The Cold War and the Shift Away from â€œVictoryâ€
Interviewer

So we need you to give us your rank and spell your name, in its entirety for the transcriber, soâ€”

Matthew Moten

Okay. Iâ€™m Colonel Matthew Moten, M-A-T-T-H-E-W M-O-T-E-N, and Iâ€™m Professor and Deputy Head of the Department.

Interviewer

Alright, so the war termination project, tell me the origins of it, how you came up with the idea, and then where it went from there.

Matthew Moten

About a year ago, General Marty Dempsey, whoâ€™s the Commanding General of TRADOC, had an idea to edit an old book called Americaâ€™s First Battles, which was written about 25 years ago. It was a collection of essays talking about the first battle of every American war, andâ€”

Interviewer

Very important book, right?

Matthew Moten

Itâ€™s used here at West Point. Itâ€™s used in a number of different places.

Interviewer

Whoâ€™s the editor of that book?

Matthew Moten

Two fellows by the name of Heller and Stofft, and they began with the American Revolution and went as far as [the] Vietnam [War]â€”looking, again, at the first battles of every one of those wars. And it was a book that was meant to be an object lesson about the dangers of unpreparedness for war. They wrote it at the tactical level and talked a great deal about the problems of getting into war, the problems of mobilizing for war, and then, as often as not, having a relatively untrained force, the cost in blood and treasure of that first battle.

Matthew Moten

We discussed this a bit and determined that 25 years later, unpreparedness is not our problem in the American military. We are six and seven and now eight years deep into two different wars. And our problem is not so much that weâ€™re not ready. Weâ€™re plenty ready. Weâ€™re a very combat-hardened, experienced force. Our problem now is one of stamina, and how do we continue to sustain the effort for two wars, one of which is now the longest war in American history.

Matthew Moten

And we decided rather than to edit that book, we would think about putting together a

conference that would look at the other end of warfare. Rather than looking at the beginning of war, we would look at the end of war and how Americaâ€™s wars have ended. And so we decided together, in very much the way that other project didâ€”some of the best historians in America to write essays in topics of their own expertise and to put these together in a package that eventually ended in the conference that we had here at West Point in June on war termination.

Interviewer

What surprised you most about what came out of that work? What did you say, â€œWow, I had no ideaâ€?

Matthew Moten

Well, I guess there were two things that surprised me. One is that there was a pretty sharp breakpoint after the end of World War II, at the beginning of the Cold War, when we changed the way we thought about how wars could end and should end. Up until World War II, we and most people, most nations, had thought about war as something that one enters into for a particular purpose, and then you attempt to win the war. Your object is victory, however defined. And, paradoxically, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after the unleashing of the nuclear genie, we entered into a period around the globe of relatively limited war.

Matthew Moten

And America, which has this exalted status as the most powerful nation on earthâ€”shared for a long time with the Soviet Union, but nonetheless, one of the most powerful nations that had ever existedâ€”found itself in a situation where it couldnâ€™t use the immensity of that power because we didnâ€™t want war to grow, to expand to the point that it logically could with these awful weapons.

Matthew Moten

And so we found ourselves limiting our aims, our objectives, our methods, and we stopped talking about victory, and we started talking about something differentâ€”whether that be ending wars, the language of deterrence came into vogue. We talked about preventing wars. And since then, weâ€™veâ€”it would be hard to say, except for the first Gulf War in Iraq, that we have really ended a war with something that looked like an old fashioned victory.

Interviewer

That change strikes me as historic, not simply historic for American experience, but historic for the experience of humankind, right? I mean, weâ€™re reallyâ€”to war, which has been with history since the beginning of history, has always seemed to have victory as its goal. But this is an anomaly in history of the world, isnâ€™t it?

Matthew Moten

I think it is. I would be hard-pressed to think of another nation, certainly another nation as powerful as ours is today, that has chosen to limit what it can do with military powerâ€”or better stated, what it should do with military power. The other great powers of the earth from Rome to Spain to Great Britain in the nineteenth century, were far less self-limiting.

Matthew Moten

Part of that is because of the fear that we all experienced with the advent of nuclear weapons. The possibility for human beings literally to incinerate the earth is a very important part of that change in the way we thought. But it meant that having that strength, having that capability, Americans and American leaders wanted to make sure that they never got to the point of having to use it again. I think America still bears a mark of remorse, not to say guilt, for being the only nation on earth ever to have used atomic weapons.

Interviewer

The historians that you choseâ€"before, I asked if you were the one who chose them for this project. Talk to me about how you chose them and the breadth of work that they delivered.

Matthew Moten

Well, this wasâ€"it was an extraordinary opportunity for me to be associated with these people. And after we decided what the scope of the book was going to be, Roger Spiller and Joe Glatthaar, who wrote the Civil War chapter, and I wereâ€"we were sort of the beginning of this book, in terms of the team. And we talked about, first, which essays we would like to haveâ€"which is to say, which wars we would like to cover.

Matthew Moten

And then we just went through an all-star list of the best American military historians, the people who were most expert in those wars. And we began calling them, and we had a depth chart and decided that we would try to get some of our top draft picks first. And we found that when you get someone like Gerhard Weinberg to sign on to write a chapter about World War II, and you get Mac Coffman to sign on to write a chapter about World War I, the next phone call gets a little bit easier because when Iâ€™m able to say to somebody, â€œWell, Iâ€™ve got Weinberg to do World War II, and Iâ€™ve got Kaufman to do World War I, and we think youâ€™re the guy to do this chapter,â€ what youâ€™re saying to them is, â€œYouâ€™re in very good company. We think that youâ€™re at the top of your field in American military history.â€ And I found that people began to say yes rather quickly. And so we were able to assemble a very good team.

War Termination and Its Ramifications in Major American Conflicts
Interviewer

When historians usuallyâ€"well, the better historians usually will pause and say, â€œDo I have any particular insights into this topicâ€ before they write about something, so they can feel that they delivered original workâ€"what were some of the insights that they did deliver to this project? You talk about what surprised you overall about it, but what did you get from Gerhard Weinberg or from Roger Spiller or Brian Linn or the others?

Matthew Moten

Well, I guess although we didnâ€™t ask our authors of individual essays to generalize about the nature of how war ends, we did find that in the aggregate, we were able to reach some generalizations. And probably the most important contribution that this book is going to make is a new departure in military theory.

Matthew Moten

Roger Spiller has been thinking about these things for very many years. And as he read

the essays along with me, he began to tease out what we call six propositions about the nature of how wars end. And weâ€™ve found some things thatâ€”well, Iâ€™ll give you one example. First, it shouldnâ€™t be surprising to anybody that the war aims that a nation has going into a war will change as the war progresses. War tends to take on a life of its own. And where one intended to be at the beginning of a war is rarely, if ever, where one ends up. Thatâ€™sâ€”

Interviewer

This is a constant frustration of generals, in particular, with respect to teaching politicians about that. Isnâ€™t that right? I mean, we have historical examples of politicians who set out, perhaps a little more aggressively towards those set of war aims, thinking that theyâ€™re achievable and that those in uniform are likely to say, â€œWar is chaos, war is the unpredictable, we can try it as much as we can to control it, butâ€”to expect the unfamiliar, expect to be surprised.â€

Matthew Moten

Thereâ€™s that aspect, and thereâ€™s also the aspect that political leaders tend to want to be a little bit less precise about what their war aims are. I donâ€™t know that itâ€™s so much that the generals have to teach them that war is going to be unpredictable, but political leaders want their war aims to be somewhat malleable so that as the war goes on, as time goes on, they may be able to adjust what it is that theyâ€™re trying to achieve.

Interviewer

Give me an example. Tell me one of the wars that you chose and how the interaction between the politicians and the generals on this subject.

Matthew Moten

Well, in the Mexican War, for example, it was pretty clear, I think, that President James K. Polk went to war for reasons that were not entirely legitimate. He wanted to annex the state of Texas, and that was plain, and he made that plain. What he didnâ€™t make plain to anybody except his inner circle was that he also wanted to take what are now the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and California. And he kept that somewhat hidden, under the table. A lot of people began to suspect it. And it made it difficult for General Zachary Taylor and General Winfield Scott to conduct their campaigns in a way that was in accord with administration policy, when that administration policy was not well definedâ€”or at least, not well pronounced. Everyone had their suspicions, and Winfield Scott, at least, came to grief at the end because he was relieved after he had achieved victory in the final campaign of the Mexican War because he had run afoul of President Polk politically.

Matthew Moten

Another example thatâ€™s probably a happier example, at least in terms of victory on the Americansâ€™ part, is that Lincoln went into the Civil War with the single aim of preserving the Union. And he had no expressed intent to destroy the institution of slavery as he went into the war. And he maintained that war aim of preserving the Union, of reuniting the states. Even though he eventually decided that he had to add to his policy with the Emancipation Proclamation, which was the end of slavery and those parts of the Confederate states that were still in rebellion, and it was essentially the death knell of slavery if the Union should happen to secede, as it did. So thatâ€”

Interviewer

But the war is an acronym. It was in the spirit of theâ€”of fighting the war that Lincoln created the Emancipation Proclamation, isnâ€™t that right? Otherwise, it would have had to have congressional approval and gone through the wholeâ€”

Matthew Moten

Yeah, Lincoln used the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure, and he thought of it as a war measure. And he greatly expanded the powers of the presidency.

Matthew Moten

The debates over the limitation or the abolition of slavery had been going on since the writing of the Constitution. And the legislature had never been able to come to any resolution about thisâ€”at least a resolution that both sides could accept and interpret it in the same way.

Matthew Moten

And now, Lincoln, as a war president, uses emancipation as a measure to strike at the South economically and, by extension, militarilyâ€”without going through Congress, without asking for legislative approval of what he had decided to doâ€”because he thought that it would help him win the war, and it did.

Interviewer

Talk to me about the termination of World War II. You spoke about the unleashing of the nuclear genie. Did Truman know what he was doing when he made that decision? Did he have a choice, really?

Matthew Moten

Iâ€™m not sure that anybody truly knew exactly what would happen when those bombs were droppedâ€”or at least when the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Understanding the enormity of that explosion, I think, was beyond most peopleâ€™s understandingâ€”except perhaps the scientists who had seen the test explosion in New Mexico.

Matthew Moten

Truman, I think, knew that he had an extremely powerful weapon, a weapon that was unlike any other that had ever been used. And I think he also understood that it would have a tremendous impact on the thinking of the Japanese political and military leaders. He also had in mind, there were plans on the booksâ€” and Gerhardt Weinberg talks about this in his essayâ€”there were plans for the United States mainly, and its allies, to invade the home islands of Japan. And having looked at all of the other campaigns against the Japanese in the Pacific, and looking at the advantages that the Japanese would have defending thatâ€”their island homeâ€” the casualties on both sides were expected to be horrendous.

Interviewer

What number, kind of numbers we talking about?

Matthew Moten

Oh, 750,000 to a million casualties in that single campaign alone.

Matthew Moten

And itâ€™s interesting, looking at the choice that Gerhard Weinberg made. When I asked him to write the essay on the war in the Pacific, I had expected that he would look at the dropping of those two atomic weapons as the final campaign. But Gerhardt surprised me by writing an essay about the campaign in Okinawa, which was the last land and naval campaign without atomic weapons at Okinawa. And what the Allies learned in the fighting for Okinawa helped them to understand what the costs would be that were associated with the possible invasion of those home islands, and it probably helped them to make that decision to drop those bombs, and they hoped to shorten the war.

Interviewer

This is part of the fun ofâ€”and part of the processâ€”of history, right, is to say, well, this may have happened, but it happened because this happened. And that happened because this happened.

Interviewer

You said part of the fun of this project was to look at the ramifications of those last campaigns, and how they changed history going forward. And that each historian was given the opportunity to look as far forward as he or she may have wanted to. Give me an example of that kind ofâ€”the domino effect of one event leading to another to another to another on a particular war thatâ€™s covered in this book.

Matthew Moten

Well, I think probably the best example would be, again, back to the Civil War. That war ended with about as complete a victory as one could imagine. The Union armies vanquished and dispersed each of the Confederate armies that they were facing. The Union armies paraded down Pennsylvania in Washington. It was a complete victory.

Matthew Moten

And then the unexpected happenedâ€”the unexpected that points of the importance of what weâ€™re doing here, and that is that itâ€™s not just that you need to win a war. It is how you end, how you finish this war that is important. And the United States, one could argue, largely because of the assassination of Lincoln, took its eye off the ball of the post-war occupation and reconstruction of the South that was going to have to happen.

Matthew Moten

Itâ€™s not so much that it neglected it, but that it went about it in a confused way. Congress and President [Andrew] Johnson were not in synch with one another about how the reconstruction should take place. The Army, the United States Army, demobilized very quickly so that they were trying to cover millions of square miles of southern territory and to enforce federal law in states that had recently been in rebellionâ€”and they had far too few soldiers, far too few resources, to accomplish that. And as a result, a dozen years after what we think ofâ€”

Interviewer

So letâ€™s come back to that question about how wars create these domino effectsâ€”that how wars end can trigger events successively through generations, really.

Matthew Moten

Unexpected things happen. In the Civil War, for example, there was what would look like on paper an almost complete victory with the Union armies marching down Pennsylvania Avenue for a victory parade. The Southern armies had been vanquished, and the troops had been dispersed to go back to their homes. But then, how you end the war, and how you deal with the aftermath of the war, turns out to be terribly important.

Matthew Moten

After that parade, the Union armies demobilized became a small fraction of what it had been during wartime. But still, the job of the post-war occupation of the South, and Reconstruction, which is to say bringing the southern states back into the fold, was not complete. And the United States Army didnâ€™t have the resources or the manpower to do that job effectively.

Matthew Moten

And over a period of time, resistance to Reconstruction, resistance to the social and political change that had been intended by the Lincoln administration, by the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, but the South pushed back on that. And a dozen years after victory had been declared in the Civil War, Reconstruction came to an end. The old political leadership in the South returned to power. They enforced racial segregation, Jim Crow laws, and that legacy of what I would call a failed Reconstruction continues with us all the way into the 1960s when, in a sense, the Civil War continues with the Civil Rights Movement, with the Freedom Riders in Mississippi.

Matthew Moten

And one could argue that the racial reconciliation that could have begun in earnest in the aftermath of the Civil War is still playing out today. So the ramifications of not ending a war, in as complete or as thorough a fashion as one might, can have long-lasting consequences well into the future.

The Iraq War as a Failure of Imagination
Interviewer

Itâ€™s interesting because, when you think about it, sometimes itâ€™s the politiciansâ€™ error, sometimes it may be the generalsâ€™ error that keeps a war, in a sense, simmering. Think of World War I laying the seed for World War II. Think of the first Persian Gulf War. Some argue, by not going to Baghdad, we invited the second Gulf War, the War in Iraq, more recently. Think of George W. Bush declaring the end of the war in victory, four years before we really, three years before the surge itself, I think it was. And certainly, one would argue that the insurgency was as big a challenge as the war itself, if not more of a challenge to the American Army, post-his declaring victory. Can you speak to these seesaw effects that go between the politicians and the generals?

Matthew Moten

One of the things that is a truism, but we have found again by working through this project, is that wars are a lot easier to get into than they are to get out of. And it is important, and I think perhaps one of the object lessons of what weâ€™re doing, by trying to provide this scholarship for students of war, but also for strategists (generals), policymakers (presidents), to understand that when one embarks upon this enterprise of warfare, one needs to understand that it is not going to go where you think it is going to go, that it will

branch out in a number of different scenarios. And one needs to think through that very carefully.

Matthew Moten

As we began the War in Iraq, it was fairly easy to see that America had the military power to invade Iraq, to defeat Saddam Husseinâ€™s Army, and to get to the capital and take it in rather short order. And, in fact, we pared back the forces that we chose to send into Iraq, knowing full well that we would be able to do that without much difficulty. And we did.

Matthew Moten

But we did not foresee what would happen when we had achieved that part of the task. We thought of that as the task, not a part of the task. And when I say we, Iâ€™m talking about the policymakers and their advisors in the Bush administration. And on the 1st of May, 2003, two months into this war, President Bush stood before a banner that said, â€œMission Accomplishedâ€ on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and expressed the thought that we had achieved what we had set out to achieve.

Matthew Moten

And more than seven years later, we are still in Iraq dealing with an insurgency, dealing with what had been a civil war. And we had failed to imagine what would happen when we unleashed the forces within Iraq that had been oppressed and kept down for so long by Saddam Hussein. It was a failure of imagination.

Interviewer

It seems like thereâ€™s also something to be said for the fact that generals, or the army, understands war to end at a certain point and then be the politiciansâ€™ game going forward. Am I right thatâ€”

Matthew Moten

I wouldnâ€™t agree with that. Iâ€”there is aâ€”

Interviewer

Maintaining the peace is different than waging the war. This is what I mean to say.

Matthew Moten

It is importantâ€”I think that there is an archaic notion. In fact, Cordell Hull expressed this at the beginning of World War II, as the negotiations were breaking down with the Japanese. And I wonâ€™t say this exactly verbatim, but he essentially said to the War Department, â€œIâ€™ve done all I can. Negotiations have failed. Itâ€™s now in your hands.â€ And itâ€™s important for policymakers, diplomats, generals, strategists, to be involved with one another in assessment, in plan-makingâ€”in peace time as well as in war. If there is seen to be this bright red line between policy on the one hand and strategy on the otherâ€”between war on the one hand and peace on the otherâ€”we will tend to have a fumbling of responsibility at the highest levels of government.

Matthew Moten

And it will cause us to have the sorts of difficulties that you mentioned earlierâ€”for example, with the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I. Again, an example of an

almost complete victory by the Allies over the Germans, and then a peace treaty that was largely divorced from clear-headed understanding of realities on the ground, but also one that, because it was so draconian in the way that it treated the German people in the aftermath of that war, laid seeds of resentment and guilt that, as Marshal Foch said after the treaty was signed, all but guaranteed another world war.

Interviewer

What are you saying, armistice? This isnâ€™t a treaty, this isâ€”an armistice for 20 years.

Matthew Moten

An armistice for 20 years. And he turned out to beâ€”

Interviewer

Almost exactly right.

Matthew Moten

Precisely correct.

Matthew Moten

When you said failure of imagination before, failure of imagination on the part ofâ€”referring to the fact that we were surprised in Iraq in most recent conflictâ€”failure of imagination on the part of whom? The policymakers, strategists, politicians, the generals, the diplomatsâ€”all of the above?

Matthew Moten

The responsibility for going to war in our country rests with the political leadership. The military leadership should advise them closely, is responsible for executing policy to the best of its ability. But the responsibility ultimately rests with duly elected political leadership.

Matthew Moten

Thereâ€™s also a tendency, not just in the War in Iraq, but in all wars, to have this expectation that we are able to see the future clearly, and we have the means at our disposable to make this a short war. And that is rarely, if ever, true. And it was, again, clear at the outset of the Iraq War that we had the ability to make short work of the Iraqi Army and the Republican Guards in Saddam Husseinâ€™s government. And we did. But we did not think through, and in some cases, we chose to disregard counsel that had been given to political leaders about what would happen in the aftermath of a victory in Iraq, a victory in as much as we had taken Baghdad and vanquished the Iraqi Army.

Interviewer

People often make comparison between the War in Iraq and the War in Vietnam. And the termination of the War in Vietnam had some dramatic impact upon Army doctrine with respect to the willingness to get involved in a counterinsurgency. One might argue that Vietnam, the wish to have no more Vietnams, may have helped make us ill-preparedâ€”to bring in the notion that you said was part of the first volume, or the predecessor volume, of this notion of war origins as well as war terminationâ€”ill-prepared to fight the insurgency that followed the victory, so-called â€œvictoryâ€ in Iraq in 2003. Can you lay out that notion

that Vietnam informed the War in Iraq, 25, 30 years later?

Matthew Moten

Iâ€™m not sure that thereâ€™s a straight line. I would say two things. One, Vietnam is a special case because itâ€™s the only war that we unambiguously lost. And itâ€™s not surprising that institutions such as the United States Army and United States Marine Corps chose to turn away from the bitter lessons of Vietnam.

Matthew Moten

And the other thing is that we had an immediate reason to turn away from that because we came to understand that fighting in Vietnam, in and of itself, was a distraction from our bigger strategic missionâ€”which was an ongoing global Cold War with the Soviet Union. And tying down so many resources in Vietnam distracted us and hampered us in that larger mission.

Matthew Moten

And in the 1970s, into the 1980s, the armed services in the United States began to focus more clearly on the global conflict, preparing for what might or might not beâ€”and fortunately turned out not to beâ€”a hot war with the Soviet Union. But we began to put our energies in terms of doctrine, in terms of buying weapons, in terms of training soldiers, in terms of recruiting service members, to facing that larger, more important global threat.

Matthew Moten

And, in the end, the Cold War ended, and America unambiguously won it. And I donâ€™t think that one can say that thatâ€™s a bad outcome of our choice to neglect, move away from, what we had learned about counterinsurgency in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Like you could argue with the last campaign of the Cold War, so to speak, a war that never became a hot war, was the build-up, right, was the American build-up in responseâ€”to change this doctrine more dramatically and to build up for a war with the Soviet Union?

Matthew Moten

And George Herring essentially argues that in his essay. I donâ€™t want to put words in his mouth, but heâ€”

Interviewer

No, thatâ€™s how I took it.

Matthew Moten

Yeah.

Collective Reflections on War Termination
Interviewer

Now the book and the conference have an interesting relationship. Tell me how the conference came about.

Matthew Moten

Well, the way we made this conference work was that having recruited the authors to write the essays, we brought them all together for a planning conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in January.

Matthew Moten

And it was a day and a half where we were able to, in one room, get everybody to appreciate the scope of what we were trying to do, to clear up some misconceptions, and to have everybody buy in to the purposes of the project, the scope of the project, and, in fact, the importance of what we were doingâ€"because as we looked at this and began to talk to each other, we realized that as much as historians have looked at warâ€"the origins of war, its purposes, its conductâ€"nobody, thatâ€™s an exaggeration, but seldom have people looked at the end of war as a topic worth studying in and of itself.

Matthew Moten

And we decided that we were able to do something that was historically interesting and somewhat new. But even further, we might be able to make a contribution to military theory and to think about this business of putting the beginning and the middle and the end of war togetherâ€"thinking about war, beginning with the end in mind, and to think through all of those various scenarios and consequences.

Matthew Moten

We had that conference in North Carolina, which got everybody, not thinking the same way, but at least asking the same questions. And then we spent several months writing our essays, and then we came back together here at West Point in June and delivered those in a conference sponsored by General Dempsey and the Training and Doctrine Command and decided at that point that the project should not end there.

Matthew Moten

And the authors expanded their essays into something that is, we hope, is going to be a pretty important book called Between War and Peace: How America Ends Its Warsâ€"which we hope to have published early in 2011.

Interviewer

And whoâ€™s the publisher of that?

Matthew Moten

The Free Press, which is a branch of Simon and Schuster.

Interviewer

Did the experience of coming together, leaving, and coming back together again, lead to any transformations from the historians themselves about what they thought about war terminationâ€"given that period of study, between each other, sharing ideas?

Matthew Moten

Iâ€™m not sure that I would go that far. I would say this. Let me just talk a little bit about the process. At our planning conference, we agreed that our authors were going to tackle a common set of questions. We didnâ€™t shackle one another with a common outline, but

we decided that what we would look at would be, first, to talk about the origins of the particular war. And then the war aims of each side, how the war began.

Matthew Moten

And then, because this is not a book about the wars themselves, we would quickly run through a strategic narrative of the entire war in order to get to the final campaign and look at how that final campaign played out, how the war endedâ€”was there a complete victory, was there a peace treaty, did we have people on a rooftop in Saigon trying to get on a helicopterâ€”how did the war end.

Matthew Moten

And then look atâ€”to stop and make an assessment at the end of that war, having looked at what the war aims of each side had been, how did thoseâ€”first, did the war aims change, and the answer is usually yes, how did those war aims change, and where did, especially the United States, stand at the end of that war, compared to where it had intended to be with its war aims at the beginning.

Matthew Moten

And then I ask each of the authors, at that point, to look forward, to look into subsequent historyâ€”gets back to a question that you asked earlierâ€”and to think about the ramifications of that war and that peace on the rest of American history, and particularly on how it affected the armed services.

Interviewer

When war is done well, when the mission is articulated, executed, and completed with foresight, what does it look like? What war in American history would you say was the more successful?

Matthew Moten

Well, two stand out. The Civil War, that Iâ€™ve already talked about a couple of times.

Interviewer

Except you made the argument that, in the end, it took another 100 years.

Matthew Moten

Well, yeah, the war was done well. The victory was complete, butâ€”and here is why itâ€™s important to talk about how we do the post-war operations, how to structure the peace. The better, more complete example would be World War IIâ€”where the United States, under the leadership of FDR, had an opportunity to plan its entry into the war for a couple of years before the Japanese raided Pearl Harbor.

Matthew Moten

And we had begun to mobilize. We had thought, in a great deal of detail, what our strategy would be. And when the United States found itself drawn into that war by the Japanese attack, we were ready to begin. And, in very short order, we declared that we were going to try to defeat Germany before Japanâ€”the Germany-first aspect of that strategyâ€”and then having defeated the Germans, we would then turn our full attention to the Japanese.

Matthew Moten

And we also determined, and FDR and Churchill pronounced this, that we were going to seek nothing short of the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers. With those broad outlines and an understanding about priorities on resources, troops, material, we then put together a global campaign that allowed us to win a war, first in Europe, and secondly in the Pacificâ€”and then to impose treaties of peace on Germany and Japan and to occupy those nations in a way that itâ€™s hard to argue how it could have been more successful than it was.

Interviewer

But couldnâ€™t you argue, and a sense you do with the Civil War, that the termination of World War II did not complete the missionâ€”that it didnâ€™t eradicate totalitarianism from Europe, it laid the seeds for the Cold War. That territory was still under subjugation by this time by the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, that Yalta was a failure. In other words, this here is another war that you could argue could even, for all its successes, laid the seeds for the next war?

Matthew Moten

History doesnâ€™t stop. The objectives that we tried to achieve in World War II, I would say that we did achieve them, which was unconditional surrender of the Germans, the Italians and the Japanese. And we did it in the order that we intended to do it, and that victory was complete. In order to achieve that, we had to align ourselves with the other growing and great power on earth, which was the Soviet Union. And by any stretch of the imagination, the Soviet Union shouldered a tremendous share.

Interviewer

More than anyone else reallyâ€”

Matthew Moten

In terms ofâ€”

Interviewer

Lives lost.

Matthew Moten

Lives lost, soldiers involved, number of units. The Soviet expenditure of blood and treasure is not to be sneezed at. It was enormous.

Matthew Moten

But at the end of the war, coalitionsâ€”at the end of any war coalitions break up. You no longer have a common enemy, you donâ€™t have the purposes of the war to bring you together. And itâ€™s almost inevitable that coalitions are going to go their separate ways.

Matthew Moten

And you mentioned totalitarianism. It wasnâ€™t our purpose in World War II to eradicate totalitarianism. It was our purpose to defeat the Axis powers, who happened to be totalitarian. Soâ€”

Interviewer

You mentioned earlier on that [the] Okinawa [campaign] was, to Gerhard Weinberg, the final campaign of the Second World, not the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshimaâ€”interesting notion, because you then set the stage for the decision to drop the bomb. What other historians in the project came up with interesting, surprising choices for last campaigns?

Matthew Moten

The War of 1812, Wayne Leeâ€”when I think of the War of 1812 and how it ended, one immediately thinks of Andrew Jackson and the Battle of New Orleans. And when Wayne Lee told me that he intended not to do that, I argued with him. And I said, well, youâ€™re going to miss the boat if you donâ€™t focus on New Orleans. And he said, watch what Iâ€™m going to do.

Matthew Moten

And Wayne focused on the Plattsburgh campaign in northern New York and made the argument that the Plattsburgh campaign said a lot more about where that war had gone duringâ€”as it evolved from 1812 to 1814â€”about how the United States had developed an army that was capable of standing toe to toe with the British. And in fact, when the Plattsburgh campaign was satisfactory, successfully completed, that outcome affected peace negotiations that were already going on in Europe. And the peace treaty that was settled upon reflected understandings of what had happened on the ground at Plattsburgh and in other battles in northern New York.

Matthew Moten

And, of course, the Battle of New Orleans is fought after the treaty is already ratifiedâ€”after the treaty is already agreed to, not ratified. And, in a sense, the Battle of New Orleans was unnecessary. Nowâ€”and Wayne also made a number of arguments about what that meant for the United States in terms of its sovereigntyâ€”one could call it the continuation of the American Revolution. The British were no longer going to be an important force in North America, as an adversary to the United Statesâ€”in that that would have happened with our without New Orleans.

Matthew Moten

And he made me finally agree with him that he was right to concentrate on Plattsburgh and not New Orleans. Probably the bigger outcome of New Orleans was to launch the political career of Andrew Jackson.

Interviewer

Without it, he doesnâ€™t become president, right? I mean, heâ€™sâ€”

Matthew Moten

Without it, heâ€™sâ€”well, he would still have been a very colorful figure, but he might never have become a political figure without the fame and notoriety that that campaign brought him.

Interviewer

Other ones. When did Vietnam end? What was the last campaign of Vietnam, the Tet?

Matthew Moten

Well, this is an interesting point. Weâ€”as Gian Gentile was writing his essay on Vietnam, we spent a lot of time talking to each other about what the final campaign was. And one of the issues that comes out of this, that informed Roger Spillerâ€™s thinking, is that the final campaign is not necessarily the terminal campaign. The final campaign of the Vietnam War, one could say, was the 1972 offensive, just before the Paris Peace Treaty in January of â€™73. One could even argue that itâ€™s after the United States is already out of the war. Itâ€™s the North Vietnamese offensive in â€™75 that eventually reunifies South Vietnam under the Hanoi regime.

Matthew Moten

But the Tet Offensive that took place in 1968â€”four years earlier than the United States got out, seven years earlier than the war finally endedâ€”was the one that changed the war strategically in such a way that it was never going back. And itâ€™s fascinating, because in the Tet Offensive, the allies, the United States and South Vietnamese were defending against a North Vietnamese and Viet Cong offensive. And operationally and tactically, the allies won.

Matthew Moten

But strategically, and more importantly, politically, they lostâ€” because the American people had been led to believe that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were on their last legs, thereâ€™s light at the end of the tunnel, itâ€™s only a matter of time.

Matthew Moten

And then all of a sudden, with the Tet Offensive, they demonstrated that they had the capabilityâ€”the military capabilityâ€”to launch a large sustained offensive, even if they couldnâ€™t win it. And the American people who had begun to have doubts about the war before the Tet Offensive began turning against the war in large numbers after that. And so politically, the war turns there. And strategically, in terms of the American peopleâ€™s willingness to support the policy and the strategy on the ground, I think that the war could not have been won after that.

Matthew Moten

Now, I just waded into a huge historiographical thicket. There are people who would come out of the woodwork to argue with what I just said, which is one of the fun things about history.

Interviewer

Right. And that goes to the heart of what would happen in Vietnam and why we lost in Vietnam. Thatâ€™s the whole debate youâ€™re referencing, which also references the notion, or the terminal campaignsâ€”what did you compare that to a minute ago, the terminal and the final.

Matthew Moten

The final campaign.

Public Opinion and American Foresight
Interviewer

Wars fought by democracies are going to be different than those fought by authoritarian regimes, it would seem. The impact of the public opinion upon a war in a democracy is much more acute. The impact of the public opinion on a war that relies upon a conscripted army has to be much more acute, I would think. Authoritarian armies are going to fight wars in different ways than democracies fight wars. Is that a conclusion also?

Interviewer

This assumes that these are wars fought by mass armies tooâ€”as opposed to dedicated, fine professionalâ€”

Matthew Moten

Right. But I would also say that, to me, another interesting point is that since 1973, weâ€™ve had what we have called an all-volunteer military force. I prefer to call it an all-recruited force. And one of the reasons that we have been able to sustain years-long warsâ€” now the longest war in American history in Afghanistan, and Iraq is not far behind itâ€”is that only 1% of the American populous is engaged in those wars in any meaningful way, which is to say that thatâ€™s the percentage of the American people that has been fighting and that percentage of the people has their families worried about them back home.

Matthew Moten

But if you look at where these wars register on the American consciousness, going into an election year this year, I read this morning in the paper that about 7% of the electorate listed Afghanistan as being the most important topic on their minds, well behind the economy, where almost 40% of the American people think that thatâ€™s the most important thing.

Matthew Moten

So having an all-recruited army, and a relatively small one, in comparison with the rest of the populous, and using large numbers of contractors in our current wars, allows political leaders toâ€”to some degreeâ€”to move the problems of the war off of the kitchen table agenda of the American people.

Matthew Moten

To the degree that an authoritarian regime can maintain control of its populace.

Interviewer

Now, thatâ€™s probably good for the successful conduct of the war, but it may be bad for the legitimacy and the execution of the war with respect to democratic input, right? This is a kind of balancing act here. This is the defining difference between Iraq and Vietnam, right, is that, more than anything else, really, that this war, as unpopular as the Iraq War may have been, it was never as unpopular as the Vietnam War because the sons and daughters of the great middle class are not necessarily participating here in any kind of needful way.

Matthew Moten

Yeah, I think thatâ€™s exactly right. There was always the possibility that oneâ€™s sonâ€”and in those days, it was almost always a sonâ€” would be liable for military service

and could possibly go to Vietnam, although, there were lots of ways out of that service. But one of the ramifications of the War in Vietnam was the question of who served and who didnâ€™t and how one went about avoiding that service, if one did.

Matthew Moten

I donâ€™t see that as becoming a political issue in the aftermath of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because we recruited everybody who was going to go fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. And there is no sense of guilt or the stigma thatâ€™s going to be associated with non-military service in the aftermath of these wars.

Interviewer

Thereâ€™s the assumption of risk when you make the decision to join, right?

Matthew Moten

Yeah.

Interviewer

But with respect to war termination, it has a huge impact, right, â€™cause the War in Vietnam, as Gian points out in his essay, so depended upon what the attitude was here at home. Whatever side of the argument you wanted to be, the notion of the public input was importantâ€”it certainly can be agreed upon almost by everyone.

Matthew Moten

People were taking to the streets in their ten thousands in the late 1960s and the 1970s to protest against the Vietnam War, and that sort of animus that the anti-war demonstrators had, I think, was largely fed by the possibility that they might be liable, or that their brothers, their fathers, might be liable for service in Vietnam.

Matthew Moten

While there is certainly an anti-war movement in the United States over these last several yearsâ€”mostly directed against Iraq, but now being directed more and more against Afghanistanâ€”itâ€™s not nearly as virulent. It doesnâ€™t have nearly as many people involved in it, and certainly not with the passion that had been directed against the War in Vietnam.

Interviewer

How would youâ€”now the projectâ€™s completeâ€”how would you like to see this work beâ€”what would please you for the outcome of this particular work, in terms of how itâ€™s used and understood going forward?

Matthew Moten

I have a simple and grandiose ambition for this bookâ€”and that is that some future president contemplating the awful decision to go to war will be discussing these issues with his national security team, and his National Security Advisor will hand him a copy of Between War and Peace as he gets on the helicopter to fly to Camp David for the weekend and say, â€œMr. President, before you make this decision, youâ€™d do well to spend a weekend with this book.â€

Matthew Moten

There arenâ€™t any answers in this book. This is not a book of advocacy. It is not a book of punditry. And it is certainly not an anti-war screed. But this book is meant to inform policymakers about the potential consequences and the unforeseen consequences of going to war. And I hope that it will help them to avoid the kinds of failures of imagination that their predecessors have had.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you very much.

Matthew Moten

Okay.

Interviewer

Just as an addendum to what weâ€™ve just discussed, I would add that itâ€™s not a grandiose thought. Leaders, policymakers read as they are executing their policy and making their decisions. We know that President Bush and Secretary Cheney were reading John Lewis Gaddis. We know that Alistair Horne was being read. We know a whole host of other books that were on the reading list of policymakers during the War in Iraq, Eliot Cohen among them. Speak to your notion of that with respect to this war and any others.

Matthew Moten

Well, itâ€™s my understanding that President Bush was reading Eliot Cohenâ€™s Supreme Command, which is a collection of broad vignettes about political leaders in war time. And the thrust of Cohenâ€™s argument is that political leaders need to have a hands-on approach to their direction of warfare. And that they need to be very forceful in the way that they deal with their military leaders, and that they should not feel any compunction about interfering at whatever level they choose.

Matthew Moten

And I donâ€™t necessarily disagree with the conclusions that Cohen reaches about that, although, Iâ€™ve got some questions about his evidence. But he has picked what he considers to be four very successful military leaders and makes the argument that they should be empowered to engage at any level of warfare.

Interviewer

Who were the four that he chooses?

Matthew Moten

Lincoln, Ben-Gurion, Churchillâ€”and Iâ€™m losing the last one.

Interviewer

And of course, McPherson came out with his book about Lincoln as a war strategist around the same time.

Matthew Moten

Yeah, I think thatâ€™s a very good book. The point is that I think that President Bush was

reading this book and began to think of himself in that mold. And I think that it guided his thinking in terms of developing his war aims and the importance that he placed on being a decisive, resolute leaderâ€”perhaps at the expense of being a thoughtful, information-gathering one.

Interviewer

On the notion that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

Matthew Moten

Yeah.

Interviewer

In the greater breadth of kind of material that weâ€™d hope that a chief executive, or the Commander in Chief, would undertake, would give him some humility to the approach, if nothing else then.

Matthew Moten

Yeah. And if the Bush administration had spent some more time gathering information about the possibilities that what might have happened. Well, one of our authors, Conrad Crane, was co-author of a pamphlet done by the Strategic Studies Institute that looked at the problems of post-war Iraq. And it listed, and I may get this number wrong, 134 things that we needed to be thinking about, about what Iraq would look like after a successful campaign. They published that in February of 2003, and we went to War in Iraq in March. That advice, even though it was published by the United States government, was largely disregarded and discounted.

Interviewer
Thank you very much.