

Conversation with a US Military Officer

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At the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., I teach economics to military officers. In general, I love my job and my students. With a median age of about 31, they have much more curiosity than the typical undergrad. That makes sense because, as military officers, they have traveled widely and noticed many things. So, for example, when I've talked about the economics of taxation and pointed out that every tax causes some distortion, past students have mentioned Guam, where, they point out, virtually all the houses look half-built. They then tell the rest of the class and me that property taxes on finished houses are much higher than on semi-finished houses.

Because I teach economics and because my expertise is in domestic economic policy, foreign policy issues don't come up as much as one might think. But occasionally they do. So, for example, when we're discussing oil markets, about which I know a lot (I was the senior economist for energy with President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers), we often read my August 1990 Wall Street Journal article, in which I showed that Saddam Hussein, even if he held on to Kuwait and even in the unlikely case that he took over other Middle East oil-producing countries, would not have done, with the oil "weapon," much harm to the U.S. economy.

Which brings me to the military officer mentioned in the title above. To protect his position in the career military, let me call him "John." When I taught him in a class about a year ago, it was this article, I believe, that led John to ask the obvious question: "If oil is not a good enough reason to intervene in the Middle East, then why does the U.S. government intervene there so much?" I hemmed and hawed because I don't think there's one answer, but, rather, a mixture of two mistaken beliefs: first, that if the "wrong" person were in charge in the Middle East, he could do a great deal of damage to the U.S. economy and, second, that the U.S. government has the competence to carry out the right policy (see my "Milton and David Friedman on U.S. Military Intervention"). Add to this the U.S. government's "special" relationship with Israel, plus various interests that push for any policy once

the policy has been in force long enough to create and strengthen special interests. John's bottom line was that the U.S. government should get out of the Middle East. When he came up to speak after class, he told me that he was a big fan of various Cato Institute policy papers, whose thrust was similar to the thrust of what I was saying in class.

I ran into John on campus a few weeks ago. While we were talking, one of his professors from another department (I'll call him Professor X) came over and, without introduction, told me that John had been a "gutsy student" in his class. Why? Because in his class, John, one of the more junior officers in the group, had argued for what the professor called "neo-isolationism." This, according to John, was a term used in a 1996 article by Barry Posen and Andrew Ross, professors at MIT and the Naval War College, respectively. They used this term to mean not having the U.S. government interfere in other countries' business. It turned out that this other professor had more or less agreed with John. When the other professor left, I asked John how he had come to his views, because clearly he had come to them before taking my class. What follows are his comments (to the best of my recollection). They make a fitting end to this article because they need no explanation.

"I worked my way up through the Navy, starting as an enlistee and then becoming an officer. In every job I had, I was dealing with details, making sure I did my job well and that the people under me did their job well. There was no time to look at the big picture. One time, for example, we were off the coast of Ecuador and I had no idea why we were off the coast of Ecuador. When I got to Professor X's class, that was the first chance I had to look at the big picture. We have this thing called U.S. foreign policy. Why do we have it? What do we want from the world? What do we want the rest of the world to do? We went through all kinds of readings, some of them from the Cato Institute. The more I learned, the more skeptical I became. I had joined the Department of Defense, not the Department of Offense. So why was the U.S. government sending us around the world on offense? One Cato policy analyst whose work I liked was Doug Bandow, who pointed out that we're well-defended already because we have oceans on each side and friendly nations on each border.

"Then I started to understand the negative views that so many people around the world had of the U.S. government. I put myself in the position of someone in one

of those other countries and realized that if I saw the U.S. government getting nosy and inserting itself in the business of my country, I'd be pretty angry at the U.S. government, too.

"Take Iraq. Why are we building such a massive embassy in Baghdad? What kind of message are we sending? If that's not imperialism, then what is? After all, what are the nation's goals? If the nation's goals are to plant a foothold in the Middle East, then building that big embassy makes sense. But doesn't that make us a bigger target for terrorists? It seems to me that that makes it more dangerous for an American to travel, not less. We would be better served defending ourselves. I love America and I will defend America. If someone is a threat to America, I have no problem removing that threat. But I don't want a U.S. world. I don't want a U.S. government that dominates people around the world. I don't want to force democracy down anyone's throat. I think the idea of not forcing ideas down people's throat is itself very American. I want a robust military. I want the U.S. government to have a highly developed intelligence operation so that we're not sitting ducks. But I don't believe in invading other countries."