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# The Military Option

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### **A big military operation against Hamas in the Gaza strip? A cease-fire with Hamas?**

**Our media discuss these questions dispassionately, as if they were equivalent options. Like a person in a showroom making a choice between two cars. This one is good, and so is the other one. So which should one buy?**

**And nobody cries out: War is the height of stupidity!**

CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, the renowned military theorist, famously said that war is nothing but the continuation of politics by other means. Meaning: war is there to serve policy and is useless when it does not.

What policies did the wars in the last hundred years serve?

Ninety-four years ago, World War I broke out. The immediate cause was the assassination of the Austrian heir apparent by a Serbian student. In Sarajevo they showed me how it happened: after a first attempt on the main street had failed, the assassins had already given up hope when one of them came across the victim again, by sheer accident, and killed him. After this almost accidental killing many millions of human beings lost their lives in the following four years.

The assassination served, of course, only as a pretext. Every one of the belligerent nations had political and economic interests that pushed it into the war. But did the war really serve these interests? The results suggest the opposite: three mighty empires - the Russian, German and Austrian - collapsed; France lost its standing as a world power beyond all hope of recovery; the British Empire was mortally wounded.

Military experts point to the shocking stupidity of almost all the generals, who threw their poor soldiers again and again into hopeless battles, which achieved nothing but slaughter.

Were the statesmen any wiser? Not one of the politicians who started the war imagined that it would last so long and be so horrible. In early August 1914, when the soldiers of all the countries marched into the war with merry enthusiasm, they were promised that they would be home "before Christmas".

No political aim was achieved in that war. The peace agreements that were imposed on the vanquished were monuments of unbridled imbecility. It can be argued that the main result of World War I was World War II.

THE SECOND World War was, seemingly, more rational. The man who launched it practically single-handed, Adolf Hitler, knew exactly what he wanted. His opponents went to war because they had no choice, if they did not want to be overrun by a monstrous dictator. Most of the generals on both sides were far more intelligent than their predecessors.

And in spite of this, it was a stupid war.

Hitler was, basically, a primitive person who lived in the past and did not understand the Zeitgeist. He wanted to turn

Germany into the leading world power - an aim that was wildly beyond its capabilities. He intended to conquer large parts of Eastern Europe and to empty them of their inhabitants, in order to settle Germans there. That was a hopelessly obsolete concept of power. Like all ideas of establishing settlements as a national instrument, it belonged to centuries past. Hitler did not understand the meaning of the technological revolution that was about to change the face of the world. It can be said: Hitler was not only an evil tyrant and a monumental war criminal, but ultimately also a thoroughly stupid person.

The only aim that he almost achieved was the annihilation of the Jewish people. But even this mad endeavor failed in the end: Jews today have a strong influence on the most powerful country in the world, and the Holocaust played an important role in the establishment of the State of Israel.

Hitler wanted to destroy the Soviet Union and reach a compromise with the British Empire. He belittled the United States and almost ignored it. The result of the war was that the Soviet Union took over a large part of Europe, America became the main world power and the British Empire disintegrated forever.

Indeed, the Nazi dictator proved, more than anybody else, the utter futility of war as a political instrument at this point in time. After the destruction of Hitler's Reich, Germany did achieve his goal. Germany is now the dominant economic and political power in a united Europe - but this was attained not with tanks and heavy guns, without war and military might, solely by diplomacy and exports. One generation after all the German cities had become heaps of ruins in the Nazi adventure, Germany was already flourishing as never before.

The same can be said about Japan, which was even more militaristic than Germany. It achieved by peaceful means what the generals and admirals had failed to achieve by war.

FROM TIME to time I read enthusiastic reports by American tourists about Vietnam. What a wonderful country! What a friendly people! What good business can be done there!

Only a generation ago, a brutal war was running amok there. Masses of people were killed, hundreds of villages burned, forests and harvests destroyed by chemical agents, soldiers fell like flies. Why? Because of dominoes.

The theory went like this: if all of Vietnam were to be taken over by the Communists, all the other countries of Southeast Asia would fall. Each one would bring down its neighbor, like a row of dominoes. Reality has shown that this was complete nonsense: the Communists took over all of Vietnam, without affecting the stability of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. When the war memories faded, Vietnam indeed followed the path of its northern neighbor, Red China, but in the meantime China has a flourishing capitalist economy.

In the Vietnam War, the stupidity of the generals competed with that of the politicians. The champion was Henry Kissinger, a war criminal whose towering ego disguised his basic stupidity. At the height of the war he invaded the neighboring peaceful Cambodia and broke it into pieces. The result was a gruesome auto-genocide, when the Communists murdered their own people. Yet many still consider Kissinger a political genius.

THERE ARE those who maintain that for sheer futility, the invasion of Iraq takes the cake even in this fiercely competitive field.

It seems that the political leadership in Washington foresaw the dramatic rise of the world-wide demand for oil. They decided, therefore, to strengthen their hold on the oil of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea basin. The war was intended to turn Iraq into an American satellite and to station there, under a friendly regime, a permanent American

garrison that would keep the whole area under control.

The results, up to now, have been the opposite. Instead of consolidating Iraq as a united country under a stable pro-American regime, a civil war is raging, the state is tottering on the brink of disintegration, the population hates the Americans and considers them a foreign occupier. The output of oil is less than it was before the invasion, the immense costs of the war undermine the American economy, the price of oil is increasing incessantly, America's once elevated position in world public opinion has reached rock bottom and the American public is demanding that the soldiers be brought home.

There is no doubt that American interests could have been safeguarded far better by diplomatic means, using the economic clout of the US. That would have saved thousands of American soldiers and ten times as many Iraqi civilians, and trillions of dollars. But the problematic ego of George Bush, who hides his hollowness and insecurity behind a bluster of noisy arrogance, caused him to prefer war. As to his cerebral prowess, a world-wide consensus has been achieved even before the end of his term in office.

IN THE 60 years of its existence, the State of Israel has fought six major wars and several "smaller" ones (the War of Attrition, the Grapes of Wrath, the two intifadas and more.)

The 1948 confrontation was a war of "no alternative", if one justifies the Jewish intrusion into Palestine by the fact that there was no other solution for the problem of their existence. But already the second round, the war of 1956, was an example of incredible short-sightedness.

The French, who initiated the war, were in a state of denial: they could not admit to themselves that in Algeria a genuine war of liberation was taking place. Therefore, they convinced themselves that the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, was the root of the problem. David Ben-Gurion and his aides (and particularly Shimon Peres) wanted to remove the "Egyptian Tyrant" (as he was then uniformly called in Israel) because he had raised the banner of Arab Unity, which they considered an existential threat to Israel. Britain, the third partner, was longing for the past glories of Empire.

All these aims were totally negated by the war: France was expelled from Algeria, together with more than a million settlers; Britain was pushed to the margins of the Middle East; and the "danger" of Arab Unity proved to be a scarecrow. The price: a whole Arab generation was convinced that Israel was the ally of the nastiest colonial regimes, and the chances of peace were pushed back for many years.

The 1967 war was intended at the beginning to break the siege on Israel. But in the course of the fighting, the war of defense became a war of conquest which drove Israel into a vertigo of intoxication from which it has not yet quite recovered. Since then we have been captives in a vicious circle of occupation, resistance, settlements and permanent war.

One of the direct results was the 1973 war, which destroyed the myth of our army's invincibility. Yet without this being the intent of our government, this war had one positive result: three unusual personalities - Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin and Jimmy Carter - succeeded in translating Egyptian pride over the successful crossing of the Suez Canal into a peace agreement. But the same peace could have been achieved a year earlier, without war and without the thousands of killed, if Golda Meir had not arrogantly rejected Sadat's proposal.

The First Lebanon War was, perhaps, the most hopeless and dim-witted of Israel's wars, a cocktail of arrogance, ignorance and complete lack of understanding of the opponent. Ariel Sharon intended - as he told me in advance, to - (a) destroy the PLO, (b) cause the Palestinian refugees to flee from Lebanon to Jordan, (c) drive the Syrians out of

Lebanon, and (d) turn Lebanon into an Israeli protectorate. The results: (a) Arafat went to Tunis, and later, as the result of the First Intifada, returned to Palestine in triumph, (b) the Palestinian refugees remained in Lebanon, in spite of the Sabra and Shatila massacre that was intended to panic them into fleeing, (c) the Syrians remained in Lebanon for another twenty years, and (d) the Shiites, who had been downtrodden and beholden to Israel, became a powerful force in Lebanon and Israel's most determined foe.

The less said about Lebanon War II the better - its true character was obvious right from the start. Its aims were not frustrated - simply because there were no clear aims at all. Today Hizbullah is where it was, stronger and better armed, shielded from Israeli attacks by the presence of an international force.

After the First Intifada, Israel recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization and brought Arafat back to the country. After the Second Intifada, Hamas won the Palestinian elections and later took over direct control of a part of the country.

ALBERT EINSTEIN considered it a symptom of madness to repeat again and again doing something that has already failed and to expect a different result every time.

Most politicians and generals conform to this formula. Again and again they try to achieve their aims by military means and obtain contrary results. We Israelis occupy an honorable place among these madmen.

War is hell, as an American general pronounced. It also rarely achieves its aims.

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