JEFF RIGGENBACH

An opposing view

Get out now; our men are dying needlessly

ORANGE, Calif. — The USA shouldn't have a military presence in the Middle East in the first place. If we hadn't been there last weekend, at least 28 American servicemen would not have lost their lives.

It has been argued that the USA has a legitimate interest in maintaining access to Persian Gulf oil fields. But, in fact, the extent of our dependence on imported oil has been grossly exaggerated.

Our own oil reserves would be more than sufficient to supply our needs if government would simply allow market forces to do their work, instead of interfering with them at every turn and throwing roadblocks and disincentives in the paths of the entrepreneurs who otherwise would rush to develop those reserves.

Moreover, it is sheer foolishness to pretend that Persian Gulf oil is the only importable oil anywhere in the world. If we couldn't buy oil from Persian Gulf nations, what would prevent us from making deals with the owners of the vast oil reserves in Mexico, Venezuela, the North Sea, and various other spots around the globe?

Obviously, the oil issue is nothing but a red herring. The real reason the U.S. government insists on maintaining a military presence in the Middle East is that only by doing so can our politicians and foreign policy bureaucrats throw their weight around in that part of the world and shape the events that take place there.

But, of course, the internal and external affairs of other sovereign nations are properly none of the U.S. government's business. By meddling in other nations' business and attempting to play self-appointed policeman to the world, our government only builds ill will abroad and ensures that American citizens will be unpopular wherever they travel.

If this, and the needless loss of American lives, both in terrorist bombings and hijackings and in military incidents like the one that disfigured this past weekend, were the only problems created by our meddlesome foreign policy, that would be bad enough. But our insistence on running other nations' affairs for them does more harm than that.

It has also served for decades, under the false name "national security," as the pretext for a steady expansion of U.S. government power over the lives of individual citizens. And, since more than half of our bloated, so-called "defense" budget is actually spent not on defense, but meddling and adventuring in other parts of the world, it has done much to increase the tax burden and the size of the national debt.

The best thing we could do for the families of those fallen servicemen aboard the Stark is to get out of the Middle East now so that no similar incident can take place there again.

Jeff Riggenbach produces the nationally syndicated daily radio program, Byline, *for the Cato Institute.*