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Hail Christopher Preble

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[*The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*](#)

Christopher Preble

Cornell University Press, 2009

Although there has always been some animosity between some Antiwar.com and some Cato Institute people, I don't share in that animosity. Is either organization perfect? No. Welcome to reality. But both organizations are doing a lot of good and striving to make the world a better place. Among those who are trying to make the world more peaceful is Christopher A. Preble, the director of foreign policy studies at Cato. And in his latest book, *The Power Problem*, Preble argues against the U.S. military dominance that so many Americans take for granted and even favor. The subtitle of the book gives much of his message: *How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*.

Preble accomplishes a lot in 170 pages of prose and 34 pages of footnotes. He does so by carefully building his case and, in the end, making a devastating case for a much-reduced role for the U.S. military in the world. I would go even further than he does. Still, the differences between Preble's and my views are minor compared to the differences between Preble's views and those of the foreign policy establishment.

Preble states his bottom line in the introduction: "We should reduce our military power in order to be more secure."

In his first chapter, Preble succinctly gives some recent history of how politicians and the intellectuals who influence them have thought about foreign policy. Preble reminds us, for example, that in the mid-1990s, the Republicans in Congress were the antiwar party and voted to prevent President Clinton from spending money on "peacekeeping" operations in the former Yugoslavia. Clinton ignored Congress and committed U.S. troops anyway.

Preble also tells of the fact – which many have forgotten – that in 2000, neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan "had enthusiastically supported McCain, scorning Bush and his coterie of realist foreign policy advisers, led by Condoleezza Rice, a protégé of Brent Scowcroft." Preble adds:

"From Kristol and Kagan's perspective, the younger Bush seemed too much like his father, willing to contemplate good relations with the dictators in China, willing to tolerate Saddam Hussein remaining in power in Baghdad, willing to cut taxes but not necessarily willing to – as McCain had done – appeal to Americans' supposedly innate desire for national greatness."

Unfortunately, George W. Bush, he of "humble foreign policy," who had said that the U.S. government shouldn't "go around the world and say this is the way it's got to be" decided, after 9/11, to have the U.S. government go around the world and say this is the way it's got to be.

Preble gives good ways of grasping the huge cost of America's foreign policy. In 2007, for example, the Pentagon's budget, plus its special funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, totaled \$622 billion, or \$2,065 for every American resident. He compares that to military spending by Britain (just over \$1,000 per resident), France (\$845), Japan (\$340), Russia (\$495 in 2006), and China (a piddling \$92 in 2006). Preble goes further, noting that the number for the U.S. should include the part of the Department of Energy's budget for nuclear weapons (\$17.1 billion), the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and the Treasury Department's expenditures on military retirement costs. He went too far here: A big part of the Department of Homeland Security's budget, for example, is for programs that have little to do with foreign policy as most people understand that term. I don't defend those other programs – I would like to end virtually all of them – but they are not part of foreign policy.

Preble goes too far in another way. He estimates the part of interest on the national debt that is due to military spending and adds that in to the cost of foreign policy. But that's double counting. The cost has already been taken account of in the original expenditure. The fact that it was paid partly by debt rather than solely by taxes is irrelevant.

When he gets to specifics about military programs, though, Preble shows his mastery of the subject. He has excellent critiques of the expensive Joint Strike Fighter program, the F-22 fighter jet, the Virginia-class submarine, and the disastrous V-22 Osprey. He also lays out just how incredibly expensive military manpower is, noting a Congressional Budget Office study that found the average military compensation to be over \$115,000 annually. Moreover, he notes, Americans operating in war zones, including both uniformed military personnel and other government employees and contractors, pay zero federal income tax. Preble includes in the cost of intervention an intangible that is nevertheless real. He writes: "[O]ur possession of great power invites resentment, scorn, and sometimes hatred. In its most extreme forms, this hatred is manifested in violence against Americans wherever they live, work, or travel." Elsewhere, he buttresses this claim with two damning quotes from neoconservatives. The first is from Robert Kagan's 2003 book, [Of Paradise and Power](#), in which he wrote, "It is precisely America's great power and its willingness to assume the responsibility for protecting other nations that makes it the primary target, and often the only target." The second is from Paul Wolfowitz, who admitted in 2003 that the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf War had "been Osama bin Laden's principal recruiting device."

There you have it, straight from the horses' mouths. That makes [Rudy Giuliani's statement](#) during a 2007 Republican presidential debate that he'd never heard anyone claim that the 9/11 attacks were a response to the use of U.S. military power abroad all the more shocking. Either Giuliani was lying to play to his audience or he had never read Kagan's book, written four years earlier, or Wolfowitz's statement, made four years earlier. My money is on the latter. For all his talk about 9/11, I would bet that Rudy Giuliani spent less than an hour pondering *why* it happened.

Preble also introduces the economist's idea of opportunity costs. By spending as much as it does on the military, the U.S. government takes resources that could have been used elsewhere. Preble quotes former President Dwight Eisenhower making this point in a 1953 speech:

"The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete highway. We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people."

In discussing the draft, Preble argues against it but actually *understates* the case. He writes that "conscription is strategically unsound, morally reprehensible, and politically unthinkable." Yet he accepts the view of many pro-draft people that a draft would be "lower cost than the all-volunteer military." Not true. As many economists, including [Walter Oi](#), [Milton Friedman](#), [William Meckling](#), and [I](#), have pointed out, a draft actually raises the cost of a given-size military but hides the cost by shifting it onto the shoulders of young people who are unlucky enough to be male and healthy. A page later, Preble approvingly quotes Doug Bandow's assertion that "Conscription only shifts the burden of paying to those who are drafted," but he doesn't seem to see the contradiction between that and his earlier statement.

The strongest chapter of a strong book is his chapter "We Use It Too Much," in which Preble argues that the U.S. intervenes far too much in the affairs of other countries. Preble quotes the arguments made by those who favor this intervention and then refutes them beautifully. Niall Ferguson, for example, argues that without a hyperpower such as the United States, the world would experience a dark age. Comments Preble, "It is instructive that Ferguson had to reach back to the ninth century to find a historical precedent on which to base his argument." Preble notes that chaos is hardly in the interest of people in other countries and that they can spend on their own security. Preble points out that other governments spend much less of their GDP on defense for two reasons: (1) they free ride on U.S. expenditures, and (2) they have a different conception of the threat. Preble also notes that as more governments are added to an alliance, as has happened with NATO in recent years, the odds that NATO will get into a war go up, not down.

Not to be missed in this chapter is Preble's wry sense of humor. He quotes Canadian

politician Michael Ignatieff's explanation that it falls to Americans to "bear the ark of the liberties of the world." He also quotes then-Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, in his address to the U.S. Congress, asking, "Why me? And why us? And why America?" Blair then answered, "Because Destiny puts you in this place in history, in this moment in time, and the task is yours to do." Preble comments, "One wonders how these men know so well what destiny intends for Americans." Later, in discussing the view that America is the only country in the world with the ability and foresight to police the world, Preble writes, "Indeed, to read much of what passes for serious discussion in foreign policy circles today, one might conclude that the United States isn't simply the world's indispensable nation, but rather that is in the world's *only* nation" (italics his).

Preble also nicely handles the issue of oil, covering some of the same ground I covered in my "[Do We Need to Go to War for Oil?](#)" He points out that because oil is sold in a world market, one oil-producing nation cannot single out a particular country for punishment. He also quotes [my finding](#) in the early 1990s that even if Saddam Hussein had held on to Kuwait and had, implausibly, taken over the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, his exercise of his newfound monopoly power would have caused at most an annual loss of half a percent of GDP.

Preble ends by advocating that the United States government focus on defending the United States rather than kidding itself that it can run the affairs of the world well. In making his case, he references a study in which Georgetown University's David Edelstein surveyed the record of postwar occupations from the time of Napoleon to the present day and found that two thirds of all occupations failed. I agree with the direction in which Preble wants to move. I disagree with the speed. Preble writes, "I don't wish the U.S. military to be cut in half overnight." But he never says why.

Most of the criticisms of the book I've laid out to this point are relatively small. But I have two major criticisms. The first is Preble's incessant use of the word "we" when what he really means is a small set of decision-makers in the executive branch of the U.S. government. I have laid out elsewhere ([here](#) and [here](#)) some of the pernicious consequences of that abuse of language. My second objection is that not once in the whole book does Preble mention one of the huge costs of U.S. military intervention, a cost that I know he recognizes because he and I have discussed it. The cost I refer to is the death and destruction that U.S. military intervention has wreaked on people in other countries. Just as "Paris is well worth a mass," that cost deserves at least a paragraph.

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