Everywhere I talk about the book, I get asked by somebody in the audience, "So, smart guy. What do you recommend we should do about ISIS?"

And in some respects, the purpose of this book is to suggest that that is the wrong question. What to do about ISIS is a nontrivial question, but it's not the most important question. I think it is of far less significance than questions like these: Does waging war across a large swath of the Islamic world make sense? Is that war winnable? If not, why are we there? And for the most powerful country in the world, is there no alternative? Have we no choices? The book suggests that before answering the ISIS question, we should consider how we got where we are today, which necessarily requires evaluating what prior U.S. military efforts in the region have yielded and at what cost. My book tries to tell the story of an immense and ongoing military enterprise — this War for the Greater Middle East.
My story starts in 1980. Why 1980? Because in January of that year, President Jimmy Carter—certainly our least bellicose president in the last half-century—used the occasion of his State of the Union address to designate the Persian Gulf a vital U.S. national security interest. In layperson's terms, the Persian Gulf now became a place that we would fight for. This Carter Doctrine, as it has subsequently come to be known, touched off the process of militarizing U.S. policy not only in the Persian Gulf but across much of the Islamic world, landing the United States in a condition of open-ended war. The narrative I tell unfolds chronologically: It begins with the failed Iran hostage rescue attempt, which occurred 36 years ago this month, and it concludes with the now-renewed Gulf War—by my count, the fourth Gulf War in which we have been participants over the course of the last four decades. The book does conclude, after about 400 pages, alas, that that war has not ended. And we can certainly expect that there will be more campaigns to come.

The book tries to answer four specific questions: First, what motivated the United States to act as it has? Second, what have the civilians responsible for formulating policy and the soldiers responsible for implementing policy sought to accomplish? Third, regardless of their intentions, what actually ensued? And fourth, with what consequences? In short, the book links aims to actions to outcomes.

The central theme of my story can be briefly stated: A nation priding itself in having the world's greatest military—and we do have the world's greatest military—has misused its military power on an epic scale. It's not simply that we've not prevailed. Obviously we've not prevailed. Rather, through a combination of naïveté, short-sightedness, and hubris, we have actually made things worse—at very considerable cost to ourselves and to others.

What has this war been about? Well, in a narrow sense it began as a war for oil. Yet even at the outset, much more was at stake than ensuring access to the cheap gas that ensures the American way of life. From day one, the larger purpose of America's War for the Greater Middle East has been to affirm that we are a people to whom limits do not apply. The advertised purpose has been to liberate, defend, or deter. Yet the actual purpose has been far more ambitious in my view.
The real mission has been to sustain the claims of American exceptionalism that have long since become central to our self-identity—to bring into compliance with American purposes the revolutionaries, warlords, terrorists, despots, or bad actors of various stripes given to defiance. To employ the kind of jargon that’s popular in this city, back in 1980, the United States set out in willy-nilly fashion to “shape” the greater Middle East. Given the conditions existing there, employing military means to bring the region into conformity with American purposes has resulted in an undertaking of breathtaking scope. Over time, U.S. forces have been in action everywhere from Iran and Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, Somalia and Sudan, Bosnia and Kosovo, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran and Iraq—the list goes on. Indeed, the list keeps on getting longer.

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Along the way, we tried overwhelming force, and shock and awe. We invaded, occupied, and took a stab at nation-building. We experimented with counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, regime change and decapitation, peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, retaliatory strikes and preventive attack, even something that the Air Force called “air occupation.” U.S. forces operated overtly, covertly, and through proxies. Almost certainly, they went places and did things about which we, the American public, today remain in the dark. Unfortunately, no administration, from Carter’s to the present, ever devised a plausible strategy for achieving these ambitious American aims. Each in turn has simply reacted to situations it confronted. Nor has any administration made available the means needed to make good on the grandiose ambitions that it entertained. Indeed, on the U.S. side, one of this conflict’s abiding qualities has actually been its paltriness.

Today the problems besetting the greater Middle East are substantially greater than they were when substantial numbers of U.S. forces first began venturing into that region. Indeed, ISIS offers but one example of the results. We may argue and we may disagree regarding the underlying sources of these problems, but there is no arguing with the fact that U.S. military efforts to alleviate the dysfunction so much in evidence have failed. It seems to me there are really two plausible ways to employ American power: The first is basically to wait things out, insulating yourself from the problem’s worst effects while promoting a nonviolent solution from within. This approach requires patience, and comes with no guarantee of ultimate
success. And with all the usual caveats attached, this is the approach that the United States took during the Cold War: wait them out. The second approach is more direct: It aims to eliminate the problem through sustained and relentless military action. This approach entails less patience, but it incurs greater near-term costs. And after a certain amount of shillyshallying, it was this head-on approach that the Union adopted during the Civil War in crushing the Confederacy. In its War for the Greater Middle East, however, the United States chose neither to contain nor to crush. Instead, it charted a course midway in between—in effect the United States chose aggravation. With politicians and generals too quick to declare victory, and the American public too quick to throw in the towel when faced with adversity, U.S. forces rarely stayed long enough to actually finish the job. Instead of intimidating, U.S. military efforts have annoyed, incited, and generally communicated a lack of both competence and resolve. In the ultimate irony, the circumstances ostensibly making the Persian Gulf worth fighting for in the first place have ceased to pertain. If today the American way of life still depends, whether for better or worse, on having access to plentiful reserves of oil and natural gas, then defending Canada and Venezuela should take precedent over defending Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Even so, short of its initial rationale, the War for the Greater Middle East continues as if on autopilot. That the ongoing enterprise may someday end, that the troops will finally come home, appears so unlikely as to be unworthy of discussion. Strikingly, in the middle of a presidential campaign, the prospect of the troops ever coming home goes unmentioned. Like the War on Drugs, or the War on Poverty, the War for the Greater Middle East has become a fixture in American life and is accepted as such. Among the factors contributing to the lack of any serious challenge to the war's perpetuation, it seems to me four stand out: One is the absence of an anti-war or anti-interventionist political party worthy of the name. The ongoing war has long since acquired a perfidious seal of bipartisan approval. And as such, the two major parties are equally disinclined to probe too deeply into this war's origins, conduct, or prospects.

The second reason for the war's perpetuation is that politicians aspiring to high office find it more expedient to declare their support for the troops than to question the war's efficacy. So candidates in every election system since 1980—emphatically in the present election cycle—have avoided anything like a serious
debate regarding U.S. military policy in the Islamic world. Yes, a particular military campaign gone awry, like Somalia or Iraq, or Libya in 2011, might attract some attention—but never the context in which that campaign was undertaken. So the War for the Greater Middle East awaits its Eugene McCarthy or its George McGovern. The third reason for the war’s perpetuation is that, sadly, some individuals and some institutions actually benefit from an armed conflict that drags on and on. Those benefits are immediate and tangible. They come in the form of profits, jobs, and campaign contributions. For the military-industrial complex, and for its beneficiaries, perpetual war is not necessarily bad news.

Finally, however, there is this: thus far at least, Americans themselves appear oblivious to what is occurring, policymakers having successfully insulated the public from the war’s negative effects. In a fundamental sense, the war is not our concern. But here’s the rub: In the 21st century, the prerequisites of freedom, abundance, and security are changing. Geopolitically, Asia is eclipsing in importance all the other regions of the world, apart perhaps from North America itself. The afflictions besetting large portions of the Islamic world will undoubtedly persist, but their relative importance to the United States as determinants of American well-being will diminish. In this context, the War for the Greater Middle East has become a diversion that Americans can ill afford. To fancy at this point that the U.S. military possesses the capacity to shape the course of events there is an absurdity, and indulging that absurdity further serves chiefly to impede the ability of the United States to attend to far more pressing concerns.

Ultimately, the game that matters will play out here at home rather than in some far-off place like Iraq or Afghanistan. Whether the United States is able to shape the greater Middle East will matter less than whether it can reshape itself, restoring effectiveness to self-government, providing for sustainable and equitable prosperity, and extracting from a vastly diverse culture something to hold in common of greater moment than shallow digital enthusiasms and the worship of celebrity. Perpetuating the War for the Greater Middle East is not enhancing American freedom, abundance, and security. If anything, it is having the opposite effect. And one day, the American people may awaken to this reality. Then and only then will the war end. When that awakening will occur however, is impossible to say. For now, sadly, Americans remain deep in slumber.