Moscow can beat up on a small neighboring nation like Georgia, but has no capacity to threaten America or conquer Europe. China might become the next peer competitor to America, but that is long in the future. This supposedly dangerous competitor possesses a small intercontinental-ballistic-missile force and no aircraft carriers. Its military spending is a fraction of America's.

India is another potential great power, but has little cause to be hostile to the United States. And Delhi shares an interest with Washington in constraining Beijing.

In its desperate search for possible enemies, the Heritage Foundation warns that "the EU could emerge as the dominant power in a Europe that is hostile to the United States." So Washington must build up its military and occupy its European allies so they don't attack America?

Terrorism remains the most obvious threat to America, but it is no substitute for the Soviet Union. The reason groups like al-Qaeda attack civilians is because they lack serious weapons. Terrorists threaten to kill hundreds or thousands, not destroy nations.

Moreover, every intervention risks creating more enemies and promoting more terrorism. The issue obviously is complex, but history demonstrates that terrorism is a common political tactic. Until recently the most prolific suicide bombers were the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Had Ronald Reagan not inserted U.S. forces into the middle of the Lebanese civil war, made up of twenty-five warring factions, neither the U.S. embassy nor the Marine Corps barracks would have been attacked. Washington has learned that there is a price to be paid for bombing, invading, and occupying other nations.

The United States does spend a lot of time protecting its allies, but that primarily serves their interests. After all, the Europeans, Japanese and South Koreans are all well able to defend themselves. Why should it be counted as an advantage for U.S. taxpayers to

underwrite European welfare states?

Indeed, creating defense dependents makes America less secure. Is the United States better off if its friends are all weak, insecure and helpless without American support? Or is America safer if its friends possess potent militaries, cooperate with each other and are determined to safeguard their own interests? The question answers itself.

Much is made of protecting economic prosperity and international trade. Who, however, is threatening the global economy? The most likely future challenger to American dominance, the PRC, is even more dependent on international commerce than is the United States. In contrast, the world's most malign actors, who might want to disrupt their neighbors' economies—North Korea, Burma, Iran, Venezuela, Al-Qaeda—are among the most isolated states and groups. Most possess limited ability to interfere with much of anything.

Anyway, the time is long past when everyone everywhere should sit back expecting Americans to take care of every global security problem. International cooperation has helped confront Somali pirates. The European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia and even China all have much at stake in today's global trading system.

Some neoconservatives chatter about "the defense of freedom," and therefore propose to employ eighteen-year-old Americans in an attempt to liberate the globe. As Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, however, it is far easier to establish governments which hold elections than to create genuinely liberal societies. Moreover, Americans killed in such foreign adventures are not able to enjoy U.S. democracy.

More basic humanitarianism remains a tempting justification for military intervention, but it isn't a matter of defense. Successfully creating an honest, effective central government in Kabul, even if possible, doesn't matter much to the United States. It might be convenient to have a compliant government in power, but Central Asia never has been much of a security concern for the United States. Weakening or eliminating al-Qaeda is a central objective, but terrorists have proved able to operate from most every nation, including advanced industrial states. Al-Qaeda's future will not be determined by who rules Kabul.

As for saving lives, Iraq demonstrates just how hard it is to use war for humanitarian purposes. The estimated number of dead Iraqis starts at one hundred thousand and climbs to an incredible one million. Non-fatal casualties are higher. Some 4 million people are thought to have been forced from their homes.

In any case, the highest responsibility of the U.S. government is to its own people, including those in uniform. Their lives should not be risked without something substantial at stake for their own society. It is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain limited, constitutional government at home while conducting an imperial foreign policy abroad. "War is the health of the state," observed Randolph Bourne.

Ironically, despite the attempt of neoconservatives to appropriate his legacy, Ronald Reagan led the way toward a responsible conservative foreign policy. He used the military only three times—to retaliate against Libya for its terrorist attack in Berlin, remove the

communist government from power in Grenada and intervene in Lebanon. After the attacks on the American embassy and the Marines he recognized the last to have been a terrible mistake, withdrawing rather than launching an attempt at nation building—causing some conservative critics to accuse him of encouraging terrorism.

Even worse was the neoconservative reaction to his commitment to end the Cold War. Many neocons saw him as a dupe. *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz compared Reagan to Jimmy Carter and even Great Britain's Neville Chamberlain. Podhoretz charged that "appeasement by any other name smells as rank, and the stench of it now pervades the American political atmosphere." While it's presumptuous to predict what Ronald Reagan would say about foreign policy today, it is hard to believe that he would be on the side of "conservatives" who advocate endless war.

Today the United States maintains around one thousand military installations of various forms overseas. Hundreds of thousands of Americans are stationed on foreign soil. Most of the U.S. military is configured for offensive action abroad. America may not be a traditional empire, annexing foreign territories and exploiting foreign peoples. But Washington is following an imperial policy. Ultimately, conservatives must choose what matters more: preserving liberties at home or conducting social engineering abroad.

It is no response to argue that domestic entitlements pose the biggest financial threat to America. With a \$1.3 trillion deficit, \$13.5 trillion national debt, and more than \$100 trillion in unfunded Medicare and Social Security liabilities, the United States can't afford to waste money on anything, especially the defense of populous and prosperous allies.

Moreover, war also creates unfunded liabilities. Today the "defense" budget accounts for roughly one-quarter of U.S. outlays. But that is just current expenditures. Counting expenses for past military operations, such as veterans' benefits and interest on borrowing for military expenditures, the Friends Committee on National Legislation figures that the military accounts for about 44 percent of current outlays.

One can quibble about specifics, but consider the case of Iraq. That conflict has cost about \$740 billion so far. However, total costs are conservatively expected to hit \$2 trillion as the government cares for veterans who have lost limbs and suffered serious head injuries. Economists Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes believe the ultimate price of the Bush administration's folly may end up even higher.

Tea Party activists face an important crossroads. They can adopt the failed Republican model of combining budget-cutting rhetoric with foreign warmongering. Or the movement can maintain a consistent commitment to promote limited government and individual liberty. An imperial foreign policy impoverishes rather than enriches America. Our overriding objective should be to preserve America as a free and prosperous republic.

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