Winning Battles, Losing Legitimacy

The Compound Security Failure of the American Way of War

By Isaiah "Ike" Wilson III

The Comforting Myth

A familiar phrase has resurfaced in recent commentary about American military actions: the idea that one can be "doing the right thing for the wrong reason." Commentators including attorney David Boies and CNN host Michael Smerconish have invoked the maxim to suggest that controversial uses of military force can ultimately be justified if the resulting operations appear successful.

The phrase has an intuitive appeal.

It reassures observers that visible success—destroyed targets, defeated adversaries, dramatic operational achievements—can redeem flawed decision-making.

In war and statecraft, however, the idea is not merely misleading. It reflects a deeper misunderstanding that has repeatedly shaped American strategy over the past half century.

The problem is straightforward: the phrase collapses three distinct dimensions of judgment—intent, action, and outcome—into a single measure of success.

In everyday life such simplification may be tolerable. In strategy it is profoundly dangerous.

Military actions derive their meaning from the political purposes they serve. When the strategic rationale behind an action is flawed, tactical success cannot redeem it. Indeed, tactical success often obscures the deeper strategic errors that produced the action in the first place.

The United States has repeatedly fallen into this trap. Over the past several decades, American forces have demonstrated unparalleled tactical and operational capability. Yet these battlefield successes have frequently failed to produce durable political outcomes.

The result is a paradox: a military unmatched in tactical excellence paired with persistent strategic frustration.

Clausewitz's Forgotten Warning

Nearly two centuries ago, the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz warned that war is not an autonomous activity but a continuation of politics by other means.

The insight is often quoted in American military education. It is less often fully internalized.

Clausewitz's point was not simply that war serves political purposes. It was that the logic of politics must guide the conduct of war from the outset. Military operations are instruments of strategy, and strategy itself is subordinate to political objectives.

When this relationship is reversed—when military action drives political reasoning rather than the other way around—tactical success becomes strategically meaningless.

The United States has repeatedly demonstrated this inversion.

The Paradox of the American Way of War

From Southeast Asia to the Middle East, American military campaigns have consistently displayed extraordinary operational competence.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. forces won the overwhelming majority of engagements with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units. Superior firepower, mobility, and intelligence produced consistent tactical advantages.

Yet these battlefield victories failed to translate into the political legitimacy necessary to sustain the South Vietnamese government.

The same pattern emerged in Iraq. The 2003 invasion rapidly toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein, demonstrating the extraordinary effectiveness of American combined-arms warfare. Within weeks the Iraqi state collapsed.

But the absence of a coherent political strategy for governing Iraq after the regime's fall transformed that tactical triumph into a prolonged insurgency and regional instability.

Afghanistan followed a similar trajectory. The Taliban regime fell quickly under pressure from U.S. airpower, special operations forces, and Afghan partners. Yet the political structures necessary to sustain long-term stability proved fragile, ultimately collapsing two decades later.

These cases reveal what might be called the paradox of the American way of war: unmatched tactical and operational capability paired with persistent strategic disappointment.

If this pattern has appeared repeatedly across conflicts, however, the explanation cannot lie solely in the particular circumstances of Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. The persistence of the pattern suggests something deeper in the way the United States thinks about and organizes the use of military force.

Why the United States Keeps Making This Mistake

If the pattern of tactical success and strategic frustration has appeared repeatedly across conflicts, the explanation cannot lie solely in the unique circumstances of Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. The persistence of the pattern suggests something deeper—features of American civil–military relations and strategic culture that predispose the United States to prioritize operational success over political coherence.

Three dynamics are particularly important.

First, the United States possesses a military institution that is extraordinarily effective at solving operational problems. Over the past half century, the American armed forces have developed a professional culture built around mastery of planning, technology, and battlefield execution. Operational art—the ability to design and conduct campaigns that defeat enemy forces—has become the centerpiece of American military excellence.

This success, however, has created a subtle distortion. Institutions tend to emphasize the problems they are best equipped to solve. In the American system, military organizations are optimized for defeating adversaries in combat. They are far less equipped to design or manage the political settlements that must follow battlefield success.

As a result, the military instrument often operates with remarkable precision while the broader political strategy remains underdeveloped. Campaign plans answer the question of how to defeat the enemy's forces. They rarely answer the more difficult question of what political order must replace them.

Second, American political leaders have often treated military power as a tool capable of producing rapid and decisive outcomes. The technological superiority of U.S. forces reinforces this expectation. Precision strike capabilities, global intelligence networks, and expeditionary logistics create the impression that force can be applied in limited ways to achieve discrete objectives.

Yet political outcomes rarely conform to such expectations. War disrupts political systems in ways that are difficult to predict or control. The collapse of regimes produces power vacuums. Local factions compete for authority. External actors intervene to shape outcomes.

These dynamics require sustained political engagement—often lasting far longer than the military operations that triggered them. But democratic political systems are rarely structured to sustain such commitments easily. The temptation is therefore to treat military success as the endpoint of strategy rather than its opening phase.

A third dynamic lies in the institutional separation between civilian policymakers and the military organizations responsible for executing operations. In theory, this separation is essential for democratic governance. Civilian leaders determine political objectives; military professionals design and conduct campaigns to achieve them.

In practice, however, the relationship often produces a gap between political intent and operational design. Civilian leaders frequently articulate broad goals—removing a regime, degrading a terrorist network, deterring an adversary—without fully specifying the political conditions that must exist once those goals are achieved.

Military planners then translate these objectives into operational tasks focused on defeating enemy capabilities. What often remains underdeveloped is the intermediate layer of strategy that connects battlefield outcomes to durable political arrangements.

This gap becomes particularly dangerous in modern conflicts where the decisive terrain is political legitimacy rather than physical territory. Destroying adversary forces may be operationally straightforward. Constructing legitimate governance structures is far more complex.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States demonstrated overwhelming military superiority. Yet the political institutions that were meant to replace the defeated regimes struggled to command public legitimacy. Corruption, factionalism, and external interference steadily eroded their credibility.

The problem was not a lack of tactical success. It was the absence of a coherent political design capable of translating military achievements into durable governance.

These institutional dynamics are reinforced by a broader feature of American strategic culture: a persistent belief in the decisive power of military force. From the Civil War through the world wars of the twentieth century, the United States experienced conflicts in which battlefield victory produced clear political outcomes. Such historical experiences reinforce the expectation that defeating adversaries militarily will naturally produce favorable political settlements.

But contemporary conflicts rarely follow that pattern. Insurgencies, civil wars, and gray-zone competitions unfold within complex political ecosystems where legitimacy, governance, and social trust determine long-term outcomes. Military power remains essential, but it is only one instrument among many shaping the strategic environment.

When the United States applies overwhelming military capability without equal attention to these political dynamics, the result is a familiar cycle: impressive operational victories followed by protracted struggles to shape the political order that emerges afterward.

Breaking this cycle requires more than improved planning for post-conflict stabilization. It requires a deeper shift in strategic thinking—one that treats military operations not as the centerpiece of strategy but as one component of a broader political design.

Only when the political end state is defined with clarity before force is employed can tactical brilliance contribute to strategic success rather than obscure its absence.

Tactical Success as Strategic Mirage

Modern warfare increasingly amplifies this paradox.

Technological advances allow military forces to achieve dramatic and highly visible effects. Precision-guided munitions destroy targets with extraordinary accuracy. Special operations raids eliminate high-value individuals. Cyber operations disrupt adversary networks.

Such actions create the appearance of decisive progress. They produce immediate and measurable outcomes.

Yet the political consequences of military force unfold on a different timeline.

A successful strike may eliminate a hostile leader while strengthening the narrative that sustains the broader movement. A limited military action may signal resolve while simultaneously triggering escalation dynamics that destabilize the strategic environment.

Tactical brilliance, in other words, can coexist with political deterioration.

This dynamic has become increasingly evident in modern counterterrorism campaigns. Eliminating militant leaders disrupts organizational structures, but such operations rarely address the underlying political conditions that enable insurgent or extremist movements to persist.

Visible success masks deeper strategic stagnation.

The Phase IV Blind Spot

The Iraq War vividly illustrated another recurring feature of American strategy: the tendency to treat the destruction of enemy forces as the decisive phase of war.

In February 2003, then–Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki warned Congress that stabilizing Iraq after the invasion would require "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers." His assessment reflected the reality that overthrowing a regime is merely the beginning of war's political phase.

Senior civilian leaders dismissed his estimate as "wildly off the mark."

Events proved otherwise. Insufficient planning for post-conflict governance allowed insurgency and sectarian violence to flourish, forcing the United States to deploy far larger forces than originally anticipated.

This episode exemplifies the Phase IV dilemma—the persistent underestimation of the political and administrative challenges that follow military victory.

But the deeper problem is conceptual. American strategy has often treated war primarily as a military undertaking rather than as a political project.

Legitimacy as a Strategic Resource

Political outcomes in war ultimately hinge on legitimacy.

Legitimacy is frequently discussed as a moral concept. In strategy it functions as a practical resource. Governments require legitimacy to mobilize populations, sustain alliances, and maintain authority over territory.

Military force can destroy regimes. It cannot automatically generate legitimacy.

The experience of Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates the consequences of this reality. Postwar governments in both countries struggled to establish legitimacy among their populations. Corruption, factionalism, and perceptions of foreign imposition eroded public trust.

These legitimacy deficits undermined the strategic effectiveness of American military operations. Tactical victories could not compensate for the absence of a political order widely perceived as legitimate.

Legitimacy, in other words, proved as decisive as firepower.

War in a Compound Security Environment

The strategic challenges facing the United States have become even more complex in the twenty-first century.

Modern conflicts unfold within what might be described as a compound security environment—a landscape in which military, economic, informational, technological, and societal dynamics interact simultaneously.

In such environments, actions intended to achieve narrow military objectives can trigger cascading consequences across other domains.

A successful military strike may degrade an adversary's capabilities while simultaneously eroding international support. Economic sanctions may weaken a regime while strengthening nationalist sentiment among its population. Information campaigns may shape public narratives while undermining institutional trust.

These interactions produce feedback loops that complicate strategic planning. Actions in one domain reverberate across others, generating outcomes that are difficult to anticipate or control.

In a compound security environment, tactical success becomes an even less reliable indicator of strategic progress.

The Venezuela and Iran Tests

Recent American operations illustrate the continued relevance of these dynamics.

The U.S. military's dramatic snatch-and-grab operation against Nicolás Maduro demonstrated remarkable operational capability. Yet the strategic implications of the operation remain uncertain. Removing a leader does not automatically produce political stability, and such actions can generate legitimacy challenges both domestically and internationally.

Similarly, U.S. and Israeli operations targeting Iranian leadership and infrastructure have achieved impressive tactical effects. But their long-term strategic consequences remain unclear.

Military actions that appear successful in isolation may trigger broader regional escalation, strengthen hardline factions within adversary states, or complicate diplomatic efforts to stabilize volatile regions.

In a compound security environment, even successful operations can produce strategic side effects that undermine the political objectives they were intended to advance.

The Strategic Discipline We Lack

Avoiding the illusion of tactical success requires restoring a disciplined understanding of strategy.

Before any military operation begins, policymakers must answer a fundamental question: what political condition are we trying to create?

This question appears straightforward. Yet history suggests it is often insufficiently addressed in practice.

Strategic planning frequently focuses on defeating adversaries rather than constructing the political arrangements that must follow. Military operations become ends in themselves rather than instruments of a broader political design.

The result is a pattern of campaigns that achieve impressive battlefield results without producing durable strategic outcomes.

Beyond the Illusion

The comforting notion that one can "do the right thing for the wrong reason" collapses under strategic scrutiny.

In war, the reason behind an action—the political logic that justifies it—determines whether the action itself is meaningful. Tactical success cannot compensate for flawed strategic reasoning.

Indeed, tactical brilliance often delays recognition of strategic failure. Visible victories reinforce confidence in existing approaches, encouraging policymakers to double down on strategies that may be exacerbating the underlying problem.

The illusion of victory can therefore be more dangerous than defeat.

Defeat forces reassessment. Illusion encourages complacency.

Relearning Strategy

The United States remains the most capable military power in the world. Its armed forces possess extraordinary technological and operational advantages.

But military superiority alone cannot guarantee strategic success.

Winning wars requires more than defeating adversaries on the battlefield. It requires shaping political outcomes that can endure after the fighting ends. Achieving such outcomes demands strategic discipline—the ability to align military operations with political objectives, anticipate cascading effects across multiple domains, and recognize that legitimacy and governance are as central to victory as firepower.

Until that discipline becomes central to American strategic thinking, the United States risks continuing a familiar pattern: winning battles while losing the political war.

And until that pattern is broken, tactical success will remain what it too often has been in modern American warfare—an illusion mistaken for victory.

Isaiah "Ike" Wilson III is a retired U.S. Army colonel and former senior civilian executive in the U.S. Department of Defense. He is a professor of practice at Arizona State University and previously served as president of the Joint Special Operations University. He is the author of *Thinking Beyond War: Civil–Military Relations and Why America Fails to Win the Peace* and writes on strategy, civil–military relations, and the evolving dynamics of modern conflict.