

# Drift



*The*  
UNMOORING  
*of* AMERICAN  
MILITARY  
POWER

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Rachel  
Maddow

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## Drift

“America is in urgent need of a real debate over its addiction to sprawling militarism and endless war. It affects, and degrades, every aspect of national life: political, cultural, and economic. Nobody is better positioned to trigger that debate than Rachel Maddow, and that’s exactly what she does in this **startlingly insightful and well-written** book. By stripping away the propaganda that distorts national security policy and laying bare its reality, Maddow has written **one of those rare political books that can transform American understanding of what their government is actually doing.**”

—GLENN GREENWALD, columnist for Salon and author of *Liberty and Justice for Some*

“Written with the flair for scintillating satire that has endeared Rachel Maddow to liberals and moderates alike—and infuriated neoconservatives, evangelicals, and some tea partiers—*Drift* is funny, rich, and right. But at its end, when you put it down, you will be troubled. We are losing our republic and Ms. Maddow tells you why.”

—LAWRENCE WILKERSON, professor of government and public policy at the College of William and Mary and former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell

“*Drift* is a serious and carefully conceived piece of investigative reporting, illuminating a subject—the vast and mostly secret militarization of our society—that most Americans have no idea of, thanks in large part to the failure of many high-profile journalists to discuss it. Rachel has once again broken the mold and she should be immensely proud of this book, which is written in the same bright, clear, engaging style she brings to broadcast television.”

—MATT TAIBBI, author of *Griftopia*

“Rachel Maddow’s *Drift* is a long overdue and provocative examination of the abuse and excesses, and just plain foolish elements in our national security systems. These are issues that deserve our attention.”

—TOM BROKAW, NBC News special correspondent and bestselling author of *The Greatest Generation*

“In *Drift*, people who love Rachel Maddow will discover that her gift for finding amazing anecdotes and funny, revealing details totally translates to the page. People who hate her may be surprised by how often in *Drift* she espouses some of the most conservative values: a suspicion of big government and unbridled federal power, a zeal to cut wasteful spending and a yearning to return to the intentions of the Founding Fathers.”

—IRA GLASS, host of public radio’s *This American Life*

“Brilliant book. *Drift* will stun Americans with its portrait of a hyperventilating United

States that has produced too many real-life *Dr. Strangelove* moments. Drawing from thoughtful, national-interest-driven conservatives and not just the liberal establishment, Maddow makes the case that what ought to be a strong nation is instead risking shipwreck by letting war and military matters escape real political and economic gravitational force. **Every page informs and angers at the same time.**”

—STEVE CLEMONS, Washington editor-at-large for *The Atlantic*

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# Drift

The Unmooring of American  
Military Power

Rachel  
Maddow



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To former vice president Dick Cheney.

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*Oh, please let me interview you.*

Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds are added to those of subduing the force of the people. The same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes and the opportunities of fraud growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneration of manners and of morals engendered by both. No nation could reserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.

Those truths are well established. They are read in every page which records the progression from a less arbitrary to a more arbitrary government, or the transition from a popular government to an aristocracy or a monarchy.

—James Madison, “Political Observations,” April 20, 1799

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### Is It Too Late to Descope This?

IN THE LITTLE TOWN WHERE I LIVE IN HAMPSHIRE COUNTY, Massachusetts, we now have a “Public Safety Complex” around the corner from what used to be our hokey Andy Griffith–esque fire station. In the cascade of post-9/11 Homeland Security money in the first term of the George W. Bush administration, our town’s share of the loot bought us a new fire truck—one that turned out to be a few feet longer than the garage where the town kept our old fire truck. So then we got some more Homeland money to build something big enough to house the new truck. In homage to the origin of the funding, the local auto detailer airbrushed on the side of the new truck a patriotic tableau of a billowing flaglike banner, a really big bald eagle, and the burning World Trade Center towers.

The American taxpayers’ investment in my town’s security didn’t stop at the new safety complex. I can see further fruit of those Homeland dollars just beyond my neighbor’s back fence. While most of us in town depend on well water, there are a few houses that for the past decade or so have been hooked up to a municipal water supply. And when I say “a few” I mean a few: I think there are seven houses on municipal water. Around the time we got our awesome giant new fire truck, we also got a serious security upgrade to that town water system. Its tiny pump house is about the size of two phone booths and accessible by a dirt driveway behind my neighbor’s back lot. Or at least it used to be. The entire half-acre parcel of land around that pump house is now ringed by an eight-foot-tall chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, and fronted with a motion-sensitive electronically controlled motorized gate. On our side of town we call it “Little Guantánamo.” Mostly it’s funny, but there is some neighborly consternation over how frowsy Little Guantánamo gets every summer. Even though it’s town-owned land, access to Little Guantánamo is apparently above the security clearance of the guy paid to mow and brush-hog. Right up to the fence, it’s my neighbor’s land and they keep everything trim and tidy. But inside that fence, the grass gets eye-high. It’s going feral in there.

It’s not just the small-potatoes post-9/11 Homeland spending that feels a little off mission. It’s the big-ticket stuff too. Nobody ever made an argument to the American people, for instance, that the thing we ought to do in Afghanistan, the way we ought to stick it to Osama bin Laden, the way to dispense American tax dollars to maximize American aims in that faraway country, would be to build a brand-new neighborhood in that country’s capital city full of rococo narco-chic McMansions and apartment/office buildings with giant sculptures of eagles on their roofs and stoned guards lounging on the sidewalks, wearing bandoliers and plastic boots. No one ever made the case that this is what America ought to build in response to 9/11. But that is what we built. An average outlay of almost \$5 billion a month over ten years (and counting) has created a twisted war economy in Kabul. Afghanistan is still one of the four poorest countries on earth; but now it’s one of the four poorest countries on earth with a neighborhood in its capital city that looks like New Jersey in the 1930s and ’40s, when

Newark mobsters built garish mansions and dotted the grounds with lawn jockeys and hand-painted neo-neoclassic marble statues.

Walking around this Zircon-studded neighborhood of Wazir Akbar Khan (named for the general who commanded the Afghan Army's rout of the British in 1842), one of the weirder things is that the roads and the sewage and trash situation are palpably worse here than in many other Kabul neighborhoods. Even torqued-up steel-frame SUVs have a hard time making it down some of these desolate streets; evasive driving techniques in Wazir Akbar Khan often have more to do with potholes than potshots. One of the bigger crossroads in the neighborhood is an ad hoc dump. Street kids are there all day, picking through the new arrivals for food and for stuff to salvage or sell.

There's nothing all that remarkable about a rich-looking neighborhood in a poor country. What's remarkable here is that there aren't rich Afghan people in this rich Afghan neighborhood. Whether or not the owners of these giant houses would stand for the undrivable streets, the piles of garbage, the sewage running down the sidewalk right outside their security walls, they're not here to see it. They've moved to Dubai, or to the United States, or somewhere else that's safer for themselves and their money. (Or our money.) Most of these fancy properties in Wazir Akbar Khan were built by the Afghan elite with profits from the international influx of cash that accompanied the mostly American influx of war a decade ago—built to display status or to reap still more war dollars from the Western agencies and journalists and politicians and diplomats and private contractors who need proper places to stay in the capital. The surges big and small have been good to the property barons of Wazir Akbar Khan: residential real estate values were reportedly up 75 percent in 2008 alone. Check the listings under Kabul "villas" today and you'll find properties priced from \$7,000 to \$25,000 a month with specs like this: four floors, a dozen rooms, nine toilets, three big kitchens, sleeps twenty.

No one sold the American people on this incarnation of Wazir Akbar Khan as one of the desired outcomes of all those hundreds of billions of tax dollars spent in Afghanistan. But it's what we have built at Ground Zero Afghanistan. Whatever we were aiming at, this is the manifest result.

Consider also the new hundred-million-dollar wastewater treatment facility in Fallujah, Anbar Province, Iraq, which provides only spotty wastewater treatment to the people of the city. In 2004, after the US military all but demolished Fallujah in the deadliest urban battle of the Iraq War, it was decided that the way to turn the residents of the recalcitrant Sun Triangle away from Al-Qaeda and toward their country's fledgling government would be to build a sewage system for all of Fallujah. The initial \$33 million contract was let to a South Carolina company in June 2004, while the city was still smoldering. There was no time to waste. The Bush administration's Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office identified the sewage system as a "key national reconciliation issue." The goal was to have it up and running by the beginning of 2006.

Nearly five years after the deadline, having clocked in at three times its initial budget, there was still not a single residence on line. Accordingly, the plan was "descoped"—scaled down—to serve just a third of the city. In the midst then of doing a third of the work for triple the money, there was talk of walking away from the project without connecting even that one-third of Fallujah residences to the aborted plant. We had built a shit-processing plant.

that didn't process shit.

And it gets worse. According to a 2008 report by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, about 10 percent of the money paid to Iraqi subcontractors for the Fallujah project ended up in the hands of "terrorist organizations." According to that same report, residents near two particular pump stations "[might] become angry" if the system ever did come on line, because "funding constraints" made "odor control facilities" impractical. Even households that were not part of the collection system would still be subject to what the Iraqi minister of municipalities and public works delicately called the "big stink." The eighty-page report also noted, with dry finality, "The project file lacked any documentation to support that the provisional Iraqi government wanted this project in the first place."

When, finally, late in 2011, seven years into the project, at a cost of \$108 million, we managed to get a quarter of the homes in Fallujah hooked into that system, this partial accomplishment was not met with resounding huzzahs. "In the end it would be dubious to conclude that this project helped stabilize the city, enhanced the local citizenry's faith in government, built local service capacity, won hearts or minds, or stimulated the economy," the Special Inspector General said in 2011. "It is difficult to conclude that the project was worth the investment." A hundred million American dollars, partially diverted to the group fighting US troops, to build (poorly) a giant, unwanted wastewater-treatment project that provides nothing but the "big stink" for three-quarters of the city. No one would argue for something like this as a good use of US tax dollars. But it is in fact what we bought.

Here at home, according to an exhaustive and impressive two-year-long investigation by the *Washington Post*, the taxpayer-funded Global War on Terror also built enough ultra-high-security office space (Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facilities, or SCIF, in bureaucrat-speak) to fill twenty-two US Capitol Buildings: seventeen million square feet of offices in thirty-three handsome and generously funded new complexes powered up twenty-four hours a day, where an army of nearly one million American professionals spies on the world and the homeland. It's as if we turned the entire working population of Detroit and Milwaukee into high-security-clearance spooks and analysts.

The spy boom has been a beautiful windfall for architects, construction companies, interior specialists, and above all defense contractors, enriching thousands of private companies and dozens of local economies hugging the Capital Beltway. All those SCIFs and the rest of the government-contractor gravy train have made suburban Washington, DC, home to six of the ten wealthiest counties in America. Falls Church, Loudoun County, and Fairfax County in Virginia are one, two, and three. Goodbye, Nassau County, New York. Take that, Oyster Bay.

The crown jewel of this sprawling intelligopolis is Liberty Crossing, in the Virginia suburb of Washington—an 850,000-square-foot (and growing) complex that houses the National Counterterrorism Center. The agency was created and funded in 2004 because, despite spending \$30 billion on intelligence before 9/11, the various spy agencies in our country do not talk to one another. So the \$30 billion annual intelligence budget was boosted by 25 percent, and with that increase we built ourselves a clean, well-lighted edifice, concealed by GPS jammers and reflective windows, where intelligence collected by 1,271 government agencies and 1,931 private companies under government contract is supposedly coordinated.

It is a big, big idea, and perhaps necessary—the financial commitment to it implies at least

that we think it is. But it turns out Liberty Crossing is a bureaucratic haystack into which the now even more vast intelligence community tosses its shiniest needles. When a businessman relayed to CIA agents in Nigeria that his son seemed to be under the spell of terrorists and had gone to Yemen, perhaps for training, that duly reported needle got sucked into the fifty-thousand-reports-per-year haystack, only to be discovered *after* Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab boarded a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit and tried to set off a bomb he'd stuffed into his underpants. "The complexity of this system defies description," a retired Army lieutenant general and intelligence specialist told the *Post* reporters. "We can't effectively assess whether it's making us more safe."

If no one knows if it's making us safer, why have we built it? Why are we still building it, at breakneck speed? Liberty Crossing is slated to almost double in size over the next decade. Remember the fierce debate in Congress over whether or not it's worth it to do that? No? Maybe. But neither. But we keep building it. We keep chugging along.

National security is a real imperative for our country—for any country. But the connection between that imperative and what we do about it has gone as frowsy as my hometown's little gas pump station in high August. Our national security policy isn't much related to its stated justifications anymore. To whatever extent we do argue and debate what defense and intelligence policy ought to be, that debate—our political process—doesn't actually determine what we do. We're not directing that policy anymore; it just follows its own course. Which means we've effectively lost control of a big part of who we are as a country. And we've broken faith with some of the best advice the founders ever gave us.

Our constitutional inheritance didn't point us in this direction. If the colonists had rejected British militarism and the massive financial burden of maintaining the British military, America wouldn't exist. The Constitutional Convention debated whether America should even have a standing army. The founders feared that maintaining one would drain our resources in the same way that maintaining the eighteenth-century British military had burdened the colonies. They worried that a powerful military could rival civilian government for power in our new country, and of course they worried that having a standing army around would create too much of a temptation to use it. Those worries about the inevitable incentives to war were part of what led to the division of government at the heart of our Constitution, building into the structure of our new country a deliberate peaceable bias.

But in the past generation or two, we've drifted off that historical course. The steering has gone wobbly, the brakes have failed. It's not a conspiracy, there aren't rogue elements pushing us to subvert our national interests to instead serve theirs. It's been more entertaining and more boneheaded than that.

The good news is we don't need a radical new vision of post-Cold War American power. We just need a "small c" conservative return to our constitutional roots, a course correction. This book is about how and why we've drifted. It wasn't inevitable. And it's fixable.



## G.I. Joe, Ho Chi Minh, and the American Art of Fighting About Fighting

THOMAS JEFFERSON WAS A LIFELONG AND HABITUAL FRETTER. He was wary of animal foods, spirituous liquors, state religion, national debt, abolitionists, embittered slaves, unelected federal judges, Yankee politicians, Yankee professors, and Yankees in general. But his predominant and animating worry was the centralization and consolidation of power—in large banks, in close-knit and secret societies, and, most of all, in governments: the enemy within. “There are instruments so dangerous to the rights of the nation and which place them so totally at the mercy of their governors, that those governors, whether legislative or executive, should be restrained from keeping such instruments on foot, but in well-defined cases,” Jefferson wrote as the Constitution of the United States was being debated. “Such an instrument is a standing army.”

His feelings didn’t much change with time. In 1792 he wrote, “One of my favorite ideas is never to keep an unnecessary soldier.” In 1799 he wrote to a political friend that he was “not for a standing army in a time of peace, which may overwhelm public sentiment.”

Classicist that he was, Jefferson was apt to bolster his arguments with well-polished (if not strictly accurate) examples of early Western history: “The Greeks and Romans had no standing armies, yet they defended themselves.... Their system was to make every man a soldier and oblige him to repair to the standard of his country whenever that was reared. This made them invincible; and the same remedy will make us so.”

That’s at best a loose military history of Greece and Rome—they did rely at times on standing armies. But you see where he’s going with this. Jefferson acted on his “unnecessary soldier” idea when he became president in 1801. He cut the standing army by a third and left the defense against foreign invasion largely to a “well-regulated militia” under the control of the various states and localities. And he remained unmoved by what he viewed as alarmist and cynical calls for a large nationalized active military. “Were armies to be raised whenever a speck of war is visible in our horizon,” he warned Congress in his sixth annual presidential message, “we never should have been without them. Our resources would have been exhausted on dangers which never happened, instead of being reserved for what really to take place.”

Jeffersonian prudence held sway in this country for a century and a half. The professional military was an institution of limited reach and power; in times of peace we kept the regular army busy building defense works and ports and bridges. Whenever we went to war in a big way, we went to war with citizen-soldiers; the small nucleus of an active-duty army swelled with militiamen, reservists, National Guardsmen, enlisted persons, and draftees. When the United States went to war, the entire United States went to war. And no nation’s military

demobilized with such verve and velocity when the fighting was over. Hell, volunteers on the battlefields were legally separating themselves from the US Army while the Mexican War started in 1847. The War of 1812, the Creek War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War—they were all the same: the clarion call to duty, the citizens' eager answer, the victory parades (having picked our fights judiciously, we were, by the mid-twentieth century, something like 9–0), and the return to home and hearth. Within eighteen months of the conclusion of World War I, Congress had completely dismantled the American Expeditionary Forces and reduced the active-duty military from four million soldiers back to the prewar number of less than three hundred thousand. The effect of tossing more than three million suddenly unemployed men back into an ailing job market did not have an altogether sanguinary effect on the national economy, or on the national mood ... but hey, nobody ever said war was supposed to be a jobs program.

Mobilization for World War II was even larger, and the postwar drawdown nearly as dramatic. In 1945 there were twelve million people on active duty in the US Armed Forces; five years later, that number had dropped 88 percent, to just one and a half million. But this stunning demobilization had few concomitant dislocations. Call it the War-and-Peace Dividend or the World's Greatest Stimulus Package. A country that left a Great Depression at home to confront the Axis powers overseas converted the massive government spending of the war effort into an unprecedented civilian economic boom when that war was won. Factories that had been making jeeps and warplanes and submarine engines and ammunition were now turning out new Chevrolet Bel Airs, Allis-Chalmers tractors, Cessna 170 airplanes, and Frigidaire iceboxes. It didn't hurt our standing in the world economy that about one in five able-bodied young men in Germany and the Soviet Union had been killed in the war, and at least one in ten of Japan's. And it didn't hurt that the industrial cities of Japan and Germany (and much of Western Europe, for that matter) were smoking holes; of the 10 million cars manufactured worldwide in 1950, the United States made more than 8 million of them, and sold 'em all over the world.

We were a country that could afford to be generous to our returning veterans, and more than sixty years later we're still reaping the benefits of that generosity. The post-World War II GI Bill assured returning vets a year's worth of wages whether they worked or not, and paid college tuition and a living stipend, too. Nearly half of the male students on college campuses in 1948 had been to war. And it also offered low-interest government-guaranteed loans for buying a home. Housing construction and manufacturing boomed. The curve for GNP, household income, and personal spending trended up, up, and up.

The United States of America was a robust nation—a nation of means—and we rebuilt and reconfigured our institutions after World War II in a way that reflected this. Yes, the military demobilization after the war was massive and fast, but even the dramatically shrunk-down US military of 1950 was three times the size it had been before World War II—and with a big footprint. The US soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, right alongside all those consumer goods, were already leading exports. We had 150,000 troops in the Far East, 125,000 in Western Europe, and a smattering in such diverse and far-flung locations as Panama, Cuba, Guatemala, Morocco, Eritrea, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Samoa, and Indochina. Wary as never before of the Communist threat—now a constant “speck of war visible in our horizon”—America had come to see Jefferson's preoccupation with standing armies and threats from

inside our own power structure as a bit moldy. We were, after all, the only country still capable of keeping the planet safe for democracy.

Through the fifteen years that followed World War II, we trusted our commanders in chief—Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, they'd all served!—to project our military power in measured and meaningful ways. We ratcheted up our extraordinary nuclear program, broke the Soviet blockade of Berlin with a dramatic airlift, beat the Commies back in Formosa and Thailand, fought them to a standstill in Korea, and stared down Khrushchev when our spy planes caught him red-handed putting missiles in Cuba. When President Kennedy decided to engage the Soviets in the space race, the nation's finest military pilots were the chosen first team.

The United States military was an institution of unsurpassed public esteem, top to bottom. You could measure that regard in a hundred different ways. Take, for instance, the plaything metric. In 1964 one of the hottest new toys on the market was a doll, for boys: G.I. Joe.

There was not a whiff of peacetime, soon-to-be civilian in this toy; these were not Ken dolls in dress uniforms at the debutante ball. G.I. Joe was olive drab, M1 rifle, canned Spanner, scar-faced, down-and-dirty. The hard-plastic soldiers (petroleum-based all the way) were built to take a pounding. In the spring of 1965, in GI Bill-built suburbs from Levittown, New York to Castro Valley, California, ten-year-old boys were digging miniature foxholes and jerry-rigging Dad's old handkerchiefs to make paratroopers out of their new dolls. Hasbro had an instant hit; G.I. Joe did close to \$20 million in sales that first year. Early indications pointed to steady growth.

But sales reports later in the '60s made for unhappy reading in the Hasbro boardroom, and by the early 1970s the toy company found itself leaning on gimmicks to sell G.I. Joe. They included fuzzy flocked hair (they called it "realistic"), a nonregulation beard, colorful new uniform choices, swiveling "Eagle-Eyes," and a fighting hand formed into a "Kung Fu Grip" (Bruce Lee had taken off by then). Hasbro folded G.I. Joe into "The Adventure Team ... ready to go wherever adventure leads." The company was at pains to minimize the militaryness of its military doll.

You can't blame the Hasbro marketers and their sell-side analysts for having been optimistic in those first heady months of 1964. They were sure they were riding the long wave of good feeling for US soldierdom. How could they have known that the ground under G.I. Joe was beginning to shift, even in the happy springtime of his advent?

The first tectonic tremor came from the White House in the early months of 1965 when President Lyndon Baines Johnson began the prosecution of his own hot war in Vietnam. He had campaigned in '64 by promising, "We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." He'd painted his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, as a dangerous hair-trigger warmonger (with some help from Goldwater himself, who, in a May 1963 ABC interview, proposed dropping low-yield nuclear bombs on Vietnam to destroy supply lines and achieve "defoliation of the forests." And why not? Among their many-splendored uses, nuclear explosions can be excellent pruners).

Yes, in 1961, Johnson's predecessor John F. Kennedy had promised at his inauguration, "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty." But Johnson's promise was not

Kennedy's; Johnson promised to resist the expensive temptations of foreign wars and to build a Great Society at home instead. He promised not to escalate in Vietnam. He promised he would not allow the United States to get "tied down in a land war in Asia." But then, despite the promises, despite his determination not to, Johnson got dragged to the conclusion that the United States needed to be fighting in Vietnam. He moved to convince the American people and Congress that he should have the authority to use military force there—the wildly exaggerated Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 would be the basis for the only congressional authorization Johnson ever sought for war. Then, with only halfhearted gestures toward trying to keep the country on board with a war he never really wanted to fight, Johnson started about trying to fight his war in a way the American people might hopefully not notice too much. "We don't think we'll ask for much money," Johnson confided to the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Richard Russell, in the summer of 1965, as he made plans to increase the ground forces in Vietnam from 80,000 to 180,000, "because we don't want to blow this thing up."

LBJ "tried to fight a war on the cheap," one of the Johnson administration's key intelligence men, George A. Carver, would say years later, "and tried to fight a war without acknowledging that he was fighting a war."

The agonized president was trying to thread a new and difficult needle: taking the nation's armed forces to war without taking the nation as a whole to war. And central to that effort was one crucial decision. Against the advice of his secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, over the outright objection of the chief of staff of the US Army, Johnson simply refused to call up the modern parallel to those old Jeffersonian state militias, all those men living in our neighborhoods: the US Army Reserve and the National Guard. The Guard or Reserves had been called to fight in every American war in the nation's history—even in the nonwar that was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1963—but in Vietnam, Johnson hesitated. In part he was worried that a full-scale mobilization would draw the Russians and the Chinese into the war, but mostly he didn't want to get Congress and the rest of the country all het up and asking too many questions.

"I don't think I'll have to call [the Reserves] up now," he told Russell. "I think it's too dramatic. I think it commits me where I can't get out. And it puts me out there further than I wanna get right at the moment.... You don't think I oughta have a joint session, do you?"

"Not as long as you don't call up any Reserves and all I wouldn't," Russell answered. The six-term senator from Georgia was sympathetic to the president's predicament. ("I never worked on anything as hard in my life," Johnson complained to the man who had been his mentor and champion in the Senate.)

"It woulda driven me mad," Russell told Johnson. "It's the only thing I've ever hit in my life I didn't have some quick answer to, but I haven't got one to this."

But the seasoned senator also reminded Johnson that failing to mobilize the Reserves would send a signal to the Soviets, the North Vietnamese Communists, and the rest of the world that we lacked will. "It adds to ol' Ho Chi Minh's argument that we ain't gonna stay there, that we gonna pull out.... Call up the Reserves, they understand that language. They understood it in Berlin. They understand that."

"Well, if I extend the enlistments and if I put a hundred thousand out there they understand it," Johnson answered with a chuckle, though he did not mean to amuse. "And I'



gonna step up my draft calls. Double 'em.”

The draft wasn't new for Vietnam; it had been plugging holes in the active-duty armed forces since 1917. For a president trying to flesh out a Vietnam fighting force without causing too much consternation, increasing the draft seemed a better choice than calling up Reserves. In 1965, the Guard and Reserves were the things you quietly signed up for to avoid service, and Johnson was already hearing from congressmen, who were hearing from prominent constituents, who were in nowise interested in having their sons' Guard and Reserve units called up to fight in some godforsaken war in the jungles of Southeast Asia. And Johnson agreed! This was, after all, not a major war, at least not a war with a major effect on the home front. And there was also Johnson's hope that his war would be a US rout, soldiers sent and out in a matter of months: *Ho Chi Minh got anything to match this?* Johnson supposedly bragged to reporters during a bathroom break.

But even as the war's Phase II, “the preparing-to-win phase,” as Vietnam historian Neil Sheehan called it, stretched into its second and third years and then started to look like a ugly, viciously prosecuted, no-end-in-sight, preparing-to-lose phase, Johnson stubbornly refused to call up the Reserves, and stubbornly refused to come clean with the country that we—all of us—were in a real war. So from the first 3,500 combat Marines Johnson sent ashore near Da Nang on March 8, 1965, to support the first sustained bombing of North Vietnam to the 535,000 American troops who were in Vietnam at the end of his presidency, something like 1 percent would be Guard and Reserves. The active-duty armed forces shouldered the burdens of Johnson's land war in Asia—fleshed out by draftees, chosen at random from among the ranks of young American men who were unable or unwilling to get themselves out of it.

Whether or not Johnson's decision had any effect on the outcome of the war in Vietnam is debatable, and ultimately unknowable, but there was an enormous cost inside the United States—it tore the military from the heart of the country, and it tore the country from the heart of the military. One young company-commander-turned-novelist saw that wrenching cost in its inglorious entirety. Jim Webb showed himself to be an extraordinary soldier in Vietnam; he won two Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars, a Silver Star, and, for bravery under fire, the Navy Cross. But what really set him apart was his remarkable acuity. From the darkest jungle trenches, the twenty-three-year-old lieutenant managed to apprehend the big picture. And in his Vietnam War novel, *Fields of Fire*, Webb distilled the national tragedy in pitch-perfect dialogue between a battle-tested regular Army NCO and a young lieutenant:

“I'll tell you a little story, maybe it'll make sense. When I came back from Vietnam the first time I went to the Reserve Training Center, like I said. It wasn't really big over here yet. We all knew it would get bigger, though, and we figured Johnson would call up the Reserves. We kept telling all the Weekend Warriors that they'd better get their shit in one bag, because they were going to war. Like Korea. And it got bigger, but Johnson didn't have the balls to call up the Reserves. Reserves can vote. And they drive airplanes for United. And they run businesses. Instead, Johnson just made a bigger draft, filled it with loopholes, and went after certain groups of kids.”

“You said yourself the kids were great.”

“It ain't what happens here that's important. It's what's happening back there.”

Shit, Lieutenant, you'd hardly know there was a war on. It's in the papers, and college kids run around screaming about it instead of doing panty raids or whatever they were running around doing before but that's it. Airplane drivers still drive their airplanes. Businessmen still run their businesses. College kids still go to college. It's like nothing really happened, except to other people. It isn't touching anybody except us. It makes me sick, Lieutenant... We been abandoned, Lieutenant. We been kicked off the edge of the goddamn cliff. They don't know how to fight it, and they don't know how to stop fighting it. And back home it's too complicated, so they forget about it and do their rooting at football games. Well, fuck 'em. They ain't worth dying for."

The American troops' disenchantment with the country's civilian cohort was real, but so was civilian disenchantment with the Vietnam War, and with the military itself. And it was not confined to student activists and peaceniks. The worst of the war had been beamed into middle-class living rooms all across America—the blood and gore, the death, the waste, the atrocities. The public's idea of the country and what it stood for had taken a holy beating. One active-duty company commander who returned from Vietnam to a job at a recruiting station in Kansas City was stung by the overriding sentiment he found among his new neighbors. "This is a horrible war and our troops are doing terrible things over there," they say, "but we know you're not like that, Paul."

Much as the military man tried—"I am them. I am typical. I am what the Marine Corps is all about"—he never felt able to convince his civilian friends that they had a military to be proud of.

Said one veteran: "There's a wall ten miles high and fifty miles thick between those of us who went and those who didn't, and that wall is never going to come down."

We'd gone to war in Vietnam in a way that we'd never gone to war before, and no one like us knew how it turned out. So while we did what we'd done after every war, while we dramatically drew down ground troops in Vietnam—from 510,054 in 1969 to 212,925 in 1971 to 265,000 in 1973—this time the brass decided it would be done differently: in the future, presidents wouldn't have the option Johnson chose. The next time America went to war, it wouldn't be the military out there alone, "kicked off the goddamn cliff" as Webb's NCO would say. Officially, the post-Vietnam restructuring of the military was called the Total Force Policy; unofficially, everyone called it the Abrams Doctrine.

Creighton Abrams was the US commander in Vietnam from 1968 to 1972, while troop strength there went from more than half a million to one-fifteenth of that number. Then he returned to Washington, where he served as Army chief of staff from 1972 until he died in 1974. And as chief, while winding down that increasingly unpopular and costly war, Abrams restructured the United States Army in a way that made it harder for a commander in chief to go to war, or at least harder to fight a war without having first sought the support of the American people for that war.

It's hard to make the case that Abrams began his reorganization with the intent to remake the nation's political structures, or with the express purpose of closing off options available to America's elected officials. He certainly never talked about it that way. His overriding

concern was the restoration of the institution to which he'd devoted his entire life: the United States Army. Vietnam had bled that institution dry. Its combat readiness around the world had been greatly diminished; the Seventh Army in Germany had become little more than a pricey replacement depot for Southeast Asia. The Guard and Reserves were in shambles, viewed as a haven for shirkers. And Abrams had seen firsthand how even the soldiers who had served honorably and proudly in Vietnam were demoralized. He personally knew the sting of civilian criticism: Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, had trouble hiding his contempt for Abrams. In 1971, Nixon said to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that Abrams "had his shot" to win a military victory in Vietnam, "and he's not going to get any more." The following year, he wrote to Kissinger of Abrams, "Our military leadership has been a sad chapter in the proud military history of this country."

As commander on the ground of a hated war, Abrams grew to love the Army and its soldiers all the more. "In a changing world, changing times and changing attitude and the various political motivations that have thrust themselves upon our country," he told the First Infantry Division in their last hours before returning home, "[you] represent a constancy of those essential virtues of mankind: humility, courage, devotion, and sacrifice. The world has changed a lot, but this division continues to serve as it had in the beginning. I choose to feel that this is part of the cement and the rock and the steel that holds our great country together."

Abrams's passion as Army chief at the end of Vietnam was to manage the nation's demobilization from that conflict in a way that protected the military. Even as wartime appropriations dried up and the size of the Army shrunk dramatically and the now-hated draft was abolished, Abrams wanted a big national investment in military readiness. He had served in three American wars, and he described how calling up an unprepared Army out of an unprepared nation meant shedding too much American blood when it came time to fight: "We have paid, and paid, and paid again in blood and sacrifice for our unpreparedness.... I don't want war, but I am appalled at the human cost that we've paid because we wouldn't prepare to fight."

His solution was elegant in its simplicity and its financial efficiency. Under Abrams's Total Force Policy, the Guard and Reserves would no longer be shelters to avoid service but rather integral parts of the nation's fighting capacity. It would be operationally impossible to go to war without calling them up. Abrams wove the Guard and Reserves into the fabric of the active-duty military; he made those in-your-neighborhood citizen-soldiers responsible for functions without which we could not wage a major military campaign. And in weaving the Guard and Reserves into the active-duty military, he also wove the military back into the country.

John Vessey, who worked under Abrams during the restructuring, remembered the general's central focus: "He thought about [the kind of nation America was] an awful lot, and concluded that whatever we're going to do we ought to do right as we are a nation. Let's not build an Army off here in the corner someplace. The Armed Forces are an expression of the nation. If you take them out of the national context, you are likely to screw them up. That was his lesson from Vietnam. He wasn't going to leave them in that position ever again."

And so the political threshold for going to war was raised. The Abrams Doctrine—the Total Force Policy—put American politicians in the position of being "designed out" of waging war.

in a way that was dislocated from the everyday experience of American families. Remember Russell's advice to Johnson when the president wondered whether he'd have to address a joint session of Congress about a huge escalation in Vietnam: "*Not as long as you don't call up any Reserves I wouldn't.*" With the Abrams Doctrine, calling up the Reserves would no longer be optional, and therefore neither would that pilgrimage to Congress. The president's hand was forced: if America was to fight a war, the life of that "airplane driver for United" would have to be profoundly disrupted, civilians would have to be pried out of their civilian jobs. What Johnson had resisted as "too dramatic" in the last war would become the political price of admission to the next one.

The loudest story of the summer and fall of 1973 may have been the Senate slowly tightening the noose of Watergate around President Nixon's neck, but at the same time Congress was also busy writing "A Joint Resolution Concerning the War Powers of Congress and the President." The War Powers Resolution of 1973 would be an explicit reassertion of the prerogative spelled out under Article 1, Section 8, "to fulfill the intent of the framers of the Constitution of the United States" that Congress—and Congress alone—had the power to declare war.

The framers had been voluble in their rationale for and in their defense of Article 1, Section 8. "The Constitution supposes, what the History of all Governments demonstrates," wrote James Madison, "that the Executive is the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it. It has accordingly with studied care vested the question of war in the Legislature." Even that suspected monarchist Alexander Hamilton saw the wisdom of keeping the power to declare war out of the hands of a single executive. Madison, Hamilton, and the fellow framers were building structural barriers against what they saw as the darker aspects of human nature. The lures to war—personal hatreds, political glory, material spoils, and the simple atavistic enthusiasm for violence—might be too enticing for one man to resist, and might be too easy to promote "by fixing the public gaze upon the exceeding brightness of military glory," as a later congressman, Abraham Lincoln, put it, "that attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood—that serpent's eye that charms to destroy." Madison wrote in his notes during the constitutional debates that Virginia delegate George Mason "was for clogging rather than facilitating war; but for facilitating peace."

The framers clogged up the works by making the decision to go to war a communal one. By vesting it in the Congress—a large, slow-moving deliberative body of varied and often competing viewpoints—the Constitution assured that the case for any war would have to be loud, well argued, and made in plain view. The people's representatives would be forced to take time and care to weigh the costs against the benefits.

This structure did not make the young United States what you'd call pacifist; we didn't spread ourselves from sea to shining sea on high ideals and impeccable manners alone. But the wisdom of erecting high barriers to war making traveled unimpeded through early generations of Americans. In his first term in Congress, Abraham Lincoln reiterated the founding principle with a low-born frontiersman's understanding of who pays the costs of martial élan: "The provision of the Constitution giving the war-making power to Congress was dictated, as I understand it, by the following reasons: kings had always been involving and impoverishing their people in wars, pretending generally, if not always, that the good of

the people was the object. This our convention understood to be the most oppressive of a  
kingly oppressions, and they resolved to so frame the Constitution that no one man should  
hold the power of bringing this oppression upon us.”

In 1973, the successors of that frontier congressman had just had a painful refresher course  
in the perils of lowering the barriers to war. They had allowed Johnson to exercise  
tremendous prerogative; he'd shoved more than half a million soldiers into Southeast Asia  
without taking his case through Congress and the American people. So in 1973, the United  
States Congress reasserted itself. It passed legislation to raise and reinforce the structural  
barriers to a president waging his own wars. The post-Vietnam Congress wanted no future  
president to be able to act with that sort of impunity. (As the crotchety old Justice Hugo  
Black would remind folks who complained about the roadblocks to criminal prosecution  
embedded in the Constitution's Bill of Rights: “They were written to make it more difficult!”)

The War Powers Resolution of 1973 was an imperfect law. But by passing it, the legislative  
branch was putting the executive on notice—it no longer would settle for being  
backbencher on vital questions of war and peace. If the president wanted to execute  
military operation (*any* military operation), he had to petition Congress for the authority  
to do so within thirty days; if Congress didn't grant explicit authorization, that operation would  
have to end after sixty days by law. The Oval Office would no longer have open-ended war  
making powers.

The assertion of congressional power had strong support across party lines. When an  
incensed President Nixon vetoed the War Powers Resolution, both the House and the Senate  
overrode that veto with votes to spare.

And the legislature didn't stop there, especially not when the subject was once again  
Vietnam. In April 1975, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee suspected that  
Nixon's replacement, President Gerald Ford, wasn't telling all about his latest request for  
financial support for our allies in South Vietnam, President Nguyen Van Thieu's failing army.  
As far as the committee members could discern from the parade of witnesses sent from the  
White House, President Ford wasn't willing to accept the facts on the ground: the North  
Vietnamese Army was about to overrun the friendly government in Saigon and there wasn't  
anything he could do about it. American combat troops were long gone.

During an executive session of the committee, the senators worried aloud that the Ford  
administration had not made a real plan for the coming collapse of Thieu's government. They  
worried that the president's stubborn support for a failing South Vietnamese military might  
lead us back into a hot war there, with combat troops once again on the ground. Congress  
had given Johnson and Nixon too many chances, and these presidents had made too many  
costly mistakes and miscalculations. The Senate was not in a mood to give Ford free rein. The  
game was up. Ford wasn't going to get his \$722 million appropriation. He needed to  
understand that.

So the committee, in the middle of that executive session, dialed up and requested a near  
unprecedented face-to-face consultation with the president, and then marched en masse down  
to the White House and into the Cabinet Room. “We wanted to tell you our concerns and  
hear from you your concerns,” Ford's fellow Republican, Sen. Howard Baker, told the new  
president. “We hope when we have, we will have established a new era of negotiation  
between the Executive and Legislative branches.”

Ford was horrified. He wrote in his memoir that the last time the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had showed up at the White House demanding a meeting was back in the Woodrow Wilson administration. Ford—having just come from the House of Representatives himself—was floored by the legislators’ presumption. He described the meeting as “extremely tense.”

And it was. The minutes show the senators pointedly suggesting that the president get control of his ungovernable and unrealistic ambassador in Saigon, that he make a *real* plan to evacuate the 6,000 Americans and the 175,000 South Vietnamese friendlies, and that he drop his appropriations request by two-thirds and limit it to funds for safe evacuation ... or forgo it. There wasn’t going to be any more open-ended aid to stand up additional South Vietnamese infantry divisions.

“If there isn’t some indication of aid,” Ford harrumphed, “the situation could disintegrate rapidly.”

“I will give you large sums for evacuation,” Sen. Jacob Javits told the president pointing blank, “but not one nickel for military aid for Thieu.”

“We are not wanting to put American troops in, but we have to have enough funds to make it look like we plan to hold for some period,” Ford offered at the end of the meeting. But the senators damn sure weren’t going to get sucked into any more combat missions, even in the effort to evacuate.

“This is a reentry of a magnitude we had not envisioned,” Sen. John Glenn, the famed pilot and astronaut, told the president. “I can see North Vietnam deciding not to let us get the people out and attacking our bridgehead. Then we would have to send forces to protect our security forces. That fills me with fear.” The Senate had dug in its heels, and there was little the president could do.

Oh, but those days stuck in the craw of the inhabitants of the West Wing circa 1975. Gerald Ford’s chief of staff would still be complaining bitterly about that “congressional backlash” and the War Powers Resolution nearly forty years later. “The resolution, despite its questionable and still untested constitutionality,” Donald Rumsfeld huffed in his 2011 memoir, “undercut the President’s ability to convince troublemakers of America’s staying power.” Ford complained aloud to his cabinet that Congress had stepped in where it had no business, forcing him to become the president who would, as he put it, “cut and run,” who would “bug out” of Vietnam. Secretary of State Kissinger actually whined to Ford that a few Republican senators had been *really* mean to him.

But this wasn’t about mean. This wasn’t about Kissinger, it wasn’t about Ford, it wasn’t personal at all. This was about the fundamental question of American martial power and how it’s wielded.

In the aftermath of America’s decade-long tragedy in Vietnam—in the military demobilization, in the course corrections, and in the political recriminations that followed—something important happened. The new structures that grew out of that searing experience—the Abrams Doctrine, the War Powers Resolution, a newly muscular Congress—had reached a fundamental, change-the-country force. Taken as a whole, they had the sort of salutary outcome old George Mason would have cheered: they clogged up the country’s war-making apparatus.

The questions of how we provide for the common defense, how we apportion our limited

resources to the military, how we prepare for war, and whether or not we go to war we  
back where they belonged, out in the open, subject to loud and jangly political debate.

It must be noted for the record, however, that sales of G.I. Joe remained soft, even with  
the Kung Fu Grip.



## A Nation at Peace Everywhere in the World

WHEN RONALD REAGAN SPOKE A THING ALOUD, HE BELIEVED it forever and for always. By the time he started running for president, in 1976, he had already developed an unwavering and steadfast faith in the correctness of whatever came out of his mouth. “Once he had made an emotional commitment to this or that policy or story,” Reagan’s most sympathetic biographer, Edmund Morris, would write, “no amount of disproof would cause him to alter his belief in it.” Facts and contrary evidence did not get in the way of a good story—especially one that appeared to set his audiences’ heads bobbing in knowing assent. Welfare queens were driving around Chicago’s South Side in Cadillacs, he’d say out on the stump; one had defrauded the clueless federal government to the tune of \$150,000 a year *tax-free*! Public housing in East Harlem had gone luxury: “You can get an apartment with eleven-foot ceilings,” Reagan told a group in the early primary state of New Hampshire, “with a twenty-foot balcony, a swimming pool, a laundry room, and play room.” The federal government was spending \$90 billion a year on welfare and other programs the states should be administering. So let ’em do it. That would balance the federal budget right there. It all sounded about right to Reagan, and to a lot of the people who showed up for his rallies.

And still, the Gipper could not seem to get the necessary traction in that first race for the Republican nomination. The sitting (though unelected, as Reagan would point out) president Gerald Ford, defeated the onetime governor in the first six primaries that year, including the one in Reagan’s birth state of Illinois by nearly twenty points. By early spring, Nancy Reagan was trying to gentle her husband out of the race; the campaign was so broke his managers weren’t sure they could afford the jet fuel to get his yellow Hughes Airwest DC-9 chartered plane (the Big Banana, the press corps was calling it) to the next contest in North Carolina. But Reagan thought he still had one more card to play, maybe the trump card, against the president who knuckled under to Congress and bailed on the last war.

For Reagan, it wasn’t just that Ford had “bugged out” of Vietnam, or that the president was playing footsie with Congress about cutting defense spending. It was the whole issue of national security—the politically potent, unbearably humiliating idea that the United States of America appeared weak in the eyes of the world. Just look at what was happening right under our noses, Reagan told audiences in North Carolina. They might not be aware of it, but President Ford was about to give in to the veiled threats of Panamanian leader Gen. Omar Torrijos. “What are the quiet, almost secret, negotiations we’re engaged in to give away the Panama Canal?” Reagan began to ask his audiences. “The Canal Zone is not a colonial possession. It is not a long-term lease. It is sovereign United States territory every bit the same as Alaska and all the states that were carved from the Louisiana Purchase. We should end those negotiations and tell the general: We bought it, we paid for it, we built it, and we *intend to keep it!*”



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