

STRATEGIKA

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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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ARE TOTAL WARS OBSOLETE?

IN THIS ISSUE

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ABOUT THE POSTERS IN THIS ISSUE

Documenting the wartime viewpoints and diverse political sentiments of the twentieth century, the Hoover Institution Library & Archives Poster Collection has more than one hundred thousand posters from around the world and continues to grow. Thirty-three thousand are available online. Posters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia/Soviet Union, and France predominate, though posters from more than eighty countries are included.

Clausewitz: Still Relevant

By Chris Gibson

Given its position as the world's greatest superpower since World War II, it is an enigma that the U.S. lost wars against decidedly inferior enemies in Vietnam and Afghanistan and struggled mightily to achieve very little in Iraq despite massive investments (blood and treasure) for nearly a decade. Certainly, there were a number of factors that contributed to these unexpected failures. Among these are restraints on national decisionmakers regarding requisite levels of military force arising from concerns over nuclear escalation, the exorbitant costs and negative media coverage associated with long wars, and perhaps, evolving morality among the American people.

While I believe all these possible factors played some role, the primary reason we lost those wars was poor strategy and ineffective communication, which in turn led to poor military campaign planning, resourcing, and execution. Thus, as it turned out, Clausewitz's insights from the early 19th century were (and are) still relevant today regarding how nations formulate grand strategy. Specifically, Clausewitz declared that before a nation goes to war it must first know its political goals and ensure that they are realistic and achievable. Subsequent to that, nations must harmonize those goals (or ends) with the ways (methods) and means (resources) for winning that campaign. He further cautioned, once committed to a military campaign, the people, the government, and the armed forces all must unify behind it or risk increasing "friction," and possibly, failure.

Regarding Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the United States ignored all these points and ultimately paid dearly. In each case, we failed to achieve our stated political goals. In this essay I will compare and contrast our experiences with these aforementioned failures with the overwhelming success achieved during the Persian Gulf War to illustrate the criticality of coherent grand strategy formulation.

At first blush my point here may appear trivial or pedantic, but it is highly consequential. If global superpowers are still capable of winning modern wars decisively despite legitimate concerns over nuclear escalation and daunting costs, then a well-conceived and resourced "Peace Through Strength" grand strategy approach, grounded in deterrence, can still succeed. If, however, superpowers are incapable of winning modern wars for the reasons suggested above (and possibly others), then it's not likely that credible deterrence can be achieved; in which case the U.S. will have to develop alternative approaches to security. I believe that modern wars are winnable and grand strategies to secure peace and prosperity based on deterrence are still possible. I explain why and how below.

Vietnam

As H.R. McMaster documents in *Dereliction of Duty*, in Vietnam our national leaders clearly were very concerned about triggering a Chinese response similar to one we had experienced in Korea only a decade earlier.



Image credit: Poster Collection, 06677, Hoover Institution Archives.

Any expansion of the war could also bring into the conflict the global communist leader, the Soviet Union, which carried with it the specter of potential nuclear escalation. These concerns weighed heavily on the minds of American national leaders and played a role in their decision to limit the amount of force employed during the Vietnam War. For these reasons, and others I'll mention below, President Johnson settled for "graduated pressure" as the campaign's grand design.

Given that this war was really the first one shown daily on American television, the brutal images constantly displayed reinforced the decision to limit the amount of force to help sustain popular support for the war. Moreover, mounting costs, too, played a role in the strategic decision to go with "graduated pressure" as the Johnson administration wanted to fight the Vietnam War as they invested heavily in its signal domestic priority—the "War on Poverty."

Throughout the mid-1960s, all these factors contributed to the decision to stick with "graduated pressure," despite obvious signs that this strategy was not working. When he first deployed ground troops to Vietnam in March 1965, President Johnson publicly insisted that we needed to defeat the communists in Vietnam to stop the spread of this insidious philosophy before it reached our shores. The appeasement approach Chamberlain embraced at Munich with Hitler failed and he had no intentions of repeating that mistake. Yet, despite these public utterances as McMaster uncovered, behind the scenes American decision makers were more preoccupied with *not losing* than winning, because a loss in Vietnam in 1965 would jeopardize the Great Society legislation which was before Congress.

So, was our central political goal to not lose in 1965 or to defeat the communist threat in South Vietnam? In relation to those goals, what were our political goals regarding North Vietnam? The confusion over political aims of the war had cascading negative effects because winning a war requires more resources than merely avoiding a loss. This confusion adversely affected military campaign planning, resourcing, and execution and disaster soon followed. The reality is we never really got around to making the necessary investments to win that war. As McMaster pointed out, the Joint Chiefs were fully aware of that flaw but pursued the strategy nonetheless. In Vietnam our ends, ways, and means were never harmonized and the U.S. war effort struggled mightily. The American people eventually soured on the costly stalemate. In the end, we settled for making the pain go away by shifting security responsibilities to the South Vietnamese during the Nixon administration and then withdrawing our forces. In 1975, South Vietnam fell to the communists, and we lost.

Our strategy was flawed from the start. President Johnson miscalculated when he escalated with ground troops. A decade earlier, as President Eisenhower was confronted with French requests to intervene as the Vietnamese ground forces surrounded their forces at Dien Bien Phu, the former general saw no real path forward that harmonized vital U.S. national interests (ends) with acceptable and viable ways and means. For that reason, he rejected the French request and kept America out of the war in Vietnam. Although very little (if anything) had changed a decade later, in 1965 President Johnson ordered U.S. ground troops into Vietnam to fight an unpopular and unnecessary war we were never committed to win. Eisenhower read and understood Clausewitz. Johnson did not.

Afghanistan

After al-Qaeda attacked our country on September 11, 2001, the United States had to respond. Our swift and decisive military campaign to destroy their forces was justified and necessary. The decision to occupy Afghanistan and commit to rebuilding it as a thriving Jeffersonian democracy, however, was fanciful, unnecessary for vital national security interests, and ignorant of history. Stunningly, it only had been a dozen years since the Soviet Union withdrew their military forces after trying hard and failing to politically remake Afghanistan. The Soviets did not learn from the earlier failures of the British empire, which had similar aspirations for Afghanistan in the 19th century and lost. Yet somehow it was going to be different with America in Afghanistan? No, we learned the hard way that the laws of "strategic physics" are not suspended for anyone, including "exceptional" America. Ends, ways, and means still must be harmonized and rationalized.

To be clear, while especially difficult and costly, nation-building after a war *is possible*. We did just that after World War II. The Allied powers rebuilt Germany and Japan and remade them into peaceful nations. But there was a big difference between Germany and Japan after World War II and Afghanistan in 2001. After our traumatic experiences with fascism before and during World War II, most Americans believed it *was* in our vital national security interests to fundamentally change the political arc of those countries. Given that, we committed to positioning over a half million men and women in Europe alone (many others in Japan) for several decades and spent a sizable portion of our GDP to rebuild the infrastructure of those war-torn nations. As such, our ends, ways, and means were harmonized, and we achieved those difficult and costly political goals. With Afghanistan (as with Vietnam), U.S. national leaders were never able to make a compelling argument to the American people why rebuilding and remaking that country was a vital national security interest. Consequently, our level of resource commitment was insufficient to achieve those lofty (and unnecessary) goals. With Afghanistan's lack of history with democracy and its entrenched culture, it's not clear any level of resources would have sufficed.

Once again, the absence of realistic political goals and overall strategic clarity led to poor military campaign planning, coordination, and execution. Curiously, somewhat similar to our experiences in Vietnam, we ended up resourcing Afghanistan *not to lose*, rather than to win, and after 20 years of stalemate, many Americans from across the ideological spectrum questioned the value of continuing this "endless" war. It did not seem worth it to continue to expend more blood and treasure for an unlimited period to achieve what was perceived as very little strategically. Thus, both the Trump and Biden administrations searched for exit ramps. Not all "exit ramps" are created equal, however, and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was especially inept. That entire brutal experience shall live in infamy as a testament to what can happen to any country, even global superpowers, who don't learn from Clausewitz.

Iraq

After the 9/11 attacks, neo-conservative strategists within the George W. Bush administration (including the Vice President Dick Cheney) who had long argued that the aims of the Persian Gulf War were too limited convinced the President that the United States should pursue regime change in Iraq. The rationale was that Iraq was associated with the 9/11 attackers and possessed weapons of mass destruction, and thus was an existential threat to the U.S. We were told we could not wait for a "mushroom cloud" before taking action to protect ourselves. So, in March 2003, exactly 20 years after President Reagan insisted to the world that America does not start wars, we did just that, attacking Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein.

The initial phase of the invasion went very well. Iraq's military was routed, and Hussein's regime was toppled in just a few weeks. American casualties were, thankfully, very low. Hussein was on the run, hiding in places throughout Sunni-held areas in Iraq. Before long, however, trouble developed as we embarked on an ambitious plan to remake Iraq into a multi-ethnic, religiously tolerant republic based on democratic principles. This proved unpopular and a full-blown insurgency against our occupation ensued, eventually expanding into a bloody civil war between Sunni and Shia factions throughout the country. The U.S. led coalition simply did not have the force structure and resources in place to defeat the insurgency and to broker peace between the warring factions. We spent nearly a decade, including a major surge of troops and resources in 2007, before we were able to gain enough stability to eventually transfer authority for security to Iraqi forces and withdraw back to the U.S. Today, while the Iraqi government remains intact and largely in control of the country; and while it is true that Iraq is less of a haven for terrorists than Afghanistan, the reality is that we never achieved our initial strategic aims for that war of choice. While Iraq is not controlled by a government sympathetic to al-Qaeda, it is *not* a thriving multi-ethnic, religiously tolerant republic. Nor is it a close ally of the U.S. It is instead a Shia-led majority and more of an ally to our arch nemesis, Iran.

The costs for our very marginal gains have been staggering. We lost thousands of servicemembers killed in action and have a generation of wounded who will need care for decades. Meanwhile, our domestic politics have been transformed for the worse. Now years later, deep political and ideological divisions remain, and

we have a mountain of debt that threatens our future. All these factors have contributed to the widespread cynicism of the American people who increasingly distrust their leaders and institutions.

Had we right-sized the invasion force from the start to ensure we could stabilize the country after regime change, we may have saved a decade's worth of heartache and the blood and treasure we lost, but the end result likely would have still been the same: a Shia-led Iraq, friendly towards Iran. From the start, our strategic aims were not realistic given that country's previous history and culture. Like Vietnam and Afghanistan, faulty strategic thinking and poor campaign planning and execution led to suboptimal outcomes in Iraq.

The Persian Gulf War

In contrast to these failures, the United States achieved overwhelming strategic success in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. The major difference between these wars was how we approached strategy, starting with the political aims for the conflict. The goal identified for the Persian Gulf War was clear, limited, and achievable—to expel Saddam Hussein's Iraqi military from Kuwait. This goal was effectively communicated to both domestic and foreign audiences allowing for broad and overwhelming support among constituencies throughout the U.S.-led coalition. The political leadership of the coalition thereafter properly resourced and supported the commanders and troops in the field. The political and strategic processes set the conditions for effective military campaign planning, coordination, and execution. The results speak for themselves. Within 100 hours the coalition's ground campaign achieved the stated aim of the war. The Iraqi military was thoroughly defeated and humiliated and expelled from Kuwait. The war ended. The resounding political victory was matched by the lopsided combat results. While any soldier killed in combat is mourned sacrifice, compared to the Iraqi forces and other campaigns throughout history, the 392 combat deaths suffered by coalition forces during the Persian Gulf War were, thankfully, very light.

The decisive military victory had extraordinary strategic effects. Not only did it resolve the crisis by liberating Kuwait, it also effectively ended Hussein's ability to threaten his neighbors. Further, the U.S. military renaissance, which had been underway for nearly two decades following the devastating loss in Vietnam, was now affirmed and on display for everyone in the world (friend and foe alike) to see. This significantly enhanced deterrence and strengthened the hand of American diplomats and elected leadership for a generation. In the end, that military campaign stands as an example of how to effectively execute grand strategy.

Going Forward

Significantly then, the abject failures in Vietnam and Afghanistan (and to a marked degree in Iraq) does *not* mean that the U.S. is incapable of winning a modern war because of legitimate concerns over potential nuclear escalation, high costs, and public aversion to long wars. The results of the Persian Gulf War prove that if we must wage war, we can still do so successfully. That fact renders viable the "Peace through Strength" grand strategy based on the concept of deterrence. This approach can be used to keep the peace and to secure American vital interests.

Thus, the lessons we should take from the entire post-World War II era is that we must develop future senior leaders capable of effective strategic thinking, communication, and decision-making. Those strategic skills of senior leaders when coupled with properly manned, trained, and equipped armed forces will deter potential adversaries and, should deterrence fail for whatever reason, fight and win our country's wars decisively.

The key to American Grand Strategy then is to develop a clear vision that is achievable and popular among the people. This strategy should incorporate all elements and dimensions of national power. Such an approach will persuasively convey to potential adversaries that if they attack the U.S. they will lose and end up worse off than they started. All of this affirms that while much has changed since Clausewitz first published *On Strategy* in the 19th century, his central arguments regarding national security and foreign policy remain valid and we ignore them at our peril.

Accordingly, as this new administration gains its footing, it should work on rallying the American people behind our “Peace through Strength” grand strategy approach. In parallel we should pursue other national priorities such as restoring fiscal sustainability, revitalizing our industrial base (we should not be reliant on any other nation for our critical minerals and materials, energy, and food), and above all else, significantly improving the readiness of our armed forces. This approach will also require smart trade policies and vibrant alliances, but all the aforementioned points are achievable and have worked for America in the past.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration deployed a similar strategy, which enabled the U.S. and the West to win the Cold War. Reagan made good choices, set realistic strategic goals, dramatically improved the readiness of the U.S. military, and never got us bogged down in hubristic nation-building efforts that weren’t necessary—a lesson we forgot in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although the Trump administration’s grand strategy during the first term was in many ways as effective as Reagan’s (if not more so), that doesn’t guarantee similar outcomes this time around. Success must be earned this time by once again practicing smart grand strategy and making wise decisions. History is replete with examples of hubris where once effective leaders thereafter over-reached and made foolish choices, for which their nation paid dearly. Let that not be our fate now. We face significant challenges checking and shaping a rising China including deterring an invasion of Taiwan, securing wise and just peace agreements that last in Ukraine and Gaza, rectifying unfair trade practices, and ensuring we can continue to compete and flourish in an age of dizzying technological change.

Yet, in the face of these daunting strategic problem sets, we have the potential to restore American power and stature and enjoy our best years of peace and prosperity. That should be our priority and focus going forward. Re-reading Clausewitz will help.



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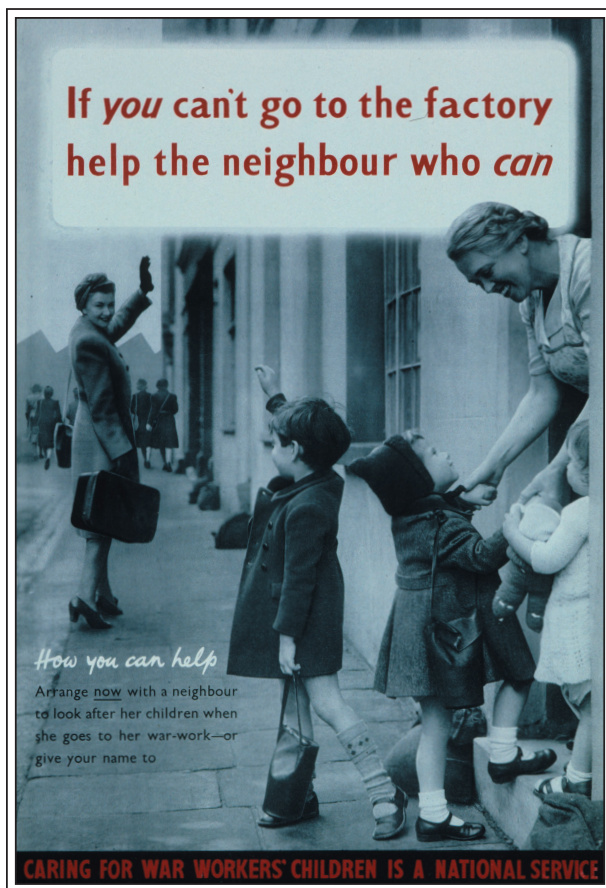


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The Surest Way to Lose a War

By Gordon G. Chang

The surest way to lose a war is to refuse to recognize that you're in one. The United States at the moment is doing exactly that, ignoring reality. The People's Republic of China is at war with an oblivious, unprepared America.

Beijing is not trying to hide how it characterizes Sino-U.S. relations. In May 2019, *People's Daily*, the most authoritative publication in China, carried a landmark editorial that declared a "people's war" on America.

In 2023, PLA Daily, the official website of the Chinese military, defined that term, an important one for China's ruling organization: "A people's war is a total war, and its strategy and tactics require the overall mobilization of political, economic, cultural, diplomatic, military, and other power resources, the integrated use of multiple forms of struggle and combat methods."

By now it's clear: The Communist Party, with its strident anti-Americanism, is establishing a justification for its war on America. As James Lilley, Washington's ambassador to China at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, said, "The Chinese always telegraph their punches." Among other things, this means Chinese "propaganda" has consequences.

The Party has always viewed the United States as an existential threat not because of anything Americans say or do but because of who they are. As Miles Yu has pointed out, an insecure ruling organization in Beijing is afraid of the inspirational impact of America's ideals and form of governance on the Chinese people. Charles Burton of the Sinopsis think tank put it this way in February: "The Chinese regime reviles the United States because it is a beacon to the world affirming the universal entitlement to individual human rights of citizens everywhere and the power of the noble principle of government of the people, by the people, and for the people."

This means, try as Americans might, the U.S. will never have amicable relations with China as long as the Communist Party rules.

China's definition of war is different from America's. Although Beijing has denied that *Unrestricted Warfare*, the 1999 book by two Chinese air force colonels, is official doctrine, Chinese actions mimic the book's arguments. China's regime is employing, in its across-the-board assault on American society, nontraditional tactics.

Take fentanyl, one of dozens of opioids Chinese technicians design and make in laboratories in China. The near-total Chinese surveillance state knows and therefore approves of the activities of the drug gangs and, of course, state-owned fentanyl producers, and the Chinese central government and Communist Party provide diplomatic, material, and banking assistance. Even China's nominally private social media sites, like ByteDance's TikTok, promote illicit drug use in the United States.

Yes, China is in a war as it expansively defines the term. Warfare also explains, among other things, the Communist Party's theft of hundreds of billions of dollars of American intellectual property each year;

its repeated intrusions into American military bases; its millions of cyberattacks every day against U.S. networks; its relentless infiltration of American schools, media outlets, and political parties; its maintenance of secret police stations on American soil; and its malicious tarring of the U.S. all the time by its propaganda organs.

China's regime is escalating its war on America. The signs are unmistakable. For one thing, Xi Jinping can't stop talking about his intentions. His now-favorite slogan is "Dare to fight." Xi's message has quickly filtered down through the ranks. The Chinese military tells us it is "ready to fight."

China's leader is doing more than just talking, however. He is implementing the largest and fastest military buildup since the Second World War, he is trying to sanctions-proof his regime, he is stockpiling grain and other commodities, he is firing military officers opposed to going to war, he is surveying the U.S. for nuclear weapons strikes—that's what the Chinese balloon that floated over America two years ago was doing—he is converting civilian factory lines for war production, he is calling up reservists, and he is mobilizing China's civilians for battle.

No American president in a half century, however, has been able to call the Chinese regime an "enemy."

America acts as if it is at peace, which is the surest way to lose an ongoing war.

POLL: Are concepts like "total war" and "unconditional surrender" outdated in our globalized world of the nuclear age? And if so, why?

- ☐ Total war and unconditional surrender were always rare events in history and are not indicative of most conflicts.
- ☐ Absolute war and forced surrender are anachronistic ideas given the threat of nuclear escalation.
- ☐ Western societies no longer see existential wars as either moral or necessary and have evolved beyond them.
- ☐ War reflects unchanging human nature, so its most extreme manifestations will always be with us.
- ☐ Total war and unconditional surrender remain necessary options when enemies inevitably seek to destroy a state.



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Chang lived and worked in China and Hong Kong for almost two decades. He is a columnist at *Newsweek* and *The Hill*. Chang has given briefings at the National Intelligence Council, the CIA, the State Department, U.S. Strategic Command, and the Pentagon. Chang frequently appears on CNN, Fox News, Fox Business Network, and Newsmax. He is a regular cohost and guest on *CBS Eye on the World with John Batchelor*. He served two terms as trustee of Cornell University.



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Winning Wars

By Jakub Grygiel

It is difficult to win wars that seek exceedingly tall objectives. Wars seeking total victory over the enemy, demanding his unconditional surrender and a leadership or regime change, are an example. The gap between required means and desired goals becomes so large that the war turns into an unsatisfactory endless slog: the objective is always just beyond the horizon. This is a recipe for lengthy wars that require large expenditures of force, rarely end in negotiations, and ultimately are very difficult to win.

When the objectives sought by the two opponents are irreducible, that is, when neither side can nor is willing to dial down its aims, victory of at least one of them is more difficult to achieve. The use of violence in fact rarely results in the perfect realization of the initial objectives that both opponents decided to pursue at the outset. Simply put, mili-

tary power is a finite resource that does not automatically produce the predicted and desired outcomes. Hence, to use a current case, if Russia seeks to conquer Ukraine and install a pro-Moscow regime in Kyiv, such an objective is likely non-negotiable for Ukrainians (and, arguably, the longer and bloodier the war, the more the Ukrainians will reject a negotiated end that would undermine their independence). Russia can achieve such a goal of regime change only through a total military victory over Ukraine. This is not impossible, but certainly more difficult than just a redrawing of some borders in Crimea and the Donbas.

The connection between war aims and war termination (or victory of one side) is obviously not a recent discovery. For example, Fred Iklé in his classic 1971 book entitled *Every War Must End* observed that to “bring the fighting to an end, one nation or the other almost always has to revise its war aims.”¹ And by “to revise,” Iklé seems to have meant “to decrease” or “to moderate”: war ends with at least one side lowering the original goals it had set to attain. A state that sought to conquer a large swath of land may have to be satisfied with a smaller territorial gain, if tenaciously opposed by the locals. Or a country that fights for its independence and sovereignty may have to abandon some lands or alter its geopolitical leanings in order to end the war. The point is that war will not end if neither side is willing to reduce the original objectives.

Hence, a war of territorial adjustment can end when some border change has occurred, even if not perfectly matching the initial goals. A war of punishment may end when some pain, deemed sufficient for whatever purpose, has been inflicted. Or a war for glory can end when the prestige seeker declares satisfaction with whatever image of glory he has attained. Even in such cases, of course, war is not easy to end as the goals may alter during the fighting, often increasing as the sunk costs go up. In Iklé’s words again, “Those with power to start a war frequently come to discover that they lack the power to stop it.”²

It is much more difficult to end the war when the goals pursued are either-or, non-negotiable, and hence not easily amenable to be adjusted downward. Regime-change, genocide, or the total conquest of a state are such goals that, while not morally equivalent, are similar in their nature: either one achieves it or not. For the targeted side, there is also little compromise possible (a partial regime change? A partial genocide?). As

a result, the war is likely to be long and, short of a total military victory of one side, difficult to terminate by negotiations.

In brief, the difficulty of winning a war may lie not just in the military aspects of the conflict (the technology, the resources, the manpower, or the tactical prowess) but also in its political nature. If one pursues goals that are too tall and require total victory over the opponent, victory may be very difficult to achieve.

1 Fred Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, original 1971), p. 96.

2 Iklé, p. 106.



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Remembering Our Bellicose Roots

By Edward A. Gutiérrez

What most often prevents wars from being won? Worry over nuclear weapons? The cost of modern weaponry, medical care, and *matériel* that makes prolonged wars expensive? Media coverage depictions of war's savagery that repels the public? No. It is modernity's disordered and idealistic worldview that forbids the violence necessary to humble and crush an enemy. Only this prevents wars from being won: the will to accept evil exists, and the dirty hands required to defend against it.

Dirty Hands

Higgins: "It's simple economics. Today it's oil, right? In ten or fifteen years, food, plutonium, and maybe even sooner. Now, what do you think the people are going to want us to do then?"

Turner: "Ask them?"

Higgins: "Not now. Then. Ask them when they're running out. Ask them when there's no heat in their homes, and they're cold. Ask them when their engines stop. Ask them when people who've never known hunger start going hungry. You want to know something? They won't want us to ask them. They'll just want us to get it for them."¹

It is an old story. One of realism versus idealism. Due to geography and innumerable other blessings, it is with extreme ease that Americans divorce themselves from war's scourge. Americans, like Turner in the conversation above, can afford the luxury of a worldview that attempts to explain evil as an incongruity, one that mankind defeated long ago. Higgins knows better. With decades of clarity confronting evil across the globe, he accepts that state security requires dirty hands in a fallen world. Higgins understands human nature.

While there will always be a concern for the cost of war, none know what the future holds and what the circumstances might be when the cost must be paid. As Thucydides reminds us: "In peace and prosperity states and individuals have better sentiments, because they do not find themselves suddenly confronted with imperious necessities; but war takes away the easy supply of daily wants and so proves a rough master that brings most men's characters to a level with their fortunes."² The West casts value judgements with ease on the past, but our comfortable armchairs do not provide the appropriate vantage point to witness the sobering realities of life on the frontline, such as Ukraine, Middle East, or the African Sahel and Great Lakes regions. But we should not require those reminders since war is the story of Western Civilization.

Ancient Mediterranean Milieu

The ancient Mediterranean was the frontline. It is too convenient and ahistorical to construct antiquity as one of conquest and ignorance. Men and women faced death and pain from birth to a degree we cannot fathom. Infant mortality was circa 30 percent and people died from infections and disease with scant scientific explanation. Death in war was one of a multitude of ways to die. War was omnipresent. Yet, "The corpse itself inspired little horror," finds Robert Garland.³ The ancient Greeks believed life is *stasis*—struggle, conflict, strife. Around 700 BC, whilst reflecting on *stasis*, Hesiod concludes that *stasis* "encourages war and evil battle, wretched; no man loves her, but by necessity, through the will of the deathless ones, they honor the oppressive Strife."⁴ Hesiod is right: life is *stasis*. The deathless ones—the gods—shaped the world. Accept it.

Their worldview was more honest about the defensive measures the state needs to protect citizens from violence. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, and Romans all fought continuous internal and external wars for survival, but nonstate actors from the frontiers also waged endemic warfare. Thus,

war was not bound by any theological, sociocultural, or political strand. *Stasis* entwined all. The less we seek history's wisdom, the deeper we succumb to false narratives of the human condition. It is a matter of acceptance. Millenia of proximity is no excuse.

Libido Dominandi

St. Augustine understands the crucial aspect preventing perpetual peace: mankind's *libido dominandi* (lust to dominate). Throughout his life Augustine struggled with how a moral man confronts an immoral world, but with Rome's sack in AD 410, it was then he grasped the full weight of our fallen nature as he constructed his masterpiece, *City of God*, where he asserts, "Even peace is a doubtful good, since we do not know the hearts of those with whom we wish to maintain peace, and even if we could know them today, we should not know what they might be like tomorrow."⁵ Augustine acknowledges that man can only battle against the *libido dominandi*, but never extinguish it . . . it is a temporal reality we accept in our fallen world.

It is a matter of Higgins versus Turner. The father of history agrees. Herodotus ends *The Histories* with praise not for a Greek, but a Persian, King Cyrus the Great, who warns, "Soft countries . . . breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too."⁶ An exhaustive intelligence analysis of the adversary's order of battle, a plethora of hypersonic weapons, and innovative quantum processors are useless without the will to use them in defense of America from those who lust to dominate her.

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- 1 *Three Days of the Condor*, dir. Sydney Pollack (Paramount Pictures, 1975).
 - 2 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* in *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996), 199 (III.82).
 - 3 Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 122.
 - 4 Hesiod, *Works and Days* in *The Poems of Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, and the Shield of Herakles*, trans. Barry B. Powell (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 109 (15–17); see also, *Theogony*, 45 (179–186).
 - 5 St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 2003), 858 (XIX.5).
 - 6 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin, 2003), 603 (IX.122). It is important to note, de Sélincourt was a First World War combat veteran who fought during the Gallipoli campaign, became a fighter pilot, was shot down, and then endured Holzminden prisoner-of-war camp for over a year. After the war he returned to Oxford and became a beloved teacher and writer.



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Winning Is a Choice

By Robert Kaufman

The saying goes in football that a prevent defense invariably prevents your side from winning. This is true likewise when it comes to war. The limitations Democratic administrations have self-imposed on waging war loom as the greatest obstacle to the U.S. winning them. Granted, the sometimes, but not always legitimate fear of nuclear escalation and tendentious media coverage have contributed to the reluctance of Democratic Party presidents since Lyndon Johnson even to define victory as an aim of war, much less achieve it. The United States lost the Vietnam War, however, owing largely to its feckless strategy of graduated escalation and bargaining aimed at convincing an implacable North Vietnamese regime that it could not win rather than striving to defeat it. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations' exaggerated fear of Soviet and Chinese intervention accounted largely for their self-defeating restraint.

Consider, too, how the Biden administration squandered Ukraine's heroism and its initially much greater chance of victory, because of its neuralgic fear of Putin's serial ultimatums. President Biden thus slow-walked military assistance to Ukraine, taking too long to provide too little, with too many restrictions. This lack of fortitude and foresight transformed a winnable conflict into a war of attrition heavily favoring Russia, with its exponentially larger resource base and a relentless Putin impervious to the domestic constraints that operate in open societies. That does not mean, of course, that Biden or any other commander-in-chief should slight the costs and risks of escalation, especially to the nuclear level, which Putin has repeatedly threatened. It does mean more soberly balancing the plausibility of the threat of escalation versus the costs and risks of not escalating. Putin, the Iranian mullahs, and Xi Jinping have exploited the United States' one-dimensional obsession with the perils of escalation to our strategic disadvantage. Take heed that virtually all Putin's threats—including nuclear escalation—have proved hollow while having their intended effect of eroding the resolve of the Biden administration and most of the Western European members of NATO.

The unbridled fear of escalation has not exerted the same chilling effect on either the ends or means of the Axis of Tyranny—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—committed to achieving victory in war and prevented from it only by dint of the capability and credibility of the free world's military deterrent. Nor has the inordinate fear of escalation always unhinged more resolute leadership in other open societies, including our own. For all the controversies over the two Iraq wars and the legitimate doubts about their prudence, the Republican administration of George H.W. Bush did win the first decisively on the battlefield. So too did the administration of George W. Bush provisionally win the second, until the Obama administration snatched defeat from jaws of victory by withdrawing American forces much too soon.

Contrast, too, the Biden administration's serial timidity towards the multiple, massive provocations by Iran and its proxies—especially its relentless pressure on Israel to restrain its response to the atrocities of October 7, 2023 that would have spelled defeat—with Israel's brilliantly waged and successful wars against Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran, placing the Netanyahu government on the threshold of achieving smashing victories over all three. The IDF's devastation of Iranian air defenses has rendered even the Iranian nuclear program vulnerable to a decisive blow. Israel accomplished this by defying every step of the way the Biden administration averse to the risk of a decisiveness, and skeptical about the legitimacy of Israel winning in the first place. The magnitude of Iran's and its proxies' defeat at the hands of Israel and the catastrophic losses Russia has suffered in their war against Ukraine also paved the way for the sudden collapse of the Assad regime that Iranians and Russians no longer could spare the capabilities to rescue. So victory in war remains

desirable and possible for open societies even in the nuclear age and media environment, with the requisite preparation, determination, and inspired leadership.

The greatest and most dangerous constraints to the United States winning wars arise instead from the priorities and outlook of the progressive left regnant in the Democratic Party. Contrary to the gloom and doom of not only the liberal-left but the isolationist wing of the Republican party, the United States has ample resources to fight and win wars in vital geopolitical regions so long as we stop doing what we have been doing for too long: underfunding defense; overregulating the economy; vastly overspending on domestic programs wasteful at best and harmful at worst; neglecting our withering defense industrial base; tolerating a dysfunctional Pentagon's sclerotic procurement process, which yields too few weapons, costing too much, and taking too long to produce, while stifling the innovation necessary to develop and deploy with a generous margin to spare, the weapons platforms essential for retaining American military pre-eminence.

The United States can easily afford to spend five percent of the GDP that is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve the type of defense posture that can deter wars and win them at the lowest possible cost and risk, when even the best deterrent inevitably fails. We also can successfully—albeit with greater difficulty—rethink our spending priorities; rebuild our military industrial complex; reform the Pentagon; and revitalize the private sector. The United States must banish once and for all every vestige of woke ideology so corrosive in many precincts, doubting not only our capacity to fight and win wars, but the moral legitimacy of winning itself.

Clausewitz reminds us that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Technology, the dynamics of domestic politics, the ebb and flow of moral sensibilities, all affect but do not determine whether the United States can continue to deter major wars, or fight and win wars when even the most robust deterrent sometimes fails. We have nothing and no one to blame but ourselves if we continue to ignore that there is indeed no substitute for victory and having the capability and political will to achieve it.



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What Most Often Prevents Wars from Being Won?

By Mark Moyar

The advent of nuclear weapons heralded a fundamental shift in warfare, as war for the first time confronted humanity with the prospect of complete annihilation. Military and civilian strategists sought avenues for fighting and competing without triggering a nuclear holocaust, which led nations to moderate their ambitions and settle for outcomes short of victory. This change in strategic calculus is the primary, although not the only, reason why wars have been more difficult to win since 1945.

In the first two major wars after World War II, the fear of nuclear war, in combination with the fear of protracted warfare inside China, discouraged the United States from taking actions necessary for decisive victory. When the Chinese army intervened in the Korean War, Douglas MacArthur urged President Truman to invade China and strike it with nuclear weapons to obtain a decisive victory. Truman, however, feared that MacArthur's proposed strategy would provoke a nuclear response from China's Soviet ally and bog the United States down on the Chinese mainland. As a result, Truman chose to keep the war within the confines of the Korean peninsula, producing a military stalemate that ended with a peace agreement leaving neither side victorious.

During the Vietnam War, top U.S. military leaders urged President Lyndon Johnson to invade North Vietnam and smash it with air power to end the war. Johnson rejected their advice, believing that these actions would lead to a third world war against China, which by then had nuclear weapons of its own. Hence, the United States remained on the strategic defensive, and eventually it lost the will to continue bankrolling its South Vietnamese allies.

During the war in Afghanistan of 2001–21, Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons discouraged the United States from violating Pakistan's sovereignty to the extent necessary to deprive the Taliban of access to Pakistani territory. The sanctuary afforded by Pakistan enabled the Taliban to keep fighting in Afghanistan regardless of casualties. Losing patience with protracted conflict again, the United States would abandon its allies once more.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, it stood a good chance of achieving decisive victory, because Ukraine had unilaterally relinquished its nuclear weapons in 1994 based on ephemeral foreign security guarantees. But Ukraine's conventional forces foiled the Russian military's attempts to seize Kiev. During the ensuing stalemate, fear of a global nuclear war has prevented both Russia and Ukraine's allies from using nuclear weapons in pursuit of total victory.

In recent insurgencies and civil wars, as in more distant ones, poor leadership has often prevented victory. Great powers seeking to maintain a friendly government often prop up weak leaders, because of either deference to national sovereignty or a lack of good alternatives, and many such leaders prove incapable of completely eliminating enemy combatants within their own borders. The United States was saddled with this problem in Cambodia, El Salvador, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen. The Soviet Union faced the same problem in Afghanistan and Ethiopia. Other examples include Yugoslavia in Greece; South Africa in Angola; France in Indochina; and Britain in Yemen.

Heightened aversion to large and persistent casualties has also curbed the appetites of some nations for the protracted attrition warfare that led to decisive outcomes in the past. This aversion contributed to American willingness to end many of its recent wars without victory: the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Somalian

intervention, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War. European nations repeatedly gave up on post-1945 wars that accrued too many casualties, such as the First Indochina War, the Algerian War, and the Troubles.

Greater media coverage of war has contributed to this aversion. So has the decline in family size. When the average family had three or four sons, it was more accepting of the risks of sending a son into the military than in the current epoch, when few families have more than one son. The spread of democracy has also contributed, for democratic nations are more responsive to the sentiments of the masses whose sons make up most of the armed forces. In addition, decline in religious belief in parts of the West has intensified casualty aversion, since humans are generally less willing to risk their lives if they do not believe in anything beyond the current world.



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Schopenhauer Versus the Architects of Failure

By Ralph Peters

What prevents Western powers, especially the United States, from winning wars? The answer is obvious, yet we refuse to learn and continue to lose. Our efforts are half-hearted from the beginning. We lack the will to win. We dream of winning wars nicely, neatly, and quickly, all the while cajoling merciless foes to embrace our lifestyle.

What does it take to win wars? Obviously, magnificent weaponry and showers of wealth are insufficient. What do our enemies have that we lack? An inherent grasp of now-neglected German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's encapsulation of what enables human beings to transform their epochs: *die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* ("The world as will and vision."). Overcoming humanity's cunning, cruelty, and turgid inertia requires superior tenacity (*Durchhaltevermoegen*) and a ruthlessly honest assessment of the situation confronting us.

We fail on both counts.

We enter conflicts as victims of our own blithe propaganda, unwilling to accept that our enemy's vision may be more clear-sighted—and certainly more robust—than our own. We don't even make a serious inquiry as to our enemy's complexity and resourcefulness or our own vulnerabilities, from a "Gotcha!" media conditioned to turn a half-blind eye to a foe's malevolence while amplifying our least stumbles, to political leaders led by politics alone.

Schopenhauer (or his relevant-right-now predecessor G.W.F. Hegel) may not have won the title of Mr. Congeniality, nor are the great pre-Nietzsche German Idealist philosophers easy to package for our collapsed attention spans, but two centuries on, they remain humanity's most incisive critics of human activity, individual or collective, since the compilation of the Old Testament.

But aside from prose thick as tar and our fidgety impatience, there's an even greater impediment to their study, a long-lingering post-World War II conviction that all of those German philosophers paved the way for Adolf Hitler (who had little time for visions other than his own). Well, hammer Nietzsche all you want—his superman nonsense did real damage and still does—and Martin Heidegger was an eager Nazi, but Hitler and his ilk did not pause amid the Holocaust to ask, "What would Immanuel Kant do?" Blaming Hegel for Nazism (or Marxism) is akin to blaming Abraham Lincoln for slavery.

Don't spurn. Learn.

In the nineteenth century, American intellectual life—in that golden age from Ralph Waldo Emerson to William James—looked to Germany, and it was much to our benefit. The world wars left us willing to buy German automobiles, but unwilling to engage with some of humanity's most-profound thought because it spoke the wrong language. (And what better excuse for a lazy undergraduate than "Hitler ate my homework?")

In the late summer of 2004, I was in northern Iraq as a guest of the Kurdish government. During my stay, Marine General James Mattis led a tough, brilliantly capable force into Fallujah, a terrorist city-state. After a gritty week of fighting, Mattis was on the eve—literally—of a vital win.

The global media saved our shattered enemy. Desperate for career-making headlines, U.S. and international journalists reported insurgent propaganda as fact: We were killing innocents, we were attacking hospitals wantonly . . . In Washington, the blustering draft-dodgers who launched the war panicked, and President Bush the Younger ordered a halt in Fallujah. The Kurds with whom I sat watching developments were mortified: We all knew that our troops would have to go back in a matter of months, and that it would be an even more costly fight when we did.

The administration that sent our troops off to war didn't really mean it.

Of course, we'd already lost Iraq before First Fallujah. We lost it before we even reached Baghdad, when an American division commander, better suited for politics than warfare, made swooning headlines by refusing to let his troops search a suspect mosque, preferring to have his Soldiers "take a knee." He "showed respect for Islam." And in doing so he guaranteed that mosques would become safe houses for insurgents, arms depots, and terrorist command cells. Thousands of our troops would die because we had demonstrated that we weren't serious. The general, of course, was promoted and went on to grandstand in Afghanistan, too.

There is no prize of worth short of victory—which is always possible, if our will is stronger than the enemy's and our analysis of the situation we face isn't corrupted by fantasies of war on the cheap.

The United States should never go to war unless we mean to win, no matter the cost or complaint. But we will go into quagmires of our own concoction again and again, assured that the enemy we came to kill will

like us once they have observed our virtues. We just need a couple of years to forget our latest embarrassments and their costs. The greatest superpower in history—measured by wealth and weaponry—is weak of will and blind to human reality.

Schopenhauer's bones are rattling.



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What Prevents Wars from Being Won?

By Zafiris Rossidis

"No war is over until the enemy says it's over. We may think it over, but in fact, the enemy gets a vote."

— Gen. James Mattis

Throughout history, military conflicts have been waged with the objective of achieving decisive and conclusive victories. However, in contemporary warfare, outright military triumphs have become increasingly elusive due to a combination of strategic, political, economic, and technological factors.

One of the most significant factors preventing wars from being decisively won is the presence of nuclear deterrence and strategic containment policies. While nuclear weapons haven't been used since August 1945, their broader strategic implications shape military decision-making and escalation thresholds. Israel's alleged nuclear capability serves as a powerful deterrent against full-scale regional war, ensuring that conflicts remain within the realm of conventional military engagements. Russia hinted that it could use its nuclear

arsenal in the war with Ukraine. Additionally, major global powers impose constraints to prevent escalation beyond tolerable limits, thereby restricting the capacity of warring factions to achieve total military dominance.

The development of international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions and various United Nations resolutions, has significantly altered the nature of modern warfare, adding another crucial constraint toward warfare. As Edward Luttwak wrote:

Wars used to begin and end. Since the UN arrived, with the fiction of collective responsibility (nobody sent troops to Rwanda; nobody arrived to defend the Jews on May 15, 1948), this changed. The fiction results in imposed cease-fires that preclude peace. Wars used to force a reversion to peace via the victory of one side or the other. But now wars are interrupted by cease fires that no longer lead to negotiated armistices, let alone peace. Wars interrupted ensure unending conflicts.

Historically, wars were often won by utterly crushing an enemy, sometimes through massacres, forced displacements, or widespread destruction. Today, international humanitarian norms, along with human rights organizations, have made such tactics unacceptable. In the Israel– Hamas conflict, for example, Israel faces intense scrutiny over its military actions in Gaza, while Hamas is also condemned for targeting civilians. The moral constraints imposed by the global community prevent either side from resorting to the kind of overwhelming force that characterized past wars of total victory, such as the destruction of Carthage by Rome. As a result, military campaigns are often limited to strategic operations rather than complete annihilation of the adversary.

Modern warfare imposes immense financial burdens, making prolonged conflicts unsustainable. The high cost of advanced weaponry, missile defense systems, intelligence infrastructure, and medical support for military personnel places significant economic pressure on warring entities. For example, Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system, while highly effective, comes at a steep operational cost, with each interception costing tens of thousands of dollars. The exorbitant costs of maintaining prolonged hostilities often lead to strategic deadlocks rather than conclusive military victories.

The omnipresence of digital media and real-time news coverage has fundamentally altered the conduct of war. Unlike historical conflicts where military leaders could execute strategies with relative opacity, modern warfare unfolds under intense global scrutiny. Graphic depictions of civilian casualties, infrastructure destruction, and humanitarian crises generate powerful public reactions, shaping diplomatic responses and influencing domestic and international policies.

In the Israel– Hamas conflict as well as the Russian offensive in Ukraine, media narratives play a critical role in mobilizing global opinion, leading to pressure for ceasefires and negotiations rather than allowing one side to secure an overwhelming victory. Furthermore, the rise of cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns adds a new layer of complexity, as both sides leverage digital platforms to influence perceptions and strategic outcomes.

A key challenge in achieving definitive military victories is the evolution of asymmetric warfare, where state actors engage non-state groups operating within civilian populations. Traditional military doctrines, designed for conventional state-on-state conflicts, often struggle to effectively counter guerrilla tactics, decentralized command structures, and urban warfare environments. Hamas, for example, employs tunnel networks, human shields, and improvised rocket systems to offset Israel’s technological superiority. This asymmetry prevents clear-cut military victories, as conventional forces must navigate complex operational environments while adhering to humanitarian constraints.

As warfare continues to evolve, military strategists and policymakers must navigate these multifaceted challenges, recognizing that absolute victories are often unattainable in the modern geopolitical landscape.



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America’s Failure to Win Wars—Inside the Trinity

By Hy Rothstein

Introduction

What most often prevents wars from being won? The general tendency is to examine strategy, tactics, technology, weaponry, leadership, training, logistics, and whether the war was a just cause. Rarely is the quality of a country’s citizens and their relationship to their government considered as factors necessary for winning a war.

They should be. Clausewitz recognized these factors in his simplified social trinity of people, army, and government, and their relationship with one another. While each element of the trinity has deep social and structural roots, their relationship with one another is variable. Still, a balance is required. President Eisenhower in his farewell address also recognized the trinity and went a step further when he cautioned that, “Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.”

Eisenhower was addressing the conditions inside each of the trinity's three elements. Clausewitz warned that neglecting the balance among the three would undermine a nation's ability to fight a sustained war and win. Since the end of World War II, the trinity has become unbalanced. But does the balance required by Clausewitz depend on healthy conditions inside each element? Unhealthy internal conditions may explain why the trinity has become dysfunctional and why the United States now fights but loses wars.

The purpose of each of the elements in Clausewitz's social trinity is as follows: The government declares war and establishes its objectives; the army fights the war in pursuit of established objectives; and the people are the engines of war and the footbrake that leads to peace. Paradoxically, dysfunctional relationships among these elements give each more room for maneuver and arguably generate endless wars. What happens when disorder appears inside the elements? Checks on government overreach are minimized if Americans neglect their obligations as citizens. A professional army that no longer has a flow of citizen soldiers through its ranks becomes removed from the population it serves. The government whose citizens are shielded from war can operate with less constraint. Most disturbingly, the army gets to fight wars as it sees fit without checks from the government and the people. An examination of the breakdown inside each element of the trinity follows.

The Government—Unbridled Foreign Policy

The end of World War II radically altered how the United States would view its future security policy. America's allies in Europe and Asia were struggling to recover from the war's devastation. The communist threat was growing rapidly. Because of its postwar status, the United States assumed responsibility for leading the defense of Europe and Asia. The small American citizen-soldier army that defended the country for almost two centuries gave way to a new, permanent, military industrial complex needed to fulfill the task of defending the world from the communist juggernaut.

Fortunately, the task of defending the world against communism that began in 1946 ended successfully in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. How is it that what seemed in 1991 to be a new era of global peace and prosperity quickly slipped back to what many politicians and scholars call a new Cold War with Russia and China? The "end of history" didn't last long. Part of the answer may be an American foreign policy that substituted hubris for prudence.

Recent national security documents warn that the greatest challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the threat posed by revisionist powers—specifically Russia and China. What does that mean? Revisionism describes those two nations' increasing willingness and ability to challenge what they see as U.S. efforts to dominate and enforce the existing international order. Considering the foreign policy of the United States during the past quarter century, it should be no surprise that China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, impose its economic model, and reorder the region in its favor, while Russia seeks to restore its great power status and control the periphery of its expanded empire.

What generates this revisionism? An unbiased observer cannot rule out that aggressive American policy has something to do with generating this revisionism. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has invaded or intervened militarily in more than a dozen countries from southeast Europe to the western Pacific, ignoring or dismissing the objections not only of Russia and China, but even of our own allies, and at times discounting the obligations of the UN Charter.

The United States has also interfered in elections in dozens of countries. Given these circumstances, it is not unreasonable that Russia and China, and nations such as Iran and North Korea, would take steps to immunize themselves against what they see as aggressive U.S. intentions. President Trump's recent refusal to rule out the use of military or economic coercion to force Panama to give up control of the canal that America built more than a century ago, to push Denmark to sell Greenland to the United States, and to make Canada the 51st state only reinforces American foreign policy threats.

Isn't it entirely possible that the revisionist powers simply seek the military and economic means to defend against what they perceive as a reckless and dangerous ideological threat to their own geostrategic interests? The last Cold War saw America engaged in a fundamentally defensive struggle seeking to contest what we and our allies perceived as a militant ideological threat. The new Cold War may see the shoe on the other foot.

The People—The Want of Obligation

The government's expansion of its commitment to defend democracy abroad occurred simultaneously with the growing political alienation of its citizens. Historically, it was in the poleis of ancient Greece that the concept of the citizen-soldier was born. It was generally agreed upon that in return for the state providing protection, services, and enforcing the law, citizens accepted their obligation to fight, and if necessary, die for the state. However, the relations between state and citizen diminished as the small, Greek-styled participant communities evolved into megalopolises. The nature of the political community changed.

The modern, vast, liberal state masks its residents from their obligations of active citizenship and patriotic commitment. More and more people seem to drop out of political life. To use Michael Walzer's term, they become "alienated residents." They become strangers to the state. Today, these alienated resident strangers have been joined by millions of resident aliens who are also estranged from the state. As a result, fewer men and women feel obligated to become politically engaged, let alone defend the state against foreign aggression.

Despite this slump towards political alienation, a surge of patriotism among Americans has taken place especially when the nation is threatened. Common purpose brings people together. Accordingly, Americans become motivated to embrace their national identity and their responsibilities as citizens. This was certainly the case from the Revolutionary War through the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. National identity seemed to be in the forefront and other identities moved to the background.

This achievement was a product of the culture established by America's founding settlers who believed in the rule of law, the rights of individuals, the value of work, the gift of citizenship, and the belief that they had the duty to try to create heaven on earth, a "city on a hill." This culture attracted millions of immigrants who wanted to become Americans. Jean de Crèvecoeur's 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* perfectly described the American melting pot: "He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men."

By the 1960s, the national story of an American people united by a creed of freedom and equality, and by language, territorial integrity, civic traditions, national symbols such as the National Anthem, the Flag, and the Pledge of Allegiance, was under attack. As national purpose faded, tribalism grew. The ideological zeal of socialism was fading, but its proponents on the left sought an alternative.

The Left found its answer in identity politics. Identity politics grew out of anti-colonialism. Marx's class struggle was reformulated into an ethno-racial struggle, an endless competition between colonizer and colonized, victimizer and victim, oppressor and oppressed. The new multiculturalist Left was driven to expose the alleged power relations that subordinated and exploited minorities. It was a war against America and liberal democracy as much as Nazism and Stalinism ever were.

Samuel Huntington illustrated this shift from unity to disunity in the poetry recited at two presidential inaugurations. At President Kennedy's 1961 inauguration, Robert Frost hailed the "heroic deeds" of America's founding and the creation of "a new order for the ages." Three short decades later at President Clinton's inauguration, Maya Angelou had a different message. She identified twenty-seven racial, religious, and ethnic groups and denounced the immoral repression they suffered because of America's militant profiteering and its eternal link to "brutishness." Frost celebrated the melting pot that made everyone Americans, while Angelou saw the manifestation of American identity as evil and a threat to the real identities of sub-national groups.

The latest effort to divide the American people is critical race theory. It is a cheap repackaging of the Left's previous attempts to regenerate the failed socialist class struggle by again using race and class to create a revolutionary coalition of the dispossessed. Sadly, in American universities, corporate human relations departments, and government agencies, euphemisms such as "equity," "social justice," "diversity and inclusion," and "culturally responsive teaching" have become part of the organizational culture. But these non-threatening terms should never be confused with the American principles of equality and fairness. Fortunately, critical race theory has lost much of its authority. Still, the divisiveness it generated has hurt how Americans view each other, their institutions, and their obligations as citizens. In 1992, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. warned that the "cult of ethnicity," if pushed too far, may endanger the unity of society. The evidence suggests disunity is here.

The Army—A Distinct Sub-Culture or a Reflection of the People?

There are at least two reinforcing trajectories undermining the health and readiness of the U.S. military. The first is cutting off the average citizen from the nation's military and creating a warrior caste that carries the burden of fighting America's wars for the remainder of its citizens. The second trajectory divides the warrior caste by prioritizing radical progressive policies that have been imposed by the very leaders charged with ensuring military readiness. This trajectory may be changing.

First, since the military became an all-volunteer force in 1973, more than 80 percent of its personnel have come from families where at least one family member has previously served. For nearly 30 percent, it was a parent. This is striking considering that less than one percent of the population serves in the military. The U.S. military is becoming a family business and as a result is isolated from most of the American people.

Adding to familial isolation is a geographic component. Today's members of the military come primarily from the South and from communities outside military bases. The South produces 20 percent more recruits than would be expected while the Northeast produces 20 percent fewer. This was not the case prior to 1973. Military service was spread evenly, geographically, because of the draft. The small number of counties that currently produce recruits is unsustainable. Recent recruiting shortfalls bear this out.

There is also strong evidence that Americans with military connections, whether serving themselves or related to those serving, have different views from their civilian counterparts on issues ranging from domestic politics to national security. In the Northeast and on the West coast, regions defined by liberal politics, people are suspicious of the military. In schools, military recruiters are minimally allowed to interact with students and only because it is against the law to stop them completely.

The growing divide between citizens and soldiers is harmful. Reliance on a shrinking pool of recruits tends to produce a sense of isolation for both citizens and soldiers. More troubling, the warrior caste begins to show contempt for the larger society that they are responsible for protecting.

Second, up until the inauguration of President Trump in 2025, a radical, progressive social agenda had been imposed on the military by elected and appointed leaders who either had little understanding of the purpose, character, and traditions of the military, or didn't care. Much of the progressive agenda is based on the idea that America is systemically racist. Accordingly, military personnel were required to attend indoctrination programs dividing service members along racial and gender lines, the opposite of what is necessary to build cohesive teams based on common values.

Treatment based on group identity promotes discrimination. Yet in 2021, President Biden signed an executive order requiring all organizations in the military to create Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices. The overall goal, Biden said, was "advancing equity for all," using the progressive's euphemism for achieving desired outcomes through discriminatory policies.

Progressive ideology undermines military readiness in various ways. First, it undermines cohesiveness by stressing differences based on race, ethnicity, and gender. Second, it undermines leadership authority by

introducing questions about whether promotion is based on merit or quota requirements. And third, it leads to military personnel serving in jobs and units for which they are not fully capable of serving.

One example of how progressive ideology damaged readiness is related to standards and physical fitness, hallmarks of the U.S. military. When former Defense Secretary Ashton Carter opened all combat jobs in the U.S. military to women, he also committed to “gender-neutral standards” to ensure that female service-members could meet the demanding rigors of combat. The Army diligently worked for a decade to create a gender-neutral fitness test. However, after finding that women were not scoring up to standard, and under fierce pressure from advocacy groups, the Army threw out the test. The old dual standard requiring less from women was resurrected even though the rigors of combat do not have a dual standard. Readiness standards were subordinated to a progressive social agenda.

Despite the new Trump administration’s quick and direct executive orders to terminate everything associated with progressive ideology, it will not spontaneously end. Wokeness in the military has become ingrained. The people who benefited from progressivism and those hurt by it will continue to divide rather than unite the military for many years.

Summary and Conclusions

The security of the United States is based more on the quality of the citizens it produces and their relationship to their government than to any technological or material factors. The importance of these two factors does not eliminate the more quantifiable requirements for the quality and quantity of weapons, personnel, munitions, advanced technologies, and mobility platforms. But it is worth remembering that strong actors, measured in quantifiable terms, have routinely been defeated by weaker actors throughout history.

Clausewitz’s social trinity cannot produce victory if the elements of the trinity are dysfunctional. A comprehensive action plan to fix what is broken inside each of the elements is beyond the scope of this essay. It is also likely beyond the scope of what a liberal democracy can reasonably do. Draconian measures can make the cure worse than the disease. Nevertheless, there are two specific things that if restored, will generate positive changes inside the trinity’s three elements. The first task is to reestablish the spirit of citizenship among Americans. The second is to reconnect citizens and their military. Where to begin.

First, fix the nation’s education system. Schools have a profound impact on teaching future citizens. Schools have traditionally been instruments of assimilation and keys to forming a sense of American identity. Unfortunately, America’s education system has most recently been ground zero for rejecting what historically has brought Americans together. Too much attention placed on cultural and ethnic differences has nourished prejudices and stirred antagonisms. Students are alienated from the state and each other.

On the surface, it seems that academic institutions are immovable. Schools have always been battlegrounds for debates over beliefs and values. This is a good thing until it goes too far. Fortunately, most Americans, the silent majority that include students and teachers, recognize the vogueish nonsense that has been going on in schools. It is also fortunate that most students and teachers are followers, not leaders who possess strong convictions. Self-interest prevails. Having spent a good portion of my life in the academic world, the words “courageous and politically committed” would rarely describe a teacher, especially at the university level.

This means that a modest critical mass of right-minded teacher-administrators could change the orientation of education in America. Government incentives and disincentives can also shape what goes on in classrooms. Additionally, enabling parents who pay taxes and tuition to have a greater role in their children’s education will empower the silent majority. Finally, there is no reason to have tension between the organic, rich diversity that exists in America and the common culture necessary to hold American society together. Educators who won’t see this should be removed from the education system.

Second, reinstate the draft. Mobilizing the national will for war is essential for seeing a conflict through to victory, especially for protracted wars. Unfortunately, the American people were mostly eliminated from

the conduct of war when the draft ended in 1973. Clausewitz's trinity was reduced to two elements; its logic was broken. The end of the draft resulted in the loss of ownership of war. Even people who identified as patriots had no real obligations to the government or the military. Eliminating the draft was a political winner and its weaknesses are hidden as long as wars remain limited. But what if the United States had to fight a major war? We see the human toll in Ukraine. We also see that better technology is not a panacea for success nor a substitute for boots on the ground. Would an American president order conscription or accept defeat, or simply not fight, even if fighting was necessary for the security of the nation? That so much of America's military effort relies on so small a share of its citizenry should be worrisome by itself.

These are difficult questions. The reality is that the pure military value of a draft in terms of greater manpower is questionable. Additionally, the economic argument against a draft is powerful. And there is the case that compulsory military service eliminates the concept of personal freedom. But these issues are secondary to harnessing the will of the American people to sustain a war and both empower and constrain the government. Americans should have skin in the game.

Just as important, service to one's nation is a fundamental civic responsibility. There is a feeling of collective identity that is created when everyone is eligible for the draft. A military draft requires the government to be more accountable for its actions. More families become connected to the daily operations of their government. Family and friends of a draftee are likely to be more attentive when viewing current events. Citizens will want to learn more about the threats that their government faces. These interactions keep elected officials accountable for their choices. And finally, when draftees return home, they will be better citizens. Alternative forms of national service will be necessary for some people.

It is not an understatement to say that engaged citizens are necessary for a democratic republic to function properly. It is also reasonable to suggest that contemporary government disfunction is connected to a critical mass of disengaged citizens. The culture that had kept American society together has deteriorated. Reorienting the education system and resurrecting the draft, notwithstanding current recruitment challenges, offer paths towards developing better citizens who are engaged in the country's future. These tasks are simple in concept but difficult to implement. Yet nothing worthwhile is easy.



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Lack of Will Prevents Wars from Being Won

By Bing West

Winning depends upon the combination of will and capability. In the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, U.S. capability was twice that of our enemies, and our will was three times less. Consequently, we lost all three wars.

Isaiah Berlin observed that understanding how a person thinks requires drilling down to the central idea he holds, usually hidden behind diversionary rationalizations. In the cases of Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the hidden central idea of the policymakers was that America was too rich to lose. In each war, the policymakers believed the enemy—a fraction of our size in population, wealth, and modernity—was outclassed. Our weapons and firepower seemed to assure our inevitable success. This Jupiter complex restrained the commitment of both adequate resources and resolute persistence. Since America could not lose and the wars were not existential, our presidents sought to win without inflicting too much harm upon the enemy or committing the required number of American forces, while not arousing the American people by demanding taxes to pay for the wars. Our presidents lacked the will to win. Our enemies had more determination than did a succession of seven American presidents.

Today, the situation is worse. We no longer have a superior capability, let alone the will to win. Under President Reagan four decades ago, America confronted the Soviet Union, and the Defense budget was 6% of GDP. In 2025, America confronted China, and the Defense budget had been slashed in half, to under 3%. Either we spent twice as much as necessary to deter the Soviet Union, or we are foolishly underfunded to deter China, a more formidable foe than was the Soviet Union. We're like the owner of a fine house in a rough neighborhood who cuts in half his home insurance because he is tired of paying 6% in insurance. Then his house is burnt down.

There is no consensus to increase military funding. Congress annually spends 30% of revenues on welfare payments to fund our least wealthy, and 11% to protect our entire country. There is no historical precedent for that imbalance. It represents a monumental gamble that America will never again fight a major war. China, however, intends to overthrow America as the world's superpower. There's no middle ground and no enduring accommodation between two nations with global reach and antagonistic philosophies of human rights. As Professor Graham Allison has expressed it, "when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception."

With military funding barely keeping up with inflation, our capabilities will eventually be surpassed by China. "The PRC [People's Republic of China] has made it clear," FBI Director Christopher Wray warned in 2023, "that it considers every sector that makes our society run as fair game in its bid to dominate on the world stage."

Chairman Xi is determined to emplace China as the dominant power in the Pacific by subjugating Taiwan. "All indications point to the PLA (People's Liberation Army) meeting President Xi Jinping's directive," Admiral John C. Aquilino, head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said in 2023, "to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027."

Taiwan could increase its defense spending from an inadequate 2.5% of GDP to 6% and produce two million antiship drones every year. China's invasion fleet numbers 2,000 ships. If each ship had to survive more than a thousand AI-enabled drone attacks, an assault would be impossible. Taiwan refuses to do this because it believes America will fight World War III on its behalf.

The odds are against that. U.S. policy has deliberately left ambiguous whether we will defend Taiwan. Before Xi, in his 70s, passes from the scene, he will test our resolve. An analogy is 1938, when Hitler ordered his military to seize the Sudetenland. His generals objected that the British could send in a superior force. If so,

Hitler replied, pull out. Ironically, the British generals told their prime minister the same thing; they weren't strong enough to resist. In a contest of wills, England backed down and Hitler marched into the Sudetenland without firing a shot.

When, like Hitler, Xi tests America's resolve, the outcome will depend upon our culture and the president in office. Consider 1991, when Iraq seized the tiny nation of Kuwait. President George W. Bush declared, "this will not stand." He blurted it out and our nation—our culture—spontaneously agreed. Our coalition swiftly drove Iraq from Kuwait.

But in the three decades since, we lost two wars. Trust in our leaders plummeted. Worse, our body politic is divided about what kind of country we have been and what we should be in the future. Confronting the Soviet Union, President Reagan said, "we win, and they lose." No president has declared that about China, our determined enemy.

When the Chinese military challenge does come, will the president declare, "this will not stand"? Or back down and not risk a confrontation that could escalate into a world war?



F. J. BING WEST is a military historian who has written a dozen bestselling 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 coauthor General Jim Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. A graduate of Georgetown University and Princeton University, 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 Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service (twice), the Navy Distinguished Civilian Service Award, the Marine Corps Heritage Award (four awards), Tunisia's Medaille de Liberté, the Colby Military History Award, the Goodpaster Prize for military scholarship, the Free Press Award, the Marine Corps Foundation Award for Leadership, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Media Medal. His forthcoming book is entitled *Winning Battles, Losing Wars: A Combat Veteran's Accounts of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan—and What Comes Next*.

Discussion Questions

1. Was a “Carthaginian Peace” such as ended the Third Punic War commonplace in history?
2. To what degree did religion enhance or limit the severity of wars of the past?
3. Does the interdependence of the globalized world make states more or less inclined to go to war?
4. Does classical deterrence still deter conflicts or is that a simplistic and ossified idea?



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Today's Soldier and the Current Military Revolution

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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