

## **Empire Crack'd: Five Faces of Defeat**

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### **Empire Crack'd: Five Faces of Defeat**

**AG** - Immanuel Wallerstein - The United States is today the greatest military power in the world. Israel is today the greatest military power located in the Middle East. One of the most obvious temptations of military superiority is to use military force when one wants to accomplish something which is resisted politically. The United States decided to use force against Iraq in 2003. Israel decided to use force against Lebanon in 2006. In both cases, the governments made these decisions, calculating that they could surely win the military conflict, and win it quickly.

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*Immanuel Wallerstein offers five reasons why the greatest military powers -- global and regional -- can lose when they decide to use force to accomplish something resisted politically by others.*

### **Five Reasons Why Great Military Powers Lose Wars**

#### **Immanuel Wallerstein**

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Normally, the greatest military power in the world or in a given region can indeed win such military engagements, and win them quickly. That is what we mean when we say they are the greatest military power. But winning depends on a situation in which the military gap between the two states is truly overwhelming. If it is less than overwhelming, the decision to resort to military force can backfire, and backfire badly. This is so for five reasons.

1) If the weaker power turns out to have enough power to slow down the process, and even more to bog it down, then the primary result of the military engagement is to show up the limits of the presumed superior military strength of the greatest military power. Indeed the lesson that the world draws from such a situation is that the greatest military power is militarily weaker than most people had presumed. Other countries draw political conclusions from such a show of less than overwhelming military power.

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2) A prolonged war is always, and inevitably, a nasty war. The greatest military power engages in actions that begin to seem offensive morally. If the war is truly short, such offenses are quickly forgotten. But if the war drags on, they become more and more a part of the generalized perception not only in the two countries engaged in the war, but in the rest of the world. The greatest military power begins to lose whatever moral edge it claimed and with which it was credited previously in world public opinion. Slowly but surely, countries that had been more or less on the side of the greatest military power begin to take their distance, and sometimes even express political and moral anger.

3) At the outset, a very large majority of public opinion in the greatest military power usually backs its government's decision to go to war. This backing takes the form of patriotic fervor and great moral approval of their government. But such internal public approval is supported by the belief that the war is not merely just in their eyes but that the war will also be won swiftly, and therefore relatively painlessly.

When the war begins to bog down, there are two groups in the population of the greatest military power who begin to withdraw support from their government. There are those who think that the government hasn't tried hard enough and is basically incompetent. They call for escalating still further the military assault. If this turns out to be for any reason impossible, this group often draws the conclusion that they should pull back entirely from the war. There is a second group who begin to have moral doubts about the war, and begin to urge pulling back not because the government is ineffective but because it is morally wrong. Even though these two groups of internal critics are saying opposite things, and are at considerable odds with each other, the two discontents add up to considerable internal pressure on the government to change its policy.

By the time the warfare is really bogged down, the government of the strongest military power is in a lose-lose situation. If it pulls back, it loses. And if it doesn't pull back, it loses. The result at first is paralysis (called "staying the course") and then humiliation. If the sense of humiliation is sufficiently great, it can lead to extreme internal tensions within the country that had been thought of as the strongest military power.

4) The longer such a situation goes on, the more expensive it becomes -- expensive in human lives (of the greatest military power), and expensive economically. The more expensive it becomes, the more the government begins to lose internal support. The country against whom the war is being fought is no doubt damaged physically, often to an extreme degree. But the damage to the strongest military power turns out to be very great as well, even if it is less likely to take the form of the destruction of infrastructure.

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5) As all of this occurs -- the demonstration of less military strength than was believed previously, the loss of moral edge, the increasing withdrawal of internal support, the increasing cost to the greatest military power -- the outcome is that the overall political position in the world-system of the greatest military power declines, sometimes precipitously.

The political conclusion one has to draw from these five reasons is that the greatest military power better be really sure that its military edge is really overwhelming before it brings down such negative results on itself.

**Immanuel Wallerstein**, Senior Research Scholar at Yale University, is the author of *The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World* (New Press).

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