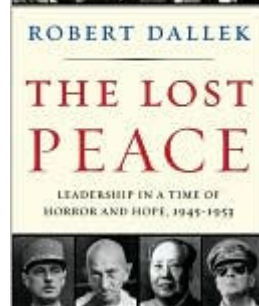


The Lost Peace: Leadership in a Time of Horror and Hope, 1945-1953

Robert Dallek

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- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I want to thank you all for joining us.

Leadership and decision making is a subject we have visited before, but today we have a special opportunity to listen to one of our country's most distinguished historians, Robert Dallek, as he deconstructs decisions taken by world leaders in the period from the closing months of World War II through the early years of the Cold War. The decisions taken during that time had, and still have, profound consequences, influencing our relations with China, Korea, the Middle East, and around the globe.

Heads of states have always had the power to influence events. This was especially clear at the end of World War II, when the time seemed ripe for a calculated revolution in world politics. The Allies' defeat of fascism, Nazism, and Japanese militarism presented an extraordinary opportunity for a more rational approach to international differences and more humane governance.

The leaders at that time—[Roosevelt](#), [Churchill](#), [Stalin](#), [Mao](#), [de Gaulle](#), and [Truman](#)—were an able and effective group of politicians who found themselves with circumstances favorable to changing international relations for the better. Yet, these leaders failed to attain the elusive goal of world peace.

What went wrong? Why did they rely on traditional power politics, despite the catastrophic violence that their nations had endured?

As this insightful book indicates, history is the sum of hundreds of individual decisions. Accordingly, Mr. Dallek examines the irreversible mistakes by weighing the choices these leaders made against alternative scenarios that might have led to a more peaceful and more constructive outcome.

While he advocates that today's leaders heed the mistakes of the past, he writes that he remains optimistic, in that the missteps recounted "should be taken not as an admission of hopelessness but as a reminder that flawed leadership was less the consequence of circumstances than of choice."

As our country tries to define its foreign policy strategy and maps out its goals, a reading of [The Lost Peace](#) offers not only a fascinating historical perspective but also provides timely insight. In the end, this book reveals that we do have the capacity to learn from history.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our guest today, the distinguished historian Robert Dallek. Thank you very much.

Remarks

ROBERT DALLEK: Thank you for that very nice introduction.

When I get an introduction like that, it always puts me in mind of one I got several years back, when I was lecturing in the Soviet Union. My host on that occasion, who I like to think had an imperfect command of English, introduced me by saying, "Professor Dallek is the author of several distinguished works. They're the kinds of

books that once you put them down you can't pick them up again." [Laughter] Not music to the author's ears.

I like to begin these talks also, as a historian, by relating another anecdote about my son, who has also become a historian and has a doctorate from my alma mater, Columbia. When he was about four or five years old, he said to me one day, "Daddy, you're a doctor, aren't you?"

I said, "Well, yes, but not like your pediatrician."

He said, "Oh, I know that, because you're also an historian."

I was delighted he could make this distinction at so tender an age.

But then he wanted to know, "Does that mean that you make people in the past feel better?" [Laughter]

Let's see what I can do for these people in 1945-1953. I'm not too optimistic.

Let me begin by saying a word about what I have done in my scholarship over time. Every book I have written—and there are several—begins with a question, which is the central proposition that I want to address.

When I began working on [Franklin Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy](#), I was puzzled at the assertions made about Roosevelt during World War II—that he was naïve about Stalin, about the Chinese communists, and didn't have a realistic grasp of world affairs. I found this very difficult to accept, since he was the consummate politician, and probably the greatest politician we had in the 20th century. I got into the archives. What I found there confirmed my assumption that it was exaggerated to see him as naïve.

When I turned to [John F. Kennedy](#) for a [biography](#), I was puzzled by the fact that here was a man who had served only 1,000 days, and when you ask people in this country who are the greatest presidents of American history, consistently and predictably they told you [Washington](#), [Lincoln](#), FDR, but then they would add the name John Kennedy. I was puzzled.

How could someone who was one of the briefest-serving presidents in the country's history, had been there for only 1,000 days, why did they include him as one of the truly great presidents of American history? Again, I worked my way through the archives, and I found some very interesting answers there.

From the two volumes that I did on [Lyndon Johnson](#), I again was puzzled. How could it be that a man who was in Roosevelt's tradition, so to speak—he loved FDR, he thought of himself as FDR's protégé—and he was a brilliant politician, how could he have been tapped out by [Vietnam](#), which destroyed his presidency? In 1964 he won a massive election, one of the great landslide victories in American presidential history. Yet, by 1968 he had to resign because he had lost his hold on American public opinion, and his consensus had been shattered. Again, I worked my way through the archives, and I found interesting answers.

[Nixon and Kissinger](#), is a book that I published on those men three years ago, and they had the reputation as extraordinary foreign policy leaders.

I went to the archives and I said, "I'm thinking of doing a book on [Nixon](#) and [Kissinger](#), but I understand there are telephone transcripts that Mr. Kissinger has locked up in the Library of Congress until five years after his death."

The archivist said, "Do the book. He is being forced to open this material because the famous series of [The Foreign Relations of the United States](#) is turning to the Nixon period now, and we've insisted that we have Mr. Kissinger's telephone transcripts."

Well, 20,000 pages of materials. Absolutely fascinating stuff—not all of it obviously, plenty of grist there, but fascinating stuff nevertheless.

I'm not going to tell you what my findings were in each of these books. I'm going to make you buy them, if this has been enough of a tease. But this is what I do. I begin with a question and I go into archives.

The Lost Peace, was a little different in the sense that I was looking at leadership all over the globe and I wasn't going to go around the world. I was looking not only at Roosevelt, Truman, [MacArthur](#) and [Joseph McCarthy](#) in the United States, but I was also looking at [Nehru](#), [Gandhi](#), Churchill, [Attlee](#), Stalin, [Hitler](#), [Syngman Rhee](#), [Kim Il-sung](#), Mao Zedong, and [Zhou Enlai](#). Obviously I don't have the language skills to go and do that.

But there was a puzzle here for me. At the end of World War II, there was such a yearning around the globe for long-term peace. The world had suffered so terribly. It was the greatest, most destructive war in human history. Probably 50 million people perished in that conflict, with 25 million people in the Soviet Union alone.

In the Soviet Union, we know from materials that are available to historians now, that there was a yearning for a kind of accommodation with the West. There was hope that Stalin would be forgiving, so to speak, and allow the citizenry of the Soviet republics to have open and free exchange with people in the West, and there was hope that there could be some kind of long-term peace. Of course it didn't come to pass.

The question I puzzled over was: Why not? How did it come about?

Let me just briefly read to you from the preface to this book I have written, which at least gives you some general idea of what I tried to do in this book.

"This is a book about the generation of leaders in the years of upheaval between the close of World War II and the early Cold War. It is not a comprehensive history about why and how the Cold War began. Rather, it is an attempt to underscore the misjudgments and unwise actions that caused so much continuing strife and suffering, and suggest alternatives that might have made for greater international harmony.

"While I highlight the failings of notable men who dominated the scene during this time, I am not intent on denying them their due, or in the case of the greatest villains of the day, revising their reputations for wrongdoing. My greatest interest is in revisiting the decision making and events of the period as a cautionary tale—a reprise of what went wrong as a call for future improvement in world affairs, or an educator's lesson of what might have been done to avoid the difficulties that beset strong and weak nations around the globe.

"Such an exercise in finger-pointing and advice-giving is bound to promote debate. The what-ifs of history are always risky propositions, more the product of speculation than persuasive evidence. I would be the first to grant that my suggested remedies for the missteps of the period reflect the historian's advantage over leaders who could not know how things would turn out. During his presidency, John F. Kennedy told the historian [David Herbert Donald](#), 'No one has a right to grade a president—not even poor [James Buchanan](#)—who has not sat in his chair, examined the mail and information that came across his desk, and learned why he made decisions.' Yet it is the historian's job not only to examine the record as fully as possible but also to render judgments on how past officeholders performed. Otherwise, we are no more than chroniclers telling a story without meaning.

"I hope my retrospective suggestions on how world leaders might have done better for the millions of people they governed are seen as a constructive exercise that encourages reflection on their limitations. The fact that men and women gained governing power—whether by democratic elections or extraconstitutional means—is no guarantee of wise leadership.

"The success of this book depends less on whether I stimulate a chorus of approving nods on the alternatives I see to some of their actions than renewed discussion of how the most powerful men of the 1940s and early 1950s performed, and—more importantly—what their mistakes tell us about crafting more considered actions in the future. That most of the book's focus is on leaders' shortcomings is not meant as a lament about the limits of government to act more wisely. The post-1945 era had its share of sensible actions between nations. I hope my discussion of wrong turns, then, is seen not as a cry of despair but as a reminder that we can do better in resolving conflict and promoting international cooperation."

In that regard I'll tell you an anecdote. About four to five years ago, a French attorney sent me an email in which he said he had read my Kennedy book and that he was keenly interested in Kennedy; could I have lunch with him in Washington, which is where I live? I said, "Yes, of course, I'd be most interested to do that."

We had lunch. A very nice, intelligent man. My French is lousy and his English was perfect.

Toward the end of this lunch I asked him if he had children. He said yes, they were in their 20s.

I asked him, "How do your children think of themselves?"

He said, "Of course as French, but also as Europeans."

I said, "Could your children imagine a war between France and Germany now?"

He said, "Of course not, absolutely not."

What it reminded me of was a book that recently was published by [James Sheehan](#), the German historian at Stanford University, called [Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?](#) The book is about how Europe has gone from Mars to Venus and how the United States has gone from Venus to Mars in this transformation.

Apropos of all this, before I talk a little bit about the contents of this book, I'll tell you another anecdote about how we historians can get ourselves into trouble when we try to do this speculation about interpretation and other answers.

I was once giving a lecture to a group of physicians. One of them did not like anything I said. In the question-and-answer period he said to me, "You're wrong about this, and wrong about that."

I stopped him and I said, "No, no, doctor. You don't understand. Historians are never wrong. That's why we don't carry malpractice insurance." [Laughter]

I quoted to him the great Dutch historian [Pieter Geyl](#), who said that "history is argument without end." And it is.

We can argue over these issues to this day. The purpose of doing that, before I talk to you a little bit about the misjudgments I see leaders making, is very much to put current people in mind, and particularly the leadership around the world, that they can do better, and they can avoid the kinds of conflicts, losses, and suffering that are so common.

I'll tell, very briefly, one tale out of school. I have had dinner twice with President [Obama](#). He is keenly interested in history. In June of 2009 he invited a group of nine historians, and then again in May of this year, 2010, he invited ten historians. There were about 14 at the first dinner, 15 at the second dinner, at a roundtable in the White House. We had a wonderful discussion with him on both occasions.

He is someone who is keenly interested in history. Obama is open to suggestions and discussion as to how history can be used to do better in the present and hopefully in the future.

Did we give him the elixir, the Holy Grail? Obviously not. He is struggling. But I can tell you he is a very intelligent man. How could it be otherwise, someone who invites historians to have dinner with him? [Laughter]

Let me say something about the miscalculations that I found and discussed in this book.

First of all, the start of World War II.

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. They were convinced that the United States was such a pacifist, isolationist nation that once they struck at our fleet and decimated it at Pearl Harbor, we would not last for more than six months in the war.

Admiral [Yamamoto](#), who designed the attack on Pearl Harbor, said, "If the Americans fight for more than six months, we'll lose the war." It was his hope, and the hope of the Japanese leadership, that we would give up before then.

Adolf Hitler declared war on the United States. We didn't declare war on him. He declared war on us four days after Pearl Harbor, on December 11, 1941. Hitler's assumption again was that the United States was a bastard society made up of Jews, Catholics, Germans, French, Poles, Hungarians, Russians, Blacks and Hispanics, and it couldn't possibly be the equal of the *Übermensch* (the master race) in Germany. This was a terrible miscalculation on his part.

We made a terrible error in judgment also at the start of the war. We thought the fleet in Pearl Harbor would be a great deterrent, and the Japanese wouldn't attack because the fleet was there to deter them. In fact, the Japanese saw it as a target.

The great German philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) said that "Convictions are greater enemies of the truth than lies."

This is what we're talking about. People enter into these convictions, these assumptions, these beliefs, that so lead them astray, and they are not open to being educated or informed or to thinking outside the box, in different ways that might lead them toward a wiser judgment. I'll give you some examples.

Take Stalin first of all. Josef Stalin was of course a brilliant dictator—if one could use the term brilliant—and he couldn't accept the idea that at the end of World War II there could be an accommodation with the United States.

We were enormously grateful to the Soviets for, as [George Kennan](#) said, having "torn the guts out of the Nazi war machine." We were highly sympathetic.

The picture of the Soviet Union during the war that was painted by [Wendell Willkie](#) in *One World* was that they are becoming just like us. Willkie's proposition was that we were going to get along for as far into the future as anyone could see.

The American public was just so smitten with this idea. In fact, [Henry Luce](#), who was anything but a liberal, published in *Look* magazine an article in which he said, "The Soviet people are just like the American people. They dress like us, they think like us, they talk like us. They have an [NKVD](#) that is just like our FBI." Maybe that part was true, but as for the rest, it was this illusory thinking that we really are one world, we're all part of the same.

Stalin was convinced by his Marxist ideology that there had to be this struggle between capitalism and communism, and that communism would triumph. If he had been more receptive to the idea that we wanted to get along, that we were going to accept the fact that they had a system different from ours but that they were restrained—but instead, of course, he rushed to take over Eastern Europe and build nuclear weapons. That was a great mistake.

One of the great mistakes I feel of this postwar era has to do with the building of atomic and hydrogen bombs. Here I take much of my text from what George Kennan wrote later in his book, called [The Nuclear Delusion](#).

Harry Truman went to the [Potsdam Conference](#) and he met with Stalin and Churchill initially, and then Clement Attlee.

At the end of one meeting—I'm sure many of you know this—Truman went up to Stalin and casually said to him, "We have a new all-powerful weapon."

Stalin, as cool as could be, said, "Very good. I hope you use it well."

What a foolish thing on both sides. Why couldn't Truman have gone into conference with him just with translators and have said, "We're developing an atomic bomb." It didn't mean he had to give the secret to Stalin. It didn't mean we had to open ourselves to giving them equal access to that weapon.

Shouldn't Truman have understood that Stalin's reaction meant of course he knew about the development of that weapon? They had spies in the [Manhattan Project](#). He knew what was going on.

We know from archival materials now, that after that conversation, Stalin went back and talked to some of his principal aides, and he said, "We must speed up our development of the bomb."

The hydrogen bomb in 1950. We at that point had something like 100 atomic bombs and the Soviets maybe had two or three, if that. Kennan wrote a 79-page memo in which he counseled [Acheson](#) and the Truman White House not to build a hydrogen bomb.

He said: "These are not usable weapons. You can't use them on the battlefield because you'll destroy your own troops as well as the enemy. The only thing you can do is massive destruction. Tell the Soviets we can develop a hydrogen bomb. We don't want to do it. We need to be restrained. Let's not get into an arms race."

Would Stalin have said, "Oh yes, let's kiss and be lovey-dovey?" I doubt it.

If we had done that and the Soviets went ahead and developed a hydrogen bomb, we would have known about it very quickly. We had this huge advantage over them, 100-to-1 probably, in atomic bombs. There was no real danger to the United States. We then instantly could have gone ahead to build hydrogen bombs.

A similar point about NATO. George Kennan regretted greatly the fact that his memos about containing communism—which was a brilliant idea, because what he was talking about was political and economic containment, not military containment. He opposed the building up of NATO.

Kennan's argument was that this military alliance is unnecessary because the Soviets are not going to move against Western Europe. This is not Adolf Hitler. Stalin's too careful and too determined to sustain his own regime and survival. Kennan argued don't do it, they will set up a counter-alliance. Of course that is exactly what they did, by setting up the [Warsaw Pact](#).

He later wrote at length about how this arms race had developed. Stalin, of course, made this huge blunder and miscalculation, that he could outbid us in an arms race.

Of course, the outcome is what? That he destroys Soviet communism in many ways. The investment in their military establishment was so phenomenal. I had visited the Soviet Union in 1979, and again in 1989. I was astonished when I got there at the impoverishment of that society. I rode on some buses, and looking at the ordinary citizens, the clothing they were wearing.

I went into what was called a *produktivni*, a supermarket of theirs. All you found on the shelves were a few cans of fish and some rotten potatoes.

I stayed in the Rossiya Hotel, and for breakfast some mornings there would be some eggs and other mornings they had no supplies, because it was wintertime and they could not clear the rivers to use the barges to bring products into Moscow. I found it in many ways a kind of primitive society.

But not their military. They had built up this phenomenal military establishment. In the long run it ruined them, and it seems to me, it brought them down.

[Reagan](#) was right in the sense of "Keep up the arms race, is going to break their back."

So dead wrong. There are so many other examples of this.

Charles de Gaulle was an absolutely brilliant leader. In some ways he may have been the greatest leader coming out of World War II, in the sense that he had nothing and yet he emerges. He has no army to speak of, he's in exile in London, he's beholden to the British and the Americans, and yet he maintains a certain dignity.

When he meets with Roosevelt and Stalin, and later Truman, he's so perceptive. When he meets Roosevelt at the [Casablanca Conference](#) he says, "The president did not view me kindly." He said, "He wore a mask of amiability." That was Roosevelt, of course. He didn't think the French were worth a tinker's damn. They had surrendered. They didn't deserve a place at the peace table at the end of World War II. De Gaulle read him perfectly.

He goes to Moscow in 1944 and meets with Stalin at a drunken bacchanal, an evening dinner. Stalin is drunk, and he starts carrying on about how, "You see this man? He does tank production. He does not meet quotas, we hang him. See this man? Plane production. He does not meet quotas, we shoot him."

De Gaulle describes that the look on his face betrayed himself to Stalin. Stalin said to him, "I see you are not happy with what I describe. Well, you see, people think I'm a monster, but maybe I have sense of humor, you see." De Gaulle knew better. He understood.

He came to the United States in the fall of 1945 and he said: "Ah, the Americans. They think the world will be perfect if everybody just follows their lead." The American proposition he found was that "inside of every foreigner is an American waiting to emerge." That's what he sees.

He really was quite extraordinary—except he has the conviction that France cannot be a great power again unless it reclaims its colonial empire. He drives to put France back into Vietnam. The price they pay in blood and treasure is terrible. What a miscalculation.

Let me give you one more example: the Korean War.

Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-sung are dying to get into a war with each other. In 1950 Syngman Rhee is 70 years old. He is determined to unify the peninsula under his control. Kim Il-sung has the same objective, and he asks Stalin's permission to move against the south. Stalin at first demurs and tells him, "There's an insurgency in the south against Syngman Rhee. Hold your hand. Maybe that insurgency will topple him." But it's not going to. He convinces Stalin that he should let him attack the south.

Stalin's assumption is that though Dean Acheson has said that Korea is not part of a North-East Asian security belt, and this seems to be an inducement to let the North Koreans attack the South, Stalin is convinced that if there is a war, the Americans will come into the fighting. He was absolutely right about that.

He thought: "This will be great, because it will distract them from my East European empire. They won't be able to put pressure on me over what's happening in Europe."

Dead wrong, because what comes out of the Korean War is [NSC-68](#) [National Security Council Directive 68] which leads to this massive expansion of the American military, and forces Stalin, as he sees it, into a massive expansion of his military, and the ultimate outcome, as I said before, is the collapse of his Soviet system.

Kim Il-sung, Syngman Rhee, and Stalin's goals for the Korean War are dead wrong.

We come into the war, and I find that quite understandable. Truman could not sit back and just let them come across the Parallel. First of all, politically it would have been very destructive to him in 1950. Also what he understood was that it would have shocked and undermined the confidence of our allies in Japan and in Europe. He needed to come into that war.

MacArthur brilliantly executes the landing at Inchon. They drive the North Koreans back above the Parallel. Then the big decision: What do you do? Do you cross the Parallel?

Truman goes to Wake Island and meets with Douglas MacArthur, who gives him the worst possible advice. He says to him: "Yes, of course cross the Parallel."

"First of all," he says, "the Chinese will not come in." He said, "I've seen their armies fight in World War II"—of course what he saw were the nationalist armies, not Mao Zedong's communist army.

"They won't fight. If they come in, they won't be worth a lick. And if they do come in, there will be the greatest slaughter because they have no air cover." Dead wrong.

Indeed, Mao Zedong comes in. He makes a blunder too. Nine hundred thousand Chinese perish in that fighting. Three million Koreans on both sides of the line lose their lives in that conflict.

What's the outcome? Need I tell you? Back to the 38th Parallel, both sides still poised, still struggling with each other. As recently as last week, the North Koreans are rattling the sword, talking about striking against South Korea if they don't stop their propaganda. What was the point of that war?

As I said, I understand that Truman had to go in. Crossing the Parallel—again, there was huge pressure on him. Remember what Richard Nixon said about [Adlai Stevenson](#) in the 1952 presidential campaign?

"Stevenson has a Ph.D. from Dean Acheson's cowardly college of communist containment."

The point is that this would have been containment, which of course was the strategy that allowed us to win the Cold War without a direct conflict. It would have been, it seems to me, the wise thing to have done.

The political pressures in this country were so enormous on Truman to avoid this idea that it was cowardly containment. "It is time," they said, "for liberation, for rollback." That was of course the [Eisenhower](#)-Nixon slogan in the 1952 campaign.

But Eisenhower knew better. When Eisenhower went to Korea after he was elected and he flew over the lines between the Chinese in the north and the South Koreans and the Americans, Syngman Rhee and a number of people in the United States were pressing him to launch an offensive. He knew his military history and he knew something about strategy and tactics, and he wouldn't do it. He said, "They're too well dug in. The price we would pay would be ferocious."

What he did behind the scenes was to threaten the Chinese with the possible use of atomic bombs. It frightened them into coming back to the peace table, and we got a truce in Korea.

These are just a handful of the mistakes I see. All I can tell you is that when I teach my students these days—and I teach a seminar for Stanford University in Washington, which has a very active program—what I tell my students is, "If I depress you too much, you can't sue me for your psychotherapy bills." [Laughter]

I appreciate it's a somewhat dark view of human affairs. But have we achieved [Valhalla](#), Wilson's proposition of "the war to end all wars," making the world safe for democracy? I'm afraid we're still a long way from doing it.

But if they'll only read my book. [Laughter] Enough said.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: John Hirsch from Columbia University. The way you've presented this this morning, about miscalculations and misjudgments, can be extrapolated through Vietnam and Iraq. Without going into the whole story of those two wars, millions of people have died in both of those wars over decades. Now the United States is in Afghanistan, and there is a big debate in this country and elsewhere about whether what is being done there makes any sense.

Also you never know what the other guy's doing; you sort of infer that without quite saying it. I mean that's part

of this problem, and what [Joseph Nye](#) calls the [Prisoner's Paradox](#).

What suggestions do you have for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy that derive from this analysis? I'm thinking again about Vietnam and Iraq.

ROBERT DALLEK: Thank you for that wonderful question.

This is something that came up at our dinners with the president. At the first dinner, [Bob Caro](#), Lyndon Johnson's biographer, was there, and he raised with the president the fact that Lyndon Johnson's [Great Society](#) came to a halt as a consequence of Vietnam. It stopped it in its tracks, so to speak.

I then said to him, "Mr. President, there's a rule of thumb I teach in my American history classes, namely that these wars killed big reform movements. World War I killed off progressivism. Franklin Roosevelt said, 'Dr. New Deal has been replaced by Dr. Win the War.' Truman's [Fair Deal](#) went aglimmering with Korea, and Vietnam of course, as Caro said, called a halt to the Great Society."

He knew what I was saying. He said, "Iraq was a mistake." There was nothing new there. He had been saying that on the campaign trail.

At the second dinner, when I raised something about this again with him, he said, "Iraq was a mistake. I'm getting out now."

[Garry Wills](#), the historian, was also at the first dinner. Garry said to him directly, "Don't get into Afghanistan. It's a trap. It is a bottomless pit." In essence he was saying, "Remember what happened to the British and the Russians there. It's a no-win situation."

He said on that occasion—it's the only time in these two dinners that he said, "Off the record, I'm not unmindful of what you're telling me. I've got a problem."

Anyone who has read [Bob Woodward](#)'s new book, [Obama's Wars](#), what you find there, I also infer in an article in the current issue of *Foreign Policy*, "[The Tyranny of Metaphor](#)." I begin the article by quoting from [Denis Brogan](#), the British historian, who in 1952 published an article in *Harper's* magazine titled "[The Illusion of American Omnipotence](#)." I said that this just as easily could be called "The Omnipotence of American Illusion." That's what this is.

Wills said in a piece in the *New York Review of Books*, "Mr. President risks becoming a one-term president by getting out of Afghanistan. It is a no-win situation—sacrifice of blood and treasure to no particular good end."

Wills then, after the president announced that he was increasing the troop commitment by 30,000 in Afghanistan, publicly broke with him. Sadly, Wills was not invited back to our second dinner. I regret that. He should have been there to voice his opinion again.

I raised something about wars again. The president repeated what he said about Iraq. He didn't talk about Afghanistan.

Let me tell you what is going on with him, in my interpretation and my judgment. He knows full well what we are talking about. He is intensely mindful of that. What we are operating with here is the politics of foreign policy, which is the same thing that Harry Truman had to struggle with when he had to make that decision about crossing the 38th Parallel.

During the campaign, after the president said many times he voted against the Iraq war, he had to say, "Afghanistan was the right war, this was the correct war."

It reminded me of [Dukakis](#) when he was running against the first Bush. He put on that tank helmet and somebody said he looked like Snoopy. He was ridiculed for that. But he was trying to influence the image of himself as someone who knew something about national security.

Why haven't we had a woman as president? Egads! It's ridiculous. Why haven't we? In part, because of this national security preoccupation. We're so fixated on this idea that you have to have somebody who knows something about the military. Well, what the hell do they know? Look what happened with Vietnam, with Iraq—all this information and this sort of knowledge.

The president understands this fully. That's why in his speech he also said that come July 2011, he's going to begin a withdrawal. I think he's really committed to that. That's what Woodward raises in that book. He talks about his tremendous ambivalence.

The political pressure on him is enormous.

I did an interview yesterday for the book with [Charlie Rose](#). Charlie said—it was a good question—"Where's his courage?"

Remember John Kennedy's [Profiles in Courage](#)? Although, as [Eleanor Roosevelt](#) said during the 1960 campaign when she recalled Kennedy's behavior toward Joe McCarthy, she said, "I wish he'd shown less profile and more courage." [Laughter]

On the other hand, I understand. There's a good reason why I'm not a politician, I'm a historian. I don't want to have to make those compromises. The historian doesn't have to. We can be principled and heroic.

The point is that this is the reality of American politics, and it is where the political culture is in this country. A group like yours does the Lord's work, in that you are working, you are struggling, to hopefully make people more mindful of the limits of this kind of militarism.

One of the things I regret is that President Nixon put into place the volunteer military. You need a draft. When you are going to go to war and lives are going to be sacrificed, it should not be those handful of people who volunteer. It should be a commitment from the whole society. That is absolutely essential. But what do I know?

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim. Much of what you said about the aftermath of World War II could be said about the run-up to World War I and the aftermath of that, and any number of other catastrophes. What do you think are the distinctive lessons of the World War II postwar period?

Is it possible to say—I know this is kind of a perverse notion, and I take no exception to anything you've said about how badly things turned out—but didn't they turn out maybe a little bit better than the aftermath of World War I?

ROBERT DALLEK: Oh, yes.

QUESTIONER: That was what these statesmen were trying to avoid, and weren't they modestly successful in doing so?

ROBERT DALLEK: It's a very good point you're making. There's no question that, especially if you want to emphasize the better side of things, the better angels, Truman's containment doctrine was at the end of the day very wise, and sensible. We avoided a big nuclear war—and we have avoided one so far. That doesn't guarantee that this will go on forever. But we avoided one.

The lesson they did take from World War I was that you could not do this kind of namby-pamby peace arrangement. At the end of World War I, all the rhetoric and the [Versailles Treaty Article 231](#), the *Kriegsschule Wada* [phonetic]: Who's guilty of causing the war? Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Punish them, make them pay reparations, et cetera.

We didn't occupy them, and it really provided fertile ground for the rise of Nazism and fascism in Italy, and communism came. I would argue that so much of that century was the offshoot of what happened in World War I.

We did better at the end of World War II, in that yes, you had to occupy Germany and Japan, and there had to be demilitarization. Of course, the outcome there is that Japan and Germany have turned in that wonderful direction toward a much more benign and democratic society.

As I said at the start of my talk, my conversation with that French attorney gave me hope. I don't see it as hopeless.

On the other hand, you're right that maybe it's human nature; Maybe it's that people love to fight these wars. [Freud](#) talked about the dark side of human nature. I would hope not, but I'm afraid there's not a history here to suggest that we are going to have peace for the long term.

To be celebratory about the achievements, it's fine. But if there are lessons to be learned, it's less so from the gains we made than from the blunders. That is what I have tried to do in this book.

Franklin Roosevelt was extraordinarily shrewd. I will just take one second to say in that first book I was telling you about with FDR, what I found there was the fact that Roosevelt mirrored the public feeling in the United States.

Wendell Willkie's book, *One World*, is an extraordinary volume. Go back and read it. It was published in 1943. It's this picture of everybody in the Soviet Union becoming just like the United States. He goes and he meets these sturdy, hardy frontiersmen in Russia who reminded him of his ancestors in Indiana. Same as in China. He talks to Stalin and he says, "You're educating your people so well, you're going to educate yourself right out of your job. You see democracy." He says Stalin laughed heartily, as well he might have, at this fool telling him about democracy.

Roosevelt understood this perfectly, and he mirrors all this. He comes back from [Yalta](#) and he says, "This conference represents the end of spheres of influence, the end of balance-of-power diplomacy." Malarkey! He knew. He said to some senators, "Spheres of influence govern history. This is what controls it."

The payoff was September 1944 when he and Churchill signed an aid memoir about the atomic bomb, in which they say, "We will not give the secret of the bomb to the Soviets, to Stalin." He suspects there is going to be something like, hopefully a cold war, not a hot war.

There was a really big up-side, and the world—maybe incrementally we do make gains. Think of this country.

I tell my students, especially these days from the South, 60 years ago people in that region could not imagine a society in which there was equal voting rights for African-Americans, a place at the table and opportunity. Could any of them in their wildest imagination have believed that we would have a black president?

I marched with [Martin Luther King](#) in Alabama. He invited historians to come. I was lucky enough to be on the last day of that march. I tell you, I was frightened. I'm a physical coward. I was scared to death, because of those Alabama National Guardsmen.

A colleague of mine and I went up to one of them. It was a hot, steamy day. We asked for a drink of water from their canteen. They wouldn't give it to us. If looks could kill, they would have killed us. But, happily, Johnson had federalized that National Guard, and so they were under orders to be restrained.

But what a difference! So has there been progress? Yes. And, by God, we'll even see a woman as president of the United States.

QUESTION: Allen Young. In your view, would the Cold War have evolved differently if Franklin Roosevelt had remained alive?

ROBERT DALLEK: Excellent question. I speak to that at the end of that Roosevelt book.

I don't think so, except that it would have come about more quickly than it did under Truman. Truman was an FDR shadow, and the public was so convinced that if Roosevelt had been there he would have worked out some kind of accommodation with Stalin. I don't think that would have happened.

Roosevelt could have said to the public, "You know how hard I tried to get along with Stalin. It's not working. Now we have to take stronger action."

Truman couldn't do that, because, as it was, [Henry Wallace](#) and the Progressive Party, which was evolving, developing, were very much on his case, and he had to be careful not to be seen as breaking with Roosevelt's accommodationist dealings with the Soviet Union.

So we would have had the Cold War and it would have gone more quickly under Roosevelt. He would have had more credibility to argue to the public that we needed to take a stronger stand.

QUESTION: Nancy Kirk. Would you care to compare General [Petraeus](#) to General MacArthur?

ROBERT DALLEK: No. [Laughter]

I don't know that Petraeus has his credentials. Clearly, Petraeus is a very intelligent guy. I come back to my comment that convictions are a greater enemy of the truth than the lie.

In some ways, I feel it's unfair for these guys in the military, in the sense that if a president says, "Fight this war in Iraq," what are they going to do? They go and they fight it, and they are going to give their best judgment as to how to conduct the war.

Are they going to say to the president, "Oh, I think we'll lose"? The whole impulse, the whole pressure on them, is to take a "can do" approach to things.

That was very much the case in Vietnam. What you find behind the scenes with the Johnson materials is that the more they encouraged him, the more skeptical he became. He was no fool. But he was trapped by his own rhetoric and trapped by his own convictions that it would have been a disaster to lose Vietnam.

Look what happened. We lost Vietnam. Do we win the Cold War? Did it really matter? Did we need to be there in the first place?

[Walt Rostow](#) was a friend of mine. Walt used to say, "With Vietnam we gave the other nations in South East Asia time to develop."

Is it a convincing argument? Maybe. Maybe not. I never in public disputed it with him, because one has to feel that the losses that all those families suffered—57,800, I believe were killed in that war, and there were many others who were maimed, wounded, suffered. To say to them, "pointless," is a terrible slap in the face. Walt's proposition was something that gave them some solace.

QUESTION: Ernest Rubenstein. Had John Kennedy lived and remained in office, do you think he would have had the political courage to pull the United States out of Vietnam before the buildup?

ROBERT DALLEK: Yes. I think it's a wonderful question. I address it at the end of my book.

I don't think we ever would have done in Vietnam what Johnson did. Kennedy was very skeptical about the use of military actions.

He saw the Navy chiefs during World War II, and he would write letters home about the misjudgments and miscalculations he felt they were making.

[The Bay of Pigs](#) stung him terribly. What it taught him was not to take at face value what these advisors were telling him, including his military advisors.

He despised [Curtis LeMay](#). During the Cuban missile crisis he recorded all those Ex-Com meetings. We have those conversations in which Kennedy went out of the room, and the military were furious at him, that he would not commit himself to invading and bombing Cuba, but instead tried diplomacy first. We're so fortunate that he was there, because we could have ended up, as we know now, in a nuclear exchange with the Soviets.

With Vietnam, he urged the removal, and directed [Bob McNamara](#) to take advisors and 1,000 troops out of Vietnam by the end of 1963. He was profoundly skeptical about being able to win there.

He would have won reelection in 1964. He said to one of his aides, "If [Barry Goldwater](#) is our opponent"—which he probably would have been—"we're going to get to bed much earlier on election night than we did in 1960." He was convinced that he would beat him decisively. And he would have.

At least he never would have escalated troops the way Johnson. He saw it as a trap. He told [Arthur Schlesinger](#) that. Arthur has talked to me about that, and told me about how skeptical he was.

We'll never know exactly what he would have done. You can write into history anything you want when it's this sort of counterfactual history. I would like to think he never would have done that.

But we did it and we paid a terrible price for it, especially the families who lost loved ones. So it is.

I hope I can come back in 100 years to see what's happening to the country.

JOANNE MYERS: You just told me history will repeat itself, so we hope it will bring you back here.

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