

Why We Seek War: America as a Reluctant Warrior

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Most Americans see their nation as essentially peace-loving, a reluctant warrior that fights only when fanatical enemies force it to. But measured by its actions rather than its self-image, the United States is a warrior nation more than any other major modern power is. Since 1898, it has entered 10 conflicts most people recognize as wars, and only twice—in World War II and the recent Afghanistan war—directly in response to major attacks on its people or forces.

In other cases, provocations—some delivered, some received, some grossly exaggerated (as with the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incidents)—preceded war, but the U.S. initiated full-scale action.

Hundreds of other military actions have gone forward without the “war” moniker, especially in the Caribbean and Central America, and often at great cost, as with the blast that killed 241 Marines in Beirut in 1983 amid Lebanon’s civil war and the 2003 occupation of Iraq after President George W. Bush declared the fighting over.

And except in the world wars, America’s foes have been vastly inferior militarily, economically, and in other ways—hardly bullies poised to take over the world, though often linked to such bullies in reality or in Americans’ imagination.

The reluctant warrior has been busy, able to overcome its reluctance. Presidents often invoke that reluctance. As American intervention in Vietnam escalated, President Johnson insisted that “we seek no wider war”—presumably forced on him by the enemy. President Bush insisted that it was up to Saddam Hussein, not him, whether war occurred in 2003—a disingenuous stance, some observers complained, given his posture as determined leader, America’s power, and his claim that events were moved by “the hand of a just and faithful God,” in which case no one was in control.

But that posture makes sense in one way: only by seeing themselves as reluctant warriors can Americans enjoy war’s secret thrills and benefits.

Few Americans love war in some bloodthirsty way. Even, perhaps especially, veterans of war have long offered somber or angry reflections on war, and few have seen a providential God at work in war — presidential God talk is largely for home-front consumption. But Americans yearn for what war presumably brings if not for war itself—the power and pride it may yield or the internal cohesion it presumably brings.

For a people who abhor war, Americans use the word with remarkable promiscuity. One can regard the abhorrence as sincere while still seeing a displaced embrace of war at work.

President Lyndon Johnson declared wars on so many things—poverty, disease, crime, the Communist Vietnamese—that it became hard to keep them straight. Nixon declared wars on cancer, “smut,” and domestic “enemies,” and every president from Reagan on has declared “war on drugs.”

Flush with success in the first Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush sought to analogize his domestic programs to the war against Iraq (“We can bring the same courage and sense of common purpose to the economy that we brought to Desert Storm”). Others—activists, lobbyists, members of Congress, key officials—have declared war on AIDS, breast cancer, trade deficits, abortion, smoking, illiteracy, and other problems. When not actually at war—and sometimes even when we are—we are usually at war metaphorically.

Yet the familiar suspicion that presidents indulge in war-making for political gain fails to explain adequately the recurrent resort to war. As any president can readily see, over the past century war has badly served presidents’ long-term political interests, whatever momentary advantage it offered.

War has contributed nothing to forestall the political downfall of very president who has seriously engaged in it, with the exception of FDR, who had the good fortune in political terms to die before World War II ended and to have presided over a war so gargantuan as to depart from the American norm.

Wilson’s Democrats went out of power after World War I, Truman’s presidency suffered badly in the Korean War, Johnson’s and Nixon’s presidencies collapsed amid the Vietnam War, and the first Gulf War gave George Bush no lasting political traction, just as none accrued to Clinton’s from the Kosovo War; in every case, the opposing political party retook the White House amid or after the war.

If presidents have exercised “wag the dog” reflexes, they have done so at their own peril. The roots of American war-making go far beyond presidential calculation (or miscalculation). They lie in America’s global ambitions and the threats that others pose, but also in a political culture which makes war the nation’s primary imaginative framework.

How have Americans reconciled their self-image as pacific with their embrace of so much that pertains to war? Success in avoiding war’s destruction has helped. War has occurred far from their shores through ever-advancing technologies of antiseptic cleanliness, as least for Americans, and recently with welcome brevity in Gulf War I.

Even in World War II, the death by accident, disease, and combat of 400,000 American service personnel paled in comparison to what other major combatants experienced. Resistance to such losses has been one way Americans express their reluctance to go to war—and their insistence that others bear its cost.

However slowly, World War II keeps receding in national consciousness, and all the wars that followed have in varying degrees left a sour aftertaste. To analogize to the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the two Gulf Wars, the Afghan war, or the amorphous “war on terrorism” is a tough sell.

The storehouse of national imagination that is war now features empty shelves and troublesome products. That the “war on terrorism” will re-stock it seems doubtful.

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