

Yale Political Union

Nonpartisan debating society

Posted: November 6, 2009 04:03 PM

Should the United States Slash its Defense Budget?

What's Your Reaction?

On November 3rd, 2009, Benjamin Friedman, a Research Fellow in Defense and Homeland Security Studies at the Cato Institute, spoke at a debate at the Yale Political Union in favor of the resolution "Resolved: Slash the US Defense Budget." Full minutes of debate can be found at [here](#). Below are the first two student speeches on the topic:

The Chairman of the Progressive Party gave the first speech in the negative rebutting Mr. Friedman.

Thank you Mr. Speaker.

Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight I would like to talk about the American Empire.

It is a term that has been thrown around with far too much flippancy in my opinion. Many Americans inherently shy away from the notion of empire, afraid of its colonial connotations and upset by the tension between American principles and overseas conquest.

From its revolutionary struggle against a colonial oppressor to Wilsonian notions of self-determination, the United States has historically stood firm as a bulwark against foreign colonial aspirations. We forced the dissolution of European empires after the end of World War Two. We even issued the Monroe Doctrine, that ostensibly freedom-ensuring declaration that saved the Western Hemisphere from those dirty Europeans.

Yet, not only has this not stopped American colonialism in the past, but it is also not what modern explanations of the American empire refer to. Let me be clear: true, unadulterated colonialism is dead. The United States' empire is, and will be, an empire of ideals, and that quintessentially American notion of universal principles.

Though many will correctly label America's current actions in Iraq and Afghanistan as blatant imperialism, this is not what I am speaking of. I am not advocating that the United States run around the world, stealing people's sovereignty with its enlarged military. That's just rather juvenile. Instead, America must be a little more stealthy. It is through McDonalds diplomacy, through Hollywood diplomacy, through the steady exportation of American culture and identity that America can truly remake the world in its image. An affinity for all things American that evolves by choice rather than by an American bullet is what will ultimately strengthen American foreign policy in the long run.

Thus, a worldwide recognition of American values should be the primary foreign policy goal of the American people. When a nation's people like America, it is more likely that its leaders will like America. And if they like us, they are more likely to cooperate with us. And if they're willing to cooperate, then they're more likely to let America take the initiative. And it is my firm belief that independence of action is all-important in international affairs.

With the end of the Cold War, and the defeat of the international communist menace, America would appear to have nearly unlimited freedom of action. We are the sole remaining super power. Capitalism has decisively defeated the twin 20th century challenges of fascism and communism. Western democracy and free markets reign supreme. And the United States has become a hegemonic power with nearly unlimited resources to remake the world in its image.

And why shouldn't America try to remake the world in its image? American history and identity teach that America is an exceptional nation, with a moral duty to deliver people to the promised land of liberal democracy. When asked, most Americans agree that the United States should promote democracy abroad. The vast majority of Americans truly believe that they live in the best country in the world with the best system of government in the world.

Democratic peace theory, detestably warm and fuzzy as it might be, empirically holds true. Democracies simply do not fight major wars against one another. If we are to ensure the security of the American state, then the most enduring and lasting way to do so is by making every other country in the world a democracy.

Unfortunately, this founding American principle of setting the example and spreading democracy has been tarnished by the excesses of the Bush Administration and the NeoCon movement. I would argue that it is in America's best interest, and essential to its future security, to spread democracy abroad. Just because the execution was flawed does not mean that the theory was flawed. As the Cold War taught us, we can seduce people to the logic of liberal democracy and capitalism without using force. We can improve their standard of living and expand their political freedoms without occupying their territory. There is a reason the Soviet Union had to build the Berlin Wall. West Berlin's thriving capitalist utopia contrasted starkly with the impoverishment of communist East Berlin, and the East Berliners knew it. That is how you properly spread democracy. Coercion is unnecessary when ordinary people can see the differences like night and day.

However, just because we should not impose democracy by force of arms does not mean that we should eliminate our army, nor slash our defense budget. Great power status and America's hegemonic position are a function, first and foremost, of the United States' clear military superiority vis a vis the rest of the world. Without our military, we are just another Japan, a nation with immense economic resources, but little ability to actually throw its weight around.

My argument is more than simple altruism and setting an example. Japan is an economic giant and a bastion of stable, functioning democracy in Asia. It would appear to have just as strong of an ability to influence international affairs according to the simple logic of altruism. In fact, as of 2008, Japan actually has a larger GDP than China. And yet, I think we can all agree that China commands exponentially more power in international affairs. Despite the absence of great power wars since 1945 and the ascendance of economic issues, military power remains an important measurement of international influence.

Many would argue that maintaining a large army without a clear threat is a waste of money. Yet the Cold War taught us another important lesson: perceptions matter. With our outsized army, we do not actually have to make war, we just have to maintain the ability to do so. During the Cold War, neither the US nor the Soviet Union ever wanted to actually use their nuclear weapons. But just because there was no intention to use them did not mean that there was no incentive to possess them. Given that nuclear weapons are a worthless deterrent in the age of non-state actors and limited warfare, we must retain superior conventional forces if we are to ensure our power position and our very survival.

Moreover, the United States defense budget represents over 40% of the world total. The United States is responsible for the security of a great many nations around the globe. I'm sure many people see this is a bad thing, that other nations are getting a free ride under America's security umbrella. I would argue the exact opposite. The ability to defend oneself is one of the prime components of sovereignty. Is a nation truly sovereign if another nation can simply bully it around and dictate what it can and cannot do? Allowing other nations to free ride on American defense spending also keeps them dependent on the United States for their very survival. This gives America a certain measure of control over them, and thus increases US influence.

Just look at the Suez crisis of 1956 for example. Britain, France, and Israel tried to invade Egypt and take control of a large swath of its territory. Once President Eisenhower heard the news however, he immediately demanded that the aggressors withdraw, and they did, in utter humiliation. With existential security as leverage, the United States, precisely because of its enormous defense expenditures, wields massive influence with numerous nations, especially those in Europe. Slashing the US defense budget would entail giving up this leverage, and abdicating a colossal amount of current US power.

It has been argued that domestic programs offer a better use for government money, but it must be said that U.S. hegemony is inherently good for Americans, given the vast security dividends and the potential for increased prosperity and peace. Turning the entire world into one giant mercantilist empire would hardly be bad for the US economy. Independence of action may be intangible, but it should not be underestimated. To lose

our military superiority is to abdicate our power position. It is to join the ranks of Britain and France, former great powers who must now simply watch while the new kid on the block dictates the terms of international affairs and remakes the world in its image.

More information on the Yale Political Union and its debates can be found at www.yale.edu/ypu.