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Diane Labrosse and Thomas Maddux, H-Diplo/ISSF Editors

George Fujii, H-Diplo/ISSF Web and Production Editor

Commissioned by Thomas Maddux

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Introduction by Robert J. Lieber, Georgetown University

James Lebovic's book, *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq*, provides the basis for a rich and topical debate, not only about America's capacity to intervene effectively in unconventional and asymmetric conflicts, but also about Afghanistan, the recent intervention in Libya, and more broadly about questions of power and primacy.

To put this subject in the context of a wider debate about American power, many of the contemporary authors and pundits who write about what they consider a new era of decline imply that in more halcyon days, the United States could achieve the outcomes it wished. The assumption is largely unexamined, and the Lebovic book provides a valuable reminder that even at the height of its power, and especially from the time of its Vietnam escalation, this was not at all the case. One can add here that there have been other telling examples: withdrawal from Lebanon in 1984 after the bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in the previous year, the Somalia intervention and the "Blackhawk Down" incident in October 1993, and more recently the grinding wars against insurgents in Afghanistan as well as Iraq.

In his book, Professor Lebovic undertakes a thoughtful and detailed study of the Vietnam War and extracts the similarities and lessons from that experience for the United States' recent role in Iraq. Other authors have also dealt with the difficulty great powers face in winning small or insurgency wars, for example Gil Merom's *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), which focused not only on the U.S. in Vietnam, but France in Algeria, and Israel in Lebanon. Lebovic's book is especially useful as a reminder that military intervention in non-conventional wars involves not only problems of asymmetrical warfare, but also other compelling factors such as sharply differing objectives, dependence on third parties, free-riding, international legitimacy, ethical restraints, domestic political support, and competing geopolitical priorities.

Military tactics enter into the picture as well. A fundamental question about the Iraq War is whether that conflict was misconducted or misconceived. For example, Daniel Byman has recently posed this question about Iraq.¹ It is important not only to note the impact of the "surge" led by General David Petraeus in 2007-2008, that largely succeeded in turning back the insurgency, but also a comparable change in tactics in Vietnam in 1968. There, with General Creighton Abrams replacing Gen. William Westmoreland, U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) shifted from costly search and destroy tactics to a more effective clear and hold emphasis along with a buildup of local forces. This allowed the U.S. to withdraw its ground combat troops by 1972, and yet enabled the ARVN, supported by American airpower and naval gunfire, to defeat a main force North Vietnamese invasion in 1972. The South Vietnamese collapse three years later was a consequence not of unconventional warfare, but of congressional halting of U.S. air and naval action and subsequently a cutoff of military assistance so that South Vietnam succumbed to a large scale conventional attack by the North Vietnamese in 1975.

¹ "An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?" *Security Studies*, October 2008.

The four reviewers here provide thoughtful and appreciative treatments of Lebovic's book. They find it a significant contribution, but they pose important questions about context and assumptions. Andrew Bennett credits Lebovic with providing the most complete comparison to date between the interventions in Iraq and Vietnam and for setting out lessons on debates of great relevance to the United States as a democracy and the world's most powerful state. As Bennett notes, Lebovic identifies similarities as well as differences between Iraq and Vietnam. The key similarities include the facts that both were irregular wars involving opponents using guerilla tactics; both were asymmetric wars between a great power, with vast military capabilities but limited in its goals and willingness to sustain casualties, and a much weaker but far more committed adversary; both were wars in which American decision-makers and the public had little prior understanding of local history, languages, and cultures; in both wars, U.S. domestic political dynamics and institutions were very important, including growing public opposition as casualties increased; and both wars involved mid-course changes in U.S. strategies and a lowering of goals and expectations. Yet Lebovic also notes five key differences: Iraq began as a conventional war and became a counterinsurgency, while Vietnam was the reverse; Vietnam involved three times as many U.S. troops and 15 times as many U.S. soldiers killed; in Vietnam America fought nationalist and anti-colonial forces that had Soviet and Chinese backing, while in Iraq the U.S. became enmeshed in a sectarian civil war; in Vietnam the U.S. client state was riven by personal power struggles whereas in Iraq the battle was among societal elements; and in Vietnam the U.S. sought to preserve the status quo while in Iraq it sought to transform the state. Bennett adds to this list of differences, citing the Cold War context, jungle versus urban terrain, and advances in military technology.

While generally praising the book, Bennett does pick up on broader debates. In cautioning against the difficulties of using force in asymmetric wars, Lebovic has emphasized the Weinberger-Powell doctrine regarding war. Named after President Reagan's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and former Secretary of State Colin Powell, this doctrine holds that force should be used only in defense of vital interests, with clear and achievable goals and sufficient force size, that force should be a last resort, and that its use must enjoy public and Congressional support. Here, Bennett makes the point that Lebovic neither cites nor devotes sufficient attention to the competing view of former Secretary of State George Schultz and former Secretary of Defense Les Aspin. From their perspective, the threat of force is often necessary for diplomacy to succeed, force need not always be used when it is threatened, limited force can be used for limited goals, some humanitarian as well as security and economic goals may justify the use of force, Presidents must often act before there is time for Congressional and public opinion to coalesce, and making the use of force an "all-or-nothing" affair only emboldens adversaries to whittle away at American interests. And there are also risks in failing to act on a timely basis, as in appeasement of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s and the Rwandan genocide in 1974.

Bennett raises one other issue about sources and facts. Lebovic writes that the Bush administration "claimed proof of cooperation between Iraq's former leadership and the al-Qaeda network to suggest that Saddam Hussein was behind the World Trade Center

attack". But no source is cited for the statement, and Bennett notes that to his knowledge, neither President Bush nor Vice President Cheney directly asserted such a link.

Sarah Kreps focuses on three key differences between Iraq and Vietnam that either have been deemphasized or omitted altogether in Lebovic's book. First, the scale of Vietnam was vastly different for the U.S. in terms of troop commitments and casualties. Second, the troops in Vietnam were mainly draftees, compared to the all-volunteer force in Iraq, and thus Vietnam was much more salient for the American population at large, which in turn meant greater domestic constraints. Third, the international and regional distribution of power in Southeast Asia imposed significantly greater limitations during the Vietnam era. Iran and Syria have grown in regional influence, but they have not been the vexing factors in Iraq that the Soviet Union and China were during the Vietnam War. Thus, in Vietnam the U.S. faced a scenario over which it had far less agency, and even lower level intervention risked third party responses by two nuclear-armed states, China and the Soviet Union.

Professor Kreps argues that taken together these three factors provide for more divergence between the cases than Lebovic allows. While crediting Lebovic with producing a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers, she asks whether the effect of the author's argument may be a veiled call for neo-isolationism, and she ends by cautioning against the risk of overlearning the lessons of Vietnam and Iraq.

Dominic Tierney praises Lebovic's discussion of the lessons of Vietnam and Iraq as being far more nuanced than most accounts and observes that the controlled comparison of the cases works well. However, he too suggests important questions for further discussion. Tierney takes issue with the principal lessons drawn by the author. First, he asks if the U.S. stakes in asymmetric war really are so low, acknowledging that while this was the case in Somalia, the stakes in Vietnam and Iraq were actually perceived as being high. In Vietnam, these involved the domino theory and America's reputation. (I can add here that in 1967-68, Henry Kissinger, while expressing reservations about the initial commitment to Vietnam, nonetheless emphasized that America's credibility was now at issue and could be damaged by a precipitous withdrawal.)

Second, Tierney asks if the U.S. really is disadvantaged in asymmetric wars. Even when America devotes a smaller slice of its resource pie to a conflict than does its adversary, the U.S. resources are so much greater that it may nonetheless bring considerable weight to a given commitment. In addition, not every insurgency movement is as committed as were the Vietcong and North Vietnam. As he bluntly observes, "Indeed, the militias in 'ethnic conflicts' sometimes turn out to be composed largely of drunken and sadistic bullies who are quite capable of slaughtering unarmed civilians, but run away when confronted with a show of force."

Third, Tierney questions whether the U.S. really is disadvantaged in counter-insurgency relative to conventional interstate war. America lost in Vietnam, but it was—as Lebovic notes—both a conventional war against North Vietnam and a counter-insurgency campaign against the Vietcong. Moreover, in the early twentieth century, the United States defeated insurgencies in the Philippines, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Tierney thus asks if the

lessons of the book would alter if the author considered a broader and perhaps more representative sample of cases. Historically, America's conventional wars have proved to be far bloodier than its counter-insurgency campaigns.

Fourth, Tierney challenges the assumption that the United States is disadvantaged in counter-insurgency relative to other countries. He cites the Soviet Union's loss of 15,000 men in Afghanistan while waging a brutal counter-insurgency that killed one million civilians. He then cautions that the U.S. has no alternative but to prepare for irregular war, and – as does Kreps – warns against assuming otherwise. After Vietnam, there was a similar dynamic where the U.S. military concluded it should never do counter-insurgency again, prepared obsessively for war against the USSR in Europe, and unlearned everything it had learned in Vietnam at such great cost.

For Suzanne Nielsen, the most important contribution of this book is Lebovic's argument that limits to U.S. military capability will probably recur in some shape or form in other asymmetric conflicts. Here she emphasizes the author's insight as to how the U.S. ability to leverage third parties into a conflict to help achieve American goals is likely to be seriously constrained. As a case in point, she cites current difficulties in gaining Pakistan's cooperation vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

Nielsen introduces two broad concerns that might have received more attention by Lebovic. The first of these involves strategic planning and, for both Vietnam and Iraq, the absence of rigorous discussions at the highest levels as to whether the ends sought could be achieved given the means the U.S. was willing to bring to bear. Another issue for Nielsen concerns the structure and capabilities of the American national security apparatus. In all, however, Nielsen highly recommends the book, observing that the author's list of limits on the ability of the United States to gain needed leverage in asymmetric conflicts is both plausible and daunting.

Taken together, these four reviews together with Lebovic's book provide a valuable elaboration and deepening in our understanding of Vietnam and Iraq. Lebovic and Nielsen tend to find these experiences to be much more limiting in terms of the American capacity to intervene, while Bennett, Kreps, and Tierney caution against over-extending the argument and excessively devaluing the importance and utility of force. In all, these reviews and the Lebovic book not only move beyond the often acrimonious and oversimplified treatment of both conflicts, but contribute to a broader grasp of the problems and wider debates about intervention in asymmetric and unconventional conflicts and the uses of American military power.

Participants:

James H. Lebovic is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, military budgets and procurement, democracy and human rights, and international conflict in journals that include the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and the *Journal of*

Conflict Resolution. He is the author of four books including *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge, 2007) and *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins University, 2010). He is currently at work on a book on the United States and nuclear arms control.

Robert J. Lieber is Professor of Government and International Affairs at Georgetown University. He is now writing a book on the future of the American era. His most recent authored book is *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century*, published by Cambridge University Press. In addition, he is author or editor of fourteen other books on international relations, U.S. foreign policy, and energy security.

Andrew Bennett is Professor of Government at Georgetown University. He is the author of *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (MIT Press, 1999), and, with Alexander L. George, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press, 2005). He is currently at work on a book on whether and why American proponents of U.S. military intervention in Iraq in 2003, including politicians, pundits, academics, and military and diplomatic officials, have changed their minds and declared the intervention to have been a mistake.

Sarah E. Kreps is an assistant professor of Government at Cornell University. She is the author of *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Interventions after the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and a number of articles on the use of military force published in such journals as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Security Studies*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, the *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Kreps did her BA at Harvard, MSc at Oxford, and PhD at Georgetown. Between 1999-2003, she served on active duty in the US Air Force.

Suzanne C. Nielsen, a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army, directs the International Relations Program in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point where she teaches courses in international relations and national security. An intelligence officer by background, she has served in the United States, Germany, the Balkans, Korea, and Iraq. Her books include *American National Security*, 6th Edition, which she co-authored, and *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, which she co-edited, both released by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2009. Her dissertation on change in military organizations won the American Political Science Association's Lasswell Award for the best public policy dissertation in 2002 and 2003. A distinguished graduate from the U.S. Military Academy, she also holds a masters and a doctorate in political science from Harvard University. Her research interests include civil-military relations and change in military organizations.

Dominic Tierney is assistant professor of political science at Swarthmore College, and a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He completed his PhD in international politics at Oxford University and has held fellowships at the Mershon Center at Ohio State University, and the Olin Institute and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. His latest book is *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (Little, Brown 2010). Dominic is also the author of *Failing to Win:*

Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics (Harvard University Press, 2006), with Dominic Johnson, and *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America* (Duke University Press, 2007).

Several scholars and countless news reporters and pundits have drawn parallels between the U.S. interventions in Iraq and Vietnam. In *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq*, James Lebovic gives by far the most complete comparison to date, drawing on a wide range of well-chosen sources and acknowledging the differences between the two conflicts as well as emphasizing their similarities. Lebovic frames his discussion in ways that provide policy-relevant lessons on big-picture debates over the challenges that asymmetric warfare, irregular warfare, military occupations, and alliance management pose for the U.S. as both a democracy and the world's most powerful state.

This is an ambitious undertaking, and as both conflicts remain controversial, scholars, policy-makers, politicians, and interested citizens will no doubt find themselves agreeing with Lebovic on some points and disagreeing with him on others. Yet all of these readers, including experts, will benefit from Lebovic's careful and thorough analysis of both the well-trodden historical record of Vietnam and the first draft histories now available of the ongoing conflict in Iraq. Moreover, the lessons Lebovic draws are particularly timely at a moment when, as of this writing, the United States has just become a leading member of the international coalition that is enforcing a "no-fly zone" and engaging in air strikes on pro-Qaddafi ground forces in Libya.

Lebovic focuses single-mindedly on the comparison of Vietnam and Iraq through the book, save for his concluding chapter, where he applies his conclusions to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and other recent and current conflicts. This allows an in-depth comparison focusing on the similarities of the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts. In Lebovic's view the five key similarities are: 1) both were irregular wars involving opponents using guerilla tactics; 2) both were asymmetric wars between a great power, with vast military capabilities but limited goals and limited willingness to bear casualties, and a much weaker but far more committed adversary or adversaries; 3) both were wars in which U.S. decision-makers and the U.S. public had little prior understanding of the local history, languages, and cultures; 4) U.S. domestic political dynamics and institutions were similar in form and function in both cases, including growing public opposition as U.S. casualties increased; and 5) both wars involved substantial mid-course changes in U.S. strategies and a lowering of American goals and expectations

Lebovic also notes five key differences between the two conflicts: 1) Iraq started as a conventional war and became a counterinsurgency, and Vietnam was the reverse; 2) Vietnam involved three times as many U.S. troops and 15 times as many U.S. soldiers killed as in Iraq; 3) in Vietnam the U.S. fought nationalist and anti-colonial forces that had Soviet and Chinese backing, and in Iraq the U.S. became enmeshed in a sectarian civil war; 4) in Vietnam the U.S. client state was riven by personal power struggles and in Iraq the battle was among societal elements; and, 5) in Vietnam the U.S. sought to preserve the status quo and in Iraq the U.S. sought to transform the state.

One could of course add many other differences: the geopolitical context had changed from Cold-War bipolarity to unipolarity; the regional political contexts of the two wars were very different; the U.S. feared the fall of other “dominoes” after Vietnam and the Bush administration initially hoped to cause a democratizing domino effect in the Middle East after Iraq; Vietnam was a rural war fought in jungle terrain and Iraq is an urban conflict; and medical, military, and surveillance technologies changed markedly from Vietnam to Iraq, including not just American technologies but the Iraqi insurgents’ access to such advanced weapons as shaped-charge improvised explosive devices (IEDs), but in both conflicts human intelligence remained more vital than technical intelligence. Lebovic’s detailed case studies note many of these and other differences in passing, but he does not single any of them out as among the most important differences between the conflicts.

In general, Lebovic concludes that it is exceptionally difficult for the United States to succeed in asymmetric wars. In such wars, he argues, America’s goals and its willingness to bear costs and casualties are limited, whereas American adversaries are deeply committed to conflicts in their own neighborhoods. These adversaries are willing and able to bring to bear unconventional and sometimes brutal tactics to offset American military superiority and win over or intimidate local populations. Meanwhile, American allies are inclined to free ride on U.S. efforts, and host governments not only free ride but often engage in corruption so that leaders and their families can reap the fruits of American aid. It is hard for the United States to gain leverage over these governments since their very weakness makes them resistant to any concessions, and pressing them too hard risks their collapse. Public support in the United States for the use of force also tends to diminish over time as casualties increase, and American leaders face the dual challenge of deterring or coercing adversaries by talking tough, threatening long-term commitments, and warning of possible escalation, while at the same time reassuring allies and the American public that the U.S. commitment is not open-ended. These intertwined problems often lead to a growing gap between ambitious goals and limited resources, and in both Vietnam and Iraq they eventually forced the United States to scale back its goals and forces.

Lebovic’s account raises many questions and provides well-argued conclusions on many historical debates. Could the U.S. have “won” in Vietnam or achieved more ambitious objectives in Iraq at sharply lower costs if it had adopted appropriate counter-insurgency strategies from the beginning? Lebovic is skeptical on this regarding both conflicts. Did bombing and other escalatory strategies bring adversaries to the table and create negotiating leverage or only delay settlements? Lebovic is doubtful that escalatory strategies provided much leverage. Does the apparent success of the 2007 “surge” and change in strategy mean that a surge can work in Afghanistan? Lebovic attributes the success of the surge in large part to fortunate developments in Iraq that are unlikely to be repeated in Afghanistan.

Lebovic also addresses many policy-relevant theoretical debates, including that on the costs and benefits of unilateralism versus those of multilateralism providing pros and cons for both sides. I will focus on two key debates: first, the debate over asymmetric wars and the competing “Schultz-Aspin” and “Weinberger-Powell” doctrines regarding these wars,

and second, the controversy over whether democracies that must be sensitive to public opinion can successfully carry out asymmetric and irregular wars.

After the Vietnam war, as Lebovic notes, many scholars outlined the general difficulties the U.S. would face in asymmetric conflicts. Following U.S. setbacks in Lebanon in 1984, then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger enshrined many of these scholars' concerns in what became known as the "Weinberger Doctrine." This doctrine, later embraced by Colin Powell in his positions as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Security Advisor, and Secretary of State, emphasized that force should be used only in defense of vital interests, that it should be used with clear and achievable goals, that sufficient force should be used to achieve designated goals once the U.S. committed to force, that the size and tactics of any U.S. forces deployed should be appropriate and continually updated, that force should be a last resort, and that the use of force should have a "reasonable assurance" of support from the American public and Congress.

Lebovic cites this doctrine explicitly (p. 2), and it resonates strongly with his argument cautioning against the difficulties of successfully using force in asymmetric wars. There is a competing perspective, however, that Lebovic neither cites nor gives the full attention that it deserves. This is the view articulated by Weinberger's bureaucratic adversary, Secretary of State George Schultz, as well as Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, and it is a view shared by many diplomats, scholars and politicians. According to this school of thought, the threat of force is often necessary for diplomacy to succeed, force need not always be used when it is threatened (indeed, successful threats obviate the need to use force), limited force can be used for limited goals, some humanitarian as well as security and economic goals may justify the use of force, Presidents must often act with dispatch before there is time for Congressional and public opinion to coalesce and these audiences may come to approve of force despite initial misgivings, and making the use of force an "all-or-nothing" affair only emboldens adversaries to whittle away at American interests.

Whereas Lebovic, Weinberger, Powell, and others emphasize the lessons of conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, Lebanon in 1984, and Somalia in 1993, and the ongoing challenges of Afghanistan, the Schultz-Aspin school emphasizes successful uses of American forces, including not just those in symmetric conflicts like WWI and WWII but those in asymmetric conflicts in Bosnia (leading to the Dayton Accords in 1995) and Kosovo in 1999. The latter group also points to the costs of failures to use force in the appeasement policies Britain pursued at the Munich conference in 1938 and, more recently, in U.S. inaction during the Rwandan genocide during the Clinton Administration.

It is noteworthy that this debate is being replayed over Libya. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates initially positioned himself in the Weinberger camp by voicing skepticism on the use of force, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sounded more like Schultz and Aspin in arguing that a no-fly-zone could prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Interestingly, Obama Administration officials whose work or professional histories led them to emphasize the Rwanda analogy also argued for the use of force, including U.S. Representative at the United Nations Susan Rice, who had been a Clinton Administration official working on Africa during U.S. inaction over Rwanda, and National Security Council staff member

Samantha Power, who has written extensively on the international community's repeated failure to prevent genocidal violence.

Who is right, either on Libya or more generally? The answer, of course, is "it depends," as many variables play a role in determining success or failure in the use of force. Lebovic does an admirable job of recounting the dilemmas, risks, and costs of using force in asymmetric wars, but in his brief references to Kosovo and his more detailed assessment of the surge in Iraq he attributes success in an ad hoc way to fortunate circumstances unlikely to be repeated. A stronger approach would have been to address more systematically the conditions under which great powers succeed or fail in asymmetric wars, similar to David Edelstein's study of success and failure in military occupations.¹ If, as Edelstein argues in the case of military occupations, a study that includes the full population of asymmetric conflicts shows that great powers end up failing more often than not in asymmetric wars, and if the costs of failures outweigh the benefits of success, this would give greater urgency to the question of why they keep engaging in such wars and help policy-makers better choose the wars at which they are more likely to succeed. Lebovic's book makes an important contribution toward a more comprehensive study of this kind, and such a study is too much to ask of a book that already provides detailed case studies of two major conflicts, but Lebovic could have nonetheless laid the groundwork more clearly for this wider enterprise by giving more consideration to the critics of the Weinberger-Powell doctrine, if only to show more convincingly that their arguments hold only in narrow and well-defined scope conditions.

A second important debate concerns whether democracies as well as great powers are disadvantaged in asymmetric conflicts. Here, Lebovic gives a balanced and nuanced discussion of the relationship between American public opinion and casualties in war, but he does not address in any detail scholars' arguments over whether brutal tactics are necessary or useful in asymmetric wars and whether democracies are willing to engage in such tactics. On the issue of American public opinion, Lebovic notes both the "conventional wisdom" that support for war declines as casualties increase, and academics' arguments that the public to some degree follows leaders' cues and also responds positively to good news in wars. He emerges with a contingent (and I think correct) view: public support depends on the strategic and moral importance of U.S. goals and the likelihood of success, but that support tends to drop as casualties increase, especially because casualties are an unambiguously bad outcome and progress in asymmetric wars is often ambiguous. He adds, however, that U.S. government support for asymmetric wars is surprisingly robust and long-lived, even after the public has come to view such wars as mistakes.

In contrast, Lebovic does not engage the scholarly debate on whether brutal tactics are useful in asymmetric wars and whether democracies are willing to engage in such tactics. Gil Merom has argued that democracies are disadvantaged in asymmetric wars because, unlike their opponents, they are willing neither to use the levels of violence and brutality

¹ David Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

needed to win nor to sustain the high levels of troops and casualties that less brutal tactics would require to succeed.² Alexander Downes argues that democracies have in fact been willing to inflict mass civilian casualties, especially when they face a potential loss in war and/or high casualties of their own forces.³ Ivan Arreguin-Toft has offered arguments on both sides of this debate.⁴ Lebovic includes all three authors in his bibliography, but apart from brief references and a short discussion of U.S. violations of human rights at Abu Ghraib prison, he does not address the important issues they raise.

An ambitious book such as this is bound to raise not only important debates but also quibbles over sources and facts. I have only one worth mentioning: Lebovic maintains without citing a source that the George W. Bush administration “claimed proof of cooperation between Iraq’s former leadership and the al-Qaeda network to suggest that Saddam Hussein was behind the World Trade Center attack” (p. 9). Bush administration officials did indeed say many things that could easily have been inferred as implying such a link, and perhaps as Lebovic argues they even intended to imply such a link. According to public opinion polls, much of the public mistakenly came to believe in such a link. To my knowledge, however, there is no unambiguous statement where either President Bush or Vice President Cheney asserted a direct link between Saddam Hussein and the planning of the 9/11 attacks. Lebovic’s use of the word “suggest” is sufficiently qualified to be consistent with this, but this is an important point on which much has been written, and Lebovic could have explained and documented more fully what Bush, Cheney, and others did and did not say about it.

The Limits of U.S. Military Capability effectively uses the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan to clarify the challenges that asymmetric wars pose for the United States. It arrives at an important juncture at which the United States is drawing down its forces in Iraq, continuing to vigorously carry out a counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan and related efforts in Pakistan, and participating as a coalition member in a new military effort in Libya. With the ultimate outcomes of all these ongoing efforts still in doubt, scholars and policy-makers alike would be well-advised to reflect on Lebovic’s sobering analysis of the causes and costs of overly-ambitious U.S. interventions in Vietnam and Iraq.

² Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³ Alexander Downes, “How Smart and Tough are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security*, 33 (4): 9-51. See also Alexander Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), which Lebovic does not cite.

⁴ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Within three weeks of the United States' invasion of Afghanistan, *The New York Times* had posed the following question: "Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam?" Invoking words like "quagmire" and "stalemate," the veteran journalist RW Apple Jr. concluded that "echoes of Vietnam are unavoidable."¹ Less than a decade earlier, in 1993, critics of the Somalia intervention also summoned Vietnam analogies. *The Washington Times*, for example, cited it as "a mini-Vietnam" and an "eerie reminder of a botched war three decades ago."² Taking its turn in the doghouse, the Iraq War has been the most recent conflict to elicit the Vietnam analogy. Speaking for a number of critics, the late Senator Robert Byrd surmised that "surely I am not the only one who hears echoes of Vietnam."³

When a war takes a turn for the worst, observers instinctively reach for the Vietnam analogy, but most seem to use it as shorthand for a bungled war. Whatever the war in question, rarely is there sustained analysis about whether the Vietnam analogy is the appropriate historical parallel. In *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq*, James Lebovic has provided just that.

Adjudicating the question of whether and why Iraq looks like Vietnam is important because, as Lebovic notes (citing George Santayana), "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." (1) As the title implies, Lebovic believes that the architects of the Iraq War failed to heed the lessons of Vietnam and have consequently repeated the same mistakes. Those lessons, briefly, are as follows:

- Material preponderance does not translate into favorable outcomes when nations are engaged in irregular warfare.
- Reliance on third parties such as local civil society, indigenous populations, or regional powers for a successful outcome constrains the United States.
- A balance of resolve favors the opponent in "a small conflict" in part because the perception of low stakes for the U.S. creates an adverse public opinion environment.
- State-building—including working successfully with a host government and winning over the local population—is a difficult proposition.

Taken together, these challenges amount to a David beats Goliath scenario. This is a familiar and convincing narrative, one that first cropped up in scholarly journals around

¹ RW Apple Jr., "A Military Quagmire Remembered: Afghanistan as Vietnam," *New York Times*, 31 October 2001, 1.

² Rowan Scarborough, "Mission of Mercy Starts to Remind Many of Vietnam," *Washington Times*, 6 October 1993.

³ "Echoes of Vietnam' in Debate over Iraq," *USA Today*, 7 April 2004.

the time of the Vietnam War⁴ and one that has gained currency in the years since the Iraq War.⁵ In fact, one criticism of the book is that it submits both a narrative and sources—such as *Fiasco* and *Cobra II*—that will be well-known to the book’s likely readers.

When thinking about these lessons, it seems reasonable to ponder the ways in which Iraq does *not* resemble Vietnam and the implications of those differences. If it is true that ignoring the past can lead to repetition of the same mistakes, then omitting key differences can also distort the advisability of particular policy prescriptions. This is the qualitative equivalent of omitted variable bias, which neglects important factors and then lends more causal weight to factors that are included in the “model.” To this end, three important differences have been omitted that, if included in the analysis, would have given the impression of more divergence than Lebovic allows.

For one, the scale is different. At its peak, 500,000 troops were serving in Vietnam, compared to about 162,000 in Iraq. Similarly, fatality rates were remarkably different. In Vietnam, the loss rate was 6,968 per year between the peak years of 1965-1972.⁶ In Iraq, the peak year of casualties was 2007, when 971 coalition troops died. If the public’s sensitivity to casualties affects its level of support,⁷ then leaders’ options were far more constrained by the domestic audience in Vietnam than in Iraq.

A second, related difference is that the troops in Vietnam drew largely from a conscription military compared to the all-volunteer force in Iraq. Since the recruits were drafted from the population at large—of course deferments were certainly possible and not uncommon during the Vietnam War—the war was more salient to the median voter, which in turn meant considerably more domestic constraints. This was particularly the case after the 1968 Tet Offensive when the public increasingly registered its belief that the US was “losing ground” in Vietnam.⁸ By comparison, the public has been considerably less exercised about the Iraq War, perhaps in large part because the median voter was not shouldering the burden of war by being drafted. Nor were there “war taxes” levied; indeed, the Bush

⁴ Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics*, 27: 2 (1975); David Baldwin, “Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies,” *World Politics* 31: 2 (1979).

⁵ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” *International Security*, 26: 1 (2001); Jason Lyall, “Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” 63 (2009); Jeffrey Record, “Why the Strong Lose,” *Parameters* (2005-06).

⁶ Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute 2004).

⁷ While there remains some debate on the relationship between casualties and public support, the casualty sensitivity thesis continues to be one of the prevailing arguments in the public opinion literature. See, inter alia, John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1973).

⁸ John Mueller, “Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam,” *American Political Science Review* 65: 2 (1971).

Administration *cut* taxes during the Iraq War. Protests against the Iraq War tend to be more limited than the broad social movements that swept the 1960s and 1970s. Leaders in turn have been under fewer domestic constraints across the period of the Iraq War than in Vietnam.

Lastly, the international and regional distribution of power in Southeast Asia looked different from that of Iraq and imposed considerably more constraints. While states such as Iran and to a lesser extent Syria have grown in regional power and influence over the course of the Iraq War, they have never been the vexing factors that the Soviet Union and China were during the Vietnam War. Moreover, as Lebovic himself observes, the U.S. was in a position of tamping down the effect of meddling third parties in the Middle East: “a US escalation threat arguably prevented key border states—Syria and Iran—from increasing their support for militant groups” (208). In Vietnam, the U.S. faced a problem of a different nature and magnitude. The United States faced a scenario over which it had far less agency. Even lower level intervention risked third party responses by two nuclear-armed states, China and the Soviet Union. In other words, far from solving the problem of third party involvement, escalation only heightened the risk. In short, third party involvement in these conflicts—its presence in Vietnam and absence in Iraq—created two starkly different strategic maps with correspondingly different array of strategic options and constraints.

In the end, Lebovic concludes that when it comes to military force, “less is more.” (229). This conclusion has considerable intuitive appeal, but is more difficult to sustain when taking both factually and counterfactuals into account. For example, this logic would indict what seemed to be the effective implementation of the Powell Doctrine in the 1991 Gulf War. Born out of Colin Powell’s experience with graduated escalation in the Vietnam War, which he saw as too little, too late, the Powell Doctrine called for large-scale, overwhelming force as the key to decisive victory. The US intervened with this lesson as a guide, deploying half a million troops—850,000 when combined with coalition forces—and brought a quick end to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. Was this case of overwhelming force an argument for “more is more” or was the 1991 Gulf War an anomaly with ungeneralizable lessons?

The “less is more” conclusion also raises important counterfactual questions about the conduct of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. Could overwhelming force have ended these wars more quickly and decisively? Lebovic does due diligence to this question and determines that more force would not have succeeded, but we know that less was not more either.

It seems that perhaps the answer to this conundrum and the real conclusion is that “none is more”—in other words, this may be a veiled call for neo-isolationism, which is an interesting but overlooked implication of the Vietnam-Iraq comparison. If the Vietnam War made large-scale intervention unpalatable for decades after the war, should we expect that same outcome when the U.S. leaves Iraq? Secretary of Defense Robert Gates certainly hopes so. In February 2011, he told West Point cadets that “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General

MacArthur so delicately put it.”⁹ It seems that support for “never again” and a “not another Iraq” mentality of isolationism has already gained momentum. An interesting question then becomes, under what conditions will the U.S. be able to undertake another major intervention? Are we condemned, as Robert Jervis has cautioned,¹⁰ to learn from history and make the opposite mistake, not responding to a threat that warrants attention? Can we overlearn the lesson of Vietnam and Iraq? Perhaps this would have taken the analysis too far afield and, as it is, Lebovic has already produced a valuable resource to diplomatic historians, international security scholars, and indeed policy makers.

⁹ Thom Shanker, “Warning against Wars like Iraq and Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 25 February 2011.

¹⁰ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976)1968), 275.

Review by Suzanne C. Nielsen, United States Military Academy

The views expressed are those of the author and do not purport to reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

Over 2,000 years ago, the military theorist and practitioner Sun Tzu wrote, “There are some roads not to follow; some troops not to strike; some cities not to assault; and some ground which should not be contested.”¹ Lest any enthusiasts believe that tremendous military capability exempts the United States from this insight, in this book James Lebovic sets them straight.

In *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability*, the author does not argue that the United States should always eschew the use of force. However, he points out that greater aggregate strength may not be enough to guarantee the United States victory in situations in which its goals are ambitious and yet its national interests at stake are slight. In these situations, outcomes are not best predicted by a comparison of military strategies and capabilities. Instead, success will depend on “the choices of adversary leaders, their foreign allies, indigenous societal leaders, groups, and populations, and the American public such that a military operation essentially becomes a ‘leverage problem’” (2). In sum, “the size, strength, flexibility, and adaptability of the US military do not ensure victory in asymmetric conflicts: US influence—and success—depend on conditions that the United States cannot easily manipulate” (3).

This book makes a number of compelling arguments about the limits of U.S. power. First, while it may be useful for some purposes for theorists and practitioners to examine the aggregate material capabilities of states, greater aggregate power is no guarantee of a state’s ability to achieve a specific policy outcome in particular circumstances. This insight certainly carries over into military affairs. As military theorist and practitioner Carl von Clausewitz pointed out centuries ago, an assessment of comparative military strengths, or “war by algebra,” cannot predict outcomes because it will fail to capture the emotional, psychological, and political dynamics that will shape the course of a military conflict.² Lebovic also probes what it means—and does not mean—that the United States is the world’s sole superpower in today’s unipolar world. While the United States does possess substantial aggregate power, and may be unique in its ability to protect the global commons and to support the status quo among states in multiple regions of the world, U.S. military capabilities are nevertheless “dispersed,” “deficient” for certain purposes, and “depletable” across conflict areas or over time (14-21). Somewhat paradoxically, the great material power of the United States brings with it an accompanying weakness. Because the interests of the United States are global, the United States will be hesitant to commit itself

¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963; Oxford University Press Paperback, 1971), 111.

² Carl von Clausewitz., *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 76.

fully to any one conflict. In this sense, some of the constraints on the exercise of U.S. power will be self-imposed.

While these discussions of power and the implications of unipolarity are valuable, the most significant and distinctive contribution of this book is to point out that limits to U.S. military capability, which have sometimes been interpreted as being unique to particular wars, will probably recur in some shape or form in other asymmetric conflicts. Lebovic explores these limits over the course of five empirical chapters and then summarizes the resulting findings in the book's conclusion. While the primary case studies are the U.S. wars in Vietnam and Iraq, in the concluding chapter the author also briefly explores the potential utility of these findings for understanding the role of the United States in the current war in Afghanistan and for other contexts in which "the intervening power cannot simply impose its will on an adversary" (224).

As one example of an important constraint, the author discusses how the U.S. ability to leverage third parties into a conflict to help achieve U.S. goals is likely to be limited. In the case of the Vietnam War, the pressure that the United States placed on the Soviet Union and China to assist it in bringing North Vietnam to the table for negotiations was limited by the greater priority that the United States placed on its relations with these states. In addition, while the United States initially hesitated to expand the Vietnam War in the local region, its later decisions to introduce forces into Laos and Cambodia did not bring a decisive end to the war and had significant, negative repercussions for these two states. Similarly, in the Iraq War beginning in 2003, the United States had mixed interests with regard to addressing the Syrian and Iranian roles in fueling the conflict in Iraq. The restrained approach chosen by the United States toward these countries was partially incentivized and strongly reinforced by a lack of support among U.S. regional and European allies for any expansion of the war. The author's important contribution here is to point out that while the specific manifestations may vary, limits on U.S. leverage against third parties to U.S. asymmetric conflicts are likely to recur and are likely to be significant. (Think of the current limits on U.S. efforts to gain Pakistan's assistance in ameliorating violent conflict in neighboring Afghanistan as yet one more case in point.)

Overall, the author's list of limits on the ability of the United States to gain needed leverage in asymmetric conflicts is both plausible and daunting. The United States can expect limits on its ability to leverage adversary forces, indigenous populations and societal leaders, adversary leaders, and host governments. In addition, the United States is likely to face constraints imposed by the need to preserve U.S. domestic support and the desire to protect other important U.S. policy goals. Some of the tremendous differences between the Vietnam and Iraq Wars actually strengthen the plausibility of the idea that these limits are likely to manifest themselves across a wide variety of asymmetric conflicts. As an example, both within and across the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts, the ability of the United States to leverage host governments to assist in the achievement of U.S. goals was constrained. In both cases, the United States paid disproportionate costs to achieve its goals due to the host government's inability or unwillingness to provide support.

As mentioned above, the author's point in probing these limitations is not to argue against the use of force as an option for the United States. Instead, by pointing out their existence, the author is arguing that they are foreseeable and persistent and should be taken into account by those considering the use of force. To borrow again from Clausewitz, what matters most in war is "the ultimate success of the whole."³ Efforts to judge whether a particular war was or was not worth fighting have to be made with the benefit of historical hindsight and even then assessments will be subject to controversy. Nevertheless, if the full range of constraints and costs are not taken into account up front, then it is more likely that the United States will experience policy failure or, at a minimum, end up devoting more of its blood and treasure to a conflict than the U.S. interests at stake would seem to justify.

In addition to these major claims, other gems in the book include the brief literature reviews and applications of important strategic concepts. One example is the discussion of signaling, which helps to make clear the many difficulties associated with efforts to communicate a clear message to one's adversary, particularly when the goal is to compel the target to undertake an action that is against the target's interests. A second example is the author's discussion of public support for war policy. Though conclusions in the relevant literature vary, Lebovic makes a reasonable claim that political leaders can expect to find it challenging to maintain public support when the stakes appear to be low, U.S. political elites are divided, costs cumulate, and signs of progress are either non-existent or are hard to read. (See Chapter 4 for these discussions.)

Though the limits to U.S. military capability discussed by the author are important, it seems worthwhile to ask whether strategic planning also deserves a more explicit and thorough discussion. The Vietnam and Iraq wars are both notable for the absence of inclusive, structured, and rigorous discussions at the highest levels of the U.S. government about whether the ends sought could be achieved given the ways and means that the United States would be willing to bring to bear.⁴ Indeed, during the administration of U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, there seem to have been periods during which the United States' aim in Vietnam was simply not to lose. In the case of the Iraq War that began in 2003, Lebovic points out that post-invasion violence "originated in large part in the absence of prewar planning for the aftermath of war" (43). Subsequent changes to make the goals of the United States in Iraq even more ambitious made these challenges even graver. Here is an area where case selection may be an issue. While lack of careful planning may raise costs, the reader is left to wonder how much sound strategic planning and robust efforts to test reality could have improved results. Though good processes do not guarantee success, they may make it more likely that intervening powers will achieve

³ Clausewitz, 177.

⁴ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997); Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

their desired policy outcomes at an acceptable cost—or, given a more complete picture of likely costs, decide not to intervene at all.⁵

Another possible issue that the book may have usefully explored relates to the structure and capabilities of the U.S. national security apparatus. As one of his lessons drawn from the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq, the author notes that “Apart from the question of leverage over host governments, the United States will encounter formidable challenges when building host-government institutions requires accompanying changes in societal values, attitudes, and practices” (212). As the U.S. military has increasingly come to recognize, obtaining security, building institutions of governance, and achieving sustainable economic progress are tasks that need to occur in concert and which military organizations alone are unable to accomplish.⁶ Unfortunately, the executives of government departments and agencies have incentive structures that favor avoiding cooperative tasks such as these.⁷ There is a broad recognition today that progress in the types of conflicts that Lebovic discusses will require a “whole-of-government” approach.⁸ However, actually developing the needed capability and capacity within a diverse array of civilian departments and agencies and then achieving effective collaboration among them and with the military services in operational environments will not be easy to achieve.

All things considered, these two additional issues do nothing to undercut the author’s central claims. No book can cover every single issue and those that are addressed by this book are tackled well. I highly recommend it for students, educators, and practitioners of U.S. national security policy. It is well worth the investment.

⁵ John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam 1954 & 1965* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1989).

⁶ Robert M. Gates, “Landon Lecture,” (speech given at Kansas State University, November 26, 2007), accessed at: www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199.

⁷ James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

⁸ Barack Obama, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 2010).

There is much to like in James Lebovic's book *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability*. It's crisply written, thought provoking and offers a sensible analysis of the challenges that the United States faces in counter-insurgency campaigns. The author's discussion of the lessons of Vietnam and Iraq is far more nuanced than most accounts I have read, and the controlled comparison of the cases works well. However, since praise is less useful than criticism, let me suggest some issues for further discussion.

According to Lebovic, the principal lessons of Vietnam and Iraq are that the United States should understand the limits of its power, the pitfalls of using force, and therefore adopt restrained goals. The basic argument is summarized early on: "US military capabilities are fundamentally limited and...US costs rise and benefits diminish appreciably in wars in which the US stakes are low and its goals broad and ambitious" (2). Furthermore, Lebovic writes that, "The United States is disadvantaged in these contests given quantitative and qualitative limits on US capability, potential US aversions and concerns, and strong resistance to US goals from local adversaries *and allies*" [italics in original] (3).

Are the Stakes Low?

Is it true that U.S. stakes are low in asymmetric war? Lebovic argues for the existence of "a paradox of power," whereby "the more capability a state possesses, the lower its stake in any given conflict" (209). In other words, while the insurgent adversary is totally committed to victory, the United States faces competing global priorities and therefore displays a limited commitment.

U.S. stakes are low in certain conflicts against insurgents—the intervention in Somalia in 1992-1994 is a good example. But U.S. stakes were not perceived as being low in Vietnam or Iraq. In Vietnam, two factors heightened the stakes: the domino theory, and the obsessive concern with America's reputation. Lyndon B. Johnson may have declined to mobilize the reserves, but he did send half-a-million ground troops to Vietnam.

The supposed paradox is not convincing. Greater U.S. capabilities and global commitments may have *magnified* the perceived stakes in Vietnam. Retreat was seen as having devastating consequences for America's broader position. Consider the counterfactual: if the U.S. were weaker would it really have believed it had *more* at stake fighting in Vietnam?

Is the U.S. Disadvantaged?

Is the U.S. "disadvantaged" in asymmetric war, and, if so, relative to what exactly? There are at least four respects in which this could hold true.

First, the United States could be disadvantaged *relative to its expectations*. In other words, when it begins missions, it does not fully anticipate the challenges that Washington will face. Therefore success "inevitably falls short of the intervening power's initial goals" (227).

And indeed, the United States is often the victim of overconfidence about the speed with which foreign countries can be transformed in nation-building operations.¹

Second, the United States could be disadvantaged *relative to the insurgent forces*. As Lebovic writes, “Relative to its adversary, the United States is disadvantaged by its weaker resolve and smaller resource share invested in a small conflict” (209).

Here, it’s true that the United States usually has a smaller slice of its resource pie invested in the struggle, although this is balanced by the United States’ far greater total resource pie. Whether Washington displays lower resolve than its insurgent adversaries is an empirical question. Certainly, this was the case in Vietnam. But not every insurgency movement is as committed as the Vietcong. Indeed, the militias in “ethnic conflicts” sometimes turn out to be composed largely of drunken and sadistic bullies who are quite capable of slaughtering unarmed civilians, but run away when confronted with a show of force.²

The book is mostly focused on the challenges faced by the United States when it fights insurgents. Indeed, at times, Lebovic implies that the adoption of insurgent tactics is a relatively straightforward way of humbling the United States. There is little consideration of how things look from the insurgent perspective. A rebel might conclude that Lebovic underestimates the difficulties that the guerrillas face. After all, they have taken up insurgent tactics precisely because they are too weak to overthrow the regime and eject U.S. forces. And success is hardly pre-ordained. Each challenge encountered by the United States is mirrored by an equal or greater challenge faced by the insurgents. Washington finds it hard to work with the host government: but the insurgents don’t have a host government to work with.

Third, the United States could be disadvantaged in counter-insurgency *relative to conventional interstate war*. At first glance this seems self-evident. Just contrast America’s struggles in battling insurgents in Vietnam and Iraq with its record of zero (clear-cut) defeats in conventional war.

But on reflection, the notion of consistent U.S. success at conventional war, and consistent U.S. failure at counter-insurgency, gets murkier. America lost in Vietnam but this campaign was—as Lebovic notes—simultaneously a conventional war against North Vietnam and a counter-insurgency campaign against the Vietcong. Over time, the war actually shifted away from an insurgency and more toward a conventional struggle.

Furthermore, widening the historical lens, the U.S. record against insurgents improves. In the early twentieth century, for example, the United States defeated insurgencies in the Philippines, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Lebovic recognizes that the Vietnam and

¹ For overconfidence about nation-building in Vietnam and Iraq see Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

² John Mueller, “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War,’” *International Security* 25:1 (Summer, 2000): 42-70.

Iraq cases are “exceptional” (3). Of all of America’s experiences fighting insurgents, Vietnam and Iraq are the two most costly exercises. Would the lessons of the book alter if the author considered a broader and perhaps more representative sample of cases?

In addition, America’s conventional wars have proved to be far bloodier than its counter-insurgency campaigns. If we put Vietnam to the side because it blurs the two categories of conventional war and counter-insurgency, and if we include the Civil War as a conventional war, there is a striking finding: for every American who has died fighting insurgents, over one hundred Americans have died battling enemy states. Washington certainly faces “leverage” problems engaging insurgents. But it faced equal or greater leverage challenges in conventional war, for example, attempting to coerce China and North Korea and keep the coalition united in the Korean War.

Fourth, the United States could be disadvantaged in counter-insurgency *relative to other countries*. The book does not offer such a comparison, but it would be tough to argue that the U.S. record is inferior to that of other states. It’s true enough that America maintains a “finite capacity to project power inland” (21) —but then again, which country doesn’t? During the 1980s, for example, the Soviet Union lost 15,000 men in Afghanistan waging a brutal counter-insurgency that killed one million civilians. Which superpower is “disadvantaged”?

Avoid or Embrace?

The usually implicit, but occasionally explicit, message of the book is that the United States is ill-suited to asymmetric war and should avoid this type of mission. Lebovic writes that “critics of military transformation rightly ask whether the United States should engage in irregular warfare, which places the United States at a comparative disadvantage” (20).

But the problem is that the United States has no alternative but to prepare for, and engage in, irregular war. For one thing, victory in conventional war often leads to nation-building and irregular war, for example, after the Civil War (southern Reconstruction), the Spanish-American War (the Philippines), or more recently, in Afghanistan and Iraq. “You break it, you own it,” as the saying goes. Here, the stabilization phase is often essential to the overall success of an operation. The U.S. military is either prepared for this endeavor or it is not.

And the United States may need to engage in asymmetric conflicts in other situations. For example, Lebovic hints that he would have favored U.S. intervention in Rwanda (225), “to stop a genocidal slaughter of monumental proportions.”

The danger of Lebovic’s argument is that it could contribute to a gathering backlash against nation-building (including counter-insurgency, peacekeeping, and humanitarian intervention). Given the understandable public weariness with the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and given a traditional U.S. aversion to nation-building, many Americans will be attracted to the idea of focusing on conventional campaigns by planning for conflicts against China or Iran. After Vietnam, there was a similar dynamic where the U.S. military concluded it should never do counter-insurgency again, prepared obsessively

for war against the USSR in Europe, and unlearned everything it had learned in Vietnam at such great cost. The United States has to be careful to avoid this mistake again.

Recently, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned against: “the kind of backsliding that has occurred in the past, where if nature takes its course, these kinds of capabilities—that is counterinsurgency—tend to wither on the vine.”³

Let me end by restating that I found Lebovic’s book to be thoughtful, well written, and extremely stimulating, and I hope that its arguments are widely read and carefully considered.

³ <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1240>

Author's Response by James H. Lebovic, The George Washington University

I appreciate the time and care that the roundtable participants put into their reviews. I am especially grateful for this opportunity to respond to the reviews, to clarify some points and resolve some unanticipated disputes. Whereas Andrew Bennett and Suzanne Nielsen assume that I am advocating that the United States intervene abroad with care and Bennett notes that my argument “resonates strongly” with the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, Dominic Tierney takes my logic to imply that the United States should avoid asymmetric wars. Sarah Kreps goes even further and argues that my book is a “veiled call for neo-isolationism” and notes that my “logic would indict” the Powell Doctrine, as applied (successfully) in Desert Storm.

I concede that I contribute to this disagreement by intentionally avoiding judgments, in the book, about whether the United States should have invaded Iraq, withdrawn from Iraq sooner rather than later, acted multilaterally rather than unilaterally, or intervened abroad only when its national interests were directly threatened. In my view, such advocacy would distract from my central argument about the challenges of U.S. involvement in asymmetric conflicts. Above all else, I wanted to communicate that all such conflicts require that the United States employ scarce and fleeting leverage – under trying political, economical, social, and psychological conditions – when addressing any one problem requires, and may make more difficult, the solving of others. Although I eschew labels, it is fair to say that my arguments place me in the “look-before-you-leap” school of foreign policy.

Drawing from the Powell Doctrine (as defined in the Bennett review), I assume that the United States should act within its means. I depart from that Doctrine by arguing that the United States need not act only when its national interests are threatened directly. Although my book is agnostic on the issue of humanitarian intervention, I am not. I believe that, sometimes, the need to avert human catastrophe requires that the United States accept the risks of intervention and simply “do what’s right.” But I also believe that U.S. policymakers must not read the Rwanda tragedy into every conflict – to see the failure to act there as reason now to act everywhere, without concern for the effects that intervention will have on the capability to respond in other conflicts. It must be remembered that Western governments proved unwilling to intervene in Rwanda, in 1994, to stop a genocide of monumental proportions after having weathered the unanticipated costs of the intervention in Somalia. I take issue with the Doctrine, as well, on the necessity of employing overwhelming force. I argue that a bigger force in Iraq could have created other problems for the U.S. mission, just as a smaller initial commitment (e.g., in Vietnam) could help set an operation up for failure. Simply put, I argue that means should fit the goals and goals should fit the means. Too often, the United States has acted abroad without a clear sense of what it had to accomplish or what it could accomplish given the means that were available for a task. Indeed, the Libyan intervention (mentioned by Bennett) has all the markings of yet another instance of the United States pursuing an ambitious set of goals with inadequate capabilities, with the potential for making matters considerably worse.

The imposition of a no-fly zone (and aerial support for the rebels) could prove a recipe for a short or long-term stalemate that will leave the current regime (or its remnants) in power, breed dissension within the anti-Gaddafi alliance, expose the United States to criticism for having overreacted or under-reacted, prolong the period over which the feared bloodbath occurs, position the rebels to commit rights abuses of their own, and leave Western governments unwilling to respond in other places, where they might actually do considerable good. Finally, I take issue with the Doctrine's implication that the United States can devise a definitive standard to guide intervention. In my view, U.S. policymakers can reasonably disagree over the nature and weight of the criteria to employ or whether the criteria were met in a particular instance. My hope in writing my book was to inform these disputes, not end them, and perhaps even to fuel disputes when debate has ended prematurely. I concede, then, that my basic argument is a familiar one. I take that as validation of sorts. I offer a seemingly obvious lesson that we have too often had to relearn.

I would also like to address a number of the specific issues that the reviewers raised about my argument. Because these issues are so varied, I will address them by discussing each of the reviews in turn.

Bennett does a fine job of presenting my major points and their subtle implications. He does, however, pose two important questions. First, drawing from the arguments of Les Aspin and George Schultz, Bennett notes the utility of the mere threat to employ U.S. force and wonders if my trepidations about intervention might prevent the United States from acting successfully with minimal effort. I am sympathetic to that argument and believe that the threat of intervention – implicit or otherwise – can push U.S. adversaries to bargain in good faith and make otherwise unobtainable concessions. But I also worry about threats that are made with the false assumption that the adversary will cave under duress. I fear that U.S. policymakers will resort to threats as a low-risk approach when stakes are insufficiently high to justify U.S. intervention, and then feel compelled to act on those threats when they fail and U.S. credibility is now at stake. Second, Bennett asks whether I would have reached a different conclusion had I acknowledged that democracies do act brutally in conflicts in order to bring a quick settlement and avoid the domestic political fallout of a prolonged and costly war. I concede, in theory, that brutality is a significant source of “leverage” in asymmetric conflicts. But I also believe that it might not produce a more favorable outcome – as the (undemocratic) Soviet Union demonstrated in Afghanistan – or prove a viable option for the United States, as a *democracy*, in the information age. For that reason, the United States and its allies went to great lengths in Iraq and Afghanistan to limit the civilian toll.

Nielsen nicely develops a number of key arguments from my book. But she does ask two critical interrelated questions that I should have addressed more thoroughly in the text. She asks whether U.S. success in a conflict can be improved with exhaustive strategic planning and whether U.S. policy will be challenged by the difficulty of resolving rivalries and bridging organizational divides within the U.S. government. My hope is that studies such as mine will lead to more judicious assessments of the benefits, costs, and risks of U.S. military missions – before they are launched. I recognize, however, that any such planning is impaired by the need to proceed with haste in crises and the challenges of understanding

the complexities of a conflict *before* the United States has intervened. I recognize further that planning and implementation are impaired by the difficulty in coordinating policies and programs across a vast bureaucracy. Thus, Nielsen's point about the challenges of working within and around the U.S. government are well-taken. It suggests that U.S. leaders will find themselves short on "leverage" in various intra-governmental asymmetric conflicts that sometimes override the foreign asymmetric conflict within which the U.S. government is ostensibly engaged.

Kreps highlights key differences between the Vietnam and Iraq wars, with the implication that the neglect of these differences led me to overstate the constraints on U.S. policymakers in Iraq. She is certainly correct that the variables she identifies are the potential bases of an "omitted variables" bias. These variables, if excluded, could render the conclusions dependent – by default – on factors that are included in the analysis. For that reason, I subjected each of the factors that she identifies to extended treatment in the book. My point was that it is easy to compile a checklist of "obvious" differences between the two conflicts – their scale, societal demands, and participants. It is quite another to establish that they were consequential. By showing that these differences did *not* produce varying effects, I strengthen the case (through falsification) that the factors I identify *are* critical to explaining the conflict outcomes. Kreps focuses her attention on three variables.

First, Kreps argues that the Vietnam and Iraq wars differed significantly in scale – in the size of the U.S. force and its casualty levels. Specifically, she argues, "if the public's sensitivity to casualties affects its level of support, then leaders' options were far more constrained by the domestic audience in Vietnam than in Iraq." Kreps implies that considering the high number of U.S. troop casualties in Vietnam would have led me to a different conclusion: the U.S. public's support for a war effort drops as casualties increase and thus U.S. leaders had far more room for discretionary action in Iraq than in Vietnam. But the casualty thesis, within which Kreps grounds her argument, is unrelated to the overall scale of a war effort: it is posited and tested by focusing upon *change* in war support as troop casualties in a conflict increase over time. In other words, it does not assume a constant drop, across conflicts, in support per unit of U.S. troop deaths. Regardless, as I show in Chapter 4, the data do not support her thesis: what is remarkable about public opinion in the Vietnam war was that public remained fairly supportive of the Vietnam effort for years (up until the 1968 Tet offensive), despite the U.S. toll, and that public support for the Iraq war plummeted rapidly, despite the relatively small number of U.S. casualties, ultimately to the lowest levels of U.S. public support for the Vietnam war. I conclude the discussion by noting that there are many reasons to doubt that the public responds only to casualties or to casualties *per se*, that is, casualties as other than "bad news," that combines with other bad news and indicates to the public that the war is not going well or will impose prohibitive costs.

Second, Kreps argues that the Vietnam and Iraq wars differed in their societal footprint given the presence of a Vietnam-era draft. With sensitivity to that possibility, I show (in Chapter 4) that both Lyndon Johnson and George Bush had to deal with critical societal wartime constraints. Johnson refused to mobilize the U.S. reserve force, which would have extended the effects of the Vietnam war to include a larger percentage of the population

and more advantaged social and economic groups. The Bush administration – absent a return to the draft (for which there was little public support) – had to place the entire burden for prosecuting the Iraq war on the U.S. volunteer force. In the end, both administrations had to contend with a finite pool of budgetary and labor resources that “society” made available for the war efforts, and had to compromise wartime goals, in consequence. The Johnson administration accepted a stalemate in Vietnam; the Bush administration accepted a lessening of violence in Iraq without significant progress at bridging sectarian divides. Once again, I establish that an alleged difference between the administrations did not produce a different outcome.

Third, Kreps argues that Iran and Syria were never the “vexing factors” for the United States in Iraq that the Soviet Union and China were to the United States in Vietnam. She is not clear on what made these countries peculiarly vexing, given the self sufficiency of the Viet Cong in the early years of the war effort, Hanoi’s defiance of its major power patrons, growing U.S. confidence that these powers would not intervene directly in the war, and the relatively large role of border states in providing direct and indirect support to Hanoi. Without question, the United States (especially in the Johnson administration) acted in Vietnam out of concern for an expanding war effort. But the reality, as I detail at length in Chapter 3, is that the United States acted with far less restraint in Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam war than the United States did toward Syria and Iran during the Iraq war. Indeed, the United States subjected the former to intense bombing, actively supported loyalist groups there, took the ground war into Cambodia (in 1970), and provided aerial support for a South Vietnamese incursion into Laos (in 1971). In contrast, the United States worked ardently during the Iraq war to prevent a regional contagion and spillover of effects that would provoke U.S. adversaries and alienate U.S. allies. The U.S. approach to Iran was confounded, for example, by the necessity of gaining its cooperation to halt its nuclear program, to exercise restraint in arming and training Shiite militia in Iraq, and to prevent a proxy war via Hezbollah against Israel and U.S. interests worldwide. Conversely, by ignoring constraints on the U.S. capability to shape conditions in border states, the United States ultimately sacrificed Laos and Cambodia to the U.S. effort in Vietnam.

Tierney identifies a large number of issues regarding my thesis in the course of discussing my book. His points deserve serious consideration, though they do not undermine my thesis.

First, Tierney challenges the underpinnings of the “paradox of power” that I identify in Chapter 4: “with power comes responsibilities that tax the capabilities of a preponderant party and reduce its stakes in ‘small’ conflicts.” He argues that the power of the United States actually increased its perceived stakes in Vietnam and that, to accept my logic, is to argue that the United States would be threatened less if it were weaker. He is correct that the U.S. stakes in Vietnam were magnified by the fact of U.S. power but “small” here is a relative term: the all-important questions, though, are whether U.S. stakes were small when considering enormous and far-flung U.S. global obligations (such as defending Europe against a Soviet attack) and whether the assumption that the stakes were great in these (small) conflicts could survive their mounting costs. The wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan suggest that the answer to the latter question is a resounding, “no.” In any

case, the basis of the paradox is that perceived U.S. stakes stem from U.S. strength, not weakness.

Second, Tierney implies that adversaries in asymmetric conflicts are often far less formidable than I imagine – indeed, that the United States might find itself facing a less-than-worthy adversary that can be dispatched with relative ease. But the irony of “small” adversaries is that, by definition, they might not warrant a U.S. response and, if they do, it’s because they are the tip of an iceberg of a challenge. To put it bluntly, rarely will the United States find itself reenacting *High Noon*, solving problems with a quick draw and a convincing squint. As much as I respect the prowess of the U.S. military, I fear the consequences of intervention that is predicated upon the assumption that the United States need only stare down a bunch of drunken cowards, petty thieves, or sadistic thugs to right some wrong or bring peace to the town folk in some part of the world. For example, I have no doubt that a major display of U.S. naval and aerial force could deal – at least, temporarily – with the existing “pirate” problem off the Somali coast. The issue is whether the United States has the resources to spare for that purpose and whether solving the problem in that way will create new – perhaps, bigger – problems for the United States. That is the likely result inasmuch as the piracy problem has arisen from social, economic, and political maladies, that is, from Somalia’s standing as a failed state. Unfortunately, the history of U.S. intervention – in Somalia, for that matter – is replete with examples of U.S. policymakers underestimating their adversary and understating the challenges that U.S. soldiers would confront.

Third, Tierney argues that leverage challenges arise in conventional conflicts, that these conflicts have proven consistently more costly to the United States than counterinsurgencies have, that the United States might be no more disadvantaged in asymmetric conflicts than other powers are, that the United States has a larger resource pie from which to draw than do U.S. adversaries in asymmetric conflicts, and that the war in Vietnam involved conventional and non-conventional stages. I agree entirely – and believe that my argument still holds.

Fourth, Tierney maintains that the U.S. disadvantages in insurgencies come with accompanying disadvantages for insurgents. For example, the United States might have to wrangle with host governments but insurgents have no host government upon which to rely. The fact is, however, that insurgents in South Vietnam did establish governance, collect taxes, maintain order, dispense “justice,” and institute a draft. They were actually advantaged by offering an alternative to a host government that was widely viewed as ineffective and corrupt. In Iraq, the insurgents capitalized similarly on the widely held view among Sunnis that they were being persecuted by the Baghdad government.

Fifth, Tierney argues that my conclusions would change if I examined a larger set of cases that included U.S. interventions in the early twentieth century in the Philippines and elsewhere. I concede that it might – but not necessarily to produce viable inferences. After all, global conditions – norms, communication technologies, and public awareness – have changed since the days of the horse and buggy. I am more impressed with the consistency

of evidence that is drawn from the large-scale military efforts of recent decades than with evidence drawn from cases that were selected to represent an undifferentiated universe.

Sixth, Tierney maintains that the United States has no choice but to prepare for irregular war if only because conventional wars have eventually proven to require stabilization efforts. I agree. But I recognize that the United States must balance its commitment to counterinsurgency with the demands of preparing for other contingencies. I also worry that preparing for counterinsurgency will leave the United States vulnerable to the “law of the instrument.” Capability to perform a mission is a blessing and a curse if it leads the United States to seek opportunities to use that capability.

Finally, Tierney wonders if I am becoming part of the problem by feeding the public perception that U.S. involvement in irregular conflict is tough and costly. Although I suffer from the delusion that my work will have a large impact, I submit that blaming academics and journalists for the Vietnam syndrome is like shooting the messenger. Worse, it impedes the recognition that the inevitable cost of misguided ventures is a loss in the capability to act, again, when necessary.

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