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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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U.S. MILITARY READINESS

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Rethinking Major Interventions Abroad

By Williamson Murray

Any major intervention abroad, if it is to achieve a lasting political settlement, will almost inevitably involve the commitment of ground forces. America's air and naval forces are impressive, and there are few, if any, who can match them. But in the end, air and naval forces cannot seize, much less hold, ground. The bottom line is that the United States will have to commit its ground forces in defense of its interests as well as those of its allies, if it is to achieve its larger interests. The problem is that war in the twentieth, and now in the twenty-first century, has come to involve much more than the straightforward defeat of enemy conventional forces. It now involves unconventional conflicts, hybrid warfare, the suppression of terrorist movements, and cyber war against unseen enemies. It demands a political and military leadership that understands the historical and political complexities of present and future enemies.

The early years of the Cold War provide a useful model of how we might best think about whether the engagement of ground forces is necessary either directly into war or indirectly to support America's political and economic interests. In the post-World War II period, American statesmen confronted the threat posed by the Soviet Union and its puppets. By the late 1940s, the United States had found it necessary to support the economic rebuilding of Europe, the maintenance of the areas of Berlin controlled by the Western Powers, and the creation of NATO.

Outside of the atomic bombs in the U.S. arsenal, American military power represented a paper tiger. That all changed with the Korean War. The commitment of major air, sea, and especially ground forces brought the North Korean advance to a screeching halt. What followed then was the strategic decision to limit the ground commitment in Korea sufficient to maintain a stalemate on the peninsula. At the same time a massive buildup of military power began, with much of the deployment of U.S. military forces, especially army divisions, to Europe. In both cases the result was a considerable success. The eventual armistice allowed the growth of a South Korean economic giant. Likewise, the commitment of American military power to a Europe that shares many of the traditions and values of the United States has provided a foundation lasting with its ups and downs for over seventy years, and now proves useful in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Unfortunately, the record of American interventions on the ground since 1960 has for the most part proven less successful. H. R. McMaster's brilliant retelling of the political and military incompetence that resulted in the commitment of massive amounts of resources and hundreds of thousands of troops still makes depressing reading. What makes the history of that period even more depressing is the fact that we managed to

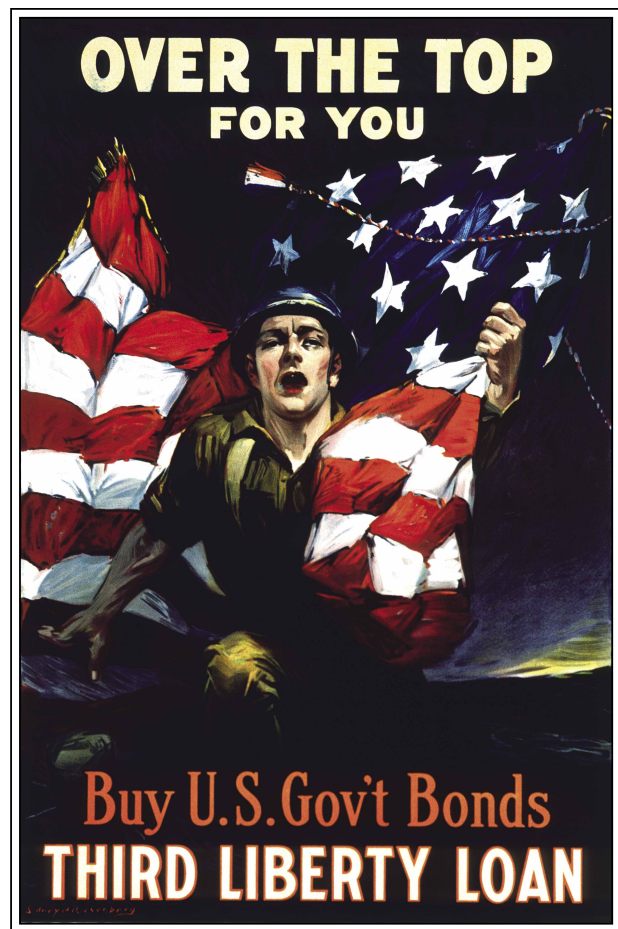


Image credit: Poster Collection, US 1189, Hoover Institution Archives.

repeat every mistake the French had made in their war against the Viet Minh, even after they were gracious enough to forward to the Pentagon their after-action report on their eight-year catastrophe in Vietnam. Such was our contempt for even the recent past.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, American policy makers and their military advisors resisted the temptation to involve ourselves in places like Somalia, Ethiopia, and Angola, except in the most limited fashion. Instead, it was the Soviets, who allowed themselves to gather under their umbrella those failed states at considerable economic cost. The intervention in Afghanistan represented the last step that finished off the Soviet political and economic system. The United States was willing to employ proxy forces to make Soviet efforts even more difficult, but the cost of providing substantial numbers of Stinger missiles and other small arms to the Afghan Mujahadeen involved no American lives.

In July 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in an effort to recoup the enormous loans he had made to the Gulf Arabs to support his lengthy and costly war with Iran. He clearly expected that there would be no response from the Western Powers including the United States, whose diplomats had enunciated their disinterest in his actions. Helped by Prime Minister Margret Thatcher, President George H.W. Bush immediately dispatched F-15s to be followed rapidly by ground forces. The buildup, under the code name of Desert Shield, involved not only major U.S. force, but a wide-ranging coalition of Western and Arab nations.

By November 1990 the Coalition had deployed considerable military forces, sufficient to defeat the Iraqis and drive them out of Kuwait. But there were worries over the potential cost, many military analysts describing Saddam's army as consisting of battle-hardened soldiers. The discussions among the president and his military advisers at that time reflected the cautions created by their experiences in the Vietnam War. Colin Powell, then chairman of the JCS, argued for maximum ground military force if it were necessary to force Saddam from Kuwait by military force. The result was the decision in November 1990 to postpone the offensive until another U.S. Army corps had deployed to Saudi Arabia.

The movement of that corps would not be completed until early February, but the air campaign began in early January with strikes that destroyed the Iraqi air defense system in the first night. Thereafter Coalition air forces began an around the clock bombing of airfields and ground forces in Kuwait and Iraq. The length of that air campaign provided Saddam an opportunity to take advantage of the Coalition's failure to attack on the ground, to pull his forces out of Kuwait, and then to argue to the Arab street that the Americans and their Western allies had been too cowardly to face his army *mano a mano*. But Saddam, stubborn to the end, refused to take advantage of the situation. Instead, in late February the mailed armored fist of the Coalition's tank and marine divisions destroyed the cream of the Iraqi Army in one hundred hours and ended the myth of Iraqi military effectiveness.

Governed by the political constraints that Bush and his advisors had utilized to establish the multi-nation coalition, the advance stopped upon reaching the frontier areas of Iraq. In every sense, the Gulf War of 1991 represented an effective use of ground forces within an intelligent strategic framework to achieve political objectives. But many failed to see it in that way. To them, the crushing of Saddam's military had presented a unique opportunity to destroy the Ba'athist regime and replace it with something far more reasonable, at least according to Western standards.

Nevertheless, the next American commitment of American ground forces proved less than successful. Late in Bush's presidency, affairs in Somalia had reached the point where the complete breakdown of authority had created mass starvation across much of the country. The initial American commitment consisted of Marine units well prepared for the political difficulties of dealing with a complex and murderous situation. The army unit that followed was not well prepared to understand the nuances of a tribal society, and the result was the ambush in Mogadishu in October 1993 that left eighteen American soldiers dead and seventy-three wounded. Under considerable political pressure, President Bill Clinton decided to pull American troops out,

which ended UN efforts to bring political order to a failed state. At least there was no long-term commitment of ground forces to a situation that possessed no clear political end state.

9/11 changed the ballgame. The al-Qaeda attack, supported and protected by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, gave the United States no choice but to commit major military forces to destroy both bin Laden's terrorists and the regime that had protected them. The mobilization and deployment of U.S. forces was impressive, although there seems to have been little effort to come to grips with the political realities of tribal Afghanistan. The following campaign seemingly destroyed both political entities. But as the campaign was ending, the Americans made their first political mistake. By December bin Laden had holed up in the Tora Bora mountains. The Marines and the first Army troops arriving were prepared to go after him. But General Tommy Franks, displaying a lack of interest in Clausewitz's emphasis on the political as being primary, sent local militia to do the job. Bin Laden escaped and the United States missed an opportunity to send the message to like-minded terrorists that it would come after them no matter how distant the location.

How unprepared the U.S. military was for what ensued after the fall of the Taliban regime is the fact that, when Lieutenant General David Barno took over as commander in 2003, the only U.S. doctrinal publication he could find on the counter-insurgency warfare was the textbook he had had West Point in 1972. Within a year, those overseeing the wreckage of Afghanistan, left by twenty years of war and civil war, made a number of mistakes that would influence the course of events leading to August 2021. One of the more serious came with the emergence of Hamid Karzai as the leader of Afghanistan. Karzai possessed all the criteria beloved of Westerners. He spoke English, enunciated all the proper commitments to liberal values to Coalition members, and at least had not participated in the internecine strife that had characterized relationships within Afghanistan for centuries. The problem was that he possessed little of the ruthlessness of the Afghan warlords and was manifestly unable to operate in the violence-prone milieu of Afghanistan.

Another major mistake came with the effort to disarm the warlords and their bands of armed thugs and replace them with an Afghan police force and army. The problem was that the latter did not yet exist, and into the vacuum created by the disarming of the warlords, the Taliban rapidly flowed. Adding to emerging difficulties was the fact that the American president, George W. Bush, had made the decision to destroy Saddam's bedraggled regime and eliminate his supposed program in weapons of mass destruction.

In retrospect, there are few decisions made by the leaders of the United States in the period since 1961 that have proven more facile and ignorant of the political and cultural framework of the area, than that in which U.S. troops would operate after the fall of Saddam's regime. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was thoroughly successful in sabotaging efforts to establish an effective postwar occupation, and as a master manipulator of the bureaucracy was immensely successful in his efforts. After the crushing military victory over Iraq's military, the U.S. occupation began—one characterized by chaos and ignorance. Bush Jr. and Dick Cheney, the vice president, seemed to have picked the American civilian leader responsible for the occupation on the basis that he had been a classmate of the latter at Yale in the early 1960s. The military leadership through 2006 was appalling, neither Ricardo Sanchez nor George W. Casey displaying the slightest interest in nor understanding of the complex dynamics of the civil war unraveling before their eyes. With a political and military leadership ignorant of Iraq, its history, and its political framework, the result could only have been disaster. Only the arrival of the surge of troops in early 2007, General David Petraeus, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, the State Department's representative, prevented a catastrophic collapse of Iraq. It is not worth recounting the dismal tale that followed. It is all too familiar to readers of *Strategika*.

Are there lessons, then, that one can learn from the record of the past sixty years? First of all, there will be future crises that seemingly require the commitment of ground forces. The careful, nuanced use of ground forces in the fifteen years after World War II would seem to provide a useful example. Simply put, to prevent

the replay of future disasters, American political and military leaders *must do so only with a careful, historically based understanding of the "other," his culture, and his understanding of the world.*

The problem is that Americans, largely thanks to their appalling educational system, know virtually nothing of history, including their own, and possess even less competence in foreign languages. With our universities more interested in wokism than serious learning, we are well prepared to march confidently into the future with assurance that we will repeat every mistake made in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.



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Send in the Marines? Rethink Major Interventions Abroad, Especially on the Ground and in the Middle East

By Josef Joffe

America's intervention record has not been a happy one. It worked only twice: in Germany and Japan. But the conditions are not replicable: total defeat, unconditional surrender, open-ended military presence, access to the U.S. market, and induction into America's alliance network. Guaranteed security stills the flames of nationalism and allows democracy to flourish. War plus regime change turned out just right in these two instances.

Turning enemies into friends and fascists into democrats was a breathtaking, indeed, historic accomplishment. Other interventions were not so blissful. The United States fought to a draw in Korea and was humiliated in Vietnam. It defeated the Taliban, only to see them return twenty years later. Felling Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi was swift, but internal peace, let alone democracy, has remained a will-o'-the-wisp in both countries. Bill Clinton abandoned Somalia after "Blackhawk Down," and the loss of just 18 men. Go back farther, to innumerable interventions in Mexico and Central America. These merely changed the names of the strongmen, not the treacherous conditions that kept bringing them to power.

It is a poor record that suggests: Look very carefully before you leap. Ask these questions: What is our chance of success? Can we bear the costs? Which ends are worth the bloody price? Are we willing to stay without an exit date? Do we have to come back?

At this point, a critical distinction is de rigueur, namely between strategic and regime-change intervention, also known as "democracy promotion." Toppling the bad guys is doable, as Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia, and Libya show. Yet, transforming an autocracy into a democracy has proven a noble dream beyond Berlin and Tokyo. Even after twenty years in Afghanistan and Iraq, intervention has proven a loss leader.

Strategic intervention is a different kettle of fish. The biggest difference is interest, as distinct from humanitarian duty or "teaching the Latin American republics to elect good men," as Woodrow Wilson had it. The distinction is between "good for us" and "good for them." Making the world "safe for democracy" was not the real issue in two world wars; it was the ideological icing on the strategic cake. The point was to make America safe by defeating Kaisers and Fuhrers. Existential threats mobilize a nation and sustain it in blood-drenched and open-ended warfare—including the hecatombs of enemy civilians, as in Dresden and Hiroshima. Note that massive collateral damage now triggers revulsion in democratic polities.



Image credit: Poster Collection, US 2359, Hoover Institution Archives.

Now, fast-forward. “The American hegemon has no great power enemies,” Charles Krauthammer announced in 2002.¹ That was true then, while Russia was licking its wounds and China was biding its time. Today, they are hungry adversaries, seeking to dislodge the U.S. from its global perch. Beijing is threatening U.S. interests as far out as Guam. Russia has been trying to restore its old empire by subduing Georgia, grabbing Crimea, and invading Ukraine while throwing around nuclear threats.

But nuclear weapons have changed the strategic game, as far back as the Berlin Crisis of 1961 when U.S. and Soviet tanks were facing each other across the Brandenburg Gate. Will Putin execute his nuclear threats? Will Joe Biden actually fight to protect Taiwan? Ordinary mortals do not have the gift of prophesy, but they do know that nuclear powers have never fought one another directly.

Given nuclear overkill, the game is not about boots on the ground, but about deterrence, alliance, and credibility. It is about balance both on the regional and global level, but not by sending aircraft and armies into combat—with incalculable consequences. Against the Chinese and Russian revisionists, the U.S. should be the balancer of last resort, as there is nobody else to shoulder the burden. Crushing them is out of the question. Intervention has to be circumspect and indirect, to recall Liddell Hart in a modern context.

Let’s put this rule in operational terms. Post-Iraq, the U.S. is in fact intervening all over the world, yet by showing, not swinging its big stick. It is arming Ukraine (with \$15 billion so far) and deploying modest deterrent forces—“tripwires”—from the Baltics southward. Yet, it will not grant Kyiv long-range weapons capable of hitting Russia. The U.S. has revived NATO and harnessed allies from Berlin to Canberra. The “intervention” is oblique and measured in order to keep the big war at bay.

In the Far East, intervention comes in the guise of naval deployments and reassurances to allies from Taipei to Tokyo. The U.S. has been masterminding sharp-toothed sanctions against Russia to weaken Putin’s war machine by non-violent means. In the Middle East, it is not “George W.,” but “Obama” and “Trump.” No more Afghanistans and Iraqs, not even against a third-rate power like Syria, which is practically a Russian satrapy. Neither Obama nor Trump intervened in the cauldron that is the Middle East. But Trump did intervene indirectly by crafting the Abraham Accords, a de facto anti-Iran alliance harnessing both Israel and Arabs. Intervention is being executed with means short of great-power war. Or by getting there “fustest with the mostest” to deter and place the burden of deadly escalation on the other side.

Now to the \$64,000 question: What to do about Iran, which is not only a revisionist but also a revolutionary power expanding across the Middle East and patiently assembling the wherewithal of the Bomb. Yes, the U.S. and Israel could demolish Iran’s nuclear assets. But the threat has never been executed. Too costly, too dangerous, and with an uncertain pay-off.

So here too, even against a second-tier power, caution rules. Force yields to sanctions on Tehran, arms deliveries to the Gulf states and Israel, and far-flung coalition-building. These are substitutes for the real thing: armed intervention. To repeat: Since “mission accomplished,” America has been intervening all over short of war. But it does so by acting as alliance impresario and balancer of the last resort. The U.S. is a hegemon on the cheap. It must avoid great-power war though such contests were routine among would-be kingpins throughout history.

In the shadow of the Bomb, the name of the game is the indirect use of power. But to hang back is not to bug out. The world is no longer unipolar in the strategic sense. The U.S. is acting as sub-strategic power no. 1, convening, coaxing, and corralling. It deploys forces to deter, not to defeat nuclear-armed players. It exploits its unsurpassed economic and financial resources. It delivers weapons and funds. It dispatches cyber, not real warriors into the battle for Ukraine. Thus, it is gifting the nation with precious battlefield and space-based intelligence. In a way, the U.S. is fighting a classical proxy war against Russia to restore the European balance, but at one step removed from direct confrontation.

Why not put boots on the ground? For one, the lessons of past failures say “no.” Second: stay away from the nuclear brink. It is safer for the U.S. to pull strings rather than triggers. To fight is warranted and obligatory only when the nation’s existence is at stake. It is, as it were, prudent and economic hegemony. Not glorious, perhaps, but parsimonious and efficient. The rule is to keep in mind the vast distance between wars of choice and wars of necessity.

1 “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *National Interest* (Winter 2002–03), p. 8.



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U.S. Grand Strategy: The Case for Realism

By Chris Gibson

The question before the house is: have our commitments to Ukraine and threats to Taiwan forced the U.S. to reconsider potential involvements in other parts of the world? The short answer is no—we *are not forced* to limit our actions based on those commitments. We have the strategic bandwidth to take decisive action in multiple parts of the world at once if we have to do so.

That stated, I strongly believe the U.S. *should* change course and recover its “Peace through Strength” grand strategy approach employed especially well by the President Reagan administration, and be much more careful in its decisions to use military force. Since Vietnam, the U.S. has been too hasty to use force and that approach has not made us safer. In the process, we have expended resources (including the precious lives of our citizens) that would have been better invested elsewhere. Those wars of choice

have also significantly contributed to the polarizing of American politics and the tearing of our nation’s social fabric. Social and political turmoil sap national power, and limiting this development is an important consideration when choosing a grand strategy.

Our grand strategy should be grounded in realism that is advanced by deterrence and strengthened by alliances, with the aim of securing American vital interests, especially promoting peace and prosperity for all of her citizens.

Beyond the aforementioned, I offer three additional reasons for reestablishing a grand strategy of “Peace through Strength.”

1) We are blessed with the natural resources, remarkable human potential, and impressive military capabilities to establish a credible deterrence that would influence the strategic decision-making of China, Russia, and other potential adversaries. As the U.S. (and West’s) victory over the communist bloc during the Cold War displayed, *this “Peace through Strength” grand strategy approach works.*

2) *This approach is fiscally responsible and sustainable*, an aspect of grand strategy design often overlooked. History demonstrates that nations who over-extend and squander precious resources unnecessarily invite dire consequences. It could be argued that the Soviet Union’s failure to develop a fiscally responsible and sustainable grand strategy played an important role in the West’s victory during the Cold War. Wars of choice are not in our interests, especially when a military occupation is employed after intervention and regime change.

To be clear, the U.S. military operation to defeat al-Qaeda after the attacks of September 11, 2001, was just and initially effective. But the 20-year occupation that followed was folly, which is especially disappointing

considering we appeared to learn nothing from the British and Soviet empires' disastrous occupations on the very same ground. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not justified and also a strategic mistake, and the decade-long occupation that followed was not much better—although we do appear to have achieved some positive strategic effects two decades on. While beyond the scope of this essay, I maintain we could have achieved better strategic effects in Iraq by other methods than invasion and avoided all the wrenching costs.

It's important to point out that a "Peace through Strength" approach does not rule out covert kinetic operations against terrorist organizations when intelligence warrants such action against adversaries planning, coordinating, and rehearsing for attacks against Americans. The distinction here is between one course of action that relies on rapid strike operations by Joint Special Operations Forces against a known enemy combatant group; and another course of action that commits massive amounts of U.S. conventional ground (and Joint) forces to invasion of a sovereign nation, regime change, and a lengthy and costly military occupation of a foreign land. Military occupations appear contrary to our values and have not proven to make our nation safer.

3) *There is historical precedence for a "Peace through Strength" approach* dating all the way back to President George Washington's administration, and importantly, this approach is *consistent with our professed values* as articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Our highest aspiration is to be a peaceful nation whose chief aim is to secure liberty and promote prosperity for all so that each citizen may be the author of their life, living up to their God-given potential. As President Washington convincingly argued in his Farewell Address, a constant state of war abroad is bad for liberty at home (and costly). Our country, on our best day, does not start wars, although we are prepared to finish them on our terms if attacked. We prefer instead to deter wars and work with friends and allies to keep the peace, promote commerce, and stand as an example for the world of how a republic can help set the condition for its citizens to lead successful, meaningful, and joyful lives.

Effective deterrence relies on convincing potential adversaries that any offensive action they may take will result in costs exceeding benefits.¹ While always projecting strength and demonstrating the political will to do what is necessary to prevail when challenged is a must, sometimes strategic ambiguity and being somewhat unpredictable help achieve optimal outcomes. You can enhance deterrence by keeping your potential adversaries off balance. Potential adversaries should always interact with America with the notion that we are a better friend than foe.

At this inflection point in world history, for all the reasons stated, we should change course and recover this proven strategic approach that Reagan employed to advance freedom and protect our cherished way of life.

1 For more on how to design and implement a "Peace through Strength" grand strategy approach see Chris Gibson, *Rally Point* (New York: Twelve Books, 2017), chapter 1.



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POLL: Should the U.S. rethink major interventions abroad, especially those on the ground and in the Middle East?

- The U.S. no longer has the ability to send large armies for extended deployments abroad.
- The Middle East is no longer strategically crucial to U.S. viability.
- The U.S. should respond only with air and sea power to overseas aggressions.
- Ground forces should be saved for existential threats such as those posed by China or Russia.
- Only ground forces can eliminate threats to U.S. security and can never be ruled out anywhere.

Sustaining a Major Military Intervention

By Bing West

Is the United States either politically or materially capable of sustaining a large overseas military intervention? The short answer is that for the next several years, our military's material advantages and technological modernization give us an overwhelming warfighting edge over any foe, including China or Russia. Our military planning and command-and-control have been constantly refined and updated during the past two decades of war. Granted, Iraq and Afghanistan battlefields are nothing like we would face against our primary adversaries. But in terms of firepower, command experience, logistics deployments, and inter-service coordination, China and Russia are leagues behind us.

Our society is badly riven and the "woke" movement sponsored by the progressive Left will affect over the next decade who volunteers for the military. Achieving diversity of gender and race is reaching parity with merit in selections for promotions. These deleterious factors, however, do not undermine our military capabilities in the near term.

What does affect our ability to fight a war in the near term is the will of the president. No one can predict

where or when America will be challenged by force of arms. The decision to intervene rests foremost with the commander in chief. Ever since Korea in 1950, the presidency has usurped the role of Congress in de facto declaring war and deploying our forces. In any serious clash, the president does need the support of a badly cleaved Congress. That support is highly likely to be there when the clash first begins. What happens after that depends upon the mettle of the wartime president.

In the current case of Ukraine, the resolve of President Biden has proven problematic. He is firm that American forces will not be directly involved in a fight against Russian forces. In early March, Ukraine requested that Poland contribute MiG-29s, to be flown by Ukrainian pilots. Secretary of State Blinken gave the request a "green light." As is his wont, Putin then threatened retaliation. At the same time, having been given the green light, Poland added a twist. It would fly its thirty MiG-29s to a U.S. air base in Germany. From there the planes could be transferred to Ukraine. This required the United States and Germany to share in the risk of facing Putin's wrath. President Biden then decided not to approve the MiGs.

Since then, President Biden has refused to transfer weapons that would provide the Ukraine with the firepower to undertake counter offensives aimed at pushing Russian troops out of Ukraine. At the same time, the president is bellicose in his rhetoric. "For God's sake," Biden said, "this man [Putin] cannot remain in power." An anonymous White House official later "clarified" what Mr. Biden meant. "The president's point was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors. He was not discussing Putin's power in Russia or regime change," the official said.

Can the U.S. sustain a military intervention? In technical military terms—a trained force, battle experience, robust command-and-control, interoperability among the Services—no country for the next decade is our match. The unpredictable variable is the resolve of the commander in chief, who, based on history, will unilaterally make the decision to undertake the intervention. This is not what the founding fathers intended in the Constitution; but it is how the locus of power has shifted over the past seven decades.



BING WEST is a military historian who has written a dozen best-selling books about the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His most recent books are *The Last Platoon: A Novel of the Afghanistan War*, and with co-author General Jim Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. A graduate of Georgetown and Princeton Universities, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, he served in the Marine infantry in Vietnam and later as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Among other awards, he is the recipient of the Defense Distinguished Public Service Medal, the Marine Corps Heritage Award, Tunisia’s *Medaille de Liberté*, the Colby Military History Award, the Goodpaster Prize for Military Scholarship, the Marine Corps Foundation Award for Leadership, the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Media Medal, and the Free Press Award.

The Weary Titan

By Peter R. Mansoor

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan last year officially ended the wars of 9/11, along with the struggle to nation-build and implant democracy in the heart of the Islamic world. While unhappy with the way the withdrawal was implemented, Americans largely applauded the end of the so-called War on Terror. The American body politic, which was never really asked to sacrifice much in pursuit of victory in Afghanistan and Iraq, had tired of “forever wars,” conflicts with nebulous goals and no clear path to victory. Having spent well in excess of \$1 trillion on these wars, Americans are ready, in the words of President Barack Obama, to “nation build at home.” The United States, it seems, would rather fight culture wars at home than the more violent kind overseas.

The United States has been through this cycle before. After the doughboys redeployed at the conclusion of the “War to End all Wars,” Americans took the phrase seriously and retreated into their isolationist shell

in the Western Hemisphere, theoretically protected by two great oceans. In the 1930s the U.S. Congress passed three Neutrality Acts to prevent the country from being accidentally pulled into conflict, as many Americans believe had been the case in 1917. The America First Committee, a political organization dedicated to keeping the United States out of foreign wars, held enormous political clout. Despite these manifestations of public unwillingness to venture abroad “in search of monsters to destroy,” by the end of 1941 German submarines and Japanese carrier aircraft had convinced the American people of the need to secure their vital interests overseas.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 likewise sent the American people in search of a peace dividend. Poorly designed expeditionary operations in Somalia led to the withdrawal of American forces after a street battle in Mogadishu in October 1993 resulted in the death of nineteen U.S. servicemembers and the wounding of seventy-three others. Peacekeeping operations in Bosnia were designed with an expiration date to assuage the concerns of the American people of the U.S. Army getting bogged down in a quagmire of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

The attack on the United States on 9/11 changed this mindset. U.S. presidents kept American forces in Iraq for eight years and in Afghanistan for twenty, making it the longest war in U.S. history. Although it seems now as if internal divisions and compassion fatigue rule out sustained military operations abroad, this is only because the nation’s vital interests do not appear to be in jeopardy. No matter how divisive U.S. internal politics appear to be at present, a foreign attack has the way of concentrating the mind of the American people on their collective security.

If and when that day arrives, the United States has the wherewithal to fight its opponents to the ends of the earth and beyond. Potential opponents would be well advised not to mistake the fractious nature of American politics as a lack of national vitality, or the current budget woes as an inability to fund U.S. national defense. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, German and Japanese leaders doubted the ability of the United States to create and sustain armed forces for a long war. The ruins of Berlin and Tokyo in 1945 were a testament to their lack of faith.



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Leadership and Support for Interventions

By Mark Moyar

Americans generally unite in support of military interventions only when they perceive grave threats to their security. After Pearl Harbor, the American people embarked on war with an unprecedented degree of unity, one that was to last to the end of the war. The 9/11 attacks produced a groundswell of support for military intervention, which carried through the war in Afghanistan and the beginning of the war in Iraq, but eventually faded because of the scarcity of terrorist attacks after 9/11 and the difficulties encountered by American forces in suppressing Afghan and Iraqi insurgents.

The unpredictability of 9/11 serves as a reminder that a unifying crisis is always possible. In the near term, nevertheless, it appears unlikely that a prospective military intervention will be the result of a crisis as easy to connect to American security as Pearl Harbor or 9/11. More likely is the possibility that the prospective intervention will be tied to interests that are less obvious, as was true in such conflicts as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War. Although the unhappy outcomes of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya will discourage the United States from a major intervention in the Middle East or Africa, a war in this category would be conceivable if it involved aggression by one of America's great power rivals against an American ally, such as Russian aggression against a NATO country in Eastern Europe or Chinese aggression against Taiwan.

Sustaining support for interventions in situations lacking an obvious threat to the American homeland has always been difficult. Although public support is typically strong at the beginning of such an intervention, the human and material costs of a protracted conflict usually erode support and produce partisan bickering over management of the war. The shortcomings of recent U.S. interventions have made such a reaction all the more likely.

The current Ukraine crisis indicates a widespread popular aversion to direct intervention in a military conflict lacking clear relevance to U.S. national security, and a somewhat less prevalent aversion to aid to combatants. If Russia were to invade Estonia, or China were to invade Taiwan, large numbers of Americans would express the same doubts they are currently expressing about Ukraine. Why should the United States care about this distant struggle? Why can't other nations deal with this problem? Won't we risk a nuclear war by fighting a nuclear power?

Presidential leadership has the best track record of overcoming these sorts of doubts. Presidents can marshal majority support for an intervention, at least during the opening phases, by vigorously explaining the war to the American people, in the way that Franklin Roosevelt explained World War II or George W. Bush explained the invasion of Afghanistan. Other presidents have succeeded in sustaining support for wars less directly connected to American interests through robust salesmanship, as exemplified by Lincoln's speeches during the Civil War and Richard Nixon's during the Vietnam War. The current president, however, has been reluctant to demonstrate such leadership. In this regard, he resembles earlier presidents who failed to rally the country at a time of war, like Lyndon Johnson and Barack Obama.

Maintaining broad support is easier when the country is suffused with patriotic sentiment, which regrettably is not true today. Surveys indicate that patriotism among the Millennial Generation and Generation Z stands at historically low levels. Some of the blame belongs to educators, politicians, and parents who no longer view the promotion of patriotism as a central objective of education and politics. Multiculturalism

and unfettered immigration have diluted the citizen's sense of national identity and commitment to national solidarity. Short of a cataclysmic threat on the order of the 9/11 attacks, this fraying of the national fabric appears likely to continue.



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Can the United States Sustain a Large Overseas Military Intervention?

By Jerry Hendrix

As with many things regarding the United States and its foreign and national security policies, the answer is “it depends.” It depends upon how the war starts. In 1999 Walter Russell Mead wrote a brilliant essay “The Jacksonian Tradition” in *The National Interest* in which he explored the character of U.S. foreign policy. He described America as a nation that is slow to anger but when sufficiently provoked the various political divides disappear as the nation manifests an overwhelming, nearly undisciplined, expression of vengeance. Mead explored campaigns against native American populations, Sherman’s march to the sea, and the fire-bombing of Japan even prior to the dropping of the two atomic bombs. When angered the United States can summon the will to fight, but can it sustain it?

The second “it depends” rests upon how long a commitment is expected to endure. When answering this question, it’s important to note that the U.S. maintains forces in Europe, Japan, and South Korea decades after conflicts in those regions were terminated. It also maintained a presence in Iraq for fifteen years,

not an inconsiderable amount of time. Additionally, it maintained a defensible presence in Afghanistan for 20 years and was positioned to continue to do so at a relatively low strategic cost until the combination of strategic blindness and ignorance resulted in a botched withdrawal that has negatively impacted U.S. strategic credibility to the point that it invited the invasion of Ukraine. The earlier commitments, which remain in place, have been successful because earlier leaders were willing and able to speak “clearer than truth,” as former Secretary of State Dean Acheson famously said, to the American people, gaining their approval and long-term support for the efforts in Europe and Asia. Modern leaders across four administrations failed to make a coherent argument regarding the geostrategic importance of either Iraq or Afghanistan in words that would resonate with the current generation of voters, and thus the American position in the world has been decremented, especially vis-à-vis China, which always viewed our presence in Afghanistan with great concern.

So far as material capability to sustain operations, the United States remains at its core the wealthiest nation in the world, immeasurably blessed with raw resources and the most innovative economy on the planet. As the recent COVID crisis demonstrated, perhaps in a very negative fashion, when alerted to a threat the American people are willing to both sacrifice and spend to accomplish a strategic goal. Ironically the major challenge to the nation, the overhang of some thirty trillion dollars of debt with the resulting interest payments, may be aided by the rising inflation associated with the COVID stimulus as the inflation presents an opportunity to pay off substantial debts with substantively devalued currency prior to restabing a new economic equilibrium should the Congress address spending. This may well be a case of the cure being worse than the disease though. The bottom line is, when properly led, the American people can sustain their commitments.



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Discussion Questions

1. Why has the U.S. failed to translate tactical success into strategic advantage?
2. What exactly are American strategic interests in the current Middle East?
3. Have any of the recent large-scale ground interventions of the U.S. Army or Marines led to strategic advantage?
4. Would ground forces be required to check Chinese aggression against its neighbors?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Tactical Nuclear Weapons



Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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