

The World's Sole Remaining Superpower

Three major challenges facing the United States Faces

by MAJ Nikolas Folgert

Every nation struggles with achieving decisive military success and the subsequent transition into a dominating world power. Even more delicate than this transition is maintaining the status of world superpower and handling the challenges that inherently come with this responsibility. In the case of the United States, currently the world's sole superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the challenges are different because of the democratic nature of the federal republic. For the United States, these challenges include an under-informed population, a lack of long-term national memory, and self-limitations in the execution and conduct of wars or conflicts.

Long-term national memory in the United States is non-existent partly because of the regular election cycles established by the Constitution as well as the inflow of immigrants from across the world. The Constitutional election cycles unintentionally ensure a short memory by establishing biennial elections. Immigration ensures adequate representation of ethnicities from across the world with any alienations countered in the election process. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in the 1980s, the United States provided money and weapons to the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen. However, this was driven by one Congressman—Charlie Wilson—who promoted this agenda while sitting on the House Appropriations Subcommittees on Defense and the House Committee on Ethics and not

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in retaliation for the U.S. experience in Vietnam.¹ The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), on the other hand, might have viewed this as an opportunity to retaliate against the Soviet Union for their support of the North Vietnamese.

Further illustrating this lack of long-term national memory, one only must

look at the current news cycle and the headlines concerning Russian interference in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. Outside of historians, and maybe the CIA, the general U.S. population does not comprehend how the U.S. government acts to influence *free elections* around the world to benefit U.S. interests and relationships. The United States interfered with elections in Italy through at least the 1960s and in Latin America, Chile, Serbia, Russia, and most recently Afghanistan. Money—suitcases of money—or pamphlets were used to achieve goals. With the increased access to information via social media, pamphlets will be



As the leader in innovative technologies, the United States must also lead in establishing ethical military applications of these technologies. (Courtesy photo NASA.)

replaced by slights of truth among other aspects of *Information Warfare*.² The Tehran conference in 1943 reinforced the Allies' support of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi after the 1941 ousting of his father, the previous Shah of Iran, in the combined Soviet-Anglo invasion of Persia.³ In 1953, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's nationalization of the oil companies in Iran resulted in a combined effort by the United States to pursue regime change.⁴ The Iranians have not forgotten this just as Vladimir Putin has not forgotten the U.S. money provided to Boris Yeltsin's re-election campaign in 1996. The general U.S. population instead believes that the government, representative of the people, does not and will not engage in this sort of unethical behavior. Even in a democratic republic, those with power rarely want to part ways once power is obtained and one way to keep power is to control access to information.

Under-informed populations are easily controlled. In a democratic society, the key to gaining population control is to manage the information they receive via the news outlets or various other means today that include, but not limited to, social media. The Constitution was designed to protect American liberties. Control of the information that people receive—just enough of this issue and a sprinkling of the opposing view to make the people feel they have knowledge of the whole issue—paves the way for the gradual erosion of liberties and replacement by an elected dictatorship. The National Socialist German Workers Party, led by Adolf Hitler, effectively utilized similar tactics in the 1930s.

The U.S. domestic experiences during the Vietnam War illustrate attempts to control the information, not just to and from the public but also from the president as the situation required.⁶ The U.S. population of the 1960s, influenced in part by academia and pop culture figures including Noam Chomsky and Muhammad Ali,⁷ was wary of the Johnson Administration's accounts regarding the then-developing situation in Vietnam.⁸ They also no longer had to worry about government-sanctioned *witch-hunts* aimed at rooting out communists and socialists.⁹ After the John-



The fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War era of great power competition.
(Photo by Jim Garamone, Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs.)

son administration re-assured the U.S. population in late-1967 that the end of the war was in sight, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched the Tet Offensive in early 1968.¹⁰ The national media resultantly moved from reporting facts to delivering opinions, and the anti-war movements subsequently increased.¹¹ Academia organized and led the anti-war movements without clearly articulating their reasons, aside from pacifism. In part, this lack of knowledge by the general population was because of the classification levels of military operations that prevented an understanding of the overall situation.¹² U.S. policy and activity worldwide—as the world's police officer—has resulted in establishment of measures of self-control, especially in areas of developing technologies.

The world's leading innovator must not just develop technologies but also identify and lead the way in establishing ethics for and appropriate, lawful uses of these technologies. These self-imposed limitations are rooted in western ideologies and Just War Tradition, often resulting in restrictive Rules of Engagement (ROE) imposed by commanders intending to minimize civilian casualties,¹³ which the U.S. populace loathes. Further, U.S. precedent is paramount and results in the creation of

multi-national coalition forces where U.S. national caveats prohibit certain activities, but the knowledge of coalition partners' different caveats can still achieve the desired effects or end state.¹⁴ Since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, U.S. policy makers no longer have the political fortitude to approve the conduct of a U.S.-only military operation. This results in clear divides between the uniformed U.S. military and the civilian policy makers on lessons learned from military conflicts. This divide is clear when comparing Operations DESERT SHIELD, DESERT STORM, and IRAQI FREEDOM.¹⁵

The United States, as the world's remaining super-power position after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, is unique in history. Seldom have empires lasted longer than 400 years—the Roman Empire being the most enduring example. The United States is 242 years old and struggling to identify its place in the world without a clearly defined arch-nemesis. This post-Cold War environment left numerous responsibilities and challenges for the United States to uphold and overcome. The lack of a long-term national memory is in part because of our democratic election cycles, control of information by policy makers resulting in an under-informed population, and self-imposed

limitations on use of technologies and military force. The combination of these challenges is a significant hurdle to overcome for a relatively spry, young country with worldwide ambitions.

Notes

1. *Charlie Wilson's War*, directed by Mike Nichols, (Orlando, FL: Universal Pictures, 2007). Congressman Charlie Wilson's effort to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan because the Soviets were dropping mines disguised as candy to children from helicopters, maiming and disfiguring the children. The CIA used the money Mr. Wilson earmarked to purchase weapons and arm the Mujahedeen, particularly with FIM-92 Stinger missiles to shoot down the Soviet helicopters.

2. Scott Shane, "Russia Isn't the Only One Meddling in Elections. We Do It, Too," *New York Times*, (February 2018), available at <https://www.nytimes.com>; Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003); and Alan Brinkley, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2004). Former CIA operatives and declassified documents confirm U.S. interference in foreign elections.

3. Staff, "Timeline 1939–1945," *BBC*, (October 2014), available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk>.

4. Staff, "CIA Finally Admits It Masterminded Iran's 1953 Coup," *RT*, (August 2013), available at <https://www.rt.com>. The CIA conducted Operation AJAX (TPAJAX) to increase the Shah's monarchical powers and install a pro-American, anti-Communist Prime Minister.

5. *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, directed by George Lucas, (San Francisco, CA: Lucasfilm, 2005). This film followed Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, in which the incumbent defeated a Vietnam veteran and anti-war organizer/protector.

6. H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1998). President Johnson wanted consensus opinions from his advisors and any differences aired out prior to any meetings with him. Johnson's advisors kept detailed information from him, most likely to avoid his temper and ensuring wrath.

7. Chomsky's February 1967 publication of "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" brought him to the forefront of the anti-war movement. Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali after converting to Islam in 1964. He refused to be drafted into military service in 1966–1967 and was subsequently stripped of boxing titles and prohibited from boxing until 1970.

8. H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1998). The Johnson Administration deliberately withheld information from Congress and the American people regarding Vietnam in favor of the Great Society Legislation packages.

9. M. Stanton Evans, *Blacklisted By History: The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight Against America's Enemies*, (New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2007). Senator McCarthy died in 1957, after censure by his peers in December 1954. No other Congressman picked up the mantle from McCarthy. Senate Investigations include The Tydings Committee (1950), the McCarthy Hearings (1953–1954), and the Army-McCarthy Hearings (1954). The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), introduced in 1919, lost relevance after McCarthy's censure and was terminated in 1975.

10. James H. Willbanks, *H304RB: Vietnam I: Insurgency – The Tet Offensive: Turning Point in the Vietnam War*, Reprinted in *U.S. Army Command and General Staff College H300 Syllabus and Book of Readings*, (Ft Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, 2017).

11. Guy Raz, "Final Words: Cronkite's Vietnam Commentary," NPR, (July 2009), available at <https://www.npr.org>. Walter Cronkite's nightly broadcast on 27 February 1968 ended with his opinion of the situation in Vietnam instead of his signature sign-off. This was a first for a national media outlet and the (unintended?) result was an increase in the anti-war movement.

12. National Security Council Memo No. 68 (NSC 68) was not declassified until April 1975. This Top-Secret document outlined the United States' official orientation on Communism since April 1950.

13. USACGSC Department of Command and Leadership, "L102RA: An Overview of Ethical Philosophy and Just War Tradition," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, 2017).

14. "Torture" and enhanced interrogation techniques are often the center of this. Mines, chemical weapons, and radiological weapons are considerations. With the increased access to, and decreased prices of reaching space, this will be the next set of national caveats.

15. Coalition forces in 1991 numbered ~600,000. In 2003, ~175,000 because of the continued revision downward of approved troop levels by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney both learned lessons from 1991 differently than the uniformed military, who continually requested higher troop levels leading up to March 2003.

