



Preble's Pivot on Foreign Policy

by Barbara Donnelly Lane January 25, 2013

Chris Preble is a smart guy. He is number eighty-two on the “Defense News” list of the one hundred most influential people dealing with defense in 2013. Speaking in Atlanta on January 15, he shared his ideas about the military challenges of a second Obama term.

As the Vice President 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, Dr. Preble approves of 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 that 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, Dr. Preble is in opposition to even mainstream Republicans. However, when he echoes the Weinberger/Powell Doctrine that once guided the Reagan administration and asserts that 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.

Let's look back for a moment to 2001.

Dr. 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 for more than a decade.

Even so, from the audience, a veteran Navy Corpsman who served with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines stood to express his view that many other important objectives were also made and met in Afghanistan despite the focus put on Iraq, which meant the first war did not really get its due attention until as late as 2008.

Now he is concerned that too rapid a drawdown per President Obama's plan will mean that many Americans he personally knew lost their lives in vain.

Acknowledging that members of the military cannot be faulted when given unachievable missions, Dr. Preble carefully answered that President Obama should never have supported a troop surge in Afghanistan, which only prolonged matters.

In other words, Dr. Preble thinks the Navy Corpsman's fears were realized years before he was even deployed, and his mates' deaths have indeed been for no good reason in the grand scheme.

This is a position that should be seriously reconsidered.

Dr. Preble's idea that a quick exit would have achieved a better result in Afghanistan is academic. The future is always a murky thing to predict, but the impact of an action not taken is also a matter of mere speculation. After all, the last time the United States left this hellacious outcrop of war-torn rocks to its fate, a threat still gathered in its crevices.

So as Dr. 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.

Smart men like Dr. Preble know Al Qaeda is resurgent, so as he helps shape the debate on how to best approach a rapidly destabilizing Middle East and Africa, he should push for the United States to secure a positive legacy for the sake of national security.

No matter what, it is reasonable to want President 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.