

Mark James Miller: Obama Must Be Wary When Releasing the Dogs of War

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On April 2, 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. The Falklands — a collection of dreary, windswept strips of land jutting out of the cold water of the South Atlantic Ocean approximately 300 miles off the Argentine coast — were of no strategic value and had no precious natural resources to speak of.

In 1982, the population (nicknamed “Kelpers,”) numbered less than 2,000. The Falklands were a British possession, a throwback to England’s imperial glory days when it ruled an empire upon which the sun never set.

But to the Argentines, the continued British presence on land it had claimed as its own for 150 years was an affront that could no longer be tolerated. Quickly overwhelming the tiny British garrison, the Argentine forces lowered the Union Jack, raised the Argentine flag, and announced that the Falklands were now part of Argentina and would thenceforth be known by their Argentine name, the Malvinas.

The military junta that ruled Argentina had made the same mistake countless others have made in the past and will no doubt make in the future: By opening the Pandora’s box of war, they had set in motion forces they could not control.

Argentina had calculated that the English would not fight to retake these islands that were 8,000 miles from London and of no use to them. But the nation of [Admiral Nelson](#), [Lord Kitchener](#) and [Winston Churchill](#) was not going to acquiesce in the face of such naked aggression.

Quicker than you could say [John Bull](#), the British had assembled an armada of more than 100 ships, many of them filled with elite [Royal Marines](#) and [paratroopers](#), as well as two aircraft carriers boasting state-of-the-art [Harrier jump jets](#), and set out to recapture the Falkland Islands.

What followed was one of the most one-sided military campaigns of the 20th century. The Argentines, their soldiers mostly poorly trained conscripts, were no match for the well-drilled British troops and naval forces, who, despite being outnumbered 3-to-1 on the ground, seized the initiative and never let it go.

By June 14 the Union Jack flew over the Falklands once more and the Argentine flag was lying in the dirt. The Argentine junta, which had counted on a short victorious war to revive its sagging popularity, fell from power only a few days after the war ended.

The strategy of a “short victorious war” had backfired on the Argentines just as it backfired on [Czar Nicholas II](#) of Russia when he determined on war with Japan in 1904. Instead of the quick victory he had hoped for, Nicholas saw his huge but unwieldy military subjected to one defeat after another by the Japanese, who proved to be a much stronger opponent than the Russians had counted on.

Russia’s defeats of 1904 led to the revolution of 1905, which set the stage for the czar’s eventual overthrow in 1917.

A sign in Lithuania makes this point in another way: If you are facing east, the side you see reads, “[Napoleon Bonaparte](#) passed through here on June 22, 1812, with 500,000 men.” If you are facing west, the side you see reads, “Napoleon Bonaparte passed through here on December 12, 1812, with 9,000 men.”

Napoleon had invaded Russia on June 22, leading his Grande Army of a half-million men. But he had made the same mistake as the Argentine junta and Nicholas II — he had set in motion forces he could not control. By letting loose the genii of war he had started something he couldn’t finish. He left behind, in the vastness of Russia, 491,000 dead men, a testament to the unintended consequences war can bring.

[President Barack Obama](#) has asked [Congress](#) for authorization to wage war in the Middle East against the [Islamic State](#). It is unclear, as of this writing, whether Congress will approve Obama’s request for “limited” action.

But as Americans, this should give us pause, for it is eerily reminiscent of a similar request to use force made by [President Lyndon B. Johnson](#) in August 1964. Johnson asked Congress to approve military action in the Gulf of Tonkin in response to reported attacks on U.S. naval forces by the North Vietnamese.

Johnson’s request called for a response to these incidents only; it was assumed, though not completely clear, that if wider intervention was called for, he would return to Congress and ask for approval to do so. But the [Gulf of Tonkin Resolution](#), passed by Congress, led to the [Vietnam War](#), which did not end until 1975.

In his speech making this request for war authorization, Obama said, “I’m convinced that the United States should not get dragged back into another prolonged ground war.”

Let’s hope he means it. But we should keep in mind Johnson’s words from his 1964 presidential campaign: “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.”

Barely six months later, he ordered the first ground combat troops into South Vietnam, and there was no turning back.

No doubt the Islamic State is evil. No doubt only force will be needed to stop it. But war and the pressures it brings about can take on a force and logic of their own, and no one knows where they will end.

Let’s not forget that before and following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, supporters of the war proclaimed that we would find weapons of mass destruction that did not exist, and once that was established, they justified the war by saying the world is a safer place without [Saddam Hussein](#) in it. Now these same people are telling us that the world is not only less safe but is even more dangerous than it was in 2003 and that another war is necessary.

“Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war,” proclaimed Marc Antony in [Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar](#). But in letting those dogs loose, we need to be sure they won’t turn around and bite us.

— *Mark James Miller is a teacher and writer, and has been a part-time English instructor at [Allan Hancock College](#) in Santa Maria since 1995. He is president of the [Part-Time Faculty Association of Allan Hancock College](#), [California Federation of Teachers](#) Local 6185, and is an executive board member of the [Tri-Counties Central Labor Council](#). [Click here to read previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*