

LOSING THE WAR, LOSING THE PEACE

Tassos Symeonides
(Academic Adviser, RIEAS)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr) –
Publication date: 4 June 2017

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

Forty two years ago this past April, the United States abandoned South Vietnam in great disarray. The images of the chaotic exodus from Saigon and other parts of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975 are indelibly printed upon the collective American memory. Ever since that fateful day, “the lessons of Vietnam” have been analyzed, debated, dissected, and re-analyzed a million times.

In a narrower sense, seeking “the lessons of Vietnam” was an American effort to come to terms with the disastrous loss in Southeast Asia despite the investment of enormous war resources to this distant campaign. In broader “global” terms, however, study of the Vietnam debacle became an international debate about the efficacy, the pitfalls, and the political desirability of foreign military intervention.

Fast forward to 2017.

An increasingly unstable world is buffeted by Islamic terrorism, the Middle East cauldron, and an endless war in Afghanistan, the latter almost forgotten as it grinds on in its 16th year. Western threat perception is re-focusing on Russia and struggles to put together a common approach to the Syrian conflict and growing instability on the North African Mediterranean rim. Iran, confident in its nuclear capabilities, is flexing its muscles. In the Balkans, Turkey, and its thinly-veiled Islamic regime, looms large. The Western Balkans are again heading into ethnocidal trouble. And the European “dis-Union” is as ever divided, indecisive, and confused over what to do with irresolvable crises at home and abroad.

As in the days of Vietnam, and after years of loser military adventures to bring “democracy” to those who know next to nothing about it, policymakers, dons, and the legions of intelligence experts are again trying to find answers to the perennial question of military intervention: How can we win the peace if we cannot win the war?

In September 2016, Andrew Shaver and Joshua Madrigal published an [article](#) in *Foreign Affairs* titled “Losing in Afghanistan.” In methodical, almost brutal, fashion the authors dismantled the accepted narrative of military intervention in that distant land. Their argument is of much broader significance as it can be applied, with minor tweaks to adjust for time and place, to all recent Western attempts to influence events by the use of military force.

To those who have delved into the lessons of Vietnam “Losing in Afghanistan” carries a familiar tone. It recognizes, for example, the inherent inability of an external power to subdue insurgents who gain territorial control inside a target country. It emphasizes the seeming contradiction of the intervening power *losing control* in proportion to any *expansion* of its military commitment to intervention. And it underlines the added advantage insurgents have

when they secure outside help with logistical bases, funding, and obtaining weaponry.

With Syria presenting threats of global conflict, and with ISIL losing territory but gaining in terrorist offense Europe and elsewhere, “Losing in Afghanistan” deserves broader dissemination and recognition as a concise presentation on how *not to do things* through force of arms.

The 1999 NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia opened a can of politico-military worms that has influenced subsequent decisions to attack Iraq and Libya and continues to affect intervention thinking. In his extensive [analysis](#) of the NATO “humanitarian war” to snatch Kosovo from the Yugoslav government, Adam Roberts aptly concludes that “humanitarian operations cannot suddenly transform a political landscape full of moral complexity.” This is a key finding that continues to be ignored by those who mull over attacking third countries in defense (?) of “human rights.”

There are other major facts speaking against sending the troops into troubled states without much thought about convincing strategic imperatives.

Military intervention is expensive in both blood and treasure. Unless the intervening power possesses substantial **standing armed forces**, the budgets to back them up, and the resolve to see the operation succeed, inserting “flexible rapid deployment elements” into a growing conflict adds to uncertainty, increases violence, escalates the abuse and killing of civilians, and complicates thin political and diplomatic options that may be already beyond salvage.

As Vietnam demonstrated in the starkest possible manner, Western democracies choosing military intervention inevitably reach the point of no return because of public opinion backlash.

Military intervention, contrary to what its proponents argue, does not, and cannot, bring effective “liberation” from oppressive regimes and impose stability, let alone spark “democracy.” The hard fact to absorb for liberals and other well-meaning people, who believe swatting the bad guys out of the way solves the problem, is that dictators *do not* prepare their societies for orderly transition to a representative system. The harshest recent example is Iraq, with Libya the first runner-up.

Military intervention inures political elites to believing their own wobbly theories of what force can accomplish, often to the point of cavalier public demands aimed to muzzle any opposition trying to bring reason to the table. Tony Blair’s performance just before the invasion of Iraq, for example, was a monument of “fake news” viz. outright lying with a straight face. It highlighted the dire risks to national security born out of irresponsible and corrupt political ends and the desire for personal political aggrandizement.¹

By far, the only Western country capable of mounting sustained, long range military intervention today is the United States. The size and quality of America’s military technology arsenal, unmanned combat systems, electronic battlefield monitoring, and military tactics specifically calibrated to meet what in the past was referred to as “unorthodox ops” and “limited war” action, combine to paint US global power as having almost inexhaustible means to use force in support of national interests.

¹The British establishment eventually condemned Blair’s decision to invade Iraq but did it in typical British phlegmatic fashion by issuing an official inquiry report. Named after the inquiry chairman, John Chilcot, the [report](#) concluded that the invasion and subsequent war was based on “flawed intelligence” and that Saddam Hussein did not pose “an immediate threat.”

Yet, not even the United States can endure (and win) endless wars triggered by ill-defined strategic purposes. Beginning in 2001, US military forces went into a continuous series of distant battles which slowly sapped American power. The “war on terror” emerged as a multi-layered concept encompassing military, legal, intelligence, diplomatic, and “political persuasion” objectives. Unsurprisingly, the military part quickly claimed the lion’s share of war-on-terror expenditure which [climbed](#) rapidly to the hundreds of billions -- adding to the *trillions* of US sovereign debt.

The struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite political promises about a light at the end of a tunnel, continue to test US forces to the limit. Fielding an All-Volunteer Force (AVF), first launched in 1973 to replace the draft, the US depends on only [1.4 million](#) active frontline personnel. Considering that the Vietnam war, at its peak in 1969, demanded more than half a million troops, it is rather intuitive to make comparisons with Iraq and Afghanistan, where the intensity of battlefield operations since the 2001-03 invasions compare, and even exceed, the intensity of Vietnam combat during a much smaller time frame.² Such constant war fighting is exhausting those on the front line.³ But, as the debate on what to do in Syria heats up again, military intervention is a top option being discussed.

So far, the US and its NATO allies have maintained a carefully calibrated “conditional deployment” in Syria centered on air power and special forces advisors helping others to do the fighting. Overall, there is an understandable reluctance to expand this presence by sending in regular ground formations.⁴

Reading “Losing in Afghanistan,” but also perusing the rich bibliography on Vietnam and its expanding successor on the “war on terror,” should give ample pause to those debating the necessity to show “resolve” by staging yet another attempt at regime change. This is the time to revisit the lessons of the NATO attack on Yugoslavia. The [ruling](#) by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia exonerating Slobodan Milocevic never saw the light of publicity similar to the cataclysmic beating of the drums of war in the West in the days before bombs rained on Serbia. The story of NATO *not seeking* a UN mandate before it attacked Serbia has not been told because it would be a damning indictment of the “peacemakers” responsible for unprovoked air attacks upon civilians and infrastructure vital to the economy and everyday life. On the whole, the West’s “humanitarian” efforts to dismantle Yugoslavia is surrounded by a political-media bodyguard of lies that *no one* among the war protagonists wishes to see removed.

A similar “Yugoslav” dynamic is already at work in Syria, a country that has ceased to exist as an organized sovereign state.

Military intervention by both visible and “invisible” actors has ruined the lives of millions, has destroyed the Syrian economy, has obliterated once thriving cities, and has

²The claim that Vietnam and Iraq cannot be compared because of the radical intervening advances in military technologies and battle tactics is spurious. Iraq deteriorated into an insurgency that required “boots on the ground” and savage fighting to secure and hold territory. Afghanistan is delivering similar lessons daily. Drones, computers, advanced battlefield “imaging” and all the rest of such exotic methods cannot secure swaths of land threatened and contested by an enemy. Until the science fiction robotic war fighter becomes a reality, *real boots on the ground* will continue being central to any strategy seeking to prevail over territory threatened by an enemy.

³Multiple deployments for individual soldiers are now routine. Troops completing their tours of duty are stopped from retiring or, if they do retire, they may be recalled for added compulsory service. As a result, service personnel, including an increasing number of veterans, regularly report severe mental health problems in addition to physical fatigue and difficulties re-integrating into civilian life.

⁴Something Moscow is already doing under the semi-cover of deploying “augmented special detachments,” like combat engineers, commandos, and field military police units -- and refusing to comment on sporadic evidence of ex-Soviet forces involvement in ground fighting.

ignited an unprecedented wave of refugees threatening the stability of Europe. Syria now resembles Germany at the end of World War Two.

Those involved in the fighting now focus on how to carve Syrian territory into separate entities claiming that this is the only workable way of protecting “human and religious rights.” Again, the “humanitarian” fig leaf goes hand-in-hand with ever increasing violence, massacre, and destruction not to mention the pursuit of “geostrategic security interests” of both state and non-state actors involved in the Syrian disaster.

Despite the much maligned lessons of history, we are again working in earnest on how to promote “justified” war as the sure way of destroying what’s left of the peace.

NATO, once a collective defense organization surrounding its members only, has obtained a new mandate as a global interventionist force in breach of its founding principles. The European “dis-Union,” under mounting pressure from disenfranchised European majorities, who disagree with its efforts at building an authoritarian, globalized *imperium*, is attempting to [organize](#) a European army by order of Germany. A rational conclusion after contemplating all this is that *Realpolitik*, as savage and remorseless as ever, imposes unprecedented methods of manipulation and bamboozling of public opinion in pursuit of its objectives.

Mounting evidence that military intervention is damaging, and cause of long-term instability and humanitarian suffering, is ignored by those supporting sending the troops “to save” those who suffer. An added danger, emerging from pressures to send the military across the seas or borders, is that the powers of the executive have expanded without constitutional amendment to *ordering war initiation* without parliamentary or congressional approval.

Politicians, with very few exceptions, either ignore, or refuse to be educated about, the nature of military power. Ever since the beginning of time warriors have one purpose only: to destroy the enemy and make sure he does not rise again. Developing university curricula on “peacekeeping” and “peacemaking;” authorizing training for “humanitarian assistance missions,” and putting field commanders through seminars on how “to win hearts and minds” may have little relevance to *the warrior’s primary reason for existence* but it has been determined by opinion makers, lobbyists, government advisors, and research staffers that they provide indispensable political tools. That these tools hopelessly distort core military principles is ignored.

With no sign of an impending honest reappraisal of the use of force to settle political and social questions in troubled areas of the world, the sad conclusion is we will continue the effort to win wars by losing them and, in the process, undermine and lose the peace as well.