Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War

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The combination of failed states, elite casualty phobia, and unfolding aerial precision strike and associated technologies is profoundly altering the locus and style of future US military interventions overseas. The United States is beginning to practice a new way of warfare in parts of the world peripheral to traditional American security interests.

The Gulf War was a turning point. It was both an end and a beginning. It was perhaps the last large American full-spectrum conventional war waged against another well-armed state and the first in which airpower did the bulk of the heavy lifting against not only strategic targets but also enemy fielded forces. The Gulf War was also the first war in which casualty minimization became from the start an independent operational objective; both the formulation of war aims and the conduct of military operations were governed by dread among the political and especially military leadership that too many American lives lost would implode public and congressional support for the war.

Since the Gulf War, the United States has launched military interventions in Somalia (1992-94), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), and, most recently, in Afghanistan (2001). Unlike the Gulf War, which was waged in a place of undisputed strategic vitality to the West, these post-Gulf War interventions have been undertaken in locales beyond the traditional US strategic foci of Western Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Also unlike the Gulf War, these interventions were all launched in or against failed states incapable of offering effective resistance to US conventional military power. In all cases, US airpower had virtually free run of the enemy's air space. Even more important, in

two of the last three—Bosnia and Kosovo—US ground forces were deliberately withheld from participation; and in the last—Afghanistan—US ground forces that were committed initially were small and functioned primarily as scouts for American airpower and searchers for the enemy's leadership. In Bosnia and Afghanistan, large indigenous friendly ground forces served as surrogates, thus holding down US casualties and their perceived potential domestic political consequences.

The war in Afghanistan exemplifies a growing American propensity for intervention in failed states (there are no qualified conventional military adversaries left, and China's future emergence as a competitive strategic rival is far from a done deal) and for risk-averse reliance on ever-more-effective airpower. These propensities are a function of three factors: (1) profound structural change in the international political system—specifically, the emergence of weak and failed states as the primary threat to US security; (2) a casualty-phobic political and military leadership; and (3) the availability of new military technologies that seem to permit effective military intervention, primarily from the air, at little cost in friendly military and even enemy civilian casualties. The war in Afghanistan also shows that modern

airpower, *under the right conditions*, can achieve decisive strategic effects even against the kind of irregular, pre-industrial enemy once thought unbreakable by air attack.[1]

How did we get to this point?

Failed States as the Primary Threat

The most devastating foreign attack in American history was planned and carried out at the direction of an international terrorist network headquartered in a failed state. Indeed, the relationship between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda was symbiotic; the Taliban provided safe-haven for bin Laden and his high command, and bin Laden, in return, provided financial and professional assistance to the Taliban. Indeed, there has been a mutually supporting relationship between international terrorists and failed states worldwide, and the number of failing and failed states is growing, especially in the Islamic world and sub-Saharan Africa. Terrorism, after all, is a weapon of the weak, and weak states are often sympathetic to terrorist organizations. Sudan hosted Osama bin Laden before he moved to Afghanistan.

A century ago, the international political system was dominated by a half-dozen European great powers, Japan, and the United States. Most of what subsequently became known as the Third World was governed from colonial

offices in London, Paris, Lisbon, and Amsterdam. The primary source of instability in a system so constituted was great-power rivalry in Europe and overseas. Indeed, with the formation of the modern state in the wake of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), great-power war became the scourge of the international system. The United States itself was born of great-power rivalry (the Franco-American alliance of 1778 against Great Britain made Yorktown possible), and in the 20th century the United States waged four separate wars against other great powers (two against Germany, one against Japan, and the Cold War against the Soviet Union).

The international system has dramatically changed since 1900. War seems to have disappeared altogether among advanced industrial states, and Europe, the cockpit of large-scale interstate warfare for three centuries, has, for a variety of reasons, become a continent of near-universal peace.[2] But while Europe headed for peace, the international political system was flooded with scores of new states, many of them unsustainable, and it this phenomenon—the stillborn or collapsed state—that constitutes the greatest source of international insecurity today.

Where did these states come from? From three successive great waves of imperial disintegration: World War I's destruction of the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires; World War II's destruction of Europe's vast overseas colonial empires; and the Cold War's destruction of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, and subsequently of the Soviet Union itself. Together, these waves of imperial disintegration yielded over 100 new states, dozens of them of questionable political and economic viability. In 1914, a half-dozen great powers dominated most of the world, and there were only 59 independent countries, most of them in Europe and the Western Hemisphere; today, there are over 190 worldwide, including the failed Islamic states of Algeria, Sudan, Somalia, and Afghanistan.[3] Nor does disintegration appear to have halted. Successor states to empires continue to collapse in Africa, Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Indonesia, South Africa, Pakistan, and even Canada could well be next in line for subdivision.

Weak and failed states, not strong ones, have become the primary source of international instability, and they have attracted US military intervention because they have become shelters and breeding grounds for such transnational threats as terrorism, drug-trafficking, refugee generation, environmental degradation, and political and religious extremism. Afghanistan on 11 September was the quintessential failed state: destitute, ravaged by more than 20 years of war, incompetently governed by a bunch of heroin-taxing religious primitives, and host to the most sinister international terrorist organization in the world.[4]

The substitution of weak for strong states as the primary source of international political instability means that irregular wars within weak states rather than conventional wars among powerful states now dominate. The implications of this profound shift for both US foreign policy and defense planning are, however, not altogether clear.[5] During the 20th

century the United States rightly focused on preparation for war with other great powers, and although it did fight

limited wars against lesser enemies, it approached those conflicts as essentially conventional wars writ small.

Today there appears to be a growing realization that the phenomenon of failed states, even though some have no intrinsic strategic value (at least as calculated on the basis of traditional norms), can no longer be ignored, though some (e.g., Afghanistan) are obviously more threatening than others (e.g., Sierra Leone). American military interventions in or against failed states over the past decade, however, have been reactive rather than proactive. Political and economic efforts to obviate the need for military intervention have rarely been as impressive as the use of force itself. The tendency has been to ignore or procrastinate until intervention becomes the least unattractive course of action. American interest in Afghanistan evaporated with the defeat of the Soviet Union there in the late 1980s; the United States abandoned the Afghans it had supported against the Russians to a swamp of impoverishment, civil war, and, ultimately, to the rise of the Taliban and the arrival of bin Laden. To be sure, domestic US political support is difficult to mobilize for postwar reconstruction of shattered states overseas, but the long-term consequences of walking away are manifest.

Aversion to even minimalist nation-building in Afghanistan and other failed states has exacerbated the threats posed by such states. Iraq is an excellent example. In the Gulf War the United States was not prepared to take any political responsibility for a post-Saddam Hussein regime and therefore did not pursue a conclusive military victory. It did not even lift a military finger when the Kurds and Shias arose against Saddam in the war's wake; it essentially abandoned the Iraqi people to Saddam's vengeance, and in so doing laid the groundwork for a potentially terrifying day of reckoning with the dangerous dictator.

The necessity of regime removal (versus regime punishment) seems to be evident to the current Bush Administration, which pursued the destruction of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and is now pursuing Saddam Hussein's removal from power by whatever means necessary. Even before the 11 September attacks, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had drafted the *Quadrennial Defense Review* for 2001, which pointedly declared that "US forces must maintain the capability to impose the will of the United States . . . on any adversaries. Such a decisive defeat could include changing the regime of an adversary state or occupation of foreign territory until US strategic objectives are met."[6] Is this an implicit expression of regret over the earlier Bush Administration's failure to finish off Saddam Hussein when it had the chance?

What Eliot Cohen has called "the radically incomplete victory" of the Gulf War not only necessitated retention of a large and politically obtrusive residual US military presence on the Arabian peninsula but also condemned the Iraqi people to prolonged destitution. Worse still, the "unwillingness of the Americans to see a job through to the end . . . encouraged others to see if they could find ways of outlasting or hurting the Americans enough to keep them out of their way."[7] Among those "others" were Slobodan Milosevic and Osama bin Laden.

The issue is how much effort the United States is prepared to make in the political and economic reconstruction of states whose regimes have been toppled by American military power. In an eerily prescient book written right after the Gulf War, Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson warned against the lack of political follow-up. "We have fastened upon a formula for going to war—in which American casualties are minimized and protracted engagements are avoided—that requires the massive use of American firepower and a speedy withdrawal from the scenes of destruction," they wrote in *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose*. They continued:

> The formula is a very popular one, but it is not for that reason to be approved. It's peculiar vice is that it enables us to go to war with far greater precipitancy than we otherwise might while simultaneously allowing us to walk away from the ruin we create without feeling a commensurate sense of responsibility. It creates an anarchy and calls it peace. In the name of order it wreaks havoc. It allows us to assume an imperial role without discharging the classic duties of imperial rule.[8]

To be sure, it is not incumbent on the United States to assume complete political and economic responsibility for failed states in the wake of American military intervention. The post-World War II reconstruction of Germany and Japan are not relevant models because they required an external assumption of absolute military control and political authority that is no longer acceptable in the Third World. There is in any event no American public support for running the internal affairs of "backward" overseas states. On the other hand, the United States has a clear strategic interest in preventing Afghanistan from reverting to its former status as a haven for the likes of the Taliban and bin Laden, and this means, as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz has put it, at least "an Afghanistan where the people enjoy a reasonable level of stability and, at least by their standards, a reasonable level of prosperity."[9] Thus, some measure of post-intervention economic and technical assistance will be necessary, if not on a nation-building scale, then certainly on a nation-tending one. "It has become clear," argues historian Paul Schroeder, "that if this campaign against terrorism in general is to succeed in the long run, it will require strong, effective governments in control of many states where such governments do not now exist."[10]

On the military side of dealing with failed states, there was, at least until the war in Afghanistan, recognition that military forces maximized for large-scale combat against the conventional forces of another state were of limited utility in dealing with the irregular forces of failed state or non-state actors pursuing asymmetric styles of warfare. The professional military understandably has never been enthusiastic about intervention in foreign civil wars, and the experience of Vietnam convinced many policymakers that Western conventional armies are poorly suited to dealing with irregular non-Western forces.

On the other hand, the swift and unexpected American military success in toppling the Taliban regime suggests that the "limited utility" of conventional

forces in irregular settings may in some circumstances may be more than enough to get the job done, especially if conventional forces rely on novel tactics and technologies. As the target of an air campaign, Afghanistan and the Taliban in 2001 appeared at first glance to be a tougher nut to crack than did North Vietnam and fielded Vietnamese communist forces back in the 1960s. The Taliban presented fewer targets and were "born" Pushtun warriors, remote, and expected to wage the kind of guerrilla jihad that had proved so successful against the Russians in the 1980s.

But the Taliban turned out to be a far cry from the Vietnamese communists of the 1960s. There is a vast qualitative disparity among irregular forces in the Third World. The Vietnamese communists embodied a sophisticated and time-tested strategy and doctrine of revolutionary war. They were superbly trained, disciplined, organized, and led, and had tremendous skill in political mobilization; they were also ethnically homogeneous with sole political allegiance to a national cause. They further enjoyed critical outside support in the form of Soviet and Chinese military and other assistance.

In contrast, the Taliban were essentially a tribal-based religious militia which by 2001 had alienated most Afghans by their insufferable social oppression. They were also internationally isolated (once Pakistan turned on them). Worse still, they made the mistake of initially eschewing guerrilla warfare in favor of positional warfare (for guerrillas, an absolute no-no against a firepower-superior enemy), which permitted US airpower, assisted by special operations spotters on the ground, to destroy their forces in place. Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Wesley Clark believes the Taliban were "the most incompetent adversary the United States has fought since the Barbary pirates."[11] A retired Pakistani general called the Taliban "really a militia people, [a] ramshackle people who've been given some weapons. They've had a little training, like jumping over some obstacle logs or digging ditches, but strategy and tactics are way beyond them."[12]

The Taliban also operated in a traditional war culture in which political allegiances were bought and sold; forces simply stopped fighting and even changed sides if it was in their interest to do so. It is difficult to imagine Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Le Duan being bought off or bargained into quitting.[13]

The Taliban also were, by 2001, detested in Afghanistan. Initially popular because they promised to put an end to violent warlord rule, the Taliban soon became ferociously repressive, and their growing dependence on Osama bin Laden and the sponsorship of Pakistan's military intelligence service called into question their legitimacy as a national government. Indeed, the Taliban were a dependency, if not a creation, of Pakistan.[14] "Their gender apartheid, ethnic cleansing, religious discrimination, violation of international human rights, and [their] destruction of [Afghanistan's] historical heritage disrupted the individual and social lives of Afghans living in the Taliban-controlled areas," observes Neamatollah Nojumi, a veteran of Afghanistan's war against Soviet occupation. "The Taliban's alliance with Pakistan upset many Afghans who considered it a violation of national independence and sovereignty. The Taliban's association with bin Laden and his non-Afghan followers . . . generated additional opposition."[15] (In contrast, the Vietnamese communists, by virtue of their expulsion of French colonial rule, had unassailable nationalist credentials, especially against a South Vietnamese government that was little more than an American Cold War creation.)

Yet even the Taliban's poor comparison to the communist enemy we faced in Vietnam did not guarantee an unqualified US victory in Afghanistan. Most of the Taliban's senior leadership eluded death or capture, many of them crossing over to the winning side.[16] Osama bin Laden's fate remains unknown at this writing, and many of his al Qaeda fighters holed up in Tora Bora apparently managed to slip into Pakistan.[17] There were even reports that some of the Afghan warlords the United States hired to hunt for fugitives in the Tora Bora mountain complex actually helped smuggle al Qaeda members into Pakistan.[18] In January 2002, Kandahar's local ruler amnestied seven former high-ranking Taliban officials wanted by the United States, including the former ministers of defense and justice.[19] As many as 6,000 former Taliban troops were also reported to be joining the new Afghan army, which is charged with maintaining the country's internal security.[20]

And as of this writing it is far from clear whether Afghanistan will rise permanently above its failed-state status. In the wake of the Taliban's defeat, local and regional warlords reasserted their power at the expense of central political authority in Kandahar.[21] Moreover, the fierce fighting in the rugged mountains south of Gardez in March, in which elements of the US 101st Air Assault and 10th Mountain divisions participated (Operation Anaconda), showed that the al Qaeda in Afghanistan is far from a spent force.[22]

Casualty Phobia

If small wars within failing or failed states have dominated demands on US military power since the Cold War's demise, and especially since the attacks of 11 September, a profound aversion, bordering on the phobic, to incurring American casualties has come to dominate use-of-force decisionmaking in the United States. This dread of casualties is pronounced among the country's political and military leadership, and in the war over Kosovo it produced the elevation

of force protection above mission accomplishment. Indeed, the available evidence identifies a significant disparity in casualty tolerance between the leadership and the average citizen, with the latter more willing to accept combat losses —depending on the circumstances.

The war in Afghanistan may affect this phenomenon. Because it was a response to a devastating attack on the American homeland, it elicited a far greater public willingness to spill American blood than did earlier interventions in Somalia, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia, where America's strength of interest was perceived to be comparatively weak. In the wake of the 11 September attacks, "Americans are more willing to take casualties than almost anybody in our media thinks," contends Michael Barone. "Many of the constraints that people not only in the Clinton Administration but in the first and second Bush administrations felt that they were operating under in foreign policy and in military policy probably never applied as much as they thought. But clearly they don't now. Americans will have some considerable staying power on this [war against terrorism]."[23] Charles Krauthammer goes further: "America is allergic to casualties—but only in wars that do not matter. Our history over the last century suggests a General Theory of Casualties: America's capacity to sustain casualties is near infinite, as long as the wars are wars of necessity."[24]

US combat operations in Afghanistan were nonetheless conducted in a manner consistent with those of casualty-phobic Operations Deliberate Force (Bosnia) and Allied Force (Kosovo). Either the political and military leadership remained casualty-phobic, or circumstances permitted a cheap victory, or—most probably—both. "Vietnam and Mogadishu," warns historian Paul Kennedy, "still cast their shadows on the whole issue of ground deployments abroad."[25] Clearly, the Bush Administration did not wish to risk a repetition of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, which mandated avoidance of even the appearance of an overbearing American military presence on the ground. It also had at its disposal an indigenous anti-Taliban alliance inside Afghanistan. Yet reliance on proxies proved a two-edged sword. It spared US lives, but it may also have made it easier for Osama bin Laden and much of the al Qaeda leadership to escape. US troops were withheld from most of the potentially deadly cave searching in the Tora Bora area, leading some commentators to conclude that unabated casualty phobia—war on the cheap—may have spared bin Laden to fight another day.[26] By March, however, the United States appeared to have learned the lesson of Tora Bora and to have assumed a greater willingness to risk casualties; in Operation Anaconda, US ground forces for the first time assumed the leading role in combat against al Qaeda forces.[27]

Elite casualty phobia has been much remarked-upon in recent years. The fact of elite casualty phobia is not in dispute; it is reflected in the Pentagon's obsession with force protection[28] and confirmed by recent polling data. There is, moreover, substantial evidence that both political and military elites have convinced themselves that the American public's intolerance is significantly higher

and more intractable than is actually the case, and it is these elites, of course, who make the use-of-force decisions.

A strong aversion to casualties is rooted in American history and culture. Americans value the individual much more than they do the state, and they have always sought—and with considerable success it might be added—to substitute technology for blood in battle. But only recently has aversion become, at least in the minds of those making war and peace decisions, a phobia—i.e., an aversion so strong as to elevate the safety of American troops above the missions they are assigned to accomplish. Casualty aversion is healthy; casualty phobia is not. Ironically, the phobia may have been strengthened by the Gulf War and even more so by the war over Kosovo and the war in Afghanistan, which seem to point to the prospect of war with few American deaths.

The phobia is rooted in the Vietnam War (and seemingly revalidated in Beirut and Somalia). Vietnam produced a generation of political and military leaders that is much more reluctant to use force, or at least use it effectively, than those for whom Munich and World War II were the great foreign policy exemplars. The message of Munich was the imperative of using force early and decisively against aspiring conquerors; the perceived message of Vietnam is that the risks—both on the battlefield and in the domestic political arena—of using force more often than not outweigh the benefits, especially in cases of prospective interventions in other people's civil wars.[29]

Casualty dread is most acute among the military leadership, especially that of the Army, which is still in the grip of the Vietnam Syndrome. The taproot of that syndrome as it has evolved since the war is a conviction that the public has no stomach for casualties, and therefore that policymakers using force in situations of optional intervention[30] should be prepared to sacrifice operational and even strategic effectiveness for the sake of casualty minimization. This conviction produced a politically unsatisfying military victory against Iraq and almost a decade of strategic fecklessness in the former Yugoslavia, culminating in a NATO war against Serbia in which force protection was accorded priority over mission accomplishment. The result: a bizarre disconnect between political ends and military means in which an exclusive and initially timid application of airpower provoked an acceleration of the very Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovo that formed NATO's immediate causus belli.

Yet the lesson of Vietnam—and indeed of the war in Afghanistan—is that the public's attitude toward casualties is situationally dependent. It is difficult to sustain public support for wars in which, as in Vietnam, substantial casualties are sustained over a long period of time without any convincing progress toward a satisfactory termination of hostilities, or for military interventions, such as those conducted in Lebanon and Somalia, where even comparatively light casualties are incurred in the absence of apparent interests worth the cost. Bloody, inconclusive wars fought for

unconvincing interests are the worst cases for sustaining public support. Conversely, the public is prepared to accept great

sacrifice in blood and treasure in situations where vital interests are directly threatened, as they were by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon 60 years later. Most circumstances, however, fall somewhere between outright attack on Americans and the gratuitous and misguided interventions in Lebanon and Somalia, and it is in these middling circumstances—e.g., the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf wars—where presidential leadership (or lack of it) can make the difference in sustaining public support.

The contingent nature of the public tolerance for casualties, heavily influenced by presidential leadership in mobilizing public opinion, is supported in study after study.[31] Indeed, presidential leadership and the conclusiveness of combat may be more important determinants of public tolerance of casualties than the presence of compelling strategic interests (the definition of which is also mightily subject to presidential influence.) Such interests were questionable in Grenada in 1983, yet the quick and conclusive invasion of that island and overthrow of its Cuban-supported Marxist government was cheered by a majority of Americans. Even Iraq's invasion of Kuwait posed no direct threat to the security of the United States, and President Bush initially had difficulty in mobilizing public and congressional support for his decision to force the Iraqis out of Kuwait one way or the other. But in the end he did so, leading the country into a war in which the public's expectation of casualties was much higher than the number actually incurred.

Recent comprehensive polling data and other information marshaled by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies' Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society confirms strong elite belief that the American public will not support casualties in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The data further reveal that senior military officers are markedly more casualty-phobic than senior civilian decisionmakers, perhaps because the former do not trust the latter to stay the course in combat once the body bags start coming home in large numbers.[32]

The strategic consequences of elite casualty phobia as well as its implications for the military ethic have been treated elsewhere.[33] Suffice it to say here that the consequences include: political vacillation in war-threatening crises, degraded military effectiveness, discouraged friends and allies, and emboldened enemies. A perceived American reputation of casualty dread fostered by defeat in Vietnam and humiliation in Lebanon encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait and to resist all American efforts to expel him. Saddam believed he could inflict more casualties on US forces than the domestic American political traffic would bear.[34]

Osama bin Laden also believed, at least before the US military reaction to the 11 September attacks, that the Americans could not stand the sight of their own blood. He interpreted the US withdrawal from Somalia as proof that, as in Afghanistan, it was possible to expel a superpower from a Muslim country. Indeed, he told correspondent Robert Fisk in 1997 that "our battle against America

is much simpler than the war against the Soviet Union, because some of our mujahideen who fought here in Afghanistan also participated in operations against the Americans in Somalia—and they were surprised at the collapse of American morale. This convinced us that the Americans are a paper tiger."[35]

Somalia seemingly confirmed the lesson of the American debacle in Lebanon a decade earlier. "We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier, who is ready to wage cold wars and unprepared to fight long wars," bin Laden told John Miller of ABC News in 1998. "This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves that they can run in less than twenty-four hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia. . . . [There] they forgot about being the world leader and the leader of the new world order. [They] left, dragging their corpses and their defeat, and stopped using such titles."[36] President George W. Bush himself has lamented this misperception. In a December 2001 interview with Bob Woodward, the President declared, "I do believe there is an image of America out there that we are so materialistic, . . . almost hedonistic . . . that when struck, we wouldn't fight back. It was clear that bin Laden felt emboldened and didn't feel threatened by the United

States."[37]

But the worst strategic consequence of casualty phobia is encouragement of politically inconclusive uses of force. Casualty phobia invites half-baked uses of force. It promoted a refusal to take advantage of the opportunity of war to use the force necessary to topple the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, both of whom senior American policymakers publicly compared to Adolf Hitler. To be sure, in both the Gulf War and the war over Kosovo, US political objectives were limited, and did not include the overthrow of the enemy regime. Yet, surely, the exclusion of regime change was driven by fear of the anticipated blood cost and political risk involved.

Growing Airpower Effectiveness

But what if there was a way of war that delivered decisive strategic effects at little cost in US casualties—a way of war that stripped casualty phobia of its adverse strategic consequences by permitting the use of force without significant risk?

Clausewitzians argue that such a way of war is unattainable because fog, friction, and chance is inherent in war.[38] In contrast, Jominians, especially prophets of the Revolution in Military Affairs, believe that the scientific component of war can be elevated to the point of rendering its artistic component insignificant, even irrelevant.[39] The American military is the product of an optimistic, engineering society, and as such has always been markedly Jominian in its approach to war. The Air Force in particular has long been enamored of a vision of waging strategically decisive war based on scientific analysis and requisite air (and subsequently) space technologies, and the Gulf War seemed to constitute a major step toward realization of that vision.

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Before the Gulf War, the primary conventional military challenge—the defense of NATO's Central Front against a short-warning massive Warsaw Pact attack—was predominately a ground force one. Because the object was territorial defense, airpower by definition was relegated to a supporting role, and it was on that basis that AirLand Battle was conceptualized. Airpower would be employed mainly to disrupt and destroy the flow of Warsaw Pact follow-on forces moving across Eastern Europe before they could make contact with defending NATO ground forces; airpower would not be employed independently against strategic targets in the Soviet Union itself.

To be sure, the Gulf War was also a war for territory and involved the deployment of massive US Army and Marine Corps forces. But instead of being AirLand Battle, it was an air campaign first, and then a land battle. The 100-hour land component was accompanied by continuing air operations, but for all practical purposes the antecedent 38-day air campaign had already beaten frontline Iraqi ground forces into a near comatose state by the time coalition ground forces began to roll. The latter essentially finished off or chased out of Kuwait most of those remaining Iraqi divisions that had not been fatally "attrited" by air strikes. This is certainly the dominant judgment of those who have analyzed the role of airpower in the Gulf War,[40] even though it has been strongly challenged by a recent analysis.[41] To be sure, hindsight strongly suggests that even without the 38-day air preparation of the battlefield, coalition ground forces would probably have still made short work of the Iraqi army because of the latter's gross inferiority in leadership, training, and technology.

But the first Bush Administration had no reason to gamble: massive air assets were available, there was no great rush, and casualty minimization was deemed imperative. The payoff was only 148 American military dead (more than a third by friendly fire) out of over half-a-million committed to Operation Desert Storm. Airpower, it seemed, had finally lived up to its promise; if it had not won the war single-handedly, it had certainly been the dominant arm of victory. Revolutionary surveillance and precision-strike technologies had enabled airpower, in less than six weeks, and unassisted by ground combat operations, to destroy at least 50 percent of the Iraqi frontline divisions' equipment and lesser though still substantial percentages held by the Republican Guard and other divisions maintained in operational reserve.[42]

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Skeptics pointed out that the air campaign against Iraq's mobile scuds failed, and that incomplete intelligence left unscathed much of Iraq's infrastructure to produce weapons of mass destruction. They also argued that Iraq's fielded forces were sitting ducks, lacking any air cover and unable to hide in the desert, and that enough of the Republican Guard got away in the end to ensure Saddam Hussein's political survival. Proponents and skeptics of airpower alike also agreed that Saddam Hussein as a commander-in-chief was strategically incompetent. Iraq in 1991 was, in the words of one observer, "the perfect enemy."[43] Against a resourceful foe in a different geopolitical and physical setting, airpower's success, it was argued, would be far more problematic.

That foe and setting appeared just two years later in the form of the cunning Somali warlord Mohammed Farrah Aideed and his Somalia National Alliance irregulars operating in an urban warfare environment in a failed state. Fixed-wing combat airpower was not even a supporting arm; it was virtually irrelevant and seemed to bolster airpower skeptics' contention that the ideal conditions in which airpower was applied during the Gulf War were unlikely ever to be repeated.

Then came the two US military interventions in the former Yugoslavia, Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia and Operation Allied Force in Kosovo. In both cases airpower was applied alone, unaccompanied by US ground combat operations; ground forces were deliberately withheld by a casualty-phobic leadership which feared that anything more than token losses would collapse public and congressional support. There were, however, friendly surrogate ground forces present, especially in Bosnia, where US airpower was employed after a Croatian-Bosniac ground offensive had begun sweeping through Bosnia Serb-held territory. Though the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) played a lesser role in the outcome of Allied Force, its emergence in Kosovo following the 1995 Dayton Accords (which settled the war in Bosnia but failed to address the question of potential ethnic cleansing in Kosovo) occasioned the crescendo of Serbian atrocities that prompted Allied Force.

In both Balkan interventions, airpower was successfully used as a tool of coercion, though it was hardly the only factor in the enemy's decision to stop fighting on unfavorable terms. It is especially difficult to ascertain the strategic effects of the 12-day Deliberate Force campaign because it essentially capped an unexpectedly victorious surrogate ground offensive that had been launched almost four weeks earlier.[44] Certainly, the combination of bombing, which belatedly demonstrated US resolve, and a US promise to lift sanctions against Yugoslavia induced Slobodan Milosevic to abandon his Bosnian Serb clients, and it was this betrayal that led them to seek peace.[45] Though Deliberate Force was not formally coordinated with the ground offensive, once the air campaign was launched it did enjoy a synergistic relationship with events on the ground, and there is no question that it altered the strategic landscape by further demoralizing the Bosnian Serb leadership to the point where it concluded that it had to stop fighting.[46]

Less problematic was Operation Allied Force, a much larger and longer (78 days) air campaign than Deliberate Force. Though the KLA was active on the

ground, it was never more than a hit-and-run guerrilla force; unlike the much larger and better-equipped Croatian and Bosniac forces of August 1995, it was incapable of taking and holding much territory. Airpower thus dominated military operations against Serbia in 1999. Ground forces were deliberately withheld from combat, although toward the end of Allied Force there were indications that NATO was moving toward creation of a ground-force option.

There is virtually universal agreement that it was bombing and the implicit threat of expanded bombing that set in train the sequence of events that produced Milosevic's decision to accept NATO's, or more precisely the G-8 countries', war-termination conditions. There is broad agreement that the bombing's decisive strategic effects were produced by attacks on Yugoslavia's dual-use infrastructure targets rather than attacks on fielded forces.[47] The objective of Allied Force was not the destruction of the Milosevic regime, but the coercion of the regime to cease its brutal behavior in Kosovo—specifically, cessation of ethnic cleansing, withdrawal of Serb security forces from Kosovo, acceptance of a NATO force presence in Kosovo, return of refugees, and acceptance of substantial political autonomy for Kosovo. Coercion worked.[48]

To be sure, Allied Force was hardly an airman's ideal air campaign; political micromanagement was exceptionally

intrusive, and the campaign began on the misassumption that a few days of token bombing would bring Milosevic to his senses.[49] Allied Force also sparked an acceleration of the very ethnic cleansing of Kosovo that it was designed to halt, revealing a casualty-phobia-driven disconnect between military means and political ends. (Ethnic cleansing could be stopped only on the ground, but the Clinton Administration had publicly excluded a ground combat option, thus encouraging Milosevic to drive the remaining Kosovar Albanians out of Kosovo and thereby confront NATO with a fait accompli.[50]) Moreover, the G-8 countries softened NATO's original war-termination demands.

Allied Force was nonetheless a clear strategic win under exceptionally difficult political conditions, and airpower is the starting and ending point for any discussion of why Milosevic quit.[51]

It is also the starting and ending point of any assessment of the US destruction of the Taliban regime and disruption of the al Qaeda in Afghanistan. As in Bosnia, a combination of US airpower and surrogate ground forces prevailed. In Afghanistan, however, there was careful operational and tactical coordination between the two, with US airpower providing decisive fire support for engaged anti-Taliban forces. Indeed, there were small contingents of US special operations forces and Marine Corps expeditionary forces on the ground directing air strikes and performing other military tasks.

The gravity of the 11 September attacks seemed to have at least temporarily transformed casualty phobia into a healthy casualty aversion, the requirements for which could be satisfied by the presence of local surrogate forces bearing the brunt of the bloody ground war and even occasional US ground combat operations on the scale of Operation Anaconda. There were nevertheless

early reports of civil-military tensions, including accounts that the military action initially proposed by the US Central Command was rejected by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld as timid.[52]

As with Deliberate Force and Allied Force, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan was conducted against a politically and geographically isolated enemy operating in a failed state and having little or no capacity to resist US airpower. It was also conducted with surveillance and precision-strike technologies that made those employed in the Gulf War and even in Allied Force look primitive by comparison; they permitted a relatively small number of platforms to find and destroy a wide variety of targets—"emerging" as well as traditional strategic targets—with modest collateral damage. Potential problems of military access to Afghanistan were solved politically, and the presence of local allies on the ground made it possible to overthrow the Taliban regime with the combination of US airpower and small supporting US ground forces.

A New Way of War?

Are we looking at a new way of war? A way that allows the United States to prevail strategically at little risk to its own military forces? One that avoids (for Americans) the agony of danger and death?

If weak and failed states are to dominate the US security agenda for the foreseeable future, and if America's political and military leadership remains casualty-phobic, and if advances in military technology permit use of force with little risk—then a combination of airpower, small supporting specialty ground force contingents (backed by regular ground forces held in reserve), and indigenous proxies is likely to become the US model for waging future war. Admittedly, these are big ifs. But the international political, domestic political, and technological trend lines since the end of the Cold War seem unmistakable. No less a critic of the military than William Arkin has argued, in the wake of victory in Afghanistan, that airpower "deserves to be the centerpiece" of future US strategy and should be accorded the lion's share of the defense budget. "The argument against airpower's dominance is that there were Navy ships fighting as well, and special operations forces, and Army and Marine troops on the ground [in Afghanistan]. But the truth of the matter is that they were all there to serve an airpower strategy."[53]

Though this judgment ignores the very important roles of Afghan surrogate ground forces, Russian and Pakistani cooperation, and the Taliban's utter political and military isolation, the fact remains that failing and failed states cannot

resist American airpower. Moreover, states sundered by civil conflict almost always contain parties to that conflict who have an interest in external great-power intervention, and it is those parties, usually on the weaker side of the internal military balance, that provide the potential proxies for US ground combat forces. This was the case in Iraq at the close of the Gulf War, Bosnia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, and Afghanistan in 2001.

Thus a key to successful US military intervention in failed states is the availability of proxies on the ground. But reliance on proxies, while minimizing American casualties, poses its own problems. The first is their level of fighting power. The price of weak, incompetent, or corrupt proxies is the unenviable choice of direct and risky US military intervention or humiliating abandonment of intervention altogether. This was the choice the United States faced in Vietnam in 1965. Until that year, the United States sought to create an effective South Vietnamese proxy army, but that army proved no match for the Viet Cong. In Kosovo, the KLA could never rise above the level of a nuisance to Serbia's regular forces, and toward the end of Operation Allied Force, NATO was considering the option of direct ground combat intervention. Even in Afghanistan, American war planners were initially reluctant to enlist the forces of the Northern Alliance, which appeared to be weak and ineffective; only by trial and error did the combination of alliance forces and US airpower prove irresistible.[54] In the case of Iraq, often mentioned as high on the list of post-Afghanistan target states of the US war on terrorism, it is doubtful that the Afghan model would work. Saddam Hussein's Stalinist state has atomized all political opposition inside Iraq, and the Kurdish ethnic minority in the northern part of the country, though hostile to Saddam's regime, has neither the numbers nor the internal political discipline to provide an effective regime substitute.[55]

The second problem is control. The marriages of the United States to anti-Serb forces in the former Yugoslavia and to the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan were marriages of convenience. Proxy political agendas are rarely identical to that of the intervening external power, and since proxy ground forces fight in their own countries and absorb most of the casualties, they can insist on pursuing their own local objectives even if those objectives run afoul of their external patron's desires. In Afghanistan, the anti-Taliban forces were far more interested in recovering lost territory and ending the fighting than they were in hunting down Osama bin Laden and punishing the Taliban leadership. Once the al Qaeda had been destroyed or driven from Afghanistan, and once the remaining Taliban stopped fighting—even in exchange for the leadership's freedom or safe passage, the anti-Taliban forces had accomplished their war agenda.

American reliance on proxies is hardly new; it was a prominent feature of our prosecution of the Cold War and publicly enshrined in the Nixon Doctrine. Proxies were indispensable to US victory in the Cold War, though some proxies proved to be incompetent (the Shah of Iran, the Nicaraguan contras) or difficult to discipline (South Korea's Syngman Rhee, South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem). In some cases, yesterday's proxy (Iraq in its war against the Ayatollah's Iran) turned out to be tomorrow's threat (Saddam as master of Kuwait). On the whole, however, the United States proved far more successful than the Soviet Union in selecting and grooming effective surrogates during the Cold War.

An airpower-dominant way of war in which US ground forces—and small ones at that—are ancillary, functioning mainly as target spotters and liaisons to indigenous proxies, is an inherently attractive way of war, especially for a

society that values the individual as highly as America's does. It also permits a casualty-phobic political and military leadership to wage war effectively—i.e., to achieve decisive strategic effects without the paying the blood price traditionally associated with attainment of those effects.

But the very technology that makes "bloodless" war possible may also serve to encourage the use of force in circumstances where perceptions of stakes and risks might otherwise counsel restraint. Is the United States in fact transforming war into essentially a riskless enterprise—i.e., one in which the level of risk is dwarfed by the magnitude and high probability of strategic payoff? If so, then what is to keep future Presidents from taking a casual approach to military intervention? Should the United States really look forward to creating a capacity to wage "painless" war, war without American death, war dangerous and hurtful only to the other side? Would not the prospect of casualty-free

combat invite the use of force over even trivial stakes? After the virtually bloodless US victory over Serbia, Michael Ignatieff warned,

> New weaponry may force us to reassess an essential assumption about democracies: that they go to war less frequently than authoritarian regimes, and that they rarely, if ever, go to war against fellow democracies. Democracies may well remain peace loving only so long as the risks of war remain real to their citizens. If war becomes virtual—and without risk—democratic electorates may be more willing to fight, especially if the cause is justified in the language of human rights and even democracy itself.[56]

The argument here is not a call to resist embracing the new way of war; in my view, the kind of war the United States fought in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan is both politically and technologically irresistible. Rather, the argument is simply to recognize two important caveats in embracing the new way of war: first, that success may be critically dependent on the availability of competent local surrogates with their own political agendas; and second, that the character of the new way of war could transform our very approach to the use of force. What if no reliable proxies are available? Do we foreswear intervention altogether or take the direct US ground combat plunge?

Obviously, our new way of war is of limited value in situations requiring the conquest, occupation, and administration of territory. These missions require "boots on the ground" in sizable numbers, although airpower would still serve as a powerful supporting arm. Airpower's utility is also limited in peace enforcement operations, which require dedicated ground forces. (Air occupation zones such as the two "no-fly" zones the United States continues to impose on Iraq have done little to retard undesirable developments on the ground.) But if the name of the primary game remains regime coercion or overthrow in failed states, which is an implicit objective of the new foreign policy consensus, then our new way of war—airpower plus small supporting US ground forces plus whatever local surrogates are available— seems the tailor-made instrument of American warcraft.

NOTES

1. Airpower's early prophets focused almost exclusively on war between urban industrial states, and their postulations of victory through strategic bombardment were based on the presence of enemy urban industrial targets whose destruction from the air would produce decisive military victory. By implication, rural, pre-industrial states were problematic candidates for victory through airpower. Airpower propagandist Alexander P. De Seversky conceded that "highly industrialized societies are vastly more vulnerable to modern aerial warfare than more primitive societies" because "urban populations" and "industrialization" provide "perfect concentrated targets for enemy aviation." (Alexander P. De Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power* [Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Company, 1943], p. 147.) The view that pre-industrial states were airpower-resistant was seemingly confirmed by the Vietnam War, where massive employment of American airpower failed either to coerce agrarian and totalitarian North Vietnam or to deny sufficient communist movement down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. See Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power, The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989); James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder, Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980); Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Setup, What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, 1991); and John Prados, *The Blood Road, The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999).

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12. Kamal Matinubim, quoted in David Lamb, "Missteps Toppled Taliban, Analysts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 December 2001.

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41. Daryl G. Press, "The Myth of Air Power in the Persian Gulf War and the Future of Warfare," *International Security*, 26 (Fall 2001), 5-44.

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2000), 39-84; and Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Conflict Over Kosovo, Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001).

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