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Back to the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine?

Jeffrey Record

THE AMERICAN debacle in Iraq seemingly vindicates the restrictive use-of-force doctrine propounded by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Gen Colin Powell, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) chairman, in the 1980s and early 1990s. That doctrine expressed the Pentagon's "take" on the lessons of the Vietnam War. It called for the last-resort application of overwhelming force on behalf of vital interests and clearly defined and achievable political-military objectives, and it insisted on reasonable assurance of enduring public and congressional support.

In the case of Iraq, insufficient force was employed on behalf of exceptionally ambitious objectives with a resultant unexpectedly bloody protraction of hostilities and attendant loss of domestic political support. Indeed, the rationales upon which public support was mobilized for war—White House claims (widely questioned by experts at the time) that Iraq was an ally of al-Qaeda and on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons—were discredited by the US occupation of Iraq. War was, moreover, hardly the option of last resort. Deterrence and containment had worked effectively against Saddam Hussein since the Gulf War of 1991; sanctions and the threat of war kept him from acquiring nuclear weapons or invading his neighbors. The Bush administration's successful coercion of Saddam Hussein into permitting the return of unfettered UN weapons inspections in late 2002, which eventually would have revealed the absence of an Iraqi threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) without a war, was testimony to how really weak Baathist Iraq had become.

Does the Iraq War portend abandonment of America's promiscuous post-Cold War overseas interventionism and a return to the cautions of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine? Will the Iraq War, like the Vietnam War before it, exert a chilling effect on American statecraft, especially the use of

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force? Is the war laying the foundations for an “Iraq syndrome” analogous to the “Vietnam syndrome”? Does the Iraq War vindicate the “realist” foreign policy’s rejection of using force to promote the expansion of American values overseas? Should the use of force be confined to the protection of concrete strategic interests? Is strategic retrenchment the best insurance policy against another Iraq?

This essay attempts to shed light on, if not answer, these questions. The Iraq War almost certainly will prompt a major debate over the circumstances justifying future threatened or actual uses of US force, and many will argue strongly in favor of greater caution and restraint. “No more Iraqs” could become as popular a policy prescription inside the Pentagon in the coming decades as was “no more Vietnams” in the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s and “never again” in the 1950s and early ’60s. Yet, the unpopular Korean War was followed by the unpopular Vietnam War, which was followed by the unpopular Iraq War. The chilling effects of Korea and Vietnam proved transitory, as well may those of Iraq. Activist presidents are not bound by conservative use-of-force doctrines embraced by the Pentagon. Such doctrines, moreover, may inhibit American statecraft, especially threatened use of force on behalf of diplomacy. The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine is a case in point. A doctrine designed to prohibit a repetition of the casual and ultimately disastrous intervention in Vietnam swung the pendulum to the opposite extreme of paralysis in the form of military inaction or, in the case of action, the elevation of force protection above the mission it was designed to accomplish. Those who would return the United States to that doctrine should remember its consequences as well its origins, its weaknesses as well as its strengths. The experience of the Iraq War likely will encourage future administrations to pay far more attention to the potential unintended consequences of using major force than the George W. Bush administration paid to those of its decision to invade Iraq, but policy makers must guard against permitting prudent caution morphing into crippling timidity. The United States is, after all, engaged in a rare war of necessity against a lethal, elusive, and clever al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

Weinberger proclaimed his doctrine in the wake of the Reagan administration’s disastrous intervention in Lebanon (which Weinberger had opposed) and amidst rising concern over possible escalation of US involvement in insurgency-torn El Salvador. The announcement also targeted Weinberger’s cabinet and private-sector rival, Secretary of State George Shultz, who had strongly supported US intervention in Lebanon and fa-

vored the direct use of US force to stop the Sandinistas in Central America. Shultz was a firm believer in coercive diplomacy. More broadly, “The Uses of Military Power,” Weinberger’s famous National Press Club speech on 28 November 1984, reflected a growing consensus within the US military leadership and the Office of the Secretary of Defense on the strategic and political instruction of the Vietnam War as it was seemingly reaffirmed by failed US intervention in Lebanon in 1982–83. That instruction boiled down to six “tests” (Weinberger’s term) to be passed before the United States committed force:

1. The United States should not commit forces to *combat* overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interests or that of our allies.
2. If we decide that it *is* necessary to put *combat* troops into a given situation, we should do so wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning.
3. If we *do* decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives.
4. The relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed—their size and composition—must be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.
5. Before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance [that] we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress.
6. The commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort.¹ (emphasis in original)

Weinberger identified “gray-area conflicts” as “the most likely challenge to peace,” yet warned that they “are precisely the most difficult challenges to which a democracy must respond.” He further cautioned that if “we are certain that force is required in a given situation, we run the risk of inadequate national will to apply the resources needed.” Weinberger went on to deplore post-Vietnam congressional intrusion in the formulation of foreign policy but reserved his heaviest fire for those “theorists [who] argue that military force can be brought to bear in any crisis,” who “are eager to advocate its use even in limited amounts simply because they believe that if there are American forces of *any* size present they will somehow solve the problem.”

Weinberger decried the use of force or threatened force as a means of political coercion. As a tool of coercive diplomacy, force had obviously failed against North Vietnam, and its failure was followed by a real war. He viewed the “intermixture of diplomacy and the military” as inherently dangerous because it meant “that we should not hesitate to put a battalion or so of American forces in various places in the world where we desired . . . stability, or changes of governments or whatever else.” If the enemy counterescalated, as the Vietnamese Communists had in 1965, the United States would have to do the same. Weinberger essentially rejected force as an arm of diplomacy; he saw it rather as a *substitute for* diplomacy—to be used only when diplomacy failed. In so doing, he implicitly rejected the Clausewitzian dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means and denied the continuum of agreement, negotiation, threat, coercive diplomacy, and war.

The Weinberger Doctrine was carried into the George H. W. Bush administration by General Powell, who had served as Weinberger’s military aide and had reviewed a draft of “The Uses of Military Power.” Appointed chairman of the JCS in 1989, Powell strongly endorsed the Weinberger Doctrine, especially its commitment to winning quickly and decisively. Though he had serious reservations about using force to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait (he preferred to deter an Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia while giving sanctions time to compel the Iraqis to quit Kuwait), once that decision was made by President Bush he orchestrated the assemblage in the Persian Gulf of overwhelming US and allied force with spectacular results.² As a Vietnam War veteran he passionately believed, as did many of his fellow officers who planned and executed Operation Desert Storm, that US military forces had been almost criminally misused by both the White House and the senior military leadership. “War should be the politics of last resort,” he wrote in his best-selling memoirs. “And when we go to war we should have a purpose that our people understand and support; we should mobilize the country’s resources to fulfill that mission and then go on to win. In Vietnam, we entered a halfhearted war, with much of the nation opposed or indifferent, while a small fraction carried the burden.”³ In a speech at the Vietnam War Memorial shortly after the conclusion of the Gulf War, Powell enunciated the doctrine that subsequently bore his name. “If in the end war becomes necessary, as it clearly did in Operation Desert Storm, you must do it right. You’ve got to be decisive. You’ve got to

go in massively. You've got to be wise and fight in a way that keeps casualties to a minimum. And you've got to go in to win."⁴

Both Weinberger and Powell believed the use of force should be highly restricted. It should be avoided in situations where political restrictions threaten to impede its effective use, where a clear and quick military win is not attainable, and where public and congressional opinion is indifferent or hostile to the purpose for which force is being employed. For Powell, winning meant going in with crushing force, getting the job done quickly, and getting out cleanly—i.e., without post-hostilities political obligations that might compel recommitment of US forces in less than ideal circumstances. Having a clear exit strategy was as important as having a clear entry strategy. The Gulf War was the obvious model. The United States went in big on behalf of limited, achievable objectives; won quickly and cheaply; and departed the scene. It was a short, popular, UN-sanctioned war that claimed the lives of only 148 Americans. It was a war that seemingly cured the United States of the Vietnam syndrome.

Powell made avoidance of another Vietnam his life's mission. "Many of my generation, the captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels seasoned in that war, vowed when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in half-hearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support. If we could make good on that promise to ourselves, to the civilian leadership, and to the country, then the sacrifices of Vietnam would not have been in vain." Powell believed the greatest fault of the senior military leadership was its failure "to talk straight to its political superiors or to itself. The top leadership never went in to the Secretary of Defense or the President and said, 'This war is unwinnable the way we are fighting it.'"⁵

In 1992, after Bill Clinton was elected president but before his inauguration, Powell wrote an article for *Foreign Affairs* in which he elliptically cautioned his audience, presumably including the president-elect, against repeating the mistakes of Vietnam in the former Yugoslavia. He condemned gradualism and warned against "send[ing] military forces into a crisis with an unclear mission they cannot accomplish." He noted that "military force is not always the right answer," but urged that "when we do use it, we should not be equivocal; we should win and win decisively." He further warned that intervention's objectives must be clear and achievable, and claimed that the George H. W. Bush administration called off the Gulf War when US objectives had been achieved and immediately

vacated Iraqi territory because the only alternative would have been “the inevitable follow-up [of] major occupation forces in Iraq for years to come and a complex American proconsulship in Baghdad.”⁶ Powell returned to this point in his memoirs. He argued that it was not in America’s interest to destroy Iraq or weaken it to the point where Iran and Syria were not constrained by it. “It would not contribute to the stability we want in the Middle East to have Iraq fragmented into separate Sunni, Shia, and Kurd political entities. The only way to have avoided this outcome was to have undertaken a largely US conquest and occupation of a remote nation of twenty million people. I don’t think this is what the American people signed up for.” He added that “it is naïve . . . to think that if Saddam Hussein had fallen, he would necessarily have been replaced by a Jeffersonian in some sort of desert democracy where people read *The Federalist Papers* along with the Koran.”⁷

The Clinton administration inherited Powell as JCS chairman, but there is no evidence that either the new president or his foreign-policy principals had much use for the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine—or for Powell himself, who not only made his opposition to any US military intervention in the crumbling Yugoslavian state very clear but also was a potential future Republican presidential candidate. On the contrary, the administration displayed a propensity to use force for coercive purposes in circumstances quite the opposite of those prescribed by the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. US military action was undertaken in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Serbia in the absence of either manifestly vital interests or assured public and congressional support. In all cases force was applied in an atmosphere of agonizing indecision, and in the case of the Balkans it was minimally employed. In the war over Kosovo the result was a major mismatch between the immediate political objective sought (a cessation of Serbian ethnic cleansing) and the military means employed (airpower unsupported by ground force action).⁸ Indeed, hesitation, indecision, and casualty-phobia were hallmarks of the Clinton administration’s approach to using force, with force protection becoming an obsession to the point of trumping any other mission.⁹ The Vietnam syndrome remained alive and well in the first administration led by a president for whom the Vietnam War was the primary foreign-policy referent experience.

Hesitation, indecision, and casualty-phobia were notably absent in the George W. Bush administration’s approach to its war with Iraq. The president and his foreign-policy principals, with the prominent exception of

Secretary of State Powell, seemed positively eager for a war to bring down Saddam Hussein even though administration spokesmen conceded that Iraq had nothing to do with the al-Qaeda attacks of 9/11. The administration believed that the Baathist regime in Baghdad had chemical and biological weapons, was on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons, and was prepared to transfer WMDs to terrorist organizations or even use them directly against the United States or its Middle Eastern allies. The White House portrayed Saddam Hussein as an undeterrable madman who had to be removed before he acquired nuclear weapons.

But the objectives of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) would not be confined to Iraq's disarmament and Saddam Hussein's removal. A stable democracy that would serve as a model for the rest of the Middle East was to be established in Iraq. It remains unclear how the administration believed such a revolutionary political objective could and would be achieved in a Middle Eastern "Yugoslavia" of deep sectarian divisions and a history of nothing but tyrannical rule. The neoconservatives who supplied the intellectual rationale for the Iraq War apparently believed that democracy would naturally arise once the Baathist regime had been destroyed.

What *is* clear is that OIF violated key tenets of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. First, Saddam Hussein in 2003 arguably threatened no vital US interest. The fact that he turned out to have no WMDs misses the point: even had he possessed nuclear weapons, there is no convincing evidence that he would have been undeterrable, i.e., immune to the grim logic of nuclear deterrence. He always loved himself more than he hated the United States, and while he had used chemical weapons against *helpless* enemies (Iranian infantry and Kurdish villagers), he never used them against enemies capable of devastating nuclear retaliation (Israel and the United States during the Gulf War). Interestingly, in January 2000 Condoleezza Rice wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* in which she declared, with respect to Iraq and other "rogue" states, that "the first line of defense should be a clear and classical statement of deterrence—if they do acquire WMDs, their weapons will be unusable because any attempt to use them will bring national obliteration." She also said that rogue states "were living on borrowed time" and that "there should be no sense of panic about them."¹⁰ Moreover, no expert on Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime believed that he would transfer WMDs to any organization he could not control, especially to a terrorist organization that regarded the Iraqi dictator as a secular "apostate," and even were he prepared to do so, he

could never be sure that such a transfer would escape American detection and retaliation.¹¹ A moral and even a legal case could have been made for OIF, but not a strategic one. Indeed, some have argued that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, by providing a new recruiting and training ground for al-Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations and by creating breathtaking new opportunities for the advancement of Iranian imperial and ideological ambitions in the Persian Gulf, have established a new threat to vital US security interests where none existed before.¹²

Second, it is clear, at least to almost every observer without a vested interest in defending the administration's implementation of OIF, that the amount of force employed in OIF was insufficient to establish and maintain the stability necessary to create a new political order in Iraq. The Powell injunction to go in overwhelmingly and decisively and the Weinberger warning to continually reassess the relationship between objectives and committed force were simply ignored by an administration which believed that relatively small, "transformed" forces could accomplish American ends in Iraq. Rejected were warnings from military professionals, such as Army chief of staff Eric Shinseki, that phase-four operations in Iraq might require two, even three, times the force actually committed. The Defense Department's civilian leadership apparently could not imagine that it would require more force to stabilize post-Baathist Iraq than it would to defeat the Baathist regime. Even as the unexpected insurgency arose and sectarian violence spread, there was no serious reassessment of force size; only after Donald Rumsfeld was replaced as secretary of defense by Robert Gates in late 2006 did President Bush announce a modest increase in US force deployments to stabilize Baghdad.

Powell himself was in a most unenviable position. He was a "realist" secretary of state serving a neoconservative "idealist" foreign policy that was propelling the United States into precisely the kind of political-military endgame in Iraq that both he as JCS chairman and Pres. George H. W. Bush had emphatically rejected in 1991. The 9/11 attacks did not convince him that Saddam Hussein posed an unacceptable threat to the United States. "Iraq isn't going anywhere," he told an interviewer a week after the attacks. "It's in a fairly weakened state. It's doing some things we don't like. We'll continue to contain it."¹³ He did not believe the attacks had suddenly established the conversion of Iraq into a democracy as a vital US interest. And as planning for OIF proceeded, Powell was increasingly concerned over what he regarded as an undersized invasion force. He later recalled

that he was “always uneasy about the low numbers . . . [the Pentagon’s civilian leaders] were making up for mass with technology and speed and cleverness and special operations,” assuming that what they did in Afghanistan they could repeat in Iraq.¹⁴ He made several telephone calls to the US Central Command’s commander, Gen Tommy Franks, “questioning the force numbers and the length of the supply and communications lines.”¹⁵ And Powell later remembered telling the president before the launch of OIF that “when you hit this thing, it’s like a crystal glass. . . . It’s going to shatter. There will be no government. There will be civil disorder. . . . I said to him, ‘You break it, you own it. You’re going to own it. You’re not going to have a government . . . not a civil society. You’ll have twenty-five million Iraqis standing around looking at each other.’”¹⁶

Though it is far from self-evident that an invasion force several hundred thousand strong would have succeeded in establishing the stability prerequisite for Iraq’s political reconstruction, no OIF issue has drawn more fire from war opponents and proponents alike than the issue of *underwhelming* force.¹⁷ In the Gulf War of 1991, an attacking force three times the size of the OIF force was employed to achieve the very limited objective of driving Iraqi forces out of tiny Kuwait; 12 years later, in contrast, a comparatively small force was employed on behalf of the much more ambitious objective of seizing control of all of Iraq and providing the security necessary for that country’s political transformation. The result in 1991 was a quick and cheap victory. The result in 2003 was the beginning of a costly, protracted, open-ended, and unpopular war that could culminate in a humiliating US withdrawal, Iraq’s political disintegration, or both.

Third, whatever reasonable assurance of public and congressional support might have attended the run-up of OIF, it has long since evaporated. Failure to discover either Iraqi WMDs or a collaborative relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, the rise of an unexpected insurgency and ethno-sectarian violence, and the evident inability of the Bush administration to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion more than four years after it launched OIF have combined to steadily sap public and congressional support for what most Americans now believe is a mistaken war. The November 2006 congressional elections, in which the Democrats regained control of both the House and the Senate, were widely regarded as a referendum on the Bush administration’s handling of the war in Iraq.

Comparisons with the unpopular Korean and Vietnam Wars are revealing. According to an assessment published in December 2005 by John Mueller, an expert in wartime American opinion, “The only thing remarkable about the current war in Iraq is how precipitously American public support has dropped off. Casualty for casualty, support has declined far more quickly than it did during either the Korean War or the Vietnam War. And if history is any indication, there is little the Bush administration can do to reverse this decline.”¹⁸ Mueller was pessimistic about prospects for US success in Iraq, as was a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued in January 2007. “In effect, the United States created an instant failed state [in Iraq], and clambering out of that condition would be difficult in the best of circumstances,” contended Mueller.¹⁹ A key judgment of the NIE was that “Iraqi society’s growing polarization, the persistent weakness of the security forces and the state in general, and all sides’ ready recourse to violence are collectively driving an increase in communal and insurgent violence and political extremism.” The NIE further judged that “the term ‘civil war’ accurately describes key elements of the Iraqi conflict, including the hardening of ethno-sectarian identities, a sea change in the character of the violence, ethno-sectarian mobilization, and population displacements.”²⁰ Mueller also predicted the emergence of an “Iraq syndrome.”

In the wake of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the American public developed a strong aversion to embarking on such ventures again. A similar sentiment—an “Iraq syndrome”—seems to be developing now, and it will have important consequences for U.S. foreign policy for years after the last American battalion leaves Iraqi soil.

There will likely be growing skepticism about various key notions: that the United States should take unilateral military action to correct situations or overthrow regimes it considers reprehensible but that provide no immediate threat to it, that it can and should forcibly bring democracy to other nations not now so blessed, that it has the duty to rid the world of evil, that having by far the largest defense budget in the world is necessary and broadly beneficial, [and] that international cooperation is only of limited value. . . . The United States may also become more inclined to seek international cooperation, sometimes showing even signs of humility.²¹

But the impact of the Iraq War is likely to extend well beyond a sharp diminution of neoconservative influence on US foreign policy. It is probable that neoconservatism, which never appreciated the limits of American public tolerance for costly foreign-policy activism—especially the kind of activism that serves up bloody, failed military interventions—will be

replaced by a return to the “realist” approach to foreign policy that characterized the Richard M. Nixon and George H. W. Bush administrations. Interests, not values, will become the primary driver for considerations of threatened and actual use of force, and the Iraq War will cast a dark shadow over any presidential contemplation of major war. Presidents will find it much more difficult to sell any military action that conceivably could enmesh the United States in a foreign internal war. Almost certainly there will be, as there was in the decades after Vietnam, an extreme reluctance to commit US ground forces to combat and a corollary emphasis on substituting local surrogates for US soldiers and Marines. There will be renewed focus on training and equipping foreigners (and private military companies) to do our ground fighting for us. As was the case with the Nixon Doctrine, endangered allies and friends will be expected to bear the main burden of ground combat, with the United States playing naval and air roles. Indeed, there may well be a US budgetary reemphasis of air and naval power at the expense of ground power, though present plans call for the expansion of the US Army and Marines Corps by a total of 92,000 personnel, an expansion to be taken in significant measure out of the hides of the US Air Force and Navy.²²

This may be a mistake. But for the Iraq War, there would be no need for larger US ground forces, and the planned increases in the ground forces budgets could be applied to the overdue recapitalization of the Navy and the Air Force. Indeed, post-Iraq War ground force requirements, especially for heavy armored and mechanized infantry forces, may be considerably less than prewar requirements. The primary rationale for those forces disappeared with the Soviet Union and the shift of the Korean military balance against the North in terms of Pyongyang’s capacity to reunify Korea by force (and to even feed its people). Heavy ground forces would be of little or no utility in a war with China, and a war to block Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons almost certainly would be waged by naval, air, and (if on the ground) special operations forces.

The solution to the severely stressed US Army and Marine Corps is termination of American involvement in the Iraq War. Expanding the Army and Marine Corps by 92,000 people on the eve of an era in which the White House and Capitol Hill are likely to be exceptionally skittish about authorizing major ground-combat operations makes no long-run strategic sense. Effective counterinsurgency is a voracious consumer of ground troops, and what are the chances of the United States, in the wake

of the Iraq War, jumping into another large counterinsurgent war? The Army has traditionally despised the counterinsurgency mission; it refused to practice it in Vietnam and dropped any interest in it after that war.²³ And what are the odds that it will stay interested in the mission once it leaves Iraq? The embrace of the mission by a small number of gifted Iraq War veterans and the development of an impressive new field manual on counterinsurgency are certainly no guarantees of persistent institutional Army interest beyond the end of the Iraq War. Indeed, a strong case can be made that America's strategic culture is so hostile to the requirements of successful counterinsurgency that the United States should adopt a policy of deliberate avoidance of counterinsurgent interventions.²⁴

Whether the Iraq War will prompt a future secretary of defense—or president—to proclaim a new, more restrictive use-of-force doctrine remains to be seen. Such a doctrine almost certainly would look back to the tenets of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. Its influence, however, would be problematic. Presidents may listen to public opinion, but they are free to disregard professional military judgments on when and how to use force; Bill Clinton led a very reluctant military into politically messy interventions in Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans. So too are secretaries of defense free to ignore military advice; Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld were notorious for doing so.

More to the point, a close examination of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine reveals key weaknesses. The first is the absence of any operational definition of *vital interest*. *Vital* means life-sustaining, and the farther discussion ranges from the protection of the American homeland the more contentious it becomes. Making matters worse is the presidential addiction to selling all wars as vital. Every major US combat intervention overseas since 1945 has been attended by White House declarations of the presence of threatened vital interests. Presidents are politically compelled to bill wars of choice as wars of necessity—even though every war the United States has waged since V-J Day, with the sole exception of the war against al-Qaeda, has been a war of choice. Additionally, one of the hallmarks of being a great power is a willingness to fight for less-than-vital interests. Most wars that engage great-power participation are wars fought with limited forces for limited objectives on foreign territory against enemies posing no threat to the great power's homeland. Great powers have waged such wars to acquire and defend colonial possessions, punish aggression,

suppress rebellion, halt genocide, overthrow foreign governments, protect economic investments, and maintain their reputations for using force.

Second, while clarity of military and political aims is indispensable to successful military intervention, it is certainly no guarantee of success. War aims, moreover, are hostage to the course of hostilities. More often than not, states end wars with aims different or additional to the ones with which they started. (This is certainly true for the losers.) Only rarely do prewar exit strategies get implemented. The United States fought the last two years of the Korean War to prevent the forcible repatriation of Chinese Communist prisoners of war, a war aim it could not possibly have foreseen when it decided to fight in Korea. In circumstances of multiple war aims, success may attend some while eluding others. What does victory in Iraq mean? Elimination of the Baathist regime? Establishment of a stable democracy? Prevention of Iraq's ethno-sectarian disintegration? Withdrawal of US forces? Simply declaring success? (The Nixon administration cut American losses in Indochina via a "peace with honor" that set up South Vietnam for inevitable conquest by North Vietnam.)

Third, there are extraordinary circumstances in which war should be an early rather than a last resort. Surely, the great strategic lesson of the 1930s is that early military action is far more preferable than a last-resort use of force against that very rare, powerful enemy who is both politically unappeasable and militarily undeterrable. War against Iraq in 2003 would have been strategically justifiable had Iraq been as powerful as Nazi Germany and had Saddam Hussein been undeterred by America's conventional military power and nuclear arsenal. War, moreover, is not the only use of military power. The mere presence of force can effectively deter, and threatened force can forestall its actual use. To view the use of force as a substitute for diplomacy is to see military victory as the object of war rather than as the achievement of the political ends for which war is waged. Frederick the Great got it right: "Diplomacy without arms is music without instruments."²⁵

Fourth, assured public support at the beginning of an overseas military intervention can weaken, even evaporate, in the event of military stalemate or defeat. Public support for war was strong at the beginning of the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq conflicts, but declined dramatically over time as American casualties continued to be incurred without any apparent progress toward a satisfactory conclusion of hostilities. Sustaining American domestic political support for a war is possible as long as public opinion continues to regard the stakes at hand as worth fighting for and

as long as it is persuaded that military action is moving toward the fulfillment of the war's objectives. Support is endangered when public opinion begins to perceive that the war's costs outweigh the value of its intended benefits. The American body politic has limited tolerance for prolonged, costly, indecisive wars—which is precisely why such wars are the preferred choices of America's enemies.

This brings us to the fifth and perhaps most important point: Massive, rapid, and decisive use of force is rare except against the weakest and dumbest of enemies. It was rare even in the age of great-power warfare; not even Germany's spectacular operational campaigns against France and the Low Countries in 1940 and against the Soviet Union in 1941 delivered strategic victory. Massive, rapid, and decisive use of force is virtually impossible in a world of limited and politically messy wars, in a global environment in which nonstate enemies practice protracted irregular warfare as a means of negating the potential effectiveness of America's conventional military supremacy. No US enemy in his right mind is going to set himself up for the kind of defeat the United States inflicted on the Iraqi army in Kuwait in 1991.

The Chinese in Korea, the Vietnamese Communists in Indochina, the Sunni Arab insurgents in Iraq, and al-Qaeda and its affiliates worldwide all have one thing in common: they understood and understand that they cannot defeat the United States militarily, but that it is possible to defeat America's political will via the combination of time and unconventionality of violence. The fate of American interventions in Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia, and Iraq validates the continuing utility of protracted irregular warfare against the United States. Historian Geoffrey Perret believes that the "age of armed intervention is over for the United States. Unable to play its ace—the ability to fight and win a major war—it will no longer be feared. No developing country needs nuclear weapons now to defeat the United States. The distribution of assault weapons and explosives and the creation of an embryonic network of insurgents will do the job at much lower cost."²⁶ Retired British general Rupert Smith, a veteran of protracted wars against irregular enemies, goes further:

War no longer exists. Confrontation, conflict and combat undoubtedly exist all around the world—most noticeably, but not only, in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Palestinian territories—and states still have armed forces which they use as a symbol of power. Nonetheless, war as cognitively known to most noncombatants, war as a battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exists.²⁷

The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine is a nostalgic yearning for the days when wars were wars (and men were men); when states fought each other force-on-force in open battle; when progress could be measured by divisions destroyed, factories bombed, and territory taken; and when the enemy's unconditional surrender could be sought and obtained. It has very limited relevance in a world in which intrastate wars and transnational terrorism have replaced interstate warfare as the primary threat to US security. America's very acquisition of conventional military supremacy has become its own worst enemy by compelling America's enemies to embrace strategies and tactics denying that supremacy decisive effectiveness. As Adrian Lewis has observed in his magisterial *The American Culture of War*,

Weinberger's theory . . . postulated a black and white world with nothing in between. There were only two conditions—war and peace, victory or defeat. Hence, given the logic of this position, the Eighth Army in Korea would have had to complete the destruction of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army in North Korea, and advanced to the Yalu, and to do this America would have had to use nuclear weapons. . . . The Weinberger doctrine meant no war or more total war.²⁸

(And, in fact, Weinberger believed that President Truman was “seriously wrong . . . to limit General Douglas MacArthur's freedom of movement in Korea” and to reprimand the general for “going too far.”²⁹)

The doctrine is also a recipe and an excuse for inaction. Colin Powell opposed both US wars against Iraq and both interventions in the former Yugoslavia because, in his view, they entailed the risk of ensnaring his cherished US Army in another Vietnam. He had no such reservations about US intervention in Panama to overthrow the regime of Manuel Noriega—Panama was a tiny banana republic with no army, overwhelming force was available, and the intervention passed all of the Weinberger tests (protection of US military personnel and their families from further murder and physical harassment in Panama by Noriega's goons formed an arguably vital interest). The problem of course is that the United States cannot restrict its use of force to bashing only helpless enemies. If it could, war itself would be virtually risk free. The United States cannot pick and choose its enemies, but in wars of choice if not those of necessity, it must pick and choose if, when, where, and how it will use force.

The experience of the Iraq War almost certainly will diminish America's appetite for the kind of interventionist military activism that has characterized post-Cold War US foreign policy, especially during the George W. Bush administration. One hopes that it will also alert future presidents

and other foreign-policy decision makers to the limits of America's military power, especially when it comes to effecting fundamental political change abroad. The United States is hardly the first great power to incur the penalties of military overconfidence, and it must come to recognize how truly unique were the circumstances that delivered America's total victory of 1945 and subsequent political transformation of Germany and Japan. What has happened to the United States in Iraq mandates greater caution and selectivity in using force as well as greater attention paid to the potential unintended repercussions of military action. The Iraq War has revealed the dangers of worst-casing threats while best-casing intervention's costs and consequences.

Future enemies undoubtedly will attempt to lure us into fighting the kind of indecisive, protracted, and politically messy wars into which we stumbled in Vietnam and Iraq. But if such wars are, for the United States, wars of choice rather than wars of necessity, we should think more than twice before entering them. **SSQ**

Notes

1. Excerpts from the Weinberger speech appearing in the above and following paragraphs are drawn from "The Uses of Military Power," speech before the National Press Club, Washington, DC, 28 November 1984, reprinted in Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2000), 329–35.
2. Karen DeYoung, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 194–201.
3. Colin Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 148.
4. Colin Powell, speech at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 27 May 1991, quoted in DeYoung, *Soldier*, 210.
5. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 149.
6. Colin Powell, "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 5 (Winter 1992/93): 38–40.
7. Powell with Persico, *My American Journey*, 527.
8. Jeffrey Record, *Serbia and Vietnam: A Preliminary Comparison of U.S. Decisions to Use Force*, Occasional Paper no. 8 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, May 1999).
9. Jeffrey Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism: Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions," *Aerospace Power Journal* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 4–11.
10. Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 1 (January/February 2000): 61.
11. Jeffrey Record, *Dark Victory: America's Second War Against Iraq* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 45–63.

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12. Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terrorism* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2004); and Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terrorism and a Strategy for Getting It Right* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).
13. DeYoung, *Soldier*, 376.
14. *Ibid.*, 394.
15. *Ibid.*, 426.
16. *Ibid.*, 401–2.
17. See David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, *Revisions in Need of Revising: What Went Wrong in the Iraq War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, December 2005).
18. John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November/December 2005): 44.
19. *Ibid.*, 50.
20. National Intelligence Estimate, *Prospects for Iraq's Stability: A Challenging Road Ahead* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, January 2007).
21. Mueller, "Iraq Syndrome," 44, 53–54.
22. The proposed fiscal year 2008 defense budget increases the proportion of overall defense spending that would go to the Army from 25.4 to 27 percent and the Marine Corps from 3.7 to 4.3, while lowering that for the Navy from 25.5 to 24.8 and the Air Force from 29.7 to 28.2. See Ann Scott Tyson, "Bush's Defense Budget Biggest since Reagan Era," *Washington Post*, 6 February 2007.
23. Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
24. Jeffrey Record, *The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency*, Cato Institute Policy Analysis Paper no. 577 (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1 September 2006).
25. Quoted in Robert Debs Heintz Jr., *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1966), 88.
26. Geoffrey Perret, *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 389.
27. Gen Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 3.
28. Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 309.
29. Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 8.