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The Power Problem

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By Carlos Lozada
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"With great power comes great responsibility."

That's what wise ol' Uncle Ben advised Peter Parker, according to Spider-Man lore. But according to the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble, it's also what U.S. politicians have been telling themselves for two decades to justify hefty military budgets and frequent interventions where vital U.S. interests are not at stake.

In his new book, "The Power Problem," Preble, a former naval officer, contends that an overpowering military makes the United States weaker, not stronger. The end of the Cold War, he argues, left American leaders "unconstrained by the fear" of a rival superpower and looking to deploy the massive U.S. military in pursuit of some ever-expanding national interest. The results include such costly misadventures as Somalia and Iraq.

Dick Cheney is Exhibit A of the power problem, Preble writes, although he also criticizes Clinton-era Secretary of State Madeleine "the indispensable nation" Albright and, not surprisingly, George W. Bush.

Preble believes that President Obama, despite his best efforts, may have difficulty resisting the allure of military might: Having such power at one's disposal is too tempting, and even more so with interventionist-minded advisers.

"True wisdom comes in controlling power," Preble concludes, "and that requires an extraordinary degree of discipline." Uncle Ben couldn't have said it better.

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