



DRIFT

The Unmooring of American Military Power

RACHEL MADDOW

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About the Author:

RACHEL MADDOW is the host of the Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC. She previously worked at Air America Radio. She has a doctorate in politics from Oxford and a bachelor's degree in public policy from Stanford.

General Overview:

If American colonists had not rejected British militarism and the massive financial burden of maintaining the British military, then America as an independent nation would not exist. The Constitutional Convention vigorously debated whether America should even have a standing army as the founders understood this could drain resources and create too much of a temptation for political leaders to use it. Those worries ultimately led to the Constitution's division of government with a deliberate bias towards peace rather than war.

However, in the past generation or two, America has drifted from that historical course. Instead of war being an occasional necessity, we've grown accustomed to our nation continually fighting a war or two somewhere in the world. Even worse, in recent years a larger proportion of the military operations sanctioned by the United States have been carried out by private contractors driven by the profit motive rather than the US military executing the policy of our elected leaders. In doing so, we've broken faith with the best advice and guidance our founders gave us.

It's time for a course correction and for the United States to return to our constitutional roots. We need to revive the idea that America is a peaceable nation and we will only result to war when exceptional circumstances arise. *"It's not a conspiracy, there aren't rogue elements pushing us to subvert our national interests to instead serve theirs. It's been more entertaining and more boneheaded than that. The good news is we don't need a radical new vision of post-Cold War American power. We just need a "small c" conservative return to our constitutional roots, a course correction. It wasn't inevitable. And it's fixable."*

*** Please Note:** This political book summary does *not* offer judgment or opinion on the book's contents. The ideas, viewpoints and arguments are presented just as the book's *author* had intended.

“Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds are added to those of subduing the force of the people. The same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes and the opportunities of fraud growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manners and of morals engendered by both. No nation could reserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare. Those truths are well established. They are read in every page which records the progression from a less arbitrary to a more arbitrary government, or the transition from a popular government to an aristocracy or a monarchy.”

– James Madison

The American Art of Fighting

For the first century and a half of this nation’s history, the military was of such limited power and scope the only way war could be engaged was with citizen-soldiers who were mobilized at the outbreak and then demobilized at the termination of hostilities. Post World War II, the United States Army was three times the size it had been and 150,000 troops were left stationed in the Far East, 125,000 in Western Europe and a sizable number elsewhere around the globe. The military was held in high esteem – until the Vietnam War was begun in earnest by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the early months of 1965. LBJ was the first to attempt to take the nation’s armed forces to war without taking the nation as a whole to war and it was a spectacular failure. By the end of his administration, American had more than 535,000 troops in Vietnam.

Public sentiment was so strong against the Vietnam War the United States Congress responded by passing The War Powers Resolution of 1973. This set out explicitly that the power for the nation to wage war vested with Congress alone as set out in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution. President Nixon vetoed the bill but the House and the Senate overrode that veto with votes to spare. The extent of Congress’s resolve to exercise its authority then became clear when President Gerald Ford’s request for a \$722 million appropriation to support the South Vietnamese military was defeated. There was no other course than to end the Vietnam War.

When Ronald Reagan started running for president in 1976, he lost the first six primaries including one in his birth state of Illinois. While campaigning in North Carolina, Reagan found national security was an electoral hot button. He started talking about the fact the United States (under President Jimmy Carter’s administration) was about to return control of the Panama Canal back to Panama. Reagan knew this was in accordance with the original treaty but he came up with a hardline soundbite which took on a life of its own: “We bought it, we paid for it, we built it, and we intend to keep it!” This jingoism struck a chord with the electorate and Reagan won North Carolina easily. Seizing the initiative, his campaign managers bought a half-hour of prime time television which Reagan used to suggest the Ford administration had been asleep at the wheel while the Soviet threat grew day by day. Reagan quoted “fact” after “fact” none of which were actually true but Reagan had tapped into a huge political vein in the American electorate. Conservatives rallied to his appeal to save the nation with a passion and Ronald Reagan became the fortieth president of the United States.

Lost in the haze of the political campaign was a new dynamic which had emerged in the United States. After the horrors of the Civil War, an entire generation of Americans had enjoyed peace. America during that time had become economically strong and vibrant but there was a recurring line of thought which ran along the lines that from time to time, America need to exercise its military power in order to reaffirm its values and find

itself as a nation. America was gradually getting into the habit of being at war and was starting to believe that being at war was the price of being a world superpower.

Reagan's election as president in 1980 was a watershed event for the military in more ways than one. During Reagan's administration, the army's recruiting budget went from \$10 million a year to \$100 million. Reagan knew if he suggested any provocation to American strength and pride ("Uncle Sam being forced to put its tail between its legs and creep away rather than face trouble head on"), conservatives would flock to his rallying call. Reagan became quite adept at taking half-facts and embellishing them into full-blown rallying calls for American pride. In short, he was a skilled salesman and he knew revving up the American fighting machine from time to time made very good politics. Over the course of the Reagan administration alone, military expenditure doubled from \$150 billion a year to \$300 billion a year until it represented 30 percent of America's overall annual budget and more than 6 percent of GDP.

President Reagan was a consummate salesman. Every year around budget time, he had the Pentagon release its latest installment of *Soviet Military Power* to the public. This report, in most years 100 pages or more in length, was filled with specially commissioned artist's renderings of new Soviet weaponry – nuclear submarines, jet fighters, missiles, massive weapons production facilities and so forth. This report was also accompanied by some deliberately alarming sound bites: "The Soviets have armed themselves to the teeth and they continue to do so at a rate far in excess of any legitimate defense needs by any measure – theirs or ours. The plain matter of the fact is that, in the last ten years, Soviet military investment in hardware alone has exceeded ours by some 500 billion dollars." Reagan himself uttered the memorable lines: "We only had to heed the words of Lenin when Lenin said that the Soviet Union would take Eastern Europe, it would organize the hordes of Asia and then it would move on Latin America. And, once having taken that, it wouldn't have to take the last bastion of capitalism, the United States. The United States would fall into their outstretched hand like overripe fruit. Well, history reveals that the Soviet Union followed that policy."

To further ramp up public sentiment for a comprehensive buildup in American military power, Reagan supporters established what was called The Committee on the Present Danger or later Team B. This group of "outside experts" looked over the shoulder of the CIA and came up with their own hawkish assessment of Soviet military and political strength. Despite evidence Soviet military expenditure was actually falling as the Politburo struggled to feed its people, Team B kept on trumpeting that the Soviet threat was far more serious than most people realized. Many of the members of the Committee on the Present Danger would end up serving at various times in the Reagan administration.

The Soviets, for their part, reacted to the hardening rhetoric from the United States with caution. Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev went so far as to state: "It is dangerous madness to try to defeat each other in the arms race and to count on victory in nuclear war. I shall add that only he who has decided to commit suicide can start a nuclear war in the hope of emerging a victor from it. No matter what the attacker might possess, no matter what method of unleashing nuclear war he chooses, he will not attain his aims. Retributions will ensue inevitably." His deputy, Konstantin Cherenko said: "Nuclear war must not be permitted. It is criminal to look upon nuclear war as a rational, almost legitimate continuation of policy." President Reagan responded with: "Unlike us, the Soviet Union believes that a nuclear war is possible and they believe it is winnable."

The Reagan administration was very successful in hyping up the Soviet threat and in spending to re-arm the United States in response. The United States embarked on an impressive trillion-dollar arms buildup – using funding that would otherwise have been frittered away on schools, cities, roads, bridges and health care. It was also during the Reagan presidency yearly budget shortfalls grew from \$50 billion to more than \$220 billion or more than 6 percent of GDP – generating a fiscal sinkhole the nation has never climbed out of.

Stupid Regulations

Just prior to the 1984 elections, Congress passed the Bolan Amendment which explicitly prohibited the president from conducting a secret, CIA-funded and CIA-run war. President Reagan resented having to make a case to Congress for funding and considered that was a means of alerting the enemy to what you were planning so he started funding a covert war in Nicaragua supporting the Contras. In addition to that, President Reagan also pushed ahead with a controversial arms-for-hostages deal whereby the United States would sell arms to Iran in exchange for Iran's help in getting the Islamic militant group Hezbollah to release their hostages.

Neither the secret war in Nicaragua nor the arms-for-hostages deals went well for Reagan in the end. In fact, the Iran-Contra deals turned into a full-blown scandal which ultimately led to the indictment and conviction of several senior administration officials including the secretary of defense, two national security advisors and an assistant secretary of state. What was interesting about this entire affair, however, was that a case had been made that Reagan was right to do what he did. Wyoming Representative Dick Cheney was the author of the minority report attached to Congress's investigation and he argued that Reagan was right to defy Congress because there was nothing in America's political system which could or should constrain a president from waging whatever war he wanted however he planned to execute it. Cheney further noted: *"The President was expected to have the primary role of conducting the foreign policy of the United States. Congressional actions to limit the President in this area therefore should be reviewed with a considerable degree of skepticism. If they interfere with core presidential foreign policy functions, they should be struck down. Moreover, the lesson of our constitutional history is that doubtful cases should be decided in favor of the President."*

As surprising as it may sound, since the Reagan era Congress has never really asserted itself to stop any President who was of a mind to go to war. George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush all waged war with impunity and only cursory dealings with Congress. Since 9/11 in particular, virtually nobody in the United States has ever challenged the President's authority to make war. The Constitutional checks-and-balances have been jettisoned and when to go to war is now pretty much the decision of the President alone. President George H.W. Bush even launched Operation Desert Storm to repel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait while Congress was in recess for elections.

Every time members of Congress have tried to wrestle back from the President the power to wage war as set out in the Constitution, the White House has mustered a public relations initiative to defeat that idea. Dick Cheney, serving as secretary of defense in 1990s, even went so far as to suggest it would be "dangerous" and a "risky proposition" to leave national security decisions to Congress. As it turned out, once Operation Desert Storm looked all but inevitable, President Bush did seek a vote of congressional approval for the war which was forthcoming although it was not overwhelming. The Senate only approved the mandate for the United States to pursue military action by a margin of 52 to 47.

"Agree or disagree with the outcome, the system had worked. Our Congress had its clangorous and open debate and then took sides. We decided to go to war, as a country. This in itself was kind of a miracle, given how dismissive the Bush White House was of Congress's responsibility for such decisions, and congressional leaders' inclination to shirk those responsibilities. What forced this national debate was not humble respect for the Constitution or the founders' intent to make any decision to go to war difficult, deliberate, wrenching, and collective. No, what forced us to do the right thing was the last surviving structural barrier to war making—the Abrams Doctrine. The sheer need to call up a huge number of troops to mount any military operation of any significance anywhere in the world."

Doing More With Less

Whenever America has gone to war, the Abrams Doctrine has long held sway. In a nutshell, this article of faith asserts if the United States declares war, it has to do so with such a force that it would be plain that the nation was at war and not just the military. In other words, war must be so dramatic that it would impact on the nation as a whole and not just fall to the families of those who are serving in the military. The Abrams Doctrine had been a guiding light of thinking for military planners for generations and it was reflective of the fact the Constitution discouraged the nation waging war.

With all of the hassles which were involved in getting Congress to approve Operation Desert Storm (albeit at the eleventh hour), Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell saw an opportunity to reengineer the United States military. With the end of the Cold War, there had already been considerable discussion about a “peace dividend” where military expenditure could be scaled back in favor of rerouting tax dollars to domestic spending. Prior to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Powell had even floated a proposal for the United States military to be downsized by 25 percent to be offset by an increase in research and development of new weapons technology. President Bush had even scheduled a public announcement of the new policy for August 2, 1990 but instead of a presidential speech, the nation sat transfixed watching as Iraqi tanks started rolling across the border into Kuwait. That led to Operation Desert Storm which was a military standout success: a clear mission, explicit public support and an overwhelming show of force which saw the ground assault completed in one hundred hours and the troops back home again five months later – all at a loss of fewer than two hundred American soldiers.

All of a sudden, instead of delivering a speech about downsizing the American military machine, President Bush delivered a very different kind of speech the day after Saddam invaded Kuwait: *“Even in a world where democracy and freedom have made great gains, threats remain. Terrorism, hostage-taking, renegade regimes and unpredictable rulers, new sources of instability—all require a strong and engaged America. The brutal aggression launched last night against Kuwait illustrates my central thesis: Notwithstanding the alteration in the Soviet threat, the world remains a dangerous place with serious threats to important US interests.”*

To align with this idea, Cheney suggested the new mission of the United States military was to be able to stop the emergence of new threats to national security wherever in the world they may crop up. Cheney stated: *“Highly ready and rapidly deployable power projection forces including forcible entry forces, remain key means of precluding challengers.”* While this vision of the US Army as a rapid response force was new, Cheney and his planners also realized they would face severe budget pressures. They embarked therefore on a mission to figure out how to do more with less – which led to them questioning whether soldiers needed to carry out all the support functions on army deployments like cooking, routine maintenance, washing and plumbing. It was suggested the soldiers should specialize in fighting and outside contractors could handle everything else. This was the genesis of what would later come to be known as the Logistics Civilian Augmentation Program (LOGCAP).

The first private contractor signed on in 1992 and for a number of years, LOGCAP was the poster child for smart military expenditure with vigorous support from both sides of the political isle. The Clinton administration expanded LOGCAP vigorously and Al Gore stated in 1996: *“Outsourcing or privatization of key support functions, with the strong prospect of lowering costs and improving performance, is under way under the leadership of the Deputy Secretary of Defense. LOGCAP has provided the Army with a highly flexible contractual means of providing quality of life services to troops deployed in some of the harshest environments in the world, without impacting its combat capability.”*

When LOGCAP was first introduced in 1992, the US Department of Defense did a few hundred million dollars worth of business with companies like Brown & Root Services Corporation, which was owned by Halliburton with Dick Cheney as CEO. By the time President Clinton left office, the Department of Defense had formalized more than three thousand contracts valued at around \$300 billion. The Pentagon wasn't even able to state definitively how many private workers were on the military's payroll through these contracts – estimates ranged from 125,000 people up to 600,000. Everyone was raving about how efficient it was to employ unskilled local laborers in other countries and pay them \$1.12 an hour for training, security and food services rather than use American soldiers who had to be paid \$16 an hour plus benefits.

Unfortunately, LOGCAP also suffered from severe mission creep. What started out as outsourcing food services soon expanded into the military outsourcing its information processing, data processing, payroll, mapping, aerial surveillance and even intelligence gathering. Private companies were also taking what they learned from working for the US military and offering that expertise to rich nations like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. A gaggle of recently retired US Army generals formed a company called Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MRPI) and started offering their military expertise to the United States and other countries. In 1997 when the Pentagon wanted to update its policies for working with private contractors, the contract for doing so was assigned to MRPI.

LOGCAP was such a success its problems were for the most part swept under the rug. For one thing, it was common for many of these contracts to experience huge cost overruns which often went unnoticed. A 1997 investigation by the US General Accounting office noted: “The Army did not implement a systematic method of inspections to monitor contract performance. As a result, they could not ensure that the contractor performed work in accordance with contract provisions, used the minimum number of resources to meet the Army's requirements, and furnished the appropriate level of support.” In other words, nobody was entirely certain what the Army was getting for all its LOGCAP spending. There was also the fact private contractors were not subject to the normal Army laws and regulations so what America ended up paying for in overseas deployments was described by one observer this way: “The outcome has been the creation of a band of mercenaries—a secretive, unregulated, well-paid, under-the-radar force that is larger than the U.S. Army.” Many of the LOGCAP contracts specifically prohibit the placement of military officers to oversee the operations of civilian contractors.

“All through the Clinton years, the stench at the center of the privatization experiment was obscured by all the Al Gore–created systems-efficiency nose-gays about the flexibility and the streamlining and the sewage and solid-waste disposals and transportation grids and the generally empowering quality-of-life services at work in the fields of civilian augmentation and outsourcing. And so nobody in the Clinton administration ever really apprehended the acute and lasting problem of LOGCAP and the thousands of other small privatization ploys they unleashed; the acute and lasting problem was that they cut that mooring line tying our wars to our politics, the line that tied the decision to go to war to public debate about that decision. The idea of the Abrams Doctrine—and Jefferson's citizen-soldiers—was to make it so we can't make war without causing a big civilian hullabaloo. Privatization made it all easy, and quiet.”

It didn't take long for President Bill Clinton to come to appreciate that if he shifted slices of foreign policy missions into the private sector rather than using the US Army, he would face less oversight and political heat. Outsourcing those missions would in effect keep them off the books and away from the kind of awkward questioning Congress provided. It was also easier to tell the nation he had issued a contract for this or that mission to a private contractor than to state he was putting their sons and daughters in harms way in order to execute American policy decisions.

The first war which was basically outsourced to private contractors was the Balkans. President Clinton had expressed support for arming the Croats and the Bosnians to fight the genocidal Serbs during his 1992 campaign. Once in office, he floated the idea of engaging in a “limited war” effort of bombing runs to weaken the Serbs but Colin Powell as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out only putting troops on the ground would make a difference. So instead of going to war, Clinton committed the US military to policing a symbolic but ultimately impotent “no-fly zone” zone and suggested to the Croatian government they should hire the retired generals now working for Military Personnel Resources Incorporated. A few months later, MRPI signed a contract they termed the Democratic Transition Assistance Program which saw a cadre of retired military personnel heading to Croatia to start training Croatian officers in “basic leadership skills, planning, programming and the budgeting process.”

Six months later, the Croats had purchased about a billion dollars worth of tanks and assault helicopters from the old Warsaw powers (with the tacit approval of the Clinton administration and the help of Iran) and they launched an offensive to repel the Serbs from Krajina. The offensive had all the hallmarks of a US-style military operation and would have inspired pride as a case study at West Point but when fingers were pointed at MRPI, they reiterated they were just in the country to provide “democratic transition assistance” and not to plan battles or run wars. President Clinton didn’t appear to care one way or another. Whatever the source, the Serbs saw the writing on the wall and negotiated an end to hostilities.

When the United States was required to supply twenty thousand peacekeepers in Bosnia and Croatia to keep the Serbian military under heel, by using LOGCAP to provide support services it wasn’t even necessary for the US Army to make a high profile call-up of Guard members or Reserves. And ever since Bosnia, successive administrations have followed the same gamebook. Whenever the US Army has been required to deploy somewhere in the world, private contractors have been hired to do much of the heavy lifting. With the stroke of a pen and the wave of a checkbook, the traditional political sensitivity about deploying the US Army has vanished.

“That political sensitivity is there for a reason. Mounting an overseas military operation should force a national gut-check about wars that presidents might otherwise rush us into. It lessens the possibility of stranding our military in conflicts the country doesn’t support or, worse, doesn’t care about. Having a work-around for that political sensitivity must have felt like genius to those who wanted war without the hassle, but even in the short run, that work-around had clear unintended consequences. Not only was there little public debate about the merits of a major American deployment, there was also less pressure to bring the mission to a quick conclusion. American peacekeeping troops were in the Balkans for more than eight years, without the general public much noticing.”

By the time Bill Clinton left office, Pentagon planners had even taken to terming the use of private contractors to fight wars rather than the US military as an Operation Other Than War. These quasi-military operations have pretty much run on autopilot ever since. They allow the President to wage a war without political costs or consequences or even much civilian notice. In short, the real legacy of the Clinton years was by 2001:

- There was precedent that a President could start military operations without Congress’s approval.
- The US military budget had grown to be half the size of all other military budgets in the world combined.
- The spirit of the Abrams Doctrine – that the disruption of civilian life is the price of war – was kaput.

In other words, it was now clear to all and sundry that the United States was free to engage in any military operations the President of the day might select without all those pesky restraints and limitations which the Constitution had imposed. The only question that remains is whether this is a good thing or a bad thing.

You Build It, You Own It

Everyone wants America to have an outstanding military. That aim, however, does not exempt the military from competing with other worthy uses for the nation's financial resources. Having a world-class military is absolutely fine as long as it doesn't weaken the nation by stopping us achieving some other national priorities. America must not become one dimensional like a dictator who buys the latest arms but neglects to feed his people.

The deliberate disincentives to war which were built into the Constitution – having citizen-soldiers rather than a standing army and leaving the power to declare war to Congress rather than the President – need to be respected rather than worked around. To get to that stage, there are several policies we can institute and decisions we can make:

- Whenever we decide to go to war as a nation, let's pay for it right up front. We should raise the money that will be required through increased taxes, war bonds, whatever. If we do that, it will become clear war is expensive and should only be undertaken after much thought and deliberation.
- America should do away with having a secret military which only answers to the President. The CIA should not be charged with executing a war through special forces, drones or whatever. America's wars should be fought openly and transparently.
- We should stop asking military leaders to make judgment calls about policy. America's political leaders should never "defer to the military" when considering what to do. That's backwards.
- Our Guards and Reserves should be exactly that. They should be civilians, not an army in hiding.
- Let's stop using private contractors to carry out military functions. They always turn out to be more expensive and less responsible than the army. And if private contractors break the law, they should be prosecuted forthwith, not awarded new contracts.
- Let's agree with the extremists that the world is a dangerous place and then get on with building our own nation rather than trying to solve every international problem which comes along. Just because we have the world's best fighting machine doesn't mean we have to keep deploying it at the slightest provocation to us or our neighbors. We can find much better uses for the billions that will cost us only to find the external threats never go away.
- Let's have a nuclear infrastructure which is realistic. Let's decide what we need to deter enemies and decommission everything else before those weapons get smuggled out of the country and used against us.
- Let's assert the legislature's prerogatives on war and peace. Presidents will always be prey to the temptation to make war in order to build a legacy. Let's use the checks and balances the Constitution always intended to slant things back towards balance and normalcy.

"None of this is impossible. This isn't bigger than us. Decisions about national security are ours to make. And the good news is that this isn't rocket science—we don't need to reinvent Fogbank. We just need to revive that old idea of America as a deliberately peaceable nation. That's not simply our inheritance, it's our responsibility."

– Rachel Maddow

"One of my favorite ideas is, never to keep an unnecessary soldier. The Greeks and Romans had no standing armies, yet they defended themselves. Their system was to make every man a soldier and oblige him to repair to the standard of his country whenever that was reared. This made them invincible; and the same remedy will make us so."

– Thomas Jefferson