

# American foreign policy at point zero

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The United States has rarely lost any conventional military battle since at least 1950. Nor has it, at the same time, ever won a war. It has successfully overthrown governments through interventions or subversion but the political results of all its efforts – as in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Iran in 1953 – have often made its subsequent geopolitical position far, far more tenuous. In a word, in international affairs it bumbles very badly and it has made an already highly unstable world far more precarious than it otherwise would be if only the US had left the world alone. No less important, Americans would be far better off thereby. Because – to repeat a critical point – it has failed to attain victory in any of the real wars it has fought since Korea. Its adversaries learned as long ago as the Korean War that decentralization would stymie America's overwhelming firepower, which was designed for concentrated armies, and provided a successful antidote for massive, expensive technology.

All this is very well known. The real issue is why the United States makes the identical mistakes over and over again and never learns from its errors.

At the present time it is losing two wars and creating a vast arc of profound strategic and political instability from the Mediterranean Sea to South Asia, it has resumed the arms race in Europe, and it is making Russia an enemy when it could easily have been friendly. Economically, it has run up the biggest deficits in American history, brought on the decline of the dollar, and wherever one turns this administration has been at least as bad as any in two centuries of American history – perhaps even the worst. We now have an unprecedented disaster in the conduct of American power, both overseas and at home, in part because of the people who now rule – ambitious men and women who calculate only what is best for their careers – but also because the imperatives and inexorable logic of past policies and conventional wisdom have

brought us to this critical juncture. All the old mistakes have been repeated; nothing had been learned from the past, and official myopia is timeless.

A large part of the United States' problem, whether Republicans or Democrats are in power, is that it believes it has the right and obligation to intervene everywhere, in whatever forms they choose, and that its interests are global. Interventionism – so the consensus among Republicans and Democrats goes – is the cost of its global interests and mission, because it has been convinced for almost a century that it was preordained to remedy the world's many wrongs – and to do so by whatever means it chooses. There is nothing whatever that is unique in this regard in the present Bush Administration. This pretension, which first began during the nineteenth century and which Woodrow Wilson articulated, is simply not functional, and it has led to countless morasses, bad for the United States and far worse for the countries it has interfered with. The fact is that no nation has ever been able to assume such an international role, and those that have attempted to do so came to no good end – they exhausted their resources and passions and follies.

Political conflicts are not solved by military interventions, and that they are often incapable of being resolved by political or peaceful means does not alter the fact that force is dysfunctional. This is truer today than ever with the spread of weapons technology. The United States is not exempt from the facts that have guided international affairs for centuries.

The US has already lost the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for the very same reasons it lost all of its earlier conflicts. It has the manpower and firepower advantage, as always, but these are ultimately irrelevant in the medium and long run. They were irrelevant in many contexts in which the United States was not involved, and they explain the outcome of many armed struggles over the past century regardless of who was in them, for they are usually decided by the socio-economic and political strength of the various sides – China after 1947 and Vietnam after 1972 are two examples but scarcely the only ones. It is a transcendent truism of global politics that wars are more determined by socio-economic and political factors than any other, and this was true long before the United States attempted to regulate the world's affairs.

But why?

All this still begs the issue of why the United States repeatedly makes the same drastic errors. Are there vested interests in preparing for war? Are illusions based on them, or ideologies – or both?

In part, expensive equipment and the incredibly inflated military budget are premised on the traditional assumption that owning complex weapons gives America power, which is determined by arms in hand rather than what happens in a nation's politics and society. In fact, the reverse is often the case, especially when enemies find the weaknesses in this sort of technology and exploit it – as they increasingly have done over the past decades. Then the cost of fighting wars becomes a liability – and America's technological military an immense weakness when the government has huge deficits or lacks funds to repair its ageing public infrastructure – a fact that was highlighted when the collapse of a bridge in

Minneapolis earlier this year led to the striking revelation that 70,000 bridges in the United States are rated deficient. The Vietnam War should have resolved the issue of the relevance of technology to America's military ambitions, but it did not. The real question is: why?

To a critical but scarcely exclusive sense, the Pentagon's penchant for military toys makes an ambitious, aggressive foreign policy essential. Without enemies and conflicts, real or potential, there is no reason to spend money, and this reality often coloured its definition of Soviet goals after 1947 – despite the objections of senior CIA analysts. But the Defense Department, and national security establishments in general, are immense and all kinds of constituencies exist in them: there are procurement experts who draw up budgets and go after equipment mindlessly, people who have always dominated its actions, but thinkers, too. Each does their own thing and they are often very different. It has always had these contradictions.

But that those who run the military establishment have technological illusions, which many ordinary people share in this and other domains of human existence, keeps immense sums of money flowing to arms manufacturers and their minions. There is a very profound consensus between the two parties on arms spending, which began under the Democrats a half-century ago and it will not go away – no matter how neglected the bridges and infrastructure, health, or the like. Arms lobbies are not only very powerful in Washington but create crucial jobs in most states, and military spending keeps the economy afloat. Weapons producers make money regardless of whether the Pentagon wins or loses its wars – and making money is their only objective. It is surely a key causal factor even if it is far from being the sole explanation of why the United States intervenes where it shouldn't.

It is close to impossible to assign some weight or priority to the arms industry, but it must be taken into account that the arms manufacturers have power. Strategic lobbies in Washington contribute heavily to politicians who need campaign funding, and gain financially whether America wins or loses its wars. They are the 'x-factor' in the equation but scarcely the sole one. But, at the least, they are very important even when not decisive.

Another explanation is ambitious politicians, who will say and do whatever is required to stay in power or gain it. This factor is so familiar that it scarcely requires repeating, but the cynical ways politicians treat polls and American public opinion is a crucial aspect of this question. There are indeed problems with the public but it invariably senses realities and their constraints well before the politicians – who use the public and then ignore it. The party out of office will cater to mass opinion but usually forgets it once it comes to power – as the recent Democratic Party trajectory shows. This is usually the rule but public opinion is an element that cannot be merely gainsaid, and as the Korean and Vietnam wars proved, it could play a decisive role. An increasing majority of the people think the war in Iraq is not worth fighting, and the President is among the most unpopular in history. The public may be impotent or far too passive for its own good, and generally is, but it is far less brainwashed than the advocates of 'manufactured consent' concede. How, when, or if its role becomes more crucial is a matter of conjecture. Its

influence is usually negligible and takes far too much time to have an impact. Follies are committed long after the public condones them. But that it eventually becomes critical is a fact of life which one cannot make too much of, or too little.

Consensus on ideology and goals is crucial also, but that policies fail to work and are increasingly dangerous as a guide to action has been true for a long time and is more obvious as years elapse. The Bush Administration encapsulates it but the basic problem has existed for many decades. What the Bush coterie has seen is the culmination of a logic that is much older. It presides over a catastrophe that began many years ago.

All in all, these factors have delivered us to our present mess, which may very well exceed any in American history.

Some of the most acute criticisms made of the gross simplisms which have guided interventionist policies were produced within the military, especially after the Vietnam experience traumatized it. My history of the Vietnam War was purchased by many base libraries, and the military journals treated it in detail and very respectfully. The statement at the end of July by the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, that 'no amount of troops in no amount of time will make much of a difference' if Iraqi politics fails to change drastically reflects a current of realism that has existed among military thinkers for some decades. (Whether he acts on this assumption is another matter and depends greatly on considerations outside of his control.) Like the CIA, the military has acute strategic thinkers, and the monographs of the US Army's Strategic Studies Institute – to name one of many – are often very insightful and critical. Academics tend to be irrelevant and dull by comparison.

The problem, of course, is that few (if any) at the decisive levels pay any attention to the critical ruminations that the military and CIA consistently produce. There is no shortage of insight among US official analysts – the problem that policy is rarely formulated with objective knowledge is a constraint on it. Ambitious people, who exist in ample quantity, say what their superiors wish to hear and rarely, if ever, contradict them. Iraq is but an example, for the entire mess there was predicted. If reason and clarity prevailed, America's role in the world would be utterly different.

Those in power simply ignore the critical military's insights, and the vast bulk of officers obey orders. Many of them know better. They have learned the hard way – experience. Neocon intellectuals and scribblers utterly lack it.

We are at point zero in the application of American power in the world: the United States cannot win its extremely expensive adventures, nor will it abstain from policies which increasingly lead to disasters for the nations in which it intervenes and for itself as well. All the factors I have mentioned – its myopia regarding technology, the policy consensus that binds ambitious politicians and often makes public opinion irrelevant, the arms makers and their local interests, or the limits of rational inputs – have all combined to deliver us to this impasse. It is difficult not to be pessimistic when – as it should be – realism rather than illusions guide our political assessments. But realism is the only way to avoid cynicism.