



Walt Rostow (*right*) uses a topographic model on 15 February 1968 to update President Lyndon B. Johnson (*second from left*) on the ongoing battle for Khe Sanh, which was fought in Vietnam from 21 January to 9 July 1968. Critics of the Johnson administration have asserted that it provoked ire from the military leadership by attempting to micromanage battlefield operations from the White House, purportedly under the direction of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Such micromanagement, based on the political theory of gradualism, dramatically eroded the relationship between administration officials and the military leadership attempting to conduct the war. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

Politics, Warfare, and the American People



How America's Uneven Political Leadership Harms Its Ability to Win

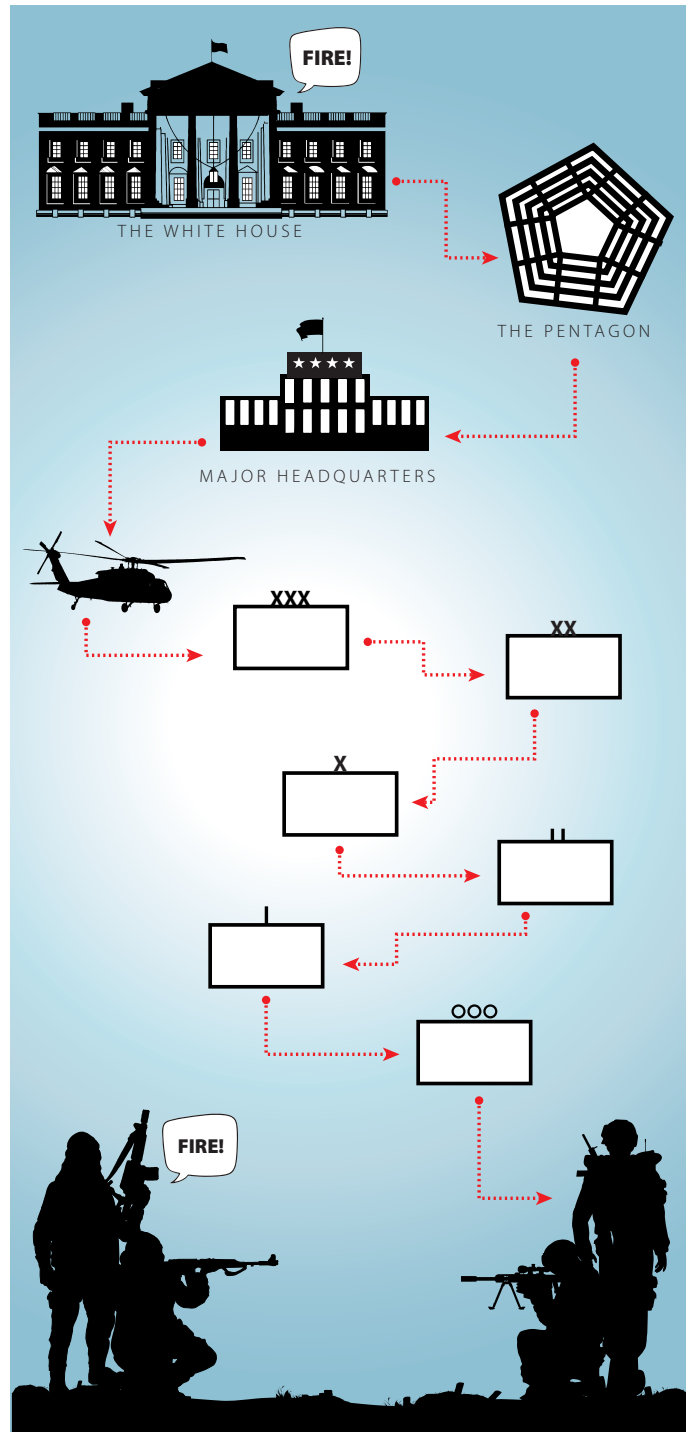
Maj. Jeremy Shields, U.S. Air Force Reserve

Despite overwhelming economic, technological, and military advantages, America's tradition is always to struggle its way to craggy victory. Is the eventual victory because of political leadership or is it because of how America organizes, trains, and equips?

Colin Gray asserts the American way of war promulgates a tradition of nonstrategic, apolitical methods that favor the American military's tactical might.¹ This theory is consistent and successful when it fights a quick, decisive, and clean conflict with a clearly defined *military* end; however, many of the engagements that the American military has undertaken since World War II were waged with ill-defined *political* goals that do not necessarily need military might to succeed.² These blurred lines have significantly contributed to America's uneven record of victory, primarily due to a lack of national leadership outside the military's control or persuasion.

America's struggles in matters of warfare are simply a manifestation of its messy political system's leadership and its inability to articulate and lead to appropriate military end states. Carl von Clausewitz's famous line of war as a continuation of policy by other means is manifested in America's political system that inherently relies on warfare to achieve whatever political goals the country has outside its borders.³ However, countless entanglements in America's history have shown that political objectives do not readily nest within the specific capabilities of violence. The military is not suited for nation-building, neocolonialism, or security operations in faraway lands after primarily military objectives are achieved and political objectives oriented toward nonviolent ways begin.

Because of the physical separation of the United States from much of the world by the two oceans bordering the North American continent, public sentiment often skews toward noninterventional opinions as skirmishes around the world unfold; foreign skirmishes are often perceived as some other country's problem. Even today, some Americans still question why President Joseph Biden would contemplate helping Ukraine, believing the war is clearly a European problem versus the existential threat to self-determination and the rights of sovereign nations everywhere to exist peacefully. Much of



(Image by Arin Lynn Burgess)

this isolationism comes from the healthy tradition of wariness of foreign entanglement. Additionally, the average American's lack of global understanding of how interrelated many issues are in an interconnected world diminishes the domestic appetite for American intervention. As a result, U.S. political leaders are

slow to wake up to the challenges that eventual military intervention will entail. What remains in that void is the vacuum of truth and political leaders who are reluctant to tell the American people the connectedness of world events, the need for America's assistance, and that issues on foreign lands will eventually come to America's shores. This lack of foresight and understanding is the usual course for America to play catch-up instead of leading the world in response to the sobering and difficult realities.

Prior to the two world wars, American attitudes in preparation for warfare followed a similar path of isolation and restraint, reflecting that the primary strategic role of the military was the continental defense of American borders and territorial protection of assets in the Pacific.⁴ The prevailing thought in the interwar periods was one of antipathy toward war, which led to a lack of political strategic aims in preparing for the eventual outbreak of World War II.⁵ In his book on prewar plans and preparations, Gen. Mark S. Watson succinctly summed up America's approach to war by saying that strategy to military events is unrolled almost entirely in the theater of war, within the sound of the guns.⁶

This history of uncertainty in national strategic direction, leadership, and policy did not start with any single president and has continued as a tradition. At the outset of World War II, on the European continent, American military leaders felt they did not fully understand the president's strategy for national defense.⁷ The repeated pattern of military preparedness preceding American foreign policy has been and remains one of the most challenging political leadership problems affecting easy success in all foreign military endeavors.

Post-World War I, people of every nation were tired of war, scarred by loss, and depleted of funds to entertain any more conflict.⁸ America had entered the Great War without any say or influence on who the enemy was or the best methods to defeat them. The guiding principle was the disillusion with warfare and the need to bask in an intervening peace dividend. Practically speaking, this meant that strategy solely focused on



Adm. Harold Rainsford Stark became chief of naval operations in 1939. From 1940 to 1941, he oversaw the expansion of the Navy as well as its involvement in the neutrality patrols against German submarines during the latter part of 1941. During this time, in anticipation of conflict with both Germany and Japan, he authored the "Plan Dog" memorandum that laid out a strategy for conducting a two-theater war. This memo became the basis for America's "Europe First" policy in which the initial focus of conflict would be attaining victory in Europe before providing more robust support to the war against Japan. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy)

preserving the peace, designing nonmilitary peaceful institutional bodies such as the League of Nations and other instruments of world unity to ensure a sense of lasting peace was possible and enduring. However, Congress, as the body of the American people, rejected President Woodrow Wilson's liberalist approach as concerns over the League's other imperial members would entangle America in ceaseless wars as they pursued hegemony over their colonial holdings. Writ large, this meant no more military intervention but the start of political leadership. However, this was not to be in the years that followed.

Military officers knew that the world order would not stay static for long. As early as 1937, even as the

commander in chief continued to pursue a policy of peace, military leaders saw the writing on the wall as they set about making contingency plans for possible scenarios involving offensive warfare.⁹ As evidenced by Adm. Harold Stark's November 1940 letter, the military machine went to work on different plans to meet various scenarios—a tradition that is still practiced today—the military would face with little political or governmental direction. The so-called “Plan Dog Memorandum” would go on to serve as the basis for the entire government's response to the eventual two-front war.¹⁰ The reverse order of the military designing what would become the official policy of the U.S. government misses the mark and underscores just how dysfunctional America was then and has become worse since the halcyon days of Franklin D. Roosevelt. A return to strong and decisive guidance from America's political leadership communicating and in concert with the military leadership will arrest this abysmal history of failed planning between the military and the political classes.

World War II's eventual end state of unconditional surrender meant that the military was no longer hinged to a limited war without an appropriate military end state or objectives to achieve that goal. The total war concept of neutralizing the German and Japanese militaries while breaking the civilians' will to support further aggression meant that the military was unrestrained from political limits to achieving its objectives. At this moment, the overarching objective of the military was of paramount importance to the extension of politics, when the optimal conditions had been achieved to realize the Clausewitzian dogma of war as a method of political advancement. Further, by setting the condition of complete and total surrender, the American leadership inferred the Soviets and the British could not sue for their own peace with Germany until the Allied militaries had achieved their desired end state. Not since those days have we had a more clear and direct policy to our military strategy.

American leadership was strong and assertive in what was needed to restore world order and defeat bad actors. The coalition of Allied partners that achieved the peace following World War II shared the common goals of repelling fascism, restoring world order, and destroying the pillars that held up these maligned structures, so that they could not reconstitute

to challenge peace and order.¹¹ This was primarily achieved by routing the Nazi military machine and detonating two atomic bombs in Imperial Japan. With total war from the military now bringing maligned actors to their knees, the messy job of establishing world order from a position of diplomatic and political means began in earnest. So why has this leadership capability been so absent since that time?

The postbellum period of World War II allowed time for the political and military leaders of the United States to debate, contemplate, and understand the new way of warfare following the release of the atomic weapons in Japan.¹² Defining what sort of military structure would be necessary for the nuclear age, how the services would be aligned, and in what types of wars America would involve itself seemed clear. There was an opportunity to synergize the political with the military and organize in such a way that military combat power would be deployed only as a last measure of a robust and complete deployment of all instruments of power. The strategy of containment presented a unique case for a whole-of-government approach to national security that wrangled the political, military, diplomatic, and professional realms toward one goal.

Two other significant wars in which America entangled blood and treasure had diametrically opposed outcomes due mainly to the way in which they were conceived and executed. The wars in Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm bear no resemblance to each other except for the overwhelming flex of combat power America brings to every fight. But to understand how one war could be so utterly demoralizing and the other war such a tremendous political and military success, one must examine the leadership contributions of Gen. Colin Powell, who was a soldier of both wars, to understand the undercurrent of restrained military engagement coupled with

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Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell points to Iraqi air bases at a Pentagon briefing 22 January 1991 during the first Gulf War. (Photo by Greg Gibson, Associated Press)

the exhaustion of all other nonviolent means. Enter the Powell Doctrine, named for the general.

The importance of the Powell Doctrine is to consider the “so what” of outcomes before pondering military action. This forces leaders to examine how power projection will link to political objectives and what comes after the end of hostilities. Powell, like his mentor and former boss, Caspar Weinberger, realized that America’s station as the leader of the free world made it impossible to ignore problems elsewhere and impractical to embrace the isolationism that has persistently made up the fabric of American ideology.¹³ While America did not ask for this responsibility, the mantle was nonetheless hoisted onto its shoulders postbellum World War II. As was stated earlier, the lessons borne of that era reveal that problems in other places eventually come to America’s doorstep. How political leaders choose to answer those calls

can be distilled to the specific questions of the Powell Doctrine.

First, the Powell Doctrine seeks to provide an arbitrary but achievable political clarity to the often messy and arcane reality of partisan politics. The doctrine generates pause among the political class by posing several questions. For example, are America’s vital interests involved? Is the action supported by the American people? Do our allies agree with our approach? Using this approach has the potential to align America’s strategic political goals with those of its military. That said, what is missing today is America’s national leadership insisting on the consideration of such endeavors.

A second aspect of the Powell Doctrine is framed within the case of the Vietnam War. The ambiguity and incremental framing of the core problem in Vietnam mixed with the gradual escalation of forces doomed a coherent long-term strategy that aligned America’s overall

strategic ends.¹⁴ As a counterexample, in the Gulf War, Powell worked with political leaders to codify what was militarily feasible once other instruments of power had been exhausted. He then worked with military leaders to design plans that would enable strategic success.¹⁵ Within this construct, defining clear objectives made the military piece attainable in the Gulf War, which is quite the opposite of the Vietnam War's outcome.

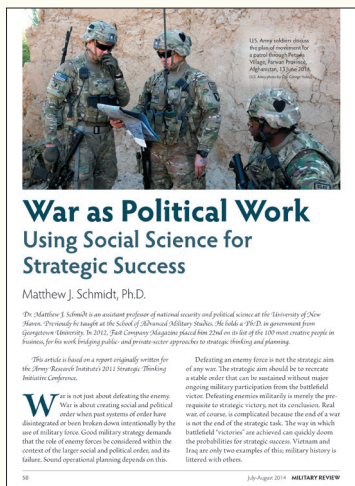
To further illustrate the malfeasance of the Vietnam War as an extreme example of military strategy not aligning with national policy, we must contemplate the unrealistic expectations of success in a limited war.¹⁶ As was the case in World War II, the political arm of America's democratic institutions did little to bring the country along with their aims in Vietnam as violence escalated, body counts mounted, and Americans debated the value of fighting someone else's war. While America had an overarching strategy since the end of hostilities in World War II to contain the spread of communism abroad, the Vietnam War lacked a coherent public affairs program to sell to the American people the reason why stopping the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia was so important. But while the war progressed, the tenuous connection to stopping Communism and building capitalist support in the decolonizing world became ever more difficult to sell to a skeptical American public. As a testament to this ambiguous and conflicting

strategy, the messaging of the Johnson White House was that the goals and end states of the war should be kept as ambiguous as possible to preserve political capital should the Vietnam endeavor fail.¹⁷ Is this how we want America to lead the free world?

As a juxtaposition to the Vietnam War, the Gulf War against Iraq and Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard is perhaps the last and greatest example of war as a means of last resort. Powell's doctrine was put to the test because from the outset of Iraqi aggression in Kuwait, the United States led the world in aggressive diplomacy, expert information dissemination, paralyzing economic flexing, and the largest deployment of American combat power since World War II. The lead-up to the Gulf War was a masterstroke in exercising all instruments of power and leading the free world to a decision point. President George Bush worked for months to build the case that Iraq's occupation of Kuwait was unacceptable and put forth a policy to return the status quo to the region, antebellum. When those diplomatic and economic levers failed, Bush laid out four primary strategic goals for the military to execute in National Security Directive 54.¹⁸ These clearly defined objectives and a specific desired end state allowed the American military to prosecute an unparalleled level of warfare to a successful military and, by extension, political end.¹⁹

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Dr. Matthew J. Schmidt asserts that strategic thinking requires the subjectivity of a qualitative approach to problem-solving as it relates to terminating a conflict by promoting a stable order within the defeated population that can be sustained without further major ongoing military participation from the battlefield victor. Consequently, defeating enemies militarily should be seen merely as a prerequisite step to of ultimate strategic victory, not its conclusion.

To read "War a Political Work: Using Social Science for Strategic Success" from the July-August 2014 edition of *Military Review*, visit https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20140831_art012.pdf.

That said, America has learned little from the Weinberger or Powell Doctrine's success in the Persian Gulf. As we close out more than twenty years of counterinsurgency operations, we only contemplated three of the eight questions of the Powell Doctrine. Crucially, the most important unanswered question of having a plausible exit strategy has haunted three separate presidential administrations and led to the unnecessary exhaustion of blood and treasure with a claim to a tenuous victory. While it is easy to initiate the military option, it is often difficult for both military leaders and senior statesmen to link beautifully crafted campaigns with clear ideas for how the war should end and diplomacy begins.²⁰

Today, echoes from the interwar period are slowly building to a crescendo. The European continent is embroiled in conflict as another belligerent despot, Vladimir Putin, is focused on rebuilding historical, ethnographic, and perceived cultural geographic lines. The tenuous peace that global institutions like NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations have enjoyed over the last seventy-plus years is under threat. In the last seven years, the once-steady hand of the United States tremored under slogans like "Make America Great Again" and the isolationist hubris of "America First." As these wildly popular catchphrases capture the minds of Americans and the policies they endeavor, they mainly serve to break down America's commitment to liberal world ideals, demonstrating that Americans once again are impervious to the entreaties of an unstable world beckoning for leadership and security. The national security policy America can trace to the ideas of international liberalism and Roosevelt are increasingly under strain. What does this change mean for today's military professionals and America's collective national security?

Military professionals have every right to demand clear and attainable military objectives from their political leaders that support American strategic policy. However, since the end of the twentieth century, what has endured has been an overly optimistic assessment

of the end of state-sponsored hostilities and strategic narcissism in hoping away conflict by meekly investing in international institutions that support world peace.²¹ When given limited, measurable, and achievable objectives with clearly defined end states, military professionals prove successful time and again. When ambiguity, mission creep, and shortsighted strategic planning cycles pervade military-based solutions, the metrics for military success skew toward uneven ends. Our most recent end to the Afghanistan war is encapsulated with the words of Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster when he said, "Afghanistan was a one-year war, fought twenty times over."²² This crystalizes America's lack of political leadership marrying military end states.

America's political system, by design, is messy, slow to react, and often wrong in its ability to steer the global narrative. The transient nature of America's political stability over the last forty years has produced incoherent national strategy and instability as to the nature of its objectives abroad. While liberal internationalist institutions are effective at keeping the status quo, much like the Joint Planning Board of the interwar periods, American military leadership cannot rely solely on strategic direction from a president who is only realistically effective for the first two years in office and a congress hell-bent on internecine partisan battles. From simply supplying combat power with little strategic input in World War I to the disastrously vague Vietnam War, the ambiguity of America's approach to war is outdated. Merely reacting with overwhelming combat capabilities first, then working out the details later is no longer tenable in the fast-moving, multidimensional warfare of the twenty-first century. America needs to be a beacon of leadership that provides a unified, steady voice of strategic policies that harmonize the instruments of power toward achievable end states. Unified political leadership with a shared mental and policy model is essential to break the cycle of uneven victories. Our national interests require this, and more importantly, our military deserve this. ■

Notes

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WE RECOMMEND



The Need for a Brigade Politics-and-Policy Staff Officer

Maj. Adam Scher, U.S. Army

By June 2015, morning battlefield update briefs were routine in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 82nd Airborne Division's Baghdad command post. On one morning of that month, however, there was a critical difference: It was the first time a member of the staff was asked to provide commentary

During discussions in Iraq with others on the brigade staff, subordinate battalions, and our higher headquarters, it became apparent we lacked a clear procedure or person to assist in interpreting the Iraqis' general political and military attitudes, or the political priorities of regional partners and adversaries, or even in understanding the differences between the Title 10, US Code, authorities and functions of the combined

This was not the first time that a brigade commander asked me to fill this role. In 2008, while working with the 160th Airborne Division (Air Assault) in Syria/Syria, Iraq, Cdr. Dominic Caracciolo asked me to study the Iraqi population and advise him on how best to interact with them. As a civilian, I met with US military officials, met regularly with local political leaders, as well as an advocate for the Iraqi population, and advise him on the political landscape within the areas of operations and joint task force and the Title 22 functions of the Office of Security Cooperation that has been operating in Iraq since 2011.¹ This lack of understanding reduced our capacity to protect, advise, and assist when our country partners asked questions about regional dynamics or global issues. The Department of Defense and State Department lacked an appreciation. The BCT staff structure limited our ability to fully understand our operational environment and best apply combat power.

This gap also highlighted the apparent beginning of what has become a recurring complaint about field grade officers and more senior military leaders—that the “best military advice” they provide is too frequently tactically sound but strategically and politically uninformed. As former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen.

James Cartwright noted, "We forget the other elements of national power will be integrated into the objective at the highest levels of government. We fail to recall the use of force is a political decision—not of

The author of “The Need for a Brigade Politics-and-Policy Staff Officer” argues that brigade line commanders engaged in occupational duties in Iraq often lacked a staff officer capable of providing expertise, insight, and clarity regarding the local political environment affecting their assigned areas responsibility. Drawing upon his own experiences serving in such a capacity, the author asserts brigade staffs often lacked a clear procedure or person to assist in interpreting the Iraqi government’s political decisions at either the central government or regional level, and for conveying to the brigade staff the differences between the Title 10 authorities and functions of the combined joint task force and the Title 22 functions of the Office of Security Cooperation that has been operating in Iraq since 2011. This lack of staff structure limited a brigade commander’s ability to fully understand the operational environment, which adversely impacted decisions on how best to apply combat power. This gap resulted in a recurring complaint about field grade officers and more senior military leaders—that the “best military advice” they provide is too frequently tactically sound but strategically and politically uninformed.

To read "The Need for a Brigade Politics-and-Policy Staff Officer" from the January-February 2017 edition of *Military Review*, visit https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_2017228_art009.pdf.