

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 31
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2001*

Article 8

11-20-2001

Stability, America's Enemy

Ralph Peters

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Peters, Ralph. "Stability, America's Enemy." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 31, 4 (2001).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol31/iss4/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Stability, America's Enemy

RALPH PETERS

© 2001 Ralph Peters

From *Parameters*, Winter 2001-02, pp. 5-20.

The diplomats and decisionmakers of the United States believe, habitually and uncritically, that stability abroad is our most important strategic objective. They may insist, with fragile sincerity, that democracy and human rights are our international priorities--although our policymakers do not seem to understand the requirements of the first and refuse to meet the requirements of the second. The United States will go to war over economic threats, as in Desert Storm. At present, we are preoccupied with a crusade against terrorism, which is as worthy as it is difficult. But the consistent, pervasive goal of Washington's foreign policy is stability. America's finest values are sacrificed to keep bad governments in place, dysfunctional borders intact, and oppressed human beings well-behaved. In one of the greatest acts of self-betrayal in history, the nation that long was the catalyst of global change and which remains the beneficiary of international upheaval has made stability its diplomatic god.

Our insistence on stability above all stands against the tides of history, and that is always a losing proposition. Nonetheless, our efforts might be understandable were they in our national interest. But they are not. Historically, instability abroad has been to America's advantage, bringing us enhanced prestige and influence, safe-haven-seeking investment, a peerless national currency, and flows of refugees that have proven to be rivers of diamonds (imagine how much poorer our lives would be, in virtually every regard, had our nation not been enriched by refugees from Europe's disturbances in the last century).

Without the instability of the declining 18th century, as the old European order decayed, we would not have gained the French assistance decisive to our struggle for independence. Without the instability of the 20th century, protectionist imperial regimes might have lingered on to stymie our economic expansion. And without the turbulence that seeks to rebalance the world today, much of humanity would continue to rot under the corrupt, oppressive regimes that are falling everywhere, from the Balkans to Southeast Asia. A free world subject to popular decision is impossible without the dismantling of the obsolete governments we rush to defend. In one of history's bitterest ironies, the United States finally became, in the 1990s, the reactionary power leftists painted us during the Cold War.

Before examining in greater detail why instability abroad is often to America's long-term benefit, let us consider the foolish manner in which we have descended from being a nation that championed change and human freedom to one that squanders its wealth, power, and lives in defense of a very bad status quo.

We began well enough, applauding Latin America's struggles to liberate itself from the grip of degenerate European empires (except, of course, in the case of Haiti, whose dark-skinned freedom fighters made our own Southern slaveholders nervous). The Monroe Doctrine was not about stability, but about protecting a new and beneficial instability from reactionary Europe. We did take an enormous bite of Mexican territory, which Mexico had inherited and could not manage, but we did not attempt to destroy or to rule Mexico. At the end of our Civil War, we were even prepared to intervene militarily on Mexico's behalf against European interlopers, had not the "Emperor" Maximilian met a fitting end at Mexican hands.

It all began to go wrong when we found ourselves with an accidental empire. Future historians, with the clarity allowed by centuries, may judge the Spanish-American War to have been America's decisive conflict, a quick fight that changed our nation's destiny and practice fundamentally. Brief, nearly bloodless, and wildly victorious, that war's importance has always been underestimated. Unlike almost all of America's other wars, it was a war that need not have been. Because it did happen, we turned outward, abandoning the convent for the streets, and could not go back. With

that war, we became an imperial power, if a benign one, thus denying our heritage as the key anti-imperial power in history.

Domestically, the nation we have today is the result of our Civil War. Internationally, our fate was shaped by the Spanish-American War--more than by any of the wars that followed, despite their greater scope and striking results. Occurring at the peak of unbridled domestic capitalism, the Spanish-American War made of us an extractive power, in which the earnings of fruit companies became more important than support for freedom and democracy. Our bayonets served business, not ideals. This pattern of valuing profit above our pride--or even elementary human decency--holds true in our present relationships with states as diverse as Saudi Arabia and China (during the captivity of a US military aircrew in the spring of 2001, some American businessmen went to Capitol Hill to make China's case, rather than rallying to support our service members; our diplomatic blank check written to Saudi Arabia on behalf of our oil interests has allowed behind-the-scenes Saudi support for terrorists, while Saudi intelligence services stonewall us and Saudi citizens commit unprecedented acts of violence against the United States).

Despite evidence to the contrary throughout the 20th century, it has remained our conviction that stability abroad is good for business and, thus, for the United States--yet, the globalization of America's economic reach was enabled only by the colossal instabilities of collapsing empires. We argued that peace was good for business, no matter the human cost of an artificial peace imposed with arms, across a century when wars, revolutions, and decade after decade of instability opened markets to American goods, investors, and ideas. Were the maps of today identical to those of a century ago, with the same closed imperial systems in place, our present wealth and power would be impossible. America has always had a genius for picking up the pieces--the problems arise when we insist on putting those pieces back together exactly as they were before. I know of no significant example in history where an attempt to restore the status quo ante bellum really worked. The new "old" regime always turns out to be a different beast, despite attempts to fit it with a worn-out saddle. Neither bribes nor bullets (nor clumsy, corrupting aid) can make the clock run backward.

Consider another decisive event roughly contemporary to our war with Spain, the Boxer Rebellion in China. Anxious to prove we were equal to any member of the club of great powers, we joined the punitive expedition to Peking (as it then was spelled) and fought against an indigenous movement which, despite its grim methods, hoped to free its country from outrageous foreign exploitation and humiliation. Of course, that was a time when men with yellow skins were judged by most Americans as incapable of anything but mischief or lassitude, and I do not imagine that we might have switched sides--after all, our own legation was under siege, along with those of other, far-more-brutal powers. Still, imagine how much less savage the 20th century might have been in Asia, and how much more peaceable the world today, had the Boxers won. The weakness upon which the European powers insisted frustrated any hope of internal development and left China naked in the face of Japanese aggression a generation later. Even during the greatest struggle in China's history--that against Japanese barbarism--we demonstrated our appetite for an imagined stability, creating for ourselves an image of Chiang Kai-shek that ignored his venality, callousness, cowardice, and impotence.

Our support for Chiang prefigured the behavior of the American diplomats of the eruptive 1990s, men and women who pretended that a functioning government remained wherever a single mid-level bureaucrat had a working phone in the blazing capital city. Stamp our feet in outrage as we will at Chinese intransigence today, we hardly may claim to have been China's benefactor in the past. As the 19th century ended and the 20th began, we chose to collude in defending the existing world order, thereby losing a world of possibilities. Our actions may have been inevitable in the context of the times, but that does not make them wise.

The Great War began to break up the old imperial system that hindered the expansion of American trade, but we did our best to defend the old order to spite ourselves. Apart from President Wilson's hand-wringing at Versailles, our newly acquired appetite for order trumped any concern we had for human freedom and self-determination. And we paid a rarely acknowledged price for our complicity in propping up the ancien régime one more time. Given our preference for micro-causation and our snapshot approach to historical analysis, we may have misunderstood the true cause of the Great Depression. The "irrational exuberance" of the day served as an accelerator, but the historical force that drove so much of the developed world into the Depression was the attempt by the cartel of Great War victors to preserve the imperial trading order, with its restricted markets and an inherent stress on the metropolitan production of

every type of industrial good without regard to efficiency. The imperial system, despite a bit of jerry-rigging, no longer answered the world's economic requirements. A brutally simple economic law is that only the expansion of possibilities enables the expansion of wealth, but the goal of Europe's waning empires was to restrict possibilities. Another seeming law is that developed economies cannot exist in equilibrium: When they cease to advance, they retreat. The old pre-globalization machine could not go forward anymore. The Depression marked the breakdown of a world economic system that had lingered into decrepitude.

Of note, the nations most immediately affected by the Depression were all trading nations, because those were the states the international system had failed; the more autarchic the state, the less it suffered in the short term, giving rise to the illusion that isolated Russia and sequestered Germany provided viable models for the future. We defended a static world order and ultimately reaped the most destructive war in history (one doesn't need a revisionist bent to recognize the economic logic that drove the monstrous German and Japanese regimes to attack the tottering imperial system that excluded them from dependable access to resources). Even our willingness to wink at the rise of Hitler and Mussolini was symptomatic of a preference for stability above all. Mussolini "made the trains run on time," and Hitler did seem to get the Weimar Republic under control at last. Did the Great Depression and the Second World War occur in the forms in which we experienced them simply because America voted, along with the depleted European victors at the end of the Great War, to stop the clock wherever the clock could not be turned back?

History insists. The thrust of the imperial twilight was toward breaking down antiquated structures, and World War II did just that. The single great beneficiary was the United States. Yet, we assumed our resounding success was somehow fragile and provisional; immensely powerful, we exaggerated our weaknesses. The Cold War was the last gasp of the last old empire, the Soviet incarnation of the Russian domain of the czars, over-extended--fatally--into eastern and central Europe. And the Cold War deformed American strategic thought and our applied values beyond recognition. From the amoral defender of Europe's rotten empires, we descended to an immoral propping up of every soulless dictator who preferred our payments to those offered by Moscow. We utterly rejected our professed values, consistently struggling against genuine national liberation movements because we saw the hand of Moscow wherever a poor man reached out for food or asked for dignity. At our worst in the Middle East, we unreservedly supported--or enthroned--medieval despots who suppressed popular liberalization efforts, thus driving moderate dissidents into the arms of fanatics. From our diplomatic personnel held hostage in Iran a generation ago, to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, we have suffered for our support of repressive, "stable" regimes that radicalized their own impoverished citizens. In the interests of stability, we looked the other way while secret police tortured and shabby armies massacred their own people, from Iran to Guatemala. But the shah always falls.

Would that we could tattoo that on the back of every diplomat's hand: The shah *always* falls. Our age--roughly the period from 1898 through the end of the 21st century--is an age of devolution, of breaking down, of the casting off of old forms of government and territorial organization in favor of the popular will. Certainly, the forces of reaction can look very strong--deceptively strong--and the temptation is always to back the devil you know (and who allows you to explore for oil on his territory). But make no mistake--in one essential respect, today's America is on the same side as the most repressive voices in the Islamic world and the hard, old men in Beijing: We are trying to freeze history in place. And it cannot be done. In our ill-considered pursuit of stability (a contradiction in terms), we have raised up devils, from terrorists to dictators, who will not be easily put down.

The Cold War warped our thinking so badly that when the Soviet empire finally collapsed in 1991, we proclaimed a new world order while thoughtlessly doing our best to preserve the old one. Our diplomats and decisionmakers needed new thinking at least as badly as did the men in Moscow. Look at our track record over the last decade: It is a litany of predetermined failures that would be laughable were it not for the human suffering that resulted.

- When our greatest enemy, the Soviet empire, finally came apart, then-Secretary of State James Baker hurriedly tried to persuade the empire's components to remain together. Blessedly, the newly independent states weren't having any of that nonsense. When the American effort to keep Humpty-Dumpty up on his wall failed, we nonetheless continued, unto this day, to support the territorial integrity of a Russian Federation that remains an enfeebled, but cruel empire. No matter how many Chechens may be slaughtered, we content ourselves with a polite wag of the finger, shrug our shoulders, then concede that massacre is an internal matter.

- After a stunning battlefield victory against Iraq, we ensured that Iraq would not suffer a "power vacuum," but would remain a sovereign state within its existing borders--even though Iraq was an unnatural, constructed state, not an organic one, and the price of its continued existence was the slaughter of Shiites in the south, the continued suffering of Kurds in the north, and the deprivation of the remainder of Iraq's population to suit the vanity of a criminal dictator. Infatuated, as usual, by the mirage of a restored status quo ante bellum, we still face the same enemy we did a decade ago. Another reason for leaving Saddam in place was our fear of offending neighboring Arab monarchs and leaders, who themselves dread deposition. Our reward has been their discreet approval of the worst terrorists in history (no Arab or other Islamic state has made a serious effort to interfere with Osama bin Laden or his confederates; on the contrary, many are quietly gleeful at American suffering, even while professing their "deepest sympathies," and elements within Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have provided funding or other support for anti-American terrorism).
- In Somalia, we insisted that a collection of incessantly competing tribes was a bona fide state, and we paid for our willful illusions in blood and embarrassment (note to Washington: lines on a map do not make a functional state).
- In Haiti, our priority has not been popular well-being, but the preservation of a central state apparatus, however incapable, demeaning, and corrupt.
- In the former Yugoslavia--a miniature empire if ever there was one--the senior Bush Administration then the Clinton Administration attempted to persuade the constituent parts of an ever-shrinking "state" that it was in their best interests to remain together, citing our own campus theorists who reasoned ethnic hatred out of existence and insisted that, all in all, the peoples of Yugoslavia got along just fine. Of course, the specimen populations paid insufficient heed to our professors and slaughtered each other with enthusiasm. Instead of considering the evidence of ethnic incompatibility at this point in history as displayed in blood before our eyes, we sent in our troops in the blithe expectation that corpses might be made to shake hands with one another. Today, we pretend that the Bosnian Federation is more than a hate-crippled criminal refuge and that Kosovo will someday be a happy component of Greater Serbia. As of this writing, we are making believe that a band-aid or two will fix whatever might be wrong with Macedonia. Our quest for stability in the Balkans has led to a false, fragile stability dependent on the presence, for decades to come, of foreign troops. To our credit, we stopped the killing, though belatedly, but we botched the peace so badly that our most enduring achievement has been to make the Balkans safe for black-marketeers.

Operation Desert Storm was our only victory of the past decade, and we threw its fruits away. We clutched the false god Stability to our bosoms, and now we are paying for our idol worship. History (for want of a better word) does have a godlike force, and we have stood against it. We have devalued our heritage, behaved as hypocrites, and succored monsters--and there is no sign that we will change our ways. From decomposing Indonesia (the questions are only of the speed of secession and the cost in blood) to the Arabian peninsula, we refuse to imagine the good that change might bring.

How did we come to this? In all other spheres, we have been the most creative, imaginative, innovative, and flexible nation in history. How is it that our diplomats and those who must rely upon them fell in love with the past, when our national triumphs have resulted from embracing the future?

Unfortunately, it can be easily explained. In times of sudden change, men look to what they know. When, after 1898, America abruptly found itself a world power with possessions offshore and across the Pacific, our diplomats relied on the existing model--the European system of collusion and apportionment designed at the Congress of Vienna by Prince Metternich, manipulated artfully in the next generation by Palmerston and his associates, and perfected, tragically, by Bismarck, whose genius led him to design a European security system that only a genius could maintain (and Bismarck's successors were not men of genius). Just on the eve of a new century that would sweep away the old order, we bought into the European system of mutual protection and guarantees (even defeated countries are not allowed to disappear; the lives of rulers, however awful their behavior, are sacrosanct; and states do not interfere in the domestic affairs of other states, etc.).

It was especially easy for our diplomats to accept the "wisdom" of the European way of organizing a strategic regime because, at that time, our diplomatic corps was dominated by the sons of "good" New England and mid-Atlantic families whose ties to and affinities toward the Old World were already out of step with those of their less-decorous and more vigorous countrymen. If the Army belonged to those born in Virginia and south (and west), then the Department of State belonged to those from Virginia and north, and to the aspirants from elsewhere who emulated our Anglophiles and Europhiles most sincerely. Today, in 2001, America's diplomatic wisdom is that of Metternich and Castlereagh, brilliant reactionaries whose intent was to turn back the clock of history, then freeze the hands in place, after the Napoleonic tumult. America's international successes in the 20th century occurred *despite* our diplomatic corps' values and beliefs.

Surely there is a middle way between supporting every failing state (usually a state that deserves to fail) and hunkering down in a bunker in Kansas while genocide prevails. The greatest immediate difficulty is that any such "middle way" would, in fact, be a number--perhaps a great number--of different ways. The classical age of diplomacy, from Metternich through Bismarck to Kissinger, is finished. In truth, a one-size-fits-all diplomatic framework never really worked, but during the Cold War we expended tremendous efforts to make it function, or at least to pretend it was working. Today, in a world that is systemically, developmentally, economically, and culturally differentiated and differentiating--despite the surface effects of globalization--our diplomacy cannot rely on easy-to-use constructs or unifying ideology (a great triumph of the 20th century was the destruction of the historical aberration of ideology in the West; today's European "socialists" owe more to trial-and-error than to Marx, LaSalle, or Liebknecht, and all but the most bigoted Americans are political pragmatists in the clinch).

Our strategic approach must be situational, though shaped in each separate case by our national interests and informed by our core values. Of course, we must recognize the limits of the possible, but our greatest problem as a global power seems to be understanding what is impossible abroad, whether the impossibility is creating enduring ethnic harmony in the Balkans through armed patrols, willing a Somali state into existence through the presence of a few thousand under-supported troops, or trying to control terrorists with blustering threats and the occasional cruise-missile spanking.

The hardest thing is always to think clearly, to slash through the inherited beliefs that no one ever examines and to defy the wise men who have built careers on exorbitant failures. All people, in every culture, are captive to slogans, but Americans must strive to do a little better. We have made a slogan of democracy abroad, imagining it as a practical means when it is, in fact, the glorious end of a long and difficult road. We speak of human rights, then wink at the mundane evil of Saudi Arabia, the grotesque oppression in China, and any African massacres that don't leak to the press--because, inside our system of diplomacy, human rights are finally regarded as a soft issue. Yet, sincere and tenacious support for human rights is always good policy in the long term. The oppressor falls, whether in one year or 50, and it is easier to do business with a nation whose freedom struggle you have supported than with one whose suffering you ignored or even abetted.

Regarding the business sector, it is the job of Wall Street to maintain short-term vigilance. But Washington must learn to counterbalance that short-term view with a longer-term perspective. Instead of a revolving door, there should be a steel wall between Wall Street and Washington. Diplomatic and military concessions to a repressive regime that allows select US-headquartered corporations economic advantages today may prove a very poor investment for our country's greater interests tomorrow. We need to think across disciplines, to break the dual stranglehold of diplomatic tradition and economic immediacy. Were we only to apply our own professed ideals where it is rational and possible to do so, we would, indeed, find our way to a better, safer world in time. But we must stop trying to arrest the decomposition of empire's legacy. We are in a period of unprecedented and inevitable global change, and we must learn to accommodate and to help shape local changes constructively. But we cannot prevent the future from arriving.

Again, there is no unified field theory of diplomacy at our disposal. This is the hardest thing for Washingtonians to understand. Our responses to the world's dramas must be crafted on a case-by-case basis and founded upon nuanced knowledge of the specific situation. There is no single framework, and the rules change from continent to continent and even from week to week. Our national interest, too, evolves. Only our core values--the rule of law, the rights of the individual, and religious and ethnic tolerance--remain constant.

Democracy is a highly evolved mechanism for maintaining the society we have achieved, but it is not a tool for

creating a society worth maintaining. Without good and respected laws, a commitment to essential human rights, and the willingness to honor differences of birth and confession, democracy is just a con game for bullies. Democracy as we know it also may require a certain level of popular affluence. But democracy alone will not bring affluence. Weak, new governments, or those transforming themselves, need training wheels on the bicycle of state, and we try to insist instead that every government should jump on a Harley. Far from building trust, democracy may shatter the remaining social bonds of weak or brutalized societies, dividing survivors into ethnic or religious factions. The over-hasty imposition of democracy can lead directly to a degeneration in the respect for human rights. Where citizens have not learned to value their collective interests, democracy intensifies ethnic and religious polarization. Democracy must be earned and learned. It cannot be decreed from without. In a grim paradox, our insistence on instant democracy in shattered states (never in strong states or in those with which we do lucrative business, of course) is our greatest contribution to global instability. We have become strategic doctors determined to prescribe the same cure for every patient we see, before we have bothered to examine the patient's individual symptoms. Without a thought, we apply the rules of the Congress of Vienna to Somalia, Bosnia, and the West Bank, then try to graft on democracy overnight. We might as well attempt to cure cancer by the application of the best medicine of the 18th century.

Let us examine, briefly, just a small selection of the strategic issues facing the United States in which the quest for stability may prove antithetical to American interests.

- *The Balkans* represent the worst of all worlds: The slaughters occurred, fatally deepening the local hatreds, before any of the world's mature governments intervened, and now we are left with artificial states overlapping with de facto states, each within unsatisfactory boundaries, each with irreconcilable minorities, and each abundantly armed and criminally funded. "If only" may be pathetic words, but consider what might have been had the Euro-American community recognized, early on, that Yugoslavia was a Frankenstein's monster of a state that begged to be dismantled. There would have been no way to satisfy all, but plebiscites under international auspices--on which we had the raw power to insist--would have saved countless lives and prevented much, if not all, of the misery that benefited only criminals, bigots, and journalists.

- *The Russian Federation* gets a pass, no matter how awful or simply contrary its behavior, in the interests of stability. Having faced down and defeated the magnificently armed Soviet Union, we have talked ourselves into fearing the weak rump state that survived its ruin. In Washington, a great deal of sanctimonious cant may be heard about the danger of nuclear weapons falling into criminal hands should Russian stability fail, even though the Soviet regime was the most powerful criminal organization in history and those left behind are petty thugs by comparison, incapable of initiating a nuclear war as Moscow suffers through its new "time of troubles." A Russia in which power devolves to outlying regions or from which territories might secede would be a more promising, amenable Russia than the slimmed-down autocracy with which we are currently enamored.

Above all, though, we must demand an accountable Russia. In dealing with Moscow, the best policy is one of calm fearlessness and quiet rigor. We should accept neither lawless behavior nor tyranny in the name of law, when it is within our power to resist it (in this regard, our power lies primarily in blocking or discouraging grants, loans, or access to beneficial financial terms). Our support for human rights should be unwavering. Instead of excusing Russia's misbehaviors, we should deal with Moscow equitably (the one thing we have never tried), rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior--making a wide range of linkages explicit to the Kremlin. Never hand out rewards in advance in the hope that good behavior will be forthcoming from Moscow. Yes, Russia is suffering through a period of psychological dislocation that requires patience and understanding, but there is a crucial difference between understanding and indulgence. We must display the enlightened firmness of a parent dealing with an unruly child: Russia must never be allowed to throw a tantrum and have its way. Finally, even should Moscow aid us in our fight against terrorism, that will not give license to the Kremlin to terrorize its own people.

- *China's* future is unpredictable, whether the analyst sits in Washington or Beijing. One potential course would be a breakdown of central control and a return to fractious regionalism. Should such a scenario come to pass, our instinctive reaction would be to support the failing central power against insurgent or secessionist regions in the interests of stability--especially given the tens of billions of dollars US-based corporations have invested, and continue

to invest, in China. But we must struggle against the short-term view. A fractured, squabbling China would be less threatening to US strategic interests in the region and might well emerge as a far more advantageous business partner (or partners). At present, our China policy, which drains American coffers to enrich a minority of American businesses, is captive to lobbyists and demonstrates no strategic vision beyond that of individual corporations. We pay China to become stronger and to prolong internal oppression--and if China weakens, we will prop up the vicious regime that spites us today. The ideal China would be a federalized, populist state, observant of basic human rights, that was economically open and militarily subdued. We are more likely to back a disciplined, tank-patrolled, centralized state that is economically restrictive--in the interests of stability. Faced with the slightest possibility of disorder, we will grunt and digest any number of Tiananmen massacres.

- *Africa* is slowly and agonizingly struggling to undo the deformations colonial regimes left behind. In the heart-rending tragedies of West Africa, where stability was the only Western idol (at least we are true to our monotheist heritage), we and the Europeans supported hollow men and hollow regimes for so long that the inevitable collapse has been especially horrific. Yet, even now, we will deal with the devil, if the devil will just promise to stop the massacres for the weekend. We must rethink our approach to West Africa fundamentally, and recognize our culpability. "States" such as Sierra Leone and Liberia are now so thoroughly broken that they require international mandates for reorganization under neo-colonial regimes. Borders should be re-drawn--in other states as well--to reflect tribal and ethnic differences or harmonies. Elective affinities are welcome, but brotherhood cannot be enforced to suit 19th-century boundaries. In Africa, separatism is a natural and healthy force, until it is perverted by delay. Much of Africa has to be reduced from imperial-sized states to elemental building blocks before the construction of healthy organizational entities (perhaps called "states," but perhaps not) can begin anew on a more natural and hopeful foundation.

In Central and East Africa, the process has taken a modified form, with African power groupings redrawing boundaries on their own, despite fervent denials that they are doing any such thing. In this region, outsiders simply need to keep their hands off, except when the killing threatens to become too egregious. Wherever possible, Africans need to discover African solutions, with corrective hands applied only when human rights abuses escalate intolerably. (Of course, it would be best if we could stop all human rights abuses, but we cannot. Regrettably, we must ignore Africa's misdemeanors and concentrate on the felonies, at least for now.) Any attempts to enforce the old European-designed borders indefinitely are bound to fail, while exciting ethnic tensions to an even greater degree than wrongheaded meddling did in the former Yugoslavia.

- *The Middle East* defies solution. A functional compromise between Israelis and Palestinians was impossible when the fanatics were merely on one side, and now they compose the decisive elements on both sides. Barring cataclysms, an Israeli born as this essay is written is likely to wade through his or her entire life in an ebb and flow of conflict. Meaning well, and behaving foolishly, we plunged into the Arab-Israeli conflict as an "honest broker," although neither side can accept the compromises required by such brokering, while our baggage as both Israel's primary supporter and the long-time backer of many of the most reprehensible Arab regimes is a debilitating handicap to mediation. We declare that stability in the Middle East is critical, no matter if it is impossible without a Carthaginian peace imposed by one side or the other.

The Israelis and the Palestinians can coexist. They already do. But their coexistence is of a different, dynamic nature that belies the meaning we attach to the term. Their struggle fulfills both sides. The Palestinians will never be satisfied, no matter how much they might regain, and the siege mentality Israelis affect to deplore may be essential to the continued vigor of their state. For both factions, struggle and the self-justification it allows may be the most fulfilling condition.

Americans assume that violent disorder is an unnatural state that must be resolved, but high levels of violence in a society or region may simply maintain a different kind of equilibrium than that to which we are accustomed. At the very least, periods of violence may be lengthy transitions that cannot be artificially foreshortened. We need not condone violence to recognize that it is not an artificial imposition upon human nature, nor will insisting that violence is unnatural make it so. We know so little about the complex origins of violence that our beliefs about it are no more than superstitions. Whether in regard to the violence of the man or the mass, our theories attempt to explain it away

rather than to understand it. The Middle East may be inhumane, but it is one of the most explicitly human places on earth.

And would a peaceful resolution of the Middle East confrontation benefit the United States, after all? Hard-core terrorists would not cease and desist--no peace could ever satisfy them. And wouldn't we lose critical leverage? Israel, no longer dependent upon the United States as its ultimate defender, might prove a worrisome maverick. The Arab world might come to rely even more heavily upon the United States, but that would be one of history's great booby prizes.

Nor do the repressive, borrowed-time Arab governments in the region really want to see a successful, independent Palestinian state. The Palestinian struggle is a wonderful diversion for deprived Islamic populations elsewhere, but none of the Arab elites truthfully likes or trusts the Palestinians, who, if they achieved a viable, populist state of their own, would provide an unsettling example to the subjects of neighboring regimes. Arab rulers regard the Palestinians as too unpredictable, too obstreperous, too secular, too vigorous, and much too creative (resembling the Israelis, in fact). As it is, the rest of the Arab world is happy to fight to the last Palestinian, insisting the Palestinians maintain demands unacceptable to Israel. The struggle will go on for a long time to come. The best the United States can do at present is to inhibit the most excessive violations of human rights, while placing responsibility for the conflict on the shoulders of the participants, not on our own. We also must avoid absurd knee-jerk reactions, such as condemning legitimate efforts by Israel to strike guilty individuals, which is a far more humane and incisive policy than Palestinian suicide-bomber attacks on discos and restaurants.

By exciting false hopes of an ill-defined peace, we only inflame passions we cannot quench. Again, we have gotten into the habit of speaking loudly and laying our stick aside. We would do better with fewer press releases and more behind-the-scenes firmness--when engagement is to our advantage. And the occasional show of overwhelming force in the region works wonders.

- *Islamic terrorism* merits separate discussion now. It is not the result of creative instability, but of the atrophy of a civilization exacerbated by generations of Western support for an artificial stability in the Arab and Islamic world. While most Islamic terrorism is culturally reactionary, another aspect of it is an impulse for change perverted by hopelessness. And terrorism is, finally, a brutal annoyance, but not a threat to America's survival, despite the grim events of 11 September. Osama bin Laden and his ilk may kill thousands of Americans through flamboyant terrorist acts, but their deeds reflect tormented desperation and fear, not confidence or any positive capability. Terrorists may be able to destroy, but they cannot build, either a skyscraper or a successful state. Destruction is the only thing of which they remain capable, and destruction is their true god. These men seek annihilation, not only ours, but their own. No entrances are left open to them, only the possibility of a dramatic exit. They are failed men from failed states in a failing civilization. Claiming to represent the oppressed (but enraged by the "liberal" behavior of most Palestinians), fundamentalist terrorists of so hardened a temper would not be contented, but only further inflamed, by any peace settlement that did not inaugurate their version of the Kingdom of God on earth. They are not fighting for a just peace, but for their peace--and even if they attained that peace, they would desire another. They are, in every sense, lost souls, the irredeemable. Their savagery is not a result of the failure of any peace process, but a reaction to their own personal failures and to the failures of their entire way of life.

These lines are written on the 13th day of September 2001, two days after the most horrendous terrorist attack in history, and America is seized by a just fury in which even the worst effects of local disasters are exaggerated. But before this essay goes to press, Americans will realize that their lives remain gloriously normal, even as the media delights in hysteria. Despite the thousands of personal tragedies and the practical disruptions that resulted from the seizure of commercial aircraft and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the astonishing thing is how little permanent effect the terrorists will have had on daily life in the United States. There will be a scar, but the long-term effects of this grotesque tragedy will ultimately strengthen America. It has reminded us of who we are, and now we are rolling up our sleeves for the task ahead.

Without in any way belittling the tragedy, the fact is that the United States will emerge stronger and more united, with a sobered sense of strategic reality that will serve us well in the decades to come. In the long term, the terrorist immolations in New York, at the Pentagon, and in the Pennsylvania hills will prove to be counterproductive to the

terrorists' cause, context, and ambitions. We are a phenomenally strong and resilient nation, while the societies that spawned our enemies are decaying and capable only of lashing out at the innocent.

- *Afghanistan*. If any conflict of the last three decades requires a revised assessment, it is the Soviet engagement in Afghanistan. Blinded by the brinkmanship and the reflexive opposition of the Cold War era, we failed to see that the Russians, in this peculiar instance, were the forces of civilization and progress. I do not defend their tactical behavior, but they did attempt to sustain a relatively enlightened, secular regime against backward, viciously cruel religious extremists--whom we supported, only to reap a monstrous harvest. Our backing of the most socially repressive elements within the Afghan resistance (because they were the "most effective") backfired beyond all calculation. Incredibly, blinded again by the seeming verities of the Cold War, we trusted the advice of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI), an inherently anti-Western organization that has since supported both the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, as well lesser terrorists, providing them weapons, funds, safe havens, and free passage to the rest of the world.

Afghanistan, as we realize all too well in the autumn of 2001, has become the terrorist haven of the world, and we helped to make it so. We were determined that communism would not be allowed to destabilize the region. Now, in one of the bitter returns of history, our military forces in the skies over Afghanistan may face American-made and American-provided surface-to-air missiles. Our folly in Afghanistan should be final proof of the falsity of the dictum that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Sometimes, the enemy of your enemy is just practicing for the big game.

- *Cuba* may be a small problem in the geostrategic sense, but it certainly fixes America's attention. The instability likely to embarrass us in Cuba will come after Castro's disappearance, as the island's current regime weakens and dissolves. The Batista-Cubans we have harbored in South Florida, whose political influence has maintained one of the most counterproductive of American policies, will try to reclaim, purchase, and bribe their way into power in the land they or their elders exploited then fled. The Cubans who stayed in Cuba, for better and worse, do not want their rich relatives back. And were we to be the least bit just, we would recognize that those who stayed behind have earned the right to decide how their island will be governed in the future. For all our ranting about the Castro dictatorship--which may not be admirable, but which is far more liberal and equitable than many of America's client governments (tourists clamor to go to Havana, not Riyadh)--an honest appraisal reveals that the average Cuban, though impoverished by the policies both of his own government and of the United States, enjoys a better quality of life than that of the average resident of many a "free" Caribbean state. If we intervene at some future date to protect the "rights" and the "legitimate property" of the Miami Cubans at the expense of the Cuban people themselves, we will shame ourselves inexcusably. Post-Castro Cuba, on its own, has an unusually good chance of evolving into a model democracy, but it will not do so if we sanction and support the carpetbagging of emigres who have never found American democracy fully to their tastes.

- *Indonesia* is the ultimate illogical state. Spread over thousands of islands and forcing together ethnically, culturally, and religiously different populations, this mini-empire almost certainly will continue to fragment, no matter the contours and composition of the Jakarta government. Inevitably, we will try to arrest the state's decomposition (as of this writing, we are rushing to renew our support of Indonesia's corrupt, abusive military). Just as inevitably, we will fail. If we and other interested states are not thinking about how to manage and facilitate Indonesia's breakup, we will find ourselves embarrassed by history again. Supporting what is essentially an ethnically based colonial regime against the will of powerful minorities on the periphery is bound to fail, first morally, then practically.

Devolution threatens a great range of other states, from Pakistan to Italy. The problems of each will be unique. But the common thread will be that attempts to arrest instability and to prolong the life of decayed, unnatural states, rather than to assist populations through longed-for political reorganizations, will always carry an exorbitant price and, ultimately, will fail.

At present, a portion of the armed forces of the United States is mired in stability operations that simply bide time in the hope that somehow things will come out right, while an even greater portion is focused on avenging the recent terrorist attacks against America. We may wish all of these endeavors Godspeed, yet it would be a disservice to the

men and women in uniform not to ask how we have come to this pass. Self-examination in the strategic sphere has not been an American strength. Perhaps it is time to make it one.

Meanwhile, we deny causes, ignore unpleasant realities, put on our flak jackets, and hope for the best. Certainly we should not replace stability operations with "instability operations" to provoke or accelerate change beyond its local, organic pace. And we must differentiate between unpopular terrorist groups and genuine mass movements: There is a great difference between the vicious Basque terrorists of the ETA and the African National Congress that triumphed over apartheid. All dissident organizations are not equally legitimate.

But we do need to stop providing life-support to terminally ill governments, and we must be open to new, unprecedented solutions, from plebiscites that alter borders to emergent or re-emergent forms of administration in failed states, whether enlightened corporate imperialism or post-modern tribalism. If the corporation can manage more humanely than the dictator, why not give it a chance? If the tribe can govern more effectively than a thieving, oppressive government, why not let the tribe reclaim its own land?

Of late, we have heard all too much about the United States being the world's policeman. We are not, we cannot afford to be, and we couldn't bring it off if we tried--not least because policemen have to be on the beat everywhere, around the clock, and their most successful work is preventive (a concept that democracies, which are reactive in foreign policy, find anathema). Apart from our new and essential crusade against terrorism, which must pursue preemptive measures, our role should be that of a global referee, calling time out when the players hit below the belt or get too rough, and clarifying the rules of the game (no genocide, no ethnic cleansing, no mass rape, no torture, etc.). Instead of trying to stop the game, which was our approach across the past decade, we should try to facilitate it when it is played by legitimate players for legitimate stakes. In the case of terrorists, of course, we need to throw them out of the game permanently.

But what on earth is wrong with people wanting their freedom? Why shouldn't populations want the armed forces of a central government that is essentially an occupying power to leave their territory? Why are yesterday's borders more important than today's lives? Why should we support religiously-intolerant regimes that virtually enslave women and persecute nonbelievers to death? How much mass suffering is it worth to keep things geostrategically tidy? How dare we send our soldiers to support bigoted monarchies that forbid our troops to worship as they choose? How stable can any government be that fears a Christmas tree? Why should we pretend that every war criminal is really a democrat waiting for his opportunity to vote? Why should we reflexively support the rich and powerful against the poor they abuse and exploit? Why must we insist that history can be made to run backward?

A new century demands new ideas. The notion that stability is the fundamental strategic virtue is not going to be one of them.

Ralph Peters retired from the US Army shortly after his promotion to lieutenant colonel so he could pursue a writing career. A contributor to *Parameters* since the 1980s, he is also the author of 12 books, including *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?*, a collection of essays on strategy; eight novels with strategic or military themes; and, under a pen name, a series of critically acclaimed historical novels.

Reviewed 19 November 2001. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil