Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy

By Christopher Preble
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In domestic policy, libertarians tend to believe in a minimal state endowed with enumerated powers, dedicated to protecting the security and liberty of its citizens but otherwise inclined to leave them alone. The same principles should apply when we turn our attention abroad. Citizens should be free to buy and sell goods and services, study and travel, and otherwise interact with peoples from other lands and places, unencumbered by the intrusions of government.

But peaceful, non-coercive foreign engagement should not be confused with its violent cousin: war. American libertarians have traditionally opposed wars and warfare, even those ostensibly focused on achieving liberal ends. And for good reason. All wars involve killing people and destroying property. Most entail massive encroachments on civil liberties, from warrantless surveillance to conscription. They all impede the free movement of goods, capital, and labor essential to economic prosperity. And all wars contribute to the growth of the state.

An abhorrence of war flows from the classical liberal tradition. Adam Smith taught that "peace, easy taxes and a tolerable administration of justice" were the essential ingredients of good government. Other classical liberals, from Richard Cobden and John Stuart Mill to Ludwig von Mises and F.A. Hayek, excoriated war as incompatible with liberty.

War is the largest and most far-reaching of all statist enterprises: an engine of collectivization that undermines private enterprise, raises taxes, destroys wealth, and subjects all aspects of the economy to regimentation and central planning. It also subtly alters the citizens' view of the state. "War substitutes a herd mentality and blind obedience for the normal propensity to question authority and to demand good and proper reasons for government actions," writes Ronald Hamowy in *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*. He continues, "War promotes collectivism at the expense of individualism, force at the expense of reason, and coarseness at the expense of sensibility. Libertarians regard all of those tendencies with sorrow."

Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman stated the issue more succinctly. "War is a friend of the state," he told the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a year before his death. "In time of war, government will take powers and do things that it would not ordinarily do."

The evidence is irrefutable. Throughout human history, government has grown during wartime, rarely surrendering its new powers when the guns fall silent.

Some might claim that a particular threat to freedom from abroad is greater than anything we could do to ourselves in fighting it. But that is a hard case to make. Even the post-9/11 "global war on terror"-a war that hasn't involved conscription or massive new taxes-has resulted in wholesale violations of basic civil rights and an erosion of the rule of law. From Bush's torture memos to Obama's secret kill list, this has all been done in the name of fighting a menace-Islamist terrorism-that has killed fewer American civilians in the last decade than allergic reactions to peanuts. It seems James Madison was right. It was "a universal truth," he wrote, "that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged to the provisions against danger, real or pretended, from abroad."

But surely, some say, the United States is an exceptional nation that serves the cause of global liberty. The United States pursues a "foreign policy that makes the world a better place," explains Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), "and sometimes that requires force, a lot of times, it requires a threat or force." By engaging in frequent wars, even when U.S. security isn't directly threatened, the United States acts as the world's much-needed policeman. That's the theory, anyway.

In practice, the record is decidedly mixed. This supposedly liberal order does not work as well as its advocates claim. The world still has its share of conflicts, despite a U.S. global military presence explicitly oriented around stopping wars before they start. The U.S. Navy supposedly keeps the seas open for global commerce, but it's not obvious who would benefit from closing them—aside from terrorists or pirates who couldn't if they tried. Advocates of the status quo claim that it would be much worse if the U.S. adopted a more restrained grand strategy, but they fail to accurately account for the costs of this global posture and they exaggerate the benefits. And, of course, there is the obvious case of the Iraq War, a disaster that was part and parcel of this misguided strategy of global primacy. It was launched on the promise of delivering freedom to the Iraqi people and then to the entire Middle East. It has had, if anything, the opposite effect.

Libertarians should immediately understand why. We harbor deep and abiding doubts about government's capacity for effecting particular ends, no matter how well intentioned. These concerns are magnified, not set aside, when the government project involves violence in foreign lands.

These doubts are informed by Hayek's observations about the "fatal conceit" of trying to control an economy. Throughout his career, the economist convincingly argued that government is incapable, over the long term, of effective central planning. Attempts inevitably fall short of expectations, because human beings always have imperfect knowledge.

This knowledge problem contributes to unintended consequences. These can be serious enough in the domestic context; they're more serious still in foreign policy. Even well-intentioned wars—those designed to remove a tyrant from power and liberate an oppressed people, for example—unleash chaos and violence that cannot be limited solely to those deserving of punishment. And wars always cost us some of our liberty, in addition to blood and treasure.

For all of these reasons—the expansion of state power, the problem of imperfect knowledge, the law of unintended consequences—libertarians must treat war for what it is: a necessary evil. "War cannot be avoided at all costs, but it should be avoided wherever possible," writes the Cato

Institute's David Boaz in *Libertarianism: A Primer*. "Proposals to involve the United States—or any government—in foreign conflict should be treated with great skepticism." The obviously desirable end of advancing human liberty should, in all but the most exceptional circumstances, be achieved by peaceful means.

The United States is in a particularly advantageous position to adopt foreign policies consistent with libertarian principles. Small, weak countries might not have the luxury of avoiding wars, but the United States is neither small nor weak. Our physical security is protected by wide oceans and weak neighbors, and augmented by the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. We get to choose when and whether to wage war abroad, and we could do so by assessing the likely costs against the anticipated benefits.

Instead, as the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer notes, "The United States has been at war for a startling two out of every three years since 1989," and U.S. policy makers show little regard for how such wars advance U.S. security. Large-scale military intervention is usually irrelevant when dealing with non-state actors such as Al Qaeda, and the U.S. government has no magic formula for reordering Iraqi or Syrian politics, the true breeding ground of the so-called Islamic State.

Although there may be occasions when military force is required to eliminate an urgent threat, thus necessitating an always-strong military, our capacity for waging war far exceeds that which is required in the modern world. Despite the ostensible end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. military's non-war budget remains extraordinarily high. In inflation-adjusted dollars, Americans annually spend more now than we did, on average, during the Cold War, when we were facing off against a global empire with a functioning army and navy, a modern air force, and thousands of nuclear weapons capable of reaching the United States in a matter of minutes. Al Qaeda and all of its copycats combined can't muster even 1/1000th of the destructive power of the Soviet Union.

If the United States used its military power less often, might that be OK for Americans but worse for everyone else? What if the cause of freedom needs the United States as its champion? People living under a tyrant's heel deserve liberation; the threat of U.S. intervention might convince the petty despot to step down; if not, the sharp end of American military power could deliver him to a prison cell, or the gallows.

Such a view unfairly privileges U.S. military power, and the power of the American state, over the power of ideas. Freedom has many champions; it betrays a curious disregard for other freedom fighters' work to suggest that liberty can only flourish under the covering fire of American arms. The question, therefore, isn't *whether* we should wish to see freedom spread worldwide. The real issue is about how best to do it.

Toward that end, U.S. policies have often been counterproductive, sometimes having the perverse effect of eroding the very concept of individual liberty. Quite a few oppressed people have watched in horror as Iraq has descended into civil war and anarchy. If that is what freedom and democracy look like, they might reasonably conclude, we'll happily opt for something else.

Similarly, the United States' entangling alliances with illiberal Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia make a mockery of Washington's claim to be an advocate for freedom.

This is not an argument against either military power or alliances per se. It is an argument against allowing the world to become overly reliant upon the military power of a single nation. Who's to say, for example, that a more militarily capable European Union would not have proved better able than the United States to deter Russian aggression in Georgia in 2008, and now in Ukraine? Could even modest military capabilities (e.g., a functioning coast guard) better defend Philippine claims to the Scarborough Shoals in their ongoing dispute with China? Might Turkey be fighting the ISIS threat on its border if the Turks didn't believe the United States would do the fighting for them? An international order that is less dependent upon the U.S. military as a vehicle for promoting liberty, and based instead on the presumption that all governments have a core obligation to defend their own citizens, could be a safer one and also a freer one.

Libertarians have traditionally been reluctant to support foreign military interventions. We still should be. We will defend ourselves when threatened. When there is a viable military option for dealing with that threat, and when we have exhausted other means, we may even reluctantly choose to initiate the use of force. Such instances are rare, however, because most of today's threats are quite modest. Libertarians have a very clear sense of the risks associated with military operations. We retain a sober sense of the certainty of unintended consequences and the possibility of failure. We should therefore be skeptical of any claim that preventive war will turn a suboptimal but manageable situation into something much better.

The experiences of the past decade have reaffirmed these truths, and taught us some new lessons, too. Although we marvel at the professionalism and commitment of those who serve in our military, we have been reminded of war's unpredictability, and that the military is always a blunt instrument. Above all, we have learned that the costs of waging wars are rarely offset by the benefits we derive from them.

That does not mean that military intervention is never warranted, or never will be in the future. It does mean that we need to more clearly define those infrequent situations in which war is the last best course of action.

The United States should and will participate in the international system. It must remain engaged in the world. But it is wrong to equate engagement with global military dominance and perpetual warfare. Human liberty exists in spite of, not because of, the power of any one nation, and it is dubious in the extreme to presume that freedom's flame will be extinguished if the United States adopts a more discriminating approach toward the use of force.

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