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12 Myths of 21st-Century War

Unaware of the cost of freedom and served by leaders without military expertise, Americans have started to believe whatever's comfortable

By Ralph Peters

We're in trouble. We're in danger of losing more wars. Our troops haven't forgotten how to fight. We've never had better men and women in uniform. But our leaders and many of our fellow Americans no longer grasp what war means or what it takes to win.

Thanks to those who have served in uniform, we've lived in such safety and comfort for so long that for many Americans sacrifice means little more than skipping a second trip to the buffet table.

Two trends over the past four decades contributed to our national ignorance of the cost, and necessity, of victory. First, the most privileged Americans used the Vietnam War as an excuse to break their tradition of uniformed service. Ivy League universities once produced heroes. Now they resist Reserve Officer Training Corps representation on their campuses.

Yet, our leading universities still produce a disproportionate number of U.S. political leaders. The men and women destined to lead us in wartime dismiss military service as a waste of their time and talents. Delighted to pose for campaign photos with our troops, elected officials in private disdain the military. Only one serious presidential aspirant in either party is a veteran, while another presidential hopeful pays as much for a single haircut as I took home in a month as an Army private.

Second, we've stripped in-depth U.S. history classes out of our schools. Since the 1960s, one history course after another has been cut, while the content of those remaining focuses on social issues and our alleged misdeeds. Dumbed-down textbooks minimize the wars that kept us free. As a result, ignorance of the terrible price our troops had to pay for freedom in the past creates absurd expectations about our present conflicts. When the media offer flawed or biased analyses, the public lacks the knowledge to make informed judgments.

This combination of national leadership with no military expertise and a population that hasn't been taught the cost of freedom leaves us with a government that does whatever seems expedient and a citizenry that believes whatever's comfortable. Thus, myths about war thrive.

Myth No. 1: War doesn't change anything.

This campus slogan contradicts all of human history. Over thousands of years, war has been the last resort - and all too frequently the first resort - of tribes, religions, dynasties, empires, states and demagogues driven by grievance, greed or a heartless quest for glory. No one believes that war is a good thing, but it is sometimes necessary. We need not agree in our politics or on the manner in which a given war is prosecuted, but we can't pretend that if only we laid down our arms all others would do the same.

Wars, in fact, often change everything. Who would argue that the American Revolution, our Civil War or World War II changed nothing? Would the world be better today if we had been pacifists in the face of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan?

Certainly, not all of the changes warfare has wrought through the centuries have been positive. Even a just war may generate undesirable results, such as Soviet tyranny over half of Europe after 1945. But of one thing we may be certain: a U.S. defeat in any war is a defeat not only for freedom, but for civilization. Our enemies believe that war can change the world. And they won't be deterred by bumper stickers.

Myth No. 2: Victory is impossible today.

Victory is always possible, if our nation is willing to do what it takes to win. But victory is, indeed, impossible if U.S. troops are placed under impossible restrictions, if their leaders refuse to act boldly, if every target must be approved by lawyers, and if the American people are disheartened by a constant barrage of negativity from the media. We don't need generals who pop up behind microphones to apologize for every mistake our soldiers make. We need generals who win.

And you can't win if you won't fight. We're at the start of a violent struggle that will ebb and flow for decades, yet our current generation of leaders, in and out of uniform, worries about hurting the enemy's feelings.

One of the tragedies of our involvement in Iraq is that while we did a great thing by removing Saddam Hussein, we tried to do it on the cheap. It's an iron law of warfare that those unwilling to pay the butcher's bill up front will pay it with compound interest in the end. We not only didn't want to pay that bill, but our leaders imagined that we could make friends with our

enemies even before they were fully defeated. Killing a few hundred violent actors like Moqtada al-Sadr in 2003 would have prevented thousands of subsequent American deaths and tens of thousands of Iraqi deaths. We started something our national leadership lacked the guts to finish.

Despite our missteps, victory looked a great deal less likely in the early months of 1942 than it does against our enemies today. Should we have surrendered after the fall of the Philippines? Today's opinionmakers and elected officials have lost their grip on what it takes to win. In the timeless words of Nathan Bedford Forrest, "War means fighting, and fighting means killing."

And in the words of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, "It is fatal to enter any war without the will to win it."

Myth No. 3: Insurgencies can never be defeated.

Historically, fewer than one in 20 major insurgencies succeeded. Virtually no minor ones survived. In the mid-20th century, insurgencies scored more wins than previously had been the case, but that was because the European colonial powers against which they rebelled had already decided to rid themselves of their imperial possessions. Even so, more insurgencies were defeated than not, from the Philippines to Kenya to Greece. In the entire 18th century, our war of independence was the only insurgency that defeated a major foreign power and drove it out for good.

The insurgencies we face today are, in fact, more lethal than the insurrections of the past century. We now face an international terrorist insurgency as well as local rebellions, all motivated by religious passion or ethnicity or a fatal compound of both. The good news is that in over 3,000 years of recorded history, insurgencies motivated by faith and blood overwhelmingly failed. The bad news is that they had to be put down with remorseless bloodshed.

Myth No. 4: There's no military solution; only negotiations can solve our problems.

In most cases, the reverse is true. Negotiations solve nothing until a military decision has been reached and one side recognizes a peace agreement as its only hope of survival. It would be a welcome development if negotiations fixed the problems we face in Iraq, but we're the only side interested in a negotiated solution. Every other faction - the terrorists, Sunni insurgents, Shia militias, Iran and Syria - is convinced it can win.

The only negotiations that produce lasting results are those conducted from positions of indisputable strength.

Myth No. 5: When we fight back, we only provoke our enemies.

When dealing with bullies, either in the schoolyard or in a global war, the opposite is true: if you don't fight back, you encourage your enemy to behave more viciously.

Passive resistance only works when directed against rule-of-law states, such as the core English-speaking nations. It doesn't work where silent protest is answered with a bayonet in the belly or a one-way trip to a political prison. We've allowed far too many myths about the "innate goodness of humanity" to creep up on us. Certainly, many humans would rather be good than bad. But if we're unwilling to fight the fraction of humanity that's evil, armed and determined to subjugate the rest, we'll face even grimmer conflicts.

Myth No. 6: Killing terrorists only turns them into martyrs.

It's an anomaly of today's Western world that privileged individuals feel more sympathy for dictators, mass murderers and terrorists - consider the irrational protests against Guantanamo - than they do for their victims. We were told, over and over, that killing Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, hanging Saddam Hussein or targeting the Taliban's Mullah Omar would only unite their followers. Well, we haven't yet gotten Osama or Omar, but Zarqawi's dead and forgotten by his own movement, whose members never invoke that butcher's memory. And no one is fighting to avenge Saddam. The harsh truth is that when faced with true fanatics, killing them is the only way to end their influence. Imprisoned, they galvanize protests, kidnappings, bombings and attacks that seek to free them. Want to make a terrorist a martyr? Just lock him up. Attempts to try such monsters in a court of law turn into mockeries that only provide public platforms for their hate speech, which the global media is delighted to broadcast. Dead, they're dead. And killing them is the ultimate proof that they lack divine protection. Dead terrorists don't kill.

Myth No. 7: If we fight as fiercely as our enemies, we're no better than them.

Did the bombing campaign against Germany turn us into Nazis? Did dropping atomic bombs on Japan to end the war and save hundreds of thousands of American lives, as well as millions of Japanese lives, turn us into the beasts who conducted the Bataan Death March?

The greatest immorality is for the United States to lose a war. While we seek to be as humane as the path to victory permits,

we cannot shrink from doing what it takes to win. At present, the media and influential elements of our society are obsessed with the small immoralities that are inevitable in wartime. Soldiers are human, and no matter how rigorous their training, a miniscule fraction of our troops will do vicious things and must be punished as a consequence. Not everyone in uniform will turn out to be a saint, and not every chain of command will do its job with equal effectiveness. But obsessing on tragic incidents - of which there have been remarkably few in Iraq or Afghanistan - obscures the greater moral issue: the need to defeat enemies who revel in butchering the innocent, who celebrate atrocities, and who claim their god wants blood.

Myth No. 8: The United States is more hated today than ever before.

Those who served in Europe during the Cold War remember enormous, often-violent protests against U.S. policy that dwarfed today's let's-have-fun-on-a-Sunday-afternoon rallies. Older readers recall the huge ban-the-bomb, pro-communist demonstrations of the 1950s and the vast seas of demonstrators filling the streets of Paris, Rome and Berlin to protest our commitment to Vietnam. Imagine if we'd had 24/7 news coverage of those rallies. I well remember serving in Germany in the wake of our withdrawal from Saigon, when U.S. soldiers were despised by the locals - who nonetheless were willing to take our money - and terrorists tried to assassinate U.S. generals.

The fashionable anti-Americanism of the chattering classes hasn't stopped the world from seeking one big green card. As I've traveled around the globe since 9/11, I've found that below the government-spokesman/professional-radical level, the United States remains the great dream for university graduates from Berlin to Bangalore to Bogota.

On the domestic front, we hear ludicrous claims that our country has never been so divided. Well, that leaves out our Civil War. Our historical amnesia also erases the violent protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the mass confrontations, rioting and deaths. Is today's America really more fractured than it was in 1968?

Myth No. 9: Our invasion of Iraq created our terrorist problems.

This claim rearranges the order of events, as if the attacks of 9/11 happened after Baghdad fell. Our terrorist problems have been created by the catastrophic failure of Middle Eastern civilization to compete on any front and were exacerbated by the determination of successive U.S. administrations, Democrat and Republican, to pretend that Islamist terrorism was a brief aberration. Refusing to respond to attacks, from the bombings in Beirut to Khobar Towers, from the first attack on the Twin Towers to the near-sinking of the USS Cole, we allowed our enemies to believe that we were weak and cowardly. Their unchallenged successes served as a powerful recruiting tool.

Did our mistakes on the ground in Iraq radicalize some new recruits for terror? Yes. But imagine how many more recruits there might have been and the damage they might have inflicted on our homeland had we not responded militarily in Afghanistan and then carried the fight to Iraq. Now Iraq is al-Qaeda's Vietnam, not ours.

Myth No. 10: If we just leave, the Iraqis will patch up their differences on their own.

The point may come at which we have to accept that Iraqis are so determined to destroy their own future that there's nothing more we can do. But we're not there yet, and leaving immediately would guarantee not just one massacre but a series of slaughters and the delivery of a massive victory to the forces of terrorism. We must be open-minded about practical measures, from changes in strategy to troop reductions, if that's what the developing situation warrants. But it's grossly irresponsible to claim that our presence is the primary cause of the violence in Iraq - an allegation that ignores history.

Myth No. 11: It's all Israel's fault. Or the popular Washington corollary: "The Saudis are our friends."

Israel is the Muslim world's excuse for failure, not a reason for it. Even if we didn't support Israel, Islamist extremists would blame us for countless other imagined wrongs, since they fear our freedoms and our culture even more than they do our military. All men and women of conscience must recognize the core difference between Israel and its neighbors: Israel genuinely wants to live in peace, while its genocidal neighbors want Israel erased from the map.

As for the mad belief that the Saudis are our friends, it endures only because the Saudis have spent so much money on both sides of the aisle in Washington. Saudi money continues to subsidize anti-Western extremism, to divide fragile societies, and encourage hatred between Muslims and all others. Saudi extremism has done far more damage to the Middle East than Israel ever did. The Saudis are our enemies.

Myth No. 12: The Middle East's problems are all America's fault.

Muslim extremists would like everyone to believe this, but it just isn't true. The collapse of once great Middle Eastern civilizations has been under way for more than five centuries, and the region became a backwater before the United States became a country. For the first century and a half of our national existence, our relations with the people of the Middle East were largely beneficent and protective, notwithstanding our conflict with the Barbary Pirates in North Africa. But Islamic civilization was on a downward trajectory that could not be arrested. Its social and economic structures, its values, its neglect

of education, its lack of scientific curiosity, the indolence of its ruling classes and its inability to produce a single modern state that served its people all guaranteed that, as the West's progress accelerated, the Middle East would fall ever farther behind. The Middle East has itself to blame for its problems.

None of us knows what our strategic future holds, but we have no excuse for not knowing our own past. We need to challenge inaccurate assertions about our policies, about our past and about war itself. And we need to work within our community and state education systems to return balanced, comprehensive history programs to our schools. The unprecedented wealth and power of the United States allows us to afford many things denied to human beings throughout history. But we, the people, cannot afford ignorance.

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