



Don't concede defeat before Afghan exit

By: Barbara Donnelly Lane – January 25, 2013

Chris Preble is a smart guy. He is No. 82 on the “Defense News” list of the 100 most influential people dealing with defense in 2013. Speaking in Atlanta on Jan. 15, he shared his ideas about the military challenges of a second Obama term.

As the VP for Defense and Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, Dr. Preble espouses a classic libertarian perspective that seeks to avoid foreign entanglements. This stands in stark contrast to the neoconservative position that dominated the Bush years and advocates the American projection of power to shape global affairs.

Therefore, Preble approves the controversial nomination of Chuck Hagel for Secretary of Defense. For him, this appointment signals a wanted shift in the president’s approach to foreign policy, which will result in a further withdrawal of the United States from the role of global peacekeeper. His hope is other countries will tend more to the expense of their own security when the world’s superpower does not act as an “indispensible nation.”

When rejecting American Exceptionalism, Preble is in opposition to even mainstream Republicans. However, when he echoes the Weinberger/Powell Doctrine that once guided the Reagan administration and asserts the government should only engage troops in missions that relate directly to American national security interests, he finds more common ground with conservative thinkers.

Furthermore, his belief that it is essential to define attainable foreign policy objectives with viable exit strategies before committing soldiers to war are parameters that American citizens in general embrace as common sense. But as the French are discovering in Mali, even a simply stated goal — to dislodge terrorists — can become much more complex once a military engagement begins.

Preble says the American invasion of Afghanistan should have had three main objectives: to degrade Al Qaeda’s ability to commit violence, to dislodge the Taliban and to telegraph a message to rogue governments to not support terrorists.

All of this was accomplished in a matter of months, so why didn’t troops leave? Instead, American commanders chose to launch counterinsurgency operations, which mired forces in the tribal mishmash of an impoverished nation.

Even so, from the audience, a veteran Navy Corpsman who served with the Marines stood to express his view that many other important objectives were also met in Afghanistan despite the

focus on Iraq, which meant the first war did not really get attention until as late as 2008. Now he is concerned too rapid a drawdown will mean many Americans he knew died in vain.

Acknowledging that members of the military cannot be faulted when given unachievable missions, Preble carefully answered that Obama should never have supported a troop surge in Afghanistan, which only prolonged matters. In other words, Preble thinks the Corpsman's fears were realized years before he was even deployed, and his mates' deaths were indeed for no good reason.

So as Preble ponders a pivot in American foreign policy to create a smaller military footprint in future, one should not forget troops are still on the ground right now.

To concede defeat before an exit has been properly negotiated — to leave forces in a vulnerable position with numbers well below what generals want — is to break faith with American troops who are not pawns in a senseless chess game. It also breaks faith with those Afghans who chose to ally with the United States. And an exit robbed of honor or any sense of success will never close a door on future problems.

No matter what, it is reasonable to want Obama — regardless of who becomes his Secretary of Defense — to clearly identify attainable objectives in Afghanistan that will secure hard won military gains if the desired outcome is indeed long-term peace.

Read more: [The Marietta Daily Journal - Don't concede defeat before Afghan exit](#)