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# *On Strategy:* The Iran War in Context

***by John L. Craig***

## Introduction

This paper assesses the Iran War through the lens of whole-of-government decision-making, logistical preparedness, the ethical and legal responsibilities of senior leaders, shifting strategic objectives, and historical context. The title echoes Harry G. Summers Jr.'s *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, reflecting parallels between Vietnam and Iran, especially in matters of strategy, or its absence.[1] Summers argued that the United States (U.S.) had not fully disentangled the issues that plagued it during the Vietnam War.[2] The current Iran War similarly tests the structure and effectiveness of the U.S.'s whole-of-government decision-making and preparedness.

The literature on war is vast. Millions of academic papers, articles, and books examine armed conflict, with more than 60,000 books written on the American Civil War alone.[3] Any attempt to analyze a specific war in full is therefore inherently limited. This paper provides a summary assessment, drawing on publicly available information. A more comprehensive treatment, such as Summer's, is beyond its scope.

Following Clausewitz, war is understood here as the continuation of politics by other means, used to achieve political objectives or compel adversaries through deterrence or violence.[4] The fundamental nature of war—violence, bloodshed, logistics, the imposition of will, and the pursuit of victory—remains unchanged, even as its character and technologies rapidly evolve.[5] Modern militaries must develop capabilities aligned with war's enduring nature while remaining agile enough to adapt to its changing character. War is complex. No two wars are alike, and the outcomes are uncertain, but the demands of clarity of purpose, coherent strategy, and adequate preparation are consistent.

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For simplicity, the term "war" in this paper refers to armed conflict, whether formally declared or not.

## Constitutional and Historical Background

The U.S. was founded on the principle of popular sovereignty. The Declaration of Independence asserted the right of a people to establish a government based on their consent, and the Constitution begins with "We the People," emphasizing that elected officials serve and represent citizens.[6] Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution grants Congress the sole authority to declare war, a power it has exercised eleven times, most recently during World War II. Congress's control over military funding reinforces this authority. Article II, Section 2 establishes the President as Commander in Chief, responsible for conducting war once declared.[7]

One of the enduring strengths of the American constitutional republic is its design to withstand disagreement and stress. Checks and balances reflect the Founders' recognition that no person or institution is infallible. This system depends on both accountable elected leadership and an informed, engaged citizenry.

After World War II, as U.S.–Soviet relations deteriorated into the Cold War, President Truman articulated the Truman Doctrine, committing the U.S. to support free peoples resisting subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.[8] The Marshall Plan provided economic assistance to rebuild Europe and buttress Western institutions.[9] The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was also formed.[10] These initiatives helped deter another world war, including nuclear conflict, but they may also have inadvertently contributed to a pattern of proxy wars.[11]

The War Powers Resolution of 1973 was enacted after the prolonged and undeclared Korean and Vietnam Wars and the secret bombing of Cambodia.[12] It aimed to reassert Congress's constitutional role and limit unilateral executive military actions. Among its provisions, it requires the President to notify Congress within 48 hours of introducing U.S. armed forces into hostilities or substantially enlarging such deployments. This reporting requirement has been invoked more than 100 times. Nonetheless, the balance of war powers between Congress and the President remains contested. Some argue that the Resolution unduly restricts the Commander in Chief's authority to use military force; others contend that broad presidential claims to unilateral war-making are unconstitutional. The question of who may authorize the use of force, and under what circumstances, remains ambiguous in practice.[13]

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U.S. wars have varied widely over time. Most 18th- and 19th-century conflicts were fought on American soil, culminating in the Civil War. In the 20th century, major wars were fought overseas—World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf War—as the U.S. emerged as a global power. The 21st century opened with the attacks of September 11, 2001, and has seen a proliferation of complex conflicts involving both state and non-state actors: al-Qaeda, ISIS, Somali piracy, the Yemeni civil war and Houthi rebels, al-Shabaab, Syria, Libya, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War (2001–2021), the longest in U.S. history. These late 20th- and early 21st-century conflicts are often ambiguous and difficult to define, raising persistent questions about U.S. roles, authorities, civil-military relations, and especially strategy at the national level.[14]

## U.S. Strategy Documents and Iran

The National Security Strategy (NSS) and

National Defense Strategy (NDS) articulate the broad priorities of U.S. national power. In their current form, they give limited attention to Iran. The NSS mentions Iran only briefly and treats its regional and nuclear threat as diminished, asserting that Operation Midnight Hammer critically disrupted Iran's nuclear enrichment capacity. It frames the primary challenges instead as hemispheric security and great-power competition. The NDS similarly emphasizes homeland and hemispheric security, and while it acknowledges ongoing terrorism and Middle East challenges, it does not present Iran as a central strategic priority.[15]

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Critics have noted that both documents are heavily political and programmatic rather than operational or implementation-focused. They lack a coherent integration of Iran as a strategic concern, despite Iran's continued regional influence and the risks posed by its proxies, missile forces, and potential nuclear ambitions. The NSS stated that "America's historic reason for focusing on the Middle East will recede" and referred to the region as "a place of partnership, friendship, and investment," rejecting the idea of "fruitless nation-building wars." The second Trump administration has explicitly sought to deprioritize the Middle East. Thus, the Iran War runs counter to the administration's stated goals in nearly every way. Less than three months after the NSS was published, on December 4, 2025, the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran.[16]

## The Iran War

### *Overview*

Despite Iran's relatively low profile in the NSS and NDS, the U.S. and Israel commenced coordinated attacks on Iran on February 28, 2026.[17] The resulting conflict has had profound regional and global consequences. Weather and terrain remain fundamental determinants of military outcomes. The U.S. Army's concepts of "decisive theater" and "decisive terrain," building on the work of Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and Jomini, recognize that certain terrain can provide a marked advantage to the force that controls it; its loss can mean defeat in a campaign.[18]

In the Iran War, the Strait of Hormuz is arguably the single most significant piece of terrain. This narrow waterway, roughly fifty miles wide at its narrowest point, carries around 20% of the world's traded oil. Disruption or closure of the Strait affects the global economy far beyond the region itself. Before the war, the Strait remained open and oil flowed freely; since the onset of hostilities, maritime security and energy markets have been destabilized.[19]

The U.S. is now engaged in an armed conflict with broad global repercussions and no clearly articulated strategic end state. Iran appears emboldened and the war's trajectory suggests that it may serve some Iranian objectives better than peace, particularly in terms of domestic consolidation and regional narrative, even as it imposes severe costs on Iran and its neighbors.[20] As of this writing, the situation remains fluid: intermittent military strikes by the U.S. and Iran, alternating ceasefires and peace talks, sweeping and often incompatible demands by both sides, and public assertions by President Trump of imminent peace deals. The war continues without a clear path to resolution.[21]

### *Background of U.S.–Iran Tensions*

The U.S.-Iran relations have been shaped by decades of mutual suspicion, intervention, and conflict. In 1953, the U.S. and the United Kingdom supported a coup that overthrew Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, fearing he might align more closely with the Soviet Union. He was

replaced by an increasingly authoritarian regime dominated by the Shah of Iran.[22]

In 1979, a revolution forced the Shah into exile. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became Supreme Leader and warned that U.S. interests in Persian Gulf oil and Western cultural influences threatened the future of the Islamic Republic.[23] Later that year, radical Iranian students seized fifty-two American hostages in Tehran, leading to the Iranian hostage crisis and a complete break in diplomatic relations.[24] Since then, the relationship has resembled a protracted Cold War, with no direct diplomatic ties.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the U.S. provided support to Iraq and Saddam Hussein, deepening Iranian mistrust.[25] Simultaneously, Iran attempted to export its Islamic Revolution across the region, building a network of Shia militias and proxy forces.[26] By the early 2000s, concerns over Iran's nuclear program, combined with its regional activities, led to severe U.S. and EU sanctions.[27] In 2015, Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany), along with the EU, reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In exchange for significant nuclear restrictions and inspections, Iran received sanctions relief.[28]

In 2018, President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA, citing intelligence suggesting that Iran continued work toward a nuclear weapon. The U.S. reimposed unilateral sanctions, without European support.[29] Afterward, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force maintained and expanded support for proxy groups, with increased attacks on U.S. personnel and interests.[30] In 2020, President Trump ordered the killing of the IRGC Quds Force commander in a drone strike, further escalating tensions.[31]

The Biden administration (2021-2025) expressed interest in re-entering or revising the JCPOA but made no substantive progress. The relationship remained fragile, marked by nuclear tensions and regional confrontations.[32]

In June 2025, the Trump administration launched Operation Midnight Hammer, targeting three Iranian nuclear facilities, partly at the urging of Israeli leadership and intelligence.[33] In February 2026, the administration initiated Operation Epic Fury, a major U.S.-led military campaign targeting Iran's national leadership, military infrastructure, and remaining nuclear capabilities.[34] Iran and its proxies responded with widespread drone and missile strikes across the region, causing casualties, damage to critical infrastructure, and significant disruption of global energy flows.[35] A memorandum of understanding was drafted in June 2026 to end the war, but unresolved disputes over freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz have led to repeated violations of ceasefire arrangements and continued retaliatory attacks.[36]

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The war has stressed the U.S. whole-of-government architecture, including decision-making, interagency coordination, and logistical preparedness.[37] The U.S. now faces the challenge of de-escalating the conflict, responding to Iran's internal dynamics and rigid ideology, managing regional instability, and restoring a more stable global economic environment.

## The U.S. Whole-of-Government Framework for War

The U.S. whole-of-government framework encompasses the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, each with distinct constitutional authorities.[38] Since World War II, however, the U.S. has increasingly engaged in armed conflicts without formal declarations

of war. Following the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the War Powers Resolution of 1973 was an attempt by Congress to reassert its role, but executive "war-making" has remained expansive.[39]

**The President, as head of state and Commander in Chief, chairs the NSC and is ultimately responsible for choosing among policy options.**

Whole-of-government processes are intended to produce clear strategies that link political ends to military means and resources. The Iran War illustrates the consequences of failing to do so: shifting objectives, inadequate planning, and reactive decisions have characterized the conflict.[40] All relevant entities and departments should be grounded in a clear and coherent national strategic objective.

### National Security Council

The National Security Council (NSC) is the President's key forum for considering national security and foreign policy issues with senior advisors and cabinet officials. Effective preparation for war requires every major national security institution to work from a common strategic framework before hostilities begin—what the military, and government, can and cannot do. In the context of the Iran War, it should have provided a clear strategic end state, ensured interagency coordination, planned for contingencies, anticipated escalation, and guarded against mission creep.

It is unclear from publicly available information whether the NSC failed to develop a coherent end state, or whether its recommendations were rejected by the President. What is evident is that no clearly articulated strategic end state has guided U.S. operations; objectives have shifted over time with variations within the administration—from protestors and revolution to regime change to peace within the Middle East and beyond to dismantling nuclear capabilities to eliminating ballistic missiles and drones to eliminating support for terrorism to reopening the Strait of Hormuz.[41] As a result, the Iran War continues without a clearly defined political outcome.[42]

### President and Vice President

The President, as head of state and Commander in Chief, chairs the NSC and is ultimately responsible for choosing among policy options. The President must balance immediate objectives with long-term U.S. interests and ensure that decisions reflect both domestic political realities and international obligations.

The Vice President can play a significant role within the NSC, including assessing domestic political support, congressional views, and public opinion. Reports suggest tension between the Vice President and the President's Iran policy, and there is little evidence of a sustained effort to build informed congressional and public support before the escalation of hostilities.[43]

The President should have determined a clear strategic end state based on the NSC's best advice, rather than inconsistent messaging, limited congressional and public support, and coalition-building.

### Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DoD), through the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is responsible for providing "enterprise-wide options" for clear national strategic objectives and transforming those objectives into military plans. This includes force protection, joint force employment, target development, battle damage assessment, and long-range logistics and sustainment.

In the Iran War, U.S. forces have reportedly displayed high tactical and operational effectiveness, particularly in the air domain.[44]

However, air power alone has never conclusively won a major war; it's part of the combined arms-joint and multi-domain operations teams.[45] Air power can successfully accomplish well-defined and limited objectives alone, as it has in the Iran War. The lack of a clearly articulated strategic end state has shifted over time and remains ambiguous. Without a well-defined strategic end state, DoD planning has shifted from limited strikes to sustained operations to an indefinite naval blockade with no clear focus for winning the war while stretching logistical systems and munitions stockpiles. A clear national strategic objective should have enabled the development of a coherent military strategy; in its absence, military excellence has not been matched by a clearly defined political outcome.[46]

### Department of State

As the President's principal foreign policy advisor, the Department of State is charged with assessing international reactions, alliance dynamics, and long-term diplomatic implications. It should provide candid assessments of how military actions will affect U.S. interests, reputation, and relationships, and it should lead the exploration of diplomatic off-ramps and negotiated outcomes.

It is not publicly known whether State offered a comprehensive alternative strategy or whether diplomatic options were fully considered or rejected. The termination of the JCPOA, combined with the absence of a clear diplomatic strategy, has left the U.S. with limited leverage beyond coercive tools. The war has damaged U.S. standing among allies and partners and has not yet produced a stable regional outcome. This concern, even anxiety, among allies and partners is not spoken publicly due to the historic dependence many countries have on the U.S. However, reports say traditional allies are asking whether the U.S. still has the clout to effectively deter adversaries—potentially leaving them vulnerable. For example, in order to bolster resources in the Middle East, the U.S. administration has: pulled key air defenses and its last aircraft carrier out of the Pacific; limited fighter rotations around Europe that help defend NATO borders with Russia; expressed a conciliatory approach to traditional foes such as North Korea and Russia and embraced the Russian, North Korean, and Chinese leaders; reduced stockpiles of missile interceptors and other key munitions, including for allies; canceled military exercises with South Korea; trashed Canada and other NATO allies; conducted record-breaking aircraft carrier deployments with long logistics tails for resupply and maintenance; shifted from air strikes to sanctions which are rattling global markets; announced a six-month review of troops in Europe; and stopped a joint U.S.-Ukraine training program on drone warfare. Taken as a whole, this is concerning. Behind closed doors, diplomats are sending the message that the U.S. is unreliable and unfocused.[47]

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### Department of the Treasury

The Treasury Department serves as the President's chief economic advisor on national security issues. In the Iran War, Treasury has reportedly implemented extensive sanctions, including measures to disrupt weapons and drone supply chains, block illicit maritime revenue streams, target financial intermediaries, freeze Iranian state assets, and restrict certain oil transactions to influence negotiations.[48] The cumulative effects of these actions are not fully

known, but sanctions alone have not compelled Iran to concede its core political or security objectives.[49] In the absence of a broader strategy, economic tools risk becoming instruments of punishment rather than levers of negotiated settlement.[50]

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### Intelligence Community

The U.S. Intelligence Community consists of seventeen agencies and organizations that gather and analyze intelligence. The Director of National Intelligence (DNI) represents the community within the NSC and should provide decision-makers with timely, accurate, and comprehensive assessments. This includes strategic warning, escalation forecasting, target development, battle damage assessment, and continuous monitoring of adversary intentions and capabilities. Any serious pre-war assessment should have fully accounted for:

1. The IRGC and Quds Force,
2. Iran's regional proxy network,
3. The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait,
4. Likely regional and global economic impacts, especially on energy markets.

It is difficult to imagine that the Intelligence Community failed to identify these factors.[51] More likely, either their assessments were overridden, not adequately integrated, or not translated into a coherent strategy. Perhaps the biggest failure of intelligence was underestimating the range and effects of Iran's missiles and drones. In addition, a confidential Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysis delivered to policymakers in May shows that Iran could withstand a naval blockade and economic sanctions much longer than considered; its resilience was underestimated and that it would not capitulate. The date this analysis was conducted and whether officials knowingly misrepresented the state of the war to Congress and the American people while continuing to reframe the military campaign as a decisive victory could not be ascertained.[52] Regardless, the U.S. entered a largely air-centric campaign without a clearly articulated end state, despite the obvious risks.[53]

### Other Key Participants

Other officials who can or should be meaningfully involved include the White House Chief of Staff, Attorney General, Secretaries of Energy and Homeland Security, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, National Security Advisor's senior legal and political staff, and outside experts.

### Logistics and Sustainment

Sound planning for logistics and sustainment requires a clear strategic end state, including anticipated duration, intensity, and geographic scope. In the Iran War, initial planning reportedly assumed limited strikes, largely from the air, for four to six weeks. As operations expanded, requirements for basing, fuel, munitions, spare parts, and medical support grew accordingly. Munitions stocks have been significantly depleted and may take years to replenish. Without a clear end state and anticipation of extended operation, it may have been difficult, if not impossible, to align logistics and industrial capacity with political aims.[54]

At the same time, global economic impacts have intensified as strategic petroleum reserves are drawn down to mitigate the loss of roughly 20% of global oil that previously transited the Strait of Hormuz. These pressures are expected

to persist.[55]

### Coalition Support

Robust alliances and economic interdependence can reduce the likelihood of war. NATO, for example, has helped preserve relative peace in Europe for more than seven decades through political, economic, military, and intelligence cooperation. Collective action multiplies the influence and capabilities of each member beyond what they could achieve alone.[56]

In the Iran War there is limited evidence that the U.S. effectively consulted or coordinated with NATO allies and other partners before initiating large-scale operations.[57] Intelligence sharing appears to have been selective, and coalition-building was not pursued as a central pillar of strategy. The decision to "go it alone," apart from limited coordination with Israel, has reduced international legitimacy, limited access to bases and support, and increased the political and economic burdens borne by the U.S.[58]

### U.S. and International Law

The Constitution explicitly grants Congress the authority to declare war but is silent on the legal framework for undeclared wars. Since World War II, this ambiguity has contributed to a pattern of major military engagements authorized through executive action, often supplemented by congressional resolutions, but without formal declarations.[59]

In response to the undeclared and prolonged Korean and Vietnam Wars, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution of 1973 to restore some balance and limit unilateral executive efforts to deploy military force. Congress also retains oversight powers and control over appropriations, while the military remains part of the executive branch and under civilian control.[60]

The devastation of World War I led to the creation of the League of Nations, and World War II to the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. The UN Charter's preamble commits member states to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" and to uphold fundamental human rights, justice, and the rule of law.[61]

The UN framework includes the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ addresses the four Latin terms that form the framework of the just war theory and international law. These are *jus ad bellum* (the right to go to war) and *jus in bello* (variously referred to as the law of armed conflict, the law of war, or international humanitarian law), though its enforcement mechanisms are limited. The related concepts of *jus ante bellum* (justice in preparation for war) and *jus post bellum* (justice after war—moral and legal rules for ending wars, rebuilding war-torn societies, and achieving sustainable peace) are less developed and merit further refinement. Nonetheless, international legal norms shape global expectations about when and how states may use force, and violations can erode legitimacy and support.[62]

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### Ethical and Moral Responsibilities

The U.S. Constitution is the basis for our democracy and the framers worked to ensure the military would be under civilian control—another enduring strength of our constitutional republic.[63] As early as 2016, the U.S. has been categorized as a "flawed democracy."[64] Surveys, including those by the Pew Research Center, reflect that many Americans no longer view U.S. democracy as a model for others and are dissatisfied with its functioning.[65] Concerns about executive overreach, corruption, and the rise of authoritarian practices have grown.[66] The

U.S. is also losing its moral and ethical standing in the world.[67]

In this environment, the ethical obligations of leaders are particularly important. Senior civilian and military leaders set the tone for truthfulness, candor, stewardship of public resources, and accountability for decisions, including about war. Ethical leadership requires more than legal compliance; it demands a clear moral framework and a willingness to put country before personal or partisan interests. Public trust is a foundational requirement of democratic governance.[68]

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As General Charles Gabriel, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, stated "Integrity is the fundamental premise for military service in a free society. Without integrity, the moral pillars of our military strength, public trust, and self-respect are lost."[69] Moreover, military ethics may be the most important "weapon," so that we do not sacrifice our humanity and our ideals of the good. They establish the moral and ethical responsibilities essential to military service. This intangible quality gives service members a force of moral authority in their individual and collective actions.[70] It should shape behavior from the Commander in Chief to the lowest echelons. The ethical obligations for the civilians, and their way of life, on the land where we fight also merit further refinement in just war theory, operational planning, and real-time execution of operations.[71]

Character, the moral and ethical values and habits of an individual, is perhaps more important today than at any other point in modern history. Doing the right things the right way. As Caslen and Matthews state, "When the nation puts its Army in harm's way…they expect it to win…but they do not expect it to win at all costs; they expect it to win the right way." Segueing from that, senior civilian leadership should have defined and communicated a clear strategic end state before sending the military into combat. To win any war, including the Iran War, leading and winning are synonymous with character.[72]

## The Military, Winning Wars, and Lessons

By most accounts, U.S. military performance in the Iran War has been strong at the tactical and, in some areas, the operational level.[73] However, in the absence of a coherent national strategy, military success has not translated into strategic advantage.[74]

Force protection has always been a basic military priority. Increasingly long-range precision weapons and low-cost drones complicate the protection of U.S. forces, especially when operating far from home bases, such as in the Iran War. Similarly, the Navy has conceded that the conflict created "a highly contested environment where traditional supply hubs in the Middle East were disrupted by combat actions." Thus, Navy ships have been denied normal port calls for resupply and maintenance during one of the longest naval deployments in modern history.[75]

In his farewell address, President and General Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of the "military-industrial complex"—the powerful alignment of military, government, and private defense interests.[76] Today, with the advent of artificial intelligence (AI), concerns extend to a broader "military-technology" or "military-AI" complex, in which advanced technologies, private firms, and government contracts create powerful incentives that may not always align with the public interest, sound strategic judgment, and potentially interfere with factual news reporting.[77] The presence of a DoD Defense

Innovation Unit (DIU) originally nicknamed "Unit X," embedded in Silicon Valley, while potentially beneficial, also raises questions about influence and priorities.[78] Such structural influences can distort decision-making, making it easier to initiate military action than to invest in sustained diplomacy, alliance management, and long-term strategy.

War is inherently unpredictable, and military leaders must be able to adapt operations and tactics as events unfold, guided by an understood hierarchy of intent.[79] The German concept of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission command, emphasizes the importance of conveying the commander's intent and granting subordinates the freedom to decide how best to achieve it. The U.S. military has adopted similar principles, which stand in contrast to micromanagement and ambiguity from political leadership.[80] Historical experience underscores this point. During the Civil War, President Lincoln ultimately learned to set strategic objectives while allowing generals like Ulysses S. Grant operational freedom.[81]

As Harry Summers famously recounted, battlefield success does not guarantee strategic victory. During a 1975 conversation about the Vietnam War, Summers told a North Vietnamese colonel, "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," to which Colonel Tu replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."[82] The message—without a clearly defined strategic end state, even a militarily superior force cannot win in a meaningful political sense.

In the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Generals Powell and Schwarzkopf, supported by President George H. W. Bush, applied lessons learned from Vietnam by insisting on a clear strategic end state, a well-defined coalition mission, and an exit strategy. The result was a tightly aligned national and military strategy that accomplished its limited objectives.[83] The Iran War reflects a departure from these lessons. Ambiguous goals, shifting rationales, and uneven political support have hindered the military's ability to translate tactical success into a decisive political outcome.[84]

## Conclusion

Since World War II, the U.S. has drifted into undeclared wars without consistently adhering to the constitutional processes and strategic discipline envisioned by the Founders and reinforced by hard-won historical lessons. The current Iran War exemplifies this drift.

From the analysis above, ten key conclusions emerge:

1. **Clear National Strategy:** A well-defined strategic end state is essential. Strategic ambiguity undermines effective planning and increases the risk of protracted conflict.[85]

2. **Public and Congressional Support:** Sustained public backing, expressed through elected representatives in Congress, is critical for legitimacy and long-term success. This was a major lesson of the Vietnam War and remains relevant.

3. **Primacy of Diplomacy and Economic Tools:** Military action should be a last resort, preceded by sustained diplomatic engagement and carefully calibrated economic measures.

4. **Whole-of-Government Planning:** Effective strategy requires integrated planning across the executive branch, robust coordination with allies and coalition partners, and meaningful congressional oversight.

5. **Recognition of Global Interdependence:** In an interconnected world, regional wars can rapidly produce global economic and political consequences. Strategy must account for these systemic effects.

6. **Rule of Law:** Adherence to U.S.

constitutional requirements and international legal norms is not optional. It underpins legitimacy, coalition cohesion, and domestic support.

7. **Ethical and Moral Leadership:** Leaders must uphold ethical standards in the use of force, including honesty with the public, respect for human life, and responsibility for long-term consequences.

8. **Integrated National Power:** Political, economic, informational, and military instruments must be synchronized. Military strength alone does not constitute great-power status; domestic governance and international credibility are equally important.

9. **Learning and Adaptation:** The U.S. must institutionalize lessons learned from previous conflicts—including Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Iran—and apply them rigorously to future decision-making. This should include implementable national and defense strategies; recognition of decisive theaters and terrain; emphasis on coalitions; adaptation to evolving weaponry; force-protection challenges; and becoming a Full Spectrum Force.[86]

10. **Clarifying War Powers:** There is a need for a more explicit, legally enforceable framework to distinguish declared and undeclared wars, delineate executive and legislative authorities, and ensure accountability when the nation goes to war.

The Iran War demonstrates that even the most capable military cannot compensate indefinitely for strategic incoherence and political dysfunction. Recommitting to constitutional processes, ethical leadership, and genuine whole-of-government strategy is essential if the U.S. is to avoid repeating these mistakes in future conflicts. ***IAJ***

## Notes

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