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## Does Military Power Keep Us Safe? (Part II)

By [Christopher A. Preble](#) | Wednesday, May 20, 2009

*In the second installment of a three-part series from "The Power Problem," the Cato Institute's Christopher A. Preble explains how a smaller military could keep the United States safe in a decidedly dangerous world — and help avoid casualties among innocents.*

For too long, we have defined our strength as a nation by our capacity for waging war.

We have come to believe, erroneously, that military power keeps us safe, and that more power will keep us safer.

But the true strength of the United States, the true source of U.S. power, is its people. Our spirit, our generosity and our ingenuity is expressed in countless ways, most of which have nothing to do with our military prowess.

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By reducing the size of our military to a level more consistent with our own needs, and by encouraging others to become more self-reliant, we can make space for the other forms of human interaction that facilitate security and prosperity over the long term.

This is neither naive nor utopian. The world is a dangerous place. It always has been. Although we aspire to a time when disputes are settled peacefully, we sometimes seem a long way from that noble goal.

Some worry of a new cold war with Russia, while others see a hot one with China in the offing, perhaps over Taiwan. Those prospects cannot be dismissed lightly, but the fact remains that the major powers have managed to avoid the very sorts of cataclysms that claimed the lives of an estimated 100 million people in the first half of the 20th century. Perhaps we've all learned something?

Even if major war between nations seems more remote than ever before, what of war between peoples, peoples disconnected from any particular nation-state or peoples united by ideologies that transcend national boundaries?

What if al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations are but the tip of the iceberg? Newspapers and opinion journals are littered these days with apocalyptic predictions of an impending — or even ongoing — world war.

How likely is it that the so-called war on terrorism will be looked upon through the long lens of history as comparable to the world wars of the 20th century? Not very.

The casualties caused by international terrorist incidents since September 11, 2001, and the prospects

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for future casualties, pale in comparison to the death and destruction that took place between August 1914 and November 1918, and again between September 1939 and August 1945.

The violence and bloodshed that can be deployed by non-state actors is an order of magnitude smaller than what could be caused by even a medium-size modern industrial state.

Can it even be compared with the Cold War, which claimed far fewer lives but lasted nearly five times longer than the two world wars combined? Again, no. Both are ideological struggles, fought chiefly by non-military means, but the threat of global thermonuclear war hung over every aspect of Cold War diplomacy.

And the scale of violence that would have been unleashed had U.S. or Soviet (or Chinese, French or British) decision makers lost their cool would have caused far more death and destruction than Osama bin Laden can muster in the darkest reaches of his imagination.

What we need is a little perspective. This perspective should inform our strategy for the next generation.

For if there is a historical analog for the radical Islamist terrorist threat of the early 21st century, it is the anarchist movement of the late 19th century. Like the modern-day terrorists, the anarchists spread chaos and disorder by blowing up bombs in crowded places and by inciting riots.

Anarchists succeeded in assassinating a number of world leaders, including Czar Alexander II of Russia, Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary — and even U.S. President William McKinley.

The killing of a single man, Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, precipitated the global conflict that resulted in more than 30 million casualties. That provides a useful lesson for the present day, but not the one that the scaremongers want you to learn: namely, that the overreaction to comparatively minor incidents can have far-reaching, and often horrific, effects.

How well do policymakers understand this? On the one hand, we have tracked down, killed or captured a host of mass murderers and prospective mass murderers — including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Bin al-Shibh, the chief plotters of the 9/11 attacks — without resorting to tactics that threatened the lives of innocent bystanders.

On the other hand, and especially in the case of Iraq, we have lashed out, convinced of our right to do so based on our own security needs, and believing the military to be the best instrument for breaking that supposed state-terror nexus.

On still other occasions, we have pointed to our sense of obligation to act, in the service of democracy promotion or the advancement of human rights, believing that those lofty goals would also undermine the terrorists' cause.

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But surely if ever there was a case of means upsetting ends, this was it, because for every ten, or even 100, quiet successes against al-Qaeda and its ilk, it takes but one loud failure to set back our efforts, perhaps for many years.

That is why much of the world looks upon the U.S. superpower as a bull in a china shop. The bull means no harm when it smashes priceless items, but it can't quite help itself. As far as the store proprietor and the customers go, the mere presence of the bull poses a problem — there is always the danger that some fool will run through the store waving a red flag.

That is exactly what al-Qaeda did on 9/11, and millions of people around the world have been living in fear ever since. They worry not that we will direct our wrath at them, but rather that in our thirst for justice we will harm those unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It is no wonder, then, that we are having so much difficulty convincing others to follow our lead toward a tolerant social order, a liberal political order and a freer economic order.

*This is the second part of a three-part series. Part III will run on Thursday.*

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