

## On “The True Tragedy of American Power”

J. Thomas Moriarty II

*This commentary is in response to the article, “On the True Tragedy of American Power” by Isaiah Wilson published in the Winter 2013-14 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 4).*

In “The True Tragedy of American Power,” Colonel Isaiah Wilson III argues that US policymakers often conflate the use of force with power. He argues, “Power is the foundation of force; but an excessive employment of force—not just military, but economic and political—can erode the power foundation.”<sup>1</sup> With a conceptual tip of the hat to the classics, he analogizes the United States to a tragic hero and focuses on the negative repercussions of an overreliance on force, especially military force, in meeting global responsibilities.

Wilson should be commended for offering a valuable discussion on the differences between power and force. That said, while Wilson’s emphasis on the consequences of excessive force has merit, it comes at the expense of fully developing the exact causal relationship between power and force, and, specifically, the role of power in limiting the availability of certain force options.

Wilson’s warning for how excessive force can lead to a decrease in state power is wise. However, this begs the question of why powerful states feel the need to employ force excessively in the first place. If a broad explanation of power is the ability to get states to do something they are not likely to do on their own, then a state that feels a need to use a disproportionate amount of force is, by definition, a state that lacks power or is in decline. Powerful states do not need to rely primarily on force; weak states do. Importantly, a state with declining power finds itself limited not only in its ability to achieve its goals without the use of force but also in the types of force it can employ. For example, a loss in economic power reduces the ability of that state to utilize economic force to settle its affairs. Thus, conceptually speaking, decreases in a state’s power create the conditions for overreliance on force, which, eventually, causes even greater power loss.

The increasing dependence of the United States on military force is not the result of leaders mistaking force for power, as Wilson argues; rather, it arises ironically from the attempts of the United States since the end of World War II to create a stable international system. A consequence of developing democratic and economically diverse countries throughout the world is that these states have begun to challenge US dominance in international affairs.<sup>2</sup> As these states increase their political and economic powers, the United States has seen its ability to influence others through the use of these advantages decline. Faced with this loss of power, the United States has begun to rely on the one

Dr. Thomas Moriarty is a Visiting Scholar and Fellow, George Washington University.

1 Isaiah Wilson, “The True Tragedy of American Power,” *Parameters* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2014):17.

2 Arthur Stein, “The Hegemon’s Dilemma,” *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1984):355-386.

element of national power for which it retains dominance—its military. If there is a true American tragedy, it's almost certainly this. It is not that policymakers misunderstand the distinction between force and power; instead, it is their flawed belief that military force can halt the loss of power in other arenas.

Analogizing the United States as a tragic hero is problematic. Central to a tragic hero is a sense of inevitability, an inability to reverse the looming doom that awaits. While the decline in US power was, and is, inevitable, the United States need not suffer Hamlet's horrific fate; it need not be a tragic hero. The United States must accept limits to both its power and its military force. In this vein, Colonel Wilson and I are in complete agreement.

## The Author Replies

Isaiah Wilson III

**M**y sincere thanks and compliments to Dr. J. Thomas Moriarty II for his commentary and his thoughtful critique of the propositions and arguments I offered in my article. The issue—of the present, past, and future of American uses of force and our understanding and appreciation of the difference between “force” and “power”—is a fundamental one, not merely as a point of academic debates, but critically determinative of our Nation's future roles, responsibilities, and most importantly, reputation and legitimacy of future US global leadership . . . its suasive “power” both at home and abroad. Dr. Moriarty's response keeps this debate alive and dynamic, at a most precipitous moment: at a time when the potential “tragedy” of mistaking force and acts of force as acts of real power could prove most deleterious to both the United States' future presence and prestige in world affairs and, more impactful, to future global stability, security, and prosperity.

Failure to distinguish between applications of strategic tools from strategy itself, combined with flawed displacement of force (to include over-use of military treatments) over time can lead to the decline and fall of great powers. This is the tragedy to which I am speaking. The “tragedy” is not merely additive, it is multiplicative . . . logarithmic. Choosing how one “displaces available force(s) over time” is an essential part of the power equation . . . of strategy itself; especially critical in times of compounding security dilemmas under austerity. Being capable of producing reliable, durable, enduring, and legitimate power solutions to geostrategic problems under conditions of rapidly declining force resources, first demands a clear-eyed and accurate understanding of the difference between force (ways and means) and power—the former being a necessary part of the latter, but considered separate from principled and value-informed ends, woefully insufficient proxies to real long-lasting power. Additionally, seeing, understanding, and leveraging the power potential in “other's” forces available (that is, the power of multilateralism; collective actioning) as part of our own power equation offers genuine possibilities for overcoming America's current tragic

flaw, and consequently, America's tragedy. Dr. Moriarty would be well reminded (as should we all) to take some solace in the fact that America may only be in "Act III," the "Climax of Action," of this five-act tragedy, where the Hero stands at a crossroads, still at a point of choice, of decision and opportunity to avoid the "Falling Action." As in all of Shakespeare's tragedies, dark tragic endings seem inevitable primarily in retrospect, once the hero's fall is complete. Tragedy dooms its hero, but it promises to its audience that a sense of the tragic—of the limits of force—might save them from the hero's fate. In this sense, tragedies are not inevitable, but rather reversible. Conflicts in force and power can be resolved, and eventually will be, whether through a catastrophe, the downfall of the hero, or through his victory and transfiguration. Once again, as in past times, why and how America chooses to intervene will matter most.