

Power and Foreign Policy

**A book review, “Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America”
by Ted Galen Carpenter, published by Cato Institute, 2008**

Robin Lucas¹

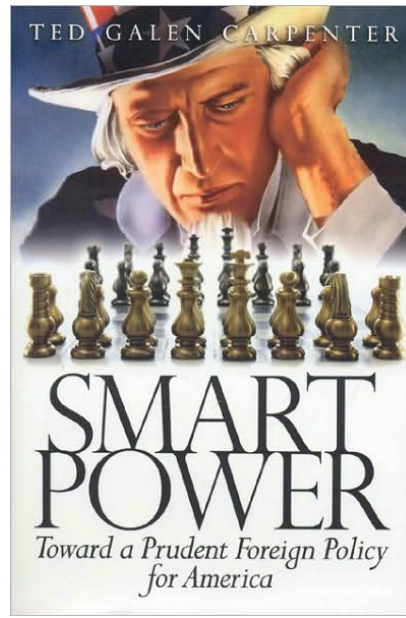
February 18, 2009

The power and influence of the United States of America on the world is undeniable. Despite the problems with its military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the developing economic crisis, its economy remains the largest in the world, which nourishes and is protected by the most powerful military establishment ever seen in history. As the sole superpower of the world, questions have been raised regarding when and how America should use this power.

Ardent advocates of the global policeman concept argue for a more proactive stance from the United States in solving the problems of the world. With its size, wealth, and power, its influence can be used to provide lasting solutions to issues affecting less stable countries and regions in the world. It is the duty of every country to provide such aid and help make the world a better place for everyone.

Or maybe not. Ted Galen Carpenter, in his book *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America*, argues the opposite. He has advocated a more pragmatic approach to solving problems, not from the point of view of the world, but from the point of view of America. It is a politically incorrect treatise, reminding readers that America’s power is not infinite, and that it cannot act as a policeman that would respond to every emergency and crisis that erupts in all regions of the world.

¹ Vice President, Minimal Government Thinkers, Inc.



The book touches on almost every controversial foreign policy topic facing America today: Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, the Middle East, Korea, Taiwan, China, NATO, Russia, the War on Terror, and the War on Drugs. It is a collection of articles written by the author for various media outfits, published between 2002 and 2007.

Starting from the introduction, the author seeks to break down the assumptions that many modern readers have, and have taken for granted, in the realm of foreign policy. Security alliances, military intervention, and policy decisions are all put in the spotlight and relentlessly analyzed in a framework that espouses *American*, rather than global interests.

Controversial ideas are forwarded at every page: America must engage with Iran and North Korea, pull its troops out of Japan and South Korea, and reconsider its security pacts with a host of countries around the world, among others. Not all readers will agree with all the conclusions and proposals, but one thing would be beyond dispute: the quality of the arguments forwarded by the author. Rebuttals will always be offered, but only a few, if any, will be able to dent the persuasive analyses written in the book.

Indeed, the collection of articles concerning the Iraq read not like a collection of articles written over a few years, but a collection of essays written after the fact. Ted Galen Carpenter has written selections which now appear remarkably prophetic. By simply applying logic and his knowledge of pre-invasion Iraq, he was able to forecast many of the problems now confronting the United States in its attempts to pacify Iraq and impose democracy on the region. He was able to foresee the split of the country along ethnic lines, the

effects an invasion would have on the war on terror, and most importantly, the success or the lack thereof of the American plan for Iraq.

Only history will tell if Carpenter would have the same success reading the tea leaves on the other issues he tackled, but the prospects look good that it will happen. And the only difference between him and other commentators and policymakers is that he looks not at lofty and ultimately abstract ideas of promoting peace, justice, and equality in the world, but through the glasses of American interests and realism.

Certain suggestions made by Carpenter would be odious to some readers. His logic will not appeal to everyone. And definitely, his ideals will be at odds with many people, but this book remains a must-read for all libertarians and people simply interested in finding out what happens when a government has too much power on its hands.

In the final chapter, Carpenter argues that America cannot indefinitely maintain its imperial posture overseas without adopting the same at home. And that is his agenda, maintaining the personal liberties cherished by libertarians everywhere. All these liberties are being eroded by a government that pleads national security interests, when these interests are not threatened. The same government seeks to impose its mirror image on countries that may not want democracy, or whose people couldn't care enough to maintain what has been given them. Or worse, whose ideas of democracy are limited to electing leaders who would adopt anti-American postures, negating all the effort, lives, and taxpayer money spent by the United States on their countries.

Carpenter does not seek to isolate the United States from the rest of the world, or absolutely rule out the military option in dealing with other countries. But he is asking for a more rational approach to the matter, by assessing interests on a scale different from the one being used in the present climate. While just as interested as the next person in seeing the spread of democracy to the rest of the world, he does not want it done by force. And from what's happening in the world right now, it seems that many are beginning to share his sentiments.