

**Sydney J. Freedberg Jr. Q&A with Adrian Novac of [www.HotNews.ro](http://www.HotNews.ro)  
27 April, 2011**

ADRIAN NOVAC: [T]he US ... is currently engaged in combat operations in several countries. I want to ask you if you think that America is addicted to war? What are the reasons - military might, geopolitical position, its foreign-policy thinking, the military-industrial complex etc. - the US keep getting in so many wars although many Americans think of themselves as a peace-loving people? Is America intervening all around the world because it feels it has the obligation "to do something" against "the bad guys" and has to solve as many of the world's problems as it can?

SYDNEY J. FREEDBERG JR.: Americans aren't particularly peace-loving, actually. But we're not wild-eyed warmongers in cowboy hats, either. We are culturally prone to be quicker on the trigger than Europeans, but also we have logical reasons to make war as often as we do – and self-interest matters more than humanitarianism.

Culturally, we are much less pacific than most European nations, absolutely. That's because Europe went through two World Wars in thirty years, which will make any society skittish about the use of force. Of course the U.S. participated in both conflicts, but we actually benefited economically, while our military losses were relatively small and our civilian casualties were zero: World War I and II didn't take place in our homeland, and our cities were not bombed, occupied, or fought over until they became ruins. Sadly, the only thing that seems to convince a society not to wage wars in the future is the experience of disastrous wars in the past; people who keep winning tend not to become pacifists! Even the U.S. became less militarily adventurous after our disaster in Vietnam – but the losses we suffered there were far less than those of most European countries in either World War, and our turn towards pacifism was correspondingly less complete and relatively short-lived.

But I'd argue that's a good thing.

The world is a bad enough place that someone has to fight on occasion if anyone is to enjoy peace ever. The threat to the capitalist democracies is far less than it was in the Cold War era, but there are still threats, and not all of them can be talked (or bribed) into passivity. In the 1990s, for example, ethnic wars in Yugoslavia threatened to destabilize Italy and the Balkans, if only through the flow of refugees. The Serbs were the instigators of the worst violence, and it took armed force to stop them. In Bosnia that force took the form of a U.S.-backed Croatian ground attack and NATO airstrikes; in Kosovo that force took the form of 78 straight days of airstrikes, essentially siege warfare with wings; and in both countries peacekeeping forces were required – large and well-armed forces at the beginning, including heavy tanks – to ensure fighting would not break out again.

Today, the civil war in Libya threatens regional stability around the Mediterranean, not just in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia but also in Italy, where refugees have already begun arriving. So the U.S., France, and Britain are using force against those instigating

the worst violence, namely the Qaddafi regime – albeit as little as they think they can get away with and still make an impact. We intervened in Afghanistan to depose a Taliban government that had enabled attacks on our soil and are still there to prevent its return to power (whether over the whole country or over just a few southern or eastern provinces; either is unacceptable to us). Even our intervention in Iraq began with a sincere, if mistaken, belief that Saddam Hussein’s regime posed an imminent threat. The United States uses force where we perceive – rightly or wrongly – that our national interests are at risk, either directly or indirectly because of threats to our allies and trade partners.

Conversely, when the U.S. does not see a threat, direct or indirect, to its national interests, we generally do not use force. The genocide in Rwanda was not only a horrific crime but also the cause of spreading instability that ultimately plunged all of Central Africa into war, a war that still burns in much of the Congo. But the U.S. simply does not have interests in Central Africa worth fighting for. The Congo is not an ally or a major trade partner, Rwanda even less so, nor is any nation in Central Africa, and neither, even, is any nation next to the nations of Central Africa. (Our only vital interests in Sub-Saharan Africa are in South Africa, Nigeria with its oil, and to an extent Somalia with its position astride major sea lanes through the Suez Canal).

Moral outrage or humanitarian compassion alone will not move the United States to act when we do not see our national self-interest at stake. But because we are the world’s single largest economy, and what’s more an economy founded on free trade, we have more interests at stake in more places than any other country, which gives us more reasons to fight.

It’s important to note that the European Union has a greater GDP than the U.S. if considered collectively, does a greater volume of trade, and therefore has more at stake worldwide. But, collectively, Europe is also more averse to military action in the U.S. – though not uniformly or entirely averse, as Britain and France have shown in Libya. Politically, Europe is not united enough to act decisively – again, as shown over Libya. And since the U.S. and Europe are economically interdependent, a direct threat to European interests constitutes an indirect threat to U.S. interests. If Europe won’t defend its own interests, America’s self-interest eventually compels us to act, as we did in the Balkans; but if Europe does act, the U.S. is generally eager to let others take the lead, as we are doing in Libya.

Now, America’s strategic position and its cultural predispositions are the fundamental reasons we go to war more often than do Europeans. But there are many political and institutional factors that make us more or less likely to resort to force in any given instance. The relative weakness of our apparatus for economic aid and international diplomacy, for example, makes our strong military the most obvious tool for policymakers to use, even when it is not the best tool. (As the saying goes, “when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”) The backlash against military action after Vietnam made us gun-shy for a decade and still affects our policy. The deep fear of terrorist attack after 9/11 made us over-estimate threats around the world and lash out accordingly. Our disasters in Iraq have made us once again relatively reluctant to use

force. But I say only “relatively” reluctant because the strategic and cultural fundamentals abide.

The United States is not an empire, but its interests and influence are imperial in scope. Rome and Great Britain before us were almost constantly at war. So, unfortunately, are we.

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*published online at <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-8634039-ziaritul-american-sydney-freedberg-explica-sua-implica-razboaie-suntem-predispusi-apasam-tragaci-mai-repede-decat-europenii.htm> on 17 May 2011*