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## Faith in War: The American Roots of Global Conflict

Gregory A. Daddis

*Chapman University*, [daddis@chapman.edu](mailto:daddis@chapman.edu)

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### Comments

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## ARE OUR STRATEGIC MODELS FLAWED?

# Faith in War: The American Roots of Global Conflict

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Gregory A. Daddis

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**ABSTRACT:** War has become a form of secular religion for many Americans in the modern era. Much of our deployment of military power during the last 50 years has rested on a set of absolute beliefs about the overall utility of war. In the process, policymakers and citizens alike maintain an enduring faith that the United States, via its military forces, has the power to transform societies abroad.

Religious fundamentalism. For at least the last decade and a half, countless Americans have relied on this one phrase to help them interpret violence across the globe and most certainly in the Middle East. More often than not, the words “religious” and “Islamic” become easily conflated, convenient aphorisms explaining what drives contemporary conflict. Many Westerners tend to view Islamic fundamentalism as a medieval, if not primitive, outlook; its adherents as not simply lagging in social and cultural development but turning their backs on the modern world. In the process, the lines between identity groups blur. Whether Taliban, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, or the Islamic State, religious zealots—militants who have forsaken not only modernity but also Western values and the civilized world—are “savages” who kill apostates, Muslim and Christian alike, to purify the world.<sup>1</sup>

If subversive Islamic fundamentalists selectively interpret the sacred text of the Qur’an to justify violence, is it possible Americans are equally discriminatory when defending their own, seemingly moral, obligations for waging war?<sup>2</sup> In truth, much of America’s deployment of military power during the last 50 years, even back to the early twentieth century, rested on a set of absolute beliefs, convictions amounting to a sort of secular fundamentalism. Policymakers and citizens alike possess an enduring faith that the United States, via its military forces, has the power to transform societies abroad.

While less religious in its call to arms than militant Islamic extremism, the devotion to reforming the world order in the American image still has strong theological underpinnings. Senator Albert J. Beveridge illustratively exclaimed God had “marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of

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1 Manfred Gerstenfeld, “Islamic Fundamentalism, the Permanent Threat,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 20, 2014; and Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *Atlantic*, March 2015. Of note, President Barack Obama has attempted to disassociate “extremism” from “religious fundamentalism.” See Kathleen Hennessey and Christi Parson, “At Summit on Extremism, Obama Defends His Semantic Choices regarding Islam,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 2015.

2 Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 138.

Dr. Gregory A. Daddis, an associate professor of history and director of Chapman University’s MA program in War and Society, has authored two books on the American War in Vietnam.

the world” in the late 1890s.<sup>3</sup> Over a century later, Chris S. Kyle, the American Sniper, deployed to the Middle East to fight against “fanatics” who “hated us because we weren’t Muslim.” According to one account, Kyle, like many soldiers, was “deeply religious and saw the Iraq War through that prism.”<sup>4</sup>

Such devotionals suggest many Americans feel war is not a necessary evil; it is simply necessary. This obligation to wage war rests on the conviction that nearly all American interventions abroad are both politically and morally justifiable. Even when questions are raised about legitimacy, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Americans’ faith in the transformative capacities of US military power is hardly dented. Thus, at the close of 2015, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham could argue proper military strategy would enable the United States not only to destroy the Islamic State quickly but also to do so while “creating conditions that can prevent it, or a threat like it, from ever re-emerging.”<sup>5</sup> These aspirations rested on little evidence that the United States could achieve such far-reaching goals in a region stubbornly resistant to American influence.

Moreover, dogmatic faith in what war can deliver limits serious debate about the utility of force in achieving foreign policy objectives. Since the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, most policy deliberations centered upon the mechanics of military strategy—troop strengths, stay-behind forces, and expansion of combat beyond certain countries’ borders. Left unexamined is the potentially flawed supposition that war is in fact furthering US policy goals. Hence, Andrew J. Bacevich observes that even in an era of “persistent conflict,” few senior officials, even those in the Pentagon, can explain why war has become “inescapable.”<sup>6</sup> With little reflection, war has become a reflexive, if not permanent, part of American conduct overseas.

### Faithful Works

The ideological underpinnings of this martial faith have a long history in the United States. Since at least the World War I era, Americans have fashioned war as a necessary struggle between democratic good and totalitarian evil. No doubt Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric matched his religious principles when he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and its allies in April 1917. Though Wilson lamented leading a “great peaceful people into war,” the president nonetheless felt obliged to “fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy” and for rights shared “by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.”<sup>7</sup>

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3 Beveridge quoted in John Lamberton Harper, *The Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25.

4 Chris Kyle, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*, with Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice (New York: William Morrow, 2013), 86; and Nicholas Schmidle, “In The Crosshairs,” *New Yorker*, June 3, 2013.

5 John McCain and Lindsey Graham, “How to Defeat ISIS Now—Not ‘Ultimately,’” *Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2015.

6 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 234.

7 Woodrow Wilson, “War Message” (address, 65th Congress, Washington, DC, April 2, 1917), [http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson's\\_War\\_Message\\_to\\_Congress](http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson's_War_Message_to_Congress).

Wilson's postulation of American democracy as the apogee of modern political development could be shared even by those citizens unenthusiastic about the American role in creating a liberal world order. When compared to Russian Bolshevism or German militarism, American-conceived liberalism, according to Wilson, was "the only thing that can save civilization from chaos."<sup>8</sup>

This sense of exceptionalism, hardly a cynical faith, became reified after the Allied victory in World War II. Americans believed they had fought for freedom and won, in part, because they were on the right side of history. The awareness of Japanese atrocities in China and German genocidal policies in Europe bolstered this sense of American moralism. Thus, historian Stephen E. Ambrose could look back admiringly and argue Americans won because of "moral superiority" and an open national system. "Democracy," Ambrose trumpeted, "proved better able to produce young men who could be made into superb soldiers than Nazi Germany."<sup>9</sup>

Ambrose's conception of democratic citizen-soldiers successfully fighting a global war against totalitarianism may have reinforced congenial notions of the "greatest generation," but World War II remained highly atypical. In fact, most of America's interventions in the twentieth century were undeclared executive actions. In Haiti, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Korea, Americans went to and remained at war for decades with little Congressional debate or oversight. In the process, US soldiers, sailors, and marines found themselves more frequently serving across the globe in police functions to stabilize hot spots and to facilitate enduring American access and influence abroad. This involvement was not an American version of imperialism, policy leaders contended, but rather a "Pax Americana" in which a strong, righteous nation was fulfilling its moral obligation to stabilize and secure the international system.

Though this confidence in American power has strong roots, we would be misguided to assume all policymakers and citizens embrace a faith-based approach to waging war. A national "way of war" paradigm is problematic given the ever-changing factors influencing both the causes and conduct of war. And yet, cultural constraints often do define how we think about conflict. As Patrick Porter convincingly asserts, Western exceptionalism has long viewed non-Western cultures as "naturally, irrationally violent." Thus, the idea that "the enemy is singularly obsessed with strength and weakness, impressed only by dash and brutal treatment" emerged.<sup>10</sup>

In the process, Americans easily fashioned any call to arms as a crusade for survival and national identity. In his state of the union address in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, President George W. Bush expressed hope that "all nations will heed our call, and

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8 Wilson quoted in Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 79.

9 Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 224.

10 Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40. On questioning the "way of war" thesis, see Antulio J. Echevarría II, *Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

eliminate the terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own.” His remarks were pure Wilsonian in tone and language. “History has called America and our allies to action,” Bush exclaimed, “and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom’s fight.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout that summer the president proclaimed our “nation is the greatest force for good in history.”<sup>12</sup>

A decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq—not to mention US drone strikes across the Middle East—did little to challenge such faith-based assumptions. In late 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter insisted the United States was going to “beat” the Islamic State because “we are . . . the noble and they are the evil. And we are the many and they are the few. And fundamentally we’re the strong.”<sup>13</sup> Could American strength truly emanate from our nobility and goodness? It seems doubtful the Islamic State sees the United States as a force for global good. In fact, from a different vantage point, crusading American rhetoric employed during the Global War on Terror could be interpreted as its own form of jihad.<sup>14</sup>

The duty to preserve, if not expand, American influence abroad has come at a cost. Since the end of World War II, US servicemen and women have served in what increasingly resembles an expeditionary force, akin to those of the British Empire in the late-nineteenth century. In fact, not long after 9/11, interventionist Max Boot advocated for a more imperial role. To Boot, the problem had “not been excessive American assertiveness but rather insufficient assertiveness.” In short, the United States was not acting “as a great power should.”<sup>15</sup> Such arguments, however, dismissed the historical record suggesting much of the Cold War era could be framed by the anticolonial struggle in the Third World. Nor did advocates of an American empire acknowledge, as did Douglas Porch recently, that throughout much of the past two centuries “soldiers on the colonial fringe deployed brutal tactics increasingly at odds with legal restraints.”<sup>16</sup>

This blurring of lines between the legitimate and extralegal use of force stems, in part, from how our faith shapes interpretations of the enemy. A crusading spirit drives Americans to believe their enemies, however defined, have aspirations of, and the capacity to achieve, global dominance. In short, all threats are existential. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks of 2015, Thomas Donnelly argued in the *Weekly Standard* that “Europe, in particular, faces what might well be an existential threat; a way of life does seem to hang in the balance.” The reason for Europe’s “collapse?” Because, Donnelly maintained, “the United States has stepped back from playing its role as the defender of the West.”

11 George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address” (speech, US Capitol, Washington, DC, January 29, 2002), <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

12 George W. Bush, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States George W. Bush, 2002*, bk. 2 (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, March 2006), 1517.

13 “Remarks by Secretary [Ashton] Carter at Fort Wainwright, Alaska,” US Department of Defense, October 31, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/626820/remarks-by-secretary-carter-at-a-troop-event-at-fort-wainwright-alaska>.

14 Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 4.

15 Max Boot, “The Case for American Empire,” *Weekly Standard*, October 15, 2001.

16 Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29.

Americans had lost their will and thus their way. Not so for the Islamic State. As Donnelly claimed, “This is a contest between the faithful—them—and the increasingly faithless—us.”<sup>17</sup>

Donnelly bewailed the loss of faith in a war against evil as nothing new. During the Cold War, for instance, nearly all politicians could lash out at opponents for not prosecuting the war against communism with more vigor. Truman’s supposed “loss of China” carried political weight for Republicans as few Americans wished to consider the possibility that US influence mattered little in the Chinese civil war between Mao Zedong’s communists and the Kuomintang-led government. In an ironic twist, the words of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy pontificated fellow Americans should not only build and maintain free nations abroad, but also to defend the one at home. H. W. Brands could thus wryly dub the height of McCarthy-era America as the “national insecurity state.”<sup>18</sup>

### Invested Talents

These Cold War and contemporary assumptions about the enemy undergirded Americans’ faith in war, both home and abroad. But so too, however, has been our faith in technology to defeat evil around the globe. Advanced weaponry promised victories at low cost (at least in American lives) and served as valuable symbols “of prestige, of technological prowess, [and] of national power and identity.” Yet as the twentieth century wore on, popular resistance movements proved frustratingly resistant to sophisticated military hardware. As Tami Davis Biddle notes, even the “overall political influence that was achieved by the possession of a vast nuclear arsenal is difficult to measure.”<sup>19</sup> Still, US policymakers believed throughout much of the Cold War that technological superiority enhanced national prestige and thus confirmed the strength (and righteousness) of a liberal democratic system over communism.

Technology also eased American incursions into postcolonial markets, a seeming necessity in the zero-sum game against Cold War communism. For the consumer-based culture of the 1950s, interventions abroad not only served to demonstrate resolve against the Red Scare of encroaching communism, but also ensured global economic access by shouldering American prosperity at home. American leaders still employed Wilsonian rhetoric when depicting their war aims: democracy and freedom remained at the center of faith-based calls for war. Moreover, the ever-growing market economy depended upon the expansion of US power overseas, and waging faith-based wars bridged the gap between domestic and foreign policies.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Thomas Donnelly, “An Existential Threat,” *Weekly Standard*, November 19, 2015.

18 H. W. Brands, *The Devil We Knew: Americans and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 31.

19 Tami Davis Biddle, “Shield and Sword: U.S. Strategic Forces and Doctrine since 1945,” in *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy since World War II*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 140; and Jeremy Black, *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents, 1450–2000* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 285.

20 As early as 1959, William Appleman Williams had established the quest for overseas markets had driven American interventions around the world long before the Cold War in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1959, 1972), 10.



Sustaining economic growth at home meant building a stable international system that allowed American access. To best achieve this vision, policymakers in the Kennedy era placed their faith in modernization theory. According to advocates like Walt Whitman Rostow, the United States would guide developing nations along a linear path to liberal capitalism. As Rostow explained, US mentorship would lead to “a new post-colonial relationship,” forming “a new partnership among free men—rich and poor alike.” Of course, such ambitions rested on the tenuous assumption that all “free men” embraced the American definition of modernity. Rostow and his supporters gave little heed to foreign political leaders, especially those in the Third World, who considered the source of their troubles not insufficient but rather excessive modernization. “Traditional” societies, modernizers argued, simply needed to overcome “pre-Newtonian science” and “long-run fatalism.”<sup>21</sup>

If modernization theorists erred in reducing the complexities of local histories and habitudes, so too did their successors in promoting nation-building abroad. Neoconservatives and liberal interventionists alike fashioned nation-building for their own needs to counter terrorism, to spread democracy, and to rebuild economies in war-torn countries. Underlying all of these aims was the faith Americans could create lasting democracies abroad. Even in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion (2003) and the erratic performance of US nation-building efforts, critics of the Bush administration leveled their charges on processes rather than objectives. Thus, one analysis of the Iraq reconstruction endeavor concluded successful “nation-building requires unity of effort across multiple agencies” and the creation of a “full integrated political-military plan.”<sup>22</sup> Whether such bureaucratic efficiencies would inspire a postconflict or failing state’s transformation into a lasting democracy was left unstated.

A crucial assumption laced within the promises of both modernization theory and the assurances of nation-builders is foreign people will always see Americans as liberators, never as invaders or occupiers. As Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton note, the “need to protect American freedom by the direct exertion of power has always coexisted uneasily with the American faith that other peoples if offered the chance will voluntarily adopt political systems and values consistent with those of the United States.”<sup>23</sup> Yet historical case studies ranging from the Philippines and Indochina to Somalia and Afghanistan suggest this faith is far too often misplaced. Of course, US forces have served admirably and been welcomed as part of numerous peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. Military interventions in support of nation-building efforts, however, regularly produced local fighters who judged Americans as doing little more than invading their own social and political spaces.

No US intervention during the Cold War better illustrated this point than the failed nation-building effort in South Vietnam. The Johnson administration never unlocked the mystery of simultaneously fighting a war and building a noncommunist nation. Though President

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21 Rostow quoted in Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 16, 45.

22 James Dobbins et al., *After the War: Nation-Building from FDR to George W. Bush* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 135–36.

23 Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500–2000* (New York: Viking, 2005), 424.



Johnson spoke in April 1965 of building schools, power plants, and farm programs, American outsiders could never convince the majority of the South Vietnamese population that their future best lay with the Saigon government.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, failure in Vietnam may have soured Americans on war, but only briefly. The decade following the fall of Saigon saw enough fighting for a recently retired US Army general to dub it an “era of violent peace.”<sup>25</sup> Post-Vietnam critics might question American exceptionalism, yet war’s exceptionalism seemed well intact.

Even if Americans were wary of foreign interventions after Vietnam, they still hardly denounced the frequent military operations taking US armed forces around the globe in the post-Cold War era. Once more, faith in American power reinforced overseas deployments. As Roland Paris notes of the period, “Peacebuilding missions in the 1990s were guided by a generally unstated but widely accepted theory of conflict management: the notion that promoting ‘liberalization’ in countries that had recently experienced civil war would help create the conditions for a stable and lasting peace.”<sup>26</sup> Yet from Africa to the Middle East to Eastern Europe lasting peace never seemed to quite take hold. Was it possible American influence and leadership could only achieve so much, even in an era when European allies were labeling the United States a “hyperpower?”

### Rightful Divisions

Such questions remained largely unanswered as American interventionists placed their faith in yet another application of military strategy: counterinsurgency. Written in 2006 as the war in Iraq was unraveling, the new counterinsurgency field manual conceded insurgencies were protracted affairs; thus, soldiers and their commanders had to manage their expectations. Yet the doctrine also promoted ambitious aims: military forces would help regain the population’s “active and continued support”; local security forces would assist in securing the population and separating them from the insurgents; and clear-hold-build operations would convince the populace to support the host-nation government. The doctrine’s writers hoped commanders could translate the lessons of the manual into practice and, with wise execution of their plans, “adapt and win.”<sup>27</sup>

This new doctrine fostered unrealistic expectations outside the military ranks about the possibilities of counterinsurgency. In the cities of Iraq and provinces of Afghanistan, however, the allegedly progressive, humanist approach retained a violent edge tending to undercut the more long-term goals of social and political stability. According to one survey, a massive increase in bombing to support military operations as part of

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24 Lyndon B. Johnson, “Peace without Conquest” (speech, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, April 7, 1965), <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650407.asp>.

25 Daniel P. Bolger, *Americans at War, 1975–1986: An Era of Violent Peace* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988).

26 Roland Paris, *At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

27 Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual (FM) 3-24 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2006), 2-1, 5-20, A-1. Of note, page 1-11 of HQDA, *Stability Operations*, FM 3-07 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2008), emphasized US national security strategy goals, including promoting “effective democracies.”

“the surge” resulted in US airstrikes killing “nearly four times as many Iraqis in 2007 than in 2006.”<sup>28</sup> Three years later Americans in Marjah, Afghanistan, spoke in violent clear-hold-build terms. After defeating a resurgent Taliban—“‘Mowing the grass,’ the soldiers and Marines derisively call[ed] it”—American commanders would bring government and police forces into the cleared area. “We’ve got a government in a box, ready to roll in,” claimed General Stanley McChrystal, the top American commander at the time.<sup>29</sup>

Looking back, the logic flaws become clear; for instance, how could counterinsurgents provide effective population-centric security leading to lasting local political reform if the population and its governmental leaders too often saw US soldiers as “anti-bodies” invading their body politic?

The tactical impracticalities of counterinsurgency paled in comparison to the larger faith that American forces overseas could change the very culture of local inhabitants and the armed forces in which they served. Paula Broadwell, David Petraeus’s biographer, cited the general’s challenge to a young American officer to help “change the culture of the Afghan military.”<sup>30</sup> Though public pronouncements of progress met with warm reception at home, they arguably lacked credible evidence in theater. After Petraeus’s departure, one US Army colonel wrote a searing epitaph on the counterinsurgents’ ambitions: “Ultimately, American strategy had failed in Afghanistan (and Iraq) because it was founded on an illusion—that American-style counterinsurgency could win Muslim hearts and minds at gunpoint and create viable nation-states on the Western model virtually from scratch in a short time.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet the lackluster record of American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan did little to dissuade the disciples of war from supporting US ground troops in Syria, Libya, and even the Ukraine. Michael O’Hanlon, for example, envisioned a “force package” of 25,000 American troops in Syria as part of a much larger international peacekeeping force. “It would not be an easy mission,” O’Hanlon acknowledged, “and Syria is not ripe for such a peace deal or peacekeeping force now.” Still, deploying US soldiers would be “promising.”<sup>32</sup> In a similar vein, Samantha Power, US ambassador to the United Nations, warned “against a kind of intervention fatigue, emphasizing that US leadership is needed now more than ever amid global threats from Ebola to the Islamic State.”<sup>33</sup>

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28 Michael A. Cohen, “The Myth of a Kinder, Gentler, War,” *World Policy Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 83, doi:10.1162/wopj.2010.27.1.75. Importantly, the new counterinsurgency doctrine did not eliminate the need for combat operations and noted the role violence plays in attempts to create a secure environment in which political progress might be made.

29 Dexter Filkins, “Afghan Offensive Is New War Model,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2010.

30 Paula Broadwell and Vernon Loeb, *All In: The Education of General David Petraeus* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 195. Of course, one could argue changing the culture of a military organization and of the local population are two separate matters, as well as American made progress in altering the culture of the Afghan military to be less corrupt and less brutal, while making comparatively little gains in changing civilian attitudes. On this issue, see Rochelle Davis, “Culture as a Weapon,” *Middle East Report* 40, no. 255 (Summer 2010): 8–13.

31 Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013), 135.

32 Michael O’Hanlon, “What 100,000 U.S. Boots on the Ground Get You in Syria,” Reuters, November 19, 2015.

33 Molly O’Toole, “UN Ambassador Warns against Intervention Fatigue,” *Defense One*, November 19, 2014.

If Power advised being “careful about overdrawing lessons” from US interventions abroad, then what should Americans take from decades of war that have at best unevenly realized foreign policy objectives? First, we should question the notion that democratic ideals and liberal capitalism are universal ideologies. During the Cold War, as David Engerman points out, both the United States and Soviet Union “held that their conceptions of society applied to all nations and people.”<sup>34</sup> Far from ushering in an era of peace after World War II, this ideological competition only furthered the global violence unleashed by colonialism’s demise. For Americans in particular, a longer view of history might have suggested that any transition to democracy was an inherently violent affair. Thus, perhaps it is beneficial to question our messianic faith that all peoples deem the US political system as the end state of history.

Second, Americans should realize that foreign policy rests on domestic consent and that dissent against military adventurism overseas is not an unpatriotic act. Like many fundamentalist faiths, our conviction in the utility of force abroad has little room for dissenting voices. When it comes to any talk of our armed forces, what emanates from the body politic is, in Cecilia E. O’Leary’s words, a “culturally conformist, militaristic patriotism.”<sup>35</sup> In the process, failure to wage war becomes an act of weakness rather than an act of restraint. Inaction becomes a failure of resolve. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy spoke for many Americans in 1965 when he argued the “international prestige of the United States, and a substantial part of our influence, are directly at risk in Vietnam.”<sup>36</sup> But were they? Was the prominence of one of the world’s superpowers truly at stake if the Vietnamese people chose communism over democracy in a civil war over national identity in the postcolonial era?

The crucial assumption that inaction axiomatically leads to loss of prestige, should be examined more forcefully by both policymakers and the citizens electing them to office. Jeremi Suri has called Americans a “nation-building people,” but these people hardly question the efficacy of the nation-building process or whether those receiving US aid actually desire to be built in an American image. Suri rightfully contends “nation-building always requires partners” and relationships are more important than raw power.<sup>37</sup> Yet, recent experiences indicate such relationships are often coercive and host-nation leaders invariably play the junior partners. While leaders such as South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem (1955–63) and Iraqi Prime Minister Nūrī al-Mālikī (2006–14) may have held immense leverage over their American benefactors, the unequal nature of allying with the United States often spreads bitterness and resentment rather than a faith in democratic ways.

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34 David C. Engerman, “Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917–1962,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume I: Origins*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 23.

35 Cecilia E. O’Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7.

36 Quoted in Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 177.

37 Jeremi Suri, *Liberty’s Surest Guardian: Rebuilding Nations after War from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 8, 271.

These unintended consequences lead to a final point: the employment of military force can actually run counter to desired policy objectives. Strategic miscalculations are hardly new. The Pearl Harbor and 9/11 attacks surely wrought unforeseen aftereffects for their architects. The same, however, could be said of US interventions over the last 15 years. Americans too easily dismissed Osama bin Laden's denunciations of US military presence on Islamic holy lands in the Middle East. It is unlikely the Bush administration anticipated a full-blown insurgency in response to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Thus, Americans should think more deeply about the repercussions of wielding their power so readily across the globe. As Alex Braithwaite persuasively argues, "the deployment of troops overseas increases the likelihood of transnational terrorist attacks against the global interests of the deploying state."<sup>38</sup> War is not without its consequences.

### Self-Examinations

Perhaps, then, our unquestioning faith in military force is misplaced. Despite defeat in Vietnam, which led to a temporary dip in enthusiasm for war, many (if not most) Americans still believe war can deliver. While we may not relish war—the challenges of military recruitment imply a lack of zeal in being part of war—we still have faith in it. But, on what evidence does this faith rely? A more critical appraisal might result in deeper inquisitions on the utility of force in the modern era. As Andrew Bacevich has asked, "How is it that our widely touted post-Cold War military superiority has produced not enhanced security but the prospect of open-ended conflict?"<sup>39</sup> If war only promotes more war, then why do we continue to turn to it?

In large sense, the United States' global application of force has become a new manifest destiny: our efforts around the world legitimize the belief that our calling is from some higher being. Our faith supports not only the goals of American-led democratic liberalism, but the means to achieve those ends as well. Yet "manifest destiny," a phrase first coined in the 1840s, has always been a myth, continuing to be, a conveniently persuasive cover for expanding the American empire. In the process, our faith in war goes largely unquestioned.

None of this is to argue, as Martin van Creveld did at the Cold War's end, that "present-day military power is simply irrelevant as an instrument for extending or defending political interests over most of the globe."<sup>40</sup> Rather, the point is Americans need to scrutinize their faith in military power. Internationalism and interventionism must be balanced with humility and an acceptance of limits. Collective security must be collective; coalitions cannot be built just as window dressing. And, Americans must accept not every foreign policy problem has a military solution.

Reflecting upon and challenging faith in the utility of military force is not unpatriotic, and questioning war's efficacy should not be a

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38 Alex Braithwaite, "Transnational Terrorism as an Unintended Consequence of a Military Footprint," *Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 2015): 374, doi:10.1080/09636412.2015.1038192.

39 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 156.

40 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 27.

third rail in American politics. War is unpredictable, chaotic, and more often than not destabilizing, even when outsiders endeavor to import freedom and democracy to a society. True, war helps “make the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us,” as Chris Hedges argues. But, Hedges is also correct in suggesting war frequently “suspends thought, especially self-critical thought.”<sup>41</sup> In an era of persistent conflict, it seems the time has come to think more critically about our faith in the power of military might.

War has become a secular religion for Americans. Yet, no religion promotes the best in humanity when its adherents narrowly view the world only through the lens of their own faith. If Anderson and Cayton are correct in proposing “Americans have fought less to preserve liberty than to extend the power of the United States *in the name of* liberty,” then the time is ripe for all of us to question not only our faith in war, but why we turn to it all too often.<sup>42</sup>

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41 Hedges, *War Is a Force*, 10.

42 Anderson and Cayton, *Dominion of War*, 421.