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Will the 2020 Candidates End Our Pointless Wars?

We are imperially overstretched and The Blob refuses to see it. Will the next president?



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The cost of Washington's endless wars fall most heavily on those who suffer under American bombs and drones. Yet the plight of foreigners is rarely mentioned. When asked about a half million Iraqi babies killed by American economic sanctions, then-UN ambassador Madeleine Albright famously replied: "We think the price is worth it."

That was characteristic of Washington's overwhelming hubris. Members of "the Blob," as America's foreign policy elite has been called, believe they are uniquely qualified to run the world. Only they can predict the future, assess humanity's needs, develop solutions. And anyone who resists their dictates deserves his or her terrible fate.

No doubt, foreign policy sometimes presents difficult choices. For instance, in World War II, the U.S. backed tyrannical Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union against monstrous Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. During the Cold War, Washington allied with a variety of authoritarian regimes.

There was a logic to such decisions. However, those choices also left many policymakers with moral qualms. Such self-doubt seems to be almost completely absent

from the Blob today. Who among advocates of the Iraq War have acknowledged the horrors they loosed upon the people of Iraq and its surrounding nations? Most resist taking any responsibility.

First, they simply deny that America is at war. President Barack Obama tried to avoid invoking the War Powers Act in Libya by arguing that the conflict did not qualify since Americans weren't doing the shooting. However, Defense Secretary Bob Gates admitted that the Libyans being targeted probably thought Washington was at war. And the consequences of that conflict were significant: violent chaos that continues to this day. Moreover, the precedent of taking out a leader who voluntarily surrendered his missile and nuclear programs could discourage future dictators from disarming.

Today some war enthusiasts deny that Americans are really fighting in the multiple conflicts in which they are engaged. Marc Thiessen, a speechwriter for President George W. Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, whose tenures were defined by the disastrous Iraq War, denounced the very concept of endless wars as a "canard." Yet casualties, though lower than before, continue with regularity in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

More importantly, the risks of much larger conflict are real. American troops in Iraq have to confront Iranian-backed militias, and a recent round of mutual retaliation risked a full-blown conflict. The Pentagon has maintained forces in Syria for potential use against—depending on who claims to be directing U.S. policy—the Islamic State, and, without legal authority, the Damascus government, Iran, Turkey, and even Moscow. American and Russian troops recently confronted each other over Syrian oilfields that President Donald Trump ordered seized—illegally. The potential for a much broader conflict remains serious.

Second, Washington's permanent War Party dismisses the harm their wars have caused. After the Obama administration headed to Libya and joined Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen, Samantha Power, perhaps the most visible advocate of supposedly humanitarian war-making, complained that Americans were discouraged by the Iraqi imbroglio: "I think there is too much of, 'Oh, look, this is what intervention has wrought'...one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons."

The last two decades of war have had catastrophic consequences. The official costs are high enough, with the Pentagon having spent \$1.55 trillion in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to the Congressional Research Service. A few billion dollars have gone into the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria. Over \$113 billion more has been spent on reconstruction in Afghanistan alone, though with little success, according to multiple reports from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

And these figures dramatically underestimate the total financial cost. Noted Brown University's Watson Institute: "Through Fiscal Year 2020, the United States federal government has spent or obligated \$6.4 trillion dollars on the wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. This figure includes: direct Congressional war appropriations; war-related increases to the Pentagon base budget; veterans care and disability; increases in the homeland security budget; interest payments on direct war borrowing; foreign assistance spending; and estimated future obligations for veterans' care." Not included are macroeconomic costs due to the massive misallocation of valuable resources.

More important has been the human cost. CRS reported about 7,000 dead and 53,000 wounded among U.S. service personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq. The split by conflict was 38 percent/62 percent, respectively. Nearly 400 American military members have died elsewhere since 9/11. A million or more—the latest available figures are years out of date—disability claims have been filed by U.S. personnel. Suicide rates among the

2.7 million who have served in either Afghanistan or Iran are higher than among the civilian population.

Also significant are casualties among U.S. contractors: 3,400 dead and 39,000 wounded. However, the Pentagon's figures may be incomplete: the Watson Institute, with its Cost of War Project, figures the number of contractor deaths to be more than 8,000, higher than the number of dead uniformed personnel. Reliance on contractors may be controversial, but they essentially represent the U.S. government. The death of a contractor in Iraq triggered Washington's strike on an Iranian-backed militia, which almost sparked war between Tehran and Washington. Several hundred allied military personnel also have died, along with an estimated 110,000 local military and police.

Worse has been the civilian toll in those nations that Washington purports to be saving. American policymakers rarely speak of this cost. After all, they believe "the price is worth it," to quote Albright. As of November, figured the Watson Institute, 335,000 civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen had died in conflicts featuring U.S. military operations. Unfortunately, these numbers are low, perhaps dramatically so.

The Iraq Body Count has documented between 184,868 and 207,759 deaths in Iraq, but many killings in such a conflict go unreported. IBC suggested doubling its estimate to get a more accurate figure. Even that may be too few. A couple respected though contested surveys figure civilian deaths could top a million. The University of Michigan's Juan Cole defended the methodology: "I believe very large numbers of Iraqi families quietly bury their dead without telling the government of all people anything about it. Another large number of those killed is dumped in the Tigris river by their killers. ...Not to mention that for substantial periods of time since 2003 it has been dangerous in about half the country just to move around, much less to move around with dead bodies."

Nor do casualties stop there. On top of those killed directly, noted the Watson Institute, "War deaths from malnutrition, and a damaged health system and environment likely far outnumber deaths from combat." For instance, in Yemen, the number of civilian dead due to famine, 85,000 by one count, vastly exceeds the number killed in the conflict, perhaps 12,000. A million people are thought to have suffered from cholera, resulting from the destruction of the country's commercial, health, social, and transportation infrastructure. Most of the damage has come from airstrikes by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which are backed by U.S. intelligence, munitions, and formerly refueling.

Explained the Watson Institute: "People living in the war zones have been killed in their homes, in markets, and on roadways. They have been killed by bombs, bullets, fire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and drones. Civilians die at checkpoints, as they are run off the road by military vehicles, when they step on a mine or cluster bomb, as they collect wood or tend to their fields, and when they are kidnapped and executed for purposes of revenge or intimidation. They are killed by the United States, by its allies, and by insurgents and sectarians in the civil wars spawned by the invasions."

War is not always avoidable. But since the end of the Cold War, every conflict started by the U.S. has been one of choice. America only ever had a serious interest at stake in Afghanistan—to destroy al-Qaeda after 9/11 and punish the Taliban government. In that case, however, the U.S. mission should have ended by early 2002, not carried on for nearly two decades.

American policymakers should stop treating war as a first resort, a panacea for international conflict and tragedy. Washington is filled with ivory tower warriors. Their

supposedly best intentions have spread chaos and death around the globe. What think this year's presidential candidates?

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