

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 10  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1980

Article 33

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7-4-1980

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### Recommended Citation

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# AMERICAN POWER AND THE SURVIVAL OF THE WEST

by

JAMES R. SCHLESINGER

**D**uring a recent period of tending a broken leg, I had an opportunity to reread Edward Gibbon's great 18th-century work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It makes melancholy reading; yet this book may have some degree of relevance to the current conditions of the United States. I particularly took note of the period in the middle of the third century, when the Emperor Gaius Gallus for the first time decided to pay blackmail to the barbarians, thinking that this would remove the threat to the Empire. It failed, and I thought that Gibbon's analysis was particularly pertinent: "As soon as the apprehensions of war subsided, the infamy of the peace was more deeply and more sensibly felt. The Romans were irritated to a still higher degree when they discovered that they had not even secured their repose, though they had forfeited their honor. The dangerous secret of the decadence and the weakness of the Empire had been revealed to the world. New swarms of barbarians, encouraged by the success of their brethren and not conceiving themselves bound by their obligation, spread devastation through the provinces and terror as far as the gates of Rome."

I do not suggest here that what Gibbon says is prophecy. Obviously we live in an entirely different world. The contest today is not between one universal state and the surrounding barbarians, but rather a contest primarily between the Soviet Union and the United States, each with a cluster of allies of various degrees of strength and steadfastness. Thus there are differences between the worlds

of the third and twentieth centuries. But while Gibbon's depiction of the Romans' plight is not a prophecy, it should serve as an admonition, for it tells us what may be in store for a great power once it psychologically accommodates to a period of decline. And a period of decline is what has set in. Whether reversible or not, I shall come to later.

**I**f one goes back to 1945, one sees a 20-year period, extending roughly to the midpoint of the Vietnam struggle, in which the Pax Americana reigned supreme. In that period there was an enormous expansion of worldwide trade and investment, and in the course of it a growth of income and production around the world that surprised those economists who had made projections at the close of World War II. That economic expansion and, incidentally, the spread of civil liberties around the world took place under the aegis of American power.

In more recent years, however, we have observed two trends that threaten continued American preeminence. One is the steady increase in American and Western dependency upon the oil resources of the Middle East; the second is the steady decline of the military power of the United States relative to that of the Soviet Union. As we have become more and more dependent upon the outside world, we have become less and less capable of defending our vital interests. And this incapability is undoubtedly a reflection of the wretched decade we have just traversed—a decade characterized by

national illusion, slippage, and follies of one sort or another. It has been a decade marked particularly by American self-doubts. It makes no difference whether one traces the beginnings back to the Tet offensive of 1968, to the US cross-border operations into Cambodia in 1970, to the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh in 1975, or to the action by the US Congress in the Angolan matter in 1976; there are a number of dates, but if one looks back over this period, it emerges clearly as a decade of American doubt, indecision, and self-reproach.

The self-criticism which has characterized this nation, normally a healthy activity, became to a considerable degree neurotic and self-destructive. Despite the post-World War II period, in which it was American strength that had been the principal bulwark of international stability, the US began to doubt the role of strength. Instead, it began to gravitate to the ironical belief that, since a position of strength had proved insufficient to achieve all of America's policy goals, somehow a position of weakness would be more satisfactory.

We had Senator Fulbright's lecture in that period on the arrogance of power, but as our power dwindled we displayed very little arrogance. Indeed, in contrast to Senator Fulbright's characterization, America's most consistently displayed trait in recent years has been the humility of impotence.

We criticized ourselves; we examined all of our conduct under a microscope, seeking for signs that somewhere the United States might be caught being partial to its own interests. And as we surveyed ourselves, we surveyed all of our allies around the world, trying to find moral defects. And we found them, from the time of President Diem of South Vietnam to the time of the Shah of Iran. And in the course of this period of moral laceration, it became downright perilous to be a Third World ally of the United States.

With the lapse of the decade of the 70's, we may be entering a new era. I am less confident of that now, however, than I was last fall. But the actions of the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan promise at least to sweep away

some of the illusions that have characterized America's conduct of foreign affairs in the course of the last decade. They may not spawn the necessary understanding of the role of strength in this dangerous world, but some of the illusions are being dissipated, and for this we may someday wish to raise a statue to the Ayatollah.

Over the course of the past decade, governed by our various illusions, we have neglected some of the fundamental realities of international affairs, and it is high time that we came back to them. The first fundamental is that military power still has utility and relevance. True, societies are ultimately based on values, but not only on values. The principal value represented by the United States is freedom, national freedom as well as personal freedom. We have spent much talk in recent years on the value of personal liberties and human rights. The point we must understand better than we have in the past is that none of our values, including that of freedom, can be sustained in the absence of strength, notably military

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strength. Skepticism concerning the utility of military power has been the fashionable point of view. To a considerable extent it remains the fashionable point of view. It is a preposterous point of view.

Military power is what permitted Britain and Russia to survive in World War II; it permitted Russia to take over the satellites of Eastern Europe. It was not the hearts and minds of the people but rather the military power deployed by North Vietnam that captured Saigon. Military power has permitted Israel to survive. It is only in the United States—*only in the United States!*—that citizens have held to this curious belief that military power lacks utility. It is the belief of a generation spoiled by an excess, if that's what it is, of security. Only those who have known security all of their lives can possibly think that military power is irrelevant.

Military power is the ultimate arbiter of international affairs. Ideally, its role is not to be used but rather to inspire awe. In the period of Pax Americana from 1945 to 1965, American military power did not need to be employed often because the United States inspired sufficient awe that few would run the risk of challenging her. We were thus successful in deterring attacks against our interests. In this period, and up to the late 1960's, we had strategic superiority—a strategic superiority which permitted us to maintain deterrence in the Middle East without the deployment of forces there. It was also true that the United States had clearcut naval superiority during this entire period. The position of the US fleet was basically unchallenged. These conditions have now changed, and I shall shortly turn to the implications of such change.

But it is the existence of military power, not its use, that is critical. One must not only have military power, of course, but the perceived will to use it. When military power has to be employed, it has in a sense failed, because the quintessential rationale for the existence of military power is the avoidance of war.

A second fundamental is that the Soviet Union remains a rival of the United States; it

is not simply a partner in detente. The Soviets have been quite clear both in their own minds and in their representations to us about their relationship to the West and about the role of detente. The Soviets say unequivocally that detente requires the intensification of the ideological struggle, by which they mean their obligation to support “wars of national liberation” around the world. Detente itself in the Soviet view is but a reflection of the shifting correlation of forces in favor of the Soviet Union and against the West. We will have to cast off our hypnosis by detente and relearn the nature of international rivalry.

A third fundamental we are in the process of relearning is that the hostility to us on the part of other nations is not simply the expression of legitimate grievances that it is our duty to discover. The hostility of nations, like that of humans, can be based on conflicting interests, ideologies, and values, and frequently on such ignoble factors as simple hate and jealousy.

In sum, the enviable security enjoyed by the American people over the past 10 years has obscured the three fundamental realities of international affairs discussed above, permitting the growth of these corresponding illusions—that the utility of military power has disappeared, that the Soviet Union has no objective other than to serve as an appropriate partner in detente, and that the reactions of other nations hostile to the United States are presumptively expressions of legitimate grievance.

**A**merica's weakness has been highlighted by its impotence in the face of the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan. It is frequently remarked that we were shocked by the Soviet movement into Afghanistan. Why should we have been shocked? The Soviets have been the dominant force in Afghanistan since April 1978. At the time of the original coup by Taraki, the Afghans changed their national symbol to the red flag. A Muslim nation that adopts the red flag is, I think, conveying a message to us. The Soviets ran lines of communication into Afghanistan after 1978 equivalent to the lines of communication that they have established in

Eastern Europe. They were treating Afghanistan as a de facto satellite well before the invasion. Under such circumstances, we need not have been shocked. The Soviet movement into Afghanistan was also predictable on doctrinal grounds, viz. (1) the Soviet interpretation of detente, as was noted above, which requires intensification of the ideological struggle; (2) the long-term Soviet policy of support of "wars of national liberation"; and (3) the Brezhnev Doctrine, which decrees in effect that once a country neighboring the Soviet Union becomes Marxist, Soviet military forces will be used to prevent a counter-revolution.

Thus, we need not have been surprised or taken aback. Our anger in large degree reflected the illusions that we ourselves had developed over the course of a decade and longer. The Soviets have proclaimed quite clearly over the years that international developments reflect the correlation of forces. The correlation of forces is primarily, though not exclusively, military in nature. Since 1949 the Soviet Union has been blocked in Western Europe by the existence of NATO, itself stiffened by the prepositioning of US forces armed with nuclear weapons. The Soviets have been blocked also in the Far East to a large extent, primarily by the shift of the People's Republic of China toward the West and by a certain toughening of Japanese policy apparent in recent years. What remains for probing is the vast area underneath and in-between, what Winston Churchill today would refer to as the soft underbelly of Eurasia.

It happens that this area of historic Russian, as well as Soviet, interest now contains the principal oil reserves of the world. It is on these reserves that the industrial world and the West will continue to depend for survival. I underscore this harsh fact. Though all sorts of panaceas are offered with regard to the energy problem, there is no near-term workable alternative to access to the oil reserves of the Middle East. Project Independence, "synfuels," deregulation, etc. are not going to solve even the American energy problem. Europe, Japan, and the underdeveloped world as well will remain

dependent on the oil of the Middle East. The OPEC nations today have 82 percent of the world's proven reserves, and that percentage is rising. If the Free World is to be held together, the United States—which is the only country capable of maintaining stability in the Middle East and serving as a counterweight to Soviet pressure—will have to be the leader and primary actor in the endeavor.

The Soviets, as dialectical materialists, are believers in what they call the objective forces of history. Correlation of forces in the Soviet view is paramount, and what they have perceived in the course of recent decades is the slow shift of the balance of power away from the United States in their favor. If that shift is permitted to continue, it will be catastrophic not only for the United States but for the entire West. Indeed, the fundamental fact of international life today is the steady deterioration of the US position in the Indian Ocean adjacent to the oil-producing regions of the Middle East and the possession by the Soviet Union of strategic momentum in the area. Unless that momentum is reversed, unless the deterioration of our position is halted, we shall witness a world calamity of unthinkable proportions. Soviet control of the oil tap in the Middle East implies an end to the Free World as we have known it since 1945. The stakes are that large! Indeed, the United States and her allies today stand in peril as great as that of the darkest days of World War II. That peril is not because of the invasion of Afghanistan, as the President has suggested, but because of the broader deterioration throughout the Middle East.

**L**et us review some of the features of that deterioration. In 1977-78, Soviet generals guiding the destinies of Cuban and Ethiopian forces established Soviet dominance in the Horn of Africa. In the spring of 1978, the initial coup in Afghanistan resulted in the effective satellitization of that nation and a major Soviet penetration into South Asia. In the summer of 1978, the chiefs of state of the two Yemens were simultaneously murdered,

resulting in a weakening of North Yemen and the conversion of South Yemen into a more effective instrument of Soviet policy. Indeed, 1978 was the last year of the so-called Northern Tier, a belt of nations comprising Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, which was established by the Baghdad Pact and CENTO to preclude Soviet movement southward to the gulf. In the course of 1978, the Northern Tier collapsed. Pakistan moved its premier diplomat from the Embassy in Washington to the Embassy in Moscow, believing that it would henceforth have to work out its destiny with the Soviet Union. Turkey, alienated from the United States by the cutoff of military assistance engineered by the US Congress in 1975 as a result of Cyprus, was suffering increasingly disruptive economic developments owing to the rise in oil prices. In the middle, the Shah of Iran, the linchpin of American policy, teetered on his throne. The fall of the Shah was a blow to US foreign policy of still unmeasured ramifications.

With the collapse of the Northern Tier and the adverse developments in Afghanistan, southern Arabia, and Ethiopia, the oil-rich states of the Arabian peninsula understandably began to feel encircled. The West had worries as well. The Soviet movement into Afghanistan established their forces some 350 miles from the Strait of Hormuz. Through that strait each day comes some 20 million barrels of oil. That is 40 percent of all the oil consumed in the Free World, 60 percent of all the oil moving in international commerce. The strait is the coronary artery of the Free World, and it is now under serious threat.

But these events, ominous as they were, were not the end of our troubles. The deterioration of the US position has continued. The events of last November in Saudi Arabia are quite significant. There has been some tendency to underestimate the seriousness of the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca. That attack went undetected by Saudi intelligence. The attackers were able to resist Saudi security forces for 15 days. It was a well-planned, well-rehearsed attack by well-trained men, probably drawing their inspiration from

sources in South Yemen. This was not the action of religious fanatics.

At the same time as the attack on the Grand Mosque, there were disorders around Dhahran in the east, where much of the Saudi oil is produced. The Saudi regime draws its legitimacy from its role as the protector of the Holy Places, and the attack on the Mosque undermines the legitimacy of the regime, not only in the eyes of its own people but in the eyes of the surrounding nations. Saudi Arabia's position has been compromised still further by events in the two Yemens, which occupy the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula. South Yemen, determinedly Marxist, is a Soviet client which has now accepted Cuban and East Bloc personnel on its soil. North Yemen, which has served as a counterweight to its neighbor, appears to be wavering and might well drift out of the Western orbit. With a combined population well in excess of that of Saudi Arabia, the two Yemens, if united under a hostile, aggressive regime, could pose a serious threat not only to Oman but to Saudi Arabia itself. The collapse of Saudi Arabia would be the ultimate disaster for American policy in the Middle East.

What we have then is a steady intensification of problems in the area. It was a year ago that the Saudi press began to talk about the Soviet onslaught in the Middle East and American passivity in the face of that onslaught. More recently we have begun to adjust, but we have not adjusted sufficiently. Like most democracies, we have reacted with too little too late. What happens in the Middle East will determine the destiny of the Free World, and the problem will not be solved by rhetoric.

**W**hat should we be doing? Three immediate steps are essential. First, we should redeploy major elements of US military forces into the Indian Ocean in order to establish a proper deterrent. At this moment, the Soviet Union possesses an order of battle north of the Iranian border which makes it the militarily dominant power in the region. In the long run, the outcome of the struggle will be determined by the balance of

power. Symbolic gestures will not suffice. Our reaction to Afghanistan has been to establish a grain embargo against the Soviet Union and a boycott of the Olympics, both actions which make us feel a lot better, but they are strategically immaterial to events in the Middle East. In order to maintain our position in that area satisfactorily, we must redress the prevailing balance of power.

The United States should thus move major elements of its own defense establishment into the region of the Indian Ocean, including sizable deployments of Marines. Ultimately we are going to require permanent land-based forces in the region for a proper and effective deterrent, just as the appropriate deterrent in Berlin depends upon the presence of a US brigade. That brigade will not, of course, whip the Warsaw Pact powers single-handedly, but it establishes bona fide protection because there is no desire on the part of the Soviets to clash with US forces, weak though they may be. Further, we are going to need a permanent effective base structure in the Indian Ocean. Berbera on the coast of Somalia will not suffice. The situation ruefully calls to mind the Russian who was commenting on the American desire to find bases in the Indian Ocean: "When you get to Berbera, you'll find that there's not much there. It's a pretty shabby facility. If you want to see a *real* facility, you should visit Cam Rahn Bay!"

The second vital step is to restore the intelligence community, in particular the CIA. The habit of self-flagellation is not something confined to Shiite Muslims in the month of Muharram. Here in the United States we have been indulging in self-flagellation for the last five years, with the whips falling most sharply on the intelligence community. Obviously, intelligence analysis of developments in the Middle East in recent years has not been of high quality. More significant is the fact that we have virtually crippled our own capability for covert operations. That capability needs to be restored. It will not be restored by the passage of a legislative charter for the CIA or a legislative charter for the intelligence community. A legislative charter simply

means more restrictions, and more restrictions by any other name remain the same thing.

If we had had an effective intelligence establishment, and if indeed we had been prepared to make use of it, or it was perceived that we were prepared to make use of it, the position of the United States today would be less handicapped in the Middle East than it is.

Third, we must restore grant military assistance. At the very moment that we decided to reduce our own armed forces under the Nixon Doctrine, which would have us depend upon the indigenous forces of our allies, we decided to strike down grant military aid, which was the sole mechanism by which indigenous military forces could be created and sustained. Today we are in the humiliating position of having to beg the Saudis for money if we are to provide military assistance to such nations as Egypt, Morocco, and Pakistan. Alternatively, we can offer credits, but our credits go at the usurious rate of 13 percent per annum. The financial position of the Pakistanis is not such that they are able to buy several billion dollars' worth of equipment at 13 percent per annum, even if they were inclined to buy it. We will have to restore grant military assistance if we are truly dedicated to the survival of the West in this region.

**T**he three measures described above should be taken now. They involve shedding more illusions, and they will involve costs and inconvenience. But we cannot afford to lose much time in debating these issues; the stakes are too high. Moreover, there are two more fundamental policy shifts needed for the longer term. The first involves the level of defense expenditures. We are going to have to do something serious about defense spending. At this juncture the Soviet Union is outspending us by 50 percent. More significantly, in terms of military investment, she is outspending us by 100 percent, the cumulative effects of which over the course of a decade will leave the Soviet Union with a force posture twice our own. Indeed, the Soviet Union today is spending more on military procurement than

all of the West combined. We sometimes hear that we do not have to spend as much as the Soviets because we have useful allies while they do not. But the Soviets are outspending all of us—Germans, Japanese, ourselves, and all the rest. We are going to have to get down to brass tacks, and that does not mean more budget fakery about defense expenditures. We are not going to be able to compete militarily with the Soviet Union on 5.2 percent of the gross national product.

The second long-range measure, most significant of all, is the adoption of an American foreign policy which is perceived by other nations as steadfast and stalwart, one prepared to support our friends and deny comfort to our enemies. The decline in the perception of the steadfastness of the United States has been a more significant factor in our weakness in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere than the weakening of our military posture per se. It has become distinctly risky for a Third World country to ally itself with the United States because of our inclinations toward self-righteousness and our unreliability and unpredictability in moments of crisis. We must have a foreign policy that is perceived as firm. That is not something that can be changed immediately. It is a long-term problem, depending to a large degree on improvement of our defense posture vis-à-vis that of the Soviet Union. Perceived steadiness, strength, and reliability are essential ingredients in our being able to retrieve and maintain our world position.

The United States did not reach its present

point of decline in a day, and it will not retrieve its position in a day. Pianist José Iturbi was once asked whether he needed to practice, and he responded, "Indeed I do." "How frequently do you practice?" "Everyday. If I miss one day, *I* notice the difference. On the second day the *critics* notice the difference, and on the third day the *public* notices the difference." Our problem in America is that we have reached the morning of the fourth day, and the international audience out there has become well aware of the difference—it no longer has the same regard for American power and American policy that it once did.

**I**f we are determined to preserve the values of Western liberty well into the 21st century, we have no alternative to getting started on the measures outlined above, and getting started quickly.

I am not, despite the apocalyptic tone of my remarks, without optimism. In 1941, at the time of Pearl Harbor, one of our most senior figures in military intelligence looked around at the wreckage of Pearl Harbor and observed, "We're going to win this war, I know that, but God bless my soul if I know how!" I don't know how we are going to straighten ourselves out either, but it has been observed that "God looks after fools, drunkards, and the United States." Let us hope that we still have the kind Providence spoken of in this observation. But let us place primary reliance on ourselves.

