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Interview with The Cato Institute's Malou Innocent on U.S. Foreign & Military Policy



Last week, Ryan Jaronyk and I had the exciting privilege of interviewing Cato scholar and Foreign Policy Analyst, [Malou Innocent](#).

We ended up covering America's overall foreign policy and what principles should direct it, the war in Afghanistan, the war against Al-Qaeda, Obama's undeserved Nobel Peace Prize, the widely-ignored PTSD epidemic in our military, nuclear

policy, and recommendations for revising U.S. policy to keep America safe.

Below is a text transcript of the first half of this hour long interview. You are free to browse and read it at your leisure, but I highly recommend that you listen to the entire interview [here](#).

Wes Messamore: Malou? You're on the air!

Malou Innocent: Thank you for having me.

Wes Messamore: Ryan, you there?

Ryan Jaronyk: Yes I am! Hello, Wes. Hello, Malou.

Malou Innocent: Hey Ryan.

Wes Messamore: It was good corresponding with you to get this

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all set up. I want to start off with your fundamental underlying principles that inform your view of American foreign and military policy, and use that as a common thread throughout this discussion. So what should be the goal of U.S. Foreign Policy?

Malou Innocent: Well I think the goal of U.S. Foreign Policy should be to keep America safe, and I think as libertarians, we should want to limit military action to situations that threaten U.S. sovereignty and territorial integrity.

We believe that attempts to remake the world in our own image are abuses of American power, and such foreign interventions motivate terrorists to attack the United States, foreign powers to make alliances against the United States, they usually fail to achieve their intended results, and they put financial burdens on the American taxpayer.

So across the board, we would be for military restraint.

Wes Messamore: So the goal is to keep America safe, to protect its sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and the goal is not to remake the world in our own image or get involved in other people's affairs.

Malou Innocent: Absolutely. And this sort of dovetails with Afghanistan and the conflation we see with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Al-Qaeda was responsible for 9-11. It is a transnational Jihadist network in countries across the world- Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, the Philippines- and yet we've lumped them in with the Taliban, which is a guerrilla Jihadi group which is indigenous to the Pashtun people of Afghanistan.

And it appears that we've broadened the number of enemies and we're telling the U.S. public that we need to protect the villages of Afghanistan from the Taliban. That's a much different objective than what we had before.

Wes Messamore: It seems that the objective always keeps changing and is always a bit ambiguous, over there and in all our foreign adventures.

Malou Innocent: Right and I think what ends up happening with this "mission creep" that we've seen in Afghanistan is that in lumping different groups and them all becoming our enemies, and what I fear is that the longer we stay in Afghanistan and the more money we spend, the more we'll feel compelled to remain there to validate our

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investment.

That's sort of a self-imposed predicament- and it's plagued us all the time in war. I think no matter what we do- whether we stay or withdraw, Al-Qaeda will always twist it into a victory. If we stay in the region, our military will always appear bogged down, our mission will always seem aimless, we will continue to incur civilian casualties, which will erode support for our occupation.

So either way, Al-Qaeda will twist it into a victory- so we should just do what's best for U.S. interests, so instead of pouring resources into a money pit, we should look at fiscal discipline, what's best for the United States, and what's best for our soldiers.

Wes Messamore: So you're rebutting the idea that we'd appear weak if we withdraw from Afghanistan. What about the objection that we'd actually be weakened by withdrawal- that we'd see a resurgence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda if we draw down forces in the region and not continue nation-building?

Malou Innocent: I don't we'll see that occur- maybe some elements would be emboldened by a withdrawal, but the Al-Qaeda network doesn't have much esteem in much of the Muslim world. In fact, we've seriously degraded Al-Qaeda's global capabilities- and that's been a success, and we haven't pushed that hard enough on the PR side.

Instead we've gotten bogged down in Afghanistan with the Taliban. Insurgencies themselves are very difficult to combat. It's a faceless enemy that can easily melt back into the population. With Al-Qaeda though, it's been different- it's been a success. And we're not weak by any stretch of the imagination.

Wes Messamore: Did I understand you correctly, when you said in the Muslim world that there is a negative perception of Al-Qaeda?

Malou Innocent: Yes.

Wes Messamore: I did not know that- what you always hear is that "Maybe there is just a radical militant fringe in Islam, but no mainstream non-militant Muslims condemn them."

Malou Innocent: Many Muslims perceive that the primary victims of Al-Qaeda have been Muslims, which has led to the marginalization

of the group itself. Many of the victims of this network have disproportionately been Muslims.

Wes Messamore: That's just something you never hear. The perception is that there is this Muslims conspiracy or imperialism- you get this whole narrative that Islam is seeking to conquer the whole world, and if it's not an extreme terrorist, that even if it's just a normal Muslim family living in- pick a country, Iran, Egypt, Indonesia- that their sympathies lie with these terrorist groups. But instead- they think these terrorists are as much a threat to their way of life as we do in America?

Ryan- feel free to jump in with any questions you have...

Ryan Jaroneyk: Yes- Malou, I have a question about Al-Qaeda. Where is Al-Qaeda in the world? Where are the "hot spots?"

Malou Innocent: Yes- in Somalia, we believe there are Al-Qaeda operatives working. We've attacked some there with drones. We believe there is some Al-Qaeda activity in the Philippines. But the leadership of Al-Qaeda is believed to be in Pakistan, in the lawless, tribal regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The number one in line and number two are believed to be in the Pakistani border lands.

The best way we have been able to snatch Al-Qaeda operatives is for the CIA to cooperate with foreign law enforcement- not necessarily blunt military force. The notion that to counter Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan- I disagree that we need sixty thousand or eighty thousand troops. Then do we need as many troops in the Philippines? In Pakistan? In Somalia?

Ryan Jaroneyk: Going back to a big picture question- with a restrained military policy, where would we place our troops and what would our budget look like?

Malou Innocent: My colleague at Cato, [Justin Logan](#), is a real expert on a lot of these "nuts and bolts" aspects of our foreign policy. Here's what I think he would say:

Logistically- before we begin to scale down our troops, we need to scaled our missions. We still have commitments to protect Northern and Eastern Europe, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan- we need to scale back these commitments first. If we narrow troops first, while remaining committed to these countries, we'll put a greater burden on a smaller number of remaining troops.

So first, we need to revise our commitments to other countries and determine whether military threats to these other countries poses an existential threat to the United States. And we need to determine whether these commitments to other countries affects our deterrent policies.

Ryan Jaroneyk: Let's take missile defense as an example: do you think Europe, Korea, and Japan possess the capability to provide their own missile defense?

Malou Innocent: Well with Japan and South Korea for instance, many of these countries can defend themselves. They do have civilian nuclear power and could weaponize it, according to some estimates, in as little as a year. Protecting them is just a holdover from the Cold War.

The notion of NATO in itself, is just a bulwark against Soviet Expansion into Europe, again a holdover from the Cold War. France and Britain are two nuclear armed powers that don't need to be protected by us.

Wes Messamore: Okay- so let's connect the dots between our "over-stretchedness" around the world and the underlying principle of keeping America safe. Do our present policies make America more or less safe?

Malou Innocent: They do waste a lot of money, and they do make America less safe. They also give Americans the false sense of assurance that we remain safe. 9-11 happened at the height of our military presence around the world. So it's not clear that deploying our military around the world is a necessary or sufficient condition to making America more safe.

In fact, the Government Accountability Office did a test run just a few months ago, taking bomb making materials into ten Federal buildings. They ordered them for \$150 off the Internet, they could assemble them in just ten minutes, they got into every single building- the Justice Dept, the State Dept- and it just goes to show that a fairly secure building in the United States could come under attack, even with our military presence abroad.

Wes Messamore: What are the most imminent threats to our national security then? So what does make America less safe? What is the real threat to our safety?

Malou Innocent: Sadly- I think it's our very own foreign policies. Not only do they induce debt creation, but they fulfill the Al-Qaeda narrative. For example, the recent elections in Afghanistan, showed how pervasively corrupt the Afghanistan regime is.

One of the motivating factors for these terrorists who attacked us on 9-11 is our support abroad for corrupt and illegitimate regimes. And that's what we're doing now. Cato's position is that intervention abroad is strongly correlated with more terrorist attacks.

Across the board, our own policies induce the threats that we are trying to defend ourselves against.

Wes Messamore: So foreign invasion, open war, none of those are real threats to our security- you'd say the biggest threat is international terrorism? And that the ultimate cause of that is our own foreign policy?

Malou Innocent: No- I'd say the primary threat is our belief that we should be intervening so much. Not necessarily the terrorists themselves.

Wes Messamore: I'd agree. I'd say that if we scientifically look into the causes of terrorism- that it is U.S. foreign policy. Cato itself did a report in 1998 based off of DOD data that showed that increased U.S. military intervention overseas is directly correlated with higher incidences of terrorism.

[You can read that foreign policy brief [here](#)]

So I'd say that scientifically, it's just true that our policies are breeding terrorism overseas. But that view is not very palatable to many Americans, especially those who identify themselves as "conservative" or "strong-on-defense" because they feel like you're blaming America. How can we make that idea more palatable?

Malou Innocent: You raise an interesting point. There is the perception that if you critique U.S. policy or U.S. foreign policy, that you hate the United States. But take me for example- I'm for military restraint, and for me at least- I love the U.S. military and its men and women in uniform. That's part of why I want to bring them home.

And you are right that the empirical data shows U.S. action abroad incites more terrorist attacks against the United States. In fact, the

2004 task force that was hand picked by Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon to assess the Bush Administration's anti-terrorism efforts, found that the underlying threat to American interests is its intervention overseas and its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

That was Rumsfeld's Pentagon. So we're not talking about Cindy Sheehan or dirt worshipping tree huggers. Those were the findings of a Republican administration and Pentagon. So I think bringing those facts to light will help show that critiquing U.S. foreign policy is what's best for U.S. foreign policy.

[You can read the entire report [here](#)]

Wes Messamore: I also think that government grows when we grow the welfare state, and it also grows when we grow the warfare state- and that the more we can make that connection- to the point of saying- because it's true but also because it has powerful rhetorical effect- that warfare is often welfare for other countries. Nation building is welfare for other countries. And if we as conservatives and libertarians oppose welfare here at home, shouldn't we oppose it even more for non-U.S. citizens with our tax money?

Malou Innocent: Exactly. Thank you! I'm so glad to hear you say that, and I wish more people would. I think it's bizarre when libertarians and conservatives believe in as little government as humanly possible, but don't see the full force of their support for intervention abroad.

Also, our notions of freedom and justice may differ throughout the world, so imposing them on other cultures may not be effective or right because they limit voluntary human action abroad. For example, you can't see me because we're on the phone, but I'm wearing a sleeveless top right now, and in some areas of the world, that is not considered dishonorable.

So we cannot assume that imposing our form of governance will be readily accepted by people around the world.

Wes Messamore: And even if we believe that our notions of liberty transcend cultural differences, even if we want to say- and I would tend to say- that if a culture is okay with certain forms of oppression or limitations on human free agency, that that culture is wrong (about *that* anyway).

It doesn't follow that the imposition of freedom on that culture will be effective or even make any kind of sense. I'm reminded of an episode of that Matt Groening show Futurama, where a character

says "We will show the world of our peaceful ways- *through force!*"
That's exactly how it sounds to me.

For Malou Innocent's response and for the second half of this interview (which includes a lot of answers to some great, very specific policy questions from Ryan Jaroneyk as well as Malou's position on Obama's recent Nobel Peace Prize)- please listen to the entire thing [here](#).

POSTED BY W. E. MESSAMORE

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