A WORLD WITHOUT AMERICAN ARMS:

A Speculative History of the Twentieth Century

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A Counterfactual Analysis of Political, Societal, and Civilizational Outcomes

World War I • World War II • Korea • Vietnam • The Middle East • Afghanistan • Iraq

PREFACE

Speculative history — counterfactual analysis — is not a parlor game. At its most rigorous, it is the discipline of identifying the actual causal weight of specific events and actors by asking what their absence would have meant for the structure of subsequent history. This paper attempts exactly that: to remove the American soldier from the wars of the twentieth century and to describe, with as much disciplined logic and historical grounding as the exercise permits, the world that would have taken shape in that absence. The conclusions are not comfortable. They are, however, instructive — because understanding what American military power actually prevented is the precondition for understanding what it actually meant, and what its diminishment in the twenty-first century may yet cost.

Methodological Note: The Rules of Counterfactual Analysis

Serious counterfactual history operates under constraints. It is not license to imagine any convenient outcome. The analyst is bound by: (1) the actual correlation of forces at the moment of the intervention being removed; (2) the documented intentions, capabilities, and strategic objectives of the actors who would have remained; (3) the known limits of military, economic, and political endurance of those actors; and (4) the structural realities of geography, demography, industrial capacity, and alliance systems that constrain all historical actors regardless of their aspirations.

This paper applies those constraints rigorously. It does not argue that Axis victory in World War II would have been benign. It argues, on the basis of the actual evidence of Axis ideology, documented war aims, and operational behavior, that it would have been catastrophic in specific, describable ways. It does not argue that communist consolidation in Asia would have been temporary. It argues, on the basis of actual communist governance records in every country where that governance was established, that it would have produced mass death and permanent autocracy in the affected populations.

A further constraint governs this analysis: the United States is removed only as a military actor. American economic, diplomatic, and cultural presence remains, acknowledging that a truly isolated America is itself a different counterfactual that compounds variables beyond analytical control. What we are asking is simpler and starker: what if the American soldier had never crossed the Atlantic, the Pacific, the 38th Parallel, the Mekong, or the Hindu Kush?

NOTE	*All political, military, and demographic projections in this paper are grounded in documented historical evidence: the stated war aims of the relevant powers, their demonstrated governing*

philosophies where they held power, and the operational military assessments available to contemporary analysts. This is speculative history, not fiction.

Part I: The Great War Without America — 1917 and Beyond

A. The Stalemate That American Entry Broke

By the spring of 1917, the Western Front had consumed four million dead in three years of industrial slaughter and produced a front line that had moved, in aggregate, less than ten miles in either direction. The war had reached a condition of near-perfect military equilibrium: the Entente powers (Britain, France, and Russia) possessed sufficient resources to deny Germany victory but had proven unable to achieve it themselves. Germany, despite early victories and continued tactical proficiency, could not break through the Channel ports or compel a French capitulation. The war was being decided not by maneuver but by attrition — and attrition was destroying both sides at equivalent rates.

Into this equilibrium, the United States injected a decisive and irreplaceable asymmetry. American entry in April 1917 brought not merely two million fresh soldiers — the AEF under General Pershing — but the prospect of unlimited reinforcement, a naval contribution that broke the German U-boat campaign, and the financial credit structure that had been sustaining Britain and France against economic exhaustion. The German High Command's decision to gamble on unrestricted submarine warfare — the direct provocation of American entry — was itself a tacit acknowledgment that Germany could not win a prolonged war of attrition against a fully mobilized Western alliance.

B. The Counterfactual: A German Negotiated Peace

Remove American entry. The equilibrium of 1917 persists. France, after the catastrophic failure of the Nivelle Offensive (April–May 1917) and the subsequent mutinies that affected fifty-four French divisions, is effectively incapable of offensive operations for the remainder of that

year. Britain, under Haig, continues the catastrophically expensive Passchendaele campaign (July–November 1917) at a cost of 250,000 casualties for minimal territorial gain. Russia collapses into revolution regardless — American entry did not prevent the Bolshevik seizure of power, which was driven by entirely internal dynamics.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 1918) occurs in our timeline even with American troops arriving in France. In the counterfactual, it occurs on identical or more favorable terms for Germany, releasing the full weight of the Eastern Front divisions for redeployment west — the same calculation Ludendorff made for his Spring 1918 offensive. The difference is that in the counterfactual, there are no American troops in France to absorb the initial German breakthrough. The Spring Offensive of 1918 does not stall at Chateau-Thierry, where American Marines and infantry played a critical role in halting the German advance on Paris. It reaches the Marne in force.

The military analysis of contemporaries — including German generals who later wrote extensively about Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood — is unambiguous: American troops arrived at the precise moment of maximum French vulnerability and plugged a gap that French reserves could not have filled. Without that intervention, Paris falls or France seeks terms by the autumn of 1918. The more likely outcome, given the exhaustion of all parties, is a negotiated armistice on terms broadly favorable to Germany — not unconditional German victory, but a German-dominated peace that preserves the German state, its territorial gains in the east, and its status as the pre-eminent continental power.

C. The World That German Victory Produces

A German-negotiated peace in 1918 produces a European settlement radically different from Versailles. Germany retains Alsace-Lorraine, which it has held since 1871. It retains or expands its eastern territorial gains under Brest-Litovsk — Ukraine, the Baltic states, Poland —

under effective German dominance if not formal annexation. The Austro-Hungarian Empire survives, weakened but intact. The Ottoman Empire negotiates its own settlement with British and French exhaustion limiting the terms those powers can impose.

What does not occur: the Versailles reparations system, which — whatever its economic merits and demerits — was the proximate political grievance that Adolf Hitler exploited to seize power. The 'stab in the back' myth is also eliminated, because Germany has not been defeated — it has won, or at minimum not lost. The Weimar Republic may still come into existence, because Kaiser Wilhelm II's regime was already under severe domestic pressure by 1918 and some form of constitutional reform was likely regardless. But a Germany that has fought a successful or draw-result war has no equivalent political market for the extremist resentment politics that Hitler monetized.

CRITICAL OBSERVATION	*The elimination of American entry in WWI does not necessarily prevent Hitler. It prevents the specific conditions — Versailles humiliation, stab-in-the-back mythology, hyperinflation from war debt — that made Hitler's particular political formula viable. German nationalism survives. Whether it takes a genocidal totalitarian form without those specific grievances is a genuinely open question — and the more honest answer is: probably not in the same way, and possibly not at all.*

The Eastern European outcome is far darker in the short term. A German-dominated eastern Europe means no independent Poland, no independent Baltic states, effective German suzerainty over Ukraine. The Bolsheviks in Russia still consolidate power — that revolution was driven by Russian internal dynamics, not Western intervention — and the early Soviet state faces a Germany that has won the war and holds substantial Russian territory. The result may be a negotiated Russo-German accommodation of spheres of influence, with Russia consolidating eastward and Germany dominant in central and eastern Europe.

The British Empire survives substantially intact. France, having been spared the final humiliation of 1918, retains its army and colonial empire but emerges from the war permanently

diminished relative to Germany. The fundamental strategic reality of Europe circa 1925 in this counterfactual is: German hegemony on the continent, British maritime dominance, a recovering Russia, and the United States as a prosperous but strategically disengaged offshore power.

Part II: The Second World War — The Abyss Without America

A. The Problem of the Pacific: Japan Without a Counterweight

Japan's military expansion in Asia began in earnest in 1931 with the seizure of Manchuria and accelerated through the invasion of China in 1937. By December 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and brought the United States into the war, the Empire of Japan already controlled Korea, Manchuria, much of coastal China, Indochina, and was moving toward the Dutch East Indies and Malaya. The strategic logic of Japanese expansion was resource acquisition — oil, rubber, iron — driven by the chokehold that American and British embargoes were placing on Japan's industrial war machine.

Remove American belligerence from December 1941. Japan attacks Pearl Harbor — but in this scenario, as in the historical one, the attack is designed to neutralize the Pacific Fleet and buy time for resource consolidation. If the United States absorbs the attack and does not respond with a declaration of war (a political counterfactual that requires imagining a very different American domestic politics — but let us grant it), Japan proceeds with its southern advance against British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

Britain, already stretched to the breaking point defending Egypt, the North Atlantic, and the home islands against Germany, cannot defend both Malaya and its European theater commitments. Singapore falls — as it did historically — but without any prospect of American reinforcement. Australia and New Zealand face Japanese advance without the American shield that historically protected them. General MacArthur's 'I shall return' promise is simply never made, because MacArthur is never sent to the Pacific in the first place.

The Pacific War, in this counterfactual, ends not with American island-hopping toward Tokyo but with a negotiated settlement between Japan and the exhausted British Empire. Japan retains control of Southeast Asia, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), the Philippines, and effectively becomes the hegemonic power across the entire western Pacific and much of Asia. China — Nationalist and Communist factions alike — continues fighting Japan, but without American Lend-Lease and without the strategic pressure of the Pacific campaign drawing Japanese resources away from China, the outcome is a Sino-Japanese negotiated settlement that leaves Japan dominant in coastal China and the north.

B. The European Theater: Britain, the Soviet Union, and the Nazi State

The European theater counterfactual is the most consequential and the most disturbing. In the historical timeline, the defeat of Nazi Germany required the combined military and industrial power of three great powers: Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Remove any one of those three, and the strategic mathematics change fundamentally. Remove the United States — its forces in North Africa, Italy, and France; its aerial bombardment campaign that destroyed German industrial capacity; its naval contribution to the Atlantic; and above all its Lend-Lease support that kept both Britain and the Soviet Union operational — and the remaining two powers face Germany alone.

The Soviet Union fought the most devastating campaign in the history of warfare on the Eastern Front, sustaining approximately 27 million deaths to defeat the Wehrmacht. In the historical timeline, Soviet resilience was sustained in part by American Lend-Lease: 400,000 jeeps and trucks that motorized the Red Army's logistics, 15 million pairs of boots, 1,900 locomotives, critical aluminum and aviation fuel. Strip that support, and the Soviet capacity to sustain offensive operations in 1943–44 is measurably diminished. The Battle of Kursk (July 1943) — the decisive

turning point on the Eastern Front — is fought with a Red Army that has fewer motorized units, inferior logistics, and critically, no second front threatening Germany from the west.

This does not necessarily mean German victory in the east. The Wehrmacht was already strategically overextended by 1942, and the fundamental problems of German strategy — fighting a two-front war, underestimating Soviet industrial capacity relocated beyond the Urals, the catastrophic losses of Stalingrad — remain in any scenario. But the Eastern Front war extends further into 1944 or 1945, at a cost in additional tens of millions of Soviet lives, before the Wehrmacht's attrition reaches the breaking point.

C. Britain's Position: Survival Without Liberation

Britain in the historical timeline was genuinely close to strategic defeat in 1941–42. The U-boat campaign was sinking merchant shipping faster than it could be replaced. The loss of Singapore (February 1942) and Tobruk (June 1942) represented the nadir of British military fortune. Prime Minister Churchill's strategy was explicitly predicated on American entry — he has recorded that when Pearl Harbor occurred, he went to bed 'satisfied that England would live.' Remove American entry, and Churchill's strategic calculation collapses.

Britain can, and almost certainly would, survive in this counterfactual — the Battle of Britain (1940) was won without American direct military participation, though American material support was critical. But Britain survives as a defensive power, not a liberating one. It holds its home islands, it holds Egypt with difficulty, but it cannot project the offensive power required to open a second front in France. The liberation of Western Europe from German occupation — France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway — does not occur from the west. It occurs, if at all, from the east.

The Soviet advance westward, had it continued without the D-Day landings and the Anglo-American advance from Normandy, would have brought Soviet forces to the Rhine — and possibly to the Channel. The geopolitical consequence is a Europe liberated by the Red Army rather than by the Western allies. France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany west of the Rhine — the entire industrial core of Western Europe — fall within the Soviet sphere of influence. This is not speculation: Soviet military behavior in every territory the Red Army occupied is documented. Eastern Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia all received the same treatment: occupation, political suppression, collectivization, the imposition of satellite communist regimes.

HISTORICAL WEIGHT	*This is the most consequential single point in this entire analysis: without American military power in the European theater, the probable outcome is not merely Nazi defeat by the Soviet Union — it is Soviet domination of all of Europe from the Urals to the Atlantic. The Marshall Plan, NATO, the liberal democratic reconstruction of Western Europe, the prosperity of the postwar period — none of it occurs. Europe becomes a continental communist empire.*

D. The Holocaust: Without Liberation, Without End

The Holocaust requires separate consideration because its moral weight is categorically different from any geopolitical calculation. In the historical timeline, American and British forces liberated the Nazi death and concentration camps beginning in April 1945 — Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and the eastern camps liberated by Soviet forces including Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1945. That liberation occurred when it did because the military campaigns that destroyed the Nazi state occurred when they did.

The Holocaust was not complete at the time of liberation. The extermination machinery had been operating at peak capacity in 1942–44. The Nazi Final Solution, per the Wannsee Conference (January 1942), targeted the approximately 11 million Jews of all of Europe, not merely those in German-controlled territory. By May 1945, approximately six million had been murdered. An

estimated five million more non-Jewish victims — Roma, disabled persons, Soviet POWs, Polish civilians, homosexuals — were also killed.

In a counterfactual where the war in Europe extends into 1946 or 1947 before Soviet forces reach and destroy the death camp infrastructure, and in which the liberation of Western European Jews from occupied France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and elsewhere is not accomplished by 1944–45 Anglo-American advance, the number of Jewish dead rises substantially. The projected eleven million target of the Wannsee Conference becomes increasingly achievable. The Holocaust in this counterfactual does not end in 1945. It ends when the camps are physically destroyed by whatever liberating force eventually reaches them — later, at greater cost in lives.

There is no diplomatic or moral hedging around this conclusion: American military participation in World War II saved an indeterminate but substantial number of Jewish lives by shortening the war in Western Europe and denying the Nazi state the time and operational freedom to complete its genocidal program. The absence of that participation extends both the war and the genocide.

E. The Nuclear Question: Hiroshima Without America

The atomic bomb was the product of the Manhattan Project — an American-led scientific and industrial effort of unprecedented scale that cost $2 billion (approximately $28 billion in 2024 dollars) and employed 130,000 people. The scientific knowledge underlying the bomb was international — Fermi was Italian, Szilard Hungarian, Bohr Danish, Oppenheimer American — but the industrial capacity to translate that knowledge into operational weapons existed only in the United States during the war period.

Remove American participation, and the atomic bomb is not developed by 1945. Germany had its own nuclear program (the Uranverein), but it was severely compromised by the emigration of Jewish physicists whom the Nazi regime had driven out, by Heisenberg's errors in calculating critical mass, and by the Allied commando and bombing operations that destroyed German heavy water production. A Germany fighting a purely European war against Britain and the Soviet Union would have more resources available for its nuclear program — but the gap between the German program and eventual bomb production was measured in years, not months, even under optimistic assumptions.

The first nuclear weapons in this counterfactual are almost certainly Soviet, not German, and probably not until the late 1940s — the historical Soviet program was accelerated by espionage from the American project, which in this scenario does not exist. The strategic consequence is a nuclear-armed Soviet Union without a nuclear-armed Western counterweight — a geopolitical configuration of extreme danger.

Part III: Korea — The War That Saved a Nation

A. The Strategic Reality of June 1950

When North Korean forces crossed the 38th Parallel on June 25, 1950, with Soviet equipment, Soviet advisors, and Stalin's tacit authorization, they attacked a South Korean army that was outgunned, outmanned, and operationally surprised. The South Korean government retreated to Pusan within weeks. Without American intervention under General MacArthur and the United Nations Command, the military logic of the campaign is not ambiguous: North Korean forces complete the conquest of the peninsula within three to four months of the initial assault. South Korea ceases to exist as an independent state.

Postwar North Korea is, by virtually every metric available, one of the most brutal totalitarian states in recorded history — a Stalinist hereditary dynasty that has governed through engineered famine, concentration camp archipelagos, the systematic murder of political opponents and their extended families, and the complete information isolation of its population. The documented death toll from North Korean political repression, famine (particularly the 1990s famine that killed 600,000 to 1 million people), and the continuing operation of political prison camps where an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 persons are currently held constitutes a continuous ongoing atrocity.

A Korean peninsula under North Korean rule from 1950 onward means that the approximately 52 million citizens of the current Republic of Korea — one of the world's most prosperous and technologically advanced democracies, the 12th largest economy on earth, a leading producer of semiconductors, automobiles, and cultural exports — live instead under the Kim dynasty. Per capita income in South Korea is approximately $35,000; in North Korea, it is

approximately $1,800 under the most favorable estimates, with the real figure obscured by regime data manipulation. The cost in human welfare of the alternative is incalculable.

THE SOUTH KOREA COMPARISON	*The contrast between North and South Korea is the single cleanest natural experiment in 20th century history on the consequences of American military protection versus communist consolidation. The two populations were identical in 1950. The outcome difference — between a prosperous democracy and a totalitarian hereditary dictatorship with nuclear weapons — is attributable almost entirely to the American intervention that preserved the South.*

Part IV: Vietnam — The Most Contested Case

A. The Honest Accounting of Vietnam

Vietnam is the most painful and contested case in this analysis, because American military intervention there was both costly in American and Vietnamese lives and ultimately unsuccessful in its stated objective. The United States committed approximately 58,000 dead, 300,000 wounded, and spent $840 billion (in 2024 dollars) across two decades of escalating involvement, and South Vietnam fell in April 1975 regardless. The moral and strategic accounting of American intervention in Vietnam is genuinely complex in a way that Korea and World War II are not.

The case for intervention — the 'domino theory' as articulated by successive American administrations — held that communist consolidation in Vietnam would cascade through Southeast Asia: Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and ultimately threaten the entire Western Pacific position. That theory has been both criticized and partially vindicated by subsequent events. It was vindicated in the specific cases of Laos and Cambodia, which did fall to communist governments following the American withdrawal. It was contradicted by the failure of communist expansion to proceed further — Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia did not fall.

B. Cambodia: The Horror That American Withdrawal Enabled

The most morally unambiguous consequence of American withdrawal from Southeast Asia was the Khmer Rouge seizure of power in Cambodia (April 1975) and the subsequent genocide it conducted. The Khmer Rouge, a radical Maoist movement led by Pol Pot, killed between 1.5 and 2 million people — approximately 25% of Cambodia's entire population — between 1975 and 1979 in an attempt to create a agrarian utopia by evacuating the cities, abolishing currency, eliminating

the educated class, and murdering anyone associated with the previous government or deemed insufficiently revolutionary.

The American bombing campaign in Cambodia (1969–1973), which killed between 50,000 and 150,000 Cambodian civilians, contributed to the destabilization that allowed the Khmer Rouge to recruit and consolidate. This is an honest accounting. But the Khmer Rouge genocide that followed American withdrawal killed ten to twenty times as many people as the American bombing. The removal of American military pressure in Southeast Asia did not produce peace in Cambodia — it produced the most intensive genocide per capita of the twentieth century.

Without American military involvement in Southeast Asia at all — the true counterfactual — the outcome is not the avoidance of the Cambodia tragedy. Ho Chi Minh's forces consolidate Vietnam rapidly, Chinese and Soviet regional competition for influence intensifies, and the radical factions in Cambodia — which existed independently of American actions — pursue their agenda in a regional environment where the only available counterweight to communist expansion has been removed. The Khmer Rouge, or something functionally equivalent, still achieves power.

Part V: The Islamic World — Fundamentalism, Tyranny, and the American Vacuum

A. The Framework: What American Power Actually Provided

American military engagement in the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first served several distinct strategic functions that are often conflated in public debate: (1) the containment of Soviet expansion into the oil-producing Gulf states; (2) the maintenance of the global oil supply infrastructure on which the entire industrial world depends; (3) the suppression or degradation of Islamist terrorist organizations with global reach; (4) the removal of specific genocidal and regionally destabilizing regimes (Saddam Hussein's Iraq); and (5) the attempt — largely unsuccessful — to establish sustainable democratic governance in Afghanistan following the Taliban's removal.

These functions had different degrees of success, different costs, and different moral valences. The accounting is not uniform. What they shared was a common logic: that a region dominated by radical Islamist governance, nuclear-armed rogue states, or Soviet satellite states would pose an unacceptable threat to global stability and the economies of the industrial world. Whether that logic justified every specific intervention is debatable. That the vacuum created by American absence would be filled by forces more benign than American power is not a defensible conclusion on the available evidence.

B. Afghanistan: The Taliban's Permanent Reign

The Taliban regime that governed Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 — and that the American military removed following the September 11 attacks — represents one of the most repressive

governments in modern history against its own population. Under Taliban rule: women were entirely barred from education, employment, and public life outside their homes; music, television, and most recreational activities were banned; public executions and amputations were conducted weekly at the national soccer stadium; and Afghanistan served as the primary operational base for al-Qaeda's global terrorist network.

Without American military intervention in 2001, the Taliban remains in power, al-Qaeda retains its Afghan sanctuary, and the 9/11 attacks — which were planned, trained for, and launched from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan — are either not disrupted or are followed by subsequent attacks of similar or greater scale from the same operational base. The question of whether the twenty-year American intervention in Afghanistan was worth its cost is legitimate. The question of whether a world with a permanent Taliban Afghanistan and an unimpeded al-Qaeda operational base is preferable to the alternative is answered by the documented record of what those organizations actually did when they had sanctuary.

C. Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Dynasty

The moral accounting of the 2003 Iraq War is the most contested of any American military action in this paper's scope. The intelligence failure regarding weapons of mass destruction, the de-Baathification policy that created the conditions for ISIS, the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed in the subsequent insurgency — these are real costs that any honest accounting must include. The case for the war as prosecuted is difficult to make on its own terms.

The case for the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime is easier, because the documented record of that regime is clear. Saddam Hussein's government was responsible for: the use of chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians in the Anfal campaign (1986–1989), killing between 50,000 and 100,000 people; the gassing of the Kurdish town of Halabja (March 1988), killing

3,000–5,000 civilians in a single attack; the invasion of Kuwait (1990) and the subsequent oil well destruction; the documented torture, execution, and 'disappearance' of political opponents at a rate that Amnesty International described as among the worst in the world; and the attempted assassination of a former American president.

Without American military intervention in 2003, Saddam Hussein's regime continues. His sons Uday and Qusay — both documented sadists with particular reputations for personal participation in torture and rape — eventually inherit power. Iraq under their governance in the 2010s and 2020s likely looks less like the troubled but functioning semi-democracy that emerged post-2003 and more like North Korea: a hereditary totalitarian state with regional hegemonic ambitions, a developing WMD program (which Saddam had historically pursued with determination), and no external constraint.

D. The Oil Infrastructure and Global Economic Consequences

The deepest economic reality underlying American military presence in the Middle East is the protection of the global oil supply infrastructure. Approximately 20% of the world's petroleum passes through the Strait of Hormuz. The Saudi, Kuwaiti, Emirati, and Bahraini oil fields, refineries, and export terminals represent the physical foundation of the global industrial economy. The American Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, exists primarily to ensure that no regional power — Iran, Iraq under Saddam, a resurgent Soviet Union — controls that infrastructure.

Remove the American military from the Gulf entirely. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait proceeds to its logical conclusion without Desert Storm: Iraq absorbs Kuwait and its oil reserves, moves forces to the Saudi border, and controls approximately 20% of the world's proven oil reserves with the capacity to threaten another 25%. Oil prices in the early 1990s would not have spiked temporarily — they would have restructured permanently at a level reflecting Iraqi control

of production and pricing. The global recession triggered by such a restructuring would be measured not in months but in years, affecting every economy on earth that depends on petroleum for industrial production and transportation.

ECONOMIC REALITY	*The postwar economic prosperity of Europe, Japan, South Korea, and every other oil-importing industrial economy in the second half of the 20th century was underwritten by stable and relatively affordable oil prices — themselves underwritten by American military power in the Gulf. This is one of the least appreciated and most consequential contributions of American military engagement to global welfare.*

Part VI: The World That Would Have Emerged — A Political Geography

A. Europe in 2000 Without American Military Power

Projecting forward from the cascading consequences of American non-participation across all the conflicts examined above, the European continent circa 2000 in this counterfactual looks approximately as follows: Soviet-dominated communist governance extends from Vladivostok to the Rhine, or possibly to the Channel. Western Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and the Scandinavian nations — the entire Western European economic bloc that in our timeline became the foundation of the European Union and NATO — exist either under Soviet satellite governance or under heavily constrained sovereignty in a Soviet sphere of influence extending to the Atlantic coast.

Britain, having survived the war but been unable to liberate the continent, occupies a lonely position as the only major Western European power outside direct Soviet control — isolated, economically damaged, and facing a Soviet empire that spans the entire Eurasian landmass from Berlin to Vladivostok. The British nuclear deterrent (which Britain developed independently and would still develop in this counterfactual) provides a measure of protection, but Britain's strategic position is radically weaker than in our timeline.

The European Union does not exist in this counterfactual. The Marshall Plan, which reconstructed Western European economies under American sponsorship, does not occur. The liberal democratic political culture that characterized Western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century — the prosperity, the human rights frameworks, the social democratic welfare states — does not develop, because the political and economic conditions that enabled it (American

security guarantee, American economic support, American institutional frameworks) are absent. In their place: the Soviet model of governance, with its documented consequences of political repression, economic stagnation, and systematic violation of human rights.

REGION	PROBABLE OUTCOME	GOVERNANCE / SYSTEM
Western Europe	Soviet satellite states or heavily constrained sovereignty under USSR sphere of influence; communist governance from the Rhine to the Channel possible	*One-party communist states; KGB-equivalent security apparatus; collectivized economies*
Eastern Europe	Full Soviet satellite status — identical to historical Warsaw Pact but extending further west, including France and Germany	*Stalinist/post-Stalinist communist governance; no Solidarity movement without Western pressure*
Britain	Independent survival but strategically isolated; nuclear armed but economically weakened; no NATO ally on the continent	*Parliamentary democracy survives but under extreme geopolitical pressure from Soviet Europe*
Russia / USSR	Victor of WWII without Western theater competition; dominates all of Europe to the Atlantic; nuclear power without Western counterweight	*Stalinist then post-Stalinist communist empire; no Reagan-era pressure driving collapse; likely survives to present day*
China	Communist consolidation identical to historical; no Korean War constraint; more aggressive posture in Asia possible	*CCP one-party state; Maoist then post-Maoist; nuclear armed; regionally hegemonic earlier*
Korea	Unified under Kim Il-sung from 1950; Kim dynasty governs entire peninsula through present day	*Totalitarian hereditary dictatorship; 52 million South Koreans living under DPRK governance*
Japan	Negotiated peace with Japan preserves Japanese control of much of Asia; Japan as regional hegemon in Western Pacific	*Japanese imperial system survives in modified form; authoritarian nationalist governance likely*
Southeast Asia	Vietnamese communist consolidation without American delay; rapid domino effect through Laos, Cambodia (Khmer Rouge), Thailand	*Communist governance across mainland SE Asia; Khmer Rouge genocide occurs without eventual Vietnamese-American pressure to intervene*
Middle East	No Gulf War; Saddam Hussein absorbs Kuwait and threatens Saudi Arabia; Iranian revolution unchanged; Taliban permanent in Afghanistan	*Baathist Iraq controls Gulf oil; Taliban/jihadist safe havens permanent; al-Qaeda operationally unconstrained*
Africa	Cold War proxy conflicts extend longer without American counterweight; Soviet influence in Horn, Angola, Mozambique deeper and more permanent	*Extended Marxist governance in Soviet-aligned states; slower economic development; humanitarian crises unaddressed*

Latin America	Soviet pressure continues without Reagan Doctrine; Nicaragua, Cuba model potentially spreads further	*More communist governments in Central/South America; Cuban model extended regionally*

B. The Population Cost: Deaths Attributable to American Non-Participation

Any honest accounting of a world without American military participation must attempt to estimate, however approximately, the population cost. This is an inherently imprecise exercise, but the documented historical evidence from the regimes and systems whose expansion American military power constrained provides a basis for estimation.

The Holocaust extension: the Nazi extermination program, operating without the Western Allied liberation of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, has access to the estimated 700,000 Jews of those countries for an additional one to two years. Combined with the extension of the Eastern Front war, the additional Jewish dead from delayed liberation plausibly ranges from 500,000 to 1.5 million. The total Holocaust death toll rises from approximately six million toward seven to eight million.

Soviet governance of Western Europe: the documented death toll of Stalinist governance in the Soviet Union from 1924–1953 — through collectivization, engineered famine, the Gulag system, and political terror — is estimated at 6–20 million (with substantial scholarly dispute on the upper range). Extended to a Western Europe under Soviet satellite governance, even assuming a post-Stalinist moderation in the 1960s, the excess mortality from political violence, famine, and economic stagnation over the second half of the twentieth century is measurable in the millions.

Korean peninsula under Kim dynasty: as documented above, North Korean governance has produced excess mortality estimated at 1–3 million through famine and political violence since

1950. Extended to the full Korean peninsula (twice the population), this figure approximately doubles.

Southeast Asia without American delay of communist consolidation: the Khmer Rouge genocide is essentially inevitable regardless of American actions. But the timing, scope, and duration of communist repression across Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia without the American-imposed delay is likely worse, not better, in the short term. Additional excess mortality of several hundred thousand to one million is plausible in the 1975–1990 period.

The cumulative estimate — rough, inherently uncertain, but grounded in documented historical rates of mortality under the specific regimes whose expansion American military power actually constrained — is approximately 20–50 million additional deaths in the twentieth century from the specific causes above. This figure does not include the long-term economic mortality of billions of people living under Soviet or Soviet-aligned economic systems rather than the market-integrated global economy that American military power underwrote.

Part VII: The American Soldier — An Accounting

A. Who He Was

The American soldier of the twentieth century was not an abstraction. He was a farm boy from Iowa at Belleau Wood in 1918, firing a Springfield rifle across a wheat field at German machine gun positions. He was a clerk from Brooklyn landing at Omaha Beach under German fire in June 1944. He was a black soldier from Georgia fighting in a segregated army under a flag that did not yet fully honor his citizenship. He was a Marine from Texas holding a frozen ridgeline at the Chosin Reservoir in -30 degree temperatures against Chinese forces that outnumbered him ten to one. He was a draftee from Ohio patrolling the Mekong Delta under a strategic policy he may have doubted. He was a National Guardsman from Arkansas in the streets of Fallujah.

Across all the conflicts of the twentieth century, approximately 625,000 American military personnel died in combat or combat-related circumstances: 116,516 in World War I; 405,399 in World War II; 36,574 in Korea; 58,220 in Vietnam; 2,401 in Afghanistan; 4,431 in Iraq; and smaller numbers in other engagements. These deaths were paid by specific human beings who possessed names, families, and futures that were foreclosed.

The question this paper has asked — what would the world have looked like without their participation — is answered not to diminish that cost but to measure it. The cost of those 625,000 deaths, and the wounds and trauma of the millions more who served and returned, can only be properly understood when set against what their service actually prevented and what their absence would have produced. A speculative history that reaches the conclusions this one has reached does not make the cost acceptable — no calculation makes individual death acceptable — but it does make it legible. It provides the only context in which the sacrifice can be honestly evaluated.

B. What He Actually Prevented

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, the American soldier of the twentieth century can be credited, with reasonable historical confidence, with the following: the prevention of German hegemony over Europe after World War I under conditions that would have precluded the specific political dynamics enabling Hitler; the defeat and destruction of the Nazi state and its genocidal machinery, preventing the completion of the Holocaust and the enslavement of Europe under National Socialist governance; the defeat of Imperial Japan and the liberation of Asia from Japanese colonial domination; the preservation of South Korea as an independent state, enabling the prosperity of 52 million people who would otherwise live under Kim dynasty governance; the protection of the global oil supply infrastructure that underwrote postwar global economic development; the degradation and disruption of al-Qaeda's operational capacity following September 11; and the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from regional power.

Against this must be honestly set: the failure in Vietnam, where 58,000 Americans and approximately 2–3 million Vietnamese died and South Vietnam fell regardless; the catastrophic de-Baathification decisions in Iraq that created the conditions for ISIS; the civilian casualties of American operations across all theaters; and the long-term moral and political costs of an American foreign policy that was not always consistent in its application of the democratic principles it claimed to defend.

The honest accounting does not produce a simple verdict. American military power in the twentieth century was not consistently wise, not always just in its specific applications, and not without grave errors of commission and judgment. But the question this paper has asked is not whether American military power was perfect. The question is whether the world without it would have been better. The answer, on the available evidence, is unambiguous: it would have been

substantially worse, in ways that can be measured in tens of millions of additional human deaths, billions of additional people living under totalitarian governance, and the probable absence of the liberal international order that has produced more global human welfare than any previous system in recorded history.

Conclusion: The Price of the Alternative

There is a thought experiment that often goes unasked in discussions of American military history: not 'was the cost too high' but 'compared to what?' Every policy decision, every military intervention, every exercise of national power exists not in isolation but in comparison to the alternatives that would have obtained in its absence. The alternative to American intervention in World War II was not peace — it was Nazi and Japanese domination of Europe and Asia. The alternative to American intervention in Korea was not Korean self-determination — it was Kim Il-sung's totalitarian rule over the entire peninsula. The alternative to American presence in the Gulf was not regional autonomy — it was Saddam Hussein's control of a quarter of the world's oil reserves.

This paper has attempted to construct that alternative world with as much intellectual rigor and historical honesty as the exercise permits. The picture it produces is not a world of liberation from American imperialism. It is a world in which the Holocaust is more complete, in which Europe is a Soviet empire, in which Korea is entirely a totalitarian state, in which Southeast Asia collapses faster and more thoroughly into communist violence, in which the Gulf's oil infrastructure is controlled by the most aggressive regional power, and in which the liberal international order — the system of institutions, alliances, and norms that has produced more human prosperity and less great-power war than any previous international arrangement — simply never comes into existence.

The American soldier was not always deployed wisely. The American government that deployed him was not always right. American foreign policy was not consistently principled in its application of the values it proclaimed. These are all true statements, and they belong in any

complete accounting. But they do not alter the fundamental historical conclusion that emerges from this analysis: the men and women who served in the American military in the twentieth century, taken in aggregate across the full arc of that century, prevented outcomes that the honest examination of history identifies as catastrophic for the freedom, dignity, and welfare of billions of human beings who were not Americans and whose names most Americans will never know.

That is a remarkable thing. It is, on the evidence, true. And it deserves to be said plainly, without triumphalism, without the erasure of American failures and crimes, and without the false modesty that substitutes for honest reckoning: the world is measurably better because the American soldier went to war in the twentieth century. The cost was immense. The alternative was worse.

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."
— John 15:13

In memory of the 625,000 American military dead of the twentieth century.
And the tens of millions more whose freedom their sacrifice preserved.

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