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Chris Preble and “The Power Problem”

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At the 2005 Cato Institute Christmas party, I told Cato’s Director of Foreign Policy Studies, [Chris Preble](#), that I wanted him to run for Congress. I should have known better, but it didn’t occur to me at the time that a Cato party is probably the one place in Washington, D.C. where such a comment is likely to be taken as an insult.

I didn’t intend it as an insult, of course, but I did mean it. Preble is an impressive guy: Ph.D. in history from Temple, Professor of history at Temple and St. Cloud University, commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy and veteran of the first Gulf War, and author of three books on U.S. foreign policy. Given that background, one might expect Chris to support bloated military budgets and endless war. But, as you might have guessed, he opposes both. Who wouldn’t want someone with Preble’s credentials and foreign policy philosophy in Congress?

Unfortunately, as Chris told me back in 2005, he has no interest at all in running for office. [Good men rarely do.](#)

So it looks like we won’t get to see elected official Chris Preble anytime soon. Fortunately, that means he’ll likely keep writing books, such as his latest, [The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free.](#)

Placing himself squarely at odds with so-called “national greatness” conservatives for whom no military budget is too big nor military endeavor too costly, Preble’s argument in the book is 1) that the U.S. military costs far more than it needs to cost to keep us safe, 2) the military is used far more often than is necessary to protect legitimate U.S. interests, and 3) the U.S. needs to radically re-think its foreign policy, beginning with a rational assessment of the costs and benefits of the military and how it is used.

Preble offers an even more succinct summary of what he calls the book’s “controversial argument”: that “we should reduce our military power in order to be more secure.”

Unlike some of the crazier elements at the fringes of the libertarian movement, Preble does not believe the

U.S. military is unnecessary, or that it is harmful. His sincere appreciation for the women and men in uniform is evident throughout the text, which makes his argument much stronger than, say, those from others who toast to troops’ deaths. Preble recognizes a legitimate role for the military, and believes military action is justified in the right contexts. Preble’s book is not unthinking, bomb-throwing radicalism, but instead a sophisticated, logical analysis of the costs *and benefits* of military power.

I learned a tremendous amount from the book. Preble’s history of the military is enlightening (particularly the parts about the military industrial complex), as is his discussion of the similarities between the Clinton foreign policy philosophy and the neoconservative foreign policy of “benevolent global hegemony.” That section alone is worth the price of the book, if only to present it to partisan hacks.

Preble’s discussion of the costs of the military was similarly enlightening, particularly the sections on the interests involved in buying military equipment (Preble highlights five weapons systems to prove his point that military technology is often saddled with inefficiencies, waste, fraud and abuse). Preble also mentions the opportunity costs of wasteful military spending, highlighting the more productive uses for which money spent on bombs could be used.

After taking on the arguments for a bloated defense budget, over the next few chapters Preble lays waste to the idea that U.S. military power is necessary to maintain a fragile global order, or that the U.S. ought to “police the globe in order to safeguard the flow of goods and services . . .”

In what I think is the book’s most impressive chapter, Preble takes on the claims that because the U.S. *can* use force for well-intentioned ends, it *should*. Preble notes that military power (which he starkly reminds us is often a euphemism for *actual people*) used abroad for humanitarian purposes is, potentially, military power not available for legitimate security concerns at home. He likens our military power not to Goliath, but to Sisyphus, who was “too smart for his own good” and condemned to perform an impossible task.

Instead of the current strategy of sending troops anywhere the President feels like, for whatever reason, Preble offers the following criteria for when the U.S. military ought to be deployed: “. . . when there are vital U.S. security interests at stake; when there is a clear and attainable military mission; when there is broad public support; and when there is a clear understanding of what constitutes victory, and therefore when our forces can leave.”

As is nearly always the case with libertarian-themed policy proposals, after laying down plenty of fantastic arguments defending the book’s central thesis, the question remains: how do we get there from here? That question is generally the major shortcoming of libertarian analysis, as we are often guilty of ignoring political reality in favor of ideal theory (as Wilkinson points out, this tendency sometimes has real-life [negative implications](#)).

Preble, however, does not ignore political realities. He is keenly aware, and describes in his book, how the actual policy-making process of logrolling, rent-seeking and all the rest tend to exacerbate America’s power problem. He recognizes that the perceived negative economic impact on a community after a base closing makes the process of scaling back military operations politically unpopular (incidentally, I would have liked to see a better discussion of the impact of base closings on military-dependent communities. Preble writes that “‘a number of communities’ that feared economic ruin following a decision to close a local base have been able to turn the land to constructive use.” However, [the footnote](#) to that sentence references only one such case. My [hometown](#) is extremely dependent on the military, so base closings are of particular interest to me).

That said, Preble doesn’t offer many solutions to the public choice problems that plague military policy. We can argue persuasively that a base has outlived its usefulness or that a weapons system is too expensive. But convincing the Congressman from the base’s district or the Senator from where the weapons system is made to vote against those projects seems impossible, and Preble doesn’t offer much by way of solutions to that

problem (this is an almost petty objection, of course. It shouldn't fall on Preble's shoulders to solve the problems inherent in all policy-making. But come on, Chris. The rest of the book is so good; couldn't you have just handled that, too?).

The Power Problem is an important book, and it ought to be required reading for anyone interested in contemporary military policy. If Congress and the President were to follow its prescriptions, America's troops would finally be able to perform their legitimate functions without stretching themselves thin all over the world, and the rest of us would doubtless be safer and significantly wealthier as a result. We can stop, as Preble writes, “being held responsible for everything bad that happens, and always on the hook to pick up the costs.” Instead, we can “remain actively engaged in the world without having to be in charge of it.”

Sounds good to me.

So, [go buy the book](#), for cryin' out loud. And after you read the book, tell Preble to run for Congress.

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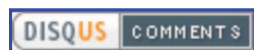
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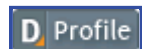
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