

The New York Times

A Brief History of How America Came to Love Small Wars

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April 18, 2018

All nations have their quirks. In Spain, it's a mid-afternoon nap. In Iran, it's polite to refuse any offer before reluctantly accepting. In the United States, it's [practically tradition](#) to initiate small, undeclared military interventions, most recently airstrikes in Syria that are expected to have negligible effect on the conflict there.

But, like all national customs, this practice did not simply emerge from some intrinsic American character. All people, after all, are fundamentally the same; differences in culture or identity are learned.

Rather, it developed through a series of relatively recent events that engineer a tendency for small wars into the American political system. And it's a history squarely at odds with both the American self-conception of an "[exceptional](#)" and moral superpower as well as foreigners' view of an irrational, belligerent cowboy country.

World War I and American exceptionalism: President Woodrow Wilson was under enormous pressure from his French and British allies to enter the war, but feared that doing so would anger Irish and German voters at home who distrusted the foreign powers. Even more daunting, he needed to mobilize Americans to fight a faraway war that, he knew, had little to do with American interests, mostly serving to expand the French and British empires.

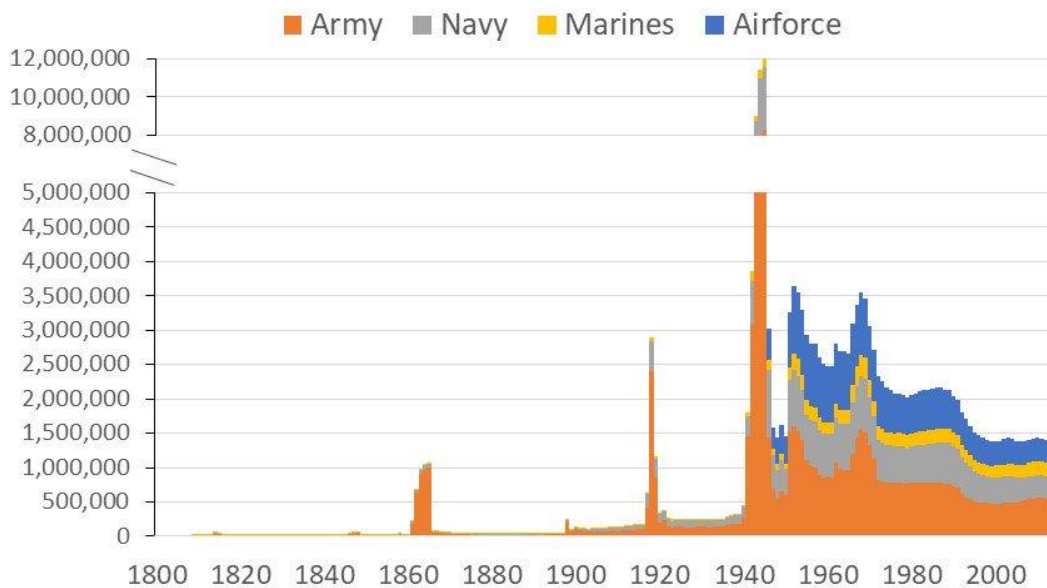
He solved these problems by arguing that intervening was about not interests but values; that it was a war to "make the world safe for democracy." He repurposed old ideas of "Manifest Destiny," the American belief in a moral mission, ordained by God, to expand west so as to impose democracy and capitalism across the continent.

Now, it was a foreign policy mission, compelling Americans to go into the world and spread their political and economic system — assumed to be the only desirable system — through military force. And because that force was virtuous, its application could only lead to good.

World War II, new norms and the standing military: Mr. Wilson’s highly ideological vision for American foreign policy didn’t initially stick. But the black-and-white, good-versus-evil nature of the second world war made it feel like undeniable truth, even a matter of core American identity.

Maybe just as important, the war left the United States with an enormous standing military — something it had never had before and that would change the politics of using force abroad.

Active Duty Military Personnel, 1800-2014



Source: Data from Department of Defense, compiled at http://www.alternatewars.com/BBOW/Stats/US_Mil_Manpower_1789-1997.htm and <https://historyinpieces.com/research/us-military-personnel-1954-2014>.

Previously, armies or navies had been created as needed. Any president had to go through Congress, as the framers had intended, to fund and raise the necessary forces. That made going to war about as easy as passing a major piece of legislation, which is to say, not very fast or easy.

Now, with a permanent standing military, the president “no longer needs affirmative, ex ante support from Congress to wage war (or at least start one),” [Ken Schultz](#), a Stanford University political scientist, wrote on Twitter this week.

This is a big part of why the United States almost never declares war anymore, but instead initiates “police actions” or “humanitarian interventions” or the like. That used to be politically costly, and now, because of the standing military, it isn’t.

Another big reason is that, after the second world war, the victors imposed all sorts of international norms and institutions meant to discourage war and to punish states that waged it.

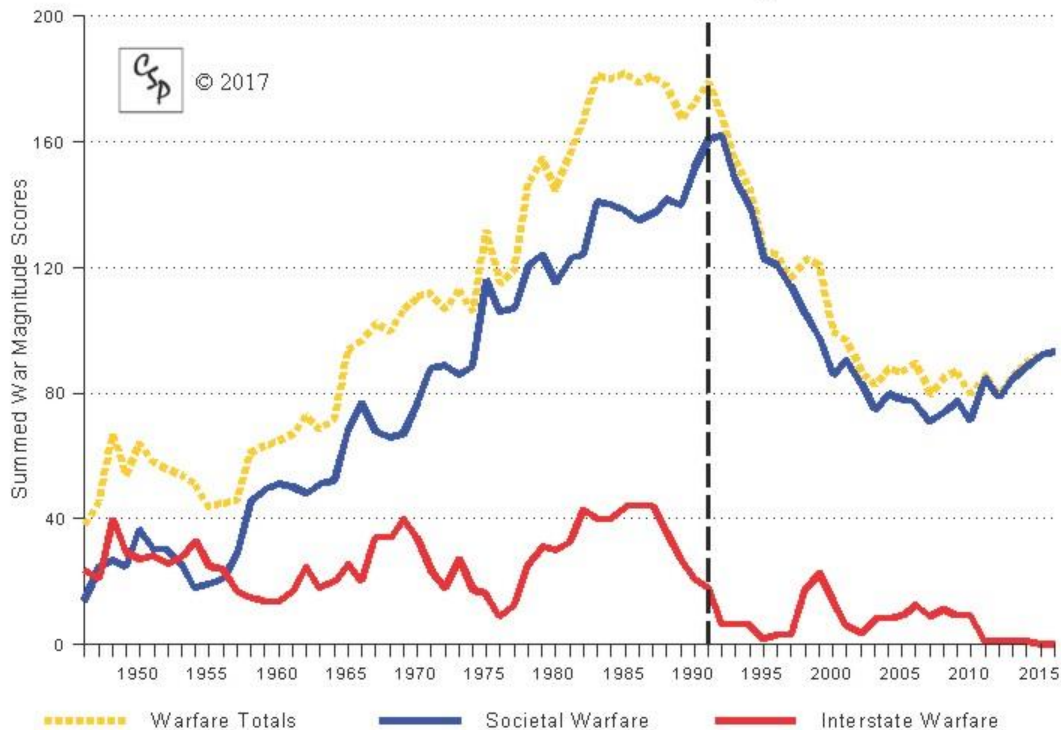
But research by Tanish M. Fazal of the University of Minnesota finds that countries still make war — they just [don’t call it that anymore](#). Instead, they favor low-level interventions meant to comply with the letter of the new international rules but not their spirit.

The Cold War and proxy warfare: The forces of geopolitical nature virtually guarantee that two evenly matched powers will compete, each driven by fear of domination by the other.

In this case, it was far worse because both powers believed their system should prevail globally — remember the power of American exceptionalism — making their fears of global conflict self-fulfilling.

But nuclear weapons and the memory of World War II kept the United States and Soviet Union from clashing directly, so they competed through small proxy states. That meant backing their preferred sides, or intervening outright, in any civil conflict that broke out in the world. And the era brought many:

Global Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2016



Some wars were started by the Cold War powers or their allies. Others came about in the political vacuums left by the end of colonialism and rise of independence movements. Each iteration brought more American and Soviet involvement, which encouraged more mutual fear, prompting more interventions.

The process, along with American fears of communism that rewarded any leader who promised to confront the threat, gradually militarized American foreign policy. Diplomacy and negotiation gave way to belligerence and the use of force.

The 1990s and the “American omnipotence problem”: For a period of about 10 to 15 years, it seemed like all the United States could do was win.

The Cold War ended. The world seemed to be converging on American-style democracy and capitalism, as had been predestined under American exceptionalism. Rogue states collapsed or gave in. Every adversary or threat seemed easily overcome, with little risk or cost.

This string of American victories — Panama, the Persian Gulf war, Bosnia, Kosovo — created what Jeremy Shapiro, the research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, calls “the American omnipotence problem.”

[Talking to us in 2016](#), he defined it as the assumption “that any problem in the world is basically solvable by American power if there is sufficient political will.”

It was intoxicating, and convinced many Americans who came of age at this time — and now hold positions of power in every major institution — that any problem remains only because of a lack of presidential will. Meaning the solution will come by pressuring that president to action.

That expectation, again built on ideals of American exceptionalism, created domestic political demands to bomb any adversary and intervene in any crisis. As Emma Ashford, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, wrote in a recent [New York Times Op-Ed](#):

“Political pressure and criticism from opponents, combined with the news media’s habit of disparaging inaction, can render even the most cautious leaders vulnerable to pressure. America’s overwhelming military strength and the low cost of airstrikes only add to the notion that action is less costly than inaction.”

This expectation, focused on military force, shows up still in survey data. Research by Sarah Kreps and Sarah Maxey, political scientists at Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania, found that Americans [feel a moral obligation](#) to help humanitarian victims — and to provide that help in the form of military action.

Sept. 11 and threat inflation: The fear and uncertainty created by the 2001 attacks vastly deepened these dynamics, gearing American politics even more toward military action as the default response to an increasingly scary world.

Congress further emboldened unilateral presidential military action, [according to](#) Elizabeth N. Saunders, a George Washington University political scientist. Voters punished any lawmaker seen as standing in the president’s way. This and other factors vastly expanded the president’s effective war powers, enabling military action that would’ve been politically or procedurally impossible before.

But the greatest change may have come through threat inflation. Americans, accustomed to thinking of their nation as an island guarded by two oceans, demanded the sort of total security that was no longer possible in the era of globalization, shortened distances and loner

terrorists. Politicians played to this sense of fear to win votes or push through policies such as the invasion of Iraq. The answer to that fear was, of course, military action.

“We need to feel safe, and are motivated to construct a view of reality that satisfies that need,” John Sides, a George Washington University political scientist, [wrote in 2012](#). “We tend to underestimate threats that we think we cannot do anything about and focus instead on threats that we think we can do something about.”

That means ignoring, say, climate change or the looming decline of American global power to instead focus on irregular guerrillas in a far-away failed state or the rantings of an anti-American dictator with a small army. Those problems can be “solved” in a way that will make us feel safer, by doing what has always helped us reaffirm our sense of national identity: imposing violence abroad.

Quote of the Day



Joe Galloway, a journalist who covered the Vietnam War, describes the experience in Ken Burns’ documentary series.

As requested, here is another quote that struck us from Ken Burns’ Vietnam war documentary. Joe Galloway describes what it feels like to be under an American airstrike, which mistakenly targeted the American troops he’d embedded with at the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965:

“I looked up and there were two jets aiming directly at our command post. He’s dropped two cans of napalm and it’s coming toward us, loblolling, end over end. These kids, two or three of them plus a sergeant, had dug a hole or two over on the edge.”

“I looked as the thing exploded and two of them were dancing in that fire. There was a rush, a roar, from the air that’s being consumed and drawn in as this hell come-to-earth is burning there. As that dies back a little then you can hear the screams.”

“Someone yells, ‘Get this man’s feet.’ I reach down and the burns crumble and the flesh is cooked off his ankles and I feel those bones in the palms of my hands. I can feel it now.”

“He died two days later. Kid named Jim Nakayama out of Rigby, Idaho.”

Mr. Galloway had this to say elsewhere in the documentary:

“You can’t just be a neutral witness to something like war. It crawls down your throat. It eats you alive from the inside and the out. It’s not something that you can stand back and be neutral and objective and all of those things we try to be as reporters, journalists, photographers. It doesn’t work that way.”