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H-Diplo/ISSF Forum on "What Have We Learned? Lessons from Afghanistan & Iraq."
***Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 2-54.**

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Introduction by Gideon Rose, Editor of *Foreign Affairs*, and by Jonathan Tepperman, Managing Editor of *Foreign Affairs*

"A Hard Education: Learning From Afghanistan and Iraq"[1]

After thirteen years of war, the loss of many thousand of lives, and the expenditure of trillions of dollars, what has the United States learned? The answer depends on not only who is asking but when. The story of the Iraq war would have different endings, and morals, if told in 2003, 2006, 2011, or 2014, and it will continue to evolve. As for Afghanistan, the narrative there has also shifted over time, and the ending also remains in doubt. Neither disaster has been unmitigated. But few would argue that Washington's approach to either has been a success worth emulating. So the most important question today is what can be learned from the failures.

Two of our authors, Max Boot and Richard Betts, offer starkly different answers. Boot argues that even though Washington is fed up with counterinsurgencies, it will end up waging more of them down the road, and so should focus on learning how to fight them better. Betts, by contrast, thinks Washington should go in the opposite direction: fighting fewer and more traditional wars and avoiding getting entangled in the domestic politics of chaotic countries on the strategic periphery.

Rick Brennan, for his part, argues that even the best planning is worthless if not ably executed and updated as conditions change Iraq's current turmoil, he writes, is the predictable result of the United States' premature exit, and he worries that a similar fate awaits Afghanistan.

As the world grapples with the medieval brutality of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, meanwhile, many in the United States and Europe have begun panicking at the thought that battle-hardened Western-born jihadists may return to unleash havoc at home. Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro argue that such fears are overblown: as the last decade has shown, the threat of such blowback is often overhyped. Returning jihadists do pose dangers, they explain, but familiar and manageable ones.

Rounding out our package, Peter Tomsen assesses a new crop of books on the war in Afghanistan. These works help explain, why despite all of the West's efforts, that country's future remains up for grabs, and Tomsen, like Brennan, worries that Afghanistan could slide back into full-scale civil war unless it gets serious and sustained help from Washington.

Embarking on the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq more than a decade ago, U.S. officials basked in their power and brimmed with self-confidence. They never dreamed that, all these years later, their humbled successors would still be grappling with the same basic

[1] This introduction originally appeared in *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 2-4.

questions of whether and how to secure and stabilize those lands. We can only hope that current and future policymakers can learn from the mistakes and leave a better legacy.

Participants:

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Benjamin D. Hopkins, Ph.D. (Cantab) is an Associate Professor of History and International Affairs at The George Washington University and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. His works include *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (Oxford University Press 2012 – co-authored with Magnus Marsden) and *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier* (Oxford University Press, 2012 – co-edited with Magnus Marsden). He is currently writing a comparative history of frontier governance in the nineteenth century world, entitled *The Imperial Frontier: Bordering and State-Construction in the Nineteenth Century*.

Alex Marshall is a senior lecturer at the University of Glasgow. His publications include *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1800-1917*, *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule* and, with Tim Bird, *Afghanistan. How the West Lost Its Way*.

Review by Todd Greentree, Research Associate, Oxford Changing Character of War Programme

"[T]he most important question today is what can be learned from the failures" in Afghanistan and Iraq, *Foreign Affairs* Editor Gideon Rose and Managing Editor Jonathan Tepperman write in their introduction to the five articles under discussion here. They conclude that, "We can only hope that current and future policymakers can learn from the mistakes and leave a better legacy."[1] Given that the United States has found itself previously entangled in long wars at enormous cost and effort while failing to achieve its aims, is the most important question, in fact, *what* are the lessons? Or is it rather, *how* to avoid being condemned to repeat them?

In this regard, the long record of *Foreign Affairs* in publishing commentary on the American experience of war is itself an intriguing topic for consideration. Little of the wisdom offered in these pieces is truly new; since 2001 dozens of essays, letters, exchanges, and reviews about Afghanistan and Iraq, containing justifications by ranking officials, warnings of disaster, and prescriptions for avoiding it, have appeared in the journal. Reach back further, to Vietnam, and the catalogue grows and becomes a legacy of echoes that reveals how profound the gap is between lessons and lessons learned. Capsule summaries of the five articles on Afghanistan and Iraq from the November/December 2014 issue, followed by admittedly selective references from earlier issues of *Foreign Affairs* serve as evidence.

Perhaps no one has written more extensively on the theme of the United States and irregular warfare in *Foreign Affairs* than Max Boot. In "More Small Wars: Counterinsurgency is Here to Stay,"[2] he endeavors to keep forgetful heads out of the sand by advising that "a nation as powerful and vulnerable as the United States" does not have "the option of defining exactly which types of wars it wages." (5) Concluding that the U.S. must improve its performance, the ten items on his checklist of recommendations -- from recognizing at the outset that counterinsurgency is always for the long haul to the importance of learning foreign languages -- are all well-established in the lexicon of lessons.

Richard Betts's "Pick Your Battles: Ending America's Era of Permanent Wars"[3] makes the classic arguments for prudence over passion in deciding whether to intervene and using rational calculus in applying military means to serve political ends. The United States is hardly alone in falling short of this challenge to strategy.

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[1] Gideon Rose and Jonathan Tepperman, "Introduction," *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 2

[2] Max Boot, "More Small Wars: Counterinsurgency is Here to Stay," *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 5-14.

[3] Richard Betts's "Pick Your Battles: Ending America's Era of Permanent Wars," *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 15-24.

In "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit,"[4] Rick Brennan takes up how groping for a unilateral exit strategy can become a substitute for the inability to terminate a conflict. The key lesson: The most important thing about a war is how it ends.

Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, in "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists,"[5] explain why the danger posed by fighters returning to the U.S. and Europe from Iraq and Syria is manageable and "less apocalyptic than commonly assumed." (38) Their point ties to a larger strategic lesson that is not limited to fear of terrorists: Over-estimating enemies provoked political pathology and led to questionable interventions on the periphery throughout the Cold War, as well as after 9-11.

Peter Tomsen's survey of five excellent books on Afghanistan, "The Good War? What Went Wrong in Afghanistan – and How to Make It Right,"[6] is especially poignant. These volumes provide retrospective insight into how the U.S. and its coalition partners might have forgone protracted occupation over the past decade; Tomsen's own experience as Special Envoy to Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992 is a chronicle of the failure to bring peace following the Soviet withdrawal and the abrupt end of 'Charlie Wilson's War,' along with its terrible consequences.

Working backwards from this 2014 series, other practitioners and scholars offer their lessons across five decades of articles from *Foreign Affairs*:

In "The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan," [7] retired Army Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry criticizes the attempt to apply once again an ambitious but unsustainable Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine based on unproven assumptions in a war-ravaged nation. *Foreign Affairs* has often served as the platform for that classic form of self-justification, the apologia, and this article is an example. Eikenberry, who has the distinction of having served as both coalition commander and U.S. Ambassador, casts blame widely for the failures in Afghanistan without including himself among those who share accountability.

Participating in the *Foreign Affairs* tradition of commissioning prominent scholars to write brief reviews of publications on war and national security, Eliot Cohen notes in "What to

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[4] Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 25-36.

[5] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 37-46.

[6] Peter Tomsen, "The Good War? What Went Wrong in Afghanistan – and How to Make It Right," *Foreign Affairs* 93:6 (November-December 2014): 47-54.

[7] Karl W. Eikenberry, "The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* 92:5 (September-October 2013): 59-74.

Read on Fighting Insurgencies" that "interest in counterinsurgency comes and goes."[8] His nine recommendations for the "hard experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq" include the 1964 classic *Counterinsurgency Warfare* by David Galula with its lessons from Algeria and Indochina, and *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* by Jeffery Race. He also includes two films, *The Battle of Algiers*, which became a must-watch for those headed down range, as well as *Bloody Sunday* about Northern Ireland. [9] Among the many volumes that Cohen's predecessor Lawrence Freedman reviews are Gordon Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, which was reportedly required reading in the first-term Obama White House.[10] Others include Kenneth Campbell, *A Tale of Two Quagmires: Iraq, Vietnam, and the Hard Lessons of War;* John Dumbrell and David Ryan (eds.), *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts* (*FA*, May/Jun 2007, 144-145); and *Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* by John Nagl, the former Army officer and Oxford scholar, which gained considerable popularity by purporting that, in contrast to the successful British experience in Malaya, the U.S. military failed as a "learning organization" in Vietnam.[11]

Distinct from the 2014 post-hoc report on lessons, a special 2006 *Foreign Affairs Report: The Iraq War* fit the category of mid-course assessment. In an exchange, the career diplomatic troubleshooter James Dobbins in "No Model War,"[12] and well-known strategist Stephen Biddle in "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon,"[13] discuss how the Bush administration made faulty choices in Iraq by modeling nation-building on the post-World War II rebuilding of Japan and Germany then taking on the insurgency as Vietnam redux.

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[8] Eliot A. Cohen, "What to Read on Fighting Insurgencies," *Foreign Affairs Reading List*, July 10, 2009, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/readinglists/what-to-read-on-fighting-insurgencies.

[9] David Galula, Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1972); *The Battle of Algiers*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo (1966); *Bloody Sunday*, directed by Paul Greengrass (2002).

[10] Lawrence D. Freedman, review of *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* by Gordon Goldstein (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), *Foreign Affairs* 88:2 (March-April 2009): 146.

[11] Lawrence D. Freedman, reviews of *A Tale of Two Quagmires: Iraq, Vietnam, and the Hard Lessons of War* by Kenneth Campbell (Herndon, VA: Paradigm Publishers, 2007) and *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts* edited by John Dumbrell and David Ryan (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), Foreign Affairs 86:3 (May/Jun 2007): 144-145; and *Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* by John Nagl, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), Foreign Affairs 83:6 (November-December 2004): 148.

[12] James Dobbins, "No Model War," *Foreign Affairs* 85:4 (July-August 2006): 153-156.

[13] Stephen Biddle, "Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon," *Foreign Affairs* 85:2 (March-April 2006): 2-14.

With falling dominoes in mind, Iraq was not the first time that U.S. leadership drew the wrong lessons from history.

Another apologia comes from Richard Nixon's Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird in "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam".[14] Laird proclaims that he is breaking his silence after 30 years to expunge "the Vietnam demons" (23) that have resurfaced in Iraq with "a view of history that is based on facts rather than emotional distortions" (27). His advice for President George W. Bush is triply ironic: 1) remain confident in the United States' nation-building ability, 2) stay the course, and 3) all will end well.

In 2003, Stephen Biddle again showed deep insight in "Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare".[15] He debunks then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's notion that reliance on Special Operations Forces, Precision Guided Munitions, and indigenous allies to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan represented a low-cost, revolutionary method to win wars. His argument is that although much was truly new in Afghanistan, the campaign was essentially orthodox, because the nature of war itself has not changed,

CIA officers and Special Forces troops from several nations were finishing the job of overthrowing the Taliban in December 2001 when Milton Bearden revived an old characterization with his article "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires."[16] As Station Chief in Pakistan during the 1980s, Bearden supervised American support for the Mujahedin "Freedom Fighters" in the Reagan Doctrine war against the Soviets. To emphasize the historical basis for his warning against occupying the country with foreign troops, he cites Rudyard Kipling's famous lines, written after Britain's disastrous second withdrawal in 1881:

> When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains
> And the women come out to cut up remains
> Jest roll to your rifle an' blow out your brains
> And go to your Gawd like a soldier.

George Herring finds the ghosts still with us in "America and Vietnam: The Unending War,"[17] which appeared shortly after Operation Desert Storm had ejected Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, leading the first President Bush to declare, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!" (104) Cautioning that the easy U.S. victory

[14] Melvin R. Laird, *Foreign Affairs* 84:6 (November-December 2005): 22-43.

[15] Stephen Biddle, "Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 82:2 (March-April 2003): 31-46)

[16] Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs* 80:6 (November-December 2001): 17-30.

[17] George C. Herring, "America and Vietnam: The Unending War," *Foreign Affairs* 70:5 (Winter 91/92): 104-119.

may have unwisely "weakened long-standing inhibitions against intervention," (104) Herring's three questions about Vietnam contain not-so-hidden lessons for Iraq and Afghanistan: "Why did the United States invest so much blood and treasure in an area so remote as Vietnam and of so little apparent significance? Why, despite its vast power, did the United States fail to achieve its objectives? What were the consequences of the war for Americans – and for Vietnamese?" (104)

In the next two book reviews, lessons are embedded in the titles and the reputations that have grown around them: Gaddis Smith on Neil Sheehan, "*A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*"; and Andrew Pierre with Lucy Edwards Despard on Robert "Blowtorch Bob" Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*.[18]

Foreign Affairs published its first explicit retrospective of the Vietnam War ten years after the fall of Saigon, with David Fromkin and James Chace's, "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?"[19] They declare as their purpose, "Specifically to learn how to avoid getting involved in such disastrous misadventures again" (722).

Historical depth increased a notch in Robert Osgood's "The Revitalization of Containment."[20] Osgood, who in 1957 had defined the challenges of limited war the U.S. first faced in Korea and then a decade later in Vietnam, writes that the ascendant Reagan Administration was,

> Repeating the first beat of a familiar rhythm of America's international and political life…defined by oscillations in America's world role between assertion and retrenchment…that correspond to the onset of crises and wars (465).

In 1979, Osgood's colleague Robert Tucker applied similar logic to an assessment of President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy in "America in Decline: The Foreign Policy of Maturity."[21] Here at the bottom end of the cycle, a previous president elected in the shadow of a long war optimistically promised that America would adopt a more benign and principled approach to the world, only to find himself confronting adversaries who remained fully intent on pursuing their own violent quests for power.

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[18] Gaddis Smith, review of "*A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam,*" by Neil Sheehan (New York: Random House, 1988), *Foreign Affairs* 67:2 (Winter 88/89): 181; and Andrew Pierre with Lucy Edwards Despard, review of *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*, by Robert W. Komer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), *Foreign Affairs* 64:5 (Summer 86): 110.

[19] David Fromkin and James Chace, "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?" *Foreign Affairs* 63:4 (Spring 85): 722-746.

[20] Robert E. Osgood, "The Revitalization of Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, 60:3 (Special Issue 1981): 465-502.

[21] Robert W. Tucker, "America in Decline: The Foreign Policy of Maturity," *Foreign Affairs* 58:3 (Special Issue 1979): 449-484.

In 1970, President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger kept the U.S. painfully engaged in Southeast Asia, and the struggle to secure "peace with honor" in Vietnam would last another three years. Anticipating future wars, Graham Allison, Ernest May, and Adam Yarmlinsky offer their guidelines for prudence and rational calculus in "Limits to Intervention."[22]

In "Still the Search for Goals,"[23] Edward Lansdale, the controversial "unquiet American" whose involvement in Vietnam dated to 1953, was deeply troubled that America had become lost "in an allegorical jungle" (93). He predicts that without a sound answer to the question of what U.S. goals in Vietnam were, "The seemingly endless war…may be headed for an end that could be dishonorable, with profound consequences" (92).

The father of American realism Hans Morgenthau was prominently opposed to U.S. escalation in Vietnam. In 1967, Morgenthau offered his history-grounded rationale in a piece with an appropriately Hamlet-inspired title, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene."[24] "There is nothing new either in the contemporary doctrine opposing intervention or in the pragmatic use of intervention on behalf of the interests of individual nations," (426) he writes. However, he cautions, the United States ran the risk of folly by oversimplifying its motives in opposing revolution and selecting courses of action that "lead it to do either too much or too little" (432).

In 1966, five years after Bernard Fall's gripping account of France's failure in Indochina appeared in *Street without Joy*[25] (and the year before he gave his life there), he turned his attention to the U.S. as it descended into quagmire in "Viet Nam in the Balance."[26] Like the battle of the Marne in September 1914, Guadalcanal, or Stalingrad, he writes, the first direct American combat against North Vietnamese forces halted what had seemed to be an "irresitable onslaught," (1) but by doing so foreclosed the prospect of a quick end to the war itself. He speculates near-accurately that, "Years – perhaps a decade – of hard fighting could still be ahead" (1).

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[22] Graham Allison, Ernest May, and Adam Yarmlinsky, "Limits to Intervention," *Foreign Affairs* 48:2 (January 1970): 245-261.

[23] Edward G. Lansdale, "Still the Search for Goals," *Foreign Affairs* 47:1 (October 1968): 92-98.

[24] Hans J. Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign Affairs* 45:3 (April 1967): 425-436.

[25] Bernard B. Fall, *Street without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1961.)

[26] Bernard B. Fall, "Viet Nam in the Balance," *Foreign Affairs* 45:1 (October 1966): 1-18.

Finally, in 1964, Edward Lansdale was still an active duty Air Force Major General and CIA operative when *Foreign Affairs* published his "Viet Nam: Do We Understand Revolution?"[27] This was months before President Johnson, who did not share his National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy's 'divine assurance' about whether to send combat forces to Vietnam, remarked, "I guess we've got no choice, but it scares the death out of me."[28] Lansdale understood there are always choices and that the U.S. would never succeed through firepower or purchase the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. What scared him was not *what* the U.S. needed to do in Vietnam, but "*How* it is fought….Although the hour is late…terribly so, there is time yet for Americans to consider the war in Viet Nam in its 'people' nature" (75, italics added).

Take the five articles on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, follow them with a fifty-year trip down *Foreign Affairs'* memory lane, and the lessons become compelling. What sorts of conclusions do they point to?

One observation that immediately comes to mind is that most of the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq are, to paraphrase Mark Twain, history rhymes. After Vietnam, only the deceptive power of forgetting can explain how it was possible to spend most of a decade violating the imperatives of war among the people, while there was no rational justification for expending so much for so long to have achieved such inconclusive results. In all three wars, committing U.S. troops to open-ended combat while attempting massive efforts to transform nations entangled in internal conflicts proved bad bets. Perhaps the lesson is that if you are contemplating a strategy built around Big COIN, it is already too late.

However, if Max Boot is right that there are more such wars to come -- and he almost certainly is correct -- how to go about remediation? Foreswearing intervention by incanting 'No more Vietnams' lasted only a generation despite the magnitude of that tragedy. There never was agreement about what defeat in Vietnam meant in any case. And as current events demonstrate, claiming in exhaustion that the 'the tide of war is receding' amounts to a unilateral pretension that provides no guidance for responding to threats when they inevitably materialize.

There is a larger lesson that would make it appear wise to tackle the problems of U.S. policy and performance that lie on the know-yourself side of the strategic equation. A troubling record has accumulated in the four largest limited wars the U.S. has fought since World War II. Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam – and Korea – were very different from each other, but, in each war, ambitious aims gave way to the demands of war, and in the face of costly and painful protraction, the search for exit became a substitute for victory. Very early on, Robert Osgood and Hans Morgenthau wrote perceptively of flawed attempts to use war as

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[27] Edward G. Lansdale, "Viet Nam: Do We Understand Revolution?" *Foreign Affairs* 43:1 (October 1964): 75-86)

[28] Lyndon B. Johnson, *Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson*, Conversation WH6503-02-7026, 7027, March 6, 1965, http://presidentialrecordings.rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/essays?series=Vietnam.

an instrument of policy, diagnosing the source of the problem in the nature of the United States as both a great power and a democracy. [29] Listing lessons is not the hard part, because such a challenge has no simple resolution. But improving the model of civil-military relations is an indispensable starting point. The policy criteria for military intervention that concern Richard Betts for Iraq and Afghanistan in 2014, like Allison, May and Yarmolinsky for Vietnam in 1970, boil down to finding ways to exercise better judgment and prudence. When it comes to the dysfunction in performance, it is obvious that U.S. foreign policy and national security institutions need to evolve; as important as they are, the advent of the counterterror-homeland security-cyberwar apparatus is reactive and incremental, and the awkward 'Whole of Government' concept is a second-best solution. The Goldwater-Nichols defense reorganization, which dates to 1986, reshaped the military command structure and was the only substantial reform of outdated legacies from the Cold War and the 1947 National Security Act. Although the congressionally-mandated Project on National Security Reform proved a politically tall order, it remains a viable blue print for the next phase.

Foreign Affairs is one of the better places in which to recognize that all of this has been said before. As difficult as it may be to change patterns of U.S. strategic behavior, the alternative is more costly repetitions of misfortune. Presumably, the process requires remembering lessons of past wars.

[29] Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); and Hans J, Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960.)

Review by Benjamin D. Hopkins, The George Washington University & the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

It is at best problematic when many of the intellectual apologists for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 now write post-mortems of the disaster that is the Global War on Terror. And doing so in no less august a Washington institution than *Foreign Affairs*. The November/December 2014 issue of the journal, however, offers just such a reflection, provocatively entitled "What have we learned? Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq." Bluntly, it seems the authors, and the Washington policy circles they personify, have learned virtually nothing.

Taking proverbial point in the collection of essays is Max Boot, one of the chief intellectual boosters of the Iraq debacle whose advocacy for the adventure appeared widely in the international press.[1] Followed by contributions from Richard Betts, Rick Brennan, Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, and finally a review essay by Peter Tomsen, the issue embodies the intellectual consensus of the Washington think-tank, policy, and diplomatic worlds. As such, it puts on display the intellectual shallowness and anemic character of that consensus. Yet the authors themselves neither seem aware of, nor inclined to critically engage, the short-comings of the established Washington world view.

Individually, the essays offer little that is either new or substantive, but rather retread the same tired ground which has become mainstay of Washington policy debates. The issue's editors try to spice things up a bit by framing Boot's call for more counter-insurgency as dialectically opposed to Richard Betts' focus on preparation for future large-scale military conflicts.[2] While these are different approaches, they are more complimentary than conflictual. The U.S. military has been doing both over the past decade and a half. And neither author calls for the wholesale abandonment of the American military's readiness for large-scale conflict or the need to operate successful counter-insurgencies against asymmetrical opponents.

There is a palpable undercurrent running through all the essays, most pronounced in Boot's and Rick Brennan's essays, criticizing the Obama administration's premature withdrawal from Iraq.[3] The authors warn the administration is about to repeat the same mistakes in Afghanistan. That criticism, though well-founded, struggles to avoid partisan tincture in places. The most notable exception to this is Peter Tomsen's essay "The Good War," which reviews three recently published books offering more nuanced views of the

[1] His most outspoken and dubious suggestion was the call that "Washington needs a colonial office." *Financial Times*, 2 July 2003, p. 1.

[2] Max Boot, "More Small Wars: Counterinsurgency Is Here to Stay," *Foreign Affairs* Volume 93, No. 6 (November/December 2014), 5-14—hereafter cited as *FA*; Richard K. Betts, "Pick Your Battles: Ending America's Era of Permanent War," *FA*, 15-24.

[3] Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *FA*, 25-36.

Afghan conflict.[4] But none of the authors offer a convincing alternative to the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq or the current drawdown from Afghanistan. Instead, Boot and Brennan assert that had the administration simply 'hung tough' and stayed on, the 'gains' in Iraq (what these were exactly remains unclear) would have somehow solidified, as if through inertia.[5] Nor do any of the contributors seriously consider, much less try to answer, the question then-General David Petraeus is credited with having asked in March 2003: "Tell me how this ends" (26). If Petraeus received no satisfactory answer at the time, he should not look to this collection to give him one now.

The authors frame the current situations in both Iraq and Afghanistan as unstable, if not chaotic, and potentially politically perilous. The lessons they seek to wring from the recent past are meant to be didactic – pointing the way to a victorious conclusion of America's never-ending Global War on Terror. . In their rendering of Iraq and Afghanistan's present, one is struck by the near total absence of any recognition of the United States' culpability in creating these volatile situations in the first place. True, nearly all the authors bemoan President Barack Obama's hasty withdrawal from Iraq and fear its repeat in Afghanistan. Betts even points to the lack of planning evinced by the Bush administration regarding post-conquest Iraq, a 'strategy' Boot characterizes laughably as "plausible – and wrong"(6). But such criticisms focus the fault of America's actions on its poor post-conquest administration or over-hasty withdrawal. What is lacking an acknowledgment that the Iraq invasion, at a minimum, was problematic from day one.

Such framing affects the policy prescriptions the authors individually and collectively forward. While Boots and Betts argue the finer points of counter-insurgency versus conventional warfare, Brennan decries the lack of resolve to see the business through, and Tomsen points his finger at Pakistan, all acknowledge the fact that the U.S. government fundamentally lacked any meaningful understanding of Iraqi and Afghan societies and their politics. Consequently, they advocate an increase in the cultural knowledge and capabilities of both the American military and its civilian counterparts. Boot writes

"The United States simply doesn't have many soldiers, diplomats, or intelligence officers who are fluent in such languages as Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, and Urdu, to say nothing of the local dialects spoken throughout much of Africa and South Asia. And it's not just a question of knowing foreign languages; even more important in many ways is a country's power structures, customs, and mindsets." (10)

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[4] Peter Tomsen, "The Good War? What Went Wrong in Afghanistan—and How to Make It Right", FA, 47-54. The books reviewed are Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014); Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

[5] To his credit, Betts evinces a great deal of skepticism toward such assertions, noting that Noori al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister, was instrumental in getting the Americans out in 2011.

True perhaps, but such knowledge has long been created, advanced, and publicly shared through area studies programs and scholarship supported by federal education funding. The problem is not necessarily a lack of capability, though in some cases, most notably regarding Afghanistan, that has proven a stumbling block.[6] Rather, the problem is that people with these skills and understandings fundamentally disagree with the projects for which people like Boot *et al*. would like to use them.

One of the best examples of the disconnect between the utilitarian use of knowledge suggested by the authors and that produced by the academy is the experience of Charles Tripp. A professor of Middle Eastern politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of London, and author of *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), Tripp and some colleagues were invited to brief British Prime Minister Tony Blair and then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on Iraq in November 2002. They emphasized that given the country's history, an invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and Britain at the time would not be well-received. Clearly, their advice was ignored.[7] So too was the advice of many of the specialists who worked on Iraq and Afghanistan both in the United States and abroad. In their stead, and contrary to the assertions of the authors, the U.S. military invested massively in creating institutional competencies in 'cultural knowledge.' The Human Terrain System, the Minerva Project, and the Cultural Knowledge Consortium are just a few of the ill-considered, and incredibly expensive efforts of increasing the military's cultural capital. Such efforts have in the main been shunned by area specialists as deeply flawed, if not fundamentally compromised. The American Anthropological Association has publicly opposed the Army's Human Terrain System, effectively making it a no-go for any anthropologist who wants a future in the academy.[8] Contrary to the assertions of the volume's authors, the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are not the outcome of good policy hindered by lack of ability. Rather, they are the outcome of bad policy based on ignoring established ability and expertise.

The focus on cultural expertise offers insight to a larger theme at play in these essays. Nearly all offer technical fixes. The lessons learned and highlighted by the authors focus on things such as force deployment, training, linguistic competencies, and intelligence gathering. None of these are explicitly political in nature. In presenting the lessons this way, the authors follow the well-trod path of James Ferguson's *Anti-Politics Machine*, wherein a technocratic framing of the problems and their proposed solutions necessarily forecloses recognition of or dealing with their fundamentally political nature.[9] Though unintentional, it is nonetheless a savvy rhetorical move by the authors. It effectively forecloses the

[6] Even here, while the scholarly community of Afghan experts was small, it did nonetheless exist.

[7] See Tripp's recollection of the interview here: http://www.choices.edu/resources/scholarsonline/tripp/ct12.php

[8] http://www.aaanet.org/issues/AAA-Opposes-Human-Terrain-System-Project.cfm

[9] James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, University of Minnesota Press (1994).

possibility of meaningful discussion regarding accountability for bad political decisions taken by multiple administrations over the last fifteen years.

Rather than offering substantive lessons about the conflicts from Iraq and Afghanistan, this volume attests to the myopia of the Washington policy establishment. As such, it will be in invaluable source for a future generation of historians who themselves consider the question of what went wrong with American foreign policy and military power at the beginning of the twenty-first century. What matters is not whether the military should focus on counter-insurgency doctrine or return to a conventional war footing, whether the army has 570,000 or 420,000 soldiers, or whether the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence Agency has always been the real enemy in Afghanistan. Instead, it is the need to remember General Carl von Clauswitz's dictum that war is politics by another means. Bad politics begets bad wars. This is what we should have learned, but clearly have not.

Review by Alex Marshall, University of Glasgow

Learning the right lessons from recent military campaigns is historically a complex and intellectually challenging affair. The ancient mantra of generals always 'preparing to fight the last war' continues to resonate, precisely because history appears to offer so many examples of exactly that -- from British veterans of the Napoleonic Wars being accused of blunders in applying earlier logistical arrangements to the Crimean War, to French generals after the First World War doubling-down on fixed fortifications and heavy artillery, precisely because of the perceived 'lessons' of the 1914-18 conflict. The whole school of modern counter-insurgency has in addition built a narrative over the tragedies of armies seemingly repeatedly forgetting, and then having to re-learn, the 'eternal' lessons of counter-insurgency: winning hearts and minds, gaining cultural understanding, and delivering essential services via the creation of a viable and legitimate civil authority. Yet behind each of these patterns there is almost always a more complex sociological, cultural, political, institutional, and economic picture to explain the apparent failure -- whether in the cutbacks to defence spending in peacetime that traditionally follow major military conflict, the emergence of indigenous local war economies in failed or failing states which undermine stabilisation, the often ambiguous impact of new technologies produced by war itself, or in the dialectical action-reaction nature of all human conflict, the latter embodied in Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz's oft-forgotten maxim that, in any conflict, 'the end result is never final.'

The French military's technological search for security after 1919, via more elaborate fortification systems, occurred not in isolation, but against a backdrop of demographic decline and persistent diplomatic failure at the international level to persuade either the British or the Americans of the need for legal reforms to outlaw aggression, to then impose economic sanctions against acts of aggression, and to generate a standing international military force to counter aggressors themselves. Given these wider strategic silences, fortifications and artillery at the time seemed a rational doctrinal shortcut to attaining at least some form of French national security. Similarly, the need for national armies to persistently re-learn the 'lessons' of counter-insurgency arises from the strategic failures of both politicians and military leaders in failing to anticipate that counter-insurgency would be a necessary skillset, given the scenarios in which their own decisions placed their soldiers. Without a clear strategic sense of what either the intervention or subsequent counter-insurgency is intended to achieve, counter-insurgency itself will therefore always be, in the cutting terminology of historian and retired Colonel Gian Gentile, a 'strategy of tactics.'[1] The notion that 'better' counter-insurgency would lead to better outcomes in past conflicts or in future has also more recently also come into question, not least due to a long-

[1] Gian Gentile, 'A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army.' *Parameters* 39:3 (Fall 2009).

overdue and welcome reassessment of the record of the much-vilified General William Westmoreland in Vietnam.[2]

The 'lessons' of the Iraq and Afghan wars covered by this special issue of *Foreign Affairs* appear no less vexed, but many of the issues that arise with interpretation also arise due to political biases and the choice of perspective taken. Throughout the majority of the articles that appear in this issue, there dominates a perspective that the outcome of these conflicts was fundamentally shaped by decisions taken-or not taken-by the United States itself, most notably by the Pentagon and the U.S. President. The Clausewitzian paradigm of understanding warfare as a dialectic is therefore almost totally lost. Dominating all these narratives instead is the myth of control, that, with a few more resources targeted in certain directions, a few policy tweaks, an efficiency check here, or an accountability safeguard there, the United States can control, shape and dominate the whole of human affairs globally in a benign direction. This in many ways is a remarkably alarming set of conclusions, given the experience of the past thirteen years; nowhere does it seem to be recognized that such a goal may simply not be in any power's reach, not even that of the United States.

Taken to an extreme, this approach results in an active misinterpretation not just of recent conflicts, but of a whole host of past conflicts as well. In the view of Max Boot, Iraq, Afghanistan and previous conflicts demonstrate a traditional American weakness in 'Phase IV' operations and nation building, a narrative within which post-1945 Japan and Germany then also form a rare and hallowed exception. The historical consequences of this alleged failing are, however, exaggerated and misinterpreted to explain the course and fate of whole continents, so that:

"This inattention made possible the persecution of freed slaves and their white champions in the South after the American Civil War, the eruption of the Philippine insurrection after the Spanish-American war, the rise of the Nazis in Germany and the Communists in Russia after World War I, the invasions of South Korea and South Vietnam after World War II, and the impetus for the Iraq War after the Gulf War." [3]

If the history of the political events retailed in this one short sentence could be reduced and boiled down to the United States purely 'bungling the conclusions of wars', then of course some minor doctrinal corrections, shifts in training patterns, and reallocation of resources would result in shifts in the entire course of world history. The reality of human affairs is more complicated, not least due to the fact that, even taking this retrospective glance, communism was already on the march in Russia before the United States ever fully entered

[2] On this, see the recent H-Diplo roundtable review of Gregory A. Daddis's work *Westmoreland's War, Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, at: https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/roundtable-xvi-18_0.pdf

[3] Max Boot, "More Small Wars: Counterinsurgency Is Here to Stay," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 93, No. 6 (November-December 2014), 6—hereafter cited as *FA*.

the First World War (Congress itself only declared war in April 1917), whilst the Philippine insurrection of 1899-1902 was more driven by the Philippine desire for full independence, rather than by any minor failures in American post-war planning.

If the tendency to believe that modest doctrinal reforms and resource reallocation will leave the United States capable of shaping and changing the course and direction of the whole of human history represents one fallacy in this collection of essays, a further glaring weakness is the promulgation of a 'stab-in-the-back' myth, one that consistently praises the U.S. military and condemns U.S. politicians. In Boot's article, General David Petraeus is praised as one of the few American senior officials to have emerged from the wars with his reputation improved (8). This skates over both the extremely questionable legacy of Petraeus's time in office in Iraq and Afghanistan in retrospect (here Rick Brennan's article,[4] reviewing the quick increase in Iraqi sectarian violence after 2010 and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's slide towards dictatorship (25) is, at least in some respects, more accurate) and the more unfortunate recent revelations which forced his retirement from the CIA. This diplomatic silence over the circumstances of Petraeus's recent fall and actual legacy is even more striking given that General Stanley McChrystal's downfall over similar personal failings is nonetheless highlighted in the very same paragraph. (8) Yet given a choice, the authors in this collection generally prefer to point an accusatory finger at America's political class, rather than examine the pathologies and institutional shortcomings of the American military, or accepting that strategy in democracies always emerges as a result of a dialogue, not a monologue, between military and civilians. Richard K. Betts even argues that an additional 10,000 troops in the US 'troop surge' in Afghanistan (40,000 as opposed to 30,000 troops) would have made all the difference to the eventual course of events there.[5]

In general, this collection reflects what is undoubtedly the ongoing pain of assimilating the lessons of, and drawing through the necessary corrections accumulated during, the United States' own near-relentless 'Long War' overseas since 2001. Many of the lessons drawn by the authors here would undoubtedly lead to genuine improvements in the United States' ability to engage with other cultures and to carry out population-centric counterinsurgency if implemented -- such as the recommendations to focus more on capacity building and language skills, via mainstreaming foreign area officers (11), or in making sure that the skills required for conducting 'war amongst the people' retain a permanent institutional home on U.S. soil (10). The flaws in the work lie not in these recommendations themselves, but in the overarching assumptions that such improvements offer the keys to victory.

There are also noticeable gaps; nowhere is the failure of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) policies or U.S. developmental strategies for these states seriously addressed, despite the economic side of the equation undoubtedly playing an enormous role in the development and perpetuation of conflict in both of the countries

[4] Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *FA*, 25-36.

[5] Richard K. Betts, "Pick Your Battles: Ending America's Era of Permanent War," *FA,* 16.

concerned. That the absence of any discussion of the opium question in Afghanistan is a striking feature of all these contributions does not mean in any way that the opium issue in Afghanistan is even close to being resolved; similarly, the absence of even basic improvements to war-damaged infrastructure and the non-delivery of essential services in Iraq, coupled with high unemployment, remains an ongoing source of social unrest and conflict, a point referred to only once by Brennan (30), and even then with no comment on the role of U.S. policies in this outcome. There remains an alarming tendency throughout, on the other hand, to equate tactical or operational improvements with greater potential strategic success, and to view such conflicts either only through the lens of the United States' national interests, or to assume that those interests would be best served, for example, by keeping "thousands of troops" in Afghanistan past 2016 (14). The final effect of the collection is to emphasize that, to a large extent, the United States is currently integrating only the lessons that it wants to hear, and only those which will require minimum change to its existing posture or strategic assumptions. The second-order consequence of precisely that approach however, as another recent book by Washington insider Vali Nasr has underlined, is that much of the rest of the world is increasingly less inclined to listen to the United States.[6] In many ways, Barack Obama's own presidency has been an effort to itself imbibe the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, and to implement a foreign policy that is more circumscribed, more informed by the limits of power and the art of the possible, and to directly target the potential root threats to America's own national interests -- not least the radicalized generation of young jihadists produced by these wars and identified by Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro in this collection.[7] This very effort at recalibration has however also encountered persistent institutional resistance and criticism, not just from the 'usual suspects' from the Republican side of the floor, but from the American military and the U.S. State Department itself: Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry on several occasions appearing notably more hawkish than the U.S. Commander-in-Chief. Such phenomena point to the ongoing pain of the 'lessons learned' process, not least its being as much about fundamental psychological biases as it is about actual lessons learned. The United States, in the view of American scholar Andrew J. Bacevich, has a pervasive faith in military might and the inherent utility and rightness of its own solutions for world affairs which, it appears, even the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have left untouched.[8] The result therefore still appears to be a 'permanent war for permanent peace.' U.S. diplomat Victoria Nuland's recent alleged intervention in the crisis in the Ukraine -- that the U.S. should shape the incoming Ukrainian government and, "you

[6] Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation. American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (Australia: Scribe Publications, 2013).

[7] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists," *FA*, 37-46.

[8] Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules. America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

know, fuck the EU,"[9] -- in this sense points to pathologies which institutional or doctrinal tinkering will be tragically insufficient to ever resolve.

[9] In February 2014 an apparently bugged phone conversation between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and the US Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt was posted online, in which the formation and makeup of the new Ukrainian government was extensively discussed, and in the context of which these words were used to describe bypassing EU diplomatic efforts at resolving the Ukrainian crisis. The authenticity of the call was never subsequently formally denied by the US government. Transcript available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26079957