

The IR Blog

Thoughts and ideas from the Five College International Relations faculty

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American Hegemony (cont.): "Where have all the Kennans Gone?"

May 18, 2009 by Jon Western

A few weeks ago, Mlada, Peter, and Vinnie began a discussion on American global leadership and the question of hegemony. While they, and others, continue to debate the significance and effect of American power in the world today, one thing we can probably all agree upon is that we are not likely to see a retrenchment in American internationalism anytime soon. The Cornell University Press Studies in Security Affairs series edited by Bob Art, Bob Jervis, and Stephen Walt has just released Christopher Preble's new book titled: [*The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free*](#). Preble is the Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute and in the tradition of libertarian, anti-statist, conservatism makes a strong case for American military and foreign policy retrenchment.

Stephen Walt gives us [his take/review](#) of the book in a recent post on his blog. Walt, a self-defined realist, is tempted by Prebles' argument, but he takes the analysis a step further by asking: Why is it that amid the global financial crisis and severe financial constraints on government budgets, the U.S. defense and foreign affairs budgets continue to grow? Moreover, why is it that in FY2009 the United States will spend more on defense and defense related expenditures than all other countries in the world combined? In other words, what explains the staying power of America's internationalist agenda? Walt suggests that there are strong domestic structural forces at play. There are dozens of institutions, lobbies, (and bureaucracies), that might disagree on specific policy objectives, but nonetheless push for America to do more and more. By contrast, he argues, there are few institutions that push for a more restrained American foreign policy and these are easily overwhelmed by the Washington internationalist cohort:

In short, what I'm suggesting here is that America's role in the world today is shaped by two imbalances of power, not just one. The first is the gap between U.S. capabilities and everyone else's, a situation that has some desirable features (especially for us) but one that also encourages the United States to do too much and allows others to do either too little or too many of the wrong things. The second imbalance is between organized interests whose core mission is constantly pushing the U.S. government to do more and in more places, and the far-weaker groups who think we might be better off showing a bit more restraint.

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