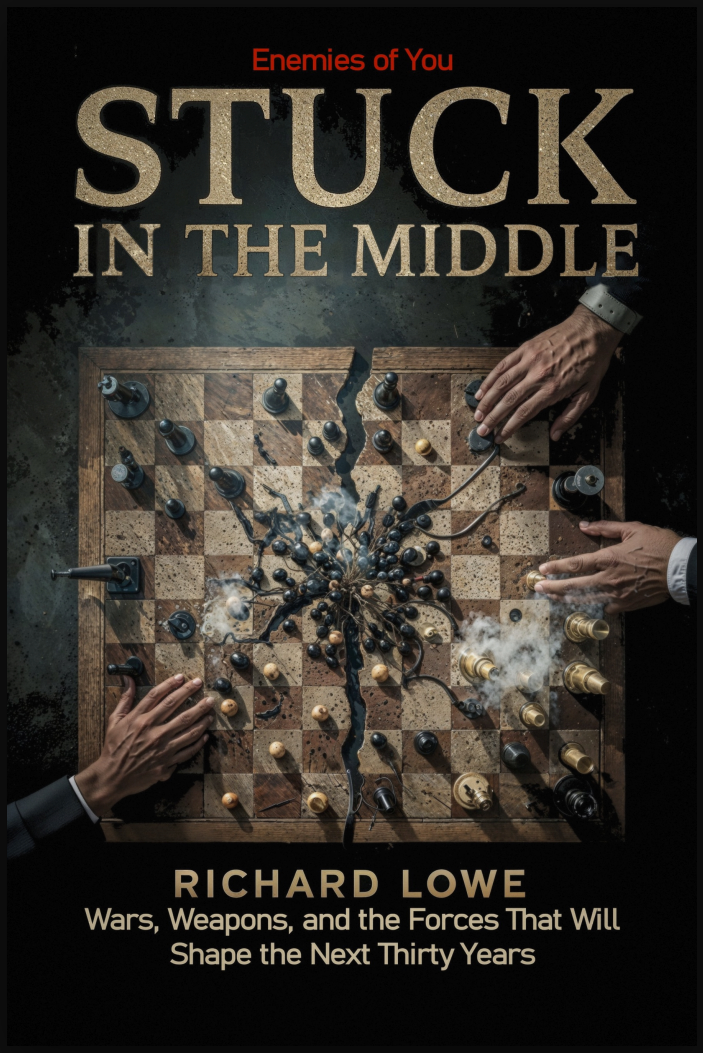
A FREE COMPANION TO STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

Reading the Forces

A field guide for sorting the headlines from the forces behind them, tracking where the next thirty years are heading, and deciding what you will do about it.



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How to Use This Guide

Keep it next to wherever you get your news.

Stuck in the Middle uses the 2026 Iran war as a stress test, then follows it out to the forces that will shape the next thirty years: a military that cannot sustain a long fight, a long American retreat, demographic collapse, the oil and food chain, a moving climate map, the next pandemic, China's empire of railroads and loans, and the tools that could rebuild the country. The events in the book will go out of date. The forces will not.

This guide turns the book into a habit. It has six parts:

1. **Event or force?** A five question filter for any headline.
2. **The forces at a glance**, with the number to remember for each one and what to watch.
3. **The headline log**, a worksheet for tracing news back to its force.
4. **The Monday morning checklist**, the book's own list of what you can do.
5. **The representative tracker**, to hold the people you elect to concrete demands.
6. **Discussion questions** for each of the book's seven parts.

> *The forces are bigger than the events. This book is about the forces.*

Part 1: Event or Force?

A ceasefire, an election or a summit changes the headline. It rarely changes the force underneath.

1. **What actually happened?** Strip the story down to one sentence of fact. Leave out the reaction, the spin and the prediction.

2. **Which force is behind it?** Match it to one or more of the forces in Part 2. Most big stories touch two or three at once.

3. **Did the force change, or just the event?** A paused war does not refill a missile stockpile. A new face on a screen does not flatten a demographic cliff.

4. **Who gains from the way it is being told?** Ask whether the coverage is about the structural problem or about the fight between the two political tribes.

5. **Which tool would fix it?** Look to Part Six of the book: nuclear energy, AI, longevity science, genetic engineering, human enhancement, the innovation engine, space. Then ask why it is not being used.

Part 2: The Forces at a Glance

One number to remember for each force, all from the book, and what to watch for in the news.

FORCE	THE NUMBER TO REMEMBER	WHAT TO WATCH
The missile math	A THAAD interceptor costs about $12 million, and the U.S. can build about 96 a year. Iran can build the missiles it is meant to kill at a rate of dozens a month.	Stockpile and production reports; interceptors fired versus interceptors built
The shrinking Navy	594 ships in 1987. Around 290 now, with maintenance backlogs that keep many from deploying.	Shipbuilding budgets, shipyard workforce, carriers pulled from the Pacific
Wars without reasons	Ten days into the Iran war, 53 percent of voters polled opposed it and 40 percent supported it.	Shifting justifications; whether an ally's war aims match ours
Somebody else's strait	Hormuz is 21 nautical miles wide and carries roughly 20 million barrels of oil and fuel a day, about a fifth of world consumption. China is its biggest buyer.	Who pays to keep sea lanes open, and who benefits
The empty cradle	Five children per woman in 1950, 2.3 by 2020. Replacement is 2.1.	Birth rates, legal immigration policy, automation
Rivers and food	A gallon of fuel moves a ton 576 miles by barge, 436 by rail, 155 by truck. Without synthetic fertilizer, the Earth fed maybe 3 to 4 billion people.	Natural gas and fertilizer prices; who controls transport
The burning map	Lake Mead hit a new record low in 2026 and Washington imposed cuts on the Colorado River states.	Water cuts, crop zones moving, coastal flooding
The next plague	African Swine Fever wiped out roughly 40 percent of China's pig herd within a year.	Stockpiles, preparation budgets cut after the crisis passes
The quiet empire	Close to $1.4 trillion in Belt and Road deals across more than 140 countries by the end of 2025.	Ports, railroads and loans; rare earth export limits
The tools	Insilico's AI took a drug from target to candidate in about eighteen months.	Reactor licensing, research funding, STEM immigration
The India question	1.46 billion people, median age 29 versus China's 40. The window closes by the mid 2040s.	Which way India leans: Russian oil, Washington, or both

Part 3: The Headline Log

Once a week, pick the biggest story you saw. Run it through Part 1 and write it down here.

DATE	WHAT HAPPENED (ONE SENTENCE)	FORCE BEHIND IT	FORCE CHANGED? (Y/N)	TOOL THAT WOULD FIX IT

After three months, look back

- ☐ Which force showed up most often?
- ☐ How many stories changed the event but left the force where it was?
- ☐ Which tool kept coming up as the fix that nobody is using?
- ☐ Did any story suggest the force had actually moved? What moved it?

Two futures, checked once a year

The Conclusion pictures 2056 two ways. Each year, check the signs you saw.

SIGNS OF THE DECLINE FUTURE	SIGNS OF THE OTHER FUTURE
☐ More wars we did not need to fight	☐ Nuclear reactors licensed and built
☐ Research defunded	☐ Immigration system reformed
☐ Immigration restricted	☐ Education and vocational training rebuilt
☐ Institutions stripped by private equity	☐ Private equity extraction regulated
☐ Factories and shipyards closing	☐ Research funded

> *The trap has a shape. Understanding the shape is the first step to getting out.*

Part 4: The Monday Morning Checklist

Chapter 34 ends with what Monday morning looks like for you, the person holding the book, rather than for the president or Congress or the Pentagon.

Know what your representatives are doing

Watch what they vote for, fund and cut, not what they say on cable news. The nonpartisan sources the book names:

- [ ] **Federation of American Scientists:** defense and nuclear policy
- [ ] **Center for Strategic and International Studies:** accessible analysis of every strategic issue in the book
- [ ] **Congressional Budget Office:** cost estimates for every major piece of legislation
- [ ] **Government Accountability Office:** audits of federal programs

Demand concrete things

Not “fix the economy” or “be tough on China.” Ask for something a representative can vote on. Part 5 lists the book's own demands.

Run for something

- [ ] Look up when your school board, city council and county commission seats are next on the ballot
- [ ] Attend one meeting of each before you decide
- [ ] Watch for the local versions of the book's problems: the school that does not teach kids to read, the zoning board that blocks housing, the commission that rejects the solar farm or the nuclear plant

Talk to people who disagree with you

- [ ] Have one conversation this month to listen, not to argue
- [ ] Start from what you agree on: good schools, an affordable house, fixed roads, clean water, a safe country
- [ ] Keep the disagreement on means, not ends

Support the institutions that produce real information

- [ ] Subscribe to a newspaper, starting with the local one that covers your school board and council
- [ ] Fund investigative journalism
- [ ] Remember why: when the local paper closes, local government borrowing costs go up, because lenders know nobody is watching the money

Part 5: The Representative Tracker

These are structural investments the book names, neither left wing nor right wing. Write down where your representative and senators stand on each.

Representative: _____ **Senators:** _____

THE DEMAND	THEIR POSITION OR VOTE	DATE	SOURCE
Fund NRC reform so the 18 month reactor licensing deadline ordered in 2025 is actually met			
Fully fund the TAME trial so the first anti-aging drug reaches the public			
Double the DARPA budget, which costs less than a single aircraft carrier			
A fast track immigration pathway for STEM PhDs who graduate from American universities			
Require the Pentagon to audit itself and pass, after eight consecutive failures			
Require private equity firms to disclose what happens to defense contractors after acquisition			
Fund vocational training at the scale the shipyard crisis demands			
A twenty year shipbuilding commitment			
Sustained industrial investment in missile production			

Part 6: Discussion Questions

For a book club, a class, or an argument over dinner. One set for each of the book's seven parts.

Part One: The Guns Don't Work

1. The book contrasts the USS Missouri with the USS Zumwalt. Where else in American life has the country traded mass for precision?
2. The author would build hundreds of frigates, destroyers and cruisers and some minesweepers. Do you agree that carriers alone are not enough? Why?

Part Two: Wars Without Reasons

3. Most Americans opposed the Iran war ten days in. What should happen in a democracy when a war is fought without public support?
4. Libya gave up its weapons program, Ukraine gave up its warheads, North Korea kept the bomb. What lesson does every country learn from that?

Part Three: The Long Retreat

5. If the Strait of Hormuz matters more to China than to the U.S., whose problem is it?
6. The book argues a world war is already under way in a shape most people do not recognize. Do you see it? What would convince you?

Part Four: The Four Horsemen

7. The author would redesign systems to work with smaller populations rather than force birth rates back up. What would that look like where you live?
8. Which of the four horsemen worries you most, and how does it make the others worse?

Part Five: The Quiet Empire

9. “You can't sink a Belt and Road loan with a Tomahawk missile.” If Taiwan is the matador's cape, what should America be watching instead?

Part Six: The Hollowed-Out Country and the Tools to Rebuild It

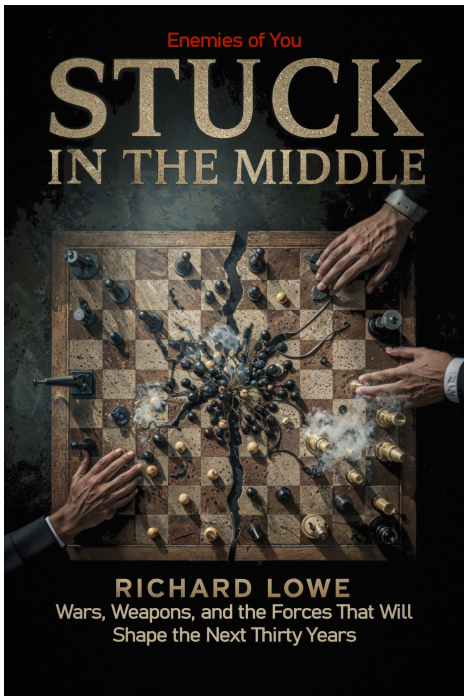
10. Every tool in Part Six exists. Which one would you deploy first, and who would have to be trained to build it?
11. The Conclusion admits the tools also collide. Which collision is the hardest to manage?

Part Seven: Stuck in the Middle

12. If you had to choose which hemisphere your grandchildren live in, which would you pick, and why?
13. The book closes with a question. What are you going to do about it?

The Whole Story

This guide gives you the lens. Stuck in the Middle gives you the whole picture: the missile math, the shrinking fleet, the four horsemen, China's quiet empire, and the tools that could still rebuild a hollowed-out country.



Stuck in the Middle:
Wars, Weapons, and the Forces That Will Shape the Next Thirty Years
Enemies of You

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