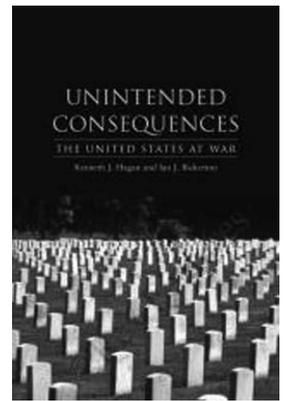


Unintended Consequences: The United States at War

Kenneth Hagan and Ian Bickerton

Reviewed by Jamie Cullens



With our current engagement in several overseas theatres of operation it is worth reflecting on Thucydides' comment that war 'is the last of all things to go according to programme'. Or Liddell Hart's remark that the 'idea that every war has been different from the last is the delusion of those who know no history'. *Unintended Consequences* pursues these themes. It can be a depressing narrative but once started it is hard to put down.

Kenneth Hagan hails from the US Naval War College and Annapolis, and Ian Bickerton from the Department of History at the University of New South Wales. They are well qualified to tackle this difficult but important subject and they ask challenging questions. Many of their ideas in the book were subsequently tested on students at the US Naval Postgraduate School.

As the current war in Iraq rolled into months and then years it became clear to the authors that the conflict has led to a large number of 'unintended and catastrophic consequences'. The provocative cover picture of the rows of headstones at Arlington National Cemetery, still increasing by the week, unfortunately suggests that things will remain the same for some time to come.

Unintended Consequences is a concise history 'offered as a cautionary tale for those who would rush to arms in order to solve unpleasant problems'. The authors claim that the US has been involved in more than 250 overseas military engagements since 1775 and examine ten American wars ranging from the so-called 'War of Independence' (which initially wasn't) to the continuing war in Iraq.

The book covers the US experience of war over more than 200 years in a compelling and fact-packed manner. It includes chapters on the Mexican war of 1846-1848, the 1898 war with Spain as well as the more familiar Civil War, World Wars, Korea and Vietnam. The authors outline the background to each conflict and then discuss the progress of each war, before finally presenting a section on their assessment of its unintended consequences.

At a time when Clausewitz is back in fashion, particularly in US professional military writing, Hagan and Bickerton develop the thesis 'that every US war transformed the national policies that led into the war'. The authors proceed to tackle Clausewitz's dictum that 'war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,' arguing that war produces new policy and the consequences are long term. They argue that not only was Clausewitz wrong but that he was 'seriously wrong'. The aim is to promote discussion and they focus on the malignant effects of war whilst recognising that war has also transformed the United States in positive ways.

The chapter on the war against Mexico is a fascinating story of the first war fought by the US on foreign soil and

the authors argue that its conduct resonates with the ongoing fight in Iraq. They note that proportionally it was the deadliest war ever fought by the US, with nearly 12,000 casualties at a cumulative mortality rate of 153.5 per thousand troops each year, compared to the US Civil War which had only 98 per thousand.

They argue that the war against Spain, which ranged from Cuba to the Philippines, resembles Iraq more than any other war. It was started to bring about a change in regime and to bring democracy to an oppressed people, and there was a strong moral righteousness in the war rhetoric at presidential level. Many of the operations were joint-Service in nature. The conventional fight was never in doubt but it soon degenerated into a brutal counter-insurgency, with atrocities and torture committed on a large scale by both sides (and some perpetrated by US commanders at the brigadier-general level). Sound familiar? The consequences of the war would manifest themselves for more than a hundred years and one was the acquisition by perpetual lease of Guantanamo Bay by the US.

Defence Update 2007 remarks that the 'stakes are high in Iraq and Afghanistan, not only for the peace and stability of those countries, but also because the outcome will influence how the United States uses its power in the future to deal with security challenges' – such as Iran, Pakistan and perhaps China. Australians probably didn't expect to have to go back into East Timor in force in May 2006 or return our Special Forces to Afghanistan, after only a short break, in May 2007. There is little doubt that we too will be dealing with unintended consequences of these actions for years to come.

You may not agree with all of the arguments in the sections on unintended consequences but this does not diminish from the overall impact of the book. *Unintended Consequences* is essential reading for national decision-makers and professional military education courses. It is also very good book for the general reader, being clear, concise, well-written and including good notes and a comprehensive bibliography. It does need some maps, particularly to illustrate some of the lesser known conflicts. ♦

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