

End Forever Wars by Winning Recurrent Ones

By [Eric Rozenman](#) (September 2023)



The Ypres Salient at Night, Paul Nash, 1918

Elbridge Colby says Americans are tired of “forever wars.” Colby, a deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Trump administration, was described by *Politico* in an April [feature](#) as “the intellectual leader and rising star of an insurgent wing in the Republican Party rebelling against decades of dominant interventionist and Reaganite thinking.”

He himself notes in an [interview](#) with *UnHerd*, that a plurality

(when not a majority) of Americans have told pollsters they would like to see less U.S. military involvement around the globe.

This attitude, inescapable given the human, economic and social costs of war, rests on a misunderstanding. One that sees war as an aberration, an eruption of violence disturbing the otherwise normal equilibrium of peace. In truth, war and peace are alternating stages in the endless cycle of human, especially inter-state, conflict and cooperation.

Glance at U.S. history. From the colonial French and Indian War (part of Europe's Seven Years War, 1756 – 1763) and Revolution through the War of 1812, U.S.-Mexican War, Civil War, Spanish American War, World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf Wars I and II (1991 and 2003 – 2011, respectively) and Afghanistan (2001 – 2021). Every other generation, if not every generation, will fight its war.

Geoffrey Perret observed most of that pattern in his 1989 work, *A Country Made by War: From the Revolution to Vietnam, The Story of America's Rise to Power*. That is, a country in which most of its citizens, most of the time, lived in peace and usually did not seek foreign conquest, was formed and in some fundamental ways sustained through and by warfare.

The United States hardly differs from England, France, Russia, China or other nations in history's alteration of tranquility and belligerency. Where America does differ is that it did not fight, usually, to colonize, to make foreigners Americans. That is, it did not go for empire. U.S. treatment of the Philippines, for example, not to mention post-surrender Japan and Germany, epitomizes this atypical behavior.

What Americans may be tired of are prolonged wars that don't end in victory. These are conflicts in which Washington's elected officials and Defense and State Department leaders, plus their corporate, think tank, and academic consultants

mult “exit strategies” rather than how to secure U.S. national interests by actually winning. At the other end of the spectrum from exit strategies are the Civil War and World Wars I and II. The Northern states were heavily committed in the former, nearly the entire country mobilizing or mobilized in the latter two. The goal was total military defeat of the enemy, and this was achieved in four years or less. Fortunately for Lincoln and the Union during the Civil War, Gen. William T. Sherman’s victory at Atlanta just before the 1864 election secured the political support to maintain that mobilization. Failure, or its apparent likelihood, energized “peace camps” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A Draw is a Loss

Inconclusive, apparently “endless wars” include Korea, where active fighting raged from 1950 through 1953, halting with the enemy in control of half the country. More than 1.7 million American troops cycled through that desolated landscape. Approximately 327,000 remained when the truce took effect dividing the Korean peninsula and people into two separate countries. Approximately 28,500 GIs still are stationed in South Korea to deter a second invasion of the now prosperous, democratic South by the Kim-dynasty led police state of the communist North.

There also was Vietnam, 1954 – 1975. U.S. forces supporting South Vietnam against the communist North reached 543,000 in 1969. Unavailing military action (Washington and Saigon tacitly agreed to let the Soviet-supported North and its surrogate Viet Cong wage land warfare in the South secure from the same at home) and widespread anti-war protests led President Lyndon Johnson not to seek reelection in 1968. His successor, Richard Nixon, began “Vietnamization” of the war. American withdrawal followed and collapse of the Saigon government—its 800,000-plus military deprived by Congress in

1973 of future U.S. supplies and air cover—came in 1975.

Lesser, but nevertheless bloody, expensive and inconclusive American military commitments were made in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, American involvement resumed in 2003 with the Second Gulf War and “global war against terrorism.” It peaked at 170,000 troops in 2007 before declining to the present 2,500 who remain to suppress terrorists of the Islamic State while being targeted by Iranian-backed groups. Saddam Hussein overthrown, Washington handed Iraq’s historically fragmented groups a flow chart for democracy. Beset by Tehran-supported militia and politicians and clerics, its disparate ethnic and religious groups at odds, optimistic U.S. plans have gone unimplemented.

U.S. forces landed in Afghanistan in 2001 in pursuit of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorists who carried out the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington, D.C. and western Pennsylvania. They also ousted the Taliban government that had harbored al-Qaeda. The total topped 100,000 in 2011, declining to 3,000 in 2021 before the Biden administration’s hasty final withdrawal ensured the Taliban’s rapid return to power. With the medieval mullahs back in Kabul, al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorists renewed their own presence, according to news reports.

So, it was not surprising that a 2022 poll by the Concerned Veterans of America and You.gov that Colby cited “seemed to indicate a majority of Americans are tired of the wars the U.S. has been involved with in the Middle East and are not eager to get into any new wars. In their poll, 44 percent had an unfavorable opinion of how Biden has approached the war in Ukraine. About a third had a favorable opinion.”

On the question, “‘Do you support or oppose the United States military becoming directly involved in combat in the Russia-Ukraine war?’ 47 percent opposed the U.S. taking military action in that country ... Just about a quarter of poll

participants supported direct U.S. military involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war.” The survey also reported that 40 percent thought America’s global military presence should be reduced, with 31 percent believing it is fine as is. “Only 12 percent wanted to see the U.S.’s military engagement increase [around the world](#).”

Colby is a co-founder of the Marathon Initiative to bring U.S. strategic and defense planning into the post-war-on-terrorism 21st century of renewed great power conflicts. He is hardly an isolationist. He argues in favor of less attention and resources devoted to Ukraine’s fight against Russia and more, much more much faster, to deter and, if deterrence fails, to prevail in war with China over Taiwan. He notes Chinese leader Xi Jinping has told his military to be ready to win such a war in 2027.

America’s Indispensable Role

So, rather than inveigh generally against “endless wars,” a more useful paradigm for Americans—citizens, taxpayers, soldiers and their leaders—probably would be to recognize the historic norm of recurrent conflict. And once recognized, to come to grips finally with the United States’ place in the world, the nature of their own freedom and prosperity, and the most dangerous threat to that liberty and well-being today. That is, to deal realistically—not always the same as being a foreign policy “realist”—with achieving American national interests.

Public opposition by Generation X and Millennials to endless wars, quite sensible on the face of it, echoes rejection by many in the preceding Baby Boomer cohort of the supposed role of America as “the world’s policeman.” No doubt Washington stepped into quagmires in attempting to decide peripheral, mostly local conflicts in post-World War II, post-colonial

Africa, Asia and Latin America. But such misguided or unnecessary involvements—in the Congo in the early 1960s, the Dominican Republic a few years later, for example—don't cancel a broader truth: If not the world's policeman, the United States has been, since 1945, freedom's bodyguard.

Imagine the world in 1989, when Ronald Reagan's accurately-described evil empire of the Soviet Union and its satellites collapsed, had America not succeeded, powerfully, a Great Britain crippled by the human losses and economic costs of World Wars I and II. Until Nazi Germany marched into Poland in 1939, triggering the Second World War, Britain had led Western countries in maintaining not only freedom of the seas and the free flow of goods, people and ideas that went with it, but what there was of a rules-based international order. By the end of the war, only the United States could bear that burden.

U.S.-led containment of the Soviet Union and its puppets meant de facto World War III, the 40-year Cold War, with its related hot conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. America maintained a large military and defense-industrial base supported by at times as much as nine percent of the gross national product (the current figure is around 3.5 percent, though of a much larger GDP) and a military draft potentially affecting nearly all young adult males (replaced in 1973 by the better trained but smaller and more costly all-volunteer force).

Washington and its network of allies successfully "contained" the Soviet Union and its satellites by economic, cultural, ideological and military means. For four decades the Cold War seemed endless if perhaps safely frozen most of the time. Nevertheless, nuclear Armageddon always loomed in the background—and in the foreground during the 13 days of the Cuban missile crisis in October, 1962. But this endless conflict did end, with Soviet collapse. From the rubble of the neo-Russian empire, which justified itself with Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, emerged dozens of independent, often free or semi-free, nations.

Had the United States not led NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, from 1949 on, the Cold War might have ended differently. The Kremlin might have stood astride not only Eastern but also Western Europe. After all, Moscow already had occupied and fortified East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, having previously swallowed Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Large communist parties in Italy and France looked to Moscow and communist forces fought a civil war in Greece. The post-World War II forecast was anything but sunny. Post-colonial Africa and Asia seemed up for grabs. Latin America (as always) was restive. Liberty's environs might well have diminished to fortress North America had not the United States promulgated and applied the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan.

Hence too the formation of NATO. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was intended, as its first general-secretary, Lord Ismay put it, to "keep the Americans in, the Soviets out and the Germans down." It thereby prevented a large, strong, anti-democratic power, Soviet Russia—functionally a militaristic successor to Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany and Adolf Hitler's Third Reich—from controlling Europe. This was an apparent necessity and in the U.S. national interest, since as historian Brendan Simms has asserted, from the 1500s on whoever dominated Europe could dominate the world. The rise of communist China as a peer rival to the United States and expansion of Asia-Pacific economic growth may have shifted the global center of gravity to Asia. If so, it has not lessened American responsibilities.

Guarantor, not policeman

So, since 1945 the United States has served not so much as the world's policeman, not as a participant in if not initiator of forever wars, but rather, as freedom's guarantor. The bodyguard of liberty—its own and often that of its allies.

It's been most successful when deterring war, but also essentially obligated to act powerfully and victoriously when deterrence fails.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the unexpectedly difficult war there has weakened it. Iran and North Korea, fundamentally and obsessively hostile to the United States do not, yet, threaten this country's survival. They do not, yet, threaten freedom in the world much beyond their borders. But China is something else.

"Let's get to the nub of the matter," Colby says, "which is: we don't have time. It's the assessment of the U.S. intelligence community that Xi Jinping has ordered the Chinese military to be ready for a successful attack on Taiwan by 2027. It's not a prediction, but that's about as much warning as you can expect in the tough world of international politics. So, we don't have time. That's four years away – in defense planning terms, that's yesterday."

To bolster deterrence, Colby advocates Washington shift resources from Ukraine to Taiwan. He points out that the illusory post-Cold War "peace dividend" and shrinkage of inflation-adjusted military budgets and consolidation and contraction of the defense-industrial base have undermined U.S. preparedness. Unless the United States gets it act together quickly, Colby warns, war with a peer or near-peer enemy like China might be the first such major conflict the United States has ever lost. Such a defeat would not be suffered by "the world's policeman" alone but by free people everywhere.

The true face of Communist Party-led China is no secret, corporate America's long search for profits in and from the great Chinese market notwithstanding. From the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre—tanks literally crushing student demonstrators—to the current genocide against Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, from abrogation of the "two-systems, one

country” arrangement for quasi-democratic Hong Kong and systematic imprisonment of dissidents, to militarization of artificially expanded reefs in international waters and spy balloons over the United States, Beijing can be recognized by its deeds. And it has its eye on America.

Outgoing Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. John Hyten, said in 2021 that the pace at which China’s military is developing capabilities is “stunning” while U.S. development suffers from “brutal bureaucracy.” According to CNN, Hyten warned that the hypersonic and nuclear weapons China is building are only partially to do with Taiwan. Rather, they are “meant for the United States of America. ... We have to plan for that, and we have to be ready for that, and that’s the position they’re putting us in with the [weapons they’re building](#).”

Republican presidential nominee hopeful Nikki Haley, former U.N. ambassador and former governor of South Carolina, seconded Hyten and Colby in a June 27 *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed. “The Communist Party is preparing China for war. Xi Jinping has said it. America has to stop wasting time.”

Will it? Can it?

During the first half of the Cold War, Social Security outlays were minimal and Medicare and Medicaid payments did not exist. Now, along with interest on the huge and growing national debt, they choke significant military budget increases.

Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) slammed Biden administration defense budgets this March: “For the third year in a row, he has requested military spending that does not even keep up with inflation. On the other hand, China has increased its military investment every year for the past 20 years. This month, the Chinese Communist Party announced a 7.2 percent increase in its military budget—about six times the rate of Biden’s proposal. That increase is probably an understatement

of China's [true spending](#)." That Mississippi would benefit from increased naval shipbuilding hardly invalidates Wicker's observation.

Not only expansion of social spending inhibits the military renewal needed to deter China. The nature of U.S. society also has changed, not only from President Harry S. Truman's Korean War budgets but also Reagan's when the United States essentially outspent and out modernized its military beyond the Soviet Union's ability to keep pace. America's younger generations tell pollsters that they think less of patriotism [than their predecessors](#); the public seems distracted by omnipresent entertainment, from Tik Tok (a Chinese produced addiction China's rulers prohibit domestically) and Instagram to Netflix and Twitter (now rebranded as "X"). Voters look politically polarized, in part by social and news media. It may be more difficult to rally this United States around its flag.

And implicit analogies with previous wars, including World War II, Vietnam and Afghanistan, may mislead. None of those were fought on U.S. soil. Homeland devastation and civilian casualties were virtually nonexistent. War with China, which might include cyber-attacks on the electric grid and water systems, or manmade chemical and biological warfare a la the Covid-19 Chinese lab leak hypothesis, for example, could produce conditions not seen in this country since Sherman's forces laid waste to large swaths of Georgia and South Carolina.

Forever wars are not the issue. Deterring, or if necessary, winning the next one is. The challenge appears great. Time seems short. Will the United States find the leaders, and followers, to meet it?

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