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U.S. Military Strategy Since Vietnam: The 9/11 Wars as Aberrations

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Impelled by an overwhelming desire to hunt down those responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States launched military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq where it toppled regimes that had little or nothing to do with 9/11. There has been a tendency to see these exercises as misguided elements of a coherent plan to establish a “liberal world order” or to apply “liberal hegemony.” In fact however, the militarization of the post-9/11 period has been a glaring, extended, and highly consequential aberration. During the quarter century before that, the United States pursued a foreign policy that was far more restrained militarily, and it seems ready now to resume that tradition (perhaps even more so) after its exhausting 9/11-induced military ventures which have so thoroughly failed to deliver satisfactory results at an acceptable cost. Moreover, public opinion in the United States it is not messianic or in constant search of monsters abroad to destroy. As part of its move back to a more restrained military policy, the United States developed—or further developed—a strategy called “by, with, and through” that was particularly evident in its successful military campaign from 2014 to 2019 against the Islamic State. In this, the United States worked with local forces by providing advice, supplies, and intelligence, and carrying out airstrikes while the locals were expected to take almost all of the casualties. Although hardly new, this approach seems to have a future and is currently being applied in the war in Ukraine.

Impelled by an overwhelming desire to hunt down those responsible for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States launched military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq where it toppled regimes that had little or nothing to do with 9/11. Initially successful at that task and eventually accompanied by rhetoric about spreading democracy and stability in the Middle East, the wars soon devolved into extended counterinsurgency (or counteroccupation) operations that have resulted in the deaths of more than 100 times as many people as perished on 9/11.

Fear about international terrorism impelled these military ventures: without 9/11, it is likely neither would have taken place. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was deemed to be at blame by having “harbored” al-Qaeda, and the central argument impelling and then perpetuating the multi-decade war there was that, if the US withdrew, al-Qaeda would move from its apparently inadequate hideout in Pakistan to again set up shop in the country to plot and carry out further attacks against the United States.¹ And the Iraq War was substantially impelled by the argument that, left in office, its leader, the reviled Saddam Hussein, would develop nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and hand them off to terrorist groups, particularly al-Qaeda.²

However, there has been a tendency to see these exercises as misguided elements of a coherent plan to establish a “liberal world order” or to apply “liberal hegemony” (Posen 2014; Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2018; Schweller, 2022). In fact, the militarization of the post-9/11 period has been a glaring, extended, and highly consequential aberration. During the quarter century before that, the United States pursued a foreign policy that was far more restrained militarily, and it seems ready now fully to resume that tradition after its exhausting 9/11-induced military ventures which have so thoroughly failed to deliver satisfactory results at an acceptable cost. Moreover, public opinion in the United States is not messianic or in constant search of monsters abroad to destroy.

From Vietnam to 9/11

In the wake of its withdrawal from the Vietnam War in 1973, the United States fell into something that has been dubbed the “Vietnam syndrome.” Although it still pursued the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it substantially avoided the active, or at any rate the direct and extensive, use of U.S. military force to do so. That is, there continued to be support for the contest against international communism but not for the tactic of opposing it through armed interventions like Vietnam where American casualties were suffered in great numbers.

¹ On this “safe haven myth,” see Glaser and Mueller, 2019, pp. 6-9.

² On the unlikelihood of such a transfer, see Mueller, 2023.

In the late 1970s, in fact, the United States essentially let its policy of containing the Soviet Union lapse and watched as the Soviets welcomed ten new countries into their camp: Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Grenada, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua, South Yemen, and Vietnam. All of those countries soon became dependent on Moscow economically, politically, and sometimes militarily—particularly Afghanistan, where the Soviets found it necessary to intervene with force in order to keep their local allies in power. As it turned out, the Soviets eventually came to realize that they might have been better off being contained.³

Even when American military force was applied during the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was done rather sparingly, not crusadingly. Its most assertive Cold War actions during that period were a military invasion of the small Caribbean Island of Grenada in 1983 and an operation to support anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan. Outside of the Cold War, the United States bombed Libya for a day in 1986 in retaliation for the Libyan government's sponsorship of terrorist activities; invaded Panama in 1989 to depose an offending regime; and led an international coalition in 1991 to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, successfully restoring Kuwait's decidedly illiberal government. In all these cases, its opponents were scarcely formidable. For example, although the Iraqi army may have looked impressive on paper in 1991, it lacked strategy, tactics, defenses, leadership, and morale, and it responded to confrontation with the U.S.-led offensive mostly by fleeing or by surrendering (Mueller, 1995). And in 1994, the government in Haiti, faced by the prospect of a U.S. invasion, was persuaded to flee.

Other military ventures Washington pursued between the Vietnam War and 9/11 were even more limited and were mostly not carried out for “hegemonic” purposes, but for humanitarian ones—something additionally facilitated by the end of the Cold War.⁴ American troops were sent to Lebanon in 1983 to help police a cease-fire there, but they were abruptly pulled out when 241 of them were killed in their barracks by a terrorist bomb. In 1992, American

³ For an extended discussion, see Mueller, 2021a, ch. 2.

⁴ For an extended discussion of this change, see Mueller, 2004, ch. 7.

soldiers helped stabilize Somalia, which was in the midst of a civil war and an attendant famine. But Washington withdrew its forces after 18 of its soldiers were killed in a chaotic firefight. Stung by this experience, the Clinton administration did not act to stop the genocide in nearby Rwanda in 1994.

There were also great concerns about civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, but along with much handwringing, the U.S. military role involved little more than supplying aid and advice and, toward the end of the conflict, conducting limited bombing missions against Serbian targets in Bosnia. Only after the fighting was over did Washington send in troops to perform policing operations. A few years later, the United States led a NATO bombing campaign against Serbia to stop violence against Kosovo Albanians, but no American forces ever got close to fighting on the ground.

Overall, this record does not suggest a country looking for a fight, questing after monsters to destroy, or seeking to act like a hegemon. As Christopher Preble puts it, the efforts often “had an ad hoc quality about them” and “seemed purely reactive” not “part of a broader U.S. campaign to shape the world order to suit its interests” (Preble, 2009, p. 28).

There was a considerable expansion of democracy during the period. However, except for the democracy-restoring invasions of Grenada and Panama and for pressures on Haiti and perhaps the Philippines, the U.S. military did not play much of a role in this. Much more important were the examples set by the United States and, even more, by Western Europe. Thus, between 1975 and 1990, Spain and Portugal and then almost the whole of Latin America adopted democracy as did Taiwan and South Korea (and, later, Indonesia). And after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991, many counties in eastern Europe, often anxious to join the appealing west, did so as well.⁵

It is true, however, that American rhetoric during the period did not match its military restraint. President Ronald Reagan insisted that world peace was at stake in the civil war in Lebanon, and President George H. W. Bush opined that

⁵ On this remarkable development, see Huntington, 1991; Mueller, 1999, pp. 212-22.

his war in the Gulf would “chart the future of the world for the next 100 years.” In addition, Bush (and later President Bill Clinton) declared that a coup in Haiti was an extraordinary threat to the security and economy of the United States. There have also been proclamations about how the United States has a responsibility to protect people in other countries and is “the one indispensable nation,” suggesting that others are, well, dispensable.

However, as suggested, such a vast proclamation was accompanied by half-vast execution. Despite all the hyperbolic and self-important rhetoric, between the end of the Vietnam War and the end of the century, the United States averaged only about 20 combat deaths per year including the toll from the barracks explosion in Lebanon (or about half that annual average if those deaths are excluded). Over the same period, the total number of military personnel dropped by 720,000, and military spending declined from 5.6 percent of U.S. GDP to 3.1 percent.

In the presidential election campaign of 2000, no one seems to have opposed George W. Bush’s explicit support in the October 11 debate for a “humble” foreign policy. Indeed, his Democratic opponent, Vice President Al Gore, deemed the idea to be “an important one.” To a considerable degree, both candidates were in tune with the times.

The 9/11 Aberration

Any commitment to humility disappeared when al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. After the attacks, Bush abruptly abandoned humility to proclaim that the country’s “responsibility to history” was now to “rid the world of evil,” seeking, it would appear, to outdo God who had tried and failed with that flood of His sometime earlier.⁶ With this bizarre goal in mind, the United States launched the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, began to hunt down terrorist suspects across the globe as part of its “Global War on Terrorism,” and

⁶ Record, 2010, p. 139. A search finds that perhaps the only newspaper to comment on Bush’s absurdly extravagant pronouncement was the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* which noted that Bush “perhaps overpromised.”

established a national security state internally.⁷ Although Bush, like most of the Republican party, had previously ridiculed the concept of “nation-building,” he now embarked on two such enterprises each of which lasted decades and, in different ways, failed miserably.

As noted, the overwhelming impetus of these wars was rather banal: to get the bastards responsible for 9/11. The United States was not engaging in messianism nor was it questing after monsters to destroy. It was seeking safety, and the ventures were based on the fears generated by, and on the perceived threat suggested by, the 9/11 experience.⁸ John Mearsheimer argues that these two “endless wars” were part of an effort “to spread democracy around the world” (2018, p. 152) while Stephen Walt says that it was “the pursuit of liberal hegemony” that “led to” those “costly quagmires” (2018, p. 14). But as historian Melvyn Leffler concludes about the war in Iraq, the United States “went to war *not* out of a fanciful idea to make Iraq democratic, but to rid it of its deadly weapons, its links to terrorists, and its ruthless, unpredictable tyrant” (Leffler, 2023, pp. 248-49). Indeed, any argument about democracy in Iraq rose in significance, as Bruce Russett (2005, p. 396) has noted, only after the security arguments for going into the wars proved to be empty. Or, as Francis Fukuyama (2005) has put it, a prewar request to spend “several hundred billion dollars and several thousand American lives in order to bring democracy to . . . Iraq” would “have been laughed out of court.” Moreover, when given a list of foreign-policy goals, the American public has rather consistently ranked the promotion of democracy lower—often *much* lower—than such goals as combating international terrorism, protecting American jobs, and strengthening the United Nations (Mueller, 2011, 152).

This militarized reaction to the 9/11 attacks accounts for the overwhelming amount of American military action over the last 50 years.

⁷ As part of this, the United States created or reorganized more than two entire counterterrorism organizations for every terrorist arrest or apprehension it made of people plotting to do damage within the country. Mueller and Stewart, 2016, p. 2.

⁸ The alarm was justified for a while, of course. Indeed, no other terrorist attack, before or after 9/11, in war zones or outside them, has inflicted even one tenth as much total destruction as 9/11 (Mueller and Stewart 2016b, pp. 117-21). That alarm, however, should in time have been reassessed. However, with little exception, it was not.

Without 9/11, the comparative military restraint of the last quarter of the twentieth century would likely have continued. For example, defense department adviser Richard Perle, one of most ardent proponents of war with Iraq in 2003, had published an article before 9/11 that, while strongly advocating a policy hostile toward the country, recommended only protecting and assisting resistance movements within Iraq, not outright invasion by American troops (2000).

Neither of the two post-9/11 wars was necessary. It is unlikely that the insecure Taliban regime in Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda had carried out training, needed to be overthrown: the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda was often very uncomfortable, and the regime might have been susceptible to international pressure—especially from Saudi Arabia, which had been trying to extradite terror chief Osama bin Laden for years (Mueller, 2021c). Instead, the interveners seemed to believe that American soldiers “could walk into the world’s most conservative villages, make friends, hunt their enemies, and build a better society,” as Canadian journalist Graeme Smith noted (2015, p. xvi). These attacks by foreigners regularly rallied tribal members to the Taliban’s cause (Malkasian, 2021, pp. 173, 454-55).

And Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq was unlikely to dominate the Middle East with its ramshackle and unreliable army that was banned from entering Baghdad with heavy equipment out of fear that it might overthrow the regime (O’Kane, 1998). Indeed, as Jeffrey Record notes, even if Saddam Hussein “had possessed nuclear weapons, there is no convincing evidence he would have been undeterrable” (2010, p. 165; see also Mueller, 2023; Mueller 2002; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2003; *New York Times*, 2002). And any connections he had with terrorist groups were with ones attacking Israel at the time in the Second Intifada, not with al-Qaeda (Leffler 2023, pp. 86, 244, 249, 252). As an Army War College study notes, in conducting the Iraq War, U.S. leaders seemed to have believed that other actors would not react. But Iran, a co-member with Iraq on Bush’s “axis of evil” hit list, had a huge incentive to make the American occupation of neighboring Iraq as miserable as possible, and the study concludes that Iran “appears to be the only victor” of the war (Rayburn and Sobchak, 2019,

vol. 2, p. 639). Moreover, terrorists from around the world were attracted to the fray, something warned about before the U.S. invasion (Mueller, 2003).

As it became clear just how costly and counterproductive the main conflicts of the “war on terror” had become, Washington began to shift back to a more restrained military approach. In the “Arab spring” of 2011, it looked for a while like a set of Middle East countries, following the example of those in East Europe after the Cold War, might liberalize or democratize. As noted, the East Europeans, like those in Spain and Portugal before them, were motivated in part by a desire to join the very desirable club comprised by the secure and wealthy countries of West Europe. Perhaps because there was no comparable club in the Arab case, liberalizing efforts fell apart in the next years. At any rate, the military response by the U.S. in this case resembled the period before 9/11 more the one after it. As in Bosnia, it joined a rather large number of other states to assist the rebels in Syria, and it supplied some Kosovo-like bombing to help those in Libya. Both efforts failed miserably: the rebels lost in Syria and those in Libya, after toppling the reigning dictator, fell into civil war among themselves.

A change in U.S. military policy was evident in a major Defense Department statement in January 2012 which stressed that “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct largescale, prolonged stability operations” (Martinez, 2012). This suggests that the military and its leaders had concluded that they simply didn’t know how to successfully execute such missions, and, in that sense, it expressed a degree of restraint, even humility. Presumably with this in mind at least in part, policymakers worked to reconfigure the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to reduce the death rate of U.S. military forces. In Afghanistan, the rate was over 400 per year in 2010-11, but it declined to under 25 per year later. The death rate in Iraq was over 800 per year between 2004 and 2007, but it declined to under 70 per year in 2010-11 and to less than 25 per year thereafter. (All of these rates, however, are much lower than those suffered earlier in the wars in Korea and Vietnam.) In 2014, Washington sent troops back to Iraq to fight the Islamic State, or ISIS, but, as will be discussed more fully in the next section, in the years that followed, the United States mostly provided advice and air support while local fighters bore the brunt of combat deaths (Gordon, 2022).

Both the Obama and Trump administrations moved to reduce U.S. commitments to the “forever wars,” echoing a shift in American public opinion that had come to sour on the conflicts even though they were identified with terrorism (Mueller and Stewart 2020, pp. 8, 19-21). As after Vietnam, the public continued to support the strategic goal—in this case fighting international terrorism—but not the tactic of direct on-the-ground intervention. Indicative of the public’s wariness about military ventures abroad was its response to bipartisan support in Congress in 2013 for the punitive bombing of Syria after the ruling regime of Bashar al-Assad was deemed to have carried out a poison gas attack on civilians. Out of concern that the action would lead to further involvement in the conflict, the public was strongly opposed to using force—as members of Congress of both parties found when they went home to their districts (Rhodes 2018, pp. 237, 240).

American participation in the war in Afghanistan declined but lingered, lasting so long, as noted, because of the appeal of the argument that, should the US fail there, al-Qaeda would return to Afghanistan to plot and carry out more 9/11s. Failure did come about in 2021 with an utter collapse of the Afghan forces trained and supplied by the US and with a consequent victory by the insurgent Taliban. However, the public reacted with remarkable equanimity. And, it might be added, al-Qaeda has yet to return to set up shop in Afghanistan. Its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had been successfully holing up in Pakistan for 20 years, did make a visit to the Afghan capital a year after the Taliban takeover. But safety did not follow him, and he was promptly killed in an American drone strike.

Evidence of this emerging public aversion to the 9/11 wars could be found at least as early as 2005 (Mueller 2005). Now, the United States seems to have fully embraced an “Iraq syndrome” or an “Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome,” and it has moved back to a considerable degree of military restraint. As something of an indicator, military spending as a percentage of GDP, which rose considerably in the decade after 9/11, is back to the levels of 2000. The American public might still support a campaign against international terrorism by air or drone, but there is little appetite for invasion and occupation—and none whatever for crusading.

Nonetheless, overall military spending remains high despite military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Campaign Against ISIS and “By, With, and Through”

Thus, the United States has moved back to a more restrained military policy as advocated by many particularly during the course of the two 9/11 wars (Posen 2014). As part of this, it has developed—or further developed—a strategy called “by, with, and through” that was particularly evident in its successful military campaign from 2014 to 2019 against the Islamic State, or ISIS. Under this strategy, the United States worked with local forces by providing advice, supplies, and intelligence, and carrying out air strikes (Wasser et al., 2021). But the locals were expected to take almost all of the casualties. And, indeed, they did: tens of thousands of people were killed in the war, but only twenty of them were American service personnel (Gordon, 2022, p. 390).

Key to the success of the strategy, then, was the willingness of the locals to fight and die for the cause. This quality, costly in lives to the locals if not to their outside supporters, is difficult to inspire or fabricate, but it helps greatly if the enemy, as in the case of ISIS, is taken to present a threat that is genocidal or existential to the locals.

The 2022 book, *Degrade and Destroy: The Inside Story of the War Against the Islamic State from Barack Obama to Donald Trump*, by Michael Gordon, a top military reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, can help to guide the discussion. As its title suggests, the book focuses primarily and in considerable depth on the American contribution to the campaign. Although it does not deal very much with the fighting qualities of ISIS—an omission that has come with analytical consequences, as will be seen—it is nonetheless highly useful in assessing the development of the strategy that defeated ISIS.

A problem is that a willingness by the locals cannot readily be created by U.S. efforts. Because of its focus on the Americans, Gordon’s book tends to underplay that dynamic.

The United States certainly tried: it spent \$20 billion over a decade to create defense forces in Iraq (Morris and Ryan, 2016). However, confused and corruption-ridden, these forces simply fell apart when challenged by ISIS fighters in 2014, abandoning territory and weaponry to ISIS even though the defending forces often greatly outnumbered the challengers (Parker et al., 2014).

But there was soon a remarkable transformation: effective forces in opposition to ISIS emerged among the locals. They came not only from the Iraqi army but also from various militia and paramilitary groups, especially Kurdish ones. They often squabbled and, as Gordon extensively documents, a central U.S. mission was to get them to coordinate their efforts. But all were in agreement on the need to extinguish ISIS and to risk death in the process.

However, although this change was likely bolstered by the American commitment, it was caused not so much by that as by local fears and revulsion at the vicious and genocidal tactics and goals of ISIS, which, as Daniel Byman puts it (2016, pp. 160,152), had a “genius at making enemies” and could not make common cause even with other Sunni rebel groups. A poll conducted in Iraq in January 2016 found that fully 99 percent of Shiites and 95 percent of Sunnis expressed opposition to ISIS (al-Dagher and Kaltenthaler, 2016). Spines had become steeled by its staged beheadings of hostages, summary executions of prisoners, and rape and enslavement of female captives. For example, in 2014, ISIS massacred some 1,700 unarmed captured Shia military cadets by shooting, beheading, and choking them, triumphantly web-casting videos of the event (Giglio, 2019, p. 157; Cockburn, 2015). This mind-concentrating episode is mentioned only in passing by Gordon. But, as one ISIS opponent puts it bluntly in the film *City of Ghosts*, the conclusion for many was “either we will win, or they will kill us all.”

In addition, the U.S. strategy against ISIS was aided by the fact that Americans came to believe that the enemy presented a direct threat to the United States—another element that is substantially missing from Gordon’s narrative. This stemmed from the vicious group’s ultimate idiocy: staging and webcasting beheadings of defenseless American and Western hostages in the late summer and early fall of 2014. Only 17 percent of the American public had advocated sending

ground troops to fight ISIS after its successful routs earlier in the year—it seemed to be yet another incomprehensible civil conflict among Iraqi factions. However, the beheadings—tragic and disgusting, but hardly of the order of the magnitude of destruction wreaked on 9/11—boosted support to over 40 percent, and that went even higher later. A poll conducted in 2016 asked the 83 percent of its respondents who closely followed news about ISIS whether the group presented “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the U.S.” Fully 77 percent agreed, more than two-thirds of them strongly (Mueller and Stewart, 2022, pp. 16, 22).

For all the success, however, it seems possible that civilian deaths would have been far lower if ISIS fighters, many of them disillusioned and fundamentally muddled, had been allowed to flee the fray.

Because of its focus on American policy and strategy, Gordon’s book says little about the inner workings and machinations of ISIS. But that issue is especially relevant to some brief suggestions at the end of the book arguing that efforts should be made to improve the strategy to reduce civilian casualties. As he points out, U.S. strategy, particularly as put forward by Secretary of Defense General Jim Mattis, was focused on “annihilating” ISIS (Gordon, 2022, pp. 327, 337-38). As a result, sieges of ISIS forces often made the fighters cornered rats and did not allow them an escape route. This led to situations such as the one in which an American bomb blew up a building housing two ISIS snipers, killing 105 civilians in the process (Taub 2018). But sometimes, local commanders did allow for escape routes, and evidence in the book suggests that this may have saved many civilian lives (Gordon, 2022, pp. 338-39).

As Gordon points out (2022, p. 397), the concern was that if ISIS fighters were allowed to escape, they would be free to rejoin the battle elsewhere. But this concern seems to have been based on an overestimate of their capacities and dedication.

In fact, after its startlingly easy advances of 2014, in which Iraqi defenders mainly fled, ISIS did not show much dedicated military tenacity (Mueller and Stewart, 2016). Some of this was evident even early on (Mardini, 2014; Mueller, 2014). Thus, the group announced in 2014 that it was “ready to burn 10,000 fighters” in one fight but abandoned the field after the loss of a few hundred (Fitch

and Nissenbaum, 2014). In late 2015, it launched three badly-coordinated offensives in northern Iraq that included “armored bulldozers,” but all were readily beaten back (Gordon, 2015).

Frontline commanders observed of ISIS that “they don’t fight. They just send car bombs and then run away. Their leaders are begging them to fight, but they answer that it is a lost cause. They refuse to obey and run away” (Sly, 2016). Increasingly, ISIS sought to ferret out informants within the ranks, some of them alienated by sharp cuts in salaries, executing them by such methods as dropping them into vats of acid (CBS/AP 2016). In defense, ISIS seems primarily to have relied not on well-organized military operations, but on planting booby traps, using snipers, and cowering among civilians (Knights and Mello, 2015). For example, to maintain its human shield, ISIS murdered hundreds of civilians who tried to escape, sometimes hanging the corpses from electrical pylons as a warning (Taub, 2018).

Rather than treating ISIS fighters as cornered rats behind human shields as U.S. policy dictated, it might have been better overall to let them escape. Some escapees might have fought again, but many seem to have been thoroughly disillusioned and were anxious to flee the fractious, murderous, and pathological ISIS society. Fears at the time that foreign fighters would return home to commit terrorist attacks were understandable, and that did happen in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016 (Callimachi, 2016). But there were few, if any, such events later; fears about returnees proved to substantially unjustified (Mueller, 2018).

The Past and Future of “By, With, and Through”

After the extended, tragically costly, and fundamentally absurd aberrations caused by the overreaction to 9/11, then, American military restraint appears to be back—perhaps even more so than in the post-Vietnam decades. And as the country limps now from its 9/11-induced failure in Afghanistan, it even seems possible that official rhetoric will mellow. Self-infatuated proclamations about American superpowerdom, exceptionalism, and indispensable nationhood, seen

by many to be arrogant, may subside, at least for now.⁹ And even notions about “the responsibility to protect” are losing their sheen.

Gordon (2022, p. 3) concludes that the “by, with, and through” strategy constitutes a “new way of war.” However, it is not clear that the strategy is all that new: Gordon himself espies “elements” of it in earlier interventions (2022, p. 393). In fact, in many respects, it was fully in view in the American (and European) approach to civil wars in Bosnia and Croatia in the early 1990s. The outside interveners were willing to supply and advise one side in those conflicts and even to apply some focused bombing. But, as noted, U.S. troops were sent to police the situation only in 1995 after the wars had been substantially settled—when the military environment had become “permissive,” as it was put at the time by President Bill Clinton and others. Helpful to the success of the mission was the fact that the opposing Serb forces were substantially incompetent and criminalized (Mueller, 2004, pp. 88-95).

Something similar could be seen in U.S. strategy in the last years of the Vietnam War two decades earlier. Sapped by declining popular support for the war at home, the U.S. contribution had been reduced to a supporting role by 1971, while the South Vietnamese forces America had trained were expected to bear the brunt of any ground fighting. In 1972, North Vietnam launched a major offensive, and for a while, it looked like South Vietnam’s military would fold. However, some elements did hang on, blunting the offensive. When that was obvious, the United States re-entered combat, but mainly with airpower, and the combined effort defeated the offensive. But three years later, when the North launched another offensive, the ill-led South Vietnamese military did collapse, and the United States mainly stood back and withdrew its personnel, watching as the North took over and handed the United States the greatest debacle in its foreign policy history. As with its later debacle in Afghanistan, failure was accepted with remarkable equanimity (Mueller 1984).

Foreign policy analyst David Ignatius (2017) argues that the United States military may well have found a “winning combination” in its war against ISIS.

⁹ On superpower arrogance, see (Fettweis, 2018).

However, as the Vietnam experience suggests, it needs local forces that are prepared to do the fighting and dying. Indeed, in a broader comparative study, Stephen Biddle and his colleagues (2018) conclude that security force assistance works best, and perhaps only, if the locals are convinced they face a mind-concentratingly existential challenge. Otherwise, their interests are likely to depart considerably from those assisting them.

Nonetheless, Gordon's contention that this "new way of war" has a future seems to be on solid ground. Although the book was in press when the war in Ukraine erupted in 2022, he suggested in later interviews that a version of the strategy is currently being applied by the United States and its allies in that conflict. Following the approach applied when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan a few years after America's Vietnam debacle, there has been support for locals opposing the invasion, but not for direct intervention.

Although the United States and NATO had done some training and had sent military aid to Ukraine in recent years, they were wary and expected that, if a Russian invasion took place, the Ukrainians might well fold the way U.S.-trained forces had in Iraq in 2014, in Afghanistan in 2021, and in South Vietnam in 1975. They were especially concerned about supplying intelligence because Ukraine's intelligence apparatus was shot through with Russian moles (Harris et al., 2022).

However, once the Ukrainians proved to be dedicated and effective at defending against a threat that seemed to endanger the existence of their state, the essential element in the "by, with, and through" strategy was established. This was bolstered by outrage at the Russian invasion, which inspired broad popular support in North America and Europe for a costly assistance effort (Friedman, 2022; Mueller, 2022a).

Moreover, it seems likely that outside support for dedicated forces like those in Ukraine can be sustained because the "by, with, and through" strategy does not require that casualties be suffered by the supporters. Mounting U.S. casualties were the essential cause of the decline in popular support for wars like Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, not events in the war (which generally proved to

have only a short-term effect) or the antics of anti-war demonstrators (Mueller, 2022b).

But if the conflict in Ukraine suggests that this “way of war” has a future, it is a limited one. As experiences in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan attest, dedicated local forces cannot readily be fabricated by well-meaning outsiders, even after decades of effort and expense.

A degree of restraint can also perhaps be seen today in the reaction to the rise of China, which many see to be the primary danger out there. Even alarmists push for little more than rearranging the U.S. military (or selling submarines to allies) in a (potentially quixotic) effort to somehow “balance” against China’s (primarily economic) rise. Other proposals have even less bite. For example, they advocate working with allies, improving American officials’ understanding of China, calling out China’s repressive policies, countering Beijing’s efforts to potentially control communication networks, and cooperating on common interests, such as climate change (Mueller, 2021b). But there isn’t much of a call for major military operations to counter China.

However, a test might come if China decides at some point to take over Taiwan by military force. If local forces resist effectively, as happened in Ukraine, it seems rather likely that the “by, with, and through” approach will be applied by the United States in much the same manner as in Ukraine. If Taiwan’s forces fold, however, outsiders are unlikely to try to rescue them on their own.

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