

## Naming Our Nameless War How Many Years Will It Be?

Posted by Joan Russow  
Tuesday, 28 May 2013 05:37 -

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By [Andrew J. Bacevich](#)

<http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175704/>

For well over a decade now the United States has been “a nation at war.” Does that war have a name?

It did at the outset. After 9/11, George W. Bush's administration wasted no time in announcing that the U.S. was engaged in a *Global War on Terrorism*, or GWOT. With few dissenters, the media quickly embraced the term. The GWOT promised to be a gargantuan, transformative enterprise. The conflict begun on 9/11 would define the age. In neoconservative circles, it was known as *World War IV* W

Upon succeeding to the presidency in 2009, however, Barack Obama without fanfare junked Bush's formulation (as he did again in a speech at the National Defense University last week). Yet if the appellation went away, the conflict itself, shorn of identifying marks, continued.

Does it matter that ours has become and remains a nameless war? Very much so.

Names bestow meaning. When it comes to war, a name attached to a date can shape our understanding of what the conflict was all about. To specify when a war began and when it ended is to privilege certain explanations of its significance while discrediting others. Let me provide a few illustrations.

With rare exceptions, Americans today characterize the horrendous fraternal bloodletting of 1861-1865 as the *Civil War*. Yet not many decades ago, diehard supporters of the Lost Cause insisted on referring to that conflict as the *War Between the States* or the *War for Southern Independence* (or even the

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### *War of Northern Aggression*

). The South may have gone down in defeat, but the purposes for which Southerners had fought -- preserving a distinctive way of life and the principle of states' rights -- had been worthy, even noble. So at least they professed to believe, with their preferred names for the war reflecting that belief.

Schoolbooks tell us that the *Spanish-American War* began in April 1898 and ended in August of that same year. The name and dates fit nicely with a widespread inclination from President William McKinley's day to our own to frame U.S. intervention in Cuba as an altruistic effort to liberate that island from Spanish oppression.

Yet the Cubans were not exactly bystanders in that drama. By 1898, they had been fighting for years to oust their colonial overlords. And although hostilities in Cuba itself ended on August 12th, they dragged on in the Philippines, another Spanish colony that the United States had seized for reasons only remotely related to liberating Cubans. Notably, U.S. troops occupying the Philippines waged a brutal war not against Spaniards but against Filipino nationalists no more inclined to accept colonial rule by Washington than by Madrid. So widen the aperture to include this Cuban prelude and the Filipino postlude and you end up with something like this: *The Spanish-American-Cuban-Philippines War of 1895-1902*. Too clunky? How about the *War for the American Empire*? This much is for sure: rather than illuminating, the commonplace textbook descriptor serves chiefly to conceal.

Strange as it may seem, Europeans once referred to the calamitous events of 1914-1918 as the *Great War*. When Woodrow Wilson decided in 1917 to send an army of doughboys to fight alongside the Allies, he went beyond Great. According to the president, the *Great War* was going to be the *War To End All Wars*. Alas, things did not pan out as he expected. Perhaps anticipating the demise of his vision of permanent peace, War Department General Order 115, issued on October 7, 1919, formally declared that, at least as far as the United States was concerned, the recently concluded hostilities would be known simply as the *World War*.

In September 1939 -- *presto chango!* -- the *World War* suddenly became the *First World War*, the Nazi invasion of Poland having inaugurated a

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*Second World War*,  
also known as  
*World War II*  
or more cryptically  
*WWII*.

To be sure, Soviet dictator Josef Stalin preferred the  
*Great Patriotic War*.

Although this found instant -- almost unanimous -- favor among Soviet citizens, it did not catch on elsewhere.

Does *World War II* accurately capture the events it purports to encompass? With the crusade against the Axis now ranking alongside the crusade against slavery as a myth-enshrouded chapter in U.S. history to which all must pay homage, Americans are no more inclined to consider that question than to consider why a playoff to determine the professional baseball championship of North America constitutes a "World Series."

In fact, however convenient and familiar, *World War II* is misleading and not especially useful. The period in question saw at least two wars, each only tenuously connected to the other, each having distinctive origins, each yielding a different outcome. To separate them is to transform the historical landscape.

On the one hand, there was the *Pacific War*, pitting the United States against Japan. Formally initiated by the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, it had in fact begun a decade earlier when Japan embarked upon a policy of armed conquest in Manchuria. At stake was the question of who would dominate East Asia. Japan's crushing defeat at the hands of the United States, sealed by two atomic bombs in 1945, answered that question (at least for a time).

Then there was the *European War*, pitting Nazi Germany first against Great Britain and France, but ultimately against a grand alliance led by the United States, the Soviet Union, and a fast fading British Empire. At stake was the question of who would dominate Europe. Germany's defeat resolved that issue (at least for a time): no one would. To prevent any single power from controlling Europe, two outside powers divided it.

This division served as the basis for the ensuing *Cold War*, which wasn't actually cold, but also (thankfully) wasn't *World*

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*War III* , th  
e retrospective insistence of bellicose neoconservatives notwithstanding

But when did the  
*Cold War*

begin? Was it in early 1947, when President Harry Truman decided that Stalin's Russia posed a looming threat and committed the United States to a strategy of containment? Or was it in 1919, when Vladimir Lenin decided that Winston Churchill's vow to "strangle Bolshevism in its cradle" posed a looming threat to the Russian Revolution, with an ongoing Anglo-American military intervention evincing a determination to make good on that vow?

Separating the war against Nazi Germany from the war against Imperial Japan opens up another interpretive possibility. If you incorporate the European conflict of 1914-1918 and the European conflict of 1939-1945 into a single narrative, you get a *Second Thirty Years War* (the first having occurred from 1618-1648) -- not so much a contest of good against evil, as a mindless exercise in self-destruction that represented the ultimate expression of European folly.

So, yes, it matters what we choose to call the military enterprise we've been waging not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in any number of other countries scattered hither and yon across the Islamic world. Although the Obama administration appears no more interested than the Bush administration in saying when that enterprise will actually end, the date we choose as its starting point also matters.

Although Washington seems in no hurry to name its nameless war -- and will no doubt settle on something self-serving or anodyne if it ever finally addresses the issue -- perhaps we should jump-start the process. Let's consider some possible options, names that might actually explain what's going on.

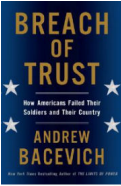
**The Long War:** Coined not long after 9/11 by senior officers in the Pentagon, this formulation never gained traction with either civilian officials or the general public. Yet the *Long War* deserves consideration, even though -- or perhaps because -- it has lost its luster with the passage of time.

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