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John A. Nagl

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ABSTRACT: Since achieving victory in World War II, the United States military has a less-than-enviable combat record in irregular warfare. This detailed historical analysis provides perspective on where past decisions and doctrines have led to defeat and where they may have succeeded if given more time or executed differently. In doing so, it provides lessons for future Army engagements and argues that until America becomes proficient in irregular warfare, our enemies will continue to fight us at the lower levels of the spectrum of conflict, where they have a good chance of exhausting our will to fight.

Keywords: victory, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, irregular warfare, landpower

As the American war in Vietnam began heating up in 1962, World War II hero General Douglas MacArthur returned to the United States Military Academy to receive the Thayer Award and encourage cadets to win the wars their generation would undoubtedly face. He exhorted them to do everything in their power to win America's wars, stating, "Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you lose, the Nation will be destroyed, that the very obsession of your public service must be Duty, Honor, Country."[1]

MacArthur did not live to see his exhortation left unheeded. Since winning "the big one" more than 75 years ago, America's win-loss record would have landed any football coach in the hot seat—if it did not get the coach fired midseason. Desert Storm was a clear military win, and the Korean War ended in a tie with an armistice, which means it is technically ongoing.

However, Vietnam, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan were not wins in any meaningful sense of the word. In Vietnam and Afghanistan, America's exit was ignominious at best. America's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to a rapid resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which took control of nearly a third of the country, necessitating the return of American forces to expel them from the ground yielded to them by Iraqi forces. American troops will likely have to remain in

1. General Douglas MacArthur, "Farewell Given to the Corps of Cadets" (speech, West Point, NY, May 12, 1962, National Center for Public Policy Research (website), https://nationalcenter.org/ncppr/2001/11/04/general-douglas-macarthurs-farewell-speech-to-west-point-1962/.

Iraq for the foreseeable future to prevent radical Islamists from toppling the government as the Taliban did after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Following America's premature withdrawal, the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in August 2021, defeating not just a superpower but the world's only remaining superpower, the Soviet Union itself having crumbled as a result of its misadventures in the Hindu Kush.

The United States can make a credible claim to being the most powerful country in history, a colossus astride the globe comparable only to the Romans and the British at the heights of their respective powers. America currently spends more on defense than the next 10 countries (many of which are its allies) combined, with nearly 45 percent of global defense spending accruing to the red, white, and blue. Why, then, has the country so little to show for the blood and treasure it has invested in its wars since 1945? Why can't America win its wars?

In particular, why can't the Army win America's wars? Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) were all ground wars, with the Army playing a decisive role. Marines, by their reckoning and by Department of Defense doctrine, fight battles and not wars, while the Air Force and Navy—both clearly superior to any challengers on the planet—played a supporting role in each of the wars of the past 75 years, but not a decisive one. Due to the Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy, American soldiers have enjoyed air supremacy since World War II, but even with this advantage, they still could not win. The result has led Andrew Bacevich, former Army officer and Boston University professor, to question whether the United States truly has the greatest military in the world.[2]

This article argues that for conventional warfare, the US Army is the best in the world but has consistently failed to plan for and adapt to the challenges of irregular warfare. The United States is the most capable state-on-state power in the world when it comes to high-intensity conflict and, indeed, the most powerful the world has ever seen. Yet, our excellence in this arena has driven our enemies to search for gaps in our armor. These enemies have found those vulnerabilities (lower on the spectrum of conflict) in the areas of terrorism, insurgency, and low-intensity conflict. Their success in these areas over the past 50 years has provided an unmissable lesson to our enemies, who will continue to fight us where

2. Andrew J. Bacevich, "Do We Truly Have the 'World's Greatest' Military?," Responsible Statecraft (website), December 27, 2021, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/27/do-we-truly-have-the-worlds-greatest-military/.

we are weak rather than strong. We must learn from our mistakes and remedy them, so America is safe wherever our enemies choose to attack.

American hegemony began in the wake of World War II, with the ascension of the United States to a power differential unmatched in human history. America produced nearly half of the world's gross domestic product and was in sole possession of the most powerful weapon mankind had ever known—the nuclear bomb. The Soviet Union, much more badly hurt by World War II than America, created a buffer zone to protect its western flank, but the Cold War erupted into conflict on another continent. American forces in South Korea were unprepared for a North Korean invasion in June 1950. After stemming the North Korean advance and the operational success of the Inchon landing, a much-larger American force was unprepared for Chinese intervention when American forces approached the Yalu River later that year.[3] America earned a tie in the first war of its period of hegemony and learned a global hegemon always has to be prepared for war—a lesson that continues to animate US forces patrolling the 38th parallel to this day. The Army can learn and has, but it is better at learning lessons related to conventional war rather than unconventional war.

The Vietnam War was even more challenging since it was both a conventional war against the North Vietnamese army supported by China and Russia and an irregular war against the Viet Cong. Like Korea, the war was conducted in the shadow of the Cold War, and the balance of power with Russia and China, supported by the specter of nuclear war, put an upper limit on America's ability to escalate. Nonetheless, the United States made gradual progress against both sets of enemies, leading North Vietnam to roll the dice with the Tet Offensive in 1968.

While the guerrilla uprising was defeated and its impact on the Viet Cong was costly at the tactical and operational levels, wars are won and lost at the strategic level. The American people lost faith in an Army and government that had told them of a light at the end of the Vietnam War tunnel. US President Lyndon Johnson chose not to run for reelection, contributing to Richard Nixon's ascent to the presidency and Creighton Abram's ascent to command of the war in Vietnam. Abrams created a much more nuanced "One War" strategy (the strategy took advantage of the fact that the Viet Cong infrastructure had been exposed during the Tet Offensive) and prioritized training and equipping the South Vietnamese Army.[4] The policy of withdrawing American ground troops but supporting the South Vietnamese army with American advisers and air support was called "Vietnamization." Heavily supported by American airpower, the

3. T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Korean War History, Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2001).
4. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

South Vietnamese forces turned back the 1972 Easter Offensive. Later, a congressional decision to withdraw further American support for South Vietnam in the wake of the Watergate scandal meant South Vietnamese forces had to face the 1975 North Vietnamese offensive on their own. They crumbled, and America withdrew in abject failure.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, the US Army turned away from counterinsurgency to focus on deterring and, if necessary, winning a conventional war with the Soviet Union in Europe. In a remarkable feat of leadership, vision, and determination, the Army created an all-volunteer force and reequipped itself with weapons systems that took advantage of the information revolution.[5] The quality of that Army was a contributing factor in the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, much accelerated by the Soviet defeat fighting an insurgency in Afghanistan supported by the Central Intelligence Agency.

While the war in Europe for which the Army had prepared never emerged—in no small part because of the Army's deterrent effect—the training and technology purchased at such great cost were put to the test in 1991 to overturn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The largest deployment of American troops since Vietnam demonstrated convincingly America's ability to defeat conventional opponents on a battlefield devoid of civilians. It was the Army's sole clear victory in the post–World War II period, even if the political result of the military accomplishment was less clear. Hussein withdrew his defeated forces from Kuwait but remained in power and a threat to regional stability.

The Army had made the right decision to focus on deterring conventional war in Europe in the wake of Vietnam; the threat was real, and the Army was unprepared for conventional war against a near-peer threat after two decades of conflict in Southeast Asia. However, following the American victory in the Cold War—a war that reached the threshold of 1,000 casualties per year only during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts—and the defeat of Saddam Hussein's army, the Army struggled to find direction without a clearly identifiable enemy. As the Army focused on drawing down among proclamations of the "End of History" and the triumph of capitalism and democracy globally, troubling conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia presented new challenges to an Army that was finding its way in what President George H. W. Bush called "A New World Order."

His son would face a greater challenge the Army and the nation were unprepared to handle. After the al-Qaeda attacks on Washington, DC, and New York on September 11, 2001, the Pentagon had no war plans ready

5. James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Sterling, VA: Potomac Books, 1997).

for an invasion of Afghanistan when its Taliban rulers refused to hand over Osama bin Laden for justice. American Special Forces and CIA operatives supported Afghan Northern Alliance fighters who toppled the Taliban in an unconventional warfare campaign.The operation, plagued by shortages of ground-troop strength, contributed to bin Laden's escape into Pakistan.

America's attention quickly turned to the next war against Iraq, a country that had played no role in the September 11 attacks. Saddam Hussein would never have allowed al-Qaeda into Iraq, and before the American invasion in March 2003, there was no al-Qaeda presence in the country. Taking advantage of the security vacuum that followed the American invasion, al-Qaeda created a substantial presence there.

In addition to a notable shortage of radical Islamists inside Hussein's Iraq, there was also a significant shortage of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), though the apparent presence of these weapons was the proximate cause of America's invasion. More concerned about deterring Iran than American concerns about his weapons stores, Hussein refused to reveal he had essentially ceased all WMD production in the wake of Desert Storm. This decision would prove fatal to him—and to thousands of American troops and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians who would perish in a war fought on incorrect intelligence.

In an attempt to win global support for the invasion, US Secretary of State Colin Powell argued before the United Nations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, testimony he would later regret. Unsure of the intelligence he was briefing, he had required CIA Director George Tenet to appear in the camera frame with him as he testified. The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 with too few troops to meet its obligation under international law to secure the country afterward and with no plan to govern the country after toppling the Hussein regime. A predictable and predicted civil war erupted between the minority Sunni, who had led the country for many years, and the newly empowered Shia majority.[6]

The civil war initially took the form of a Sunni insurgency against the American occupiers. It evolved to include both Sunni attacks on Shiite civilians and Shia-led reprisals. As the violence mounted, American commander General George Casey withdrew American forces from the cities where most of the killing was taking place. He prepared to draw down American forces at the direction of US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld until US President

6. W. Andrew Terrill and Conrad C. Crane, *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/807/.

George W. Bush decided to surge American troops under a new commander who had written a new counterinsurgency strategy.

General David Petraeus oversaw a reduction of violence of two-thirds during his 18 months in command. Although Iraq is now a troubled and violent democracy, it is the first democracy in the history of the Arab world. Mistakes in Iraq have been bipartisan. US President Barack Obama's premature withdrawal of American troops in 2011 in fulfillment of a campaign promise provided space for a resurgent Islamic State in Iraq and Syria that again threatened Baghdad. A recommitment of American forces (who are likely to remain in Iraq indefinitely) prevented that disaster. Consequently, there is no way to spin American involvement in Iraq since 2003 as a victory. While the outcome has been far less horrific than it could have been, Tom Ricks's description of the American invasion as "one of the most profligate actions in the history of American foreign policy" is an understatement.[7]

Meanwhile, Iraq absorbed an inordinate share of resources, including the time and attention of American troops and decisionmakers. Afghanistan became the forgotten war, with the Taliban regaining strength as Iraq took all the oxygen and attention the Bush administration could spare. On his election in 2008, Obama studied the war in Afghanistan exhaustively before deciding upon his own surge of troops to fight an insurgency there. Unfortunately, in the same speech in which he committed those forces, Obama also provided the date they would start to withdraw—a move reinforcing the adage that while the Americans have the watches, the Taliban has the time to wait them out.[8]

The Taliban gained strength as US President Donald Trump repeatedly requested all American troops be withdrawn, ultimately resulting in a plan for a withdrawal beginning in May 2021. Newly elected US President Joe Biden, who was never fully supportive of the Afghan surge, chose to delay his predecessor's withdrawal decision but not overturn it. The American withdrawal began in earnest early in summer 2021. Afghan security forces who had grown dependent on American airpower and logistical support wavered and broke as the withdrawal accelerated. The horrifying picture of American helicopters evacuating the Kabul embassy provided the metaphor Biden had tried to avoid when he stated Kabul would not be another Saigon, as he predicted in July 2021, "There's going to be

7. Tom E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 3.

8. Matt Zeller, *Watches without Time: An American Soldier in Afghanistan* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2021). The best book on the American war in Afghanistan is Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

no circumstance when you're going to see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan."

In the same July 8 press conference, Biden promised "I want to make clear what I made clear to [Afghan President Ashraf] Ghani: that we are not going to just walk away and not sustain their ability to maintain that force."[9] Yet, we did walk away and did not sustain the Afghan's ability to maintain the force we had so laboriously built.

This history demonstrates that since America accepted its role as global hegemon and the readiness requirements global leadership entails, America can win wars decisively and at relatively low cost (in lives if not in treasure)—as long as our opponents choose to fight us conventionally. Ricks has observed the Civil War is the Old Testament and World War II is the New Testament in the force-on-force contests that constitute the most hallowed parts of the American military canon.[10]

When enemy forces confront the United States at a lower point on the spectrum of conflict, as terrorists or insurgents, they can outlast America's patience as a nation. The Cold War demonstrated American democracy could prevail in a long war—but only if the threat was obvious and existential. When the stakes are lower and the threat less apparent, American politicians tend to tire of the conflict, and American strategists struggle to explain why continued sacrifices of blood and treasure—even at a relatively low level—are to America's benefit.

The reluctance of prospective enemies to fight the United States and her allies conventionally was apparent in the wake of the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm. Now, with two more irregular warfare failures in America's win-loss column, the choice for America's enemies is crystal clear. Nonetheless, in the wake of two abject irregular warfare failures, the Pentagon has again turned to preparation for conventional high-intensity conflict against a near-peer enemy, designating China as our "pacing threat."

The Pentagon is correct in this decision; the costs of failure in a conventional war with China would be enormous and likely result in the end of the *Pax Americana* and the enormous benefits flowing from it to the entire globe (ironically, China perhaps most of all). The weapons systems and capabilities required to deter and, if necessary, defeat China in a conventional conflict will take decades to acquire and cannot be "surged" in a short period of time; the Pentagon is correct to prioritize this conflict. However, strategy is an iterative multiplayer

9. Michael Hirsh, "Is Biden Haunted by Vietnam? Should He Be?," *Foreign Policy* (website), July 9, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/09/is-biden-haunted-by-vietnam-should-he-be/.
10. Discussion with the author circa 2010.

game; our actions influence those of our adversaries. Our very investment in these enormously costly conventional capabilities makes it less likely we will ever use them in conventional combat with China. Our thinking enemies will avoid our strengths and attack our weaknesses.

Therefore, after two decades of grinding irregular warfare, it is vital that the Army not make the same mistake it made in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, swearing America would "never again" engage in protracted irregular warfare. While American leaders should avoid engaging in wars of choice whenever possible, doing so only with eyes wide open as to the likely costs and consequences of war, they cannot forget our enemies get a vote.[11] America must learn the lessons purchased at so high a price in the past 20 years of war and build the capabilities needed to increase the Army's effectiveness in this kind of war. In the wake of Afghanistan and with continued conflict in Iraq, when the Army swears "never again," it must mean the United States will never again be as unprepared for irregular warfare as it was when the towers fell.

America's ability to win, and to help its allies and partners win, in irregular warfare is as important in prospective large-scale combat operations as it is in the wars lower on the spectrum of conflict that have dominated the Pentagon's attention for the past two decades. Future adversaries will pursue their aims through irregular warfare as an element of, or (if the US and her Allies present a sufficient conventional deterrent) as an alternative to, their conventional warfighting approach. Improving America's understanding of and ability to succeed in irregular warfare is thus central to dealing with the pacing threat of China and with the urgent threat of Russia, not to mention North Korea with its massive special forces contingent.

Leaders can learn both military and political lessons from America's bitter history of engagement in irregular war over the past 50 years. The military lessons focus on the unique challenges of counterinsurgency warfare and training and advising foreign forces. While these tasks are difficult because their success runs counter to the strategic and organizational culture of the Department of Defense and the Army, they are both knowable and solvable problems. The political challenges are more complicated since they involve sustaining public support for a protracted commitment of American troops to a counterinsurgency campaign, a task that may be impossible with a conscript army but doable with an all-professional force. The task is different with an all-volunteer force and is

11. Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

perhaps even more challenging: sustaining the support of political elites for a multigenerational troop commitment.

Doctrine for defeating an insurgency is a task the US military has solved many times. While the Army struggled to come to terms with counterinsurgency in Vietnam, it produced a sound counterinsurgency doctrine by the end of the war.[12] However, in the wake of America's withdrawal from Vietnam, counterinsurgency doctrine, education, training, and force structure rapidly diminished as the Army refocused on the Soviet threat in Europe.[13] That choice was understandable in 1975 but became less so after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the military's struggles with low-intensity conflict scenarios throughout the 1990s, beginning with Somalia and extending through the Balkans.

As a result, on September 12, 2001, the Army was not ready for the challenge it faced. Former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Jack Keane noted on the *Lehrer NewsHour* on April 18, 2006:

> We put an Army on the battlefield that I had been a part of for 37 years. It didn't have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency. . . . After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision.[14]

Indeed it was, as US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates agreed in a speech to the Association of the United States Army on October 10, 2007:

> In the years following the Vietnam War, the Army relegated unconventional war to the margins of training, doctrine, and budget priorities . . . [This] left the service unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq—the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.[15]

Although the Army was not ready for the wars it was tasked to fight in this century, it adapted and learned, producing counterinsurgency doctrine in 2006 and updating it in 2014. The 2006 doctrine focused on protecting the population as the *sine qua non* of success in counterinsurgency. It highlighted the

12. US Army, Field Manual 100–20, *Internal Defense and Development* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1974). For helpful analysis, see Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006).

13. Andrew J. Birtle, "The Counterinsurgency Legacy," in *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976*.

14. Jack Keane, "Lehrer NewsHour," PBS, April 18, 2006.

15. Robert Gates, "Remarks" (speech, Association of the United States Army Conference, Washington, DC, October 10, 2007).

importance of information operations and training host-nation security forces, a task further elevated in the 2014 doctrine as the key to America's exit strategy. Combat operations against identified insurgents and improved governance to meet the needs of the local population through economic development and the provision of essential services were all critical. By 2014, however, they were acknowledged to be subordinate to, and in support of, training and equipping local forces to take over responsibility for the country's security, likely assisted by American advisers and airpower.[16]

While doctrine increasingly acknowledged host-nation forces as the critical path to success in counterinsurgency, force structure to implement that doctrine lagged. The Army struggled to create the combat advisers required to train and fight with Iraqi and Afghan security forces and used *ad hoc* training to create *ad hoc* adviser units until the activation of the 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade in August 2017—more than 15 years into the Afghan War and more than a decade after analysts began recommending the creation of dedicated force structure to accomplish this high-priority mission.[17] In addition to the lack of understanding of counterinsurgency leading to a considerable number of mistakes early in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure to build a sufficient dedicated advisory force structure is among the most critical failures of the military in Iraq and Afghanistan and contributed significantly to American defeat in the latter war.[18] These two strategic failures far override specific questions about tactical and operational decisions made throughout the two wars in determining final outcomes.

The military lessons, however, are subordinate to the political questions of whether to intervene in the first place and whether, when, and how to leave. Convincingly, Les Gelb and Richard Betts argued that when making the most important decisions about the Vietnam War, key decisionmakers had the information they needed and deliberated appropriately; there were simply no good options available to them.[19] No one will make the same argument about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Although the decision to intervene in Afghanistan after the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden for justice was justifiable, the war in Iraq overshadowed the Afghan War from the day it

16. US Army, Field Manual 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), Chapter 7, especially page 7-9.

17. Matt Fontaine, "1st Security Force Assistance Brigade Change of Command" (media advisory, Fort Benning, GA, July 21, 2019), https://www.benning.army.mil/mcoe/pao/newsreleases/2020/1st%20SFAB%20Change%20of%20Command%20Media%20Advisory.pdf; John A. Nagl, *Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for a Permanent Army Advisor Corps* (Center for a New American Security, June 2007), https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Nagl_AdvisoryCorp_June07.pdf.

18. John A. Nagl, "In Era of Small Wars, U.S. Army Must Embrace Training Mission," World Politics Review (website), February 5, 2013, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12693/in-era-of-small-wars-u-s-army-must-embrace-training-mission.

19. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

began, stealing much of the attention and many of the resources that likely would have changed the outcome there.

As important as getting into wars is getting out of them. By 1972, America had arguably achieved a sustainable situation in Vietnam, with a small force of several thousand advisers supported by American airpower capable of turning back a conventional North Vietnamese invasion—North Vietnam's best option given the decimation of the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive. Unfortunately, events in Washington doomed South Vietnam to a horrific fate. The Watergate scandal and the subsequent loss of faith in the Nixon administration led to a congressional cutoff of all funding for additional support to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which collapsed after another North Vietnamese conventional assault in April 1975, ending what, at the time, was America's longest war.

History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes. Obama withdrew American forces from Iraq in 2011 to fulfill a campaign promise but against the advice of his secretary of defense, Robert Gates. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria swiftly rebounded and gained control of a significant portion of Iraqi territory, including Mosul, necessitating the recommitment of American advisers and airpower to regain the lost ground. As of this writing, a small force of Americans remains in Iraq; as long as the advisers endure and have the support of American airpower, the government is likely to stand. In a remarkable irony, an Iraq war fought unnecessarily and poorly early on may be perhaps the best example of successful American counterinsurgency since Vietnam.

Afghanistan could have enjoyed the same fate—a violent and imperfect one, but better than the starvation and absolute paucity of human rights that now mar the face of a country to which America devoted thousands of lives, billions of dollars, and two decades of effort. This abject defeat did not have to happen; as Rory Stewart notes:

> The Taliban were not on the verge of victory; they won because the United States withdrew, crippled the Afghan air force on its way out, and left Afghan troops without air support or resupply lines. In other words, the decision to withdraw was driven not by military necessity, the interests of the Afghans, or even larger US foreign policy objectives but by US domestic politics.[20]

As in Vietnam and Iraq, American counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan had resulted in the best end state realistically imaginable. It had a government

20. Rory Stewart, "The Last Days of Intervention: Afghanistan and the Delusions of Maximalism," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November/December 2021): 72.

that, while imperfect, was far preferable to its people than the alternative and an insurgency that could be managed by a growing host-nation security force supported by a relatively small and sustainable force of long-term American advisers. Nonetheless unpersuaded, the effort in the country was worth the costs it entailed, Trump negotiated, and Biden implemented, an agreement that gave the Taliban effective control of the country after a premature American withdrawal. Ironically, by then, America had successfully adopted the policy then-Vice President Biden had advocated in Afghanistan a decade earlier, with American advisers and airpower supporting Afghan security forces who bore the brunt of the fighting and the dying, but to no avail.

In the wake of World War I, America withdrew its forces from Europe and its weight from the international system and soon found itself embroiled in another European war even worse than the "War to End All Wars." Since victory in World War II, American diplomacy, supported by its military power, has created the greatest system of alliances and the longest period of peace and prosperity in history. That success has depended upon the commitment of American landpower in Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Kuwait, the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and dozens of other countries around the globe. Sadly, the list does not include Vietnam or Afghanistan, places where the long-term commitment of American soldiers would have been in American interests and supported the promotion of the democratic and human rights values for which America stands.

American politicians and the US Army would benefit from a deeper understanding of the fact that victory in American wars requires the long-term commitment of American forces to troubled lands. If a country is important enough to fight over, it is important enough to stay there for generations. There is no substitute for American boots on the ground; while they are not the definition of victory, without them, there is only defeat, failure, and unimaginable suffering and loss.

John A. Nagl

Dr. John A. Nagl is an associate professor of warfighting studies in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations at the US Army War College. He is the author of *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* (Penguin Books, 2014).

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