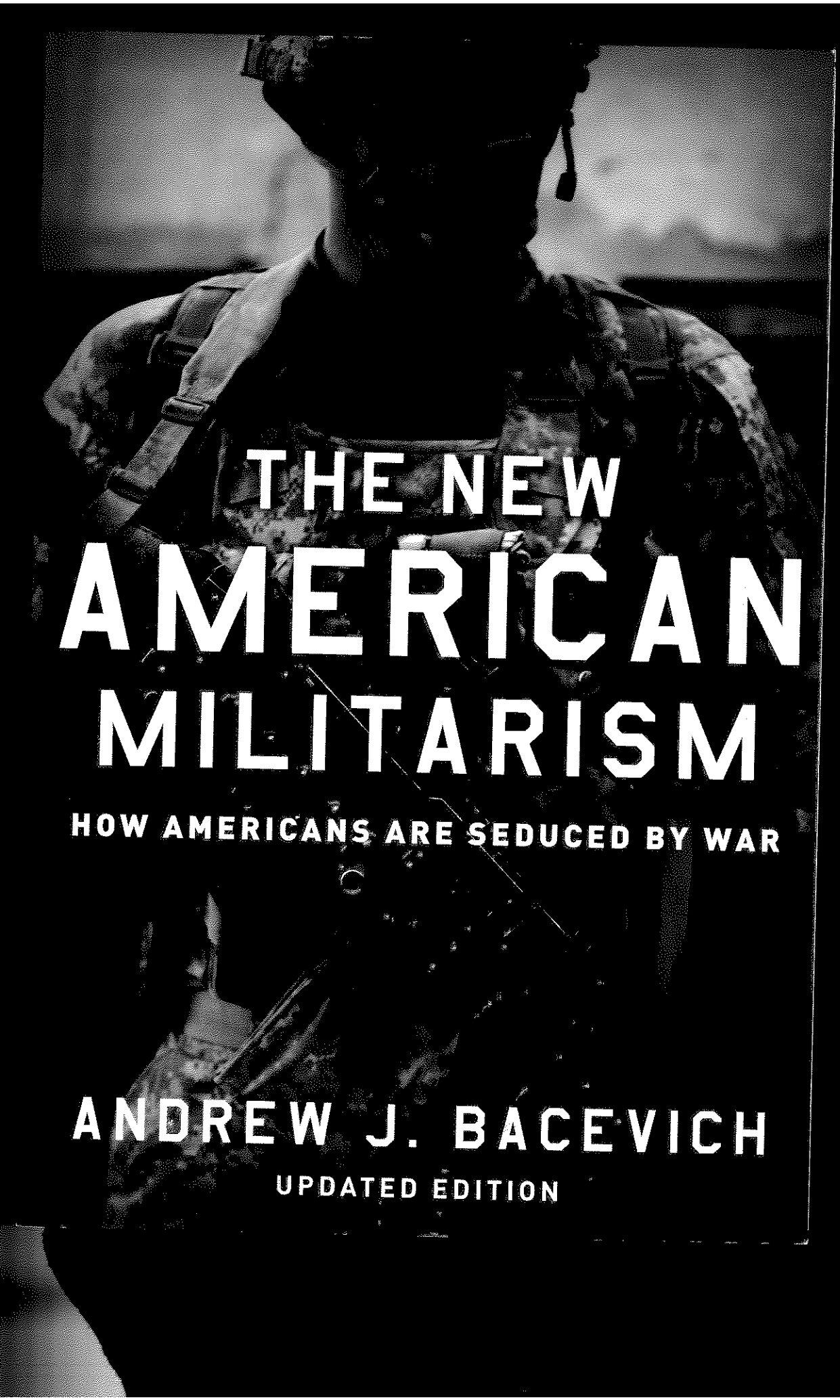

THE NEW AMERICAN MILITARISM

HOW AMERICANS ARE SEDUCED BY WAR

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UPDATED EDITION

The real World War IV began in 1980, and Jimmy Carter of all people declared it.

To be sure, Carter acted only under extreme duress, prompted by the irrevocable collapse of a policy to which he and each of his seven immediate

predecessors had adhered, specifically the arrangements designed to guarantee the United States a privileged position in the Persian Gulf. For Cold War–era U.S. policymakers, preoccupied with Europe and East Asia as the main theaters of action, the Gulf prior to 1980 had figured as something of a sideshow. Jimmy Carter now changed all that, thrusting the Gulf into the uppermost tier of U.S. geopolitical priorities.

From 1945 through 1979, the aim of U.S. policy in that region had been twofold: to ensure stability and American access, but to do so in a way that minimized overt U.S. military involvement. In February 1945, Franklin Roosevelt had laid down the basic lines of this policy at a now famous meeting with King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia on an American warship anchored in the Great Bitter Lake. Out of this meeting came an understanding: henceforth, Saudi Arabia could count on the United States to guarantee its security; and the United States could count on Saudi Arabia to provide it preferential treatment when it came to exploiting the kingdom's vast, untapped reserves of oil.[3]

In implementing this commitment, the United States opted whenever possible to keep its forces over the horizon and out of sight. For religious reasons, the Saudis considered this essential. As huge wartime U.S. troop deployments in Europe and the Pacific gave way after 1945 to onerous Cold War–mandated requirements to continue garrisoning Europe and the Pacific, the limitation suited Washington as well.

In military parlance, U.S. strategy in the Middle East from the 1940s through the 1970s adhered to the principle known as economy of force. Rather than establishing a large presence in the region, Roosevelt's successors sought to achieve their objectives in ways that entailed a minimal expenditure of American resources and especially of U.S. military power. From time to time, when absolutely necessary, Washington might organize a brief show of force—for example, in 1946 when Harry Truman ordered the USS *Missouri* to the eastern Mediterranean to warn the Soviets to cease meddling in Turkey, or in 1958 when Dwight D. Eisenhower sent U.S. Marines into Lebanon for a brief, bloodless occupation—but these modest gestures proved to be the exception rather than the rule.

The clear preference was for a low profile and a hidden hand. Although by no means averse to engineering "regime change" when necessary, Washington preferred covert action to the direct use of force; the CIA coup that in 1953 overthrew Mohammed Mossadegh in Tehran offers the best-known

example.[4] To police the region, Washington looked to surrogates—through the 1960s British imperial forces and, once Britain withdrew from "East of Suez," the shah of Iran.[5] To build up indigenous self-defense (or regime defense) capabilities of select nations, it arranged for private contractors to provide weapons, training, and advice—an indirect way of employing U.S. military expertise. The Vinnell Corporation's ongoing "modernization" of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), a project now well over a quarter century old, remains a prime example.[6]

By the end of 1979, however, two events had left this approach in a shambles. The first was the Iranian Revolution, which sent the shah into exile and installed in Tehran an Islamist regime adamantly hostile to the United States. The second was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which put the Red Army in a position where it appeared to pose a direct threat to the entire Persian Gulf and hence to the West's oil supply.

Faced with these twin crises, Jimmy Carter concluded that treating the Middle East as a secondary theater, ancillary to the Cold War, no longer made sense. A great contest for control of that region had been joined, one that Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini had made unmistakably clear was not simply an offshoot of the already existing East-West competition. This was something quite different.

Rejecting out of hand any possibility that the United States might come to terms with or accommodate itself to the changes afoot in the Persian Gulf, Carter claimed for the United States a central role in determining exactly what those changes would be. In January 1980, to forestall any further deterioration of the U.S. position in the Gulf, he threw the weight of American military power into the balance.

In his State of the Union Address of that year, the president enunciated what became known as the Carter Doctrine. "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region," he declared, "will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."[7]

From Carter's time down to the present day, the doctrine bearing his name has remained sacrosanct. As a consequence, each of President Carter's successors has expanded the level of U.S. military involvement and operations in the region. Even today, American political leaders cling to their belief that the skillful application of military power will enable the United

States to decide the fate not simply of the Persian Gulf proper but—to use the more expansive terminology of the present day—of the entire Greater Middle East. This gigantic project is the true World War IV, begun in 1980 and now well into its third decade.

What considerations prompted Jimmy Carter, the least warlike of all recent U.S. presidents, to take this portentous step? The Pentagon's first Persian Gulf commander offered a simple answer: his basic mission, Lieutenant General Robert Kingston said, was "to assure the unimpeded flow of oil from the Arabian Gulf."[8]

In fact, General Kingston was selling his president and his country short. What was true of the three other presidents who had committed the United States to world wars—Wilson, FDR, and Truman—remained true in the case of President Carter and World War IV as well. The overarching motive for action was the preservation of the American way of life.

By the beginning of 1980—facing the prospect of a very tough fight for reelection later that year—a chastened Jimmy Carter had learned a hard lesson: it was not the prospect of making do with less that sustained American-style liberal democracy but the promise of more. By the time that he enunciated the Carter Doctrine, the president had come to realize that the themes of his "Crisis of Confidence" speech six months before—sacrifice, conservation, lowered expectations, personal inconvenience endured on behalf of the common good—were political nonstarters. What Americans wanted for themselves and demanded from their government was freedom, defined as more choice, more opportunity, and above all greater abundance, measured in material terms. That meant that they (along with other developed nations whose own prosperity helped sustain that of the United States) needed assured access to cheap oil and lots of it.

In promulgating the Carter Doctrine, the president was effectively renouncing his vision of a less materialistic, more self-reliant democracy. His about-face did not achieve its intended political purpose of enabling him to preserve his hold on the White House—Ronald Reagan had already tagged Carter as a pessimist whose temperament was at odds with the rest of the country—but it did put in motion a huge shift in U.S. military policy, the implications of which gradually appeared over the course of the next two decades.

Critics might cavil that the resulting militarization of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf amounted to a devil's bargain, trading blood for oil. Carter

saw things differently. The contract had a third element. On the surface the exchange might entail blood-for-oil, but beneath the surface the aim was to guarantee the ever-increasing affluence that underwrites the modern American conception of liberty. Without exception, every one of President Carter's successors has tacitly endorsed this formula. It is in this sense that World War IV and the new American militarism manifest the American will to be free.

Throughout the first phase of World War IV, from 1980 to 1990, the United States viewed Iran as its main problem and even toyed with the idea that Iraq might be part of a solution; Washington saw Saddam Hussein as someone with whom it might make common cause against the mullahs in Tehran. During the second phase of World War IV, extending through the

1990s, Iraq supplanted Iran as the main U.S. adversary, and policymakers saw the Iraqi dictator himself as their chief nemesis. Throughout the decade, U.S. policymakers experimented with ways of dealing with that opponent while also attempting to prevent the twin concerns for oil and Israel from getting in the way of one another.

Various and sundry exertions ensued, but as the U.S. military profile in the region became ever more prominent, the difficulties with which the United States felt obliged to contend also multiplied. Indeed, rather than eliminating Saddam, the growing reliance on military power served only to rouse greater antagonism directed at the United States. Policies intended to shore up the American position in the Greater Middle East only bred challenges to that position. Actions taken to enhance Persian Gulf stability—more or less synonymous with guaranteeing the safety and survival of the Saudi royal family—instead produced instability. In this regard, the mistakes and miscalculations marring U.S. policy during phase two of World War IV led directly to the war's third and current phase.

Phase two began in August 1990 when Saddam Hussein's army overran Kuwait. From the U.S. perspective, Saddam's aim was clear. He sought to achieve regional hegemony and to control, either directly or indirectly, the preponderant part of the Persian Gulf's oil wealth. Were Saddam to achieve those objectives, there was every likelihood that in due time he would turn on Israel.[39]

So after only the briefest hesitation, the administration of George H. W. Bush mounted a forthright response. At the head of a very large international coalition, the nation marched off to war, U.S. forces handily ejecting the Iraqi occupiers and restoring the Al-Sabah family to its throne. Bowing to American pressure, Israel stayed on the sidelines. Its assigned mission accomplished, the officer corps led by Colin Powell had little interest in pressing its luck. The American army was eager to scoop up its winnings and go home.

The elder President Bush dearly hoped that Operation Desert Storm might become a great historical watershed, laying the basis for a more law-abiding international system. In fact, the war turned about to be both less and more than he anticipated. Out of that demonstration of American military prowess, no new world order emerged, but the war saddled the United States with new obligations from which there came yet more headaches and complications.

Saddam survived in power by brutally suppressing those whom the Bush administration had urged to rise up in opposition to the dictator. After first averting its eyes from the fate of the Iraqi Shiites and Kurds, the administration eventually found itself shamed into action. To protect the Kurds (and to prevent Kurdish refugees from triggering a military response by neighboring Turkey, a key U.S. ally), Bush sent U.S. forces into northern Iraq. To limit Saddam's ability to use his army as an instrument of repression, the Bush administration, with British support, declared the existence of "no-fly zones" across much of northern and southern Iraq. In April 1991, Anglo-American air forces began routine combat patrols of Iraqi airspace, a mission that continued without interruption for the next twelve years. During his final weeks in office, as one means of keeping Saddam "in his box," the elder President Bush initiated the practice of launching punitive air strikes against Iraqi military targets.

Thus, a year after what had seemed to be a decisive victory in Operation Desert Storm, the United States had transitioned willy-nilly to a policy that appeared anything but decisive. The Bush administration called that policy containment. As one result of this new policy, the presence of substantial U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, initially conceived as temporary, became permanent. A contingent of approximately twenty-five thousand U.S. troops remained after Desert Storm as a Persian Gulf coustabulary—or, from the perspective of many Arabs, as an occupying army of infidels. As a second result, the United States fell into the habit of routinely employing force to punish the Iraqi regime. What U.S. policymakers called containment was really an open-ended quasi-war.

From a World War IV perspective, this new policy of containment-with-bombs formed just one part of the legacy that President Bush bequeathed to his successor, Bill Clinton. That legacy had two additional elements. The first was Somalia, the impoverished, chaotic, and now famine-stricken Islamic "failed state" into which Bush sent U.S. forces following his defeat in the November 1992 elections. Bush descrihed the U.S. mission as a humanitarian one and promised to have American troops out of the country by the time that he left office. When Clinton became president, however, there they remained. The second element of the legacy inherited by Clinton was the so-called peace process, Bush's post–Desert Storm initiative aimed at persuading the Arab world once and for all to accept Israel.

Although not for want of trying, President Clinton was unable to extract from this ambiguous legacy much of tangible value. Over the course of his eight years in office, he clung to the Bush policy of containing Iraq while ratcheting up the frequency with which the United States used violence to enforce that policy. Indeed, during the two concluding years of the Clinton presidency, the United States bombed Iraq on almost a daily basis, a campaign largely ignored by the media and thus aptly dubbed by one observer "Operation Desert Yawn."[40]

In the summer of 1993, Clinton had also ratcheted up the U.S. military commitment in Somalia. Here the results proved disastrous. With the famous Mogadishu firefight of October 1993, Clinton quickly threw in the towel, tacitly accepting defeat at the hands of Islamic fighters. Somalia per se mattered little. Somalia as a battlefield of World War IV mattered quite a bit. The speedy U.S. withdrawal after Mogadishu affirmed to many the apparent lesson of Beirut a decade earlier: Americans lacked the stomach for real fighting; if seriously challenged, they would fold. At least, this was the lesson that Osama bin Laden drew. In the August 1996 fatwa against the United States, he cited the failure of the U.S. policy in Lebanon as evidence of America's "false courage" and found in Somalia proof of U.S. "impotence and weaknesses." When "tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American Pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu," crowed the leader of Al Qaeda, "you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you."[41]

From Mogadishu onward, the momentum shifted inexorably in favor of those contesting American efforts to dominate the Gulf. For the balance of the Clinton era, the United States found itself in a reactive posture. Over the next several years, the United States sustained a series of minor but painful and painfully embarrassing setbacks: in November 1995, the bombing of SANG headquarters in Riyadh; in June 1996, an attack on the U.S. military barracks at Khobar Towers in Dhahran; in August 1998, simultaneous attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; in August 2000, the near-sinking of an American warship, the USS *Cole,* during a port call at Aden.

To each of these in turn, the Clinton administration promised a prompt, decisive response. Whenever a U.S. response actually materialized, however, it proved innocuous. The low point came in late August 1998 following the African embassy bombings. With the United States now locked in

combat with what Bill Clinton openly referred to as "the bin Laden network," the president ordered cruise missile strikes against a handful of primitive training camps in Afghanistan, with a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory allegedly involved in the production of chemical weapons thrown in for good measure. Although the president spoke grimly of a "long, ongoing struggle between freedom and fanaticism" and vowed that the United States was "prepared to do all that we can for as long as we must," the operation, given the code name Infinite Reach, accomplished next to nothing and was over as soon as it began.[42] The disparity between words and actions—between the operation's grandiose name and its trivial impact—spoke volumes. In truth, no one in the Clinton White House had a clear conception of what it was that the United States needed to do and to whom.

Finally, despite Clinton's own energetic and admirable contributions, the peace process did not yield peace. Instead, the final collapse of that process at Camp David in 2000 gave way to a new cycle of Palestinian terrorist attacks and Israeli reprisals. An alienated Arab world convinced itself that the United States and Israel were conspiring to humiliate and oppress Muslims. Just as the Israel Defense Forces occupied Gaza and the West Bank, so too the U.S. military seemingly intended to occupy the Middle East as a whole. In Arab eyes, the presence of U.S. troops amounted to "a new American colonialism," an expression of a larger effort to "seek control over Arab political and economic affairs."[43] Moreover, just as Israel appeared callous in its treatment of the Palestinians, so too the United States appeared callous in its attitude toward Iraqis, persisting in a policy of sanctions in which the burden of punishment fell not on Saddam Hussein but on the Iraqi people.

The end of the 1980s had found the Reagan administration engaged in a far-reaching contest for control of the Middle East, a de facto war whose existence President Reagan himself either could not see or was unwilling to acknowledge. Ten years later, events ought to have removed any doubts about whether or not the circumstance facing the United States qualified as a war, but the Clinton administration's insistence on describing the adversary as disembodied "terrorists" robbed those events of any coherent political context. The various episodes constituting the war's major engagements remained inexplicable, unfathomable, and seemingly unrelated.

In the manner of his immediate predecessors, Clinton refused even to concede that the violence directed against the United States might stem

from some plausible (which is not to imply justifiable) motivation—even as Osama bin Laden outlined his intentions with impressive clarity. In his 1996 Declaration of Jihad, for example, bin Laden identified his objectives: to overthrow the corrupt Saudi regime that had become a tool of the "Zionist-Crusader alliance"; to expel the infidels from the land of the Two Holy Places; and to ensure the worldwide triumph of Islam. But megalomania does not necessarily preclude shrewdness. As Michael Klare has observed, bin Laden's immediate aim was more limited, namely "to destroy the 1945 compact forged by President Roosevelt and King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud."[44] A perfectly logical first step toward that end was to orchestrate a campaign of terror against the United States.[45]

For Clinton even to acknowledge that agenda was also to acknowledge that opposition to the U.S. presence in and around the Persian Gulf did not simply emerge out of nowhere. It had a history, one fraught like all history with ambiguity. In this case, that history exposed the underside of American Exceptionalism. In the Persian Gulf, even as it proclaimed itself democracy's greatest friend, the United States had behaved just like any other nation. For decades it had single-mindedly pursued its own concrete interests, with only occasional regard for how its actions affected others and with even less attention given to how they might give rise to future difficulties. Expediency had dictated that American policymakers avert their eyes from the fact that throughout much of the Islamic world the United States had aligned itself with regimes that were arbitrary, corrupt, and oppressive.

In the annals of statecraft, U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf from FDR through Clinton did not qualify as having been notably harsh or irresponsible, but neither had it been particularly wise or enlightened. Certainly it had not been the handiwork of innocents. In short, bin Laden's campaign, however contemptible, and opposition to the U.S. ambitions in the Greater Middle East more generally, emerged at least in part as a response to prior U.S. policies and actions, in which lofty ideals and high moral purpose seldom figured. The United States cannot be held culpable for the maladies that today find expression in violent Islamic radicalism. But neither can the United States absolve itself of any and all responsibility for the conditions that have exacerbated those maladies. After several decades of acting as the preeminent power in the Persian Gulf, America did not arrive at the end of the twentieth century with clean hands.

Years before 9/11, bin Laden understood that World War IV had been fully joined, and he seems to have rejoiced in the prospect of a fight to the finish. Even as they engaged in a wide array of military activities intended to deflect threats to U.S. control of the Persian Gulf and its environs, a succession of American presidents persisted in pretending otherwise. For them, World War IV remained a furtive enterprise.

Unlike Franklin Roosevelt, who had deceived the American people but understood long before December 7, 1941, that he was steadily moving the United States toward direct engagement in a monumental struggle, the lesser statesmen who inhabited the Oval Office during the 1980s and 1990s in weaving their deceptions also managed to confuse themselves. Despite endless assertions that the United States sought only peace, Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton were each in fact waging war and building toward a larger one. But a coherent strategy for bringing that war to a successful conclusion remained elusive.

Perhaps for that very reason, whereas bin Laden, playing a weak hand, played it with considerable skill, the United States, even as it flung bombs and missiles about with abandon, seemed throughout the 1990s to dither. During that decade, World War IV became bigger and the costs mounted, but its resolution appeared more distant than ever. The Bush and Clinton administrations used force in the region not so much as an extension of policy but as a way of distracting attention from the contradictions that riddled U.S. policy. Bombing something—at times literally almost anything—became a convenient way of keeping up appearances. Thus, despite (or perhaps due to) the military hyperactivity of these two administrations, the overall U.S. position deteriorated even further during the war's second phase.