

The Crises of US War-Making, Past and Present

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The United States is again facing backlash for its seemingly never-ending wars. On the world stage, US leadership never fully recovered following the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and whatever authority the Biden Administration reclaimed in its defense of Ukraine quickly evaporated with its full-throated support for Israel's bloodbath in Gaza. At home, widespread disenchantment with 'the forever wars,' percolating for years, boiled over into intense opposition to military aid for Ukraine (on the right) and Israel (on the left). This backlash—combined with supply chain woes, depleted weapons stockpiles, and a hollowed-out industrial-base—leaves the impression of a superpower stretched thin in the face of escalating confrontations around the globe. The US appears to be on the brink of a major crisis of war-making.

This paper compares the present moment with the last major crisis of US war-making, which unfolded amidst defeat in Vietnam. By the turn of the 1970s, widespread opposition at home challenged the military's ability to wage the war via a mass mobilization of the citizenry. Abroad, the Soviet Union seized on the quagmire as a demonstration of weakness and barbarity that undermined US leadership. This paper aims to (1) identify the contours of this crisis and (2) make sense of how officials responded to it.

Drawing from the Foreign Relations of the United States and the Digital National Security archives, as well as memoirs, reports, and newspaper articles, I find that officials in the Pentagon successfully navigated both the domestic challenges to military legitimacy and the external challenges to US power by embracing a series of organizational, technological, and financial "fixes" *with the explicit goal of removing social and political constraints on elites' freedom of movement*. By promoting a reorganization of war—from the end of conscription to the rise of high-tech, casualty-averse weapons—officials created a military apparatus that wages war with little participation (or oversight) from citizens, setting the stage for the endless wars of the twenty-first century.

Like the 1970s, today's crisis presents an opportunity for dramatic transformations in the role and organization of war-making. At that time, elites succeeded in vanquishing their anti-militarist opponents and besting their geopolitical rivals by embracing "fixes" to overcome the multifaceted crisis. Today, the same solutions are no longer available—indeed, it is now the very regime of war-making created by these "fixes" that is on the brink. The paper concludes that, unlike the 1970s, today's military-industrial elites are unable (or unwilling) to change course in the face of crisis. On the one hand, this creates an extremely dangerous situation, as the contradictions of the world's most destructive military apparatus are heightened. On the other hand, this situation may offer a more favorable balance of forces to anti-militarists than had existed in the past.

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