

## Introduction

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The Cold War's end marked the start of a three-decade era of serial conflict for the United States, often for lofty humanitarian goals. Unlike the superpower standoff of the preceding epoch, the unique period since the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989 witnessed a series of small-scale conflicts, medium-sized wars, and numerous counterterrorism operations during a time of peace among the great powers. The previous four-decade span recorded nothing similar. Rather, the "limited wars" in Korea and Vietnam were fought to contain the spread of communism. The immediate post-Wall years, instead, saw the United States behave as a liberal hegemon carrying out quasi-wars to make the world safe for Western-style democracy, to feed the starving, or to protect imperiled peoples, all in fulfillment of liberal internationalism dating from Woodrow Wilson.

The frequent hostilities after the Wall were unanticipated by Washington or other world capitals. No threat emerged from the dying Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the West's arch rival after World War II. Thus, Washington politicians promised peace dividends, slashed military budgets, and talked about non-defense spending for civilian purposes. The US Defense Department did undergo substantial reductions among its service branches, although it got little peace.

Political troubles, not genuine military threats, first erupted in the planet's peripheries. To address hostile regimes, political instability, ethnic cleansing, or mass starvation, the White House occupants looked to the Department of Defense for solutions. The Pentagon, in turn, dispatched the US Cavalry to remove adversarial tyrants, succor the destitute, and halt massacres. None of these quasi-military actions came close to the two world wars, which in Hannah Arendt's words "determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century."<sup>1</sup> In a way, they were America's version of a thirty year's war – far from homeland and of light-to-medium intensity.

The altruistic decision to wade militarily into a host of crises lay not with Pentagon, however. It sat with the White House residents, both Democratic and Republican. These Oval Office denizens spoke of moral

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obligations to save, uplift, and democratize populations in unforbearing landscapes. While they stayed clear of the phrase *noblesse oblige*, their thinking was from that school. George Herbert Walker Bush, the first post-Cold War president, set the liberal internationalism course for his successors. His establishment upbringing in New England boarding schools and acculturation in Yale's Skull and Bones society "sent [him] off to the world with a sense of *noblesse oblige*."<sup>2</sup> The elder Bush's successors, from William J. Clinton through George W. Bush, followed in his footsteps. Even their presidential heirs – Barack Obama and Donald Trump – sustained their predecessors' philosophic outlook, even if their humanitarian impulses were less central to their foreign policies.

Coming off victoriously from a four-decade matchup with its Soviet nemesis, the United States felt emboldened and girded to take on other challenges. So, the stewards of American power employed the US military for humanitarian rescue missions. In his acclaimed book, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, history professor Walter McDougall identified what he termed Global Meliorism as one of the American foreign policy traditions. Global Meliorism is the "American mission to make the world a better place." It "assumes that the United States alone possesses the power, prestige, technology, wealth, and altruism to reform whole nations."<sup>3</sup>

The post-Soviet world presented a nonthreatening strategic environment that permitted an interventionist foreign policy in faithful keeping with long-standing American aspirations. For much of the first quarter of a century after the Iron Curtain went into the historical dustbin, the United States attempted to put in place its historically cherished rules-based international order that harkened back to President Wilson in World War I. The former university professor envisioned a new international system apart from the Old World's secret alliances and frequent wars. Woodrow Wilson called for a peaceful planet safe for democracy, free for the self-determination of all nationalities, and devoid of realpolitik diplomacy.

America's burst of democracy promotion came from an abiding belief that governments benefited from legitimacy of free and fair elections. In turn, elected leadership conferred more benefits on their citizens, plus being more peaceful toward neighbors than authoritarian regimes. As such, representative institutions served concrete American interests as well as humanity's.

During the East-West contest, Washington leveraged democracies as allies against communism. Out of necessity, it also turned to authoritarian strongmen in the non-Western world to arrest the spread of communism. In the post-Soviet world, it dispatched US forces to remove

strongmen and replaced them with democratic figures. After the USSR's demise, America hoped for the stability and peace based on the conviction that democracies do not go to war against other democracies.<sup>4</sup> US officials recognized that turbulent environments needed to be prepared for elections and political parties. So, military personnel and civilian professionals worked with locals to pave the way for Western constitutional governance. American officials later cited the necessity of nation-building or stabilization as means to halt Salafi terrorist bands from taking root.

Accordingly, US military forces installed a democratically elected government in Panama, restored democracy twice in Haiti, and later labored to set up popularly elected governments in conflict-ridden Iraq and Afghanistan. In southeastern Europe, the US Agency for International Development funded and assisted a youth movement in Serbia to depose its autocrat leader at the polls after the Balkan wars, both of which the United States entered to safeguard minority populations.

Reflecting on America's liberal internationalist pursuits, professor Colin Dueck writes that "the entire post-Cold War period may be viewed as one of excessive Wilsonian idealism."<sup>5</sup> That period of exuberant internationalism has been questioned. America, its allies, and its adversaries have now entered an age of geopolitical competition most recognizable in its great-power rivalry. The immediate past will, no doubt, linger on and influence the new chapter, as America is still fighting Kalashnikov-totting terrorists in distant lands as it searches for ways to minimize its military involvement around the globe.

The armed goodwill enterprises for humanitarian assistance and democracy promotion were a far cry from the bloody battles fought in the major twentieth-century wars. But the soldiers in human rights conflicts, peacekeeping missions, or regime-change actions faced hostile fire and great numbers died from wounds or accidents. All the military-style deployments, fought under the banner of liberal internationalism, required extensive material mobilization, lengthy supply chains, close air support, and combat maneuvers. Like the past global wars, they brought together large alliances for noble purposes. Led by the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or ad hoc coalitions intervened first to establish peace and then liberal institutions, not to pursue realpolitik interests of territorial aggrandizement or expropriation of vital natural resources.

One of Washington's consistent pursuits entailed regime-change operations. Getting rid of uncooperative, adverse, or outright aggressive regimes was nothing new to Washington decision-makers even in the

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course of the bipolar competition with the USSR. What was different were the means used throughout the two eras and the purpose of the US-orchestrated ousters. In the Cold War years, the United States turned to the Central Intelligence Agency to pull off under-the-radar takedowns of leaders frustrating America's anti-communist objectives. Employing resident agents within targeted countries, CIA operatives funded and even instructed local insurrectionists, who were disaffected, ambitious, or just opposed to their leaders. These internal dissidents executed the coup while the CIA operatives watched on the sidelines. In sum, the Agency's designs would have been nonstarters without indigenous actors executing the coups.

An often-cited example of this *modus operandi* took place in the 1953 unseating of Mohamad Mosaddegh, Iran's duly elected prime minister, for his extra-legal pursuit of power, leftward political reforms, and nationalization of the British-built Iranian oil industry. Next, the CIA carried out a covert operation in 1954 by arming and funding a proxy force headed by an army officer to oust the leftist Guatemalan government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. In 1963, the John Kennedy administration backed a Vietnamese army officers' coup d'état that evicted and murdered South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem. The Agency was likewise involved in the 1973 coup and death of Salvador Allende, Chile's elected leader, for his socialist agenda and burgeoning ties with the Soviet Union.

Washington's ouster of anti-US leaders did not stop with the Cold War, however. Gone were the covert activities to defenestrate a leftist opponent as in the bygone times. Rather than relatively low-visibility coups, the United States now shifted to thousand-troop invasions with multinational coalitions or, at least, blessings from international organizations whenever diplomatically feasible. It is not that Washington governments gave up on mounting CIA-run coups; they tried but failed in Panama, Haiti, and Iraq. So, they fell back on US hard power to drive adversaries from power and to install democratic governments, not anti-communist strongmen.

The war on terror overturned America's self-appointed Pax Mundi destiny. Now, the United States perceived terrorist threats and even possibly nuclear risks. These revelations set the stage for large-scale military operations and for a clutch of limited-footprint engagements against Salafi-jihadi insurgents in the Global South. Thus, there exists a division between pre- and post-9/11 attacks. The conflicts before this divide originated from human rights impulses of liberal internationalism. The wars coming after 9/11 sprang from the necessity of hitting back at the threats to the United States. But even those combat enterprises

genueflected to liberal international principles for self-determination of nationalities, human rights, and democratic governance.

The 9/11 terrorist attack, if anything, affirmed the propensity of the George W. Bush presidency to plant American-style freedom in the arid soil of Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, the administration strenuously backed democratic movements as far afield as the Republic of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, despite vehement objections from Russia. Moscow resented US interference in its near-abroad. Regime-change missions, either through invasions or strong-arm tactics, were calculated to foster American or allied security and spread democratic institutions, seen as the obvious go-to model for humankind's betterment.

It was a singular time from the Iron Curtain's disappearance to the rise of a resurgent Russia and a surging China by the second decade of the twenty-first century. The extraordinary ascendancy of American power, unchecked by a weak post-Soviet Russia or an economically developing China, left Washington free to act as it saw fit with scant regard for adverse opinions in Moscow or Beijing. The Soviet Union's fragmentation initially left the Russian Federation without adequate financial or military resources as well as with vacillating political leadership to play effectively on the world stage.

Under the authoritarian leadership of Vladimir Putin since 1999, Russian power and influence grew. Although reliant on revenues from the export of oil and natural gas, the Kremlin leader has reformed and modernized its armed forces enough to energize NATO. As for the People's Republic of China, it cleverly built up its economy using mercantile practices, swiping American information-age technology, and pilfering blueprints for advanced weaponry. As for Western Europe, another geopolitical pole, it was aligned politically with the United States through shared NATO membership and common democratic institutions. Hence, it offered no real counterweight to a powerful America, although Paris and Berlin attempted to slow Washington's race to a second war against Iraq.

In their totality, however, the regime-changes, conflicts, insurgencies, and stability campaigns have fatigued sections of the home-front population.<sup>6</sup> Politicians, pundits, and some members of the general public consider the "forever wars" an economic burden. Occasionally, a Washington-based legislator has lashed out at the exploding national debt as a reason to reign in the wars' costs.<sup>7</sup> Others pointed out that out-of-control federal expenditures are really attributable to hemorrhaging domestic entitlement programs.<sup>8</sup>

After all, peanut-sized endless wars are tolerable for America's powerhouse economy and are essential to preventing 9/11-type attacks being

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hatched from distant havens in the underdeveloped world. These and other points are narrated and analyzed in the book.

Chapter 1 starts off by describing the transformed international landscape after the Berlin Wall's collapse. With the passing away of the USSR, the United States anticipated an age of extended peace. It sharply cut defense spending between 30 and 40 percent and banked on a "peace dividend" to be spent on long under-funded civilian priorities.

Nearly halfway through his first year in office, George H. W. Bush ratcheted up tensions with the Central American country of Panama, whose military dictator, Manuel Noriega, flouted his undemocratic rule, narcotics smuggling, and threat to the vital free passage through the Panamanian Canal that connected the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

After a spate of failed US diplomatic efforts through the regional Organization of American States and a fumbled CIA plot to have local military officers usurp the dictatorship, the Bush White House decided to take up the Panamanian ruler's declaration of war against the United States at the end of 1989.

Operation Just Cause was not flawless but it went well. Its apparent smooth execution, in fact, contributed to misleading assumptions in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns. Because the United States escaped protracted fighting and messy political issues by avoiding a lengthy occupation in Panama as well as in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, the same outcome was foreordained in other invasions.

Two noteworthy speedbumps in Panama heralded problems in future interventions, however. First, the Department of Defense (DoD) didn't adequately anticipate the degree of post-conflict looting, unruly crowds, and smash-and-burn street protests. Second, and related to the first, the DoD neglected to foresee the need for more boots on the ground to keep law and order after the Panamanian Defense Force ceased its resistance. As result, the US command had to call for light infantry reinforcements. Both of these shortcomings reoccurred in the Iraq and Afghan wars, with greater consequences.

Chapter 2 chronicles and analyzes the Persian Gulf War. The George H. W. Bush presidency prudently managed the domestic politics and the international diplomacy in the lead-up to the war. Bush forged a multi-nation, UN Security Council-backed coalition, which included most Arab countries, to launch a counterattack against Iraq's ruthless subjugation of Kuwait.

Operation Desert Storm is assessed not only for its successes and shortcomings but also for its substantial impact on the American way of war. The US air attacks resembled scenes taken from Nintendo video games. The information-age weaponry contributed to the concept of a

Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), which promised easy American victories in future wars. But RMA proved to be no silver bullet to combat Salafi-inspired terrorism and insurgency.

The war deepened Washington's political and defense involvement in the Middle East. And it introduced tactics applied in the looming campaign against terrorism. One critical facet of the immediate post-bellum Iraq policy arose from the Bush administration's imposition of "no-fly-zones" to shield the Shiite population and the Kurds from Hussein's murderous army and police. The allied air strikes on Iraqi forces constituted a de facto war that spanned the years from the end of the Gulf war to the Iraq War. Bush bent UN resolutions, waged war in a time of peace, and set the precedent for subsequent White House residents to carry on drone (unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs) attacks against Salafi terrorists in a host of countries not at war with the United States.

Finally, President Bush broached his "new world order" doctrine to international relations, which borrowed from Woodrow Wilson's idealism. He eschewed isolationism and called for "a *Pax Universalis* built on shared responsibilities." His and subsequent US leadership invoked the principles of liberal internationalism that led to hard-power solutions in the service of humankind for democracy, human rights, and minority populations.

Chapter 3 reviews the combat-styled incursions on behalf of humanity in Somalia, Haiti, and twice into the Balkans. These nontraditional engagements, known as "military operations other than war," or MOOTW (pronounced as "moot-wah") were regarded skeptically even by the top Pentagon brass as a diversion from real soldiering and by presidential candidate George W. Bush as a task that wore out the US military on nonessential duties.

In the twilight months of his presidency, George H. W. Bush altruistically deployed thousands of US troops into chaotic and lawless Somalia to distribute food to the starving population. Before leaving office, Bush pulled out most of the forces and made plans to turn over responsibility to the United Nations early in the William J. Clinton administration. Instead, the Clinton White House presided over "mission creep" in combat actions against Somali clan lords. One of these pursuit raids ended disastrously in the seaside capital of Mogadishu in October, 1993.

Although it could have been a mere historical footnote, the Battle of Mogadishu had a far-reaching impact. In addition to ordering a troop withdrawal from Somalia, it made President Clinton ever more cautious about entering volatile political environments. The United States, for example, stood aloof from the Rwanda tragedy, when 800,000 people perished in a genocidal civil conflict. The Mogadishu firefight convinced

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Osama bin Laden that, when push came to shove, America will cut and run from a fight. As it turned out, the US abandonment of Somalia offered another negative example for what happens when Washington withdraws from strife-filled lands. These vortexes usually drew in Salafi jihadis, who exploit the roiling instability for their own ends. In Somalia's case, the radical Islamists wasted little time in arriving and colluding with local terrorists. Finally, the Mogadishu skirmish woke up the US Army and Marines to the hazards posed by pitched urban warfare amid ostensibly peace-soldiering missions.

Haiti, the island state close to the Florida coast, became the next test for Clinton's America. A democratic election placed Jean-Bertrand Aristide in the presidential office, where his leftist calls for society's reordering and wealth redistribution unnerved the Haitian elite. They made common cause with the nation's top army officers to overthrow the defrocked Catholic priest in 1991. After the coup, asylum-seekers flocked to American shores, compelling the White House to act. But Washington dallied, except for transporting the Haitian boat people to out-of-the-way Panama. After dragging his feet, the former Arkansas governor at last authorized a democracy-restoring intervention in 1994, after sending an eleventh-hour diplomatic team to negotiate the military junta's departure.

Operation Uphold Democracy encountered next to none of the hostility that greeted US troops in Somalia. Yet official Army studies reported that Green Berets (Special Forces) sharpened their hearts-and-minds skills, which stood them in good stead in the interventions around the corner. Uphold Democracy did restore Aristide to presidential office. But it was beyond American power to establish corruption-free democratic governments. The Clinton administration turned over its Haiti operation to a UN taskforce in 1995. During the George W. Bush presidency, the Pentagon fielded Marines to participate in a United Nations stabilization mission in 2004, which presided over the removal and exile of Aristide, whose flawed rule generated acute political turmoil. Post-Aristide Haiti has endured a series of natural disasters and political unsettledness but generally has been off Americans' front pages.

Unfolding simultaneously with turbulence in Somalia and Haiti, the Balkans plunged into the worst bloodshed seen in Europe since World War II. Violence engulfed Yugoslavia when the southeast European country's long-simmering ethno-nationalistic tensions exploded. The catalyst was Slobodan Milošević, the new president of Serbia, one of the six republics that made up Yugoslavia. The former communist functionary fanned extreme Serbian nationalism and sense of victimhood. Serbian militias intimidated, raped, and murdered to "ethnic



cleanse” neighboring territories claimed by Serbia. Other nationalities took up arms in defense, but the chief victims were Bosnia’s Muslims and Croats.

The outgoing George H. W. Bush government hastily washed its hands of the messy civil war. The incoming Clinton administration also sought to avoid entrapment in a bloody morass, palming off the civil war to the United Nations and its largely ineffective peacekeeping force, mainly composed of British and French soldiers. When the Serbs went too far in their killing sprees, Washington, London, and Paris struck back with air assaults, forged an alliance between the Bosnian Muslims and the Croats, and urged the Russians to cease their wholehearted support for the Serbs. The US Department of State hired a private military firm to train the Croatian army, which rolled over the Serb battalions in summer 1995. Months later, the United States brokered an arduous peace settlement in Dayton, Ohio, among the contentious parties.

No sooner had peace descended over Bosnia than shooting and killing broke out in Kosovo, the tiny Muslim enclave ruled by Serbia. The Kosovars staged guerrilla attacks on Serb police and soldiers, who shot back, indiscriminately slaying innocents and assailants alike. To drive Serbia to negotiations, the Clinton White House initiated a lengthy bombing campaign against Serb military and civilian targets on behalf of the Kosovar Muslims. NATO bombed for seventy-eight days before Milošević called it quits over fear of an allied ground intervention.

The twin Balkan wars represented a watershed for their emphasis on saving despised peoples from annihilation at the hands of an extreme nationalistic government. This was a double victory for Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the principle of self-determination for nationalities. Muslims, Croats, and other nationalities living in the defunct Yugoslavia gained their own respective homelands. It was a high point for the liberal international order under American leadership.

This militarized humanitarianism formed a separate historical chapter from the robust combat invasions after the 9/11 attacks, which were undertaken for defense against Salafi-jihadi terrorism in Afghanistan and phantom nuclear arms in Iraq. Even these wars embodied Wilsonian principles, such as the protection of minorities, advocacy for self-determination of nationalities, and the imposition of democracy.

As Chapter 4 relates, Osama bin Laden’s terrorist strike catapulted the United States into an invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Likewise, the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon energized fears of more terrorist violence that ushered in the Iraq intervention and the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The GWOT led to a dozen light-footprint conflicts worldwide against Salafi-motivated insurgents.

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This chapter reviews the innovative American-led incursion to topple Afghanistan's Taliban regime that hosted the Bin Laden network. US Special Forces teams and CIA paramilitaries harnessed anti-Taliban militias to serve as a ground force rather than American troops. The Defense Department provided extensive air cover from US Air Force and Navy warplanes. Together they pushed the Taliban from power in a matter of weeks. This unconventional tactic of leveraging local partners against a common foe was repeated in other theaters.

The multinational occupation implanted a democratic system on a polarized citizenry. It strove to build a modern nation in a pre-Enlightenment society. Both endeavors faced a stubborn insurgency undertaken by reconstituted Taliban militias returning from their sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan. The US counterinsurgency suffered from errors and the diversion of resources to the Iraq War. By the time George W. Bush left office, the Afghan battlefield had badly deteriorated.

The Iraq War is the subject of Chapter 5. This second conflict against Saddam Hussein arose out of the fear and distrust from the 9/11 attack along with the mistaken intelligence assessment that Iraq possessed chemical and nuclear weapons. George Walker Bush went to war in 2003 without the endorsement of the United Nation's Security Council. Instead, Bush formed a coalition of the willing that lacked any participation by leading Arab states as in the Gulf war. More crucially, the Iraq War was a mistake, for it eliminated Hussein, who acted to checkmate Iran's expansionist agenda. His ouster meant that the United States directly confronted Tehran's machinations in the Middle East.

The opening offensive closely tracked the steps of a conventional invasion, with massive airpower and a fast-paced armor drive to take Baghdad, which it did in under three weeks. Like Afghanistan, the initial military attack went exceedingly well before the invading armies became ensnared in Iraq's raging sectarian civil war. The multi-sided insurgency at first confounded US efforts to stymie it. The Sunni and Shiite communities killed each other along with American troops and their coalition partners.

What saved the US-led effort from almost certain defeat were three factors. Chief among them was the Awakening movement within the Sunni Arab tribes, which turned against the jihadis for their excesses and joined up with American troops to rout the extremists. The Pentagon also surged nearly 30,000 additional troops into the fight. And thirdly, it implemented a fine-tuned counterinsurgency strategy. The street bombings and gun battles greatly subsided by the end of 2011, when President Barack Obama withdrew all US combat troops from the country. A significant dimension of the Iraq War centered on