Despite the United States ending the war in Iraq, putting in place plans to draw down forces in Afghanistan, cutting the defense budget and asserting there will be “no more Iraqs and Afghanistans,” the odds are better than even that it will intervene militarily in some part of the world over the next decade again. Since the end of World War II, from the Korean War in 1950 to the 2003 Iraq invasion, the US has deployed more troops and intervened in more countries with more frequency than any other liberal democracy.

Scholars often debate the proximate causes of these conflicts. They range from containing the spread of communism during the Cold War to addressing the threat of terrorism after 9/11. But there are deeper underlying reasons why America has engaged in those ventures. These include a compulsion, induced by an anarchic international system, to extend and maintain power over other states; an ideological aspiration to make the world “safe” for democracy as a means of protecting the US; and a missionary impulse to determine events in other countries. The explanations have merit, yet they do not fully explain the American propensity to use force overseas. What, for example, enables those ideas that underpin America’s military interventionism to prevail over those that call for restraint?

Supporting war uncritically

The answer lies in America’s geographical location and its tremendous aggregate power. These two factors account for the frequent triumph of interventionism in US policy debates and explain the
regularity with which the US military intervenes in affairs of other countries. Location and power have shielded the US and its people from coming into direct contact with the horrendous bloodshed and destructiveness of war. Protected from the dreadful trauma of armed conflict, Americans have consequently been slow to develop revulsion toward the use of armed force as a policy instrument. Americans instead have tended to wax enthusiastic about war. Interventionism, therefore, has often overcome restraint in the American marketplace of ideas.

Compared to the citizens of other democratic states in the post-WWII era such as Britain and France, the majority of Americans tend to express favorable rather than unfavorable views about their country’s participation in foreign wars. These opinions may either change or be reaffirmed in the course of an armed conflict but the consistent finding is that prior to the dispatch of troops most Americans support rather than critically question interventions. Unchallenged, hawkish opinion makers in the US are more likely to prevail than those advocating non-intervention. This helps to explain why the US since WWII has been far more active in military interventions overseas than other major democratic states.

The argument advanced here is admittedly counterintuitive. A secure state such as the US that is well protected by geography and power should have little reason to fight all over the globe. But it can be argued that a secure society that has not been scarred by past wars, and which believes that it can attack its adversaries at low cost to itself, tends to be more willing to cast off restraint when it perceives its national interests are being threatened. Absent the stopping power of adverse memories of war — the last war on US soil was the Civil War of 1860-1865 — a more rosette perception of the utility of armed force to advance national interests tends to prevail. Conversely, war-scarred publics, carrying bitter memories of past conflicts, tend to be more hesitant about involvement in wars overseas. These publics usually have firsthand encounters with the horrors of war either as participants or as victims on the receiving end of enemy fire. Appreciating the costs and dreadfulness of war, they tend to be more cautious about supporting deployment of troops into the field.

The majority of Americans have not had such adverse experiences. When rallied, therefore, they tend to throw their support behind foreign military intervention. In fighting a conflict of necessity, such backing enables the US government to successfully prosecute a war. But the endorsement can also lead the US into quagmires that tear the society apart and undermine the American economy. To avert the latter outcomes, understanding why military interventionism tends to triumph in the US is necessary. More appropriate policies, which should move Americans to grasp the true face of war, could then be crafted to make the policy debate more open to challenging the unwise deployment of troops overseas. Once public opinion becomes more discriminating and policymakers think twice about entangling America in potentially economically wasteful wars, Washington’s involvement in counterproductive conflicts will become less likely. That outcome will not only redound to the benefit of the US, but also to the international community.

**GEOGRAPHY, NATURAL DEFENSES AND POWER**

Geography and power are crucial factors that can determine the course and outcome of war. They enable a proponent enjoying geographical advantages and wielding formidable power to overcome an adversary at comparatively low cost to itself. They further shield the proponent from the full destruction of war. Among liberal democracies, the United States enjoys such advantages and these have had a profound impact on its citizens’ attitudes toward war.

Unlike other liberal-democratic great powers such as Britain and France, the US is surrounded by imposing spaces of water. The Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific oceans have effectively buffered it from the ravages of war throughout its history. Apart from the War of 1812, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, no foreign combatant has managed to breach these geographical barriers and engage in a protracted military campaign against the US on its own territory. In addition, its northern and southern neighbors, Canada and Mexico, have relatively benign relations with the US or have never developed the military wherewithal to attack American soil. Thus due to geography, apart from those serving in the military and in conflict zones, most Americans have never come into direct and terrifying contact with an armed conflict.

Like the Americans, the British also have natural barriers that have protected their homeland relatively effectively from land assaults. The North Sea and English Channel have historically served as formidable barriers to invading forces. Still, these geographical buffers are not as difficult to bridge as the large expanse of water separating the United States from its potential adversaries. German rockets and aerial bombers penetrated British air defenses during WWII and caused extensive damage. Unlike the US, therefore, Britain has not been completely shielded from direct contact with the devastation of modern war. Still, if Britain’s geographical barriers have not completely protected it from foreign military assault, France, among the three states in this study, has fared the worst in terms of the ability of its geographical location to fend off external attack. The terrain surrounding France has not posed an effective obstacle to invading armies throughout its history. In more belligerent times, France frequently bore the brunt of war and destruction on continental Europe. In World War I, 9 percent of all buildings in France were destroyed and 7.5 million acres of fertile land were damaged by extensive bombing. In World War II, 25 percent of all buildings in France and more than 50 percent of the transportation infrastructure were destroyed by warfare. The French are consequently attuned to the travails of armed conflict, and this has profoundly shaped their attitudes toward military intervention.

While geographical circumstances help determine whether or not a country is shielded from war, material power and its ability to shape the battle and influence the outcome of war also have a bearing on the outlook of its citizens toward conflict in general and military intervention overseas. If the citizens of a powerful state believe mil-
ih on the eventual outcome of foreign wars. The political and economic costs of war in Britain and France were only a fraction of those borne by the Americans. Britain, in short, was hostile to military interventionism.

US citizens have enjoyed the benefits wrought by its vast power. Since 1900, America has had an overwhelming power advantage — measured in terms of the multiple of its total GDP and GDP per capita — over its peer competitors. In wartime, such preponderant power, which underpins its military might, has enabled the US to defeat its adversaries at a comparatively low cost to itself. Suffering fewer casualties than its enemies and often dispatching its opponents swiftly, America’s immense power and technological sophistication generate the belief that “antiseptic wars” can be fought and won. Besides, with the US ability to project power offshore, conflicts have all been fought overseas rather than at home. The American experience of war has thus generally been more about achieving low-cost victories than suffering expensive defeats. Also, as the conflicts were fought overseas, no American city has been devastated or depopulated on the scale experienced by countries such as Britain and France. The American encounter with war has therefore been more about jubilant veterans returning home from foreign conflicts rather than a psychologically traumatized public working to rebuild devastated cities and homes. Most Americans, with the exception of veterans, remain psychologically unscathed by the horrors of conflict. Optimism about and support for the participation of US forces in foreign wars have consequently been sustained.

OTHERS SEE IT DIFFERENTLY

Such American sanguinity about war stands in sharp contrast to the sentiment prevailing in France, and to some extent, Britain. France’s material power, while formidable, could not prevent the carnage visited upon the country in two world wars. Since 1945, French power has also afforded its citizens little assurance that wars could be fought cheaply and relatively bloodlessly. During the 1990-91 Gulf War, considerably more skepticism was expressed within France about the ability of the coalition forces to prevail against Saddam Hussein than was heard in the US. French military power could not engender the belief that the coalition forces could overcome Hussein’s million-strong armed forces without suffering significant casualties. France, in short, was hostile to military interventionism overseas.

In Britain, elite and public antagonism toward interventionism is uneven. Like France, Britain has considerable power to advance its policy aims. With competent naval and land forces, the British were able to avoid a cross-Channel attack and go on the offensive in continental Europe in two world wars. Yet, despite its power, Britain has not been able to consistently prevent foreign forces from breaching its boundaries. War in Britain has not been relatively bloodless. The Luftwaffe and German V-2 rockets managed to cross the English Channel and inflict considerable physical and psychological damage on the British during World War II. And the massive bloodletting in World War I and II removed any illusion that war could be relatively painless. Exploiting its natural geographical barriers, then, British power has largely managed to fend off foreign invaders but has not been completely shielded from the devastation of large-scale interstate violence. Unlike the French and the Americans, such war experiences would affect Britons unevenly.

Different experiences shape the attitudes of citizens’ toward war. Indeed, as polls show, citizens in societies who have been shielded from the horrors of war tend to support foreign military adventures more than those who have been brutally exposed to conflict. Our findings suggest that most Americans back their government’s military forays overseas while the British and French are more ambivalent. The impact that geography and power have on mass support for a government’s decision to go to war is undoubtedly significant.

LEARNING THE WRONG LESSONS

A review of public attitudes and policy debates is telling. In the US, past military successes and the fact that no foreign adversary has devastated the American homeland has made its marketplace of ideas conducive for optimistic notions of military interventionism. Opinion polls show that the majority of American elites, reflected in their votes in Congress, have consistently thrown their support behind armed interventions abroad. American society at large has also backed military expeditions, though with less enthusiasm than what is expressed in Congress. There are times when the public, which after all forms the bulk of the forces fighting wars and thus has to calculate the costs of involvement, has expressed wariness about foreign intervention (see Table 1 above). In the immediate post-Vietnam War period, a considerable segment of US society was traumatized. The US military interventions in Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) notably witnessed dips in public endorsement. But the American mood changed swiftly thereafter, with the majority again standing behind military interventions abroad.

Military interventionism remained resilient in America because restraint as a competing idea has been unable to entrench itself deeply in a society that has been protected from directly experiencing the carnage of armed conflict. Accordingly, repeated military triumphs abroad achieved at low cost nourish the notion that force is a positive instrument of statecraft. Most Americans also tend to quickly dissociate themselves from the odd and distressing military setback, or attempt to see it as a botched but noble cause, or scrutinize it closely for lessons that can be applied in future wars to ensure success. Consider the so-called Vietnam Syndrome. It is less an aversion to war and more a fear of failure in the next war. “Never again” is more about the idea that US troops should not be deployed in a haphazard fashion and less about how to avoid war.

If the Weinberger and Powell Debates indicate anything, it is that military interventionism should be executed smartly and decisively. With victories in Grenada and Panama gradually vanquishing the dread of another potential military
The US has found itself mired in costly and meaningless wars it could have averted.

It is clearly in the interest of the US and the international community for American military interventionism to be tamed.
not be surprising that Americans tend to be more supportive of their government’s foreign interventions than the French (see Table 4 opposite).

**CAN AMERICAN MILITARY INTERVENTIONISM BE TAMED?**

If military interventionism is dominant and resilient in the American marketplace of ideas, the likelihood that Washington will deploy troops to faraway lands in the near or distant future is high. It is not our position that wars should never be fought under any circumstances. Defensive wars are morally justified. More caution, however, should be exercised when it comes to wars of choice. As it stands and as opinion polls indicate, the majority of Americans tend to back wars that draw the government — whether liberal, conservative, or neoconservative — says America should fight. More cautious positions have been drowned out. Consequently, the US has found itself mired in international community for American military interventionism.

The most direct way to tame American interventionism is to ensure that robust and open deliberation between the executive and legislative branches of government has also been suggested. Yet these initiatives are inadequate and give false hope that the US will not rush into another war. Indeed, the problem is not that the executive and Congress have not communicated enough. Rather, the issue is that the White House and Capitol Hill (and the public) hold essentially similar cheery notions about the utility of war. Simply ensuring more public debate is inadequate to check the unwise application of American force overseas.

Three other options present themselves. First, a coalition of states could come together to balance US power and induce it to act with more restraint. But this option is fraught with difficulties. Under unipolarity, any country or coalition of countries that openly congregates to check the US may be singled out and targeted for reprisal. Such a group, if it were formed, would also likely be fragile and ineffective as US pressure compels members to defect to the American side.

Second, and this is the more viable option, is for processes to develop within American society that give opposition to military adventurism a greater likelihood of winning the contest of ideas. An informed, engaged, and war-averse citizenry is necessary. This, in turn, will require the broader American society to develop a more profound understanding of the horrors of conflict. As it is unlikely that foreign adversaries will ever invade American soil, the closest that US citizens, apart from military veterans, will ever be able to experience war and its horrors is through publications, the academy and mass media.

As regards publications, a critical mass of military veterans and scholars need to produce works that demolish the romance of war. Books and articles that celebrate the leadership, heroism, sacrifice, and military flair of the combatants may make better reads, but they do not dampen popular enthusiasm for military interventions overseas. If a greater awareness of the dreadfulness of war is not generated, it is likely that future generations of Americans will continue to fall victim to ill-advised wars of choice.

It is also vital to enhance the study of military history, which seeks to broaden the understanding of war and the human condition. The more brutal the subject, the more important to probe its nature and cause. Examining combat and its outcomes, and investigating the impact of war on society can elicit somber reflection among students about the misery of conflict and the sagacity of restraint. This would inject greater scrutiny about the merits of war into the American debate.

Apart from studying military history, the realities of war should also be brought home to the public by the mass media. Casualties suffered by combatants and noncombatants from both the US and its opponents should be reported. Destruction inflicted on the infrastructure and homes of other countries should also be accentuated, not played down. By so doing, the US media can develop more public circumstantial evidence about the necessity and prudence of the use of force overseas.

To enable contrary voices to be better heard, the influence of the military-industrial complex, which comprises defense contractors and interested parties, should also be curbed. The complex, which has rallied elite and public opinion behind sustained US military expenditures, should be checked. Moves to strengthen the authority of the Government Accountability Office over the government are welcomed. So are initiatives to increase the number of Defense Department inspector generals. The US is not letting down its guard against real military threats from abroad when it acts to rein in the influence of the military-industrial complex. Instead, the move will strengthen America. If flawed military programs are not developed in the first place or are placed under close scrutiny from the start, wastage will be minimized. This will enhance the economic and social well being of Americans, especially when scarce resources are not squandered to fund unnecessary military programs, but employed for more productive economic use. Curbing the influence of the military-industrial complex and developing an ideational marketplace that is unsym pathetic to military interventionism will further reduce the likelihood that Washington will engage in more foreign military misadventures.

Finally, given the American propensity for military interventionism, there is a need for Americans to recognize that international opinion may contain pearls of wisdom about the aptness of a military deployment. Strong criticisms directed from abroad against specific US policies and military intentions should give Washington pause. Once the US is able to listen and to moderate its proclivity to intervene in another troubled spot somewhere on the globe, it will not only be able to save itself from fighting costly and pointless wars the choice, but it will also have the backing of international opinion when it has to engage in wars of necessity. When that day comes, the US is likely to find the international community again proclaiming “today, we are all Americans.”

**Table 4: Support and Opposition for Military Interventions in U.S., Britain and France**

Source: calculated from data from Table 1, 2, and 3. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average elite support (%)</th>
<th>Average elite opposition (%)</th>
<th>Average public support (%)</th>
<th>Average public opposition (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>77.4 (18.2) N=8</td>
<td>22.6 (18.2) N=8</td>
<td>59.8 (22.6) N=12</td>
<td>33.4 (20.6) N=12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>66.3 (18.6) N=3</td>
<td>22.3 (16.9) N=3</td>
<td>56.4 (14.6) N=9</td>
<td>33.3 (11.4) N=9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>72.1 (19.6) N=4</td>
<td>21.1 (13.5) N=4</td>
<td>62.1 (22.2) N=6</td>
<td>46.1 (19.5) N=7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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