

## No Brakes

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAR 3 2012

America's longest war, the fight to stabilize Afghanistan, if that is its purpose, lacks brakes, mechanisms to bring it to a stop. Previously America had significant constraints on fighting drawn out wars. Now there can be wars without end thanks to a professional military, new technology, and a changing politics of party competition.

The draft was the brake on the Vietnam War. Although the quotas for young men were always met, resistance built over time and led to protests in the streets, claims of disabling injury and religious objection, exaggerated schooling, and flight to foreign jurisdictions. Political turmoil convinced politicians that there had to be an end to the fighting no matter the outcome. A lost war was easier to tolerate, especially with a hollow treaty as its basis, than fury at home.

The political way out was to establish a fully professional military, what was called the All Volunteer Force (AVF). America could still have a moderately large military, after all the Soviet Union remained a threat, but it would be one raised by competitive wages rather than conscription. The professional military would have to fight America's wars without drafting its infantry. This prospect somewhat unnerved the military's senior leadership as they feared being trapped precisely where there are today, locked in an endless war in which the public has little stake because there is no draft. No draft, no protest.

The military's way out of this situation was to build a force dependent upon its reserves for anything but the shortest fight. The system the military insisted upon with the establishment of AVF was called the Total Force and involved making the military dependent upon reserves for much of its combat service support—the truck drivers, logistic units, medical personnel, and the like. The military reserves (in America this includes the Army and Air National Guard, the state based descendants of colonial militias) were not called to active duty for the Vietnam War (George W. Bush served as a pilot in the Texas Air National Guard and thus did not go to Vietnam) because politicians feared the mostly middle aged, married reservists more than they did the eighteen year olds draftees. By making themselves dependent upon the call of reserves, the military assumed that only popular, quick wars would be fought.

The reserves were called for the Gulf War and every major American military engagement since then. The Iraq War was a major test as the scale of forces needed exceeded the capacity of the regular military. After some anguish, the Guard and the reserves fit into the rotation and have performed well. Much has changed since the 1970s when the Total Force concept was implemented. The pay of the military, active and reserve, has gone up substantially, making military serve a choice rather than an imposed civic obligation or the acceptable way to dodge one. More of the regular troops are married and thus indistinguishable from the reserves. The public gets less concerned when the troops are used because fighting is a voluntary act, not a compelled one.

Technology helps reduce American casualties thus helping reduce the domestic political impact of prolonged war. Precision weapons increase the effectiveness and limit the exposure of American forces during combat. There has also been improvement in battlefield medical services and in soldier protection via body armor and stouter vehicles. American losses in Afghanistan are much lower than the Vietnam toll, less than 2000 over 10 years compared to nearly 58,000.

Party competition was a final brake on long wars. The Republicans would berate the Democrats post-Vietnam for being weak on defense, for starting wars but then failing to support the troops if the going became difficult. The claim

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more often than not brought electoral victory for Republican presidential candidates as voters feared the consequences of Democrat vacillation. But party competition gave another side to interventions with Republicans arguing often against those with humanitarian motives, but being willing to unleash the military whenever there appeared to be a challenge to American power. Democrats generally were opponents of military spending while Republicans became its champion. The net result was a persistent Republican electoral advantage, but with always a public debate over the costs and benefits of any big steps to be taken.

Obama has taken away the Republican defense advantage and with it the brake of party competition. He campaigned proclaiming Afghanistan as the good war and escalated combat there. The raid killing Osama bin Laden and the drone strikes in Pakistan further aided his effort to eliminate the image of Democratic weakness on security. Today the Republicans are unable to outflank him on the Right and the Left Wing of his own party is silent, fearful of jeopardizing his reelection chances and his advancement of their domestic agenda. There are no war protests. There is, in fact, hardly any discussion of the war's purpose or progress. George W. Bush wanted the US to stay the course in the Global War On Terror (GWOT), Afghanistan included, a war which had no defined endpoint. Without the brakes of conscription or party competition, we are doing just that though we no longer officially call it the GWOT. It is instead it is the war without apparent end or much criticism.

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*Read more from Harvey M. Sapolsky in his e-IR blog: [The High Ground: Observing International Security](#)*

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### About the author:

**Harvey M. Sapolsky** is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.