

CHAPTER XVII

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

“The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it.”

- GENERAL H. NORMAN SCHWARZKOPF

Since 1970 America has continued to be involved in a number of different military activities abroad. Most important of these were a cold war in Europe and a hot war in Asia.

In 1970 a military and political stalemate prevailed in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, despite the ideological conflict between democracy and communism. In the economic field, the West clearly dominated the world.

Shortly after assuming office in 1969, President Nixon started negotiations to effect an honorable withdrawal of United States military forces from a no-win war in Vietnam, which was causing increasing American casualties and tearing America apart at home. Following France's defeat and withdrawal from Vietnam and the establishment of a communist North Vietnam in 1954, the U. S. took over the defense of South Vietnam. We assumed that its defeat by North Vietnam would have a domino effect on surrounding countries against the interests of the U. S. and the Free World. But many, if not most, of the Vietnamese people saw the war as a national anticolonial



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struggle, with America replacing France as the patron of a corrupt regime.

Two years of secret negotiations finally produced a cease-fire agreement, despite continued communist guerrilla attacks and U.S. retaliatory raids against communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and North Vietnam. But by 1975 United States forces had withdrawn from South Vietnam, having suffered casualties of about 40,000 killed and 300,000 wounded. That Vietnamese casualties were much greater was no consolation, especially since the communists soon took over despite U. S. efforts to save South Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands of Americans served in Vietnam, at least 60 from Jaffrey. The war affirmed an old political truth: intervening in foreign civil wars rarely succeeds.

From 1975 to 1990 the U. S. engaged in a series of military raids and excursions, minor in military terms but politically controversial at home and abroad.

In 1983 we invaded little Grenada, ostensibly to protect U. S. citizens, but really to forestall the possible establishment of a Soviet military base there. Incompatible communication systems between the U. S. services was something of a fiasco in an otherwise successful operation, but it was a valuable learning experience for the future.

That same year 246 peace-keeping marines were killed in their Beirut barracks during the Lebanese civil war. The U. S. Navy retaliated by shelling military targets in the city.

In 1989 we invaded Panama and deposed the dictator Noriega, a former CIA collaborator, and brought him to this country for trial on drug charges, a questionable procedure under international law, but effective.

Only five Jaffrey citizens are known to have participated in these minor military actions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia in 1989-1990 eliminated the only real military threat to the U.S. NATO, arguably the most successful defense alliance in history, won out over the Warsaw Pact without hostilities or change of boundaries on either side. Hundreds of thousands of Americans, including at least six citizens of Jaffrey, served in this theater without a battle casualty.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990-1991 brought the U. S. into major military action. To prevent Saddam Hussein from gaining control of the world's greatest oil reserves in Kuwait and nearby Saudi Arabia and developing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons that would threaten Israel and other Mideast regimes, the U. S. organized a 29-coalition force under UN auspices. When Iraq refused to withdraw from Kuwait, a brilliant campaign was conducted by the U. S. and its allies, driving Iraq out of Kuwait and reducing Saddam Hussein's control over rebellious Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north of Iraq. At the outset media and political critics protested that we were going too far. Afterward they complained that we had not gone far enough, that we should have invaded Iraq and overthrown Saddam Hussein. But the U. S., most of our allies, and the Arab world would not have supported such action, and there would have been many casualties among Iraqi civilians and American forces. As it was, only 146 Americans were killed, 40 by friendly fire. Jaffrey citizens who participated in this overwhelming victory numbered about 10. In any case, the American establishment was redeemed and patriotism made generally respectable again.

U. S. military actions abroad have always included humanitarian, peace-keeping, and peace-establishing missions, which seldom receive much attention or credit unless something goes wrong, as in Somalia, where American servicemen were killed trying to protect the distribution of relief supplies during clan warfare. Such missions undoubtedly will continue as long as the U. S. remains the world's superpower with the greatest production and delivery systems to assist these endeavors. Careful consideration of our enlightened interests and realistic capabilities will be needed in each case, however, if we are to play a constructive role in world affairs.