

Gradual Escalation: How to Lose a War

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukraine war, the West (America, for this article) has been sending financial and military aid to Ukraine. But it has been doing so on an incremental, gradual basis. Time and again, withholding, then releasing money; then withholding, then releasing...especially military weapons. Those weapons, desperately needed and requested by Ukraine, have been parceled out as if Ukraine were on a budgeted line-item allowance from America. During this time, Ukraine is fighting for its very existence.

Congress and the White House have been approaching the war as if it were part of their everyday governing decisions. Some congressional representatives are against any involvement whatsoever of having America coming to the rescue of Ukraine. And the Biden administration has placed limits (both in time and the kind of military weapons) it doles out to the ally.

The political expedient approach is for the leaders in Washington to kick the can down the road, fiddling around while Rome burns.

Learning from the Past?

From its past, all the way back to WWII, this country has not learned two incontrovertible facts about how it conducts wars: (1) Gradual, piecemeal escalation of a war has resulted in an unfavorable outcome for the US. (2) Immediate, massive escalation of a war has resulted in a favorable outcome.

The table below lists six wars in which the United States was an active participant in committing its military forces to the battles. For the seventh entry, Ukraine-Russia, the US has not sent troops, but has provided arms and funds to Ukraine.

War	Escalation to Massive Forces	Outcome for America
WWII	Immediate, with continued occupation	Positive
Korea	Immediate, with continued occupation	Positive
Vietnam	Gradual, with gradual de-escalation	Negative
Iraq I	Immediate, with no occupation	Positive
Iraq II	Immediate, with gradual de-escalation	Positive, then Negative
Afghanistan	Immediate, with gradual de-escalation	Positive, then Negative
Ukraine-Russia	Gradual	?

The information in this table reveals: When America committed to immediate deployment of massive military forces, the outcome of the war was positive for the US. Conversely, when it did not, the outcome was negative. Negative in the sense that the United States lost the war or America claimed victory while withdrawing its warriors.

Also, note the phrase “gradual de-escalation” in three wars. America’s foes in these wars knew the US intended to withdraw its military from the countries under contest; a sure-fire way to go about losing a war. What is equally astounding is that in Vietnam, Iraqi II, and Afghanistan, this intent was made public. The enemy knew, as famously said, that America had the watch, but America’s enemy had the time.

Undoubtedly, I will have naysayers and other critics of this table who will question its accuracy. The next section of this report explains the reasons for the table entries.

Table Entries

WWII. Much to the consternation and frustration of Britain and France, the United States did not commit to WWII for quite a while after the war started in Europe. The US bided its time, building up its military forces, but not committing them until it was armed and ready.

Of course, Japan and shortly, Germany, hastened the process by Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaring war on America. America had to expend some of its military strength in North Africa and Italy, but it went all out on D-Day in the Atlantic and Midway (and the Coral Sea) in the Pacific: It was a commitment of massive military forces---not gradual---with the US retooling its industry to fight the war. The outcome for America, as the table shows, was positive. A total victory. America came home after Europe and Japan had been resurrected.

Korea. Many historians state the Korean War was, at best, a draw between the communists and the West. Essentially, between Communist China and North Korea (greatly aided by the USSR) and the United States.

I disagree with this interpretation. It is incorrect. The military "draw" dealt a huge blow to the partnership and joint aspirations of Stalin (USSR) and Mao (China) to take over Korea, Southeast Asia, and the Malay Peninsula, as their first steps toward world-wide communist domination.

Heretofore secret documents, now open to the public, detail how the two men planned to divvy up their spoils of war, with Southeast Asia next on their list.

Initially, the West, led by America, was caught unaware, and was almost pushed out of South Korea. But shortly, America retaliated with a massive deployment of force, and this immediate result:

American-led UN forces launched an offensive against the North Koreans in September 1950, shortly after the North Korean invasion of the South. An amphibious force of 75,000 troops and heavy armament landed at Inchon. Western forces bombed and shelled the North Koreans relentlessly. In about four weeks, the American amphibious forces, as well as the South Korean and UN troops coming north from Pusan, captured 135,000 North Korean troops. North Korea's forces were also overwhelmed in the Inchon battle. The naval force, led by the US, consisted of about 120 ships, ranging from aircraft carriers to supply vessels.¹

China entered the war after North Korea had been ravaged by US forces, and the battle went on for years. It ended with what some people called a stalemate; others called it an American defeat. Quite the opposite. It thwarted the plans of Stalin and Mao to take over most of south Asia and other parts of the world. The top brass in North Korea later requested Mao to start another war in South Korea. Mao refused.

America partially came home, but it keeps troops on South Korean soil as a deterrent to North Korea.

¹ Uyless Black, *Fractured: How the Cold War Divided America* (Coeur d'Alene, ID: IEI Press, 2023), 213.

Vietnam. In relation to the table entries, the Vietnam War was not as clear-cut as the examples just cited: WWII and Korea. For example, the opposing forces in this conflict began the prolonged battle incrementally, gradually adding forces to the fight.

Nonetheless, on one side, while the Viet Cong (South Vietnam) gradually increased their military strength and commitment, their ally, the Vietminh (North Vietnam), already had an extensive and battle-hardened army from their years of fighting the French.

On the other side, America was not prepared to fight these enemies. The initial US role was that of an advisor to South Vietnam's army. Thus, in 1961 when the war started to heat up, the United States had only 3,025 personnel in South Vietnam. From that point to 1968, it gradually escalated the conflict, adding armed forces each year. By the end of 1968, when it began to draw down its commitment to the war, it had 536,100 personnel in South Vietnam.²

The point of the entries about Vietnam in the table is that America did not commit its massive military might to the war immediately; incrementally and gradually it sent over more troops to South Vietnam. And only in 1965 did it begin to deploy its army and Marines for actual engagement with the Viet Cong and Vietminh.

How many troops did Uncle Sam send over with this change of strategy? 1,500 Marines. Compare that number to the thousands upon thousands of troops that America committed to WWII and the Korean War.

Could the immediate commitment of massive US armed forces have made the difference in the outcome of the war? We will never know. But with over half a million US personnel fighting in Vietnam, America was winning the military war. But the US lost the political war (in America) and eventually withdrew its forces. America came home, not because of its military record, but because the war had grown politically unviable. The DC leadership ran out of cans to kick down the road

But once again, the point being: Conducting modern warfare with a gradual escalation of forces to combat an enemy does not work.

Iraq I. The first Iraqi War took place in 1991 because Iraq invaded neighboring Kuwait in 1990. Spearheaded by the United States, the West responded as rapidly as possible by committing some 500,000 personnel to turn back Iraq's army. Even before the allied invasion of armies and Marines, the US-led forces flew more than 18,000 air missions, more than 116,000 combat air sorties, and dropped 88,500 tons of bombs to "soften up" of the enemy.



In addition to this massive assault, the subsequent storming of allied troops into Iraq resulted in almost 40 miles of destroyed supplies and vehicles in an area called The Highway of Death, as shown in this photo.

There was no gradual escalation of warfare in the first war against Iraq; no incremental bombing; no plodding deployment of soldiers and Marines. America never invaded Iraq. The strategy of immediate massive retaliation resulted in an almost

total destruction of the Iraqi armed forces and a resounding victory for the United States and its allies. In contrast, consider the second Iraqi War.

² Ibid., 239.

Iraqi II. The second war between Iraq and the West (principally, the United States) had a far different outcome than the first war. The US overwhelmed Iraq in the first war and enjoyed the status, prestige, and additional power associated with its lopsided victory. America was stalemated in the second war, and this military standoff resulted in a significant decrease in US influence and standing in the Middle East.³



The invasion of Iraq began on 19 March 2003 and lasted only six weeks. Sufficient forces were deployed for the US-led forces to overwhelm the Iraqi military. The capital city, Baghdad, was captured by coalition forces on 9 April 2003. The initial stage of the war ended on 1 May 2003 (but with much more to come) when President Bush declared the “end of major combat operations” in his mission accomplished speech on the aircraft carrier, USS

Abraham Lincoln, as depicted in this photo.

The United States lost the second Iraqi War. How could that happen after the allied forces had handily won their initial attack on the country? Several factors came into play. One of the most consequential was the administration’s catastrophic mis-management of the occupation of the country under the ruinous leadership of Paul Bremer. Another factor was the reversal of US troop commitments, wherein US armed forces were incrementally withdrawn from Iraqi territory.⁴

In fairness to the White House and other American high-level authorities, in 2010 the Iraqi parliament voted for US military forces to leave the country. Thus, this war came to an end with the once victorious American troops slinking out of the country...gradually, beginning December 2007 and ending December 2011.

Nonetheless, the point is that, once again, massive immediate commitment to a war proved to be successful. In this writer’s view, the biggest mistake made by America was assuming Iraqi could be molded into an American replica. Thus, the US stuck around the country far too long trying to bring this about, until it was asked to leave.

Afghanistan. Without much delay after 9/11, the US forces, aided by Western allies (the coalition), executed plans to invade Afghanistan and defeat Osama bin Laden. Initially, the coalition used extensive intelligence operatives in conjunction with friendly Afghan tribes to wreak havoc on the enemy, al Qaeda, and many Taliban forces. Money was no object, nor was any intent of a gradual escalation.

A full assault, which began 7 October 2001, was also assisted by tribal leaders and their followers, especially the Northern Alliance. The invasion of massive coalition forces, called Enduring Freedom, succeeded in driving the Taliban from power, and forced bin Laden to seek sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, an autonomous area bordering Afghanistan’s eastern provinces.

Mission accomplished, so pack up and leave. Al Qaeda and the Taliban were out of power in Afghanistan. At this time, the US could have withdrawn its forces. But America did not. There was no assurance that if the Western forces left, the Taliban and al Qaeda might not return to continue their dominance. Besides Afghanistan had not yet been converted into an American Potemkin Village.

³ Ibid., 463.

⁴ “Bush Administration May Not Get Iraq Security Deal Before End Term,” Fox News, 9 June 2008.

Thus, the immediate victory of America in Afghanistan from massive, immediate use of the military devolved into the gradual inculcation of more troops and hundreds of social programs aimed at making Afghanistan immune to Muslim reactionaries. What began successfully gradually eroded an unsuccessful occupation.

America spent years attempting to build a country of autonomous tribes into the Western concept of what a nation should be: a democracy, which entailed holding elections to select leaders of an area populated by tribes that were fervently dedicated to Islamic law and customs.

From the time of the initial allied invasion of Afghanistan, the US committed enormous amounts of money, equipment, and personnel to save the country from America's enemies. With the Taliban making a comeback and countering the allied lingering presence, the United States essentially gave up.

America came home, all with good intent. Nonetheless, its initial success was sullied and negated by its protracted and gradual---kick the can down the road---approach to the war and occupation.

Ukraine

Which leads us to return to the central theme of this article: The Russian-Ukraine War, and America's gradual, incremental, piecemeal support of Ukraine.

I hope I have sufficiently documented that the gradual escalation of fighting a war is ineffective, especially if the foe is already armed to the teeth and intent on an immediate war.

For many months, Russia built-up its military forces that surrounded three sides of Ukraine's borders. NATO, with the US being its key member, did not respond to these hostile deployments with their own armed forces. Time and again, US intelligence informed the world Russia was going to invade Ukraine. The NATO response? In view of the massive Russian military deployment into a country adjacent to several NATO members: desultory at best, both militarily and economically.⁵

To make matters worse, in December 2021 President Biden stated there would be no use of American military force; essentially, that US boots on the ground was off the table for consideration. When Putin deployed 3,000 troops to the borders of southeast Ukraine in 2021, the United States, in conjunction with NATO, should have moved---immediately---3,000 troops out of western Europe into Ukraine. When Russia moved additional forces to surround Ukraine from those three sides, NATO should have also deployed more troops, such as the 60,000 troops the United States has stationed in Europe, supplemented by troops from other NATO countries.

The US presence in the NATO forces would have presented Putin with a far different situation than the free pass he received to invade Ukraine. Assaulting Ukrainian soldiers is one thing. Assaulting American soldiers, who would have been invited guests of a sovereign nation, is quite another.⁶

The situation in Ukraine is a matter of life or death for many of its citizens, especially those living in the eastern and southern parts of the country. It is a matter of the survival of the nation. Given this dire situation, what has been America's response? Yes, aid, both financially

⁵ Black, *Fractured*, 360.

⁶ Ibid.

and militarily. But as discussed, this aid is taking place in an incremental and gradual fashion, historically a strategy shown to be ineffective.

The Past Handicaps America

Take another look at the table. Of the six wars highlighted in the article, three of them turned out to be negative for the United States and have had profound effects on America's collective psyche.

Our leaders and many citizens are afraid of becoming involved in another Vietnam, another Iraqi II, another Afghanistan. But our history of defending other countries who are trying to practice democracy and who align with our values and complement our self-interests make it difficult for us to ignore the dire situation of, in this article, Ukraine.

Instead of "getting in or getting out," we kick the can down the road, while Putin and his gang of autocratic imperialists try to take back the east European countries Russia lost in the Cold War.

We owe it to the Ukrainian, and we owe it to our own moral responsibility to "get in," and not leave Ukraine hanging in the wind. By get in, I mean:

Given America's recent history, it is likely the US will not commit troops to any battles unless it is directly threatened. Its role as the world's policeman seems to be coming to an end. Consequently, for any countries seeking our help from the Vladimir Putins of the world, these countries will have to furnish their own manpower.

Nonetheless, they may someday ask America, the most powerful nation in the world, to transfer some of that power to them in their fight for existence---not in soldiers, but in material and military aid. As France did for our country in its fight for independence from England during the Revolutionary War.