

**The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the
Necessity of Military Force**

Eliot A. Cohen

New York: Basic Books, 2017, 304 pp.

In the spring and early summer of 2017, Republicans and Democrats alike reacted angrily when President Donald Trump called for deep cuts in nearly every government department in order to offset large increases planned for the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security. The State Department took a particularly big hit—a nearly 30 percent reduction from the year before. When Secretary of State Rex Tillerson appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations committee in June, Chairman Bob Corker explained that he had stopped considering the administration’s budget request after five minutes. “This is a total waste of time,”

¹I thank David Bernstein, Art Carden, Lynne Kiesling, Phil Magness, and Sarah Skwire for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. Although I have received money from Koch-affiliated organizations in the past, I received no compensation for this review.

Corker concluded. Sen. John McCain agreed. Trump's budget was "dead on arrival."

Such criticisms appear to have had no effect on Donald Trump's determination to expand U.S. military power. It was as though he had been paying attention only to part of his high school history lecture on Teddy Roosevelt's presidency: he heard the "big stick" part of TR's quotable axiom, but missed the "speak softly" aspect. Although the U.S. military stick is already big—and certainly far more intimidating than anything Teddy Roosevelt could have ever imagined—it isn't big enough as far as Donald Trump is concerned. The headline of an early assessment of Donald Trump's foreign policy vision succinctly summarized how his approach would differ from his predecessor's: "Trump to focus on 'peace through strength' over Obama's 'soft power' approach."

Many serious national security professionals agree that this is precisely what is needed. For example, in his book, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power & the Necessity of Military Force*, Eliot Cohen explains "America needs a substantially larger military than the one it now has." And we must be willing to use it. Cohen, the Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, concedes that the "magnetism of the United States has real political consequences," but "soft power . . . also has its limits." As such, we must rely much more heavily on hard power.

Despite the fact that Americans have grown weary from a decade and a half of protracted conflict, Cohen explains that the nation must remain ready to wage—not merely deter—more wars. He is particularly dismissive of past attempts to limit the use of force. "What is needed," he says, "is a prudent set of reminders to guide American leaders who have concluded, however reluctantly, that violence is the least bad policy choice."

It is almost as though Donald Trump read Cohen's book. Trump did, after all, promise to "bomb the s— out of ISIS," and bragged about authorizing "my military" to drop the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (aka the Mother of All Bombs) on a target in Afghanistan. Donald Trump is many things, but no one can doubt his willingness to wield hard power.

Trump has even endorsed the use of violence on a massive scale, violence that has, and will, inevitably result in the killing of many innocent people. During the course of the campaign, for example,

Trump mused openly about the use of nuclear weapons. Similarly, Cohen believes that nuclear weapons are useful for more than deterrence. “The actual use of nuclear weapons by the United States is not a last resort,” Cohen writes.

Such sentiments must appeal to Trump’s belief that nuclear weapons are a critical tool in the hard power toolbox. For example, in March 2016, Bloomberg News’s Mark Halperin asked the candidate if he would rule out using nuclear weapons against ISIS. Trump replied, “I’m never going to rule anything out.” On another occasion, Trump suggested that it would be appropriate to “fight back with a nuke” if ISIS carried out a terrorist attack. When MSNBC’s Chris Matthews pointed out that Trump’s musings about nuclear first-use might unsettle decades of nuclear nonproliferation policy, and could even encourage U.S. allies like Japan to reconsider their decision to forgo such weapons, Trump dismissed such concerns: “Then why are we making them? Why do we make them?”

And although Trump has occasionally spoken of the need to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, he, like Cohen, is a harsh critic of the deal that constrains Iran’s ability to develop such weapons for at least 10 years, because both believe that it didn’t go far enough. One suspects that their agreement on Iran goes well beyond the nuclear deal. Cohen never misses an opportunity to cast Iran in the worst possible light. Trump and his senior advisors do the same. In *The Big Stick*, for example, Cohen observes that Iran fought an eight-year-long war with Iraq, without noting that Iraq was the aggressor. He writes of Iran’s dreadful human rights record, but has nothing to say about equally reprehensible violations perpetrated by U.S. ally Saudi Arabia. Cohen, like Trump, seems willing to excuse or simply ignore Saudi behavior.

This also applies to the War on Terror. Cohen never mentions Saudi Arabia’s long-standing support for Islamic extremism, but agrees with Trump and his key advisors, such as Steve Bannon, that we are engaged in a war with Islamic extremists. Our failures in the war, to date, Cohen explains, stem chiefly from “Washington’s reluctance to identify the enemy correctly to begin with.” And achieving success will require our leaders to “shake off inhibitions and misconceptions and speak the truth about this war: that it will go on for decades, if not most likely generations.”

Donald Trump has done precisely what Cohen suggested. America faces, Trump explained in November 2015, a “far greater

threat than the people of our country understand.” “We cannot let this evil continue,” Trump said during a campaign event in September 2016. “We will not defeat it with closed eyes or silent voices,” he added. “Anyone who cannot name our enemy is not fit to lead this country.”

But while Trump often says things that seem drawn from *The Big Stick*, Eliot Cohen *really* doesn’t like Donald Trump. Indeed, in early March 2016, the bow-tied academic organized an open letter signed by over 120 Republican foreign policy professionals who were “united in [their] opposition to a Donald Trump presidency.” The signatories called Trump’s support for the use of torture “inexcusable.” They cast “his advocacy for aggressively waging trade wars” as “a recipe for economic disaster in a globally connected world.” They scorned Trump’s “hateful, anti-Muslim rhetoric,” which alienated partners around the world and endangered “the safety and constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of American Muslims.” They saw his enthusiasm for a border wall with Mexico to control illegal immigration as based on “an utter misreading of, and contempt for, our southern neighbor.”

The letter concluded:

Mr. Trump’s own statements lead us to conclude that as president, he would use the authority of his office to act in ways that make America less safe, and which would diminish our standing in the world. Furthermore, his expansive view of how presidential power should be wielded against his detractors poses a distinct threat to civil liberty in the United States We commit ourselves to working energetically to prevent the election of someone so utterly unfitted to the office.

They failed. And now they watch from the sidelines as Trump attempts to secure more money for the Pentagon, an initiative that Cohen strongly supports. Indeed, many traditional Republican hawks find Trump’s defense spending increases to be insufficient. “With a world on fire,” Senator McCain said, “we can and must do better.” House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry agreed: the two committee chairs separately proposed \$640 billion for the base defense budget in fiscal year 2018, \$37 billion more than Trump’s request.

For Cohen, that is merely a start. He calls for “avoiding the phony precision of projected requirements that have long bedeviled defense planning.” In a truly bizarre passage, he scorns the very concept of grand strategy as “a soothing concept” that is “not merely illusory, for the most part, but dangerous.”

Though he admits that “strategy is the art of matching military means to political ends,” Cohen opts instead for “setting standards for the size of the defense budget that will appear to be, and in some sense are, arbitrary.” According to Cohen, “setting defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) would be a major advance.” What “arbitrary” level seems reasonable to Cohen? He doesn’t spell it out precisely but observes that “a new, sustained target of 4 percent would hardly break the bank.”

Perhaps not, but under the Congressional Budget Office’s GDP projections from January 2017, Cohen’s 4 percent would amount to nearly \$800 billion in 2018. That is over \$200 billion more than was spent in 2017. Americans spend tens of billions more to pay for America’s ongoing wars, wars that Cohen supports. Although *The Big Stick* appears to be a full-throated defense of military primacy, Cohen never tells the reader what other spending to cut, and what taxes to increase, in order to fund his massive military spending increases.

If the big stick that Trump inherited gets even bigger, Cohen and others who share his enthusiasm for a larger military used more often may quietly cheer that outcome. At the same time, however, they must desperately hope that the man in possession of such incredible power doesn’t choose to wield it in a reckless manner. And this speaks to the most serious flaw in Cohen’s enthusiasm for a much larger military, and more frequent wars.

The U.S. Constitution strictly limited the nation’s military power and compelled presidents to go to Congress whenever they desired to initiate wars of choice. Under such a system, Americans could actually have a national debate about what type of military capability was required to keep us safe. But that isn’t the debate that the hawks want us to have. If some military power is good, more is obviously better. And if Donald Trump as president can’t convince Eliot Cohen to rethink the wisdom of leaving a big stick in the hands of an unfettered executive, nothing can.

Christopher Preble
Cato Institute