Rachel Tecott Metz offers an invaluable contribution to a growing literature on US security assistance with this well-argued, well-structured article. Metz sets out to answer a question that is as policy relevant as it is theoretically rich: why do the foreign militaries trained and equipped by the US perform poorly on the battlefield? Why, for instance, did the Afghan National Security Forces crumble before the Taliban in 2021 or the Iraqi Army suffer defeat at the hands of the Islamic State in 2014?

It is this latter case that Metz draws on to develop her argument. She argues that US security assistance failed in Iraq (and presumably elsewhere) because it followed the wrong approach. It could have relied on conditionality, “us[ing] carrots and sticks” to push recipient militaries into adopting necessary reforms (102). Instead, US Army advisors relied on persuasion, “no-strings inducements, argumentation, demonstration, and interpersonal relationships” (102), an approach that generally fails at generating influence. Without facing accountability for failing to reform their militaries and insulated by “anticolonialism and sovereignty norms” (110-111), recipients of US security assistance in Iraq were free to misuse it—to their ultimate detriment when confronted by determined Islamic State militants.

The crucial insight of this article is why persuasion dominates as the mode of enforcement despite its record. It does so, Metz argues, because it serves the US Army’s bureaucratic interests, particularly its desire to ensure “autonomy against civilian intrusion” (98). Emphasizing persuasion allows the Army to present the advisory mission within a “progress narrative” (109). Such a narrative deflects civilian scrutiny and lessens civilian interference in Army affairs. Conditionality, however, presumes that a recipient military might be failing to improve its battlefield readiness, a situation that would intensify civilian scrutiny and invite interference. Needing to protect bureaucratic autonomy thus engenders what Tecott Metz labels the “cult of the persuasive” (98). Like the “cult of the offensive,” this cult inculcates ideological rigidity in the policymaking process. It holds out faith that persuasion works and that conditionality proves counterproductive, even when the evidence says otherwise.

Metz’s article makes a compelling case in sophisticated ways. Conceptually, it typologizes security assistance into four overlapping categories: “teaching,” “persuasion,” “conditionality,” and “direct
command” (101-103). This “four-rung influence escalation ladder” adds much-needed precision to the conceptualization of security assistance, a practice that spans everything from teaching classes via the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program to putting foreign units under the direct command of US Marine and Army officers, an approach that was common in the early twentieth century.

Theoretically, Metz adds another dimension to the principal-agent framework that is so prevalent in the security assistance literature. Rather than treating the US as a monolithic principal delegating responsibilities to foreign agents, she shifts the level of analysis to also capture the principal-agent problem within the United States’ own civil-military relationship. As an agent itself, the Army seeks autonomy from its civilian principals; in doing so, it adopts an ineffective means of aligning foreign agents with US national security interests. Here, one agency problem exacerbates another.

Methodologically, Metz effectively tests her theory against the advisory mission in Iraq from 2003 to 2011. As she puts it, this mission represents a “hard test” of her theory because its strategic importance to the US, its salience with the American public, and its duration all should have favored results over ideology. To support her claim that even in this case, the “cult of the persuasive” remained in effect, she makes extensive use of interviews with US advisers and Iraqi advisees and of recently declassified Department of Defense documents.

Metz’s article deserves much credit for advancing our understanding of why delegating war fighting to foreign troops so often fails. It is an impressive achievement. But it also calls for engagement with additional lines of inquiry, some of which intersect with her argument, complement it, or challenge it.

Taking the long historical view of US security assistance reveals the radically different nature of the descriptions of foreign militaries by US personnel now compared to a century ago. When the US occupied the Philippines and countries in the Caribbean Basin after the Spanish-American War, there was little talk of persuasion as the best approach to working with local forces. And there was perhaps even less talk of how US influence was stymied by an international community of sovereign equals, a sentiment which is expressed by some of Tecott Metz’s interviewees (127). From the perspective of US advisors in the early twentieth century, influence proved difficult because the Philippines Scouts and Constabulary, Haitian

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3 For an excellent overview of these occupations and the role of one U.S. Marine officer in them, see Jonathan Katz, Gangsters of Capitalism: Smedley Butler, the Marines, and the Making and Breaking of America’s Empire (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2021).
Gendarmerie, and Dominican National Guard suffered from ingrained, immutable deficiencies. This racialized framing of the agency problem called for the highest rung of the Metz’s “escalation ladder”: direct command by “white American officers,” an affront to state sovereignty which is “prohibit[ed]” in modern security assistance doctrine (132).

Metz does gesture towards the historical context for the cult of the persuasive by associating it with those “anticolonialism and sovereignty norms” (110-111). But her article leaves this social basis undertheorized. In her telling, protecting their bureaucratic interests led US advisors to talk up the benefits of persuasion. A century ago, however, those same interests were protected by talking up the paternalistic authority exerted by “white American officers” over non-white troops. Truly understanding or explaining a preference for persuasion therefore demands a theory of how a historically specific discourse made this preference possible and how different discourses would normalize alternative preferences.

Such a theory comes via IR constructivism. Under this theoretical lens, persuasion becomes contingent rather than inevitable, a means of guarding the Army’s bureaucratic autonomy whose legitimacy first depended on a particular understanding of foreign troops as persuadable—that is, mutable, rather than immutable. As I show in my own work, such an understanding followed the mid-twentieth century transformation of scientific racism within US foreign policy discourse into classifications of humanity based on culture. And it reveals itself in Metz’s article when the US advisory mission emphasized Iraqi “culture” as a defining identity (125). At least in principle, culture is changeable; race, as understood within the pseudoscience of scientific racism, is not.

Relatedly, Metz does not address the additional implications of preferring persuasion as an approach to security assistance from among other options. Despite the fact that US advisors present persuasion as suitable for an international order based on sovereign equality, this approach still reflects and projects international hierarchy. After all, T. E. Lawrence, the historical figure Metz refers to as the “cult leader at the center of the cult of the persuasive” (126), used his powers of persuasion in the service of the British Empire.

As a rhetorical strategy in the policy discourse of US security assistance, promoting persuasion goes beyond just protecting the Army’s bureaucratic autonomy. First, it elevates the status of US personnel. They become role-models with a special ability to impart their expertise and wisdom onto foreigners. In this

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6 Rittinger, “Arming the Other,” 401.
7 Rittinger, “Arming the Other,” 399.
framing, so masterful are these personnel in their interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity that conditionality becomes not just counterproductive but unnecessary. Second, promoting persuasion reinforces the idea that militaries in weak states need reform in the first place. But that reflects a determination of what serves US interests, not necessarily those of local leaders. With good reason—as Metz acknowledges (115)—those leaders often care more about distributing patronage and rewarding loyalty than about making their militaries more competent on the battlefield.⁹

In this way, the term “security assistance” turns euphemistic, obscuring the hierarchical relationship at work. This term implies that recipient militaries are simply receiving help, when in fact this “assistance” is ultimately meant to benefit the country providing it. More than just a transfer of equipment and training, security assistance constitutes what Tarak Barkawi calls the “transnational organization of military power.”¹⁰ Such an organization is not politically neutral. It operates under the aegis of the US and is wielded in the service of US foreign policy. Security assistance thus “fails” when the recipients lose battles, if not entire wars, to the US’s enemies. Were that assistance to “succeed,” it would realize, for example, “US goals of building an effective Iraqi military” (115). As Metz concludes, that kind of success can only come by deprogramming the Army’s cult of the persuasive, relying more on conditionality, and imposing penalties on foreign militaries for neglecting to do what the US wants (133). In the end, one is left to wonder what it would mean for security assistance to “fail” or “succeed” if the hierarchy were inverted and the recipients’ perspective foregrounded instead.

Moreover, while Metz focuses on how persuasion fails to improve battlefield performance, there is little mention that this approach probably also fails to improve respect for democracy and human rights.¹¹ Consider recent coups carried out by US-trained officers in West Africa or the gross human rights violations committed in the 1980s by US-sponsored troops in Central America.¹² These examples suggest that US security assistance is at best ineffective at spreading liberal values and at worst effective at spreading the opposite. And yet, despite so much evidence to the contrary, since the 1970s US officials have promoted persuasion in security assistance as a means of liberal socialization.

If this article is developed into a book-length project, a chapter on how the cult of the persuasive operates in this area could extend and complicate the overall argument. Starting in the 1970s, the promise of liberal

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⁹ See also Biddle, Macdonald, Baker, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff,” 95-104.


socialization via security assistance guarded against increased scrutiny—from Congress, the State Department, NGOs—of how US-trained forces treated their own people and governments. The cult of the persuasive thus advanced the same objective as the one Metz identifies in her article: offering a “progress narrative” to obviate the threat of outside interference in the military’s advisory missions. Eventually, however, some civilians tried to verify this narrative. This led to limited types of conditionality, as seen for example in the 1997 Leahy Law. Named after its sponsor, Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, this law denies funding for foreign military units if any of their members are implicated in human rights violations. The law’s record is mixed at best, but it does represent the kind of invasive oversight that in Metz’s account the military sought to escape.

Finally, I was struck by a statement from one of Metz’s interviewees. As she reports, a US military advisor conceded the limitations of US influence by recognizing Iraq as “a sovereign nation.” He went on to say that “We weren’t there to force them to do what we wanted, we’re not imperialists” (127). That statement came not too long after the US invaded Iraq in violation of international law, carried out regime change, disbanded the Iraqi military, and installed an American official, Paul Bremer, as a proconsul to govern the initial occupation. I was left wanting a follow-up question that pushed the interviewee to square this sanctification of Iraqi sovereignty with the “imperial structures and dynamics” at work in early twenty-first century US foreign policy.

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