



Thoughts on Chris Preble's "A Libertarian Foreign Policy"

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01/31/2012

Wednesday night, Cato scholar Chris Preble took on the common claim that libertarian foreign policy proposals lead to a more dangerous world. I found myself mostly in agreement with his analysis of the dangers of overactive foreign policy. He seemed on point in his analysis of military action as the greatest example of the fatal conceit. If we question the ability of the government to accurately and effectively do benign things like provide charity, it stands to reason that they would be even worse in a situation of life and death. Indeed, issues of perverse interests would be exaggerated a hundredfold by the sheer cost and possible effects of waging war.

Chris focused on the overuse of the military and how it harms our freedoms at home and makes our world more dangerous. In short, the assumption that those outside are dangerous and that we should protect ourselves from them leads to the granting the state massive powers to effect that "protection." The libertarian worldview, on the other hand, is "confident and cosmopolitan," as Chris put it. Rather than assuming a dangerous world, it sees foreigners as potential trade partners. It presumes other people, instead of seeing them as dangerous and unknown "others."

The issue is not, however, entirely about the overuse of the U.S. military, but about the underlying nature of foreign policy. Since the reigning assumption is that the individual has no role in foreign policy, this misconception has become the origin of expanding state power. Chris is absolutely right to identify the loss of civilian control of the military as the major issue of the day, but I believe we libertarians should go further. Rather than looking only to oppose the expansion of the state in war, we should look to build alternative institutions that will scale back such expansion for us. This will ultimately drive us toward a minimal state and a peaceful world. What we can do is start to make the focus in foreign policy not on war but trade—cooperative measures, and cultural exchange.

We are not isolationists; we just wish to reach out with trade rather than bombs. Chris quoted George Washington's famous and incredibly salient call to avoid foreign politics but not foreign trade. After all, trade is the most powerful peacemaker. We would never see a war with Mexico or Canada because our economies are massively integrated. So libertarian foreign policy is not a stagnant or restricted idea. It is not simply the idea that we should support the institution of war less, but rather that we should build something better with which to replace it. We should champion free trade and the further integration of the world economy. Chris briefly referenced embargoes and economic sanctions and the fact that they never seem to work (see: North

Korea and Cuba). Ending practices like this is the big thing we can do to stop the call for war and the assumption that it's necessary. Chris is absolutely right that the state distributes foreign aid very poorly. Local knowledge and public choice issues are well-known limitations of effective state-based aid schemes. This doesn't mean, however, that these aren't important issues in foreign policy. This idea that foreign policy is only what the state does is part of the problem. In an age when the average citizen can interact worldwide, foreign policy is a much more open issue.

We as civilians need to take up foreign policy as a concern, not only by urging state actors to reduce trade barriers and war, but also by engaging in worldwide interactions. By allowing foreign policy to continue to be state actors' game, we harm worldwide liberty. What the state can do, here and everywhere else, is get out of the way and let the private sector do its work. Let us trade and interact. This is why the rampant protectionism we heard in the [State of the Union](#) scared me almost more than the bit about Iran. Although war in Iran would be catastrophic, the trade restrictions proposed by President Obama would brew much, perhaps even more, distain for us abroad. If we can't have transnational industries and free trade, we will never begin to truly see others as people. Corporations should be doing exactly the opposite of what the President would have them do. We should be importing, sending factories abroad, and working with foreigners—not just because it makes economic sense, but it is the one and only path to a more peaceful world.