

# Actually, Our Military Keeps Winning

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**The U.S. military has a great track record of winning on the battlefield, but it must do a better job of demanding clearer definitions of strategic victory from the political leadership, along with the means and time needed to achieve it.**

**T**he following is Ambassador Jeffrey's response to "[The Tragedy of the American Military](http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/12/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516)" (<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/12/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516>), an article by James Fallows that appeared in the January-February 2015 edition of the Atlantic.

James Fallows has done yet another service to public discourse on national security with his *Atlantic* piece on "Why the Best Soldiers in the World Keep Losing." But I have two problems with it. First, he asserts that various problems, from the military's insular nature to erratic weapons development, help explain why our soldiers allegedly keep losing wars -- without proving the connection, particularly on weapons development -- a problem dating back decades. Second, I dispute Fallows' core argument that "our soldiers...keep losing." As winning not losing is the central purpose of having a military, let's start there.

Since World War II the U.S. military has won all its campaigns in strictly military terms, except the 1950 offensive into North Korea and two minor engagements, Beirut in 1983, and Somalia in 1993. By "winning" I mean that it has forced the other side to cease all or most military operations and gained command of the terrain in play. In Vietnam, the U.S. military had largely wiped out the Vietcong insurgency by 1972, and defeated a North Vietnamese Army invasion that same year. In Iraq the U.S. military defeated the Iraqi army in weeks, and in 2007-8 defeated both the al-Qaeda insurgency and uprisings by Shia militias. In Afghanistan the military and CIA took down the Taliban and drove the al-Qaeda movement into Pakistan quickly, and by 2012 had secured most of Afghanistan.

Did we accept a "draw" in Korea, ultimately lose Vietnam, and fail to fully eliminate insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan? All true, but those represent failures of policy at the national level, failures that the military contributed to by not helping develop winning strategies, but the military here has had much company, most importantly

presidents with ultimate responsibility for war strategy (and even my institution, the Foreign Service, which has not made clear our dismal record effecting socio-economic transformation and resolving deep sectarian strife in third-world countries even absent insurgencies).

The core purpose of the military is not to win wars but to win at the tactical and operational levels against opposing forces. As noted above, our military has been generally successful at this. But as Clausewitz notes, successful strategy is not just a function of battlefield success and commander genius, but above all the judgment of the political leadership in determining war goals consistent with political objectives and the military, economic and diplomatic means available; in other, Clausewitzian terms -- turning tactical victories into a strategic win. This is particularly so in limited wars of choice and inherently political internal conflicts.

In those (Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan) failure came from defining "victory" in terms of an all but impossible non-military objective, to reform societies in our image while eliminating social and political drivers of insurgency. These errors were compounded by not committing sufficient means including time to maximize chances of attaining that elusive objective. (In part because the American public saw this objective as impossible and/or not worth the price.)

While the military must focus its intellectual power on winning in the field, it shares with other institutions responsibility for formulating larger war goals. It thus not only must answer questions about whether and how our troops can defeat opposing forces, but also must help answer the question of what strategic success can be obtained if the military succeeds tactically.

In Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, even when military leaders got the battlefield right, they did not succeed in this secondary but important job. The question is why did not more officers, and with more effect, ask David Petraeus's 2003 question "how does this end?"

From my observations, the problem is that the military often conflates winning battles with winning the war, as they sometimes assume someone else was engaged in the knitting together of their tactical victories into strategic success. This was all the more understandable when strategic success as in these insurgency wars was defined in socio-political, not military, terms. Meanwhile, elements of the national leadership, congress and public assume that if our esteemed military were on the case, it would produce not only tactical victories -- its core job -- but also strategic success. To sum up, each side implicitly pushed responsibility for the really big war questions to the other side. This was not the military's failure alone, and is not "losing" in the military sense, but it is failure none the less.

The final question is, why does the military keep getting this strategic job wrong? One factor, which Fallows does not highlight, but others including Huntington have, is the anti-Clausewitz mindset of the U.S. military. If victory is defined as 'unconditional surrender' then strategy and thus victory look a lot like tactical battlefield action on a grand scale. If national leadership (at least of a power without peers) wants such a victory it just pours resources into the military until victory is achieved. And here Fallows has a point.

The more the military is isolated from our society and its political limitations, the more it can harbor this view. Likewise, the more the military is placed on a pedestal, the more its confusion of tactical military success with political victory will go unchallenged by our political system, and likely shift to reluctance to criticize the political leadership's war goals and means.

Fixing this is hard. Fallows correctly rejects a draft, but even with one, this dynamic was seen during Vietnam. The military puts enormous effort into civilian education and other exposure for its promising officers, but an inbred service family caste, military academies which segregate future officers early from civilian America, base services that isolate service families from their communities, all reinforce the separateness that feeds misunderstanding in both directions.

There is no feasible solution to this isolation, thus better to recognize and deal with it. That begins with our political

leadership's mission of winning conflicts and the military's role to assist. The military must insist on knowing what the political goals are, which assumptions underlie these goals, what the means will be, and then insist on receiving them. And the country's political leadership and public must understand that it is their job, not the military's, to define victory and mobilize resources to achieve it -- while holding the military responsible for winning on the battlefield.

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*The Atlantic*

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