

Ludwig von Mises Institute - *Tu Ne Cede Malis*

Advancing the scholarship of liberty in the tradition of the Austrian School.

The Siren Song of Pax Americana

Mises Daily: Tuesday, May 11, 2010 by [David Gordon](http://mises.org/articles.aspx?AuthorId=64) (<http://mises.org/articles.aspx?AuthorId=64>)

[The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free • By Christopher A. Preble • Cornell University Press, 2009 • Xiii + 212 pages]

America, it is frequently urged, cannot return to its traditional foreign policy of nonintervention. We live in a world that constantly exposes us to danger. Unless America acts as a world policeman, a conflagration far distant from us can soon spread and strike at our essential national interests. The lessons of 9-11 must not be forgotten. Fortunately, America is far and away the most powerful nation in the world. We can, if only we maintain a resolute will, act to promote world order: if we do not, no one else can act in our place.

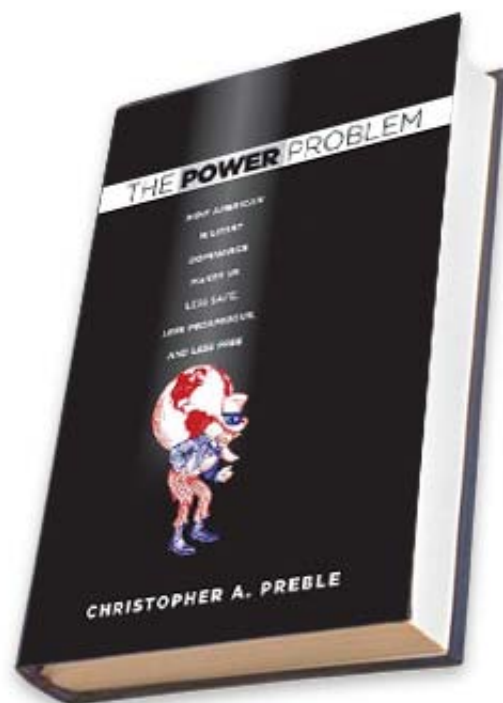
This disastrous line of thought has embroiled us in futile wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; now neoconservatives urge us to take drastic action against Iran, lest that nation secure nuclear weapons. Once more, the contention supporting a strike at Iran is that the United States must act as a hegemonic power to maintain a stable world. Christopher Preble provides an outstanding critical analysis of this dangerous doctrine in what must count as one of the best defenses of a restrained and rational foreign policy since Eric Nordlinger's *Isolationism Reconfigured*.^[1][\(#note1\)](#)

Even those inclined to give credence to the siren song of a *Pax Americana* must confront reality. Though America may be the world's mightiest nation, it cannot achieve the grandiose goals of the interventionists. America is strong, but not strong enough.

But our military power has come up short in recent years. Although the U.S. military scored decisive victories against those individuals in Afghanistan and Iraq who were foolish enough to stand and fight, it has proved incapable of enforcing a rule of law, or delivering security, in many parts of post-Taliban Afghanistan or post-Saddam Iraq... We know that our men and women in uniform can accomplish remarkable things. But we have also begun to appreciate their limitations, the most important of which being that they cannot be everywhere at once. (pp. 37–8)

If the goal of universal peace under American domination is unrealizable, the attempt to achieve it has imposed heavy costs. Most obviously, the wars undertaken to secure this chimerical goal have caused death, destruction, and resentment against the United States by the people subjected to our assault. In Afghanistan, e.g., the

use of air power to attack suspected insurgent strongholds has enraged Afghan leaders and the local



"Though America may be the world's mightiest nation, it cannot achieve the grandiose goals of the interventionists."

population causing them to question our intentions. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's "first demand" of Barack Obama was for the President-elect "to put an end to civilian casualties." (pp. 147–48)

The financial burdens of hegemony are difficult to overestimate. America spends more on the military than all other industrialized nations combined. Defenders of our current policy counter by saying that our defense spending is no higher than many other countries as a percentage of GDP, and lower than some. Preble dismisses this as irrelevant:

There are a very few poor countries that spend a larger percentage of their meager GDP, but that translates to far less military capacity in real terms ... what a country spends as a share of its GDP doesn't tell us very much about how much it should spend. (p. 67)

Talk of percentages occludes the immense amount of money the hegemonic policy demands. As an example, the Iraq War, according to an estimate by Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, will cost

between \$2.7 trillion in direct costs to the federal treasury, to as much as \$5 trillion in terms of the total impact of the war on the U.S. economy... Although critics challenged aspects of the Stiglitz/Bilmes research, two of their central arguments are beyond dispute — and they apply not merely to the Iraq War, but to all wars. First, we spend more money on our military when it is at war than when it is at peace. Second, having waged war, we pay more over the lifetimes of those injured and disabled than we would have paid if they had never fought. (p. 39)

Preble's stress on this point continues the pioneering work of Earl Ravenal, a one-time Robert McNamara "whiz kid" who became a resolute foe of interventionism. He too stressed the extraordinary financial costs of American military policy, in such works as *Never Again*.

Leftist critics of American policy often call up visions of the utopia that would result were the government to spend its military budget on social programs. Could we not, absent a crushing military budget, easily provide decent healthcare and education for all, not to mention the drastic reduction of poverty, if not its total eradication? Preble trenchantly points out the fallacy. The problem of the military budget does not lie in its crowding out of other government programs. Rather, it prevents people from spending their money as they wish, owing to the high taxes it requires:

Such arguments implicitly assume that money not being spent on a war, or the military more generally, would be spent by the *government* or on other *government* programs. That is shortsighted and ultimately counterproductive... [Opportunity] costs apply not just to what the government is spending and where the government might be spending elsewhere, but also [to] what average taxpayers are not able or willing to spend because they are on the hook for paying for an enormous and seemingly permanent military industry, and also for the occasional wars. (pp. 78–9)

The pursuit of hegemony has also adversely affected our system of government. Recent presidents have arrogated to themselves the right to commit America to war, in defiance of the Constitution.

The Founders of our great nation ... worried that wars would give rise to an overgrown military establishment that would upset the delicate balance between the three branches of government, and between the government and the people... A government instituted to preserve liberties could swiftly come to subvert them. A gloomy Jefferson opined, "The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground." (p. 80)

Defenders of current policy have a counterargument to all that has been said so far. They will reiterate the dangers that a disordered world presents to us. Even if we cannot completely attain a stable world order controlled by America, and even if the attempt to bring this about has heavy costs, we ought to try to come as close as we can to this goal.

"If the goal of universal peace under American domination is unrealizable, the attempt to achieve it has imposed heavy

Otherwise, a conflagration anywhere on the globe can quickly escalate to an existential threat to us.

where it has imposed heavy costs."

One of the best features of Preble's book is the convincing response it offers to this objection. It is unquestionably true that disorder constantly threatens various areas of the world; but why must a single power act to restore order? If America does not act, will not those nations in the vicinity of a crisis have a strong incentive to cope with it?

In fact, there is little reason to believe the world will descend down this path [to chaos] if the United States hews to a restrained foreign policy focused on preserving its national security and advancing its vital interests. This is because there are other governments in other countries, pursuing similar policies aimed at preserving their security, and regional — much less global — chaos is hardly in their interests. On the contrary, the primary obligation of government is to defend the citizens from threats, both foreign and domestic. (p. 94)^[2]^(#note2)

Those anxious to insure that America remains embroiled in the Middle East warn against a particular example of disorder, i.e., the danger to our economy that would result from an interruption in the supply of oil. Must we not act to interdict any threat to this vital resource? Preble points out that this danger is grossly exaggerated:

As oil is the principal source of revenue for the Persian Gulf countries, an explicit attempt to withhold this source of wealth from world markets would certainly be more painful for the perpetrators of such a policy than for their intended victims. (p. 111)

Even those who reject American hegemony sometimes call for American action to meet "humanitarian catastrophes." Are we to stand idly by when mass murder, e.g., in Rwanda and Darfur, is taking place? Preble has a twofold response to this unfortunately influential doctrine of the "responsibility to protect." First, military interventions often fail to achieve their ostensible humanitarian purpose and

[e]ven the best-intended military interventions, those specifically aimed at advancing the cause of peace and justice, can have horrific side-effects, [the] most important of these being the real possibility that innocent bystanders and those the operation seeks to protect may be inadvertently killed or injured... Those killed leave behind a legacy of bitterness; parents, spouses, children, friends, few of whom may have actively supported the former regime, but all of whom may forget the noble intentions of the invading force and later direct their wrath at those responsible for their misfortune. (pp. 123–24)

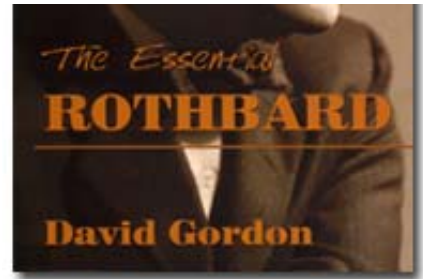
The second strand of Preble's case against humanitarian intervention appeals to the fundamental insight of his book: the limits of American power. To use the American military for humanitarian missions may strain our resources and interfere with the protection of the American people.

The Constitution clearly stipulates the object of the U.S. government is to protect "We the People of the United States." Our government is supposed to act in our common defense, not the defense of others. (p. 131)

Preble has constructed an overwhelming case against our current hegemonic policy. The most valuable insight of the book, though, emerges once one accepts this case. This vital insight answers the question, what must be done to achieve a noninterventionist foreign policy? Preble forcefully contends that we will never be able to limit American overreaching so long as the current imbalance in military power persists. Given America's overwhelming military superiority to any opponent, the temptation to use that power is well-nigh irresistible. To cope with this problem, our military forces must be drastically



reduced. Preble is no pacifist; but only by making the grasp at hegemony impossible, he argues, can we hope for a more limited and saner policy. As Preble aptly remarks, "Reducing our power and thereby constraining our *ability* to intervene militarily around the globe will limit our *propensity* to intervene" (p. 138).



(<http://mises.org/store/Essential-Rothbard-The-P336.aspx>)

"The financial burdens of hegemony are difficult to overestimate."

David Gordon covers new books in economics, politics, philosophy, and law for *The Mises Review* (<http://mises.org/misesreview.asp>), the quarterly review of literature in the social sciences, published since 1995 by the Mises Institute. He is author of *The Essential Rothbard* (<http://mises.org/store/Essential-Rothbard-The-P336C0.aspx>), available in the Mises Store. Send him mail (<mailto:dgordon@mises.org>). See David Gordon's [article archives](http://mises.org/articles.aspx?AuthorId=64) (<http://mises.org/articles.aspx?AuthorId=64>).

[Comment on the blog.](http://blog.mises.org/12682/the-siren-song-of-pax-americana/) (<http://blog.mises.org/12682/the-siren-song-of-pax-americana/>)

You can subscribe to future articles by David Gordon via this [RSS feed](http://mises.org/Feeds/articles.ashx?AuthorId=64) (<http://mises.org/Feeds/articles.ashx?AuthorId=64>).

Notes

[1] (#ref1) (Princeton, 1995). See my review in *The Mises Review* Fall 1996.

[2] (#ref2) Preble expertly disposes of the claim that international defense is a public good that will be underproduced if the United States fails to provide it: nations, it is argued, will hope to benefit from efforts by others in their region to cope with threats rather than deal with these threats themselves. Preble counters that defense is not a pure public good. To the extent that it is a public good, though, smaller powers can free ride on American defense efforts.

Ludwig von Mises Institute (.) · 518 West Magnolia Avenue · Auburn, Alabama 36832-4528

Phone: 334.321.2100 · Fax: 334.321.2119

contact@mises.org (<mailto:contact@mises.org>) · [webmaster](mailto:webmaster@mises.org?subject=Comment%20about%20the%20website) (<mailto:webmaster@mises.org?subject=Comment about the website>) · [Save to MyMises](#) (#)

[mises.org sitemap](http://mises.org/sitemap.aspx) (<http://mises.org/sitemap.aspx>) ·  (<http://validator.w3.org/check?uri=referer>) ·



(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/us/>) ·

(<http://www.facebook.com/mises.institute>)

