

Power really does corrupt as it expands

[BY TIBOR R. MACHAN](#)

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Lord Acton, the British historian is widely known for at least one of his observations. This is that "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Acton made this observation amidst a whole lot of insights and analyses that have gone down as the treasures of late classical liberal political thought. His most famous insight has by now become a cliché, a truth that we all know even if we fail to heed it in our daily lives and public affairs.

It is for this reason, among others, that the works of such contemporary libertarians as professor Robert Higgs are so vital. They give substance to Acton's cliché, if you will, in such books as "Crisis and Leviathan" (Oxford University Press, 1989), where Higgs demonstrates with umpteen historical examples just how much governments that acquire power during so-called emergencies and with the explanation - or excuse - that this power is simply needed to cope with the emergency mostly keep and expand that power after the emergency has stopped and been handled (usually without the need for the expanded powers of governments).

Most of us do not have the time or inclination to do the historical research that a scholar such as Higgs makes his daily occupation despite the fact that without a solid background in the study of such history most of us become the gullible pawns of politicians and their academic cheerleaders (of which there are simply a lot more than academics who unearth the nuggets of knowledge that shows us how vicious and useless the use of power is in human affairs).

We are just now witnessing exactly what Higgs and some others have pointed out through most of their careers.

Take, for example, Christopher A. Preble, a former commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy and now director of foreign policy studies at the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute, whose recently published "The Power Problem" (Cornell University Press, 2009) revisits some of the territory Higgs has mined but with a focus on very current foreign and military affairs.

The preamble to the book is itself worth its price. It is a quotation from General Colin Powell's "My American Journey." Powell reports that "Madeleine Albright, our Ambassador to the U.N., asked me in frustration 'What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?' I thought," Powell goes on to comment, "I would have an aneurysm. American GIs were not toy soldiers to be moved around on some sort of global game board."

Albright's obscenity does not by any means stand as a rare instance. I attended a speech given by Irving Kristol, the godfather of the neo-conservative political movement and a powerful influence in Washington, where Kristol advanced the idea that a country needs a little war now and then so as to lighten the spirit of its young men!

And this talk was the keynote speech for the Philadelphia Society several years ago, before either of the Iraq wars got under way. A friend of mine who has worked in the field of political philosophy and, in particular, on just war theory, told me after he heard Kristol that it was one of the very few times in his life that he was tempted to physically assault someone for what he was

speaking on!

The sad truth is that the power problem is completely non-partisan, and today it is President Obama and his team who are churning out rationalizations for building up Washington's arsenal of bureaucracy, with its massive weaponry given by Congress.

Although the American Founders had hoped that their arrangement of power in the capitol of the nation would manage to contain the beast, in fact they miscalculated.

And what was to be a bone fide free country, with a strictly limited government - limited via the Constitution and various devices of separation of powers - the United States has gravitated from being a promise of liberty for all to a promise of power to a rather large political sector.

It would be a great project to cut this power back to its proper scope and size!

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