

Unintended consequences

haunt the United States at war

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It is now clear to all Americans and their allies that the war in Iraq has not gone as the administration of George W. Bush originally intended. Rather than fighting a short war with a clear-cut victory and few US casualties, the US has found itself bogged down in ways increasingly reminiscent of the war in Vietnam. Instead of eradicating the stigma of the loss in Vietnam once and for all, Iraq has revived unpalatable memories. As was the case with President Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam in 1968, the Bush administration is no longer in control of what happens in Iraq. At least until the mid-2007 'surge' – the long-term success or not of which will remain unclear for some time – the so-called 'turning points' heralding a change of course in the war, such as the capture, trial, and execution of Saddam Hussein, have subsequently been described as merely 'different configurations' in the ongoing struggle against what President Bush initially identified as the 'axis of evil'.

George Bush has discovered the truth of Machiavelli's maxim that 'wars begin when you will but they do not end when you please'. Americans who know their history should not be surprised by this. Iraq is only the latest example of an American war whose unintended consequences dwarf the original justification and expectations of the leaders who drew the nation into belligerency. Every major war fought by the United States produced unintended consequences that outweighed the intended consequences. The inevitable 'fog' and 'friction' of warfare caused such unanticipated changes that it was impossible for those US leaders who entered wars to realise their original ambitions.

Clausewitz – wrong or misapplied?

The fighting of wars radically alters foreign policy, military strategy, and domestic life. The magnitude and universality of the unintended consequences of wars show the danger of embracing the proposition put forward by 19th-century Prussian soldier and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz that 'war was nothing but the continuation of policy by other means'. US war strategists have embraced

this notion, especially in the past thirty years—ironically, as an unintended consequence of the Vietnam War. Yet an examination of the outcomes of wars fought by the United States reveals that Clausewitz's assertion that war is a rational continuation of politics by other means is dangerously wrong.

A closer reading of Clausewitz would have alerted US strategists to the perils of a too-enthusiastic adoption of the military option as a means of achieving national goals. The Prussian was well aware that a major characteristic of war was uncertainty — both in the course of combat and in predicting its outcome. He was aware that states sometimes act foolishly or recklessly, and he solemnly advised: 'No one starts a war — or rather, no one in his senses should do so — without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it'. US strategists planning for Iraq apparently overlooked this salient passage in their master's work.

A realm of unintended consequences

The phrase 'unintended consequences' refers to unforeseen or unpredicted events that were the consequences of war, as opposed to foreseen events or consequences. Hannah Arendt observed that politics is the realm of unintended consequences. She was drawing attention to the distinction between the predictable world of science and the chaotic, unpredictable world of politicians. If this is true of politics, it is even truer of war, which is why the notion that war is merely the execution of policy by other means is nonsense. Because of the intensity, death and destruction intrinsic to warfare, the outcomes of wars, regardless of the intentions and motives of those who enter them and the creative military genius of those who fight them, are far more unpredictable than non-violent political actions.

It may appear that not all the unintended consequences of the United States' wars have been undesirable. From the first war of 1775-1783, America's wars have been engines of economic growth. Wars have broken down class, ethnic, and

gender barriers (at least briefly) and have caused the greatest demographic shifts in the nation's history. The abolition of slavery was clearly an unintended but positive consequence of the American Civil War. Since the Great Depression wars have repeatedly revitalised the role of the federal government as the planner and shaper of American society and life. The Marshall Plan greatly assisted the reconstruction of Europe in the aftermath of World War II. The tragedy is that it has taken wars to bring about these changes. It is one of the great ironies of modern history that a nation that sees itself as a beacon for all mankind, a nation that contains within itself the genius, the creativity, the drive to capture the imagination of peoples around the world for the past two centuries, has not always been able to harness that energy without resort to war.

The unintended and radical consequences of wars create policymaking problems as difficult to resolve as the disagreements that led to hostilities. Even so-called 'victory' comes at a price. This reality has been true for every major US war since the American War of Independence. Paradoxically, often the most immediate unintended consequences are domestic, and the brunt of these are borne by the incumbent president. Governments of democratic republics like the United States depend upon the support of public opinion if they are to truly function as democracies. Yet throughout US history, as the duration of combat increased and US casualties mounted, presidents have been unable to maintain a public consensus for their wars.

The most dramatic example of this is the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln immediately following the Union victory over the Confederacy in the American Civil War. In World War II, generally regarded as widely endorsed by the American people, dwindling public support for the fight against Japan in 1945 was a contributing factor to President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan in order to induce an immediate surrender. The fall in approval rating of President George W. Bush since 2005 to a low of around 30 per cent, following his stunning 90 per cent approval rating in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, is just another example of the inability of administrations that go to war to maintain public endorsement for the war. In all cases, as political exhaustion set in, wars led to a corrosion of the presidency, public hostility, and the domestic rejection of presidents who took the nation to war or were seen to be prolonging them unnecessarily. Lyndon Johnson and George H.W. Bush were both defeated in presidential elections in which the conduct of the US at war featured as a major campaign issue: Johnson because the war was going badly in Vietnam, and Bush after what appeared to be a triumphant victory in liberating Kuwait from the aggression of Saddam Hussein.

Intended and unintended outcomes

Most historians, when assessing the efficacy of wars, assume that the outcomes or results were intended, expected or planned. Thus it is accepted that the 1775-1783 war with Great Britain was initially fought for American

independence, the 1848 war with Mexico for the acquisition of the Southwest, and so on. Very little attention is given to the question as to what outcomes of wars were intended and what ones were not. Examined from this perspective, it soon becomes apparent that the independence of the thirteen colonies and the establishment of the United States were unintended consequences of a war begun in 1775 by loyal subjects of the King of England to redress colonial grievances over taxes imposed by the mother country. The fighting soon hardened the resolve of the colonists who then determined to seek complete separation and independence from the supposed English 'tyrant'. Similarly, it can be seen that the War of 1812, by removing European resistance to US westward expansion, led inexorably to war with Mexico (1846-1848). In turn, an unsought, destructive Civil War was an unintended consequence of tensions exacerbated over the expansion of slavery in the territories gained in the Mexican War. War bred further war.

Major US wars invariably led to further entanglements. The Spanish-American War of 1898, for example, led to the protracted and violent war to suppress Filipino nationalists. It also led to expeditions against the Chinese 'Boxers' in 1900 and to a series of 'Banana Wars' in the Western Hemisphere. Fought in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Nicaragua these neo-colonial police actions plagued the United States throughout the twentieth century. Their vestiges can be found today in US relations with the countries of Central America and the Caribbean.

World War I did not make the world safe for democracy, the proclaimed reason for US entry, rather it unleashed ethnic rivalries in Europe, and created the political resentments and economic instability that led to World War II. At home it produced a period of intolerance and repression of minorities perceived to be radicals. And while World War II catapulted the United States to economic and military pre-eminence, it also unexpectedly ushered in a half-century of unprecedented fear and armed preparedness known as the Cold War. Sixty years after peace was achieved in East Asia, more than 35,000 US troops and their dependants remain stationed in Japan. A half-century after the Korean War—itself an unintended consequence of World War II in Asia—30,000 US troops are deployed in South Korea. In some kind of bizarre twist of the contemporary policymakers' minds a perpetually divided Korea is now being touted by the Bush administration as a model for an acceptable outcome for Iraq.

Unintended and ignored patterns?

Two other wars more closely resemble the patterns emerging in Iraq today: the Spanish-American War (1898-1902) and the Vietnam War (1964-1973). In both of these wars, when seeking congressional support and appropriations for a resort to arms, the president deliberately misled Congress, lied to the American public about prior events, exaggerated the dangers of not going to war, and played down anticipated casualties (US and foreign). The two wars were fought by administrations self-righteously proclaiming the moral superiority of their cause and ostensibly seeking

to bring democracy to oppressed foreign peoples. In both the Spanish-American and Vietnam wars, the US employed its overwhelming technological superiority against what it regarded as avowedly inferior indigenous forces. The Americans expected a quick victory over enemies whose history, culture and goals they knew little about. In both wars, following apparent initial military successes, US forces soon faced long, costly and ultimately successful insurgencies determined to expel American troops from their land. Furthermore, in both of these wars, as in Iraq, suspicion and fear of the United States increased among friend and foe around the world. The consequences were far from those intended.

The predominant official reason given by President William McKinley for the War against Spain in 1898 was the liberation of the Cuban people from historic Spanish oppression. The US Navy's decision to fight for Cuba in the Pacific altered the strategy of the war and led to the acquisition of a United States empire in the Pacific. In addition to extensive Pacific possessions, the unintended consequences of the Spanish-American War included a very bloody and savage suppression of a popular uprising against United States occupation in the Philippines. More than 120,000 American soldiers served in the brutal repression of the 'insurrection' which more or less came to an end by July 1902, although sporadic fighting continued until 1907. Over 4300 US soldiers were killed and at least 16,000 Filipino soldiers perished in brutal fighting in which torture was routinely used by American forces. Mass murders of civilians and incarcerations of whole towns and villages took place. Estimates of the number of Filipino civilians killed range from 250,000 to one million.

The unforeseen consequences of the Vietnam War were equally far reaching. Democracy was damaged at home and discredited abroad. The war unexpectedly brought down President Lyndon Johnson and put an end to Johnson's 'War on Poverty' and to his dream of the 'Great Society'. The cost of the war and the resulting inflation, the abuse of executive power that took place during the war, and the violations of civil liberties led to divisiveness, violent protest and unrest across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, the brutality of the war and the atrocities committed by US forces in Vietnam alienated many developing countries.

The nation was deeply divided over the conduct and policy of the military during the Vietnam War. To redeem themselves in the public eye and to preclude another disastrous limited war, US war planners turned to the strategies of Carl von Clausewitz, who had extolled Napoleon's use of huge armies and thunderous firepower. Henceforth, the United States must fight only when its vital national interests were threatened, and it must employ overwhelming force. One of the principal architects of the new Clausewitzian strategy was General Colin Powell, who was appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by President George H. W. Bush in 1989. Powell's version of Clausewitzian strategy governed the US conduct of the Gulf War of 1991. It was reprised as 'shock and awe' in the first days of the current war in Iraq. However, in Iraq—as in the Philippines initially and in Vietnam ultimately—massive force did not achieve the desired US political goals. An Iraqi regime was indeed

toppled, but the subsequent anti-American insurgency has so far proved impossible to suppress and it has brought worldwide disgrace upon the United States.

Intending alternatives

It is essential that the United States find alternatives to war, for its own sake and for the future survival of democracy as a political system at home and abroad. George W. Bush has repeatedly told the American people that the United States is waging a world-wide war on terrorism 'over there' so that it does not have to be fought 'over here'. In the next decade and beyond the United States, in its efforts to win the so-called 'war on terrorism' will most likely attempt to increase its military power further and further beyond its borders. This is a futile course of action. Military actions—especially in the Middle East—have generated widespread antagonism toward the United States and increased the likelihood of an attack on US soil by giving life, even legitimacy, to radical Islam. Rather than calling for an expanded and greater use of military force—as was the case in Vietnam when faced with a similar failure to change a culture it did not understand—the United States should content itself with looking for ways to encourage the gradual evolution of democracy through restraint and patience.

'Negotiation' rather than 'war' should become the United States' byword in its relations with all regimes, hostile as well as friendly ones. A realistic US foreign policy would engage with nations whose regimes are inimical to its own. A continuation of massive arms sales to 'allies' as a means of deterring potential enemies, as in the recent decision to transfer to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States tens of billions of dollars of technologically advanced military equipment, simply exacerbates tensions and leads to a greater likelihood of war. It seems as if Machiavelli rather than Clausewitz has had the last word about the irrepressibility of wars. ♦

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Their jointly-authored book, 'Unintended Consequences: The United States at War' was published by Reaktion Books in May 2007 and reviewed in the Winter 2007 'Defender'.