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The misuse of American might, and the price it pays

By Andrew J. Bacevich

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The U.S. military is like the highly skilled, gadget-toting contractor who promises to give your kitchen a nifty makeover in no time whatsoever. Here's the guy you can count on to get the job done. Just look at those references! Yet by the time he drives off months later, the kitchen's a shambles and you're stuck with a bill several times larger than the initial estimate. Turns out the job was more complicated than it seemed. But what say we take a crack at remodeling the master bath?

That pretty much summarizes the American experience with war since the end of the Cold War. By common consent, when it comes to skills and gadgets, U.S. forces are in a league of their own. Yet when it comes to finishing the job on schedule and on budget, their performance has been woeful.

Indeed, these days the United States absolves itself of any responsibility to finish wars that it starts. When we've had enough, we simply leave, pretending that when U.S. forces exit the scene, the conflict is officially over. In 2011, when the last American troops crossed from Iraq into Kuwait, President Obama proudly declared that he had made good on his campaign promise to end the Iraq war. Sometime late this year, when the U.S. terminates its combat role in Afghanistan, he will waste no time consigning that war to the past as well.

Yet the Iraq war did not end when the United States withdrew. Even with Washington striving mightily to ignore the fact, the violent ethno-sectarian struggle for Iraq triggered by the 2003 U.S.-led invasion continues. In recent days, events such as Al Qaeda's ferocious welcome-to-the-new-year assault on the cities of Fallouja and Ramadi — roughly the equivalent of a Confederate army laying siege to Gettysburg sometime during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant — have made it impossible to pretend otherwise.

Events in Afghanistan are likely to follow a similar trajectory. No serious person thinks that the war there — launched even earlier, back in 2001 — will end just because U.S. troops are finally packing up to go home. No doubt the American public will forget Afghanistan as quickly as it forgot Iraq. Yet as with Iraq war, the struggle to determine Afghanistan's fate will continue, its duration and outcome no less uncertain.

The truth is something few people in the national security establishment are willing to confront: Confusing capability with utility, the United States knows how to start wars but has seemingly forgotten how to conclude them. Yet concluding war on favorable terms — a concept formerly known as victory — is the object of the exercise. For the United States, victory has become a lost art. This unhappy verdict applies whether U.S. forces operate conventionally (employing high-tech "shock and awe" tactics) or unconventionally ("winning hearts and minds").

As a consequence, instead of promoting stability — perhaps the paramount U.S. interest not only in the Islamic world but also globally — Washington's penchant for armed intervention since the end of the Cold War, and especially since 9/11, has tended to encourage just the opposite. In effect, despite spilling much blood and expending vast amounts of treasure, U.S. military exertions have played into the hands of our adversaries, misleadingly lumped together under the rubric of "terrorists."

How can we explain this yawning gap between intention and outcomes? Fundamentally, a pronounced infatuation with armed might has led senior civilian officials, regardless of party, and senior military leaders, regardless of service, to misunderstand and misapply the military instrument. Force is good for some things, preeminently for defending what is already yours. Not content to defend, however, the United States in recent decades has sought to use force to extend its influence, control and values.

In a world divided between haves and have-nots, between postmodern and pre-modern, and between those for whom God is dead and those for whom God remains omnipresent, expecting coercion to produce reconciliation, acceptance or submission represents the height of folly. So force employed by the United States in faraway places serves mostly to inflame further resistance, a statement that is true whether we're talking about putting "boots on the ground" or raining down Hellfire missiles from the heavens.

What then is to be done? That which Washington is least capable of undertaking: Those charged with formulating policy must think anew. For starters, that means lowering expectations regarding the political effectiveness of war, which is demonstrably limited.

Take force off the metaphorical table to which policymakers regularly refer. Rather than categorizing violence as a preferred option, revive the tradition of treating it as a last resort. Then get serious about evaluating the potential for employing alternative forms of power, chiefly economic and cultural, to advance American interests. The result won't be a panacea. But it won't cost as much as open-ended war. And rather than creating new problems, this alternative approach just might solve some old ones.