
The 2012 George C. Marshall Lecture in Military History

The Revisionist Imperative: Rethinking Twentieth Century Wars*



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Abstract

What students want (and citizens deserve) is an account of the past that illuminates the present. The conventional narrative of the twentieth century, exalting World War II as an episode in which Anglo-American good triumphs over Nazi evil, is no longer adequate to that purpose. Today, the “lessons” that narrative teaches mislead rather than guide. The moment is ripe for revisionism. Historians need to respond to the challenge, replacing the familiar and morally reassuring story of a Short Twentieth Century with a less familiar and morally ambiguous story of a still unfolding Long Twentieth Century.

Not long before his untimely death the historian Tony Judt observed that “For many American commentators and policymakers the message of the twentieth century is that war works.”¹ Judt might have gone even further. Well beyond the circle of experts and insiders, many ordinary Americans even today at least tacitly share that view.

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1. Tony Judt, “What Have We Learned, If Anything?” *New York Review of Books*, 1 May 2008.

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This reading of the twentieth century has had profound implications for U.S. policy in the twenty-first century. With the possible exception of Israel, the United States today is the only advanced democracy in which belief in war's efficacy continues to enjoy widespread acceptance. Others—the citizens of Great Britain and France, of Germany and Japan—took from the twentieth century a different lesson: War devastates. It impoverishes. It coarsens. Even when seemingly necessary or justified, it entails brutality, barbarism, and the killing of innocents. To choose war is to leap into the dark, entrusting the nation's fate to forces beyond human control.

Americans persist in believing otherwise. That belief manifests itself in a number of ways, not least in a pronounced willingness to invest in, maintain, and employ military power. (The belief that war works has not made soldiering per se a popular vocation; Americans prefer war as a spectator sport rather than as a participatory one).

Why do Americans cling to a belief in war that other advanced nations have long since abandoned? The simple answer is that for a time, war *did* work or seemed to anyway—at least for the United States, even if not for others. After all, the vast conflagration we remember not altogether appropriately as “World War II” vaulted the United States to the very summit of global power. The onset of that conflict found Americans still struggling to cope with a decade-long economic crisis. Recall that the unemployment rate in 1939 was several percentage points above the highest point it has reached during our own Great Recession.

Notwithstanding the palliative effects of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the long-term viability of liberal democratic capitalism during the 1930s remained an open question. Other ideological claimants, on the far left and far right, were advancing a strong case that *they* defined the future.

By 1945, when the conflict ended, almost all of that had changed. At home, war restored economic prosperity and set the stage for a decades-long boom. At least as important, the war reinvigorated confidence in American institutions. The challenges of war management had prodded Washington to get its act together. Prodigious feats of production in places like Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh had enabled the United States to raise vast air, sea, and land forces, which it then employed on a global scale with considerable effectiveness.

The American way of war implied a remarkable knack for doing big things in a big way, sweeping aside whatever obstacles might stand in the way. The bumptious wartime motto of the army corps of engineers testified to this approach: “The difficult we do at once; the impossible takes a little longer.” This wasn't empty bluster: the Manhattan Project, culminating in the development of the atomic bomb, testified to American technical prowess, but also implied broader claims of superiority. The United States was once again a country that did things—really big things—that no other country could do.

Meanwhile, with the gross domestic product doubling in barely half a decade, the American way of life once again signified levels of material abundance that made its citizens the envy of the world. Thanks in considerable part to war, in other words, the United States had become an economic, technological, political, military, and cultural juggernaut without peer.

This was the America into which I was born in 1947. I breathed in the war's vapors, which lingered long after the war itself had ended. Both of my parents had served, my father a signalman on a destroyer escort in the Atlantic, my mother an army nurse in the Pacific. For them, as for countless others, the war shaped perceptions of past and present. It shaped as well their expectations for the future and their understanding of the dangers and opportunities that lay ahead.

How well I remember as a very young boy watching *Victory at Sea* on television, with that stirring score by Richard Rodgers, the documentary series narrated by Leonard Graves, who as the theme music faded began each episode by announcing in his deep baritone, "And now. . ."

Here was history: gripping, heroic, immediate, and filled with high drama. Here too was the cornerstone of a grand narrative, constructed around the momentous events of 1939–1945, with special emphasis on those in which the United States had played a notable hand. I couldn't get enough of it.

The history I absorbed then and carried into adulthood—the story that really mattered—divided neatly into three distinctive chapters. The tale commenced with a prelude recounting the events of a *prewar* era, a period of fecklessness and folly, even if for a youngster the details tended to be a bit vague. It concluded with what Americans were calling the *postwar* era, unfolding in the war's shadow, its course to be determined by how well the nation had absorbed the war's self-evident lessons. But constituting the heart of the story was the war itself: a slumbering America brutally awakened, rising up in righteous anger, smiting evildoers, and thereby saving the world. One might say that the account I imbibed adhered closely to Winston Churchill's, albeit shorn of any British accent.

Thanks in no small part to Churchill (though not him alone), the war became in Judt's words "a moral memory palace," a source of compelling, instantly recognizable parables.² Compressed into just a word or two—Munich, Pearl Harbor, Normandy, Auschwitz, Yalta, Hiroshima—each parable expressed permanent, self-contained, and universally valid truths. Here was instruction that demanded careful attention.

With millions of others I accepted this instruction as unquestioningly as I accepted the proposition that major league baseball should consist of two leagues with eight teams each, none of them situated in cities west of the Missouri River.

In the decades since, of course, baseball has changed dramatically—and not necessarily for the better, one might add. Meanwhile, our commonplace understanding of World War II has remained largely fixed. So too has the historical narrative within which that conflict occupies so prominent a place.

I submit that this poses a problem. For history to serve more than an ornamental function, it must speak to the present. The version of past formed by World War II and perpetuated since—the version persuading Americans that war works—has increasingly little to say. Yet even as the utility of that account dissipates, its grip on the American collective consciousness persists. The times,

2. Ibid.

therefore, are ripe for revisionism. Replacing the canonical account of the twentieth century with something more germane to actually existing circumstances prevailing in the twenty-first century has become an imperative.

And that requires rethinking the role of war in contemporary history. In any such revisionist project, military historians should play a prominent part. Let me emphasize two preliminary points as strongly as I can.

First, when I speak of history I am not referring to the ongoing scholarly conversation promoted by organizations such as the American Historical Association, a conversation that only obliquely and intermittently affects our civic life. I refer instead to history as a widely shared and deeply internalized understanding of the past, fashioned less by academics than by politicians and purveyors of popular culture—an interpretation shaped in Washington and Hollywood rather than in Cambridge or Berkeley.

Second, I want to acknowledge that revisionism can be a morally hazardous undertaking. To overturn received wisdom is to create opportunities for mischief makers as well as for truth seekers. When the subject is World War II, the opportunities to make mischief are legion.

Yet the clout wielded by the Washington-Hollywood Axis of Illusions should not deter historians from accepting the revisionist challenge. Nor should the prospect of sharing a dais with someone (like me) who, while conceding that the so-called isolationists of the 1930s got some things wrong, will insist that they also got a whole lot right. And much of what they got right deserves respectful consideration today. So if someone like Charles Beard may not merit three lusty cheers, he deserves at least one and perhaps even two.

To illustrate the possibilities of revisionist inquiry, let me advance the following broad proposition for your consideration: for citizens of the twenty-first century, the twentieth century actually has two quite different stories to tell. The first story is familiar, although imperfectly understood. The second is little known, with large implications that have gone almost entirely ignored.

Enshrined today as a story of freedom besieged, but ultimately triumphant, the familiar story began back in 1914 and continued until its (apparently) definitive conclusion in 1989. Call this the Short Twentieth Century.

The less familiar alternative recounts a story in which freedom as such has figured only intermittently. It has centered on the question of who will dominate the region that we today call the Greater Middle East. Also kicking into high gear in 1914, this story continues to unfold in the present day, with no end in sight. Call this the story of the Long Twentieth Century.

The Short Twentieth Century, geographically centered on Eurasia, pitted great powers against one another. Although alignments shifted depending on circumstance, the roster of major players remained fairly constant. That roster consisted of Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan, with the United States biding its time before eventually picking up most of the marbles.

From time to time, the Long Twentieth Century has also pitted great powers against one another. Yet that struggle has always had a second element. It has been

a contest between outsiders and insiders. Western intruders with large ambitions, preeminently Great Britain until succeeded by the United States, pursued their dreams of empire or hegemony, typically cloaked in professions of “benevolent assimilation,” uplift, or the pursuit of world peace. The beneficiaries of imperial ministrations—from Arabs in North Africa to Moros in the southern Philippines along with sundry groups in between—seldom proved grateful and frequently resisted.

The Short Twentieth Century had a moral and ideological aspect. If not especially evident at first, this became clearer over time.

Viewed in retrospect, President Woodrow Wilson’s effort to portray the cataclysm of 1914–1918 as a struggle of democracy versus militarism appears more than a little strained. The problem is not that Germany was innocent of the charge of militarism. It is, rather, that Western theories of democracy in those days left more than a little to be desired. After all, those who labored under the yoke of British, French, and American rule across large swathes of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East enjoyed precious little freedom.

Yet the advent of the Third German Reich produced a moral clarity hitherto more theoretical than real. The war against Nazi Germany was indubitably a war on behalf of liberal democracy against vile, murderous totalitarianism. Of course, sustaining that construct is easier if you survey the events of World War II with one eye covered.

The central event of the Short Twentieth Century loses some of its moral luster once you acknowledge the following:

- First, concern for the fate of European Jewry exercised no discernible influence on allied conduct of the war, allied forces failing to make any serious attempt to avert, halt, or even retard the Final Solution;
- Second, in both Europe and the Pacific, allied strategic bombing campaigns killed noncombatants indiscriminately on a scale dwarfing, say, the atrocity of 9/11;
- Third, the price of liberating western Europe included the enslavement of eastern Europeans, a direct consequence of allocating to Uncle Joe Stalin’s Red Army primary responsibility for defeating the Wehrmacht;
- Fourth, at war’s end, the victors sanctioned campaigns of ethnic cleansing on a scale not seen before or since, while offering employment to scientists, engineers, and intelligence operatives who had loyally served the Third Reich;
- Fifth, on the American home front, the war fought for freedom and democracy left intact a well-entrenched system of de facto apartheid, racial equality not numbering among Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms.

None of these disturbing facts, it need hardly be said, made any significant impact on the way World War II became enshrined in American memory. I do not recall encountering any of them while watching *Victory at Sea*.

Yet these facts matter. They remind us that if the Short American Century was *sometimes* about values, it was *always* about politics and power. The allies who joined together to defeat the Axis (a righteous cause) did not hesitate to employ means that were anything but righteous. In pursuit of that righteous cause, they simultaneously connived and jockeyed against one another for relative advantage on matters related to oil, territory, markets, and the preservation of imperial privilege.

Whether out of conscience or expediency, the onset of the postwar era soon enough prompted Americans to rethink some (but not all) of the morally dubious practices that made it necessary to sanitize the narrative of World War II.

So after 1945, liberal democracies, the United States now in the vanguard, turned on the leftwing totalitarianism that had played such a crucial role in the fight against rightwing totalitarianism. No longer a valued ally, Stalin became the new Hitler. At home meanwhile, the United States also began to amend the pronounced defects in its own approach to democratic practice. However haltingly, for example, the modern civil rights movement commenced. Both of these facilitated efforts by Cold Warriors to infuse the anti-communist crusade, successor to the anti-Axis crusade, with an ennobling moral clarity. The ensuing struggle between an American-led West and a Soviet-led East, in their view, deserved to be seen as an extension of World War II.

As with World War II, therefore, so too with the Cold War: American leaders insistently framed the contest in ideological rather than in geopolitical terms. The Free World ostensibly asked nothing more than that freedom itself should survive. This served to camouflage the real stakes: rival powers, previous wars having reduced their ranks to two, were vying for primacy in Eurasia, that long contest now reaching its penultimate chapter.

This framing device had important implications when the era of bipolarity came to its abrupt and surprising end. I don't know about you, but recalling the events that unfolded between 1978 when John Paul II became pope and 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down still makes me dizzy.

Right before our very eyes, history had seemingly handed down a conclusive verdict. The search for alternatives to liberal democratic capitalism had failed. That failure was definitive. The Short Twentieth Century was kaput. Born 1914. Died 1989. *Finis*.

During what turned out to be a very abbreviated post-Cold War era, American politicians and commentators vied with one another to devise a suitably grandiose conception of what the passing of the Short Twentieth Century signified.

Whatever the specifics, the results were sure to be very good and very long lasting. As the "sole superpower," America now stood in solitary splendor, recognized by all as the "indispensable nation," able to discern even as it simultaneously embodied "the right side of history."

My text encloses those phrases in quotes. But during the 1990s, ostensibly serious people issuing such pronouncements did not intend to be ironic. They were merely reciting what had become the conventional wisdom. As well they might. Expanding on or embroidering such themes got your books on bestseller lists, your columns in all the best newspapers, and your smiling face on the Sunday talk shows.

My favorite artifact of this era remains the *New York Times Magazine* dated 28 March 1999. The cover story excerpted *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Tom Friedman's just-released celebration of globalization-as-Americanization. The cover itself purported to illustrate "What the World Needs Now." Alongside a photograph of a clenched fist adorned with the Stars and Stripes in brilliant red, white, and blue appeared this text: "For globalism to work, America can't be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that it is."

This was the *New York Times*, mind you, not the *Weekly Standard* or the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

More or less overlooked amidst all this triumphalism was the fact that the other twentieth century—the one in which promoting freedom had never figured as a priority—continued without interruption. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the West Bank, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, the collapse of communism did not qualify as a cosmic event. In such places, the competition to dominate Eurasia had been a sideshow, not the main event. So the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 notwithstanding, the Long Twentieth Century continued apace, drawing the almighty superpower ever more deeply into what was fast becoming one helluva mess.

For those with a taste for irony try this one: 1991 was the year in which the U.S.S.R. finally gave up the ghost; it was also the year of the First Persian Gulf War. One headache went away; another was about to become a migraine.

In making the case for war against Iraq, George H. W. Bush depicted Saddam Hussein as a Hitler-like menace—neither the first nor the last time the infamous Führer would play a walk-on role in climes far removed from Germany. Indeed, Adolf Hitler has enjoyed an impressive second career as a sort of stunt-double for Middle Eastern villains. Recall that back in 1956, to justify the reckless Anglo-French-Israeli assault on Egypt, Prime Minister Anthony Eden had fingered Colonel Nasser as another Hitler. Not long ago, Lindsey Graham, the reflexively hawkish Republican senator from South Carolina, likened Libya's Muammar Gaddafi to the Nazi leader.³ More recently still, the journalist Max Boot, who has made a career out of promoting war, has discovered Hitler's spirit lurking in present-day Iran.⁴

However absurd such comparisons, the Nazi dictator's periodic guest appearances make an important point. They illustrate the persistent Western disinclination to see the struggle for the Greater Middle East on its own terms. Instead, to explain developments there, Western leaders import clichés or stock figures ripped

3. Justin Elliott, "Lindsey Graham: Gadhafi Is Like Hitler," 6 July 2011, Salon.com, http://www.salon.com/news/politics/war_room/2011/07/06/lindsey_graham_gadhafi_hitler

4. Max Boot, "The Iran Threat," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 2011.

from the more familiar and, from their perspective, more reassuring Short Twentieth Century. In doing so, they confuse themselves and us.

Alas, the elder Bush's effort to eliminate his Hitler came up short. Celebrated in its day as a great victory, Operation Desert Storm turned out to be anything but that. The First Persian Gulf War deserves to be remembered chiefly as a source of wildly inflated and pernicious illusions. More than any other event, this brief conflict persuaded Washington, now freed of constraints imposed by the Cold War, that the application of U.S. military power held the key to reordering the Greater Middle East in ways likely to serve American interests. Here, it seemed, was evidence that war still worked and worked handsomely indeed.

Flexing U.S. military muscle on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific had once made America stronger and the world a better place. Why not count on American power to achieve similar results in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia? Why not take the means that had seemingly brought the Short Twentieth Century to such a happy conclusion and apply them to the problems of the Greater Middle East?

Throughout the 1990s, neoconservatives and other jingoists vigorously promoted this view. After 9/11, George W. Bush made it his own. So in explaining what had happened on 11 September 2001 and what needed to happen next, President Bush appropriated precepts from the Short Twentieth Century. It was going to be World War II and the Cold War all over again.

"We have seen their kind before," the president said of the terrorists who had assaulted America. The occasion was an address before a joint session of Congress barely more than a week after the attack on the World Trade Center. "They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century," he continued.

By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.⁵

Lest there be any doubt of where Bush was situating himself historically, he made a point of warmly welcoming the British prime minister to the proceedings. "America has no truer friend than Great Britain," the president declared, adding that "once again, we are joined together in a great cause." The implications were clear: the partnership of Tony and George revived the tradition of Winston and Franklin and of Maggie and Ron. Good once again stood firm against evil.

From his vantage point in the great beyond, Churchill must have lit a cigar and poured himself a brandy. Imagine his gratitude to President Bush for overlooking the role that he and his countrymen had played in bollixing up the Greater Middle East in the first place.

In reality, during the Long Twentieth Century, the United States had only intermittently viewed Great Britain as a friend. "Perfidious Albion" had instead been a recurring source of rapacious tomfoolery—making a mess of things and then

5. George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress," 20 September 2001, <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/gw-bush-9-11.htm>

walking away once staying on had become inconvenient. The former British Mandate for Palestine offers one notable example of Great Britain's contributions to the Long Twentieth Century. Kashmir, the nexus of an intractable dispute between India and Pakistan, offers a second.

Even so, many gullible (or cynical) observers endorsed President Bush's interpretation. September 2001 became December 1941 all over again. Once again World War II—unwelcome or inconvenient details excluded, as always—was pressed into service as “a moral memory palace.” As the bellicose authors of a great agitprop classic published in 2004 put it, “There is no middle way for Americans: it is victory or holocaust.”⁶ And so a new crusade—preposterously dubbed World War IV in some quarters—commenced.⁷

Since then, more than a decade has elapsed. Although President Bush is gone, the war he declared continues. Once commonly referred to as the Global War on Terror (World War IV never really caught on), today we hardly know what to call the enterprise.

Bush's attempt to graft the putative rationale for war during the Short Twentieth Century onto the new wars in the Greater Middle East didn't take. His Freedom Agenda withered and died. Even so, with Bush's successor closing down some fronts, ratcheting up others, and opening up new ones in places like Pakistan, Yemen, and Libya, the conflict itself persists. It's become the Long War—a collection of nominally related “overseas contingency operations,” defined chiefly by their duration. Once begun, campaigns continue indefinitely.

What then of the American conviction, drawn from the remembered experience of the Short Twentieth Century, that “war works”? What evidence exists to suggest that this proposition retains any validity? Others may differ, but I see little to indicate that our affinity for war is making the country more powerful or more prosperous. If anything, a plethora of socio-economic indicators suggest that the reverse is true.

Whatever the United States is experiencing today, it's not a reprise of World War II. Newsmagazines may enthuse over today's Iraq and Afghanistan veterans as our “New Greatest Generation,” but they overlook a rather large distinction.⁸ In contrast to the opportunities that awaited the previous “Greatest Generation” when its members came home, the wars fought by today's veterans point toward a bleaker rather than a brighter future.

History—the version that privileges the Short Twentieth Century above all other possibilities—makes it difficult to grasp the quandary in which we find ourselves as a consequence of our penchant for using force. After all, that account instructs us that “war works” or at least ought to if we simply try hard enough.

Yet it's just possible that a more expansive and less self-congratulatory accounting of the recent past—one that treats the Long Twentieth Century with the respect

6. David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How To Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004), 7.

7. Norman Podhoretz, *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 2007).

8. Cover story, *Time*, 29 August 2011.

it deserves—could potentially provide a way out. To put it another way, we need to kick down the doors of the moral memory palace. We need to let in some fresh air.

I am not thereby suggesting that the canonical lessons of the Short Twentieth Century have lost all relevance. Far from it. Yet it's past time to restock our storehouse of policy-relevant parables. This means according to the Sykes-Picot agreement and the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, FDR's tête-à-tête with King Ibn Saud and the killing of Count Bernadotte by Zionist assassins, the Anglo-American conspiracy to depose Mohammed Mossadegh and the bizarre Suez crisis, the Iran-Contra affair and, yes, Operation Iraqi Freedom, pedagogical weight equal to that habitually accorded to Munich, Pearl Harbor, and Auschwitz.

We could do with just a bit less of the Churchill who stood defiantly alone against Hitler. We might permit a bit more of the Churchill who, seeking ways after World War I to police the Middle East on the cheap, pushed for “experimental work on gas bombs, especially mustard gas” as a way to “inflict punishment on recalcitrant natives.”⁹

Implicit in the standard American account of the Short Twentieth Century is the conviction that history is purposeful, with the vigorous deployment of U.S. power the best way to hasten history's arrival at its intended destination. A sober appreciation of the surprises, miscalculations, and disappointments permeating the Long Twentieth Century, beginning with Great Britain's cavalier decision to dismember the Ottoman Empire and running all the way to George W. Bush's ill-fated attempt to transform the Greater Middle East, should temper any such expectations. What the Long Twentieth Century teaches above all is humility.

“Ideas are not mirrors, they are weapons.” The words are George Santayana's, written back when the twentieth century was young. “[T]heir function,” he continued, “is to prepare us to meet events, as future experience may unroll them. Those ideas that disappoint us are false ideas; those to which events are true are true themselves.”¹⁰

The ideas, assumptions, and expectations embedded in the received account of the Short Twentieth Century may not be entirely false. But they are supremely inadequate to the present. As historians, our obligations to the students who pass through our classrooms include this one: to provide them with a usable past, preparing them as best we can to meet events as they unfold. Measured by that standard, military historians are falling short.

William Faulkner famously said of the past that “It's not dead. It's not even past.” As a general proposition, there's something to be said for that view. Not in this case, however. The past that Americans know is worse than dead; it's become a cause of self-inflicted wounds. As historians, we need to do better. The means to do so are readily at hand.

9. Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: The World That Made Him and the World He Made* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010), 145.

10. George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” (1913).

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