



"Twilight's Last Gleaming," Ben Turnbull

Mourning in America

The factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty.

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1873)

AT THE TIME U.S. SECRETARY OF Defense Donald Rumsfeld was regaling the press and public with his memorable statement about “known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns” in 2002, he was no doubt well aware of an unspoken fourth category: what might be referred to as the “*unknown knowns*.”

These are—in the words of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek—the “disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices” which politicians pretend not to know about when they conflict with their mission—in Rumsfeld’s case, to forestall any potential opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Another term all too frequently uttered by Pentagon war strategists and civilian armchair generals alike is the *fog of war*.

The term—coined by British Colonel Sir Lonsdale Hale in his eponymous 1898 book on military strategy (the concept itself dates to 19th century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz)—has since become a panacea for any unwelcome criticism of the manner in which America’s frequently mismanaged conflicts are conducted.

The term *known unknowns* may refer to strategy and the *fog of war* to tactics, but both are equally applicable to any attempt to quantify the cost of war in human terms.

But while the exact casualty numbers of any individual war may forever remain undiscernable through the ‘fog,’ enough data resides on the ‘known-known’ side of the ledger to hazard an educated guess.

Undeniably, the human cost of America's major post-World War II wars is staggering:

- **Korean War** (1950-1953): 36,574 Americans and 2,540,000 Koreans killed.
- **Vietnam War** (1955-1975): 58,281 Americans and over 1,250,000 Asians killed. (The conflict also involved Cambodia and Laos, with about 5 million civilian deaths.)
- **Grenada Invasion** (1983): 19 Americans, 45 Grenadians, and 24 Cubans killed.
- **Panama Invasion** (1989-1990): 23 Americans and 314 Panamanians killed.
- **Persian Gulf War** (1990-1991): 293 Americans, 569 coalition soldiers, and at least 75,000 Iraqis killed (probably far more).
- **NATO Bombing of Kosovo** (1999): The U.S.-led intervention in the Kosovo War resulted in the deaths of 2 Americans and at least 1,000 Serbian civilians.
- **War in Afghanistan** (2001-2021): 2,420 Americans, 5,076 coalition and mercenary forces, 69,295 Afghan military, 55,293 Taliban/ISIL insurgents, and 46,319 Afghan civilians killed, according to the Pentagon.
- **Iraq War** (2003-2011): 4,430 Americans, 3,968 coalition and mercenary forces, and at least 34,000 Iraqi combatants killed. (Estimated civilian deaths from the war and war-related violence are well over 125,000.)
- **Operation Inherent Resolve** (2013-2017): 101 Americans and over 80,000 enemy combatants were killed in the war against the Islamic State (ISIS), along with tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian civilians — 10,000 by U.S. and coalition forces alone.

All figures are from U.S. government sources, and are no doubt well below the true numbers, as civilians typically account for 90% of wartime casualties. (A New York Times report concluded that the number of civilians killed in the Iraq War, for example, was at least 31 times higher than reported.)

These numbers also don't include other U.S. military actions, notably as carried out in Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and Syria — all part of the monumentally misnamed 'War on Terror.' (At least 23 classified U.S. 'black ops' — or secret military operations — were launched in only one recent 3-year period.)

Nor do they include non-fatal casualties or delayed deaths due to environmental contamination, land mines, chemical and irradiated weapons, economic collapse and starvation, loss of health infrastructure, or resulting trauma, suicide and other violence.

A 2023 study by the Cost of War Project at Boston University put the direct and indirect death toll of 19 U.S. military operations since World War II at 12 *million*, as well as causing the displacement of up to 60 million more.

While the U.S. is not solely responsible for all of these millions of deaths and injuries, it is undeniably complicit in them, along with millions more perpetrated by corrupt regimes that it has supported politically and militarily. Recent examples include the conflicts in Ukraine (up to 500,000 deaths) and Gaza (at least 25,000).

By some accounts, the U.S. has been at war for fully 230 years of its nearly 250 year existence, and despite cynical, patriotic claims about fighting "to preserve freedom and democracy," it's highly questionable what the American people or anyone else have gained from all this death and misery.

Of course, the American media tends to acknowledge only the wartime deaths and casualties of U.S. servicemen, ignoring the millions of foreign and civilian casualties.

Indeed, the abysmal ignorance of the American public about the shocking civilian costs of U.S.-led wars is perhaps matched only by its overwhelming indifference. ■