H-**Diplo** | **ISSF** Roundtable XII-3

James Lebovic. *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9780190935320 (hardcover, $36.95).

Contents

Introduction by James J. Wirtz, Naval Postgraduate School

The study of bureaucracy as an influence in the formulation and conduct of foreign and defense policy has receded in popularity since its heyday during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, the limits of bureaucratic processes, the influence of the decorum generated by organizational culture or even the constraints created by the overall structure of government itself are rarely identified as much of a contributing factor in policy success or failure. Instead, the world seems focused on a vicious partisan politics that demonizes the opposition and reduces issues of specific policy selection and implementation to little more than an afterthought, as if ideological purity can substitute for bureaucratic acumen and political savvy. Nevertheless, as Robert Art noted in his survey of the first-wave of the bureaucratic politics literature, how we make decisions influences the types of decisions we make.[1] Organizational processes and bureaucratic culture can frame opportunities, challenges, and options in sometimes surprising ways.

The effort to use force as a policy instrument – to conduct war – can highlight the effects of organizational constraints and bureaucratic pathologies on policymakers and policies. Limited wars are especially challenging, according to the Prussian philosopher Carl von Clausewitz, because they bring to the fore the politics of the dispute, while pushing military considerations into the background, making it hard to synchronize military operations with political objectives:

> The more powerful and inspiring the motives for war . . . the more closely will the military aims and the political objectives of war coincide, and the more military and less political will war appear to be. On the other hand, the less intense the motives, the less will the military element's natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives. As a result, war will be driven further from its natural course, the political object will be more and more at variance with aim of ideal war, and the conflict will seem increasingly political in character.[2]

During war in general and during limited war in particular, collaboration must occur between politicians who set policy objectives and tacticians and strategists who plan and execute military operations to achieve those objectives. This interaction, at least in recent times, occurs in a bureaucratic setting. As Colin Gray, a devoted student of Clausewitz, has noted:

> Policymakers will need to adjust their political guidance to the dynamic evolution of the 'big picture;' tacticians and operational commanders must report on what is proving militarily feasible and what is not, as events reveal; and strategists have to translate a shifting political guidance into operational plans to be practicable for combat.[3]

All of this suggests that it is a rare, happy coincidence when these considerations naturally align. Indeed, as Gray notes, "the historical record demonstrates a permanent structural disharmony, great and small, among policy, strategy, and tactics."[4] This disharmony is likely to manifest during limited wars.

This permanent structural disharmony, and the failure of policymakers and soldiers to create harmony in a limited war setting, is the fundamental issue addressed by James Lebovic in *Planning to Fail: The U.S. Wars in Vietnam, Iraq and*

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[1] Robert J. Art, "Bureaucratic Politics and American Foreign Policy: A Critique," *Policy Sciences* 4:4 (December 1973), 468.

[2] Carl von Clausewtiz, Michael Howard, Peter Paret, and Bernard Brodie, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87-88.

[3] Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Pr*actice (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 145.

[4] Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, 148, 5; Clausewitz, 81.

Afghanistan. Lebovic surveys the way various administrations conducted limited wars, describing how they failed to synchronize strategy, operations, and tactics, and how the need to satisfy immediate concerns tended to undermine their ability to secure their overarching political goals. To explain this phenomenon, Lebovic divides the conduct of these limited wars into four phases: (1) the decision to utilize military force; (2) the escalation of the scope or intensity of military operations; (3) the need to corral spiraling costs in blood and treasure; and (4) devising a way to exit the conflict (4-9). The critical insight in Lebovic's narrative is the identification of the different subject of 'analysis' in each of these phases and how the bureaucratic setting and type of analysis that is conducted frames the issues under consideration in limited and self-damaging ways.

Initially, my take on Lebovic's work was that he had uncovered a structural weakness inherent in the U.S. government – that short term political incentives interfered with the achievement of long-term objectives, leading to a sort of perverse 'mini-max' situation. In other words, the policymakers surveyed seemed forever fixated on minimizing losses without ever defining desirable end states or identifying the strategies or resources needed to get there. This perverse mini-max phenomenon might in fact be at work in the cases explored by Lebovic, but his temporal division of these conflicts also highlights how the scope of the issues under consideration seems to narrow during subsequent phases of the conflict. Lebovic attributes this narrowing of the issues and options that are both considered and available, i.e., how the policy question under consideration is identified and framed, to a 'myopia' on the part of policymakers and strategists. Nevertheless, the origins of this policy myopia might be found in the issue framing and the type of analysis conducted in the inter-agency setting of the U.S. executive branch. This myopia might be a by-product of the analytical predilections of modern bureaucracy and not a product of the cognitive biases or character flaws of the policymakers in question.

At each of the conflict/decision stages identified by Lebovic, the questions to be resolved become less political and more operational and tactical, relevant data becomes increasingly abundant, and the cost-benefit analysis that underpins decisions becomes increasingly focused. As a result, analysts tend to undertake cost-benefit calculations that allow optimization along specific dimensions of the conflict, while ignoring other equally important dimensions of the conflict to include the political objectives at stake. For instance, in the third, 'cost-control' phase of the limited wars that are surveyed, analysis can identify 'low-hanging fruit' by identifying the 'return on investment' produced by various types of forces, operations and tactics. It is then a simple matter to curtail those 'costly' activities once they have been identified in favor of less costly ongoing operations or novel approaches that have yet to have been fully tested. Sometimes, an effort is made to assess the consequences that will occur if costly operations are curtailed; the more likely outcome is that savings will be realized with little thought given to the long-term impact of the decision. Lebovic repeatedly observes that the questions and issues that make their way onto the top of policy agendas during the phases of limited war thus have little to do with the big strategic issues that might have motivated the resort to arms in the first place. If you ask bureaucrats to cut operational costs, they can identify where the cost savings can be had, but they are not necessarily going to provide an equally compelling analysis of what will follow when you move to realize those savings. There is a tendency to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Another issue emerges in Lebovic's analysis: even though bureaucrats like to tout their decisions as 'data driven,' it is virtually impossible to generate a data-driven analysis of the essence of strategy, to anticipate how military action will lead to desired political outcomes in both a domestic and international setting. Despite references to falling dominoes, no one ever really explained how the military effort to resist the North Vietnamese control of all of Vietnam would strengthen the U.S. political position in the Cold War, especially since there was a general agreement that the United States possessed little intrinsic interest in the military situation in Vietnam. Nobody ever offered an assessment of how much effort in Vietnam was too much effort, especially when it came to bolstering America in its great power competition with the Soviets. Indeed, as the Vietnam conflict unfolded, Americans became increasingly focused on retrieving either a stalemated or deteriorating military situation in Southeast Asia, with diminishing thought given to how events on the ground were contributing to the overall U.S. position in the Cold War.

Occasionally, as Clausewitz noted, political and military objectives can coincide – the conquest of a province could serve as both a military and political objective. Nevertheless, it is difficult ex ante to determine the amount of military effort needed to achieve a political goal because "the same political object can elicit differing reactions from different peoples, and even from the same people at different times" (5). It is hard to anticipate the scope and severity of a conflict before it is initiated,

and this uncertainty flows like an undercurrent through most of Lebovic's history. Whatever tenuous link exists in the minds of decision makers about the relationship between the use of force and an improved political setting evaporates as tactical, battlefield concerns push 'big-picture' issues off the policy agenda.

The other contributors to this roundtable on *Planning to Fail* are in agreement that the volume provides an efficient survey of a daunting defense issue – the conduct of limited war – and that Lebovic offers a splendid description of the complex situation surrounding U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. There is less agreement, however, on the theoretical locus and value of Lebovic's work. Jonathan Caverley, for instance, notes that the parsimony of Lebovic's historical narrative is not matched by explanatory clarity. Given the relatively limited amount of detail that can be included in the span of history covered by Lebovic, Caverley notes that it is difficult to asses the various explanations suggested by Lebovic for the events chronicled in the volume. Caverley also echoes Clausewitz's assessment of limited war by suggesting that U.S. failures and setbacks in these situations were over determined. The fact that U.S. policymakers found themselves in quagmire is exactly what the Prussian philosopher would have predicted. As a result, Caverley suggests that it is difficult to identify a realistic counterfactual course of events that might have significantly changed the outcomes of these limited wars, thereby offering a potential way to falsify the various theoretical suggestions offered by Lebovic. Keith Shimko raises an additional methodological concern about *Planning to Fail* – Lebovic's analysis selects on the dependent variable by only looking at cases of policy failure. In other words, the causes of failure identified by Lebovic are constants and cannot account for the success or failure of U.S. ventures into limited war. Caverley, again echoing Clausewitz's thoughts on limited war, notes that Lebovic explains a constant (the train wreck of limited war) with a constant (policy myopia, etc.).

Staying with this Clausewitzian theme, one might also add that the outcome of limited war is dialectical. Outcomes in war are produced by an interaction of the parties involved; Lebovic's study only looks at one side of failure in limited war so at best it can only provide a partial explanation of limited war outcomes. In other words, an issue raised but not fully addressed in the three cases surveyed is that Americans might not have been that bad at limited war, it is just that America's opponents were unusually capable. The hapless Americans that populate Lebovic's narrative might have done better against less determined or resourceful opponents.

Planning to Fail offers a provocative look at recent American experience in conducting limited war. Although Lebovic fails to highlight the way bureaucracy shaped American decision-making in these conflicts, his narrative rings true in the way it chronicles how policymakers do in fact suffer from a sort of myopia. Policy deliberations seem to focus increasingly on issues of immediate importance at the expense of other key considerations, especially the big picture, which is defined here as the political reasons for getting involved in the conflict in the first place.

Participants:

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REVIEW BY JONATHAN D. CAVERLEY, U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE AND MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

To my knowledge James Lebovic has provided the first work of social science to compare the United States government's approach to the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan across the entire arc of conflict from initiation to (sort of) termination.[1] This follows on Lebovic's excellent *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability*, which compared the Iraq and Vietnam wars, and contains a prescient skepticism of the prevailing U.S. counterinsurgency theory, and concludes that failure at limited war is part and parcel to superpower status.[2] Its successor seeks to lay out the forces that make such underperformance a near-certainty.

Lebovic opens this ambitious investigation with a simple statement, "Despite its planning, the United States has failed to meet its early objectives in almost every one of its major post-World War II conflicts" (1). Lebovic attacks this puzzle in a brisk, wide-ranging read with eight "lessons"—for example "sound policy requires that leaders thoughtfully consider and integrate the dimensions of policy and ensure its integrity in practice"—and eight "decisional strategies"—"policy makers must recognize that sound policy requires comprehensive assessment" and "policy makers must recognize their limited capability to control military and nonmilitary outcomes" (187-192).

Let me open my comments on *Planning to Fail* with a criticism I never thought I would write in a review: the book is too short. The scope requires racing through tightly curated secondary sources in order to give overviews of the entire arcs of three wars, each of which has lasted more than a decade. The book thus has its work cut out for it.

The book makes its basic argument in another admirably clear statement: "policy makers are myopic." It defines myopia as crafting policies "around visible elements *as if they were the whole picture* [original emphasis]." A better (non-myopic) approach would focus on "broad-based goals," but instead decisionmakers focus on "immediate goals, critical tasks, mission costs, and time schedules." Building on this statement, Lebovic offers "a macro approach that focuses analysis on persistent or recurrent cognitive influences on governmental behavior" (2).

This approach posits four sequential myopias that bias the conduct of four stages of wartime decision-making (4-8). First, during the "engagement of military forces" stage—which I take to mean starting a war—policymakers suffer from "fixation," focusing on short term goals. Second, policymakers during the "extension of military operations" stage are affected by "disjunction" a "focus on separate tasks, apart from implementation." Third, once the initial war aims become clearly unfeasible—the "limitation in resources" stage—policy makers are affected by "constriction," overly centering on "cost constraints." Finally, once it becomes clear that "disengagement" phase is upon them, policymakers feel the "extrication" decision dynamic, prioritizing exit and focusing on time constraints.

The section describing the Stage III ("limitation in resources committed") bias of "constriction" offers a good indication of how Lebovic aligns each war stage and its associated bias:

> To be sure, a president can *rationally* cap an investment when resources become scarce, other priorities belong, or the investment offers limited marginal returns. But rationality is impugned when cost curtailment—that is, getting the price down—becomes a driving and decisive factor in decision-making. At this point in the conflict, escalating involvement or exiting entirely might constitute better options (8).

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[1] To describe Iraq as a "terminated" conflict is debatable. Afghanistan, as of publication, certainly does not qualify.

[2] James H. Lebovic, *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

This paragraph epitomizes how correctly managing a bias in one stage shifts the war to a different stage and a new bias. If, instead of "constricting" during Stage III, the president "escalates involvement," then we are back to Stage II and the bias of disjunction. If the decision is to "exit entirely" then we are at Stage IV and are too concerned with the exit timeline. The overall effect of the book, which makes the observation that the "president [Lyndon B. Johnson] and his advisors moved tentatively—but still too quickly," is reminiscent of the old joke about a restaurant having terrible food *and* small portions (29).

These arguments may indeed be right. However, the book does not tell us how the reader would know if they are wrong. While the book promises "explanatory and predictive benefits," it does not specify any theoretical or empirical counterfactual allowing us to assess these benefits. The book does not present, much less test, hypotheses. The chapters present dozens of micro-counterfactuals, i.e. policymaker mistakes, but it is not clear how these add up or why any given mistake was important for the war's poor conduct.

This is further worsened by how much ground each of the three empirical chapters must cover. Indeed the book's ambitious structure makes even describing these wars a challenge, never mind explaining them. As stated above, the book offers a four-phase description of war, each with its own pathology. But even this summary does not convey the breadth of the empirical sections.

For Stage I alone, before proceeding to its own explanation, the Vietnam chapter allows "the considerable explanatory merit" of two rational explanations and two non-rational explanations—"overoptimism, underthinking, and excessive deference" and "incremental decision-making" which Lebovic argues are different from myopia (26-27). Then, within the associated "fixation" pathology, Lebovic offers five mechanisms, previously unspecified in the theory chapter, (26-33): "extended its short-term policies apart from assessing their long-term viability," "placed tactics ahead of strategy" because it focused on numbers of soldiers rather than how they would be used, "failed to recognize that preferred options have unanticipated consequences that pave the way for competing policies," "adopted policies without fully committing in theory or practice to a single view of a conflict" (which actually seems to be the opposite of fixation), and finally "pursued its policies without considering the limits of half measures and thus the potential requisites of fighting the war to a successful conclusion." Each of these mechanisms is backed up at most by two anecdotes of clear mistakes by the Johnson Administration.

Given the many phenomena the book seeks to explain across multiple major conflicts, the bibliography for any one mechanism is necessarily constrained. Selecting secondary sources is therefore a highly consequential decision, but the book does not justify their selection. For example, despite its focus on Johnson, the Vietnam intervention decision section relies mostly on the work of Graham Cosmas and H. R. McMaster, both authors who explicitly concentrated on the role of the uniformed leadership in Vietnam (MACV and Joint Chiefs respectively).[3] There are dozens of explanations for Johnson's decision in the literature and hundreds of histories pertaining to it. Why these two sources?

In fairness, the other two chapters provide very useful surveys of the two more recent, failed U.S. interventions with less voluminous scholarship than Vietnam. While no doubt the literature (and competing explanations) on these wars will build up over the coming years, it can still be ably summarized at this stage. If journalism is the first draft of history, *Planning to Fail* is the first draft of social science for these conflicts, a true service to the field.

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[3] Graham A. Cosmas, *The United States Army in Vietnam: MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 2007); H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).

However, these cases are not systematically compared to each other to advance the book's argument about the importance of bias. This may be because, according to the book, while the people, the circumstances, and even the sub-mechanisms vary in each war, there is not much to compare because the same arc inevitably occurs.

Lebovic observes (182) that "policy failure was not preordained; none of the deleterious conflict phases followed inextricably from one another." This suggests the existence of alternate, counterfactual ways to conduct each phase but again they are not specified. Indeed, the whole point of the book is that such war almost inevitably follows the same pathological arc. There is an old cliché that one cannot explain change with a constant. In this book, Lebovic explains a constant with a constant.

Lebovic compellingly demonstrates that, despite their best efforts, American policymakers are lousy at fighting limited war, and American social science is lousy at fully explaining why. But if myopia is crafting policies "around visible elements *as if they were the whole picture* [original emphasis]*,*" then the only counterfactual available is that all wars should be crafted around the whole picture. And this is impossible. For both the policymaker or the social scientist, the choice is not between limited and unlimited information, but between limitations. Policymakers and pre-existing theories are wrong all the time, but that is the lot of all humans and thus all theories. The question is whether the book offers a model that does a better job. The book's structure makes it impossible to judge.

While the book's theory is never explicitly stated, the book's theoretical target is clear. Lebovic (13) offers a "critique of the much-heralded rational theory of war, which attributes failings in military conflict to uncertainty over an opponent's capabilities and intentions." In general when social scientists seek to undermine a theory empirically, they find its feelings in the "easy case" for the targeted theory.[4] Lebovic instead chooses the hard, if not impossible, case for rationality: "the complex environment of asymmetric conflicts. With their many interdependent parts, these demanding environments confound planning and tax resources" (2).

The vast majority of rationalist work, particularly the bargaining model of war, focuses on the decision to start a war, with much of the remainder on the decision to continue it.[5] Most rational theorists generally have little to say about the conduct of war. This should not surprise. Carl von Clausewitz famously describes war's "paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of it element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject of reason alone."[6] Policymakers must navigate this trinity within the "the fog of war." Clausewitz, rather helplessly, concludes that the answer to effectively fighting such a war is "genius."

Planning to Fail follows up the claim that failure is not inevitable with two crucial sentences that would ring true to both Clausewitz and rational choice theorists: "Political leaders could have short-circuited the process by pursuing goals that suited US capabilities or avoiding no-win wars in the first place. They *did not do that* [original emphasis], however and they

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[4] Aaron Rapport, "Hard Thinking about Hard and Easy Cases in Security Studies," *Security Studies* 24:3 (2015): 431-465, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070615. For a broad review on the making qualitative comparisons in social science, see Erica S Simmons, Nicholas Rush Smith, and Rachel A Schwartz, "Rethinking Comparisons," *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 16:1 (2018): 1-7.

[5] Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics* 1:1 (2003): 43-47; Kristopher W Ramsay, "Information, Uncertainty , and War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 505–27. Alex Weisiger, "Rationality and the Limits of Psychology in Explaining Interstate War Duration," *Polity* 50:2 (2018): 215-224, https://doi.org/10.1086/696836. Adam Meirowitz and Anne E. Sartori, "Strategic Uncertainty as a Cause of War," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3L4 (2008): 327-352, https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00008018. Although see Scott Wolford, *The Politics of the First World War: A Course in Game Theory and International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[6] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976). 89.

thereafter allowed policy to run its (four-stage) course" (182). For all the book's attention to the arc of war, for Lebovic, the causal effect occurs prior to onset. *Planning to Fail* has convinced me more than ever that it is rarely a good idea to start a limited war, and that is saying something. No theory, rational or otherwise, has gotten us much further than that. In general, to quote the movie *WarGames*, the only way to win is not to play.[7]

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[7] John Badham, *WarGames* (eVideo) (Beverly Hills: United Artists, 1983).

Review by Keith Shimko, Purdue University

I must admit that on some levels I was not particularly looking forward to reading James Lebovic's latest book, *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan*, and picked it up with a mild sense of dread. Of course, this was not because I was expecting a bad book. Quite the contrary. I fully anticipated a careful, accessible and policy relevant piece of scholarship from which I would no doubt learn a great deal. On this level I was not disappointed in the least. I approached it with mixed feelings not out of any concerns about its quality but because I knew it would make for depressing reading. After more than a decade of studying and teaching about the military, political, and strategic dimensions of the 2003 Iraq war, the sheer stupidity and carelessness of it all still astounds and galls me. Perhaps because Lebovic includes Vietnam and Afghanistan in addition to Iraq, condensing all the decision-making failures of these three wars into concise chapters, the cumulative impact is unrelenting. *Planning to Fail* certainly informs, but it does not exactly lift the spirits.

When I teach my course on the Iraq wars there are two issues students always want to dwell on. The first, of course, is why the intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction proved to be so flawed and whether the administration 'lied' about Iraqi WMD because talk of 9/11, terrorism, and mushroom clouds was the surest way to scare the public into supporting the war. There has already been a great deal written on the failure and possible misrepresentation of intelligence, so at least I have something to offer my students that approaches a satisfying answer. The second question is among those Lebovic tackles: how and why did the United States fail to prepare and plan for post-invasion problems and tasks in Iraq that in retrospect seem so clearly predictable? Why was the careful planning for the military campaign to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein not matched by any similarly well thought out plan for the aftermath. Though I offer my students several possible explanations, I ultimately settle on the administration's galactic levels of wishful thinking. The Bush administration simply thought/hoped that problems would either not materialize, would be easy to solve if they did, or could be left others to deal with. Time after time the most optimistic assumptions were cavalierly relied on with no plan B in the event plan A did not pan out. I am happy (though only in the sense of not being proven wrong) that Lebovic reaches essentially the same conclusion, stating at the very outset that his "argument is very simple: policy makers are myopic" (2).

A somewhat expanded statement of Lebovic's myopia thesis with respect to Vietnam is that "the United States went to war in Vietnam without any clear sense of what it could accomplish through force; fought to U.S. military strengths without due regard for enemy strategy; ultimately enforced a ceiling on U.S. troop investment to serve domestic political, not U.S. strategic goals; and finally left the conflict with little but a delayed defeat to show for its efforts" (182). Substitute Iraq or Afghanistan for Vietnam in the passage and the basic pattern holds across all three wars. This reflects what Lebovic sees as the four stages of decision making: first, "the engagement of military forces;" second, "extension of military operations;" third, confronting the 'limitation in resources;' and finally, "disengagement of military forces" (4-9). In addition to rampant myopia in each stage, Lebovic illustrates how decisions were usually made with a focus on immediate/proximate problems that were addressed within the contours of existing policy. Seldom did policy makers think more deeply and broadly about alternatives or consider how the immediate challenges and responses related to larger national interests and objectives. Consequently, solutions to proximate problems frequently undermined, and were often unrelated to, larger strategic objectives.

Over the course of three wars and five decades there were occasional green shoots of rational decision making. One of these unfortunately rare lapses into rationality was the Bush administration's response to the crisis in Iraq in 2006. With an ongoing insurgency and intensifying Sunni-Shiite civil war ripping the country apart and Iraqi civilian casualties at their highest point since the ouster of Saddam, Iraq was on the edge of an abyss. By the middle of 2006 there may have been a face-saving exit strategy, which is how many viewed the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, but even the most delusional wishful thinkers could not convince themselves that existing policy/strategy would produce a genuinely desirable outcome (with the exception General Casey). In the summer and fall of 2006 there was a near universal recognition that the United States had reached a turning point in Iraq. Though he is a little less favorable toward the so-called 'surge' than I would be, Lebovic nonetheless thinks that the administration's decision-making process at this crucial moment was sound and approached the sort of rational procedure he wishes was more common. In finally rethinking its failing strategy in Iraq "the administration did what it should have done all along: it convened experts, reviewed U.S. options, thought realistically

about the end game, and made a deliberative choice" (182). Though certainly a welcome departure from the norm, it was too late. Whatever its short-term tactical successes, faced with resource and political constraints, the surge ultimately proved inadequate to stave off eventual strategic failure. Unfortunately, just about the only time we see this sort of decision making is upon a change of administrations or when conditions on the ground deteriorate so badly that it becomes almost impossible not to rethink policy fundamentally. But in none of Lebovic's three cases were such flashes of rationality sufficient to alter the outcome.

So where do these tales of irrational myopia lead us? Lebovic ends *Planning to Fail* by summing up the lessons of his study as a series of eight "musts" for decision makers: 1) "recognize that assessment is a continuous process," 2) "guard against ad hoc argumentation," 3) "recognize that sound policy requires comprehensive assessment," 4) "guard against temporizing," 5) recognize the value of dutifully preparing fallback options," 6) "recognize their limited capability to control military and nonmilitary outcomes," 7) "recognize the benefit of reverse engineering decisional problems when confronting threats and opportunities," and 8) "remain wary of the non-decision." (189-92)

Of course, all these admonitions seem perfectly reasonable. I am sure we all wish that foreign policy makers would embrace them. But I am left wondering whether there is any reasonable expectation that they will or can do as Lebovic wishes. In all the cases he examines, decision making was deeply flawed in very similar ways, contributing to eventual failure. Perhaps I missed something, but I found nothing in his analysis that provided any hope that future decision makers will actually do what he thinks they must/should.

This leads to my only major criticism of *Planning to Fail*. In terms of its research design, there is no variation on the dependent variable. That is, in the examination of the American experience in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan we are presented with three excellent case studies that share essentially the same outcome, strategic failure. Presumably, if decision makers adhered to Lebovic's list of musts, we would expect the outcome to be better. But we have no cases of better decision making or outcomes. The overall project, it seems to me, would have benefitted from a case or two which ended in something other than failure.

It may be that there are not many such cases, which in itself might tell us something. One candidate that comes immediately to mind, however, is the 1991 Gulf War. In fact, Lebovic notes in passing that the first Bush administration refrained from expanding the mission during what he would classify as the second stage of decision making. In not continuing/extending the war into Iraq to get rid of Saddam, President George H.W. Bush avoided the big mistake of mission expansion evident in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1991 key decision makers seemed well aware of what might have gone wrong had they attempted to remove Saddam from power after expelling him from Kuwait. This was almost certainly the right decision. Was this because Bush, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell and company actually did what Lebovic thinks policy makers must/should do? Was the decision the result of a rational process more closely resembling Lebovic's list of musts? I suspect the answer is yes.

There are certainly many valuable lessons to be learned by looking at policy failures, and *Planning to Fail* clearly delivers on this front. But the whole endeavor of studying wars where it appears decision makers 'planned to fail' almost cries out for some comparison to instances in which they actually planned to succeed, rare though they may be. That future book might not be quite as depressing.

Response by James H. Lebovic, The George Washington University

I appreciate the time that James Wirtz, Jonathan Caverley, and Keith Shimko took to discuss my book and, of course, the opportunity to respond to their comments. I think they fairly summarize my basic arguments, which frees me to focus on the specific points raised in their reviews.

This is obviously not the book that Caverley would write (in fact, has written).[12] It does not present a single, well-developed theory nor offer formal hypothesis tests. Frankly, I am not sure that I have that kind of book in me. I do believe that the field can benefit, however, from all sorts of academic books. In this one, I sought to appeal to a broad academic-policy audience. I was pleased, then, that the editors thought the draft manuscript suitable for inclusion in Oxford University's Bridging the Gap Series.

Shimko is correct: this is a "depressing" book. I meant it to be. In my defense, I could only work with the material that President Lyndon Johnson, and his successors, bequeathed to me. I do not regret the absence in the book of "feel-good stories" or a case that features a more rational approach to policy. I focus, instead, on the deleterious consequences of "means-driven" policy and accept the superiority of a more rational, goal-driven policy as a given. I observe, then, that the 1991 Gulf War, fought explicitly for more limited aims, did produce a more favorable outcome. I also acknowledge the initial success of the U.S. attacks on Iraq (citing Shimko's excellent book),[13] and on Afghanistan, which drove their regimes from power.

I argue, in short, that cognitive bias severely afflicted U.S. decision-making in the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan wars. Given U.S. unpreparedness for the challenges of asymmetric conflicts, U.S. policymakers focused on key referents, specific to each stage of these conflicts, at the expense of broader mission goals. In the first stage, they focused on immediate mission objectives; in the second stage, they attended to the military tasks at hand, assuming their alignment with broader operational goals; in the third stage, they sought to contain war costs; and in the last stage, they planned for an exit.[14] I start my assessment of these three conflicts with a comprehensive survey of the voluminous literature on the Vietnam War, reframed to fit my basic arguments. I aim to show that that war was not "exceptional" but provides "an essential introduction to the deficiencies of US wartime decision-making" (vii). I establish, in successive chapters, using a range of supportive materials, that the same general maladies tainted U.S. decision making in each of four stages of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. By my count, then, the book investigates *twelve* cases varying in 'hardness' for testing my argument. If my argument is read to pertain to a recurrent war *cycle*, I investigate only three cases. Either way, I exhaust the set of available cases.

I aimed, through the substantive chapters, to *supply evidence* of cognitive bias at work. Caverley refers to that evidence as "mechanisms," as he recounts those pertaining to the first stage of the Vietnam War. There, I build the case that the Johnson administration 'fixated' on the immediate mission without considering overall war objectives. To support my argument, I show, then, that the administration: a) focused on short-term policies apart from their long-term viability, b) put tactics ahead of strategy, c) failed to recognize the unanticipated consequences of preferred policies, d) failed to commit to a single view of the conflict, and e) failed to consider the consequences of adopting 'half measures.'

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[12] Jonathan D. Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[13] Keith L. Shimko, *The Iraq Wars and America's Military Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[14] James H. Lebovic, "The Point of the Afghanistan 'Peace Deal' is Simple: The U.S. Wants to Get Out." *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage (31 January 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/01/31/the-point-of-the-afghanistan-peace-deal-is-simple-the-u-s-wants-to-get-out/.

I agree that what I deem 'evidence' also has causal significance (Caverley's "mechanisms"). In another analysis, they could serve as independent or dependent variables in testable hypotheses. In this book, I sought, instead—in *comparing* these wars—to reveal a recurrent pattern of cognitive decisional bias. I chose, then, to view these "mechanisms" as *symptoms*, specific to a stage of conflict,[15] given the conditions of a conflict.[16]

As for Caverley's other comments, we obviously read sentences differently. Take the following. "My basic argument is simple: policy makers are myopic. They craft policies around visible elements as *if they were the whole picture* (2)." My point here is that policymakers grab a leg, a trunk, or an ear and assume that they are seeing the 'whole elephant.' I thought the meaning was clear: policymakers are biased; and they do not know they are biased. Looking back, I might have doubted the clarity of the sentence: I see that I added italics for emphasis.

Still, I do not know what to make of Caverley's reading. He asserts that these sentences set up an untestable thesis. They suggest that policymakers must be all-knowing, which is "impossible." They also proscribe testing against a counterfactual since such perfect rationality is impossible. He argues further that, in focusing on "'the complex environment of asymmetric conflicts,'" I have chosen the "hard, if not impossible, case for rationality." I am not sure that I understand these points, or how they follow from my text. I can only read them to mean that, in such wars, bias is constant and therefore we need not study cognitive psychology, bureaucratic politics, organizational dynamics, and all the rest, as potential policy influences. If that is his argument, I concede that, had I bolded or underlined the offending text, I would not have addressed his concerns.

Elsewhere, I argue that U.S. wartime policymaking need not inevitably move from one stage to the other. Contrary to Caverley's conclusion that the "point of the book is that such war *almost inevitably* follows the same pathological arc," I state that "policy failure was not preordained; none of the deleterious conflict phases followed inextricably from one another (182)." To be sure, I observe that bias presents insidious decisional challenges that defy correctives and acknowledge that later decisions are seriously constrained by the decision to intervene in the first place. I believe nonetheless that, for instance, a President Hubert Humphrey or Joseph Biden (given their dissents) might have taken the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars, respectively, in a different direction. As Shimko notes, I also have good things to say about the quality of decision making, despite the attending bias, that led the George W. Bush administration to "surge" troops back into Iraq.[17] At the very least, that constitutes an explicit recognition that bias varies in degree, and effect.

I will not quibble over whether "not preordained" or not "inextricably" amounts to "almost inevitably." But, in Caverley's next sentence, "almost inevitably" becomes a constant. Caverley complains that the book fails to allow for *any* variation in outcome, that is, the book "explains a constant with a constant." In short, the book concludes that we cannot overcome bias and are doomed to fail.

I do not live in, nor portray, that world. Indeed, in the book's conclusions, I offer prescriptions for avoiding bias in wartime decision making—indeed, in each phase of conflict. I express no confidence that policymakers will take (or seek) my advice. Still, that chapter was not a cynical exercise. It was not meant to provide the necessary 'uplift' to the book or to sugarcoat my belief that failure, stemming from disabling bias, is inevitable.

I agree that a case study of successful planning would underscore that message. In that sense, I accept Shimko's critique that the book would have benefited had it included a case of wartime success. I also recognize, however, that bias would result

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[15] Together, they amount, however, to less than a well-defined "syndrome."

[16] I note, per Caverley's concern, that I follow the Merriam-Webster definition of "compare": 1) "to represent as similar" or "to examine the character or qualities of especially in order to discover resemblances or differences." See https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compare.

[17] For more on this, see my introduction in https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XXII-7.pdf.

from "selecting on the dependent" variable. The additional case would achieve equal standing with the three wars under scrutiny, though differing from the others in scale, multilateral support, wartime strategy, and mission purposes. The Desert Storm operation, for example, promises a compelling counterpoint to the cases of failure. But how exactly would its "lessons" transfer to the Iraq War of the George W. Bush administration? What "limits" could the United States have observed in planning the 2003 invasion or occupation? The administration could have withdrawn from Iraq with the decapitation of the Iraqi regime; but that invited the host of problems that we subsequently witnessed in Afghanistan. It could have seized and destroyed suspect weapons of mass destruction (WMD) sites, but what if Iraqi President Saddam Hussein later tried to rebuild them? Or suspicions remained that Iraq was hiding illicit weapons elsewhere in the country? If so, what would an invasion accomplish without an ongoing military presence that would invite the kinds of occupational problems that the United States eventually weathered in Iraq?

In other words, armed with the additional case, we could conclude too easily that the specific lessons from 1991 applied to 2003. To the contrary, the thinking and preparation behind the Desert Storm operation suggests that doing nothing was perhaps the superior alternative.

Rather than relying on a potentially misleading case, then, I offer recommendations to prevent and address the kinds of problems that bedeviled U.S. war planning in the three major wars. I believe we can learn much about failure *from studying failure* and that we invite failure when we draw lessons about success from misleading cases. The irony of the Iraq war is that U.S. policymakers learned lessons from the early U.S. "success" in Afghanistan when they could have acquired useful perspective had they reflected on Vietnam.