



The War Party Wins Even When We Lose

Doug Bandow
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Russia has attacked Ukraine. Moscow launched an aggressive war without justification. The US is edging into the conflict and rushing troops to Europe. The international economy is staggering as America and Europe impose brutal sanctions on Russia. Democrats are ready to join Republicans in inflating an already outsize military budget. Talk has turned to Taiwan, which could drag Washington into an even worse conflict with China.

All this because the bipartisan War Party that dominates US foreign policy insisted it was entitled to not only dominate the Americas, per the Monroe Doctrine, but the rest of the world, up to, and often beyond, the borders of other nations. Despite the risk of war – far too great, as evident from Russia's assault on Ukraine – US policymakers would not acknowledge past commitments and halt the steady advance of allied military power toward Russia's border.

Having just demonstrated to the world its consistent lack of accountability, the War Party now stands to gain more power, influence, and resources. After Moscow's aggression, the military-industrial-think tank-media-lobbyist-complex immediately swung into action with proposals for enlarged armed services, plans for more aggressive military intervention, and, of course, demands for more money. Washington elites will enjoy enhanced status, positions, influence, and profit while the rest of the population pays the price.

In short, the War Party gains when the rest of us lose. Indeed, policymakers who spent the last two decades making America less safe demonstrated that they do best when they fail. Being a member of the infamous Washington "Blob" means never having to say you are sorry, no matter how many deaths and how much destruction you cause.

The Cold War was extraordinarily dangerous, but the threat of nuclear Armageddon helped keep the peace. The Cuban Missile Crisis chastened both Moscow and Washington. Had President John F. Kennedy listened to his military advisers and invaded Cuba, war would almost certainly have resulted. In Vietnam the American public learned that its government could not be trusted – indeed, the Domino Theory became one of the great busts of history: 14 years after South Vietnam collapsed the Berlin Wall fell. Two years later the Soviet Union dissolved.

Even Ronald Reagan, dismissed as an irresponsible cowboy, turned toward negotiation after the nuclear scare caused by the 1983 Able Archer military exercise. He faced down some of his most fervent supporters – who attacked him as naïve and even a commie dupe – and recognized that

Mikhail Gorbachev was very different from the usual communist apparatchik. Together they ended the Cold War.

This extraordinary achievement offered enormous promise. For the briefest moment even NATO appeared ready for retirement. Alliance advocates were reduced to suggesting that the military pact shift to promoting student exchanges and targeting drug pushers. But then interest groups took over, as Public Choice Economics would predict. Blob members and military contractors took the lead in pushing NATO expansion. After all, if the transatlantic alliance brought in new countries and expanded US responsibilities, the War Party would have a new mission and the merchants of death would sell more weapons. Never mind beatific assurances given by allied officials to Moscow – well documented by declassified documents and WikiLeaks revelations. The Russians lost. What could they do?

Well, we just found out.

However, that's not all. Consider the many other issues on which the War Party has been disastrously wrong. And called out by its critics. Yet when the worst happened, those responsible for encouraging terrorist attacks and starting endless wars profited. The worse their performance, the greater their influence.

For instance, the US backed any number of brutal dictatorships. As long as they proclaimed themselves to be anti-communist, Washington cared little about the human cost – the murders, imprisonments, torture, and other terrible crimes. Sometimes foreign policy requires making difficult choices, but ostentatiously endorsing the worst of the worst, such as Saudi Arabia, a fundamentalist Islamic autocracy, could not help but make enemies. So did supporting Israel's endless occupation of Palestinian territories and treatment of Palestinians as second-class human beings. As well as Washington warring against Muslims – for instance, intervening in Lebanon's civil war and attacking Shiite forces. Critics warned of the danger but were ignored. Then came the bombings of America's embassy and Marine Corps barracks.

Nevertheless, 9/11 shocked Blob members who believed America was immune to attack. Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda operatives explained why they targeted the US. And it wasn't because they believed America to be "the land of the free and home of the brave." In their view, the US was targeting Muslims. As it in effect was, though they were not the only victims of American military intervention. Alas, the George W. Bush administration's Global War on Terrorism, with an endless war in Afghanistan, fraudulent invasion of Iraq, and widespread drone attacks on other nations, reinforced the radicals' anti-Muslim meme and multiplied the number of terrorists.

Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump criticized the Iraq war but staged even broader and more virulent drone campaigns. Despite claims that Washington carefully targeted terrorists, the US often killed the enemies of friendly governments. Particularly chilling were "signature" strikes, based on commonplace behaviors. Reported the *New York Times*: "Gradually, it has become clear that when operators in Nevada fire missiles into remote tribal territories on the other side of the world, they often do not know who they are killing, but are making an imperfect best guess." Bad guys died, but so did innocent civilians, more than US authorities admitted.

Which created even more terrorists determined to take revenge against America. Washington's actions did not justify the resulting murder and mayhem, but they help explain it.

For instance, New York City's wannabe Times Square bomber justified his actions based on Washington's willingness to kill indiscriminately. Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad explained in 2010: "I want to plead guilty 100 times because unless the United States pulls out of Afghanistan and Iraq, until they stop drone strikes in Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen and stop attacking Muslim lands, we will attack the United States and be out to get them." When the judge asked about his willingness to kill children, he responded: "When the drones hit, they don't see children." He insisted that "I am part of the answer to the U.S. killing the Muslim people."

Of course, the greatest debacle was the Iraq invasion. Having done so much to encourage terrorism, the War Party used 9/11 as an excuse to expand its radical agenda. The Bush administration quickly lost interest in Afghanistan and turned to Baghdad, shamelessly lying to – or, putting the best possible spin on their misbehavior, irresponsibly misleading – the public about Saddam Hussein's supposed terrorist connections and nuclear program. Skeptics were vilified, their doubts dismissed as unpatriotic, even treasonous.

The most avid Neoconservatives imagined using the inevitable victory in Iraq as the springboard to additional campaigns, in Syria and then Iran. They imagined no limits. Proclaimed an anonymous staffer, thought to be Karl Rove: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

Alas, the expected Iraqi cakewalk went south as real reality inevitably hit. The result: thousands of dead and tens of thousands of wounded Americans, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, millions of displaced Iraqis, destruction of minority religious communities, creation of al-Qaeda in Iraq, spread of the Islamic State, and expanded influence of neighboring Iran. It was a heckuva' achievement. But members of the War Party suffered not at all, as its members were rewarded, promoted, and consulted despite their disastrous records. In Washington, to fail is to succeed, irrespective of the carnage left behind.

And so the saga continues. Europe avoided full scale war during four decades of the Cold War. However, determined to maintain US primacy, the War Party set up the circumstances for conflict today. The decision to attack Ukraine was Vladimir Putin's. But the crisis reflects three decades of reckless, destructive policies. Washington's Blob failed again. And already is enjoying even more influence over US foreign policy. While the American people are again paying the price.

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