

NATIONAL SECURITY & DEFENSE

In Defense of U.S. Generalship

By MACKUBIN THOMAS OWENS | March 24, 2020 6:30 AM



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General James Mattis (left) arrives at the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on his nomination to be Commander in Chief of the Central Command in 2010. (Yuri Gripas/Reuters)

America's military leaders have a long record of success as operational commanders within the limits set by U.S. policy.

My friend Michael Walsh recently penned a [scathing article](#) in *The Epoch Times* condemning the failure of American military leadership since Korea. Michael is right on most issues, but I strongly dissent from his argument there. He argues that since Korea, and certainly since Vietnam, the United States hasn't wanted to finish the job. He continues: "Our soldiers have died because there was not a single general — not David Petraeus, not Stanley McChrystal, not James Mattis — who demanded of the president, on pain of

resignation, that we win. None of them was a general worthy of the name; instead they were tactical obsessives concerned with hitting their metrics rather than winning.

But his criticism of U.S. generals for not “ending” our recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan misses some important points. First of all, the goal of any war is established by the leadership. The uniformed military fight within the bounds established by overall strategy. The application of means in order to achieve the ends of policy. In the U.S. military provides advice, which civilian policy makers may accept or reject. The military does not have the right to insist that its advice be followed. If that advice is not accepted, the military is obligated to salute and obey. Resignation is always a possible response, but resignation is not part of the U.S. military tradition.

Walsh rightly praises such American generals as U. S. Grant and George Patton, but compares their generalship to that of such contemporary military leaders as Mattis, Petraeus, and Mattis, glosses over the fact that the policy objectives and environment of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq differed from those of the Civil War and World War II. Whether we like it or not, both World War I and World War II have been *limited* wars, in terms both of ends and of means. Both the Civil War and World War II were unlimited, not because of the military but because of civilian policy.

The Civil War did not begin as an unlimited war. Policy evolved over time. At the outset, the goal was to end the rebellion as quickly as possible. But the emergence of Robert E. Lee changed the dynamic of the war. In the spring of 1862, the military defeat of the Confederacy appeared within sight as Union forces struck deep into the heart of the South, especially in the fall of 1862. But during the next year, Lee inflicted a number of defeats on Union forces, driving them back to the outskirts of Richmond until finally turned back at Gettysburg.

Until that point, Lincoln would have been willing to return to the *status quo ante bellum* after the rebellion with the seceded states reintegrated into the Union with slavery intact. The emergence of Lee convinced Lincoln that Frederick Douglass was right: Slavery was the rebellion.” As Lincoln changed policy to attack slavery, many of his generals were War Democrats who supported ending the rebellion without challenging the institution of slavery.

Foremost among them was Major General George McClellan, the commander of the Army of the Potomac in the east. Walsh calls him a “popinjay,” but the real problem was that he did not fight the war that Lincoln wanted him to fight. Like most Democrats, McClellan adhered to the slogan “The Union as it was. The Constitution as it is.” But McClellan was not alone. Even those praised as fighters, Ulysses Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, accepted that fo-

was only later in the war that they came to see the wisdom of the attack on slavery : Union strategy.

As Samuel Huntington observes in his classic study of U.S. civil–military relations, *the State*, a similar situation occurred during World War II. Before the war, most admirals supported policies they believed to be less provocative than those favored Roosevelt. For instance, Admiral James O. Richardson, commander in chief, United States Pacific Fleet (CinCUSFlt), protested against the redeployment of what would become the U.S. Pacific Fleet from San Diego to Pearl Harbor, arguing that it would invite a Japanese attack. Roosevelt approved the move in February of 1941.

Once the war began, the uniformed military supported policies short of “unconditional surrender” by the Axis power, preferring a traditional policy of national security to “victory.” Victory was the policy of the civilian leadership, not the military, which argued that insisting on total victory would prolong the war. But ordered to pursue “unconditional surrender,” the military executed its duty in support of that policy.

But as Huntington observed, after World War II, the respective positions of civilian leadership and the uniformed military changed, coming to a head with Truman’s relief of Douglas MacArthur when the latter publicly criticized the administration’s policy of limited war in Korea. MacArthur’s concern was motivated by the possibility of a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as by the belief that an unlimited war in the Far East would weaken the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviets in Europe.

Subsequent U.S. wars were also limited. We can question the prudence of fighting Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but the fact remains that the application of military force in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan was constrained by national policy. For instance, the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented President Lyndon Johnson with viable military options that could have enabled South Vietnam to survive while avoiding the massive commitment of U.S. ground troops that began in 1965. The decision to escalate had to be considered in the context of nuclear deterrence. When Johnson was weighing options in Vietnam, the United States was only three years removed from the Cuban missile crisis.

Indeed, we cannot understand U.S. strategic decisions in Vietnam without reference to nuclear deterrence. Many policymakers had come to believe that strategy in the traditional sense was no longer possible in the nuclear age. Rather than focusing on the choice of the proper military force to achieve national goals, as strategy demands, policymakers saw Vietnam and similar situations as a need for control. The goal was to prevent a crisis from spinning out of control and leading to uncontrolled escalation, possibly to nuclear war.

Military options in Iraq and Afghanistan were also limited by political decisions. Whether limits were prudent is a matter for debate, but the U.S. military's problem was how to fight wars within the limitations set by policy. During the first Gulf War, the military developed an operational plan to march on Baghdad, but the George H. W. Bush administration decided against it for the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Walsh claims that no U.S. generals have been relieved as a result of combat failures. But both General George Casey as commander of the multi-national force in Iraq and General Ricardo Sánchez, his predecessor, were pushed out, even though, like William Westmoreland, Casey was “kicked upstairs” as Army chief of staff. Petraeus, McChrystal, and Petraeus were all successful as operational commanders within the limits set by U.S. policy. No general has been successful in any previous U.S. war.

It is interesting to note that Mattis, a tough-minded realist, was fired by President Trump as commander of U.S. Central Command not because he was failing but because he kept asking uncomfortable questions of a White House that sought to centralize decision-making. Mattis was especially vehement regarding Iran, stressing the need to examine what Iran was capable of and to stir up mischief in a volatile region of the world.

Let me stipulate that U.S. policy regarding Afghanistan in particular has been characterized by hubris, the belief that we can change a primitive tribal culture into a liberal democracy. As an antidote, one should read Bing West's *One Million Steps* and Winston Churchill's *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War* (1897).

But while “nation-building” should not be the goal of American foreign policy, if the United States is going to use force, it must think things through to the end. As Carl von Clausewitz, “philosopher of war,” observed, “no one starts a war — or rather, no one in his sense — without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by the war and how he is to conduct it.” Thinking about the desired end state is inseparable from the use of force. War for political goals is merely an act of wanton destruction.

Of course, one response to the American failure to achieve our goals in Iraq and Afghanistan has been the comfortable idea that the United States can simply avoid the use of military force; but this is a chimera. Whether we like it or not, the likelihood of war remains beyond the control of political leaders who would prefer to avoid the use of force. Political leaders will always face the need to employ force in defense of American interests, and part of that decision is how to achieve a favorable political end. And again, whether we like it or not, the U.S. military will have to convert military success to political success.





MACKUBIN THOMAS OWENS is senior national security fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) in Philadelphia, editing its journal *Orbis* from 2008 to 2020. A Marine Corps infantry veteran of the Vietnam War, he was a professor of national-security affairs at the U.S. Naval War College from 1987 to 2015. He is the author of ***US CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS AFTER 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain***.

