

War Doesn't

Make Sense

America spends more on its military than all its enemies put together yet it still can't win wars. Failed adventures in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have drained America's power and diminished its prestige. The bloated Pentagon budget actually makes us weaker.

Here's the weird bit: nobody seems to care.

If any other government department spent as much and accomplished as little, the populace would be in arms, complaining about wasteful government spending. Instead we mumble "Thank you for your service" and increase defense appropriations.

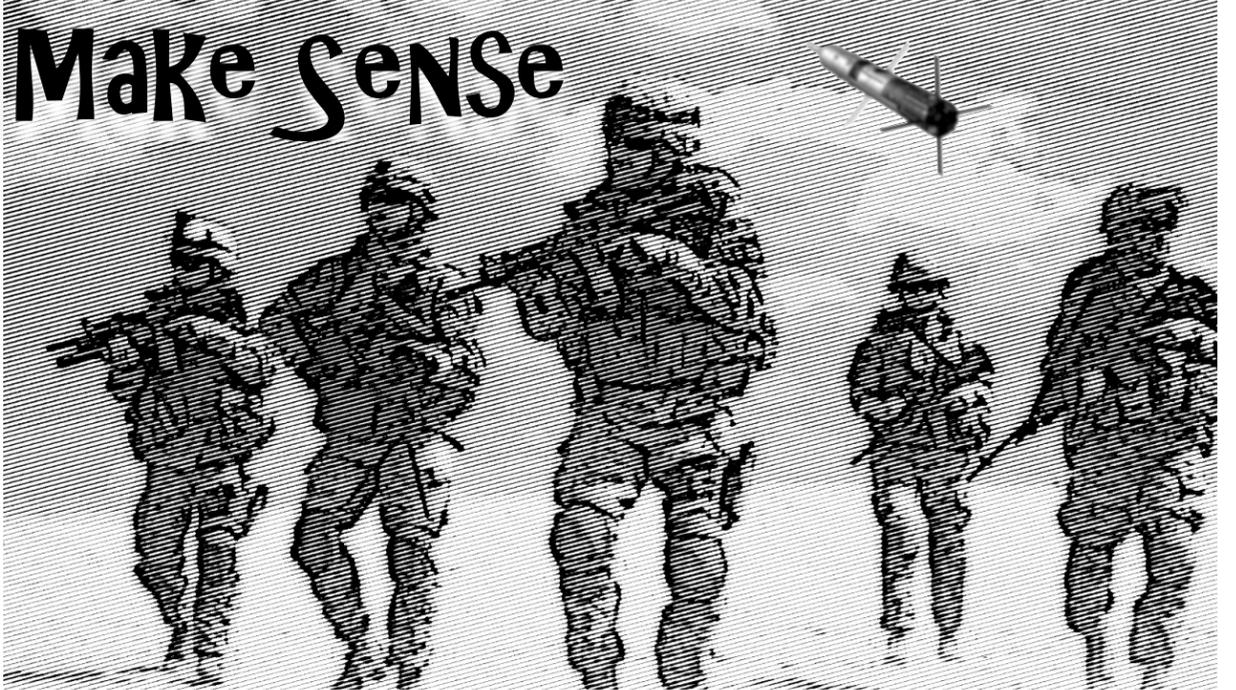
War has always been brutal and destructive, but once upon a time it had a purpose. William of Normandy invaded Britain knowing victory would make him rich beyond dreams of avarice. Soldiers followed Genghis Khan, Hernan Cortes, and Napoleon Bonaparte for the opportunity to steal gold, land, or slaves from their defeated enemies. Loot captured in war could transform a man's life, give him the money he needed to buy land or start a business. For thousands of years, the opportunities inherent in battle gave many men their only chance to escape their impoverished origins. Success in war could turn a brigand into a king.

Today it is trade and technology, not conquest, that makes us rich. Now Korean, Russian, Angolan, and Chinese companies all control more Iraqi oil fields than do American firms. Had we gone to war to steal Iraqi oil, we might have done a better job of it.

A few months ago, the United States government determined that **Bashar al-Assad's** regime used chemical weapons on his own citizens. That is a war crime, so pundits clamored for a response. Several days later, the United States, Britain, and France launched airstrikes against regime targets, firing 105 missiles. **A Tomahawk cruise missile costs almost \$2 million**, which suggests the expense of the entire operation was probably north of \$250 million. It's hard to believe the Syrian infrastructure we blew up cost nearly as much.

The effect of the well-publicized strike has been negligible. Most likely, that was intentional. Assad is closer than ever to winning the war in Syria so encouraging the rebels would do nothing but prolong the agony. In order to forestall escalation, we gave enough warning to Russia and Iran to get their men out of the way. The purpose of the strike wasn't to make a difference on the battlefield, but to "send a message." We spent a quarter of a billion dollars, blew up some buildings, killed a handful of soldiers, accomplished nothing, and most journalists applauded.

The firepower contained in those multimillion-dollar missiles would have crushed the **Carthaginians at Cannae**, wiped out **Wellington at Waterloo** and smashed the **Soviets at Stalingrad**, but today all they did was generate a few headlines, which by now everyone has forgotten. It all seems pointless, stupid



Do we really spend trillions of dollars just so our leaders can posture and armchair warriors can feel butch?

Maybe there's a better explanation.

Maybe the extravagant expense of the Pentagon budget is a feature, not a bug. Maybe no one objects when we spend a quarter of a billion dollars ineffectually bombing Syria or several trillion ineffectually invading Iraq because these days war profiteers make their money not by looting their enemies' cities, stealing their land, and selling their women into slavery, but from their own governments' spending.

My own life confirms this intuition. The invasion of Iraq has been a disaster for the United States, for the Middle East, and for the long-suffering people of Iraq, but for many of us, it was a cash cow. For a decade, I earned a solid middle-class living working just four months a year as a news cameraman in Iraq. The war on terror bought me my house.

Thousands of Americans (perhaps not coincidentally mostly from red states) worked as contractors for the U.S. military and pulled down salaries much higher than they would have earned in the private sector back home. A truck driver from Mississippi made over \$100,000 a year hauling in supplies from Kuwait. It is shocking how little of the money America spent in that misbegotten conflict ever trickled into the Iraqi economy.

Had our goal been to **win the hearts and minds** of Iraqis (or even to steal their oil), we would have hired locals to drive the trucks instead of Americans and thus garnered their loyalty. Remember, **Saddam Hussein** was not popular in 2003, and at least at first, Iraqis were open-minded about the American invasion. By shoveling money towards ordinary Iraqi citizens, America would have created a local constituency with solid financial reasons to support the occupation. Instead, Iraqis saw little benefit as the trillions spent on the war went straight into American pockets.

The Iraqi economy was destroyed between 2003 and 2008. Halliburton's stock price quintupled.

The Pentagon budget creates jobs in almost every congressional district, giving congressmen solid reasons to support budget increases. Military Keynesianism is the only fiscal stimulus habitually favored by both Democrats and Republicans. Today the primary purpose of the military is not to win wars but to stimulate the domestic economy and make our leaders look manly. These are pathetic reasons to put our sons and daughters into harm's way, not to mention slaughter the children of strangers.

Don't get me wrong: I have huge respect for American soldiers. The military may well be the most meritocratic and least racist large institution in America today. In fixed battle, our soldiers (and their awesome firepower) almost always emerge victorious. There is truth in the jarhead saying "Marines win battles. Politicians lose wars." But victory in war doesn't consist of killing lots of enemy soldiers; it lies in bending their leaders to our will, and that we have not achieved since 1945. Even the bloodthirstiest among us cannot think the wars of the past 50 years have made America stronger.

America doesn't need a huge army. With Canada to the north, Mexico to the south, and oceans east and west, the United States is more geographically secure than any nation in history. Britain defeated Hitler because it is an island. Russia defeated Hitler because it is a continent. America is both. Our enormous military is unnecessary to protect our homeland.

If we need to stimulate the economy, we can do it better by investing in infrastructure, education, or providing a better safety net. We certainly don't need a huge military so that our leaders can posture and Beltway strategists can feel macho. **War doesn't make sense anymore.** *It is time we recognized that.* War in America today is nothing but a sorry combination of show business and fiscal stimulus. No wonder we can't seem to win.

- **TOM STREITHORST**
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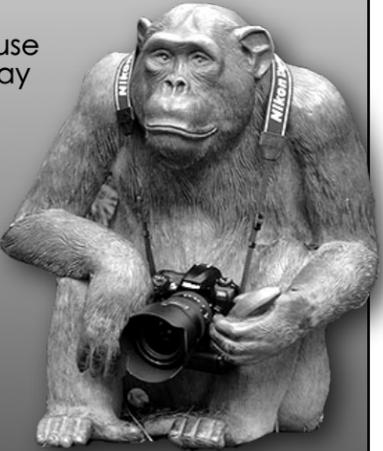
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