

Introduction

David Ryan and David Fitzgerald

On 28 July 1945, the evening after the United Nations Charter passed the Senate after protracted debate, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long wrote in his diary, "The faith of Woodrow Wilson has been vindicated. The record of the United States of 1920 has been expunged. Civilization has a better chance to survive." Similarly, the State Department's Livingston Hartley wrote, "We threw away our first chance, and the cost has been very great. ... Now we have a second under much more difficult conditions." The vote took place as the victors of World War II met in Potsdam to discuss the postwar order in Europe and the ultimatum calling on Japan to surrender. Historian Robert Divine relates that President Harry Truman, already in Potsdam, had requested immediate notice so that he could inform Joseph Stalin and British prime minister Clement Attlee of the Senate's decision to advance world peace.

Truman's predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had been haunted by Woodrow Wilson's failure to construct a just peace in the wake of World War I and dreamed of "completing his mentor's final mission" even to his dying days. In March 1945, he told a crowd, "This time we are not making the mistake of waiting until the end of the war to set up the machinery of peace." Divine writes of this episode that the protagonists "were drawn irresistibly back to the past, reliving again and again the moment of tragedy when the Senate killed the League."¹ The wording echoes the final lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."²

The title of Divine's book tracing the rise of internationalism that culminated in the ratification of the United Nations Charter is *Second Chance*,

and there is a huge irony in this “second chance” thesis. Even as the internationalism that the UN embodied triumphed, a certain mindset, the Cold War consensus coupled with a liberal international triumphalism, held by both Truman and later Lyndon B. Johnson would contribute to decisions to go to war in Korea and Vietnam, conditioned by the cultural and political paradigms of containment and dominoes falling. Historian Andrew Preston notes how a newly capacious American definition of “national security”—one that stressed the interconnectedness of global economics, security, and values—both informed visions of a postwar Pax Americana and stretched the notion of American vital interests so broadly that self-defense naturally encompassed Seoul and Saigon as much as it did San Francisco.³ By the late 1940s the United States was an emerging hegemonic power and in the not too subtle words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, they now had the chance to “grab hold of history and make it conform.”⁴

This time, with the second chance, Washington could get it right. After the political and diplomatic failures of the conclusion to World War I, the United States could exercise what historian Charles Maier has called “consensual hegemony”⁵ in the emerging West and advance solutions that would bring a cold but lasting peace to at least the Western portion of Europe (elsewhere the consent was not so obvious; nor was the peace). This time they would not repeat the mistakes of the Wilson era by punishing Germany, imposing a war guilt clause, and demanding reparations. Instead, Germany and Japan would be integrated into the United States-centered Western economy, the political tack would be one that bent in favor of relief, reconstruction, and reconciliation. It seemed a magnanimous gesture, ultimately solidified by postwar economic assistance to Western Europe as part of the Marshall Plan. Yet, of course, it made sense too as part of a larger reading of the American national interest. Succinctly put, the United States decided that by serving others, it simultaneously served its own interests.⁶

Such enlightenment did not follow the conclusion of the Vietnam Wars, the Gulf War, or indeed the unending wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. But for George H. W. Bush, the opportunity to advance a “new world order” echoed Woodrow Wilson’s aspirations for a more peaceful world. So too, in 1991, did Bush seek to create an order, to make war in the future less likely.⁷ While the concern in the wake of the Gulf War was regional order, the Bush administration’s deliberations took place in the context of the seemingly endless possibilities afforded by the end of the Cold War. Yet, as the columnist William Safire infamously observed, Bush snatched defeat from the jaws of victory in the Gulf War.⁸ The war continued throughout the 1990s, albeit at a much lower temperature, with no-fly

zones, sanctions, and occasional air strikes doing the work of containing Saddam in the absence of a postwar settlement.

Bush was constrained by his adherence to the lessons of Vietnam distilled to the Weinberger principles, especially relating to the immediacy of defined objectives, avoiding urban warfare, potential quagmires in Baghdad, and most pointedly, the strictures on an exit strategy. Despite Bush's credentials as the ultimate foreign policy president, to which his track record and experience testified, he still failed to engage the longer term issues that strategic victory necessitated. Unlike in 1945, there was little hope for political accommodation or economic integration with Saddam still in power. The dual containment of Iraq and Iran coupled with the sanctions regime that was imposed ensured ongoing enmity and irresolution of local and regional issues.

From the second half of the twentieth century onward, the aftermath of American wars has looked more like 1991 than 1945, with the "forever war" in Iraq serving as a precursor for America's twenty-first-century conflicts. The current generation of Americans has grown up with their country constantly at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, with other more episodic interventions in Libya and Syria, and drone strikes in a multitude of other places. But there is simultaneously a growing disconnect, as these wars seem to gain attention in the media only occasionally and through an obscure lens. It was with good reason that a 2017 issue of *Foreign Affairs* was devoted to "America's Forgotten Wars."⁹ Yet the country has also come to appreciate, even revere, US service personnel; the soldiers who fight these wars are treated as heroes, even if there is little consideration of or debate about the violent work that they do, or its civilian victims. There is still less thought for or concern with the Other: the Iraqis, the Afghans, or, earlier, the Vietnamese.¹⁰ There is little concern with what these wars have wrought, with what the United States and others leave behind.

The question then is why the United States, so adroit at shaping the world order in 1945, was so inept at doing so in 1991? How is it that, for all the interventionism of the American century, it has been over seventy-five years since the United States, a hegemonic superpower, has been able to end a major war on its preferred terms? This collection aims to answer this question by examining the different ways in which the United States has sought to end its wars in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The contributors are concerned with how various American policymakers have approached the challenge of ending wars, how these endings have played out in American culture, and, crucially, what the United States has left behind in the countries with which it has been at war.

The chapters tackle a diverse range of topics, from the environmental damage wrought on Vietnam to the failure to understand the Taliban's continuing operational resilience to the ways in which soldiers have been welcomed home from American wars. Yet all coalesce around the point that, despite its immense power, the United States has been remarkably myopic in its approach to the ending of wars; it has failed to appreciate the broader understanding of the national interest. American policymakers have been unable to articulate a coherent strategy for exiting wars, the United States has shown little concern for or understanding of the consequences for other countries and peoples, and—despite the repeated attempts of elites to move on from these conflicts—there has been little closure in American culture either, as these wars continue to be discussed and debated. Yet that discourse is an insular one, narrow in scope, simultaneously promoting a form of forgetting.

The central claim of the book is that the United States has disengaged from a number of wars, but it has not managed to end them. It pulled out of Vietnam, yet that war, more so than others, lingers in US culture, collective memory, and consciousness. It pulled out of Iraq twice, only to be drawn back in. It has yet to extract itself from Afghanistan. President Ford declared that the Vietnam War was “finished as far as America is concerned,”¹¹ even though neither he nor any other president ever sought a declaration of war from Congress. President Obama simply sought to turn the page on Iraq, even as the ink on the US epilogue had yet to dry. These audacious narrative turns invite a cultural amnesia, a silencing and a distancing from an abandoned war that minimizes reflection, lessons learned, and the construction of a deeper historical knowledge.

The refusal to engage in historical thinking, that form of reflection deeply immersed in the US experience of war and intervention, means that this cultural amnesia is related to a strategic incoherence and, in these wars, the United States has failed in its strategic objectives because it did not define, precisely, what they were. If Vietnam was the tragedy, Iraq and Afghanistan were repeated failures. The objectives and the national interests were elusive beyond issues of credibility, identity, and revenge; the end point was undefined because it was not clear what the point was. What did the United States want from these wars? What did it want to leave behind?

American wars in three countries are at the center of our analysis. First, the ending of the American War in Vietnam—at the time the United States' longest war—provides us with some clues as to how such quagmires can recur. As Sarah Thelen demonstrates in her chapter on the domestic politics of Nixon's attempts to end the war, the administration was not even interested in making any positive case for US strategy.

Yet only a few years after the last helicopters lifted from the roofs of the Pittman building in Saigon, Ronald Reagan not only contributed to the rehabilitation of the Vietnam War by labeling it a “noble cause” but also popularized the term “Vietnam syndrome” to identify the inhibiting factor that restrained US presidents from going to war. Whether it was Congress or putative public opinion, most administrations, including his own, opted for stirring rhetoric instead of war. Instrumental lessons were crafted to inhibit the resort to war but also to ensure that should the military be deployed for purposes of warfare, it would do so under clear criteria.

These requirements were identified in 1984 by the US secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger, and were later modified to become the Powell Doctrine. Intervention would involve, supposedly, clarity of purpose, overwhelming power, reliance on technology, and, crucially, an exit strategy, among other things. On the one hand, these stipulations represented some reflection on the Vietnam experience, counseling caution and restraint. On the other hand, the doctrine was, in the formulation of Secretary of State George Shultz, strategy via checklist, and—crucially—every item on that list referred to American will or American capabilities; an assessment of the capabilities or intent of the other side was still missing.

This doctrine, crafted in order to provide a blueprint for clean, victorious exits from wars, did not survive the American wars in Iraq. As Andrew Bacevich argues in his chapter on the US response to strategic failure, the doctrine promotes a civil-military relationship in which both sides of the divide are given an excuse to avoid hard questions about the use and misuse of military power. Even in the first Gulf War, the conflict in which the doctrine was put to use with most effect, the United States failed to achieve its strategic objectives because it had not thought seriously about the war’s end and its aftermath. David Ryan’s chapter shows that while the Bush administration sincerely believed and hoped longingly that Saddam would fall, there were no plans or contingencies put in place to ensure that outcome. The strategy was myopic—odd for an administration famed for its cautious realism. The new world order they sought was supposed to be more peaceful, as Bush argued in his address before a joint session of Congress at war’s end.¹² Yet in Iraq, because Saddam remained in power, the United States instituted a punitive sanctions regime throughout the 1990s that had devastating consequences for life within the country.

As US officials surmised in 1991, an ongoing US presence would fuel radicalism and resentment in the region and beyond. And though President George H. W. Bush noted and celebrated US primacy after the

Gulf War, goading critics of US decline (famously Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*) that they were looking the wrong way,¹³ it was the administration of his son, George W. Bush, that wanted to transform US power and hoped to turn the "unipolar moment" into a unipolar era. But like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the vaulting ambition of the George W. Bush administration "o'erleaps itself, And falls on th'other." And thus, 2003 begat an even greater tragedy than 1991, and the lack of a coherent, plausible vision for a postwar order destabilized an entire region.

A similar script played out in Afghanistan, a place that few Americans were deeply conscious of in the 1970s. By the end of that decade the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan and the US National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was quick to try to capitalize on the situation by turning it into a Soviet Vietnam.¹⁴ The strategic impulse was to impose a cost, to drain the will, to bleed the country through protracted warfare, even in a political context in which the Soviets did not have to worry about public opinion to the extent that the United States did. To some extent, President Carter's and President Reagan's support for the Mujahedin fighting the Soviet invaders did create a quagmire from which Moscow found it difficult to extract itself. Yet after they departed, Washington paid scant attention to the country and the radical developments there during the 1990s.

Afghanistan eventually became host to al Qaeda and shortly after the attacks of 9/11, Washington began military operations there in October of that year. In 2018, despite the Obama administration's rhetoric about withdrawal, the US military are still there; there does not appear to be any clarity of thought or purpose in the Trump administration on what the US objectives are or on when the troops might leave. Antonio Giustozzi's essay in this volume documents a perpetual American tendency to underestimate the strength of the Taliban. This tendency was closely related to a desire to disengage from Afghanistan and to only highlight evidence that reinforced the dominant narrative in Washington, DC.

This track record, which stretches over fifty years of war, is one of extended failure. The puzzle is that, despite the frequency of second chances for the United States, more often than not, postwar opportunities were missed; the "vision thing," as Bush called it in another context, was absent. Historian Lawrence Freedman has argued that strategy should be understood in narrative terms, that good strategists are those who author "scripts" that can be understood by both participants and observers.¹⁵ When looking to those Americans who tried to imagine postwar scenarios, we do indeed see a penchant for using narrative devices to understand the world. These devices can be useful in terms of imposing meaning on a chaotic world, but in an American context, they have

often instead provided a means with which to avoid difficult questions rather than resolve them. Indeed, Jeffrey Michaels' chapter on the Obama administration's quest for a "responsible end" to the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that scripts and narratives had more of an influence on American thinking than events on the ground did.

This tendency has a long history, stretching from Cold War narratives of containment, to visions of dominoes falling, to fantasies of American soldiers being greeted as liberators in a newly democratic Iraq in 2003. In surveying this history of repeated inability to author scripts that take into account the agency or perspective of others, we are reminded of F. Scott Fitzgerald's assessment of Hollywood producers in his unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, that the "tragedy of these men was that nothing in their lives had really bitten deep at all."¹⁶

How is it that despite the heavy costs of these wars, these failures continue to occur? How was it that nothing seemed to "bite deep" in certain policy making circles in Washington, and why do the scripts not change? Part of the answer might lie in the failure to think historically: after the US withdrawal from Vietnam, the deeper implications of that war were largely ignored and forgotten, even as the "collective memory" of the war remained a constant. In *How Modernity Forgets*, memory scholar Paul Connerton argues that accelerating time scales of information flow and media production induce a "cultural forgetting" on the part of society.¹⁷

The forgetting has been strategically useful to certain protagonists within the executive. Even as the United States had just left Vietnam, Henry Kissinger concluded that the war was relatively unique and that there were not that many lessons that could be usefully drawn from the situation; President George H. W. Bush argued that great nations could not be sundered by memories.¹⁸ Yet there is another, deeper, lingering memory of the war that vitiates US policy making. Robert Brigham's chapter on the Vietnam syndrome shows that it has in some respect influenced the thinking of every presidential administration since 1975, while David Kieran notes that the war continues to resonate in US culture.

There is an unsustainable duality in US culture between memory and forgetting. When Ronald Reagan identified the "Vietnam syndrome," he did so to imply a cultural wariness, an illness of sorts, a reticence about going to war and deploying troops—it is frequently used as a negative term, something that the United States needs to get over, to heal itself from. Rather, it could be used in a positive frame, a reticence about going to war especially when the national interests are not apparent, when objectives are ill defined and when outcomes and exits are elusive. The repetition of US wars and failed outcomes since the 1960s reflects a broad strategic myopia and an inability within policy circles to engage

with historical thinking apart from the “lessons” that might advance its tactical engagement.

All too often, the lessons literature is confined to the instrumental aspects of warfare and military intervention. The wider strategic costs, the consequences of war, the opportunity costs, and the fundamental lessons are elided.¹⁹ By confining the “depth” of lessons to the instrumental, one can seemingly engage in historical thinking, albeit within narrow parameters. As such, the focus is on greater efficiency, fewer costs, reduced risks, and fatalities instead of engaging the wider question of whether war and intervention really serve the US national interests or whether they bring about a more stable and peaceful regional order. Would diplomacy and other forms of engagement address US objectives at even lower costs, less risk, no casualties? Political scientist David Hendrickson observes, “Obama was a far more moderate character than George W. Bush, and really did want to stay out of new wars; that a fellow pacifically inclined should use force as often as he did speaks volumes about the weight of the Washington consensus.” His plea in *Republic in Peril* is for a turn to “liberal pluralism” and a new historically informed understanding of US internationalism.²⁰

Gideon Rose has argued that these unending wars are in part a product of the failure of American strategic imagination. As the United States contemplates war, it usually addresses a number of phases in sequential order—from planning to D-Day to execution, termination, and aftermath—and Rose has suggested that Washington should reverse the order of the phases, to begin with the clear notion of what they want the aftermath of the conflict to look like before decisions for war are made.²¹ Yet this has rarely been how Americans have approached war. The Cold War that John Lewis Gaddis famously termed the “long peace”²² maintained forms of stability in Western Europe while other parts of the Third World were pacified or subject to intervention to contain or rollback forms of communism, socialism, nationalism, or other forms of resistance to the Western system.

The broad conception of “national security” present at the end of World War II remained, but the means by which this security would be pursued narrowed considerably. Brutal national security states and authoritarian governments were supported to maintain forms of violent order or stability. Thus, the Cold War was a condition to be lived with, rather than a campaign that could be sequenced out in a precise order with a defined end state.

We can see this most clearly in how the United States operated in the Third World, an imagined theater that was in many ways the center, rather than the periphery of Cold War (and other) conflicts and wars.²³

In these regions, wars did not have to end when the United States could wage them with alternative instruments: the use of CIA and covert operations, the reliance on regional allies to maintain stability, the use of “proxy” or indigenous forces. The limited nature of these commitments conformed to the advice given to the Nixon administration by the British counterinsurgent Sir Robert Thompson in 1971.

Discussing how the United States might maintain a presence in South Vietnam despite domestic hopes for an end to the war, Thompson argued:

If you have a long struggle one of the important things is to keep the temperature down. You do not want to fight a long struggle at a high temperature and at a high cost and at a high tension because that in itself will be damaging to the unity of your country.²⁴

For Thompson, it was “therefore very important to fight a long war with determination but with a great deal of coolness.” Thus, American strategic thinking on conflict termination, with its sequential series of steps, bore little relation to its actual practice during the Cold War, where wars were never designed to end in the first place. These conflicts, devastating in their consequences for those at their center, remained largely invisible in the United States, both in political and cultural terms.

Of course, it is certainly not the case that the United States has not suffered, even if American wars have become increasingly less visible to the public. The costs of war have had a profound impact; these have been written about extensively.²⁵ The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coincided with the financial recession, compounding the costs and accelerating the relative decline of the United States.²⁶ David Hendrickson observes that the \$5 trillion cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan mean that the “capital that might have rebuilt America was fruitlessly extended on unachievable objects, in the most inhospitable environment imaginable, in pursuit of a phantom vision of American security, at great wastage of life.”²⁷ Yet it is clear that despite these considerable costs the United States has been inhibited only to a certain degree. War and military intervention remained attractive, whether because of the primacy of presidential power within the US system—the so-called imperial presidency—or because, as Chris Hedges put it, war is “a force that gives us meaning.”²⁸

Whether it was a war of choice or necessity, whether it involved wars on poverty, on race, on AIDS, on drugs, and any number of other issues, historian Michael Sherry and others have emphasized the importance of war in shaping US culture.²⁹ More often than not, though, it has been imagined war, either metaphorical or symbolic, that has shaped the US polity. The specific ways in which war has shaped American cultures has

meant that the costs of war, even those costs borne by Americans, have been difficult to perceive. Marilyn Young has argued, in this volume and elsewhere, that the aftermath of every American war was marked by attempts to erase the experiences of that war from popular memory. David Fitzgerald's chapter on soldier homecomings shows that even as the US public venerates soldiers coming home from war, it puts some distance between those who have gone to war and those who have not.

There is a geopolitical as well as a cultural context to these practices; thus, we need to be mindful not only of the politics of the erasure of war but also of the ways in which the absence of any existential external threats to the American homeland shaped the character of US engagement with the world, and thus its cultural interpretation of war. Indeed, historian Mary Dudziak has shown that the cultural erasure of war and the relative geographical isolation of the United States are interlinked. Even during World War II, a conflict in which millions of Americans participated, American civilians were largely spared the sensory experience of war itself. Unlike the "republic of suffering" experienced by Americans during the Civil War and by other nations throughout their histories, war was distant, understood largely through news reports and letters home.³⁰

Andrew Preston has argued that the "free security" generated by this isolation, although no longer in existence by 1945, "was a unique condition in world history, one that indelibly shaped America's approach to the world, even long after the conditions of free security had vanished."³¹ Indeed, Scott Lucas argues in his essay in this volume that the American inability to adjust to the end not only of this period of free security but of unipolar hegemony has meant that the United States has become increasingly inept at understanding the agency of local actors and what the regional consequences of its actions are.

The objective of this collection is not just to critique this American carelessness, although our contributors surely do that, but to suggest that thinking historically about these issues includes not just a consideration of what lessons might be learned for "next time" but a full accounting of the costs and of what the United States has left behind. Philosopher Mark Evans suggests that in addition to the two traditional concepts of just war theory, *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, which deal with issues before and during the war, a *jus post bellum* framing is needed to assess responsibilities during occupation or after the war. Evans relates that the theory at least has to address a wide variety of potential scenarios, including, first, what victors might do to their former enemies "with respect to punishment and reparations"; second, what they might do for them, "with respect to reconstruction"; and, third, what they might do

more broadly, such as “contributing towards future peace and security” through initiatives, institutions, or mechanisms.³²

Obviously, such thinking usually refers to wars that are clearly defined and conventional, wars that end in a *USS Missouri*-style capitulation—not the “new wars” of the 1990s and beyond. Nonetheless, Evans’ theory condemns the postwar behavior of the United States. If we look to the Vietnam War we can see how, as Ed Martini’s chapter shows, the overwhelming costs of war in lives, infrastructure, and environment, were borne by the Vietnamese, despite American promises in the Paris Peace Accords. When we look at Iraq, we see a neglect of *jus post bellum* in the spring of 1991, when the United States won the war but lost the peace as Saddam retained power and exacted revenge against the Shia and the Kurds after uprisings inspired by Washington, and in 2011, when the United States tried to move on from the damage it had caused during its occupation. The constraints of such considerations of *jus post bellum* are unlikely to exercise officials after they leave Afghanistan, despite the long-term blowback from the failure to provide aid after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

In his conclusion to his devastating book *The Deaths of Others*, political theorist John Tirman explores the “epistemology of war.” He argues that the formula for calculating success in American wars includes “the costs in American blood and treasure to save Rhee or Diem, or to bring down Saddam, or prop up Karzai, but this state-centric calculus never includes the blood of those who lived there.”³³ The United States-centered narratives have rarely advanced the broader conception of the national interest as it had done in Europe after WWII; that ultimately it was in the US interests to stabilize and to rebuild these areas, to mitigate radicalism or extremism, through the politics of prosperity that animated some thinking in the 1940s. There have rarely been deep questions or extended discussion about the impact of war in Vietnam, in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and US visions of the postwar did not take into account conditions in these countries or US obligations toward them. For even if the United States departed all of these three wars as the vanquished, the *comparative* damage and costs are very much one sided.

The countries have been devastated; reconciliation has been slow in the case of Vietnam; reconstruction, such as it was, was not through relief or integration. When Obama finally arranged the orderly withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, he talked simply about turning a page and new beginnings.³⁴ In Afghanistan, Washington lowered the threshold of its objectives to such a point that many in the United States will forget why they are there or no longer recall the purpose of the war. The primary objective nearly two decades after war commenced is to get out. Such a

recursive, self-centered approach to these wars can only be the product of a polity that has lost the ability to imagine a world in which American wars *do* in fact end and in which the United States takes responsibility for the damage that it has caused abroad. In their different ways, the contributors to this volume argue for a more expansive epistemology of war, one that is not beholden to the myopic visions and assumptions of Washington.

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Notes

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