



When Should the US Go to War?

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The U.S. is the most militarized and warlike nation on earth. Most Americans don't think of their nation that way. Indeed, stating this fact often generates anger and outrage. However, what other state has gone to war so often since the Cold War ended? Certainly not the countries most likely to be on the Right's "to bomb" list – China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Syria, or Venezuela, individually *or collectively*.

The tally of nations droned, bombed, invaded, and/or occupied, threatened with war by the US, or attacked by other nations aided by America, over the last three decades is long: Afghanistan, Haiti, Iran, Iraq (twice!), Kenya, Libya, North Korea, Pakistan, Panama, Philippines, Serbia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Uganda, and Yemen. Others have been hit with financial war in the form of immiserating sanctions, which sometimes do as much economic damage as military action.

Many of these conflicts were small scale. However, their consequences were usually large. For instance, Iraq resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties and destabilized the entire region. Yemen is a humanitarian disaster. Afghanistan's and Libya's civil wars drag on. Having failed to force the Assad regime from power, US troops remain, illegally occupying Syrian oil fields in order to hinder that desperate country's economic recovery. Threats against Iran and North Korea easily could have turned out as wars worse than Iraq.

Even America's nominal successes look threadbare. A military junta was forced from power in Haiti leading to decades of desperate misrule by nominally democratic governments. The plant destroyed by US strikes in Sudan made pharmaceuticals, not chemical weapons. Brutality by ethnic Serbs toward Kosovo's ethnic Albanians was replaced with brutality by Kosovo's ethnic Albanians toward ethnic Serbs. Somalia was a tragedy before US intervention and remained a tragedy afterwards. Terrorists are still killing in Kenya, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Somalia. Murderous insurgents remain active in Uganda.

Yet this dismal experience appears to have had no impact on US policymakers. Virtually none of them acknowledge failure let alone admit responsibility. When confronted with their mistakes they insist that this ugly reality should not, must not be allowed to limit their discretion in the future. Samantha Power, one of the most visible advocates of "humanitarian" war-making, complained about being held to account for past policy disasters: "I think there is too much of, 'Oh, look, this is what intervention has wrought' ... one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons." Or drawing any lessons at all if they indict a warrior wannabe's competence, foresight, and judgment.

America's promiscuous use of force appears to reflect two important factors. The first is that Washington enjoys military superiority over every nation and collection of nations. No country can invade the US. Deny Americans use of the seas. Dominate US airspace. Defeat conventional American forces. Force US concessions. Or, other than perhaps China and Russia, even defend against attack by Washington.

Since American officials possess the policy equivalent of a very big, expensive hammer, every problem on earth looks like a nail. Whatever the issue, use the military. If thwarted, blame inadequate reliance on the armed forces. If only more troops were used. If only more money was spent. If only the public was less impatient. If only those "liberated" by America followed Washington's orders. If only additional foreigners were droned, bombed, captured, imprisoned, tortured, and killed, then all would be well.

The second characteristic is overweening, pervasive, blinding hubris. There may no better representative of this tragic flaw, which felled many a Greek hero, than Madeleine Albright, President Bill Clinton's UN ambassador and secretary of state, and later activist on behalf of perpetual intervention, sanctions, and war. In 1998 she announced: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America: we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."

This was nonsensical cant even then. Today, after two decades of disastrous intervention in the Middle East, Albright should be laughed out of polite company. Hundreds of thousands have died as Uncle Sam blundered from one disastrous conflict to another, learning nothing. If we are indispensable and see much further, what went so wrong?

Her belief that the foreign policy priesthood – not Americans generally – is uniquely gifted also means that it is entitled to decide the world's fate. In 1996 she was asked to justify the death of a half million Iraqi babies from sanctions. Said the celebrated foreign policy soothsayer: "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price – we think the price is worth it." Remember, you have to break a few (hundred thousand) eggs to make an omelet!

If you foresee the future and are authorized to kill on a mass scale, it only makes sense to employ the military – often – to enforce your judgments. Albright famously queried Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 1992: "What's the use of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" For her, and others like her who fill Washington, American military personnel are but gambit pawns to be sacrificed in a global chess game by their betters, those with the mandate of heaven to make foreign policy decisions.

Of course, Albright is not alone in her myopic arrogance or view that war is just one of many foreign policy tools. Washington could negotiate, issue an ultimatum, apply economic pressure, issue bloodcurdling threats, or simply forego these preliminaries and loose mayhem and murder. Why treat the latter like anything special? After all, the world's peoples should know to obey America's far-sighted rulers. If they don't, they should be taught to do so.

This toxic interplay of power and hubris helps explain why war has become a first resort in Washington. Consider the uses to which the US military has been put back into the Cold War: arresting Somali warlords, nation-building in Central Asia, replacing a military junta with a violent demagogue in Haiti, intervening in multiple civil wars (Vietnam, Syria, Yemen, Angola, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Nicaragua, Serbia, Libya, Lebanon), imposing regime change (Iraq,

Panama, Grenada, Afghanistan, Libya), threatening or attacking enemies of friends and allies (Iran, Iraq, North Korea, China, Russia), combating insurgents against partner nations (Uganda, Philippines, El Salvador), disarming governments hostile to the US (Iran, North Korea), and more. So common is America's willingness to go to war that presidents of both parties routinely intone "all options are on the table" to threaten military action if US demands are not met. American policymakers attempt to coerce nations around the globe as a matter of course.

Ironically, the last two presidents criticized this extraordinary propensity to go to war – and then perpetuated the system. President Barack Obama proclaimed: "What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war." Then he increased forces in Afghanistan, joined the Europeans in ousting Libya's Muammar Khadafy, intervened in Syria against both the Islamic State and Assad regime, returned American forces to Iraq to battle ISIS, and backed the Saudi/Emirati invasion of Yemen.

President Donald Trump denounced the Iraq war and warmongering neoconservatives and occasionally criticized endless wars. Yet Washington's dynamic is little different today. He has maintained and even intensified every military action initiated or continued by his predecessor, including upping (before recently reducing) troop levels in Afghanistan, escalating the campaign against the Islamic State, and dramatically intensifying use of drones. Further, Trump does not hesitate to threaten military action. All that is lacking is a real conflict of his own – and he came dangerously close to starting wars with North Korea in 2017 and Iran in 2019 and 2020.

In addition are the many battles that went unfought despite support from at least some influential policymakers and elites. Indeed, past and present neoconservatives have spent decades advocating wars that even hawkish presidents declined to start. The George W. Bush administration considered bombing Russian forces in its conflict with Georgia. The ever-belligerent John McCain famously pushed war against Iran, North Korea, and Syria, and potentially violent confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia. Sen. Lindsey Graham suggested war against North Korea since it would be "over there," rather than "over here." A gaggle of analysts urged inserting US troops in Ukraine for use against Moscow. These proposals for military action can be best characterized as foolish, counterproductive, dangerous, and even mad.

Of course, sometimes war is a tragic necessity. It should always be viewed as a tragedy. And contrary to the conventional wisdom in Washington, it should be engaged in only when necessary. Military force is not just another policy tool. It is a unique instrument of statecraft, always deadly, cruel, costly, risky, and dangerous. Those who are most convinced of their competence to wield it – that they stand taller and see further and therefore are entitled to decide on life and death for others – are the last people who should be entrusted with it.

What makes war different?

- It kills. It maims. It wounds. It scars. Friends, foes, and innocents. Even survivors carry psychic hurt for years, sometimes forever. Property can be rebuilt, economic opportunities can be replaced, wealth can be restored. Not people.
- It costs. The US will end up spending more than \$6.4 trillion on the Afghanistan and Iraq misadventures. Which is merely the direct cost, ignoring the economic innovation and growth lost by such monumental waste. Economic and social development then suffer accordingly. And the expense is continual. An aggressive foreign policy requires force

structure. And force structure costs money. In short, the military budget is the price of America's militaristic foreign policy. Year in and year out.

- It puts the homeland at risk. Since the Civil War Washington policymakers considered the homeland to be invulnerable, but the 9/11 attacks demonstrated that those who suffer at America's hands can reach out violently. North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and ICBMs now enables it to strike the US as well. Which requires the national government to decide whether protecting Seoul is worth risking Los Angeles and Seattle. China and Russia possess even larger nuclear deterrents.
- It undermines individual liberty and limited government. "War is the health of the state," warned social critic Randolph Bourne. It is the ultimate big government program, directed at causing mass death and destruction. Since war means enemies looking for ways to harm Americans, the national security state naturally rises alongside a large military. Liberty inevitably suffers.
- It is not humane. The objective of ousting a dictatorship, ending a conflict, or otherwise saving lives is worthy. However, the impact of war is rarely, if ever, benign. The Iraq invasion triggered a tsunami of sectarian violence that cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The economic and social collapse caused by America's wars killed many more. For instance, in Yemen today tens of millions of people are malnourished and diseased. Good intentions, even if real, are not enough.
- It is unpredictable. No one starts a war expecting defeat. Often both combatants expect to win. Yet someone always loses. On rare occasions military campaigns, such as the first war against Iraq, succeed with unexpected ease. Far more often promised quick victories turned into endless kill-fests. Examples include the Civil War, World War I, and Saudi Arabia's attack on Yemen. In the latter the killing continues horribly and prodigiously.
- It generates blowback. World War I led to World War II. America's interventions in the Middle East spawned terrorists. US aid and training in Syria benefited jihadist groups, including the local al-Qaeda affiliate. Support for Kurdish militias triggered Turkish military intervention in Syria. Policymakers rarely foresee or prepare for the many ill consequences of war.
- It offers no political solution. Washington "won" in both Afghanistan and Iraq, but failed to create stable, liberal, and democratic orders. The US gave Kosovo independence, but did not prevent ethnic cleansing and atrocities directed against ethnic minorities. America and Europe helped oust Libya's Muammar Khadafy, where civil war still rages nine years later.
- It creates precedents for adversaries. The U.S.-led war against Kosovo was lawless but offered Russia precedent for supporting the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia. America's illegal (and disastrous) invasion of Iraq based on fake intelligence undermines Washington's criticism of aggression by other nations.
- It allows ivory tower warriors to stage violent crusades with other people's lives. Diplomacy and moral suasion are limited tools, frustrating determined activists. Wannabe social engineers rarely stop when meeting resistance. However, like former vice president Dick Cheney, they usually have "other priorities" when called upon to personally serve.

War creates a vast gap between the burden borne by policymakers and imposed on others.

Given the ugly reality of war, it makes no sense to think of it as anything other than a last resort. It should be reserved for truly vital interests, meaning a direct and existential threat to the country – its territory, people, liberties, and prosperity. At issue should be the nation's survival, not convenience. Run-of-the-mill interests do not qualify. There is much in the world that matters to America in one way or another. But very few such interests are important enough to justify war.

Nor do allies necessarily constitute a vital national interest. Alliances should be a means to an end, a useful mechanism to encourage cooperation toward joint objectives. However, the U.S. has turned allies into an end, the equivalent of Facebook friends, to be collected irrespective of value in hopes of accumulating more than anyone else. Many don't advance America's security and most are able to defend themselves. Few, if any of them warrant Washington promising to go to war.

Americans need to relearn the value of peace. The welcome end of the Cold War sparked a much more aggressive US. Unfortunately, Washington's increasingly promiscuous use of the military effectively targeted the American people, taking their lives, wasting their wealth, sacrificing their freedoms, and making them less safe. The next administration should chart a new course, in which war is always seen as a tragedy and understood to be a last resort.

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