

Stealth, Precision, and the Making of American Foreign Policy

by

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America's military technological superiority, in the form of stealth aircraft and precision guided munitions (PGMs), has had an identifiable effect on American foreign policy. Originally designed to defeat the Soviet Union in a major war, these technologies have had far-reaching impact beyond military capability. As the United States pursues other significant military advances, it is instructive to examine this impact and of some of the unintended consequences brought on by this successful marriage of two revolutionary technologies.

The end of the Cold War seemed to herald the beginning of a new period in international relations. The fall of the Soviet Union effectively ended communism, and a new era began where the world's two major powers need not be at odds with each other, competing politically, militarily, and ideologically in the remotest corners of the globe. Certainly, the threat of a superpower conflict that could destroy the United States greatly diminished. A period of reduced military intervention seemed imminent. With the primary national interest, that of survival, effectively secured, the United States faced a future where military intervention, it would seem, should be more rare. Yet, in the ten years following the end of the Cold War, the United States engaged in as many major military interventions as it had in the previous forty.¹ What event, or series of events, led to this seemingly contradictory foreign policy?

The decision to use force, at the extreme go to war, is the most significant decision a government can make. In the American political system, the president is at the center of that decision process. Historically, presidents have weighed very carefully the decision to use military force, considering both domestic and international issues. The five broad domestic factors that the president considers before deciding to use force are *national interests, congressional support, the likelihood that military force will achieve the desired political objective, the prospective and actual costs of the intervention (primarily in lives), and public support*. Internationally, the president must also consider *the impact on and views of our allies, neutrals, and potential enemies*. Each of these issues has a number of factors that determine its

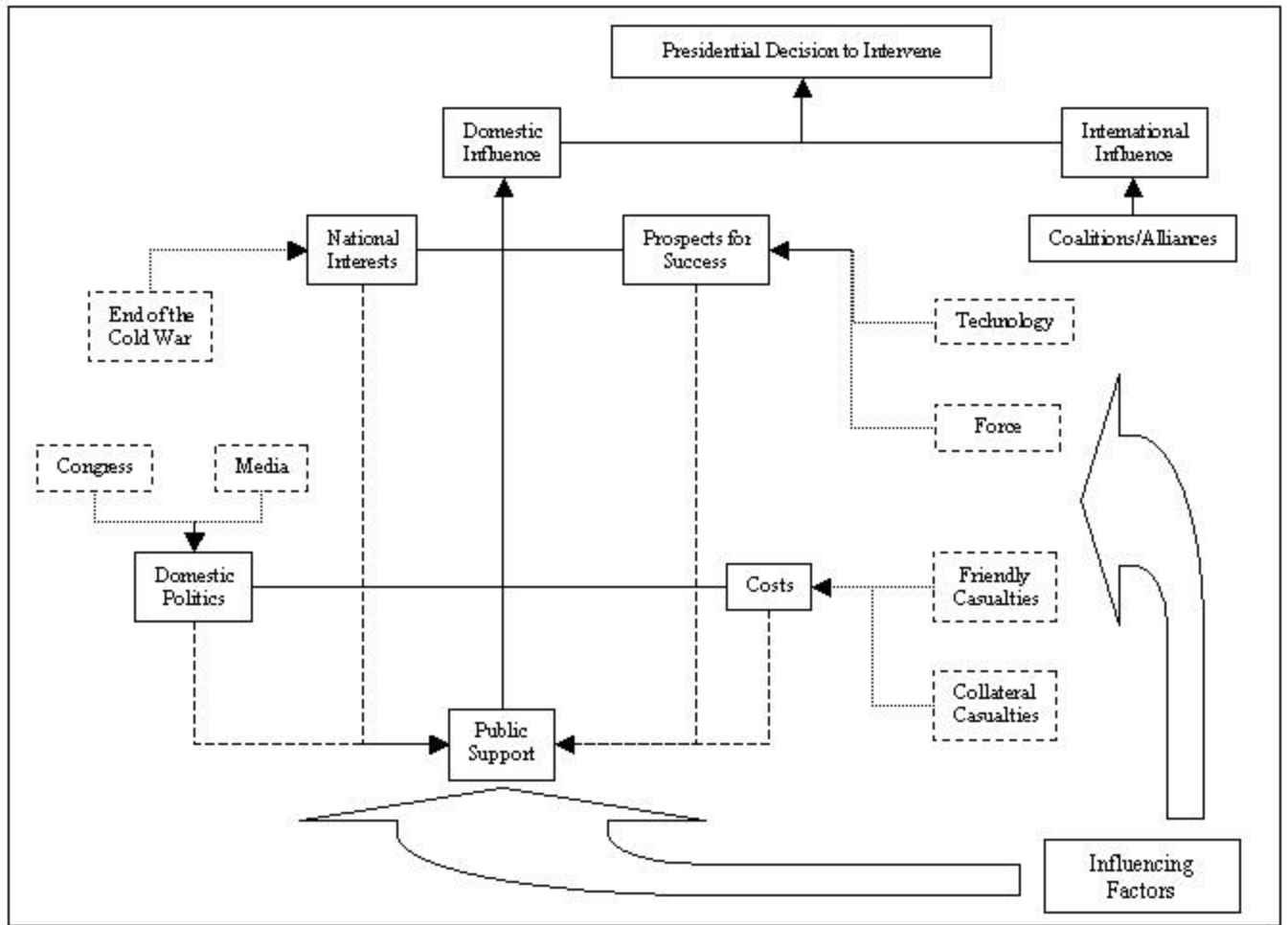


Figure 1. Influences on Presidential Decision to Intervene

level of impact on the decision. These factors, in turn, have many influences that shape their relevance for each different situation (see Figure 1). Of note is the compounding effect of public support. The American public has consistently shown consideration for the same factors that the president evaluates when deciding whether to support military intervention. Factors that affect the other domestic issues also directly affect public support, which in turn directly influences the other domestic issues. Factors that directly affect public support will be effectively multiplied through the president's decision process.

Perhaps the single most critical element shaping public support in the decision to intervene is American historical tolerance for anticipated and actual casualties during military action. In 1989, the United States introduced a powerful new weapons system during Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama to apprehend dictator Manuel Noriega. The F-117 stealth fighter, employing laser-guided bombs, had an inauspicious start in that operation but became the centerpiece of American military power in two short years. Its ability to precisely deliver munitions while affording the pilot a previously unthinkable level of protection from harm presented the president with a far less risky means to apply military force. It was now possible to

use America's military might with a greatly reduced chance of suffering friendly casualties or equipment loss.

The reduction in American casualties afforded by the marriage between stealth aircraft and precision guided munitions has had a profound effect on America's willingness to intervene militarily. Stealth gives aircraft the ability to penetrate much deeper into enemy air defenses, getting closer to the desired target and increasing the likelihood of a successful attack. PGMs are so accurate that fewer weapons are required to destroy that target, reducing the number of aircraft that must go into harm's way. This combination reduces not only the risk of (and so far actual) combat deaths, but it greatly increases the chance of a successful military operation, given that the political objectives are attainable by military means. This has had a positive effect on American public support for military intervention that, in combination, has made the president's decision to use force in pursuit of policy easier. Figure 2 illustrates this, with the heavier arrows indicating the compounding effect of stealth and precision through public support. Military intervention has become less an option of last resort and hence, more likely.

The United States presently has a clear military technological advantage over every country on the planet and, barring China, a military size advantage as well.² It is clear that

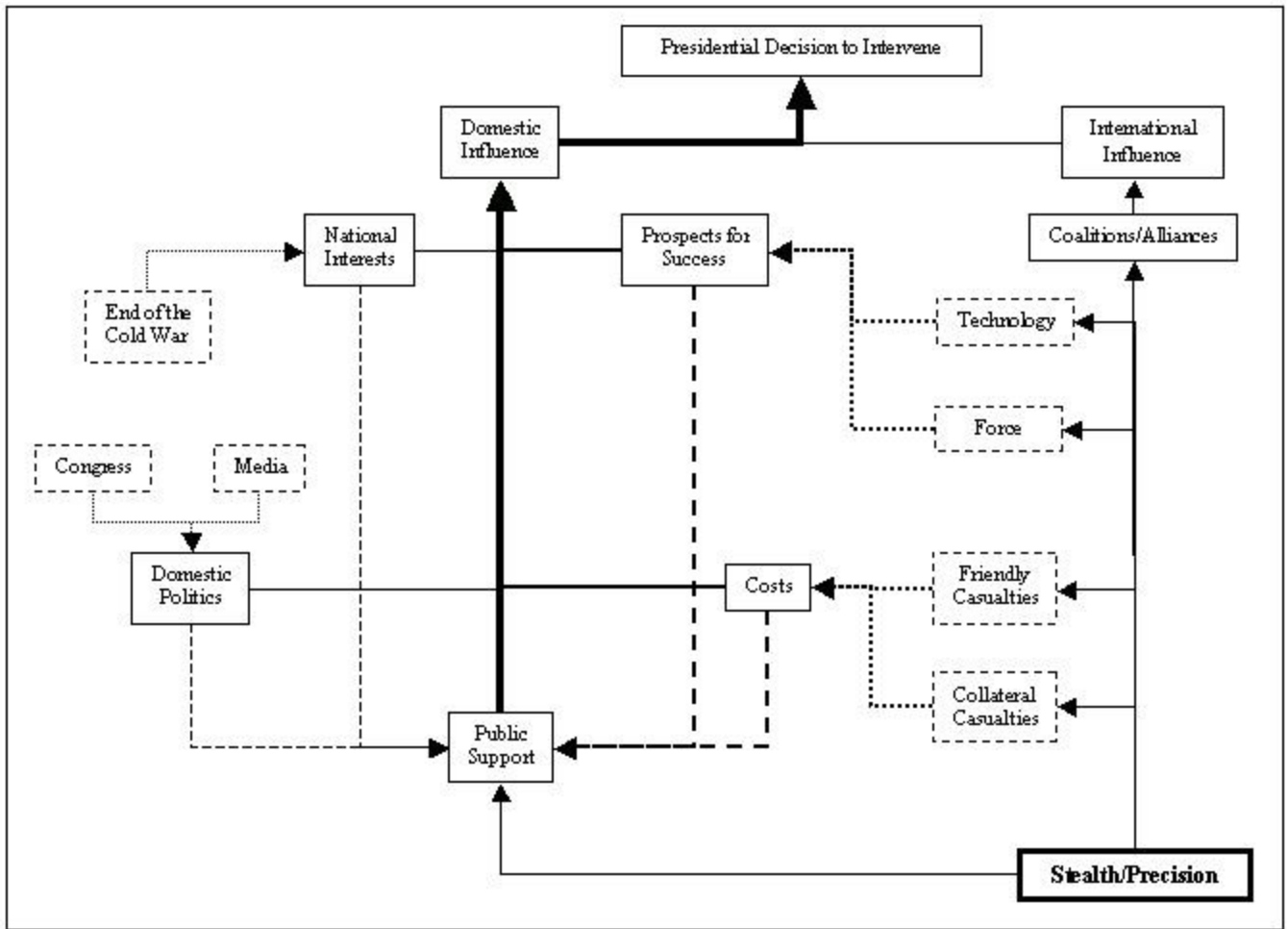


Figure 2. Stealth/Precision Influence on Presidential Decision to Intervene

military capability influenced foreign policy after the Cold War, at least as far as military intervention was concerned. But foreign policy should not be driven by capability, military or otherwise. Of course, policy makers should consider capability when making policy, but it should not be the prime determinant. As an example, nuclear weapons were a crucial part of our engagement strategy against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but they were an integral part of a larger plan. In contrast to the present, there was a strategic balance of terror between the United States and Soviets. Nuclear weapons were successful because they *were not* used. Stealth and precision have been successful because they *have been* used, but there have been unintended political and military consequences. The challenge for policy makers is determining how to integrate our current capability advantage into an overall global engagement strategy. Successfully answering this requires thorough evaluation of how the advantage has affected the foreign policy process, both positively and negatively.

Reduced risk of casualties during military action obviously gives policy makers a freer hand with respect to the use of force. It is now possible to intervene because we *can*, not because we *have to*. Before the end of the Cold War, the use of force was closely associated with vital national

interest. Although the definition of vital was stretched in many cases, American military intervention was always presented as necessary to protect or attain a vital national interest. This was not the case in the 1990s. With no vital interest at stake, President Bush committed forces to the United Nations humanitarian operation in Somalia. American public support dropped dramatically when American lives were lost.³ Later, in the Balkans, Operations DELIBERATE FORCE and ALLIED FORCE showed how Americans could tolerate military action in pursuit of less-than-vital interests for an extended period as long as no lives were lost in the process. Although Somalia ended in failure, as arguably did Operation RESTORE HOPE in Haiti, successes in Panama, the Persian Gulf War, and the Balkans may encourage the United States to act militarily more often. While military success is more certain, political success will be a more difficult challenge.

Continued military success comes at the price of increased responsibility. As more trouble spots appear, the demand for American action will rise. Policy makers will face difficult choices as to whether to apply force. During NATO's military action in Kosovo, brutal civil wars in eastern Africa took the lives of countless hundreds of thousands. Why was it appropriate to intervene in the Balkans and not Africa? In 1994, terrible atrocities were committed in Rwanda. Again, hundreds of thousands died. Although there was nothing that the United States could have done to prevent the tragedy, blame was later assigned on the international stage for its inaction. As the capability gap grows between the United States and the rest of the world, there will be more pressure to intervene militarily. While our military capability is superior, it is not unlimited. It is now more important than ever to have a well-formed, clear international engagement policy. American interests must be defined so that there is some visible criteria for military action. This requires a thorough understanding of the capabilities and limitations of military power. Violence is a tool, not a mechanism of change in itself. Applied to the correct situation, it can be very effective. Incorrectly applied, the results can be disastrous. We need only look back to the Vietnam War to realize this. A mismatch between political objective and military capability led to a national disaster. While rigid guidelines for intervention are impossible, policy makers must understand that the tool must match the objective and resist the impulse to intervene militarily merely because we can.

The military must also wrestle with the ability to intervene more freely. Traditionally, the defense establishment has advocated military action only in cases where vital national interests are threatened and there is a clear, obtainable objective. This was enunciated most clearly by former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and expanded upon by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell. The Weinberger Doctrine called for clear objectives, decisive action, and a clearly defined end state and termination criteria. In the Cold War-world, where the enemy was clearly identified and the possible consequences of military action included many American dead, this was a more-than-reasonable approach. In today's world, however, there is no unifying enemy threatening our existence. The potential cost (in lives) of military action is much lower. While it is unreasonable to think that we can abandon our role of defending the nation, or world, against a rising hegemonic threat, the military must also adapt to its new role as a tool of choice, rather than a tool of last resort. The military, notably airpower, is a victim of its own success. With specialized weapons designed to defeat the great Communist threat, it has shown great success in flexible application. Precision weapons delivered by stealth aircraft will continue to be a desired option. Realizing this, Congress and the military must

budget appropriately, focusing on maintaining our technological lead while producing enough of the desired systems to be able to handle the diverse threats that face us. This shift from a uniform funding approach, where each service receives a relatively stable portion of the defense budget, to one where a single service (the Air Force) receives a larger share will be met with resistance. It is, however, not without precedent. President Eisenhower provided the Air Force with the majority of defense funding in the early stages of the Cold War, establishing the foundation of the force that eventually won that war. Funding priorities must match political priorities (and realities). The military also must posture itself to face a busier future by maintaining flexible doctrine and training to meet a more uncertain threat.

If the military faces the unintended consequence of increased action in smaller operations, precision and stealth have also affected policy makers. Precision weapons have attained an almost mythical capability. Graphic aircraft video footage from the Gulf War gave the American public and the world the impression that we can kill whatever we want and, more importantly, avoid killing what we do not want to kill.⁴ This has raised the cost of collateral damage significantly. A refugee train that was misidentified as an enemy convoy was destroyed during Operation ALLIED FORCE. Although the number of dead innocents would not have even registered during World War II, in today's world it became a major international incident. This episode, along with the inadvertent bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, raised international opposition to a level that nearly derailed the entire operation. As military intervention is used more frequently, the likelihood of similar events will rise. Other states do not wish to have their citizens sacrificed in the pursuit of American interests, so to prevent our allies from alienating us over these mistakes, policy makers must link American interests and worldwide interests. Legitimacy of action, already important, will become critical. This legitimacy will come from coalitions with nations that share common interests. Paradoxically, as we become more able militarily to intervene unilaterally, we become more dependent upon a multilateral approach to ensure we can provide the benefit we seek.

The technologies that allow the United States to intervene more freely on behalf of others are also driving a wedge between America and her allies. American military technology is so superior to even our closest allies that it is increasingly difficult to effectively act in a multilateral coalition. Frequently, integrating allied forces means that the United States must compromise doctrinally, as in Kosovo.⁵ This leads to inefficient use of military force and the possible endangerment of the very lives we have worked so hard to protect. While unilateral action may be more effective militarily, politically it is less so. To ensure inclusive, rather than exclusive, action, we must find a way to integrate our allies into our military operations. If we do not, American action will appear mercenary, and legitimacy will again suffer.

Stealth and precision weapons give America a tremendous military advantage. This advantage gives American policy makers a great degree of latitude to apply force where it was once intolerable to the American people due to lack of vital interest. Just because we can, though, does not mean that we have to, or even should, intervene. In the end, military force must be the correct option for the situation in order to be successful. That being said, it may not be altogether bad if capability provides the impetus to act where otherwise lack of interest might preclude action. Perhaps it is now incumbent upon the United States to don the mantle of the world's policeman and attempt to stabilize the world situation and end needless suffering. But before we charge

headlong down the intervention path, policy makers must understand the limitations not only of stealth and precision, but of violence itself. Integrating technological capability in policy making is not easy and is fraught with danger, especially when effects and unintended consequences are not fully understood. Stealth aircraft and PGMs, designed to defeat a militarily superior foe during the Cold War, have changed America's post-Cold War foreign policy. Whether intended or not, technology does drive policy. As the United States pursues space-based weapons, it is instructive to look at past revolutions in technology to examine their effect outside their intended sphere. In this way, perhaps we can anticipate at least some of the challenges that technological superiority may present.

Notes

1. Bradley Graham and Eric Pianin, "Military Readiness, Morale Show Strain; Budgets Contract; Deployments Expand," *Washington Post*, 13 August 1998, final ed., A1, on-line, Lexis-Nexis, 20 April 2002, and Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment*, RAND Report MR-1365 (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001), 170.
12. See S. H. Steinberg et al., eds., *The Statesman's Yearbook*, 93rd, 97th, 117th, 127th, 132nd, and 136th eds. (New York: St. Martin's Press).
13. For a full treatment of this, see Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations*, RAND Report MR-726-RC (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND 1996).
14. See Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York, N.Y.: Metropolitan Books, 2000).
15. *Kosovo Air Operations: Need to Maintain Alliance Cohesion Resulted in Doctrinal Departures*, United States General Accounting Office Report to Congressional Requesters, Report number GAO-01-784 (Washington DC: General Accounting Office, July 2001), 2.