

The Paradox Of U.S. Power And Defeat

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Since World War II, the United States has rocketed to previously unimagined heights of geopolitical power. Paradoxically, though, this—sometimes lone—superpower has simultaneously suffered a number of strategic stalemates and even defeats, apparently succumbing to lesser foes that a global superpower theoretically should not have any trouble overcoming. Even as its strategic defeats mount, the overall might of the United States has continued to increase. Stratfor's George Friedman summarizes the history:

In spite of stalemate and defeat during the Cold War, the United States was more in 2000 than it had been in 1950. . . . On a pretty arbitrary scale—between Korea (1950-53), Cuba (1960-63), Vietnam (1963-75), Iran (1979-1981) and Iraq (2003-present)—the United States has spent about 27 of the last 55 years engaged in politico-military maneuvers that, at the very least, did not bring obvious success, and frequently brought disaster. Yet, in spite of these disasters, the long-term tendency of American power relative to the rest of the world has been favorable to the United States. ("Geopolitics and the U.S. Spoiling Attack," March 20, 2007)

In analyzing this paradox, Friedman contends that these conflicts were never as significant as they appeared to be—public sentiment and government rhetoric notwithstanding. That is, compared to the wholesale mobilization of men and industry for the war effort during WWII, only a portion of available U.S. resources and energy were tapped during the aforementioned wars. The conclusion is that if the national survival of the U.S. were truly at stake during any one of these conflicts—as opposed to there just being *important* national security issues—total war would have been fought as it was in Germany and Japan in the 1940s. The stalemates and strategic defeats in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, and the present Iraq conflict, have thus been "acceptable" because it was not necessary for the U.S. to vanquish its foes absolutely in order to maintain its overall security. As Friedman puts it,

. . . the United States consistently has entered into conflicts in which its level of commitment was extremely limited, in which either victory was not the strategic goal or the mission eventually was redefined to accept stalemate, and in which even defeat was deemed preferable to a level of effort that might avert it. Public discussion on all sides was apoplectic both during these conflicts and afterward, yet American global power was not materially affected in the long run.

How can a superpower retain its title while suffering a string of such stalemates and strategic defeats by much smaller nations? Friedman points out that these conflicts can be seen as what military strategists call a *spoiling attack*—an offensive operation designed not to defeat the enemy, but only to disrupt him and prevent a defeat. The enemy need not be crushed for a spoiling attack to be considered successful—he only needs to be disrupted or forestalled. The side making the spoiling attack can thus economize its force rather than bleed itself dry with every operation.

Viewing the concept of a spoiling attack on a global scale, one can consider the wars in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, and Iraq as offensive operations designed only to keep the enemy off-balance or

distracted rather than to defeat it. In the first four conflicts, the real enemy was the Soviet Union. Absolutely defeating Korea, Fidel Castro's Cuba, Vietnam, or the pre-revolution Iran was not necessary to keep the Soviet Union from conquering the United States—but strategists believed that engaging in those conflicts was necessary to keep the Soviet Union from asserting itself further geopolitically and militarily.

Likewise, the present enemy of the United States is militant Islam, and the Bush administration evidently went to war in Iraq to keep the Islamists from attacking the American mainland in a significant way. In this, the strategy has been successful. Even though the Islamists have not been entirely defeated in Iraq and probably never will be (or the Taliban in Afghanistan, for that matter), the fact that the United States has approached the war with such restraint demonstrates that, on some level, the strategic defeat it is currently enduring is acceptable—American national security has been preserved. Had Iraq truly been a threat, the Pentagon would have prosecuted the war far differently.

Likewise, if Iran actually posed an existential threat to the heartland, the present dance between it and the U.S. would be of a much different tempo. American policymakers seem to be "satisfied" with the current status quo, even though it gives the appearance of weakness.

If this analysis is correct, it should give us pause as we attempt to crosslink current events and Bible prophecy. Circumstances are not always what they appear to be—or how the media paint them to be. If strategic defeat consistently results in the garnering of greater U.S. power, an adjustment in thinking is necessary. If nothing else, it demands a more judicious perspective that accounts for high-level, high-stakes strategic thinking. Watching world events just became a bit more complex.