The Illogical Logic of American Entanglement in the Middle East

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Abstract

The logic of the American approach to the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Syria – both in policy and practice – bears striking resemblance to the U.S. approach to Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite policies of restraint, it has proven difficult to stop the inertia of war, be it against Communism or terrorism. As this inertia grows, so too does illogical entanglement. Such deepening involvement, whether in Vietnam or the Global War on Terror, often results in combat forces undertaking nation- and state-building missions that they are not designed for, yet have been doing for almost two decades.

Introduction

Towards the end of the Vietnam War, Leslie Gelb published a damning insider's view of the way the United States had judiciously created a faulty foreign policy towards Vietnam. His 1971 analysis brought to bear a terse view of how American policy toward French Indochina developed over several decades.[1] This policy centered on symbolism, minimal involvement, and an austere strategy that public opinion tempered.

Current American policy in the greater Middle East region appears to be no different on three similar points: Symbolic pursuit of globally defeating all terrorists, waging small wars on the periphery without a fully mobilized commitment, and a persistent policy of fighting terrorists instead of dealing with the structural forces that originally created them. In these ungoverned (or under-governed) areas begging United States involvement through the years, there has been an expansion in collaborative efforts between the Department of State (DOS), Department of Defense (DOD), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This so-called 3D spectrum of influence (diplomacy, defense, development) continues to blur the lines of human and national security such that seemingly unrelated departments and agencies have taken to a collaborative effort in advancing national interests.[2] Their policies and practices have ballooned into a quasi-interventionist model that American political leaders find difficult to reverse course. In short, the American approach to the Global War on Terror (GWOT) of the 21st century—in both policy and practice—bears striking resemblance to the United States approach to Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. These policies of minimal involvement have proven difficult—as described in this article—to stop the inertia of war, be it against Communism or terrorism.

Four years after South Vietnam fell to North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces, Gelb converted his *Foreign Policy* article into a book with Richard Betts in 1979 titled *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. Chief conclusions drawn from this book were that American commitments to contain Communism were driven by doctrinal beliefs in keeping as many countries free from Communism (Asia especially) as possible. The Johnson and Nixon Administrations, respectively, developed policies and strategies via political and bureaucratic bargaining, creating a foreign policy with blurry strategic means and ends.[3] Similar processes continue

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to inform American entanglement in the greater Middle East, as these policies fail to produce intended political outcomes.[4]

Gelb's analysis of Vietnam symbolically fits the narrative of deepening American entanglement in the Middle East. The United States is paradoxically committed to fighting terrorism and spreading democratic values, while trying to maintain some façade of stability in the greater Middle East. Unfortunately, the clumsy pursuit of terrorists and insurgents undermines the stability of the region, breeding more terrorism and anti-American sentiment.[5] For instance, an American airstrike in Mosul that accidentally killed almost 200 civilians does not help win over citizens in a region that has grown wary of America's noble motives.[6]

Contemporary American foreign policy appears to rest on the belief of maintaining Middle Eastern allies. However, these allied governments need to rely on patronage to govern, which undercuts domestic legitimacy and adds to the long-term instability of the region. The national security bureaucracy pursues such a foreign policy without addressing the corruption and weak institutions enabling grievances that fuel insurgency and terrorism. The United States approach also ignores pan-Arab grievances towards America's near-blind support for Israel and the American troops stationed on holy Islamic lands. Indeed, the recent decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem only further provoked neighbors, polarizing audiences around the sentiment of the United States behaving selfishly.[7]

The framework of Gelb's analysis provides an excellent blueprint for understanding how the United States stumbled into the Middle East without a grand strategy. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the U.S. broadened a war in the Middle East through strategic dithering: Doing enough to avoid losing, but not committing enough to secure a victory.[8] Moreover, the idea of victory has been difficult to pinpoint in Afghanistan and Iraq, other than vague aspirations for democracy to thrive and some modicum of self-sufficiency.

Symbolically, preventing the spread of communism motivated fighting in the Vietnam War while the international community waged the Global War on Terror (and subsequent tautological terms) in similar vagueness in hopes of stopping the spread of terrorism.[9] Worse yet, much like the

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Vietnam War, the ever-persistent American wars and attempts at nation- and state-building in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the region, indicate pursuits by decision-makers to do something. This compels the foreign policy machine to provide resources to the fight without identifying a plausible strategic outcome besides doing something and not losing. This is immensely at odds with Clausewitzian views on war where the means employed should be toward a specific end. Lastly, it shows that the goals and means to fight and contain violent non-state actors are bureaucratically preferable as an institutional form of perseverance. It is tough (and less glamorous) building credible regimes in the greater Middle East that do not cultivate environments ripe for insurgency. One only needs to look at the annual funding disparities any given year between the United States State Department ($50 billion in 2015) and Department of Defense ($585 billion in 2015) to see which priorities and goals are more salient to American leadership.[10] The irony is that fighting terrorism while trying to tame the Middle East are both being pursued by the United States national security bureaucracy, but through divergent mechanisms that undermine each other.

An Efficient Pursuit of Terrorism?

United States policy towards fighting terrorists in the War on Terrorism (known as Overseas Contingency Operations during the Obama era (2009-2017) with a return to War on Terror phraseology in the Trump administration is merely a byproduct of bureaucratic pursuits of efficiency coupled with the tinted ideological lenses of certain elites.[11] Each American president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) has had to accept the fact that the Middle East is inexorably tied to American interests in the realm of energy security, given that these economic ties started in the region when an American oil company discovered oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938.[12] In context of energy security, the Dwight Eisenhower administration exercised this interest as the CIA (with the help of the UK) overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq of Iran, due to his attempt at nationalizing the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.[13] The oil shocks of the 1970s illustrated the sort of domestic issues caused by disruptions to oil markets emanating from the Persian Gulf.[14] Owing to this, the Jimmy Carter administration formally codified present and future Middle East region commitments through a State of the Union address in 1980:

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> Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the
> Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on
> the vital interests of the United States of America, and
> such an assault will be repelled by any means
> necessary, including military force.[15]

Soon after, Carter established a small military contingent in the region, and only a few years later, the Ronald Reagan administration built up a new military command structure responsible for the Middle East region. Carter's Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force later grew into U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which was supposed to deal with stability and security issues in a region ranging west to Egypt, south to Yemen, east to Pakistan and as far north as Kazakhstan.[16] Consequently, a series of cascading events increased American military entanglement in the region, despite such a presence increasing local and ideological grievances. Osama Bin Laden specifically decried the presence of United States military forces near the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1990, later issuing a "Declaration of Jihad" against the United States in 1996.[17] Moreover, while Bin Laden staged numerous attacks against the United States and her interests during the 1990s, the spectacle of 9/11 finally forced the hand of the American foreign policy establishment. This compelled American leadership to commit significant resources to the pursuit of al-Qaeda and similar groups, all while seeking regime change in non-compliant states.

American involvement in the greater Middle East and the perpetual war against terrorism became a function of gradual American commitments expressed in three propositions:

> First, American immersion in the Middle East is not a story of a
> great nation blindly throwing itself into a morass. Instead,
> American leadership decided the Middle East was important
> because energy disruptions had domestic ramifications, while 9/11
> gave the necessary political impetus to engage in shadowy wars
> across the Middle East.[18] The United States was not particularly
> concerned with the type of governments in the region, but with the
> degree to which those governments adhered to some form of the
> Washington Consensus and the free-flow of natural resources.[19]
> American leadership does not see the Middle East as important in

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and of itself, and the policies of most presidential administrations reflect this notion. Instead, losing the region to non-capitalists is a perceptual trap grounded in what domestic and international audiences might think. Hence, decades of involvement in the region have made American involvement unavoidable and more complicated. Each administration has inherited diplomatic baggage that has continued to accumulate since FDR. Commitments to the perceived necessity of the region for economic and military purposes have deepened obligations to the region, which ironically, undermines American long-term goals.

Second, the myopic pursuit of rapid military victories in Iraq and Afghanistan undermined the true measure of success: Political stability. Decisions made in both conflicts demonstrate how American leadership only wanted to do enough to win militarily, while hoping for political success with minimal resource commitments. A lack of strategic outlays and resources has made political victory in the region elusive. The battles still playing out in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya—to name a few—only further reiterate the harsh reality that the United States is great at winning tactically, but terrible at winning strategically. The inability of the United States and its regional allies to keep a pro-American Yemeni government propped up is indicative of the structural and societal forces preventing the United States from getting its way.

Third, each presidential administration appears to have known the consequences of committing military forces and other assistance, while filtering information and selectively sharing with domestic audiences in hopes of maintaining support, giving the illusion of perseverance. The worst aspect of this component is that American leadership appears to know that their proposed strategies will not result in victory, but know that the sort of policies needed to win do not seem sellable to the American public. Therefore, instead of committing what is required or completely disengaging, national security elites create a middle-road policy. This results in an over-reliance on technology and limited numbers of specialized ground forces to fight low-risk wars.[20]

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Ends: "Freedom will be defended"

Each administration that committed resources to the Middle East did so with open eyes and intent, all with unwavering commitment and will for success. Unlike what Andrew Bacevich suggested about the Carter Doctrine in 1980 as a turning point for American foreign policy, each successive administration from FDR to Carter to George W. Bush and Barack Obama knew and understood the consequences of involvement in the Middle East for energy security purposes.[21] Along the way, each administrations' decision was path dependent, forcing the United States down a narrower path of policy options in the Middle East, with American leadership touting democratic principles, while simultaneously supporting some of the least free regimes in the world.[22] In many ways, it was more desirable to create compliant regimes rather than legitimate governments.

Within hours of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, President George W. Bush proclaimed, "freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended" adding "the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts."[23] One might question what sort of freedom needed defending. If by freedom Bush meant more democracy and societal openness for allies in the Middle East, his actions thereafter—arguably— did not support this. The sort of freedom Bush meant was ensuring the uninterrupted oil trade in the Persian Gulf; this is a more plausible justification given American actions in the region post-9/11. Alternatively, perhaps rather than a veiled cover for an underlying intent, he simply— and superficially—meant the United States served as the world's beacon of freedom and was not intimidated into submission. Regardless of meaning, do not blame Bush per se for such realpolitik. The British had purposefully foisted the problem of maintaining Middle East security on the FDR administration, sowing the seeds for deeper Persian Gulf commitment by each successive administration and thus, arguably, necessitating Bush's immediate post-attack rhetoric.[24]

In 1943, after several years of vigorous British politicking, FDR proclaimed, "I find the defense of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defense of the United States."[25] Towards the end of Second World War, FDR further acknowledged this need for oil and security in the region (to include the eventual creation of a Jewish state) when he met the Saudi king on his ship

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at Bitter Lake in the Suez Canal.[26] Shortly thereafter, Truman felt compelled to push the creation of the Israeli state—despite allied Arab state objections—under the pretense of securing domestic support from Jewish-Americans.[27] Witnessing the decision making process on Israel and Palestine from within the administration, Secretary of State George C. Marshall remarked, "an effective solution would probably please neither the Arab nor Israel governments."[28] Marshall was right then, and still is today.

When the Eisenhower administration had to choose between close NATO allies—UK and France—and Egypt during the Suez Crisis, Eisenhower sided with the latter for two reasons. Eisenhower despised European colonialism and the Suez Canal carried 1.5 million barrels of oil daily.[29] While his decision temporarily soured American relations with the UK and France, not to mention Israel, it did cease the prospect of significant European meddling in the region.[30] Better or for worse, the future of Middle Eastern security deepened American entanglement in the region.

After Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy formalized security ties with Israel, to which the State Department protested that this "special relationship in national security matters…would destroy the delicate balance we seek to maintain" in Middle Eastern relations.[31] The Lyndon B. Johnson administration further cemented this relationship with Israel during the Arab-Israeli War and after.[32] Unfortunately, this American-Israeli military alliance is now a fundamental component in vilifying the United States in Islamic extremist propaganda.[33] The appearance of unrelenting American support to Israel merely feeds terrorist grievances and recruiting.[34]

Richard Nixon's time in office showed the limits of Israeli support in the face of oil costs, as Dr. Henry Kissinger engaged in shuttle diplomacy, reducing tensions and adding a modicum of delicate stability to the Middle Eastern region.[35] At the same time though, Nixon saw the damage that oil fluctuations had on the American economy, and forewarned the possibility of an "American military intervention to protect vital oil supplies."[36] Gerald Ford followed up the Nixon-Kissinger stability pact by essentially engaging in security clientelism with Israel and moderate Arab states. The United States committed billions of dollars annually to these countries for the purposes of "their survival against extremist pressures" internally and externally.[37] The Ford administration essentially bought off the Middle

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East region in hopes of a long-term economic play that would prevent another disruptive oil shock. This monetary commitment set up the Jimmy Carter administration to not only formally commit the United States to defend the region militarily, but such beliefs translated into an increased bureaucratic focus on the Persian Gulf and engagement in the domestic affairs of neighboring powers.[38] Within two years of his proclamation, the U.S. military deployed to the Sinai for peacekeeping. Task Force Sinai remains there to this day and has been the focus of numerous attacks by local radical Islamist militias since 2015.[39]

Ronald Reagan bore the brunt of the decisions made by previous administrations when he took command in the early 1980s, as anti-American sentiment grew in the region. This era exhibited the beginnings of anti-American Islamic terrorism, due to perceptions of unfair American support for Israel. Reagan bungled numerous decisions in the Middle East, including the ill-fated deployment of U.S. Marines to Lebanon for peacekeeping (over 200 American troops were killed), funding and supporting Mujahedeen fighters in Afghanistan, selling weapons to Iran (the so-called Iran-Contra Affair), and complicity supporting Iraq's use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War.[40] The Iran-Iraq war later expanded into attacks against ships carrying oil in the Gulf, known as the Tanker War. The Reagan decade ended with the George H.W. Bush administration militarily responding to Iraq's inadvertent challenge to the Carter doctrine.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to secure the Rumaila oil fields, and the looming threat of Saddam Hussein pushing into Saudi Arabia to seize more oil fields, Bush responded with massive military force in conjunction with a broad international coalition of 39 nations.[41] The logic went that stability was preferred to regime change as the Bush administration and his coalition saw no reason to remove Saddam Hussein. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney prophetically declared in 1991:

> If you're going to go in and try to topple Saddam
> Hussein, you have to go to Baghdad. Once you've got
> Baghdad, it's not clear what you do with it. It's not
> clear what kind of government you would put in place
> of the one that's currently there now. Is it going to be
> a Shia regime, a Sunni regime or a Kurdish regime?[42]

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Ironically, in 2003 the George W. Bush administration forgot Cheney's logical advice. After the Persian Gulf War, Hussein remained in charge of Iraq, serving as a counterbalance to Iranian power, while Operation Northern Watch and Southern Watch kept him boxed in. Such long-term military commitments led to the permanent stationing of significant U.S. military assets in the region, all in the name of preventing future Iraqi aggression while ensuring the free flow of oil. Thus, the U.S. military found itself gradually developing large military bases in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman.

William J. Clinton inherited the post-Persian Gulf War security framework, with a large contingent of American troops permanently assigned to the region, ebbing and flowing between 5,000 to 25,000 troops with an annual cost of $12 billion.[43] At the same time, Clinton tried to forge a peaceful resolution between Israel and Palestine, while Bin Laden responded to the American presence in the Persian Gulf by attacking the United States and her interests.[44] As George W. Bush was inaugurated in 2001, top officials in U.S. security and intelligence agencies were making the case for an escalation in anti-terror operations and preparation because of the numerous indicators showing spectacular attacks against the United States were imminent, yet they were ignored as just another threat.[45] Shortly thereafter, the Bush administration, in response to the attacks of 9/11, would embolden the American foreign policy machinery to believe it could—without consequence—aggressively eliminate any authoritarian leader in the Middle East that did not play by the Washington playbook.

Means: "I encourage you all to go shopping"

Fighting a Global War on Terror requires a different kind of sacrifice not seen in previous American conflicts. It means convincing the public to forego its care and concern for a war over there, and instead worry about economic issues while an all-volunteer force engages in worldwide counterterrorism operations. During the Persian Gulf War, the American public noticed the impact of war mobilization as a total of 697,000 U.S. troops served during the short conflict, with a notable contingent of Guard and Reserve forces called up.[46] These actions were in sharp contrast to the Vietnam War, where the United States used the Reserves for symbolic

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reasons—such as the response to the Pueblo incident and the Tet Offensive.[47] The wars in Afghanistan (2001-present) and Iraq (2003-present) have put significant strain on the American military, as almost half of all forces deployed come from Guard and Reserve units, which is a large divergence from the minimal level of mobilization during the Persian Gulf War and the almost absent use of such forces during the Vietnam War.[48]

In the midst of the Iraqi Civil War of 2006, George W. Bush held a press conference concerning the economy, the war in Iraq, and on terror. Bush mentioned:

> The unemployment rate has remained low at 4.5 percent. The recent report on retail sales shows a strong beginning to the holiday shopping season across the country. And I encourage you all to go shopping more.[49]

In that press conference, he mentioned Iraq 53 times, terror 7 times, and the economy 13 times. He did not mention Afghanistan once. While not indicative of a myopic view of the perpetual war against terrorism, it does cynically represent that the shopping more attitude mattered more than dealing with the complex issue of Afghanistan. Worse yet, the civil war in Afghanistan that year had been the deadliest ever due to a resurgent Taliban.[50]

Many saw the American invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 as the easiest and cheapest way to topple the regime. American Special Forces and CIA operatives linked up with friendly warlords throughout Afghanistan and gathered intelligence on Taliban activities to inform subsequent conventional operations. Shortly thereafter in November 2001, about 1,000 Marines from the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit under the command of (then) Brigadier General James Mattis became the first conventional forces in Afghanistan. After a successful 75th Ranger Regiment operation to establish a forward operating base in southwest Afghanistan known as Camp Rhino, the Marines assumed control of the base. Camp Rhino was the first United States base established in Afghanistan and served as the foundation for the entire ground war to follow. From Camp Rhino, the Marines seized Kandahar International

Airport—which then became the first U.S. air base in the country. This enabled the introduction of follow-on forces to support the rapidly expanding ground effort. Within three months of the initial deployment, about 1,300 troops from the United States and U.K., in conjunction with American airpower, dismantled the Taliban regime and pushed them out of the major cities and into the uncontrolled *AfPak* foothills.[51] The problem with this military victory was that it was incomplete, as much of the Taliban leadership escaped into Pakistan. Thus, the Taliban escape resulted in a hollow American military victory that failed to achieve any broader strategic objectives; a political victory in Afghanistan remains elusive to this day.

The experience of a quick victory on the cheap would provide evidence to some in the Bush administration that modern wars could now be won through limited numbers of troops.[52] High-tech equipment and airpower in the hands of a small number of Special Forces appeared incredibly decisive, leading many to believe this Afghan Model to be a plausible alternative to the sort of expensive conventional air-land campaign waged in the Persian Gulf War.[53] Still, the perception that conventional troops and technology wins wars pervades much of the foreign policy elite circles in the Washington Beltway, much as it had during the Vietnam War.[54]

With the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, the initial force of 130,000 U.S. troops and 30,000 other coalition troops quickly routed formal Iraqi security forces within 21 days.[55] Almost immediately, Iraqi generals with numerous floppy disks in hand (files containing the names and information of about 125,000 reliable Iraqi troops) met with American Generals and officials to set-up a transitory security force that could be trusted in a post-Saddam Iraq.[56] The Iraqi military leadership had hoped that the Americans would be amicable to Iraqis taking care of their own safety and security almost immediately. However, Paul Bremer, the acting Chief Executive Authority for Iraq enacted a harsh *de-Baathification* program, which immediately left half a million angry personnel from the military and civil service unemployed.[57] This was an environment ripe for insurgency: Hundreds of thousands of young men with military experience were jobless, hopeless, and under occupation. While there is speculation that Bremer was compelled to make the decision by those within the Bush inner circle, a prominent Iraqi Shia cleric (Ayatollah Sistani) exerted significant pressure on Bremer to disband Iraq's military.[58] In this case,

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Shia leaders were concerned that Iraq would become a *de facto* Sunni military regime.

The initial military victories of Afghanistan and Iraq resulted in numerous ideological missteps, and conditions quickly worsened in both countries. For example, about 5,500 American troops occupied Afghanistan in 2002, but by the end of 2003, that number had doubled.[59] Not surprisingly, an internal memo from Richard Haass in 2002 identified the success of the United States in Afghanistan, and that it could be a good model on how to guide reconstruction in Iraq.[60] Similarly, 67,700 troops occupied Iraq in 2003; however, the loss of stability led to American troop levels doubling by the end of 2004. At the peak of U.S. military occupations, Afghanistan had about 63,500 troops in 2012, and Iraq had about 187,000 troops in 2008.[61] In both cases, American political leaders had hoped for too much with a limited amount of resources committed, ignoring the lack of institutional capacity in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While security and governance issues plagued both countries during American occupation, Afghanistan had been a failed state for decades if not centuries, while Iraq fell apart due to the mismanagement of the country after the war.[62] Such mismanagement by American and Iraqi government officials inadvertently created the Islamic State. Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki followed the withdrawal of American troops in 2011 by personalizing the army and politicizing other security forces.[63] This alienated many of the Sunnis in western Iraq, leading to the rise of the Islamic State, which required the U.S. military to redeploy to Iraq in 2014 to protect Baghdad. Interestingly, the 70,000 Sunni insurgents paid off (during the Anbar Awakening of 2006) to not fight the U.S. military during The Surge of 2007, eventually found employment with the Islamic State due to Maliki trying to isolate them from power when the Americans left.[64] Afghanistan is no better: some Afghan security commanders rent their equipment and loan their personnel to the Taliban.[65] Despite such American entanglement, it is difficult for the U.S. leaders to force political leadership in these weak states to choose policies that contribute to long-term stability. Worse, the United States continues providing substantial military aid to Iraq and Afghan security forces, creating nothing more than Fabergé Egg armies: Expensive but easily broken by insurgents.[66]

Expectations: "We're not winning; we're not losing"

There is a serious issue when American leadership believes it can fight a war on the cheap. Such expectations are due to a mixture of politics and ideology. The George W. Bush administration made decisions on the number of military deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq based on avoiding domestic economic impacts. Troop levels perceived as too high would have made his administration and the Republican Party politically vulnerable to the cost of the wars, measured in both blood and treasure. Sadly, Afghanistan and Iraq required more resources and a strategic timeline longer than the foreign policy machinery wanted to admit. Consider how well American post-Second World War occupation worked in Japan, Italy, and Germany, or the sizeable contingent of American troops that have remained in South Korea since the Korean War. Proper post-conflict occupations may not be as ostentatious as combat operations, but they do require significant long-term political commitments, which can be a difficult pill to swallow for a domestic audience. To this day large and consistent troop contingents remain stationed in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Korea. American commitments to Afghanistan and Iraq, by comparison, have ebbed and flowed without supporting a reasonable end-state of long-term stability in each country. Despite persistent strategic ambiguity, it appears increasingly evident that the leaders of these countries know that the United States and international community will subsidize further mismanagement of their nations.

After five years of combat operations in Afghanistan and three years in Iraq, George W. Bush came to terms with his strategic struggles. Bush admitted in 2006 "we're not winning, we're not losing," adding "we need to reset our military" in response to claims that it was stressed. Bush also noted, "we're going to need a military that's capable of being able to sustain our efforts and to help us achieve peace" in the fight against Islamic extremists.[67] Bush finally made such comments despite numerous warnings from politicians and officials that there were not enough troops or resources dedicated to stabilizing both countries.[68] At the same time, the Bush response in both countries was already too little, too late, a similar sentiment echoed at the end of the Vietnam War.[69]

The lackluster concern for fielding enough troops for Afghanistan and Iraq was built on the perception and premise that these wars needed to

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minimize impact on the American way of life and economy, which struggled in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Additionally, for ideological reasons, George W. Bush was committed to his tax cut promise for two reasons—even when the economy began flailing. First, a 2001 *Heritage Foundation* report supported the Bush tax cuts because it was believed that this would lead to increased tax revenue generation; eliminating the national debt by 2010.[70] This was ideologically misguided unfortunately, as the U.S. national debt reached $14 trillion by the end of 2010.[71] Second, Bush was heavily influenced by his father's experience with tax policy. George H.W. Bush reneged on the "read-my-lips, no-new-taxes" promise in 1990, as he pragmatically chose to balance the budget.[72] Many, and George W. Bush especially, saw this decision as a critical mistake, leading to his father's failed re-election bid.[73] Thus, George W. Bush attempted to juggle the economy and a war on terror, while making reelection a top priority.

When it came to proposing funding for the 2003 Iraq War, the Bush administration estimated it would cost a mere $50-60 billion, with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld predicting a need for no more than 145,000 troops for the invasion and post-stability operations.[74] Yet the Army Chief of Staff, General Shinseki, pushed back against those estimates. Shinseki told Congress that any coalition would need "several hundred thousand soldiers" to control the security situation after the defeat of Iraqi forces.[75] The Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, would later reprimand Shinseki for going against Pentagon estimates pushed by Bush administration appointees. Instead, Wolfowitz proclaimed that Iraq war cost estimates ranged from $10 billion to $100 billion and that the effort required approximately 100,000 troops.[76] Bush even fired his economic adviser, Lawrence Lindsey, for suggesting that the Iraq War might cost as much as $200 billion.[77] Compare such initial estimates to the cruel fact that the war in Iraq cost $1.7 trillion.[78] This figure continues to grow in light of the American commitment to fight the Islamic State, and the medical costs of long-term care for troops injured fighting in Iraq. Thus, this internal politicking within the Bush administration indicates that they likely worried more about avoiding disruptions to U.S. society and its economy than truly trying to win each war with enough resources that many experts had suggested.

The rapid initial victories in Afghanistan and Iraq also led many military and political leaders to believe that a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) had occurred; enabling the U.S. military to technologically overcome any enemy with minimal amounts of troops.[79] The foreign policy bureaucracy preferred RMA due to its low-risk warfare approach, such as airpower and Special Forces, juxtaposed to riskier—from a public relations perspective—use of boots on the ground to fight Iraqi and Afghan insurgents. Such a belief in technological superiority leading to victory has been woven in the fabric of the war-making bureaucracy since at least the Vietnam War.

Bernard Fall first astutely identified this American form of warfighting in 1961 in *Street without Joy*. Commenting on United States and French involvement in French Indochina, Fall stated, "The West is still battling an ideology with technology."[80] He added that the Americans, much like their French predecessors, over-relied on their technological advantage to avoid addressing "the woeful lack of popular support and political savvy" involved with propping up an unpopular South Vietnamese government.[81] Such over-dependence on technology means that killing the enemy becomes the primary metric for success, because it is difficult to quantify military impact on an insurgency, let alone kill it. Winning in this subjective arena is much more difficult for a military with shortened time horizons. Westernized militaries are not designed to mend the sort of political solutions required in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the idea that superior technology and firepower wins wars is a fallacy propagated by defense hawks and weapons contractors who are often ignorant to military engagements of the past.

Steven Biddle's award-winning 2004 book *Military Power* shows us that force employment—or the "doctrine and tactics by which forces are actually used in combat"—is a better and more reliable determinant of combat success or failure relative to technology, materiel, and gross numerical strength.[82] Yet, despite this modern account of how militaries are actually employed in combat, the United States still overestimates its advantage, underestimates its enemies, and entrenches itself in sustained conflicts with seemingly no clearly defined and achievable end-state.

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A Way Forward?

The adventurous military campaigns and entanglement in the greater Middle East region have imposed significant economic and human costs. At the expense of American education, infrastructure, and energy security, the Americans directed an overwhelming amount of resources and mental effort towards the region over almost two decades with little to show for it. It is less stable and no freer. Current estimates put the total cost of these wars in the greater Middle East region at $4.7 trillion and climbing.[83] Such pursuits have all been charged to the American credit card.[84] The irony inherent in these costly pursuits of stability and energy security in the Middle East is that such funds could have been better spent on contributing to the United States pursuit of domestic energy independence, thus lessening energy dependence on the Persian Gulf.[85]

Perhaps it is fitting that during Barack Obama's tenure, when given the choice between massive escalation and disengagement, he chose a third rail: Forcing Middle Eastern countries to resolve their own problems with minimal American assistance. When pressure on his administration compelled Obama to keep U.S. combat troops in Iraq after 2011, he decided against keeping a sizeable military contingent due to the Iraqi parliament denying immunity in the new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in a post-2011 Iraq.[86] Such a decision by the Iraqi government hamstrung Obama, especially since George W. Bush had penned the 2008 SOFA treaty promising to remove American troops at the end of 2011.[87] Had Obama kept forces after 2011, American troops could have faced prosecution for possible crimes in Iraqi courts, a judicial system that *Human Rights Watch* called a "broken justice system."[88] While some could criticize Obama for not doing enough to convince Iraq to allow a residual American force to remain after 2011 with SOFA immunity, the Iraqi government can be the face of more criticism for marginalizing Sunnis after 2011, which ignited the Islamic State movement in conjunction with a failing Syrian state.[89]

Obama's announcement about the symbolic end to the war on terror in 2013 was indicative of his desire to decouple the U.S. military from the problems of the greater Middle East region.[90] This change, however, for the foreign policy machinery is the equivalent of trying to move mountains. Practically nothing changed after 2013, and as the Islamic

State came to power, it required a return by the United States to impose security. Indeed, the gambler's fallacy even plays in strongly, as the United States has invested immense resources in creating a network of substantial military bases throughout the region, and creating a complex web of foreign military relationships. Worse yet, American politicians overplay and overhype threats from the region to stoke their political base and be elected.

Yet against all odds, as indicated in Jeff Goldberg's *The Atlantic* piece on the "The Obama Doctrine," Obama no longer perceived the Middle East as important to future American interests. He cynically concluded that American military power had little chance of making the region better or more stable. Similarly, Obama questioned why the United States should subsidize the military advantage held by the Israeli military. He also addressed the role of Sunni regimes inciting anti-American sentiments.[91] Conceivably, it is no surprise that Obama hesitantly and timidly deployed military force in Libya, and still saw some of his fears come true, leading to greater trepidation in how to employ military force in the Syrian civil war.

Perhaps the foreign policy bureaucracy was threatened by Obama's macro-level and longitudinal understanding of the cultural and structural changes that are constraining the Middle East. Obama reluctantly concluded that hard military power alone could not solve such problems. Only time will tell if the legacy of Obama will be, per his critics, that "he is not a realist, but an isolationist with drones and special-operations forces."[92]

Nevertheless, Obama's attempt to steer away from the greater Middle East region will be the lasting memory of his foreign policy legacy; attempting to dig America out of the British inspired rabbit hole dug for FDR and successive presidents. With over three years in office, President Donald J. Trump seems to have returned to a pre-Obama Middle East policy, which aligns closely with the Pentagon's institutional preference for a securitization of problems. The Trump administration wants to increase defense spending substantially while significantly cutting the State Department budget.[93] This will upgrade the hammer of American power to a golden plated sledgehammer.

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Obama's attempts to reduce commitments to the region will likely be a speed bump when viewed from the *longue durée* by historians. Critics saw Trump's deployment of Marines to Syria as the latest escalation in an untenable and unwinnable situation lacking a solution and exit strategy. The introduction of conventional ground forces into Syrian territory—according to media pundits—indicated a return to pre-Obama policies.[94] Yet in the latest irony of ironies, Trump's announcement December 2018 to withdraw about 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria is seen by the same critics as uninformed and apathetic to the potential destabilizing effects it may bring to the country and region.[95] Defense Secretary James Mattis resigned his post over misaligned views with President Trump on the United States approach to allies, malign actors, and strategic competitors. Mattis' resignation generated discourse that further supports the central claim to this article: The inertia and momentum of war is too great to stop. This takes us back to the Trump administration that again reversed course in August 2019 committing U.S. troops to the creation of a Syrian safe zone with the Turkish military.[96]

After almost two decades of sustained American combat operations in the Middle East, one might rightly think the announcement of troop withdrawal from Syria would be welcomed—even refreshing—news in the public narrative. Despite this, the conscious and subconscious military-industrial complex has fired back with criticism of the move. There is resistance to withdrawal in the military and Congressional circles. The inertia of war continues today as it did during Vietnam, informed and influenced by longstanding policies, traditions, and precedent. To this end, the appointment of ideological war hawks, such as John Bolton as the National Security Advisor, reinforce this trend back towards the status quo of believing that American military power can simply conduct regime changes effortlessly.[97] Moreover, it suggests that states might be more broadly labeled as terrorists, such as Iran, possibly leading to a military confrontation with Iran for its support of various Shia militias, such as the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and other groups in the Middle East and Africa.[98]

Conclusion

If history is doomed to repeat itself with the way America once supported notable insurgents, such as Ho Chi Minh and Bin Laden, then there is no doubt that some of these American backed rebels in Syria and Iraq will be

future nemeses in 20 years. The only reasonable question left is how much will the DOD continue the securitization of the greater Middle East region without a strategy resembling the Marshall Plan?

Under the Trump administration, the Middle East system appears successful for the time being. The bad guys are familiar to the good guys, and the apparatuses are in place to fight them. The political constituency in the United States is ostensibly happy that the gloves are off in the fight against the Islamic State and similar armed groups. The Trump administration appears to have given the U.S. military more autonomy in conducting its wars than any other president in recent history.[99] The oil continues to flow, and gasoline prices remain reasonable and stable in the United States However, this all comes at the expense of a rise in national debt as taxes are cut, and hundreds of billions are borrowed from other countries (such as China) to maintain an over-sized military that permits a foreign policy to operate with short-time horizons. Strategy, instead of the potential change to consider a bigger picture as intended by Obama, instead reverts to the past 70-year repetitive cycle of what seems to work. The only question is will this symbolic strategy against terrorism in the Middle East eventually succeed? Alternatively, will the ghost of Vietnam and its failed strategy haunt the United States for decades to come?

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