

# Why America Loses Wars

by George Friedman - August 10, 2021

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is moving to its inevitable conclusion. The Taliban, the radical Islamists the U.S. was fighting, are taking back control of the country, one city at a time. Put differently, the United States has lost **the war it fought for the past 20 years**. There are those who want to continue to fight, but I doubt that another 20 years will bring victory considering that the definition of success is vague and wildly ambitious. The goal was to transform an ancient and complex society from what it was to into what we wanted it to be. Defeating a country comprising warring factions and imposing peace and a new culture was beyond Washington's reach.

This is not the first war the U.S. has lost since World War II, and given the overwhelming military power of the United States, it must be explained. To explain it, we must begin with World War II, in which the United States was confronted with a conflict initiated by Japan and Germany. The United States responded by defining war as eliminating the enemy's military and shattering the enemies' society by destroying their industrial plants and cities. Victory required the enemy's defeat and a social and moral transformation of the defeated.

World War II taught the United States a number of lessons. The first was that the decision on timing was made by U.S. enemies. Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war made the decision on Washington's behalf at a time that suited them. It took away the advantage of initiative, beyond nibbling at the edges of the war. Second, Washington learned that in fighting an enemy you must use overwhelming force and that it was essential to shatter not only the military but also the morale of the nation as a whole. The U.S. would do that by applying overwhelming force on the enemy's military and society.

Victory transformed the U.S. Its power was vast and intersected much of the world. The U.S. had failed to see this prior to World War II. It now was obsessed with it. It created a vast military-industrial complex, seeing it as the critical element of national security. So it had greater friction than before, and more power than before. But it had taken another lesson from World War II. Defeating the enemy's military was not enough. As with Germany and Japan, war could only end with a moral and cultural capitulation by the enemy nation and a transformation to liberal democracy.

After World War II, America's main adversary was the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a moral nightmare. Soviet power was daunting, and a global moral challenge faced the United States.

Realpolitik and a moral struggle combined, and the U.S. and Soviet Union fought to transform nations into partisans of the moral project of either liberal democracy or Marxism-Leninism. Over time, this lapsed into massive cynicism on both sides, but at the core, the moral and grand strategies blended, and the real struggle was for the hearts and minds of the populace, shaped by covert and overt war.

Korea was the first war of moral absolutism but was shaped by very conventional war. It was in Vietnam that the new strategy was tested. Vietnam had been occupied by the French, who were defeated in their war against the communists. It ended with the division of the country between communists and anti-communists who posed as liberal democrats to salve the American soul but were simply ambitious men dedicated to holding power, using anti-communism to draw the Americans into protecting them. As a war, it was divided between endless combat on the ground and an air campaign designed to break North Vietnamese morale, much as the U.S. had broken the Germans and Japanese. But the war went beyond that. The goal was to create a government that morally rejected communism and embraced liberal democracy. So long as the communists continued to fight, the U.S. would lose. Its military capability did not reduce the communist north and their southern fighters to the state of the Wehrmacht in 1945. The regime the U.S. tried to invent and protect had no moral interest in liberal democracy.

The problem in Vietnam was the incongruity of its strategic and moral aspects. The strategy called for the defeat of the enemy army and a transformation of Vietnamese society. Somewhere in there was the automatic opposition to the spread of communism, but absent from that was an evaluation of whether this was the right place to fight world communism and whether we had the military force to compel moral change. Communism was spreading elsewhere, so why choose Vietnam as the place to fight?

The U.S. had a military reason to fight the Japanese in the Pacific. But in Vietnam, the military reason, the political reason, the moral principles constantly churned. U.S. strategy was to attrite the North Vietnamese military, cause their public to grow war-weary and impose U.S. will. The U.S. took the attrition and generated its own war-weariness after seven years of fighting. The U.S. lost Vietnam, but from its perspective, the world went on. For all the death and destruction, the war didn't change much. It was the wrong war fought in the wrong place with the wrong strategy and goals. The lesson of World War II is to control how and where war is waged. In Vietnam, the enemy decided where the war began. By opposing any communist intrusion anywhere, the U.S. allowed the enemy to choose the time and place for Washington to roll out its prepackaged strategy.

Islamic extremism was a moral challenge to America, but before that, it was also a useful ally against the Soviets. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the U.S. supported and praised the resistance. The U.S. figured Soviet enemies in Afghanistan shared at least empathy with the United States. Each served the interests of the other, and the Soviets were defeated. Then came 9/11, which was the extremist declaration of war against the U.S. The U.S. ideal of controlling war initiation was lost, in the same way it was lost in Vietnam. Something had to be done. As in Vietnam, the U.S. was sucked in almost unknowingly. It needed to destroy **al-Qaida**. Having hurt but not destroyed it, it felt compelled to stay engaged. To stay engaged, a degree of offensive warfare had to be undertaken until it became necessary to create a new regime that shared liberal democratic values. In other words, another ancient society would be transformed but without World War II levels of devastation. The strategic and moral collided. Strategically, Afghanistan was vast, and no amount of force could control more than a fraction of the country. Morally, the Afghans had their own political order that didn't value liberal democracy any more than it valued Marxism.

The wars against the Soviet Union and against the Taliban had a common theme. The U.S. was offended by their moral values and formulated a national strategy based on it. At some point, the national strategy overreached as the moral ambition exceeded strategic possibilities. Not wanting to admit failure, the war went on to exhaustion.

World War II was a moral exercise. It brought the U.S. era upon the world. The moral dimension of that war became a necessary dimension of future wars, which became more frequent as the U.S. became a global power. The moral dimension was easily visible: devise not only a clear strategy for waging war but also a measure of when the war was failing. And above all, know when the strategy isn't working and avoid being trapped by falling back on the moral to avoid making hard decisions.

The world has grown used to U.S. military intervention. It condemns it and is then comforted by its condemnations. But losing wars after years of struggle – or staying in wars you are losing for moral reasons or to hide the reality – makes no sense. The U.S. has to control where and how it goes to war. Its notion of victory includes the moral transformation of ancient people who do not think they are immoral. A moral principle on terrain well known, and weapons suited for it, works. A moral principle on unfamiliar terrain and inappropriate weapons is less effective.

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