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Isaiah Wilson III

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The True Tragedy of American Power

Isaiah Wilson III

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ABSTRACT: American distaste for tragedy has led US strategists and policymakers to mistake mere force for power. Understanding the difference between force and power is vital to America's rise as a durable and balanced global power, and not merely as a forceful hegemon. This understanding is all the more imperative at a time of compounding global security challenges and austerity.

What individuals do is related to what they think. . . . Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.¹

There is a fine line between a tragic hero's flaw and his virtue. The classic tragedies—those of Sophocles and Shakespeare, for instance—present a noble protagonist, “better than we” to the audience. His tragic flaw causes him to fall from prosperity to misery through a series of reversals and discoveries. In a typical case, the hero's fall occurs in stages: Act I introduces the hero, against whom dark forces align in Act II so by Act III it becomes clear to the audience (and sometimes to the hero) that his fate will be the opposite of what he hoped; the catastrophe of Act IV exposes the limits of the hero's power, and Act V secures our recognition (in a moment of “catharsis”) of the larger patterns at work in the play. What makes tragedy so poignant is not only how it shows human beings as the playthings of fate, but how it reveals that fate lurking in our own characters, so close to the qualities we cherish as to be indistinguishable from them. The same pride and probity that make Oedipus excel as king lead him to overestimate his strength and self-sufficiency; the same profundity and eloquence that make Hamlet a compelling individual make him a dilatory and ineffective agent. If these heroes could see their virtues within their proper bounds, they would no longer be the subjects—the victims—of tragedy. But they cannot and so they are.

American stories tend to resemble not tragedies so much as classic comedies, with happy endings and no loose ends. And yet a certain tragic sensibility recently entered into our political discourse. We increasingly sense the limits of not only our budgets, but our power to act as we would like in the wider world. We sense ever more palpably the frustrations of power and feel ever more fleetingly the privileges it affords. Like a tragic hero as the pivotal third act draws to a close, we feel ourselves at once flawed and incapable of isolating our flaw in time to save ourselves.

One dimension of our tragic flaw is this taste for happy endings itself. Among its myriad manifestations is the want of tragic sensibility in our strategic culture, which persists even as our broader political discourse becomes ever more somber. In this article, I show, first, how American distaste for tragedy has led US strategists and policymakers to mistake

Colonel Isaiah (Ike) Wilson III is a former Director of American Politics, Policy, and Strategy Program at West Point as well as founding director of the West Point Grand Strategy Program. He holds a BS from USMA, MS from Cornell, the National War College, CGSC, SAMS, and a Ph.D. from Cornell University. He has authored many publications, including *Thinking Beyond War*, 2007.

1 Francis Beer, *Meanings of War and Peace* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 6.

mere force for power. I want, then, to show how vital this differentiation between “force” and “power” has been to America’s rise as a durable and balanced global power, not merely a hegemon. It is important for us to appreciate this distinction all the more as we rethink America’s legitimate and possible roles as the leading power in the future. Finally, I will suggest what an American grand strategy informed by a sense of tragedy—as opposed to a tragic grand strategy—might look like.

Power and Force

Newton teaches us as much about the tragedy of power as Sophocles or Shakespeare. As every graduate of Physics 101 knows, Newton defined power with the following equation:

$$\text{Power} = \frac{\text{Force} \times \text{Displacement}}{\text{Time}}$$

Newton could not account for power without force, but he did not consider the two to be identical. In addition to force, one must account for both time and displacement, the imaginary straight path from the initial and final positions of a point, and the length and direction of which one expresses in the “displacement vector.” All these variables stand in harmonious symmetry in nature as reflected in Newton’s equation.

There are multiple definitions of power, but its essence is the capacity to effect change and the ability to influence others.² This is the foundation for Joseph Nye’s dissection of hard and soft power.³ Where power was once based on geography, population, and raw materials, today the basis lies increasingly on technology, education, and economic growth. Hard power, which physically compels or directs other states to act in a manner consistent with the goals of the state, typically appears in the form of incentives or threats to alter what another state does.⁴ This hard power assumes various forms: the size and capacity of the economic marketplace, political influence, and military strength most notably. The United States has used these forms of hard power to achieve its goals since its birth, but just as important has been soft power. Soft power, instead of inducement or coercion, co-opts and attracts; it shapes and changes what other states want.⁵ Quite simply, soft power is getting others to do what you want. It influences others because of attraction, and the means of soft power are less tangible but no less potent: values, culture, ideology, and institutions.

The United States has seen many of its policy objectives achieved in part due to its soft power. American ideals stood in stark contrast to those of Soviet communism and acted as a beacon for citizens trapped behind the Iron Curtain. In considering hard and soft power, where does the discussion of force begin?

² Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 1-2.

³ Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 25-26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31, 267.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

Force, of which military power is only one element, is the most blatant display of power.⁶ Power and force have a unique relationship and are too easily conflated, contributing to errors in strategic judgment and actions. While military force is an essential element of American national power, it is neither the only essential element nor is it a sufficient proxy for American power. In terms of politics, power rests on a state's prestige and capacity to cause or prevent change, and it requires legitimacy, which it derives from those who may be subject to it. True power is self-legitimizing, purposeful, and strategic in securing national interests. As such, power grows when others recognize the capacity, latent or otherwise, a state possesses. Force, on the other hand, consists of the tools that a state employs as an extension of its power, and when employed without legitimacy and strategic purpose, may be very dangerous for the state that does so. Power is the foundation of force; but an excessive employment of force—not just military, but economic and political—can erode the power foundation. Paradoxically, the recognition of power comes from the display of force, but when states employ force excessively, it may lead to a decrease in power. The unmistakable link between power and force may, in fact, be found in national will and legitimacy. The longer a state employs force, the greater the potential for a decrease in national will, which may eventually result in the diminution of power.

Reconsidering American Power

For long stretches of US history, the basis of constitutional discussions centered on how to maximize liberty and prosperity, and how to organize force with a view to preserving them. The goal was sufficient centralization of force to ensure citizen's rights and no more than the minimum necessary to protect and ensure liberty. It was only in a Constitution so conceived that the unionist's slogan, "join or die," could coexist with the revolutionary's *Don't Tread on Me!* By using principle to restrain force, the ends of government to limit and define its means, the founders understood, the nation could generate true power.

Where does American power stand today? From one vantage point, US power seems unsurpassed. The United States is not only a member-state of a global community of nation-states, but its leader. And the global community—at least insofar as it is defined by global trade, humanitarian impulses, and other touchstones of American liberalism—is itself the American regime writ large. In this sense, the United States is not merely part of the system; it *is* the system. As a result, US domestic politics and policy determinations have widespread consequences beyond American shores. Also as a result, American strategists feel a special responsibility to guarantee the stability of the system as a whole.

Seen another way, however, American power not only checks but undermines itself by appearing only in the guise of force. American military force has had a mixed record of success, particularly over the past decade in Afghanistan and Iraq. These and other irregular wars and military-humanitarian operations (MHOs) the United States has engaged in have demonstrated the inability of mere military force to

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 134.

generate the conditions necessary to resolve conflicts: political agreement among internal factions, improved capacity in host nation civil governance, and increased economic development. Force of arms can bring down regimes with far greater ease than it can build them up. Partly as a result of the prominence of force in the American disposition toward the world, the persuasive and alluring aspects of America's soft power—its ability to attract other states through its ideals, ideas, and culture—is also in question. And with good reason, as the United States' focus on force led it in many cases to compromise its own core ideals with greater effectiveness than any enemy could have done.

This, then, is the heart of the tragic paradox we face: a system of government that generates power by restraining force has produced a nation commanding unparalleled force, and with it the tendency to place force rather than power at the core of its international relations. As the founders knew, military force is an essential element of American power. But this power rests equally on its capacity to effect or prevent change by means of its prestige and legitimacy, which have as much to do with the opinion of those subject to American power as with the opinions of Americans themselves. True power is legitimate, purposeful, and strategic in securing national interests. The nation founded on such a notion of power, yet bewitched with its own force resembles nothing so much as the tragic hero tilting toward his drama's climax.

The United States' successful efforts to open markets are partially responsible for its tenuous economic situation, and may potentially lead to political backlash domestically.⁷ A worsening economic condition for the United States may result in an inability to garner the necessary will for further uses of economic force.⁸ The ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have strained the United States politically and economically.⁹ Of late, the United States may have experienced a decline in its power due to an excessive utilization of force and the greater use of force in lieu of leveraging its latent power capacity. It has become imperative that national decisionmakers, policymakers, and the American public alike, begin to tackle directly and outright this complex and often paradoxical interplay between American power and American force.¹⁰

Legitimizing American Power

Legitimate power in the American tradition was originally conceived as limited power, with an intentional emphasis on balance, durability,

7 Glenn Somerville and Chris Buckley, "China and US Each Claim Gains on Yuan Talks," *Reuters News*, May 25, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE64M09Q20100525>.

8 Bruce Bartlett, "How Deficit Hawks Could Derail the Economy," *Forbes*, January 8, 2010, <http://www.forbes.com/2010/01/07/deficit-great-depression-recovery-opinions-columnists-bruce-bartlett.html>.

9 The political effects of the United States' actions have been the subject of several analyses, including Andrew W. Terrill, *Regional Spillover Effects of the Iraq War*, Strategic Studies Institute, January 6, 2009; and Les Gelb, "Karzai Bests Obama, For Now," *Council on Foreign Relations* (May 11, 2010); Joseph Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2008).

10 The prominent use of its military, international democratization efforts, and uses of economic statecraft in pursuit of national objectives are utilizations of force that may have affected the power/force equilibrium of the United States.

certainly energy . . . but importantly, also modesty.¹¹ America's approach to power was originally an enterprise in the construction, constitution, and assurance of a "minimalist state of power"—just enough centralization of power to ensure citizen's rights and no more than that minimum so as to protect and ensure liberty. The key political considerations in connection with power were to be found not in physical force as an end-all, but rather in the questions of justice and authority, i.e., what is the moral and legal status of power? Looking back even further, in the American tradition and to the nation's grounding in Scottish Common Sense philosophy, the view of power was/is that it is morally neutral—not bad or good in and of itself—that its goodness or badness depends more on how it is used, when, and for what purposes. In short, American Power, traditionally and to remain consistent with who we are, who we have been, and who we intend to continue to be in the future, as a republic, must always be purpose-driven, not ways-and-means determined. Author, journalist, and political commentator, Leslie H. Gelb, offers a useful contemporary commentary on the tenets of power, in his book, *Power Rules*:¹²

- "*Power was never to be considered in soft or hard terms*" This is actually more a way of categorizing "force" not power. Power is not fungible and divisible in that way. Power is, and was, essentially the capacity ("the ability to . . .") to get people to do what they otherwise don't want to do, by pressure and coercion, using one's resources and position. Persuasion, values, and the use of force can and often do flow into power, but at its core, power is psychological and political pressure.
- "*Power equals capacity.*" Tracing the development of the word from its ancient Greek and Latin origins, we find Power defined and understood to mean nothing more than "ability" as a noun and "to be able" as a verb. Being a Power as a nation, much less a Great Power, is about being able and in a position to compel others to your will; it is psychological and political action. In that respect, the description of Power is synonymous to the Clausewitzian theoretical concept of war—an act of policy (i.e., what governments choose to do and choose not to do), and as such, a continuation of politics by other means. Power is a grapple. It derives from establishing psychological and political leverage or advantage by employing resources (i.e., wealth, military capability, commodities, etc.), position (such as geographic regional balancer or political protector), as well as maintaining resolve and unity at home. Power, thus, varies with each and every relationship and changes with each and every situation. It has to be developed and shaped in almost each and every situation, and will vary over time and place. Critically, the wielder of power must take great care to be credible to be taken seriously, both at home and abroad.
- "*Having a 'base of Power' is much more than a simple adding up of resources.*" It depends on the kind and nature of those resources—namely, a nation's relative self-sufficiency and resilience once a power struggle

11 A full and comprehensive review of the Founding and Framing era literature is well beyond the limits of this short article. However, a definitive and authoritative compendium source is found in *The Federalist Papers*. Source for this article is Clinton Rossiter, comp., *Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, The Federalist Papers*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1961).

12 Leslie H. Gelb, *Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009).

begins. For the American republic, the rightful and legitimate “base of power” is not to be found in any particular process or institution, and surely not in any political party; it should never be allowed to be found in anything other than the people themselves—the *General Will*.

- “*Power shrinks when it is wielded poorly.*” Failed or open-ended wars diminish power. Threats and unrealistic promises left unfulfilled diminish power. Mistakes and continual changing of course can also diminish power.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, it is important to appreciate the Founders’ and Framers’ original intent for the source pool and main sanctuary of American power—the law; and importantly, not a sanctuary found in rule *by* law, but rather in rule *of* law.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, and now closing on half-way into its second decade, military force has occupied a central place in American foreign policy as the nation has confronted new threats, opportunities, and responsibilities resulting from globalization and other geopolitical shifts in the international environment. Questions about whether and how to intervene militarily have become more important than ever.

Since the end of the Cold War, and certainly since the shock of 9/11, the United States has found itself faced with a “Goldilocks” dilemma. It had to find that “just-right,” or rather, that ethically just and legally right, answer to the operational questions of the day—that is, how to project and exercise military power in a manner that is effective, but just and lawful. It is at the heart of this goldilocks challenge where questions of American power versus force lie.

The post–Cold War period has proven to be a period of widespread ethnic-religious, cultural conflict that neither states nor nonstate actors have been able to contain. Since 9/11, the international community has had to confront the rise of transnational terrorists. It has also been challenged to accommodate developing norms and obligations related to such things as human security, self-determination, and human rights.

US military interventions since 1989 have fostered tectonic changes in the international system. They have challenged traditional norms, principles, rules, and decisionmaking procedures that have provided stability to the system for the past sixty years. In particular, US interventions have challenged what was once considered largely inviolable—territorial sovereignty.

While the 1990s witnessed the beginnings of a decline in interstate wars, there has been a rise in internal conflicts, and, importantly, an increase in the internationalization of these internal conflicts. In fact, the defining feature of many of the military interventions of the 1990s—Somalia, the Balkans, Haiti, Rwanda, Kosovo, East Timor, and others—has been the rising call and drive for foreign interventions aimed against sovereign states on behalf of citizens and communities within those states.

Thus, the inviolability of state territorial sovereignty has unraveled, in part through a combination of changes in the international security system, but also at the hands of interveners among whom the United States has been and continues to be a lead participant.

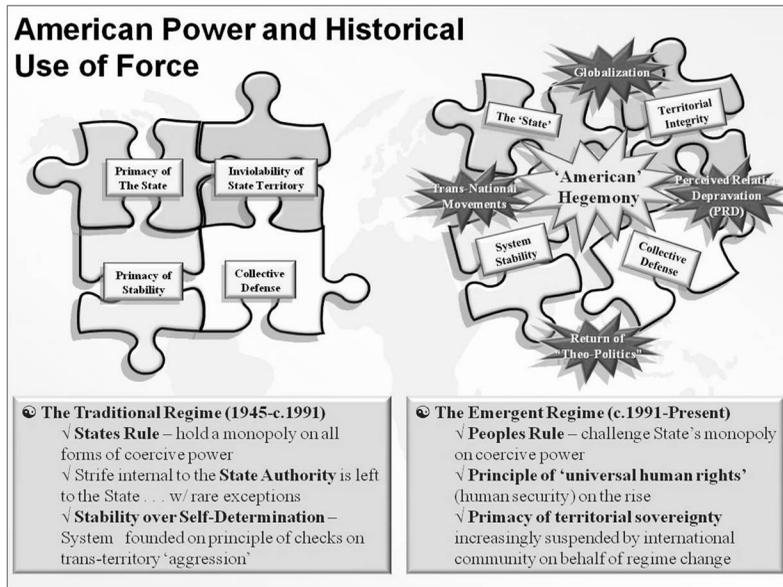


Figure. The Paradox of American Power

Indeed, it has become apparent that the United States has had a profound effect on the destabilization of the international system and that it has challenged the traditional legal and normative international regimes that have defined the obligations—and limits—of right and just intervention, and the limited and precision uses of force as one (but not the only) application of American power, for a half century. The power dilemma facing the United States and the international community today is one of a goldilocks story line—it involves reconciling these new justifications for intervention with the traditional norms that focused on checking territorial aggressions by asserting near-absolute state sovereignty.

In an earlier age, “island nations” like Great Britain (and to a lesser degree, the United States) could build-down, even decimate, their peacetime armies with impunity, as intervention was typically limited to redressing violations of a sovereign state’s territory by an aggressor and a restoration of status quo *ante-bellum*. But since the 1990s, the global security environment demands more from its great powers and especially its leading state. Today’s interventions, to be considered right and just, must establish a better state of peace *post-bellum*.¹³ The prevailing norm of universal human rights, once confined to the Hague and Geneva Conventions, increasingly assumes the more demanding form of a Responsibility to Protect capable of triggering (or at least justifying) uses of military force for humanitarian purposes by an ever-growing

13 *Jus post bellum* (“justice after war”) obligations are on the rise, and have been for the past two decades as evidenced by the emergence of new, albeit still uncodified conventions obligating foreign intervention forces to not only wage just interventions, justly, but also to stay the intervention “beyond the warfight” as occupier on behalf of assisting in the establishment of a new social-political governance—regime rebuilding. See Rear Admiral Louis V. Iasiello, Chaplain Corps, U.S. Navy, “*JUS POST BELLUM: The Moral Responsibilities of Victors in War*,” *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 3/4 (Summer/Autumn 2004): 33-52, <http://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/022cae3-60c8-4caa-9153-bd08f28387d5/Jus-Post-Bellum--The-Moral-Responsibilities-of-Vic.aspx>

number of nation-states. The internationalization of internal conflicts, oftentimes pitting one or more nation-states against roguish regimes making national claims of self-determination, adds yet another ill-defined but common *causis belli*.¹⁴ A sustainable security strategy in this day and age must be based on a provision of force and a doctrine for guiding its application capable of attaining “viable peace.”¹⁵ A sustainable security posture depends on marrying the right capabilities with the right strategic goals (balance) and a capacity for mobilizing and sustaining force that can achieve economies of scale in international interventions (durability). The ability to marry so-called hard and soft power in effective-cost and legitimate ways is the supreme test of security strategy making.

This has not, however, been the United States’ favored mode of intervention. Instead, the history of American intervention reveals an inclination to using martial instruments to cure what are, essentially, political dilemmas. The flexibility and projectability of the US military instrument has secured its prominence in the minds of American strategists, and yet the American record in unconventional interventions (“dirty little wars”) has actually been quite dismal. This is especially so when the United States has found itself an external patron to the counterinsurgent in intrastate wars and military-humanitarian interventions. Many of the United States’ experiences in these types of interventions have ended in stalemates or incomplete finishes.¹⁶ The Vietnam War was a complete war-loss for the United States; it is perhaps too early to tell how Afghanistan and Iraq will be remembered, but the trends do not give much reason to hope these interventions will free the United States from its historical trend. These interventions began well enough, but like a boxer replete with years of bout experience and a reach that outdistances younger, less-experienced competitors, the United States is left facing this tale of the tape: “great reach, but poor endurance in the latter rounds.”

Part of the problem is simply not having enough physical capacity to meet global requirements, but this problem is not easy to address. If ours is a “not enough boots on the ground” problem, then one simple answer might be to limit the ground on which we send our available boots. We might at the very least resolve not to occupy *more* ground, as then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it when he said that “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should

14 Isaiah Wilson III, “Dueling Regimes: The Means-Ends Dilemma of Multilateral Intervention Policy,” *World Affairs*, January 2001.

15 A definition of “sustainable security” commensurate to the conditions of the 21st century operating environment expands beyond traditional physical and material-based concepts of security, i.e., beyond those forms of security typically achievable and sustainable by military power alone. Today’s wider concept of “security” and the threats to it include, but are not limited to, issues of human security (and the provision of basic essential needs), cultural security, economic security, and environmental security. For a full description, see “Promoting Sustainable Security,” NDC Occasional Paper No. 12, NATO Defense College, Research Branch, Rome, February 2006, and also the research by the *Find for Peace*. For a definition of “viable peace,” see Jock Covey, Michael J. Dziedzic, and Leonard R. Hawley, eds., *The Quest for Viable Peace: International Intervention and Strategies for Conflict Transformation* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005).

16 Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization* 63 (Winter 2009): 67-106.

‘have his head examined.’”¹⁷ We might also get rid of ground currently occupied.

Neither option, however, is feasible in today’s environment. The ground and the threats on it, after all, “get a vote,” and they sometimes demand an American presence even when Americans would prefer to be elsewhere. While we might wish to withdraw from some of the nearly 130 countries where we perform a variety of intervention tasks ranging from traditional combat to peace operations, to do so would likely destabilize the world even more than our occasional missteps do.¹⁸

Alternatively, the United States might acquire more boots. We have long known the number of troops necessary for waging and winning unconventional interventions. To defeat the violence of an insurgency, a precondition for stabilization and reconstruction operations, we know that it takes approximately one rifleman for every twenty insurgents. For stability and reconstruction, approximately fifty soldiers are needed for every one person in the population. These forces would be a multicomposition force bringing a wide variety of skills and knowledge to this side of the counterinsurgency campaign, ranging from skills in major combat operations to city and regional planning expertise. Finally, we should not discount perhaps the most important lesson of all regarding war . . . while it is vitally essential to first determine the kind of war a nation is embarking upon (the supreme Clausewitzian warning), sometimes particular kinds of wars may embark themselves on a nation-state, or community of nation-states. Put more simply, sometimes war is less a matter of strategic choice and more an unavoidable issue of moral imperative.

Not having the appropriate quantities of force (simple overstretch) is bad enough; attempts to stretch that ill-fitting set of capabilities over and onto a problem set well beyond the traditional military uses of force (compound overstretch) can foster the illiberal practices that make American intervention seem an exercise in imperialism. There is, of course, a point of diminishing return that all great power nation-states (and empires) must come to face as they attempt to expand or merely to maintain their global status.

“Nations project their military power according to their economic resources and in defense of their broad economic interests,” Paul Kennedy has argued. “But, the cost of projecting that military power is more than even the largest economies can afford indefinitely, especially when new technologies and new centers of production shift economic power away from established Great Powers—hence the rise and fall of nations.”¹⁹ The mechanism that seems to lead a nation-state from liberal towards more imperial forms of intervention is military force itself, and

17 Tom Shanker, “Warning Against Wars Like Iraq and Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2011.

18 On troop deployments, see GlobalSecurity.org, at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/global-deployments.htm>. I have focused on the inadequacy of current military force posture from a “landpower” (US Army) standpoint for two main reasons: (1) lack of space to discuss Total Force shortfalls and (2) the nature of the 21st century security dilemma is namely a landpower and littorals challenge—ours is an incapacity to sustain force on ground we need to hold to build viable peace and stability for the duration of the intervention. This task is largely and predominantly a core Army function, and consequently from a military standpoint, a landpower shortfall.

19 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), Introduction.

particularly the manner in which it is used. For the Roman Empire, it was the legions—the institution of last resort—that, in their efforts to secure Rome and her empire by means of increasingly authoritarian uses of coercive force, contributed to her decline. Great care must be taken to ensure that the actions our own “legions” take in defense of liberalism do not have the unintended effect of fostering illiberalism.

To turn to our technological preeminence for solutions to vexing human problems of this sort is to confuse the fruit of our success with the cause of it. We do not enjoy power because of our advanced technology; we enjoy advanced technology because of our power.

In summary, it is important, essential, that the United States now reconsider its understandings of power and its uses of force for at least two reasons. First, the United States must, as a nation, recognize that it is, in and of itself, a system effect.²⁰ For better or worse, or perhaps mixes of both, and particularly since its “last great power standing” rise to global hegemony in the wake of World War II, the choices the United States makes in where and how it intervenes (including those choices of where not to intervene) are not merely US choices, but choices that impact the entire world-system.²¹ Having a deep and accurate understanding of and appreciation for differences between force and power is critical to liberal, legitimate, and instrumentally effective global leadership; mistaking uses of force, “forcefully,” for power is a recipe for accelerated decline of America as a great power, with destabilizing consequences for long-term global stability, security, and prosperity.

Secondly, more difficult but equally important, we must take account of the implications of our own roles and responsibilities, of our policy choices and actions, into our Power calculations. The United States has had a heavy hand in infusing the current international system with much of its current instability—this, in spite of the noble goals and intentions behind those policy decisions and uses of force. The internationalization of otherwise internal conflicts, military-humanitarian operations, counterinsurgency, democratization, and preventive war—all uses of American military force that have had destabilizing effects on the stability of state regimes, national ethno-sectarian balances, and stability of the international system in general. We as a nation and global leading power must become a better study of the quality of peace that we promise through our acts of wars, those of short and long duration. We must calculate the power consequences of the peace we ring in through uses of force.

Renewing American Grand Strategy

Confronting a punishing budget crisis, an exhausted military, reluctant allies, and a public whose appetite for global engagement is waning, the United States faces an intertwined set of critical questions. Among these questions, three stand out:

- How will current political realities affect the range of strategic choices

²⁰ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

²¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

available to policymakers?

- How can the United States government make the best possible strategic choices?
- What role will the existing tapestry of US relationships and regional partnerships play?

All of these are political questions. When resources become scarce, the politics surrounding budget decisions escalate. All of these are also military questions. In the final hours of last-ditch discussions to avoid the February 2013 sequester, Joint Chiefs Chairman General Martin Dempsey summarized the military aspect of budget battles with bracing clarity. “What do you want your military to do?” General Dempsey asked in testimony to the House of Representatives. “If you want it to be doing what it’s doing today, then we can’t give you another dollar. If you want us to do something less than that, we’re all there with you and we’ll figure it out.”²² All of these are, finally, questions of grand strategy; they involve the calculated relation of means to large ends.²³ On this plane, the fundamental challenge facing the United States might be put this way: After sixty-five years of pursuing a globally engaged grand strategy—nearly a third of which transpired without a great peer power rival—has the time finally come for retrenchment?²⁴ Or can the United States discover a way to navigate uncertainty while preserving American dominance as a leading power in and of the international system? These questions will be at the core of our political debates in the years to come.

US strategists need to think of power, to whatever purpose it is put, in relative rather than in absolute terms. The key to their success is the ability to gain the most from their capabilities while their adversaries do not. US strategists also must understand the difference between the power to win battles and the power to win wars. Winning battles is important, but the battles have to count toward winning wars. Understanding which ones do and which ones do not is a purely intellectual exercise.

A renewed American grand strategy would acknowledge the nation’s tragic flaw: its pride in its force and technology. It would also acknowledge the proximity of this flaw to the nation’s virtue: the set of principles and institutions for restraining force that have proven uniquely adept at producing abundant prosperity, force, and with them unsurpassed power. And it would, finally, exorcise, or at least contain, the ghost that has haunted American intervention by casting war as a matter of mere force rather than an instrument of policy.

As they prepare for this spiritual struggle, American grand strategists might recall that not all ghosts are “goblins damn’d,” as Hamlet worried the ghost of his father might be; they are just as frequently “spirits of health,” returning to remind the living of first principles and restore their sense of duty. We should exorcise our goblins while welcoming the spiritual remnants of times when American power prevailed even in the absence of preponderant force.

22 Claudette Roulo, “Chairman Outlines Sequestration’s Dangers,” *American Forces Press Service*, February 13, 2013.

23 John Lewis Gaddis, “What is Grand Strategy?” lecture delivered at Duke University, February 26, 2009, <http://tiss.sanford.duke.edu/DebatingGrandStrategyDetails.php>.

24 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13): 7–51.

The great challenges and opportunities that lie before the statesmen of the United States lie in questions of American Power. Power is about choices—choices over how to generate force, in different quantities and of different qualities; whether we choose to generate force on our own or in genuine partnership with others. Again, a reflection on the Monroe Doctrine and the American approach to power versus force is instructive to us now and going forward. The Doctrine was issued at a time when nearly all Latin American colonies of Spain and Portugal had achieved independence from the Spanish Empire and the Portuguese Empire. The United States, working in agreement with Britain, wanted to guarantee that no European power would move in. It was actually mainly through partnership with Great Britain that the United States was able to make credible, with the presence of British military force, the deterrent threat of Monroe. In short, what we see at the time of Monroe, and in the Doctrine itself, is a grand expression of American power (according to most scholars on the subject, one of the grandest expressions of US power in the country's history) at a time when American force was relatively anemic. This power-force paradox offers the United States great and important lessons for the gathering and learning as America's capacities to generate and sustain force inevitably continue and decline while its global leader responsibilities increase and become more complex. As Sir Isaac Newton taught us centuries ago, the bigger determinant over the strength and direction of power is found in how we displace force over time. Displacement of force, or rather, how we as a nation choose to use our force, and the manner of behavior behind our uses of that force, or rather, how we as a nation choose to use our force, and the manner of behavior behind our uses of that force, independently and in collective actions with others, is a strong determinant of power, just and rightful power, legitimate power.

Austerity in terms of dwindling dollars and cents does nothing to deny citizens nor elected leaders in making these power choices. Only a self-imposed austerity of sense and sensibility can deny a great nation like the United States of all the opportunity that “rides on the dangerous winds” of future times ahead and are, undeniably, ambiguous and ripe with crisis.

As in past times, why and how America intervenes will matter.