



(Photo by Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division/World Telegram photo by Dick DeMarsico)

An enthusiastic crowd of people in New York City's Times Square celebrates the announcement of the Japanese surrender on V-J (Victory over Japan) Day, 14 August 1945.

# How about Winning Our Nation's Wars Instead of Just Participating in Them?

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**I**t has been over eighteen months since the Islamic State (IS) captured the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, and it has now expanded well beyond its initial bases in Iraq and Syria. It currently

claims that numerous provinces of other states have declared allegiance to its authority, including in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Dagestan. IS's serious intent



to network these provinces into a new and radical Islamic nation-state with global ambitions for conquest is evident in the materials discovered in many of these locations, which emphasize in detail the required principles for administering such a state, discussing everything from the management of public utilities and wealth distribution to organization of the training within its various camps and villages.

Ominously, those materials also emphasize the continuing need for recruitment of foreign fighters in an effort to add to the approximately thirty thousand now engaged in their expansionist campaign of holy war (jihad). Those currently fighting under the IS banner have come from approximately eighty different countries—already a formidable coalition. However, in an effort to diversify and expand this force, IS has launched additional recruitment efforts in Indonesia, the Philippines, European Union states, and the Southern Caucasus. IS recruitment has even begun to creep into the very tough, security-minded state of India.

Concurrently, IS has built relationships with like-minded jihadists across the globe, directing indiscriminate, vicious, and barbaric attacks in Saudi Arabia, France, the United States, Russia, Libya, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Turkey, Kuwait, and Bangladesh. IS leaders also firmly believe that the Internet is a *virtual province*, and they dominate it.

With the above developments in mind, I strongly believe (as do many others) that this threat has metastasized far beyond a localized problem of a few thousand in only a few countries in the Middle East. It has become instead a global cancer affecting and influencing the fate and well-being of hundreds of millions of people around the world. For example, events such as the continuing forced migration of millions of refugees from the Middle East into the heart of Europe brought on by conflict with IS should clearly demonstrate in and of itself that the actions of IS present a clear mid- and long-term threat to the cultural and political existence of the West.

## A Habituated State of Ennui in the Government

Recently, I testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee in support of Sen. John McCain's efforts to review the Goldwater-Nichols Act thirty years after it

was enacted by Congress.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the Goldwater-Nichols Act helped overcome deeply embedded individual Armed Forces parochialism by forcing the Department of Defense and the military services to work together jointly under threat of sanction and penalty of law. However, much has changed since the passage of this act that calls into the question of its effectiveness and relevance to the current security situation. Important questions about our military services and their Title 10 responsibilities, the size of the Pentagon's bureaucracy, and whether our combatant commands under Goldwater-Nichols mandates had lost sight of their true reasons for existing all came up during testimony and the question-and-answer session that followed. However, what was most disturbing to me about the testimony given and the ensuing discussion was what we did not talk about. We did not discuss *winning*—or more candidly—why it appears that we can no longer win. To be even more precise, one blunt and vital question did not get asked: Can we win wars anymore?

On assessing such a question, let us just stick with IS, our latest and currently our most blatant in-your-face enemy. Though history tells us that there will be many other enemies in the years ahead, for now, let us focus on just one and on the prospects of beating this enemy.

## Islamic State as a Case Study in Whether the United States Can Still Win Wars

Contrary to the pessimistic view of some pundits in academia, the government, and the media, IS is beatable. In terms of a one-for-one military match-up in armed combat, we have consistently proven that they can be beaten tactically. However, history, as well as our own painful experience with war, should demonstrate that just tactical victories on the ground are clearly not enough to win wars. The key to success is having the moral and political will to do everything necessary to beat them. But, thus far, to truly win, to steal the willingness away from the opposition and create a real sense of a victor and a vanquished—a clear winner and a loser—requires a sustained whole-of-government effort well beyond what we have been allowed to do in any conflict in which we have engaged in recent times. Strategic

victory without sustainment is a recipe for defeat, and we may be on the path to defeat.

For the proper context to understand why, it is necessary to recognize that sustaining over time the physical and moral ground gained in war to achieve victory stems mainly from political decisions. But, in order for the political leadership to make the necessary commitments, they must be thoroughly informed and familiar with the requirements to achieve victory as well as the consequences of failing to do so. Moreover, they (especially our commander in chief) must have the will to direct what is necessary. This raises some salient questions: Has our military leadership been honest in its assessments with our political leadership with regard to what was really needed to achieve victory against IS? And, have our commanders in chief taken to heart and given credence to what the nation's military and diplomatic leaders have advised them is necessary to do? It is incumbent upon readers to judge for themselves the adequacy of answers to those questions as they pertain to recent wars, including the one we are now engaged against IS.

With the above as context, the real questions I wanted to be asked during my testimony—questions I believe should have been of singular concern for those in and out of uniform—are these: Do we know how to win wars anymore? And, do we still have what it takes? Sadly, I have come to the conclusion that the answers for both are that we probably don't.

## A Hard Epiphany

As a nation, our inability to win wars stems mainly from having lost sight of what it means to win and of the vital importance in doing so in our own interests. As a result, we now participate in war simply because we can, often as a result of what might be viewed critically as merely high-level political whims dressed up in high-sounding rhetoric. Many factors have produced this situation. First, because we went away from a draft Army, the broad American community has lost the personal stake it once had in any political decision to go to war, and, as a result, many Americans have lost true appreciation or concern for the real human costs involved in war. Instead, many Americans view the Army as little more than a highly respected mercenary force, one that many politicians have come to view as an impersonal



(Photo by Associated Press)

Demonstrators chant pro-Islamic State slogans 16 June 2014 as they carry the Islamic State flag in front of the provincial government headquarters in Mosul, Iraq.





(Image from Islamic State Twitter site, courtesy Iraqi News website)

The so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria announced the names of countries it seeks to imminently control and published a map 10 October 2014. The map includes all Arab countries, nearly half of all African and European countries, including Spain, and 25 percent of the area of the continent of Asia.

plaything of policy that can be deployed without considering the actual human dimension or costs of deployments involved in war, either at home or on the battlefield. In such circumstances, decisions to order long-term deployments or endless rotations aimed at achieving limited and vague objectives that are well below what is required to achieve clear victory have become all too easy to make. Abetting such a policy mindset, over time, our entire military (especially the Army) has inflicted on itself similarly sterile and impersonal policies that don't manage people, but rather manage systems of rotational assignments—from individual, to unit, to the worldwide augmentee system going back to the Vietnam War (a loss).

The result has been entrenched and overly bureaucratic policies that stipulate repeated rotations overseas for long periods of time on missions that have no clear pathway to the terminal objective of victory. Experience has shown that these policies place an immoral burden on our soldiers—particular among the junior ranks and junior NCOs. Not surprisingly, such policies appear to be a significant factor in the greatly increased number of divorces, collapse of families, and suicides among our returning servicemembers.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, such debilitating policies, incrementally developed over years, have produced a downward slope in the intellectual and attitudinal military mindset of our leaders who have now been habituated throughout their careers to accept as the new normal weak “wish-for-the-best” losing military strategies that usually aim at maintaining a status quo vis-à-vis the enemy and not the objective of victory.

Concurrently, our government bureaucracy, especially inside the Pentagon, has evolved over time a similar intellectual complacency encouraged by an ineffectual and rice-bowl-centric interagency process. This bureaucracy places such a chokehold on how the military operates today that we are now incapable of envisioning a politically feasible, realistically achievable victory as the end state of the operations that the military is tasked to perform, much less planning and executing the steps necessary to develop or execute a viable strategy for attaining victory.

## Broad Principles for Mitigation

As a first step to mitigate such a morass of contributing factors preventing our military from being able to

defeat our enemies, our military leadership has to stop pretending like we're winning the current war against IS; we're not. Quite the contrary, our military leaders should feel morally bound to protest, in a meaningfully way, the political mindset that routinely embarks the U.S. military on participating in wars—often not even insisting that they be called wars—with no clear metrics describing a victorious end state, and does so just because it has a professional military available and it can.

In conjunction, our national commitment to demanding success must also change if we are to have victory in the future. To accomplish this, Americans in general must be made in some way to have a very personal stake in the duration as well as outcome of conflicts in which our politicians contemplate taking us. For example, if the military—including the Reserve and National Guard—was told to go to war, and that it would not be coming home until that war was won, we would organize and fight much differently than we have done for the past few decades.

We did exactly this when we habitually used to win wars. My father was a World War II veteran; when he deployed to Europe, he wasn't told he'd be home in four months or six months—or after his unit's first year's rotation to the European theater was up. He was simply told by his leaders, go win the war on the European continent—which he did, serving proudly as a corporal until the job was done.

Why shouldn't we do the same today if we are serious about winning wars? What has changed? Is it too hard? Do we lack the forces to sustain a lengthy war? Do we lack the will? Or, rather, do we now have a system in place that makes it too easy and convenient to send our forces to fight wars in which the U.S. citizenry and politicians have little personal stake? Has that system grown so overly bureaucratic that it can't get out of its own way? Has winning become too politically incorrect for our nation? The answer to all those questions, in my view, is yes.

If our military was directed to go fight a war with the specific understanding that it would be required to stay until it won the war, we would plan and fight much differently than we do today. And, more urgent and specific planning, as reflected in reformed policies and procedures, in my assessment, would result in wars that would be far less costly than the perpetual funk of perfunctory conflict in which we now find ourselves.

Such a change in mindset would prevent, for example, the nonsense we routinely see at large U.S. bases in war zones where many soldiers become preoccupied with getting to a Pizza Hut or a Burger King located on the base instead of eating the rations that are already provided. Remember, someone has to protect those convoys of frozen burgers and pizzas along the highways we fight on. Many of those protecting the convoys filled with totally unnecessary supplies like these were no doubt blown up by al-Qaida's improvised explosive devices or Iran's explosively formed penetrators.

However, complaining about the suitability of chain-business pizza in a war zone is not the point. Rather, war zone pizza parlors and burger barns serve as a collective metaphor for the inappropriate ease and comfort that policy makers now too easily promote within the military toward war making that is reflected in a lack of strategic purpose that should aim at victory in as short a time as possible. This is not an elementary argument. Clearly, winning is something we have not done well, with few exceptions, over the past half century of conflict and war. (Those exceptions include Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm in the early nineties and the defeat of al-Qaida in Iraq, 2009–2011.)

Therefore, we need dramatic reform of our mindset as reflected in extensive changes to our defense and interagency structure. Such changes should go well beyond Goldwater-Nichols to whole-of-government planning and execution of a war effort, and they should come as soon as possible. However, at present, there is an immediate and urgent necessity for organizing for absolute victory against IS's very vicious and cancerous form of radical Islamist extremism before it is too late; reform (in some cases, radical reform) that enables organizing and acting decisively against IS is the most important requirement today.

## **Organizing for War against the Islamic State**

The kind of war we are currently in with IS is in many respects not at all new. Globally oriented terrorism is not a new phenomenon but has existed in many permutations since even before the nineteenth century. So, we should not be surprised at the current levels of violence involved directed mainly at soft targets that are appearing in many quarters of the



(Photo from BBC News, courtesy of Wikipedia)

The BBC posted this photo on its website 25 August 2015 with the caption, "Islamic State (IS) has published images of what appears to be the destruction of the Temple of Baalshamin at the ancient ruins of Palmyra in Syria." BBC noted that IS had announced "the complete destruction of the pagan Baalshamin temple." The destruction of the second century BCE temple was consonant with an IS policy of systematically destroying all vestiges of non-Sunni Islamic history and culture as it expands control over territory, including ancient pre-Islamic archeological sites, Shia Muslim shrines, Christian churches and monasteries, and libraries.

world today; such are normal for conflicts involving irregular fighters and terrorists. However, what is new is the traction IS has with vast numbers of potential recruits from among disaffected elements around the globe, and the speed at which IS is able to recruit and organize such recruits, primarily through the Internet. This means that IS has the realistic potential to eventually swell its ranks of fighters and supporters to hundreds of thousands in both the western and eastern hemispheres, especially if the West allows what appears to be the creation of a physical and radicalized Islamic state that would serve as an IS staging base of operations and focal point for further expansion and sanctuary.

Consequently, to win this war, we must defeat IS not only by direct action against its claimed land space and physical assets, but also by attacking the value system and moral code it uses to recruit through an information war. In doing so, we must refute the excuses the radical Islamists use to justify their actions, and we must make clear to all people the unacceptability to us of the justifications IS uses to wage war against us.

At the same time, we must promote an unambiguous alternative value system that stands in stark contrast to the primitive and barbaric dogma the grotesque and radical IS espouses. It should be made clear in disciplined information war that IS doctrines are anathema to modern peoples of any race, nationality, ethnic, or *religious* group, since they are counter to what civilized peoples everywhere have been trying to establish for generations in terms of universal agreement on basic human rights, values, and morals.

Such a conflict between competing values systems will be challenging because, too often, IS effectively appeals to the deep resentment many Islamic populations have for the West in general and in particular the United States, justifying their war against the West on philosophical grounds derived from radical Islamic scholars who use seventh-century moral codes to justify their actions. In this respect, IS enjoys a great advantage due to its intimate understanding of the mentality of the young Muslims it is attempting to lure by enticing them to join a cause that appears to offer



worldly pleasures, rewards, and adventure in addition to spiritual salvation through Jihad.

We must also recognize that IS members do not see their activities as immoral or repulsive. Quite the contrary, they feel morally justified in their actions based on the belief system that underpins their actions. As a result, we must be careful not to underestimate our enemies' intellectual capabilities in pursuing the goals they seek. They are clearly not the junior varsity or second-string team some have characterized them as being, either intellectually or in their ability to shrewdly wage psychological as well as physical war with the limited resources they have.

Though IS adherents subscribe to a return to a seventh-century set of values that condones slavery; brutalization of captives; exotic punishments for reputed crimes; domination, exploitation, and rape of women and children; and forced subjection of nonbelievers of their brand of the Islamic faith, they are not stupid. Quite the opposite, they are true believers who have shown both fanatical zeal and commitment, as well as great skill and acumen in manipulating world opinion and outmaneuvering their enemies. Moreover, many IS adherents have shown a willing—sometimes eager—inclination to die as martyrs for their global mission. To highlight a sobering comparison, few Westerners are persuaded enough in the defense of their own ideology and culture to willingly volunteer as suicide bombers for their cause. In contrast, many IS followers appear to be more than willing to do so.

As evidence of serious intent to cleanse the world of non-Islamic power and influence, IS is systematically destroying vitally needed property and infrastructure that the fragile nation-states they are attacking need to survive, including in many cases the cultural history of peaceful, non-Islamic peoples living in those states. Consequently, the ideological foundations of many nations striving to achieve stability through tolerance of ethnic and religious diversity are being undermined as IS schemes against them to compel their subjugation to the IS caliphate. Taking all this into consideration, we must also acknowledge and take seriously the fanatical commitment of IS jihadists and their serious and malevolent long-term intentions toward us. Let's face it: they want to win and believe they are.

Finally, we also have to recognize and counter the intentions of the state and nonstate supporters who are enabling growing violence against us. Defeating IS will entail not only engaging IS directly—both through

decisive force of arms and overwhelming information operations attacking their values system—but also taking dramatic steps to cut off the support they receive from a host of players, including unfortunately, many of whom are among those we nominally consider allies but who are covertly supplying and supporting IS for their own national or personal purposes. Taking such steps will require not only diplomatic dexterity and sophisticated cultural acumen, but also great courage and toughness in the face of an entrenched bureaucratic mindset that prefers at present to rely on wishful thinking as a strategy.

## **War Only Ends in Victory—One Way or the Other**

In sum, we must face the fact that we are at war. It is not something that can be ignored or wished away. And, in war, winning is the only thing. The current war is no different. It is not a little kid's soccer game where everyone gets a trophy. As you read these words, people are being killed and maimed on the multiple sides of this war. The misery and suffering are intense, the injustices—already staggering in number—continue to mount. It is consequently in our best interests, and the interests of those who we may yet be able to preclude from becoming innocent victims, that the war be brought to an end as soon as possible, which means we must decide to seriously wage war.

We must also face the fact that a long war works to the advantage of IS. For the members of IS, the suffering of people being enslaved, raped, tortured, or in a host of other ways ruined, is irrelevant. The victims have no human rights because human rights outside of IS doctrine do not exist. IS only has one aim: to conquer and compel all people to accept their conception of a fundamentalist and much radicalized Islamic lifestyle, or die. Thus, time has no meaning for IS. Unless directly confronted, attacked, and decisively defeated, left to their own timeline, it matters not when the caliphate comes or how long it takes to get there, only that it does.

When we win against IS, it will be our right and prerogative to argue philosophically all day long about the how and the why of the war, mistakes made by military leaders and politicians, and, hopefully, lessons learned leading to successes. But, if we lose—which we must prudently recognize as a real possibility if we don't take decisive action before an IS becomes an established reality—we will lose both the right and ability to argue. I say let's stop participating in this never-ending conflict and instead, let's win! ■



(Photo courtesy of SANA)

In this undated photo released by the Syrian official news agency SANA, Khaled al-Asaad, one of Syria's most prominent antiquities scholars, speaks at an official function. Islamic State (IS) terrorists abducted the 81-year-old Asaad in May 2015 after he refused to leave the archeological site at Palmyra, Syria. After beating and torturing him, the terrorists beheaded Asaad 18 August 2015 and strapped his body to a column in Palmyra's main square. Assad had spent more than fifty years working on Palmyra, a UNESCO recognized cultural site. Until its systematic destruction by IS during 2015, Palmyra was one of the best preserved sites of ancient Roman-style architecture and sculpture.

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## Notes

1. U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on Supporting the Warfighter of Today and Tomorrow," stenographic transcript by Alderson Reporting Co., 3 December 2015, accessed 1 February 2016, <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-91%20-%2012-3-15.pdf>.

2. Gene Thomas Gomulka, "Saving Military Families," *Military Review* (January–February 2010): 111–16; Aaron

Glantz, "The Truth about Veteran Suicides," *Foreign Policy in Focus* website, 8 May 2008, accessed 8 February 2016, [http://fpif.org/the\\_truth\\_about\\_veteran\\_suicides/](http://fpif.org/the_truth_about_veteran_suicides/); Stacy Bannerman, "Broken Military Marriages: Another Casualty of War," *AlterNet* website, 23 January 2009, accessed 8 February 2016, [alternet.org/sex/122198/broken\\_military\\_marriages\\_another\\_casualty\\_of\\_war/](http://alternet.org/sex/122198/broken_military_marriages_another_casualty_of_war/).