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## Unnecessary Wars

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**MIDGE DECTER'S** essays and reviews have appeared over the past four decades in a number of periodicals, including *The Atlantic*, *The American Spectator*, *First Things*, *National Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Weekly Standard* and *Commentary*. She has published four books: *The Liberated Woman and Other Americans*; *The New Chastity and Other Arguments Against Women's Liberation*; *Liberal Parents, Radical Children*; and *An Old Wife's Tale: My Seven Decades in Love and War*. She has been the executive editor of *Harper's*, literary editor of *Saturday Review*, and a senior editor at Basic Books. From 1980 to 1990, she served as Executive Director of the Committee for the Free World, and from 1990 to 1994 she was a Distinguished Fellow of the Institute on Religion and Public Life. She is currently a member of the boards of trustees of the Heritage Foundation, the Center for Security Policy, the National Forum Foundation/Freedom House, the Institute on Religion and Public Life and the Clare Boothe Luce Fund.

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*The following is adapted from a speech delivered by Ms. Decter on June 8, 2002, at sea aboard the Crystal Symphony, during the first Hillsdale College cruise, "A Salute to Freedom."*

I have lately been thinking about war – as I imagine most Americans are doing at least some of the time these days – and doing so, I keep remembering what Winston Churchill said about World War II. He called it “the unnecessary war.” Yet no one fought harder and at greater cost to his reputation for Britain to arm itself for that war. What Churchill meant by calling it the unnecessary war was that had Britain and France – and, let us say it, the United States – not been so confused or so dreamily slothful in the mid-1930s – (for instance, pretending to themselves that when Hitler moved his army into the Rhineland, as Germany had been forbidden at Versailles to do, he would be prepared to rest con-

tent) – the Nazis, who were at that point still very weak, could almost certainly have been stopped in their tracks.

Thus it was that everyone temporized while Hitler built: the British heaping scorn on those who, like Churchill (indeed preeminently Churchill), kept urging the government to expand the Royal Air Force; the French hunkering down behind what they pretended to believe was an impregnable Maginot line; and the Americans once again caught in the old debate about whether what went on in Europe had anything – or if anything at all, exactly how much – to do with us.

What Hitler meant to do, he had said in his book and, later, in his speeches. But few so-called “distinguished” and “sensible” Western statesmen could credit him with actually believing the things he said. So Hitler was embraced by Austria, he was handed Czechoslovakia, and not all that

long after, having signed a deal with the Russians, he marched into Poland. In 1938, the British Government had agreed that there should be a conference among Britain, France, Germany and Italy, at which the territory belonging to Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland would be handed over to the Germans — which, of course, it subsequently was, along with the rest of that poor abandoned country. Indeed, it was to be twice abandoned by the West: once to the Germans and, near the end of World War II, to the Russians. In any case, hearing of plans for a four-power conference in 1938, Churchill wrote a letter to a friend in which he said, “Owing to the neglect of our defenses and the mis-handling of the German problem in the last five years, we seem to be very near the bleak choice between War and Shame. My feeling is that we shall choose Shame, and then have War thrown in a little later. . . .”

Why should I have been thinking about all this lately? Well, not just because thoughts of Churchill offer such bright moments in the contemplation of the so largely God-forsaken century through which the world has just passed — though they do. But because — though it is sometimes hard to believe — the United States is now at war. And because the war we find ourselves in at this point may also turn out in that Churchillian sense to have been an unnecessary one.

## The Gulf War and Our War

**WHAT MIGHT** have happened — let us ask ourselves the question — if, in the Gulf War of 1991, then-President Bush and his generals had determined, as many of us had supposed at the time, that the aim of the war would not merely be to restore the sovereignty of Kuwait, but to destroy the Saddam Hussein regime and free the Iraqis in order to establish, if not a democratic, then at least a reasonably benign, government? It is hard, as the philosophers tell us, to argue a counterfactual; but let us just suppose that we had smashed the Saddam Hussein regime — which we were, after all, only weeks away from doing: members of the much vaunted Republican Guard, you may remember, were surrendering even to news photographers. We would have been required to stay in Iraq for a while. But in our helping to set up a government and bringing some relief to the hungry and generally brutalized Iraqis, who knows how far the foundations of the other hated and hateful regimes in the region might have been shaken? Indeed, can we be absolutely sure that after send-

ing all those hundreds of thousands of troops to Saudi Arabia in the operation known as Desert Shield, the reason we called off the war only days — or maybe weeks — before genuine victory was not at the request of the Saudis? After all, the despotic and unpopular Saudi regime probably has the most to fear from anything that shakes the political stability of the region.

The war we are in now, the war against terrorism, is, we can all agree, a more complicated affair than was the Gulf War. For one thing, the terrorists appear to have no country — or rather, they have many: they come from many countries — and at the same time none needs take responsibility for them. They have many countries in which to train, and there are many governments and some private sources willing to finance them. It is usually to the advantage of the terrorists that they appear to be simply an organized gang of men (and sometimes women) who are full of grievance about something, whether we are talking about the IRA, the Basques, the Tupaq Amaros, the PLO, or al-Qaeda; and until now — and even now to some extent — it has been to their advantage that the country or the center of power that is actually behind them remains a matter of some concealment.

Our current President Bush took his lumps, both foreign and domestic, for the speech in which he made so bold as to name the members of what he called the “Axis of Evil.” You would have thought, indeed, that he had nuked these countries rather than merely called them by name. One of the members of this Axis of Evil, North Korea, began to behave somewhat better, at least temporarily, as a result of having been frightened by that speech. The others, sheltering comfortably beneath the fury of the international press, including much of the American press, against an American president’s speaking harshly of his country’s enemies, continued on about their dirty business.

We are at war. Faced with those terrible Churchillian alternatives, shame or war, the President chose national honor. And those who said you cannot go to war in Afghanistan — it is too hard; the terrain there is impossible; the winter there is impossible; look what happened to the Russians — like those who made equivalently specious arguments about the Nazis, argued in vain. To be sure, we had the advantage — strange word — that Churchill and his circle did not have in the mid-30s: that of tasting the enemy’s fire and brimstone on our own soil, in one of our own great cities. And at least one result is that ordinary Afghans, the centuries-long victims of what the imperial European powers used to refer to as “The

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Great Game,” and latterly victims at the hands of their own terror-driven government, are beginning to smile. They are beginning to smile, to listen to music, to rebuild their houses and to dream of governing themselves. Perhaps they will even accomplish this last. And who but the American Army could have – and even more important, who but the American army would have – made this possible?

### Retribution Plus

IT IS no wonder the Saudis are rushing around the Middle East and Crawford, Texas, playing the unaccustomed role of peacemaker. They know what General Colin Powell should have known in 1992 and what Secretary of State Colin Powell should know in 2002: namely, that if Saddam Hussein goes, the populace of Iran, which is, we are told, growing more pro-American with every passing day, will soon be in the streets bringing down the mullahs – unless, of course, the people of Saudi Arabia, fed up to the teeth with the deprivations and brutalities of Wahhabism, take to their own streets first. And what, in that case, would happen to Syria? And might Lebanon – that former jewel of the Middle East, first disrupted and terrorized by the PLO and then taken into brutal custody by Syria – once

again open its arms to its former, now mostly escaped, Christian population?

It is too pleasing to contemplate. It is too pleasing not to contemplate.

All this – you ask – from destroying Saddam Hussein? Well, yes, in destroying him and not rushing from the field; in destroying him and then sticking around, protecting the good guys and helping them in whatever way is necessary to take hold of power. That, after all, is what happened in Germany. We stayed there. We took the Germans through the ritual of denazification. And then came Konrad Adenauer, a great man to whom the world owes a great debt: with the strength of our friendship and commitment behind him, he brought the Germans from darkness to light. Is there an Iraqi Konrad Adenauer? What gives us the right to assume that there is not?

But what, I can hear you ask, if there *are* no good guys waiting to appear on the Middle Eastern scene? My answer is: they are always there to be found. Frightened, maybe; powerless, maybe; inexperienced, maybe. Often, perhaps always, it must take a war to free them. Take Afghanistan again.

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There are also, to be sure, always bad guys waiting for their evil opportunities. That we know, or should, from as far back as the Bible. But we Americans make a grave mistake if we fail to recognize that with the exception of these bad guys, often controllable only with bloodshed, the world is everywhere full of ordinary people who want exactly what we want, though they may not even dare to dream of it. Whether they are Asians or Africans or Middle Easterners or Latin Americans, what they want is a decent place to live, decent food to eat, to be able to stick around long enough to watch their children grow and prosper, and perhaps above all, not to get pushed around by people with guns in their hands.

This may not sound like a whole lot to those of us who are Americans, but that is because we are a people blessed beyond the greatest capacity of human beings to be grateful.

I do not mean to suggest that our war against terror (which is badly named: it should, for the sake of clarity, be called the war against terrorist powers) is being, or should be, fought *for the sake* of all these Middle Eastern populations. No more than was the war against Hitler fought for the sake of the Germans. It is — let us say it in the simplest of terms — being fought for retaliation, retaliation against our enemies for having stepped over one line too many.

There is, after all, something in the makeup of democratic peoples that longs to eschew warfare — or even, which may be more important, any serious preparation for warfare — as an instrument of policy. It was that something that in the early 1930s left Churchill mad with frustration as he kept urging the Chamberlain government to expand and upgrade the Royal Air Force. In the opposite sense, it was what motivated President Clinton during the 1990s to cut back so dangerously on our defense establishment while sending American troops on ill-defined and ill-understood missions of alleged peacemaking.

And beyond Clinton's having cut the military, though surely not unrelated to it, he suffered the

U.S. to sit still for a number of terrorist bombings in various overseas places either with no retaliation, or with an entirely bootless, indeed ridiculous, one. Small wonder that al-Qaeda believed — correctly, as it would turn out — that with better and more able preparation and planning than was given to the project the first time around, its minions would be able to take out the World Trade Center completely. Did Osama bin Laden foresee or understand that the demolition of the Twin Towers would be considered an act of war and would bring about the appropriate response from the United States? We do not know whether he did or not, but was there in his recent experience any reason he should have?

Now we are told that there is a great debate going on in Washington about what to do after Afghanistan. This one says, take out Saddam. That one, echoing the so-called expert voices of 1991, says we cannot do it; we have neither the arms nor the men needed for the job. Another says, no, Iran first; it is ripe and ready to go. A fourth, following the line of the Saudis, says, the problem is not the Arabs, the problem is the Israelis; you have to wade in and enforce a settlement in what has been a struggle of more than eighty years' duration, and all your problems will be at an end. What the President will decide to do — whom he will determine to listen to — we cannot yet know. Perhaps he will listen to his own heart, which has so far served him, and us, so very well.

## Necessity and Blessing

**BUT THERE** remains the question — so far not even asked, let alone answered — of what *we* are to do. After September 11, the American public showed that old, spirited, high-hearted, selfless civic devotion that some of us are old enough to remember from the 1940s. But alas, almost all of that sentiment has faded by now. It has faded from neglect, because nothing real or serious

*continued on next page (detach envelope)*

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was ever asked of it. It has faded in the glum light of partisan politics, particularly those partisan demands for some kind of reckoning of who was at fault for September 11. It has faded as well in the sour comedy of those recent warnings to the public that they must be on guard against inevitable future terrorist attacks – as if there were actually some way for ordinary citizens to do that when it is in the very nature of terror that there be no such way.  
 Above all that spirit has faded because nothing has been asked of us, either as citizens or, even now that Ground Zero has been cleared away, as neighbors. Our sons and grandsons will not be compelled to join the armed forces; beyond being glued to our televisions, we will not in any way be invited to take part in our country's war effort; we will not be informed by our President, as those brave – and happy – Brits were informed by Winston Churchill, that he has "nothing to offer" us "but blood, toil, tears, and sweat."  
 It will, then, be hard for us to hang onto what is most important to remember: that our country, the strongest on earth, has been pressed by circumstance – I would say, has been granted the opportunity – to rid the world of some goodly measure of its cruelty and pestilence.

Is America's war in the Middle East an unnecessary one? Well, yes. The western powers, after all, created those sheikdoms, carved them out of the Ottoman Empire and handed off pieces of territory to the leaders of this desert tribe or that after World War I. They could have been shaped, reshaped, moved into more decent and compassionate – let us not even say democratic – directions, had anyone but had the will and the foresight to do so. And if necessary, they could have been given instruction by superior force in how to be proper members of the international community, this last especially at the time of the OPEC oil embargo.  
 Well, were there wisdom enough and strength of will enough in the world, perhaps all wars would be unnecessary. But in our weak and fallen state we must recognize that they are apt to be inevitable. Still, unlike the citizens of many another warring power, we Americans now have the opportunity to bring some good upon the world. That, however, is not merely some cold necessity. That, my friends, is a blessing. 🇺🇸



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## VOLUME 31 • NUMBER 9

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