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When Are Gains in Wartime Durable and Irreversible?

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The news stories surrounding the assassination of Ahmed Wali Karzai, Afghan President Hamid Karzai's half brother, touched on a familiar theme, one that recurs after nearly every unhappy news item from Afghanistan. The second paragraph in [the New York Times story](#) ^[3] is emblematic of the coverage elsewhere:

The death of Mr. Karzai, who effectively ruled much of the country's southern tier from Kandahar, sent tremors through the country's political establishment and

raised questions about whether tenuous security gains made by the influx of American forces in the south could hold. (emphasis mine)

Similar worries surround the impending withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Under the headline "We Could Still 'Lose' Iraq" [Max Boot earlier this year warned](#) [4]:

Iraq remains a volcano. It has been capped for the moment but could erupt again. Especially because the most effective cap — a U.S. military presence — is due to be removed at the end of the year.

All this talk of reversible gains and persistent threats got me thinking: when is that *not* the case? Is it ever true that U.S. forces can be removed from a particular place with the complete confidence that nothing bad will ever happen there again? Is it realistic to think that military operations—even when combined with the whole-of-government/smart power/3D security etc that is so in vogue these days—will succeed in delivering to the American people, or to the world, a situation that can be accurately characterized as free of all possible threats?

Of course not. But such warnings, which today are often a thinly veiled technique to justify the indefinite stationing of many tens of thousands of U.S. troops in dozens of places around the world, fit within a much broader rhetorical tradition.

Once war has begun, the advocates for that war will claim that aspiring merely to stave off defeat is worse than aiming too low; it signals that one has already been defeated mentally and spiritually. However, winning a war—which is to say accomplishing the originally stated objectives at an acceptable cost—is rarely good enough either. Long before FDR's Four Freedoms and Woodrow Wilson's war to end all wars, wartime aims have often transcended the immediate goal of defeating an adversary militarily. The mission creeps. The goal becomes to eradicate all bad things, to never have to return to the way it was before.

When Lincoln at Gettysburg famously inveighed that those who fell there would not die in vain, he wasn't thinking merely of defeating the Confederacy. He appealed to his audience to fashion a new, better government. Pericles' funeral oration invokes similar themes. The call for the living to honor the sacrifice of the dead by not merely continuing an armed struggle, but to also expand the original war aims, is more than just manipulation. It taps into deeply held beliefs about man's ability to transcend earthly reality.

Ever since the Almighty banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, we mere mortals have been trying to get back in. I guess that's a credit to our collective persistence. Then again, in the ancient story of Sisyphus, being forced to attempt to accomplish an impossible task was a form of punishment every bit as horrific as hellfire and brimstone.

A cynic might claim that attempts to remove all threats from the world are merely a full-employment gambit, a ploy by security professionals and military suppliers to justify ever-rising budgets. Actually, one need not be a cynic [to conclude such a thing](#) [5].

But that's a discussion for another time. Returning to the original point, even seemingly decisive military victories can always be reversed. Accepting this reality, and being willing to weigh the costs and benefits of continuing a conflict, should never be equated with surrender. We can aspire to improve the human condition even if we realize we will never quite enter the Promised Land: a place free of hunger, danger, fear, uncertainty and doubt. It is when we actually believe that the desired end state is achievable, and when we join claims of success just around the corner with entreaties to redouble our efforts, that we get ourselves into trouble.

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