

No Easy Victory

Written by Barry Stentiford

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BARRY STENTIFORD, JUL 12 2017

Americans are repeatedly frustrated by their inability to turn military prowess into satisfactory endstates. We believe that previously, wars ended decisively, with an absolute and obvious termination point that was recognized as such at the time. However, since the end of World War II, such decisive conclusions have been elusive. Modern strategists, so the narrative goes, find themselves in a more complex environment. As a result, strategic leaders, and the public they serve, find themselves frustrated by the messiness of modern war termination.

Modern strategists should, however, stop looking for that decisive end. This understanding that war termination is messier since World War II owes more to selective memory, false nostalgia, and myopia than history. The problem is not a change in the environment in which wars are fought, but in a false understanding of how wars in the past concluded, abetted by historical narrative that places past American wars into neat sets of dates that upon closer inspection, have little basis in reality. Strategic problems are complex problems, and complex problems seldom end cleanly. Modern strategists concerned with war termination would be better served by taking a closer and deeper look at the conclusion of past wars, which strongly suggests that an ambivalent, uncertain petering out of war has been the rule rather than the exception.

Take three obvious examples of what are normally thought of wars that ended decisively: the War of American Independence, the Civil War, and World War II. Each has a popular image of a decisive end. The Revolutionary War ended with the surrender of Lord Cornwallis to George Washington at Yorktown, followed by the Peace of Paris that recognized the independence of the United States. The Civil War ended at Appomattox Court House, when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant, and World War II ended with either the meeting of American and British Soldiers with their Soviet counterparts in the wreckage of Germany, or on the deck of the USS *Missouri* with the surrender of the Japanese. However none of these examples look so clean and decisive upon an even a cursory look at the events that followed apparent conclusion.

After a tactical and strategic victory over Cornwallis at Yorktown, Washington had to struggle to keep his army together for more than a year, well aware that the British still held New York City, Charleston, and part of Rhode Island. Likewise, the Continental Congress signed a separate peace with Great Britain, reneging on its alliance with France. The treaty hardly ended strife with Great Britain, which maintained troops in some of the western territories ceded to the United States, and maintained good relations with Indian tribes hostile to the United States, not to mention the British naval and army presence in Quebec, Halifax, Bermuda, and the Bahamas. That many Americans considered the War of 1812 the Second War for Independence was not for nostalgia, but because to many, Britain remained a real threat long after the surrender of Cornwallis and even the signing of a peace treaty.

Likewise the surrender of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in May 1865 seems to mark a clear end of the struggle—the Confederate government was in dissolution and its president soon captured. But some Confederate armies held out into late summer. Border violence in the West continued for a generation or more, with some former Confederate irregulars transforming themselves into criminal gangs. Likewise organizations such as the original Ku Klux Klan can be interpreted as a continuation of the war by irregular means as ex-Confederate soldiers turned to terror to keep the Freedmen subordinated. The US Army soon found itself, after Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts, performing occupation duties in much of the South, spending a decade in a failed attempt to ensure Freedmen could vote. If the twin war-time goals of the Federal government had become, by late 1862,

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restoration of the Union and abolition of slavery, the failure of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow dragged out the conclusion of the war at least until the 1960s.

Finally, the ending of World War II was perhaps the messiest. While the Germans and Japanese largely accepted their defeat and little in the way of irregular war continued after the formal acceptance of surrender, it hardly ended strife. Indeed, much of European history, and US and Soviet involvement in Europe, from 1945 until the early 1990s, was part of the complex task of turning a military victory over the Third Reich into a desired strategic endstate. In the Pacific, the Chinese Civil War, Korean War, Vietnam War, and other wars and insurrections should be seen as part of the holdover from World War II. That Japan has never accepted Soviet/Russian sovereignty over some of the Kuril Islands suggests that the Pacific War is still not completely over.

Other American wars had equally or even less clean endings, but the myth of the formerly decisive war termination continues. Strategic leaders and the American public would do better by recognizing the complexity of war, and accepting the likelihood that the ending of war will be messy and often will result in something different from what was sought at the beginning. Expecting or seeking a clean, definitive end is a historical and not productive.

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