

# H-Diplo | ISSF

Roundtable, Volume III, No. 9 (2012)



A production of H-Diplo with the journals *Security Studies*, *International Security*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the International Studies Association's Security Studies Section (ISSS).

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF> | <http://www.issforum.org>

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

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

Commissioned for H-Diplo/ISSF by Thomas Maddux

---

Dominic Tierney. *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires and the American Way of War*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010. ISBN: 978-0316045155 (hardcover, \$27.99).

Published by H-Diplo/ISSF on 22 February 2012

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-3-9.pdf>

## Contents

---

Introduction by James H. Lebovic, George Washington University .....	2
Review by Stephen A. Bourque, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College .....	5
Review by Christopher Gelpi, Duke University .....	11
Review by Bruce W. Jentleson, Duke University .....	15
Review by Jon Western, Mt. Holyoke College .....	18
Response by Dominic Tierney, Swarthmore College .....	21

---

## Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu)

Introduction by James H. Lebovic, George Washington University

---

**D**ominic Tierney's *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Ways of War* is an unusual achievement. It is a provocative scholarly book about the U.S. approach to war that was written for a broad non-academic audience. For the academic and layperson alike, it succeeds in establishing that the heated controversies of the moment follow a familiar pattern. Indeed, it is impossible to read Tierney's book without reflecting upon recent events. The Obama administration has struggled mightily to define (and redefine) the U.S. mission in Afghanistan; it has announced deep defense cuts though the United States remains at war; and with the shift in defense budgetary priorities, it will trim the very capabilities (for counterinsurgency) that U.S. leaders had once viewed as keys to success in Iraq and Afghanistan. But what led the administration finally to act? Was the administration recognizing belatedly that the public would not tolerate nation-building efforts? Or had the clock simply run out on the U.S. effort?

For Tierney, the current U.S. war in Afghanistan – a brief but fitting endpoint in his book – recapitulates lessons learned from a long history of U.S. foreign military intervention. From the American Civil War to the present, the message is clear: the United States (and its public) embraces 'crusades' – interstate wars for total victory that inflict great casualties and destruction – but resists the 'quagmires' of nation-building for their low return and prohibitive costs in U.S. lives and resources. As Tierney surmises, "Americans are addicted to regime change and allergic to nation-building." (7) To be sure, his thesis invites controversy. Indeed, three basic concerns and criticisms resonate through the roundtable contributions.

First, the participants question Tierney's evidence – its sources, selection, and interpretation. They claim, for instance, that he confuses the rhetoric that leaders employ to sell wars with their actual purposes, relies upon anecdotes and generalizes from limited facts, and draws the wrong conclusions from available facts. The participants observe, then, that the behavior that Tierney associates with a U.S. crusade is unexceptional by interstate standards (for instance, Germany and Japan were hardly indiscriminate in their use of violence); U.S. public support for the war against Japan *did* waver; the United States (in the course of its "crusades") moderated terms for surrender (as against Japan) or accepted limited goals from the outset (in the first Gulf War); U.S. leaders have had to contend mainly with public indifference, not demands for a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan; and the United States has engaged in nation-building operations (in such places as Kosovo and Bosnia) with little public dissent over long time periods.

Second, the participants question the usefulness of placing all U.S. military missions into two categories that are neither exclusive of one another nor exhaustive of the possibilities. As they argue, nation-building was frequently a noncontroversial part – even a defining feature – of those U.S. military missions that Tierney associates with the crusade tradition. In actuality, World War II gave birth to the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe, nation-building in Vietnam was an inextricable part of the interstate U.S. battle to contain the spread of global Communism, and so forth.

Third, the participants question the very utility of Tierney's categories by asking whether delineating a 'crusade' and a 'quagmire' tradition conflates the goals of a given mission with the military consequences and (supportive or allergic) popular response to the mission. The conflating of causes and effects raises fundamental questions. Why would an "allergic" public initially rally behind operations that transparently involve nation-building? Put differently, why did it take painful lessons to remind people that they don't like nation-building? After all, they liked these operations enough initially that we can identify a downward shift in popular support for them. Perhaps, as multiple participants conclude, the U.S. public is not allergic to nation-building; it is allergic to failure. In Western's words, "it may be that Americans support nation building that works." Thus, any U.S. administration that involves the United States in an *unrewarding* conflict will eventually confront the limits of U.S. resources, and public patience. The public wants the U.S. military to win – perhaps, quickly, and emphatically – and then come home.

One can agree or disagree with Tierney's thesis. But no one can dispute that his ambitious undertaking generates much-needed debate on a timely topic. That his writing is fluid and accessible makes it more likely that he will reach both scholarly and policy audiences.

### **Participants:**

**Dominic Tierney** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Swarthmore College, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and an official correspondent at *The Atlantic*. He completed his Ph.D. in international politics at Oxford University. Dominic has published three books: *Failing to Win: Perceptions of Victory and Defeat in International Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2006), with Dominic Johnson, which won the International Studies Association award for the best book published in 2006; *FDR and the Spanish Civil War: Neutrality and Commitment in the Struggle that Divided America* (Duke University Press, 2007); and *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (Little, Brown, & Co., 2010). He is currently working on a book project about negotiating with U.S. enemies.

**James H. Lebovic** is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Southern California. 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: U.S. National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge, 2007) and *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins University, 2010). He has completed work on a book on the United States and strategic-nuclear arms control from the Truman to Obama administrations.

**Stephen A. Bourque** (BA, Florida State University; MA, Ball State University; MMAS, U. S. Army Command and General Staff College; Ph.D. Georgia State University), is currently

professor of history in the School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, where he teaches the operational art of war. He has taught at Georgia State University and Kennesaw State University in Georgia; Moorpark College and California State University, Northridge in California, and the University of Kansas, the Naval War College. He is the author of several articles and books including *Jayhawk! The VII Corps in the 1991 Persian Gulf War* (2002), *The Road to Safwan* (2007), and *Soldiers' Lives: The Post Cold War Era* (2008). He is currently working on a manuscript on the Allied bombing of France in during the Second World War.

**Christopher F. Gelpi** (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1994) is Professor of Political Science at Duke University. His primary research interests are the sources of international militarized conflict and strategies for international conflict resolution. He is currently engaged in research on American public opinion and the use of military force, and on statistical models for forecasting military conflict and transnational terrorist violence. He is author of *The Power of Legitimacy: The Role of Norms in Crisis Bargaining* (Princeton University Press, 2002), co-author (with Peter D. Feaver) of *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton University Press, 2004). and co-author (with Peter Feaver and Jason Reifler) of *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

**Bruce W. Jentleson** is Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at Duke University. His most recent books are *The End of Arrogance: America in the Global Competition of Ideas*, with Steven Weber (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century* (W.W. Norton, 4th edition 2010). His policy world experience included having served as Senior Advisor to the State Department Policy Planning Director (2009-11).

**Jon Western** is Five College Professor of International Relations at Mount Holyoke College and the Five Colleges, Inc. Most recently, he is the co-editor, with Patrice C. McMahon, of *Getting Its Act Together? The International Community and Statebuilding* (forthcoming, Routledge 2012) and author of *Why Bother? The Rise and Fall of U.S. Statebuilding from Sarajevo to Kabul* (forthcoming in 2013).

Review by Stephen A. Bourque, School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

---

For the last decade, a relatively small, professional American military has fought two extensive wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. Prompted by the events of September 11, 2001, Afghanistan, the home of al Qaeda, experienced the first intervention. Early images of special forces soldiers on horseback, chasing the terrorists and their supporting Taliban government into the mountains, resulted in outpourings of popular support for then-President George W. Bush and his 'war on terror.' Nine years later, the luster is gone. Terrorist Osama bin Laden lies at the bottom of the ocean, officials question the dedication of the United States' most important ally, and a successor president looks for a way out.

The conflict in Iraq has been even more contentious. Beginning with the premise that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein possessed large quantities of chemical weapons and was a threat to America, U.S. forces preemptively invaded old Mesopotamia and toppled the dictatorship. The joy of victory was great, yet soon dissipated after the military failed to find the promised weapons and found itself fighting a growing insurgency. By 2006, the obvious presidential mismanagement of the war caused the public outcry to become deafening. President Bush tried to salvage the situation by replacing a few members of his previous military leadership with a new Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates and a new ground commander, General David Petraeus. Following a changed focus and a moderate increase in troops, misnamed the 'surge,' American forces began to bring stability to Iraq. With President Barrack Obama in office, the public criticism has lessened as the United States military turns over the task of security to a shaky Iraqi government, with all troops leaving Iraq at the end of 2011.

In general, there has been little American public questioning of the conduct of these wars. Once the emotional rush of the initial engagements had passed, most Americans heeded President Bush's advice and went on living their lives. Meanwhile, beyond the view of most of the population, a generation of dedicated public servants said good-bye to their families every two to three years and returned to the combat zone. Returning soldiers often comment on how little their civilian friends know, or care, about what they experienced during their tour in the combat zone. While selected commentators and politicians argued about the value of the "surge" into Iraq, or various counter-insurgency strategies in Afghanistan, the average American displayed little passion for the fight. Only when there was obvious incompetence, such as during the period leading up to the dismissal of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2006, did average Americans loudly criticize their government's conduct of these wars. Although these wars are a major contributor to the current debates over the national financial deficit, current Republican presidential contenders have said little about these conflicts in their recent debates.

Dominic Tierney believes that these conflicts have been contentious and suggests that there is a historical pattern to public debate and acceptance over the military conflicts of the United States. His book's title, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American*

*Way of War*, alludes to an earlier work by the late historian Russell F. Weigley. Weigley wrote at a time when there was extensive public discourse over American military operations. Like others frustrated by the experience in Vietnam, Weigley sought answers for the nation's ultimate failure in a comprehensive study of American military strategy. In *The American Way of War* (Macmillan, 1973), Weigley argued that American military strategy was historically one of annihilation – a goal of overthrowing the enemy's military power and destroying the enemy state. The other option – attrition, or wearing the enemy down – had been the method before the Civil War and the rise of American power. Once the nation became equal or superior to its opponents, the military went to war to destroy and overwhelm the enemy. Toward the end of Weigley's life, the historian Brian Linn challenged Weigley's premise in a detailed article in the *Journal of Military History*. Weigley's argument was too simple, Linn wrote, and the book “devotes insufficient attention to alternative American ways of war, most notably attrition in its modern sense, and more important, deterrence.”<sup>1</sup> In his response, Weigley acknowledged: “I plead guilty to placing too much emphasis on only two categories of strategy and trying to shoehorn practically everything into one or the other of those limited concepts.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Weigley, Tierney attempts to provide a theoretical basis to understanding the nature of war, especially in terms of public policy and understanding. He postulates that there are “generally two kinds of military conflict: interstate war (where the United States fights against other countries) versus nation-building (where American troops fight against insurgents).” He further simplifies his argument by referring to interstate war as the “crusade tradition” and the smaller conflicts as the “quagmire tradition.” (7) Not attempting to describe the military aspects of war, Tierney seeks to understand “wider public beliefs and cultural origins of our way of war” and suggests, “whereas Americans confidently look to overthrow the adversary in interstate war, they rarely have the same enthusiasm when fighting insurgents.” (11) Unfortunately, as in the case of Weigley's landmark work, Tierney's generalizations are difficult to support. Each conflict is different and no two are congruent in relation to their causes, prosecution, or political justification.

In the second chapter, Tierney provides the framework for his definition of the crusading tradition. He argues that these are interstate contests that aim to overthrow the enemy regime. In the process, “restraints on the use of force tend to fall away.” (15) Tierney suggests that the crusading tradition, and the use of excessive force, is somehow unique to the American people. One of his most provocative arguments is that the United States goes out of its way to target civilians in support of its goals. He suggests: “Since the nineteenth century, no country has engaged in the mass killing of civilians on as many separate occasions as the United States.” (18) This kind of proposition is quite troubling and detracts from his overall narrative. While it may be statistically possible to construct such an argument, it is, at best, subject to serious debate. Can he truly claim that Americans

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian M. Linn, “*The American Way of War Revisited*,” *The Journal of Military History* 66:2, (April 2002): 505.

<sup>2</sup> *JMH*, 531.

partook in more civilian killings than the Germans in two world wars? More than the Japanese across Asia from 1900 to 1945? Even the British, our democratic partners during the twentieth century, established civilian concentration camps during the Boer War, blockaded Germany during World War I, and began the mass bomber offensive in World War II. Each effort affected enemy civilians and resulted in mass suffering and death.<sup>3</sup>

In another passage in this chapter, the author claims: "...in modern history, it's very unusual to insist that the enemy submit entirely to one's demands." (19) Again this is an argument open to historical challenge. In World War I the German government sought but failed to impose its demands on the West. A victory over the French would not have resulted in a simple peace treaty; and Belgium would have become, essentially, a German province. The ruthless Treaty of Brest-Litovsk is an example of what the Germans' war termination demands would have looked like if they had been successful in 1918.<sup>4</sup> Both the Germans and Japanese were not simply seeking regime change in the Second World War; they sought total domination and, in many cases, extermination of whole segments of the conquered population. Responding to the struggle of the war, the Red Army forced many governments at the end of that conflict to submit entirely to Soviet domination. As the author points out, both Germany and Japan have renounced this militarism and have generally been free of conflict since 1945. Some credit to that change might have something to do with the scale of destruction they experienced, as well as a military presence by the victors that continues to this day.

Many other statements in this second chapter simply are not historically supportable. Tierney writes: "German soldiers in World War II often executed civilians face-to-face. But U. S. troops tend to keep a healthy distance when killing noncombatants." (15) Yet, it was the German military that launched air attacks on a host of cities in the beginning of the war, from a distance. The German air force executed the first deliberate air attack against a civilian city, Rotterdam, and the first air campaign against a state, Great Britain, during the summer and fall of 1940. Its navy in both world wars conducted submarine warfare against civilian and military targets in the Atlantic Ocean and, often, in sight of America's shore. And it was the German military that developed the so-called 'Vengeance Weapons,' the V1 and V2 Rockets, which killed more than 12,000 British and Belgian civilians. Only a massive Allied bombing campaign and the overrunning of the launch sites prevented the civilian toll from being much greater. By 1944 the Allies, represented by the Royal Air Force Bomber Command and the United States Army Strategic Air Force, had won control

---

<sup>3</sup> Tierney cites a table developed by Alexander B. Downes as his evidence [Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), Political Science Study. 45-47]. The chart, while interesting, is open to serious debate. For example, Germany's conduct through four years on the Eastern front in World War II counts as one event. It would not be unreasonable to consider German targeting of the different Soviet nationalities as individual events. In addition, this chart obviously ignores information on the bombing of friendly civilians in Italy, France, and Belgium. Downes' 'dataset,' while interesting, has flaws and was not developed to support a thesis investigating U.S. combat methodologies.

<sup>4</sup> See Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), for an extensive discussion on what Germany intended for its new order in middle Europe.

of the sky over Germany and occupied Europe and began a systematic bombing campaign to end the war. What the Germans did, and what they intended to do, was different. Certainly, such debatable statements weaken the author's overall argument and influence how the reader interprets the remaining chapters.

In the third chapter, Tierney describes the quagmire tradition. At the core is his belief that this mode of war is essentially "*nation-building*, or interventions within another country to create a stable and usually democratic government to defeat insurgents." (35) He argues that Americans do not like these missions and have little tolerance for them. The problem is that each instance of such small wars, to use C. E. Callwell's definition, is different.<sup>5</sup> These conflicts do not fit into a neat box. For example, it is interesting that Tierney neglects any mention of the American Indian Wars. This was American counter-insurgency and nation-building at its best, in a conflict against a host of independent tribes lasting for several decades. Few Americans complained and were glad to assume control of the acquired land. The same is true of the post-Desert Storm effort in Kurdistan (Operation Provide Comfort). Only briefly discussed in Tierney's supporting chapters, it was an example of an operation that worked and was popularly supported. The Vietnam conflict is another example of a conflict that does not meet the either-or criteria, and the author affirms this complexity. Even the current conflict in Afghanistan has resulted in few protests or popular demands for Americans to quit the war. The reality, from this reviewer's perspective, is that few conflicts fit into a simplistic evaluation model. Most are complex events, a spectrum of conflict that includes conventional operations, stability operations, and humanitarian support.

Over the next several chapters, the author summarizes America's wars, seeking to place them within the quagmire or crusader traditions. In each, he pairs one interstate war with a nation-building example: Civil War and Reconstruction, Spanish American War and the Philippine War, World War I and the Central American wars, World War II and Korea. In the Vietnam example, Tierney argues that it was an example of "dueling traditions." (172) Distracting to this reviewer is the fact that these summaries are often based on generalizations and anecdotal evidence, and are not particularly well-structured. For example, he argues in the case of the Second World War that "public support barely wavered." (154) Considering that this conflict witnessed the largest domestic propaganda campaign in American history, such support should not be surprising. A simple perusal of the various war bonds campaign posters and various *Why We Fight* newsreels gives a hint of the pressure placed on wavering Americans to support the war. It certainly did not hurt that the enemy's conduct was so atrocious and, in the early years of the war, so threatening. Yet, by the end of the war, support was not as strong as the author suggests. Richard B. Frank clearly demonstrates in *Downfall* that the nation was war-weary by the summer of 1945. Both troop morale and public support were such a matter of concern that demands for troop demobilization, following the German defeat, profoundly affected the projected

---

<sup>5</sup> C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles & Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: H.M.S.O., 1906; repr., Bison Books, 1996).



invasion of Japan.<sup>6</sup> The bottom line, in this case, is that popular support did waiver and the political elites paid attention to it.

A serious issue that affects the American public's perceptions of war concerns the nature of its armed forces. Only the Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam were fought by conscript armies. In all the others, professional forces, often supported by volunteer establishments, projected American power. While intellectuals and politicians may debate the validity of this country's use of force, the average American goes about his or her life generally unaffected by it. Since the Vietnam War and Cambodian incursion in May 1970, there have been few major, national anti-war protests. This reviewer believes that the serious arguments about the merits for and against intervention or nation-building do not take place on the proverbial main street, but among politicians looking for short-term advantage.

Glossed over in this summary of America's conflicts are some issues that contribute to popular acceptance. For example, there is a difference between wars of necessity (The Second World War) and wars of choice (Somalia, 1992). A hostile attack on American soil, such as at Pearl Harbor in 1941 and in New York and Washington, DC, in 2001, focuses public attention like few other events. In these circumstances, Congress either declares war or issues a declaration supporting the military action. In these kinds of wars, the American government launches a massive public relations campaign to convince the public to join in the crusade. In other cases, America is forced into a conflict that it does not desire. Especially in the world of modern diverse media, there are humanitarian concerns that force American intervention. In cases such as the Balkans, and most recently in Libya, our allies demanded the intervention of the United States military. Each intervention was hotly debated in Congress and these arguments found expression in the modern media. None of these conflicts were wars of nation-building, but rather attempts to solve problems that others could not solve. Problems of perception with the American public reflected the host of other problems faced by modern presidential administrations. Other interventions were not about nation-building but centered clearly on protecting American investments. Most notable in this regard were the banana wars of the inter-war period. In other cases, they were a challenge to a perceived threat, such as the intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and Grenada in 1983. Others were a result of the perceived conflict between the United States and the Communist powers. Our wars in Korea and Vietnam and interventions in Greece and Nicaragua are the most obvious examples. If nation-building was the purpose, it was part of a broader strategy of containment.

In his final chapter, "The Founding Tradition," Professor Tierney seeks to offer a way out of this supposed dichotomy, to offer an alternative view of war based on "the *founding tradition*" (251) This tradition "highlights the wisdom of restraint during interstate war and promotes the military's involvement in a range of duties beyond conventional fighting." (267) Essentially, he argues for a multi-purpose military force that is competent at

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 127-29.

both building and fighting. The reality, of course, is that America's military forces have always performed these tasks, and not just in the early days of the republic. Recent military operations following Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake are obvious examples of the multi-capable military force this nation has today. A major portion of the modern military effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan has been beyond the scope of conventional fighting.

That is unfortunate, because I believe citizens of the United States do view war differently than those in Europe or Asia. The disconnect between service member and citizen is, in this reviewer's opinion, the essence of 'how we fight.' Protected by its unique geography, for the United States war remains generally an abstract event that competes with other day-to-day activities. Missing from our national narrative is the personal experience of battles at Verdun, Warsaw, Leningrad, and Nanking. No American city has been bombed like London, Caen, Dresden, Berlin, or Hiroshima. Today, most citizens argue over paying more taxes and generating jobs, while only academics and statesmen debate the merits of using unmanned aircraft to hunt hostile opponents in the Pakistani border lands, Yemeni hinterlands, or Columbian jungles. Professor Tierney has attempted a difficult task, in fact one that may, as Russell Weigley discovered, be too difficult to place within a neat theoretical construct. In the end, therefore, I am not convinced the author has thoroughly described the multi-faceted and various ways Americans fight or view war. Too many generalizations and debatable evidence taint his overarching arguments

Finally, at the beginning of the final chapter, the author laments: "U. S. troops write fewer letters home about valor and chivalry." (248) He does not cite evidence to support that statement, and this reviewer finds it substantially incorrect. Today, American service members correspond with their loved ones daily using electronic mail, Skype, and smart phones. On Facebook and other social media, the members of this small, professional military force describe their thoughts and observations about long, multiple deployments. They often write about the nobility of their cause and how they assisted Iraqi or Afghan society. They often describe the bravery of their comrades and how proud they are to serve along side these men and women. It is not uncommon to find postings in this media memorializing the sacrifice and valor of one of their comrades on the anniversary of his or her death. It is a different military from previous conflicts, as most soldiers are now married and leave their families behind when they go to war and actually adds another dimension to participant's correspondence. As one female Army major deploying to Afghanistan wrote on Facebook after saying goodbye to her children one last time: "This is the hardest thing I have ever done." The writing about valor, chivalry, duty and honor, remain alive in the modern U. S military.

Having been rather critical in my comments, I want to commend Professor Tierney for embarking on such a difficult task. We military historians are a critical group and pride ourselves in understanding both the conduct and context of military affairs. *How We Fight* provoked in this reviewer a wide range of thoughts and emotions. I hope Tierney continues to develop and support his interesting thesis.

**H***ow We Fight* is a very ambitious book that advances a parsimonious explanation of American public support for war over the past century and a half. Tierney's work is founded on classic works by Louis Hartz and others concerning the culture of American foreign policy<sup>1</sup>. Like Hartz, Tierney focuses on the dialectic American struggle between the desire to transform the world in its own image and the desire to avoid being sullied by contact with other societies. Tierney pushes beyond this classic work, however, by formulating concrete hypotheses about the kinds of military missions that Americans will or will not support. On the one hand, Tierney predicts that Americans will support 'crusading' wars that involve conflict between states. Moreover, Tierney expects that the popular desire to crusade will lead the U.S. to press for unconditional victory and will lead the U.S. to replace opposing regimes after vanquishing them. On the other hand, Tierney predicts that Americans will not support so-called 'nation-building' conflicts that require counter-insurgency tactics to defeat non-state actors because Americans view these wars as 'quagmires' that drag the United States into the mud.

This is a provocative and parsimonious explanation of American public support for war, and Tierney should be lauded for the clarity and ambition of his claims. The absence of reliable survey data prior to the 1950's makes the empirical task of testing this argument especially difficult, and I think that the book could have benefitted from more detailed discussion of what should count as evidence of American public attitudes in the absence of survey data. Even allowing for the difficulty of this empirical hurdle, however, I did not find the evidence that Tierney musters to be entirely persuasive in supporting his ambitious claims.

Tierney's study begins with the Civil War. The author is surely right that what began as a limited conflict against secession became a crusade against slavery in order to maintain public support for the war. He is also right in claiming that the nation-building mission of post-war reconstruction was widely unpopular in retrospect and viewed as a failure. It is not clear, however, whether it was the nation-building or counter-insurgency nature of this mission that led to popular disillusionment. After all, the (successful) counter-insurgency aspect of Reconstruction against the Ku Klux Klan occurred largely in the late 1860's while the mission became demonstrably unpopular a decade later amidst the perception of widespread corruption among the 'carpetbaggers.'

Next Tierney turns to the Spanish-American War and makes a plausible case that American's were attracted to the crusading rhetoric put forward by 'yellow journalism' supporting the war. The successful American counter-insurgency in the Philippines that followed the U.S. occupation, on the other hand, simply does not fit his argument. From 1899 to 1902 the United States conducted a successful counter-insurgency operation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955).

Within the United States, the Anti-Imperialist League tried unsuccessfully to promote public opposition to the campaign. In particular, the League opposed President McKinley's bid for reelection in 1900 in favor of William Jennings Bryan – a strong supporter of the Spanish-American War, but a strong opponent of the subsequent annexation and occupation. McKinley won reelection easily, making it hard to claim that the public demanded withdrawal from a quagmire in the Philippines.

World War II would seem to be the most apt example of a crusade, but even here the labels do not entirely fit. Tierney's discussion notwithstanding, the United States accepted a conditional surrender from Japan. Indeed, the U.S. settled for terms that it had decisively rejected months earlier. Nonetheless, in the wake of demonstrable success on the battlefield the public did not punish Truman for abandoning the crusade for unconditional surrender in the Pacific.

Moreover, World War II was followed by another set of major American nation-building operations in Germany and Japan that Tierney does not address. Tierney's omission is understandable since these occupations were not wars, but the successful public relations campaign to sell the Marshall Plan to the American people combined with the lack of strong public pressure to withdraw from American occupations in Europe or Asia suggests that the American public is willing to tolerate some nation-building exercises.

Testing Tierney's argument becomes easier beginning with the Korean War and the availability of survey data, but unfortunately these data do not appear to comport any better with his theory. For example, while the Korean War was briefly a crusade to roll back communism, public support for the war was high during the summer of 1950 when it was still a limited operation to defend South Korea. Specifically, in August 1950 – after UN forces had succeeded in rescuing South Korea but before the Inchon landing and the effort to unify Korea – nearly two-thirds of the American public supported the war. By December of that year – after the U.S. had begun its crusade to rollback communism and had been soundly rebuffed by Chinese forces – public support dropped by nearly 30 percent. Public support then increased after the U.S. initiated armistice talks that pushed toward compromise rather than crusade, and public evaluations of the conflict improved further after the successful conclusion of a peace treaty that codified the 'tie.' Thus as the Korean War – a multilateral limited military engagement that resulted in a compromise settlement – came to a close, a Gallup poll found that only one-third of the public viewed the war as a mistake.

Vietnam was, of course, eventually viewed as a quagmire by the American public and widely unpopular by its conclusion. But it is worth noting that the war was popular in its early stages despite the fact that it was always a limited 'nation-building' mission. As late as the spring of 1966 about 60% of the public supported the war, and prior to the Tet offensive the only events that significantly reduced public support for the war were the Fulbright hearings on Lyndon Johnson's deception regarding the Tonkin Gulf incident. It was only after the perceived failure of Tet Offensive that the public widely began to view nation-building in Vietnam as a quagmire.

Like World War II, the Gulf War was viewed as the anti-quagmire, but it was not – as Tierney suggests – a crusade. The United States never made regime change a goal of the mission, and while Tierney cites polling data suggesting that the American public would have supported regime change, the public did not punish the Bush Administration for limiting its goals. For example, in March of 1991 – several weeks after the end of combat and the decision not to seek regime change in Iraq – more than three-quarters of the public approved of Bush’s handling of the war.

Tierney is correct that many of the nation-building exercises of the 1990s did not generate the widespread support that the Gulf War enjoyed. One exception, however, is the American invasion of Panama. While the focus of this mission was regime change, it was not a crusade in Tierney’s terms. The goal was internal political change within Panama because of Manuel Noriega’s involvement in the drug trade. The public supported the invasion – known as Operation Just Cause - from the outset. But more problematically for Tierney, the counter-insurgency operation that followed the invasion and sought to promote democracy in Panama – known as Operation Promote Democracy – generated no public opposition. Similarly, data collected by Richard Eichenberg also show that the nation-building missions in Kosovo and Bosnia enjoyed 56% and 43% approval ratings during the operations, and in neither case did the public place substantial pressure on the government to withdraw American forces once hostilities declined and peacekeeping was successfully underway.<sup>2</sup> Thus the 1980s and 1990s seem to have had their share of limited military operations focused on nation-building and peacekeeping that the American public was willing to support.

With regard to the Iraq War, Tierney is right that the conflict was framed as part of a broader crusade against terrorism. However, public support did not consistently decline after the U.S. began counter-insurgency operations in response to a rising level of civil violence. For example, between June of 2004 and January 2005 - as the U.S. made progress toward the ‘ink-finger elections,’ support for the war did not decline in response to U.S. casualties. Moreover, the reduction in violence after the ‘surge’ in U.S. forces during 2007-2008 increased public perceptions that U.S. counter-insurgency operations were successful and decreased public pressure to withdraw from Iraq.

On page 238 Tierney cites data that I collected in 2004 – along with my co-authors Peter Feaver and Jason Reifler - to suggest that the public’s perception of the Iraq War as a nation-building mission was undermining public support for the war.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Tierney points to our finding that the most common definitions of ‘success’ in Iraq among the American public at that time were: 1) a stable Iraqi government, 2) Iraqis providing for

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard C. Eichenberg, “Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981–2005.” *International Security* 30:1 (2005):140–177 [DOI: 10.1162/0162288054894616; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894616> ].

<sup>3</sup> Christopher F Gelpi, Peter D Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

their own security, and 3) Iraqis living peaceful normal lives. Tierney's description of the result is quite correct, but these data only suggest that the public perceived the mission as nation-building. They do not address whether that perception reduced public support for the war. After reading *How We Fight*, however, I retrieved those data to investigate this question. Using the Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler indicator of casualty tolerance as a measure of willingness to keep fighting in Iraq, I replicated our original model of war support and then added a variable identifying which respondents defined success in terms of the nation-building goals identified by Tierney. Contrary to his expectations, individuals who defined success in terms of nation-building were actually significantly more likely to express a willingness to stay and fight in Iraq, even at the risk of additional U.S. casualties.

In sum, I think that Dominic Tierney's *How We Fight* is an admirably ambitious explanation of American support for war. Unfortunately, I do not think his explanation fits well with the historical record. The American public has demonstrated a willingness to support limited military engagements that end in negotiated settlements as well as counter-insurgency missions that focus on nation-building. While quagmire is undoubtedly a dirty word in the American vocabulary for war, it seems more closely associated with failed missions than with nation-building ones. Similarly, the public seems willing to support decisive and successful military operations regardless of whether or not they are crusades for regime change and unconditional surrender.

Review by Bruce W. Jentleson, Duke University

---

I agree with the main thrust of the argument Dominic Tierney makes in *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires and the American Way of War*. Many aspects of his approach appeal to me. But I also have differences with how he develops his argument and how far he takes it.

I strongly concur with the emphasis on political culture in explaining American foreign policy. This has frustrated classical realists, as Tierney notes in an end note (chapter 2, note 16) citing laments from Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan about how U.S. foreign policy is too driven by ideology rather than interests. It also has undermined Marxist and some revisionist arguments which, while often right on economic interests and class having more impact than acknowledged in classical pluralist theory, tends to underestimate the independent effects of political culture and ideology.

I laud a political scientist who takes history seriously. Our discipline has become way too dominated by formal models, meta-theories and quantitative methods that bend, fold and mutilate history in constructing variables and running statistical tests.

And I strongly support the effort to link theory and policy. Tierney states at the outset that one of his purposes is to learn from history and derive from his analytic framework applications and lessons for American foreign policy. As someone deeply committed to “bridging the gap”, which includes being a co-founder of the International Policy Summer Institute (IPSi) for fostering greater policy relevance among political scientists, I am eager to see more such work.<sup>1</sup>

But there are some aspects of the basic framework that I question.

First, I agree that moral crusade is a relatively unique quality. But is aversion to nation-building unique to the United States? European colonialism doesn't count because that was about building colonies to serve the interests of the metropolises, rather than building nations to stand on their own. Canada, Europe and Australia are cited (39) as examples but these nations' operations are largely peacekeeping nation-building, meaning they come in after the fighting is mostly over and under legitimizing multilateral mandates, not war-fighting nation-building. I can't think of an example of a nation-state that is inclined to nation-building through war-fighting.

Second, on this point and others, aversion to nation-building is less reactive than rational. It's hard to do. I began to get intonations from the text of the stay-the-course line of

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Need for Praxis: Bringing Policy Relevance Back In,” *International Security* 26:4 (Spring 1992): 169-183 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092106>]; Jentleson and Ely Ratner, “Bridging the Ivory Tower-Beltway Gap,” *International Studies Review* 13:1 (March 2011): 6-11 [DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2486.2010.00992.x, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2010.00992.x>]. On IPSi and our Bridging the Gap project, see our website, <http://american.edu/sis/btg/index.cfm/>

argument that holds that if the United States (U.S.) would just have had the political will, it could have succeeded much more often in its nation-building efforts. But even before considering Iraq and Afghanistan, Chapter 4 on the Civil War and Reconstruction raises questions about nation-building do-ability. I got a lot out of this chapter, learned a lot, and enjoyed reading it. The point that Reconstruction had some initial success is well made. But what also comes through is the inherent imbalance of resolve that favored the “occupied”, for whom core interests were being threatened (economic, identity, local cultural, societal ordering) giving them much more incentive to keep trying to subvert, wait it out, etc., compared to the occupier who, even accepting the genuineness of moral commitment, simply had less at stake and more important things to focus on. Sure, “exhaustion and terrorism fatigue” (83) set in for the North, but as an altogether rational calculation and not just a subjectively reactive. Along these lines there was the 1876 deal trading at the end of Reconstruction for Rutherford B. Hayes becoming president, with the insistence of the South on these terms and the concession by the North following the same rationality of inherently differential salience of interests.

This unfavorable balance of resolve tilting against the nation-builder is one that is inherent in the enterprise. There are very few cases of nation-building success other than post-World War II Germany and Japan which for so many reasons are highly ungeneralizable. On Vietnam it was “difficult to fault the American people when, after that long a period of active engagement, the Joint Chiefs of Staff could only offer more of the same for an indefinite period with no assurance of eventual success.”<sup>2</sup> This wasn’t mood swings or knee-jerk, it was an assessment of high costs and low returns and not likely to change over time. Similarly in Iraq and Afghanistan the American public has been assessing the costs/benefits ratio. I’ll come back to this when I discuss policy implications; the point here is to question Tierney’s analytic emphasis on the reactive and not the rational.

Third, I wonder whether the crusader tradition fits as well as is claimed and in the ways that are claimed. What about realist security and interest-based explanations for a number of these? Wilson’s ‘make the world safe for democracy’ was part of his selling of entry into World War I, but there also were security threats like the Zimmerman telegram and the Lusitania. Moreover, Wilsonian crusaderism had more effect on strategies for the peace than on how the U.S. fought the war. If World War II was principally crusading, why didn’t the U.S. do more and sooner to stop the Nazi Holocaust? The Korean War was about defending South Korea much more than toppling North Korea. Panama in 1989 was heavily about domestic politics (war on drugs) and leader to leader animosity, both of which were more pragmatic than idealistic. The 1990-91 Gulf War was one in which the U.S. did not “march on the adversary’s capital and topple the government” (7). And public support was not strong for regime change.<sup>3</sup> I still agree that the U.S. does have more of a crusader

---

<sup>2</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 270.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” *International Studies Quarterly* 36:1 (March 1992): 49-73 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/260091>].



tradition than other countries, but the overstatement and mis-statements in the book raise concerns about both historical interpretation and policy implications.

On the policy implications, while as noted I commend the effort, I'm not convinced by the points made. Tierney is right that our era is one in which intrastate war has been and will continue to be more prevalent than interstate war, and that there are many failed and failing states whose consequences impact U.S. interests. But his main recommendation of getting over American quagmire worries and devising better strategies only works if the problem is more one of staying power than of inherent limited do-ability of the mission. State building is necessary but has to be undertaken more through long term sustained strategies of conflict prevention, capacity building, sustainable economic development and the like than war fighting. Tierney wrote when the General David Petraeus-led shift to counterinsurgency strategy (COIN) in Iraq was at its height. But it is not working nearly so well in Afghanistan. Indeed in Iraq it is increasingly evident that fundamental sources of instability remain, and that the "surge" was very much that, a short-term impact but not a sustainable basis for security.

None of these criticisms negate the value of the book. They are offered much more in the spirit of refinement than refutation, discourse than derogation. *How We Fight* is an important contribution in itself and for the thinking it prompts in others.

**D**ominic Tierney gives us much to think about in his book: *How We Fight? Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War*. As his title suggests, his central thesis is that there are enduring elements in how Americans view and fight war. On the one hand, Americans see war as a crusade -- “a grand campaign to topple tyrants and rid the world of evil.” (p. 249) According to this crusading tradition – as Tierney labels it -- when the United States goes to war, it goes all in to change regimes and make the world a safer place. On the other hand, Americans also have a quagmire tradition. They are wary of the complexities of limited wars, nation building, and stabilization missions, fearing that these missions quickly deteriorate into protracted stalemates. In a nutshell, he says, America is “addicted to regime change but allergic to nation building.”

According to Tierney, these competing traditions have “served America well” in the past. The crusading tradition has led it to fully mobilize and win decisively in the most significant conflicts – World War I and World War II for instance. But, because of its aversion to nation building, the United States has also been deterred or able to cut its losses in conflicts that are less vital to its key interests.

The problem today, however, is that the world is changing and the demand for future war and intervention will be more likely to require a more limited use of force rather than total wars of the past. How the United States fights them may very well determine much of its future.

The book, which was written for a broad audience, has a cadence that is sometimes at odds with the standard scholarly work – something that is simultaneously satisfying in that the anecdotal narratives are interesting and engaging and occasionally frustrating in that a great deal of complexity is overlooked.

Still, the overall argument is intriguing and thought provoking: Can we reduce two hundred years of U.S. war fighting to a tension between two competing traditions? Is the United States really a crusading nation addicted to regime change? And, is it really averse to nation building?

**Are American wars fought as crusades?** On one level, it is clear that American politicians and the public almost always invoke grand proclamations of American exceptionalism and messianic claims of destiny and God’s will when America goes to war. A real strength of Tierney’s book is his presentation of a number of fascinating anecdotes and speeches in which American political and spiritual leaders invoke this grandiose rhetoric proclaiming the righteousness of America’s purpose and actions. It is clear that there is a powerful crusading tradition – at least in the political discourse.

Yet, *why* the United States fights and *how* it fights are two different questions – a point that is sometimes conflated in the book. And, while political rhetoric is present in each of Tierney’s richly described cases, it is not clear to what extent that political rhetoric is causal

in *why* the United States fights. There are often deeper strategic and political logics at play in the decisions for or against war or intervention. These logics are also often contested politically – especially in instances when the United States has not been directly attacked. Because of this political contestation, we often see the instrumentalization of political rhetoric to mobilize constituencies behind various arguments for and against war.

We can see some of this by looking a bit more closely at one of Tierney’s cases. Following the defeat of Spain in Manila Harbor in 1898, Tierney demonstrates that most Americans – including many American elites -- were somewhat ambivalent about acquiring the islands. The United States crusaded to overthrow Spain in Cuba, but then it was clearly unprepared for nation building in the Philippines.

Yet a series of perceived strategic imperatives compelled Presidents William McKinley and then Theodore Roosevelt and several of their successors to commit substantial resources to keeping the Philippines. The rise of Japan and Germany and the emerging global competition for China’s markets coupled with economic ideologies of expansion convinced many decision makers in 1899 that the United States had a strategic imperative for maintaining control over the Philippines. Tierney describes the well-known moment when President McKinley prayed to God for guidance on what to do in the Philippines, but it is likely that in the absence of these perceived strategic imperatives, those prayers would have been answered differently.

And while Tierney uses this case to demonstrate the American aversion to nation building because elements of public opinion turned against the counter-insurgency campaign, for most members of the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, walking away was simply not an option. The United States continued prosecuting the war and after the rebel leader Aguinaldo was captured, the United States settled in for another four decades of nation building in the Philippines.

Furthermore, this “crusading” domestic mobilization rhetoric is probably not unique to the United States. Thucydides’ “Pericles’ Funeral Oration” reveals powerful and enduring motivational themes to mobilize soldiers and citizens to fight, die, and kill. Expressions of national pride, duty to ancestors and war dead, and conceptions of god’s will and god’s destiny are found in almost all wars. Napoleon justified his march into Egypt in broad terms of God’s will, the British invoked elements of the “White Man’s Burden” for its ‘civilizing mission’ to expand and defend its nineteenth century Pax Britannica.

Nonetheless, Tierney does make a compelling case for his broader points that once the United States enters a war, Americans prefer the use of overwhelming force over limited wars and that there is a messianic element to American war fighting. American wars are not fought simply to advance a set of strategic interests, but to fundamentally alter the world, to make the world safer and better.

**Are American’s averse to nation building?** Tierney also makes a compelling case that fears of quagmires do influence American attitudes toward nation building. The Philippines, Korea, and Vietnam scarred American attitudes on limited wars and today

nation building is widely ridiculed. But, it is not always clear what Americans are opposed to. Americans generally oppose limited war, but often have conflicting attitudes toward stabilization missions, peacekeeping operations, and nation building.

Tierney demonstrates how Americans objected to a number of conflicts and nation building projects and his arguments in many of these cases are compelling. But there are several instances in which the United States deployed and then maintained significant resource commitments – with public support -- for stabilization and nation building projects. The Philippines, post-war Japan and Germany, South Korea, Bosnia, and Kosovo have all had significant levels of U.S. resource commitments, money, and public support.

The broader question is: under what conditions do Americans support some of these projects and not others? Is it nation building per se that generates American resentment and opposition or is it limited war -- that often experience rising costs and casualties and have little prospect for success that create public opposition?

Public opinion and war scholars have long recognized a range of constraints on public opinion and war. Some suggest the public is averse to casualties (John Mueller), others suggest public opinion drops when prospects for success or victory drop (Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi), while others suggest that public aversion might be linked to core policy objectives that seek regime change (Bruce Jentleson).<sup>1</sup> This debate can't be resolved here, but each suggests that as various costs of war increase and key war objectives and conceptions of victory become muddied, support for the effort declines. Conversely, those that have limited casualties or seem to be moving forward with a relative degree of success tend to be less controversial, and hence, more widely supported. Hence, it may be that Americans support nation building that works.

Despite my reservations about some of the details in this book, Tierney's is a welcome voice in the trade press literature on American wars. He captures the essence America's history of warfare and presents it in a digestible, yet sophisticated and historically rich way. He constructively challenges many of the claims made within the crusading rhetoric and presents his argument in a way that is interesting, engaging, compelling, and even entertaining to a broader audience.

---

<sup>1</sup> John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: University Press of America, 1985); Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (March 1992).

Response by Dominic Tierney, Swarthmore College

---

Let me begin by offering my considerable gratitude for the time and effort spent by four distinguished scholars in reviewing the book. The comments are insightful, and even where there is disagreement the debate is advanced.

America's experience of war over the last two centuries is an immensely complex topic, and offering a widely applicable theory is a forbidding task. How can we possibly generalize about the diverse experiences of millions of people in missions as varied as the Civil War, counter-insurgency in the Philippines, the invasion of Panama, and Afghanistan today?

*How We Fight* argues that a critical factor in explaining perceptions of war is the nature of the campaign: interstate war versus nation-building. Interstate war is typically viewed as a glorious crusade for regime change; nation-building is typically viewed as a disastrous quagmire. These beliefs are partly based on the battlefield reality and partly shaped by cultural factors that predispose Americans to think this way.

The purpose of *How We Fight* was to integrate different theoretical work in a comprehensible and accessible way. The book draws from Samuel Huntington's insight that the American creed predisposes people to critique stabilization missions, Russell Weigley's thesis that the United States favors wars of annihilation, Bruce Jentleson's finding that the objective of the mission is crucial for public support, Chris Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler's work on the role of battlefield success, and Peter Liberman's research on the power of vengeance in shaping public attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the historical chapters show that the tapestry of America's experience of war has identifiable strands. Americans thought about the Civil War in ways that echoed later perceptions of the Spanish-American War, the world wars, and the Gulf War. American beliefs about southern Reconstruction were similar to later perceptions of nation-building in the Philippines, Latin America, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

I will respond to each reviewer in turn.

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "American Ideals Versus American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly*, 97:1 (Spring 1982): 1-37 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2149312>]; Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42:4 (August 1998): 395-417 [DOI: 10.1177/0022002798042004001, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022002798042004001>]; Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security* 30:3 (Winter 2005/06): 7-46 [DOI: 10.1162/isec.2005.30.3.7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.30.3.7>]; Peter Liberman, "An Eye for an Eye: Public Support for War Against Evildoers," *International Organization* 60: 3 (Summer 2006): 687-722 [DOI: 10.1017/S002081830606022X; <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S002081830606022X>].

Bruce Jentleson's review is impressive and thought-provoking; critical but also gracious. Let me respond to several lines of discussion.

Jentleson questions whether an aversion to nation-building is uniquely American. There are certainly many examples where stabilization operations were unpopular in other countries—like the French mission in Algeria. But nation-building encompasses a wide range of missions, from relatively peaceful stabilization operations as with the Balkans, to bloody counter-insurgency as with Afghanistan. The Europeans, Canadians, Australians and Japanese are at least comfortable with peaceful nation-building as a core function of their militaries. Americans, by contrast, are averse to all types of nation-building. Certain aspects of U.S. culture encourage an exceptional degree of skepticism about nation-building, such as the equation of stabilization missions with welfarism, and memories of Vietnam. The use of 'quagmire' as a synonym for nation-building is also heard far more frequently in the United States than elsewhere.

Why are Americans so skeptical about nation-building? For Jentleson, Americans are pretty prudent, and accurately see nation-building as a debacle. I argue that there is a cultural bias that predisposes people to see the outcome as a failure.

Jentleson claims that there are "very few cases of nation-building success other than post-World War II Germany and Japan." Sometimes, of course, the United States does fail at nation-building, with Vietnam as a spectacular example. Iraq has also been exceptionally costly in part due to avoidable errors. But in other cases the U.S. succeeded. Nation-building during southern Reconstruction produced significant gains—at least in the early phase before the North grew weary. During the Cold War, the United States succeeded at nation-building in Germany, Japan, Italy, Austria, and South Korea, and averted a dangerous crisis by stabilizing Lebanon in 1958. The peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s stabilized the war-torn Balkans with zero American casualties. In other cases, the outcome was mixed, but there was more success than people usually recognize. The intervention in Somalia, for example, in 1992-1994 saved 100,000 lives. The United States has also defeated insurgencies in the Philippines, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and arguably Iraq—although sometimes at a high cost.

For someone who sees the record of nation-building as a grim sequence of failures, we might pose a question: what exactly is the standard for "success"? What would the target country have to look like for the United States to receive the laurels of victory? Oftentimes, we implicitly set the bar for success as 'American-style stability and democracy.' But when the United States intervenes in a shattered country like Somalia, Afghanistan, or Kosovo, we should not demand that the intervention somehow miraculously replicate the United States. Instead, success requires evidence of reasonable progress. The view that nation-building typically fails is based as much, or more, on the metrics used by the observer as by anything that actually happens on the ground.

Jentleson sees an inherent dynamic in nation-building where the occupied have a more pronounced interest in the mission than the occupiers, display greater resolve, and therefore tend to win in the end. Nation-building is inherently a labor of Sisyphus.

Here, Jentleson assumes that in a nation-building mission there is an antagonistic relationship between the occupiers and the occupied. This interpretation fits with the usual image of nation-building where the ‘people’ resist the American occupiers, producing the dreaded quagmire. It’s certainly plausible, although not certain, that most people in South Vietnam opposed the U.S. presence in the country. Several of the U.S. interventions in the Caribbean in the early twentieth century also seem to have been unpopular. But in many other cases, there was local support for the U.S. presence. Kosovo, for example, is probably the most pro-American country outside the United States. Even in Afghanistan, most people back the international presence and oppose the Taliban.

It’s true that Americans believe that fewer national interests are at stake in nation-building missions. But American perceptions of interests are profoundly shaped by psychological and cultural dynamics. Amid the crusading fervor of an interstate war, Americans tend to see their core interests being engaged. But once a mission switches to nation-building, Americans very quickly determine that few interests are at stake, and as Jentleson puts it, there are “high costs and low returns.”

It is not objectively true, of course, that U.S. interests decline in nation-building versus interstate war. War, after all, is fundamentally about achieving political goals. As the United States learned in Iraq, there is little point in overthrowing a tyrant if the target society then descends into chaos and civil war. American beliefs are akin to a surgeon recognizing the vital stakes involved in open-heart surgery, but then deciding that the patient’s need for prolonged post-operative recovery is both tedious and unnecessary. In fact, significant interests are engaged throughout the process.

Furthermore, if Americans truly assess the costs and benefits of military action in a cool-headed and rational manner, then one might expect that similar events occurring in interstate war and nation-building missions would be judged in a similar manner. But the exact same events look very different when they happen in one type of operation versus the other—with those occurring during nation-building missions invariably appearing in a worse light.

First, when American soldiers are killed it tends to reduce public approval for the use of force—but this effect is four times greater in nation-building missions compared to interstate war. (275, fn. 13) Looking at the big picture, over one hundred U.S. troops have died in interstate war for every American soldier killed while nation-building, but Americans glorify interstate war and see nation-building as a forbidding labor. (277, fn. 36) Second, Americans are far less forgiving when U.S. soldiers kill civilians or enemy prisoners in nation-building missions compared to interstate war. American war crimes only became a major issue in the Philippines, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan—all of which were nation-building missions. Mistreatment of adversaries was more frequent in the Pacific theater in World War II, but few people seemed to care. Third, in interstate war, enemy atrocities, like the Nazi slaughter of civilians, redouble American resolve, but in nation-building missions the same events, such as insurgent bombings in Iraq, make people think the United States is losing.

Consider the case of Vietnam. Some Americans saw the conflict primarily as an interstate war against North Vietnam backed by China, whereas others saw it as a nation-building mission in the midst of a civil war in South Vietnam. This provides a neat test of the theory. As we would predict, those Americans who prioritized the nation-building aspects of the mission were consistently less supportive, more in favor of withdrawal, and quicker to highlight the U.S. killing of civilians. The same set of facts looks very different depending on whether they are framed by interstate war or nation-building.

Jentleson also questions the crusading mindset in interstate wars. It's true that realist concerns are sometimes powerful explanations for why the United States enters conflicts in the first place. But once the fighting begins, there is a predictable "crusader wave" as people rally around the flag, interpret the campaign as an idealistic and vengeful mission, and press for maximum war aims. In the Civil War, and the world wars, for example, the cool-headed and wary Americans on the eve of fighting were dramatically different from the militant Americans found in the midst of war. A transformation of beliefs in wartime is hardly unique to Americans, of course, but the nature of this transformation is shaped by cultural traits.

Now let's turn to some of the cases that Jentleson challenges.

One of the puzzles of the Civil War and Reconstruction is why the North displayed such incredible resolve to defeat the South when hundreds of thousands of northerners were being killed and injured, and so little resolve to stabilize the South after 1865 when few if any U.S. troops were being killed. Part of the story is that protecting the Union in the Civil War engaged more basic interests than stabilizing the South. Another part of the story is that idealism and vengeance shaped how northerners perceived and understood these campaigns. Northerners saw the Civil War as a glorious crusade for the highest of ideals and an opportunity to punish the wicked South. But they judged southern Reconstruction with an idealistic high bar for success, and tended to be less motivated by wrath.

Was nation-building in the South do-able? If the North had started earlier and shown just a small fraction of its commitment displayed during the Civil War, then over time, more southerners would have adapted to the changing order. Could the North have created a post-racial paradise? No. Could the North have prevented the emergence of apartheid, and left a self-sustaining Republican Party in the South? Possibly.

Jentleson asks, "If World War II was principally crusading, why didn't the U.S. do more and sooner to stop the Nazi Holocaust?" For most of World War II, the Holocaust was not a key part of how the crusade was understood. For one thing, during the campaign, wrath may have been a more potent constituent of the crusader's elixir than humanitarian idealism. And there were also practical issues about how much Americans knew about the Holocaust and what the United States could realistically have done to end the slaughter. The crusader's fury was ultimately directed at overthrowing the enemy tyrants, liberating Europe, and punishing the 'devilish' Japanese.



Jentleson writes that, “The Korean War was about defending South Korea much more than toppling North Korea.” But it’s striking that within three months of the United States entering the war, U.S. war aims escalated and American soldiers marched toward the Yalu River in a bid for regime change—with strong popular support. After Truman slammed the brakes on the crusade and decided to fight for limited war aims, the conflict became the least popular interstate war since the War of 1812.

On the 1991 Gulf War, Jentleson adds, “public support was not strong for regime change.” But polls taken during and after the war tell a different story. (196) After the fighting began, over 70 percent of Americans wanted to escalate the war aims and overthrow Saddam. To test the strength of this sentiment, pollsters explicitly reminded people that the United Nations had authorized only a war to free Kuwait. Even so, a majority of the public sought to ignore the UN and fight for regime change. So pollsters went a step further, and asked these hawks if they were willing to sacrifice thousands of extra U.S. lives to remove Saddam from power. Most people still said yes. Just after the fighting ended in February 1991, 46 percent of Americans claimed that the United States should have toppled Saddam. By April, the figure was 56 percent. By July it was 76 percent. In 1992, 69 percent of Americans thought that the Gulf War was not a victory, because Saddam “remains in power in Iraq.” (201)

What about Afghanistan and Iraq? Is the public rationally updating their perceptions of success based on the tangible costs and benefits? To some extent yes, and there is a considerable overlap between the battlefield costs and growing public skepticism. But Americans were destined to see these missions as failures even if the United States had carried out textbook nation-building missions with significantly lower costs. Dramatic positive change in Afghanistan with few U.S. casualties would still look like a mess to most Americans back home because they judge according to idealistic standards. It’s notable that when the level of violence sharply decreased in Iraq after 2007, overall public approval for the war did not significantly improve based on this new information, but instead continued to erode.

On the policy implications, Jentleson believes that stabilization missions are too difficult and should be avoided. I completely agree that “State building is necessary but has to be undertaken more through long term sustained strategies of conflict prevention, capacity building, sustainable economic development and the like than war fighting.” Nation-building is a last resort in exceptional cases. And if Americans crusade less, they will topple fewer regimes and engage in fewer nation-building missions.

Despite Americans’ disdain for these missions, the United States cannot avoid nation-building. America’s past is one of nation-building, its present is one of nation-building, and its future is likely to be one of nation-building. Many different foreign policy paths lead to stabilization operations, from regime change to humanitarian intervention. If the overthrow of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein tells us anything, it is that when the United States engages in nation-building, it needs to have the plans, the resources, and the commitment to win the peace.

In his critique, Christopher Gelpi engages in a spirited search through American history for cases that don't fit the thesis. Let me take these cases in turn.

With southern Reconstruction, Gelpi writes: "It is not clear, however, whether it was the nation-building or counter-insurgency nature of this mission that led to popular disillusionment." My reading of the case is that northerners would have wearied of nation-building in the South even if the insurgency had been weaker, although the constant drum-roll of violence certainly exacerbated nation-building fatigue.

Gelpi suggests that the Philippine War of 1899-1902 "simply does not fit [the] argument," because William McKinley (with Theodore Roosevelt as Vice President) won reelection in 1900 despite championing the counter-insurgency mission. But McKinley won in 1900 primarily because of the booming economy. His support might well have been even higher absent the counter-insurgency war in the Philippines. In an analysis of the role of foreign policy in the 1900 election, Robert Saldin concluded: "McKinley realized that the imperialism issue could hurt his reelection chances." The president subsequently handled the issue with great tactical nous to "negate his vulnerability."<sup>2</sup> An analogy could be George W. Bush winning reelection in 2004 despite—not because of—the nation-building mission in Iraq.

Were Americans comfortable with nation-building in the Philippines, as Gelpi implies, or did they see it as a failed quagmire? The extreme patriotism of the era encouraged some Americans to see it as their 'duty' to defeat the insurgents. But overall, the evidence suggests that Americans viewed nation-building in the Philippines as a thankless task, utterly at odds with the glorious Spanish-American War. (110-112) The mission sparked an anti-war movement that included labor leaders as well as industrialists like Andrew Carnegie. Perhaps the most striking evidence comes from the former supporters of nation-building who grew disenchanted. McKinley privately said he should never have taken the islands. Roosevelt called nation-building in the Philippines "an intensely disagreeable and unfortunate task," and described the territory as a "white elephant" and America's "heel of Achilles" in the Pacific. In 1901, the pro-war *New York Times* concluded: "The American people are plainly tired of the Philippine War." (112)

The experience of nation-building in the Philippines was sufficiently negative that the United States abandoned its experiment of acquiring colonies. Even though the Philippine insurgency had been largely crushed, by 1907 polls showed that only 20 percent of Congress wanted to keep the territory, and the discussion shifted to America's exit strategy. The Democratic Party platform in 1912 called the occupation an "inexcusable blunder." (114) According to the military historian Andrew J. Birtle, "The Philippine War had been an unpopular war, both at home and within the Army itself."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Saldin, *War, the American State, and Politics since 1898* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941* (CMH Publication 70-66-1, 1998), 138.

Gelpi argues that World War II ended with the “conditional surrender,” of Japan, yet, contrary to my thesis, “the public did not punish Truman for abandoning the crusade for unconditional surrender in the Pacific.” Truman was not punished, however, for a simple reason. Americans did not believe that the president had abandoned the crusade. After the atomic bombings, the Japanese accepted the terms of the Potsdam Declaration (which amounted to unconditional surrender) with the proviso that the emperor be retained as ‘Sovereign Ruler.’ Truman rejected this offer and issued the Byrnes Note, which left open the possibility that the emperor would be allowed to serve, but said that he would be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied powers. Furthermore, the Japanese people would ultimately decide on their form of government. Hawks in Japan were horrified, but the emperor accepted the Byrnes Note unconditionally.

On September 2, 1945, in a formal surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay, Japanese representatives, “acting by command of and in behalf of the Emperor of Japan,” signed the official Instrument of Surrender: “We hereby proclaim the unconditional surrender to the Allied Powers of the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters and of all Japanese Armed Forces and all Armed Forces under Japanese control wherever situated.”<sup>4</sup> If any more proof were needed of the enemy’s complete surrender, the United States occupied Japan. Far from Truman “abandoning the crusade” as Gelpi colorfully puts it, the Pacific War ended with one of the closest approximations to absolute unconditional surrender of any war in modern history.

Gelpi states that I do not discuss nation-building in Germany and Japan. The cases are in fact mentioned in the book, albeit briefly. (180) Interestingly, out of the dozens of nation-building missions since the Civil War, these are the only cases I found where Americans were consistently positive about the results. But the exception actually proves the rule. American idealism encourages Americans to set a very high bar for success when judging nation-building, and people only see the mission as a success if the target country ends up looking as stable and free as the United States. Such an outcome was possible with Germany and Japan because they were already advanced societies before U.S. forces arrived. By contrast, such an outcome is impossible in impoverished or deeply divided societies like Somalia or Afghanistan, and so nation-building in these countries is doomed to be seen as a quagmire, whatever happens on the ground.

Gelpi also questions the case of Korea, suggesting that Americans were comfortable with an interstate war fought for limited goals. However, as noted earlier, the Korean case fits the theory fairly well. The United States quickly expanded its war aims in pursuit of regime change, with popular backing. Then, in the fall of 1950, Harry Truman’s decision to abandon the crusade and fight a limited war, and the significant battlefield defeats, were correlated with a collapse in support for the campaign.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Instrument of Surrender,” 2 September 1945, National Archives and Record Administration [website], [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured\\_documents/japanese\\_surrender\\_document/](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/japanese_surrender_document/), accessed 21 February 2012.

Reading Gelpi's comments, one might get the impression that the Korean War became significantly more popular from 1951-1953: "Public support then increased after the U.S. initiated armistice talks that pushed toward compromise rather than crusade." But support hovered around the low level of 40 percent until the fighting ended in 1953. Gelpi mentions a poll in January 1953 where only one third of Americans saw the war as a mistake. But this poll is almost certainly an outlier. Three previous polls asking the same question in 1952 found that either a majority or a plurality of respondents said that Korea was a mistake. During 1952-1953, there were seven polls asking whether the war in Korea was "worth fighting" and the number responding affirmatively was respectively 31 percent, 34 percent, 39 percent, 37 percent, 32 percent, 27 percent, and 38 percent.<sup>5</sup>

The Korean War did not align with the American vision of what war ought to look like. By 1953, the dominant view of the conflict was of a grim stalemate, and one of the primary lessons that emerged was 'no more Koreas.' Symbolically, the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. shows a group of exhausted soldiers slogging their way uphill.

As for Vietnam, Gelpi notes that the war became unpopular only after the Tet Offensive in 1968, and therefore Americans were fairly comfortable with nation-building in South East Asia, at least from 1965-1968. But this critique hinges on the claim that Americans saw Vietnam as a nation-building mission from 1965-1968. It might seem obvious to us that Vietnam was a nation-building mission all along, but at the start of the war most Americans saw the campaign as fundamentally an interstate war against North Vietnam backed by China. In February 1965, for example, only seven percent of Americans believed that attacks on U.S. forces were "mainly part of the civil war in South Vietnam," while 26 percent blamed "the Communist government of North Vietnam," and 53 percent held "the Chinese Communist government" responsible. (173)

One of the reasons why support declined after 1968 is that the Tet Offensive signaled to Americans that the war was a nation-building mission in the midst of a civil war in South Vietnam—and people became predictably gloomier.

Despite Gelpi's doubts, the Panama intervention in 1989 is consistent with the theory. Operation Just Cause was an interstate war with a goal of regime change and the use of force was predictably popular. Gelpi wonders why "Operation Promote Democracy," the stabilization mission in Panama following regime change, "generated no public opposition." This relatively small-scale mission (which was actually called Operation Promote Liberty) did not generate opposition primarily because it was completely unknown to most people. A search of the *New York Times* archive reveals not a single article that mentions "Operation Promote Liberty" in the last thirty years. There are few, if any, polls about the

---

<sup>5</sup> Data from the Roper Center database ([http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data\\_access/ipoll/ipoll.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html)) . Note: the final two polls were conducted shortly after the fighting ended.

operation. If the United States had embarked on an extensive, prolonged, and visible, nation-building mission in Panama, it would probably have proved unpopular.

Gelpi suggests that Americans were supportive of nation-building in Bosnia and Kosovo. But these missions were never very popular with the public even though they were highly successful at stabilizing the Balkans with zero U.S. casualties. For example, in 2000, only 37 percent of Americans agreed that the United States and its allies had made “progress in achieving the goals they started out with” in Kosovo.<sup>6</sup> Skepticism was especially prevalent among Republicans. George W. Bush came to power in 2000 seeking to end these operations. Donald Rumsfeld gave a major address in 2003 called “Beyond Nation-Building” in which he promised a small military footprint in Iraq—precisely to avoid another prolonged quagmire like in the Balkans.

In the case of nation-building in Iraq, Gelpi is right that support did not decrease in a straight line from 2003 to 2011. There were periods when approval temporarily stabilized or even briefly increased, for example, when Saddam Hussein was captured. But overall, the data suggest a steady decline in support—consistent with the quagmire tradition. In November 2011, approval for the war in Iraq hit an all-time low of 29 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The new statistical results that Gelpi reports on Iraq are intriguing and worth closer investigation. Why would those who define success in expansive terms also be casualty tolerant? Perhaps they tended to be supporters of the Bush administration and therefore followed the president’s cues about the expansive goals of the mission, and accepted higher casualties. It would be interesting to see whether those Americans who chose expansive goals—in other words set a high bar for success—tended to perceive that the mission was succeeding or failing.

In summary, I am grateful for Gelpi’s search for disconfirming cases, which is a useful step in theory building and testing. Certainly, there are aspects of each war that do not fit neatly into the crusade and quagmire traditions. History is rarely so kind to a theory.

But none of Gelpi’s proposed exceptions are very convincing. The Philippine War was unpopular, as even its supporters readily acknowledged. Americans believed that the Pacific War ended in unconditional surrender because it basically did. Korea was a rare U.S. interstate war fought for limited goals, and it was probably the least popular interstate war for two centuries. The invasion of Panama was a classic crusading interstate war aimed at regime change and unsurprisingly proved popular—while the stabilization phase that

---

<sup>6</sup> For data on these missions see Dominic Tierney, “America’s Quagmire Mentality,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 49:4 (Winter, 2007/2008): 47-65. DOI: 10.1080/00396330701733936. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396330701733936>

<sup>7</sup> See “Iraq,” PollingReport.com, <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>, accessed 21 February 2012.

followed was completely unknown to most people. Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo, and especially Iraq, were typically wearying experiences.

The pattern remains strong. In nation-building missions, as compared to interstate wars, Americans tend to be less supportive, less tolerant of casualties, and less forgiving of U.S. atrocities. In every interstate war since the Civil War, Americans favored the maximum goal of regime change. In every nation-building mission since 1865, with the exception of Germany and Japan, Americans were skeptical.

Gelpi writes that: “While quagmire is undoubtedly a dirty word in the American vocabulary for war, it seems more closely associated with failed missions than with nation-building ones.” But when Americans hear the word “nation-building,” they think “quagmire” and “failure.”

Since some of the ground has already been covered, I will respond to Jon Western’s astute review more briefly.

Western points out rightly that the crusading rhetoric of presidents is sometimes instrumental. A good example would be George H. W. Bush’s sudden decision in 1990-1991 to adopt moralistic language and describe Saddam Hussein as Hitler. This likely represented an attempt to mobilize support rather than a reflection of Bush’s genuine beliefs. But even here, the moralistic language was used precisely because it resonated with other Americans. And once employed, Bush discovered that words have consequences. In 1991, Americans were left wondering why the demonic Saddam remained in power.

Western also mentions the Spanish-American War, suggesting that strategic logic compelled the United States to seize the Philippines. But in *How We Fight* (pp. 99-104) I argue that it is problematic to see the seizure of the Philippines as being driven by realist logic—not least because the advocates of expansion quickly decided that the islands were strategically useless.

Echoing a point made by Gelpi, Western accepts that nation-building in the Philippines was unpopular, but notes that the United States did not actually leave the territory until 1946. This is a fair observation. The quagmire tradition predicts that Americans will become skeptical of nation-building and see the mission as a failure—which occurred in the case of the Philippines. How quickly these perceptions translate into the United States actually withdrawing can vary according to a number of different dynamics.

Western is absolutely right that crusading rhetoric is not unique to the United States. France in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic War is a good example of a country that fought to advance its ideals with a crusading style. But no other country engages in this behavior with anything like the consistency of the United States.

Western asks a critical question: when will Americans support nation-building projects? As I note above, the only cases where Americans were consistently positive about nation-building were post-war Germany and Japan. This suggests that Americans are enthusiastic

only when the target country ends up looking as stable and free as the United States. However much progress the United States makes, if the target looks unstable at the end of the mission, Americans will see the outcome as unsatisfactory.

Western suggests that “Americans support nation building that works,” but Americans have been skeptical about missions that succeeded like southern Reconstruction (initially), or more recently, Bosnia and Kosovo. One has to wonder: what would Somalia, Iraq, or Afghanistan have to look like for Americans to see the outcome on their television screens and believe an intervention had worked?

Western notes other theories on public support for war, for example, Jentleson’s theory that the type of mission is critical and Feaver and Gelpi’s theory that perceptions of success are most important. Both of these theories are correct—indeed the argument in *How We Fight* may connect them together. Americans support interstate war and oppose nation-building because they are predisposed to perceive interstate war as a success and nation-building as a failure.

In his review Stephen Bourque provides a number of criticisms of *How We Fight*. None of these criticisms, however, are convincing.

First, Bourque argues that it is wrong to see Afghanistan and Iraq as divisive conflicts, because, “there has been little American public questioning of the conduct of these wars.” If true, this would be a serious problem for my argument that nation-building is unpopular!

But, of course, there has been a great deal of public, elite, and media questioning of these wars, the grave costs in blood and treasure, the missing WMDs in Iraq and whether the Bush administration lied, the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, and so on. In the case of both Afghanistan and Iraq, there was rising disapproval, growing perceptions of failure, and an increasing desire to withdraw. In his 2005 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, “The Iraq Syndrome,” John Mueller compared public support for the war in Iraq with earlier backing for the wars in Korea and Vietnam: “The only thing remarkable about the current war in Iraq is how precipitously American public support has dropped off. Casualty for casualty, support has declined far more quickly than it did during either the Korean War or the Vietnam War.” The war in Iraq, and Bush’s handling of it, was one of the defining issues in the 2006 and 2008 elections. In October 2011, approval for the war in Afghanistan hit an all-time low of 34 percent. The following month, in November, approval for the war in Iraq hit an all-time low of 29 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Second, Bourque asserts that Operation Provide Comfort, or U.S. nation-building in Kurdistan in 1991, was “popularly supported” and this undermines the claim that Americans dislike nation-building. I’m not aware of any polling on this case. Furthermore,

---

<sup>8</sup> See “Iraq,” PollingReport.com, <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>, accessed 21 February 2012, and “Afghanistan,” PollingReport.com, <http://www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>, accessed 21 February 2012.

it's debatable whether Operation Provide Comfort qualifies as nation-building given that it was relatively small in scale, with a minimal role for ground forces, lasted only a few weeks, and was narrowly focused on delivering humanitarian aid, rather than stabilizing Kurdistan.

Were Americans eager to nation-build in Iraq after the Gulf War? The answer is no. A poll taken in April 1991 found that only 32 percent of Americans wanted to get involved in the civil war in Iraq by aiding the Shiite and Kurdish rebels. (197) After 2003 we gained further confirmation that nation-building in Iraq is not a popular activity with Americans. It's also notable that all of the U.S. nation-building operations of the 1990s—in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo—were unpopular and seen as failures.

Third, Bourque argues that the distinction between interstate war and nation-building is unhelpful. Of course, any attempt to create a typology of war may produce ambiguous cases, and I discuss in detail how some Americans perceived Vietnam as an interstate war against North Vietnam, whereas others saw it as a nation-building mission in South Vietnam (with significant and predictable consequences in terms of support and favored strategies). As concepts go, however, distinguishing interstate war from nation-building is fairly straightforward. Are Americans fighting the organized military of another state or are Americans trying to stabilize a country? Missions tend to fit fairly easily into one of these two boxes. There is an entire literature on nation-building, for example, which presupposes that these operations can be distinguished from interstate war.

Fourth, Bourque takes issue with my argument that “no country has engaged in the mass killing of civilians on as many separate occasions as the United States.” As Bourque puts it: “Can [Tierney] truly claim that Americans partook in more civilian killings than the Germans in two world wars?” On p. 18 I refute this claim in the sentence immediately preceding the one quoted by Bourque. “Clearly, other nations have been far more murderous than the United States. Nazi Germany slaughtered close to ten million Soviet noncombatants during World War II.”

The point is that the United States often claims a deep and idealistic commitment to avoid targeting civilians in wartime. But if the enemy resists, as in World War II or Korea, the gloves can come off. In his dataset, political scientist Alexander Downes found that the United States carried out the mass killing of civilians in interstate war on more separate occasions than any other country (although as Downes recognizes, and I explicitly note, other states like Nazi Germany have killed more total civilians).<sup>9</sup>

Fifth, in *How We Fight* I argue that Americans almost always demand the maximum war aim of regime change in interstate war, which is striking because in modern history, it's very unusual to insist that the enemy submit entirely to one's demands. Bourque contends that demands for unconditional surrender are actually commonplace and cites the German war aims in the world wars.

---

<sup>9</sup> Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 44-47.



But the world wars are exceptional cases. On occasion other countries have sought total victory and regime change, but more often they have fought for limited war aims. Britain, for example, engaged in over a dozen wars from the 1500s to 1914—and none of them ended in unconditional surrender. When Britain battled alongside the United States in the world wars, it fought for maximum goals. But since 1945, Britain has often pushed for restrained objectives in wartime, for example, in the Korean War and the 1991 Gulf War. Similarly, China has recently been comfortable fighting interstate wars for limited goals, for example, against India and Vietnam. In addition, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Russia fought limited wars against Japan, Poland, and Finland. By contrast, since the Civil War, the American public has favored the maximum goal of regime change in every single interstate war. Other countries may crusade for regime change at certain times: only the United States does so habitually.

Sixth, Bourque is skeptical of the claim that “German soldiers in World War II often executed civilians face-to-face. But U.S. troops tend to keep a healthy distance when killing noncombatants.” (15) Here, Bourque seems to think I am arguing that German soldiers killed civilians face-to-face more often than from a distance, and lists instances where Germany bombed civilians.

This rather misses the point, which is that German soldiers killed civilians face-to-face more often than American soldiers killed civilians face-to-face. German personnel often shot, gassed, or otherwise slaughtered civilians in close proximity. But when U.S. troops engage in the mass killing of civilians in wartime, they almost always do so from a distance, through bombing or blockade.

Seventh, Bourque takes issue with my point that in World War II “public support barely wavered.” (p. 154) There are nuances to the case. In the book, for example, I argue that we recall World War II as an idealistic missionary struggle, but actually this kind of sentiment was quite muted in 1941-1945. Similarly, on p. 156 I discuss the minority of Americans who were cautious about the campaign, or not sure what the war was about.

Any study, however, of American attitudes toward war must note the consistent and high levels of public backing for World War II. Adam Berinsky analyzed the polling data from 1941-1945 and concluded that “support for World War II, over the almost four years of U.S. involvement in the conflict, did not wane, even as war deaths mounted.”<sup>10</sup> Approval for expansive war aims including unconditional surrender and joining a reformed League of Nations actually increased during the war. Therefore, it is accurate to state that, “public support barely wavered.”

Eighth, by focusing on the distinction between interstate war and nation-building missions, did I miss a critical alternative variable that explains public views of war? Bourque

---

<sup>10</sup> Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 73.

proposes a rival factor: Americans support wars of necessity like World War II, but they oppose wars of choice like Somalia. And, of course, everything held equal, when U.S. territory is directly attacked, public support for war will tend to be higher.

But the distinction between interstate war and nation-building can trump this effect. As I wrote in *How We Fight* (276): “Americans are comfortable with interstate war, and follow the crusader template, in cases where the United States was attacked (World War II, the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan), and wars of choice (the Spanish-American War, Grenada, Panama, Iraq). Similarly, Americans are disillusioned by nation-building missions that are campaigns of choice (Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq), as well as by those operations that are the consequence of being attacked (southern Reconstruction, Afghanistan).”

Ninth, Bourque summarizes the conclusion on the founding tradition as follows: “Essentially, [Tierney] argues for a multi-purpose military force that is competent at both building and fighting. The reality, of course, is that America’s military forces have always performed these tasks, and not just in the early days of the republic.”

We are in full agreement: U.S. troops have indeed “always performed these tasks,” which I describe in some detail in the book. The point missed by the reviewer is that the Founders were enthusiastic about these wider activities as a core function of the military, whereas later Americans were far more cautious. Even though the U.S. military is consistently confronted by stabilization operations, the belief is nevertheless widespread that its true job is to “fight and win the nation’s wars” by which is meant interstate war.

Tenth, Bourque disputes my comment that today, “U.S. troops write fewer letters home about valor and chivalry,” (248), pointing out that Americans continue to correspond frequently about instances of bravery. I have no doubt he is right. But the tone of soldiers’ letters has changed, reflecting an evolution in how we think about war.

The point about “valor and chivalry” is a reference to the earlier discussion of soldiers’ letters during World War I. (126) Compared to present day troops, Americans serving in World War I talked more often of chivalry and literally saw themselves as knights on a new crusade. In *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, David Kennedy writes (p. 213), “In the homeliest lines scribbled by the humblest privates, the war was frequently couched in language that appears to have been lifted verbatim from the pages of G.A. Henry or, more often, those of Sir Walter Scott.” Kennedy notes that this style is very different to the letters of soldiers today: “Those accents may ring strangely in the modern ear, but they flowed easily from the tongues and pens of the doughboys in 1918.” (p. 213) So, indeed, “U.S. troops write fewer letters home about valor and chivalry.”

My substantive point here in the book is actually to qualify the overall thesis. Despite the enduring traditions I identify, the changing content of letters is just one example of how our experience of war has altered fundamentally over time.

## Conclusion

Reading these comments was an exceptionally stimulating process and I am very grateful that such distinguished scholars gave so freely of their time.

The coming years will provide opportunities for confirmation or disconfirmation of the argument in *How We Fight*. At the end of the book, I suggested that in the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq, there would be a profound backlash against nation-building, analogous to the backlash that followed earlier phases of nation-building in the American South, the Philippines, Latin America, Vietnam, and Somalia. Since the book was published at the end of 2010, evidence of the backlash has only grown stronger. Support for the war in Afghanistan continues to erode. Both Barack Obama and the Republican leadership now reject nation-building as a goal of the U.S. military. One of the rules for U.S. intervention in Libya was “no nation-building,” with American involvement limited to air power.

But if history is any guide, the United States will be back in the nation-building game, and soon. One pathway is through the American love of regime change as a goal in interstate war. A military campaign against Iran, for example, may escalate in ways that were never predicted at the start of the struggle. A war that begins with limited goals of destroying Iranian nuclear sites could ultimately inspire a crusader wave in the United States and demands for the overthrow of the Iranian regime. Then, of course, if America breaks it, it owns it. And if you like nation-building in Iraq, you’ll love nation-building in Iran.

---

**Copyright © 2012 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---