**CHAIRMAN’S MESSAGE**

**On Nonintervention and Retaliation**

S
colars at the Cato Institute have argued that the
use of military force can be justified when vital
American interests are at stake, public support
for engagement exists, we are likely to prevail, and there
are no better options. Of course, each of those condi-
tions raises numerous additional questions, and reason-
able people can disagree about specific cases. After 9/11,
Cato scholars backed narrowly defined military involve-
ment in Afghanistan. But we have rejected adventurism
that merely seeks national greatness, promotes nation-
building, encourages military responses to imagined
crises, transfers wealth to corrupt dictators, or unduly de-
pends on the efficacy of government.

We endorse self-defense: the use of retaliatory force
against domestic and foreign predators who have initi-
ated force against us. We recognize, however, that the
application of that principle can be every bit as difficult
as defining, in the context of military intervention, vital
interests, public support, the probability of victory, and
the costs and benefits of alternative responses.

Resources are always limited. Efforts to counteract
an identified danger will necessarily diminish private in-
vestment or resources available for other government
pursuits. Accordingly, we must not rely on precautionary
logic, the notion that government must take preventive
action whenever an activity poses a possible risk. In-
stead, we have to quantify not only the prospective risk
but also the probability of its occurrence. Yes, a low-
probability chance of a catastrophic event can justify ex-
tensive defensive actions, including military force. But
pretending that a catastrophe is certain can lead to dan-
gerous and wasteful preventive measures.

Using retaliatory force is particularly troublesome
when punishing “endangerment”—that is, conduct that
might violate the rights of others but hasn’t yet done so.
How much increased risk do I have to endure before
your potentially (but not yet actually) harmful behavior
is restrained? Surely government can impose safety re-
quirements on nuclear power plants without waiting for
a fatal accident. But should government be able to com-
pel automobile manufacturers to install expensive anti-
pollution equipment? How about retaliation against
nuisances, such as loud noises or bright lights? When do
these sorts of behaviors violate the rights of others?

In the foreign policy arena, at what point, if at all,
should the United States intervene militarily? Suppose
we were to establish that Iran or North Korea was de-
veloping an offensive nuclear capability. Bombing those
countries might stop their aggressive behavior, but de-
terrence must be evaluated at the margin. How much
added deterrence do we get by using our military versus
alternative means of persuasion that might cost less, sac-
cifice fewer (or perhaps zero) American lives, and garner
more support from our allies?

Cato’s critics insist that predators must be swiftly and
forcibly stopped. Police encountering a bank robber, for
example, don’t negotiate peaceful alternatives whereby the
criminal can keep half his loot if he promises not to rob
again. But what if the property stolen belongs legitimately
to the robber; or the bank is owned by Kim Jong Un; or
the thief has hostages; or he possesses a bomb or explo-
sive vest? Meeting the robber unhesitatingly with retal-
atory force might be the worst way to secure our rights.

Nearly every act imposes some risk on others—driv-
ing, carrying a gun, lighting a campfire, developing a
nuclear weapon. Which of those acts represents the ini-
tiation of force that justifies retaliatory action? When
considering borderline cases such as endangerment,
sensible observers understand the need to apply prag-
matic, utilitarian cost-benefit measures—for example,
the magnitude and probability of the harm that might
occur, the likelihood that government action will rem-
edy the problem, the availability of alternative reme-
dies, and the cost of intervening.

The complexities of foreign policy and military en-
gagement cannot be shoehorned into a Procrustean rule
endorsing retaliatory force or precautionary interven-
tion. Foreign policy can entail collateral damage and
gross unintended consequences. Therefore, force is
rarely if ever the first and best resort. Nor should we as-
sume prescience on the part of our elected officials—
the same officials who gave us Vietnam and Iraq. Beware
the fatal conceit that government planners can gather
and process dispersed and imperfect knowledge to re-
shape the world according to their wishes.

The purpose of a principle is to allow us to charac-
terize the vast majority of cases as falling on one side of
the line or the other. But there will always be hard
cases—ambiguity at the margin—that we will have to
tolerate and resolve pragmatically case by case. Some-
times the luxury of clarity is accorded only to those who
refuse to see the fog.

Robert A. Levy