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# The New Battlefield: The United States and Unconventional Conflicts

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Sarkesian, Sam C. *The New Battlefield: The United States and Unconventional Conflicts*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986. 344pp. \$37.95

No one reflecting upon the uneven record of the United States in Third World conflicts can doubt either the significance of Sarkesian's topic or the importance of discerning how to do better in the future. The author sets out "to study and analyze the U.S. political-military posture and effectiveness in responding to unconventional conflicts"; his target audience includes "those in policy-making circles, military professionals, and the faculty and staff at senior service schools." Regrettably, the author's execution of his design is seriously flawed in this instance, and those he wishes to inform are unlikely to be satisfied with his offering. Indeed, the all too apparent absence of a rigorous editorial pen has done both the author and the subject matter a marked disservice.

The basic theme and organization of the book are promising at first glance. Intending his book to be much more than a sequel to his earlier work on *America's Forgotten Wars*, Sarkesian properly notes that international affairs remain "complex and dangerous," with no clear replacement for "the earlier European world order" in sight. Insofar as the United States is concerned, the critical reference points are "[the] expansion of communism and the Vietnam War." The author accurately focuses on the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of the U.S. capacity to respond to conflicts in the Third

World. His three-part analysis addresses sequentially: the character and challenges posed to the United States by unconventional conflicts; U.S. responses to those conflicts, past and future; and the philosophical, moral and political interplay between democracy and the capacity to deal effectively with Third World wars.

In the process of developing this analysis, Sarkesian makes a number of useful points that collectively suggest the promise the manuscript must have had. Most forceful are his arguments on the dilemma presented to democracies and their armed forces by unconventional conflicts whose attributes "do not easily fit into American perceptions of war or into the American mind-set and world-view." The notion that democracies which adhere "to abstract moral and ethical principles . . . may quickly destroy themselves" awakens bitter memories of events in the United States during the Vietnam war. That this is known to our adversaries and exploited by them, cannot be reassuring to American planners and strategists. Sarkesian also suggests that any direct involvement of U.S. ground combat forces should be seen as a "last-resort strategy" to be adopted only if abstention or withdrawal is incompatible with the support of vital U.S. interests, something largely consistent with the so-called "Weinberger Doctrine." He correctly identifies the importance of high-quality leadership to both the revolution and the counterrevolution; the inconsistency and lack of "staying power" in U.S. policy; our undue

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preoccupation with the Soviet Union in our strategic planning to the detriment of our capability to deal with challenges to our security arising in the Third World; the existence of "ample evidence of incomplete and slanted reporting in the media"; and the pervasive influence of the Vietnam experience on the "American psyche"—something utterly detrimental to the effective conduct of U.S. policy in the Third World. Most pointed of all, at least from the perspective of the professional military, is Sarkesian's all too apt judgment that "most conventional criteria . . . may not be true indicators of who is winning and losing," a chilling reminder of certain enduring attributes of the Vietnam experience.

All of these points are well-taken, and the relentless prospector of these gems can ferret them out. Overall, however, this book is a potpourri of inadequately developed and discursively treated topics, some important and others peripheral. The material is awkwardly organized and repetitive, with poor transition from section to section, reading almost as if it were a collection of discrete vignettes. A critical factor noted by Sarkesian is the role of "third powers" in unconventional conflicts, yet barely two pages are devoted to this subject while numerous repetitive and largely redundant intra-chapter and chapter summaries encumber the text. There is no need to restate the relationship between foreign policy and national security policy, or to discuss U.S. interests in

both chapter 1 and chapter 7. Chapter 4, "The Conflict Spectrum," is important thematically, but it should have come at the beginning of the book—if only to give the reader the *author's* definition of low-intensity conflict, which is so central to the preceding three chapters. Sarkesian's admirable commentary on the relative merits and utility of the works of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu for the United States was unfortunately "buried" in chapter 6, whereas an earlier representation of those philosophies would have been most valuable.

A solid treatment of the topic raised in *The New Battlefield* is certainly necessary. Unfortunately, insofar as this book is concerned, such a treatment remains to be done. Banalities such as: "The Third World has become the new battlefield. . . . The causes of revolution are complex. . . ."—this after the last four decades?—and "there is no sure strategy for counterrevolution except better government" do not help much. Perhaps Sarkesian, with an editor more appropriate to his considerable talents, will do better in his next book.

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Mallison, W. Thomas and Mallison, Sally V. *The Palestinian Problem in International Law and World Order*. Burnt Mill, Harlow Essex, England: Longman House, 1986. 564pp. \$39.95