

## NO END OF A LESSON -- *UNLEARNED*

America appears once again to be on the brink of a war. This time the war is likely to be in Syria and/or in Iraq. If we jump into one or both of these wars, they will join, by my count since our independence, about 200 significant military operations (not all of which were legally "wars") as well as countless "proactive" interventions, regime-change undertakings, covert action schemes and search-and-destroy missions. In addition the United States has provided weapons, training and funding for a variety of non-American military and quasi-military forces throughout the world. Within recent months we have added five new African countries. History and contemporary events show that we Americans are a warring people.

So we should ask: what have we learned about ourselves, our adversaries and the process in which we have engaged?

The short answer appears to be "very little."

As both a historian and a former policy planner for the American government, I will very briefly here (as I have mentioned in a previous essay, I am in the final stages of a book to be called *A Warring People*, on these issues), illustrate what I mean by "very little."

I begin with us, the American people. There is overwhelming historical evidence that war is popular with us. Politicians from our earliest days as a republic, indeed even before when we were British colonies, could nearly always count on gaining popularity by demonstrating our valor. Few successful politicians were pacifists.

Even supposed pacifists found reasons to engage in the use of force. Take the man most often cited as a peacemaker or at least a peaceseeker, Woodrow Wilson. He promised to "keep us out of war," by which he meant keeping us out of big, expensive European war. Before becoming president, however, he approved the American conquest of Cuba and the Philippines and described himself as an imperialist; then, as president, he occupied Haiti, sent the Marines into the Dominican Republic and ordered the Cavalry into Mexico. In 1918, he also put American troops into Russia. Not only sending soldiers: his administration carried out naval blockades, economic sanctions, covert operations -- one of which, allegedly, involved an assassination attempt on a foreign leader -- and furnished large-scale arms supplies to insurgents in on-going wars.

The purpose, and explanation, of our wars varied. I think most of us would agree that our Revolution, the First World War and the Second World War were completely justified. Probably Korea was also. The United States had no choice on the Civil war or, perhaps, on the War of 1812. Many, particularly those against the Native Americans would today be classified as war crimes. It is the middle range that seem to me to be the most important to understand. I see them like this.

Some military ventures were really misadventures in the sense that they were based on misunderstandings or deliberate misinformation. I think that most students of history would put the Spanish-American, Vietnamese, Iraqi and a few other conflicts in this category. Our government lied to us -- the Spaniards did not blow up the Maine; the Gulf of Tonkin was not a dastardly attack on our innocent ships and Iraq was not about to attack us with a nuclear weapon, which it did not have.

But we citizens listened uncritically. We did not demand the facts. It is hard to avoid the charge that we were either complicit, lazy or ignorant. We did not hold our government to account.

Several war and other forms of intervention were for supposed local or regional requirements of the Cold War. We knowingly told one another that the "domino theory" was reality: so a hint of Communist subversion or even criticism of us sent us racing off to protect almost any form of political association that pretended to be on our side. And we believed or feared that even countries that had little or no connections with one another would topple at the touch -- or even before their neighbors appeared to be in trouble. Therefore, regardless of their domestic political style, monarchy, dictatorship, democracy, it mattered not, they had to be protected. Our protection often included threats of invasion, actual intervention, paramilitary operations, subversion and/or bribery, justified by our proclaimed intent to keep them free. Or at least free from Soviet control. Included among them were Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, Chile, Italy, Greece, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Indonesia, Vietnam and various African countries.

Some interventions were for acquisition of their resources or protection of our economic assets. Guatemala, Chile, Iraq, Iran and Indonesia come to mind.

Few, if any, were to establish the basis of peace or even to bring about ceasefires. Those tasks we usually left to the United Nations or regional associations.

The costs have been high. Just counting recent interventions, they have cost us well over a hundred thousand casualties and some multiple of that in wounded; they have cost "the others" -- both our enemies and our friends -- large multiples of those numbers. The monetary cost is perhaps beyond counting both to them and to us. Figures range upward from \$10 trillion.

The rate of success of these aspects of our foreign policy, even in the Nineteenth century, was low. Failure to accomplish the desired or professed outcome is shown by the fact that within a few years of the American intervention, the condition that had led to the intervention recurred. The rate of failure has dramatically increased in recent years. This is because we are operating in a world that is increasingly politically sensitive. Today even poor, weak, uneducated and corrupt nations become focused by the actions of foreigners. Whereas before, a few members of the native elite made the decisions, today we face "fronts." parties, tribes and independent opinion leaders. So the "window of opportunity" for foreign intervention, once at least occasionally partly open, is now often shut.

I will briefly focus on five aspects of this transformation:

*First*, nationalism has been and remains the predominant way of political thought of most of the world's people. Its power has long been strong (even when we called it by other names) but it began to be amplified and focused by Communism in the late Nineteenth century. Today, nationalism in Africa, much of Asia and parts of Europe is increasingly magnified by the rebirth of Islam in the *salafiyah* movement.

Attempts to crush these nationalist-ideological-religious-cultural movements militarily have generally failed. Even when, or indeed especially when, foreigners arrive on the scene, natives put aside their mutual hostilities to unite against them. We saw this

particularly vividly and painfully in Somalia. The Russians saw it in Çeçnaya and the Chinese, among the Uyghur peoples of Xinjiang (former Chinese Turkistan).

*Second*, outside intervention has usually weakened moderate or conservative forces or tendencies within each movement. Those espousing the most extreme positions are less likely to be suborned or defeated than the moderates. Thus particularly in a protracted hostilities, are more likely to take charge than their rivals. We have seen this tendency in each of the guerrilla wars in which we got involved; for the situation today, look at the insurgent movements in Syria and Iraq. (For my analysis of the philosophy and strategy of the Muslim extremists, see my essay "Sayyid Qutub's Fundamentalism and Abu Bakr Naji's *Jihadism*" on my website, [www.williampolk.com/](http://www.williampolk.com/).)

What is true of the movements is even more evident in the effects on civic institutions and practices within an embattled society. In times of acute national danger, the "center" does not hold. Centrists get caught between the insurgents and the regimes. Insurgents have to destroy their relationship to society and government if they are to "win." Thus, in Vietnam for example, doctors and teachers, who interfaced between government and the general population were prime targets for the Vietminh in the 1950s.

And, as the leaders of governments against whom the insurgents are fighting become more desperate, they suppress those of their perceived rivals or critics they can reach. By default, these people are civilians who are active in the political parties, the media and the judiciary. And, as their hold on power erodes and "victory" becomes less likely, regimes also seek to create for themselves safe havens by stealing money and sending it abroad. Thus, the institutions of government are weakened and the range of enemies widens. We have witnessed these two aspects of "corruption" -- both political and economic -- in a number of countries. Recent examples are Vietnam and Afghanistan.

In Vietnam at least by 1962 the senior members of the regime had essentially given up the fight. Even then they were preparing to bolt the country. And the army commanders were focused on earning money that they sold the bullets and guns we gave them to the Vietminh. In Afghanistan, the regime's involvement in the drug trade, its draining of the national treasury into foreign private bank accounts (as even Mr. Karzai admitted) and in "pickpocketing" hundreds of millions of dollars from aid projects is well documented. (<http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/inspections/SIGAR-14-62-IP.pdf>, the monthly reports of the American Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction.)

*Third*, our institutional memory of programs, events and trends is shallow. I suggest that it usually is no longer than a decade. Thus, we repeat policies even when the record clearly shows that they did not work when previously tried. And we address each challenge as though it is unprecedented. We forget the American folk saying that when you find yourself in a hole, the best course of action is to stop digging. It isn't only that our government (and the thousands of "experts," tacticians and strategists it hires) do not "remember" but also that they have at hand only one convenient tool -- the shovel. What did we learn from Vietnam? Get a bigger, sharper shovel.

*Fourth*, despite or perhaps in part because of our immigrant origins, we are a profoundly insular people. Few of us have much appreciation of non-American cultures and even less fellow feeling for them. Within a generation or so, few immigrants can even speak the language of their grand parents. Many of us are ashamed of our ethnic origins.

Thus, for example, at the end of the Second World War, despite many of us being of German or Italian or Japanese cultural background, we were markedly deficient in people who could help implement our policies in those countries. We literally threw away the language and culture of grandparents. A few years later, when I began to study Arabic, there were said to be only five Americans not of Arab origin who knew the language. Beyond language, grasp of the broader range of culture petered off to near zero. Today, after the expenditure of significant government subsidies to universities (in the National Defense Education Act) to teach "strategic" languages, the situation should be better. But, while we now *know* much more, I doubt that we *understand* other peoples much better.

If this is true of language, it is more true of more complex aspects of cultural heritage. Take Somalia as an example. Somalia was not, as the media put it, a "failed state;" it was and is a "non-state." That is, the Somalis do not base their effective identity on being as members of a nation state. Like almost everyone in the world did before recent centuries, they thought of themselves as members of clans, tribes, ethnic or religious assemblies or territories. It is we, not they, who have redefined political identity. We forget that the nation-state is a concept that was born in Europe only a few centuries ago and became accepted only late in the Nineteenth century in Germany and Italy. For the Somalis, it is still an alien construct. So, not surprisingly, our attempt to force them or entice them to shape up and act within our definition of statehood has not worked. And Somalia is not alone. And not only in Africa. Former Yugoslavia is a prime example: to be 'balkanized' has entered our language. And, if we peek under the flags of Indonesia, Burma, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Congo, Mali, the Sudan and other nation-states we find powerful forces of separate ethnic nationalisms.

The effects of relations among many of the peoples of Asia and Africa and some of the Latin Americans have created new political and social configurations and imbalances within and among them. With European and American help the governments with which we deal have acquired more effective tools of repression. They can usually defeat the challenges of traditional groups. But, not always. Where they do not acquire legitimacy in the eyes of significant groups -- "nations" -- states risk debilitating, long-term struggles. These struggles are, in part, the result of the long years of imperial rule and colonial settlement. Since Roman times, foreign rulers have sought to cut expenses by governing through local proxies. Thus, the British turned over to the Copts the unpopular task of collecting Egyptian taxes and to the Assyrians the assignment of controlling the Iraqi Sunnis. The echo of these years is what we observe in much of the "Third World" today. Ethnic, religious and economic jealousies abound and the wounds of imperialism and colonialism have rarely completely healed. We may not be sensitive to them, but to natives they may remain painful. Americans may be the "new boys on the block," but these memories have often been transferred to us.

*Finally, fifth*, as the preeminent nation-state America has a vast reach. There is practically no area of the world in which we do not have one sort of interest or another. We have over a thousand military bases in more than a hundred countries; we trade, buy and sell, manufacture or give away goods and money all over Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe. We train, equip and subsidize dozens of armies and even more paramilitary or "Special" forces. This diversity is, obviously, a source of strength and richness, but, less obviously, it generates conflicts between what we wish to accomplish in one country and what we think we need to accomplish in another. At the very least, handling or balancing our diverse aims within acceptable means and at a reasonable cost is a challenge.

It is a challenge that we seem less and less able to meet.

Take Iraq as an example. As a corollary of our hostility to Saddam Husain, we essentially turned Iraq over to his enemies, the Iraqi Shia Muslim. (I deal with this in my *Understanding Iraq*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 171 ff.) There was some justification for this policy. The Shia community has long been Iraq's majority and because they were Saddam's enemies, some "experts" naively thought they would become our friends. But immediately two negative aspects of our policy became evident: non-specialists: first, the Shiis took vengeance on the Sunni Muslim community and so threw the country into a vicious civil war. What we called pacification amounted to ethnic cleansing. And, second, the Shia Iraqi leaders (the *marjiaah*) made common cause with coreligionist Iranians with whom we were nearly at war all during the second Bush administration. Had war with Iran eventuated, our troops in Iraq would have been more hostages than occupiers. At several points, we had the opportunity to form a more coherent, moral and safer policy. I don't see evidence that our government or our occupation civil and military authorities even grasped the problem; certainly they did not find ways to work toward a solution. Whatever else may be said about it, our policy was dysfunctional.

I deserve to be challenged on this statement: I am measuring (with perhaps now somewhat weakened hindsight) recent failures against what we tried to do in the Policy Planning Council in the early 1960s. If our objective is, as we identify it, to make the world at least safe, even if not safe for democracy, we are much worse off today than we were then. We policy planners surely then made many significant mistakes (and were often not heeded), but I would argue that we worked within a more coherent framework than our government does today. Increasingly, it seems to me that we are in a mode of leaping from one crisis to the next without having understood the first or anticipating the second. I see no strategic concept; only tactical jumps and jabs.

So what to do?

At the time of the writing of the American Constitution, one of our Founding Fathers, Gouverneur Morris, remarked that part of the task he and others of the authors put it, was "to save the people from their most dangerous enemy, themselves." Translated to our times, this is to guard against our being "gun slingers." All the delegates were frightened by militarism and sought to do the absolute minimum required to protect the country from attack. They refused the government permission to engage in armed actions against foreigners except in defense. I believe they would have been horrified, if they could have conceived it, by the national security state we have become. They certainly did not look to the military to solve problems of policy. They would have agreed, I feel sure, that very few of the problem we face in the world today could be solved by military means. So, even when we decide to employ military means, we need to consider not only the immediate but the long-term effects of our actions. We have, at least, the experience and the intellectual tools to do so. So why have we not?

We have been frequently misled by the success of our postwar policies toward both Germany and Japan. We successfully helped those two countries to embark upon a new era. And, during the employment of the Truman Doctrine in Greece, the civil war there ended. There were special reasons for all three being exceptions. Perhaps consequent to those successes, when we decided to destroy the regimes of Saddam Husain and Muammar Qaddafi, we gave little thought of what would follow. We more or less just assumed that

things would get better. They did not. The societies imploded. Had we similarly gone into Iran, the results would have been a moral, legal and economic disaster. Now we know -- or should know -- that unless the risk is justified, as our Constitution demands it be by an imminent armed attack on the United States, we should not make proactive war on foreign nations. We have sworn not to do so in the treaty by which we joined the United Nations. In short, we need to be law abiding, and we should look before we leap.

Our ability to do any of these things will depend on several decisions.

*The first* is to be realistic: there is no switch we can flip to change our capacities. To look for quick and easy solutions is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

*The second* is a matter of will and the costs and penalties that attach to it. We would be more careful in foreign adventures if we had to pay for them in both blood and treasure as they occurred. That is, "in real time." We now avoid this by borrowing money abroad and by inducing or bribing vulnerable members of our society and foreigners to fight for us. All our young men and women should know that they will be obliged to serve if we get into war, and we should not be able to defer to future generations the costs of our ventures. We should agree to pay for them through immediate taxes rather than foreign loans.

*The third* is to demand accountability. Our government should be legally obligated to tell us the truth. If it does not, the responsible officials should be prosecuted in our courts and, if they violate our treaties or international law, they should have to come before the World Court of Justice. We now let them off scot-free. The only "culprits" are those who carry out their orders.

*Fourth*, in the longer term, the only answer to the desire for better policy is better public education. For a democracy to function, its citizens must be engaged. They cannot be usefully engaged if they are not informed. Yet few Americans know even our own laws on our role in world affairs. Probably even fewer know the history of our actions abroad -- that is, what we have done in the past with what results and at what cost.

And as a people we are woefully ignorant about other peoples and countries. Polls indicate that few Americans even know the locations of other nations. The saying that God created war to teach American geography is sacrilegious. If this was God's purpose, He failed. And beyond geography, concerning other people's politics, cultures and traditions, there is a nearly blank page. Isn't it time we picked up the attempt made by such men as Sumner Wells (with his *An Intelligent American's Guide to the Peace* and his *American Foreign Policy Library*), Robert Hutchins, James Conant and others (with the General Education programs in colleges and universities) and various other failed efforts to make us a part of humanity?

On the surface, at least, resurrecting these programs is just a matter of (a small amount of) money. But results won't come overnight. Our education system is stogy, our teachers are poorly trained and poorly paid, and we, the consumers, are distracted by quicker, easier gratifications than learning about world affairs. I had hoped that we would learn from the "real schools" of Vietnam and other failures, but we did not. The snippets of information which pass over our heads each day do not and cannot make a coherent pattern. Absent a matrix into which to place "news," it is meaningless. I have suggested in a previous

essay that we are in a situation like a computer without a program. We get the noise, but without a means to "read" it, it is just gibberish.

Our biggest challenge therefore comes down to us: unless or until we find a better system of teaching, of becoming aware that we need to learn and a desire to acquire the tools of citizenship, we cannot hope to move toward a safer, more enriching future.

This is a long-term task.

We had better get started.

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