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REVIEW ESSAY

Overpowered?

Questioning the Wisdom of American Restraint

Michael Mandelbaum

*MICHAEL MANDELBAUM is Christian A. Herter Professor of American Foreign Policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and the author of the forthcoming book *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era*. For an annotated guide to this topic, see "What to Read on American Primacy" at www.foreignaffairs.com/readinglists/american-primacy.*

"Money can't buy happiness," the old saying goes, and anyone who doubts that this is sometimes true should conduct a Google search for "lottery winners horror stories." He or she will find accounts of people for whom a great financial windfall led to misery, bankruptcy, and even suicide. In international relations, power is the equivalent of money -- highly desired, actively sought, and eagerly used. The theme of three new books about power and U.S. foreign policy is that as with money, so with power: a great deal of it does not necessarily bring success.

It can even have the opposite effect. Powerful countries can and do carry out foreign policies that fail, making them less prosperous, less respected, and, ultimately, less powerful. In each of the books, the prime example of the dangers of power, the equivalent of the lottery winners destroyed by riches, is the United States during the George W. Bush administration. For all three authors, the essence of what Christopher Preble calls "the power problem" is that the United States has too much of it.

Each author advocates a foreign policy different from the one Bush conducted. Each calls for more modest aims and wider international cooperation. And although each severely criticizes the Bush administration, all find evidence of the drawbacks of power in the policies of other administrations and in the histories of other countries as well. The three books have another important feature in common: each is backward-looking. Although they do not seem to recognize it, the era in which U.S. foreign policy could be driven in counterproductive directions by an excess of power is in the process of ending.

DEBATING DOMINANCE

Jack Matlock is one of the most accomplished U.S. diplomats of the last half century. His specialty in the Foreign Service was the Soviet Union, where he served four tours of duty -- the last of them, from 1987 to 1991, as U.S. ambassador. Prior to his final posting in Moscow, he advised President Ronald Reagan on Soviet affairs.

Matlock's assessment of the Bush administration is harshly negative. He says, for example, that the 9/11 attacks

"could have been prevented if the Bush administration had shown minimal competence in using the information the CIA had provided." Matlock, a trusted aide to Reagan, contends that in temperament and outlook, if not always in policy preferences, Barack Obama more closely resembles the president with whom he worked than did President George W. Bush -- a judgment likely to occasion both surprise and dismay among the partisans of all three chief executives.

The most important feature of *Superpower Illusions* is Matlock's explanation of the wayward course of U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War. It has stemmed, he believes, from a mistaken understanding of how and why the great conflict with the Soviet Union ended. Americans have wrongly seen this end as a kind of military victory. In fact, it was "a negotiated outcome that benefitted both sides." The four-decade-long policy of containment certainly helped create the conditions in which the conflict could end as it did, but military power alone could never have produced that ending. Matlock denounces "the idea . . . that it was U.S. force and threats, rather than negotiation, that ended the Cold War, and also that Reagan's rhetoric 'conquered' communism, and that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the equivalent of a military victory." Such claims, he goes on, "are all distortions, all incorrect, all misleading, and all dangerous to the safety and future prosperity of the American people."

The triumphalist interpretation has had pernicious consequences. It has reinforced Russian leader Vladimir Putin's narrative of his country's recent history, which asserts that the end of the Soviet Union was an unmitigated disaster, foisted on the Russians by the West in order to weaken the Russian nation. That narrative supports Putin's autocratic domestic policies and Russia's reflexive hostility to the United States.

The incorrect reading of the Cold War's end has also contributed, by fostering an exaggerated sense of American power, to harmful foreign policies on the part of the United States. Matlock is particularly eloquent and convincing on one of them: the decision to expand NATO to former communist countries and former republics of the Soviet Union while excluding Russia. NATO expansion was not necessary to assure the security of the newly independent countries of eastern Europe, he says, and it has had devastating consequences for U.S. interests. In his view, it "increased America's exposure to risk by adding countries to its security guarantee, . . . weakened NATO (because the more members it had the more its unity was challenged by competing national interests), and . . . alarmed Russia and made it less willing to cooperate fully with the United States."

NATO expansion proved all the more offensive to Russia because Western leaders had given assurances to their Soviet counterparts that the alliance would not move eastward. Matlock was present when U.S. Secretary of State James Baker conveyed such an assurance to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990. In light of his account, the argument made by the apologists for NATO expansion -- that the United States was entitled to carry it out because Soviet leaders never received a written promise that it would not take place -- can be seen as the travesty of basic American principles that it is. Neither the founders of the United States nor those who led it through the trials of the next two centuries ever intended their country to behave like a dishonest businessman whose word cannot be trusted unless it is formally embedded in an ironclad legal contract.

Matlock writes on the basis of 35 years as an active participant in making and carrying out foreign policy. Giulio Gallarotti's perspective, by contrast, is that of an observer. Gallarotti is a professor of government at Wesleyan University, and *The Power Curse* is written in academic style for other academics.

Its title echoes a phenomenon familiar to economists: the resource curse. This is the perverse tendency for a large endowment of a valuable resource -- usually oil -- to make a country poorer by stunting the development of the

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institutions necessary for a productive economy and by boosting the value of the country's currency, thereby harming its exports. Gallarotti asserts that a large endowment of power has a comparable effect, leading its possessor to adopt policies that weaken it.

In one sense, his thesis is surely correct. The foreign policies of great powers do sometimes fail, and their power is almost always a cause of the failure in that without this power they would not have embarked on the failed initiatives in the first place. To take two of the cases Gallarotti discusses, ancient Athens would not have tried to conquer Sicily and the United States would not have intervened in Vietnam had the two great powers not had substantial military and economic resources. Whether the systematic relationship between power and failure that Gallarotti posits actually exists is less clear.

He argues that power leads to failure in four distinct ways: by discouraging states from adapting to complexity, by making them vulnerable to overstretch, by leading them to fall victim to moral hazard, and by inducing them to act unilaterally. Not all of the terms he uses are well defined. "Moral hazard," in its original economic context, refers to a situation in which the gains from economic activity are privatized and the losses are socialized -- that is, borne by the government. As Gallarotti uses the term, however, it seems to mean merely overconfidence, which is something different. A firm or an individual operating in circumstances of moral hazard has a strong incentive to engage in behavior known to be risky because the potential economic benefits are large and the losses will be borne by somebody else. An overconfident government, by contrast, carries out policies that it does not consider risky. It believes that it will suffer no losses because the policies cannot fail.

Like Matlock, Gallarotti believes that the Bush administration's foreign policies, to which he devotes an entire chapter, weakened the United States, but the chapter does not always inspire confidence in his grasp of the realities of the world in which Bush and his colleagues formulated these policies. Gallarotti writes, for example, of the social welfare activities of the three principal terrorist organizations in the Middle East that "the generosity on the part of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Al-Qaida has become legend among Muslim populations in a number of countries." The policies of these three organizations that have had the widest effects, however, most certainly did not enhance the welfare of those they affected. Hamas' assaults on Israel and criticism of Egypt led to a blockade by the two countries of the Gaza Strip, where Hamas holds power, which has made the conditions of life there miserable. Hezbollah started an unprovoked war against Israel that caused extensive damage in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut. Al Qaeda's major accomplishment since 9/11 has been to murder thousands of fellow Muslims. Gallarotti does not specify the countries in which these three groups have become legendary, but they cannot be the ones in which Hamas, Hezbollah, and al Qaeda actually operate.

The Power Curse concludes with a series of lessons from the cases it examines, which amount to an injunction to governments to conduct their foreign policies in a prudent, cautious, and flexible fashion. This is surely good advice for powerful countries -- and for weak ones, and for those that are neither, as well.

RESTRAINING ORDER

The recommendations for U.S. foreign policy in Christopher Preble's *The Power Problem*, by contrast, go well beyond prudence. Preble is the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank with a libertarian political outlook that generally favors a far more modest foreign policy than recent administrations have chosen. On the evidence of this volume, Preble considers the defense of the borders of the United States to be the

only legitimate use of U.S. military power.

He, his colleague Ted Galen Carpenter, and other foreign policy analysts affiliated with Cato can be counted on to make a cogent case against whatever international initiative the U.S. government happens to be contemplating or actually carrying out. Since the think tanks in the nation's capital that are more closely aligned with one of the two main political parties usually support the government's foreign policy initiatives (at least when their favored party is in power), and since the international projects the U.S. government launches sometimes turn out badly, this is a valuable service.

Preble denies that he is an isolationist, and he and his colleagues do strongly favor free trade. Cato's approach to foreign policy in fact corresponds to what the scholar Walter Russell Mead has called the Jeffersonian approach, one that the nation's third president embraced and sought to practice. Its main belief is that the liberty on behalf of which the American colonists revolted against their British overlords is not only precious but also fragile: military adventures abroad can compromise it at home. Eighteenth-century Jeffersonians feared a "man on horseback," a military leader, like Napoleon Bonaparte in France, who would seize political power. Today's Jeffersonians have two different concerns about foreign wars and ongoing entanglements in the affairs of other countries. They fear the creation of a permanent coalition of interests -- what President Dwight Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex" -- that will distort the nation's foreign policies. And they object to spending money for foreign purposes rather than channeling it to social welfare programs in the United States or, as Cato would prefer, leaving it in the hands of U.S. taxpayers.

Some who find post-Cold War U.S. military interventions unwise would subscribe to President Theodore Roosevelt's admonition to "speak softly and carry a big stick." They would, that is, endorse a robust military as long as it is not used very often. Preble disagrees. For him, the United States and its armed forces recall Oscar Wilde's remark that he could "resist everything except temptation." Preble considers a large military to be a permanent, irresistible temptation to intervene overseas and therefore favors a smaller one. The United States should devote considerably fewer resources to defense, he believes, and he deftly illustrates the ways in which defense contractors and military officials manage to fund weapons systems the country does not need.

Preble makes frequent reference to the founders of the American republic, whose definition of a proper foreign policy in many ways matches his own. Like him, they generally opposed maintaining a large military establishment and the waging of foreign wars. However, the United States' foreign policy depends on not only what its eighteenth-century leaders believed but also what the world of the twenty-first century is like, and on the latter subject, Preble has very little to say. Readers of *The Power Problem* will find no discussion of North Korea's nuclear weapons, or the growth of China's power, or Iran's regional ambitions, or the spread of Saudi Arabia's radical Islamist ideology. Perhaps none of these requires the close and sustained attention of the United States, but Preble makes no serious effort to explain why this is so. The impression that emerges from the book, by default, is that the author sees the world outside North America as a larger version of Antarctica: alien, uniform, unpromising, and harmless.

THE FRUGAL FUTURE

Whatever the quality of the analysis underlying it, however, Preble's vision of a more modest U.S. foreign policy, which Matlock and Gallarotti share, is destined to be adopted. The United States will do less, perhaps much less, beyond its borders in the next two decades than it has in the last two.

This retrenchment will not come about because the views of the founders have gained currency among the wider U.S. public or as the result of the disappointments and failures of recent U.S. military interventions. The principal cause will be the fiscal condition of the United States. The country will bear the burden of a huge and growing national debt, from three principal sources: the chronic deficits from 2001 to 2008, the very high costs of coping with the financial crisis of 2008 and the recession it dramatically deepened, and, most important, the skyrocketing bill for Social Security and Medicare as the baby-boom generation becomes eligible for these entitlements.

The Bush administration, it is worth noting, was directly responsible for the first of these sources, indirectly responsible for the second, and did nothing to reduce the costs of the third. Under the eyes of eternity, therefore, the greatest damage that the administration will be seen to have inflicted on the United States' position in the world will come not from the Iraq war, about which so much ink has been spilled (including in the three books under review), but rather from its profligate fiscal policies.

There are four ways to address a deficit: by borrowing, by reducing spending, by raising taxes, and by printing money. Because the second and the third have proved politically impossible and the fourth would be economically ruinous, the United States has relied on the first. But it will not always be able to borrow all the money required to fill the gap between the government's expenditures and its revenues. At some point, taxes will have to rise and spending will have to fall. Fewer resources will be available for all other programs, including foreign policy. In these circumstances, with Americans paying more to the government and receiving fewer benefits from it, popular support for an expansive foreign policy will decline. The public will insist more strongly than at any time since before World War II on using its dollars for domestic, rather than international, purposes.

It will not permit expensive military interventions leading to state-building exercises, such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. It will not support the kind of humanitarian interventions, to rescue people under assault from their own governments, that the Clinton administration undertook in the 1990s in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. The nation's growing fiscal burden is also likely to put pressure on its most important international missions -- its military presence, which helps keep the peace, in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, places where instability could seriously harm U.S. interests.

The prospect of a reduced U.S. presence around the world does not disturb Matlock, Gallarotti, or Preble. Each is confident that other countries will step forward to fill any geopolitically perilous vacuum that a more modest U.S. foreign policy creates. With the passing of what they regard as the wantonly unilateralist Bush administration, all see great potential for more extensive international cooperation. All believe, that is, that other countries will risk lives and spend money in pursuit of goals they have in common with the United States.

Perhaps eventually they will, but the first year of the presumably kinder, gentler, more multilateral Obama administration yielded little evidence of a willingness on the part of others to share the United States' global burdens. If, as Washington pulls back, others do not step forward, the world is all too likely to become both more disorderly and less prosperous. In that case, the verdict on the state of the world in the year 2030 may differ sharply from the judgment these three books pass on the last 20 years. Whereas their common theme is the dangers that arise when the United States has too much power, their successors two decades from now will be chronicling the even worse -- perhaps far worse -- consequences of the United States' having too little of it.

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