

No Exit

America has an impressive record of starting wars but a dismal one of ending them well.

By Andrew J. Bacevich

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S decision to escalate U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan earned him at most two muted cheers from Washington's warrior-pundits. Sure, the president had acceded to Gen. Stanley McChrystal's request for more troops. Already in its ninth year, Operation Enduring Freedom was therefore guaranteed to endure for years to come. The Long War begun on George W. Bush's watch with expectations of transforming the Greater Middle East gained a new lease on life, its purpose reduced to the generic one of "keeping America safe."

Yet the Long War's most ardent supporters found fault with Obama's words and demeanor. The president had failed to convey the requisite enthusiasm for sending young Americans to fight and die on the far side of the world while simultaneously increasing by several hundred billion dollars the debt imposed on future generations here at home. "Has there ever been a call to arms more dispiriting, a trumpet more uncertain?" asked a querulous Charles Krauthammer. Obama ought to have demonstrated some of the old "bring 'em on" spirit that served the previous administration so well. "We cannot prevail without a commander in chief committed to success," wrote Krauthammer.

Other observers made it clear that merely prevailing was nowhere near good enough. They took Obama to task for failing to use the V-word. Where was

the explicit call for victory? "Win' is a word that Obama avoided," noted Max Boot with disapproval. The president "spoke of wanting to 'end this war successfully' but said nothing of *winning* the war." Fred Barnes of the *Weekly Standard* read off the same talking points. "The personal commitment of the president to pursue the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda until they are defeated was not there," he lamented. "...To have rallied the country and the world, Obama needed to indicate he would lead a fight to win in Afghanistan, with the help of allies if possible, but with the armed forces of the U.S. alone if necessary. He didn't say anything like that. He didn't come close."

Oddly enough, the military leaders to whom Krauthammer, Boot, and Barnes all insist that Obama should defer also eschew the V-word. McChrystal and McChrystal's boss, Gen. David Petraeus, have repeatedly said that military power alone won't solve the problems facing a country such as Afghanistan. Indeed, the counterinsurgency doctrine that Petraeus revived and that McChrystal is keen to apply in Afghanistan in effect concedes that violence alone is incapable of producing decisive and politically useful outcomes. Expend as much ammunition as you want: what today's military calls "kinetic" methods won't get you where you want to go. Acknowledging that battle doesn't work, counterinsurgency advocates call for win-

ning (or bribing) hearts and minds instead. And they'll happily settle for outcomes—take a look at Iraq, for example—that bear scant resemblance to victory as traditionally defined.

That the post-Cold War United States military, reputedly the strongest and most capable armed force in modern history, has not only conceded its inability to achieve decision but has in effect abandoned victory as its *raison d'être* qualifies as a remarkable development.

Since 1945, the United States military has devoted itself to the proposition that, Hiroshima notwithstanding, war still works—that, despite the advent of nuclear weapons, organized violence directed by a professional military elite remains politically purposeful. From the time U.S. forces entered Korea in 1950 to the time they entered Iraq in 2003, the officer corps attempted repeatedly to demonstrate the validity of this hypothesis.

The results have been disappointing. Where U.S. forces have satisfied Max Boot's criteria for winning, the enemy has tended to be, shall we say, less than ten feet tall. Three times in the last 60 years, U.S. forces have achieved an approximation of unambiguous victory—operational success translating more or less directly into political success. The first such episode, long since forgotten, occurred in 1965 when Lyndon Johnson intervened in the Dominican Republic. The second occurred in 1983, when American

troops, making short work of a battalion of Cuban construction workers, liberated Granada. The third occurred in 1989 when G.I.'s stormed the former American protectorate of Panama, toppling the government of long-time CIA asset Manuel Noriega.

Apart from those three marks in the win column, U.S. military performance has been at best mixed. The issue here is not one of sacrifice and valor—there's been plenty of that—but of outcomes.

A seesawing contest for the Korean peninsula ended in a painfully expensive draw. Kennedy's Bay of Pigs managed only to pave the way for the Cuban Missile Crisis. Vietnam produced stupendous catastrophe. Jimmy Carter's expedition to free American hostages held in Iran not only failed but also torpedoed his hopes of winning a second term. Ronald Reagan's 1983 intervention in Beirut wasted the lives of 241 soldiers, sailors, and Marines for reasons that still defy explanation. Reagan also went after Muammar Qaddafi, sending bombers to pound Tripoli; the Libyan dictator responded by blowing up Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland—and survived to tell the tale. In 1991, George H.W. Bush portrayed Operation Desert Storm as a great victory sure to provide the basis for a New World Order; in fact the first Gulf War succeeded chiefly in drawing the United States more deeply into the vortex of the Middle East—it settled nothing. With his pronounced propensity for flinging about cruise missiles and precision-guided bombs, Bill Clinton gave us Mogadishu, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo—frenetic activity with little to show in return. As for Bush and his wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the less said the better.

What are we to make of this record? For Krauthammer, Boot, and Barnes, the lessons are clear: dial up the rhetoric, increase military spending, send in

more troops, and give the generals a free hand. The important thing, writes William Kristol in his own assessment of Obama's Afghanistan decision, is to have a commander in chief who embraces "the use of military force as a key instrument of national power." If we just keep trying, one of these times things will surely turn out all right.

An alternative reading of our recent military past might suggest the following: first, that the political utility of force—the range of political problems where force possesses real relevance—is actually quite narrow; second, that definitive victory of the sort that yields a formal surrender ceremony at Appomattox or on the deck of an American warship tends to be a rarity; third, that ambiguous outcomes are much more probable, with those achieved at a cost far greater than even the most conscientious war planner is likely to anticipate; and fourth, that the prudent statesman therefore turns to force only as a last resort and only when the most vital national interests are at stake. Contra Kristol, force is an "instrument" in the same sense that a slot machine or a roulette wheel qualifies as an instrument.

To consider the long bloody chronicle of modern history, big wars and small ones alike, is to affirm the validity of these conclusions. Bellicose ideologues will pretend otherwise. Such are the vagaries of American politics that within the Beltway the views expressed by these ideologues—few of whom have experienced war—will continue to be treated as worthy of consideration. One sees the hand of God at work: the Lord obviously has an acute appreciation for irony.

In the long run, however, the nattering of Kristol and his confrères is unlikely to matter much. Far more important will be the conclusions about war and its utility reached by

those veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who will eventually succeed Petraeus and McChrystal on the uppermost rung of the American military profession.

The impetus for weaning Americans away from their infatuation with war, if it comes at all, will come from within the officer corps. It certainly won't come from within the political establishment, the Republican Party gripped by militaristic fantasies and Democrats too fearful of being tagged as weak on national security to exercise independent judgment. Were there any lingering doubt on that score, Barack Obama, the self-described agent of change, removed it once and for all: by upping the ante in Afghanistan he has put his personal imprimatur on the Long War.

Yet this generation of soldiers has learned what force can and cannot accomplish. Its members understand the folly of imagining that war provides a neat and tidy solution to vexing problems. They are unlikely to confuse Churchillian calls to arms with competence or common sense.

What conclusions will they draw from their extensive and at times painful experience with war? Will they affirm this country's drift toward perpetual conflict, as those eagerly promoting counterinsurgency as the new American way of war apparently intend? Or will the officer corps reject that prospect and return to the tradition once represented by men like George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Matthew B. Ridgway?

As our weary soldiers trek from Iraq back once more to Afghanistan, this figures prominently among the issues to be decided there. ■

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Will's Testament

The dean of conservative columnists turns to Robert Taft.

By W. James Antle III

AS BARACK OBAMA weighed his decision whether to send additional troops to Afghanistan, former Vice President Dick Cheney grew impatient. "The White House must stop dithering while America's armed forces are in danger," Cheney said. "It's time for President Obama to do what it takes to win a war he has repeatedly and rightly called a war of necessity." Most conservative commentators cheered Cheney's broadside, but George F. Will was not amused.

"A bit of dithering might have been in order before we went into Iraq in pursuit of nonexistent weapons of mass destruction," Will said on ABC's "This Week." "For a representative of the Bush administration to accuse someone of taking too much time is missing the point. We have much more to fear in this town from hasty than from slow government action." Thus the dean of Washington conservative columnists refused the helping of red meat being served up by the Spiro Agnew of our time, siding instead with a liberal Democratic president.

One might be tempted to conclude that Will has merely become the latest media figure to be starstruck by Obama, his onetime dining companion. The president has been known to send a thrill up grown men's legs before. Except that when Obama decided he would dispatch 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan after all, Will was just as scathing: "George W. Bush waged preventive war in Iraq regarding (nonexistent) weapons of mass destruction. Obama is waging preventive war in

Afghanistan to prevent it from again becoming 'a staging platform for terrorists,' which Somalia, Yemen or other sovereignty near-vacuums also could become."

Will argued in his syndicated column that to sustain such a commitment, "U.S. forces might have to be engaged in Afghanistan for decades before its government can prevent that by itself." "The president's party will not support his new policy, his budget will not accommodate it, our overstretched and worn down military will be hard-pressed to execute it, and Americans' patience will not be commensurate with Afghanistan's limitless demands for it," he concluded. "This will not end well."

The emergence of George Will as a skeptic of the hyperinterventionist foreign policy favored by many on the Right—the sorts Will describes as the "most magnificently misnamed neoconservatives" who "are the most radical people in this town"—has been one of the most surprising developments in the Washington debate. He seldom deviated from the neoliberal-to-neoconservative consensus on foreign affairs in the past, and his newfound restraint has come at an interesting time.

The deaths of William F. Buckley Jr. and Robert Novak have left Will the most respected conservative columnist in the country. Only Cal Thomas appears in more newspapers; only Will's fellow *Washington Post* scribe Charles Krauthammer is comparably influential among conservative elites. Will is unique in that he is both widely read by rank-

and-file Republicans and also widely listened to by GOP powerbrokers. But the passing of Buckley and Novak has also left Will almost alone among the top conservative columnists as a critic of foreign adventurism—Novak had opposed post-Cold War interventionism from the start, Buckley had begun to turn against it late in life.

As Will has become more outspoken in assessing the distance between conservative foreign-policy rhetoric and reality, his critics on the Right have tried harder to ostracize him as a pseudoconservative elitist along the lines of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. After Will's first column urging U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol hit back in the *Washington Post*: "Let's be honest. Will is not calling on the United States to accept a moderate degree of success in Afghanistan, and simply to stop short of some overly ambitious goal. Will is urging retreat, and accepting defeat."

"What is fascinating is how Will writes as if Sept. 11 never happened, and the Afghan war is happening in a vacuum in which the only strategic goal is providing security and economic development for the Afghan people," wrote Jules Crittenden on his website, conceding, "though in fairness Will does, towards the end, mention the goal of denying al Qaeda bases of operation, but only in despair, to suggest it's impossible, so why try?"

In *Commentary*, former Bush pamphleteer Peter Wehner excoriated Will as a for-it-before-he-was-against-it flip-